

BY *Louis Peters***FORTUNATE -
UNFORTUNATES**

The Jewish Children's Home in New Orleans took care of our orphans and distressed youngsters for more than one hundred years. This was during the times when the poor of Houston were unable to care for themselves or their relatives' offsprings.

Louis Peters and his late twin Sam were both one of the "fortunate - unfortunates", as he says. His touching account of those days follows in several segments.

Today - the Jewish Children's Regional Service, the outgrowth of that same Home, still provides many services for children among us and around us.

That's what we were - we kids who were raised in the Jewish Children's Home in New Orleans. Unfortunate, through the death of one parent and the inability of the remaining parent to care for us, because fate had decreed the alternative was an institution. Fortunate, because of all the institutions we could have been sent to, near and far, fate further decided, that because we were born Jewish, and lived in one of the seven southern states, we were

among the "elite" and should be raised in the Jewish Children's Home.

Looking at it in retrospect, and from the vantage point of age, we were indeed the lucky ones. We had advantages seldom known and experienced by the average child in the normal family group. I sometimes feel a little sad for those children who were not privileged to be raised in the Jewish Children's Home, circa 1925-1932, and wonder if they weren't the unfortunate ones.

True, there were a few disadvantages, such as never knowing the warm feeling of a mother straightening your tie before going on a date. There's no denying that those witnessed acts of tenderness sometimes were the cause of little inward pangs of envy. Maybe, that's the reason, as adults, the family units are so extremely important to us, and as parents, we

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have a tendency to be a wee bit more indulgent of our children.

As compensation for the loss of the small family unit, with 250 brothers and sisters, we were never faced with the problem of boredom. Life was young and exciting. There were never enough hours in the day.

Raise your voice and shout, "who wants to play ball" and in a matter of minutes a game is in progress. We had the equipment, facilities, and always the playmates. Should you desire to learn to play a musical instrument - that was almost too simple. Only a matter of walking into the music room, on three specified days of the week, and discuss the details of instrument and lessons with the professional music instructor. Maybe a quiet period of reading suited your mood. There were two libraries, other than the public library that was available, from which to choose. The Home's adequate library or the superintendent's magnificent personal library. Either, or both, were at your disposal.

How many children have had the ecstasy of going to their own camp every summer, with the piney woods at your back door, the roaring surf at your front door, for a seven week period? And at the end of a physically exhausting day of playing, fishing, swimming or a myriad of activities, enjoying the peaceful drowsiness, sitting on the pier or beach, under the stars, singing the

popular songs of the day. Not very many.

Singing, always singing. How important a part of our life, at that age, was singing. I can still see us kids, at camp or on those hiking trips, sitting around a campfire singing. Even today, I can hear the nostalgic strains of "Love's Old Sweet Song".

How many brothers had dozens of sisters, or vice versa, to teach them to dance? Not many. My memory returns to those "non-school" nights when, gathering in the large livingroom, we danced to the music of the player piano, the radio with its big band music, or one of our own talented kids making the baby grand "talk". We didn't all become experts, but with so many in the

family participating, we all learned the latest steps.

The only co-educational school in the City of New Orleans is a private school named Isidore Newman School. It is located two blocks from the Home. Starting with kindergarten and continuing through high school, in the same buildings, its reputation for excellence is so renowned, that even to this day children are registered at birth to assure admittance at school age. Ironically, only two classes of society could afford the cost of tuition. The children of the affluent and the children of the Home. Mr. Newman, the wealthy founder of the school and benefactor to the Home, stipulated in the school's charter the binding relationship between the two. This farsightedness subjected us Home kids to an educational environment that resulted in many outstanding scholars.

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BY Louis Peters

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— Part II —



Last week Louis Peters began the fascinating account of his years in the Jewish Children's Home of New Orleans. His story told of the remarkable role of the Home — taking care of our orphans and distressed youngsters for more than one hundred years. That segment ended with the part that the Isadore Newman School played in the lives of the Home Kids.

Nor were our home study periods left to haphazard chance or the mood of the child. After the evening meal, on any school night, there was a specific time and place devoted to study and lessons for the following school day. In an upstairs study hall, supervised by students from Tulane Medical School, in exchange for room and board, we children had the added advantage of an able tutor if assistance was needed.

