

Meg Greenfield *Post 12-4-74*

The General and the Jews

The General Brown flap appears to be ending the way these things always do: in sudden, unnatural silence. Having delivered some highly inappropriate remarks about the influence of American Jews on foreign policy, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff

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was himself delivered a presidential rebuke. And although his departure from prescribed military silence on policy questions may yet have consequences, so far as the substance of the controversy is concerned, there the matter rests.

Except, of course, that it doesn't. I expect that from General Brown's point of view and that of many who share it, everything about the episode—from the seemingly excessive outcry to the President's reprimand—only reinforced an impression of disproportionate Jewish influence in our public life. And I am even more confident that from the point of view of innumerable American Jews the episode reinforced precisely the opposite conclusion—not that they are powerful and influential but rather that they are precariously placed and eternally vulnerable and that the beast of official anti-Semitism is always lurking somewhere near. That difference of perception is, I think, what is filling the silence, and it seems to me worth exploring.

I start with the proposition that General Brown's remarks can be demonstrated, on an abstract intellectual plane, not to have merited so pained a response. The pro-Israel lobby is a reality, after all, and many public figures have taken issue with it. Similarly, in portraying Jews as a discrete, definable class of citizens, he did nothing our sociologists, political scientists and novelists have not taken to doing with relish. Indeed, at a debating-point level, one can even deflate the importance of his more blatantly prejudiced observations, such as that concerning the need to get "tough-minded" with the Jews "who own, you know, the banks." Jewish control of the banks is about as real a phenomenon as Jewish control of the Archdiocese of New York. But such telltale biases are hardly confined to any one group. It was in fact an article of faith in the outer generational reaches of my own Jewish family that Christian men, almost without exception, drank to excess on Saturday nights and thereafter

beat their poor wives senseless.

But rebuttal of this kind moves us not an inch toward understanding the anxieties General Brown touched. For, taken together, his remarks added up to precisely that image which Jews in this country have been taught most to

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feared—that of a single intercommunicating entity whose mysteries are sinister, whose rapacity is boundless and whose members are somehow different from and slightly less than Americans. And that, in Jewish experience, has generally been the tip-off that something was coming.

My own relentlessly assimilationist upbringing in Seattle a generation ago was haunted by the very specter General Brown called forth. We were Americans first. We were anti-Zionists. What light and warmth we drew from our limited religious observance was a peculiarity not to be shared with the non-Jewish world. And the odd cultural throwback, such as my father's weakness for bagels, was regarded by my mother as a kind of atavistic vulgarity that must be indulged from time to time lest, in a fit of pent-up primal appetite, he go out and commit an ax murder—or do something else equally, well, "pushy."

We were, in other words, trying to live down a stereotype and somehow, by so doing, to insulate ourselves from danger. For historical guidance there was the uncommon number of religious holidays that seemed to commemorate a close call with extinction. Pharaohs, Romans, Assyrians—some, as it seemed, had always been trying to do us in for being "different." So now we would be the same, because we really *were* the same—except of course that we were also "different." When the subtleties of all this showed signs of eluding a child there would be a parental reminder. "Remember," my father once said, having gone to God knows how much trouble and expense to see me through a series of schools, camps and clubs where my acquaintanceship would be almost exclusively non-Jewish, "they'll never really be

your friends."

I didn't then and don't now believe it—and I'm not sure he did. But the anxiety was there, and revelations of the butchery in Europe during the war did more than give it a new force. For us—and I'm sure, for countless other American Jews—those revelations, ac-

companied by pictures of people who looked just like us and might even be distant kin, marching off to the trains with terror in their eyes, created a profound feeling of shame at our own systematic denial of a Jewish identity or connection.

So Jews became less fugitive, less reticent about assuming a collective responsibility for the well-being of the survivors and less skittish about organizing themselves, within the American political system, as one of many ethnic pressure groups. And it is not, I think, to suggest that most of them feel anything less than American or fail to see the current Mideast struggle for the tragic confrontation that it is, to acknowledge that there was a terrific emotional playback from the Six Day War. For Jews all over this country, whose allegiance is beyond question and who may share my own reservations about many aspects of Israeli policy, an indescribable relief flowed from watching the Israelis shatter the immemorial Jewish self-image as history's fat kid—the one with the violin case and glasses, who was forever being shoved off the curb without resistance or complaint.

"Don't *beshrei* it," my father used to say, in one of those vestigial Yiddishisms that put my mother up the wall, meaning: don't talk about it, don't tempt fate. The postwar exit of American Jews from the "closet" and their exuberant public assumption of concern for overseas Jews has coincided with a kind of ethnic frankness boom, so that "Jewishness" is now one common currency of TV comedy, of political and literary discourse. I will confess that it makes me nervous as a cat; and in this I know I'm not alone. For behind what must look to General Brown like an excess of self-confidence and even cultural imperialism, there is a bottomless reservoir of edginess and doubt.

For this misapprehension you can hardly blame him. Jews talk about Jewishness, why shouldn't others? Is it even possible that people who speak so freely of their heritage these days can be wondering if they will end up leaving their heirs only another piece of holiday candy to commemorate yet another close call? It is preposterous. It is melodramatic. It is self-pitying. But it is real. I think one reason General Brown doesn't understand it is that, for all the cultural "explosion," Jews tend to convey these things only to each other. They are too wary, too untrusting, too scarred and too certain of their ultimate aloneness to tell the General Browns of this world what is really on their mind.