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## Father Coughlin and the Jews: A Reminiscence for Younger Colleagues\*

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“. . . neither Father Coughlin nor Social Justice is anti-Semitic . . . in the sense that it is opposed to any individual Jew, to any religious Jew, to any group of Jews.

We are opposed, however, to having atheistic Jews impose their code of life upon our political structure, our economic structure and our national structure.”

Social Justice, July 7, 1941, p. 4.

Reliving the communal past may be an exercise in sentimentality. It may serve simply as a temporary purgative, providing catharsis for the writer, in the course of which his readers might themselves experience a degree of kindred relief, or, at least, some arousal of interest. Acquaintance with the not so distant American Jewish past for the young social worker, however, should do more than pique his or her interest, offer him solace or nurse his indignation. It should provide him with a better grasp of those emotions and attitudes which continue to shape the American Jewish consciousness and determine much of the behavior of his older colleagues in Jewish communal work. For the latter the present is strewn with reminders of this past; in some instances, indeed, the past dominates their perceptions utterly.

Like myself, these older workers and teachers, interacting with their co-workers of a later generation, often find themselves yearning to give them something of the “feel” of the American Jewish community of the nineteen thirties. I have frequently been struck, for example, by the need to correct the exaggerated notions some of my Jewish students have of the power and unity of the earlier community and their consequent inability to understand why, collectively, we did not take more effective action at the time on the problems which beset us and Jews overseas. Today, to

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Jewish social workers under forty, both our heightened sensitivity to slights from the general public—in the last analysis, we of this older group don’t think Archie Bunker’s pet hatreds are all that funny—and our wariness may seem unnecessary or even pathological.

Perhaps the brief flurry of “Burn Jews, Not Oil” slogans after the Yom Kippur War, the comments of General Brown on Jewish activity in Congress and Agnew’s “Zionist influence” ploy have helped our younger colleagues to be less critical of our worried defensiveness. But they grew up in an American Jewish community in which there has been palpable political power, economic security, the presence and example of Israel, and considerable potential for internal mobilization on social issues affecting it. We did not. They cannot help but view our actions through the prism of their experience, thinking it in all essential respects to have been ours. But ours was an experience of a different kind of community, a vulnerable, divided community—one contemporary authority estimated there to be seven major ideological divisions among committed Jews alone<sup>1</sup>—and it faced an American society which contained large and important elements which were openly hostile to Jews. It is essential that those of our fellow American Jewish social workers who came to maturity later understand something of this experience. Without this, much of the contemporary communal behavior of their fellow

<sup>1</sup> See Milton Steinberg, *A Partisan Guide to the Jewish Problem*, Bobbs-Merrill and Co., New York, 1945, pp. 158-173.

American Jews, particularly those over fifty, and even some of their own reflex reactions to events, must seem puzzling to them.

How does one communicate any of this earlier experience? An encyclopedic treatment of the era from an American Jewish perspective is beyond the skills and energy of most of us. One can, however, extract a slice of that period, and, with one's readers, immerse oneself briefly but intensely in that thin wedge of time and events.

### Coughlinism

For me, the individual whose activities had particular salience for American Jews in the 1930's was Father Charles E. Coughlin who founded and led the National Union for Social Justice. It was this popular radio priest who, after beginning by attacking "international bankers" early in the decade, ended by leading a nation-wide political attack on "atheistic and communistic" Jews, giving new respectability to the bizarre allegations contained in the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Coughlin's weekly paper, *Social Justice*, is now gathering dust in bound volumes in the stacks. Recently, however, I scanned many of its columns. As one who had read them when they originally appeared on newsstands and library reading racks, I found myself contending with many of the same feelings with which I had to wrestle almost forty years ago. A sampling of the contents of even a few of these columns may, I believe, provide my younger fellow Jews with a sense of what the thirties felt like for the American Jew as Jew. Perhaps they will then understand better why, for many of us, our emotional clocks are fixed at that time, shaping our consciousness, both as a community and as individuals, to this day.

