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INTERVIEWEE: MICHAEL DOBKOWSKY  
INTERVIEWER: LAWRENCE BARON  
NOVEMBER 2, 1983

LAWRENCE BARON: I'm interviewing Michael Dobkowsky who's an Associate Professor in the Religion Department at Hobart Smith College. He's the author of the book published by Greenwood Press, *The Tarnished Dream*. It's a history of American anti-Semitism. As well as the author of a book on American policy towards refugees during the Holocaust. It's a collection of documents called *The Politics of Indifference*.

Michael, in your book *The Tarnished Dream*, you argue that anti-Semitism in America is deeper and more pervasive than people had felt earlier. A number of historians have argued that it's sort of tangential to American politics. Could you elaborate on that?

MICHAEL DOBKOWSKY: Yes, I think . . . let me just begin by saying that I think the problem of American anti-Semitism has probably been understudied by historians. And that's interesting when compared to the tremendous number of books and articles that deal with the subject in terms of the European Jewish experience. When I began looking at the problem I found that a curiosity and wanted to look at why that might be the case, and there's some reasons that I think are fairly obvious and then some are not so obvious. The obvious reasons are that the American Jewish community has achieved a significant degree of success in terms of entering into the mainstream of American society on all levels – social, political, economic – in terms of education and so on. And one may infer from that that if anti-Semitism was a problem in the past, it couldn't have been too great a problem because Jews have, quote unquote, "made it" into American society. I think that's one factor.

A second factor might have something to do with developments in higher education. It wasn't really until the post-World War II period that Jews were entering into a graduate school to gain PhD degrees in the Humanities and the Social Sciences. Therefore, there weren't too many Jewish scholars interested in history, for example, and American History more specifically, and that area of anti-Semitism remained somewhat undiscovered, or under examined.

One more factor, was I think, in general, American historians in the 50's and in the early 60's tended to view American society as a society that was essentially moving forward in a progressive sort of way; that conflict was minimal in American society, and that essentially all groups eventually were able to find their place in American society.

When I began to look at the problem, I found – at least in terms of my own research and in terms of my analysis of my research – that anti-Semitism in America was more pervasive than the literature suggested that it was. It was very pervasive in terms of popular culture. I'm now talking about the period from roughly the Civil War to roughly the 1930's, which was the period I basically concentrated on in my book. And when I looked at the popular literature as well as the high culture literature, I found a fairly consistent negative stereotypical projection of Jews, on almost every level. What kinds of sources did I look at? Things ranging from dime novels, popular pulp press, to more popular kinds of literature – magazine articles, newspaper articles, that kind of thing. Even extending into what we would call "high culture".

I think that can't be argued with; I think if one looks at . . . although it's very difficult to say that it's possible to assimilate all of American popular culture, and I certainly am not making a claim that I did either. But I think it probably can't be argued with, that the image of the Jew in American popular culture was not a positive one. The difficulty, in terms of interpreting that data, is related to the issue of what effect does that pervasive negative imagery have on how Jews were treated in American society. Is there a direct correlation, for example, I guess an extreme position would be: there is a direct correlation between the perception that a society has of a particular ethnic or religious group and how that group will be received and treated in that society. Others would say that may not be the case. That in theory, one could have a negative image of a particular group and

in practice there would be very little direct relationship between that perception and how that group is treated.

I try very carefully in the book not to make the case that there is a direct correlation, because I don't believe the case can be made. All I was trying to do, and all I think I would be comfortable stating, is that common sense tells me that there must be a relationship between image and reality. How much will depend a great deal on external factors, on regional factors, on the period of time we're talking about, on the local incident that might bring anti-Semitism to the surface in a local community. But, my point is that without understanding how Jews were perceived in American society, one can't understand, for example, the interest of many of America's major universities after World War I and the early 1920's to initiate quota systems, or other kinds of restrictive residential or social quotas that were initiated in America in the late nineteenth and into the early part of the twentieth century. You can't understand the quotas without understanding the underlying perception of Jews in American society, of Jews generally.

LB: How do you think the image of the Jews, or whatever anti-Semitism there was, affected the formulation of American immigration policy when we decided to start restricting immigrants after World War I?

