RESEARCH CENTERS AND ASSOCIATIONS

CONCEPTION AND BIRTH OF THE ASSOCIATION FOR THE SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY OF JEWRY: A CASE STUDY IN ASSOCIATIONAL FORMATION

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INTRODUCTION

On September 1, 1970 a group of sociologists met in Washington, D.C. to share and discuss their common interest in the sociology of the Jews. In the course of that informal meeting session, a new association was formally born and initially shaped: The Association for the Sociological Study of Jewry. In the period from 1970 to the 1980's, the Association for the Sociological Study of Jewry became the preeminent academic association in the United States in the specialized field of the sociology of the Jews. It currently possesses a relatively small but successfully established structure of elected officers, an executive committee, about 300 members in the United States and other countries, some local city chapters, various annual national and regional meetings, a newsletter and its own journal, Contemporary Jewry.

This paper reconstructs the events involved in the conception and birth of the Association for the Sociological Study of Jewry, 1966-1970. In doing so, it also attempts to explain what processes were operating in these events, as well as what larger factors contributed to their occurrence. The paper is presented as a case study in "associational formation," here seen as the "birth" (and conception) part of that aspect of voluntary association research that seeks "...observable regularities in the birth, growth, and death of particular groups and organizations of various types, attempting to explain these dynamics both in terms of internal and external conditions of the organizations in question." (Smith, 1972:12). It is the current writer's conviction that the more general and comparative analysis of voluntary association processes should be more grounded in and derived from additional in-depth case studies of specific associations.

Materials and methods used in this reconstruction and interpretation were varied. A major source was the author's recollections of his personal experiences as a participant in the story. This participation in the conception and birth involved not only the exercising of memory, but consultation and review of an extensive number of documents acquired during and retained from the 1966-1970 period, as well as others from the period the author served (continuously from 1970-1975) as Secretary (1970-1973) and as Secretary-Treasurer (1973-1975) under a steering committee Chair (1970-1971) and under the first two Presidents (1971-1975). These included letters, memoranda, announcements, minutes (both the formal public versions and the original fuller handwritten notes), meeting sign-in sheets, ballots, membership registration forms and lists, newsletters, etc.

Several useful documents were materials received in 1973 from Arnold Dashefsky, when Dashefsky completed his term as first Treasurer and passed on his whole file of various materials to the author when he (Friedman) assumed the new constitutional office of combined Secretary-Treasurer. Finally, to round out and fill in some of the author's blank spots about certain key happenings and motivations and interactions of others, Arnold Dashefsky and Solomon Poll allowed him to conduct lengthy phone interviews with them in 1981.

LAYING THE GROUNDWORK

The founding of the Association for the Sociological Study of Jewry in 1970 occurred during a special-interest meeting planned, organized, and co-chaired by Bernard Lazerwitz and Norman Friedman. How they came together to bring about what became a facilitating occasion for the founding, then, is a key part of the "conception."

By 1970 Lazerwitz was a prominent and recognized researcher of the sociology of Jewry and an author of numerous articles in that field. He had received the Ph.D. degree in 1959 and over the years had met an extensive number of other sociologists also interested in studying the Jews. Thus by 1970 he had developed a sizable informal "contact network" of others in the field who knew and respected him, so that his name involved in a call for a Jewish sociology meeting would have good and visible recognition value.

For Friedman's road to 1970 the account begins somewhat before his eventual contact and acquaintance with Lazerwitz. To be specific, it begins on August 30, 1966, which this paper also uses as the date for the beginning of the "conception" of the Association for the Sociological Study of Jewry. Friedman, then an assistant professor at the University of Southern California, on that date presented a paper at the 1966 annual meeting of the American Sociological Association in Miami, Florida, at a session...
on "Sociology and History." At the close of the session, Werner Cahnman of Rutgers University, a prominent senior historical sociologist and sociologist of the Jews, introduced himself to Friedman, expressed interest in the paper and, after some further conversation, graciously asked Friedman to have lunch with him and his wife. At lunch, Cahnman and Friedman discovered and discussed, among other things, their mutual interest in Jewish sociology.

