A hospital with history

Judy Siegel-Itzkovich, THE JERUSALEM POST   Jun. 23, 2007

Berlin's 250-year-old Jewish Hospital has saved lives with more than surgery, medication and treatment. When the Nazis wanted to round up its Jewish patients nearly seven decades ago, staffers painted their skin with dots to give the impression that they suffered from a terrible contagious disease. The Nazis put the hospital under quarantine, and hundreds were saved from the gas chambers.

The Holocaust was an extremely painful, if relatively short, period in the history of Germany's oldest existing Jewish institution.

Berlin-Jewish has produced a traveling exhibition about its two-and-a-half centuries. Developed by students at the University of Potsdam and the Moses Mendelssohn Center for European Jewish Studies in Potsdam, the 22-section exhibit was completed last December and opened to patients, staffers and many young visitors. The following spring, it was shipped to Jerusalem's Shaare Zedek Medical Center.

The launching ceremony at the Jerusalem hospital - established by German Jews 105 years ago - was attended by Mattias Platzeck, prime minister of the German state of Brandenburg, who flew over for the event, along with hospital director Dr. Jechezkel Singer, University of Potsdam president Prof. Sabine Kunst and Moses Mendelssohn Center director Prof. Julius Schoeps.

Several weeks later, it was packed up and moved to Beit Ariela in Tel Aviv, and it will soon be on display at the Rambam Medical Center in Haifa. From there it flies to New York, where it will be on display from October in the foyer of Mount Sinai Hospital.

THE ANNIVERSARY has also been marked with the production of three documentaries on the hospital; the stories of four eyewitnesses who were in it during the Nazi era, and a filmed documentation on the exhibit from its inception to the opening.

Beaming Potsdam university students (almost none of them Jewish) who researched, prepared and built the exhibition were on hand at the Shaare Zedek opening at the end of April, and wore T-shirts prepared specially for the event. A 200-page catalog and history of the hospital, called From Heqdesh (hostel for sick travelers) to Hightech: The 250 years of the Jewish Hospital as Reflected in the History of Berlin Jewry, the volume is full of drawings, pictures and text on the surging, decimation and rejuvenation of the Jewish community and the hospital.

Nahum Pessin, Shaare Zedek's associate director-general for development (who spoke in place of hospital director-general Prof. Jonathan Halevy, who was abroad), said it is "the only German-Jewish hospital in the State of Israel.

Virtually everything in the original building on Jaffa Road came from Germany - the beds, doors, handles and equipment." Shaare Zedek's founding director-general, Dr. Moshe Wallach, and his successor, Dr. Falk Schlesinger, both came from Germany, as did the first registered nurse to arrive in Palestine, Schwester Selma Mayer. Today, in its present location

near Mount Herzl, Shaare Zedek has 500 beds, compared to 343 in the Berlin Jewish Hospital.

PLATZECK SAID Brandenberg had a long history of Jewish residence, and that it could not ignore the "dark history of Germany" during the Nazi era.

Today, he continued, there is a migration of Jews from the former Soviet Union, and Potsdam even has a new synagogue under construction. Singer, who also heads one of the Berlin hospital's internal medicine departments, added that in the late 18th century, it treated nearly 400 patients. One witness wrote that "sick people of all kinds are admitted, be it locals, servants or students, whether foreigners from Poland, Prussia or from the Empire who either got ill here or who have been sent here to be cured. The care is exceptionally good, and the doctor prescribes the best and most expensive medicine - when necessary, they even order wine, chicken and chocolate." At the Shaare Zedek event, refreshments intentionally included wine, chocolate and (pareve) chicken soup.

"We at the Jewish Hospital see ourselves as successors and continuers of a longstanding medical tradition. For many centuries, the Jewish community of Berlin has held the belief that a community is there to provide help to the sick and weak. In Judaism, tzedaka (charity) and bikur holim (visiting the sick) belong to the most important obligations of communal life," Singer said.

Today, located in Heinz Galinski Street (named for the longtime late head of the German Jewish community) in the city's Wedding district, Berlin's Jewish Hospital is a trauma hospital that treats over 20,000 people a year. In addition to emergency rooms are surgery, internal medicine, neurology and psychiatry departments and special vascular, abdominal, heart insufficiency, multiple sclerosis, addiction and other centers.

The catalog provides a fascinating account of the ups and downs of Jewish settlement in Berlin. Jews were first mentioned as having been in the city in 1295, when a guild codicil enacted by the city council stated that local wool weavers were prohibited from purchasing thread from Jews - but the codicil did not mean that Jews had settled in Berlin; they may have been wandering tradesmen.

The first official mention of Jews settled in the city was in a legal document from 1317 in which Count Waldemar confirmed that all Jews living there who had committed a crime fell under the authority of the city magistrate. In 1501, a Jewish tinker was accused of having purchased ritual objects stolen from a church, and the accusation against one Jew was applied to Jews of the whole area. This libel turned into accusations of ritual murder of Christian children, and in 1510, 38 Jews were burned alive in the marketplace, followed by the expulsion of all Jews from Brandenburg. But in 1671, Jewish refugees expelled from Vienna were allowed to settle in Berlin, and this is considered the founding of the community. The foundation stone for the first synagogue was laid in 1712, and the father of the Jewish Enlightenment, Moses Mendelssohn - who translated parts of the Hebrew Bible into German (in Hebrew letters) - was born in Dessau around 1729. "For Mendelssohn, there was no contradiction in being a Germany man of the Enlightenment and a religious and law-abiding Jew at the same time," the catalog notes.

