

Defining the Open Door

One of the enduring legacies of America has been the willingness of this nation to serve as a refuge for the oppressed. The 1980 Refugee Act continues that tradition by granting refugee status to any person who is unable or unwilling to return to a country because of "persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution." The current interpretation and application of that law as it applies to Central American refugees, by the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), subverts the intention of that law. Therefore, it runs counter to the most basic principles on which America is founded.

In fiscal year 1984, only 328 applications for asylum from Salvadoran refugees were granted; 13,045 were rejected. This extraordinary rate of rejection reflects the fact that this administration has interpreted the 1980 law in the narrowest possible way. It requires evidence of *direct* persecution by the *government* and denies the reality of death squads and nongovernmental militias who kill civilians. Over 30,000 civilians may have been killed in El Salvador since 1979. Populations of whole villages have been displaced.

The intricate and complicated interactions between right wing government elements, independent militias, death squads, and government officials make the ordinary distinction between governmental and private persecution virtually useless. This is particularly the case in countries where government troops must rely on private militias to deal with insurgents.

It is difficult to believe that Washington is taking this stance naively. Thus, serious questions arise about why the INS refuses to confront even the most obvious cases of flight to escape persecution and perhaps death at the hands of political opponents. We are forced to conclude that, allied as it is with San Salvador, Washington does not want to admit the gruesome circumstances that are causing the exodus. It rather prefers to ignore the carnage and to assume that economic and demographic motives are primary. It thus refuses to recognize these refugees as political and hence deserving asylum. Denying the danger, the INS deports

such refugees, often returning them to the circumstances from which they fled.

Concerned citizens debate the morality and efficacy of Washington's Central American diplomacy, but the needs of refugees ought to receive wide support from all sides. It is un-American to deprive asylum applicants of a fair and complete hearing and to interpret the law to apply only to victims of direct and explicit governmental persecution. We receive few applications from the victims of death squad attacks, who cannot subsequently use their deaths as evidence. It is contrary to both morality and international law to deport refugees to a life-threatening circumstance.

The INS should be insulated from political pressure, so that officials can rule on applications without reference to America's relations with the governments of offending nations. Currently, a refugee from a Soviet-bloc nation is far more likely to be granted asylum than a refugee from a right-wing government allied with the U.S. The principle of political asylum must transcend such arbitrary preconceptions about the nature of political oppression. We call upon the appropriate congressional committees to investigate the policies of the INS to determine if it is complying with the law.

Sanctuary

We are outraged by the treatment recently received by religious workers who have sheltered refugees seeking asylum, in defiance of Washington's restrictive policies, according to the basic standards of international law such as the 1949 Geneva Conventions. On January 15, Federal prosecutors indicted sixteen church workers active in the religious sanctuary movement. The indictments were a culmination of a federal investigation that reportedly involved undercover surveillance of church meetings and worship services, as well as the infiltration of church organizations by government informers and agents.

We applaud the work of the religious sanctuary movement, which represents an expression of profoundly exalted religious values, and we urge the

government to end its policy of harassment. We are distressed by government tactics that threaten the religious freedom of those committed by conscience to abide by the ethic of sheltering those in distress.

The sanctuary movement is not unlike the underground railroad that sheltered fugitive slaves before the Civil War. The underground railroad was one of the moral high points of nineteenth-century American history, and it contributed to the eventual abolition of slavery. It also calls to mind those righteous gentiles who risked their lives to shelter Jewish refugees from the Nazis. When we persecute those who protect the life and freedom of others, we rob America of people who create the moral tone that America stands for. Our nation is enriched, not threatened, when our religious leaders speak ethically and act politically in opposition to government policies that they believe to be morally indefensible.

Responsible Jewish Journalism

All of us were deeply disturbed in January when Operation Moses' rescue of Ethiopian Jews was halted by the Sudan because of the publicity received by this originally covert effort. That it was a Jewish weekly that broke the story first, when such national papers as *The New York Times* had refrained (as part of a policy not to endanger human life) from reporting the story, has raised significant questions about the nature of the responsibility of Jewish journalism.

We are firmly convinced that an independent Anglo-Jewish press is necessary if we are to have a vital Jewish community. We have long been troubled by the progressive elimination of Anglo-Jewish weeklies. In recent years, the Federations have assumed control of 70% of such once-independent weeklies. Whatever their strengths, Federation-supported weeklies are bound to reflect the consensus of the competing community factions and are thus generally unable to challenge the official consensus within the Jewish community. Rather than reporting both sides of a controversy, most weeklies blandly report the community's middle

ground. Federations should be discouraged from silencing the remaining independent voices now commenting on the Jewish scene.

There are many who question the need for independent Jewish journalism and who suggest that it is dangerous. They define responsible Jewish journalism as defending Jewish interests and promoting the Jewish viewpoint for readers who have ample exposure to an American press that is often antipathetic to Jewish and Israeli concerns.

We reject this viewpoint for several reasons. First, we do not believe that homogeneity is healthy for the life of the Jewish community. A healthy community is composed of informed Jews, and for that we need a substantial amount of controversy and articulation of conflicting viewpoints. Sometimes, the promotion of Jewish interests requires the criticism of institutional policies.

We agree that Jewish journalism ought to be good for the Jews; however, our definition of that good is different from that of those who advocate the eschewal of controversy and the promotion of uniformly positive public relations. As things now stand, it is often difficult to find serious, factual articles in the Jewish press concerning issues of great importance. If the Anglo-Jewish press is to be a vehicle for Jewish communal cohesiveness, then that press must maintain its credibility as a reliable news source. Furthermore, responsible Jewish journalism should stimulate Jews to face the difficult issues we all confront. It should be sufficiently interesting to engage the attention of marginal Jews, rather than catering to the desire of insiders to read about their friends.

Second, North American Jews do not need to be as insecure as we sometimes are. We worry too much about what the gentiles will think if Jews criticize Israeli policies, or if Jews criticize one another. If Jews speak predictably — and disingenuously — with a single voice on all issues, our viewpoint is likely to be disregarded as canned. If we are more open in expressing our views, then we can lobby effectively and intensively about issues where there is true unanimity. Each element in the Jewish community is more effective when it is seen as autonomous and not merely a mirror reflecting Jerusalem's voice.

Nevertheless, Jewish periodicals do have responsibilities that are not shared by other journalists. The prevailing view among journalists today is that