BETTER HOUSING FOR PENSIONERS

BY OSCAR LEONARD

It will not require much arguing here to prove that the Jews of what is generally called the ghetto are badly housed. This is true of those above or on the edge of the poverty line. It is necessarily as true of those who have fallen below the poverty line and who receive assistance from relief agencies. Not that relief workers or directors of relief organizations are content with the housing of the pensioners; but to make ends meet with the financial resources at their disposal they tolerate, often, bad housing. Of course, no relief worker or director of a relief organization will allow pensioners to live in extremely insanitary houses. But the housing of the poor is not what it should be. Nor can those interested in them make this housing all they would desire it to be. But desires and wishes cannot be transformed into cash and landlords will not listen to essays on the need of better housing among the poor. They want real cash, and when cash is limited the relief worker is compelled to place his people in quarters not entirely desirable to him.

One of the most valued directors of the St. Louis Jewish Educational and Charitable Association thinks he has a solution for St. Louis. He is a professional man, a physician of unquestioned ability, an editor and a lover of his fellow-men. He is genuinely interested in his work as a director and has pondered over the problem of housing the pensioners suitably. I shall not state here what I think of the plan. I wish to place it before my fellow social workers. I hope they will give their opinions about this plan, which I present here from the point of view of the man who has presented it to me and to some of my predecessors.

The gentleman argues as follows: We have a number of families and individuals whose rent we pay. We have others whom we pension regularly and who pay their own rent, either in full or in part, out of these allowances. They all live under housing conditions with which we are dissatisfied. Some of them are sick and need our visiting nurse and our physician. Consequently our nurse and our physician have to trod all over the district to reach them. They lose a great deal of time making these visits. This time could be devoted to more and better work on the part of the nurse and physician. The volunteer friendly visitors, too, would find it easier to make their visits if they do not have to cover many blocks.

He therefore suggests that one or more houses, all adjoining, be rented by the Association for these "regulars." Such house or houses, he argues, would be put in the best possible condition. The plumbing would be good, premises kept clean by a person in charge, sanitary rules would be strictly observed. It would even be possible to heat the apartments from a central heating plant and thereby save time and money and give better heat and comfort. The vaults would be done away with and in their places modern sanitary appliances would be installed. Bathing facilities would be placed at the disposal of these families. In a word, our "regulars" would have what we cannot give them under the present conditions. In the long run it would probably even be cheaper to house them under these proper conditions than it is now. I have given the gist of his argument. Is he right or is he wrong? Would you as a social worker and a friend of the needy introduce such a scheme in your city? Tell why you would introduce it, or give your reasons why you would not do so.

Ghet Committee Appointed

That the abuse surrounding and accompanying the granting of rabbinical divorces, commonly known as *Ghets*, has grown to an alarmingly great extent is apparent. At a recent meeting of the Executive Committee of the Jewish Community of New York (*Kehillah*) the *Ghet* question was discussed. It was determined that the matter be considered with all possible diligence by a committee (special) composed of the following: Rev. J. L. Magnes, Rev. Dr. Ph. Klein, Judge Otto Rosalsky, Louis Marshall, Walter H. Liebmann and Monroe M. Goldstein.

A MORE SUBTLE METHOD NEEDED

Most social work is guided by moral, economic or hygienic considerations; that is to say, a case or a situation is studied with reference to vice, or poverty or health, and the problem is worked out through the data gathered with reference to these three criteria. Sometimes civic considerations and at others purely social factors are regarded; but these cases are rare, at least in the work of private philanthropies. In solving a family problem, the object generally is to find what the family ought to do in order to be "healthy and wealthy and wise," and this decision by outsiders becomes the bed in which the family must lie. The decision in most cases is good counsel; but Procrustes himself had no more trouble taking a nap than the average broken-down family in following what is undoubtedly best for it to do.

