When Hate Came to Town: New Orleans' Jews and George Lincoln Rockwell

Author(s): LAWRENCE N. POWELL

Source: *American Jewish History* , December 1997, Vol. 85, No. 4, SPECIAL ISSUE: Directions in Southern Jewish History, Part Two (December 1997), pp. 393-419

Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press

When Hate Came to Town: New Orleans' Jews and George Lincoln Rockwell

LAWRENCE N. POWELL

It is a truism that Jewish identity has traditionally been more attenuated in the South. The greater degree of assimilation below the Potomac is mainly a byproduct of pressures felt by Southern whites of all stripes to toe the line on matters racial and religious. What has been different for Southern Jews is their isolation and small numbers, which intensify the conformist pressure. For pragmatic reasons they have sought to blend in with their gentile surroundings, exalting the values of social adjustment over the claims of a separate Jewish identity.

In few other Southern Jewish communities has assimilation (in the nonpejorative meaning of the word) advanced as far as it has in the Crescent City. The New Orleans Jewish community is unusual even by Southern standards. It is very old, tracing its origins to the early nineteenth century. It is comparatively small for a city of New Orleans's size: only around 10,000 Jews resided in New Orleans as recently as 1970, or one percent of the population. It is overwhelmingly Reform German Jewish (by a margin of two-to-one at last reckoning) because of the relatively small number of Russian Jews who settled here. And it is extraordinarily well-adjusted. Descendants of old-line Jewish families have dominated the local retail and wholesale trade. They have loomed large in the city's big downtown law firms and have sat on the boards of major charitable and educational institutions. And, because of their social and economic success, they have generally frowned on anything that called attention to their Jewish identity, such as Zionism, which they once staunchly opposed. Within the closely woven regional networks of Southern Jewry they were even famous for carrying spiritual assimilation

---

For an overview of Southern Jews see Eli N. Evans, *The Provincials: A Personal History of Jews in the South* (New York, 1973). There is much insight in Melissa Fay Greene, *The Temple Bombing* (Reading, Mass., 1996); Stephen J. Whitfield, "The Braided Identity of Southern Jewry," *American Jewish History*, 77 (March 1988): 363–87; and Carolyn Lipson-Walker, "'Shalom Y'All: The Folklore and Culture of Southern Jews" (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1986). The author wishes thank the following individuals for their suggestions and helpful criticisms: Mark Bauman, Steve Goodell, Lance Hill, Richard Latner, Joseph Logsdon, Bobbie Malone, Patrick Maney, Henry Mason, Naomi Paiss, Joseph Roach, Plater Robinson, and Rebecca Scott.

to unheard-of heights. For years the men's club of the city's leading synagogue used to host shrimp boils in the Temple.[1]

Of course, there has always been more than one Jewish community in New Orleans. A much smaller Orthodox group, rooted in eastern Europe and arriving later, has historically felt more at home with its Jewish identity, and that different orientation toward Judaism has given rise to tension and disagreement between the two Jewish communities, one old, the other new. It should be noted that the underlying tensions have not turned on Jewish identity as such but on its meaning. For all the temptations and opportunities that have existed to convert, few old-line Jewish families have done so. They may have eschewed ritual (at least until very recently), but they have not abandoned Judaism. Theodore Lowi's observation regarding "old" Jews in Gadsden, Alabama, applies equally well to New Orleans: "Old Jews display virtually every feature of ethnicity save its acceptance."[2]

Still, disputes over whether to make public one's Jewish identity have divided the New Orleans community since turn-of-the-century debates over Russian Jewish immigration (the older Reform community wanted to discourage it). For years Zionism was a flashpoint of conflict. During the desegregation crisis the disagreement focused on whether the organized Jewish community should take a public position as *Jews*. Because of its greater size, economic power, and cultural prestige, the older Jewish community invariably had its way in these matters. But there was one occasion when they had their hands full: when their assimilationist identity clashed with one grounded in the memory of the Holocaust.[3]

The confrontation happened in May 1961 when the neo-Nazi agitator George Lincoln Rockwell led a hate ride to New Orleans to picket the local premier of the movie *Exodus*. The local and regional backdrop was one of rising racial tension and incipient anti-Semitism. Established Jewish leaders in the city reacted by trying to quarantine Rockwell, in order to deny him publicity and limit his chances for stirring up anti-Semitic feelings. This was not the response favored by the city's small

1. On New Orleans Jews see Julian B. Feibelman, *A Social and Economic Study of the New Orleans Jewish Community* (Philadelphia, 1941), 133 and *passim*; Bobbie Malone, *Rabbi Max Heller: Reformer, Zionist, Southerner, 1860–1929* (University, Ala., 1997); Evans, *The Provincials*, 227–46; Leonard Reissman, "The New Orleans Jewish Community," in Leonard Dinnerstein and Mary Dale Palsson, eds., *Jews in the South* (Baton Rouge, 1973), 288–304; Calvin Trillin, "U.S. Journal: New Orleans Mardi Gras," *The New Yorker* (March 9, 1968), 138–44.

2. Theodore Lowi, "Southern Jews: The Two Communities," in Dinnerstein and Palsson, eds., *Jews in the South*, 265–82 (the quotation is on 281).

3. Malone, *Rabbi Max Heller*, 84–94.

community of Holocaust survivors, who numbered around 50 families, mostly belonged to the city's small Orthodox congregations, and came from overwhelmingly east European backgrounds. The sudden intrusion of Nazism into everyday awareness aroused their anger and fear. More than that, it reawakened long-repressed memories, triggering that inner conflict which so many survivors feel between the need to forget and the obligation to remember. Between the Southern Jew's instinct to blend in and the survivor's impulse to bear witness, there was little room for compromise. "Rockwell aroused the community pretty damn good," says Barney Mintz, long-time board member of the New Orleans Anti-Defamation League (ADL).[4] He was putting it mildly. The 1961 controversy over Rockwell's hate ride, like the 1977 furor in Chicago over neo-Nazi attempts to parade through Skokie,[5] laid bare deep social and ideological rifts within the New Orleans's Jewish community.

Son of a radio comedian who counted among his friends such Jewish entertainers as Benny Goodman and Groucho Marx, George Lincoln Rockwell was a seminal figure in America's postwar white power movement. Indeed, to a generation of American racial extremists he was practically a role model. William Pierce, founder of the neo-Nazi National Alliance and pseudonymous author of *The Turner Diaries*, which inspired both a murderous bankrobbing spree in the early 1980s and, apparently, the 1995 bombing of the Federal building in Oklahoma City, got his start in neofascist politics by editing a Rockwell quarterly.[6] David Duke was another Rockwell disciple. "The greatest American who has ever lived has been shot down and killed," the high school senior sobbingly told a friend, after learning of Rockwell's assassination by a disgruntled former follower in 1967.[7]

Rockwell's enormous influence within the neofascist movement,

4. Bernard Mintz, interview with the author, 5 October 1995.

5. The Skokie controversy has mainly been treated as a free speech conflict between strong-willed survivors and the ADL, but there is evidence that the crisis also precipitated latent divisions between new and old Jews over Jewish identity. See Donald Alexander Downs, *Nazis in Skokie: Freedom, Community, and the First Amendment* (Notre Dame, Indiana, 1985), and David Hamlin, *The Nazi/Skokie Conflict: A Civil Liberties Battle* (Boston, 1980).

6. ADL, *Extremism on the Right: A Handbook*, new revised edition (New York, 1988); James Ridgeway, *Blood in the Face: The Ku Klux Klan, Aryan Nations, Nazi Skinheads, and the Rise of a New White Culture* (New York, 1990), 66.

