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MR. SAUL E. JOFTES

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AN ARTIST OF THE POSSIBLE

By H. M. BLUMBERG

What are the international affairs of a world-wide Jewish brotherhood, like Bnai Brith, and what kind of person directs them?

South Africans, including the late Prime Minister, Dr. H. F. Verwoerd, had the opportunity in mid-August this year to satisfy their curiosity, when they met Mr. Saul Joftes, Secretary-General of the International Council of Bnai Brith.

The record of Bnai Brith on an international level reflects not only the dispersion of Jews throughout the world in the mid-twentieth century, but also the diminishing isolation of Jewish communities anywhere on earth in our age of jet travel and trans-continental communication.

Claiming to be the oldest and largest Jewish service organisation (it was founded by Jewish immigrants from Germany in New York in 1843), Bnai Brith looks upon its international obligations and privileges as very important, and the man who directs them must possess unusual qualities of political judgment and diplomatic skill.

For thirteen years, Saul Joftes has been entrusted with the task of observation, interpretation and organisation, with his headquarters in Washington and a mission to rove the world.

He visited South Africa twice: the first time on a reconnoitre in 1953; the second time a few weeks ago to inaugurate a programme for the extension of Bnai Brith in Southern Africa.

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Trained as a lawyer, Saul Joftes is cautious in making an assessment after a short visit, hesitant to express an opinion, and wary about taking up a fixed position on a domestic issue. When he does, it reveals a sensitive ear and a shrewd eye for an opening.

I have no idea how he shapes in open argument, but in informal discussion in a drawing-room, around a committee table, over a coffee, he emerges as having an analytical mind, rather than a flamboyant manner. I have been told that on two occasions in Johannesburg, he actually dug in and spoke out, but his customary stance is that of the orthodox diplomat, rather than a publicist of ideas and opinions.

That approach is in itself unusual in Jewish public life.

Take, for instance, the night when he returned from the much-publicised thirty-five-minute interview with Dr. Verwoerd in the Prime Minister's office in Cape Town at the beginning of August this year.

I was asked to interview him for what could have been presented as something of a scoop, since the Prime Minister's interest in Bnai Brith was as unusual as it

was obviously unexpected. Pleased that he had the interview, satisfied with the course it took, Saul Joftes was nevertheless anxious that it should not be blown up bigger than it was, either to make good newspaper copy or to enhance his personal status. The temptation was there, as the interview with the Prime Minister had come on the very first leg of his tour and undoubtedly could have been exploited to "good advantage" by a man less experienced in dealing with situations involving Jewish attitudes and the Jewish image at the highest State levels.

If, as a veteran Washington commentator recently suggested "it is an old American custom to suspect the worst about the motives of our politicians," I suppose I would not be far off if I suggest that it is "an old Jewish custom to suspect the worst about about the motives of those who are always having appointments with politicians, Premiers and Presidents."

Aware of it, Joftes doesn't care about it. He maps out his programme, makes his plans, and gets his appointments, quite sure of their purpose. In this respect, he is fortunate in that Bnai Brith's International Council and their United Nations Liaison Committee allow Joftes considerable flexibility, and rely to a large extent on his initiative and judgment.

He is grateful to the honorary officers for that authority and trust, but is especially grateful to Frank Goldman, one-time President of Bnai Brith, his guide and mentor, who took him out of a university job teaching International Law at the Boston Law School — to send him to the Nuremberg Trials as an observer.

"I was, I suppose, born with a silver spoon in my mouth," Joftes admits, "and had every advantage from my youth, being sent up to Harvard, eventually graduating with four University degrees, enabling me to teach Comparative Government at Harvard and to see my future in the Academies."

International Law, Politics and Comparative Government, as branches of the social sciences, belong to the new world of nation states, and derive their authorities and texts extensively from the they senten-

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tiously draw on good old Grotius, who wrote "De Jure Belli Ac Pacis" in 1625, with a sly side-look at Machiavelli and the Borgias a hundred years earlier.

They are in every way contemporary studies, picking up their terminology and concepts from the daily events of a society which since the beginning of this century doesn't seem to have much time to spare for the painstaking method of the student or scholar.

In the United States, scholars and teachers have been putting up a brave show of keeping up with a world which with wars and revolutions piling helter-skelter on each other, scarcely gives the ink of the textbooks time to dry, be-

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fore their facts are violently outdated.