MD: I think that one could make a case that there is a fairly direct correlation. Now, let me just step back for a moment and say – as you know the immigration policy of America, the quota systems that were initiated beginning in 1921 and finally implemented in 1928 – were not directed solely against Jews. Were in fact directed at southern and eastern Europeans and favored northern Europeans and essentially Europeans. However, after having said that, it seems to me that there is a direct correlation between the negative perception of Jews and the interest in – I might even say enthusiasm for – immigration restriction. For many of the leaders of the immigration restriction movement, Jews were the primary target. For others, Catholics might have been the target. Southern Italians might have been the target.

But I'm saying, for many of the people, Jews were the major target, or certainly, a major target of that legislation. The reason is related to how Jews were perceived. Jews were seen . . . Eastern European Jews were seen – and these would be the Jews that were coming to America in the hundreds of thousands beginning around 1881 – were seen as unproductive, they were seen bearing an alien religion, carrying an alien culture and religion with them. They were described as being not hard working, not good material for assimilation, un-American, bearing with them alien ideas, whether they be religious ideas or political ideas, and the political issue became a very important one after World War I.

More specifically Jews were seen as being predisposed to radical, Marxist politics, revolutionaries. Now if you have these kinds of images, very pervasive in American society, I think it's obvious that many people would be inclined to say, "Yeah that makes some sense. We're admitting hundreds of thousands of people. They're not going to make good farmers, they're going to congregate in cities, particularly cities on the Northeast coast, primarily New York City. They're not Christian; they're interested in revolution. They were the Russian revolution". The fact that Leon Trotsky spent some time in the Bronx didn't help matters, you know.

This kind of image made it possible for people like Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, who didn't like Catholics and didn't like Jews, to be very interested in supporting immigration restriction. So I think there is a correlation.

LB: How did the situation change during the 1930's? Did it get worse? After all, Hitler comes to power in 1933 and there's a renewed desire to immigrate among German Jews, who were not excluded, necessarily, under the quotas? Did things change for the Jews during the '30's because of the Depression?

MD: I think things got worse. It's a commonplace, but I think it's probably true, that during times of economic stress the best elements in our personalities are suppressed and the worst come out. It's understandable. I don't need to describe the difficult times that America was in in the 1930's, very difficult economic times domestically. And on the international front, the war clouds were becoming more and more obvious. When you combine that with existing legislation in place concerning immigration, quotas in place, and as you indicated, the need for a haven for Jews, certainly after 1933, and each passing year that need became more and more obvious, you have a situation where the pressure is on to keep people out and the need is for people to get in. And I would be willing to argue that the situation that potential Jewish refugees faced from Germany and Austria, and that would be the case in the 1930's, was directly linked to his generally negative perception of the place of Jews in American society.

I know that historians shouldn't engage in "what if" questions, but I'll just throw it out and apologize in advance. What if we had a very different perception of Jews? What if the image of Jews was such that we saw Jews as being a very positive attribute in the American melting pot, something to be desired, not something to be shunned? Would our policy have been changed in the 1930's? Would those people who were inclined to want to pressure the Congress to change the immigration laws because they realized that the situation in Germany was potentially catastrophic? And there were people already in the mid-1930's and certainly by the late 1930's who realized that something was going on here that was a little bit different than anything that we had experienced in recent years.

Would it have been more possible for those people to convince Congress that maybe Congress needed to step back, even for a temporary period of time, even for one year, and loosen up the immigration laws? Would it have been more possible for people to begin to pressure the President, or for Roosevelt himself to have been inclined to initiate the pressure on Congress? I think possibly "yes".

Now there's no way to answer it but I guess what I would say is, the situation that potential Jewish refugees from central Europe faced was a result of a series of pieces of legislation that were passed before the issue of refugees became prevalent, and they were suffering the result of hard luck. When they most needed to arrive it was least possible for them to be accepted. It's interesting about stereotypes. I mentioned before that it's hard to make a direct correlation between image and act, and maybe we shouldn't make that correlation.

But suddenly in the 1930's we read in the popular press, in the *Saturday Evening Post*, in newspapers, about German Jews. We read very negative things about German Jews that are very reminiscent of things that were written ten or fifteen years ago about eastern European Jews. And the irony is, that it was sort of common knowledge that German Jews had very little to do with eastern European Jews, in terms of their religious behavior.

