

THE IMPACT OF THE CONFERENCE ON THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMUNITY*

Presidential Address

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IN an era of "atomic clocks" that permit time measurements to accuracies of better than one part in a million, how does one begin to measure the impact of the National Conference of Jewish Communal Service on the American Jewish Community?

As I listened to the major presentations at this conference, including the paper given by Philip Bernstein on Thursday in our session at the National Conference of Social Welfare, I recalled in review the developmental history of Jewish communal services in America, the circumstances of time and place which gave rise to them, and the basic issues of philosophy and practice which were posed periodically. One might be tempted to say with the Frenchman "plus ce change, plus c'est la meme chose." But that would represent an inaccurate over-simplification that might be compared with a superficial view of a river which, as it journeys on, does not reveal to the casual viewer the ferment, change, accrual and erosion which goes on underneath its surface.

It is not my intention to give you a detailed history of the conference for a time perspective in evaluating its con-

tribution. We shall very soon have the benefit of a fine documentary history of the conference, which has been prepared by Michael Freund, with the guidance of a conference committee chaired by Harry Lurie. The final pages of the manuscript are now being typed and publication plans are receiving current consideration.

It has occurred to me that, for our purposes, one could establish three broad eras or epochs which highlight the contributions of the conference to the evolving Jewish communal services in America during the past 60 years. Before doing so, however, I want to make very clear at the outset that I do not imply that these three areas had their exclusive beginning and end in a specific time period. Elements of these three categories continue to have their ebb and flow in the stream of development of the Conference. They stand out, however, at particular times, as major aspects of growth and change in the conference and Jewish communal services which have significance for us as we begin to look toward the future.

As Allan Nevins, Pulitzer prize winning historian once put it, "the past can no more be packaged by quarter-centuries (or similar periods) than the force and body of the Mississippi can be partitioned by features of its banks.

Much that was accomplished in a given period was rooted in distant years and atomic fusion is the achievement of Lord Rutherford's day as well as our own."

Let us take a brief glimpse at some significant events in Jewish and general community life in the second half of the 19th century which had their impact upon Jewish communal services and the creation of the predecessor organizations of our conference.

The post civil war period to 1880 was marked by social and economic expansion on the American scene. American Jewry at this time was largely western European, urban, middle or upper class. In the main, it was a period of adjustment and adaptation, giving rise to many institutions and organizations, such as the forerunners of the YMHA's and Jewish community centers of today, reform Judaism, Jewish hospitals, philanthropic and Jewish cultural voluntary organizations. The proliferation of voluntary service agencies gave rise in the 1870's to the charity organization movement, in the community at large.

And then came the pogroms and persecution in Russia and Poland which led to the mass migrations to America. Herman Stein, in his history "Jewish Social Work in the United States (1654 to 1954)," describes this period as follows:

"The period between the onset of large-scale immigration in the 1880's and the virtual cessation of such immigration after the quota act of 1924 saw the most basic and far reaching developments in the field of Jewish social work. It was during these years that hitherto small, stable philanthropies became huge, sprawling, multi-functional resources; that philanthropy under completely voluntary control began gradually to pass into the hands of paid professionals; that training for the field of social work came into the picture in increasingly formal and permanent form; that con-

flicts arose between traditional forms of charity and newer concepts, particularly in the field of child care; that new educational and cultural centers were established to help immigrants adjust, with conflicts between some of these resources and the immigrant population; that pressure for coordination and centralization in fund raising finally resulted in the establishment of federations in all of the larger Jewish communities; that the participation of leadership from eastern European Jewish background began to break the solid hold of the older Jewish settlers, primarily from German backgrounds; that overseas aid became a principal responsibility of the Jewish community, calling forth united effort from all sub-groups; that national coordinating organizations arose and national professional associations were developed within the Jewish field; that Zionism took hold among large segments of American Jewry, with diverse sub-groups and philanthropic efforts on behalf of Palestine's Jews, one of its by-products. . . . In the teeming alleys and throbbing life of New York's lower east side and in the 'east sides' of scores of other cities the shape of present day social work began to form."

