

# CUTTING EDGE

BY EDWIN BLACK

## Nate Perlmutter Speaks Out

His name headed the assassination lists of the leading hate groups. His organization epitomized the undaunted Jewish citizen, unwilling to mince words about anti-Semitism. His leadership was fiercely independent, a model and a beacon for Jews throughout the world. His name was Nathan Perlmutter, executive director of the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith. Last week, Nate lost his long bout with cancer and died at the age of 64. When that happened, the Jewish community lost more than just a great leader. They saw the end of an era.

Nate was the last of the great Jewish American leaders in the tradition of Stephen Wise. Forceful, charismatic, intellectual and eloquent, Perlmutter became the nation's foremost and most unmistakable defender of Jewish liberty. Several weeks ago, shortly after coming out of the hospital, Nate sat in his upper east side apartment, his wife Ruthie at his side, and straddled by telephones, file folders and newspaper clippings, and the other tools of his trade. Physically, he was so weak he could not walk without help from his daughter. Mentally and spiritually, however, he was as incisive a man as the American Jewish post-War experience could hope to create. His private observations and insights may now be told, and this is what he said.

First he explained a choice made almost forty years ago when he graduated from New York University in 1949. "Corporate and criminal law didn't appeal to me," recalls Nate. "It was just after the War, and I really wanted to make a contribution to the Jewish community. I decided to do something about anti-Semitism."

So in 1949 Nate joined the Anti-Defamation League's Denver office. During the next fifteen years, he rose to become director of the Detroit, Miami and New York regions. Except for an eight year interim with other Jewish organizations, Nate continued to distinguish himself in the ADL, and was named national director in 1979, a position he held until he died. Associate national director ADL director Abe Foxman observes, "During Nate's years, he could have become a millionaire as a corporate or criminal attorney. He chose instead to devote himself to the cause of Jewish civil rights. That is sacrifice -- a lifetime of sacrifice and devotion."

During those years, Nate has seen American Jewry change radically. "At one point, American Jews were grouped by their neighborhood," explains Nate, "and later according to their ideology, and then by their synagogue. But today, organizational life has become our neighborhood and our ideology. Indeed the organization has become our synagogue. It is the structure around which active elements among American Jewry derive a sense of community. It has given us what association with a synagogue and what the ideological variations in Zionism did not. This is now the main way Jews come together -- regardless of geographic location, religious practice or economic status. It is the most important unifier our people have today."

More than a sense of community, Nate insists Jewish organizational life had "given us political sophistication and political weight. Our voice is far more resonant," says Nate, "than one would think 2.5 percent of the American population rightfully or logically should have. That voice resonates in the White House, and is heard by every Presidential aspirant."

"All this was literally invented by America's political system, and especially the electoral

college. Indeed, because we are geographically distributed as we are," he argues, "we are seen as the political doorman that says 'come in' or 'stay out' in such states as New York, California, Florida and Illinois. Hence, we are listened to."

Nate admits that as more Jews identify with organizations, two negative tendencies emerge. "First, we see a major effort to embrace liberal reforms, which is fine as a function of social justice. But when these reforms are increasingly leftwing reforms, even when they serve to entrench anti-Israeli causes, we're making a mistake. So, yes, apartheid is a terrible system, and I'd like to see South Africa's government change tomorrow. But I cannot therefore become an ally of the African National Congress, an enemy of Israel and therefore an enemy of Jewish life. Similarly, I see some elements in the Jewish community supporting the Sandinistas, even though they are strong advocates of the PLO, strong Marxists and intensely anti-Israel, and therefore an enemy of Jewish life."

"This is nothing less than a bleeding heart syndrome," continues Nate. "Hey, politically, we're hemophiliacs. Fortunately, mainstream Jewry is immune to these dangerous siren songs from the left. But this tendency is growing and it does concern me."

Organizational Jewry's second shortcoming is indeed a trait of all organizations -- petty bureaucracies that can be less than charming. The example of Elie Wiesel was discussed. Wiesel was subjected to a whispering campaign when after his Nobel Prize acceptance, he remarked about disadvantaged Palestinians. "Organized life compacts and permits us to focus our strength, and direct it in a way which as individuals or members of little shteebles, we never could," asserts Nate. "And it then develops bureaucracy, and you therefore see organizations competing meanly with each other, and people putting each other down. But then again, nobody ever said that an open democratic system is neat."

