

Space for life

The Jerusalem Hills Therapeutic Centers offers at-risk youth a brighter future

BARRY DAVIS



The Abu Ghosh campus provides at-risk youngsters with a safe, supportive environment. (Orna Ben Shitrit-Raz)

Just over 80 years ago, close to 1,000 Polish-born “Teheran Children” arrived in British Mandate Palestine after a long, circuitous, and tortuous journey from Iran.

They were the first large group of Holocaust survivors to make it over here after being expelled from their native Poland to the USSR and enduring hunger, cold, disease, and untold existential challenges for four years before being dispatched by the Soviets to the Iranian capital. From there, Jewish Agency workers sprang into action and sent them by ship, train, and on foot to Palestine. There, local activists found homes for the children in kibbutzim, boarding schools, and Henrietta Szold youth villages.

After such a protracted traumatic episode, not all the youngsters were emotionally capable of adapting to life in the Land of Israel within normative frameworks. Thirty-four of them needed closer attention. Alert to their predicament, Henrietta

Szold, founder of Hadassah, the Women’s Zionist Organization of America, contacted the B’nai B’rith office in Jerusalem and asked for help.

She duly got that from the B’nai B’rith Jerusalem Lodge that agreed to house the fragile children on the second floor of the Beit Hannah Hostel on Ethiopia Street in downtown Jerusalem, in the care of experienced childcare professionals headed by Yehuda Dux. This led to the establishment, in 1943, of the Children’s Home.

That was the catalyst for what eventually became the Jerusalem Hills Therapeutic Centers (JHTC), on the outskirts of Abu Ghosh. It follows previous incarnations and offshoots, in Bayit Vagan and Gilo, in working to rehabilitate traumatized immigrant and Israeli children and youth and help them integrate into mainstream Israeli society.

Some of the milestones in that four-

score-year journey are displayed on the upper floor of the main building at the Abu Ghosh campus in an evocative and emotive exhibition of prints, devised by Orna Ben-Shitrit Raz and her husband, Museum of Eretz Israel photography curator, Guy Raz.

The collection does a good job of conveying the ambiance, dynamics, and milestones of the organization’s timeline to date. That is very much down to the caliber of the snappers.

“The early photographers who documented the institution were among the best photographers of the day,” the curators say. “The home where the first children lived on Ethiopia Street, in 1943, was captured by Zvi Oron.”

Bialystok, Poland-born Oron was a much sought-after photojournalist during the British Mandate and served as the high commissioner’s official photographer. Israel Prize laureate David Rubinger is also on

the exhibition roll call and, together with Czech-born Rudi Weissenstein, who established the legendary Pri-Or photography store in Tel Aviv. He recorded the opening of the Bayit Vagan home in the mid-1950s. With camera-toting firepower like that, you can’t go far wrong.

The exhibition features moving, fun, and joyous moments from the institution’s bio. And walking around the campus with Director of Resource Development and Community Relations Naama Gur Peleg, one gets the notion that the happiness-inducing factor is high on the JHTC agenda.

There is a palpable sense of attention paid to aesthetics, and staff members do their utmost to make their young charges feel at home and accepted.

“We want the children to feel we respect them, and to provide them with a place that is comfortable and pleasant,” says Gur Peleg as she shows me around one of the residential buildings. The bedrooms I saw certainly looked a lot more welcoming than my university dorms room, 40-something years ago, in Ramat Aviv.

Safe space for children

At any one time, there are around 100 children and youth, aged six to 15, in care at Abu Ghosh, largely referred there by the Social Welfare Ministry.

“We are categorized as a post-hospitalization boarding school,” Gur Peleg explains. “Some of the children come to us after [psychiatric] hospitalization, and some come to us instead of being hospitalized. All the children who come here suffer from severe psychological damage, which is a result of what they experienced in their earliest years.”

The remedial and care philosophy behind the place is called Therapy in Life Space, devised by Chezi Cohen, a German-born psychoanalyst who ran the home for four decades, and after whom the Abu Ghosh campus is now named.

Part of the therapeutic approach involves providing the children, who have been through so much and spent their formative years feeling unloved and neglected, with a

well-structured daily schedule. The weekly timetable I saw, pinned up on a noticeboard in one of the dormitories, clearly delivered on that score.

After rising at 7:30 a.m., the kids start school around an hour later, followed by lunch, then free time in their rooms. Then there are organized activities, afternoon tea, time to tidy up their rooms and stuff, supper, group sessions, and an end-of-day summation session.

"Each dormitory has 12 children. They live, eat, and do everything else together, and they go to school together," Gur Peleg says. Presumably, that engenders something of a team spirit and helps the children develop friendships and relationships, something they sorely lacked before they got to the JHTC.

The program is also designed to instill in the children a sense of responsibility and self-esteem. They take turns, for example, to serve the others at meal times, and to wash the dishes.

The institution is heavily staffed with therapists, caregivers, teachers, and other employees who are very much hands-on with each and every child. The accent is on developing close supportive relationships and fostering a sense of trust. These are children who generally arrive at the institution after experiencing abuse – emotional and physical – and who view the world around them as threatening and downright frightening.