There weren't many children who were lucky enough to have quality medical attention and care like us. With our own registered nurse living on the premises, adjacent to a well-equipped infirmary and pharmacy, there was never a "family crisis" when a child became suddenly ill or fractured a bone while at play. It was a comforting, reassuring feeling, in our illness and pain, as we climbed the stairs to the second story. For we knew that waiting for us was "Veenie" who would heal us with



A corner of the Jewish Children's Home, as it appeared in the '30's and the '40's.

her combination of medical skill and motherly love.

I remember the night she came running home, leaving a dinner party, after receiving a call from her assistant, to cool and calm my

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burning, twisting body, and to soothe my childish fears. The recovery period, after the tonsillectomy, was sheer luxury. Never was a child more lovingly pampered.

Kid-like, we used to wonder if it was necessary to inconvenience the doctors, three times each summer, just to give us preventative shots. Or the dentist who came twice yearly to check our teeth. But I guess most kids wonder about those things. I do know that because of one of those semi-annual dental checkups, I started visiting the orthodontist for three years to have my teeth straightened. Not many children back in those days wore braces.

To a child, a doctor is a doctor and a dentist is a dentist. They neither knew nor concerned themselves with professionalism. Maybe it was because New Orleans was an outstanding medical city, with a famous medical school; maybe there were a lot of reasons, for I never found out, but what I did learn in my adult years was simply astounding. That those medical people treating us, almost at our beck and call, were not only highly qualified, they were among the Who's Who of the medical profession. How fortunate can a child be?

What was the special magic used to discipline 250 active and happy children, ranging in age from two to eighteen, with hardly an appearance of regimentation? Through the years, especially as a

parent, the answer to this question has tantalizingly intrigued and eluded me. I sometimes believed I discovered the formula, only to discover the answer beyond my understanding.

The answer couldn't be physical punishment, for there were two rules that were unbreakable, especially by adult members of the professional staff. One, it was an unpardonable sin, which usually resulted in dismissal, for an adult to strike a child. Even an involuntary slap for provocations that would stretch the patience, even of a parent, to the breaking point. Two, it was mandatory, almost to a degree of fanaticism,

that every child sit at the dining table and eat all their food at mealtimes. Unless they were away from the premises visiting family or friends.

Perhaps it was the matter-of-fact fairness and absence of unenforced ultimatums that made sense to the adolescent mind. All of us were aware that when discipline was required, the "punishment would fit the crime". If we failed to hang our clothes in the closet then we would, at the end of the school day, be punished by monotonously hanging up our clothes for the balance of the afternoon instead of playing. Or if we went to school with unshined shoes, we would spend the afternoon shining our shoes. Or if our chores, like sweeping the dormitory, weren't satisfactory, we would spend the afternoon sweeping the dormitory. There were

instances when we, like all children, disobeyed the rules or "sassed" our elders. When you raised 250 children, you raised 250 personalities. Even then the punishment was swift and certain, and the extent of the punishment depended on the seriousness of the disobedience. Maybe you were restricted to the premises for a weekend and couldn't go to a show, or a ballgame, or visit family or friends. Maybe for two weekends. Sometimes it was a special privilege taken away or a few hours spent sitting on a chair in your room, without radio or reading material, contemplating the indiscretion.

Could it have been the genius of Uncle Harry. That rare individual, Harry L. Ginsburg, who

as superintendent, was nationally recognized as an outstanding authority on child psychology and a leading pioneer in advocating advanced philosophies in child care? Accomplished musician, artist, philosopher, spellbinding story teller, able administrator and good enough ball player to be allowed a position on one of our ball teams. He was the court of last resort to the frustrated staff member when a child became a disciplinary problem.

I still remember those visits, though more than a half-century has passed, with a vividness as though it was yesterday. As I entered his office and sat myself

in a chair facing his unlit desk, he would slowly turn, not as an adversary or disciplinarian, but with a touch of a smile upon his lips say, in his well-modulated, calm voice, something like, "I'm surprised to learn that you are creating a problem because I've always considered you to be an intelligent and responsible boy. There must be a logical reason for your actions. Let's you and I, together, intelligently and logically see if we can find the 'psychological reason' for your actions." Then together we'd start probing into my psyche. I do believe that we kids grew up with that phrase ringing in our ears, "psychological reason for your actions." There was no way we teenagers, regardless of how smart or mature we thought we were, could outwit or out-argue Uncle Harry. He was a master, with few peers, in child psychology.

