

American Jewish Orphanages Housed the Most Fortunate Unfortunates

By Marlene Trestman



Photos credit: Jewish Children's Regional Service, New Orleans

A Hebrew class conducted at the Jewish Orphans' Home of New Orleans, known as "the Home," c. 1890. From 1856 until 1946, the institution provided a shelter for children who were orphaned or whose parents were unable to care for them.

In 1866, as he set out into the world to fend for himself, Nathan Goldstein thanked his caregivers "for all the pains you have taken to educate, support, clothe and bring me up to be honest and true." Writing not to parents or relatives, the 14-year-old was expressing gratitude instead to the board of the Jewish Orphans' Home of New Orleans, where he had lived for four years following the death of his Polish immigrant father.

So, too, Edgar Goldberg later lauded the "loving care" he received from 1884 to 1891 in the same "dearly beloved institution" in New Orleans. "The Home," as it was known since its founding in 1856, was one of some 50 Jewish orphanages

that operated across this country prior to the mid-twentieth century, born as much from the biblical commandment to care for widows and orphans as from fear of discrimination if Jews did not "care for their own."

Highly regimented and isolating, often abusive by today's standards, orphanages did not always engender such glowing praise from their alumni. Nathan and Edgar, however, illustrate the reality that Jewish orphanages, like their many non-Jewish counterparts, once regularly offered a stable and desirable environment for children whose parents—suffering from maladies and misfortunes, if not dead—could not provide the necessary care. Together these 50 Jewish orphan-

ages, including at least five that B'nai B'rith established or sustained, sheltered, fed, clothed and educated tens of thousands of American Jewish children.

These institutions varied greatly in size, with residential populations ranging in the early 1900s from about 90 children at Philadelphia's Jewish Foster Home and Orphan Asylum and 166 at San Francisco's Pacific Hebrew Orphan Asylum to 500 at Cleveland's Jewish Orphan Asylum and 1,700 at New York City's Hebrew Orphan Asylum. Whether called orphanage, asylum or home, or whether the original impetus arose primarily from yellow fever fatalities (New Orleans), Civil War deaths (Cleveland), or rising Eastern European immigration (Atlanta), these Jewish orphanages sought to raise children within the faith and properly educate them to take their place in society as productive Jewish Americans. Although a handful of these institutions adhered to traditional Orthodox observances, such as the Marks Nathan Jewish Orphan Home in Chicago and the Orthodox Jewish Orphans Home in Cincinnati, the vast majority, largely founded and run by German Jews, followed Reform Judaism and reared their charges to embody the values of their prosperous and highly assimilated benefactors. These children would serve, in the words spoken by B'nai B'rith leader Simon Wolf at Atlanta's Hebrew Orphans' Home in 1891, as "a rebuke to our enemies and encouragement to our friends."

Home hallmarks: education, socialization and assimilation

Education was a hallmark of Jewish orphanages, many of which sent their children to public schools, citing the importance of outside socialization to foster good American citizens, supplemented by industrial programs to teach marketable skills. The Home in New Orleans stands out for prioritizing such socialization. In 1904, dissatisfied with the education its children were receiving in public schools, the Home opened the Isidore Newman Manual Training School for its wards to learn alongside

children from the community, regardless of religion (but open only to whites in the racially segregated city), whose parents could afford to pay tuition. As a result, “only two classes of society” attended the prestigious school, humorously remarked Home alumnus Louis Peters about his Newman classmates: “The children of the affluent and the children of the Home.”

The design and location of Jewish orphanages served as bold and tangible measures of Jewish philanthropy and the respect accorded by the surrounding communities. B’nai B’rith’s Cleveland Jewish Orphan Asylum, for instance, opened in 1868 in a large, brick former sanitarium on a seven-acre tract bordering an elite German community that housed many of the city’s most distinguished families. In 1886, in partnership with B’nai B’rith, New Orleans’ Jewish orphanage prominently positioned its new structure, lauded as a “magnificent monument to Hebrew benevolence,” amid the city’s stately mansions. “We are making history today,” declared Leo N. Levi, B’nai B’rith District Seven president and future national president, at the laying of the cornerstone as “American Jews, whose wanderings and blistered feet have found a hospitable welcome here, where the constitution of a free and enlightened people guaranteeing equal rights to all men before the law, touches and exalts the persecuted heart like a divine benediction.” After thanking B’nai B’rith for erecting its “Venetian-style” orphanage in his city, Atlanta Mayor John T. Glenn praised Jews “for protecting and sustaining the unfortunate” and for doing “the world good and not harm by living in it.”