The reader is asked as he or she is confronted with portions of these columns to allow himself to assimilate their impact. In addition he must try to imagine the stridency of the hate-filled voices via short wave radio and the news of Jewish degradation and helplessness which daily reached us from Europe during the time these columns appeared. He will need to face the picture of himself and his

people which the words form, the uncertainties they induce, and the powerful antagonism toward him and his which they convey. Only in this way can he begin to empathize with his fellow Jewish reader of four decades past, who today may be his senior colleague or client. To complete the portrait of this literature as a source of pain and contention, the reader should know that, "The vendors not only sold the paper but they also shouted anti-Semitic slogans and offered to fight."<sup>2</sup>

Interviewing Father Coughlin in the 1960's, Sheldon Marcus was bemused by the fact that, "This lonely, solitary figure was once the most hated and the most feared American of his time. He was Christ; he was Hitler; he was savior; he was destroyer; he was patriot; he was demagogue . . ." <sup>3</sup> *The Detroit Free Press* by 1938 was referring to his regular radio program as Father Coughlin's weekly attack on the Jews.<sup>4</sup> (By his own estimate this program was heard by seventeen million people. Even the most conservative accounts put his audience at several million at least.) "There was always a great fear among us about Father Coughlin because of his tremendous following . . . we were afraid," Philip Slomovitz remembered in 1970.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed there was good reason to be worried. Hadley Cantril, and Gordon Allport, two of the most eminent social psychologists of that era attested to the awesome power Coughlin was achieving through his radio programs.

Were it not for Father Coughlin's feat in creating exclusively on the basis of radio appeal an immensely significant political crowd, (they wrote) one could scarcely believe that the radio had such potentialities for crowding. In the case of Huey Long, of Mussolini, of Hitler, the leaders were well-known in advance, and the listeners had ready-made atti-

<sup>2</sup> George Seldes, *The Catholic Crisis*, Julian Meissner, New York, 1939, p. 119.

<sup>3</sup> Sheldon Marcus, *Father Coughlin*, Little, Brown and Co., Boston, 1973, p. 11.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Tull, *Father Coughlin and the New Deal*, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse, N.Y., 1965, p. 207.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Marcus, *op. cit.*, frontispiece.

tudes toward these leaders that needed only to be intensified and directed through vocal appeal. But in Father Coughlin's case the attitudes required creation as well as shaping. He was not a well-identified leader before he used the medium of broadcasting. His principles were not well known nor were they widely accepted . . . (But) It took only a few months of periodic broadcasting for Father Coughlin to secure his alleged membership of 8,000,000 in the National Union.<sup>6</sup>

Cantril and Allport's emphasis on the politicization of this crowd of listeners is important. What made for the fear of which Slomovitz speaks was not so much the extent of anti-Semitism—after all, widespread anti-Jewish sentiment was nothing new in America—but rather the fact that it had become part of the creed of a political movement. In Irving Howe's words, "The social anti-Semitism of the early decades of the century, relatively bluff and 'good-natured,' had been accepted by most of the immigrants as part of the way things were; the anti-Semitism of the twenties and early thirties, sustained first by Henry Ford's money and broadcast later by the radio priest, Father Coughlin, had become more frightening because more directly political."<sup>7</sup> This is not to say that numbers were not in and of themselves cause for alarm. In 1934, Coughlin "was getting more mail than anybody else in the country, including President Roosevelt."<sup>8</sup>

Yet time in some cases softens perceptions. The horrors of world war and their echoes in the United States reach their zenith and then are soon forgotten. The sharp edge of earlier ethnic and religious antagonisms becomes dulled as once important socio-political issues become a dead letter. By 1965, Tull was reminding us that ". . . 'fascist' was the scare word of the 1930's . . . Except for his occa-

<sup>6</sup> Hadley Cantril and Gordon Allport, *The Psychology of Radio*, Harper and Brothers, New York, 1935, pp. 8-9.

<sup>7</sup> Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, Harcourt, Brace and Jovanovich, New York, 1976, p. 630.

<sup>8</sup> William Manchester, *The Glory and the Dream*, Little, Brown and Co., Boston, 1973, p. 109.

sional references to a corporate state there is little reason to charge Coughlin with fascist sympathies."<sup>9</sup> Greeley, writing two years after Tull, admits that, "It is possible to see Coughlin as a fascist and quite easy to think of him as an Anti-Semite."<sup>10</sup> He suggests, despite this, "It may be more charitable, however, to see him as a sincere and well-meaning social reformer without much scholarly or intellectual understanding of economic problems and social problems whose head was turned by the immense popularity of his radio broadcasts. Disillusioned by the New Deal's failure to take him seriously he turned more and more against it and his anger and frustration carried him down the path that ended in the worst sort of demagoguery."<sup>11</sup>

How easy it is in retrospect to explain away the anti-Semitic activity of former political leaders like Coughlin. At the time, however, particularly from 1938 on, those Jews who listened to Coughlin's broadcasts and who read what he and his supporters wrote were neither in the position nor the mood to accept explanations of why he was behaving in this manner. All most of them knew was the sound of his rich baritone on the radio every Sunday mouthing theories which by direction or inuendo held Jews to be responsible for the twin evils of atheistic communism and unfettered capitalism and their attendant miseries, while, all the while, the horrors of Naziism were being visited on Europe's Jews, as Hitler devoured Central Europe piecemeal.