Evidently the system worked — and worked well. With extremely few exceptions, children left the home as well-adjusted individuals and entered the mainstream of society as respected members of their community.

Through the charisma of his personality and the wisdom of his philosophy, he set into motion a pattern of reforms that was to greatly affect the lives of us kids. The reforms he advocated and fought for were responsible for changing an institution into almost a boarding school. He argued that the world in which the children would live as adults had no real relationship to the institution in which they were now being raised. He preached that one day, when society became more enlightened, children would be raised in foster homes, supervised by pro-

professionals, rather than large institutions.

I remember that spring of 1925, when I first entered the "Golden City" as a child of nine, more clearly than the fall of 1932, when I left. That's what we called the Home, "Golden City". We even sang a song composed by our musical professor about the Golden City. The monthly newsletter appealing for funds was called the Golden City Messenger. To a barefoot, street-wise kid of nine, going on twenty-four, headed straight for the reformatory, it was a Golden City come true. The idea of having two pairs of shoes, one for dress and one for play, was luxury. Learning that as a normal routine people actually ate three meals a day, and at specific times of day, was unbelievable. This beautiful world was beyond my fondest dream. Enveloping me like a warm, secure blanket, I knew instinctively that this was my own little world.

That's what it was — our own little world. A city within a city. We had our own structure of government called the "Family". At the head of each family was a big brother or sister. Analogous to a Scout troop, the "family" was the patrol and the big brother, or big sister, was the patrol leader. There the similarity ceased. The responsibility and especially the authority that big brothers, or big sisters, had over the members of the family bordered on dictatorship. (Note: I was Joe Samuels' big brother). Responsible for the performance of big brothers and sisters was a president and two vice presidents. One set for the girls and one set for the boys.

Each of us had an identification number. The prefix "1" for female and "2" for male. My number was 268. Ours was a system of punishment by demerits, called "checks". The amount of checks received, if you were caught, was determined by the rule broken. The accumulated total for the week determined the privileges taken away. During the evening meal, a member of the staff would read aloud for all to hear, the child's number, the infraction of the rule, and the given amount of checks. Sometimes, when the reader paused for breath after calling a long list of numbers, some smart alec, thinking themselves a quarterback, would yell "shift". That was always good for a laugh.

We had our own boy scout troop, complete with uniforms, banners, tents and equipment. Pulling our trek carts, that was the most active troop in the city, we hiked everywhere. A habit that was to continue for years after the troop was disbanded.

There was little emphasis placed on studying Judaism, none on Hebrew, but we attended Friday night services in our own little synagogue on our own premises, the superintendent reading the short service.

On the third floor was our own movie theatre, equipped with projection booth, screen and theatre chairs. Every Saturday morning two of the older boys would pick up a can of film from the local movie distributor, and every Saturday night was "movie nite".

By circumstance of pride we even acquired our own fraternity when one of our bright teenagers, not to be outdone by a few

classmates who were bragging about the high school fraternity to which they belonged, proudly announced that he too belonged to a fraternity. When challenged for the name, he proudly proclaimed "HK" fraternity. He never told them that "HK" stood for "Home Kids". To this day we refer to each other as ex-HK's.

And our own little store where, every Sunday after lunch, we could buy, out of our weekly allowance, for mere pennies, goodies like candy and snowcones.

Yes, we had our own little city within a city. To us children at that period in time, it was comfortably secure and we were happy. But there were forces of change, of which we had little knowledge or understanding, that once set into motion were to traumatically tear away the fabric of our Golden City.

When I first arrived, Uncle Harry was the assistant, and a man named Vollmer was superintendent. Evidently, there must have been a clash of personalities, for on more than one occasion we children could hear them heatedly arguing. I remember going out of my way to stay out of Mr. Vollmer's sight. I feared him since the day only a month after my arrival when he gave me a tongue lashing for running inside the building. The last person giving me so caustic a tongue lashing was a policeman.

