

THE JEWS AND NEGRO RIGHTS

Review of a first pamphlet on the vital topic of the need for full participation of Jews in the fight for equality for Negroes

By Alice Citron

THE roots of white superiority are as gnarled and stubborn as those of an oak tree. For it was 90 years ago that the landowning Bourbons of that day with conscious plan and design reinforced white supremacy as a political program. When it seemed that the alliance of poor whites and the ex-slaves would win equality for the Negro people, the master class feverishly fought this unity. To split the forces of emancipation and progress the "purity of Caucasian blood" became the slogan of the hour. A white man was likened unto a God and a Negro could be only a "barbarian."

It is this pernicious thinking that Sanford Goldner strongly challenges in a pamphlet, *The Jewish People and the Fight for Negro Rights*. (Published by The Committee for Negro-Jewish Relations, Post Office Box 3012, Terminal Annex, Los Angeles, Calif., \$.25.) He addresses himself to the whole of the Jewish people to show how urgent is the clearest understanding by the Jewish people that Jews must be a real part of the liberation struggle of the Negro people. He tries to show that the Jews cannot maintain any degree of equality in a situation where 15,000,000 Negroes are subjected to feudalistic discrimination and oppression. The sharp increase in assaults against the Negro people and stepped-up anti-Semitic activities make it a paramount duty of Jews to engage in the battles of the hour for fair employment practices laws, for an end to segregation in housing and against the frame-up of Negroes.

Goldner indicates that the very history of the Negro people was smothered or distorted to help bring about this super-abuse. For the masters here as elsewhere believe that ignorance of the fighting traditions of the Negro people would hamper the activities of the Negro people. This ignorance would also hamper unity of the Negro people with the working class and others. Goldner reviews the Negro's forced arrival in this country and shows how industrialists and landowners profited from the Negro's enslavement. He documents charges of anti-Negro violence in daily practice such as police murder and forced labor on chain gangs. He asks: "Can we live with so much brutality in our midst and not ourselves be brutalized?"

Attention is given to the "Economics of Racism" in a documented chapter which shows that the annual wage of Negro workers is less than half of that of white workers. The link between this special oppression and anti-Semitism is made by showing that the Wall Street owners

of the South are also those who encourage and finance anti-Semitic groups such as the infamous American Liberty League, the Crusaders and the Sentinels of the Republic.

Yet, despite the fact that white supremacy is the common enemy of Negroes and Jews, this thinking pervades the Jews as well as non-Jewish whites. All classes of Jews are affected, not just factory owners and business entrepreneurs. Goldner calls sharp attention to an expression like "shvartze" (black) which is a specific Jewish form of belittlement and scorn of the Negro people. So long has this anti-Negro propaganda existed and so long has there been separation between the Negro and white people, that no segment of white American life can claim immunity from this type of thinking.

A Decade of Negro-Jewish Cooperation

During World War II there were great increases in mutual activity between Jewish groups and Negro organizations. Goldner skims over this development and therefore prevents a fair appreciation of what actually took place. This negates the possibilities that stem from this great experience. A more detailed examination of the lessons of the war period would give the reader a clearer understanding of where he, himself, can begin to put into life the conclusions drawn by the author. While it is true that through the long and arduous years of the Negro people's struggle for full equality, allies were fleeting, the war years brought about many changes. Since anti-Semitism was being propagated on a mass scale by Coughlinites and other forces mentioned by Goldner, Jews became more conscious of the need to cooperate in the fight of the Negro. The firm resolve to defeat Hitler and the powerful efforts of the Negro people to be an equal part of the anti-fascist war helped the Jewish people understand better the significance for them of the Negro's fight for equality.

A direct result of the mass outcry of the Negro people was a tremendous Citizens Emergency Conference for Interracial Unity held in New York on September 25, 1943. Among the initiators were Marian Anderson, Dr. Channing Tobias, Hon. Stanley M. Isaacs and Dr. Stephen S. Wise. Such planks as "Action to End Employment Discrimination" and "National Campaign for Democracy in the Armed Forces" brought to numerous Jewish delegates a better grasp of what the Negro people still had to win.