### A Brief Chronology

Who was Father Coughlin? The details of his life, his political, and economic theories and his ventures in social action are spelled out in the well-documented biographies by Marcus and Tull cited earlier.<sup>12</sup> His general political activities and economic ideas reflect the turmoil of post-World War I and Depression

<sup>9</sup> Tull, *op. cit.*, p. 246.

<sup>10</sup> Andrew Greeley, *The Catholic Experience*, Doubleday and Co., New York, 1967, p. 243.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> See Marcus, *op. cit.* and Tull, *op. cit.*

America, the collapse of Wall Street and the emergence of the New Deal. He had begun his public career with devotional broadcasts every Sunday on station WJIR Detroit in 1926 after the facilities of the station were turned over to him for this purpose when his church was burned down by the Ku Klux Klan. A strong political theme was introduced into his broadcasts in the 1930's when he entered the arena of social action in order to put into practice the teachings of the Church on labor, a just wage etc. as embodied in the papal encyclicals of the turn of the century. Possessed of perhaps the most beautiful speaking voice in America and supported by a staff wise in the ways of finance and public relations he was eventually heard by millions of people coast to coast every week during the Depression. Originally he was a supporter of Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal and on occasion he appears to have been influential in Democratic Party decision-making. In 1935, however, he broke with Roosevelt and, excoriating the New Deal as Communistic, later moved to a political position in which he advocated a corporate state, the only contemporary model of which presumably existed in Fascist Italy. Violently anti-British and a fervent isolationist, Coughlin attracted a large following. What was most ominous was his ability to draw several million Americans into his National Union for Social Justice despite its vague and ill-conceived program of "Christian Capitalism." He was able even to run his own candidate for president in the national elections of 1936. Although this candidate did quite poorly, Coughlin's potential power at the time is reflected in the fact that for many thoughtful people this poor showing was a matter of considerable relief. Even the *Christian Century*, which had predicted Coughlin's political eclipse, editorialized, "One is amazed now in thinking back only a few months to remember how ominous seemed the threats of the blocs of Coughlin, Townsend and the political heirs of Huey Long."<sup>13</sup> By 1938, Coughlin was one of

<sup>13</sup> Editorial, "The Total Eclipse of Father Coughlin," *The Christian Century*, Vol. 53, November 8, 1936, p. 1517.

the most outspoken pro-Axis (that is, pro-Italian, pro-German) figures in American public life. Although silenced for a brief period, most of the time he was to be found railing against the British, the Jewish bankers and the Jewish Bolsheviks every Sunday on the radio and every other week in his newspaper, *Social Justice*. This publication was devoured as Gospel by the members of the Christian Front, Coughlin's own would-be storm troopers who were emerging in the larger cities of the east and midwest. Only America's entrance into World War II effectively removed Coughlin and his organization from the national state.

In all of this, the matter of Coughlin's relationships with his superiors, colleagues, and the laity in the Church deserves a volume in itself. Catholics in the United States generally felt embattled as American liberals continually attacked the Church for supporting Franco against the anti-clerical, though duly elected, Republican government in the Spanish Civil War. Coughlin's superior, Bishop Gallagher, was his staunch supporter. A number of other bishops were less than enthusiastic about him, however, and Archbishop Mooney fought him vigorously as did many Catholic intellectuals. But many of the laity, it is fair to say, adored him, and it seems clear that parish priests in many parts of the country found his ideas congenial and promulgated them. Knowing the temper of the times and the temper of many within the Church at that time one is dismayed, but not surprised, to read that the famous Father Flanagan of Boys' Town, "whose own financial plight was desperate" in the thirties, sent Father Coughlin a check for one hundred dollars.<sup>14</sup> Nor is one startled to find Richard Cardinal Cushing, a universal favorite among all religious groups in Boston, proclaiming as late as 1966 that Coughlin was a man ahead of his time, "the giant of his generation among the committed priests of America."<sup>15</sup>

But what did these developments mean to American Jews? Reading *Social Justice* and

<sup>14</sup> Marcus, *op. cit.* p. 9.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, Frontispiece.

exposed to the fulminations of its writers and Coughlin's devotees, what was the range of the impact on us, who were the object of their frenzy?

