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YIVO Exhibit, 'Runaway Husbands, Desperate Families' Resonates

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By Amy Neustein, Ph.D.



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NEW YORK — On Monday in lower Manhattan the most fascinating exhibit opened at the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research. In concert with the Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services, YIVO presented "Runaway Husbands, Desperate Families," providing a brutally honest historical look at Jewish immigrant men who abandoned their families on Manhattan's lower Eastside in the early part of the 20th Century.

Reading about the exhibit in the lead up to its opening this week, I can say with absolute candor my curiosity was piqued. First, men deserting their wives and children belies the Jewish model of family integrity, stability and wholesomeness.

Second, such a sorrowful portrayal of dysfunctional life on Manhattan's Lower Eastside contravenes the cinematic and literary stories of the idyllic Jewish immigrant family that embraced the American Dream, as they fled the abject poverty of European shtetls and the religious persecution from the outside world.

But for me, "Runaway Husbands, Desperate Families" resonated on a much deeper level. As a researcher and author of numerous journal articles, books, and opinion columns on the family court system, I had truthfully not known of the pivotal role of the Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services in advocating for legislation to insure that men who left their wives and children would be charged with a felony if they refused to provide for their families even though they were living elsewhere.

Even more important, I hadn't known of the courageous work of the Jewish Board in steadily building legislative support to form the Domestic Relations Court (now known as Family Court) – as a central institution that could mandate child support payments rather than leave these crucial matters to the vagaries of happenstance in which needy families would be dependent on the munificence of others.

Equally enlightening was my learning that the noble efforts of the Jewish Board to head off the traumatic fate of children being shuffled into orphanages because of penurious family circumstances –resulting from the desertion of the paternal bread-winner – had extended far beyond the Jewish mendicant family to include households of all ethnicities and faiths. The familiar theme of *Tikkun Olam* was indeed evident over a hundred years ago, for Jews took it upon themselves to lead the way for others – persons of all faiths – when faced with the inescapable calamities of everyday life.

As a sociologist, I recognize the social implications of how tirelessly the Jewish Board worked to preserve family life. At the minimum, the materials curated for "Runaway Husbands, Desperate Families," show the Sisyphean efforts made to bring back men who had deserted their families – some of whom were found across the river in Newark, NJ, living carefree lives with paramours. By posting ads in newspapers, plastering buildings with photos and names, and registering with the National Desertion Bureau (an agency created in New York in 1911 to track down runaway Jewish husbands), it was hard for these men to escape in perpetuity.

One must not forget that the desertion of one's family at the early part of the 20th Century had occurred during the days of sweatshops that became a fixture of daily living. I shudder to think of women who had to throw themselves into that line of work to feed their families. Given the long, arduous hours in sweatshops and the frequency of accidents that maimed and disfigured its employees (without any financial compensation for their loss of their ability to work), it is likely that children more often than not ended up in orphanages as their only means of survival.

It was against the backdrop of this Dickensian existence that the Jewish Board labored to change the laws so that children would be spared the trauma and hardship of landing in an orphanage – leading a life where they would become *de facto* waifs after the desertion of the family figurehead. Such a situation was undoubtedly inimical to Jewish society for it contravened Jewish values at its very core.

What is most remarkable is that the Jewish Board was committed to lobby for the protection of children deserted by their fathers, which was even more difficult back then when Jews did not enjoy much recognition in civic life – and certainly didn't have practical means for successful lobbying of the power structure.

What struck me about this historical narrative is that in my study of divorce and custody cases, from New York to San Diego, I often see how hastily family court judges can order the removal of a child from their mother to be placed in a foster home (or a series of foster homes), even if just for a year or two, while the divorce litigation is pending.

This wanton removal of a child from the security of its home to be sent to an institution is happening all too frequently. If we look to history to learn lessons, we see the valiant efforts of early 20th Century Jewish society in keeping children at home with nurturing mothers – which they understood as a far better solution to thrusting destitute children into the sterility and coldness of institutional care.

It's obvious the YIVO and Jewish Board exhibit on runaway husbands speaks volumes on many levels – and for me, it certainly stirred very deep emotions.

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