Remembering New Orleans' Jewish Orphans' Home, through the eyes of 'Fortunate Unfortunates'

The home boasted a nurse and a dental clinic. There were free ballet classes and free school tuition.

BY JOHN POPE | Contributing writer
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Built in 1887 on St. Charles Avenue, the Jewish Orphans' Home was designed by architect Thomas S buildings around a central courtyard, ringed by wide galleries. The girls' dormitory, on the right, ran dormitory ran parallel to Leontine Street.

Photo Courtesy of JCRS

Hannah Golden was only 7, but she had a firm idea about what constituted an orphanage. Based on one she had seen in her hometown of Tulsa, Oklahoma, she was convinced that such a place looked like something out of a Charles Dickens novel — crowded, dim and dirty.

Hannah's mother had died when she was 3, when the country was in the grip of the Depression. Because her father was struggling to support himself, Hannah and her sister, they lived with relatives until her father decided that arrangement couldn't continue.

So he bundled the girls into a car and headed for New Orleans — location of the only home for Jewish orphans in seven states.

When she found out where they were going, "I was so angry with him," she said in an interview. "I screamed and hit him and grabbed the wheel, and it went over into a ditch."

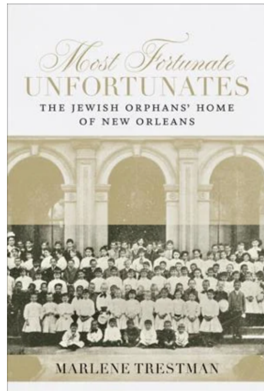
But when the three finally reached New Orleans, the girls were amazed by the welcome they received at the imposing, red-brick building at St. Charles and Jefferson avenues.

"It was great, really," said Hannah Gordon Limerick, now 95 and living in Scherz, Texas.

Each child had a room with a desk, a chair and a chifforobe, and there were swings and volleyball and badminton courts on the grounds. Dinner was served on china on cloth-covered tables; the children had linen napkins.

Staffers “took the place of my parents and were, essentially, my parents,” said Sam Brody, 94, of Framingham, Massachusetts, in a telephone interview. “It was a kind place.”

Ballet and school



Marlene Trestman has written the history of that institution in “Most Fortunate Unfortunates: The Jewish Orphans’ Home of New Orleans” (LSU Press, $39.95).

Marlene Trestman

PROVIDED PHOTO COURTESY OF DEVIN MORTON

A launch party for the book will be held Wednesday (Oct. 25) at 6:30 p.m. at the Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience, 818 Howard Ave.

"We feel honored to have had Marlene's guidance as we were creating our exhibit about the Home for the museum,” said Kenneth Hoffman, the museum’s executive director. "It's one of the most commented-upon exhibits. So

many visitors had a grandparent or great-grandparent there. Marlene's commitment to getting the history right is truly inspiring."

Her research included interviews with more than 100 former residents and descendants.

"Their interviews changed the book from a drab institutional chronology to a vibrant, living account of what it was like to live in the home," Trestman said.

The home boasted a nurse and a dental clinic. There were free ballet classes — Limerick recalled dancing in several productions of "The Nutcracker" during her seven years in the home — and tuition for the children was free at Isidore Newman School, just a few blocks away.

That school, which had been started in 1904 as a manual-training school for children who lived in the home, evolved into one of New Orleans' most prestigious educational institutions. Home residents attended free.

It was "the best school in New Orleans," said Brody, who lived in the home for 10 years and lettered in football, track and wrestling.

'We had a nice life'

At the orphans' home, there were chores. Hannah Golden, who aspired to become a nurse, worked in the infirmary, and Brody swept the yard. Children assigned to the kitchen loaded the electric dishwasher.

A 1930 Times-Picayune article described the home as "the institution that is not an institution."

"We had a nice life," Limerick said. "They were our family when we opened the gate from school, and we were home."

It was the second such New Orleans home for Jewish children. Work on permanent housing for widows and orphans had started in 1854 in response to the particularly vicious yellow fever epidemic during the previous summer, when about 8,000 New Orleanians — 1 in every 12 to 15 residents — succumbed to the disease, Trestman writes.

On Feb. 1, 1856, that home opened its doors at Jackson Avenue and Chippewa Street. That building is gone, but a fencepost remains. The home moved to bigger quarters on St. Charles Avenue in 1887 and stayed there until it was closed in 1946. The building was

'The Jewish Home,' by George Francois Mugnier, ca. 1880, shows the orginal location of the home at Jackson and Chippewa streets. It opened Feb. 1, 1856, and moved in 1887 to St. Charles Avenue.

Photo Courtesy of the Collections of the Louisiana State Museum

demolished in 1964 and replaced by the Jewish Community Center, but its marble cornerstone is part of the modernistic structure.

During its nine decades, the home housed 1,623 children and 24 women.

“I would have lived there if I had come along two decades earlier,” Trestman, 67, said.

Wards of the state

Her father, who was in the state mental hospital in Jackson, died in 1965, and her mother, who had lived in the St. Thomas public housing complex with her children, died of breast cancer three years later.

Marlene Trestman and her brother, Robert, were declared wards of the state and raised in foster care.

Because the Newman School's charter said anyone in her situation could attend tuition-free, Trestman graduated from Neman and went on to earn an undergraduate degree at Goucher College and a law degree at George Washington University.

Trestman had been a special assistant to Maryland's attorney general until 2013, when she left the practice of law because she felt compelled to write the biography "Fair Labor Lawyer: The Remarkable Life of the New Deal Attorney and Supreme Court Advocate Bessie Margolin." Margolin had lived in the home for 13 years.

While working on that book, "I had already dedicated myself to the idea of a second book to tell the comprehensive history" of the Jewish Children's Home, Trestman said.

“Comprehensive” may be an understatement. The files on the children fill four 3-foot-long file drawers, and Trestman amassed five notebooks of news articles. All this is on her website, marlenetrestman.com.

The home — the first Jewish orphanage designed and built for that purpose — “was always a model of institutional pride for Jewish communities around the country and in New Orleans,” she said.

The home’s census peaked at 173 in 1915, Trestman said. It dropped to 63 by 1939. Adults were living longer; Social Security and other New Deal programs meant more money that would let single parents keep their children; and there was a growing trend against institutionalizing children.

There had been strong feelings about keeping the home open, even though its high operating costs made that unfeasible, Trestman writes. But, she says, the death of Harry “Uncle Harry” Ginsburg, the home’s beloved, longtime superintendent, in June 1946 “cemented the inevitable decision to close the home.”

The 31 children in the home were returned to their families or placed in foster care. Its successor for nonresidential and other services is the Jewish Children’s Regional Service.

The title of Trestman's book echoes a statement from a 1930 interview with resident Louis Peters, who lived there from 1925 to 1932: "Fortunate unfortunates. That's what we were — we kids who were raised in the Jewish Children's Home in New Orleans."

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