

COMMUNITY RELATIONS SURVEY OF
WILMINGTON, DELAWARE

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Introduction

In collecting the data on which this study is based, leaders of the community-at-large as well as Jewish community leaders were interviewed. Published material, including newspapers, bulletins of organizations were also examined. The findings recorded herein represent a digest of the data which was gathered. But only such information has been included as is pertinent to providing an understanding of inter and intra-community relations in Wilmington, directed toward planning a practical program leading to improvement.

GROUP RELATIONS IN THE COMMUNITY AT LARGE

Political

Politically, Wilmington is a conservative city, a stronghold of the Republican party. Initiation of certain projects designed to promote social welfare has been confined to voluntary pressure groups, composed of liberal Protestant ministers and laymen, the Friends Society, a few Jews and Catholics, Labor and Negroes (through the NAACP). Organized liberals constitute a small though growing group.

Hardly any Jews are active in political party affairs. Few have sought or held elective office. At the present time, there is one Jewish city solicitor, one magistrate and one state deputy attorney general.

Press

The two daily newspapers, reflecting in their editorial policy the political views of the dominant party, are favorable in their treatment of matters affecting Jews. A weekly paper, the "Sunday Star", is very friendly to liberal causes. Its circulation is comparatively small, reaching mainly working class and minority groups, because of its popular appeal.

Labor and minority groups utilize the "Sunday Star" as a vehicle for publicizing activities. A questionable feature is the regular section devoted solely to announcements and news of local Jewish organizations (occasionally a special column of Negro news is also published). There is a division of opinion in the Jewish community with regard to the value of publishing segregated local Jewish news. The Jewish community monthly bulletin, "Federation News", could absorb much of the material which is not of importance to the community-at-large.

Industrial

An insignificant proportion of Wilmington's Jews are industrial workers. They are more prominent in the categories of small businessmen (merchants, grocers) and white collar workers (salesmen, buyers, office help, management). The city is headquarters for several large corporations whose plants and branch offices are located throughout the country. Wilmington is considered a "white collar" town although certain large industrial establishments (fibre, leather and rubber products; ships; railway equipment) are found there and in New Castle County, of which Wilmington is a part. These industries draw their labor supply from New Castle County, surrounding suburban and agricultural districts and the eastern shore of Maryland. A growing industry, introduced in Delaware by three Jewish brothers, is large scale, scientific poultry production.

The local CIO is optimistic concerning prospects for employment in the period following reconversion. About 3,000 workers became unemployed directly

after cessation of the war with Japan. It was estimated that the situation might become aggravated as a result of the closure of nearby Chester and Baltimore plants. Nevertheless, the consensus indicated belief in prompt recovery.

Several informants pointed out that, though Jewish businessmen were affected during the last depression, pauperism among Jews was relatively rare.

Labor

During the period of CIO growth, labor organizations encountered considerable resistance from employers. At the present time, labor is fairly well entrenched. Prejudices, primarily directed toward Negroes, are found among members of both AF of L and CIO unions. Attitudes on discrimination and activities to combat it vary in AF of L unions (The local chapter of the American Federation of Teachers is especially active in promoting liberalism and stimulates the entire labor movement to some extent). The central CIO body pursues an active program of education to promote mutual understanding in the interest of labor unity.

With few Jewish industrial workers, the Jewish community as a whole has little contact with organized labor. Jewish pro-labor organizations, such as the Workmen's Circle and Poale Zion do not participate in affairs of the local organized labor movement.

Anti-Semitism in the ranks of labor can be called "swear-word" anti-Semitism, i.e. it does not appear to flow from active hatred of Jews. It receives expression in conflicts with Jewish employers. On one occasion it was directed with some intensity against a Jewish worker who led a faction opposing a CIO organization drive. A counteracting factor is represented by the presence of a Jewish CIO organizer, who is highly respected by the rank and file.

Civic and Social Welfare

With the exception of patriotic endeavor relating to the war, the number of Jews active in civic and social-welfare organizations is minimal. On the credit side, it can be said that several Jews have made outstanding contributions to community welfare.

Not only Jews but also foreigners and those of immediate foreign extraction are rarely invited to become members of such organizations as Rotary, Kiwanis and Lions. Jews have not attempted to join service organizations, either because several have been blackballed (although there is no conclusive evidence to substantiate the charge of anti-Semitism) or as a result of disinterest in the activities of these organizations.

