

Orphans Together: A History of New York's Hebrew Orphan Asylum

By Kim Van Alkemade

Shippensburg University of Pennsylvania

[Copyright reserved by the author. Please do not quote without permission.]

In 1822, the descendants of the original Sephardic population of New York and the more recently arrived German Jews together formed the Hebrew Benevolent Society to provide assistance for orphaned Jewish children. Conflict between the groups, however, delayed the creation of an orphanage for nearly forty years. It was the international outcry over Edgardo Mortara's kidnapping in 1858 in Bologna, Italy, by agents of Pope Pius IX,¹ that brought the Society back together to fund the first orphanage for Jewish children in New York. The Benevolent Society fundraising dinner in December of that year raised \$10,000 before a "Tammany-style brawl" broke out between the Orthodox and Reformed Jews over the latter group's refusal to don yarmulkes for the benediction; gentile guests, including New York Mayor Daniel Tiemann, had to restrain the participants.² While the practice of holding annual dinners was thereafter suspended, the Hebrew Benevolent Society did, in 1859, finally begin planning for the orphanage.

Even as construction plans were being drawn up for a permanent building to house the orphanage, the Hebrew Orphan Asylum officially opened in 1860 in a rented townhouse in Chelsea, where a rabbi and his wife supervised a couple dozen orphaned and half-orphaned boys and girls. Their tedious daily routine was punctuated by frightening skirmishes with Irish gangs on the way to public school, and varied only during the high holy days and other religious holidays, when the children trekked to a different synagogue for each occasion, the Society that sponsored them being unable to agree as to the particular brand of Judaism with which their charges were to be instilled.³ It was in this house on Lamartine Place that the children passed the years of the Civil War, surviving the New York Draft Riots that brought looters to their very street (an abolitionist neighbor escaped the mob across the orphanage's roof).⁴ In November

¹ See Kertzer, David I. *The Kidnapping of Edgardo Mortara*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1999) for an excellent account of this incident.

² Bogen, Hyman. *The Luckiest Orphans: A History of the Hebrew Orphan Asylum of New York City*. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992.), p. 17.

³ Ibid., p. 22.

⁴ Ibid., p. 30.

1863, the children moved to the HOA's new location on East 77th St., an elegant building featuring modern conveniences such as hot and cold running water that was designed to house two hundred children.⁵ Following an industrial model, the orphanage taught girls to be domestics and instructed boys in such trades as shoe-making and printing; its most ambitious enterprise was a print shop that published a magazine called *Young Israel* to which Horatio Alger contributed a serialized novel.⁶

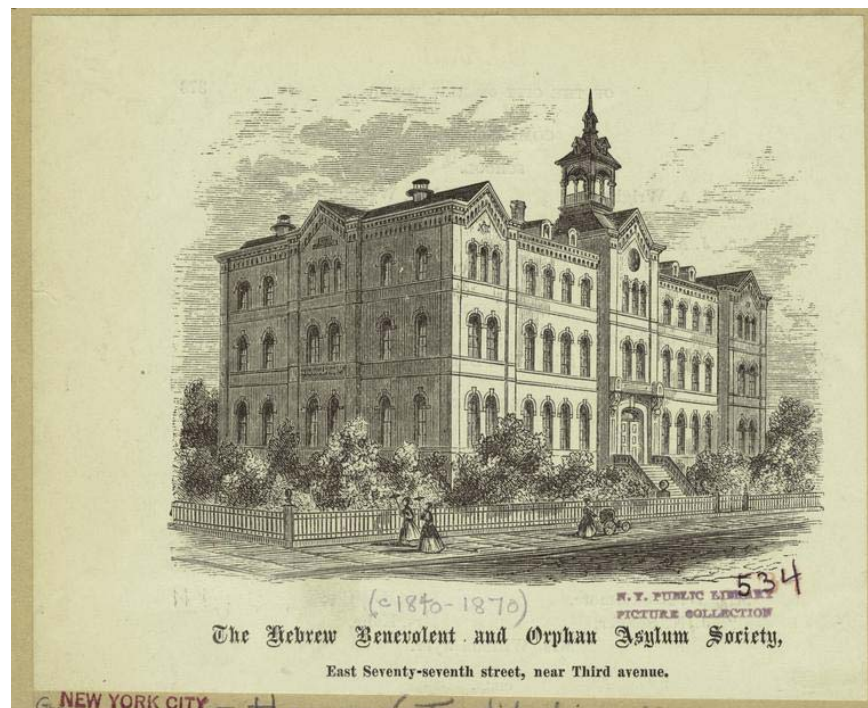


Figure 1 The HOA on East 77th St.
From the Digital Collection of the New York Public Library.

