MIRA BRICHTO

by LAURA GRIFFIN

In the dank, abandoned libraries of Russia and Eastern Europe, "everything is disintegrating," says Mira "Milly" Brichto. "I saw books on the floor withering away, We're talking about hidden treasures. We sit here and these things are withering away. Libraries were victims of the war, too."

Barely five feet tall, Brichto is a tiny woman with a huge presence, a grandmother from Ohio and former literature professor who has devoted her life to humanitarian work and social activism. She is the founder of the R'fa-aye-nu Society, named for a prayer from Jeremiah17:14: "Heal me, O Lord, and I shall be healed." She translates *R'fa-aye-nu* as simply "Heal us." Formed in 1993, R'fa-aye-nu's mission is "to help those in need of physical or spiritual healing, regardless of faith or ethnic background."

Part of that mission has been to save those hidden treasures –

Torah scrolls and Jewish texts that have undergone decades of neglect and degradation – for future generations. Brichto has been active in her work both to open archives containing Jewish texts and to encourage institutions to adopt modern techniques to preserve, catalogue and digitize these materials and to improve the conditions in libraries and archives through weatherproofing and air conditioning.

The society's mission, however, is broader than recovering, restoring and preserving the vast body of literature endangered by war and neglect. The society's work in Central and Eastern Europe endeavors to promote spiritual healing by bringing together Jews and Christians to face their complex shared history. And then there's physical healing – organizing donations from America of surplus medical supplies and equipment. Brichto has acknowledged that the dual objectives of physical and spiritual healing are confusing to some, but she feels they are integrally connected. "The medical equipment that we send is sort of like our calling card," she told the *Cincinnati Post*. "It generates goodwill."

While much of the work is comparatively quiet and behind-the-scenes, Brichto has orchestrated public celebrations, interfaith ceremonies and educational initiatives to address the history of anti-Semitic violence and the rift between Christians and Jews in that part of the world. One such celebration followed her 1996 success in restoring a century-old Torah scroll, which had been confiscated in a 1914 pogrom, to its original home in Krakow's Rema Synagogue. The celebration witnessed Jews and Catholics singing and dancing together on Krakow's ancient cobblestone streets as part of *hachnasat sefer Torah*, a welcoming of the Torah, a ritual that hadn't occurred in Krakow since the Holocaust.

"It was a very emotional, beautiful day," recalls Brichto. Of all the work she has done, bringing Jews and Christians together for a common goal is what she feels is one of her biggest accomplishments.

These days, Brichto continues her work of motivating people of different faiths to help preserve rare and disintegrating Jewish texts. A frequent traveler to Eastern Europe when she was younger –

the *New York Times* called her "a natural-born religious diplomat" – today she lives with the constant back pain characteristic of spinal stenosis, a narrowing of the spinal canal, and much of her work is done through phone calls and correspondence. A recent project, the Lviv Archives Preservation Project, a $105,000 initiative, was launched in 2005 by the U.S.-Ukraine Foundation in cooperation with the R'fa-aye-nu Society based on a proposal by Brichto.

Her one-bedroom apartment in a Cincinnati retirement home is filled with artifacts of her life: paintings by a Jewish artist from Warsaw; books of haiku and Psalms; a well-worn Bible on an end table; letters from politicians, bishops, priests, and a U.S. Army general; files of paperwork for grant applications and for reparations from the Germans for recovering books confiscated during the Holocaust. Several small, silver Kiddush cups are stacked on her dining table, a reminder of the Ukrainian bar mitzvah boys who never got to use them.

"Farmers are always finding them in barns where Jews hid during the war. They sell these in the markets – they're everywhere," says Brichto, adding that she bought as many as she could to honor those boys.

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Throughout her life, being Jewish has defined Milly Brichto. She was born in 1927, in McKeesport, Pennsylvania. Her father, Aladar Pollak, was the rabbi for a community of Orthodox Hungarian Jewish immigrants and was himself a recent immigrant. Brichto was one of eleven children and the seventh daughter in a row.