#### The Moderate Period

From 1936 into early 1938 the Jewish reader of *Social Justice* would simply have been left uneasy by vague, contradictory signals in its columns. The Jewish question was referred to sparingly. For weeks it was not mentioned. A few references to Jews were negative, but in the nature of supposedly helpful criticisms, and some were actually positive in tone. Inevitably, the Jewish reader, caught off balance, must have been assailed by a bout of self-questioning. "How can I be so suspicious?" "Perhaps if I am a 'good' Jew they will like me." "Can I be sure they don't like some Jews?" Ignoble sentiments, to be sure, but one did not want to add obtuseness and oversensitivity to the complaints about Jews by those who, after all, might turn out to be, as they protest they are, "friendly" critics.

#### The Battle Against the Jews

In any event, early in 1938, the reader of *Social Justice* received strong intimations of what was to come on the Jewish question. The material contained in the volumes for this particular year is perhaps most evocative of feeling for those of us who were growing into adulthood at the time. This was a watershed year, the year of Herschel Grynzpan and Kristallnacht—the destruction of Germany's synagogues which followed his desperately brave act of resistance to Naziism, the year of the Anschluss and Jewish flight from Austria, the last twelve months of peace in Europe.

As horror began to engulf Jews overseas, one read nothing of this in *Social Justice*. What one did read in the lead article for March 28, 1938 was the need of the American workman to defend himself against the most important Jew of all, Bernard Baruch.

It is rumored that in Jewish circles Mr. Baruch holds the ace hand in matters of policy. In financial circles he is omnipresent and never visible. In politics he is mercurial, slipping with the suddenness of quicksilver

through the closely woven strands of every net and landing upright, smiling and glittering on the presidential desk of every occupant of the White House . . . the Jew knows how to ingratiate himself into the hearts of every president and cabinet for the purpose of selling his political peanuts.<sup>16</sup>

Clearly, if he sought compassion for his people now being bloodied in the streets of Europe the Jewish reader would not find it in the pages of *Social Justice*. On the contrary, he discovered there that the Jews were only getting what they deserved. After all, hadn't they not only created Bolshevism, or so the litany went, but also seized control of the finances of the world through the capitalist wing of their secret polity? Revealing their designs in the May 16th issue of that year, Ben Marcin set about describing the manner in which the Sassoons, the "oriental" branch of this conspiracy, had "captured the rich and progressive civilization of India" during the nineteenth century.<sup>17</sup> Two weeks later it was explained how the Sassoons had arranged to intermarry with the Rothschilds who dominated Europe. The next month there followed a thunderous attack on these Jewish bankers in an article entitled "Punch and Judy Banking." This diatribe, among other things, laid the destruction of Europe's traditional social structure at the door of the aforementioned combination of Jewish families, which, in effect, now ruled all our lives.<sup>18</sup>

If he did not feel himself overwhelmed by incredulity the Jewish reader might at this point have been intrigued, wondering how *Social Justice* and Father Coughlin would now finally demonstrate the existence of unbreakable ties and unity of purpose between the two sets of "bad" Jews, to whom they constantly referred, the usurious Jewish capitalists and their brothers, the Jewish Communists. Beginning in July of 1938, the answer was laid out in full detail. Jewish Communists and Jewish bankers are united partners in an organized conspiracy. Their nefarious plans are

<sup>16</sup> *Social Justice*, March 28, 1938, p. 3.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, p. 9.

<sup>18</sup> *Social Justice*, June 20, 1938, p. 21.

revealed in a document known as the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.

#### The Elders of Zion

Published in Russia in 1906 and circulated throughout the world by the anti-Semitic organizations in every Western country, the *Protocols* purported to be the minutes of a meeting of three hundred leaders of world Jewry who were plotting the takeover of Christian civilization. The modern Jewish reader would find both the language of the *Protocols* and the intention behind their fabrication ludicrous. He dismisses them at his peril, however. During recent years they are said to have been widely disseminated in Arab countries and one does not have to take too dark a view of human nature or history to expect that they will surface here again someday.