Rumor had it that Mr. Vollmer was asked by the board of directors to resign. Whatever the reason, he was replaced by a man named Lashman, who had been in charge of our fundraising and public relations. Because he had never

married, and it was the policy of the board that the position should be filled by a married man with a family, Uncle Harry was not promoted. His inner feelings about the promotion were never revealed, but Uncle Harry became the influencing force behind Mr. Lashman.

Mr. Lashman, an intelligent, soft-spoken, kindly person, was dearly loved by the children. Elatedly, I felt privileged, as my daily chore was to empty the garbage cans from his apartment. For the first time in years there were two men running the home, working in harmony. What had earlier been advocated was not introduced as actuality.

The first thing to go was the scout troop. The boys were instructed, if they wished to be scouts, to join an "outside" troop. Then the synagogue was closed and, for the first time, we started learning about Judaism. We were divided into three groups, became members of the three reform synagogues, faithfully attended Saturday morning services and Sunday school. The Saturday night movies were discontinued and we started attending the movies "up town"; and the children's theatre guild; and sporting events; and all the other events that children normally attend. Some of us even became active members of a real honest-to-goodness high school fraternity.

The winds of change began to blow, and with it went the comfortable security of our little city, forcing us to face a more normal life, fearfully but excitingly.

Then, seemingly, tragedy struck when, after only a couple of years and a very short illness, death removed Mr. Lashman, the man we loved. I remember, during his short illness, how we children grieved over his illness and prayed for his recovery.

Our concern after his death because of known board policy was well founded. But our concern, luckily, was short lived, when Uncle Harry, confronting the Board, stated that he was married to the Home, his family were the kids, he would never again act as assistant, delivered an

ultimatum that unless he was appointed superintendent that very day, he would resign. The Board capitulated, appointed him superintendent, and the winds of change blew even harder.

The demerit system of "checks" was discontinued; the "family" structure was disbanded; total responsibility and authority of the big brothers and sisters abolished; and names replaced numbers. The long dormitories were converted into small two and three bed private rooms. At times it was breathtaking, but we children started living like other children. Those were happy days to be a Home Kid.

The winds of change also blowing in the "outside" world sounded the inevitable death knell of my Home that had lived for almost one hundred years. The increasing affluence of the Jewish community and the steady assimilation of immigrants enabled the family, struck with the misfortune of parental loss, to be better able to stick together. The population of the Home started dwindling.

Paradoxically, I was both happy and saddened, during a visit in 1946, to find within this enormous structure on a square block fronting fashionable St. Charles

Avenue, that there were only twenty-six children being cared for. There were as many professional staff members who had devoted a lifetime of love, as there were children. Gone was the noisy, pulsating activity, except in memory, of many kids at play, as I sat on a bench in the inner courtyard. Replaced by a quiet hum that to me, lost in reverie, was hardly noticeable.

I somehow knew with turbulent emotion, as I took a last look on departure at this large beautiful baronial-styled building with its neat front lawn bordered by a black ornamental iron fence, that I was gazing upon the end of an era and a place I had always called Home. It closed its doors, forever, just two years later.

I learned a valuable and fulfilling lesson during those years, that to this day has been secretly treasured. That there was a dignity in receiving — as well as giving. We children knew that our Home was funded by the B'nai B'rith, United Fund, philanthropic foundations, Jewish communities in the seven Southern States, and a multitude of people — we stuffed the envelopes containing appeals for funds. Our price of admission to any major theatre, baseball game, swimming

pool, sporting event, etc., in the city of New Orleans was the simple phrase, "I'm from the Jewish Children's Home". Quickly and without fuss, we were admitted. Memberships, by the hundreds, were purchased to the Children's Theatre Guild, in our name, by wealthy Jewish matrons who remained anonymous. We didn't know at that time, nor concern ourselves, what arrangements had been made, if any, whereby the statement, "I'm from the Jewish Children's Home" became the open sesame to so many doors. Nor did I ever find out. Importantly, we were never made to feel, nor did we ever feel, that charity was given, or that charity was received. It was given with dignity — it was received with dignity.