It is said that within 12 years after the first Russian refugee had been received, the numbers that entered equalled the total Jewish population in the U. S. before their arrival. In the course of a single generation, one out of every three Jews living in Russia, Austria-Hungary of pre-war days and Roumania had left his land.

The great needs and problems arising out of these conditions led to the organization of the first national meeting for the purpose of conferring on problems of charity in St. Louis in 1885, under the chairmanship of Marcus Bernheimer. A major concern at this meeting was that the new immigrant would be diverted from the large cities

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and become a burden on smaller communities. For several years thereafter, representatives of the leading societies were called together to meet some current crisis; agreed on some action to be taken, and adjourned.

In 1899, Cincinnati issued a call to other cities for a meeting to which there came delegates from a score of societies to what I. S. Isaacs, writing in the publication "Jewish Charity," Vol. 3, No. 8, called "A 2 days' meeting that was harmonious and enjoyable." . . . Mr. Isaacs further states: "The requisite number of adherents having been obtained, the National Conference of Jewish Charities was formed." The first meeting of the Executive Committee of the Conference was presided over by Max Senior in Dec. 1899, at which time a Constitution was adopted and the following committees were approved to submit papers at the First Annual Meeting of the Conference: Transportation of Transients, Family Desertions, Work for the Unemployed, Friendly Visiting, Hospital for Consumptives, Telegraphic Code and Finance.

The purposes of the Conference, as stated in the Constitution, were "To discuss the problems of charities and to promote reforms in their administration; to provide uniformity of action and cooperation in all matters pertaining to the relief and betterment of the poor in the U.S., without however interfering in any manner with the local work of any constituent society." Membership was open "to any regularly organized Jewish society having charitable and philanthropic purposes."

Thus was our Conference born and the first of the three aspects of the contribution to the development of the Jewish Communal Services in America was set in motion. I think of this period as highlighting the "What" in Jewish social work. The founding fathers were dedicated laymen, intuitively responding to

need, endeavoring to coordinate where services existed and organizing to cooperate in the establishment of new services where needed, such as the industrial removal office, in 1901. Time does not permit me in this oral presentation to share with you excerpts from the Proceedings of the Biennial Meetings of the Conference of Jewish Charities in its first decade. Before 1905 the Conference was deeply involved in practically every issue confronting us today. Even as they were preoccupied with defining need and establishing services, they were also evolving concepts which make fascinating reading. "Monetary relief is not always charity," said Morris Goldstein in 1902 in his paper on causes of poverty and remedial work of organized charity. And in 1904 Solomon Lowenstein continued to caution against over-emphasizing "The Danger of Pauperizing the Applicant" and he expressed the conviction that "With the better education and equipment of our people many of the questions which perplex us should disappear in another generation." The temptation is great to go on quoting revealing statements by the pioneers in the early conferences. But you will have to read them for yourselves when the conference history is published. I shall give you only one more because it leads into the next point I wish to make.

In 1902 Max Senior, President of the Conference, said that mass migration had made volunteer administration of charity increasingly unworkable, and by the same token was changing the concept from that of giving aid to relieve economic distress to one of providing many and varied services, such as helping in adjusting to a new environment, removal from New York to other parts of the country, legal aid, vocational guidance and the like. In 1909 a study was made of Jewish philanthropy which revealed that 1,191 agencies were helping about

40,000 people and spending 10 million dollars annually and there were only 73 paid workers. The study referred to the prevailing low salaries and low status of the workers.

As another illustration of the contribution of the Conference in its early years to the creation of new agencies, may I remind you that in 1916 the National Conference of Jewish Charities established a field bureau "to disseminate information about the organization and administration of Jewish Social Service activities." The Field Bureau also conducted surveys, the most notable example being the Chicago Survey of Jewish Charities, which, I believe, was the first thorough survey of the entire social work program of a large city. Simultaneously, the New York City Bureau of Philanthropic Research which had been organized by the Kehillah and the Local Council of Communal Institutes was helping to study local social agencies. The work of this bureau was merged, in 1919, with the Conference Field Bureau. The Bureau of Jewish Statistics and Research, which had been established in 1914 by the American Jewish Committee, formed the Bureau of Jewish Social Research "To serve American Jewry in the study and promotion of Jewish social and communal activity." This was one of the predecessor organizations of the council of Jewish federations and welfare funds.