Thus began a friendship that continued until 1970 (and after) with correspondence, sharing of writings and ideas, and personal contact at subsequent sociology meetings. By Spring 1968, at the Eastern Sociological Society meeting in Boston, Friedman and Cahnman were sharing the expressed feelings that it would be very valuable and gratifying someday to get together, if possible, a sociology of Jewry interest group meeting at the American Sociological Association annual meetings. And when, in 1970, Friedman wrote Cahnman of specific plans, in conjunction with Lazerwitz, to do just that, Cahnman was most delighted and encouraging and pledged his support. Indeed, his ongoing encouragement about the field from 1966-1970 had a great inspirational effect upon Friedman's various actions.

In 1967 Friedman commenced a one-year postdoctoral research fellowship at the Lown Center for Contemporary Jewish Studies at Brandeis University. While at Brandeis, Friedman sought the advice and counsel of several Boston-area sociologists about his fellowship research. One sociologist he met in this regard in the Fall of 1967 was Bernard Lazerwitz, then at Brandeis University's Heller School. This began an acquaintance and friendship of the two, which continued after 1968, when Lazerwitz moved to a position at the University of Missouri at Columbia (Friedman's doctoral alma mater, by coincidence), and Friedman to one at California State University, Los Angeles.

In March 1969, Friedman and Lazerwitz renewed ties at the meeting of the Midwest Sociological Society in Indianapolis. In a lengthy conversation they discussed the possibility of somehow bringing together a session meeting of sociologists interested in the sociology of the Jews at the annual American Sociological Association meeting, possibly in 1970. Lazerwitz suggested that Friedman make contact with Fred Massarik of the U.C.L.A. Business School upon returning to Los Angeles (Lazerwitz and Massarik were then associates in the National Jewish Population Study) indicating that as part-time Research Director for the Los Angeles Jewish Federation-Council, and "U.S. Representative" of a group called the Association for Jewish Demography and Statistics (hereafter referred to as the A.J.D.S.), Massarik could probably be helpful.

**PLANNING A SPECIAL SESSION**

Friedman subsequently did establish phone contacts with Massarik in Los Angeles during the 1969-1970 academic year. After discussion, Massarik agreed to allow Friedman and Lazerwitz to use the secretarial and mailing facilities at his office at the Federation, and the mailing list of the U.S. Branch of the A.J.D.S., to call a Jewish sociology informal interest group meeting at the forthcoming 1970 American Sociological Association meeting in Washington, D.C., on the condition that it be identified as a meeting under the auspices of the A.J.D.S.

During 1970 Friedman obtained permission and a room and time assignment from the American Sociological Association office for the meeting. During the summer of 1970, a mailing went out to the A.J.D.S. mailing list in America, as well as other persons not on that list whose names were known to Friedman by reputation and/or to Lazerwitz by personal acquaintance, as persons active in Jewish sociology. Those contacted, in turn, were urged to invite others. The notice, composed by Friedman, announced that the America Branch of the A.J.D.S. would sponsor a special session on "The Sociological Study of Jewry," at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association on September 1 at 1:30 p.m. in the Assembly Room of the Sheraton-Park Hotel in Washington, D.C. The tentative program would include opening and welcome by Friedman, a progress report on the National Jewish Population Study by Lazerwitz, and "other matters of interest." The latter item, including a point about sponsorship, was explained as follows:

The third area of "other matters" is deliberately being left open informally, to take into account whatever the special concerns of those assembled may be. Some possible discussion topics might include: current research in progress; needed areas of future research; special research problems encountered in studying Jews; the relationship of the sociologist of Jewry to issues confronting the general Jewish community; the sociology of Jewry in relation to current "ethnic studies" courses, etc., etc.

It should be stressed that although the Association for Jewish Demography and Statistics is organizing
and sponsoring the session, the program will not be narrowly confined to only the strictly demographic or statistical, but devoted to the broad topic of 'The Sociological Study of Jewry,' and the whole range of approaches and issues that might include. An important latent function of the session will be the opportunity for sociologists interested in this subject to meet, get acquainted with one another, and exchange ideas; so please spread the word about the session to all potentially interested persons.

