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'IMPACT WAS TREMENDOUS'

The Black Panthers Of Israel— Who Are They? Where Are They?

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The Black Panthers in Israel — who were they? What was their impact on the society? Where are they now?

At the most there were only thirty or forty of them, young Sephardi adults, most in their late teens or early twenties, members of a youth club in the Musrara Quarter in Jerusalem. Their demonstrations, staged early in 1971 against the Establishment, shook Israeli society out of its complacent smugness that it was coping satisfactorily with its internal social problems. It wasn't.

Their list of grievances — inadequate housing, inferior educational facilities and limited employment opportunities in particular and discrimination against members of the Oriental community in general — found sympathetic response in Israel although their name antagonized many. Actually few of the Black Panthers in Israel knew much about the American movement of the same name. They chose their name for the sake of publicity. There was shock value in using such a name and shock the society they did.

"Their impact on our society was tremendous," says Dr. Eliezer Jaffe, senior lecturer in Social Welfare at the Hebrew University and former director of Jerusalem's Family and Community Services. "They made the government and the public aware of the existence of the Ashkenazi-Sephardi conflict."

The government has been working to bridge the gap for a long time. "However," claims Dr. Jaffe, "the pace has been too slow.

"The government's first reaction to the Black Panthers protest demonstrations was a kind of 'first-aid' response. Soon after the demonstrations, a special meeting of the Knesset was held and an ad hoc appropriation for welfare made. Additional social workers were appointed. Jerusalem got seven new street-corner social workers and thirteen new school social workers. All received two-year appointments. However, contract renewal is not auto-

"On a more basic level, the Prime Minister set up a special committee of seventy key people to advise her on ways of helping underprivileged youth." She is the chairman, indicating the seriousness with which she views the problem. The full report and findings of this committee have not yet been made public.

The Black Panthers brought to public notice the housing needs of the disadvantaged, of the families with large numbers of children who live crowded in one or two inadequate rooms. They pointed out that no longer can Israel have an "either-or situation." Just as housing for new immigrants is an important State priority, so is housing for the disadvantaged veteran Israeli a priority of similar importance. Both must be provided for. The Ministry of Housing responded by drawing up a five-year housing plan which takes into consideration the problems of young couples and multi-children families as well as those of immigrants.

Similarly, the army changed its policy and began accepting potentially rehabilitable young men despite teen-age criminal backgrounds. It also allocated Gadna (a pre-military citizenship training program) instructors to work with street-corner youth.

In non-governmental circles there were also "interesting spin-offs" as Dr. Jaffe calls them. Young couples organized to get housing. Social workers became more militant about the services they were forced to provide and demanded more tools such as diagnosticians, more foster homes and more beds for the chronically ill and aged.

Ashkenazi students woke up to the problem of Sephardi Jews and held mass meetings, exploring the basic issues. Many of these students also supported the municipal social workers who had been laid off when they had demanded additional welfare funds. In addition, two communes of approximately 12-15 students were set up in a slum area of Jerusalem; the members

are working with the disadvantaged youth of that neighborhood. This program has support from the Hebrew University whose president has publicly stated that the university should become more involved with the community.

"Although, as an organization, the Black Panthers have more or less ceased to operate, their impact on the society was — and still is — substantial. Even now there still are sporadic demonstrations, predetermined and planned, organized by small hard-core inner groups who refuse to be rehabilitated. And whenever a demonstration is announced, hundreds come out to support it," notes Dr. Jaffe. "reminders that there are still those who feel that the government is not moving fast enough."

Today, the majority of the original Black Panthers have found their way into society. Some are enrolled in courses at a school for physical education instructors, others are at a cooking and catering hotel management school. Some have entered the army or joined the Merchant Marine. Others are working.

"In short," concludes Dr. Jaffe, "the Black Panthers brought to our society some glimmer of understanding that our social problems, when left to fester, endanger everyone and that our national battlefronts today are not only located on the (Suez) Canal, but also in the streets of Katamon, Musrara and Hatikva." (These are slum quarters in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv.)