In *Trends in Social Work*, speaking of the National Conference of Social Work, Bruno says "Coming into existence almost at the very time that charity was emerging from an undifferentiated practice of good will to a specialized function of the state and of society, the Conference furnished a means whereby the developing practice took on a national character." How truly this can be said of the National Conference of Jewish Charities as it moved on in 1919 to become the National Conference of Jewish

Social Service changing to an individual membership organization open to any person interested in the purposes and activities of the conference.

By this time there was a continuing increase in paid personnel. It is significant to note that in 1918 the Conference passed a resolution calling for the establishment of a Standing Committee on Standards and Qualifications for Jewish Social Workers, with power to prepare a registration form, for use to Jan. 1, 1920. After that date only those who came up to the standards set by that time would be registered Jewish social workers. This plan did not go through, chiefly because of the interruption of service of the secretary of the Conference for overseas duty and also because of "The resistance of some workers." In the earliest days of the conference, the United Hebrew Charities conducted training programs in cooperation with the New York School of Philanthropy and other courses were offered for the volunteers doing social work. Michael Freund in his important history of the Training Bureau for Jewish Communal Service describes the great variety of early undertakings to train employed personnel. From 1918 to 1924 the Conference was actively involved in the development of plans for a School for Social Work which reached fruition in the opening of the Graduate School in July, 1925, with Dr. Maurice Karpf as director.

These activities and the changing nature and nomenclature of the Conference and its annual conference programs reflect the second major aspect of the contribution of the Conference to the enrichment of Jewish Communal Services. We had moved from the concern with the *what* to an ever increasing emphasis on the *how*—the improvement of methods of work, standards of operation and training and a concern for better working conditions, security

for the worker and improved status. The general field of social work was working in these directions and not only were we moving along with our other colleagues, but in no small measure, we were contributing leadership in these directions, in the National Conference of Social Work, the American Association of Social Workers and other such groups. The refinement of skills and the development of the profession contributed to the enrichment of service, and to our status as professional workers.

The third broad area of importance in evaluating the contribution of the Conference to Jewish communal service in America truly represents a continuous thread which has been subjected to many tugs and pulls over the years and perhaps represents the major challenge to us in our times—and that is what I designate as the WHY phase of our being. There have been years in which our annual meetings have reflected doubts and conflicts around the basic philosophies of organized Jewish community life in America and their implications for practice and program priorities. This also has been true in relation to various aspects of social work philosophy and their application to the development of Jewish community services in America.

While this matter represents a continuous thread in the development of the Conference, it was perhaps in the 1930's that we had our most severe growing pains, and sturm and drang around these questions. It was the period of economic depression and widespread unemployment. The rise of Nazism and Fascism distressed the world and renewed the crises and despair of world Jewry, as in the days before the establishment of our conference.

It was the time of the great depression, affecting workers and clients alike and when governmental social welfare programs were introduced on a large scale

to meet the needs of the depression, and the WPA projects brought blessings and problems, not the least of which was the impact on hard won standards and professional development. It was a time of general ferment and the growth of radical movements. Heavy case loads and increasing calls for service enlarged the numbers of rank and file workers and gave impetus to the development of trade unionism in social work. The distance between lay and professional leadership was widened. Resistance was built up to the leadership role in the Conference of Executives and Administrators. Influenced by the teachings of Mary Richmond, there was a movement away from the so-called applied psychology approach to dealing with people and their problems and a greater concern for social action as a way of affecting the environment for prevention of problems. It is in this period that the family agencies began to shift to the public agencies clients requiring long term financial assistance and began placing greater emphasis on counseling services. Relationships with governmental and non-sectarian community agencies stimulated the problem of thinking through "who are we and what are we" and the local agencies and Conference programs were involved in ideological conflicts of fundamental significance. The 1936 Annual Meeting of the Conference gave major consideration to the following matters: Anti-Semitism, aspects of American Jewish youth problems, group work and case-work and Jewish content in Jewish social work.

