ENQUIRER LOCAL NEWS COVERAGE

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Grandmother tries heal old hatreds

North Avondale woman heads international agency that unites people of different faiths to help Europeans

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Grandmothers aren't supposed to slide down banisters. Yet here's Mira Brichto, all of 72 years, with her knees clutching the smooth rail, her body laying against the banister and her hands resting one in front of the other as if holding a golf club.

Mira Brichto
(Ernest Coleman photo)
| ZOOM |

The head of an international, interfaith effort to provide physical and spiritual healing slides down the stairway banister and smooths her pants.

Then Dr. Brichto casually walks through her North Avondale home, pointing out the framed black Madonna and a Chagall-like painting of a Russian Jewish wedding scene.

She doesn't mention the bannister sliding.

Conversation veers from the nature of humanity to her grandchildren to a Hebrew poem. Under Dr. Brichto's direction, they are all connected, woven into a pure and delightful affirmation of life and the possibility of goodness in all people.

She is not naive. She has seen the horrors of hate. The slaughter of 6 million Jews. The man who hid under a barn floor for the first three years of his life.

The crosses burned on a hill across from her childhood home, a warning Jews weren't welcome there.

“Evil and good are different things,” says Dr. Brichto, who has doctorates in literature and psychology. Her gray hairs unfurl like untoward couch springs; she doesn't always get around to brushing them.

She is tiny, no more than 5 feet and maybe 100 pounds, but her vision is immense.

“Maybe one ounce of good weighs infinitely more than 1,000 ounces of evil,” she says.

In 1992, she founded the R'fa-aye-nu Society, which means “Heal us” in Hebrew. It comes from the words of Jeremiah (17:14): “Heal me, O Lord, for only so may I be healed.”

The goal is to tend to the physical and spiritual needs of all people. The organization solicits donations of free medical equipment, hospital supplies and clothing to distribute in Central and Eastern Europe. It also spearheads efforts to restore Torah scrolls and conserve and preserve historic Jewish and Christian documents that languished under Communist rule.

Perhaps the most important work is the gossamer threads Dr. Brichto spins, connecting Jew to Catholic, America to the Ukraine.

She hopes to patch the bitter, historic rifts between these groups by showing them the possibility of doing good things, that working together bears more fruit than fighting against each other. That they can “use the past to improve the future.”

Her husband, the late Rabbi Herbert Chanan Brichto, a former dean at Hebrew Union College and a Bible scholar, considered his wife “a pathological optimist.”

Dr. Brichto smiles at the memory. Her faith in people is not a sickness.

She recites a poem.

“Laugh at me,” she says, first in rhythmic Hebrew, then in English. “Laugh at me. Laugh at my dreams. Because I believe in man.”

A dark line curved below the knuckle of his pinky finger, but Dr. Brichto's father didn't let the scar on his hand spread hate like gangrene.

Rabbi Aladar Pollak and his wife, Riza, were deeply religious and believed all people were valued in the eyes of God. He wouldn't let a night of terror change the foundation of his faith.

In the ink of night, her father, Rabbi Pollak and his family hid in the attic of their home in a small Hungarian town in the early 1920s.

Story of father

The soldiers, hungry and drunk, rummaged around the first floor, and one of the daughters began crying. The soldiers started up the stairs, and Rabbi Pollak put his hand in her mouth to muffle the sound. The girl bit through the skin, all the way to the bone, but it was suddenly quiet.

The soldiers stopped halfway up, apparently having decided the noise they heard was the sounds of geese. They left, stealing the birds on their way out.

In 1924, her family emigrated to McKeesport, Pa., in the southwestern corner of the state. Dr. Brichto, Milly to her seven sisters and three brothers, was born in 1927.

When her father died seven years later from cancer, he left an ethical will. “My beloved children,” it started. In longhand German Yiddish, he gave moral and ethical advice to the children he would not see grow up.

Once a month, the family gathered to re-read the will. Dr. Brichto still can remember pieces of it.

No tale-bearing. Value education. Respect each other. Respect their mother.

The family moved to Brooklyn, so the children would have better access to Jewish education.

By the mid-1930s, stories trickled in. They heard of soldiers lining up Jews and arbitrarily shooting them at a place called Dachau in southern Germany.

