

THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE

date FO-MW
March 23, 1972

to Seymour Lachman

from Judah Graubart

subject National Interreligious Consultation on Soviet Jewry

As per your request, I am sending you my evaluation of the two-day National Interreligious Consultation on Soviet Jewry, held at the University of Chicago's Center for Continuing Education on March 19-20. Since I am sharing this material with a few of our colleagues, I am taking the liberty of including some background material which I think they'll find relevant.

As you may know, the Consultation grew out of a series of highly fortuitous (and equally unlikely) circumstances involving Sister Margaret Traxler, the Executive Director of the National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice and our office. Last July, one of our members alerted us to Sister's concern for Soviet Jews by calling our attention to the newsletter of the National Coalition of American Nuns of which she is president, and which carried a strong statement on Soviet Jewry. Following some initial AJC-NCCIJ contacts, we agreed that some sort of inter-faith effort should be made for Soviet Jews, though the specific nature remained undecided. Then, one afternoon as Eugene Du Bow and I were riding in a taxicab to the NCCIJ for further programmatic discussions, we hit upon the idea of a national conference on Soviet Jewry, by, for, and of the Christian community, a suggestion which, Sister Margaret received with great enthusiasm.

Following consultation with the IAD, we arranged through Sister Margaret and Professor Andre LaCocque of the Chicago Theological Seminary for a meeting of nationally prominent Christians, to discuss the dual proposal of the formation of a predominately Christian task force on Soviet Jewry, as well as the aforementioned conference, to be sponsored by the task force. Also attending the meeting, by the way, was Dr. Mikhail Zand, the Soviet Jewish emigre who was at that time in the U.S., as well as our Chapter Chairman Richard Levin, Eugene Du Bow, Gerald Strober, David Geller and myself.

Although the deliberations that day waxed long and arduous, the result was well worth the effort. The assemblage agreed to constitute themselves as the National Interreligious Task Force

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on Soviet Jewry, designating Sister Traxler and Dr. LaCocque as Co-Chairmen. They also decided to sponsor the National Inter-religious Consultation on Soviet Jewry. (Subsequent to that meeting, Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum and Bishop Iakovas were added as Co-Chairmen to give the Task Force a more representative base. David Geller was named Chairman of the Co-ordinating Committee, a position which was designed to emphasize AJC's role to other national Jewish organizations.)

The next step taken was that of soliciting a prominent group of people to lend their names as co-sponsors of the Consultation. Through Sister Traxler, we were able to arrange for R. Sargent Shriver to serve as National Honorary Chairman. Shriver in turn, allowed his name to be used on telegrams to about 150 nationally prominent Americans, of virtually every political stripe and color, inviting them to serve as Co-sponsors. As you now know, the response was excellent, and the stationery read like a mini-version of Who's Who in America.

Following the establishment of the Sponsors list and the Task Force, in December, the work on the Consultation began. The details are too numerous for this memo, so I'll confine myself to a few major points. Roughly 1,500 - 2,000 invitations based on lists from the IAD as well as Task Force suggestions, were sent to leading Christians from around the country. When all was said and done, we had a final tally of 170 positive responses, representing the highest leadership echelons of the Protestant and Catholic establishments.

I should mention at this point that in addition to the two-day conference, the Task Force also decided to have a post-consultation interfaith rally for Soviet Jewry, at the auditorium of the Holy Name Cathedral, the Chicago "Vatican." Because of certain political problems, the Interreligious Assembly was co-sponsored by the Task Force and the Chicago Conference on Religion and Race.

Thus established, the Consultation began with a dinner on Sunday evening, March 19th at the University of Chicago's Center for Continuing Education. Eloquent greetings delivered by representatives of the three major faiths, Father Edward Egan, Co-Chancellor for Human Relations and Ecumenism, on behalf of Cardinal Cody; Rabbi Moses Mescheloff, President of the Chicago Board of Rabbis; Reverend Daniel Barrett, Acting Director of the Church Federation of Greater Chicago, and a representative of Mayor Daley. The remarks by Fr. Egan were especially gratifying, not only for their content, but because, of course, he was speaking on behalf of His Eminence.

Following the greetings, Marc Tanenbaum, who was serving as the evening's Chairman in place of the absent R. Sargent Shriver,

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introduced one of the Consultation's two keynote speakers, Mayor Charles Evers of Fayette, Mississippi. Evers then proceeded to duplicate Roy Innis' performance at the Madison Square Garden rally, though fortunately, in a much less militant tone. His basic theme was that we had no right to appeal for oppressed people in foreign countries while there was still racism in America. Although his talk had little or nothing to do with Soviet Jewry, the audience gave him a very long ovation, indicating that he had struck a very responsive chord.