In the field of social-welfare, however, Jews can have no excuse. Yet altogether too few participate in the work of the Housing Association (slum clearance), Prisoners' Aid Society (penal reform), Safety Council, Society of Fine Arts, Youth Council, Legislative Forum, and others.

Religious and Interfaith

Situated on the edge of the "bible belt", Wilmington is strong in adherents of Fundamentalism, yet Fundamentalism is not a burning issue.

The Ministers' Association excludes Catholics, Unitarians and Jews but relations between Jewish and non-Jewish clergy are good. A wide gap in social outlook divides leading Protestant ministers from their influential laymen, the ministers continuously

seeking, though without significant success, to liberalize their congregations. The more solidified Catholic group is led by a politically alert priest, a supporter of Italy in the war against Ethiopia, who accepts invitations to address the Temple Brotherhood and shares speakers' platforms with Protestants. The worst conflict between Catholics and the community-at-large was provoked by a drive for sex education, initiated by a Unitarian minister.

For some years a monthly Catholic forum has been conducted under direction of Mother Agatha, principal of a parochial school. Outstanding liberals, including Jews, addressed the audience. This project may be discontinued by order of the Bishop in favor of a new labor forum under diocesan auspices.

Interfaith activity is carried on by rabbis of the reform and conservative synagogues in cooperation with Protestant ministers. Rabbis address Protestant congregations and Protestant ministers reciprocate. The Reform Sunday school and woman's organization interchange visits with Christian groups. One Jewish layman addresses church groups with excellent effect. A Jewish fraternal organization holds an annual interfaith meeting involving a large non-Jewish attendance.

In the largest Orthodox synagogue, ministers are invited to occupy the pulpit on Sabbath Eve and church Sunday schools may visit the synagogue. But there is no exchange. During the Christmas season, pupils of the Associated Hebrew School receive instruction on the Christian religion, a positive picture being given. However, many Jews maintain that, in the interest of strengthening Jewish life internally, it would be inadvisable to have Jewish children visit Christian institutions or mingle extensively with members of another faith.

Negroes

The most severely disadvantaged group in Wilmington's population are the Negroes. They are segregated in inferior schools and in the city's only legitimate theatre. Attendance in movies is prohibited. Housing is exceptionally bad. The only restaurant which serves Negroes and whites is the one in the railroad station. There is segregation in hospitals, although patients may be mixed when separate facilities are not available. Negro doctors are to be found only in the Catholic hospital. Many institutions have separate washrooms for Negro and white. Employment is confined to menial jobs, with extremely rare exceptions.

Discussion with a Negro informant disclosed the information that the Negro group is disorganized and lacks leadership. Competent white observers feel that the Negro problem is fast approaching the danger point.

To the extent that this limited investigation could determine, there have been few complaints against Jewish storekeepers who are located in Negro neighborhoods. (There have been many complaints in connection with OPA violations, but these did not become an issue in the press.) According to the consultant's Negro informant, there is no ill-feeling among Negroes against Jews. Nevertheless, the fact that some colored domestic workers do advertise for work in Gentile households should not be ignored.

In the area of social welfare, there has been some progress which has benefited Negroes. Liberal Protestants, ministers and laymen, Friends Society, teachers' representatives, labor leaders and less than a handful of Jews have succeeded in securing the establishment of a Family Court, a Youth Council (on delinquency), a State Council of Social Welfare. They are now pressing for a recreation program and a State Civil Rights Bill (the latter measure was voted down last year).

Schools

In April 1945, a committee of teachers appointed by the superintendent of schools submitted a report on discrimination and prejudice in the school system. The report revealed the existence of serious inter-group tensions and suggested corrective measures.

Fundamental to the situation is the intolerant attitude displayed by some teachers and principals toward minority groups, especially Jews and Negroes. Many teachers are graduates of inferior training schools and some of them are too old to be receptive to new ideas or additional training.

Jewish children complain that "a wall separates Jews from Gentiles". Refused admittance to fraternities and sororities, they have formed their own organizations. Many Jewish children are reluctant to absent themselves on Jewish holidays as these days are frequently selected by unsympathetic teachers for examinations; teachers as well as pupils have made derogatory remarks on these occasions. Children do not mingle in the lunchrooms. A typical instance cited concerns a Jewish pupil who read an essay on the problems facing Jews applying for jobs. His essay was received with snickers by fellow-pupils. When the teacher of the class was approached in this reference, she stated that she thought there was nothing wrong and that Jews were oversensitive.