7. Tyler Bridges, *The Rise of David Duke* (University, Miss., 1994), 13 (for the quotation) and 40; Michael Zatarain, *David Duke: Evolution of a Klansman* (Gretna, La., 1990), 116–7.

however, had little to do with organizational prowess. The American Nazi Party (ANP), which he founded in 1959 and served as commander, never came close to building a mass following like that of the anti-Semitic radio priest Father Charles Coughlin in the 1930s. At its height the ANP probably claimed fewer than 3,000 members. And his hard-core followers—mostly young men from broken homes and lower-middle-class backgrounds, many with criminal records—could hardly have numbered in excess of 30. These he formed into storm trooper units, replete with khaki uniforms and swastika armbands. He and his men lived together in a ramshackle, two-story frame house in Arlington, Virginia, on a rise Rockwell called Hatemongers Hill, just across the Potomac River from Washington, DC. One visitor to Rockwell's headquarters was struck by unpaid bills piled high on the table.[8]

There is no question that Rockwell was a troubled man. He failed at nearly everything he tried, from commercial art to magazine publishing. Personal relationships were a challenge, too, including marriage (he was divorced twice). His autobiography, *This Time the World*, reads like a Rorschach test of conflicted sexuality. It is brimming with anger at his mother for programming his wedding night with store-bought gadgets. It rages at "masculinized" women. It swoons with admiration for the naked male body over that of nude women. It is shot through with dread of black male sexual potency ("Negroes can beat white men any day in speed of sex maturity and accomplishment").[9]

For all of his quirks and organizational shortcomings, the commander did possess a rare tactical genius. Rockwell was the one who devised the shock tactics that neo-Nazis employed before they began running for office in the 1980s. The tactics were principally publicity stunts calcu-

8. Leland V. Bell, *In Hitler's Shadow: The Anatomy of American Nazism* (Port Washington, N.Y., and London, 1973), 112–3; Ridgeway, *Blood in the Face*, 66; Frederick J. Simonelli, "The American Nazi Party: 1958–1967," *The Historian*, 57 (Spring 1995): 559–61; Tony Ulasewicz with Stuart A. McKeever, *The President's Private Eye: The Journey of Detective Tony U. from N.Y.P.D to the Nixon White House* (Westport, Conn., 1990), 134–9; "Death of a Storm Trooper," *New York Times*, 27 August 1967, section IV, 4:1.

9. George Lincoln Rockwell, *This Time the World* (n.p., 1963; second edition), 95, 98, 128, 173, 45. At Brown University, where he contributed cartoons to the school magazine before dropping out to become a naval pilot during World War II, his artwork betrayed a "consistent preoccupation with violence" and "themes of death, cannibalism." ADL, "Facts: Rockwell," vol. 13, no. 10 (September 1960), 161–2, in George Lincoln Rockwell File, General Files II, IV, B45, Jewish Federation of Greater New Orleans Records, Tulane University, 4 (hereinafter GLR, JFGNO, TU).

lated to provoke a reaction from Jewish defense groups like the American Jewish Committee and the ADL. With the sharp ebbing of anti-Semitism from its wartime high-water mark, organized American Judaism sought to capitalize on the improved climate by giving professional Jew haters the silent treatment, denying them the headlines that counterdemonstrations by angry Jews might produce. The strategy had a name: the "quarantine policy." Some called it "the cold shoulder treatment" too. Whatever the nomenclature, the policy accorded well with the American Jewish community's traditional commitment to defending civil liberties, even those of the enemy. Indeed, that stance had practically become a cultural value.[10] Rockwell reasoned that he could lift the news blackout by ceasing to be "a sneaky Nazi," like his "sissy" comrades on the extreme right, and becoming an "OPEN, ARROGANT, ALL-OUT NAZI." The aim was to "aggravate them so bad . . . that they will have to notice us."[11]

There was nothing halfway about the commander's provocations. Bathed in floodlights, a huge swastika nailed to its front gable, his house in Arlington, Virginia, became a veritable Nazi shrine. The Horst Wessel hymn blared from its wire-mesh windows. Two guard dogs—a Doberman named Gas Ovens, and a German Shepherd called Auschwitz—patroled the premises. "When I was in the advertising game, we used to use nude women. Now I use the *Hakenkreuz* and storm troopers. You use what brings them in," he said. Students from local universities came to gawk and returned with Nazi flags to fly from their fraternity houses. In the summer of 1960 Rockwell vaulted to national attention when he staged a series of open-air meetings in full Nazi regalia on the Washington mall next to the Smithsonian Institute. Angry Jews mobbed him. On July Fourth he tried to hold a rally in New York City's Union Square. The mayor's office denied him a permit, an action later reversed by state courts. At the turn of the year Rockwell mounted a picketing campaign in selected American cities against the newly released film *Exodus*, a box-office hit recounting the founding of the state of Israel. Carefully preannounced, often by flyers declaring "He is Coming" or "We Are Back," Rockwell's appearance in company with a handful of armbanded

10. Leonard Dinnerstein, *Anti-Semitism in America* (New York and Oxford, 1994), 151–2; Naomi W. Cohen, *Not Free to Desist: The American Jewish Committe, 1906–1966*, with an introduction by Salo W. Baron (Philadelphia, 1972), 375–6.

11. Rockwell, *This Time the World*, 245–6, 253–4; American Jewish Committe (AJC), "Rockwell Scores in his Campaign to Stir Up Trouble," in *For Your Information*, AJC Bulletin, VI, 2 (February 1961), 4, in GLR, JFGNO, TU.

storm troopers triggered major riots in Chicago, Boston, and Philadelphia. The tumults reaped the ANP a publicity bonanza.[12]

Meanwhile, Rockwell hit upon another headline-grabbing stunt: a hate ride to New Orleans. On Saturday, 20 May 1961, he wired the New Orleans Police Department (NOPD) that he intended to picket the Wednesday evening premier of *Exodus* as well as the local NAACP headquarters. A few days earlier the New Orleans theater where the film was scheduled to open had received anonymous letters daubed with red paint and stamped with swastikas. Flyers announcing that "the commander is coming" also appeared in the mailboxes of selected New Orleans Jews.[13]

The commander's latest project was calculated to play off recent headlines. On the same day that Rockwell wired the NOPD, Alabama Klansmen had assaulted an integrated group of freedom riders in the Greyhound bus terminal in Montgomery. A week earlier white racists had firebombed the first freedom rider bus on a highway outside Anniston, Alabama, and savagely beaten its occupants. Both civil rights contingents were on their way to New Orleans. The brutal attacks made front-page news around the globe. For the next several days public opinion was riveted on the furious negotiations taking place between the Kennedy Justice Department and Alabama state officials to arrange safe passage for fresh reserves of civil rights protesters. To make sure that his hate ride arrived in town in tandem with the freedom ride (the civil rights bus never made it), Rockwell waited until Monday, 22 May, to dispatch his hate bus from Arlington.[14] Not really a bus, it was actually a blue and white Volkswagen van carrying five storm troopers. Painted beneath the rear window were the words "LINCOLN ROCKWELL'S HATE BUS." Emblazoned on the top and sides were the statements "WE DO HATE RACE MIXING" and "WE HATE JEW-COMMUNISM." The driver was one of Rockwell's most zealous supporters, an action-loving ex-

12. "Rockwell Scores," 1–4; "Bigot Seeking Buildup: The 'News' Techniques of George Lincoln Rockwell," a fact sheet from the AJC (March 1962); "Rockwell and 'Exodus,'" confidential AJC memo, March 6, 1961; the quotation appears in ADL, "Facts: Rockwell," 163. See also Bell, *In Hitler's Shadow*, 112; Ulasewicz, *The President's Private Eye*, 139–42.

13. "Supplemental Report relative to the arrest of George Lincoln Rockwell, et als," from Presly J. Trosclair to Joseph A. Guillot, May 30, 1961, Offense Reports, Item E-11897-61, New Orleans Police Department Records, City Archives, New Orleans Public Library (NOPL), hereinafter Rockwell Police Report. A copy of one of the flyers can be found in "American Nazi Party, 1961," the Delesseps S. Morrison Papers, in NOPL.

14. Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954–63* (New York, 1988), 412–70.

Marine and Greek-American from New York who had Americanized his name to John Patler. Blessed with dark good looks, he had been drummed out of the Corps for moonlighting as a storm trooper while stationed at Quantico, Virginia. Shadowing the hate bus southward was a 1961 green Chevrolet carrying three more troopers. Rockwell himself did not enplane for New Orleans until the following day.[15]

According to a UPI reporter, the commander described New Orleans as "a real hot spot."[16] Rockwell had obviously been following the local news. For seven months White Citizen Council housewives had been picketing nonstop two recently desegregated public elementary schools in a poorer section of town. In November 1960 hundreds of white teenagers had run amok through the central business district, assailing blacks and tearing through public buildings. Five special sessions of the state legislature in Baton Rouge managed to keep the pot boiling by seizing control of the Orleans Parish School Board only to have their obstructionist enactments immediately annulled by a federal district judge.[17] By May 1961 the city was a tinderbox of racial unrest.

