

Fact & Opinion

CUTTING JEWISH LOSSES FROM INTERMARRIAGE

Statistics of intermarriage between Jews and non-Jews are for the most part fugitive and ambiguous. Interpretations of such statistics, and especially projections based on them, are correspondingly diverse. The preponderant opinion among those who have studied the matter is that, over time, intermarriage results in more losses to the Jewish community than gains; that is to say that Jews who marry non-Jews abandon or divest themselves of their Jewish affiliations and identities more often than non-Jews who marry Jews give up their religious affiliations and identities and, moreover, that the majority of children of intermarriages are reared as non-Jews and/or opt eventually for religious and community identifications other than Jewish.

As these comparisons suggest, some intermarriages result in conversions of the non-Jewish spouses to Judaism (or, barring formal conversion, embracement of Jewish communal or other affiliation and abandonment of counterpart former relationships). Among students of these and related phenomena are some who believe that synagogues and other Jewish institutions and agencies are remiss in that they do not more actively encourage such conversions or changes of association. One such is Brooklyn College sociology professor Dr. Egon Mayer, who has studied intermarriage over a period of years and, most recently in collaboration with Dr. Amy Avgar, assistant director of the American

Jewish Committee's William Petschek National Jewish Family Center, conducted a study resulting in a report titled "Conversion Among the Intermarried."

Dr. Mayer estimates that in one of every three marriages involving a Jewish spouse the other spouse is non-Jewish. He also notes that conversions to Judaism currently number an estimated 10,000 annually. Both intermarriage and conversions have been growing steadily over a period of years. The traditional Jewish aversion to proselytizing would appear to be eroding somewhat—though there still is no active proselytization. Candidates who offer themselves for study leading to conversion find greater receptivity and more enthusiastic acceptance. The preponderant Jewish attitude toward intermarriage, however, remains hostile or at least disapproving. Drs. Mayer and Avgar are among those who think this attitude may be Jewishly counterproductive, since it often confronts the non-Jewish spouse in an intermarriage with active or passive rejection by the Jewish spouse's family, leading in time to alienation of the couple and their children from all Jewish identification. In their study, the two researchers thought they might find data to buttress their belief that more active efforts to convert the non-Jewish spouses might reverse or stunt this trend toward alienation.

They studied 309 intermarriages widely scattered geographically. No claim can be made for the representativeness of this group of cases and the authors make no such claim. Their findings and conclusions are not represented as applicable to all intermarriages or to all conversions.

The respondents were the spouses who had been non-Jewish at the time of marriage. Of the 309, more than one-third—109 said they had converted to

[A footnote to the foregoing: the Rabbinical Assembly (Conservative) of Nassau-Suffolk (two Long Island, N.Y., counties) by resolution banned rabbis who perform intermarriages.]

Judaism. Women outnumbered men three to one among the respondents. (Dr. Mayer deems this a reflection of the widely accepted research finding that Jewish men are more likely to marry non-Jewish women than Jewish women non-Jewish men.) Of the 109 who had converted, 86 percent were women. (Feminists might want to reflect on the significance of this. Dr. Avgar told a New York Times interviewer that she thought it reflected a greater degree of spirituality and search for religious experience and for ways of belonging among women and that "women are still more obliging and sympathetic, seeing these attributes as feminine," nearly two decades of feminism notwithstanding.)

But most significant in the study findings relevant to the researchers' hypotheses are the statements of the respondents regarding their reasons for converting or not converting. Most of the non-converts reported that they had not been urged or encouraged to convert; and, indeed, that neither their spouses nor the in-laws had appeared to be concerned about religious differences. Relatively few—about a third—said that their own religious convictions precluded their considering conversion. Of those who were married in Jewish religious ceremonies—both converts and non-converts—only eight percent reported having been encouraged to convert. Almost half of those who had converted, by contrast, reported that their spouses and in-laws had evinced concern about the religious differences.

All of this would seem rather clearly to suggest that greater encouragement of conversion of non-Jewish spouses might result in a larger number of such conversions, with consequent gains or reduction of losses to the Jewish community.

Disclaiming any endorsement of inter-marriage, Dr. Mayer said, but "... when two people of different backgrounds do decide to marry, some decisions should be made; and we should at least leave the door open to a person who is willing to consider conversion."

