

**Pearl Finkelstein, Unknown Hero: the Winnipeg Jewish Orphanage and Social Work in the
Winnipeg Jewish community in the 1930s**

by Dr. Sharon Graham

Submitted for the 2020 Switzer-Cooperstock Prize in Western Canadian Jewish History

Winnipeg, Manitoba

May 1, 2020

The Winnipeg Jewish Orphanage housed children from 1917 until 1948, and for a long portion of its existence it was served by an untrained social worker, Pearl Finkelstein, later Silver. Miss Finkelstein had volunteered with the Jewish Orphanage as a young woman, and was hired to succeed the Orphanage's first social worker, Bertha Koyle. Unlike Koyle, who had worked at the Orphanage as a nurse, Finkelstein had not worked professionally within a child care setting. But instead of searching for a trained social worker, the Board and Superintendent of the Orphanage chose a woman who had grown up within the Jewish community of Manitoba and who intimately knew the families she served. By doing so the Jewish community gained a worker who was emotionally invested in protecting her community's children and families from illness and distress.

In this essay, I will revisit and expand upon my doctoral research on the Winnipeg Jewish Orphanage in order to explore how Pearl Finkelstein was able to work as an early service worker to assist families in crisis. Beginning with Finkelstein's biography, I will situate Finkelstein within the Canadian social work profession. Using my research in the Children's Records of the Orphanage, I will reconstruct Finkelstein's approach to community, service and the causes of poverty. I will also compare Finkelstein's training and perspectives with those of Jane Wisdom, a contemporaneous social worker who was formally trained and who spent her career as a social worker in the Atlantic region of Canada. I hope to use this essay to prompt deeper discussions about female workers in the Winnipeg Jewish community and to raise awareness of the work of this relatively unknown public servant.

My research was informed by many sources, but the majority of my findings regarding Pearl

Finkelstein's work was the Children's Records of the Orphanage, now held by the Winnipeg Jewish Child and Family Service, and oral history interviews conducted with Finkelstein, under the name of Mrs. Sol Silver, that are held by the Jewish Heritage Centre of Western Canada. I was fortunate to be granted access to the Orphanage Children's Records thanks to the invaluable assistance of Al Benacerraf, Executive Director of the Jewish Child and Family Service. Thanks to Andrew Morrison, archivist with the Jewish Heritage Centre, I was granted access to the oral history tapes, now digital recordings. Due to the research agreement that governs my doctoral work, I no longer have access to the notes I gathered from the Children's Records, so all records cited in this paper were originally cited in my dissertation. In my note-taking on the Children's Records, the children were assigned an anonymizing alphabetical-numerical code according to how I found them in the records. Other personal details about the children and their families were anonymized. The social worker's notes in these Records were used by the city of Winnipeg Children's Bureau to make decisions about admissions and discharge of local children from municipally funded childcare institutions, including the Jewish Orphanage. Citing the Children's Records is important, because the full scope of Finkelstein's work in the Orphanage and with the families of the Winnipeg Jewish community was otherwise un-recorded. Finkelstein's oral history interview offers interesting insights into her way of thinking about her time as a social worker, but I found that the Children's Records revealed the true extent of her far-reaching work with Orphanage families.

The Winnipeg Jewish Orphanage

But first, a short history of the Winnipeg Jewish Orphanage, whose existence created

Finkelstein's work. Originally two Jewish orphanages were established in Winnipeg in response to a 1912 community rumor that Jewish children were being housed in Christian orphanages.¹ One orphanage was established by the prominent community member R. S. Robinson, who was insistent that the new institution be named after his recently deceased mother, Esther Robinson. The other orphanage was founded by a group of women who objected to naming an institution after an individual, and who eventually allied themselves with the local B'nai Brith Lodge.² In 1913, both orphanages, the Canadian Jewish Orphanage and Esther Robinson Jewish Orphanage and Children's Aid Society began housing children into private homes that had been turned into institutions.³ By 1916, however, the original founders of the two orphanages were either no longer involved or their passions about naming rights had cooled. World War I had greatly impacted the Jewish community's ability to support two orphanages and the Esther Robinson had experienced several fires.^{4,5} The decision was therefore made to amalgamate the two orphanages into one better-supported institution, which was formally achieved in 1917. Louis Greenberg and his wife were hired from Chicago for the role of Superintendent and Superintendent's wife; he had had formal child care training.⁶ Under Greenberg, the drive to construct a custom-built Orphanage began. The children were moved into a modern, fire-proof and spacious building on Matheson Avenue East in 1920. The building had the capacity to house approximately 100

1 H. E. Wilder, "The Jewish Orphanage and Children's Aid of Western Canada," JHC 10, F10, Jewish Heritage Centre of Western Canada, 1.

