Purim in Israel

Purim is a time of merry-making in Israel -- the local version of the Carnival or Mardi Gras, when costumed children roam the streets for anything up to a week. Miniature policemen stop huge buses, three-foot-high "kings" lord it over bands of "gangsters," and mothers heave a sigh of relief after weeks of hectic preparations.

But the grown-ups, too, enter into the spirit of this festival, which commemorates the saving of Jews in Persia from the wrath of King Xerxes (Ahasverus) by the wiles of beautiful Esther, though costumes for them are not obligatory and their celebrations usually have a simpler character.

Perhaps the most interesting of all the Purim parties in Israel last year took place in Nathanya, because nearly all of the 200 hosts at this party were over 70 years old. But this did not prevent them from thinking up the most original costumes and putting on some lively sketches for their guests, who averaged "only" 40 years of age.

The scene was an old-age home, established only a short time before by Malben, the Joint Distribution Committee's welfare program in Israel, a home for aged immigrants without means and without relatives able to take care of them. The "guests" at this party were the social workers, doctors, nurses, occupational therapists and even the Directors of Malben -- in fact, all those who had helped to get these 200 aged from canvas huts in temporary immigrant camps into their new home, gleaming with the sheen of fresh paint. The "invitations" were a sign of gratitude, for the 200 aged men and women had been in their new home but a few weeks -- the forerunners of the 460 aged who have been accommodated in the other buildings of the Nathanya home which have been built since last Purim.

Anybody not in the know, seeing the whirling figures of 70-year-old ladies enjoying an old-fashioned Viennese waltz, or the courtly old gentlemen, asking with a
deep old-fashioned bow for a dance with a pretty, 20-year-old nurse, or the immense enthusiasm with which a group of ten old folk acted out a brief sketch, would not have believed that these people, full of the joy of life, were the same ones who, bedraggled and despondent, had to slosh their way through muddy, primitive camps only a few weeks earlier.

This transformation had had such a profound effect on their outlook on life that many had begun to think of marrying again, despite their advanced age (most of the so-called "single" people in the home are widows or widowers). Thus, one of the sketches was of a quintuple marriage ceremony, with ten old ladies and gentlemen arrayed in mock wedding finery.

The aged made it clear that they were aware that this miraculous transition to life in clean, comfortable buildings, with occupations suited to their state of health and strength, was due to the generosity of American Jewry who, by their contributions to JDC through the United Jewish Appeal, made possible the erection of this home, as well as of 15 other Malben old-age homes, which by now shelter over 2,400 aged newcomers to Israel. "I wish we could have had a few American visitors here tonight," a Rabbi's wife from Budapest said thoughtfully. "If they could only see what all this means to us, to be able to enjoy ourselves for the first time in 15 years without fear of arrest, persecution or starvation, I think they would feel well repaid for all the help they are giving us."

2/24/55