The American Jew who read the *Protocols* in 1938 could not in any sense afford to laugh at them. If, however, he read them as they were excerpted by Father Coughlin in his column "From the Tower" he found himself being clubbed with one hand and stroked with the other.

Week after week, throughout the summer and fall, Father Coughlin in his column, as well as on the air, commented on selected segments of the *Protocols*. Yet, he generously excused most Jews for what the *Protocols* contained, noting in his first article on the subject that:

Everyone who mentions the *Protocols* is listed immediately as a Jewbaiter. That is very poor logic. Although the *Protocols* are supposed to represent an account of a meeting held by certain so-called Jewish leaders, it is fair to say that the vast masses of Jewry know little or nothing about them. It is likewise fair to assert that the vast mass of Jews entertain no organized thought against gentiles or Christians.<sup>19</sup>

Still, he hastens to point out, Herzl "gave public and official utterance in his Diaries (published in part in the *Jewish Chronicle* of July 14, 1922) which fit in intimately with definite passages of the *Protocols* themselves."<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> *Social Justice*, July 18, 1938, p. 5.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

Furthermore, he continues, overcoming logic with inuendo, "Whether the *Protocols of Zion* are as spurious as the Knights of Columbus so-called oath—these questions do not contradict the accord which is evident in the content of the *Protocols* with the very definite happenings which are occurring in our midst."<sup>21</sup>

Coughlin's voice, "without doubt one of the great speaking voices of the twentieth century," would have to be heard to fully understand why, as he commented on the *Protocols*, millions responded with such fervor to his "manly. . . intimacy" and "ingratiating charm."<sup>22</sup> One can, however, by looking even briefly at their actual wording truly grasp the virulence of the *Protocols* themselves. The sixth protocol, which Coughlin discussed first, for example, contains language such as the following:

"The aristocracy of the goyim (gentiles) as a political force, is dead—we need not take it into account; but as landed proprietors they can still be harmful to us from the fact that they are self-sufficing in the resources upon which they live. It is essential therefore, for us at whatever cost to deprive them of their land. This object will be best attained by increasing the burdens upon landed property—in loading lands with debts. These measures will check land-holding and keep it in a state of humble and unconditional submission. . . ."

"In order that the true meaning of things may not strike goyim (gentiles) before the proper time we shall mask it under an alleged ardent desire to serve the working classes and the great principles of political economy about which our economic theories are carrying on an energetic propaganda."<sup>23</sup>

But the Jewish reader of the 1930's may very well have encountered the *Protocols* before. What was new and important was Father Coughlin's commentary, for his major point was that it is evident that what is now taking place is in accord with the plans the *Protocols* reveal.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Wallace Stegner, "The Radio Priest and His Flock," *The Aspirin Age*, Isabel Leighton, editor, Simon Schuster, New York, 1949, p. 234.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

Read again this plan explained in the Sixth Protocol to destroy civilization.

No wonder the author of this document foresaw many years ago how to create want in the midst of plenty and how to agitate the thoughtless masses to the point of revolution.

"We shall raise the rate of wages which, however, will not bring any advantage to the workers for, at the same time, we shall produce a rise in prices, of the first necessities of life, alleging that it arises from the decline of agriculture and cattle-breeding."

This has been accomplished under the re-gency of the New Deal.

"We shall further undermine artfully and deeply sources of production by accustoming the workers to anarchy and to drunkenness. . . ."

This has been accomplished through the agency of the C.I.O. which for many months has been under the influence and leadership of communistic philosophy with its needless and unauthorized strikes and its destruction of property; with its clubbing of officers and its seizure of government in various states. . . ."

The best rebuttal which the modern leaders of Zion can offer to the authenticity of the *Protocols* is to institute a vigorous campaign against Communism. Jews as a whole oppose Naziism and Fascism.

When will they begin their campaign against Communism?<sup>24</sup>

No antipathy, the reader was here assured, is extended towards the Jews for their religion. Bitterness on the part of Christians is engendered only by the fact that Jews are financially rapacious. Even Jewish sources admit this.

The *Jewish Encyclopedia* admits that Jews have financed nations for war; that the rate of money exchange is largely determined by them; that the Rothschilds control gold, mercury, lead, and tin, quicksilver and tobacco; that Lewisohn and Guggenheim control copper and, to a certain extent, silver; that the Asiatic Jews, the Sassoons, control opium throughout the world. . . .

