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One Dollar

New book on beginnings of Selfhelp Home



Dorothy Becker

When Ursula Levy's aunt and uncle moved into the Selfhelp Home on Chicago's North Side, she became intrigued by the home and its residents, most of them Holocaust survivors from Germany.

Levy, a psychiatric nurse clinician and nurse for the Chicago Public Schools and a Holocaust survivor herself, met Dorothy Becker, the co-founder and director of the home. She was impressed by Becker's philosophy of celebrating the lives of the aging residents.

In fact, Levy says, she looked forward to visiting her aunt and uncle because the atmosphere at Selfhelp was so upbeat and festive—far different from most other facilities for the elderly.

After Levy's relatives died, she continued visiting Becker at the home and struck up a friendship with her. Becker, she soon discovered, had been asked to write her memoirs but was modest and had trouble writing about herself. She asked Levy to do it for her.

The resulting biography, "The Spirit Builder—The Life and Times of Dorothy Becker: A Breakthrough View of Aging",

emerged from hours of taped interviews with Becker, her daughter, friends, colleagues, and Selfhelp residents, employees and volunteers.

Becker was born in Berlin in 1910. After Hitler seized power, the Beckers fled Germany in 1937 and settled in Chicago's Hyde Park neighborhood.

Unlike most of the immigrant women in their predominantly German Jewish neighborhood, she didn't have to find employment because her husband was a physician. Two months after she arrived in Chicago, Becker and four other women decided to form a group to help other immigrant women who couldn't afford to take off from work when their children got sick. They went into their homes, took care of the children, cooked, cleaned, and shopped. The group eventually became Selfhelp.

At the home, Levy says, every person is valued and every day is a celebration of life. Becker's philosophy of aging, built into the foundation of the Selfhelp Home, predated by several decades the current research on aging. Becker died in 1999.

Levy's book, just published, follows Becker's life story and the intertwined story of the Selfhelp Home. It includes a wealth of photos plus an appendix of documents important in the history of Selfhelp, lists of its early volunteers, and more.