AN ALL-DAY ALL-YEAR JEWISH RELIGIOUS SCHOOL IN CENTRAL MAINE

Sabattus, Maine, not far from Auburn, in the middle of the state, may seem to many (as it does to this commentator) an odd place for a Jewish religiously oriented residential school; but that is where Franklin Academy, which is such a school, is occupying (again, oddly) the renovated building that formerly housed the Ave Maria Convent and School of the Dominican Sisters.

THE EGG AND THE JEWISH PROBLEM

Throughout the Diaspora, Jewish cultural enclaves have burgeoned, flourished, declined and disappeared. Some live in history as glorious examples of Jewish thought, creativity or achievement. Others earn, at most, footnotes in the writings of historians. One of the latter is the now almost forgotten saga of the Jewish chicken farmers of central New Jersey, a saga that is being preserved for posterity in a film documentary by Gertrude Dubrovsky, supported by an award for that purpose by the New Jersey Historical Commission.

Mrs. Dubrovsky was raised on a chicken farm (as were Rabbi Alexander Schindler of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations and George Segal, the artist, among others) and operated such a farm herself for 15 years.

As a young man just out of graduate school and struggling to cope with the Great Depression, the editor of these columns knew some of the farmers, whose experiences he was studying for a projected pamphlet on farming as a vocational choice for Jewish youth. Those he remembers were former operators in New York's garment district, who had sought escape from the drudgery of their machines and the shabbiness of their workplaces and, aided in many cases by loans from the Jewish Agricultural Society (\$2000 would buy five acres including a dwelling

and chicken coops in those days, and a farm family clearing \$4000 annually from the sale of eggs considered that it was making a decent living even as late as the early 1950's). By that time, some 1200 or so Jewish chicken farmers were marketing something like a quarter-billion eggs a year. By then, the Jews from eastern Europe who constituted the first wave of agricultural pioneers had been augmented by Holocaust refugees. But the egg boom became a bust in the 1960's and most of the farmers sold off these lands to real estate developers building houses for the developing suburbs. A few remain, the more prosperous who mechanized their production processes and expanded their enterprises.

But almost all that remain now of what was a little more than a generation ago a thriving Jewish community are an occasional synagogue or Jewish center, like the Reform synagogue in Toms River (founded as a community center by the mostly socialist and agnostic, if not atheistic, farmers of the area) and the surviving Jewish community center in Farmingdale, originally a wooden structure built by 12 families in 1928, where in 1934 Yiddish lessons were available.

BAR MITZVAH AT WEST POINT

There have been many Jewish cadets at the U.S. Military academy at West Point, but never before did Jewish cadets become Bar Mitzvah during their period of training there until that happened earlier this year to David Santo and Robert Paley. Both are sophmores at the Academy. Neither had had any religious training prior to their intensive preparation for their formal assumption of adult Jewish responsibility by the Jewish chaplain of the Academy, Lt. Col. Marc A. Abramowitz. The ceremony was conducted at the West Point Jewish Chapel, the opening of which in 1984 was chronicled in these columns.

While on the subject of cadets: The

three U.S. service academies graduated an aggregate of 25 Jews last spring.

Franklin Academy's recently circulated announcement says it "may very well be the first school of its kind in the world." Indeed, it may. Its circular says it is for "young adults in grades 7-12." This corresponds roughly to ages 12-18. But, of course, adulthood begins with Bar Mitzvah. To quote further from the announcement:

"... it will educate twelve months a year, stress the existence of G-d in the world, and essentially utilize Judaism as the medium for that understanding. . . . will adhere to . . . Jewish dietary laws and observances. . . . Each youngster becomes involved in the maintenance of the school, from the every-day housekeeping chores to the farming and animal husbandry aspects of the program."

Inquiries may be addressed to the school's headmaster, Robert B. Vail, Franklin Academy, R.R.1, Box 3124, Sabattus, ME 04280

INSIDER INFORMATION?

The following is in its entirety from the May 15, 1987 issue of the New York edition of the *Jewish Week*:

Former budget director David Stockman told a meeting of top UJA-Federation supporters that the nation faces major economic belt-tightening in the 1990's. Addressing the annual Wall Street Forum of UJA-Federation, he criticized President Reagan's tax cuts and called for a cut in government entitlement programs. The Wall Street Division annually raises \$13.