The HOA continued to grow, dislocation after the Civil War, epidemics, depressions, and the rising tide of immigration from Eastern Europe all conspiring to create an unending supply of orphaned, destitute or abandoned children. Between 1860 and 1919, 13,500 children were admitted to the HOA,⁷ but admissions always outstripped discharges. Few children were ever adopted, because most were only half-orphans if they were orphans at all, as destitute Jewish

⁵ Bogan, p. 35.

⁶ Ibid., p. 50.

⁷ Ibid., p. 180; see also Bernard, Jaqueline. *The Children You Gave Us: A History of 150 Years of Service to Children*. (New York: Jewish Child Care Association, 1973.)

single parents or relatives used the institution “as a boarding school.”⁸ After only twenty years in their building, a much larger orphanage was needed, and in 1884, the Hebrew Benevolent Society erected a magnificent new building for the HOA on Amsterdam Avenue between 136th and 138th Streets at a cost of \$750,000 for land and construction, and annual operating expenses of \$60,000.⁹ Expenses above and beyond state allocations were made up by donations from the members of the Benevolent Society, who were determined to demonstrate the superiority with which New York’s Jews took care of their own.



Figure 2 City College of New York in 1903. The HOA is depicted across Amsterdam Ave. in the upper right.
From the digital collection of the New York Public Library.

The building on Amsterdam Avenue was an imposing structure in the Modern Renaissance style that rivaled the halls of The City College of New York across the street;

⁸ Bogan., p. 48.

⁹ Ibid., p. 99.

children brought to its front door almost invariably described it as medieval castle. The architect's goal had been to "make a building chaste and dignified in its exterior . . . and in its interior combining the elements of safety, convenience and usefulness." The handwritten building plan from 1882 pointed out the numerous flights of stairs for "saving the inmates in case of fire or other peril," and provided for so many toilets the architect fretted that perhaps "the instructions to make ample provision for water closets has been too liberally interpreted."¹⁰

Soon, over one thousand children were living in the main building, which featured its own electrical generator, bakery, and even a water filtration system, installed after a dysentery outbreak in 1898 traced to impurities in the city's water left seven children dead.¹¹ The HOA was self-sufficient to a fault, enabling the facility to easily survive a week of isolation following the great blizzard 1888.¹² It was also meticulous in guarding the health of the children: although the influenza epidemic of 1918 made many children into orphans, it left the residents of the HOA untouched.

My family's story became connected to the HOA when my great-grandfather, Harry Berger, abandoned his family in 1918. He had married my great-grandmother, Fannie Lewis, on March 6, 1906. The ceremony, held at the Pacific Hall on East Broadway, was officiated by "Rev." Israel Kupper of the Congregation of the Sons of Israel. At the time, Harry was a tailor, and the couple took up residence around the corner at 151 Henry Street. The witness to the ceremony was not Fannie's father, Isaac, who had objected to the marriage, but a Prinsky Lewis, perhaps the uncle Fannie's sister had herself been forced marry, in a scenario of family drama reminiscent of an Anzia Yezierska novel.¹³

The couple's life together started off well. In 1910, Fannie gave birth to her first son, Seymore, at Sydenham Hospital while the family was living at 20 E. 116th St. in East Harlem. Like so many others seeking to escape the tenements of the Lower East Side, their relocation followed the construction of the East Branch of the subway, which could have transported Harry the eight miles from his home down to Canal St. in the Garment District, where he had advanced from tailor to cutter in a shirtwaist factory, in just 28 minutes. By the time Victor was born at home in 1912, the family had moved up to the Bronx, perhaps to be nearer to Fannie's sister,

¹⁰ Hebrew Orphan Asylum (HOA) Collection. American Jewish Historical Society, New York, NY.

¹¹ Bogan, p. 126.

¹² Ibid., p. 113.