The announcement closed with the names and affiliations of Friedman and Lazerwitz.

Friedman and Lazerwitz had no strong preconceptions about what this meeting might or ought to lead to, in regard to possible formalization of this "informal" session into some sort of new entity. The announcement, however, sparked a written response from one recipient. Arnold Dashefsky, an assistant professor at the University of Connecticut, wrote to Lazerwitz on July 20, 1970 that:

The possible discussion topics suggested for 'other matters' all appear to be important. In this connection I should like to suggest the establishment of an interdisciplinary Section or Society for the Scientific Study of Jewry (SSSJ), whose function would be to provide a structure within which an ongoing discussion of these issues could take place.

To my knowledge existing structures, e.g., Institute of Contemporary Jewry at the Hebrew University, NEJS at Brandeis, and the Association for Jewish Demography and Statistics are limited to communication among their own ranks and perhaps including a few other personal associates. An association like the SSSJ would establish interpersonal contacts, engender affective relationships, and enhance lines of communication among researchers from a variety of institutional affiliations and geographical locations. Such an approach would hopefully generate more creative and critical research.

On July 22, 1970, Lazerwitz briefly replied to Dashefsky, Friedman, and Massarik (in a collective memo) that:

...among the topics we also talk about at our Washington, D.C. gathering should be that of broadening our organizational linkages. Seems like a fine idea to me. What about it, Norm? And, Arnold, I'm certain that I speak for Norm and Fred when I say go right ahead and introduce this topic. Sounds like a pertinent one.

Massarik, though, was less hospitable to the idea than Lazerwitz had assumed. After all, Massarik was the "U.S. Representative" of the A.J.D.S. and that body was sponsoring the forthcoming session and had paid secretarial/mailing costs, making Dashefsky's suggestion somewhat awkward. In a letter of August 13, 1970 to Dashefsky, Massarik wrote that:

Prof. Lazerwitz kindly sent me a copy of your letter of July 20 concerning possible establishment of an interdisciplinary Society for the Scientific Study of Jewry (SSSJ).

I think the concept implicit in what you propose is a good one. There is no doubt that we need better links among scholars interested in the scientific study of Jewish life in the U.S. and elsewhere. I would suggest, however, that while a preliminary discussion of this idea may be useful, consideration be given in 1970-71 to strengthening and broadening the still very young (and at this time rather small) American Branch for the Association for Jewish Demography and Statistics, rather than to the launching of an entirely new group.

To give a little background: The American Branch of this Association was established in 1968-69, following extensive discussions with Professors O. Schmelz and R. Bachi, key figures in the worldwide Association based at the Hebrew University, Jerusalem. At the time that these discussions took place, I indicated strongly that in the U.S. it would be appropriate to broaden the concept of the Association beyond traditional demographic and statistical concerns. I indicated that we need to move toward a general scientific study of Jewish life, in the U.S., including among other topics, the study of Jewish identity. With this view, the U.S. Branch of the Association for Jewish Demography and Statistics was launched on a modest scale.

It seems to me that, whatever the name, we should focus our energies on the now developing association
among colleagues who are interested in scholarly empirical inquiry in this field. Indeed, we may want to consider establishing relationships among organizations such as the Association for Jewish Studies, meeting at Brandeis University, September 8-10, with the American Jewish Historical Society, and with various groups, who in some manner, are addressing themselves to Jewish studies. Ultimately, though there may be no monolithic merger, we would learn more about each others interest, as a basis for strengthening studies in the field. Present proliferation, however, may not be the best answer.

After expressing this dim view of possible "proliferation" Massarik then used the occasion to extend Dashefsky an invitation to join the A.J.D.S.

MEETING IN 1970

The stage was now set for the actual session on September 1 in Washington. It assembled as scheduled. Thirty-five persons attended, some of whom learned about it from posted signs or from other persons at the American Sociological Association meeting, rather than from the earlier mailing. Co-chairman Friedman welcomed them; co-chairman Lazerwitz gave his presentation, and then Friedman commenced the open discussion period.

