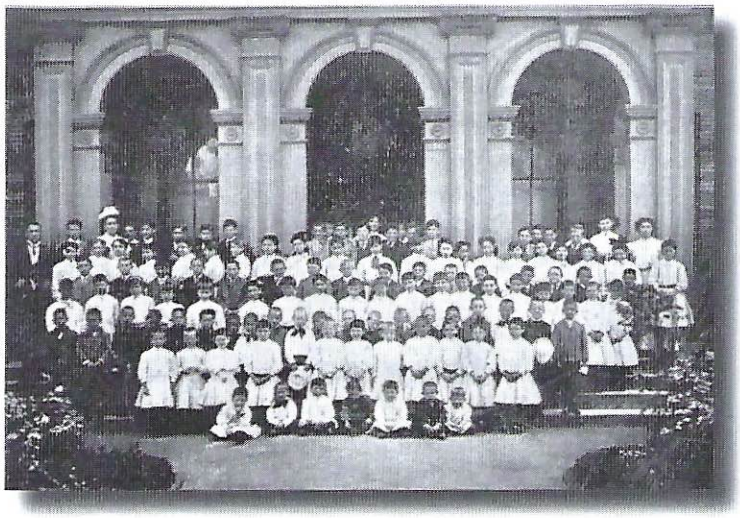
NEW ORLEANS JEWISH ORPHANS' HOME: SOME NEW YORK CONNECTIONS

by Marlene Trestman



New Orleans' Jewish Orphans' Home, c. 1909. Superintendent Chester Teller stands at far left with children in front of Home on St. Charles Avenue. Photo courtesy of the Jewish Children's Regional Service

"Well do I remember my first admission into that abode of peace, when darkness and gloom seemed closing around me," wrote 13-year-old Lena Adler in 1870. She was one of six New York-born siblings who were reared in New Orleans' Jewish Orphans' Home following their parents' death from yellow fever. Flash forward to 1925 when, writing from her residence in New York's original Hotel San Remo overlooking Central Park, Lena chose to celebrate her 70th birthday, and her apparent prosperity, by donating $1,000 to the Home, today worth over $13,671.

Given the family misfortunes that prompted entry into the orphanage and the relatively high quality of care afforded while there, such expressions of gratitude by Home alumni are neither unique nor particularly surprising. More noteworthy for *Dorot's* readers, however, may be the number of Home beneficiaries, such as Lena Adler and her siblings, whose narratives are linked in some way – before or after their childhood in the Home – to New York and other locations across the country. Home records disclose that no fewer than 100 Home alumni were born in New York, while 34 children initially were discharged to a surviving parent or other relative there. From anecdotal information, New York became the state in which dozens of Home alumni later resided and where many descendants of Home alumni live today.

The Home was born from the fatal aftermath of yellow fever epidemics in 1853 and 1854. A group of civic-minded Jewish leaders organized themselves in March 1855 as the Association for the Relief of Jewish Widows and Orphans of New Orleans, and in February 1856 opened the nation's first purpose-built Jewish orphanage (just nine months after Philadelphia's Jewish orphanage opened in rented quarters). For 90 years and in two locations, the Home operated as a residential facility under a series of official titles that reflected its changing population: it was named the Home for Jewish Widows and Orphans until 1880 when it stopped admitting widows, the Jewish Orphans' Home until 1924, and finally the Jewish Children's Home through its 1946 closing. The Jewish Children's Regional Service (JCRS), as the successor agency is known today, continues to provide life-changing services to Jewish children throughout the mid-South.

Driven as much by fear of anti-Semitism as by the biblical mandate to protect widows and orphans, by the turn of the century the Home was joined by 20 other Jewish orphanages across the nation, which are listed in Table 1. Comparatively, the Home was smaller than most. Its peak population of 173 children in 1915 was only a fraction of the size of New York's and Cleveland's Jewish orphanages, which housed peak occupancies of 1,755 in 1916 and 600 in 1906 respectively. Moreover, the Home's cumulative total of 1,623 children (1856-1946) is dwarfed by New York's 18,000 (between 1860 and 1941) and Cleveland's 3,000 (between 1868 and 1917). The Home was more closely aligned in size with Jewish orphanages in Philadelphia (227 children in 1909) and Atlanta (79 children in 1910).

