

Everyone knows of someone who was in the Home

Marlene Trestman writes history of New Orleans' Jewish Orphans Home

In late October, Marlene Trestman embarked on a number of activities in New Orleans connected to the release of her new book, “Most Fortunate Unfortunates: The Jewish Orphans Home of New Orleans.”

“There’s no other place the book could launch,” she reflected.

The book details the history of the Home, which was established in 1854, dedicated its first building at the beginning of 1856 and closed in 1946, after which the Home has lived on in the form of Jewish Children’s Regional Service. An accomplished attorney, Trestman is a native of New Orleans, and was orphaned when she was 11. She and her brother wound up as wards of the state — had it been two decades earlier, they would have been residents of the Home. Instead, JCRS supervised their foster care as legal guardians.

“For all of the advantages I was given in my unfortunate circumstance, I felt like a most fortunate unfortunate,” she said. “I wanted to find out if the children who grew up in the Home felt the same way.”

The idea for the book came as she was writing a biography of Bessie Margolin, who was a champion of wage and hour

rights for workers, and argued numerous cases before the U.S. Supreme Court. Margolin was instrumental in many provisions of the Fair Labor Standards Act, drafted the original regulations under which the post-World War II Nuremberg trials took place, and was an attorney for the Tennessee Valley Authority.

Margolin was also an alumna of the Home. Trestman, who met Margolin when she was headed to college and struck up a lifelong friendship, had often been asked to give talks about Margolin’s legacy. Since nobody else was going to write a biography, Trestman decided she had to do it.

“As a lawyer, I know how to write,” she said, “but it’s different writing a book where people want to purchase it.”

As she went through the Home files from 1913 to 1925, “I was really seeing all the history of the home in the boxes, digests and board minute books.” Going through those files and seeing the range of stories as she was looking for information about Margolin, she knew that her next project had to be the history of the Home.

She figured there were two main audiences with different interests — families who had relatives in the Home, and scholars who are looking to understand the history of Jewish orphanages, philanthropy and education.

The Home was the first Jewish orphanage in the country to have a purpose-built dedicated building. Trestman is particular about the wording, because a Jewish Home in Philadelphia opened before New Orleans, but it was in a rented building. She explained that the founders in New Orleans felt that they had to offer something of permanence to attract donors, so they rejected the idea of renting another facility.

“Life in the home was really nothing like the Charles Dickens or Jane Eyre, or even Little Orphan Annie,” Trestman said, but “it certainly was regimented and nothing someone would wish for anyone.” After all, it meant that both parents had died, or one had died and the other was unable to provide care.

“The home was always intending to be a compassionate place for the kids, and for the most part it really did serve kids in a humane and caring way, the best that an orphanage can do.”



Photo courtesy JCRS/Marlene Trestman

The boys and girls were separated by a courtyard fence, until 1909.

Compared to other Jewish orphanages in the country, the one in New Orleans was rather small. Homes in New York might have 1,000 kids at once, while the Home in New Orleans had a peak enrollment of 173 in 1915, “where there might be seven other kids your age instead of hundreds.”

In all, the Home had over 1600 residents in its nine decades of service.

With that, “I don’t think you can shake a stick in New Orleans or around the South without hitting somebody who had a family member in the Home,” Trestman said. There were 390 who came from Texas, while the rest were from the other six states in B’nai B’rith District Seven, which established a formal relationship with the Home in 1875.

The book’s title, Trestman said, is somewhat of a question. While not everyone had a happy experience, as one might expect in an orphanage, “by and large” the residents felt fortunate. As she went through stories, “I wasn’t cherry-picking kids.”

She said there was “great fortune afforded these children in terms of the care, medical attention, food, clothing, social well being, education they received.”

What is now Isidore Newman School was first established in 1904 to educate residents of the Home. When the Home closed, an agreement was reached with the school to continue to admit anyone who would have been eligible for the Home. Trestman said that agreement was used in her case, and she thinks it may have been the last time that was needed.

