

**Marlene Trestman, *Most Fortunate Unfortunates: The Jewish Orphans' Home of New Orleans* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2023), 352pp.**

Marlene Trestman's thoughtful and deeply researched *Most Fortunate Unfortunates: The Jewish Orphans' Home of New Orleans* tells the story of the Home for Jewish Widows and Orphans in New Orleans ("the Home"), the "first purpose-built Jewish orphanage" in the United States. Widely praised as "the institution that is not an institution," "a home-like Home," and "a real home for its youthful inhabitants," the Home provided care for 1623 children and 24 adult women over the course of its ninety-year history. While keeping the focus squarely on the Home itself, Trestman usefully sets it in the context of Southern Jewish history, evolving American Jewish identities, developments in Jewish communal service, and broader trends in public health and caring for children in need.

The Home opened in 1856, in response to devastating outbreaks of yellow fever in New Orleans. With existing Jewish benevolent organizations insufficient to meet the needs of the many devastated families, leading members of the city's Jewish community joined together to establish an institution to house needy widows, orphans, and half-orphans. (Within a few decades, the Home discharged its last widow and henceforth focused exclusively on children.) In addition to purely philanthropic impulses, founders were motivated by a desire to ensure Jewish continuity and to demonstrate the commitment of Jews to caring for their own. The Home cared for the children until they could be returned to a parent or relative (the most common result), were old enough to be self-sufficient, or had found a suitable employer or apprenticeship (for boys) or a respectable husband (for girls).

Trestman traces the Home's history through the challenging years of the Civil War, increasing immigration in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a regional partnership with B'nai B'rith, changes in best practices for dependent children in the first decades of the twentieth century, and the turbulence of World War II. Over the years, the Home expanded, remodeled, and rebuilt regularly; it incorporated indoor and outdoor recreation areas, swimming baths, a workshop, classrooms, an infirmary, study rooms, a library, a synagogue, summer camping, and

more. In 1904, it opened the Isidore Newman Manual Training school, becoming the only American orphanage to open a coed, secular school where Home children attended alongside paying children from the well-off families of New Orleans. For decades before the advent of government social programs, it offered the region's needy Jewish children care and the potential for upward mobility.

Throughout, Trestman pays careful attention to race, gender, and class. She does not shy away from the irony of the fact that among the Home's founders were men who enslaved Black persons, including children, or that several of the Home's leaders during the Civil War were Confederate sympathizers who saw the South as the place that had provided Jews with extensive prospects. The Home's leaders were also not immune to the gender ideologies of the time. While women played important roles in running the institution, bending contemporary gender norms, men always remained firmly in control (unlike in some comparable institutions); while female residents were provided with educational and professional training opportunities, their futures were envisioned very differently from those of their male counterparts. And for decades, the Home's board struggled with whether exposing resident children to their wealthier counterparts would harm them by raising unrealistic expectations or help them by providing them with role models and connections.

Beginning in the early twentieth century, experts in the nascent field of social work began increasingly to emphasize the importance of home life for dependent children. Where possible, professionals argued, aid should be given to families—for example, through mothers' pensions—to enable children to stay in their homes. Where that proved impossible, foster care or adoption was now seen as preferable to institutional care.

For the first few decades, the Home's leaders resisted these trends, choosing instead to focus on making the Home more "homelike." Rather than attempting to keep children with their families or place them for foster care or adoption (indeed, only just over a dozen cases of adoption occurred in the Home's ninety-year history), administrators transformed dormitories into smaller bedrooms, abandoned institutional long dining tables for more intimate arrangements, and provided children with more opportunities for individualization, through clothing,

personalized birthdays, and spending money. Indeed, New Orleans as a whole remained skeptical of foster care. Only in the mid-1920s did the board begin more regularly to explore ways to keep children with their mothers rather than admitting them to the Home.

The financial pressures of the Depression finally pushed the Home toward refusing admission for children for whom acceptable family care could be secured. With increasing government aid for families during the New Deal, declining birth rates, declining death rates for parents, and growing acceptance of foster care, the need for institutional care diminished, and the Home's population fell. In 1944, the board made its first real move toward offering foster care. When superintendent Harry Ginsburg died in 1946, the Home closed its residential facility and transformed itself into a regional, nonresidential children's service, known today as the Jewish Children's Regional Service.

While Trestman takes an analytical eye to the Home's history, her affection for the organization is palpable and personal. As a young child, with a struggling mother and a father in a state mental hospital, she went to camp and ballet classes in the former orphanage building; when her mother died when Trestman was eleven years old, the Jewish Children's Regional Service oversaw her foster care. If she had been a few decades older, she likely would have lived in the Home.

Trestman did a prodigious amount of research for *Most Fortunate Unfortunates*. With residents' case files mostly lost, she plumbed admissions records, annual reports, minutes, and newsletters, in addition to many archival and manuscript collections. She utilized nearly 140 oral histories—many of which she conducted herself—of Home alumni and their families, descendants, former staff, and former leaders. This research occasionally results in perhaps an overabundance of detail, but it also lends richness and depth, especially to the stories of individual alumni.

As a wonderful corollary to her engaging book, Trestman has created an extensive online supplement, available at [marlenetrestman.com](http://marlenetrestman.com), that will be of interest to any reader, but especially to scholars or teachers of Southern Jewish history or child welfare. The supplement includes an extensive photo gallery with historical images of the Home's various buildings; a growing list of alumni profiles that include biographical sketches, photographs, and primary source documents; overviews of fifty-three

other American Jewish orphanages; sketches of the Home's founders, including the number of people they enslaved; and information about superintendents, staff, and the children admitted. It is a model for how authors can enhance their publications and make primary source material easily accessible to students and colleagues.

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**Andrew Meier, *Morgenthau: Power, Privilege, and the Rise of an American Dynasty* (New York: Random House, 2023), xxi +1,046 pp.**

**Daniel Schulman, *The Money Kings: The Epic Story of the Jewish Immigrants Who Transformed Wall Street and Shaped Modern America* (New York: Knopf, 2023), xviii +570pp.**

**Steven Ujifusa, *Last Ships from Hamburg: The Business, Rivalry, and the Race to Save Russia's Jews on the Eve of World War I* (New York: Harper Collins, 2023), 356pp.**

Until recently, academic scholars paid selective attention to members of the American Jewish business establishment that emerged during the middle decades of the nineteenth century. Much is known about the involvement of a few prominent Jewish entrepreneurs, bankers, and lawyers in the spheres of philanthropy and politics, albeit primarily on the national level and in New York. The religious sphere is also well