¹³ See for example Yezierska, Anzia. *Bread Givers*. (1925. Forward Alice Kessler-Harris. New York: Persea Books, 1999.)

listing their address as 765 E. 160th Street. From here, Harry would have ridden the Third Ave. Elevated Line, traveling the 8.79 miles from 3rd Ave and 161st St. down to Grand St. in 35.5 minutes.¹⁴

By 1916, Harry had become a “contractor of waists.” As a shirtwaist contractor in the garment industry, he was one of the “tough breed of underfinanced adventurers” of whom “as many as one third” typically went bankrupt in a year.¹⁵ It was an industry that became even more competitive after labor conditions for the young Italian and Jewish women who operated the sewing machines improved in the wake of the tragic Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire of 1911.¹⁶ Despite the advantages of unionization, these young women continued to be subject to harassment and exploitation from bosses,¹⁷ such as Harry Berger. After impregnating a young Italian worker and losing his business to bankruptcy, my great-grandfather deserted his family, a circumstance that “had become a fact of life for numerous immigrant Jewish families during this period”¹⁸ as the regular “Gallery of Missing Husbands” page in the *Jewish Daily Forward* attests.¹⁹ Not only was Harry an economic failure and a philanderer, he was also suffering from tuberculosis, a disease rampant among garment workers, so it should come as no surprise that he headed west to Colorado.²⁰ Although Harry initially stayed with his brother in Leadville, thousands of tubercular Jews were flocking to all parts of Colorado, where there was an established Jewish presence,²¹ many seeking the cure at the free Denver Sanatorium of the Jewish Consumptives Relief Association.²²

Back home, my abandoned great-grandmother Fanny now had three boys, the youngest, Charles, just four years old. She raised sixty dollars by selling her household possessions; she even resorted to pawning her engagement ring, but the jeweler informed her that the diamond, if

¹⁴ Visit www.nycsubway.org for access to historical maps and timetables.

¹⁵ Howe, Irving. *World of Our Fathers*. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976.), pp. 157, 159.

¹⁶ See Von Drehle, David. *Triangle: The Fire that Changed America*. (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2003.)

¹⁷ See Ewen, Elizabeth. *Immigrant Women in the Land of Dollars: Life and Culture of the Lower East Side 1890--1925*. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1985.)

¹⁸ Friedman, Reena Sigma. “‘Send Me My Husband Who Is In New York City’: Husband Desertion in the American Jewish Immigrant Community, 1900-1926.” (*Jewish Social Studies* 44.1 (Winter 1982): 1-18), p. 1.

¹⁹ Metzker, Isaac, ed. *A Bintel Brief: Sixty Years of Letters from the Lower East Side to the Jewish Daily Forward*. (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1971.)

²⁰ See Rothman, Sheila M. *Living in the Shadow of Death : Tuberculosis and the Social Experience of Illness in American History*. (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995.)

²¹ See Uchill, Ida Libert. *Pioneers, Peddlers & Tsadikim: The Story of Jews in Colorado*. (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 1979.)

²² See Abrams, Jeannie. *Chasing the Cure in Colorado*. (Wayne State University Press, 1991.)

it had ever been real, had been replaced with paste and was worthless. She moved out of the East Harlem apartment and in with her sister and brother-in-law/uncle for a while, but the house at 1162 Garrison Avenue in the Bronx was crowded with children and misery, for the incestuous marriage was terribly unhappy. On December 27, 1918, after Harry had been gone for over a month, Fannie Berger relinquish her children to the Hebrew Orphan Asylum. Fannie was lucky enough to secure employment for herself at the HOA, as a domestic earning twenty-four dollars and room and board, so she was able to live near two of her sons.

Charles was only four, however, too young to be admitted to the orphanage. Instead, he was assigned to the Hebrew Infants Asylum, which boarded him out with a foster family and barred Fanny from visiting him for six months. When that time had finally passed, Charles contracted the measles and was quarantined for another six weeks. Fanny couldn't take the separation any more, and told her superintendent, Mr. Lionel Simmonds, who had himself grown up in the HOA, that she would have to quit her position if she couldn't have her little boy with her. He relented, and allowed Charles to live with his mother until he was old enough to be officially admitted to the HOA. Perhaps the young boy's unofficial status explains why Charles is not listed along with his brothers in the 1920 census, in which the residents of the HOA comprised an entire enumeration district.

My grandfather, Victor, would live at the HOA for eleven years: from his sixth birthday until 1930. The boys were separated into groups by age, while their mother lived in a separate building on the grounds, where her sons were able to visit her only briefly after school. If Victor's introduction to institutional life was anything like Hy Bogan's, he was probably soon painfully introduced to the authority of the monitors, older boys in charge of daily discipline who were free to met out punishments from slaps to punches to "standing lessons" without explanation.²³ There was only one adult counselor for each dorm of around a hundred children. Only the youngest group of boys enjoyed the occasional attentions of a female counselor; young men studying at City College were typically hired as counselors for boys age eight and older. For these young men, a job as counselor at the HOA was almost like a college scholarship; my Uncle Seymore himself became a counselor, staying on at the HOA after being discharged in 1926 while studying business at City College.