While I am not sure of the reason for Evers' unfortunate presentation, I think part of his motivation may be traced to his lack of understanding about the Consultation, his role in it, and the plight of Soviet Jews in general. My colleague, Max Leavitt, who drove Mayor Evers to the University from the airport, later mentioned to me that the Mayor hadn't the vaguest notion of what he was expected to say, and further confessed his nearly total ignorance about the Soviet Jewish situation. Although Max tries to offer Evers some guidance, by that time it was already too late.

Following Evers presentation, Ambassador Rita Hauser spoke, and gave a forceful litany of the plight of Soviet Jews. I think that while her speech was not an oratorical masterpiece, nonetheless, since she was speaking as an administrative~~on~~ official, it was quite important.

In further evaluating that session, I must say that I thought it was the weakest of the program. Ever's speech, which incidentally, was not anti-white or Jewish, did little for our effort. However, I don't think he harmed the Consultation, since Evers was effectively counterbalanced by Hauser, the clergy greetings, and Marc's skillful handling of the situation. (In fairness, it should be added that Marc, Gerry, David and Jim all felt the speech served the helpful purpose of putting a touchy issue into the open, an appraisal with which I disagree.)

Finally, the dinner meeting profited greatly from the presence of Shlomo Shoham an eloquent Soviet emigre who spoke of his seven years in prison camps as well as of the overall plight of the Soviet Jewish minority.

On Monday morning, the first of the day's three sessions, a panel discussion with Dr. Thomas Bird of CCNY, Richard Maass of the NCSY and Bernard Gwertzman of the New York Times came off quite well. Of the three, Bird was the most outstanding. He contrasted the plight of Soviet Christians and Jews, and supporting his presentation with a wealth of statistical data on the two communities. Richie's presentation, while not as scholarly as Bird's, was nonetheless a top flight analysis of Soviet Jewry, and also complemented Bird's, since he included some historical background on Soviet Jewry, which Bird did not. Gwertzman spoke mainly about his personal experience

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as a Times correspondent in Moscow, and was in a word, terrible. However, despite Gwertzman's failure, the morning session must be rated as one of the highlights of the Consultation. Bird's and Maass' presentations, especially the former, were most helpful in illustrating to the Christian conferees that the plight of Soviet Jews was not simply propaganda, but indeed, a reality, a sentiment which many present expressed.

The luncheon session with Father Robert Drinan, the Boston Congressman, also served some very useful purposes. First of all, he did not concentrate on the Soviet Jewish plight per se, as did each previous speaker, but instead, concentrated on government's efforts---or lack thereof---on behalf of Soviet Jews. Specifically, he talked about Congressional attitudes towards the Soviet Jewish Relief Act, as well as the importance of President Nixon's forthcoming visit to Moscow. While Drinan's speech may not have been precisely tuned to the needs of an uninformed Christian audience, nonetheless, it was one of the most crucial talks of the entire Consultation. For with it, and with the reportage in the New York Times and other papers, the political significance of the Task Force, and the Consultation was made eminently clear to those who are in a position to be concerned about such matters.

Succeeding the Drinan address came the session of the program, which truly reflected the impact of the Consultation on the 170 conferees. The four workshop sessions offered the conferees their first opportunity to discuss material they had absorbed, as well as offer their reactions to it. Without going into great detail, it ^{was} safe to say that the workshops manifested the true success of the Consultation. In all four sessions, as reported at the closing plenary meeting there were a plethora of tochlas suggestions, with a genuine affirmation of the need for an ongoing secretariat. Frankly, one of my concerns had been that the discussants might get bogged down in the minutiae and abstractia which often accompany such conferences, but to my pleasant surprise the reaction was precisely the opposite. The plenary session reflected the delegates deep commitment to Soviet Jews and other minorities. Briefly summarizing the suggestions, the conferees emphasized, in addition to the need for an ongoing secretariat, their desire for continual information, their hope for grass roots Christian involvement, and their desire to be involved in the April 30th Solidarity Program.

