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THE IMAGE OF THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE

-- Findings from an Exploratory Research Phase --

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Exploratory Research Phase --



Prepared for
American Jewish Committee

By
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This memorandum summarizes the main findings of an initial, exploratory study of the American Jewish Committee image. Thirty-three conversation-type interviews with prominent Jewish men and women living in Chicago, Kansas City, Milwaukee and Syracuse provide the data for this analysis. Those interviewed were selected by the researchers from a list of names prepared by the American Jewish Committee for each of the four cities; all were considered by the Committee to be people who potentially might -- or who perhaps should -- be interested in the goals and activities of this organization.

The interviews covered a wide range of topics. In addition to a series of questions designed to find out how much and what these people knew about and thought of the AJC, we were also interested in learning what they know and how they feel about Jewish defense organizations in general (and the Anti-Defamation League and American Jewish Congress in particular); what attitudes they have toward other Jewish organizations; their views of present problems and future trends in the Jewish community, both locally and nationally; their more private feelings about being Jewish and their identification as Jews with both the Jewish and American communities. As was to be expected, those interviewed -- all intelligent, thoughtful and articulate people -- had many opinions and attitudes. These were expressed freely and strongly, revealing important themes and patterns. It is these overall tendencies that are summarized here, in an attempt to indicate

the main findings obtained and to suggest in general terms the kinds of findings likely to be encountered in subsequent phases of this research.

- (1) The image of the American Jewish Committee tends to be vague and ill-defined.

Little information, vague ideas, confused identifications, partially valid assumptions and incorrect guesses -- these generally are the kinds of answers given to our questions about the American Jewish Committee. With only one or two exceptions, everyone claimed to have heard of this organization; a majority stated that it probably deals with some aspect of anti-Semitism and is engaged in some form of Jewish defense work; less than a majority said they know someone who is a member of the Committee; very few were able to distinguish its activities and goals from other Jewish defense groups. Typical ways of talking about the American Jewish Committee are as follows:

"I should know quite a bit, but I'm guilty of this (i.e., of not knowing). Mostly it has to do with discrimination and justice, to fight and protect not only the Jews but the rights of other minorities."

"I know they, too, have a hand in anti-Semitism. This is my understanding of their work."

"My understanding of the American Jewish Committee is that it is to collectively represent Jewish opinion and action on community matters. This is all I know of it. I can't answer more on this."

There are those few who know considerably more about the American Jewish Committee, and there are some who know considerably less. It is the typical respondent who is represented by the above quotations, who associates it with Jewish defense work in some manner or other and who pleads ignorance about its more specific functions and purposes.

It is believed significant that there often is an apologetic tone to these comments -- a sense of embarrassment about not having a clearer image of the Committee. This is because most of these people see themselves as strongly identified with the Jewish community, as currently active in one or more Jewish groups, as leaders (past, present or future) in the local Jewish community. Confronted with our questions, they are forced to admit that they don't know as much as they should about this organization; and sensing that the Committee is (or was) an important Jewish organization, they are inclined to feel a bit guilty about not having this information.

(2) The Committee's main image characteristics...

Additional questions and probes bring forth several different image qualities that these people know, assume or guess to be associated with the American Jewish Committee. These can be described as follows:

It has considerable prestige, both socially and intellectually -- probably unexcelled in these respects by any organization discussed. As one man expresses it, its members are the "cream of the crop." This is the one facet of the American Jewish Committee image that comes through stronger than any other, so that even those who know virtually nothing about its program and activities are apt to "have a feeling that it draws the top echelon of Jews." This, of course, can make the idea of membership in the AJC seem quite attractive, and some people in the sample admit that they would be flattered if invited to join. On the other hand, the prestige of the Committee can be somewhat intimidating, leading to personal anxieties about being "out-classed" once in its ranks. It is as though people in this sample were in effect saying: "Nobody's asked me yet to join. It would be quite an honor. I wonder if I'd be eligible. And I wonder if I'd be noticed by fellow members once I got in."

