

Our Rejected Children by Albert Deutsch - extract from the Chapter *Detention Homes* pp.246-251

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In contrast to the flashy exterior of Juvenile Hall, New York City's Youth House, in the heart of the East Side slum district, looked like a horrible place in which to stuff children. It was located in the middle of a typical slum block, surrounded by decaying tenement houses about the worst imaginable location for such an institution. It was hastily converted to its present purposes in 1944 from an old private home for mal-adjusted youth. Its barred windows and many padlocked doors added measurably to its depressing, oppressive appearance.

Yet Youth House was generally considered to be the best detention home in the country, a place eagerly visited by experts in child care from far-off areas. Within its walls, I found, many children were getting more love, understanding and trust during their average two or three weeks* stay than they had ever received in their entire lives.

Youth House was lifted above its bad environment, above its own tenement appearance, by a triumph of the human will by the dynamic quality of its director, the enthusiastic teamwork of its staff and an unusual sense of understanding on the part of its board of directors. It was pervaded by the spirit of tactfully directed love for children long deprived of love. It was a living proof of how much people who care can do under severe handicaps. If its physical setting shamed the world's wealthiest city, its spirited program and impressive results afforded a solid pedestal for pride.

I sat by while a Youth House social worker held an orientation group session with a batch of newly arrived boys, fresh from children's court. She explained they weren't there for punishment, but for help. A few institutional rules were outlined, as were the house's school and recreational program. The social worker smilingly invited questions, and answered them frankly. The faces, confused and scared at first, gradually lost their tension.

Youth House was divided into several dormitories, based on age groupings and behavior problems. Each had a rumpus room where boys could relax after school hours. The play was supervised, but not regimented, and major stress was placed on cementing group relations.

Youth House maintained its own school Public School 611, operated by the City Board of Education as part of its regular system, where specially selected teachers temperamentally suited to work with troubled children provided an enlightened program. A Youth House counselor was always at hand to discuss problems with any boy seeking advice.

Youth House was the result of a scandal that shocked New York City in 1944 when a series of newspaper articles by Miss Evelyn Seeley exposed inhuman conditions in shelters operated by the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. This exposure led the municipal authorities to withdraw financial support from those privately operated, quasi-public shelters and to establish their own facilities for the temporary care and custody of dependent, neglected and delinquent children. Youth House was hastily set up to receive boys aged seven to sixteen awaiting hearings at or disposition from the city juvenile courts in the boroughs of Manhattan, Brooklyn and Queens. Its first month was well-nigh catastrophic, with ninety-three boys escaping from the place in mass breakouts. That's when they barred the windows and padlocked the doors.

In 1948, there were only three escapes from Youth House. But runaways weren't checked mainly by the bars and bolts. The most important deterrent to breakouts was the dynamic program developed after that disastrous beginning.

The man mainly responsible for developing that program was Frank J. Cohen, a youthful social worker who directed Youth House. Cohen was an unswerving disciple of the philosophy of nonpunishment.

"No boy is punished here for any reason whatsoever/" he told me. "We don't whip anybody, or deprive anybody of food. Most of these kids have had a bad enough beating from life before they got here. We don't gush over them. We don't overwhelm them with sentimental sympathy. But we let them know we trust them, and that we'd like them to trust us. Often, a boy's stay in Youth House marks his first contact with real trust and understanding. Most of them respond after a while."

The day before my visit to Youth House, a twelve-year-old boy had suddenly punched another boy on the jaw, for no apparent reason. The aggressive child was taken into the director's office, where he sullenly invited punishment.

"I don't care what you do to me," he said.

Director Cohen told him there would be no punishment, and invited the boy to talk it over. In a few minutes, the lad was in tears, telling how his mother had reneged three times in succession on promises to visit him. He had sat for hours, with mounting tension, waiting for an expected visit. The explosion occurred when he realized his mother wasn't coming. Cohen phoned the mother immediately, put the boy on the wire, obtained a sure promise to visit, and sent the boy out, greatly relieved.

Disturbed and beaten-up children were not, of course, converted into juvenile angels in the two or three weeks they spent at Youth House. Some were troublesome hellers all during their stay. But whatever the provocation, nobody was punished. The director or one of his staff members talked to the offending child, encouraged him to reveal "what was eating him," allowed him to let off steam, and tried to give him insight into his obligation to play fair and square in his community, Youth House.