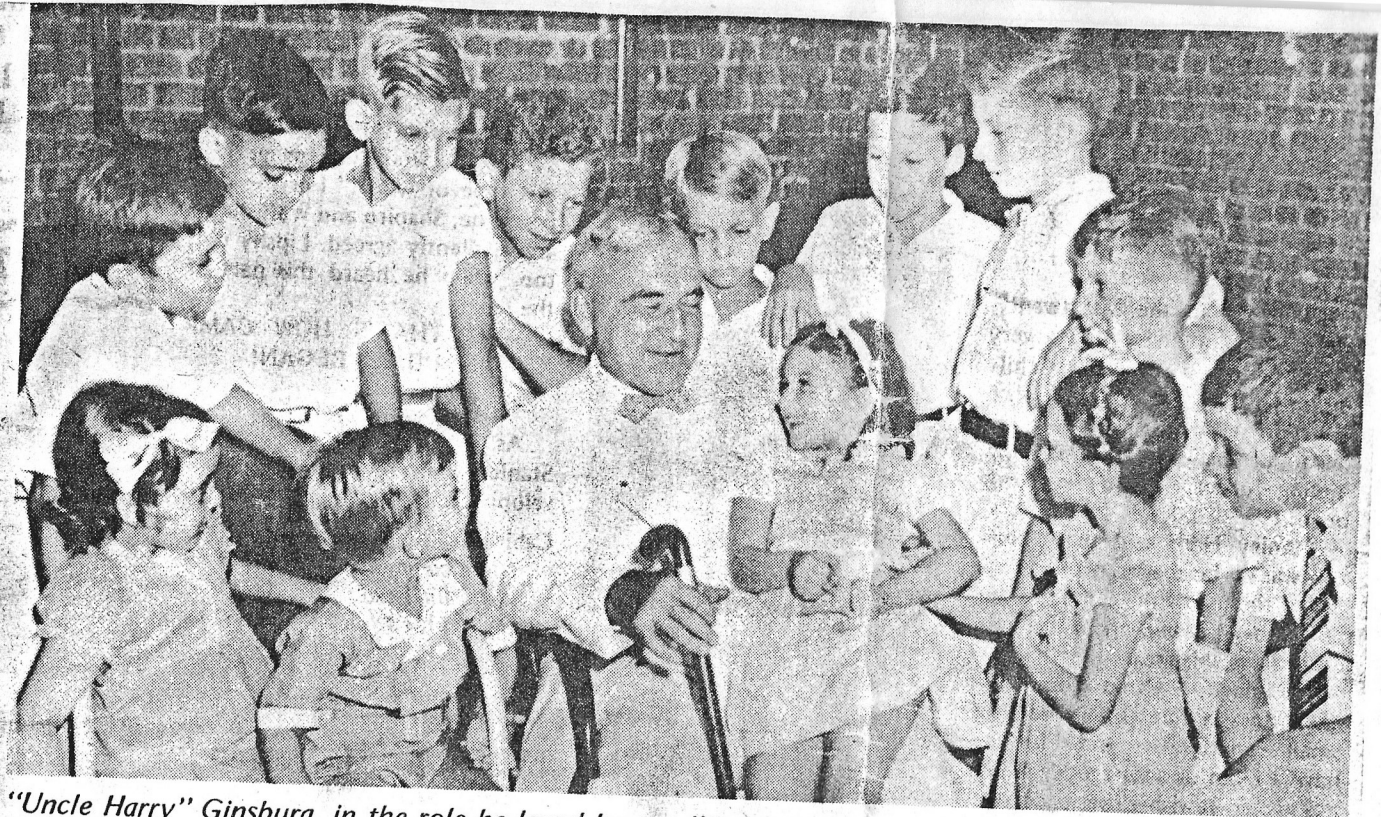
When, for economic reasons, it became evident that it was too costly to maintain this large establishment for so few children, and to close the Home, it was decided that the time had arrived to take advantage of advanced sociological ideas and to experiment with a new development in child care. The concept of placing children, under constant professional supervision, in foster homes, to be

raised and loved in the environment of a small family unit. That was the beginning of the Jewish Children's Regional Service. The prophesy of Uncle Harry had come true.