RABBINICAL DILUTION

A 300 family congregation in an eastern Seaboard community, claiming a membership "with a broad range of religious perspectives," advertised recently for a "full-time Rabbi for long time established liberal modern orthodox synagogue." (We don't know how the search went—or may be going.)

DIVAS OF THE PULPIT

The first women ever to be formally dubbed *chazanim* by the Conservative Movement were graduated last spring by the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. They are Erica Lippitz and Marta Rosenfeld Barugel and they were given diplomas attesting to their cantorial qualifications.

NAZI VANDALISM REPAIRED BY
COMMUNIST EAST GERMANY

A Jewish cemetery in what is now East Berlin, virtually destroyed by the Nazis, has been ordered rebuilt by the East German Government.

In the presence of a small crowd that gathered for a ceremony marking the rededication of the burial ground, the government's minister for religious affairs declared that the government is committed to preserving for posterity the memory of Jewish life in the country. Among the audience were survivors of the Orthodox congregation, Adass Israel, that had founded the cemetery.

Students at the Von Humboldt University in East Berlin are reported to have volunteered to perform maintenance duties at the cemetery after its restoration.

SKOKIE REVISITED

Remember Skokie? That's the Chicago suburb where, in 1978, a group of American Nazis sought permission to stage a march through a community that included some 7000 or more Holocaust survivors and, after winning in U.S. Supreme Court a suit to force the municipality to grant the permit, decided (no doubt reflecting on the likelihood that an understandably enraged citizenry might not be able to restrain its impulse toward violent opposition) to forego the opportunity.

Well, subsequently, the Chicago Jewish community chose Skokie as the notably appropriate site of a monument com-

memorating the Jewish victims of the Holocaust. Symbolizing Jewish resistance as well as Jewish suffering, the monument was dedicated last May 31, a Sunday, in the presence of a throng, mostly survivors.

At 6:15 the following morning, it was discovered to have been vandalized during the night with spray-painted swastikas and anti-Semitic slogans. It was decided to leave the desecrating inscriptions, to show, as one viewer put it, "that anti-Semitism still exists in the United States."

In the aftermath, it appears that the vandals outsmarted themselves. Said Skokie's Mayor Albert Smith, a Roman Catholic, "It has backfired. . . . Instead of creating . . . hatred, [it has brought us closer together." A local priest said of the impact of the defacement on viewers: "Now you have to come and face the reality . . . of anti-Semitism and the Holocaust. it is no longer purely conceptual."

. . . AND IN OTHER PLACES, AT
OTHER TIMES

The sun never sets on the British Empire, Englishmen used to boast. It no longer is true. But it remains true, as it was when the boast was founded in fact, that the sun never sets where a Jew cannot observe it—though it is simply an observation, not a boast. Here some further instances, to add to the many previously remarked upon in these columns.

Hungarian Jewry: Of the pre-Hitler Jewish population of some 850,000, fewer than 300,000 survived the murderous brutality of the Arrow-Cross, the Hungarian Nazi party. Of those, some escaped, including 100,000 rescued from Adolph Eichmann's dragnet toward the war's end, through the efforts of Raoul Wallenberg. Today, Hungary's Jews number about 80,000, the largest Jewish community in any Communist country outside the U.S.S.R. Most of them live in Budapest and there, last May, officials of the World Jewish Congress gathered to dedicate a monument to Wallenberg's

memory. It was the first international gathering of Jews in any Eastern European nation since World War II and, aside from its specific purpose, was significant on that score.

But more significantly, the event calls attention to the relatively benign Hungarian treatment of Jews. There are other, earlier, memorials to Wallenberg in Budapest. The city has twenty synagogues, the only rabbinical seminary in Eastern Europe, a kosher restaurant, and a museum exhibiting Jewish artifacts dating back to the third century.

Brazilian Jewry: The first known landing of Europeans in Brazil was that of a Portuguese admiral, whose personal secretary (who accompanied him) was one Gaspar da Gama. Da Gama was born in India to Jewish parents, from whom he was kidnapped, and later was baptized. There may have been other Jewish-born men among the crew. At any rate, Portuguese immigrants to the Brazilian colony over the ensuing century included thousands of Marranos. They observed Judaism covertly and, when the Dutch attacked in 1624, they enthusiastically supported the forces of the country that subsequently allowed them to openly profess their religion. The Dutch occupation proved transitory, however; and with the Portuguese reconquest in 1654, most of the Marranos joined the defeated Netherlands again, this time in their forced migration to Europe or such Dutch-controlled Caribbean islands as Curaçao and Barbados. Destined for historical fame was a contingent of 23 who sought haven in New Amsterdam.

