



NEIGHBORHOOD STORIES

By Bette McDevitt

Alef Chair Restoration, Squirrel Hill

Howard Reisner and I were conversing in his shop when a young man came in to inquire about having a chair repaired. For a moment he looked around, silent, and then exhaled in a soft voice, “Holy smoke!”

There are chairs everywhere. Yellow chairs, cane back chairs, upholstered chairs, dining room chairs, chairs outside the door of the small shop, inside the shop, hanging from the walls, and squatting all over in various stages of repair and disrepair. After all, this is the Alef Chair Restoration Shop on lower Murray Avenue in Squirrel Hill, and Howard Reisner is the “chairman.” The young man described his own problem chair, and Reisner boomed, “Bring it in! If it’s a chair, I can fix it!”

This is a neighborhood where chairs hanging from the walls would not be frowned upon. People still stroll on Murray Avenue, dipping into the recesses of long, skinny stores that sell merchandise from around the world and food of varied ethnicities.

Reisner sanded a small piece of wood, a box to hold a Jewish prayer scroll, as he spun the tale of how he became an expert in the restoration of chairs. His interest in woodworking began in high school classes in New Jersey, and he moved on to design office space for large corporations in New York. When the economy took a downturn

in the ’80s, he returned to woodworking and furniture restoration.

He and his wife, Lenore, moved to Pittsburgh from New Jersey in 1994 so his four younger children could attend the Yeshiva School in Squirrel Hill. “We had already sent our two older children to school there, and rather than pay room and board for the four younger ones to attend, we moved here. My wife got a job teaching there, and it has worked out very well.” He opened the shop in Squirrel Hill, specializing in chairs. Although Reisner pays his bills by woodworking, he considers himself a rabbi, a “street rabbi,” as he calls it, and he looks the part with a Moses-type long beard. His work and his spiritual life are intertwined. Alef, part of the name of his shop, is the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, the foundation of all the other letters, which give meaning to everything in the universe, according to Reisner.

The Reisners have 15 grandchildren from their six children, not uncommon in the Hasidic branch of Judaism to which they belong, known as the Chabad Lubavitch movement. None of his children have followed



him into woodworking. “They tell me it has to be more than just learning how to do it. You have to have the desire and the artistic talent to do it, and also the hands-on mechanics. I can lay the pieces out on the floor like a skeleton, and see how they should go together.”

That’s just what he did with chairs that had been damaged in New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina. The owner of the chairs brought them in pieces in several plastic bags. “This will take a year,” Reisner told the owner. The chairs, made in France, were decorated in gold leaf. “I had to hand carve some new pieces, take out old rusty tacks, and drill new holes.” In a year, the chairs were restored, and are now in the owner’s dining room.

“I love chairs,” he said. “The ones people bring to me are personal. It may be a young woman who wants to rock her new baby in the same chair in which her mother rocked her as a baby. Or a couple married 50 years who wants to restore their dining room chairs and pass them on to their children.”

Reisner takes special pride in the restoration of a chair that was made in Lebanon 1,500 years ago. “It wasn’t so hard. The wood was almost petrified. I tightened up some loose parts and restored mother-of-pearl inserts.”

He never turns away a chair. “I always tell people to ‘bring it in.’ Sometimes I get pieces of a chair mailed to me in a big carton. Then I go home and say to my wife, ‘How am I ever going to fix that chair?’ But I do, and my reward is when the customer is pleased with the result.”

Bette McDevitt is a regular contributor to *Western Pennsylvania History*.