2 Wilder, 1-3.

3 Wilder, 4-5.

4 Arthur Daniel Hart, *The Jew in Canada: a Complete Record of Canadian Jewry from the Days of the French Regime to the Present Time* (Toronto: Jewish Publications Limited, 1926), 228. "Orphans Flee Fire in Orderly March," *Winnipeg Tribune*, Monday, October 11, 1915, 5; "Tots Flee Fire in Night Robes. Matron of Jewish Orphanage Struggles Through the Smoke to Awaken 30 Children," *Winnipeg Tribune*, Monday, June 19, 1916, 5.

5 "Amalgamate Orphanages," *Winnipeg Tribune*, Monday, November 13, 1916, 5.

6 David Himmel, *A Camp Story: the History of the Lake of the Woods & Greenwoods Camps* (Charleston: The History Press, 2012), 14-15.

children.⁷

Soon after the move, Greenberg and his family left Winnipeg, after having helped design the building and fundraised extensively for the new Orphanage building. The next two superintendents were similar to Greenberg in that they were both married men whose wives worked within the institution, but neither had childcare or social work training or experience. Aaron Osovsky was a CPR worker, journalist and Yiddish dramatist, who began his career with the Orphanage as a volunteer.⁸ Osovsky was a passionate writer who cared deeply about raising the Jewish children of Western Canada in an enriching environment. He was also abusive and manipulative, even to small children under his care. It was under Osovsky's tenure that Pearl Finkelstein was hired as the second Jewish social worker. Osovsky was pushed out of the Orphanage in 1934 for unclear reasons; the Board of Directors stated that it was because Osovsky disagreed with the direction that the Board wished to take.⁹

H. E. Wilder and his wife were hired next as the superintendent couple. Like Osovsky, Wilder had worked as a journalist and a Jewish community volunteer, including a long stint as the editor of the local Yiddish newspaper, *The Israelite Press*. He kept handwritten psychological sketches and observations about the children in the files, using little formal psychological language but showing a desire to understand his charges. In 1935, Wilder opened the Orphanage up to boarding students from rural towns and villages who were sent to the Orphanage so that they could attend the excellent Winnipeg public schools as well as the supplementary Jewish school

⁷ Hart, 228.

⁸ Arthur Chiel, *The Jews in Manitoba: a Social History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1961), 121, 124.

⁹ W. Cohen, "The Out-Going President of the Orphanage Explains Osovsky's Resignation," *Israelite Press*, January 9, 1934, 1.

on site. Wilder was more open to criticism of the Orphanage, commissioning a review of the institution by Irving K. Furst, Supervisor of the Jewish Children's Bureau of Chicago, in 1939.¹⁰

Furst recommended closing the Orphanage completely. He found several problems with the Orphanage, including: too many very young children under its care; irregularities in aspects of the financial accounting; too many children who had spent more than five years in the Orphanage; the practice of taking in children while their parent recovered from a medical crisis was deemed as not beneficial to the children in question, and many more concerns.¹¹ Furst's report set the Orphanage Board on a course towards completely changing its child welfare structure. Part of the reason for this re-direction was practical, as the number of children in the Orphanage was steadily declining. While the building had been constructed for about 100 children, by 1939 Furst reported that only 86 children living there.

In April of 1945 a committee report was submitted to the Board that re-opened the discussion about closing the Orphanage. By this time, the Orphanage population was much smaller and Mr. Wilder had retired. The Children's Records show that by 1944, a Mr. Lipson was the Superintendent, and by 1946, Miss L. Wilson, previously a nurse, was named as the Matron of the Orphanage. The problem was one of a growing emptiness, with the population of the Orphanage declining from 95 children in 1931 to a paltry 49 children in 1944.¹² The Orphanage was closed to the children of Western Canada by 1948, although teens who were brought to Winnipeg as Holocaust child refugees spent some time living in the building while their foster

10 Irving K. Furst, "Survey: the Jewish Children's Home and Aid Society of Western Canada," May, 1939, JHCWC, JHC10, F7, 1.

11 Furst, 10-19.

12 "Title obscured, (submitted to the Board of Directors on April 8, 1945)," JCHWC, JHC10, File 6, 1-2.

homes were arranged. The United Hebrew Social Services Bureau, staffed by professional social workers such as Thelma Tessler, became the primary social service organization for Jewish families in Winnipeg. A senior's housing co-operative and Congregation Rosh Pina (now Etz Chayim) were built on the Orphanage plot of land on Matheson Avenue West.

Pearl Finkelstein from volunteer to social worker

As Suzanne Morton wrote in her biography of pioneering Canadian social worker Jane Wisdom, the lives of social workers can illuminate both the limits and possibilities of an individual's actions.¹³ One of the Orphanage staff members who acquired power from working in the Orphanage was Pearl Finkelstein. Finkelstein was a woman who worked through the volunteer structure of the Orphanage to become one of its key employees. Born in 1896, Pearl Finkelstein was the granddaughter of Tevel Finkelstein, one of the first Jewish settlers in Winnipeg.¹⁴ According to Reuben Slonim's memoir of his life in the Orphanage, *Grant to be an Orphan*, Finkelstein was a noted leader of the Girls' Auxiliary at the Orphanage, "There was not only a Board of Directors and a Ladies Society but a Girls Auxiliary, a group of young women headed by Pearl Finkelstein, who ferreted out our hobbies and provided activities for leisure hours."¹⁵ As a member of one of the founding families of the Winnipeg Jewish community, she was deeply invested in the creation and maintenance of Jewish communal institutions. It's also clear that she genuinely cared for the families with whom she worked.