These statements can always be denied, of course, but why does the *Jewish Encyclopedia* inferentially make such boasts?<sup>25</sup>

Finally, if we still doubted the authenticity

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

of the *Protocols*, the following "quotations from Rabbis" would convince us. According to *Social Justice*:

In 1901, Rabbi Rudolf Fleischman of the Polish city of Schocken, now called Skoki, stated: "*The Protocols really did exist, and they were no forgery*. Moreover, they were positively of Jewish origin."

In 1906, Rabbi Grunfeld of the Polish City of Swarzedz gave the following characteristic Jewish answer: "My dear questioner, you are too curious, and want to know too much. We are not permitted to talk about these things. I am not allowed to say anything, and you are not supposed to know anything about the *Protocols*. For God's sake be careful, or you will be putting your life in danger."<sup>26</sup>

One misreads the mind of the times if one believes that all of this was dismissed by everyone, at least everyone of any intelligence, as balderdash. For various reasons, rather than assess the more outrageous of Coughlin's pronouncements, of which the number was now steadily mounting, some of his readers and listeners chose to fasten on those few of his ideas which at least could be given a coating of respectability. Ignoring his more bizarre distortions, they continued to see him as essentially a defender of the faith against Communism. Particularly isolating in its effects for Jews was the tendency on the part of other readers, who, while dismissing the *Protocols* as obviously fraudulent, cautioned the Jews that they were setting themselves up for persecution by the kinds of positions which a number of them were taking on ideological issues throughout the world. The editors of one diocesan newspaper, quoted by George Seldes, were typical of this group. They wrote, "We feel it our duty to again expose the forgery of the *Protocols*. We also feel it our duty to inform the mass of the Jewish people of the dangerous paths charted by their alleged leaders."<sup>27</sup>

The views reflected in *Social Justice* appeared to enjoy the support of at least a substantial minority of the American public. The beliefs of this segment of society included, at

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> George Seldes, *op. cit.*, pp. 103-104.

worst, a large element of virulent anti-Semitism and, at best, devotion to the idea that no more Jews should be included in American life. This last, which took the form of strong opposition to Jewish immigration, was encouraged openly by the Coughlinites. "Who Comes First, Aliens or Americans," read one column heading in the January 23, 1939 issue of *Social Justice*. Among its highlights were the following:

There are in America more than 4 million foreigners not naturalized according to estimates of the Commissioner of Immigration published in the report of the Secretary of Labor . . .

Every foreigner at work in this country means an American out of work. Every additional foreigner admitted means that another American may be deprived of his just opportunity to work . . .

Of the total immigration of last year 19,736 were Jews.

Jewish refugees are rapidly using up the quotas permitted under immigration laws from Central Europe.<sup>28</sup>

This type of anti-refugee propaganda had a telling effect on American immigration policy. The Wagner-Rogers bill, for instance, which would have admitted twenty thousand refugee children over a two-year period beginning in 1939 was, as Irving Howe describes it, killed through asphyxiating amendments. It never reached the floor of either house of Congress. A Gallup poll found only 26 percent of the population approving of the proposal to rescue these youngsters. Several factors are said by Howe to account for this frightening and saddening response. Among them, "People feared that refugees would compete for scarce jobs. Anti-Semitism fanned by demagogues like Father Coughlin played its part."<sup>29</sup> Columns such as that cited above worked more than idle mischief. They helped assure that children who could otherwise have lived would never escape the death-trap of Europe.

<sup>28</sup> *Social Justice*, January 23, 1939, p. 18.

<sup>29</sup> Irving Howe, *op. cit.*, pp. 392-393.

### The State of Jewish Emotions

From time to time the writer still encounters Jews his own age who look at him blankly when he mentions Father Coughlin. This apparent lack of recognition is generally followed by a hazy statement of recollection, "Oh, didn't he have a radio program or something?" and one suspects that the tendency to repress unpleasant memories and their affects is being put to good use in the interest of emotional self-protection. It is safe to assume that few Jews who lived in urban sections of the East and Midwest were entirely unaffected by this man and his movement. Millions of listeners, a weekly publication with a large national circulation, economic problems of great magnitude throughout the country, anti-Semitic components in the heritage of gentile Americans, whether native or foreign-born, the example and propaganda resources of the European dictators—with all of these factors behind him, Father Coughlin could not help but command our attention.

