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Review:

Care and Conflict: The Story of the Jewish Orphanage at Norwood, Lawrence Cohen

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Care and Conflict: The Story of the Jewish Orphanage at Norwood,
Lawrence Cohen (Bern: Peter Lang, 2014), ISBN 978-3-034-31768-9,
pp. 305, £48.00.

This doctoral dissertation is an exceptional piece of work. As the author explains in the acknowledgments, he himself lived in the Jewish Orphanage in Norwood in the 1950s. Yet the style and mode of his account demonstrate that, far from simply “going native”, the author has used his perspective “from below” to good heuristic effect. Also unusual is the breadth of his study. Not only, given that his focus is principally historical, is the author well versed in sociological concerns. He also offers something akin to a cultural study, drawing on perspectives from the philosophy of religion, of a total institution in transformation.

The successive chapters clearly illustrate the red thread that runs through the study. Following a short survey of the orphanage’s history the author discusses its changing names over time, demonstrating how they reflect a succession of historically and socially specific approaches to the institutionalization of childhood. For the protagonists, each of these changes marked a form of advancement. In 1876, the Jews’ Hospital and Jews’ Orphan Asylum were merged under this joint designation. Initially it catered for 152 children. Its outwardly impressive building – a mix of palace and military barracks (illustration on p. 44) – embodied the prevalent contemporaneous notion of how children should be “reared” outside the family: it was a total institution. The author offers a detailed and vivid account of its everyday functioning and practice.

Without at any point over-burdening his account with unnecessary detail, Cohen points to developments in Jewish communities in the USA and divergent concepts articulated in continental Europe as to how children might be brought up. An important case in point is Johann Hinrich Wichern (whom, on p. 114, he mysteriously gives the first name Emmanuel), the founder of the Rauhe Haus in Hamburg, which, with its family-like groups, represented something of an antithesis to Norwood. Each chapter offers interesting reflections on theoretical (take the analysis of institutions at the beginning of chapter 5) and methodological (take the discussion of oral history at the end of chapter 6) concerns.

In chapter 3, Cohen offers a comprehensive account of the rise of institutionalism and the residential model at Norwood and its dominance until the end of the First World War. While the orphanage continued

to grow (in the 1930s it catered for almost four hundred children) the residential mode came under increasing pressure. The concepts of family-like groups housed in cottages and foster families gained traction in society and stood for a not merely theoretical but practical critique of the total institution (chapter 4). The attempt to ameliorate the latter's worst effects (chapter 5) crystallized into the "good enough" residential model. Drawing on the work of the psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott, it was predicated on the notion that institutions should cater to the needs of children in the way in which parents would in everyday life within the family. Specifically, leisure opportunities were improved and discipline was relaxed in the interwar years. Corporal punishment was banned, for instance, though in fact it continued to be practised. In the context of its far-reaching social reform programme, the post-war Labour government substituted family groups and foster families for the institutionalized residential model. This also encouraged anti-institutionalism within the Anglo-Jewish community (chapter 6). The grand building at Norwood was demolished in 1962 and children in need were placed in family groups and foster families.

How dominant the institutional vantage and with it the perspective of the managers and carers was is demonstrated not least by the fact that reports on revolts in the orphanage did not become public knowledge until the mid-1960s (p. 193). Until then, they played an important role in the oral tradition of the "inmates" and cemented the sub-cultural identity they inevitably developed in the face of a total institution (chapter 6). Cohen's study finally makes the oral history of the hunger riots that occasionally flared up and the resistance mustered against repression and the disciplinary regime available to the public.

In the final two chapters the author takes issue with the myth of continuous improvement in the realm of institutionalized childcare. All forms of non-familial childrearing, he insists, have developed their own specific modes of repression. That he omits familial repression from his account would be my only criticism of this exceptional study.

Timm Kunstreich (translated by Lars Fischer)