Another institution connected to the Home was a camp in Bay St. Louis, run by the Jewish Charitable and Educational Federation. There was a growing trend to establish camps and get kids outside of cities during the hot summers, and the Home started bringing the residents there in 1918. By the 1930s, the residents would go to the camp for a month at a time, and it was a “uniformly beloved feature of the home... even kids who hated living in the Home, Bay St. Louis was a respite and soothed their soul.”

But the book is only part of the story. Her website, marlenetrestman.com, has an extensive list of resources, including a list of American Jewish orphanages; the founders, officers and superintendents of the New Orleans Home, children’s birthplaces, siblings, ages and lengths of stay; and a searchable list of all of the Home’s children, listed by registry number.

The website “may end up being a bigger impact than the book,” she said.

In addition, she is assembling profiles of as many of the residents as possible. It is “my way of honoring all the people who shared photographs and memories.”

Most Fortunate UNFORTUNATES

THE JEWISH ORPHANS’ HOME
OF NEW ORLEANS



She was “delighted” every time she got a message from someone who had relatives in the Home, whether they knew about it for decades, or started exploring genealogy and found they had an ancestor they did not realize was Jewish and discovered they had been in the Home.

Having a relative from the Home was a source of pride for so many people, she said.

Thus far, she has done 73 profiles on her website, and had hoped to do 100 before the book launched. “I’m going to keep going, I feel a commitment to do that,” she said.

She was able to interview many former residents, but “so many of the alumni who I interviewed are now deceased.”

The oldest one she interviewed was Ellis Hart, “and I’m so glad I got to interview him before he passed.” Trestman grew up with his niece and nephew, Susan and Richard Hart, at Newman, and she believes their father, Carol, “had a hand in my being identified and able to go to Newman School under the Home’s charter.”

Many hugely successful, well known individuals throughout the Jewish South were alumni of the Home, and both the book and website have many of their stories.

There were also a lot of stories from the staff. In the 1920s, to provide more adult supervision, promising graduate students were offered free room and board at the Home, as long as they watched the kids and ate with them. In many cases, they wound up being role models.

Uncomfortable topics

Because the book is also for historians, she did not shy away from thornier parts of the Home's story, starting with the Home's founders and slavery. Many of the founders owned slaves, showing how deeply rooted the institution was in the South, and how people in the Jewish community participated as part of becoming American. In all, she said 14 of around 30 founders had a total of about 90 slaves, with over half being owned by the Home's founding vice president.

She noted the "apparent irony of the seemingly well intentioned philanthropists who dedicated time and treasure and talent, and at the same time were putting ads in newspapers for their runaway slaves who were mothers and children."

Four of the board members fled the area rather than take the oath of allegiance to the Union after New Orleans fell, she added. "It would have been a huge hole if I hadn't gone into that," she said. "It puts the Home in the context of New Orleans and the context of the times."

In recent years, many institutions have faced reckonings of sexual scandals by staff, and the Home also had an episode — but one that was well publicized in the 1880s, when it happened.

Rabbi Simon Weil, who had been at the congregation in Woodville, Miss., became superintendent, but after a couple of years was forced out when a 15-year-old girl accused him. Because of the times, the language used was quite vague, but what surprised Trestman is how the board was transparent, issued a statement that was printed in publications across the country, and that they "believed the young accuser and took her word over the former rabbi/teacher who had come with high recommendations."



Photo from Golden City Messenger, June 1925, courtesy of JCRS

The Home's 1925 confirmation class in the Home's synagogue.

Despite that, the board released the girl to her brother's care in Port Gibson and would not consider requests for her to come back to the Home, because of 19th century mores on virtue and purity.

As for Trestman's writing career, unless it is related to her legal work, those days are over. The histories of Margolin and the Home "are the only two stories I felt compelled to write," though work on the Home's website is far from done and will continue. "It's been a complete joy."

In addition to the presence of JCRS, there are a few physical signs of the Home still in New Orleans. The site of its final building became the Jewish Community Center's Uptown location. The cornerstone from the Home's 1887 location is embedded in the JCC by the front entrance.

When she started writing the book, she went to Jackson and Chippewa, the site of the original Home. "Some of the original intricately designed fence posts are still there," not connected to anything. A large tree has engulfed that fence, physically growing over it.

She reflected, "It's almost poetic, the history of the Home is so absorbed into New Orleans."