On the night of March 20th, the Task Force sponsored the Inter-religious Assembly for Soviet Jewry, with Marc Tanenbaum, Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen, Dr. Cynthia Wedel, President of the National Council of Churches, Rev. Dr. M. L. Wilson, President of the National Committee of Black Churchmen, and Father Edward Vergis, Dean of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese. Again, avoiding details, let me confine myself to a summary of the speakers remarks. Marc was first on the program, and did an excellent job of setting the tone for the entire Assembly, speaking in an anti-cold war, pro detente, human rights for all minorities, vein. Wedel and Wilson also spoke about their hopes for the

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spiritual freedom of Russian Christians and Jews. An unexpected plus was Father Vergis, who spoke quite eloquently about the Jewish plight, also noting the oppression of the Russian Orthodox church. However, as expected, the real star of the evening was Archbishop Fulton Sheen. His biblical analogy from Daniel of the fourth angel in the furnace with the three youths who were being burned representing the presence of the Divine wherever his "children are suffering" was indeed very moving when he applied it to the suffering of the Jews and Christians (but especially Jews) in Russia. Sheen also stated that Nixon's first forthcoming visit to Moscow was "one of the two or three critical movements in a man's life", and thus, he hoped the President would not let this opportunity to help oppressed Jews and Christians pass by. Although His Eminence occasionally fell into cold war rhetoric, Sheen's address was nonetheless, one of the evening's highlights, and was certainly very important in terms of reaching the Administration.

In reporting on the Assembly, notation should also be made of the Spirit of Soul Singers, who, in my opinion, were the real heroes of the evening. An integrated group of gospel singers, mostly black, wearing dashikis and other forms of Afro clothing, they turned what could have been an evening of interesting speeches into what can best be described as an exciting hand-clapping, Baptist revival meeting for Soviet Jews. Also along those lines, the UAHC youth group, called the Soviet Jewry Caravan, also added some additional zest to the proceedings.

A word should be added about the success we had in generating attendance for this program, which by the way, was an SRO crowd of about 650-700 people. Virtually every means of free publicity was utilized. In addition to form letters from Sargent Shriver to every clergyman in the Chicago area, we sent out thousands of mimeographed notices to Jewish organizations, who in turn included them in their mailings, and we also worked through the UAHC youth groups. Finally, we sent a form paragraph to synagogues for inclusion in their bulletins. All this was in addition to the public service announcements and free electronic billboard space we procured through Sheryl Leonard's efforts.

If I may, I should like to add a word about the staff contribution to this program. To begin with, Gerry Strober, deserves a great deal of commendation for his extraordinary efforts. Without his help, the Consultation would never have enjoyed the success that it did. And in addition to the important contributions from Marc, David Geller and Jim Rudin, recognition should also be made of the fine work of my supervisor, Eugene Du Bow and my associate, Sheryl Leonard. Throughout the planning and execution of the entire program, Gene was on top of all the details---and problems---and did a remarkable job in terms of coordinating the various aspects of the program. Sheryl's role with regard to publicity, (to say nothing of the many other Consultation aspects she handled), was, in a word, superlative.

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Through her efforts, which began literally months ago, we not only had repeated headline stories in the black and Jewish press, but an extraordinary amount of lead stories, feature articles and column headings in all four Chicago dailies, as well as the all important story mentioned in the New York Times. Additionally, we had extensive radio and television coverage and as you know, we made UPI, AP, RNS, Radio Liberty, Kol Yisroel, Voice of America, and Radio Free Europe. Further, I understand that we can expect coverage in forthcoming editions of the National Catholic Reporter and America. By the way, mention should also be made of the fine cooperation and assistance rendered from the national office by Mort Yarmon and Natalie Flatow. And finally, my colleague Max Leavitt, also deserves our thanks. Although Max has nothing to do with either Foreign Affairs or Inter-religious Affairs, he worked very hard on numerous aspects of this program.

At this point, we are now in the process of developing follow-up programs. Bookie, as you know, is trying to arrange an appointment with the President for the four Chairmen of the Task Force, and we are also considering a Washington vigil on the eve of Nixon's Moscow visit. Additionally, Fr. Drinan will be visiting Soviet refugees in Israel in May on behalf of the Task Force, and a potential "Interreligious Mission to Moscow" is also in the offing. Further, we will be shortly printing the Task Force's first edition of "Heimland", the former Chicago Chapter newsletter which is being given over to the National Interreligious Task Force on Soviet Jewry.

Finally, special kits containing materials from the Consultation are being sent to each one of the Honorary Co-Sponsors, along with a letter asking them to serve as permanent sponsors of the secretariat. The secretariat, by the way, will temporarily continue in much the same way that the Task Force did, with the NCCIJ address, and the Chicago AJC as staff.

Warmest regards,

JG:ps

cc: Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum, Samuel Katz, Mort Yarmon, Gerald Strober, David Geller, Rabbi A. James Rudin, Natalie Flatow, Will Katz, Isaiah Terman, Eugene Du Bow, Sheryl Leonard, Max Leavitt.