In the eyes of national Jewish leaders the hate ride was a calamity waiting to happen. Rockwell's recent escapades in Northern cities had proven that American Jews were far from lockstep agreement concerning the quarantine policy. It was not merely teenagers who were mobbing Rockwell's picketers at theaters where *Exodus* was showing. Holocaust survivors had also thronged the crowds. "It is emotional satisfaction that the counterdemonstrators seek and obtain," wrote an official of the American Jewish Committee. These "New Americans" needed to be taught that in a democracy the only thing they needed to fear was fear itself.[18]

But national leaders were afraid. Their greatest concern was that Rockwell's Southern forays might cement a union between American Nazis and the resurgent Ku Klux Klan. There had been, after all, a rash of bomb attacks against Southern synagogues between 1954 and 1959; in fact, almost 10 percent of bombing targets had been Jewish. Just as worrisome was the possibility that headline-grabbing stunts like the hate ride might enlist racial backlash in the service of anti-semitism.[19] It was

15. Rockwell Police Report. See also ADL, "Facts: Rockwell," 164.

16. Rockwell Police Report.

17. Adam Fairclough, *Race & Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana, 1915–1972* (Athens, Ga. and London, 1995), 234–64.

18. "The Time to Educate About Quarantine is Now," memo from Dr. S. Andhil Fineberg, AJC Institute of Human Relations, New York, Feb. 6, 1961, in GLR, JFGNO, TU.

19. Ulasewicz, *The President's Private Eye*, 131, 136; Green, *The Temple Bombing*, 6.

an anxiety that the organized Jewish community in New Orleans knew all too well.

The city's Jewish leadership never doubted for a moment where it stood on the quarantine policy. The cold shoulder strategy formulated by national Jewish organizations harmonized perfectly with their assimilationist desire to avoid controversy—indeed, to keep the word "Jew" or "Jewish" off the front page. The community's upper echelon was well represented on the board of the local ADL. "We had top quality not only in terms of contacts but actual ability, men and women who had direct access to the mayor and the police. We had everything in place here," says the slight, goateed Irwin Schulman, who headed the branch office at the time. The executive committee included such local influentials as board president Moise Steeg, a prominent lawyer and behind-the-scenes powerbroker of Alsatian Jewish origin, and Barney Mintz, a furniture store owner and legendary football halfback at Tulane in the 1930s. Alerted by the national office months in advance that the ANP would likely demonstrate in their city, the local ADL called an emergency meeting of the executive committee as soon as news broke that Rockwell's hate bus was journeying toward New Orleans, with the commander soon to follow. The committee met on Monday evening (22 May 1961). There was scant debate over tactics and philosophy. Everyone agreed that Rockwell's civil liberties must be respected. Quickly attention focused on the real task at hand: devising a plan for choking off Rockwell's publicity. With little prompting, committee members volunteered to contact the city's three television stations, 10 radio stations, and three major dailies. Others promised to use their good offices with the mayor, the governor, the governor's secretary, the Tulane Dean of Students, the American Legion, the Veterans of Foreign Wars, and the Civil Defense Director in Washington. "We didn't have to start *de novo*," Schulman explains. "We just started pressing buttons and making calls."[20] The contacts were all completed by noon the following day.

If the ADL leadership acted with more than usual dispatch it was probably because the city's mounting racial tensions were fast eroding the middle ground of political moderation. Many New Orleans Jews had

20. Irwin Schulman, interview with the author, 2 October 1995; Schulman to Moise Steeg, 15 June 1961, ADL records, on file at the New Orleans ADL office. Thanks to Jerry Himmelstein, current ADL director, for sending me a copy of this detailed report on the Rockwell incident. See also the memo of Isaiah Terman to Harry Baron, "Picketing of 'Exodus,'" 6 February 1961, AJC, in GLR, JFGNO, TU.

been trying to occupy the moderate center since at least the 1930s. They included Edith Stern, Julius Rosenwald's daughter, who would shortly underwrite a major voter registration drive in the Deep South, and Rabbi Julian Feibelman, who had thrown open the doors of Temple Sinai in 1949 for an address by Ralph Bunche to the first integrated audience in the city's modern history. But the center was definitely beginning to collapse. The nonstop picketing by white housewives, the sit-ins by black students at downtown lunch counters, the ongoing battle between federal courts and state officials—all intensified the pressure on Southern whites to stand up and be counted in favor of white supremacy. To be sure, the segregationist coercion fell with particular severity on Southern Jews in isolated rural communities. But their co-religionists in cities like New Orleans caught some of it as well. A major source of discomfort was the prominence of Northern Jews in the freedom rides. "'Oh, they're just Yankees. They think different,' I remember Southern Jews saying to take the heat off themselves," says Anne Levy, who experienced the Holocaust as a child and came of age in New Orleans.[21] But the heat rose steadily all the same. Virulent anti-Semitism even began cropping up on bumper stickers around town. One read "I Like Eich," a reference to the Adolf Eichmann trial then underway in Jerusalem. Social discrimination was nothing new to Crescent City Jews. It had long barred their entrance to the city's elite Mardi Gras carnival krewes. Yet tongue-in-cheek endorsements of genocide bespoke a conspiratorial anti-Semitism that was somewhat new to the Crescent City.[22] Says the ADL's Irv Schulman: "We lived with the fact that many segregationists had a kernel or more of antisemitism."[23]

The segregationist about whom Schulman and his associates worried most, however, was no run-of-the-mill anti-semite. The absolute boss of mineral-rich Plaquemines parish, Judge Leander Perez carried racial extremism so far as to bring on his excommunication from the Catholic Church. Perez not only dominated the White Citizens Council of Greater New Orleans, the vehicle of massive resistance in Southern Louisiana, but from behind-the-scenes he even stage-managed the Louisiana legislature's massive resistance to desegregation. The silver-haired judge was responsible for much of the nonstop picketing against two integrated public elementary schools in the lower Ninth Ward. Moreover, in November 1960 he had incited teenage rowdies to riot in downtown

21. Anne Levy, interview with the author, 12 October 1995.

22. Reissman, "The New Orleans Jewish Community," 303–4; Evans, *The Provincials*, 310–5; Dinnerstein, *Anti-Semitism in America*, 188–91.

23. Irwin Schulman, interview with the author, 2 October 1995.

New Orleans. In a speech to a massive rally at Municipal Auditorium the night before the melee, he thundered, "Don't wait for your daughter to be raped by these Congolese. Don't wait until the burr-heads are forced into your schools. Do something about it now." At the same time he lashed out against "Zionist Jews," whom he regarded as "the most dangerous people in the country today." On other occasions Perez had blamed the Jews for instigating both the Communist conspiracy and "forced integration," which he believed was nothing less than a Jewish plot to destroy "our white Christian civilization" by manipulating "emotional Negroes."[24]

Perez's anti-Semitism and growing political strength powerfully focused the Jewish community's attention on its own vulnerability. This feeling of growing isolation doubtless explains the obvious resolve of community leaders to separate Jewish concerns from those of Rockwell's other major target, African-Americans. The commander had made no secret of his intention to simultaneously picket both the *Exodus* premiere and a meeting of the New Orleans branch of the NAACP. But the ADL leadership never gave a moment's thought to forging a cross-racial alliance of tolerance against the forces of bigotry. "As I recall," says Schulman of the Monday evening strategy session, "there was no mention of desegregation, no concern about civil rights and anti-Semitism, except that Rockwell was linking the two." The ADL leaders were clearly determined to keep those concerns apart. "This was *'Tokkes an der Tisch'* time," says Schulman, employing the Yiddish phrase for important business. It was an old and understandable reflex among Southern Jews, this placing of self-preservation ahead of sympathy for the oppressed, another way of blending in and donning the camouflage of conformity. During the Rockwell crisis anti-Semitism was not merely the primary concern, it was the *only* concern.[25]

Not surprisingly, then, New Orleans's Jewish leadership tacitly embraced the white establishment consensus regarding "outside agitators." It was based on the argument of immoral equivalence. Mayor Chep Morrison captured it in a press release equating freedom riders and hate riders: "The 'Nazi Storm Troopers' and the 'Freedom Riders' . . . mean nothing but trouble and are not welcome here," he declared, denouncing "publicity stunts continuously put on by agitators representing extreme

24. Fairclough, *Race & Democracy*, 244; Glen Jeansonne, *Leander Perez: Boss of the Delta* (Baton Rouge and London, 1977), 225–6.

