

Fred DeZwiger

A PARADISE FOR THE INSANE

INITIATED FOURTEEN CENTURIES AGO by the tragic death of a beautiful Irish princess beheaded by her crazed father, the care of some 3,000 insane persons is today the unique mass vocation of the 20,000 Flemish inhabitants of Geel. The only place in the world where mental patients enjoy the run of a whole town like tourists at a year-round resort, this neat little Belgian cobblestone and brick-house city is every visitor's idea of a paradise for the mentally ill.

Motoring through the sandy, unfertile country east of Antwerp, we came to a small town stretched along a score of narrow cobblestoned streets, its houses looking possibly a little cleaner still than those that we had seen in other Flemish towns earlier that morning. In its centre, a huge and incredibly ancient church would impress even the most sophisticated sightseer. The windows of the neat little red-brick houses were decked with dainty lace-edged curtains. But time was running short and we still wanted to get a glimpse of Oolen—where Congo radium and uranium concentrates are processed—before heading back to Antwerp.

We asked a pedestrian how to get to the Herenthals highway. "I couldn't tell you, I'm afraid. You see, I am *l'empereur Napoléon* and just returned here myself from Moscow. If you will excuse me, monsieur", said this middle-aged man in a bedraggled business suit, taking his leave not without some dignity. We tried another. "The way to Herenthals? Sure; you drive straight down this street, turn *right* at the traffic lights and keep going. It won't take you more than ten minutes!" By this time, a woman had come up to the car and, as our helpful guide crossed the street, she excitedly volunteered: "Don't listen to him, he's crazy. You want to turn *left* at those lights. I should know, I've been driving a steamroller between Herenthals and Geel for more than twenty-five years."

In a flash, we realized that this was the famous place we had heard about from a Brussels psychiatrist, the unique instance of a whole town acting as one large mental institution, some twenty thousand ordinary small-town folk whose chosen vocation

—in America one might call it a part-time job—is the care of some 3,000 insane boarders. Here in Geel as nowhere else in the world it is rather the mentally normal who feel out of place, while the neurotic, the paranoiac, and the schizophrenic enjoy the run of the town, perform whatever limited services they are capable of, and live as nearly normal lives as could be hoped for.

The key to it all is an expertly run medical transit station or “placing committee” where some of Belgium’s best neurologists carefully control admission of **mental patients** to the town’s 2,000-odd foster homes, and where boarders are quieted whenever they become temporarily unruly. Thanks to the fourteen centuries of experience in dealing with mental idiosyncrasies, Geel foster parents make it possible for the station’s neurologists to admit even surprisingly difficult cases with very few of these placings ending in failure and eventual transfer to a regular mental hospital elsewhere. As a rule, however, they are so competent and so proud of their skill that the worst insult a Geel foster-family can suffer is to have no more boarders entrusted to its care.

The spectacular results obtained at Geel have led to attempts to establish “open institutions” in other countries, but few of these experiments have succeeded. The most successful application has probably been that of the “Family Care Program” initiated by the State of California in 1939. In too many cases, unfortunately, even several years of painstaking training could not make up for the centuries of experience in the delicate art of approaching mental patients which has been accumulated by the residents of Geel. These simple country people, and their children from earliest youth, know probably more about the many idiosyncrasies attached to insanity than even the best neurologists can suspect, because their knowledge is grounded in practical experience and because they have devised their own efficient though wholly unscientific terms to describe the numerous symptoms.

Geel’s massive church, dedicated about 1450 A.D., and its archives dating back to the twelfth century, are ample historic evidence of the town’s traditional devotion to the sick of mind. And yet, even beyond these two dates, sagas and legends point as far back as the sixth century A.D. to the original starting point of this unique career in *caring for* rather than *curing* the insane. Cautiously picking his words, the chief psychiatrist at the transit station gave us a scientist’s version of the story of the unfortunate princess Dymphna of Ireland. Many events from this legend are artistically portrayed inside the church, and our medical friend reminded us that many of Europe’s legends have been proved to contain at least a core of fact.

When the heathen king of Ireland lost his wife, messengers were dispatched to search the island for another mate worthy of his royal throne. But as one by one

the couriers returned they all brought back the same frustrating report: no maiden in the land was prettier or more worthy of becoming the Erse queen than was his own daughter Dymphna. Seized by the Evil Spirit, the legend continues, the heathen king then and there decided to marry his own daughter. Dymphna, however, was a devout Christian and would not listen to her father's incestuous proposal. Her refusal so enraged him that the girl and her father-confessor, Gerebernus, were forced to flee from Ireland in great secrecy. Tossed hither and thither in a small sailing vessel, they finally reached port at Antwerp and from there continued their flight inland. At the small village of Geel, some thirty miles due east of the port, they felt safe from pursuit, built themselves a hut in the vicinity of a rustic chapel, and there, attended by two faithful servants, they spent their days in prayer and fasting.