When the Home ceased to exist as an organization for child care, the building and land were donated to the Jewish community. After a couple of years, its building, which was boarded and dilapidated from non-use and lack of repair, was finally demolished. In its place, as a fitting tribute to its memory, now stands the New Orleans Jewish Community Center.

The Prophets of biblical times admonished the people, preaching it was not fine buildings and raiments, protestations of faith, ashes and sackcloth that found favor in the sight of the Lord, but humility, justice, caring for the widows and orphans. In humility, allow me the dignity of asking our Jewish community to consider joining the rest of us ex-HK's in supporting the Jewish Children's Regional Service. This may afford some future person at some future date, with a heart full of appreciation, the opportunity to write about Fortunate Unfortunates.

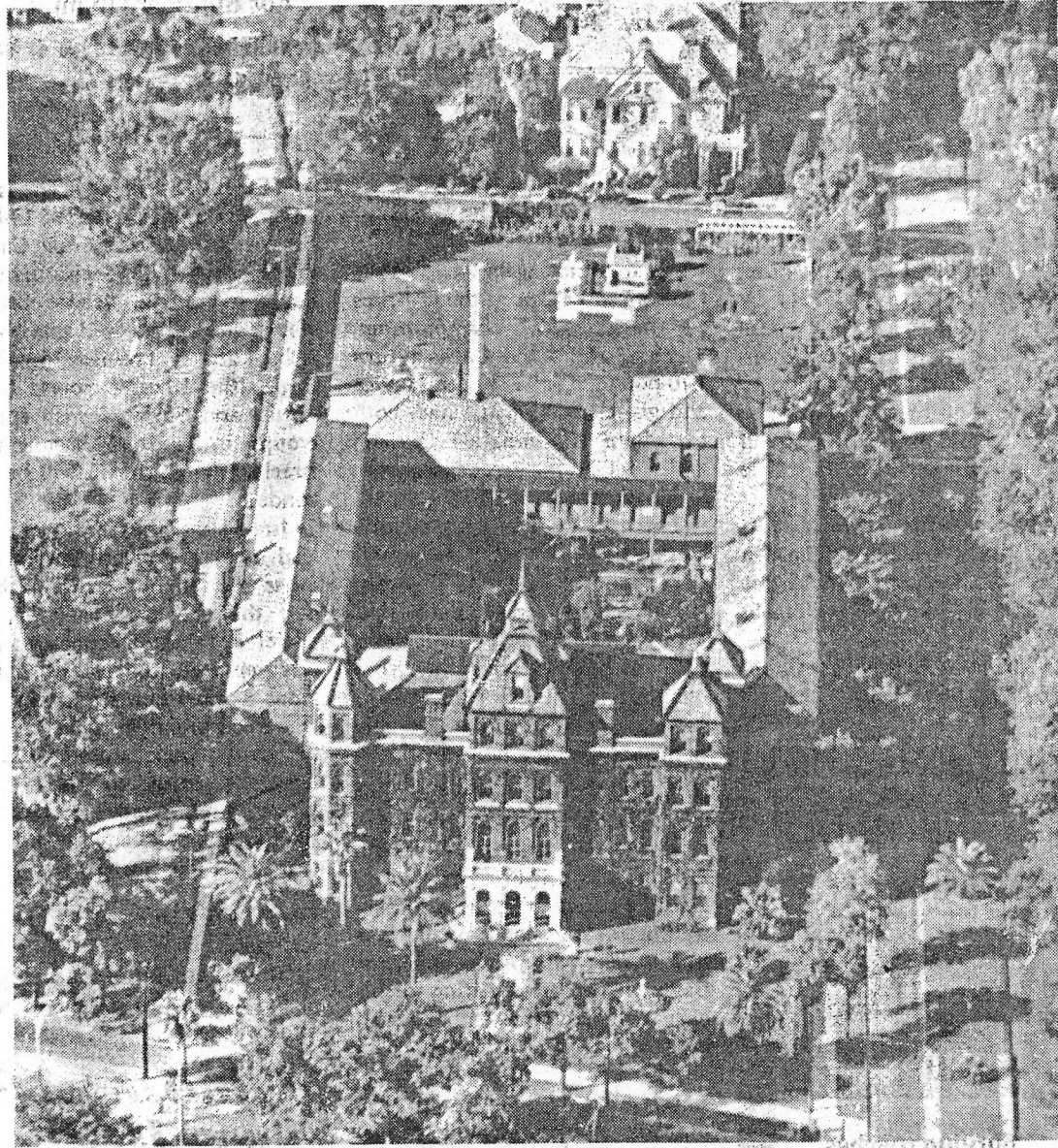
All photographs are from the priceless scrapbook of Fannie Maas Gerson, who was in the Home with Louis Peters.