Individual Jews may have reacted to Coughlinite propaganda with inner serenity and disdain for its promulgators or, at the other extreme, by redoubling their efforts to conceal their Jewish identity. All, however, whether courageous or craven, or even if they somehow managed to avoid thinking about the matter overly much, shared a sense of bewilderment over the strength of this onslaught and the depth of hatred it revealed. Furthermore, Coughlin's columns and broadcasts subtly exploited internal differences among Jews. The left among us was teased by the idea that, were it not for those terrible Jewish super-capitalists, we could be part of a genuine American populist movement. The right and center could wonder whether, if it weren't for those Jewish radicals, we could remain undisturbed alongside other patriotic Americans. Each, in this sense, could be perceived by the other as thwarting its aspirations.

Coughlinism could also trigger off a host of self-defeating emotions, mainly that form of self-criticism, which, after a period of germination, emerges as self-hatred. Few of us are

totally immune in this regard and it was not only the assimilated Jew, in haste to join the nearest Unitarian congregation, who was at risk. Some of the most committed Jews among us felt emotionally vulnerable whenever charges of economic parasitism were levelled against our people. As Hayim Greenberg, foremost among America's Labor Zionist thinkers cautioned his readers in 1942, not only was the Tolstoyan idea of the special virtue of manual labor responsible for the attitude of self-condemnation among some Jewish intellectuals; Zionism itself bore its share of responsibility. In the past, Zionist leaders, himself included, Greenberg noted, had not hesitated, on occasion, to declare from the platform that "to be a good Zionist one must first be somewhat of an anti-Semite." The return to Eretz Israel, so this line of thinking went, "required physical work above all and the normalization of the economic structure of the Jewish people. Whosoever does not engage in so-called 'productive' manual labor, is to be held a sinner against Israel and against mankind." Greenberg went on to point out that "When addressing the non-Jewish world we become exceedingly apologetic and talk of extenuating circumstances to explain our supposedly incriminating economic position . . . We admit expressly or by implication, that we constitute a useless and unlovely element in the economic set-up of every country." Greenberg actually felt it necessary to remind the sophisticated and dedicated Zionists for whom he was writing that, "The present economic structure of the Jews may not be ideal, but there is nothing shameful or unethical about it . . . there is nothing evil or parasitic about work which is not manual . . . Any work which satisfies human needs or is socially useful is productive work."<sup>30</sup> Anti-Jewish attacks such as Coughlin's had taken their toll; too frequently they turned us inward in masochistic self-examination instead of outward against

<sup>30</sup> Hayim Greenberg, "The Myth of Jewish Parasitism," Hayim Greenberg, Ed., *The Inner Eye*, Jewish Frontier Association, New York, 1953, pp. 64-65.

those who would denigrate us.

A variety of groups meanwhile peppered the gentile community with the most fantastic and outrageous propaganda about Jews and Judaism.<sup>31</sup> Their charges covered every conceivable aspect of life. One would have to have been a Talmudic scholar, an authority on European history, a student of canon law, Marxist theory and the Russian Revolution in order, for example, to deal with the accusations scattered throughout any single twenty-five page issue of *Social Justice*. Naturally, after, for instance, being accosted as this writer was, by high school chums on three separate occasions and asked quite heatedly whether the Talmud suggested the ravishing of Christian girls, most of us left the task of refutation to the various Jewish defense organizations.

In the midst of this turmoil few of us thought the unthinkable, namely, that, "It could happen here." Generally, we buoyed up our spirits with the genuine affection felt by most Americans of the time for Fanny Brice or Eddie Cantor, or basked in the reflected eminence of the Jewish Secretary of the Treasury and two Supreme Court Justices. Not a few of us found our security in Marshall Goldberg's All-American football play or Hank Greenberg's batting average. Never far from the consciousness of even the least sensitive of our fellow-Jews, however, was the feeling that we were beleaguered.

### And Today

This, then is the silhouette of the "bad old dream" which fleetingly haunts American Jewry in its middle years, reminding us of something we hope is no longer there. Certainly we can reassure ourselves that the acceptance of Jews into the mainstream of American intellectual, economic and political

<sup>31</sup> A clear idea of these groups and their methods is found in Lew Lowenthal and Norbert Gutterman, *Prophets of Deceit*, Pacific Books, Publishers, Palo Alto, California, 1948. The German Library of Information, of course, an official Nazi propaganda arm in New York, functioned without hindrance throughout most of this period.

life is incomparably greater than it was when *Social Justice* was being hawked from street corners, newspaper kiosks and church steps. There is no denying that times have changed.