25. See Eli Evans's sensitive and insightful observations about southern Jewish dilemmas during the civil rights movement in *The Provincials*, 311–2, a theme that Melissa Fay Greene likewise develops brilliantly in *Temple Bombing*.

and radical viewpoints." The *Times-Picayune* echoed the argument, as did the Young Men's Business Club, which passed resolutions chastising Nazis and civil rights activists alike for bringing on federal interference with states' rights. The city council passed a resolution urging the police "to escort 'freedom riders' and other agitators through the city non-stop."[26]

Through it all, the paramount concern of the city's Jewish leadership remained what it always had been: to keep a damper on their own community and thus deny Rockwell an incident that could win his party fresh recruits from the kind of people then swelling Perez's racist movement. But there were early signs that micromanaging this crisis might be easier said than done. A few younger men in the community were angry enough to provoke a confrontation. Bernard Bennett, a six-foot-four and athletically built Jewish contractor, and his cousin Sam Katz, both members of one of the oldest Reform synagogues, declared flat out that they planned to challenge Rockwell and his men. "I was determined those guys weren't going to march," Bennett says. A cousin who worked for the mayor called to try to talk him out of it. "Will you go to jail?" she asked. "Well, I'm prepared to do that."[27]

The biggest worry racing through the minds of ADL leaders was the reaction of the city's New Americans, as local Holocaust survivors were known. Members of the executive committee were all too familiar with refugee involvement in anti-Rockwell demonstrations in Boston, Chicago, New York, and Philadelphia. Would survivors who settled in New Orleans also take to the streets? The answer was not long in coming. During the ADL's Monday evening strategy meeting, the head of the NOPD's Counter Intelligence Unit called Schulman with information that a group of "local refugees" was planning a counterdemonstration at the opening of *Exodus* at the Civic Theater downtown. Shortly after getting off the phone Schulman received a call from one of the New Americans. At the very moment the ADL board was formulating its hush-hush strategy a large group of survivors had been meeting in Ralph Rosenblat's butcher shop on Carondelet street, in the heart of the old black-Jewish shopping district. Schulman and the survivor talked and argued for nearly two hours. They hung up agreeing that a delegation of survivors would meet the next day at noon with the full ADL board,

---

26. "Statement by Mayor Chep Morrison," 24 May 1961, Delesseps S. Morrison Papers, NOPL. See the editorial "Same Purpose," New Orleans *Times-Picayune*, 25 May 1961, p. 19; also "Club Condemns 'Riders,' 'Nazis,'" *ibid.*, p. 10; and "Agitators Face Non-Stop Order," *ibid.*, 26 May 1961, p. 22.

27. Bernard Bennett, interview with the author, 19 December 1995.

which included the presidents of the Jewish federation, the Jewish Welfare Fund, and B'nai B'rith.[28]

More than 20 men had responded to the call for an emergency meeting at Ralph's Butcher Shop, and they took about as little time to reach consensus as did their ADL counterparts. However, the New Americans decided to confront Rockwell's storm troopers rather than give them the cold shoulder. The decision stemmed from a fury that offset any fear survivors may have felt about Rockwell's scheduled appearance. "The anger gave us courage to fight," says Felicia Fuksman, a Lodz ghetto survivor. "And this time we were in a position to fight back."[29] The anger was not directed at Rockwell alone. They were also furious at their adopted country for having allowed Nazism to make a comeback. They viewed American politics through the lens of recent European history, and they were therefore baffled by the paradox that one should defend the free speech rights of those who would abolish free speech. The bewilderment only widened the rift between themselves and American Jews, who after all looked on civil liberties as both a cultural value and a political strategy. Let Reform Jews exercise their quiet power behind the scenes, New Americans told themselves. As far as they were concerned they were going to protest Rockwell's visit come hell or high water. After all, were they not witnesses to an epochal catastrophe? And for that reason did they not have a message for the future, the warning, as Primo Levi put it, that "It happened, therefore it can happen again"?[30]

This need to bear witness sprang from the deepest wells of survivor guilt. Like survivor communities elsewhere in America, the refugees who had settled in New Orleans after 1948 as displaced persons had experienced the Holocaust in all of its dimensions. They had jumped from trains and hid in forests. They had faced starvation in ghettos. They had fled to the Soviet Union or passed as Christians on the "Aryan side." They had been in labor camps, concentrations camps, transit camps, even death camps like Auschwitz-Birkenau. But however they had experienced Nazi persecution, each was oppressed by a sense of having usurped earthly places belonging by right to murdered loved ones or close friends. That unwarranted guilt stemmed from the belief—to quote Levi again—that "the worst survived, that is, the fittest; the best all

28. Schulman to Moise Steeg, 15 June 1961, ADL records, on file at the New Orleans ADL office.

29. Felicia Fuksman, interview with the author, 3 February 1996.

30. Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* (New York, 1989), 199.

died."[31] So why were they spared while saintly sisters perished? "I felt disappointed when I survived," says Gita Rosenblat, Ralph Rosenblat's wife and the only surviving member of a Jewish family that had once comprised a large proportion of her Polish village.[32] The murder of those innocent victims seemed so senseless. How could these deaths be rendered meaningful? There was only one way—remembrance: by never forgetting and never letting the world forget the memory of those who had perished. Remembrance was thus both an obligation and a way to assuage the guilt. As Mrs. Rosenblat's husband bluntly puts it, "I owe a debt to remember those losses."[33]

Nonetheless, until Rockwell came to town the New Americans of New Orleans had been trying harder to forget than to remember. Because traumatic events are less remembered than relived, survivors were understandably averse to dredging up the painful past. Besides, Cold War America seemed little interested in what they had undergone. After the revelations of the liberated camps sent shudders of revulsion through the public mind, Americans quickly shrank from the smell of quicklime and ash. In the 1950s it was tempting to sublimate horrific scenes of corpse-strewn pits into vague anxiety about nuclear war and meaningless mass death. The times were unreceptive to survivor testimony. "Nobody was listening to us back then," says Shep Zitler, a Vilna native and camp survivor. Indeed, the very subject of the Holocaust, with its imagery of victims tramping off to death like sheep to slaughter, raised troubling issues concerning Jewish honor and self-worth. How did survivors manage to survive? Why didn't they put up more of a fight? American Jews were reluctant to ask, and survivors, fearful that the audience they sought to reach might be repelled by the story they tried to tell, found it easier to keep their memories under lock and key.[34] "They were afraid of being judged," remembers Anne Levy, the child survivor of both the

31. Of all the voluminous writing about survivor guilt and testifying, Primo Levi's insights remain the most penetrating. See his *Survival in Auschwitz: The Nazi Assault on Humanity* (New York, 1961), 5–6, 36; *The Reawakening* (New York, 1965), 207; and especially *The Drowned and the Saved* (New York, 1989), 12, 76–84, 149–51 (the quotation is on p. 82). There is also deep insight in Robert Jay Lifton's essay "On Survivors" in his *History and Human Survival* (New York, 1971), especially 169–70. Lawrence Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (New Haven and London, 1991), especially, 39–76, is indispensable.