13 Susan Morton, *Wisdom, Justice and Charity : Canadian Social Welfare Through the Life of Jane B. Wisdom, 1884-1975* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), 3.

14 "Pearl Finkelstein Silver," *Winnipeg Free Press*, Thursday, September 12, 1991, 23.

15 Reuben Slonim, *Grand to be an Orphan*. (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin & Company Limited, 1983), 15.

In Allan Levine's history of the Manitoba Jewish community, *Coming of Age*, Pearl Finkelstein is noted as being Moses Finkelstein's daughter, but this is incorrect, although she was a part of the notable Finkelstein family.¹⁶ Moses Finkelstein was Pearl's uncle, and had served as an alderman in 1904, and was thus the first Jew on the prairies to serve in public office.¹⁷ The rest of the family was also influential: Tevel Finkelstein was a tough but amiable early settler, battling within and without the Jewish community to get his own way, be it by selling liquor in his grocery store or serving as President of the Shaarey Zedek synagogue for multiple terms.¹⁸

Pearl was actually the daughter of a lesser-known child of Tevel, Calman or Colman, and her accomplishments as an adult woman have been almost completely forgotten by the Jewish community. Until I found her notes in the Orphanage Children's Records, I had no idea the extent of the work that was done by the Jewish social workers with the Children's Bureau even before the hiring of Thelma Tessler. Tessler was the first Jewish social worker in Winnipeg to have academic training in her field, and she is best known for her work with bringing Holocaust refugee children on a special transport to Canada.¹⁹ The community of refugee children were prominent in the Jewish community and spoke fondly about Tessler. But the families who interacted with Pearl Finkelstein did not seem to discuss their experiences with her publicly, possibly because they didn't form a cohesive, recognizable group like the Holocaust refugees.²⁰

Finkelstein, however, worked hard for the Orphanage children but received very little formal

16 Allan Levine, 172.

17 Harry Gutkin, *Journey Into Our Heritage: the Story of the Jewish People in the Canadian West* (Toronto: Lester & Orpen Dennys, 1980), 187.

18 Allan Levine, *Coming of Age: a History of the Jewish People of Manitoba*. (Winnipeg: Heartland Associates, Inc., 2009), 65.

19 "Thelma (Bessie) Tessler Edwards," *The Arizona Republic*, March 18, 2010, accessed July 22, 2019, <https://www.legacy.com/obituaries/azcentral/obituary.aspx?n=thelma-bessie-edwards-tessler&pid=140820429>.

20 Matt Bellan, "War Orphans Hold Reunion: 50th Anniversary of Orphans Brought to Canada by Canadian Jewish Congress from 1947-1949," *Canadian Jewish News*, July 30, 1998, 24.

recognition for her time as the only Jewish social worker in Winnipeg.

Finkelstein did leave an oral history interview that was conducted in 1968 for the Jewish Historical Society of Manitoba, now the Jewish Heritage Centre of Western Canada, under her married name, Mrs. Sol (Pearl) Silver. (I will continue to refer to her as Finkelstein in this essay, as that was her name in the time period under consideration.) In her oral history, Finkelstein described her childhood within the close community of the Manitoba Jewish community. Her father ran many businesses in his life, including multiple rural stores and a large farm in Rosenfeld, Manitoba. The family prospered and she lived a comfortable life. In addition to her early volunteer work with the Orphanage Girls Auxiliary, Finkelstein was also involved with the National Council of Jewish Women (NCJW) Juniors. Finkelstein recalled making Channukah hampers with the NCJW Juniors for Jewish families on relief, and visiting the homes of people who needed those hampers. She dated her involvement in the Orphanage as a volunteer from 1918 until 1931, when she began working for the Orphanage as a paid social worker. In the oral history she explained how she tried to find the children jobs when they were older, and described the kinds of families who used the Orphanage.²¹

Although she didn't emphasize her accomplishments in her oral history, the records reveal that despite her lack of a professional education, Finkelstein was a determined, helpful and sensitive worker for her clients. This is all the more impressive considering that while she may have been a member of the Manitoba Jewish elite, she never showed any sense of superiority over her

²¹ Mrs. Sol (Pearl) Silver (nee Finkelstein), interview by Nathan Arkin and Harvey Herstein, March 8, 11, 18, April 1, 2 and October 16, 1968, Tape 292, transcript, Jewish Heritage Centre of Western Canada, Winnipeg, Manitoba.