The discussion was lively and energetic. It mainly centered around how best to bring together those persons sharing an interest in the sociology of the Jews. Various views were expressed about associational forms (scientific society? political caucus?) and existing associations. The most emphatic and vociferous sentiments were in favor of formalizing some sort of new and separate association, rather than leaving the interest area on a more informal basis or becoming part of an already-existing association. Formalization of a new group was urged most strongly and vocally by Solomon Poll (University of New Hampshire), Marvin Verbit (Brooklyn College), and Dashefsky. After considerable discussion, it was finally voted that those in attendance would constitute a loosely organized new association that would share the interest area of sociology of Jewry. With this vote the "birth" had occurred.

It was further agreed that volunteers should stay longer to constitute a "steering committee" to explore future actions and possibilities. The larger body adjourned, and the voluntary steering committee of 13 elected four committee officers: Poll (Chairman), Verbit (Vice-Chairman), Friedman (Secretary), and Dashefsky (Treasurer).

The steering committee then reviewed its charge to plan for a 1971 meeting and ponder the new association's relationships with other bodies. It was decided that the general purpose would be to further the "social scientific study of Jewish life," and that all interested social scientists, regardless of discipline or religious-ethnic background, would be welcomed.

Emotions were running high. There seemed to be strong feeling, even a euphoria, in both the general and steering committee meetings, that participants were involved in something very important and meaningful to them, and that this was just the beginning of a highly significant undertaking.

In the subsequent printed minutes of that meeting, Secretary Friedman rather arbitrarily used the designation "Association for the Sociological Study of Jewry" (in quotation marks) for the name of the group. He did so because the session had been titled "The Sociological Study of Jewry," and because Dashefsky's "Society for the Scientific Study of Jewry" (suggested earlier in his letter) struck Friedman as too similar in wording to the existing Society for the Scientific Study of Religion and Society for the Study of Social Problems. In any event, the name Association for the Sociological Study of Jewry (hereafter referred to as A.S.S.J.) seemed to be accepted and was used then and since without challenge.

When selecting Steering Committee officers, Werner Cahnman was asked about a possible office, but modestly declined, suggesting such tasks should be left to younger colleagues. With Cahnman graciously declining to take a formal leadership role, nominee Solomon Poll was an understandable choice for Chairman of the Steering Committee. Poll was a full professor at the University of New Hampshire and widely known in Jewish sociology circles for his book, The Hasidic Community of Williamsburg. He had developed an informal contact network of numerous sociologists of Jewry over the years, especially in the Philadelphia and Boston areas. Prior to the 1970 Washington, D.C. meeting, he personally was acquainted with Verbit (with whom he became close when Verbit was a master's student at the University of Pennsylvania and Poll was an assistant professor there), Lazerwitz (known to Poll from when both lived in
the Boston area), Eugen Schoenfeld of Georgia State University (a good friend and known to Poll as a former "Yeshiva bochur"), Cahnman, Jack Porter, and Zena Blau.

Before the actual meeting time, Poll had discussed with Verbit and Lazerwitz and others his strong interest in forming a new Jewish sociology association that would be broader than just demography and that would be a scientific and scholarly association for all those Jewish and non-Jewish social scientists who were "legitimately studying Jews" (rather than be a Jewish political caucus for young Jewish activists). And apparently, he and others brought those feelings to the meeting.

Who "founded" or "gave birth to" the A.S.S.J. in 1970 or at least "launched" it at that meeting? In a broad sense, it was largely the combination of the (somewhat overlapping) Lazerwitz and Poll contact networks, plus several other enthusiastic individuals not previously in extensive contact with or associated/identified with either man, such as Dashefsky. More specifically, Friedman and Lazerwitz's concrete actions served as an important catalyst or midwife operation in actually bringing about the meeting session itself at which these various forces could be brought together. The strong determination of Poll, Verbit, Dashefsky, and others to forge a new association was extremely important. And in the steering committee meeting's initial defining and formalizing actions, the organizational and communication skills of Verbit, an assistant professor at Brooklyn College, were already evidenced, qualities that were soon to be of crucial importance in the formative next or initial three years (1970-1973) of the Association, when and as Verbit moved to a position of central importance in shaping the Association's early career.

