"Cradled in Judea"

Jewish Orphanages in New York, 1860 – 1960



KINDERGARTEN AT THE HOA, C. 1920, HYMAN BOGEN PAPERS, AJHS

Are you a "graduate" of a Hebrew orphan asylum Jewish orphanage in New York or the descendant of someone who was? Do you know anyone whose life includes that experience? If so, you won't want to miss the Society's next exhibition. If not, read on anyway – the story of American Jewish orphanages is little known and highly interesting.

Continuing to make its archives come alive, in January 2006 the AJHS will open an exhibition on a forgotten aspect of American Jewish philanthropy: the orphanages that served the needs of dependent Jewish children for more than a century. Today, these facilities – and Jewish family and children's services in general – are available to individuals of every faith and ethnicity. However, before the 1950s, Jewish orphanages served a range of needy Jewish children. In addition to parentless orphans, they provided group homes for children whose parents were too sick or too poor to care for them. On numerous occasions, impoverished parents brought their children to these orphanages, hoping that their offspring would get a better start in life than they could afford to provide.

These Jewish children – referred to by historian Hyman Bogen as "the luckiest orphans" – received substantial nutrition, secure housing, sturdy clothing, discipline, health care, public school education, athletic opportunities, preparation for adult life skills and training in Judaism. What they almost never got was the warmth and individual attention that comes to children in a family home. Nor did they get exposure to any form of Judaism other than Reform. Despite these limitations and the disadvantages of poverty from which they started, many of the orphanage graduates went on to highly productive careers and started stable families of their own.

The nineteenth-century philanthropists, educators, rabbis and child care workers who established and maintained these Jewish orphanages



HOA BAND MEMBER, C. 1915, HYMAN BOGEN PAPERS, AJHS

were moved by complex ideals. When the first Jewish orphanages were created in the 1860s, government agencies rarely provided social services, so Jewish philanthropies had to meet the needs of their most vulnerable members or risk losing them to the streets or to Christian missionaries. Starting in the 1880s, the massive influx of Yiddish-speaking immigrants into the United States had the effect of disrupting many families. The German-Jewish leadership elites of New York City tried their best to create "ideal homes" for the children of their less fortunate co-religionists – in their phrase, to cradle them in Judea. However, until 1903 they discouraged orphanage residents from speaking Yiddish and it was not until 1914 that kosher food was made widely available in the orphanages.

The American Jewish Historical Society is privileged to care for the archives of several Jewish orphanages, including the Brooklyn Hebrew Orphan Asylum, Home for Hebrew Infants, Hebrew Orphan Asylum, Hebrew Sheltering Guardian Society of New York, Hebrew Infant Asylum of New York City, Hebrew National Orphan Home, Hartman Homecrest Records, the Pride of Judea, the records of the Seligman Solomon Society and the papers of Hyman Bogen. The exhibition, curated by the Society's archival staff, draws from these collections.

The exhibition runs until June 2006. To arrange for a group visit to the exhibition, please contact Cathy Krugman at ckrugman@ajhs.cjh.org or at 212 294-6164.

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