

Book Review: *The Home On Gorham Street*

The Home On Gorham Street by Howard Goldstein.
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by
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Howard Goldstein

I must admit to having had reservations about reading a book about orphanages (or the holocaust, or slavery). But being familiar with some of the earlier works of Dr. Goldstein, it seemed to me that I should look at his entry into a new writing milieu. Most of his writings are about social work practice, and this book on the face of it, seemed unusual. Why was he looking at one orphanage? Why not a history of orphanages, or the dangers of orphanages, or other things I thought he should be writing about? By the middle of the first chapter, I was absorbed, eager to read on, realizing that the experience was not to be missed. So, to put the bottom line first: this is an interesting, important, and well written book that brings to life a fundamental and much disputed aspect in the history of child care in America.

While many of us have images of orphanages, generally implanted from stories and movies, we rarely get a close glimpse of what these institutions might have meant in shaping the lives of those who boarded within, nor do we get a picture of the role played by the institution's organizers and

communities. In an intense, scholarly, and warm account of the orphanage institution and its context, Goldstein helps us make the leap from uninformed fantasy to empathetic reality. He helps us to see that under certain conditions an orphanage can be a home.

Goldstein grew up across the street from the home on Gorham Street. He played with many of the children and attended programs, plays, and shows that the home offered to the general community. Several of his childhood friends remember "Howie" very well when he interviews them decades later, and they recall their mutual adventures.

The Home on Gorham Street is a depository of the history and narratives of the institution itself and of "the voices of its children." Going back to the old neighborhood to trace the journeys of some of the "children," now adults, and examining historical documents, Goldstein brings back to life a once dynamic community in which the children of the home, and the children of the community, shared parties, games, celebrations, and their homes.

While the history of how this institution came to be and to disappear is interesting, at once both unique and familiar, it is the children, now adult voices, which help us to understand how their lives were shaped by the orphanage's philosophy, its staff, and the community. All in all, the children's home comes through as a nurturing and helpful setting for the children's growth. Though the rules and regulations were often strict, with the Jewish Orthodox setting requiring adherence to regular worship times, the children found ways to behave like children, bending the rules and finding alternative stories for themselves in the community. The nurturing community, neighbors, and volunteers offered generous opportunities for the children's growth.

Not all of the children were orphans. Some had been deserted by their parents and others were left by fathers whose wives had been institutionalized. At times an aunt or uncle could not manage to care for the child of a collapsed marriage, and the child eventually was placed in the home by default.

The voices of the former wards play out the duality of achievement and abandonment—the adult, proud to have evolved into a productive citizen, and the child, torn by the loss of family. In what may be a succinct commentary on their lives, Goldstein notes, "Few of these elders who joined me in considering their lives did so

with great regret; pride and dignity, in fact were common themes. . . . They did well because there was no other way to do it, given what they asked of themselves: 'I had to make good, I had to be something; You have to be a mensch.'"

Within the context of the children's voices, we are told the history of some of the organization's prime movers. We learn of their dreams, actions, and tributes bestowed upon them by the community and by the alumni of the institution. These too are moving descriptions, vivid and sympathetic.

Building upon the reader's vivified concept of the children's institution, its myths, its challenges, its successes, and its essential role in the development of valuable lives fated with early misfortune, Goldstein closes *The Home On Gorham Street* with a commentary about the current state of affairs in child development and group care. Bringing the reader back to the present, Goldstein seeks immediately to activate the optimistic spirit of his story. By debriefing the reader on the needs and challenges of the present, he seeks to redirect the reader's sensitivities to a realm that benefits from the fruits of reflection.

The spirit in *The Home on Gorham Street* is difficult to convey without massive references to the conversations with the former wards and to the narratives from the author's own experiences with the lives of the

children in the home. It reflects the human quality of the people who dreamed of serving children, of the staff and volunteers who tried to make the "home" a home, and of the aspirations of the children themselves. It reflects the spirit of the author, perhaps it is enough to say, the spirit of a mensch—a person. □

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