

San Francisco Without Jews

In 1925, a man named Hugo Bettauer wrote a novel in German called *The City Without Jews*. Bettauer was Viennese, not Jewish; and shortly after this book was published, he was murdered by a 20-year old defendant of "German culture." The book has long been forgotten by most, but it created a great stir at the time. It was his vision of what would happen to Vienna if all the Jews were driven out by anti-Semites.

Even Bettauer could not envision the enormity of what would really happen to the Jews a decade later. But he was prophetic enough to project a national law which would expel Jews, and those of Jewish ancestry.



Raab

Bettauer's point was that the loss of the Jews would be highly destructive to the city of Vienna. But he saw the loss largely in terms of the business and financial life of the city. As one mayor said: "Together with the Jews, we drove prosperity out of the country." Financial expertise was lost, along with business inventiveness; the clothing industry came to a standstill and the value of the krone dropped drastically. This was an old European version of the Jewish role in society. During the middle ages, kings often invited the immigration of Jews, in order to stir the business and financial life of their realms. Of course, this can be recognized as the same image of the Jew which, viewed negatively instead of positively, became the central image of the anti-Semites.

The other loss which Bettauer saw was cultural. "Except for the opera, there's nothing whatever going on in the theatre ... All of our musical comedies, old or new, were either written or composed by Jews ... the pastry shops are converted into a standing bar with hot frankfurters ..." However, a major element here, as well as in the declining business life of Vienna, was Bettauer's image of the Jew as consumer ... of elegant clothes, of theatrical events, of fancy pastries. This, indeed, was the image of the rich middle class Jew of Vienna.

What if there were a Bettauer to project a *San Francisco without Jews* in 1975? What losses to the city would be invoked? It would not be an idle exercise. It would be one way to evaluate the role of the Jews in our society. What would be lost to the city, to the United States today, if the Jews suddenly disappeared; and how important would that loss be? It is even one way to evaluate Jewish communal objectives. There is something demeaning about the Jews being chiefly characterized by a friendly Bettauer as financiers, musical comedy producers and fancy pastry eaters.

But the Jews are *not* the financiers and bankers of San Francisco, nor even the major business movers. The decline of family businesses and the rise of large corporations has been ending the era of Jewish prominence in those fields. Jews are still disproportionately numbered among patrons of cultural events and restaurants. They are still disproportionately numbered among creators of cultural activity, especially in the written word. Life would undoubtedly be somewhat duller in a San Francisco and America without Jews, as it was in Bettauer's Vienna without Jews.

But it would be distressing if that were all the difference that the absence of the Jews would make. So, we come to another subject, one that is at the heart of Judaism: the Jewish vision of general society, of the relationships that should exist among men. Bettauer did make this comment in his novel: "Jews had taken with them all the dash and spirit of politics." But he wasn't very specific, except to suggest that without Jews there was no anti-Semitism; and without anti-Semitism, political activity also became dull.

Does the Jewish community add a moral/rational tone to the political life of our city? Do we add a significant edge of consciousness about wounds to justice—and about the dangers to freedom, even those that are invoked in the name of justice? Do we have some unique role in this arena? If not, what are we?

At the least, it would make an interesting and instructive parlor game some quiet evenings, if you were to try to assess that question: what difference would it make to San Francisco if the Jews were to disappear overnight?