

CONVENTIONAL IGNORANCE

Young Americans are pretty ashamed of their country, right?

Well, when asked recently whether they were proud to be from their country, over 95 per cent of Americans between ages 18 and 24 said "yes." The youth of Great Britain came closest, with about 83 per cent indicating pride in country; and Japan followed with 70 per cent. Only about 60 per cent of the young people from West Germany, France, Switzerland or Sweden said "yes."

So it is again demonstrated that we should not use the San Francisco Bay Area as a measure of what's happening in the United States. We usually get our "conventional wisdom" by observing what is being said in our own parlors and our own circles. They are usually very limited circles. Witness those who were so surprised that almost 95 per cent of American youth signed up for the draft registration.

Aside from pride in country, there was another characteristic in which American youth differed radically from the youth of the other industrialized nations with which they were compared: religion. Asked how important religion should be in life, 41 per cent of American youth said "very important." Only about 10 per cent of each of the other countries gave that answer. The continuing religious commitment of American youth probably confounds another segment of conventional wisdom.

Of course, people don't like their conventional wisdom to be confused by facts. Bernard Wasserstein, the chronicler of Britain's shameful record on Jewish refugees during World War II, has just written an article in *Midstream* about a traditional piece of conventional wisdom, entitled "The Myth of 'Jewish Silence.'" In fact, American Jews were anything but silent about the plight of Jews in Nazi Europe.

Wasserstein spoke recently to an American Jewish audience and found out how deep was the conventional myth: "One member of the audience angrily denounced Rabbi Stephen Wise for not having filled Madison Square Garden with a monster protest demonstration. In fact, I pointed out, Rabbi Wise *did* fill Madison Square Garden with a monster demonstration."

There were an endless number of such protest demonstrations by the Jewish community all over the country. There was a vigorous boycott of Nazi goods before the war. One day 30 thousand Jewish storeowners closed up shop to dramatize and protest the Nazi persecution of the Jews. And so forth. The trouble with conventional wisdom is that it often gets in the way of finding out what is really wrong, and what really has to be done in order to be effective.

In another article in the current *Midstream*, Eliyho Matzozky points out one of the failures of the American Jewish community in that era -- not so much apathy as fragmentation: "At this late date (early 1943), the Jewish leadership had still not united in an organized effort and program to secure the immediate rescue of their brethren." But there were also national circumstances underlying America's resistance to refugees -- which the Jewish community had never addressed because it had not considered them "Jewish issues." The deficiencies in social action often lie with those self-styled "activists" who insist on factionalism; and who also often rush on the stage, when much is already beyond control.

The "conventional wisdom" which we pick up from our friends and associates is to be treated with skepticism, and especially with humility. As Sholom Aleichem said: "Men make mistakes not because they think they know when they don't know, but because they think others don't know."