The "Christ-killer" accusation is frequently directed to Jewish children. A friendly, liberal Catholic, who objected to the manner in which his children were taught the crucifixion story in parochial school, raised the issue at a communion breakfast. He reported that his remarks were passed over in "stony silence".

The superintendent of schools, who has been in Wilmington for only three years, has already initiated several projects leading to the introduction of intercultural elements in a revised curriculum. Unfortunately for his own comfort, he is caught between two currents; a conservative one represented by the Board of Education (appointed by a county judge and including among its members, by tradition, one Negro, one Jew, one woman and one Catholic) and a militant, progressive one represented by the local chapter of the American Federation of Teachers (AFL). Because the superintendent is ~~more~~ convinced that the status of the Negro and Negro-White relations has immediate serious implications, these problems rather than the specific Jewish one, receive his major attention.

It is not the policy of the school administration to consider religion of teachers as a basis in hiring. New applications were not printed during the present superintendent's tenure of office and the old ones, which are still in use, do have a religious question. Similarly, pupils' records require recording of parents' church affiliations. The superintendent emphasized that no use is made of the question. Nevertheless, he would like to have it removed. There is some doubt as to whether a proposal to have the question eliminated will meet with the approval of the Board.

An indispensable requirement preliminary to-and concurrent with executing constructive changes in the schools in the organization of a community-wide body of citizens (perhaps a branch of the National Conference of Christians and Jews) which will encourage and create mass support in the community-at-large.

Discrimination

Residential restrictions against Jews and members of other minority groups are prevalent in Wilmington and surrounding districts. Many Jews believe that some restricted property is owned, wholly or in part, by Jews residing in Philadelphia. An

authoritative informant states that there is no substance to the charge.

Country clubs do not admit Jews to membership and do not allow their admittance as guests. Other groups, such as the University Club, reject applications of qualified Jews or persons of "foreign extraction," i.e. Greeks, Poles, Italians, Negroes, of course, are uniformly excluded.

Ordinarily, Jews who are not business proprietors find employment with other Jews. When applications of Jewish professional workers have been rejected by the larger industries, there is a tendency to blame it on anti-Semitism and to overlook other valid motives. Several industries, which previously discriminated against Jews, have altered their policy during the war years. Contrary to popular opinion there is no evidence to indicate that the Du Pont Company has a policy to bar Jews. However, in this organization as in others, subordinate employees having power to hire, exercise their personal inclinations and authority in discriminatory practices.

Organized anti-Semitism

Organized anti-Semitism has failed to take root in Wilmington. The Coughlin movement, which confined its operations to sales of literature, has been inactive during the war. Another group with anti-Semitic potentialities died in the early stages of organization.

INTRA-COMMUNITY RELATIONS

Social Life

The vast majority of Jews in Wilmington depend on the Jewish community, its institutions and organizations, to fulfill their social as well as religious and specifically Jewish cultural needs. In addition, nearby Philadelphia offers many attractions with regard to social activities, entertainment, etc. Rarely do Jews have social contact with Gentiles in Wilmington. With the formation of a country club now contemplated, it is possible that Philadelphia's influence will be diminished, but, on the other hand, some fear that an exclusively Jewish country club may impede activities aimed to integrate the Jewish community in the life of the city.

Not all lay and professional leaders of the Jewish community agree that it would be desirable to promote closer association between Jews and Gentiles. Some are satisfied with the status quo. Others complain that the Gentile community, or a substantial part of it, is not affable toward Jews. But at this point there occurs a division of opinion: (a) those who advocate that Jews should, therefore, concentrate on enriching their internal life (while this group consists mainly of immigrant Jews, it includes also many of the first generation); (b) those who believe that though Jewish cultural life should be strengthened, the Jewish community has been altogether too insular, for which it is partly at fault. In the last category, one can probably find a numerical majority of the community leadership.

Within the Jewish community, social and economic castes have not become identified with synagogue affiliation and persons with means are evenly distributed among Orthodox, Conservative and Reform groups. This is a youthful community and while there is no lack of social circles, a distinct pattern based on wealth or other considerations is yet to be formed. There are trends, such as the organization of a country club, which indicate that the pattern is evolving.