THE COMMUNITY grew, and Jewish health services had their beginnings in the early 18th century. In Berlin and other large settlements, Jews employed their own doctors. They were not allowed to acquire a university degree in medicine until the end of the 18th century, but medical knowledge was passed from father to son or son-in-law.

In 1756, the Jewish Hospital was built on Oranienburger Street near the Jewish cemetery of Berlin. "It is four stories high and 20 windows wide. The building includes 12 rooms, five for female and seven for male patients. There is also a convalescence hall, a storage room, a prayer parlor and an apartment for the director," stated one witness in 1791. A Sephardi physician, Benjamin de Lemos, became medical director in 1760, and his son-in-law Marcus Herz succeeded him in 1779. Herz had a dispute with Jakob Marx, a representative of the Hevra Kadisha (burial society) about the danger of burying people alive.

It was agreed that a feather or a mirror had to be used to prevent premature funerals: If the mirror did not fog up or the feather did not move, the patient was officially dead.

Then, in 1857, the Jewish community bought land on August Street and built new premises for the hospital, which opened in 1861. It was regarded as one of the most modern hospitals in Europe, and even had mobile bathtubs wheeled to the bedside and four water closets (toilets) on each of the four floors. A hypobaric chamber was built in 1875 to treat bronchitis and asthma patients with compressed air. When a diphtheria epidemic broke out in Berlin in 1883, an isolation unit was built to minimize the risk of infection. The next year, a nursing school for Jewish women (who were not accepted to Christian nursing schools) opened to teach medical methods, medication guidelines and treatment.

THE THIRD and final premises for the hospital is in Berlin's Wedding district, which was a working-class neighborhood at the beginning of the 20th century. Jews comprised less than 1% of the population, but the area was chosen because of cheap land; the new building opened in 1914, just before the outbreak of World War I.

Anti-Semitism flourished as Jews were accused of being "cowardly war deserters" even though the proportion joining the war was far higher than their numbers in the population. Despite the shortage of equipment, the hospital treated many war wounded. A steady influx of Jewish refugees from Eastern Europe bolstered the local Jewish community. The Weimar Republic brought political turbulence and inflation, and some Zionist Jews made their way to Palestine. In 1933, the National Socialists took over Germany, and 80 Jewish doctors - including the director of the Jewish Hospital - were arrested on the pretext that they belonged to a "Marxist, communist and anarchist" organization.

With the Nuremberg Laws, non-Jewish doctors increasingly refused to treat Jewish patients, and in 1938, all Jewish doctors' medical licenses were revoked. Soon, Jews could be treated only by "caregivers to the sick" rather than trained doctors. Many Jewish physicians left for the US or Palestine.

During Kristallnacht (November 9-10, 1938), the Jewish hospital was spared the savage violence that desecrated and destroyed synagogues and Jewish institutions throughout Germany. But some of the 20,000 (mostly male) Jews arrested by the Nazis included Jewish Hospital doctors, who were deported to concentration camps. One, Hermann Strauss, died in Teresienstadt almost 40 years after he invented the lifesaving procedure of colonoscopy. A prison ward with 20 beds was installed on the hospital's second floor. Some of the numerous Berlin Jews who attempted suicide with gas or sleeping pills in the face of deportations ended up in the Jewish Hospital for treatment; an estimated 7,000 killed themselves before the Nazi dictatorship fell.

THE NAZIS established a "department for the investigation of transport claims" in the hospital, where doctors had to decide whether Jews who applied for exemption from deportation for health reasons were able to be taken away. In November, the Jewish Hospital

was forcibly sold to the Academy for Youth Medicine, and the Gestapo and Criminal Police tried to liquidate it completely. But the New Reich Organization was established on the hospital grounds. A psychiatric ward was opened in 1942 to admit mentally ill Jews from all over Germany who until then had escaped "euthanasia"; the following year, they were deported to extermination camps. A total of 36,000 Berlin Jews were deported to death camps between 1941 and 1945.

Finally, on May 25, 1945 - just three weeks after the surrender of the German capital, pharmacist Erich Zwilsky became the Jewish Hospital's managing director, assuming responsibility for the only Jewish institution that had remained in operation throughout the war. A total of 145 beds became available for patients, among them many displaced persons. There were only 6,000 Jews remaining in Germany, compared to 170,000 toward the end of the Weimar Republic. The hospital became a foundation run by a board of trustees in 1963, following negotiations with the Berlin Senate, and reconstruction and expansion began.

Today, with its 71 doctors and more than 400 other employees, Berlin's Jewish Hospital cares annually for 11,000 inpatients and 9,000 outpatients of all religions and backgrounds. Looking hopefully to the future, with this exhibition it has not forgotten its past.