A family has a psychology as well as a physiology, and it is here that perhaps the methods of philanthropy fail. Not that the mental make-up of the maladjusted, to use the barbarous but expressive professional lingo, is slighted altogether. Far from it. Do we not fear to extend aid at times, lest almsgiving break down the beneficiary's power of resistance? Do we not calculate the effect of every act upon the feelings, habits and temperament of the person dealt with? This is done, but not as a factor of no less importance than the income of the family, or the health of the children. Indeed, all psychological approach to the consideration of these questions is made on the score of "common sense" and with little reference to the principles of psychology, or from its point of view. Social and philanthropic work has been altogether too much concerned with the outside, the physical aspect of social problems.

The following case, not altogether fanciful, may illustrate the point here brought forward: A widow with seven children ranging from infancy to two boys of working age is reported as having a feeble-minded child, unable to take care of itself, six years of age. The mother is a capable woman, who helps to support the family by selling goods on installments; two boys work and bring their earnings home. There is no question of income. The case comes up, reported from the school truant officer, and upon investigation it is found that a twelve-year-old child remains at home, when the mother goes out, to take care of the feeble-minded child. The solution of the difficulty would be either through the mother's staying home or through the removal of the child to an institution for the feeble-minded. The mother declines a weekly stipend equal to the amount she says she earns, on condition that she remain at home with the child. She also declines to send the child away from home. Then begins a long campaign of social worker and truant officer and trained nurse, on the one hand, against the mother, on the other, for the better care and education of her children. The social forces feel that they are right as to what is best for all concerned; but the mother is unyielding. At last, after they have given up the battle in despair, the mother makes a complete *volte face* and not only asks but importunes that the child be removed to the institution. The institution is crowded; it takes time to get the child in; arrangements for the permanent care of the child are made, and finally the admission is made and the case marked closed. Everything else is in good shape. Six months pass, and the mother demands the return of the child, stating that she is now better able to take care of it, and that she was foolish in being prevailed on, and that if she is given the child there will be no cause for further complaint. Investigation shows that there is no change at home, nothing to warrant the belief that the child will be any better off at home than it was before; the child is doing well at the institution, and the superintendent warns that if the child is sent home it will not be again received. The woman is obdurate, and threatens to go to law unless the child is given to her. She is set down as a stubborn, willful woman, who prefers her own way to the good of the child, and who should be opposed in her present attempt against the welfare of the child to the bitter end.

On the paper record this decision is amply warranted. The woman has been troublesome and stubborn. She has resisted all plans of intelligent people to set her house

in order; she is apparently now persisting in her own way careless of the welfare of the child she professes to love.

But is this the whole story? Let the case be taken entirely from her side, as it has been taken entirely from the side of the social agencies. The mother love in the woman is strong; it is a part of her rather forceful personality. She believes that no stranger can be so kind to her child as she is; and she pities the unlovely object that she is asked to put out among strangers. She cannot be convinced that strange nurses and officers can take not only the place of a mother, but also take it to better purpose. Argument on this point is futile; for she accepts her position as axiomatic, as sure as fire burns and water quenches. She refuses to accept aid from a society because this would make her dependent upon the society and obligated to do its will. She would have to give up her child, if the society made the demand. She refuses assistance, in behalf of the child, not as the others thought, in disregard of its interests. The long campaign which was waged about the child got upon her nerves; she began to see more clearly the care the child needed; she tried to give it some of this care, failed, and became more nervous about it. Finally, her state of mind was such that the presence of the neglected child in her house became a source of intense nervous irritation, and in despair she appealed to the agents to put the child away. Six months of freedom from this care and she became her old, strong normal self. Her love for the child was intensified by absence; she felt able to take care of it and began to wonder how she ever permitted it to be sent away. If the ladies had not worried her she would now have her child at home, and all would be well. When she thought of the helpless child among strangers every atom of her motherhood was aroused, and she demanded the return of the child. She would go to law if it were not returned to her.

Thus the case stands. Whatever may be the final outcome, one thing should not be lost sight of—the mental life of the mother as exhibited in her attitude toward her child and to the agencies that would work with her. That mental attitude is as much a part of the case as her widowhood, her peddling, her neglect (according to standards) of her unfortunate child. To dismiss this opposition as mere stubbornness, a moral defect, is to fail to understand the case from a human point of view. It would illustrate why so much impeccable counsel is wasted on other people. They are told what they ought to do, but they will not do it. Very trying, but very human.