Probably closely associated with the prestige image of the Committee is the belief that it was initially restricted to German-Jewish membership but that in recent (post-war) years has become more open to Jews of East European origin. There is no evidence in the data that this development disturbs those of German origin, but there is evidence that those of eastern European origin are somewhat ambivalent about it. The latter feel that the development is a healthy and democratic one. But they also sometimes feel that it is long overdue and tend to be sensitive about showing any elation over their new-found eligibility. It is as though the eastern Europeans were in effect saying, "It's about time, and you aren't going to see me falling all over myself trying to get in."

The American Jewish Committee is thought by some to have assimilationist tendencies. "Its members probably aren't as proud of their Jewishness," as one man put it. This facet of its image, however, is thought to be in a process of change -- even by those who most overtly condemn it. The Committee is believed by these people to be more pro-Jewish (or "less anti-Semitic," as one man put it) than was formerly the case. The perception of the Committee's changed position vis-a-vis Israel has probably been most instrumental in contributing to this re-evaluation; it is thought that the Committee now works more in behalf of Israel's interests than before, or at least that it "no longer wants to hurt Israel."

The American Jewish Committee is believed to work "quietly behind the scenes." Partly this belief seems to rest on the supposition that since the Committee has so much prestige and its work is so little known, it must be working behind the scenes. In part, however, the belief rests on the Committee's reputation for "striped pants diplomacy" -- the diplomacy that negotiates behind closed doors and gets things done with few people being any the wiser for it. This facet of its image is differentially perceived by the sample. Some like the idea of under-cover work, feeling that discreet and secret processes are less likely to boomerang with anti-Semitic charges of "excess influence." But others claim that the Committee's approach tends to be namby-pamby, and they find little cause for vicarious exultation in its undramatic (because unpublicized) successes.

The American Jewish Committee is believed to address itself to problems which are remote -- temporally, geographically, and emotionally -- from the practical realities of everyday life in the local community. There is little objection to the Committee's relatively lofty approach of scientific research and international diplomacy -- and indeed this approach contributes to the respect felt for it. However, those who entertain this view of the Committee do object that the lofty approach is not accompanied by a down-to-earth approach that has some immediate relevance to the concrete problems of the local community.

Thus, to summarize, the "plus" side of the Committee's image is that its members have a great amount of social prestige, that they can operate quietly but effectively on the international scene via personal diplomacy, that they can take a long-term approach to problems via their support of research, that they have become a more open organization through their acceptance of non-German-Jews, and that they have come to take a more positive attitude toward Israel and the Jewish identity. The "minus" side of the Committee's image is that its prestige may seem intimidating; its program, too abstract and lacking in relevance to the local situation; and its acceptance of eastern European Jews, Israel, and "Jewishness," is too much of a "Johnny-come-lately" concession to the spirit of the times.

- (3) It is hard for these people to perceive themselves as members of the American Jewish Committee.

Let us now reorganize what has been said about the image of this organization and look at it in terms of what it can mean for enlisting prospective members. The vagueness of the Committee's image is probably an asset, in that it permits more freedom to the Committee in selecting the most favorable aspects that it wishes to emphasize and the least favorable aspects that it wishes to disassociate itself from.

The high social prestige of the organization is likewise probably an asset, for by and large these are people who tend to derive great personal satisfaction from the social reputation of the organizations in which they are active members. The social prestige of the Committee, if accompanied by a proper emphasis on its democratic qualities (including all this implies about acceptance of eastern European Jews), should make an invitation to membership flatteringly acceptable without arousing anxieties about being possibly "out-classed" by the elite of society.

There are two major factors, however, which (judging from the responses of this small sample) will prove more formidable obstacles to enlisting new members. One factor is the difficulty these people have in envisioning a meaningful role for themselves within the ranks of the organization. These are very active people (both men and women), who tend to take their organizational activities very seriously. They want to be doing, fulfilling, achieving, completing tasks (all the while bemoaning the fearsome burdens they bear because of it, but dissatisfied if such is not the case). Organizations to which they give only money do not provide them with the sense of fulfillment they crave -- such organizations do not excite them and tend to get lost in the shuffle of last year's dues checks.