While it is true that much of the violent emotions involved in discussions around the "why" of social work have diminished, and much progress has been made in the acceptance of the reality of an American Jewish community, many unresolved issues confront us in all aspects of Jewish communal serv-

ice as to how to best serve our constituencies in regard to their Jewishness and the role and responsibility of the Jewish social worker in regard to building a creative Jewish community life. In this year of the 10th anniversary of the State of Israel, we have the opportunity to think through more fully the relation of the American Jewish community to the people of Israel and other world Jewries and as social workers, find ways of relating ourselves to communal developments there, and vitalize our contributions to those we serve in enabling them to be comfortable in their Jewishness even as they take their places at one with all other Americans, and in finding significant meaning for themselves in Jewish values and in their Jewish spiritual and cultural heritage.

A very positive contribution has been made by the National Conference of Jewish Communal Service in bringing together the various functional fields that serve the Jewish people of America. In the degree to which this association under Conference auspices can become increasingly meaningful in the sharing of common concerns will this translate itself into significant gains for the total Jewish community. Not the least of the contributions emanating from the Conference, of course, is the qualified personnel who over the years have given leadership in the Jewish and general community and in the professional associations.

The Journal of Jewish Communal Service should be mentioned as an outstanding contribution to the development of Jewish communal service and to the total field of social work in America.

It is important to recall the changes in names of our Conference in the past 60 years because they reflect the changing emphases in our organization, in consonance with the changing times and our relationship to them. Until 1918, we were known as the National Conference of

Jewish Charities in the United States. From 1919 through 1936 we called ourselves the National Conference of Jewish Social Service. In 1937, we changed our name again, this time to the National Conference of Jewish Social Welfare and now, since 1952 we call ourselves the National Conference of Jewish Communal Service. One cannot predict at this time what forces or ideas will lead to another change.

As we leave this festive anniversary conference and move into the 60th year of our work, I wonder if we could not dedicate ourselves, somewhat in the nature of the scientists in the international geophysical year, to a series of explorations, innovations and earnest study of the forces in the Jewish and general world which have an impact upon us as Jews, as members of the human race, and as professional workers who can help to make this a better world to live in. Many of the speakers at this Conference have suggested a variety of tasks that lie ahead. The meaning of change, the challenge to service middle and upper income families, the need for more and better training resources and added recruits for Jewish communal service, our relation to ever increasing public responsibility for social welfare are but a few that have been presented. I would add to this list the need to achieve a closer understanding with rabbinical leadership and a more effective integration of services among ourselves in the local community. Who was it that asked us to establish sound criteria for a healthy Jewish community life based on research? Certainly there is much unfinished business in regard to relationships with the general community on many fronts and a task of major proportions in relation to strengthening the quality of Jewish communal living in America. These are times in which we are involved with all humanity in problems of survival and world peace and

there are many opportunities for us to share with colleagues in other associations and as citizens in making ourselves heard and felt in relation to these matters. It is my own belief that in many of these tasks, much progress can be made with lay and professional leadership working together. We need to come together more frequently as colleagues than once a year in annual conventions. I would earnestly hope that interdisciplinary consultations will take place with increasing frequency on the local or regional levels.

I do not know how many of you had an opportunity to read the Rockefeller Brothers Fund Report on the American Economy. It is an important document, well worth your review. May I quote the closing statement from it?

"This report has dealt largely with the material and physical well being of our citizens. But these gains will have only partial meaning unless they are accompanied by the fullest possible realization by the individual of his spiritual, intellectual and cultural capacities. Our democratic faith is a faith in the whole human being. We are concerned for the individual's life and health, his security and comfort; but even more we must be concerned for his highest aspirations."

Our Jewish cultural heritage regards man as created in the image of God, capable and worthy of the good life. As members of the National Conference of Jewish Communal Service, in our various ways, individually and collectively, it is in our hands to help our fellowmen achieve the good life and the full life.