Pollak raised his children to see "everything through the eyes of being Orthodox American Jews," says Brichto. She fondly recalls him bringing the family outside during a solar eclipse. He broke a glass and put a piece over fire to darken it with smoke. Then he let the children look at the eclipse through the glass. "At that moment, he taught us a prayer," she says. "He connected everything through religion. Religious ritual was tied to the romance of our family."

Sometimes, at night, they would crawl into his bed to hear

his stories. "He wore a night cap and told us Bible stories. I can remember what he emphasized and how he told them to us," Brichto says. Those stories never left her; they even motivated her to become a storyteller herself, publishing two children's books, *The God Around Us: A Children's Garden of Prayer* (1955), and its second volume, *The God Around Us: The Valley of Blessings* (2001). "My genius, if I have any at all, is telling children Bible stories, and they're the same Bible stories he told us," she says.

Her father died of cancer when Brichto was seven. After her father died, her mother moved the family to New York, settling in the Williamsburg area of Brooklyn, with its flourishing Orthodox community. "Being Jewish wasn't skin deep, it was the opposite of that," Brichto recalls. "Even if kids were throwing stones or calling us 'dirty Jew,' we kept our pride and continued to walk. We would just remember not to walk down that street where those kids were again. We didn't see ourselves through the eyes of the kids who threw stones or through the eyes of victims.

"Everything in our whole lives was about being Jewish," she continues. "You'd get up saying morning prayers, wash your hands and say another prayer. After a while, it becomes automatic. But there is danger in that – the danger of not thinking about it."

Education was important in the Pollak family. They were part of the local Orthodox intelligentsia, and Brichto remembers philosophical discussions around the family table. "We were considered a thoughtful family. They put it this way: Even the girls were intelligent," she says, recalling that it was important to her parents that all the children, including the girls, learned. "I was the only kid I knew who was reading what her mother read. I think the fact that I was encouraged to read really explains what happened to me, how I turned out like I did."

In that atmosphere, Brichto was raised to think for herself and question everything.

And she did – eventually too much for her family. "When I reached that point where I was testing all of that, all hell broke loose," Brichto says.

She went to the first Jewish day school for girls in Brooklyn and later to a public high school, where she stood up for human and civil rights, started the first Negro History and Culture Club in 1942, and wrote editorials for the school newspaper.

"The black school was closing and some of the students were going to come to our school and there was some rumbling and unrest," she says. "I wrote an editorial saying that when they came, instead of being afraid of them degrading our school, we should welcome them. The way blacks were treated at the time was against American values."

Her younger brother, Yakov Pollak, now an Orthodox rabbi, always had a great deal of respect for his big sister. "She was an intelligent, forthright, strong-willed person. She set an example and implanted in us a great degree of liberalism," says Brichto's "kid" brother, rabbi at Brooklyn's Congregation Shomre Emunah. "Through her example, we were all for civil rights and human rights."

Nevertheless, Brichto's mother worried about her daughter's "wayward and rebellious" ways. She felt her daughter's behavior as an adolescent was not in keeping with strict Orthodoxy. "We were allowed to question and test, but only within the framework of acceptance. It wasn't *a* way of life it was *the* way," Brichto recalls. "My mother told me, 'No boy from a good family will be interested in you.'"

Then she met Herbert Chanan Brichto, who came from a well-respected Jewish family of rabbis. He liked her spunk and intelligence. "I was the girl who not only *could* think, I did," she says.

They married and Chanan went on to become a U.S. Army chaplain during the Korean Conflict, a leading Torah scholar and Reform rabbi, and a professor, biblical scholar and dean at Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati. Marrying someone who was Reform caused somewhat of a strain in Brichto's relationship with her mother and some of her siblings. Nevertheless, Brichto, who had felt constrained by the strictness of Orthodoxy, moved toward Reform Judaism, although as she has aged, she has moved back toward Orthodoxy.