32. Gita Rosenblat, interview with the author, 17 February 1996.

33. Ralph Rosenblat, interview with the author, 14 February 1996.

34. It is worth noting that the term *holocaust* did not come into general circulation until the 1960s. On the conspiracy of silence in the 1950s and 60s, see Dorothy Rabinowitz, *New Lives: Survivors of the Holocaust Living in America* (New York, 1976),

Lodz and Warsaw ghettos. "They didn't understand," adds Shep Zitler. "How could they? It was beyond belief."[35]

Given the climate of the 1950s it is understandable why New Orleans survivors lost themselves in the present and tried to bury the past. They had spent their days building new lives. "We didn't have much time to think about the past," says Ralph Rosenblat. In those early years all energy was bent toward making it in America. New Americans established businesses and raised new families with very little help. After taking care of the immediate employment and housing needs of Europeans refugees, American Jews had swiftly forgotten about the survivors. Assimilation was the dominant mood, and that temper discouraged unacculturated greenhorns from getting too close. So the survivors stayed to themselves, transforming their marginality into a close-knit community of fictive aunts and uncles to give their American-born children a sense of family that had been torn from them by a world-historical tragedy. When they came together for picnics and parties, they took pains to bar the past. "We were trying to have a little good time," Rosenblat says, "we were trying to forget." But it was not always easy to keep the past at bay. Merely slicing bread could trigger memories of nonstop camp dreams of how good it would feel to possess the entire loaf. Or someone else might say when the fatigue of a long week was loosening its grip, "Look what our family is missing. I wish our family would be here."[36] The reminiscing often happened over coffee and desert, during games of gin rummy, or while on Sunday afternoon outings to the Lakefront or the beach, when breezes off the water rustled blankets heaped with food and their American children played Parchesi or pitch and catch under ancient live oaks bearded with Spanish moss. Then survivors might release themselves in Yiddish and start comparing notes about who was in which camp when, and what each saw and

---

93, 120, 193–4; Deborah Lipstadt, "The Holocaust: Symbol and Myth in American Life," *Forum on the Jewish People, Zionism and Israel*, 40 (1980–81), 73–88; William Helmreich, *Against All Odds: Holocaust Survivors and the Successful Lives They Made in America* (New York, 1992), 39–42, 69–70; Helen Epstein, *Children of the Holocaust: Conversations with Sons and Daughters* (New York, 1979), 26, 97–8; Edward Linenthal, *Preserving Memory: The Struggle to Create America's Holocaust Museum* (New York, 1995), 1–15; and Michael R. Marrus, *The Holocaust in History* (New York, 1987), 3–5, 108–12. Lawrence Graver's recently published *An Obsession with Anne Frank: Meyer Levin and the "Diary"* (Berkeley, 1995), is a moving study of the struggle between assimilationist Jews and Jewish novelist Meyer Levin for ownership of Anne Frank's memory.

35. Anne Levy, interview with the author, 18 August 1995; Shep Zitler, interview with the author, 10 January 1996. See also, Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies*, iv–xv.

36. Ralph Rosenblat, interview with the author, 17 February 1996.

knew. "I was there then." "My brother went to that Lager." "My grandmother used to live in such-and-such town." In the '50s these moments happened rarely and never lasted long.[37]

But two things occurred in 1961 that abruptly wrenched them back to the past. One was the trial in Jerusalem of Adolf Eichmann, the former head of the SS Jewish Desk who had been abducted by Israeli agents in front of his home in Buenos Aires, Argentina, for his role in organizing the death camp transports. Commencing in April 1961 and lasting through August, the trial featured testimony from a parade of Holocaust survivors living in Israel. The New Orleans's media covered the proceedings extensively. The other jolt, of course, was Rockwell's hate ride, which coincided with the Eichmann trial's climactic moment, the riveting testimony by Joel Brand and others concerning the 1944 extermination of 500,000 Hungarian Jews.[38] By itself the Eichmann drama was enough to awaken long-dormant memories. All across America the publicity surrounding the trial bestirred Holocaust survivors into breaking their silence.[39] But survivors in New Orleans confronted the added provocation of neo-Nazi exhibitionism on their hometown streets. The effect of Eichmann and Rockwell barging simultaneously into consciousness was cathartic, to say the least. A tidal wave of returning memory engulfed the city's New Americans, bringing with it that debt of remembrance that, to many survivors, was the only reason they survived. Everything came rushing back now.

Thus, when 20 or so survivors gathered that Monday evening in Ralph's Butcher Shop the air was charged with electricity. Anger filled the store. Solomon Radasky, a Warsaw furrier who had survived the ghetto uprising and subsequent imprisonment in Maidanek and Auschwitz-Birkenau, said, "I come from a family of 78 people. Aunts and uncles, nieces and nephews, cousins. A large family and not one is alive now." He was determined to stand tall. As he stated, "I survived to speak in the name of my family." Everyone else present that evening spoke with equal vehemence and the same sense of loss. They were simply in no mood to listen patiently to reasoned appeals from American Jews about the political wisdom of keeping the peace and avoiding controversy.

Because it was a workday, only five participants from Monday night's gathering at Ralph's met with the full ADL board the following day. The

37. Felicia Fuksman, interview with the author, 2 February 1996.

38. Tom Segev, *The Seventh Million: The Israelis and the Holocaust* (New York, 1991), 323–66; *New York Times*, 25 May 1961, A12.

39. Segev, *The Seventh Million*, 327, 350–1, 361; Rabinowitz, *New Lives*, 193.

delegation included Sam Radasky and Ralph Rosenblat, Max Fuksman, David Meisel, and Leo Scher—all were activists in the tiny survivor community. Some were known for quicksilver tempers. Given the conflicting agendas, the meeting would have been turbulent in the best of circumstances. But the fact that the ADL executive committee made the New Americans wait nearly two hours in the anteroom while sifting through unfinished business only heightened the survivors' resentment. "The ADL didn't take us seriously, like we didn't know nothing," says Solomon Radasky.[40]

The meeting was tense throughout. For ADL Executive Director Irving Schulman, it was "one of the most difficult sessions I have sat through in my five years with the league," as he wrote in his official report.[41] Leo Scher recited his travails in the Czestochowa ghetto and several labor camps. Another survivor gave testimony. Their English was broken, their words thick in sibilants. One American said he didn't understand what they were trying to say. Solomon Radasky raised his hand. "Can I say something?" Sure, he was told. Radaksy's speech often begins softly, with faint traces of Jewish singsong. He is rawboned, with a shock of wavy hair. "Look, I am from Poland. I am from Warsaw." Radasky proceeded to tell his history. "Where I was, about the ghetto uprising, which concentration camp I was in, everything. And I showed him the number on my arm." The man said he now understood but quickly added that the ADL was powerless to keep Rockwell from picketing. The survivors lived in a democracy now. They had the police on their side. Things were done differently in America. Here there was a constitution. It was important to avoid violence and confrontation. They should deny Rockwell publicity. This was the way to handle the situation. This was sound politics. Everybody needed to follow the plan that community leaders had already painstakingly devised.

The lecture didn't go over well with the New Americans. "I started talking rough," Radasky says, who flushes when he becomes angry. "'Well, if you and the ADL cannot do nothing, we gonna do it, because it's not 1939 or '40 or '44. We gonna do it." The room temperature shot up. "We batted heads on this at length," Schulman's report stated.[42]

Several ADL leaders in the room that day were World War II veterans who wore their self-possession easily. But the New Americans, seething

40. Solomon Radasky, interview with the author, 10 September 1995.

41. Schulman to Moise Steeg, 15 June 1961, ADL records, on file at the New Orleans ADL office.

42. *Ibid.*; Solomon Radasky, interviews with the author, 10 September 1995, 3 February 1996.

with frustration over their status as poor relatives, spoke from experiences possessed by few others. "You *gentlemen,*" they said, "you *gentlemen,* what do you know about this stuff? You don't know anything about how to survive. You don't understand the Nazis. We know. Let us handle it." The message could not have been clearer: you might be good Reform American Jews, but your knowledge of the world is not as deep as you think.

"It was like an epee, just slicing them to pieces, like Zorro with a Z," Schulman remembers. "And they did it so finely, I'm not sure the guys knew exactly what was happening. They tried to respond with quiet, sophisticated frustration."

