

THE "K" SYNDROME

"There's no hard evidence that it's really anti-semitism." That's the kind of dismissing remark you heard recently in one city when a Molotov Cocktail was thrown at a synagogue, and then at a Jewish book store. "There are dozens of Molotov Cocktails being thrown in the area," one person said. "If two of them are thrown at Jewish places, that's not disproportionate to our population. Why assume anti-semitism?"

That question misses the point. Perhaps it is time to recall an experience with anti-semitism a few years back, when the culprits were caught. Some of you will remember. It made national news. It became a textbook case in anti-semitism.

A middle-aged Jewish couple, Mr. and Mrs. K., were refugees from Europe. One night they received an abusive phone call. A private hell began for them which lasted over a year.

Night after night, the phone would ring, sometimes three or four times, and Mr. and Mrs. K would be assailed with filth and abuse. They reported that the abuse became increasingly anti-semitic. Mr. K. ran his business from home and could not have an unlisted number. Mr. and Mrs. K. became sick with desperation.

Finally, a lead developed, and several teen-agers were arrested as the engineers of this anti-semitic harassment. The JCRC immediately joined with the law enforcement people in searching for the origins of this atrocity. Was an organized Nazi group involved? Were there anti-semitic materials in the teen-agers' rooms? Was there an anti-semitic atmosphere in their homes?

In this case, the answer to all these questions was "no." But that answer was not comforting; indeed it was more disturbing than if the answer had been "yes." It showed how easily anti-semitism can generate itself.

Those teen-agers had started their harassment game by calling numbers somewhat at random. It was an "amusement." The Ks were so obviously distressed by the calls, that the victimizers decided they would make a prime target. So wherever these teen-agers were at night, at some phone booth or in somebody's home, they picked up the phone and harassed the Ks.

During the first period of this callous game, these teen-agers made no anti-semitic references at all. It was already pretty late in the game when they discovered that anti-Jewish references particularly disturbed their refugee victims. So, in their cruelty, they began to concentrate on anti-semitic harassment.

How did they know enough about standard anti-semitic stereotypes so that they could use them? Come, now. Those anti-semitic stereotypes have been part of Western literature and consciousness for almost two thousand years. The really critical question is not how many people know about or believe in these stereotypes; but how many people are willing to *act* on them.

The key question is whether a society and its people are committed *against* violating a group's rights even if they don't like that group. About a third of the American population says that it is indifferent to anti-semitism, one way or another. That is the dangerous population. That is the population without which Hitler could not have come to power. The teen-agers were part of that population. They were willing to use anti-semitism for their own purposes, and in the process *became* anti-semites.