A few years later the promise of this conference resulted in discussions on the FEPC bill in New York, the first passed on a state level. So strong was the sentiment that Governor Thomas E. Dewey recommended anti-discrimination legislation to "place our State in the forefront of our nation in the handling of this vital issue." Many Jewish groups participated in the hearings on the bill. Louis Hollander said: "Let me say right now that representing the CIO of this State as well as the Amalgamated Clothing Workers in the city, we are very much for a law that will bar discrimination permanently." The remarks made by the representatives of B'nai B'rith, American Jewish Committee, Jewish War Veterans, American Jewish Congress and others did not differ much from those of the Negro and left wing supporters of the measure. Out of such actions came the agreement between the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the American Jewish Congress to issue jointly an annual *Balance Sheet of Group Relations in the United States*. Six have already appeared.

In the past decade, perhaps more than ever before, Jewish organizations have cooperated with Negro groups on issues of Jimcrow and discrimination. Immediately after the war the American Jewish Congress even advocated and carried on mass participation on these issues. But unfortunately this was soon abandoned in favor of top level action by specialists. At present the AJ Congress and other organizations like the American Jewish Committee carry on top level activity with Negro leaders on discrimination and segregation in the legislative area and in court actions. Despite the limited nature of such activity, it is not accurate to say, as Goldner does, that "in organized Jewish life we have barely begun to stir from the dead center of inactivity." This implies, erroneously, we believe, that the average Jew had no organized foundation on which he can build. But the fight against Jimcrow and discrimination is part of the program of many Jewish organizations and the Jew who wants to fight on these issues can therefore base his activity on the existent programs in his organizations.

Toward Greater Membership Participation

Goldner erred in not having fully discussed the level of activity that does exist in Jewish organized life. A few examples will indicate this. Many Jewish organizations appeared in the FEPC Senate hearings in February. Among them were representatives of the National Community Relations Advisory Council (coordinating body for major Jewish organizations), the Anti-Defamation League and the National Council of Jewish Women. Another highly significant example is the joint work of Jewish figures with NAACP leaders before the platform committee of the 1952 Democratic convention in an attempt to force adoption of an FEPC plank with teeth. Many other instances could be given.

One might well ask, "But all this activity is carried on

by the top leadership. How are the masses of Jews being drawn into such actions?" Although the memberships are not on the whole being involved, it remains of utmost importance that these programs on discrimination do provide a basis for drawing the Jewish masses into activity. And this shows that Goldner fell into a serious error by completely underestimating the really great extent of already existing relationships between Jewish organizations and the largest Negro organizations. While it is essential to maintain a critical attitude toward the existing relationships in the interest of making them more effective in dealing with discrimination, it serves no purpose to omit consideration of such activities.

The leadership of Jewish organized life has for the most part always tried to stifle mass activity because they fear genuine democracy in their organizations. Today there is an added reason why many Jewish leaders are fearful of mass participation. They are terrified of being smeared as "reds." Nevertheless, the activity that is carried on has positive elements and has the potentiality of being expanded and extended into the kind of mass activity that will go a long way to achieve results in the fight against Jimcrow and discrimination of all kinds.

This is a starting point for Jews who are in earnest about getting results. Members of Jewish organizations who absorb the information on oppression of the Negro people presented by Goldner are in a position in their groups to give effect to what they learned because of the programs on Jimcrow and discrimination to which these organizations are committed. They can insist that the programs of Jewish organizations leave the printed page, leave conference rooms and are brought to the entire memberships. They can demonstrate that action will bring Jews closer to a very significant ally—the Negro people. California, undoubtedly, has much to add on this issue to the numerous experiences in the East.

A chapter in the pamphlet that had set forth the actual, existing relationships between Negro and Jewish organizations would have rounded out a fine and unique contribution to the understanding of what American Jews must do to further alliance with a powerful ally. California is to be congratulated that one of its sons gave of his varied and important experiences to all Jews who have the eyes to see and the mind to understand. Surely, a wide audience for Dr. Goldner's work will help to break the walls of resistance and pave the way for a better fight for democracy.

Who Lifted What Curtain?

EXCERPTS from a release and pictures issued by the Polish Embassy in Washington were printed in the *Intermountain Jewish News* (Denver) of May 13 under the headline, "Poland Lifts Iron Curtain to Reveal 60,000 Jews and How They Live."

Since, as any JEWISH LIFE reader knows, information about the life of Polish Jews is easily available (see various issues of this magazine), one wonders if the headline should not have read: "We Lift Our Curtain on Polish Jews and How They Live."