One of the most popular authors of these textbooks, recommended to South African students in the 'forties, was Frederick L. Schuman, and when I tossed his name into conversation with Saul Joftes, it was fascinating to see how his face lit up (and so did mine!). "Why," he interjected, "Schuman was actually my Professor for several years. Have you ever read his piece on 'The Scapegoats' in his 'Commonwealth of Man'? It is actually prefaced with a reference to the story of the live goat sent to Azazel by our Jewish priests." (Leviticus 16, Maftir for Yom Kippur, of course.)

This facet of Joftes' personality and this insight into his academic aspirations led me to ask him bluntly whether he is happier in the jousting, not all of it always gallant, involved in Jewish public life and on the international political arena, or whether he perhaps regrets that he has left the lecture rooms and libraries for the committee rooms and platforms.

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"No," he answered, "not at all. I enjoy my work in Bnai Brith, even if I came to it by chance."

"Just after the Second World War ended," he told me, "Frank Goldman, a personal friend of the family and a very remarkable man and Jew, came along with an offer to me to keep a watching brief for Bnai Brith at the War Crime Trials, which were to be a watershed not only in contemporary Jewish history, but in international law.

"Goldman then followed this up with a challenge. 'Would I stay behind in Europe, and from Paris, reorganise Bnai Brith in Europe?'

"I accepted and stayed there for four years."

After that, Saul Joftes, lawyer and lecturer, began a career of service to his people. His next assignment was to Santiago, Chile, from where he established Bnai Brith in practically every country in South America. In 1953, he was posted to Washington and promoted to be Director-General of Bnai Brith's Office of International Affairs.

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This work has enabled Saul Joftes to operate in two divergent but closely inter-related spheres, within the Jewish community outside the United States, and attached to the United States mission to the United Nations, where Bnai Brith enjoys representative status.

His career thus turns him into a globe-trotter with a specific mission to the Jewish communities, not only of the Diaspora but also of Israel, at the same time as it gives him an entree to the corridors of influence and power in Washington and at UNO in New York.

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After many eventful years of this watching, warning and working, Saul Joftes has formulated a clear and unequivocal philosophy of his relationship to his own country, the Jewish people and Israel.

"I am concerned with the welfare of Israel, because it is the country of my people," he says, "but it is not the same thing as claiming that Israelis are my nation, in the strictly political or legal sense."

Rejecting any accusation that Bnai Brith can in any country work against Zionist interests, Joftes claims that it is in fact a singularly important instrument within the Jewish world and outside it for developing Israel.

Joftes was at pains to explain to me how through the Hillel Foundations which Bnai Brith operates on the American campus, and would like to establish at selected South African universities in the near future, an intellectual Jewish element is drawn closer to Jewish life and thought, and therefore to Israel and all that that country represents in modern Jewish experience, than by a frontal Zionist attack.

He dislikes shibboleths like pro or anti-Zionist and repudiates the allegation that by coming to Jewish students, with a general programme such as they have evolved for Hillel, Bnai Brith threatens to turn the university campus into a "kulturkampf" for its Jewish students.

"There cannot be any monolithic programme for the modern Jew," according to Joftes, and that much he seems to have in common with Dr. Nahum Goldman and his disciples, especially those who rallied round him at Brussels a few months ago, when the fifth assembly of the World Jewish Congress was held. Dr. Goldman's words were: "We are now in a struggle for the survival of a Jewish people as a people,

its right to maintain its specific character as a people, to be united as a people, to continue to develop its unique character, not to be forced to assimilate itself among the majorities among whom it lives in the Diaspora, or as the State of Israel, not to assimilate in character to all the other States of our time."

Joftes is convinced that a fraternal service organisation like Bnai Brith has an important role to play in that struggle, wherever it can be joined, and certainly with whichever environmental tools it can be fought. Thus he pointed out to me that whereas in Israel, Bnai Brith has Hebrew-speaking lodges, in the U.S. typically American lodges ("Americans are great joiners," he added wryly), in Belgium our lodges conduct their affairs in Flemish and for that matter, I would like to see lodges in Oudtshoorn or Bloemfontein or some place else, conduct its meetings in Afrikaans from time to time."

Basically, of course, Joftes is a pragmatist in his approach to the Jewish problems of survival, whether physical or spiritual, and relates our problems to the human and not necessarily the ideal condition.

Hence, my suggestion at the head of this profile, that if politics is the art of the possible, he is an artist of that art, a Bostonian by training, a conservative by inclination and a Jew by conviction.