

A NEW ERA?

Many San Francisco Jews were heard to say last week, on hearing of Saul White's death: "It's the end of an era." They were wrong.

When I came to San Francisco in 1950 to do an article on San Francisco Jews for *Commentary*, Rabbi White was one of the first people to see. He was considered the "leader of the opposition."

What was he opposed to? The "Old Guard." Why? There were three counts. In the first place, Saul was a Zionist, and there weren't many of those in the Jewish leadership at the time. When the editors of *Commentary* asked me to do the piece they said that all they knew about the San Francisco Jewish community was that it was the stronghold of the anti-Zionist Council for Judaism.

Second, Saul White was opposed to the relative inactivism of the Old Guard, especially in matters of social justice. But neither reason was the main engine for his opposition to the Old Guard. He put it simply:

"They are mostly good men. They have done fine things here. But because of their background, they are out of step with Jewish life. A Jewish community cannot flourish without its traditions, its historical and cultural references."

He did not cast the Old Guard as demons because he recognized that the struggle was more fundamental than that. The struggle was against a natural tendency in a free, integrated society, of a kind which San Francisco exemplified. As the article said about the Old Guard leadership, partly as a result of Saul White's evaluation:

"They are not marked by evidence of self-hatred, Jewish anti-semitism, fear, hysteria or other minority neuroses. The most remarkable fact of San Francisco is not the vanishing (or shrinking) Jew, but, on the contrary, the insistent Jew -- the Jew who

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insists on being a San Francisco Jew despite the historical (and geographical) distance from his ethnic origins, the thorough Americanization, the complete lack of ghettoization, the social mobility, the freedom of wealth, the mutations in religious thought, and the relative isolation and absence of pressures."

But Saul White knew that even this insistence on Jewish self-identity would thin away if, over the long run, there were no deeper connections to Judaism, to Jewish education, traditions and past. And he continued his opposition, until the opposition joined him.

What happened to the San Francisco Jewish community on Saul White's three counts? The Council for Judaism disappeared, and San Francisco Jewry became a national model of financial and political support of Israel. The Federation has brought local per capita giving to Israel to one of the top levels in the country. The country's first regional organization of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee was formed in San Francisco about 15 years ago. And so forth.

On the second count, relative to social justice, the San Francisco Jewish community became the recognized leader in organizing California's overall campaign for civil rights legislation. And on the third count, relative to Jewish tradition -- ah, the struggle still continues, but in matters of Jewish education and attention to Jewish tradition, there has been nothing less than a revolution in San Francisco Jewish life in the last four decades.

Saul White didn't do all of that. History moved in his direction. But, more than any other single person, he symbolized that radical change in the soul of the San Francisco Jewish community. More than any other single person, he affected it.

Rabbi Saul White's death did not end an era. Rather, his memory stands for a new era which he helped to start some time ago, and which is still growing.