

Soviet Consul And The Jews

Last week, the society pages featured a posh affair held by the Soviet Consul-elect in San Francisco—and a handful of people with Jewish names were reported in attendance.

No little controversy has resulted. On its Hot Line (585-2033) the Bay Area Council on Soviet Jewry is currently roasting those people with Jewish names who were in attendance.

Now, it is obvious that no one can regulate another person's individual conscience. For example, one can have a Jewish name, or be of Jewish ancestry, and not wish to identify as a Jew at all. That is everyone's right—in America at least. Even those who wish to identify as Jews can define their Jewishness in their own terms, even to the exclusion of the community. But suppose one *does* feel some special relationship to the Jewish community in America and in the Soviet Union? How, then should one respond to a social invitation from the Soviet Consul-elect? There is the argument that it is not to the advantage of Soviet Jews for American Jews to refuse communication with Soviet officials. How can we influence Soviet officialdom if we refuse to talk with them?



Raab

As a general proposition, that has some merit. We don't want to return to the days of the Iron Curtain, when all the militancy in the world couldn't have shaken Stalin's oppression of Russian Jews. But there are some traps here. One recalls the faculty member, during the worst days at San Francisco State College, who refused to exert influence on some of the more destruction-bent students because, if he did, he said, "I would lose my influence with them."

That's technically known as "Quarter Influence", because with that kind of influence, and a quarter, one can be assured of a ride on the cable car. "Communication" can be as misleading. Talking about the unseemly San Francisco weather with the Consul-elect does not in itself establish useful communications.

There is, of course, the question as to whether one should consider himself so exclusively a "Jew." After all, there are improving relations between the United States and the Soviet Union; and, after all, we are Americans as well as Jews. This is a more complicated problem in self-identification. Everyone's main identification shifts a bit according to the situation. For example, every man who is an attorney and a father has both those identities. But in the office, he's mainly an attorney, and at home he's mainly a father. In the ring, Muhammed Ali is a fighter—and a black man. As a tourist in South Africa, he's a black man—and a fighter.

And that's the identity problem of a Jew at a Soviet social affair these days. Whether he likes it or not, his identity *as a Jew* tends to become prominent in such a situation. Why? There are different states of opinion about *exactly* what's happening to Jews in the Soviet Union. But it's common knowledge that there are Jews in Soviet prison camps today, mainly for the reason that they are practicing Jews. It is common knowledge that there is a special campaign of terror directed against Soviet Jews.

For example, during the very week of the Soviet Consulate affair in San Francisco, 63 Jews were arrested in the Soviet Union. About a dozen of these, Jewish women in Moscow, were awakened for arrest at 5:30 in the morning—a recurrence of the kind of nightmare which sears modern Jewish memory. Their crime had been to peacefully petition the government for release of Jewish prisoners. Many relatives of Jewish prisoners don't even know where these prisoners are.

Under such circumstances when an identifiable Jew shows up at a social gathering at the Soviet Consulate, it inevitably holds a certain significance for the public—as it would if a black man attended a social affair at the South African Consulate. The columnists, as evidenced last week, find a special titillation in their presence. It's a signal that things can't really be so bad for the Soviet Jews. Whether they mean to or not, there is the hazard that Jews will be so used—perhaps deliberately by the Soviet officials.

Anyway, that's the hazard, and the dilemma. It is conceivable that Jews attending these affairs can use them to communicate their concerns as well as to chat about the weather. But they should be clear about the image they're creating.