The role of Massarik is a curious one in the history of the Association. Though he played a part in helping to call for the 1970 meeting that in turn led to the A.S.S.J., he subsequently did not take an active part in it. Once in the early 1970's he indicated to Friedman that this was because the A.S.S.J. met at the time of the annual American Sociological Association meeting, which usually conflicted with the same-time annual meeting of the American Psychological Association, which he attended and with which he was more involved and identified.

Would Massarik's fledging Association for Jewish Demography and Statistics have developed into the broader based Jewish sociology or social science group Massarik mentioned in his 1970 letter to Dashefsky, had the A.S.S.J. not been formed? It seems doubtful, partly because the A.J.D.S. probably would have had difficulty convincing non-demographers and statisticians that its academic bases in psychology and in a school of business management were probably not the most favorable launching pads from which to attract sociologists. The current writer has no knowledge as to organizing and rapport skills, alone or in combination with others.

The 35 persons in attendance in 1970 included a variety of types by age and affiliation. Among the academicians, about five were relatively established professors, age 45 and older. (Present and well known, in addition to Cahnman and Poll, was Zena Blau.) Thirteen professors were under 45 years of age. About five participants were (relatively young) graduate and undergraduate students. The remainder of participants held various research or agency positions, including several persons who were based in the Washington, D.C./Baltimore area itself.

Actually the 1970 meeting was blessed with a good "mix" of participants, which would prove to be important for subsequent associational growth and success, as news of what had happened at the meeting later spread through formal publicity and informal word-of-mouth. The presence of people of the stature of Cahnman, sociologists of Jewry that this was a scholarly and "serious" development, not a transitory caucus or just some sort of countercultural "greening" of Jewish sociology. To younger academics and graduate students, the active presence and participation of such diverse and less established (35 years-of-age and under) younger colleagues as Verbit, Friedman, Dashefsky, William Silverman, graduate student Jacob Lindenthal, and graduate student Jack Porter, among others, suggested that this was also a well. And as inquiries flowed in after September 1970, it was apparent that a cross-section of both older and younger sociologists was taking notice.

LARGER FACTORS AIDING FORMATION

It is interesting to speculate about whether or not the A.S.S.J., or something similar to it, would have come into being in the early 1970's without the particular chain of events and individual/collective actions described above. Or, in other words,
were there larger causal imperatives operating that probably would have produced similar results eventually, what might be called an "inevitability of formation" thesis?

This intriguing hypothetical question is difficult to answer, of course. Perhaps some other person or persons might have organized a similar session in a future year, and perhaps an equally enthusiastic group of people might have pushed ahead to form a new association. There is no certainty, to be sure, that they would have. It seems that there were three important factors operating that made this sort of formation probable, though not inevitable: the existence of a larger-than-ever pool of Jewish-born professional sociologists; the emergence of a favorable social climate for the development of special-interest sociological subgroups; and the evolution of something of a larger revival in general American Jewish life.

First, by the early 1970's, there were more professionally trained Jewish-born sociologists than ever before. The overwhelming majority of Jewish-born sociologists had never been especially interested in the sociological study of Jewry, and, for that matter, were not very religio-ethnically involved or were not committed Jews, so-called "Jewish-Jews" (Lipset, 1963:163). Now it is no secret that it is the more Jewish-Jews who have tended to become more intellectually involved in the sociological study of Jewry. With a much larger general pool of Jews in sociology by 1970, there was also a larger pool segment of Jewish-Jews (a pool within the pool) more interested in the sociology of Jewry than ever before. Hence, a larger pool of persons was available than in earlier years for the probable starting of a group like the A.S.S.J.