desperately poor clients. It seems that professional boundaries were not firmly kept by Finkelstein, and she often had clients over to her home for dinner. She would meet her colleagues from the Social Welfare Commission (SWC, which provided financial relief to suffering families) and the Children's Bureau and discuss cases with them on the streetcar where their conversations could be overheard. Her work was first finding jobs for the teens who were aging out of the Orphanage into the grim employment prospects of 1930s Winnipeg. Most of this work was conducted face to face, meeting with employers at their factories to try to persuade them to take on an unskilled teenager. But Finkelstein also worked very hard with parents of children when the first call was made for help from the Jewish Orphanage for childcare. Without professional training, Finkelstein relied on her extensive familial and friend networks within the Jewish community and her sympathetic and non-judgmental temperament to help her clients. Unlike the more professional social workers who came after her, Finkelstein rarely commented in the file on the furnishings of the home she was visiting, unless getting the family some furniture was part of the brief. Also unlike other social workers in the Children's Records, Finkelstein seemed to have little interest in her clients' sex lives, the reasons for their business failures, and their arguments with their neighbours, unless those problems contributed to the crisis. In her lack of interest in parents' sexual behaviour she was similar to Mrs. Bertha Koyle, the first Orphanage social worker who had been hired as a nurse, and who most likely trained Finkelstein.

A child's time spent in the Orphanage might have be short, but their family's involvement with the Jewish social worker could last years, and Finkelstein developed friendly relationships with many of her clients. Families were very poor and in need of help in navigating the complex requirements of local social welfare organizations, which could take a long time. For example, in

the case of Mrs. JD, help was required over a period of five years. Mrs. JD was a single mother whose husband was in jail in the United States. During her first few months of receiving attention from the Children's Bureau, Mrs. JD was assigned a non-Jewish social worker who focused on her sexual history, as both mother and baby were suffering from a sexually transmitted infection. As Mariana Valverde has argued in *Light, Soap and Water*, Jews were often seen by British-Canadian Protestant elites as being deficient in sexual morality and to be carriers of disease and promoters of vice; Mrs. JD's illness must have recalled this stereotype to the non-Jewish social worker.²² But after three months, Mrs. Koyle took over and worked with Mr. Toni of the SWC to get Mrs. JD established in her own home. The mother's health was still poor, however, and she was about to have surgery when she asked for Finkelstein's help after Koyle had retired, in admitting her older child to the Orphanage while she planned to recover at a fresh air camp for mothers during the summer before the operation. During the course of placing little JD in the Orphanage, Mrs. JD told Finkelstein that her hospital bills for the planned surgery were refused coverage by the City of Winnipeg, even though the doctors had offered to waive their fees. Finkelstein then called Mr. Levadie of the SWC, who worked with St. Joseph's Hospital to ensure that the operation would not cost the mother. Finkelstein, working with Miss Stoller the social worker of the General Hospital, was able to find funding for a medical corset from the National Council of Jewish Women for Mrs. JD. Mrs. JD then left town for work, but when she returned she needed help finding an apartment, and Finkelstein traveled around the city with her to find an appropriate place for the family. Finkelstein then worked with the United Hebrew Relief's worker Miss Ginsberg to arrange for financial help to cover the shortfall between relief payments and the

²² Mariana Valverde, *The Age of Light, Soap and Water: Moral Reform in English Canada, 1885-1925* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 105-106.

rent; she also worked with the NCJW to arrange for the loan of a go-cart when one of Mrs. JD's children broke his leg and couldn't get around without wheels. When it was time for the JD children to attend the afternoon Talmud Torah school for a religious education, Finkelstein ensured that the mother would not have to pay tuition. Mrs. JD then needed emergency medical care again, and the children were admitted to the Orphanage for a third time for a short period.²³ Over these five years, Finkelstein was not only helping Mrs. JD admit her children to the Orphanage, but was also coordinating between various government and charitable organizations in order to ensure that she and her children received what they needed. Finkelstein, with her extensive contacts within the Jewish charitable world and within the social services field, could get things done for her clients.

The other part of Finkelstein's job was helping teens transition from the Orphanage to adult life, and she often had to visit her contacts in the Jewish community to find teens jobs and boarding or foster homes. The story of the ZK children is a complex one, as they spent many years in the Orphanage. After their mother died, their father disappeared to look after a sick sister in the United States, and never returned. Problems occurred when it was time for the ZK children to find their way in the world. They had been made wards of the Orphanage in order to secure municipal funding for their maintenance, but the Province and the City considered children to be grown by sixteen, and refused to fund their support after that age. The Orphanage Ladies Auxiliary provided teens with enough clothes and other personal possessions before they left the Orphanage. But even with the new clothes and possessions provided by the Ladies Auxiliary, teens were not ready to live on their own at age sixteen. In the corpus of the Children's Records, I

²³ Record JD1 and 2, Jewish Child and Family Service Holdings, Jewish Orphanage of Western Canada Records.

