

# 5 Island nursing homes linked to state inquiry

By ROBERT MIRALDI

Amid mounting pressure on Gov. Carey to appoint a special prosecutor to investigate abuses in the nursing home industry, investigators have revealed that one proposed and four existing nursing homes on Staten Island have been linked to the Bernard Bergman syndicate.

Bergman, an orthodox Jewish rabbi who allegedly has turned ownership of 100 metropolitan area nursing homes into a \$200-million empire, is presently under state and federal subpoena to answer questions about his cartel of homes.

Bergman, however, is reported to be in Vienna and could not be reached for comment.

The nursing homes which have been linked by investigators to the Bergman empire are Silver Lake, New Vanderbilt, Verrazano, New Brighton and the unopened Island View Care Center.

Additionally, the under-construction Anna Erica Health Related Facility and Home for Adults, a 427-bed facility at 200 Lafayette Ave., New Brighton, has also been linked to the Bergman cartel.

The information was supplied to the Advance primarily by investigators for Manhattan Assemblyman Andrew Stein, whose Temporary State Commission on Living Costs has been boring in recently on Bergman and his associates.

Also involved in compiling information on Bergman connections in Island nursing facilities was the Staten Island Community Corp., the Stapleton-based, federally-funded anti-poverty group which became interested in Bergman during an investigation into ownership of the Island View Care Center at 1000 Targee St., Concord.

The Stein Commission, in conjunction with a U.S. Senate Subcommittee of the Special Committee on Aging, will begin joint hearings Jan. 21 to investigate Medicaid frauds and political corruption in the nursing home industry.

Also presently conducting investigations into Bergman are the attorneys general of New York and New Jersey; the state Health Department; and the New Jersey State Commission of Investigation.

Meanwhile, the owners and operators of the implicated Island facilities have denied emphatically any connection with the Bergman empire.

"I have never dealt with Bergman, I'm not involved with him, I don't pay rent to him," said Solomon Heisler, operator and part owner of the New Vanderbilt Nursing Home, Vanderbilt and Tompkins Ave., Clifton.

"Maybe I met him," Heisler said in a telephone interview, "but never in any financial deals."

A research associate for Assemblyman Stein, however, calls Heisler a "biggie," in the Bergman syndicate. He said that there is no "definite" tie-up between Heisler and Bergman.

But, the spokesman said, "you can definitely say that there is a link between the Heisler homes and the Bergman syndicate."

He identified the Heisler-controlled homes as Silver Lake, Vanderbilt and Verrazano. The state Board of Social Welfare also lists Heisler as the operator of the Anna Erica facility and a title search at the County Clerk's office, St. George, reveals Heisler to be part owner of the New Brighton facility.

There are nine nursing homes on Staten Island. Three are non-profit. Heisler, Stein's office feels, controls four of the six proprietary homes on Staten Island.

The basic contention of Stein investigators, backed up by a report recently released by the New York State Public Health Council, is that nursing home owners are engaged in a "gigantic Monopoly game," trading nursing homes back and forth.

The results of the dealings, often between relatives and/or dummy corporations, is an increased price of the nursing home, followed by an increased Medicaid reimbursement rate for the owners.

New Yorkers will pay about half a billion dollars this year to private nursing homes for care of the indigent aged, while the level of care afforded the aged will not be improved.

On Staten Island, according to a 1973 report by the Richmond Department of Social Services, 88.3 per cent of nursing home residents are receiving Medicaid payments. New Brighton was not opened when the study was compiled.

The Silver Lake Nursing Home at 275 Castleton Ave., Brighton Heights, for example, has had 17 owners since it opened in 1966.

The last recorded sale was at a price of nearly \$6 million, for a property assessed at less than \$2-million. A state official, John J. Finn, analyst for the Health Department, challenged the price as a basis for a Medicaid rent increase and the sellers lowered their price by \$1.5 million.

Medicaid pays private nursing homes all costs, including

rent, interest and depreciation, plus a 10 per cent profit on investment.

Silver Lake is presently subleased by three operators, Solomon Klein, Otto Weingarten and Annette Gross. Klein is a brother-in-law of Frank Klein and Weingarten a son-in-law of Heisler. Both Klein and Heisler, according to Stein's office, are operators of Bergman-linked facilities.

"Silver Lake has nothing to do with Bergman," says Otto Weingarten, also the Silver Lake administrator. "The tie-up never existed. It's even stupid to react to it."

Israel Weingarten, operator of Verrazano Nursing Home (and also a cousin of Otto Weingarten), denies any Verrazano connection to Bergman, whose political influence allegedly reaches into the caucus rooms of the state legislature in Albany.

"To Bergman I never spoke," Weingarten says. "If I fell over the man I wouldn't know him. I have never met him."

Weingarten says he does not get involved with the owners (Heisler is listed by the State Department of Health as one of a trio of licensed owners), but simply pays his monthly rent to the Verrazano Associates.

One of the Verrazano Associates, Rabbi Samuel Liefer, receives the check at his Brooklyn home. According to Health Department records, Liefer is Bergman's brother-in-law. Liefer could not be reached for comment.

The operator of New Brighton Manor, Joshua Levy, said that he pays rent to the 12 Ellery Construction Corp. "I cannot tell you anything more. If you write me a letter maybe I can find out where you could reach them," he told the Advance in response to a question.

The 12 Ellery Construction Corp. is the same company which has been involved in the building of the Heisler-operated Anna Erica home.

The Island View Care Center, according to Stein's office, is an out-and-out Bergman-owned nursing home. In fact, when Doctors Hospital

was negotiating for the possible purchase of the Concord facility, which is adjacent to the hospital, hospital officials negotiated directly with Bergman.

Donald Bloomberg, administrator, says he was approached by Bergman and his attorney, Abraham Kass. "We told him that there would be problems getting state approval for the lease or purchase of the building by a private, proprietary hospital with state reimbursement."

"But Bergman said he could get us permission from somebody he knew up in Albany," Bloomberg added.

The deal eventually fell through. Island View has yet to open.

Heisler, who has asked for an injunction to stop the Stein commission probe, is expected to be subpoenaed to appear at the state-federal hearing.