Jewish orphanages varied in policies and practices amid evolving standards of childcare. While the New Orleans and Cleveland asylums, for example, adopted “self-government” programs in the early 1900s, placing older children in charge of younger peers to teach their charges responsibility and citizenship, the Atlanta orphanage expressly rejected the innovation, instead aiming to simulate normal family life. The Atlanta facility also responded to mounting criticism of

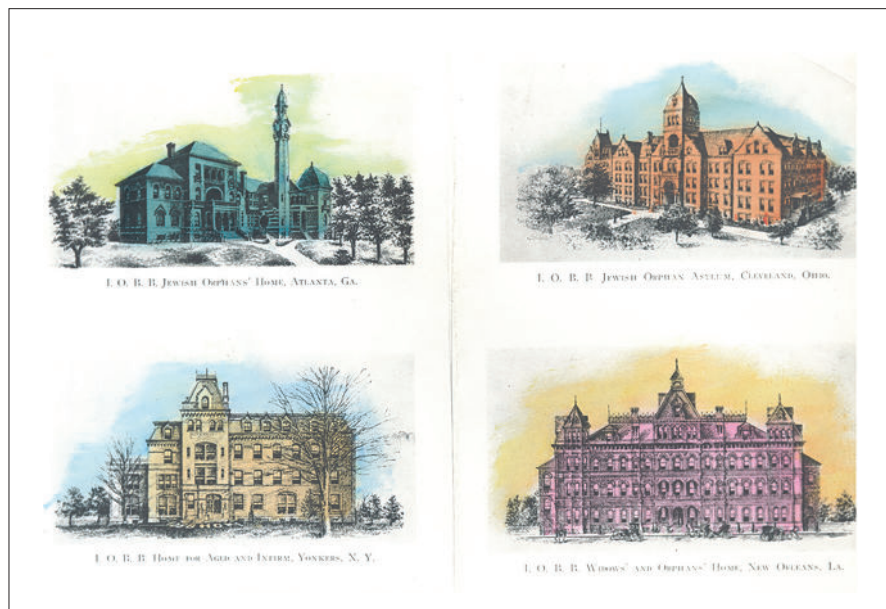


Photo credit: B’nai B’rith Archives Collection, Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio

A tinted postcard depicting B’nai B’rith philanthropic institutions including orphanages in Atlanta, Cleveland and New Orleans, c. 1900.

institutional care by embracing parent subsidies and foster care. In contrast, the New Orleans orphanage responded by creating the most “home-like” environment possible, which by the late 1920s included transforming large barracks-style dormitories into small, personalized bedrooms, winning local praise as “The Institution That Is Not an Institution.”

A new mission for Jewish orphanages

By 1940, however, national trends—including the advent of Social Security, declining mortality among child-bearing adults and increased wages—converged to drastically reduce American orphanage populations. Most Jewish orphanages closed and transitioned to provide non-residential services, such as the Jewish Educational Loan Fund in Atlanta, the Jewish Family and Children’s Service of Greater Philadelphia and the Jewish Children’s Regional Service in New Orleans.

Jewish orphanage founders correctly viewed orphan care as a long-term investment. In 1918, for example, B’nai B’rith Second District President Joseph Seligman described the benefits the organization derived from its orphanage partnerships. “The many thousands of wards have made the B’nai B’rith

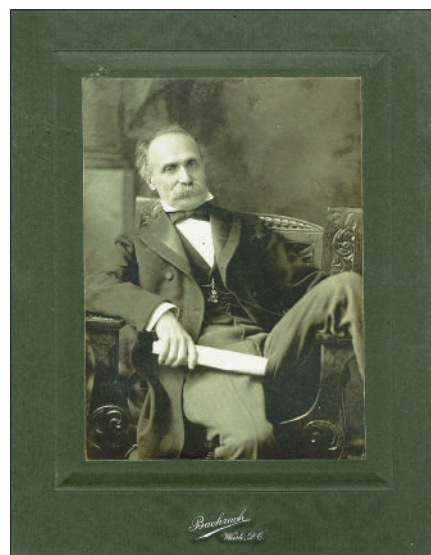


Photo credit: B’nai B’rith Archives Collection, Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio

A nationally known Jewish leader who served as B’nai B’rith’s president in 1904-05, Simon Wolf (1836-1923) was a founder of and major contributor to the Atlanta B’nai B’rith Hebrew Orphans’ Home.

worthwhile. In these children our work shall live, not only in this generation, but in many generations yet unborn.” Many orphanage alumni fulfilled Seligman’s prophecy, including a few notable examples from the New Orleans orphanage.