²³ Personal interview with Hyman Bogan, 2002.



Figure 3 HOA baseball team; Victor Berger, author's grandfather, seated in front.

Beyond bullying, bells, and long periods of silence, however, the HOA did offer both diversion and support. Victor played on the HOA baseball and basketball teams, was on the staff of their monthly magazine, *The Rising Bell*, was a member of numerous clubs, and specialized in social events, such as the Masquerade Committee.²⁴ In 1927 and 1928, Victor won ten dollar prizes; in 1929 he won a Seligman Soloman award of twenty-five dollars. After graduating from DeWitt Clinton high school in 1930, he was hired as a lab assistant by a dentist, Dr. Levine. In 1931, Victor was awarded an HOA scholarship to pre-dental school on Dr. Levine's recommendation. Why my grandfather did not become a dentist remains a mystery to me. My grandmother's explanation was that the Depression had depleted the HOA's scholarship fund, forcing Victor to drop out of school, but the Scholarship Committee seemed confident enough in February of 1932 to promise to see Victor through the six years of training required "if the boy makes good" and in August of that year, Victor was still working for Dr. Levine during the day and attending night classes at City College of New York.²⁵

Fannie had, in 1924, secured a divorce from her absconded husband, who died in 1929. When a letter came to Fannie asking her to send money for a headstone for her former husband,

²⁴ HOA Collection.

²⁵ Personal communication from Leona Ferrer, Alumni Coordinator, Jewish Child Care Association, 2003.

she called her boys together to ask their advice. They were unanimous: “Don’t send him a dime. He left us, we don’t owe him a thing,” they told their mother. The Russian immigrant who abandoned and orphaned his American sons would be buried without a marker.

Despite burgeoning enrollments, the HOA was, itself, also slowly dying. For decades, it had been the nation's premier orphanage, but its building's design so perfectly embodied the institutional approach to child care that it was incapable of adapting to new social research that found that children thrive better in group homes and foster care than in large institutions. By 1920, the Hebrew Orphan Asylum was losing its position to the Pleasantville Cottage School, its rival Jewish orphanage in Westchester. Pleasantville's cottage system, in which small groups of children of various ages lived together with a house mother who prepared their meals, exemplified the latest philosophies. In a “game of philanthropic one-upmanship,” the HOA determined to surpass Pleasantville and regain its preeminence.²⁶ The HOA trustees developed a plan to raise the four million dollars they would need to construct the largest, best, and most expensive orphanage in the country on rural property the Asylum owned in the Bronx. Following the new cottage model, it would comprise twenty-four separate buildings, including residences for eleven hundred children, a hospital, a school, a gymnasium, a synagogue, a powerplant, and a greenhouse.

The HOA expansion plan seemed possible, for the trustees had found a buyer for the Amsterdam Avenue property: the NY Yankees baseball team, which was in a desperate search for a home of its own. In 1921, the Yankees were about to start their ninth season as the paying guests of the Giants at the Polo Grounds in Manhattan, but the Giants, resentful perhaps of the popularity of Babe Ruth's Yankees, refused to enter into another long-term lease and only grudgingly agreed to a two-year extension. The move would get the team out from under the inhospitable and jealous Giants (as *The Times* graciously put it, the Yankees had been “living with their stepbrothers, the Giants, for so long a time that the hospitality of the latter appeared slightly frayed”) and the Yankees fully expected “to march triumphantly into the gleaming new grounds in April, 1923.”²⁷

But the deal fell through, and the HOA had no choice but to resign themselves to remaining where they were, while the Yankees went on to build their “gleaming new grounds” in

²⁶ Bogan, 185.

²⁷ *The New York Times*, January 30, 1921, p. 1.

the Bronx. For two more decades, the HOA continued to house well over a thousand children at a time, in addition to fostering-out hundreds more, but its population slowly dwindled until it was closed in 1941. In 1955, the New York City Parks Department replaced the building with a playground; today, a plaque commemorates the history of the site, now known as the Jacob H. Schiff Playground.²⁸

²⁸ I have never been able to find the sign at the park itself, but it is available at the website of the New York City Dept. of Parks and Recreation by visiting http://www.nycgovparks.org/sub_your_park/historical_signs/hs_historical_sign.php?id=7323