German Jews, the stereotypes tell us, were middle class, highly educated, and so on. You begin to read in the press that German Jews are coming to America. They are arrogant; they are inassimilable for different reason, namely because they think they are superior to American society, they are replacing native Americans in the job market, which was clearly not true; they are coming by the hundreds of thousands or by the tens of thousands, which clearly was not true; that you needed a German dictionary to walk around the streets of New York City. If you said "Herr Doctor" in a bus everyone stood up – these kinds of jokes, stereotypical statements were said at a time when people were desperate. The situation was so difficult that they clearly could not tolerate this kind of negative perception. The reverse should have been the case.

LB: You mentioned Roosevelt before and if he had pressured Congress. For most Americans, Roosevelt is perceived as having assembled a coalition of ethnics, especially Jews, of Blacks, of the out-groups, who supported him and really built a Democratic coalition for the next thirty or forty years, yet it seems that he did very little to change immigration policy. How do you account for that, especially after 1939 with the increasing numbers of Jews, and other groups, that were being displaced from Europe?

MD: Well, it's difficult to account for it and this is a problem for many people. As you know, Roosevelt was seen as the savior of American society, the American Jewish community in particular lionized Roosevelt for a long time. But in recent years people have been looking at the man, the man as President, more carefully and have been coming away with an opinion that . . . tarnishes his image, in a sense. I am not a scholar of Roosevelt; I am not an expert on Roosevelt. What I guess I'm reading from people who have been looking at the situation, who are trying to analyze the situation, is that Roosevelt was clearly a consummate politician. He attempted to surround himself with groups, and interests that would help him and help the Democratic Party get elected – very skillful at that. He, for the most part, shied away from very controversial issues, and when he made the mistake of entering into a controversial issue – like the Supreme Court packing incident – he learned his lesson and backed off. He was very careful about that.

I think that Roosevelt was a decent human being; I have no reason to believe that he harbored any overt anti-Semitic sentiment; I think he was a decent human being. I think, however, the issue of refugees clearly was not primary on his agenda. For most of the '30's and even for the early part of the '40's, now one could argue that it should have been, and I would be one who would argue it should have been, that here we were dealing with human life and what could be more important than human life? I guess though, I don't want to be in the position of defending him and I don't want to be in a position of saying this was a monster who fooled us all.

All I want to say is there were countervailing pressures on Roosevelt. Clearly, the Depression in the '30's was one; World War II was a massive headache, to say the least. And he was a person who delegated authority; maybe his greatest mistake, in a sense, when it comes to the refugee issue. He decided that this was not going to be an area that he was going to take active, day-to-day, interest in. He left it to the State Department for the early part of the war.

And either he assumed that people were acting responsibly and didn't know, or he knew that they weren't acting responsibly but because of domestic pressures and international pressure decided to not press the issue. And, in fact, it could be argued that he wasn't pushed or pushed hard enough by domestic forces. I began by saying that Roosevelt was a great politician and I think politicians, for better or worse, react to political pressure. And if the political pressure coming from the isolationist segment of American society, for example, was seen as greater than that coming from the interventionist side, or from the humanistic side, in the case of the refugees, he probably – given the kind of person he was, the kind of politician he was – would lean toward the isolationist side. When it became clear that something unprecedented was happening, and then the pressure began growing, he made some changes, but late in the game, very late in the game.

I think – standing back from the issue as a historian looking at the period – I think it is reasonable for people to make judgments. He was the President of the United States. That gives him a tremendous amount of power and responsibility. I think it is reasonable even in retrospect, to say that he did not utilize that power or that responsibility in the best way on the refugee issue. I think that's appropriate to say as long as we couple that with some understanding of the complexities of the issue and the tremendous domestic and international pressures that he was under, in addition to the physical pressures that he was under around 1943, when he became a very sick man.

LB: You mentioned that he delegated responsibility to the State Department. Is there evidence – I know you've worked with the documents on refugee policy – is there evidence in State Department policy after 1940 that there were people who were, perhaps, less liberal making policy on this issue and that's one of the reasons so few people were accepted into the United States and there really was never any collective policy for refugees, it was always on an individual basis?

MD: I think there is some evidence for that; I think you're right in saying that we can't speak of a collective policy. I think it would be wrong to say, even, that the State Department had an anti-refugee bias. Many people in the State Department, or some people in the State Department, might have had an anti-refugee bias. OK? But I would be careful about saying the State Department. The State Department is the butt of many criticisms and maybe most of them are deserved.