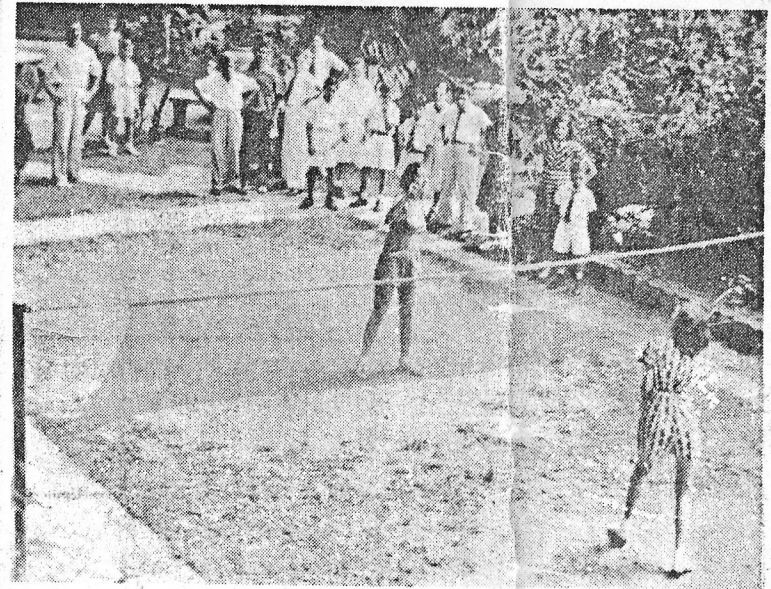
"Uncle Harry" Ginsburg, in the role he loved best, telling stories to the younger children in the Home. He was Superintendent during the time Louis Peters was there.



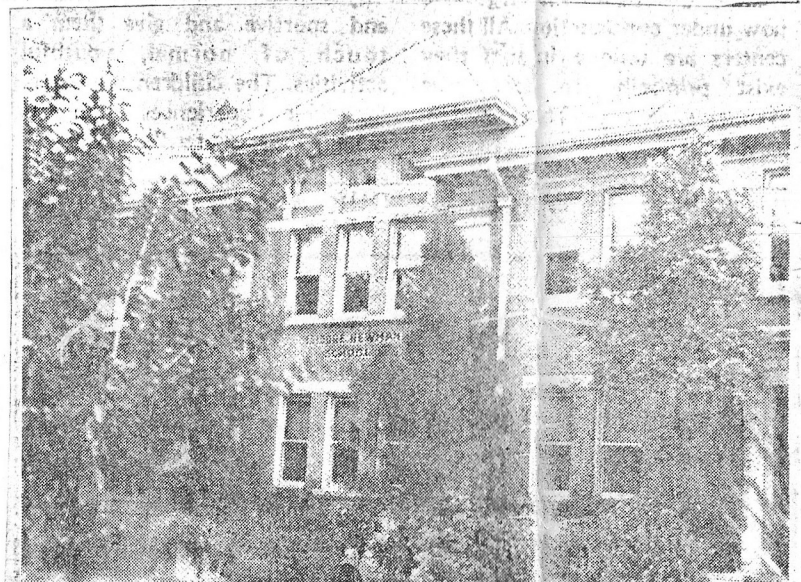
Children found a home in hospitable New Orleans from all over the south — Alabama, Arkansas, Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Tennessee and Oklahoma.



An aerial view of the beautiful Jewish Children's Home, its buildings and grounds, prior to demolition — to make way for today's Jewish Community Center of New Orleans.



Playing a game of badminton. (Inner courtyard)



The main building of the Isidore Newman (Manual Training) School — later to become, with many new additions, New Orleans' finest college preparatory school.