And yet, in the midst of amicable gestures between Christian and Jewish religious activists, joint Jewish-Catholic institutes, and the like, we remain concerned. On the op-ed page of the *New York Times* for June 19, 1976, for instance, one reads with growing consternation an article by Andrew Greeley, the eminent priest-sociologist, who is presumably a scholarly friend of American Jewry. In it this expert on social research and ethnicity writes agitatedly of the presumed anti-Catholicism of some hypothetical young Jewish academics and the contributions of this attitude to anti-Jewish feeling. Responding soon afterwards, Rabbi Henry Siegman affirms that Greeley is not an anti-Semite. Still, he adds, "he has only himself to blame for that inevitable impression, for his polemic is couched in language that is intemperate, reckless and calculated to incite people less thoughtful than he to precisely the kind of mindless stereotyping he decries."<sup>32</sup> However much we reassure ourselves, faced with the abrasiveness of criticisms like Greeley's a whiff of the unpleasant past assails us.

We are accustomed to monitoring vestigial American anti-Semitic groups, whatever their political or racial coloration.<sup>33</sup> What makes us wonder about the true state of Christian feeling, however, are lapses in sensitivity on the part of those who presumably are not anti-Semitic. For example, our concerns become pronounced when we read of the proposals of one group of Episcopalian liturgists in the winter of 1975-76. This group suggested that a set of ancient Christian poems, the so-called *Reproaches*, be instituted in the Episcopalian Easter service. These verses are shot through with virulent anti-Semitism. Although still a part of the Roman Catholic service, some

<sup>32</sup> Letter, *New York Times*, July 1, 1976, p. 29.

<sup>33</sup> See Arnold Forster and Benjamin Epstein, *The New Anti-Semitism*, McGraw Hill Book Co., New York, 1974.

Catholic theologians would like them removed. Warning of this possible action by the Episcopalian church and its results was given by Thomas Idinopolous, currently professor of religion at Miami University of Ohio in the August 4-11, 1976 issue of the *Christian Century*. Viewing the matter with something approaching consternation, he wrote:

One might suppose that the freedom of Jews today to live in predominantly Christian America (if not in Soviet Russia) had fashioned a happy ending to the long, melancholy story of Jewish-Christian relations in the West. If this were really so, then perhaps the use of the *Reproaches* in American churches could be viewed as an unhappy reminder of one of the more dismal traditions of the church. But the matter may not be so simple. If a study conducted some ten years ago on patterns of American anti-Semitic attitudes remains valid then a surprisingly large minority of American Christians continues to hold the Jewish people as a whole responsible in some sense for the death of Jesus. It would be impossible to demonstrate what role the *Reproaches* have played in promoting this view, consciously or unconsciously, during the heightened feeling of the Good Friday service. But what is beyond a doubt is that the *Reproaches* function psychologically to justify and legitimize such a view.<sup>34</sup>

It is reassuring to learn that the *Reproaches* were finally deleted from proposed *Book of Common Prayer*.<sup>35</sup> The Jewish onlooker, however, would find the process by which this occurred instructive. As described by the Jewish Telegraphic Agency:

(The poems) had appeared as part of the Good Friday liturgy in an experimental version of the book titled *The Draft Proposed Book of Common Prayer*, of which 50,000 copies were published last February. In May, responding to numerous objections

<sup>34</sup> Thomas Idinopolous, "Old Forms of Anti-Judaism in the New Book of Common Prayer," *Christian Century*, Vol. 93, August 4-11, 1976, p. 684.

<sup>35</sup> *Rhode Island Jewish Herald*, October 1, 1976, p. 13.

from scholars, liturgists and individuals within the Episcopal Church, as well as from Roman Catholic, Protestant and Jewish leaders, the Church's Standing Liturgical Commission withdrew the *Reproaches* from the recommended text, and set up a committee to suggest alternative material.

Last week, Episcopalian lay and clergy representatives at the governing convention approved the book without the *Reproaches*, despite the efforts of a small group of delegates to retain them.<sup>36</sup>

The deletion reportedly was hailed by some Jewish leaders as an "historic act of respect for

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

Judaism and friendship for the Jewish people.<sup>37</sup> One wonders whether a more reasonable response might have simply been outrage that, some thirty years after Auschwitz, these *Reproaches* would have been considered at all.

Yes, times have changed since the period and events that have been described. Christian-Jewish relationships, both theological and social, are no longer what they were. Perceptions of status and mutual obligations have been altered. The question remains, however, "Just how much?"

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*