Your point is . . . I think we need to be very careful. When we look at the State Department we look at some people in influence on the refugee issue who were less than liberal, I think your term. People like Wilbur J. Carr. Or J. Pierpont Moffat, Breckenridge Long. I'm not saying that they were anti-Semitic; I'm not even saying that Breckenridge Long was anti-Semitic – the person whose most usually accused. I'm saying that they were less than sympathetic. I think it's up to people to determine for themselves, when they look at the evidence what that actually means, "less than sympathetic".

Clearly for people like Carr and Moffat and Long, they interpreted their jobs to be the guarding of America from possible subversive, negatives element of the European population that might make their way over here in the refugee flood that they say as imminent. They might have been wrong on all of those points; I think they were. Nazi fifth columnists, so to speak, were a minor problem in the overall scheme of World War II, a very minor problem. For Breckenridge Long, though, that was a major problem. Again the irony of accusing German Jews of being potential Nazi fifth columnists, I'm not sure that Long understood the subtlety or the ridiculous nature of that point. They interpreted the law strictly; that was a decision that many of them made on the policy level in Washington. Yes, we have evidence. We have documents coming from those people and people like them back to the Counselor officials in Europe saying, "Be very, very careful. Interpret the law as strictly as you can; within limits in most cases, but be very, very careful".

One can imagine a different kind of instruction going out to the Consular officials of Europe. "This is a desperate situation. Be as generous as you can, within the law". I think most of us today would have preferred the latter. I think Breckenridge Long didn't read it that way. That's the negative kind of side. On the positive side, we have evidence, for example, Consular officials in some of the European capitals, in Germany in particular. Some of these officials who were on the line, were processing visas and so on, apparently were tremendous humanitarians, to the extent that they could operate within the bureaucratic red tape of the law here and the pressures that the Nazi State was imposing in Europe; they did a very good job. At least many refugees say that they did. Names are named. Other Consular officials are not described in those sympathetic terms. They are described as being very callous, very official, very bureaucratic, not feeling. So I think it's a mixed bag. I think unfortunately the people on the higher levels of policy making in the State Department were less than liberal.

LB: What about . . . there's one final accusation that I'd like to look on refugee policy that's been made, and recently been made with a great deal of controversy in the American Jewish community, which is that one of the problems was that the American Jewish community, after all – I forget the percentage who voted for Roosevelt – should have expected some favors from Roosevelt, didn't exercise their influence, they were afraid to challenge Roosevelt, they were afraid to move on this issue for a number of reasons. Is there any truth, or is that sort of retrospect soul-searching?

MD: I think there's some truth to it, an again it's a very complicated, controversial issue. And I guess I would come down on this point in a similar vein to what I said about Roosevelt. It's not black and white. Those people who say that the Jewish community is guilty and responsible, I think are over-stating the case. Those people on the other side who are critical of the community that worked last years, and who are inclined to defend the American Jewish community, are probably over-stating the case on their side. I think I would agree that the American Jewish community didn't do enough. No one did enough. It didn't do enough for a number of reasons. I think there is the question of knowledge and understanding of what was happening. Clearly – we now know – that information was available about the Holocaust, as we're now calling it, as it was occurring, or fairly . . .

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MD: Clearly – we now know – that information was available about the Holocaust, as we now are calling it, as it was occurring, or fairly shortly after, for example, concentration camps were actually put in operation or annihilation camps. But the ability of people to assimilate that information, to make sense of it, is something that I think we need to take into consideration. Secondly, I think we have to look at the state of the American Jewish community in the 1930's and the 1940's. And here is where I would refer back to what I was talking about at the beginning.

The population of the American Jewish community in the '30's and '40's was roughly four, four-and-a-half million. It was a population of immigrants and children of recent immigrants. It was a population that had just begun to move out of the inner cities, and the working class, and beginning to move into what we would call the middle class. It was a population that was beginning to move into higher education. In other words, it was a population beginning to feel like it was part of American society.

But it had a very clear memory of the anti-Semitism not only of Europe – if we're talking about the immigrant – but of the anti-Semitism of America. This is not a distant memory for the American Jewish community in the 1930's. One could argue, and I would like to argue very strongly, that one of the most pernicious results of anti-Semitism is the . . . paralyzing impact it had on Jews in the '30's and '40's, and maybe even to some extent today. Jews self-censured themselves.