never found a sixteen year old who did not experience distress at being placed out of the Orphanage. Managing their money, getting along with foster parents, employers or landladies, and keeping themselves clean, were often skills that teens could not seem to manage until they were usually eighteen. ZK1, at sixteen, was unable to manage his money. ZK1's record indicates that he fell behind on his rent to his landlady, spending his money on the things like cigarettes and gambling. In order to get him to straighten up, Finkelstein recruited Osovsky and members of the Orphanage Board to speak with ZK1 about his debts. She also helped him keep his lodgings by pleading with the landlady, and found him a new job when he lost his old one. Eventually, he left town for work, writing at least once to Osovsky to keep in touch.²⁴

The second sibling in this family, ZK2, was perhaps more responsible with her money, but also experienced difficulties growing up without the benefit of parents. ZK2 was very reliant on Finkelstein as she was truly alone in the world. ZK2 and the Orphanage staff decided that she would train in nursing, and she was enrolled in an apprenticeship program with a local hospital. At a certain point in her training, ZK2 was required by the apprenticeship program to buy a pair of white nursing shoes, and Finkelstein made an appointment with her to go and get them, with the Orphanage covering the cost. But Finkelstein and ZK2 ended up going to the movies instead once ZK2 explained that she probably was not going to be promoted further in the program. ZK2 was let go from the training course, and lost her room because she ran out of money. She once again turned to the Orphanage and the Jewish social worker, most likely Finkelstein, who found her a new position and new place to live.²⁵ It could be seen as unprofessional to take a client to

24 Record ZK1 and 2, Jewish Child and Family Service Holdings, Jewish Orphanage of Western Canada Records.

25 Record ZK1 and 2, Jewish Child and Family Service Holdings, Jewish Orphanage of Western Canada Records.

the movies, and it certainly didn't help the teen find a new path forward. But maybe what ZK2 needed on that day from Pearl Finkelstein was a simple moment of friendship.

Being untrained in professional social work meant that Pearl Finkelstein didn't receive as much education as some of the women who succeeded her. But her connection to the Orphanage gave her considerable power and agency, and it allowed her to independently work for years.

Finkelstein worked until her marriage to Sol Silver, the owner of Western Glove Works, when she was around 40. If she hadn't been active in the Girls Auxiliary, it's unlikely she would have been hired as the social worker. During her time as the Jewish social worker, Finkelstein helped numerous families recover from crises and get re-established. The Orphanage allowed her to acquire a certain amount of power to act within other people's lives, and to influence events for the children and families that she clearly cared about. With that power, Finkelstein lived a life that was structured around her own professional work.

Pearl Finkelstein's Approach as a Social Worker and Comparison with the career of Jane Wisdom

Was Pearl Finkelstein's approach and motivations as the Winnipeg Jewish social worker unique to other social workers? How did her perspective inform the decisions she made on behalf of her clients? For this section, I will be comparing Finkelstein's life, training and career with that of Jane Wisdom, a social worker whose life was traced and analyzed by Suzanne Morton in her book, *Wisdom, justice, and charity: Canadian social welfare through the life of Jane B. Wisdom, 1884-1975*. Finkelstein and Wisdom approached social work from different perspectives and

acquired different training, although interestingly, they both took up careers in social work due to a feeling of duty and care for their communities, and both expressed deep satisfaction with their careers. Finkelstein was untrained, and therefore she knew little of the theoretical ideas that were the underpinnings of her career. Her approach to her families was very good at solving short-term problems, but she did not consider the underlying causes of poverty and injustice in Winnipeg. Wisdom's university training gave her a deeper insight into the underlying causes of her client's distress, and the structural forces that underpinned poverty.

Unlike Pearl Finkelstein, Wisdom entered into a career in social work intentionally and remained in the profession for her entire working life. Born twelve years earlier than Finkelstein in 1884, Wisdom was a committed Presbyterian from Saint John. Wisdom spent much of her childhood living with the results of her parents' dwindling finances, moving with her family from rented home to home until they left the city to live closer to her mother's extended family in Nova Scotia. Her parents were forced to economize on every expense, with the exception of the children's private education.²⁶ However, the Wisdom family and their eventual home of Pictou County, Nova Scotia encouraged educating girls through high school and beyond.²⁷ Wisdom followed her older sister to the Royal Victoria College at McGill University in Montreal, and thus was able to enjoy a socially and intellectually stimulating women's university experience.²⁸ Her time in Montreal changed her from a rooted citizen of a region into a citizen of the world who was able to move for a job. Needing to work, Wisdom returned from her parents' home to Montreal two years after her graduation and was hired as one of the first paid visitors (an early