Says ADL board member Barney Mintz, "There was no way of discussing anything with them. They were going to beat the hell out of Rockwell and his men with baseball bats. They didn't care what the law said. In my opinion, they didn't have the sophistication and the understanding of what our constitutional rights were." Mintz, whose department store was firebombed in March 1965 during his stint as president of the local ADL, is an uncompromising defender of civil liberties.[43] "We've got to be purer than Caesar's wife on free speech because as a minority Jews are the first people to feel a backlash." Still, even he admits that constitutional arguments seemed abstract at the time. "They were adamant. 'Did you see it? Do you know what it's like?' It's pretty damn hard to answer that."[44]

It is unclear how the meeting ended. The record indicates that the ADL board persuaded the New Americans to go along with its strategy on a trial basis. But it must have lacked confidence in the agreement, because it called a larger meeting for 5:00 pm the same day in the International House downtown. All day Monday and Tuesday the phones in the ADL office had been ringing off the hook. Rumors were flying right and left. One had it that survivors intended to bring bags of unopened razor blades to the theatre to avoid charges of carrying concealed weapons. "If these people [the storm troopers] gave them any trouble they were going to slice them up with single-edge razor blades," says Moise Steeg, the ADL board president at the time.[45] It is one of those details that several ADL leaders recall vividly but local survivors

43. Detonated in the vestibule by a hand grenade stuffed with black powder, the bomb shattered two large showroom windows. There was no note or letter, nor was the culprit ever found. Bernard Mintz, interviews with the author, 5 October 1996, 6 September 1997; New Orleans *Times-Picayune,* 22 March 1965, 14.

44. Bernard Mintz, interview with the author, 5 October 1995.

45. Moise Steeg, interview with the author, 2 February 1995.

cannot remember at all. "They got a little bit scared," says Shep Zitler of the city's Jewish leadership. "Maybe they were thinking, 'These Goddamn refugees, maybe they're going to start killing. That's all we need in the city of New Orleans. These crazy people just might do it. What can we do?'"[46]

The late afternoon meeting was heavily attended. All of the city's rabbis were present, as were the heads of the Jewish Federation, the Jewish Welfare Fund, the National Council of Jewish Women, and Hadassah. Since it was at the end of the workday many survivors showed up as well. Everyone jammed into the chandeliered, flag-draped assembly room on the third floor. For good measure Moise Steeg invited police superintendent Joe Giarrusso to address the crowd. Steeg calmly set forth the steps taken so far to deal with the crisis and "implored the dissidents to refrain from using violence."[47] Then Superintendent Giarrusso, his barrel chest bulging in his customary dark blue suit, reassured the audience that the police department had matters well in hand. "I just told them we would be right on top of the situation," he says.[48]

The New Americans were still steaming from the ADL meeting earlier in the day. Radasky raised his hand again. He gave a minilecture about Hitler's rise to power and his double game of professing respect for the rights of Jews and gypsies while actually hating both groups—"like people here are hating the blacks." Then he issued the same ultimatum he had put to the ADL board. "You're the chief of police. If you want to help us, you can help us. If not, we gonna take Rockwell off the street."[49]

Giarrusso vowed to arrest anyone who broke the law. But now other survivors were piping up. "I recall a guy sitting in the front row," Giarrusso says. "He got up and got beside himself with what he might do."[50] It was probably Ralph Rosenblat. "Chief, I don't care what you gonna do or how you gonna do it. I cannot be responsible for my blood. I cannot say at that moment how I am going to react if I'm walking on the sidewalk and see Rockwell with his people wearing SS uniforms with the Hakenkreuz." Giarrusso reiterated his threat to arrest law-breakers. "Chief, you will have to do your duty, but I cannot endure. You do your part; I will do my part," Rosenblat replied.[51]

---

46. Shep Zitler, interview with the author, 10 January 1996.

47. Schulman to Moise Steeg, 15 June 1961, ADL records, on file at the New Orleans ADL office.

48. Joe Giarrusso, interview with the author, 12 September 1995.

49. *Ibid.*; Solomon Radasky, interview with the author, 10 September 1995.

50. Joe Giarrusso, interview with the author, 12 September 1995.

51. Ralph Rosenblat, interviews with the author, 1 February 1995, 14 February 1996; Joe Giarrusso, interview with the author, 12 September 1995.

The meeting broke up with another vague pledge by the survivor group to abide by the communal consensus to let the ADL and the police handle the situation. But the ADL still lacked confidence that the agreement would stick. So Schulman and one of his board members showed up at Ralph's Butcher Shop later that night to implore the New Americans to stay calm. They clustered around the deli case near the walk-in cooler where Rosenblat stored kosher meat, close to the chopping block and grinding machine. "People were talking. We were shouting," says Shep Zitler. "I will kill him! I will shoot him!" screamed one survivor, referring to Rockwell.[52] "Trust us," Schulman pleaded. "I pledged my reputation, which is pretty good," he says. "They trusted me 70 or 80 percent, maybe. But they trusted only themselves, and probably not each other." The meeting concluded with further promises to abide by agreements reached earlier in the day. But the situation remained tense.

"It was a bitch," Schulman admits.[53]

Superintendent Joe Giarrusso was not the sort of man who worried easily. A World War II Navy veteran, he had a well-deserved reputation for crisis management. Upon taking office he had wasted little time cleaning up a police corruption scandal. He dealt peremptorily with lunch-counter sit-ins at downtown department stores, arresting civil rights activists for "criminal mischief." With fine impartiality he moved vigorously against the thousands of prosegregation rowdies who had stormed the school board offices in November 1960 following Judge Perez's inflammatory speech in Municipal Auditorium. Giarrusso ordered the fire department to spray blue dye at the rioters' feet and arc it high above their heads, to make it easier to identify participants. Sympathetic toward the crowd, the firemen instead turned on a garden hose at low pressure. Giarrusso was known for plain speaking. "I can piss a harder stream than you're putting out there," he barked.[54]

But the superintendent knew a dangerous situation when he saw one, and he had seen enough of the local survivors' volcanic emotions to sense that the situation contained, as a subsequent police report put it, all the ingredients for "a full-scale riot."[55] Something of the kind had taken

52. Ralph Rosenblat, interview with the author, 14 February 1996; Shep Zitler, interview with the author, 10 January 1996.

53. Irwin Schulman, interview with the author, 2 October 1995.

54. Joe Giarrusso, interview with the author, 12 September 1995; Edward F. Haas, *DeLesseps S. Morrison and the Image of Reform* (Baton Rouge, 1974), 217, 261, 269–71.

55. Rockwell Police Report.

place inside the New York County Courthouse at Foley Square during a hearing on the American Nazi Party's legal battle with Gotham authorities to obtain a speaking permit. Rockwell had stepped up to the television microphones planted in the Rotunda and shouted, "Eighty percent of the American Jews are traitors and should be exterminated."[56] The crowd exploded in a flurry of punches as umbrellas sliced the air. Giarrusso was worried enough to employ personal diplomacy. He telephoned contractor Bernard Bennett with a plea to avoid violence,[57] and he had his oldest brother, Rudy, intercede with Solomon Radasky, who lived a block away. Rudy, like the rest of the Giarrusso boys, also served on the police force, and his son was good friends with Radasky's son David. Rudy came over one night to talk Radasky out of confronting Rockwell. "Do you really want to do this?" he asked.