Later, Jews from other parts of the world came to Brazil—from Morocco and Turkey in the early decades of the nineteenth century, from Egypt in the aftermath of the 1956 Sinai War, and from Eastern Europe as refugees from pogroms, world wars and the Holocaust.

Only a rough estimate of the Jewish population of the vast country is possible today. Rio de Janeiro, its largest city, includes some 50,000 Jews—about half

Askenazic, half Sephardic. Among them, they support 20 synagogues, the largest of which is the Associação Religiosa Israelita.

Argentinian Jewry: The largest Jewish population in any Latin American nation, that of Argentina, is perhaps the world's most impressive living monument to the benefactions of Baron Maurice de Hirsch, whose grants for the establishment of Jewish agricultural colonies in the western hemisphere in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century brought to Brazil the base of what is now a vigorous, thriving community. (Many Jewish gauchos rode the Argentine pampas at one time. Few remain. But the sophisticated techniques of wheat farming and cattle-raising—Argentina's chief industries—were pioneered by Jews.) The Jews of Argentina, dating back to the sixteenth century had been thoroughly assimilated and absorbed by the mid-nineteenth century.

Today, Buenos Aires alone has a Jewish population of 250,000. It supports 50 synagogues, 71 day schools enrolling 30,000 students in elementary and secondary grades, eight yeshivas, a museum, a hospital, a number of social clubs, a Yiddish newspaper and a rabbinical seminary (the only one in Latin America).

In Cordoba, Argentina's second largest city, the 10,000 Jews are only about one-half of one percent of the population, and the first Jewish settlers in the city arrived only 80 years ago. It is therefore all the more remarkable that Cordoba recently (June, 1987) dedicated a plaza in tribute to Israel—a plaza built with municipal funds and formally presented by the city's mayor. Jews have achieved political and academic distinction, as well as professional eminence and commercial prominence. The municipal attorney general is Jewish, the dean of the law school of the university (at 374 years the second oldest in the hemisphere) is a Jewish woman. There is one synagogue, which also houses a community center, an elementary day school (600 pupils) and a high school (300 pupils). The latter has a 10 hours per day

schedule, which includes instruction in Jewish history and tradition and such skills as computer programming.

Asian Jewish Enclaves: In all the vastness of Asia, there are estimated to be only about 7,000 Jews. That they maintain any semblance of Jewish practice, worship and communal cohesion is remarkable; yet at a conference of the Asia Pacific Jewish Association in Hong Kong early this summer (co-sponsored by the World Jewish Congress) there were delegates from Fiji (representing 15 Jews whose nearest Jewish "neighbors" are four hours flight time away), New Caledonia (80 Jews), Taiwan (40 Jewish families) and Thailand (85 Jews). Hong Kong itself is home to fewer than 1,000, in a city of five million.

The delegate from Bangkok, Thailand, was a Lebanese-born woman who, as a volunteer, helps run a Jewish community center where kosher meals are served on the Sabbath and organizes Talmud Torah classes for youngsters. The small community maintains two synagogues—one Orthodox attended chiefly by Afghan and

Iraqi Jews engaged mostly in commerce in precious stones, and a larger one of more liberal bent with a membership mostly of European origin. A volunteer *shochet* ritually slaughters poultry; kosher meat is imported, frozen.

The Taiwanese delegate was an American employer of a U.S. chemical company, married to a Chinese Buddhist (who joins her husband in Jewish communal activity.) The synagogue, in Taipei, he reported, musters a *minyan* at least once weekly and celebrated three *bar mitzvahs* last year.

The 600 Jews of Singapore were represented by a rabbi, who serves as well as cantor, *shochet* and *melamud*. The community has two synagogues, a Talmud Torah, a community center and a home for aged—the services made possible in part by proceeds from trust funds inherited from the pre-war years, when some 6,000 Jews lived in Singapore.

The delegate from Sri Lanka could claim to represent only herself and two other Jews. (Her husband is a Buddhist, but she has reared two daughters as Jews.)