26 Morton, 19-21.

27 Morton, 27.

28 Morton, 38.

term for social workers) for the Montreal Charity Organization, working among the city's poor anglophone families.²⁹ Her family's Christian values of charity and service, as well as the growing international settlement house movement, had made such a career very appealing to Wisdom, who appears to have been blessed with a kind and thoughtful temperament. In 1910 Wisdom traveled to New York to train for her career further, and there learned with pioneers in case work investigations.³⁰ From New York Wisdom moved to Halifax, where she worked in the very newly established Social Service Bureau, coincidentally arriving a year and half before the Halifax explosion of a munitions ship which resulted in 2,000 deaths and left 10,000 Halifaxians homeless. Wisdom and her caseworkers became stewards of the city's Relief Commission, which tried to provide housing and financial aid to affected families.³¹ Wisdom left Halifax in 1921 to return to McGill in order to pursue a masters degree in social work, which she did not complete, where she engaged with the international debate regarding the professionalization of social work.³² For fifteen years after she abandoned her graduate research, Wisdom toiled as the Executive Secretary for the Women's Bureau of Montreal, a charity which, under her leadership, sought to help unwed mothers establish themselves and their children in their own stable home.³³ Wisdom eventually wished to be closer to her family and moved back to Nova Scotia, where she was the sole worker running the municipal social welfare office of Glace Bay.³⁴ This was the post that ended Wisdom's career. According to family lore, Wisdom had a sweetheart who died during World War I.³⁵ She never married but remained close to her sisters and their children, as well as

29 Morton, 61.

30 Morton, 84-85.

31 Morton, 116-120.

32 Morton, 132.

33 Morton, 163.

34 Morton, 201.

35 Morton, 224.

having close ties with other Canadian social work pioneers, including Charlotte Whitton.

According to Morton, “Wisdom rejected any division between expertise and professionalism and core human values.”³⁶ Her approach was sympathetic to her clients and had been developed before the shift to psychoanalysis that occurred increasingly in the late 1930s, which meant that her work with unwed mothers, for example, resisted attempts to pathologize her clients.³⁷

Wisdom was also interested in root causes of poverty, which led her to advocate for political solutions to social problems. For example, her unfinished graduate work on the striking workers of Cape Breton included her perspectives on social science, interventionist government actions, and industry and workers' attempts at cooperation.³⁸ In her final posting in Glace Bay, Wisdom lectured in radio broadcasts about the necessity to reform Nova Scotia's antique Poor Laws in favour of modern legislation which allowed for provincial standards and consistent funding for families and individuals in need.³⁹

By contrast, Finkelstein never considered herself much of a scholar, and her education was not considered as important to her future as her marriageability. According to the oral history recording, Finkelstein was dissuaded from attending university as her paternal aunt had done, with her mother saying, “Aunt Eva married a welder, and I don't want you to marry a welder.”⁴⁰

Wisdom's family thought that she had been denied a romantic life due to the loss of a sweetheart in World War I; Finkelstein, who was younger, also considered herself to have been a romantic

36 Morton, 162.

37 Morton, 187-189.

38 Morton, 137-139.

39 Morton, 210.

40 Mrs. Sol (Pearl) Silver (nee Finkelstein), interview by Nathan Arkin and Harvey Herstein, March 8, 11, 18, April 1, 2 and October 16, 1968, Tape 2, Jewish Heritage Centre of Western Canada, Winnipeg, Manitoba.

victim of the war, as there were fewer partners available to women of her generation⁴¹ In fact, Finkelstein considered her interest in community service to have directly arisen from this lack of romantic partners, saying about her founding of the Juniors branch of the NCJW, “In November 1929, Jewish Juniors was formed. There were so many young unmarried girls...products of World War I who were never married, and many of us were in our late 20s by that time.”⁴² She also noted that her work as a community volunteer, which she had pursued during her adulthood even before she was hired as the Jewish social worker, was encouraged and valued by her parents. After her mother's sudden death, she remembered,

I had always worked at the Orphanage, you know, volunteer work. And when Chanukah came around each year, we gave every one of those children a special gift...So I was in the habit of going to the wholesale to buy these gifts with Mrs. Spivak, who was the president of the Ladies Society. So I didn't know what to do and I said to my father, this was a week afterward [her mother's funeral], I said, “Dad, what shall I do now?” And he said, “Continue just as you've always done, because this is the way mother would always want you to be.”⁴³

When she was asked to take on the role of the Jewish social worker by the Orphanage, Finkelstein at first demurred. Her family was financially stable and so she was unsure if it was proper for her to accept a salary, especially from an institution which was struggling so much during the Depression. But the work, at first limited to finding work for graduating teens, was very necessary.⁴⁴ Finkelstein was perfect for this job, because she knew many of the employers in Winnipeg through her extensive kinship networks. Her oral history is full of references to the intermarried families of the first wave of Jewish immigrants to the Canadian prairies who arrived

41 Mrs. Sol (Pearl) Silver (nee Finkelstein), interview by Nathan Arkin and Harvey Herstein, March 8, 11, 18, April 1, 2 and October 16, 1968, Tape 2, Jewish Heritage Centre of Western Canada, Winnipeg, Manitoba.

42 Mrs. Sol (Pearl) Silver (nee Finkelstein), interview by Nathan Arkin and Harvey Herstein, March 8, 11, 18, April 1, 2 and October 16, 1968, Tape 2, Jewish Heritage Centre of Western Canada, Winnipeg, Manitoba.