"We try to build our program on mutual trust, and it works/" Cohen explained.

And one saw the truth of that statement mirrored in the faces of the children. Those newly arrived were suspicious, resentful, frightened, tense. The tension gradually eased, the cold armor of distrust thawed out under the warm rays of unreserved friendliness. The average child at Youth House left knowing that he didn't live in a completely hostile world, that there are some decent and understanding people in it, that one didn't have to keep his dukes up constantly to ward off enemy blows, and that there were ways of living together in trust and friendship.

How long that feeling lasts why, that is another matter. Two or three weeks is a brief interlude in the life of the developing child. From Youth House he might go to a state or private reform school, or to a foster home, or back to his own home and the old environment all way stations where he would linger longer on his road of destiny.

But one thing would be certain: the stay at Youth House wouldn't have harmed him. He wouldn't have wasted his brief time in bitter idleness or demoralizing repression. He would have been given a glint of hope, a fleeting insight into his personality and his problems, an encounter with people he could trust and who trusted him. That encounter, however brief, would be constructive. If it had any impact at all on his developing personality, it would be an impact for good.

I experienced an equally favorable reaction when I visited Girls' Camp, New York City's detention home for girls operated as the distaff annex of Youth House. Girls' Camp, established in 1945, was located on a twelve-acre site on Welfare Island in the East River, surrounded by assorted municipal hospitals and a home for the aged. In this strange setting, as at Youth House, intelligent direction and loving care combined to develop a first-rate program for children in trouble. The camp had served as a convalescent day-care center before its reconversion.

The girls at the camp (there were seventy there) generally had deeper emotional problems than the boys at Youth House. Most of the girls had been rejected by their own parents, who brought them into court with complaints like these:

"She's just no good. We want her to be put away. And we don't want her back. We're through with her."

"I can't control her. She won't go to school, and won't obey her parents and won't help me in the kitchen. And she runs around with too many boys."

"She's a bad child, and I've had my fill of her. Send her away. I don't want to have anything more to do with her."

Most of the boys, on the other hand, got tangled up with the police, were defended by their parents, and had at least the comforting thought that they were wanted at home and would have a home to return to when their "trouble" with society was settled.

Parental rejection is much harder for children to bear than is conflict with the impersonal law. That makes the problem of handling delinquent girls all the more difficult.

Girls' Camp received its charges at a critical moment in their adolescent careers. They arrived at the camp tense and confused, often hopeless and helpless. They were waiting for something to happen, not knowing what, and were building up defensive, devil-may-care attitudes. The world, including their own family, was against them. They were susceptible to waves of hysteria. Their morale was almost completely shattered. Life seemed pointless and aimless. They developed a mask of indifference and even of callousness, to shield themselves from further emotional blows.

The staff that met them at Girls' Camp enveloped these youngsters with love and understanding. Seldom had I seen a staff so driven by decent attitudes toward children in trouble. The director, Miss Alice Overton, was a trained social worker with long experience in handling girls with problems. Like her superior, Frank Cohen at Youth House, she had a realistic understanding of troubled adolescence, free of sentimentalism and idealistic nonsense. Her past experience had not made her callous to the needs of children. She knew that punishment and the fear of punishment had never worked as a rehabilitative device. She shared with Cohen the nonpunitive approach to delinquent behavior. That approach worked at Girls' Camp as it did at Youth House.

Miss Overton had surrounded herself with a staff of young and vigorous workers, believing in the same tenets of treatment, and applying those tenets with impressive teamwork. The girls themselves were made to feel a part of this rehabilitative team.

"For once in her life, the Camper has social status," Miss Overton explained. "She finds herself in a society which needs her effort in order to function."

Both Youth House and Girls' Camp provided me with a perplexing paradox: experts generally urge, and justly so, that children be checked out of detention homes as speedily as possible. But in such rare places as these two, the pity is that the girls and boys cannot be maintained for months instead of only two or three weeks. Many children could be permanently buttressed for a good life by longer exposure to the thawing-out programs that prevail there. It is hard on topnotch staff members to see the youngsters taken away just as the results of wholesome treatment are becoming manifest.

Youth House and Girls' Camp were the shining exceptions to the general rule of drab, debilitating detention homes. Would that they were speedily followed as examples by the others!