Hebrew Class in the Home, c. 1895. Photo courtesy of the Jewish Children's Regional Service

Table 1. American Jewish Orphanages*

OPENED	NAME	CITY
1855	Jewish Foster Home & Orphan Asylum	Philadelphia PA
1856	Home for Jewish Widows and Orphans	New Orleans LA
1860	Hebrew Orphan Asylum	New York NY
1860	Hebrew Orphan Asylum	Charleston SC
1861	Hebrew Orphan Asylum	Newark NJ
1868	Jewish Orphan Asylum	Cleveland OH
1871	Pacific Hebrew Orphan Asylum	San Francisco CA
1872	Hebrew Orphan Asylum	Baltimore MD
1878	Brooklyn Hebrew Orphan Asylum	Brooklyn NY
1879	Hebrew Sheltering Guardian Society	New York NY
1879	Jewish Orphan Asylum	Rochester NY
1889	Hebrew Orphans Home	Atlanta GA
1890	Leopold Morse Home for Aged & Infirm Hebrews and Orphans	Boston MA
1893	Chicago Home for Jewish Orphans	Chicago IL
1895	Hebrew Infant Asylum	New York NY
1896	Jewish Foster Home	Cincinnati OH
1897	Home for Destitute Jewish Children	Boston MA
1898	Home for Hebrew Orphans	Philadelphia PA
1899	Jewish Infant Orphans Home	Cleveland OH
1901	Home of the Jewish Friendless	Chicago IL
1905	Marks Nathan Jewish Orphan Asylum	Chicago IL
1909	Jewish Orphans Home	St. Louis MO
1912	Jewish Children's Home	Louisville KY
1918	Jewish Sheltering Home for Children	Minneapolis MN
1924	Jewish Children's Home	Milwaukee WI

*The author is aware of no other comprehensive list of American Jewish orphanages and welcomes additions and corrections to this table.

In addition to its early founding, the Home is historically significant because it was one of the last Jewish orphanages to close. It responded to a half-century of mounting criticism of institutional child care not by closing (as did Atlanta's Jewish orphanage in 1930) or by moving out of the city to adopt a "cottage plan" (as did New York's Hebrew Sheltering Guardian Society in 1912), but by continuously creating the most "family-like" environment possible and by integrating its children into the community, such as by closing its synagogue and sending its children to nearby synagogues for worship and Sunday School. The Home is also historically significant because of its unique relationship to the Isidore Newman School which it built in 1903; Newman was not only the city's first private, co-ed, non-sectarian, college preparatory school, but may also be the nation's only such school that was founded for the express purpose of educating dependent children side-by-side with youngsters from the community whose parents could afford to pay tuition.

Despite scholarly and popular attention paid to other orphan programs and orphanages, the Home's history remains virtually unexplored – a lapse this author is working to remedy. Researching the Home and its residents, however, is not without challenges. First and foremost, unlike other orphanages that have been studied, the Home did not preserve its children's case files, reportedly due to privacy concerns. Moreover, the remainder of the Home's records

are neither centrally housed nor online. Administrative files (including annual reports) are kept at Tulane University's Louisiana Research Collection, while the Board's massive, leather-bound minute books (dating back to 1855) are housed at Hebrew Union College's American Jewish Archives (AJA) in Cincinnati. Additional historic records reside with the JCRS in Metairie, Louisiana. To bridge the sizable gaps in the Home's records, interviews were conducted and recordings of interviews of 100 alumni and their descendants completed by others were obtained. Many of the descendants generously shared photos and other family records.

Bessie Margolin, right, with siblings Jack and Dora, in the Home's courtyard, c. 1917. Photo courtesy of Malcolm Trifon

In addition to its total cumulative population of 1,623 children, the Home also sheltered 24 widows, based on a tally from the records. No fewer than 209 of the children and 22 of the widows were foreign-born. Although most children (and all widows) were residing in Louisiana (445) when admitted, the children represented eight Southern states, including 138 different cities and towns. After an average stay of seven years, with one of every five children residing there 10 or more years, the Home initially discharged its children to no fewer than 28 states; more than half of the children were initially discharged to a different community from which they were admitted, often relocating before settling and raising families.