Brichto began teaching Hebrew the day after her wedding and went on to teach elementary school as well, working in both Jewish and Catholic schools. However, she didn't get her college degree until after her two daughters and a son were born. Eventually, thinking it was time to do something she hadn't had the chance to do earlier in life, she also earned doctorates in literature and psychology. She created a lively home in Cincinnati, where Friday night meant a family dinner that always included a variety of friends and neighbors.

"My brother once said, 'Father had taught us to question everything and mother taught us to *experience* everything,'" says Brichto's younger daughter, Katey Brichto, a writer who lives on a farm outside of Madison, Indiana. "Our mother was always such a champion of living and doing. If we fell down or had trouble with boyfriends, or whatever, her response was, 'That's life. Experience it. Live it.' That was very wonderful in a lot of ways."

Her mother, Katey continues, "was not afraid of spontaneity, adventure, risk, or even pain that much. She is not the type of person who concedes defeat easily. I think she really is taking off at a point where people are ready to quit."

That philosophy extends to Brichto's relationship with two of her grandchildren who were born hearing-impaired. She has worked tenaciously to make sure they did not miss out on anything, helping them get into a school for the deaf in Missouri, driving them there herself when needed and helping her daughter give them the best and most fulfilling lives possible.

"My biggest challenge and my biggest accomplishment, really, were these children," Brichto says. "When I see something has to be done, I don't worry about who is going to help, I just do it. When I want something, I will it to happen, but not without a lot of work."

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That philosophy, that tenacity, is in full evidence in Brichto's work through the R'fa-aye-nu Society, an outgrowth of earlier work she started at the initial request of her younger brother, Yakov. In 1979, Rabbi Pollak came to his sister with an unusual story. At the request

of a dying rabbi, he had agreed to retrieve from the Soviet Union twenty volumes of work by a Talmudic scholar. Pollak had smuggled the first volume out by strapping part on his back under his coat and putting part in the lining of his wife's skirt. The other nineteen volumes remained and he needed to find a route through diplomatic channels. "I interested my sister in joining me in getting out the manuscripts," says Pollak, who is also chairman of the Jerusalem Institute of Talmudic Research. "She's a very honorable person and she had the know-how in making the right contacts with religious leaders throughout the world. The fact that she knew Cardinal Bernardin helped, too."

It helped because much of the Jewish literature she was determined to save was in the hands of Catholics and she therefore needed the cooperation of church leaders. "When villages were emptied out (under Nazi occupation), more often than not the village priest would take these materials to the monastic library," Brichto explained to the *National Catholic Reporter*. "Who else knew how to read and write?"

The cardinal had become friends with the Brichtos years earlier when he was archbishop of Cincinnati. Brichto turned to Bernardin for help, recalling, "I had to go to somebody for whom people would readily break the law. But I couldn't turn to longshoremen. Everything had to be done with an enormous amount of respect. It had to be done with clean hands and a pure heart."

Cardinal Bernardin wrote a letter on her behalf that resulted in Brichto and her brother gaining an appointment with Cardinal Franciszek Macharski of Krakow, the former see of John Paul II. Brichto recalls comparing the Jews' written legacy to paintings confiscated from the Church by the Communist government, but pointed out that as opposed to the Catholics, who had survived and could fight for the return of the artwork, all that was left of the majority of the area's former Jewish inhabitants were their documents. Little else was needed, Brichto says, to convince the cardinal that the Jewish people should have full access to documents in the Church's hands.

"You are in the right. You should have the originals. We should have copies," Macharski said, according to Brichto. "They belong to you."

When she later founded the R'fa-aye-nu Society, she made Cardinal Bernardin the honorary chairman. "Cardinal Bernardin opened a lot of doors for us. He and I made a good team – an unexpected one, so it had kind of an impact," Brichto says. Unexpected in part because of Brichto herself. "A long time ago I became aware of the stiffness with which clergy of different religions present themselves to each other…[but] I wasn't clergy and I was a woman. The rules didn't apply to me," she says. Despite the fact that she says she is "as learned as many a rabbi and certainly as committed," the clergy she worked with relaxed around her. "That woman thing works," she says. "They were sort of taken by surprise."

