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“See how many names they capture of [non-Jewish] persons who are well-meaning and friendly to Jews!” Rabbi Stephen S. Wise complained to a colleague, concerning the upstart Bergson Group, in 1944. “It is too sad for words.” Veterans of the Soviet Jewry protest movement often allude to the connection between their activism and American Jewry’s response to the Holocaust. Some say they were determined not to repeat the mistakes of Rabbi Wise and other leaders of that generation. Others have told me in interviews that they learned from the Bergson Group’s remarkable success at recruiting prominent non-Jews to support the cause of rescuing Jewish refugees.

For Rabbi Wise, the sight of his rivals winning the support of prominent Christians was nothing short of agonizing. For Soviet Jewry activists twenty-five years later, building coalitions with Christians was crucial to the success of their movement. The story of that ecumenical effort is documented in the important new study *American Christians and the National Interreligious Task Force on Soviet Jewry*, by the Israeli-American scholar Fred A. Lazin.

Grassroots protests for Soviet Jewry in 1963-64 by the Cleveland Council for Soviet Jewry and the New York City-based Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry pushed the issue to the fore in the American Jewish community. Established organizations such as the American Jewish Committee (AJC) subsequently began allotting Soviet Jewry a more prominent place among their concerns.

That the AJC would be the spearhead for a Jewish-Christian coalition on Soviet Jewry flowed logically from the committee’s long-standing focus on relations between American Jews and non-Jews. The well-to-do Jews of German descent who created the committee in 1906 did so out of a conviction that they knew best how to make the proper impression on non-Jews.

Two major developments within the Catholic Church paved the way for Christian involvement
in the Soviet Jewry movement, according to Prof. Lazin. One was Nostra Aetate, the declaration by Pope Paul VI, in 1965, absolving Jews of the centuries-old deicide charge and rejecting antisemitism. The second development was the church's loosening, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, of traditional restrictions on the involvement of nuns in the broader society. As a result, a growing number of nuns became active in causes such as African American civil rights and, eventually, Soviet Jewry.

A Houston nun, Ann Gillen, was hired as the first executive director of the interreligious Soviet Jewry task force that the AJC established in 1972. She was driven by a profound sense of remorse over the fact that during the Holocaust, and again during the 1967 Six Day War, many Christians were “silent and inactive, if not actually opposed to the concerns of Jews and Judaism,” as she put it (p. 45).

Sister Gillen was the powerhouse behind the fifteen years of activity that followed. A source of seemingly unbounded energy and commitment, she organized conferences, marches, vigils, media interviews, speaking tours, and publications; met with elected officials; undertook multiple visits to the USSR to meet with Soviet Jews; and mobilized Christian clergy and laypeople to speak out.

On occasion, Sister Gillen’s passion took her somewhat beyond the comfort zone of her more reserved colleagues at the AJC. Lazin mentions, for example, how Sister Gillen, together with a Chicago rabbi and the task force’s president, Sister Margaret Traxler, “crashed” a luncheon featuring a Soviet diplomat in order to confront him face-to-face about Jewish emigration. On another occasion, Gillen insulted members of a Soviet-orchestrated delegation of Russian Orthodox clergymen, an incident which an AJC official characterized as “unpleasant” (p. 220).

By the early 1980s, Sister Gillen was becoming increasingly concerned about the mistreatment of Christians inside the Soviet Union and began mentioning them in her various publicity campaigns. Israeli officials, and some American Jewish activists, feared this could undermine the Soviet Jewry campaign, since the two oppressed peoples had very different goals. The Jewish problem could be resolved by letting them leave the USSR; to end the mistreatment of Christians would require major changes in the Soviet system of total societal control.

Some in the Jewish community approved of Sister Gillen’s shift and wanted to take it even further. Lazin reports that Jerry Goodman, leader of the National Conference on Soviet Jewry, proposed changing the name of the task force to the “National Interreligious Task Force Against Religious Oppression in the Soviet Union.” Seeking a balance between those who wanted to focus solely on Soviet Jewry and those who wanted to expand the mission, the AJC ultimately decided to tolerate a de facto broadening of the task force’s agenda so long as it remained only a small part of its work. The dispute was temporarily resolved, but more serious fissures would emerge in the years to follow.

Coalitions are built on the principle of finding intersecting interests and leaving areas of disagreement aside in order to pursue a larger common goal. AJC leaders disagreed with their Catholic friends on a range of major policy questions, from abortion to government funding for parochial schools, but found common cause on Soviet Jewry. Some disagreements, however, could not be set aside; surprisingly enough, the dispute that proved to be the final straw concerned Nazi war criminals.

By 1986, some AJC officials had grown disillusioned with Sister Gillen’s increasing interest in Soviet (non-Jewish) dissidents. Without the AJC’s knowledge, she authorized a coalition of human rights groups to include her task force but list it without the words “on Soviet Jewry” in its name. Gillen’s shift “expresses a commitment to work for fundamental change in the USSR, a commitment which surely goes beyond the agendas of the Soviet
Jewish movement in the United States,” one AJC official fretted (p. 197). With the AJC’s support for her work already waning, Sister Gillen pushed matters to the brink by taking up the causes of Karl Linnas, an Estonian who committed war crimes in the Nazi concentration camp of Tartu, and John Demjanjuk, a Ukrainian guard who took part in atrocities in Sobibor.

Sister Gillen viewed the Linnas and Demjanjuk cases through the prism of Soviet oppression of Christians in Soviet-occupied Eastern Europe. She began writing letters to Israeli and American government officials, claiming the evidence against the accused war criminals was fabricated by the Soviets as part of a plot to frame them. Gillen went so far as to compare the Soviets’ alleged mistreatment of Demjanjuk to their mistreatment of Natan Sharansky, and she accused Israeli prime minister Shimon Peres of staging a Soviet-style “show trial” of the Sobibor death camp guard. It was a sad final chapter in Sister Gillen’s years of interactions with the Jewish community, and contributed to the AJC’s decision to shut down the task force in 1988.

One of the major obstacles that Soviet Jewry activists in the United States faced early on was that “the American public and government officials perceived the American Soviet Jewry advocacy movement as being exclusively Jewish,” Lazin writes. “Sister Gillen ... helped to alter this perception” (p. 222). By demonstrating that the plight of the Jews was of concern not merely to the Jewish community but to a broad range of American citizens of all faiths, Sister Gillen and her colleagues helped make the movement both newsworthy and potentially consequential in the eyes of political leaders. After all, people who march in picket lines are the ones most likely to vote, donate, and influence their friends and neighbors. “Those who observed the protests and demonstrations came to realize that American Christians were protesting alongside American Jews,” Lazin concludes. “These cooperative efforts contributed to influencing the American government to pressure the Soviet Union to allow free emigration of Soviet Jews” (p. 222).

American Christians and the National Interreligious Task Force on Soviet Jewry is an interesting, well-written, and thoroughly researched study that fills an important gap in the scholarship of the Soviet Jewry movement and at the same time adds to our understanding of the broader issue of Christian-Jewish relations in America.

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