Second, there developed in the late 1960's and early 1970's activist ethnic and feminist movements in the larger society. These, in turn, promoted the founding of more specialized and pluralistic subgroups in sociology—political caucuses and/or scholarly associations—along racial, national origin, religious, and feminist lines. The A.S.S.J. (or a probable similar group) can be viewed as one such special interest group emerging at that time in that larger social climate.4

Third, beginning in general American Jewish life in the late 1960's and early 1970's, it is fairly clear now in retrospect that something of a Jewish revival (however uneven) was occurring. In addition to an overall resurgence of Jewish ethnicity, there was the grass-roots Jewish emotional reaction to the Six Day War, the Jewish student movement, the growth of havurot (fellowship groups), the expansion of the day school movement, the growing concern for Soviet Jewry, the revitalization of Orthodoxy, etc. And the collegiate growth of courses and programs in Jewish Studies was happening, which had prompted the founding of a new Association for Jewish Studies in 1968. (Friedman recalled that when he heard in 1968 about the key role his fellowship boss at Brandeis, Professor Leon Jick, was playing in the formation of the Association for Jewish Studies, he wondered to himself if sociologists of Jewry would ever be able to collectively meet together, the way Jewish humanities scholars were about to do. By 1969 and 1970, he felt it was worth a try.5) It is important that even though many of the A.S.S.J. founders had strong Jewish backgrounds and interests that had long preceded this larger Jewish revival period, no doubt they and certainly others heretofore less involved were influenced by it in varying degrees, although it is difficult at present to specify all the exact linkages.6

In 1974 (jumping ahead for a moment), then A.S.S.J. President Marshall Sklare remarked in casual conversation with several A.S.S.J. board members that he would never have predicted back in the 1950's, when being a sociologist of Jewry seemed like such a lonely and isolated preoccupation, that an association like the A.S.S.J. would materialize in the 1970's. But in retrospect, the larger pool, the more favorable climate for specialized sociology groups, and the impact of the larger American Jewish revival, account in a general way for many of the differences in the two periods.

In any event, the A.S.S.J. had definitely gotten launched in 1970, certainly no small accomplishment all things considered. Its conception began on August 30, 1966, and its birth occurred on September 1, 1970, both during annual meetings of the American Sociological Association. Immediately after lay the further planning in 1970-1971, the even more formal and official "founding" meeting in 1971, the challenging early years of the Verbit administration (1971-1973) and of the first constitutionally elected Sklare administration (1973-1975).

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The road from conception to birth included the following processes: evolution of key informal contact networks; consideration of alternative associations; facilitators; 1970
formalization steps; goal-definition; and early participation of sociologists of diverse ages and statuses. Causally, associational formation of this or a similar group at that time appears to have been probable, though not necessarily inevitable. Factors aiding formation included an increased pool of interested Jewish-Jewish sociologists; the larger movement toward founding more specialized and pluralistic subgroups in sociology; and a revival in general American Jewish life. Finally, as this case feeds back into the more general and comparative study of associational formation, it is suggested that major analytic categories for further research and conceptualization include: contact networks; alternative considerations; the role of facilitators; formalization steps; goal-definition; background and composition of participants; formation probability and/or inevitability; and larger factors of social context and climate related to formation.

REFERENCE NOTES

Note: I am grateful to Bernard Lazerwitz and Harold Himmelfarb for reactions to an earlier version of this paper.

1. Throughout the paper, the phrases sociology of the Jews, sociology of Jewry, and Jewish sociology will be used similarly and interchangeably. For an excellent discussion of the intellectual evolution of the field of sociology of Jewry throughout the early 1960's, see Sklare, 1974: 1-27.

2. Well, perhaps not entirely a coincidence, since both were native-born Missourians, Lazerwitz from St. Louis and Friedman from Kansas City.

3. Dashefsky did not join, because he felt the demography base of the group was too narrow.

4. At least one important related group, it might be noted, went in the opposite, less specialized, direction during the 1960's. The American Catholic Sociological Society converted itself into the more general Association for the Sociology of Religion.

5. It was Jick who had initially directed Friedman to Lazerwitz at Brandeis University, and, significantly, Jick and Lazerwitz had known each other since their undergraduate college years at Washington University in St. Louis.

6. Certainly several important founding and later members were influenced by the so-called Orthodox revival, which began far before 1967 during the post World War II period, and some others by the Jewish student or Jewish "counterculture" movement of the late 1960's and early 1970's.