Once she started, Brichto wanted to continue the work of rescuing and preserving these documents. She felt that the recovery of religious texts was of paramount importance, because education and learning are so highly valued in the Jewish tradition. There were not only religious texts of course – there were documents, newspapers, letters, and other materials. "Records, correspondence, these are very important in Jewish religious life. This is our responsum, our interpretation of Jewish law…and it is scattered all over Europe," she told the *National Catholic Reporter*.

Brichto felt that to gain access to archives and libraries, she needed to give people something in return. And so the idea of sending surplus medical supplies was born. She arranged for the shipment of mammography equipment to Poland. She sent medical supplies no longer needed by the U.S. Department of Defense or American hospitals to Ukraine. In 2000, R'fa-aye-nu provided financial aid to Ukraine after a mining accident in the eastern part of the country killed eighty-one people.

"Milly always envisioned great things," says Dr. David Gilner, director of Libraries for Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, who has known Brichto for thirty-five years and worked in an advisory role with her in her efforts to save texts. "At the same time, she was

very happy to stimulate the consciousness of Eastern Europe and make them aware of what they had and the value of that."

Brichto worked with Jewish and Catholic leaders in Kiev to help restore a 102-year-old synagogue that had been a puppet theater for six decades under Soviet rule and where, during World War II, the Nazis killed many of the synagogue's members at the Babi Yar massacre. She brought that and other R'fa-aye-nu projects to the attention of legislators including U.S. senators Joe Lieberman of Connecticut and Hillary Rodham Clinton of New York, as well as Representative Marcy Kaptur of Ohio, who sent letters of support.

Kaptur worked with Brichto for years. She helped Brichto get medical equipment where it needed to go and aided in the proper disposition and replacement of Torah scrolls. "The world needs more Milly Brichtos," says Kaptur, who is Catholic. "She works in a way that builds bridges instead of walls. She's helping to piece together remnants of a glorious history. And she's unrelenting in her efforts. I never walked with her through some of the archives she discovered, but I saw the pictures and I know it was a searing experience for her," she says. "I felt when I met Milly that I had met the Old Testament in a very refined and learned way. She bridged the Old Testament to the modern era. She's a timeless individual, such a woman of history."

In part because of Brichto's work, a Ukrainian bishop sent a letter to his government, asking to restore confiscated Torah scrolls to their original synagogues. "This is probably unprecedented in that landscape, in that part of the world, that the spokesman on behalf of the religious needs of the Jewish people would be a Ukrainian Greek Catholic bishop," Brichto told the *Cincinnati Post*. "It would have been unimaginable in any other time."

"Just the idea of the thing was the exciting part – wanting to rescue all this bibliographia and wanting an exchange of ideas between Catholics and Jews," says Regine Ransohoff, Brichto's former assistant for five years. "Then giving them physical assistance in an effort to get them to help her in uncovering all this Jewish work. I'd never been involved in anything like it. Working with her was

amazing. She has all these great ideas. She is one of the most brilliant women I've ever met."

Through the years, Brichto provided three million dollars worth of surplus medical supplies for the region and gained permission to access libraries. But Brichto remains frustrated that so much is still left to save and preserve.

A major obstacle is the sheer expense of preserving the works, making them accessible, and improving their storage conditions, which has kept her from achieving her goal. However, says Gilner, "She laid the foundation. Because of her, some projects are ongoing in Lviv and Poland. She was certainly very successful. She made the matter truly ecumenical – it was about saving culture, not plundering it. She had some great visions; had there been money, many great things would have been accomplished. But you do the best you can and never give up, and that's Milly."

Despite never giving up, Brichto says at times she feels like a small voice in the wind.

"I can't bring back the dead, but I can help restore their written word," she says. "The irony of this pains me: We spend so much money on Holocaust memorials, but if who died was so important to us, then their lives should be also. What did they treasure? What were their values? What was contained in their writings?"