Note: Religious, educational, cultural, organizational aspects are considered elsewhere in this survey.

Current Issues in the Jewish Community

This community, in common with many others, is alive with a diversity of opinion. Whereas broad questions, e.g. Zionism, are not subjects of vigorous controversy among Jews (the community is almost unanimously pro-Zionist), divisions on practical problems, accompanied or initiated by unpleasant personality clashes and cliquism are not scarce. A review of the history of the community during the past fifteen years reveals that such conflicts are now less frequent and less intense.

Federation, with its representative base, is developing into a clearing house and forum for the discussion and solution of intra-community problems. However, the scope and jurisdiction of Federation, have not been clearly defined and occasional disputes arise when individual organizations feel that their prerogatives or autonomy have been abused, or that, administratively, Federation has not acted along non-partisan lines. In the interests of community harmony it would be desirable to define the areas in which Federation has the privilege of intervention. A serious effort should be made to develop an understanding in the community of Federation's role and to secure broad participation in its affairs.

Civic-Protective Work

In the past civic-protective work has been conducted by the ADL Committee of B'nai B'rith and several individuals. Lately, the ADL Committee has been inactive but the B'nai B'rith women's auxiliary has entered the field with some enthusiasm, distributing literature to churches, war plants, libraries, and teachers.

Recognizing that community relations work might be more effectively conducted by an authoritative body based on the entire Jewish community, the B'nai B'rith has concurred in establishing a sub-committee of Federation for this purpose. Such a committee was appointed in 1944, but it has not yet begun to function systematically.

The recommendations which follow are directed toward creating an effective community relations committee and suggesting general areas of functioning. It may not be possible to initiate immediately activities in all the areas described herewith. Nor do these suggestions embrace all the possibilities for good work. They are intended simply as a basis for discussion by community leaders.

RECOMMENDATIONS

I A special community relations council should be created, entrusted with the responsibility of combatting anti-Semitism, and conducting a broad program of inter-faith and intercultural activities. The community relations program should stem from and be a functional arm of the Federation.

It is suggested that the community relations council consist of between 15 and 25 members, representing as broad a cross-section of the community as possible, with a small steering committee and functioning subcommittees. The membership of the community relations council should comprise:

- a - A group appointed by the Federation in a manner designated by it.
- b - Delegates of local branches of the national agencies affiliated with the NCRAC, selected by the respective local branches.
- c - Representatives of the Wilmington Jewish community-at-large selected on the basis of their individual qualifications.

✓ II The Chairman of the community relations council should be one who commands the respect of the Jewish community and the community-at-large. Associated with him there should be capable men and women, each of whom can be assigned to cover specific segments of the community life and population, e. g., business, labor, radio, and press, civic organizations, women's organizations, schools, Negroes, interfaith, veterans, foreign language groups, etc.

III It is recommended that the executive director of the Federation serve as the executive secretary to the community relations council, with provision for an assistant to head up this program in the future, if it is deemed necessary. Provision should be made for office space, clerical assistance, and for the implementation of the program of the community relations council.

IV It is suggested that the professional director visit the national agencies affiliated with the NCRAC and several already functioning community relations councils in other cities.

V It is recommended that members of the Jewish community participate more actively in social, civic, welfare, labor, and veterans organizations of Wilmington.

VI In view of the local situation, it is recommended that the community relations council participate in the organization of a local chapter of the National Conference of Christians and Jews and that close cooperation be established with other similar inter-faith organizations functioning in that area.

VII As part of its long-range program, the community relations council should give primary attention to the education of the Jewish community; to imbue youth and adults with the practice of positive Judaism, to eliminate defeatism, to build self-discipline, and to encourage participation and integration in the life of the community-at-large. It will be the task of council members to influence group leaders, to involve their followers in activities designed to unify the community as a whole around democratic concepts, mutual respect and understanding.

PROGNOSIS

In certain areas, little progress can be anticipated in the immediate future (residential restrictions, service organizations). In others (schools, interfaith, labor, self-discipline, etc.) there are splendid opportunities for establishing better relations and raising Jewish status to a high level.

It can be concluded that community relations in Wilmington are neither of the worst nor of the best. Jews have many friends in the community-at-large and, a positive community relations program and conscientious, energetic leadership, can secure many more.