Like Lena Adler, the majority (83%) of the Home's children arrived with a sibling, including one Alsatian family of nine siblings admitted in 1858, and nine sets of twins. While accommodating siblings was an institutional advantage over foster care, the Home's small size enabled siblings to maintain closer contact than in larger orphanages that rigidly segregated by gender and age.

In the Home, children generally were discharged when the Board deemed them self-sufficient or, for more than 70% of children, when they could be returned to a relative. Few children were adopted, which was not a goal of the Home's Board. On the other hand, in the early years, the Board considered marriage to a proper husband a desirable discharge option for its girls. In 1860, the Home celebrated its first marriage; Esther Carillon was the daughter of Dutch-born Rabbi Benjamin Cohen Carillon, who lived briefly in New York before coming to New Orleans with his family via the West Indies. Esther died in 1934 in New Orleans at age 91, survived by 10 of her children.

Brooklyn-born Bessie Margolin in 1972 celebrating her retirement as U.S. Associate Solicitor of Labor. Chief Justice Earl Warren, to her right, was guest speaker, while Justice Douglas turns to listen. Justices Goldberg and Fortas are also present. U.S. Labor Department photo.

Other Home alumni with New York connections include Brooklyn-born Bessie Margolin, whose childhood in the Home from 1913 to 1925, for which she expressed gratitude as an adult, laid the groundwork for her career as a pioneering champion of worker rights at the Supreme Court. New York-born Isaac Hockwald, who left the Home in 1878, became a pillar of the community in Marshall, Texas, where he founded the synagogue and hospital, and organized professional baseball. He, too, never forgot the Home, contributing regularly and attending the 100th anniversary in 1955, as its oldest living alumnus at age 89.

Morris Mengis, who left New Orleans' Jewish Orphans' Home in 1862, is shown here in 1905 shortly after winning a rare million-dollar verdict in a New York court for his part in a profitable railroad deal. Photo courtesy of Roberta Wade

Among the Home's most colorful characters was Morris Mengis, who made New York his adoptive home. Admitted in 1856 at age seven from Bayou Sara, Louisiana, Morris's turbulent seven-year-stay was marked by his "utter want of subordination." He evaded expulsion by becoming a jeweler's apprentice, which explains his later passion for finery. By 1891, *The New York Times* declared Mengis "one of the coolest and liveliest hustlers that New York has ever sent to Maryland," known for plying legislators with champagne. After his lavishly renovated Baltimore hotel went bankrupt, he borrowed enough on his jewelry to return to New York – where in 1904 he won a million-dollar verdict against railroad tycoons for reneging on a deal for their profitable purchase of the Western Maryland Railroad.

Along the way, Mengis secured seven patents and shared the limelight when his daughter was named a co-respondent in the infamous divorce of Mrs. John Jacob Astor. When Mengis died in 1921 at age 73, he was known throughout Long Island as a thoroughbred turfman, a gambler and a shrewd businessman; but unlike Lena, Esther, Bessie and Isaac, Morris Mengis never looked back on his days in the Home.

Author's Note: Individuals who generously contributed information about Home alumni noted in this article are: Rose Gilbert, great-great-granddaughter of Esther Carillon; Malcolm Trifon, nephew of Bessie Margolin; Marshall, Texas historians Audrey Kariel and Janet Cook; and the late Roberta Wade, granddaughter of Morris Mengis. If you have information about any of the Home's alumni, please contact the author through the website, www.marlenetrestman.com.

The late Roberta Wade, at age 95 in 2016, with her friend, Theresa DuBois. Roberta was eager to share the colorful story of her grandfather, Morris Mengis, who left the Home in 1862 and found fame and fortune. Photo courtesy of Roberta Wade

Marlene Trestman is the author of Fair Labor Lawyer: The Remarkable Life of New Deal Attorney and Supreme Court Advocate Bessie Margolin (LSU Press, 2016), which captures Margolin's inspiring journey from the New Orleans Jewish orphanage in which she was raised to the United States Supreme Court, where she championed the rights of America's workers. Trestman, a New Orleans native who lives in Baltimore, is working on her second book, Most Fortunate Unfortunates: New Orleans's Jewish Orphans' Home, 1855-1946.