Another major change in American Jewish life, according to Nate, is the rise of a more independent Jewish press. "I think it's been only the last two or three years," he says, "but something very good is happening there. I remember when the Jewish press was a handout press. The most exciting things one read were photograph captions of people receiving awards. But increasingly we see independent Jewish newspapers developing top writers and stories, and they have already had a major impact on the quality of the community. At the same time we see changes in Federation leadership, younger people, and they are unaware that the Anglo-Jewish press is doing something really exciting. So federation papers are joining this movement."

Perhaps nowhere has American Jewry changed so dramatically as in its relationship to Israel, insists Nate. The catalyst: Israel's handling of the Pollard affair. The result: "A sudden emboldening of the more establishment Jewish personalities in organizations to publicly differ with Israeli leaders on policy," declares Nate.

"This change has occurred just over recent weeks," he adds. "I'm not proud, but I'm not embarrassed either to have been amongst the very first. My remark that the Pollard affair began as stupidity and quickly sank into ineptitude was carried on the front page of the Washington Post. That's something I would have never said under any other circumstances, not even when Israel went beyond that 30 or 40 mile line in Lebanon. But the ADL was hardly alone. Witness the approach of the Conference of Presidents, the American Jewish Congress and many others."

Nate identified as a second conflict Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir's recent efforts in Washington to alter American refugee status for Russian emigrants. "Our motivation is not speak of political difference with Israel. On that, most of us in organized Jewish life still defer to Israel. Rather, we are concerned that Israel is inflicting wounds upon itself, and we then have to speak up."

"All of a sudden one understands, there's a vast difference between political office holders

in Israel and the Zionist dream," he continues. "When you see politicians protecting themselves, as in the Pollard case, you are emboldened to speak more plainly to the caretakers of that dream. Suddenly we no longer confuse the occupants of today's political structure with the dream of the Ben Gurion. The change? The American Jewish community has shown it can no longer be taken for granted. Israeli politicians are apt to therefore be more responsible. That has not weakened our relationship with Israel. That has strengthened it."

Asked his greatest unfulfilled aspiration for the Jewish community, Nate replied at once, partly in Yiddish: "Jewish identity in the absence of anti-Semitism. It's very easy to be Jewish when everybody is anti-Semitic; you're constantly reminded that you're a Jew; it's not even your choice. Hitler started the most successful membership drive Jewish organizations have ever known. When you are defined as a Jew, when the Jew-haters are trying to kill you, it's easy to retain your identity. But it's a very difficult achievement in an open, security society. The more we succeed, the more endangered that part of our personality becomes."

Nate pinpointed Jewish education for the young as the only answer. "We still have to instill in Jewish youth a jealous pride, a genuine love of being Jewish -- whether or not anyone is persecuting them," urged Nate. "Someone else will have to figure out how. But that is now our great priority."

Nate forbid me from writing about his long, agonizing illness. But this much can be revealed. To see him shortly before his death, a withered version of his earlier self, was heartbreaking. To listen to his stunning wisdom, his sharp mind and to see him interrupt our conversation with constant telephone calls to ADL offices and contacts as he continued the agency's pressing business until the last moment, to see all this was proof that leadership starts and finishes with a great intellect.

So many eulogies, memorials, prizes and sincere wishes have been prepared for Nate, that my words are unneeded. History will make its own statement. But when it does, we will realize that with the passing of Nate Perlmutter, we have seen the last giant of American Jewish leadership. Indeed, Nate is already in the ground, yet even now we are still reading his words, still affected by his wisdom, and we are still following his lead.

*(Edwin Black is the author of The Transfer Agreement: The Untold Story of the Secret Pact Between the Third Reich and Jewish Palestine (Macmillan), winner of the Carl Sandburg Award for the best nonfiction of 1984 and nominated for the Pulitzer Prize. His weekly syndicated column is published by Jewish newspapers in 50 cities throughout the United States and Canada.)*

## Never Another Israel-Egypt War, Cairo Envoy Tells B'nai B'rith

MONTEVIDEO — The Egyptian ambassador to Uruguay told members of B'nai B'rith here that there will never be another war between Egypt and Israel.

The main speaker in the monthly forum sponsored by B'nai B'rith District 28 (Uruguay), Baraka indicated that all foreign troops should leave Lebanon "in order to move towards a peaceful solution."

He denied that the existing peace between his country and Israel is "cold," explaining that "Israelis are more frequent travelers than Egyptians." He added that "so many more of them visit Egypt than Egyptians visit Israel."

"We are happy that they come and we receive them warmly," he said.

Ambassador Baraka noted the fact that he was the keynote speaker at a B'nai B'rith meeting is an indication of friendship and concluded with his declaration that Egypt and Israel will never fight again.