Meanwhile the king was searching all Europe to avenge his wounded pride, and when, as fate would have it, the fugitives were discovered he first had Gerebernus slain in front of Dymphna and then with his own sword beheaded his daughter. King and retinue then vanished from the scene. Awestruck, the villagers buried the two martyrs, whose fame soon spread across the land. Obviously, Saint Dymphna's fortitude had conquered the Evil Spirit. Gradually she came to be honoured as the protectress of the possessed. From far and wide the mentally ill began to undertake pilgrimages to worship at her shrine. In due course, God confirmed the girl's holiness by allowing many a miracle to be wrought on her tomb. About the middle of the fifteenth century, historical records take over from legend following the erection over the hallowed place of the present Geel church. At the same time several sickrooms were built near the place of worship for the convenience of mentally deranged pilgrims. And since we must assume that most if perhaps not all of these patients remained uncured by the supernatural powers of the sanctuary, it is only reasonable to conclude that more and more pilgrims stayed—or were kept there by their relatives—to enjoy the alternative of competent care by the good priests of St. Dymphna's. Money was never allowed to become an issue, since the indigent were treated free, "for the love of the Saviour". To pay for these cases the local citizenry were gradually asked to contribute offerings or services, which were reputed to be fraught with great blessings for their authors. It was in their efforts to supply such services to needy pilgrims that the local people began to take the wretched creatures into their houses as space in the church sickrooms became insufficient. For centuries, however, treatment of the insane itself was administered exclusively by the priests; and it is from their experience that modern Geel psychotherapy was to profit so much. Today all observation, diagnosis, treatment, and foster control are in the hands of university-trained neurologists. Passed on from the early Christian

ages to our present scientific era, this uninterrupted chain of medical tradition is probably another unique aspect of the Geel situation. And throughout these past 1400 years of medical progress, the nursing competence of the ordinary Geel villagers has provided the basic ingredient without which this miracle could probably not have lasted a week. This understanding care and this instinctive love of the foster parents for their charges appear to be the true miracle of Geel, a miracle far greater than could be the spectacular cure of a few of its pilgrims. Of some 8,400 cases admitted between 1926 and 1950, 2,200 or 26 per cent went home either improved or cured!

Today as in past centuries, there is still no money to be made in accepting mentally deranged boarders—their relatives or health and welfare agencies pay only a nominal fee of from 25 to 50 cents a day. Nor would a Geel foster-family understand what you were talking about if you were to ask them whether they “clear” anything at the end of the year. They are quite content to simply *live* with their charges; they act out of traditional, infinitely deeper incentives than the profit motive. The entire institution would collapse the minute they would begin to figure out their costs and profits, and this relic of another age would vanish forever from the face of the earth. It is the very lack of these disinterested inner motives in most other people which has undermined so many attempts at applying similar methods elsewhere.

Apart from the medically controlled transit station, there is not a single public or private asylum in Geel. All mental patients are boarded in foster homes—usually in pairs—and for the youngsters a school provides specially adapted education to some 350 retarded, deranged, and epileptic children. “At first it is very hard for a mother to leave her abnormal child to strangers in this extraordinary town”, one visiting mother said, “but when on your second or third monthly trip you detect, if not an improvement of its mind, at least a greater degree of happiness caused no doubt by the *free* association with similarly handicapped children and the more naturally understanding approach of teachers and foster parents, you soon learn to forget your own frustrated ambitions and to view its future in terms of your child’s own limited aspirations and contentment.”

“That,” concluded the chief psychiatrist after the woman had left, “is the whole philosophy of Geel put in a nutshell. In this madmen’s paradise the entire town is their ward, their neighbours are their nurses, and it’s the outsiders who are crazy. This town’s first consideration is to take good care of its patients. And it knows from long experience that, in this atmosphere of unparalleled freedom and casual normality, many a mental case will effect a complete cure and return to his

family or his professional duties. At the same time, this place will rush no one; the hopelessly deranged and even the very difficult patients will have the best chance in the world to finish their days here as happily and as freely as you or I”.

“One more thing”, he added as an afterthought, “make sure you don’t publish my name in this article. If you do, I’ll want you to print the full list of our more than 2,000 foster families. Remember, *they* are the only irreplaceable, the truly important people around here.”

OUTLINE FOR A FRIEZE

Sara Van Alstyne Allen

Virtue is shown as a flat countenance, a lusterless eye,
 A figure quiet and purposeful. But vice shapes a new
 And livelier design. Caparisoned by night, in color of the sun,
 Trumpeting down the gates, they come, and people stand
 Uplifted in rejection; each hand protests, and yet
 The ears receive music wild and beautiful, golden coins
 Bubbling along sand. The violent eye, the flaming sky,
 The body twisted on an ivory rack, each plays its part
 Against the broken gate. The people, vanquished, wait,
 Naming in rhythmic alphabet anger, avarice, envy, gluttony,
 Hate, pride, sloth, words made for chanting as a banner soars
 Above the rusting armor and the bending spears.