Toby Radasky Kornreich was listening in the next room: "I remember my father saying, 'Yeah, we want to do this. It's really important. You have to understand it.' And then there was this discussion about World War II and Hitler." Rudy Giarrusso left shaking his head. "Yeah, yeah, you're right," he said. "I'll talk to my brother. We'll take care of it. You don't have to come with your bats and whatever."[58]

The superintendent went all out to prevent trouble. "We watched them the whole time they were here," he says of Rockwell and his men. According to the police report, as soon as Rockwell and his traveling companion, Roy James, landed at Moisant Airport—"at 1:46 pm on the afternoon of Tuesday, May 23, 1961"—the two men came under continuous surveillance. When the Volkswagen hate bus crossed the hourglass straits separating the lakes from the Gulf and reached the city limits, NOPD squad cars picked up the tail from state police units. It was 10 in the evening. Fifty minutes later the graffiti-covered vehicle turned into a restaurant and trailer court on Chef Menteur Highway, and several police cruisers pulled up alongside. The head of police intelligence approached John Patler, the driver, and told him to remove the lettering from his bus, quoting Revised Statutes of 1950, Title 14, Paragraph 7. "We cautioned them in strong words. We told them to take that Swastika off that Volkswagen," says Giarrusso, who was also at the scene. Patler and his companions did as they were told.[59]

Thereafter police surveillance shifted into even higher gear. The

56. Ulasewicz, *The President's Private Eye*, 135.

57. Bernard Bennett, interview with the author, 19 December 1995.

58. Toby Radasky Kornreich, interview with the author, 2 September 1995.

59. Rockwell Police Report; Joe Giarrusso, interview with the author, 12 September 1995.

picketing at the Civic Theater and the NAACP meeting was not scheduled to take place until the next evening, Wednesday, 24 May. So, as a run-up to the evening's events, the Rockwell group drove across Lake Pontchartrain that morning to stage a rally at the Fountainebleu State Park in Mandeville. The police were practically on their bumper all the way across the 26-mile-long Causeway. The commander and his men were forced to turn around as soon as they reached the park because state authorities had padlocked the entrance. The police attention was beginning to make the storm troopers jumpy. On the drive back the driver of the hate bus tried to elude the police tail by speeding down one of the Causeway's turn-around ramps. But the vehicle caromed off the concrete railing while trying to avoid hitting a state police car, and the driver was taken into custody for "reckless driving." The police released the bus.[60]

Even Rockwell was becoming unnerved by the suffocating scrutiny, for later that morning he called police headquarters from his Canal Street hotel room, where he was huddling with his remaining nine followers. He wanted to know how many pickets he would be allowed to put on the streets that night and if there were any restrictions as to lettering. He asked if he would be permitted to make a speech in a public park. The police told him that no more than two pickets would be allowed at both the Civic Theater and the NAACP meeting at the Corpus Christi Church and that he should use his own discretion as to what to write on his signs. But under no circumstances would he be "permitted to make a speech here in New Orleans due to the present situation." Meanwhile, a police detective was listening in on the Rockwell group from an adjoining hotel room. The superintendent was leaving nothing to chance.[61]

Yet one factor in the equation seemed beyond Giarrusso's control. What were local survivors planning to do? The fury Giarrusso had witnessed at the International House meeting the previous day had him worried. Late in the afternoon, a few hours before the movie was due to start, he sent a patrol car to Ralph's Butcher Shop to remind the New Americans that he was serious about arresting anyone caught disturbing the peace.[62]

---

60. New Orleans *States-Item*, 24 May 1961, p. 1; New Orleans *Times-Picayune*, 25 May 1961, p. 1.

61. Rockwell Police Report. According to the police report, the detective overheard snippets of conversation about the use of a shotgun or "about a BB gun in place of a shotgun."

62. Joe Giarrusso, interview with the author, 12 September 1995.

Despite the threats, the gentle admonitions, the pleas and moral arm-twisting, the "New Americans" were determined to do what their gut feelings had been telling them they should do when the news broke that neo-Nazis were coming to town. As the 8:00 pm screening time for *Exodus* approached, 20 survivors piled into five cars and drove to the Civic Theater on Baronne Street, in the heart of the central business district. They were armed, but not with razor blades. "Just baseball bats and pieces of iron pipe, half inch, three-quarters of an inch pipe," says Solomon Radasky. "We was ready to fight."[63]

Giarrusso was prepared for trouble. He had detailed 35 to 40 patrolmen to the vicinity of the theater alone. "We had them all over the place," he admits.[64] The ADL also appeared in force—"eight or 10 of our friends who were fairly physically inclined," as Moise Steeg describes them. Even the local FBI office had set up a surveillance post on the second floor of Barney Mintz's furniture store right across the street from the theater.[65]

Because New Orleans sits on the hinge of two weather systems that are often in collision, downpours can be biblical. At around 7:00 pm a thunderstorm blew in from the Gulf, dumping several inches of rain on the downtown area. In a matter of minutes two feet of water was streaming down Baronne Street in front of the Civic Theater. Groups of moviegoers took shelter inside covered doorways up and down the street. A sodden crowd stood shivering in the theater arcade. Having trouble parking, the New Americans waded to the phone company's arched entranceway down the block from the theater. "It was a pouring day," remembers Ralph Rosenblat. "We was swimming."[66] The rain pelted the downtown area for 45 minutes. Then, almost as suddenly as it started, the storm slackened into a drizzle and the waters parted, as the city's elaborate hydraulic system pumped the runoff into Lake Pontchartrain. A few minutes later a 1961 green Chevrolet carrying six storm troopers pulled up in front of the theater. Rockwell and Roy James climbed out. They were wearing khaki uniforms and red armbands emblazoned with swastikas. The square-jawed commander, his trademark dark cowlick drooping over his forehead, was carrying a sign that

63. Solomon Radasky, interview with the author, 10 September 1995.

64. Joe Giarrusso, interview with the author, 12 September 1995.

65. Moise Steeg, interview with the author, 2 February 1995, Barney Mintz, interview with the author, 5 October 1995.

66. Joe Giarrusso, interview with the author, 12 September 1995; Ralph Rosenblatt, interview with the author, 1 February 1995; Bernard Bennett, interview with the author, 19 December 1995.

read: "EXODUS . . . Written by a Communistic Jew." On the obverse side were the words, "AMERICAN [*sic*] FOR WHITES—AFRICA FOR BLACKS—GAS CHAMBERS FOR TRAITORS."[67]

Everything happened fast after that. Rockwell and James made a few passes in front of the theater, 40 feet in each direction. Then the New Americans emerged from the phone company entranceway and started walking in formation toward the two picketers. The crowd packed under the theater marquee pressed forward. The atmosphere was electric, as if the fast-moving weather front had deposited a charge outside the theater. Bernard Bennett, who had been waiting in the arcade with his cousin Sam Katz, had to restrain a male survivor standing near him, because, as Bennett later testified, "the sight of the Swastika armbands caused an emotional reaction almost uncontrollable." As soon as the New Americans got within 20 feet of the sign-carrying picketers, Giarrusso ordered Rockwell and James arrested. They were charged with violating the same criminal mischief statute under which civil rights lunch counter demonstrators had been arrested the year before.[68]

The police then moved quickly against the four storm troopers parked near the theater in the green Chevrolet, taking them into custody and confiscating a toy gun and a "stiletto-type knife" found under the front seat of the car. Just then the blue and white hate bus drove up in front of the theater. Police had chased it from the NAACP meeting at Corpus Christi Church for "obstructing traffic." Now Giarrusso had its four passengers placed under arrest as well. The entire operation was over by half past eight.[69] ADL Director Irving Schulman, in his official postmortem, characterized Giarrusso's crisis management as "one of the swiftest and most effectively carried out bits of police action I have ever seen." But the arrests also happened to be unconstitutional.[70]

As for the New Americans, they bought tickets for that evening's performance and went inside and watched the movie. Their role in the controversy was a deeply satisfying experience, one they still talk about with great animation. They had confronted a specter that had destroyed their families in the Old World. And, perhaps just as important, they had forced the local community, Jewish and non-Jewish alike, to take them and their experiences seriously. It was the first time since their reception

---

67. Rockwell Police Report.

68. Rockwell Police Report; New Orleans *States-Item*, 25 May 1961, p. 1; Ralph Rosenblatt, interview with the author, 1 February 1995.

69. Rockwell Police Report.

70. Schulman to Moise Steeg, 15 June 1961, ADL records, on file at the New Orleans ADL office.

as refugees that they had been regarded with anything except benign indifference.

