

“Adoptable Jewish Children and the Shifting Legacy of Louise Wise”

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This paper is based on the papers of Justine Wise Polier (1903-1987) whose mother was Louise Waterman Wise. Louise Wise, social worker and activist, founded the Free Synagogue Child Adoption Committee (renamed Louise Wise Services) in New York City to serve orphaned, homeless, and neglected Jewish children. CAC was the first Jewish organization to promote adoption at a time when the massive Jewish orphanages still defended institutional care as more efficient and beneficial for children. Her daughter, Justine Wise Polier, became a New York City domestic relations court judge, a child welfare activist, and President of the Board of Directors of her mother's agency in the post-World War II era. Despite her mother's progressive sectarian legacy, Polier became a vocal critic of religious and racial matching in adoption. She believed the separation of church and state was essential to preserving American democracy, and that organizing adoptions along sectarian lines was discriminatory and hurtful to children. She transformed Louise Wise Services into a leader in trans-racial and trans-national adoptions that served children of all faiths. My paper examines this key ideological and practical transition in the work of Louise Wise Services in the context of changing notions of family-making in the post-WWII period.