What, then, about the Committee's program can excite them, get them thinking and talking to their friends? This sample does not, directly at least, provide us with an answer to this question -- for insofar as they consider the possibility of membership they say they do not know what they could do other than pay dues. It may all be very reassuring to know that some members are familiar with the side entrance to the White House or with David Ben Gurion's telephone number -- but where does that leave them? It may be very nice to know that the Committee has sponsored some of the outstanding researches in the area of human relations (actually, not many in this sample are specifically aware of this) -- but all they ever had was one semester of "psychology." In short, international diplomacy and scientific research do not seem very enticing to these people compared to the realities of the new Temple, the activities of the recreation center, the decisions about the administration of the hospital, etc., etc. These are real things that they can see and do (and do in the open); these are the concrete realities about which their life, success, reputation, and identity can revolve.

The second major obstacle noted in this sample to enlisting new members is that the Committee is typed by these people as a "defense" organization. When we look at the over-all organizational life of these thirty-three people, we see that such organizations as the Committee,

the American Jewish Congress, and the Anti-Defamation League do not assume roles of major importance. Seldom are any of these defense organizations singled out by members as the "most important" of the organizations to which they belong. On the other hand, charity, family welfare service, medical research, education, worship, and especially federation activities appear to serve as the foci around which the most meaningful organizational activities occur. Defense, it would appear, does not serve as such a focus. This brings us to the next point in our preliminary findings.

(4) The meaning and emphasis of "defense" may be shifting.

There are three kinds of defense discussed by this sample. One kind of defense is world defense against discrimination. This pertains to discrimination against other Jews in other parts of the world -- such as South America, Russia, North Africa, southern United States, etc. This kind of defense, of course, is accepted as a binding duty and responsibility for all good Jews. It is not, however, the kind of defense about which they want (or know how) to become actively involved; monetary participation, as through the CJA, is sufficient for most of them.

The second kind of defense is defense against discrimination in this country and in the local community. This

pertains more to discrimination against self, family, and friends -- or more exactly, discrimination which could readily become so. The feeling of the younger men, and/or the third and fourth generation men, is that the need for this kind of self-defense has considerably waned. Part of this feeling appears genuine enough, part of it may be "wishful thinking." In either event, the need for this kind of self-defense against discrimination is not thought to be particularly strong. Anti-Semitism, of course, is by no means thought to be passe -- but it is thought to be more sporadic, more occasional, and something resisted more by the over-all political and moral structure of American society (thanks to the successful defense efforts of the earlier generation).

The viable existence of Israel probably has some bearing on diminished concern about self-defense against discrimination. Whether Zionist or not, these men and women testify to a great pride in Israel's accomplishments and express comfort in the knowledge that it is there. They do not want to live there -- perhaps they say that they even do not want to visit it -- but, still, it is there in case of need. It is likely that if Israel did not exist, then the concerns about defense in this country would be greater (and, concomitantly, participation in defense organizations like the Anti-Defamation League and the American Jewish Committee would seem more crucial).

Self-defense against assimilation may be the growing "defense" need in the eyes of these men, taking the place of self-defense against discrimination. The trend toward increased observance of "traditions" personally testified to by some of these men (i.e. "observing more tradition than their parents observed") and -- even more widespread -- their promotion or tolerance of increased observance in their children, suggest a prevailing feeling that this is the growing concern of the present and that it will characterize many (organizational) activities in the future. Present pre-occupation with charitable and educational organizations, of course, afford some expression for these concerns about assimilation, and some of these people explicitly point this out. Again and again, it is said that as discrimination wanes, there is an increasing danger of assimilation and loss of identity. Religious and cultural traditions and organizations, and charitable and educational organizations, all serve to lessen these anxieties. Assimilation is probably the uppermost overt concern of this group and is the central focus of discussions concerning the problems of this day and age and how they, as Jews, differ most from the past.

- (5) There is evidence of a felt-need for a central, unifying organization to handle Jewish affairs, particularly in the area of defense against discrimination.