43 Mrs. Sol (Pearl) Silver (nee Finkelstein), interview by Nathan Arkin and Harvey Herstein, March 8, 11, 18, April 1, 2 and October 16, 1968, Tape 2, Jewish Heritage Centre of Western Canada, Winnipeg, Manitoba.

44 Mrs. Sol (Pearl) Silver (nee Finkelstein), interview by Nathan Arkin and Harvey Herstein, March 8, 11, 18, April 1, 2 and October 16, 1968, Tape 1, Jewish Heritage Centre of Western Canada, Winnipeg, Manitoba.

in the 1880s. Finkelstein was also friends with the non-Jewish elite who grew up in the same neighbourhood in Winnipeg, one of whom, she noted in her interview, had served on the executive of Eatons department stores. She never experienced antisemitism in her youth, and knew people from all walks of life, usually counting them as friends. Her parents' friends she considered her extended family.⁴⁵ Finkelstein could therefore call on her family's networks, her personal connections through her volunteer work, and her friendly personality, to sway employers to take on teenaged employees at a time when there were many labourers looking for jobs.

In the oral history interviews, Finkelstein relayed a story of how she had found a job for one of the graduating Orphanage teens with Mr. Sol Silver, the man who was to become her husband. This case was also described in the Children's Records, as that of NO1 and it's clear from those files that she asked Silver to hire the boy as a personal favour.⁴⁶ In the oral history of her life, Finkelstein laughed about this case, linking it to the tendency of some Orphanage boys to steal small items, saying,

I wasn't even married to Mr. Silver at that time, and he'd say, "What did you mean? You know you placed this boy, you know that he steals!" And I'd say, "Oh, I ..." I lied to him, I lied to Mr. Silver! Because I tried to protect those boys in every which way that I could. Because they were young!⁴⁷

If it hadn't been for Finkelstein's personal relationship, she would not have been able to find this boy work in the Western Glove Factory; she exploited Silver's trust to benefit NO1. In her oral history, Finkelstein relates how she was somewhat baffled by her family's elevated social status,

45 Mrs. Sol (Pearl) Silver (nee Finkelstein), interview by Nathan Arkin and Harvey Herstein, March 8, 11, 18, April 1, 2 and October 16, 1968, Tape 1 and 2, Jewish Heritage Centre of Western Canada, Winnipeg, Manitoba.

46 Record NO1, 2 and 3, Jewish Child and Family Service Holdings, Jewish Orphanage of Western Canada Records.

47 Mrs. Sol (Pearl) Silver (nee Finkelstein), interview by Nathan Arkin and Harvey Herstein, March 8, 11, 18, April 1, 2 and October 16, 1968, Tape 1, Jewish Heritage Centre of Western Canada, Winnipeg, Manitoba.

but it's clear that she was able to use this status on behalf of the Orphanage children. However, NO1's stealing was merely one behaviour that was problematic at the Orphanage, and Finkelstein's dismissal of theft as normal boyish behaviour was not helpful to him. NO1 was in and out of the Orphanage for some time during his adolescence, and had a difficult time transitioning to the adult world outside of the Institution.

Finkelstein's work with families was less well-known or remarked upon in her oral history. Although her life had been consistently privileged, Finkelstein's notes never betrayed any unkindness towards the parents with whom she worked, many of whom were suffering from extreme poverty, illness and family conflict. It's unclear who taught Finkelstein to create her case notes, although they are similar in appearance to the records of the Winnipeg Children's Home which are now held at the Archives of Manitoba. It is likely that the notes were required by the Winnipeg Children's Bureau, which oversaw municipal funding and had overtaken formal decision-making for the childcare institutions in Winnipeg. Finkelstein's notes in the Orphanage Children's Records were notably detailed and completely focused on solving problems.

For example, Mrs. ZB was suffering from acute mental illness after the birth of her daughter. Rabbi Israel Kahanovitch, considered by many to be the Chief Rabbi of Western Canada, contacted the Jewish Orphanage hoping to get the baby admitted so that Mrs. ZB could have time to recover. Finkelstein noted that the family's housing was a problem. Located in the interior of the Beveridge Block (802 Main Street), these rooms had no outside windows, and the lights had to be kept on in the suite at all times. Living in such a nightmarish situation probably contributed to Mrs. ZB's self-diagnosis of postpartum depression (in the file, Finkelstein recorded the mother

as saying that she was “baby crazy”), and she had attempted suicide. The baby was admitted eventually to the Orphanage, and then Finkelstein set out to help find this family a better place to live. The parents found an unheated suite that consisted of two rooms on different floors. This situation was unlivable, and Finkelstein refused to help them secure this apartment. Finkelstein was then concerned about the next suite the ZBs found, as it had been condemned by the city Health Department, but they had many friends living in that apartment block, so Finkelstein called the Health Department to allow them to live there in spite of its poor condition. The baby was soon after discharged back to her parents.⁴⁸

All of Finkelstein's work in the ZB case was focused on solving the immediate problem of housing. Finkelstein was not interested in deeper psychological explanations for Mrs. ZB's suicide attempt, although her assessment that an unlit apartment would contribute to poor mental health was most likely correct. But there's no indication in the ZB record or in the later oral history that Finkelstein ever asked herself why landlords were able to rent homes in such poor condition, or why the city Health Department was unable to force owners to maintain their property. The larger, underlying causes of poverty and distress in Winnipeg never entered into Finkelstein's analysis. This was not because Pearl Finkelstein was unintelligent, but rather that she was used to viewing her work as projects instead of as a piece of a larger whole.

