

## **Federation of Bessarabian Jews in America** by Gloria Green, Independence / Winter Garden, FL

March, 2012

Leo LERNER came to America in 1891 with his wife, Rose SCHWARTZMAN LERNER and five daughters. Their names on the ship's manifest are shown as David, Rebecka, Taube, Jibe, Adele, Citel and Deborah. Rose came from Bendery, like her nephew, Jacob Moses SCHWARTZMAN and her father, also Jacob SCHWARTZMAN, whose wife was Tillie SPIVACK.

Daughter Deborah (Dorothy LERNER GORDON) had a stellar career in New York City on stage, in print (NY Times column) and on television (Youth Forum).

Leo LERNER, who became a practicing attorney, was concerned with all the orphans in the tenement areas of New York City. He established and became the first President of the Federation of Bessarabian Jews in May of 1912. The group was concerned that "Jewish orphan tots of the country, many of whom were at that moment losing their Jewish identity in the public or Christian foundlings and asylums of our nature." An initial goal was to establish the Hebrew National Orphan Home. It was launched on the Lower East Side on December 5, 1912, after the group raised \$64 to establish "a Jewish orthodox home for the care of orphaned and destitute Jewish boys." On October 14, 1913, the first installment of \$400 was paid for the premises at 57 East 7<sup>th</sup> Street. The HNOH House opened its doors on June 7, 1914 accommodating about 50 boys. By the 1920s, there were more than 300 boys in residence.

Below is some of the related material available on the Internet, including information on the founding of the Hebrew National Orphan Home. Reading some of the controversy, it appears their primary concern was Jewish orphans in the immediate neighborhood/tenement district on the Lower East Side of New York. The Lerner Family lived on Rivington Street at this time.

### **Federation of Bessarabian Organizations - Certificate of Incorporation:**

On the 29<sup>th</sup> of May, 1912, a group of men gathered together to sign the document which created the Federation of Bessarabian Jews. The objective: "To organize the Jews coming from the Province of Bessarabia and the southern part of Russia for cooperative work in behalf of special interest; to enrich the spirit of brotherhood among the membership of said organization; to educate its members in the science of philanthropy and benevolence; to cultivate its members in the knowledge of true American citizenship . . . to establish subordinate members of this organization all over the United States for the same purposes . . ."

The original members of the Society: Wolf ZOUSMER, Benjamin SCHREIBER, Samuel SOFFER, Abraham SHEINOUS (SHANOUS), Aaron BRANOWER, Morris PIKE, Reuben GROSSMAN, Harris COOPER, Israel ROTHSTEIN, Frederick GOLDENTYER, Solomon SCHEINER, Max WARKOW, Meyer FELDMAN, Morris TENENBAUM, Benjamin SCHWARTZ, Solomon ROSENFELD, Isaac SHERMAN, William BRONTMAN, Morris HOLTZMAN, Meyer FELDMAN, Max SCHWARTZ and Louis CHOBRUSKY, and Leo LERNER.

According to the booklet created for the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration of the founding of the NHOH, "The group was concerned that "Jewish orphan tots of the country, many of whom were at that moment losing their Jewish identity in the public or Christian foundlings and asylums of our nature. This was the first venture of its kind of any magnitude in this country."

Source: *Twenty Years of Progress* by Saul Kaplan.

The Home was established after ignoring the New York Kehillah which objected to a Home that was not intended for the community at large: Source: *Jewish immigrant associations and American identity in New York 1880-1939* by Daniel Soyer.

Less successful were some more far-reaching experiments that aspired to unite New York Jewry in overarching structures similar to those that had once dominated the local Jewish communities of Europe. Leaders of such ambitious undertakings as the New York Kehillah appealed for landsmanshaft support, and many societies did in fact join them. Ultimately, however, landsmanshaftn and other societies zealously guarded their independence and rejected affiliation with centralized communal structures. Memories of the corrupt and iniquitous kahal system in Europe conditioned the Jewish public's reluctance to

Indeed, the Kehillah sometimes even seemed to interfere with the cherished autonomy of the landsmanshaftn. In 1912, for example, the Federation of Bessarabian Organizations decided to follow the example of the larger Galician, Russian-Polish, and Romanian federations, all of which sponsored (or had already undertaken to establish) hospitals or other social welfare institutions intended for the community at large. The Bessarabians, believing that there was a need for an orphanage close to the neighborhoods from which the children had come, resolved to build such an institution on the Lower East Side. The Executive Committee of the Kehillah, however, thought that "there was no need for any new institutions of this kind" and tried to persuade Bessarabian leaders to drop the idea.<sup>47</sup> Two years later, when the Bessarabian Federation seemed determined to go ahead with its plan, a motion was introduced at the Kehillah convention that "the Kehillah take steps to prevent the establishment of new Jewish orphan asylums, or hospitals unless a thorough investigation and hearing shall satisfactorily show that such new institutions are needed." The major proponents of the measure, including Louis Marshall and Cyrus Sulzberger, argued strenuously that no new institutions were needed, least of all in "crowded residential sections of the city" like the Lower East Side. A few delegates, including at least two affiliated with landsmanshaftn,

spoke against the motion, contending that the Kehillah had "no right to meddle in such matters." The resolution passed, but two years later the Bessarabians opened the Hebrew National Orphan House anyway.<sup>48</sup>