The first thing a defeated worker wishes when she is balked in this way is for more law; the right to go into the home, take the child out, put it where it will be more comfortable, and leave the mother to learn by the result that only good was meant for her all along. The difficulty is, that good cannot be done this way. No one to whom it is done realizes that good is meant. The mother simply sees that you have the power, and you have done what you please, to her great grief. This explains why so many excellent programs do not work out. The people for whom they are intended oppose them the most determinedly. And that is because everything has been taken into account except poor human nature.

The psychologic treatment of a case should not be left to the caprice or the judgment of the individual worker. On the contrary, we need the careful development of methods that will serve a worker in her daily rounds. Perhaps such methods have not yet been developed and that "judgment" and "common sense" are the only resource. But such methods will have to be devised if social control is to be a freedom and not a tyranny. They must be worked out, if the "surveys" that are being made shall have human value. What boots us if we know what man has done, is doing, or ought to do, if we do not know what he can do, wants to do and will do?

New Member

The Toledo Federation of Jewish Charities. Officers: Henry Streetman, president; Ned Nathan, first vice-president; Joseph Nast, second vice-president; Harry Levison, secretary; Isidor Silverman, treasurer, and Herman Hirsch, superintendent.

NEW BOOKS

Young Working Girls. By Robert A. Woods and Albert J. Kennedy. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin Co. $1.00 net.

The sub-title of this work is "A Summary of Evidence from Two Thousand Social Workers." It was prepared by the authors for the National Federation of Settlements and contains an introduction by Miss Jane Addams, first president of the Federation.

It will be interesting to our readers to refer to some generalization respecting the Jewish population. The well-known fact is referred to that Jewish girls crowd the high and commercial schools and take their places beside children of families with a start of one or more generations on American soil.

One of the difficulties in the up-bringing of girls is the ineffectiveness of the mother. The statement is made, "nearly all mothers, whether foreign-born or American, are almost altogether without the range of the dominant interests of their working daughters. The mothers were brought up in a different age and in a different world."

The authors recognize the value of instruction in sex hygiene, but feel that it should be carefully imparted with reference to the particular individuals for whom it is intended. It speaks with approbation of the work of some of the settlements in giving instruction first to the mothers, so that they may in turn give the proper knowledge to their daughters, "a course which is under present conditions infinitely harder, though much more rewarding, than the opposite one of imparting instruction directly."

Attention is called to the urgent need of thorough supervision of commercial amusement resorts which should largely be in the hands of women, who must be given all necessary police authority. "Even more important that the function of following and seeking to intercept girls who are definitely involved in evil ways is that of carrying out many needed forms of preventive work." Dance halls, theaters and amusement parks, as well as the streets, should be watched by women supervisors, so that they may safeguard young girls.

The volume recognizes the need of vocational guidance which it expects will soon be a public school function.

Sufficient has been suggested here to indicate the character of study and the generalizations. We have here a volume helpful to all those who come into contact with young working girls. The reports of the work done in the settlements, as well as the results of their observations, present much material for the improvement of the social life of the young people of the immigrant population.

In the chapter on "Elements of Good Club Work," a plan of organization followed at the Henry Street Settlement of New York City is quoted as having had conspicuous success. This plan appears to be much more systematized for club leaders than obtains in most settlements.

C. S. B.

Markets for the People. By J. W. Sullivan. Macmillan.

J. W. Sullivan's "Markets for the People: The Consumers' Part," examines the various commercial channels between the producer and the consumer of foodstuffs in an endeavor to arrive at a conclusion as to the means by which the buyer for the household may obtain the best service and the highest possible percentage of economy. The author considers the demerits of the present prevailing system of retailing, the hindrances to co-operation in America, the failure of housed retail public markets and the financial losses of the wholesale system in metropolitan cities.

To Mr. Sullivan was committed for several years for examination the numerous projects to reduce the cost of living offered at the Washington headquarters of the Trade Unions of America, together with the reports, official and otherwise, from many countries. The knowledge which he has gained in this manner he has supplemented by personal study of market systems in Europe, particularly in Paris, London and Berlin. The caption of the last of his seventeen chapters challenges attention: "A Metropolitan Market System, Cut Price and Costless."