Even Finkelstein's ability to connect with any person and to situate herself and those around her within the comforting embrace of community, could work against her clients. In my dissertation I found evidence from multiple sources that one of the superintendents, Aaron Osovsky, was

⁴⁸ Record ZB, Jewish Child and Family Service Holdings, Jewish Orphanage of Western Canada Records.

abusive with both children and adults. But in her oral history, Finkelstein rejected all claims that Osovsky could be abusive, bringing up the question before it was even asked of her:

And I say Mr. Osovsky should be thanked for the kind of children he brought up. There were many things said about him which were not nice, I can't say whether they were true or not. You know, after all, he did bring up a family of his own who went to school, they were well educated. And this was.. there was a great deal of jealousy, even between the community and the kind of children Mr. Osovsky brought up.⁴⁹

To Finkelstein, Osovsky was not merely one individual man who had abused the children of the Orphanage, children who she loved. He was a person inside her network of relationships that she knew so well, and as a father he was a success. It's true that Osovsky's children acquired professional educations, but that does not erase the abuse that he meted out to the Orphanage children. Although she was fond of all the Orphanage children, Finkelstein never did connect their inability to trust adults, another facet of life in the Orphanage that she acknowledged in the oral history, with abuse they may have received at Osovsky's hands. This was a truth about life that Pearl Finkelstein was unable to face – that there are abusive people in the world, even if they're fellow community members. Additionally, Finkelstein never excluded people from her circle, usually to good effect. In her oral history, she relayed a story about delivering a Chanukah charity hamper to a poor family when she was part of the NCJW Juniors, and noted that the oldest child in that family was now related to her by marriage. To Finkelstein, the people she met were part of her network or potentially so, and this lack of discrimination gave her the ability to empathize with her clients and to be pleased about relatives marrying into families which had once been poor. But it also meant that Finkelstein could sometimes show a lack of discernment and analysis.

⁴⁹ Mrs. Sol (Pearl) Silver (nee Finkelstein), interview by Nathan Arkin and Harvey Herstein, March 8, 11, 18, April 1, 2 and October 16, 1968, Tape 1, Jewish Heritage Centre of Western Canada, Winnipeg, Manitoba.

Finkelstein's career can be contrasted with Jane Wisdom's for both good and ill. Similarly to Wisdom, Finkelstein remained single while she worked as a social worker, although she ended up marrying and thereafter quitting work. However, without Wisdom's training and willingness to travel and work in a variety of contexts, Finkelstein had no clear view of the systematic forces that were allied against her clients. If she had pursued social work training in another city, she would have seen many kinds of crises that people encountered without being distracted by the overlapping relationships that they shared. Wisdom's university undergraduate and graduate studies in arts and in the social sciences gave her the ability to consider the causes of poverty, leading to her development of social service agencies, her political advocacy, her studies of striking workers and her commitment to the field of social work. This is not to say that Finkelstein wasn't usually effective at her job; like Wisdom, Finkelstein worked hard to help her clients without judgment and moralizing. Finkelstein also was able to help her clients using her strength of nurturing her extensive personal connections, whereas Wisdom used her training and energy for her clients; both put untold hours towards helping their communities.

Pearl Finkelstein (Silver) worked very hard without much historical recognition. As a working woman, she was able to use her experience as a dedicated volunteer to transition into a new career as a social worker. This career became her life for many years, and it is undeniable that she was able to help many Winnipeggers. When reading her notes, I was struck by how friendly her tone was to her clients, and how willing she was to see their virtues instead of their flaws.

Finkelstein tended not to deliver lectures, instead she dedicated herself to her client's difficulties, and was willing to listen to their needs. Finkelstein chose a life of service, similar to the choice

made by Jane Wisdom, and both women stated that they were glad they had done so. Because of her choice, the Orphanage children were found jobs, foster homes or boarding homes, and had a softer launch into the world. Families who needed the Orphanage temporarily for child care were given help in finding new homes, jobs or medical care in order to be able to bring their children home. The history of the Winnipeg Jewish community often focuses on the men who established institutions and ran them, but the women who often fundraised, planned and ran the institutions as paid staff can sometimes remain anonymous. The extent of Pearl Finkelstein's work was unaccounted for in official histories, but the Jewish Orphanage Children's Records revealed just how much work she did to help Winnipeg families and children during the Depression.

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