“We knew some of the horror,” Dr. Brichto says, “but we couldn't hardly believe it.”

Her mother opened the doors to their brownstone home to Jewish refugees. It was common to sleep four and five to a bed. Around the kitchen table, the refugees talked of the mass killings in Europe.

One man recounted how soldiers emptied a rabbinical school in Lithuania. The soldiers led the 2,000 to 3,000 students into the woods and shot them. The man escaped somehow, but before he left, his teacher told him to rebuild the school someplace else.

Dr. Brichto's mother held a ladies tea and raised $300 to $400. The man went to Cleveland and founded a Talmudic academy that still is open today.

“You can use good for evil,” Dr. Brichto says. “You can use evil for good.”

Swords into plowshares

The floor of Dr. Brichto's house in Cincinnati is scuffed. Dust hides in some corners; her life is too busy to worry about that. But the fine craftsmanship in the zigzag pattern of walnut still is apparent.

Dr. Brichto has a story.

The man who built the house in 1919 wanted to replicate a Williamsburg style. That included walnut floors. But World War I put a pinch on the walnut market, with the wood used for stocks of rifles.

After the war, the man bought the surplus military rifles, sliced off the walnut stocks and built his floor.

The Bible talks of beating swords into plowshares, crafting weapons of war into instruments of peace and prosperity.

“The pain that was experienced (in the Holocaust) is unredeemable,” Dr. Brichto says. “Part of being human is to have memory. But we are more than just the memory of the Holocaust.”

Dr. Brichto raised three children and delights in her five grandchildren. She earned her doctorate degrees from the University of Cincinnati and has taught children both in

secular and religious classrooms.

Some of her most important work was done in secret.

Until the Iron Curtain fell, Dr. Brichto worked surreptiously to conserve and preserve documents. She enlisted the help of Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, the former Archbishop of Cincinnati and a good friend. Together, they embarked on an international, interfaith journey to bring physical and spiritual healing.

Cardinal Bernardin's connections and Dr. Brichto's tenacity paved the way.

“We all lived through World War II, and we know people who didn't,” Dr. Brichto says. “This is preventive anti-terrorism. This is something we can do today.”

After the fall of Communism in 1989, Dr. Brichto's work became more public. Three years later, she established R'fa-aye-nu.

The society delivered the first mammography unit to southeastern Poland and transferred surplus medical supplies from the Department of Defense to the country. R'fa-aye-nu gave financial assistance this past winter when a mining accident in eastern Ukraine killed 81 people.

It also has brought Jewish and Christian groups together to work toward common goals. In April, a Ukrainian Greek Catholic bishop sent a letter to his government, asking for the return of Torah scrolls to synagogues.

“This is probably unprecedented in that landscape, in that part of the world,” Dr. Brichto says, “that the spokesman on behalf of the religious needs of the Jewish people would be a Ukrainian Greek Catholic bishop. It would have been unimaginable in any other time.”

Affirmation of life

On Mother's Day, Dr. Brichto rang up U.S. Rep. Marcy Kaptur, who represents the Toledo area. She wanted to share good news about an upcoming project in the Ukraine and called the congresswoman at home.

Four hours later, Dr. Brichto hosted the wedding of her daughter, Katey, at her home. She escorted the bride down the steps. She walked — even though she had threatened to slide.

The guests, Jewish and Christian, young and old, milled around the spacious house and danced to jazz and rock, to clog music and Jewish folk songs.

It doesn't seem incongruous to Dr. Brichto that she would work to help the people of Ukraine just hours before 100 people arrived at her home.

She makes a seamless transition from international advocate to doting mother. For her, it is part of the continuum of affirming life in all ways.

A 3-foot by 2-foot frame hangs in the hall of Dr.

Brichto's home. Her mother embroidered the picture of two plump women, one working in the kitchen, the other making a visit. It personifies a Bible verse from Leviticus that forbids gossip.

The translation from Hungarian is, “Neighbor lady, go away. You cannot gossip here.”

Dr. Brichto gazes at the picture, grease spots and a blackened smudge telling of the days it hung above the kitchen stove of her childhood home.

“Real religious living,” she says, “is built into your living, not from dogma.”

Brichto's projects build understanding