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## Salute to the Romanian Jews in America and Canada, 1850-2010

By Vladimir Wertsman

publication of events in Romania. Another national organization was the Federation of Bessarabian Jews of America (1911-48) with educational, social, philanthropic, and benevolence aims; it had three thousand members with branches in New York, Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Syracuse, Washington, DC, Montreal (Canada), Paris (France), Argentina, Peru, Colombia, Uruguay, Trinidad and Tobago, and Israel (Tel Aviv). It published *DER BESSARABER YID: YORBUKH* (The Bessarabian Jew: Almanac), 1946-48, on the occasion of the organization's three world conferences. A third national organization was the Romanian

<http://www.hnoh.com/>

The Hebrew National Orphan Home was born on New York's Lower East Side on December 5, 1912, when a group of men and women having raised \$64 dollars launched the idea of establishing a Jewish orthodox home for the care of orphaned and destitute Jewish boys. The idea became a reality on October 14, 1913, when a committee of the Bessarabian Verband, a group of Rumanian Jews timidly paid a first installment of \$400 for the premises at 57 East 7th St., and on June 7, 1914 the HNOH House as it was then known opened its doors with accommodations for about 50 boys. The "H" as it quickly became known expanded its facilities by adding the premises at 52 St. Marks Place and 8th St. The two converted tenement houses backed each other so that their backyards created an enclosed courtyard.



On July 15, 1919 the Tuckahoe Road facility was purchased for \$300,000 in [Yonkers, New York](#) and it opened on July 26, 1920. In 1947, it changed its name to Homecrest then it merged with the Gustave Hartman home for children in 1956 under the name of Hartman-Homecrest and in early 1962 Hartman-Homecrest was merged into the Jewish Child Care Association (JCCA) of New York and the name HNOH after 60 years, was no longer.

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The clothes were custom-tailored.

Back in 1914 when the great metropolis was bursting and groaning under a rapidly increasing population, and many attendant problems, none of which it knew properly how to handle, something new was added to the color and complexities of life on New York's Lower East Side. Each morning in their rush to work, the dwellers of the tenements in a particular three block area were impelled to pause and watch a parade.

It was not exactly a military type procession. There was no band, no flags or banners. The marchers were not in uniform, neither in dress nor step. The clothes they wore were indeed dissimilar, not too well fitted, but clean. The cadence by which they marched was dictated by the usual conglomeration of noises emitted by the morning's hawkers of newspapers, freshly-baked rolls and pretzels, not-so-fresh fruit, vegetables, fish and clothes-to-exchange. The gait of the marchers could hardly be categorized as military or processional, yet they attained a goal each morning. The formation was in columns two with hand-in-hand. This was not so much in accordance with drill or tradition but more as a measure of security lest one get lost amidst the pushcarts, garbage cans and baby-carriage which laid claim to the same narrow sidewalks which constituted the parade route.

The dwellers of the tenements, old and young and under pain to get to work on time in the mid-town sweatshops or in the newer uptown factories (above 23rd street), did however pause and with sympathy watch the morning processional. It was the march of the "yacermalachs," the little boys from the new orphan home on East 7th Street to First Avenue, down to 5th Street and east toward Avenue A to P.S. 25. At first there were but four - the Kossofsky brothers. Then there were more. Up to 20 in the first year; 60 in the second year; over a hundred in the third year.

In those years, The Hebrew National Orphan Home could do little more than reflect the community's and the nation's limited knowledge and understanding regarding care of orphaned and displaced children. Shelter, food and clothing were an accepted program. Obtaining these simple necessities was no meager chore. It was the era of philanthropy via collection of food and clothing in shopping bags and rent money in nickels and dimes. It is to the everlasting glory of the Home's founders that the bare essentials were thus provided.

The daily routine, which today appears so backward and empty-like then seemed complex and did fill the day. The boys slept and lived in dormitories. On East 7th Street, and later extending to a second converted tenement building on East 8th Street, it was about 25 in a dormitory. It was oatmeal or a facsimile in the morning, a sandwich in a brown paper bag and then off for the march to P.S. 25.. Between 3 and 5 PM and after supper it was either Hebrew school, to which teachers donated their services, or play in the concrete-paved yard between the 7th and 8th Street buildings. The yard did have one basketball ring with net. The yard was large enough for box-ball but not for baseball.

What was most significant of life on East 7th Street was the isolation of the HNOH boys from the rest of the community. Symbolic was the tall iron fence separating the Home from the rest of life on 7th Street and beyond. It sure was different to be an orphan. Even at P.S. 25, the only hours spent away from the Home, teachers and the other kids showed that they knew the difference.