Following his discharge from the Home, Nathan Goldstein prospered

The Creed of the Jewish Orphan Home

I am the Jewish Orphan Home.

My children are Jewish children. Judaism is their approach to God. They shall pray as did their fathers in the spirit of the Jewish Prophets.

My children are orphans. They began life with a loss. That loss must be made their opportunity. They shall build against it, and weakness shall become strength.

My children are part of me. I am their home. I am their father. I am their mother. I am their servant. Whatever my heritage and whatever my acquisition, I shall pass it on to them.

I am their father. I provide their sustenance. I afford them food that their bodies shall become keen and strong. I afford them education. Their minds shall be shaped and grow. I prepare them against the great adventure of life.

I am their mother. Out of my love I would create in them the spirit by which men live. With God I would fashion their soul. They shall walk bravely, deal kindly and seek oneness with the One Purpose.

I am their servant. I come in the guise of an institution. I come in the person of a foster mother. I come as a messenger of good tidings. I help the family to live on under its own roof and at its own board. I come to heal hurts, and I believe that by many paths we find God.

I am the J. O. H. Every child ever learned at my knee is mine. Feeble or strong, he is mine. Distant or near, he is mine. Does he forsake me, he is still mine. He has warmed himself at my fires. He has eaten at my table. He has been comforted at my breast. He is my child.

I am the Jewish Orphan Home.

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Photo credit: B'nai B'rith Archives Collection, Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio

The “Bellefaire Creed” appeared in one of the institution’s fundraising magazines, c. 1930-40. Established as the B’nai B’rith Cleveland Jewish Orphan Asylum, it was known for its innovative childcare methods, and operated from 1868 until 1943. After that year, Bellefaire changed its orientation to specialize in the treatment of boys and girls with emotional and psychological problems.

his debt of gratitude through service. In 1908, he founded the Jewish Herald, the first subscription weekly newspaper for Houston’s burgeoning Jewish community. Two decades later, B’nai B’rith honored Goldberg, citing not only his work as chair of the order’s most recent

convention but also the “unstinted support” he had given Jewish causes as an individual and through his newspaper. Even after his death in 1937, Goldberg’s good work continued through another Home alumnus. Joe Samuels lived in the Home from 1929 to 1936, after which he founded B’nai B’rith’s Down-town Lodge in Houston and organized frequent reunions for fellow “ex-Home kids.” In 1973, after the death of Goldberg’s successor, Samuels purchased the newspaper, today called the Jewish Herald-Voice, in which he carried on Goldberg’s legacy of supporting the Jewish Children’s Regional Service, B’nai B’rith and other Jewish causes until his death in 2011. Samuels’ daughter and grandson run the paper today. 

Researching the histories of Jewish orphanage residents

For descendants of orphanage alumni and other family historians, JewishGen (“The Global Home for Jewish Genealogy”) recently launched an online tool through its USA Research Division. The Jewish Orphan database (bit.ly/jewishgen) currently includes a spreadsheet identifying the 1,623 children and 24 widows who lived in New Orleans’ Home, along with birth dates, parents’ names and other information compiled from the Home’s handwritten registry books. In addition, the Jewish Orphan database includes a link to an extensive state-by-state roster of American Jewish orphanages, orphan benevolent societies and their successors, which, although compiled in 2004 and no longer actively maintained, offers a great start to locating Jewish orphanage records.

Herself an orphan, Trestman is the author of *Most Fortunate Unfortunates: The Jewish Orphans Home of New Orleans* (LSU Press, 2023), and hosts a companion website that includes nearly 100 alumni profiles, detailed appendices and a spreadsheet she shared with the JewishGen USA’s Jewish Orphan Database.

in Greenville, Mississippi, as a retail merchant and banker, donating time and treasure to numerous civic and charitable causes. Within the Jewish community, besides founding and leading Greenville’s Hebrew Union Congregation for 55 years, Goldstein remained grateful to his orphanage, serving on its alumni association before becoming the first alumnus to win election to its board of directors. At its 1929 convention, B’nai B’rith District Seven honored 79-year-old Goldstein.

Edgar Goldberg, too, sought to repay