Over and over again, the complaint is made in this sample that existing Jewish organizations are guilty of overlapping, duplicating activities and that this leads to an unnecessary decrease in efficiency and potency. "There should be one organization to do these things" is the repeated cry.

In its broadest sense, this dissatisfaction with the plurality of Jewish organizations extends to all Jewish institutions -- so there are some who want one central organization to raise funds, administer charity, conduct defense, and supervise worship. More commonly, however, the charge of "duplication" is leveled at defense organizations such as the Committee, the Anti-Defamation League, and the Congress. The prevailing feeling is that if these organizations would get together, pool their resources and operations, then defense against discrimination could be conducted in a more efficient and effective manner. It is likely that the decline in importance of "defense" in the traditional sense is one of the factors contributing to this wish for a unified defense force.

* * * *

Thus, to summarize, these thirty-three people suggest that the American Jewish Committee is presently identified as one of several competing organizations, all

of which are involved in an area of Jewish life that is becoming less and less important. Participation in the Jewish community, at least as exemplified by these respondents, is commonly felt to be more satisfying and more worthwhile if it pertains to communal activities, where the goals are more visible and the activities more tangible, and where there is a sense of contributing to the local scene.

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To people who see themselves as active and capable, the Committee is felt to be too remote; they do not readily see themselves as functioning members of this group. There is also the suspicion that the Committee might still be too exclusive for people like themselves, so that while it might be prestigious to be a member, it might also be somewhat uncomfortable. Under these conditions, present involvement in many other kinds of Jewish groups becomes a convenient reason for not being more interested in the Committee -- and even for not knowing more about it.

A brief description of the sample is as follows:

| | | |
|------|-------|----------|
| Sex: | Men | 30 |
| | Women | <u>3</u> |
| | Total | 33 |

| | | |
|------|----------|----------|
| Age: | Under 40 | 2 |
| | 40-49 | 14 |
| | 50-59 | 13 |
| | Over 59 | <u>4</u> |
| | Total | 33 |

Generations in this country (father's side)

| | |
|-----------|----------|
| One | 7 |
| Two | 15 |
| Three | 7 |
| Four-five | 2 |
| No info. | <u>2</u> |
| Total | 33 |

Region or country of origin (father's side)

| | |
|-------------|----------|
| Germany | 5 |
| East Europe | 25 |
| Palestine | 1 |
| No info. | <u>2</u> |
| Total | 33 |

Synagogue or Temple Affiliation:

| | |
|--------------|----------|
| Orthodox | 1 |
| Conservative | 11 |
| Reform | 16 |
| None | 4 |
| No info. | <u>1</u> |
| Total | 33 |

Some of the Major Jewish Organizational memberships:

| | |
|---------------------------|----|
| B'nai B'rith | 17 |
| Anti-Defamation League | 2 |
| American Jewish Committee | 2 |
| American Jewish Congress | 1 |

| | |
|---------------------------|---|
| Temple clubs, Sisterhoods | 5 |
| Council of Jewish Women | 2 |
| Hadassah | 2 |

| | |
|--|---|
| University-related organizations (Hillel, Brandeis) | 4 |
|--|---|

| | |
|---|---|
| Jewish educational councils or societies | 8 |
|---|---|

| | |
|-----------------------|---|
| Zionist organizations | 7 |
|-----------------------|---|

| | |
|-------------------|----|
| Jewish Federation | 14 |
|-------------------|----|

| | |
|--|----|
| Miscellaneous Jewish community organizations: | 32 |
|--|----|

| | |
|-------------------|----|
| Community centers | 9 |
| Welfare | 14 |
| Homes for Aged | 6 |
| Hospitals | 3 |

| City: | Listed | Interviewed | Refused Interview | Not Contacted/or Delayed Interview |
|-------------|--------|-------------|----------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Chicago | 26 | 9 | 2 | 15 |
| Kansas City | 25 | 8 | 2 | 15 |
| Milwaukee | 19 | 10 | 1 | 8 |
| Syracuse | 20 | 6 | - | 14 |