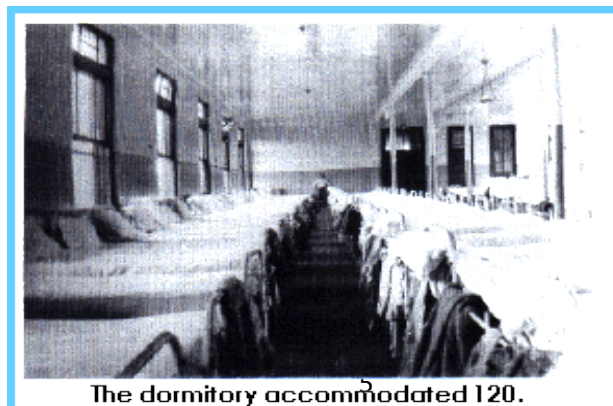
From its oasis among the tenements, the HNOH was moved in 1920 seventeen miles away into "The Country". In Yonkers, the surroundings were different. The air was "cleaner". There was more space - larger dormitories, each of which could accommodate as many as 105 beds. Soon the HNOH census would rise to over 300. You didn't have to leave the big red building at 407 Tuckahoe Road to go to elementary school. Classes were set up in the building. The isolation from the rest of the community was now complete. The daily routine was now fully regimented.

It wasn't really bad, only inadequate. The cityfied youngsters enjoyed many discoveries in their country surroundings. There were apple and pear trees to cause severe tummy aches when their unripe fruit had been secretly plucked and devoured. There was a barn to burn down after attempts to roast corn and mickeys in an open fire built in its hayloft.

There were other things, more constructive, which came later. They included facilities for which there had been no room at East 7th Street such as a library, a gymnasium, a music room, a work shop and a proper Synagogue in which to worship. Still lacking, however, was the programmatic approach and training for the life that was to follow in the real world - in the world outside 407 Tuckahoe Road. That's how it was for 20 years, from 1920 to 1940. Actually it was the social reforms brought on by Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal that gave to the HNOH, as it did to all of the nation, the new and healthier concepts of social responsibility, of the needs and the rights of the young and the displaced in the fabric of a free and democratic society.

New Deal legislation adopted in the Nineteen-Thirties for Social Security, for direct aid to widows and dependent children had a direct impact on the HNOH. Orphaned children, given financial support by the government agencies, could now be taken care of by relatives or close friends of their parents. The term "orphan" was heard less and less. Another kind of child more urgently in need of help, came forward. The child of the broken-up home, the displaced. Everywhere throughout the nation, the era of the "orphan home" was coming to an end.

The metamorphosis started at HNOH in 1940. The Home census had begun to dwindle from its high of 300 a few years before. Simultaneously the newer social concepts already had convinced the Home's officers of the need to depart from the old policy of isolation and regimentation of its young charges. First reform was the demolition of the 105-bed dormitories and conversion of their space into four and five-bed rooms. Some of the space was utilized to house facilities for a new vocational training program including a print shop, photography studio, woodcraft shop and studios for experimentation in radio and television. Skilled instructors were installed to direct these new activities.



The dormitory accommodated 120.

Next came the enlargement of the Home's Social Service department and extension of its program to include foster home placements. In 1943 a professional Case Work Service was introduced and in 1944 a Psychiatric and Psychological Service. Instituted the same year was a Remedial Education Program. By 1950 the character of the Home had indeed changed. The stigma of orphan could no longer apply to the youngsters now housed at 407 Tuckahoe Road. The name was changed to "Homecrest". The new name was selected by the youngsters themselves, most of whom had been brought out of broken-up homes to Yonkers.

The issue of institutional care versus "home care" in an integrated community had, however, not been settled. But soon it would be, for it was a question affecting not Homecrest alone but all of the child-care agencies in the area. In 1955 the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies of Greater New York conducted a thorough survey of the community's needs and responsibilities in this field of service. Federation recommended an end to the large institution-type care and a merger of several agencies in the field to provide the "home in the community" care needed by an increasing number of children.

In 1956 Homecrest, once the HNOH, merged with The Gustave Hartman Home for Children to become Hartman-Homecrest. In the next year, the first of the community-integrated living quarters for youngsters under care of the merged Home was established in Howard Beach, Queens. There in four tastefully decorated and well furnished apartments now live 18 boys and girls ages 13 to 18. With the help of a "House Mother" and "House Father" they lead quite normal lives. They attend the local high school, worship in the local temple and participate in all of the cultural activities and the riches of community life available to all youngsters of like ages. Similarly, eighteen children between ages 6 and 13 are now domiciled in a large mansion-like house in Mt. Vernon and twenty are being housed in Far Rockaway. A staff of physicians, psychiatrists, psychologists and social workers serve their special needs. But there is no isolation, no stigma, no procession through the streets as objects of sympathy.

On June 27, 1958 the old red-brick building at 407 Tuckahoe Road closed its doors.

[HISTORICAL ACCOUNT FROM 1958 HNOH JOURNAL]



ARCHITECTURAL DRAWING AND PHOTOGRAPH  
1919 - 1920