Noting the plural form of the institution's name – Jerusalem Hills Therapeutic Centers – I was enlightened by executive director Noa Haas, a psychoanalyst. "The *amuta* (nonprofit) has a children's home, and we have a therapy and training center which runs various courses. We have a psychotherapy course, and we have shorter courses for coordinators and counselors, dedicated courses," she says.

"And there is now also a psychotherapy course for haredim," Gur Peleg pipes up. "That is revolutionary." Indeed, expanding the caregiving hinterland for severely traumatized children has to be a winning move on all fronts.

Looking toward a curative end I was beginning to get the idea that the JHTC not only provides a home and, hopefully, a fresh start in life for traumatized children and youth, but it also spreads the word as far and wide as it can.

"We see ourselves as a body that disseminates our know-how. And we



The Jerusalem Hills Therapeutic Centers began life on Ethiopia Street in downtown Jerusalem in 1943. (Zvi Oron)



The Children's Home's first director, Yehuda Dux, with some of the 'Teheran Children.' (Zvi Oron)

have an outpatient clinic for ambulatory care for children and youth," Haas adds. That's quite a purview. "One of the aims of the *amuta* is not only to care for the 90 or so children we have here but also to impact the whole therapy approach and how to address children with severe psychological disorders."

That takes place on a truly global level. "I am a member of the European Psychoanalytical Federation," Haas continues. "The federation came to visit, and psychoanalysts from India came here. We have professional ties with people whose therapy philosophy is similar to ours."

That follows Chezi Cohen's lead, as well as the general line of therapeutic thinking. "It is about working with the children through listening to them, not necessarily by means of drugs or short-term care."

Haas says the institution takes a comprehensive overview of the children's needs and is willing to go the extra yard or two – and bide its time – in order to achieve the desired curative end result.

"There are quicker fixes which, ostensibly, are less expensive for the system. But, in the long term, they prove to be inefficient. The children come back through a revolving door."

Even so, Haas says that not all the children and youth in their care leave the institution fully equipped to cope with the outside world.

"Unfortunately, some have to leave mid-process because they reach an



Rachel Yanait Ben-Zvi (third from left), educator and wife of then-president Yitzhal Ben-Zvi, at the inauguration of the new campus in Bayit Vagan. (Pri-Or)

age when they can no longer stay here. They have to leave after ninth grade. We used to have older kids but, for budgetary reasons, we can't

have that anymore. So, they leave for other frameworks if they can't go back to their homes."

For Haas, it is all about taking the

The Next Generation



JHTC children lead a very active life based on a well-structured daily schedule. (Orna Ben Shitrit-Raz)



Children's Home youth seek a better future. (JHTC B'nai B'rith Archives)



Late long-serving JHTC executive director Chezi Cohen with one of the children. (JHTC B'nai B'rith Archives)

children as individuals and following their progress as closely as possible, from the outset. "I came here in 1984," she recalls. "I learned about the institutional thinking of not only seeing the children in their dorms. Our presence as professionals in the life space is important, not only with regard to my seeing them later in the therapy room. I can go to break-fast and observe the children and see how they are getting on. That is very important."

THE RELATIONSHIP with the parents is also of great importance. Parents – although not all – go to Abu Ghosh every week to spend time with their children and sit with social workers and other members of staff. They get a progress report and are kept on board with the arduous process of helping the children get up to speed socially, emotionally, and academically.

That isn't always easy and, as one social worker put it, "They see us as

rivals for their children's affection. To come here, for them, is the symbol of their biggest failure. It shows they have failed [as parents]."

And there are even more challenging situations whereby the parents (or parent) don't want, or are unable, to participate in their child's road to recovery. Sometimes, parents don't make the telephone call that their child has been eagerly anticipating, turn up for their weekly appointment, or even host their

child at home for a weekend every three weeks. That leaves the child in an almost completely deserted campus for a couple of days, while his or her pals are at home in the bosom of their families. In such cases, the children who don't have anywhere to go are cared for by members of staff.

"Unfortunately, there are quite a few children who don't have anywhere to go," says Haas. "We have a rota system with the managers and other employees. We are open 365 days a year."

No effort is spared to make sure the children get the attention and care they need and can feel safe and secure. Nur Peleg says there are 17 caregivers and other professionals for every dozen children.

"There is an organic team," Haas explains. "There are three tutors, three teachers, a psychologist, a coordinator, and a social worker. And there are *shinshinim* (youngsters on *shnat sherut*, a service gap year prior to recruitment to the IDF) and psychology and social-work internees."

"There are also teachers who come here to gain practical experience," Gur Peleg adds. It reminds one of the adage "It takes a whole village to raise one child."

The system has borne rewarding fruit over the years, with around 70% of JHTC alumni going on to find their place in Israeli society. That requires great effort and, naturally, financial investment. B'nai B'rith dropped out of the picture some years ago, and donations are always gratefully accepted.

The folks at the JHTC clearly have their work cut out for them. As any teacher at a regular school will, no doubt, testify, it ain't easy coping with a class of kids who may not be constantly on the same wavelength. Try doing that with children and youth who have taken more than their fair share of knocks at a tender age and come to the campus with severe attention disorders and all manner of emotional baggage.

"We don't always succeed," says Gur Peleg. "There are children we can't help, unfortunately, but we do our best to give them the care and support, and a sense of security, which hopefully offer them a better brighter future."

You can't ask for much more than that. ■

For more information:
childrenshome.org.il/en/