Now maybe one could say they were wrong; nothing would have happened. They could have spoken out more clearly, forcefully; there was no real danger. But I don't think that was true. I think they felt there was a danger; I think there probably was a danger. I think anti-Semitism in the 1930's probably reached the height that it's every reached in American society. The Father [Coughlin's?] were floating around the country on the radio. The [Bund?] was in operation. The Depression was in full swing and people were nervous. So there was a kind of self-censorship, holding back.

Now, we can criticize. We can say this was an unprecedented tragedy, as people have said; Auschwitz is an unprecedented tragedy. How could you be afraid that you would lose your job, you couldn't get your kid in Harvard? You were comparing apples and oranges; what were they afraid of? No one expected a program in the United States. That's retrospective history. They were afraid. Let me just say one more point. I think if criticism is to be leveled, however, I would be comfortable leveling it on the American Jewish leadership. This is where I would disagree very strongly with people like Lucy Davidowitz who have come out in recent articles in *Community* magazine and other places, defending American Jewish leadership.

I think that leaders, if they say that they are leaders, can and should be held accountable. The masses, so to speak, can be timid. Leaders are not permitted to be timid. Steven Weis, who is sort of the titular leader – Rabbi Steven Weis – has been criticized a great deal. Melvin Urofsky in a recent biography says that's a little bit unfair. He could be criticized only for one thing – his naiveté. And I think maybe Urofsky's right. He believed Roosevelt when Roosevelt told him we're doing everything we can. He believed him in 1935, 1936 and in other words he kept believing him. Eventually that argument has to collapse; there comes a point when you can't believe any more and he should have stopped believing.

The American Jewish Committee was supporting a very tentative kind of quiet, behind the scenes, traditional Jewish response to oppression. They were nervous, everyone was nervous, but I think one can criticize leadership more than followers. And I think that's where I would come down on that issue.

LB: Thank you for granting us this interview and again note that you have a number of works on this: *The Politics of Indifference* which is University Press of America, and also *The Tarnished Dream*, Greenwood Press. Thank you.

MD: Thank you very much.

LB: How'd it sound, Josh? Several years ago a book called *Incident in Massena*, by Sol Friedman came out and caused quite a stir in the North Country about the charge, apparently during a Jewish holiday, that a number of Jews had possibly kidnapped a young Christian girl, and this led to the questioning of the Rabbi of Massena. The book that came out really made it seem like a major anti-Semitic incident had occurred in Massena, of the sort that had led to programs, to riots, in Eastern Europe. Could you comment on how you view that book, as a historian, and what the significance of that incident may be for American history as well as American Jewish history?

Michael Dobkowsky: I am aware of the book, I have read the book, and I've read some reviews of the book. I have no extensive first-hand information of the case, although I did look through the papers at the American Jewish Committee, and there were some letters and clippings that deal with the case there. My impression is firstly, that . . . how should I say this generously? The book exaggerates the importance of the incident; in fact, the pseudo-incident. It tries to make the case that this was potentially a horrible event, and I guess actually pushes the point that in America, no less, there should be even the hint of a blood libel is a very, very serious thing. Now I think, clearly, any hint of blood libel or any accusation of a blood libel is a serious thing, and I don't want to say that it wasn't serious, on that level.

However my impression after reading the book and after reading some of the responses to the book, my general impression of how the incident was handled in Massena, locally, and the importance, for example, of the whole issue of blood libel, I won't say a mountain out of molehill, but not worthy of all the attention. Clearly there were people – and there may still be people in America today – that believe in blood libel. But this is a very, very, very, very minor anti-Semitic mythology in American history. Even the professional anti-Semites of America don't spend any time on that issue; that's not an issue for them. So it's not a major issue. I guess I would say that it was unfortunate that anyone at any time, at any place, would think that that might be part of a Jewish ritual. But that it was a very isolated case; it was handled reasonably quickly and reasonably responsibly and does not deserve the kind of attention that was focused on that case. Putting Massena on the map for many of us who did not know where it was before. So that would be my overall impression. It's not an important piece of anti-Semitism in American history.

LB: OK. Pat?

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*Transcribed by jCook, Fall 2005*