Like most real-life crises, Commander Rockwell's 1961 hate ride to New Orleans lacked neat resolution. Because the freedom riders never made it to New Orleans, the ANP was deprived of the publicity bonanza that Rockwell had been counting on from the beginning. Refusing bail, Rockwell demanded that the FBI investigate the NOPD's violation of his civil rights. Then, mimicking freedom riders who were then fasting to protest their own incarceration in Mississippi, the commander and his men staged a hunger strike in the Orleans Parish Jail. Rockwell stayed in jail only until June 1, when he posted a bond and, according to some reports, made a beeline for a local steak restaurant, wiring storm troopers still behind bars that they should end their fast. "Your will and dedication is inspiring white men everywhere to stand up and fight," it read. "Start eating and God Bless you. Sieg Heil."[71]

Beginning on 13 June, the trial lasted two days. The local chapter of the ACLU assumed the defense of everyone except Rockwell, who acted as his own attorney. All 10 Nazi defendants were convicted, fined, and sentenced to jail terms ranging from 30 to 60 days. A three-judge panel overturned the verdict in 1962, however. A year later the US Supreme Court struck down the criminal mischief statute used by New Orleans authorities to stifle civil rights activists and neo-Nazis alike. Rockwell was in his glory. "The hate bus tour of the South has ended, at last, with total victory for the White Man and the American Nazi Party!" he crowed in the pages of *The Stormtrooper*.[72]

After his jailing in New Orleans, Rockwell remained in the national limelight off and on for the next several years. In 1962 he attended a Nation of Islam convention in Chicago, heaping praise on black separatist Elijah Muhammed as "the Adolph Hitler of the Black Man." He toured the college and university lecture circuit, producing tumult and news coverage wherever he went. When street protests against the Vietnam war erupted, Rockwell and his storm troopers pelted "peace creeps" with eggs, paint, and fists.

---

71. American Jewish Committe (AJC), "Neo-Nazi Hate Bus Tours South," in *For Your Information*, AJC Bulletin, VI, 6 (June 1961), 2 (for the quotations), in GLR, JFGNO, TU; New Orleans *States-Item*, 27 and 29 May 1961; New Orleans *Times-Picayune*, 31 May; 1, 2, 7 June 1961.

72. *The Stormtrooper*, 2 (August, 1962), 14; State of Louisiana vs. Seth David Ryan et als, (June 12–14, 1961), 170–951, Section C, Clerk of Court Records, Orleans Parish Criminal Courthouse. See also New Orleans *Times-Picayune*, 13 and 14 June 1961; 29 May 1962; Lombard v. Louisiana, 373 US.

His face scarred from numerous street battles, his finances shakier than ever (most of his income derived from a mail order business in "hatenany" records and "White Power" T-shirts), Rockwell grew morose toward the end of his life. He was depressed at losing control of youthful storm troopers who had been drawn to the ANP by the romance of streetfighting action. They soon grew frustrated with the commander's legalistic strategy of notifying the police of his next move so as to maximize publicity. One of the malcontents was swarthy John Patler, the hate bus driver. Rockwell expelled him from the ANP in April 1967 for fomenting discord between dark-skinned and fair-skinned party members, the latter of whom Patler habitually referred to as "blue eyed devils." Four months later, as the commander was backing his blue and white Chevrolet out of a parking space at an Arlington, Virginia, shopping center, Patler fired several shots from a Mauser semi-automatic pistol through Rockwell's windshield while crouched atop a coin-operated laundromat. The commander stumbled out of the passenger side door and collapsed in a flurry of soap flakes. He died almost immediately of massive damage to major blood vessels leading to the heart. Patler was convicted in December 1967 of first degree murder and sentenced to 20 years in prison.[73]

Rockwell's assassination was about the only aspect of the 1961 hate ride possessing resolution. The tensions aroused by the commander's visit between local survivors and American Jews certainly did not disappear. Surface relations returned quickly enough to customary civility, but the paths of the two communities seldom crossed, and the underlying difference over the meaning of Jewish identity remained as wide as ever. Coming off the self-confidence gained from the Rockwell affair, the New Americans sought to solidify that identity in Holocaust memory. Less than a month after their confrontation at the Civic Theater they filed incorporation papers with the Secretary of State in Baton Rouge under the official name New American Social Club, giving official existence to what had heretofore been merely an informal group of friends. One purpose for seeking a charter was to institutionalize the new survivor tradition of collective action. "When we went through the

73. "Rockwell, U.S. Nazi, Slain; Ex-Aide Is Held as Sniper," *New York Times*, 26 August 1967, A1; "Rockwell Burial Causes a Dispute," *New York Times*, 27 August 1967, A28: 1; "Ex-Nazi Aide Guilty in Rockwell Death; Gets 20-Year Term," *New York Times*, 16 December 1967, A33: 5. See also Bell, *In Hitler's Shadow*, 115–23; Ulasewicz, *The President's Private Eye*, 141, 144. After Rockwell's murder the Nazi and Klan movements achieved a fusion during the 1970s and 80s. See Evelyn Rich, "Ku Klux Klan Ideology, 1954–1988" (Ph.D. diss., Boston University, 1988); and Ridgeway, *Blood in the Face*, 79–91.

Rockwell experience," Shep Zitler says, "we figured out that one individual cannot do anything, but as a group we can do something."[74] But the main motive was to assert a communal Jewish identity based on the collective memory of World War II, for the first order of business was to plan an annual Holocaust Remembrance ceremony that would take place on or near the April 19 anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising. Continuing up to the present, it is one of the oldest such ceremonies in the country.

The city's survivors paid a high price for this new foray into public life. Almost immediately the "New Americans" were torn asunder by schisms and secessions. The small contingent of German survivors, always standoffish toward their Polish counterparts, were the first to leave. Then several Polish survivors dropped out. Club meetings became stormy, at times nearly pugilistic. Language difficulties lay at the root of some of the fights. "There was always misunderstanding because we were having the meeting in English and our people are thinking in Yiddish and to translate from Yiddish to English isn't easy," says Shep Zitler. Thus, as a member of the second generation explains, someone might blurt out, "Your daughter is a dog, when they really meant to say she was in puppy love."[75] Electioneering added new friction. Strong-willed individualists clashed over who was going to be in charge, who was going to be the *macher*, to use the Yiddish term for big shot. "You have a room full of bosses," explains Solomon Radasky's son David, now a lawyer in Kansas City. "When it comes to New American Club politics, there are a lot of people who say it's not worth it, and I'm one of them."[76]

But most of all there were shouting matches over the primacy of suffering and the ownership of memory. "We were competitive people with strong ideas," says Shep Zitler with considerable understatement. Quarrels broke out over what should be included in the ceremony, who should read the kaddish, who should sing the song of remembrance. Increasingly the issue of leadership got mixed up in the contentious issue of memory. Should the president be the most acculturated member of the group, so as to let American Jews know that they, the survivors, had long ago sloughed off their greenhorn roughness? Or should the club's leader be the individual possessing the most authentic Holocaust experience?

---

74. Shep Zitler, interview with the author, 10 January 1996; New Orleans *Jewish Ledger*, 21 July 1961, p. 2.

75. Shep Zitler, interview with the author, 14 August 1995; Martin Sher, interview with the author, 26 August 1995.

76. David Radasky, interview with the author, 26 August 1995.

Solomon Radasky, the Maidanek and Auschwitz-Birkenau survivor, says, "A person that was not in a concentration camp cannot assume the feeling of speaking about the Holocaust."[77] He eventually withdrew from the club.

For that first ceremony, in April 1962, the fledgling club pulled out all the stops. They raised $5,000 for a wood-carved sculpture to be placed in the lobby of the Jewish Community Center, where the annual event continues to be held. And they invited every Jewish organization in the city to send representatives. This was the New Americans' chance to become a social force within the larger Jewish community, to come out of the shadows and into the center of things for a change. But that first audience, like many subsequent ones, was comprised mainly of New American family members. As for the city's Reform community, only the National Council of Jewish Women bothered to send a representative, and she brought her knitting. "We were disappointed," complains Shep Zitler of that first service. "We were treated like poor cousins."[78] The disappointment lasted until the mid-1980s, when the Holocaust started to become a new civil religion and substantial numbers of American Jews began attending the annual Holocaust Remembrance Ceremony. By that time a heavy influx of transplants from the North had helped reinvigorate Jewish traditionalism, creating more emotional space for assertions of Jewish identity. By that time, too, most of the differences that once separated old and new Jews in the Crescent City were beginning to mist over with time, which is how many deep-seated disagreements seem to resolve themselves anyway.

77. Shep Zitler, interview with the author, 14 August 1995; Solomon Radasky, interview with the author, 3 February 1996.

78. Shep Zitler, interviews with the author, 10 January, 27 March 1996.