



Christians and Jews should publicize Soviet oppression, says local speaker

The repression of Jews and Christians in the Soviet Union appears to be "worse than it has been in 10 years, worse than it has been in 15 years."

THAT assessment was made by Sister Ann Gillen, a Catholic nun from Chicago, in an address in Mobile sponsored by the Mobile Area Jewish-Christian Dialogue, the Mobile Ministerial Association and the Mobile Catholic Archdiocesan Commission on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs.

Sister Gillen, who is executive director of the National Interreligious Task Force on Soviet Jewry, told the Mobilians gathered at Ashland Place United Methodist Church that she learns of conditions in the Soviet Union from persons she has met on trips to that country.

THE SHORT, middle-aged nun, wearing a blue pants suit, explained the National Interreligious Task Force was formed in 1972 by religious leaders concerned

about reports that Jewish people in the Soviet Union were "threatened, not with annihilation as during the Holocaust (the murder of millions of Jews by the Nazis in the World War II era), but with assimilation, with disappearance in the Soviet culture ... and threatened with continued onslaught of anti-Semitism from time to time, orchestrated by the state, and still living endemically in the subculture of the people."

AT THE time the task force was organized and she was named executive director, Sister Gillen said, "I was not optimistic. I thought of so much ignorance, so many bitter memories that people of the ethnic and religious groups have from the past."

She was told by one religious leader, "If you can organize and sensitize 2 percent of a group and they are educated and willing to be articulate, you can change the direction of history."

SAID THE nun, "In the past eight years of working

with Jewish groups in various countries, in various cities, I have found that it is true. It can be done."

From 1948 to 1970, she said, 7,000 Jewish persons left the Soviet Union "under their own steam, with their own effort because not much was being done in the West.

"THERE WAS no organized program similar to what we have had in the past decade when 250,000 people have been able to leave. On the strength of that, 50,000 non-Jews have been able to leave as well."

In the Soviet Union, according to the speaker, "the constitution restricts the people to the right of religious worship. That means no religious education, no evangelization, no charitable works. All of these are either eliminated or taken over by the state. Four-fifths of the houses of worship have been closed."

ON A 1978 visit to the Soviet Union, Sister Gillen talked with Jews "who had decided they were not going to send their children to

school to learn that they were second- and third-rate citizens. They were going to teach their children themselves.

"They began a kindergarten ... and they were teaching their children mathematics, chess, Hebrew, music, art. That went on for about a year or a year and a half until last December. That was closed.

"**THERE IS** a big clamping down on Jewish people who want to reclaim their identity, who want to give their children the roots of their own identity, some knowledge of their own heritage.

"There is nothing about Jews in the Soviet encyclopedia, nothing about Jews and their contribution to civilization, certainly not anything about Jews and the Bible."

Christian children, like Jews, receive pressure from their school teachers to reject religious beliefs, according to the speaker.

SHE SAID Soviet leaders are "really upset by the fact that even after 60 years" of communist atheism, "45 percent of the people are still religious, still believe. So they are concerned that their atheistic curriculum isn't working properly."

Sister Gillen talked about the repression of the Ukrainian Catholic Church in the Ukraine republic in the Soviet Union.

She said, "They had 5 million members before Russian control. In two years, between 1939 and 1941, all the monasteries and convents and church schools, publications, charitable institutions, lay organizations and three seminaries were closed. Church property was nationalized." (When World War II began, the Soviet Union united eastern Galicia to the Ukraine, and all church activity was suppressed.)

THE UKRAINIAN Catholic Church officially was dissolved. The hierarchy of the Ukrainian Church, however, is saying "there still is a Ukrainian Church even if it's underground."

In describing what happened to the Ukrainian Church, Sister Gillen named atheism as one factor. The Soviet leaders "don't want any group that has any commitment to some outside element like the Vatican."

She named Russification as another factor. The Soviet leaders "really don't want people speaking Ukrainian or Hebrew or Yiddish. They want people to speak Russian because it is easier then to produce the Soviet man, the Soviet woman who will think in that same mentality."

WESTERNERS

have difficulty obtaining addresses of worship sites of Jews, Christians and Moslems in the Soviet Union, according to Sister Gillen.

During a tour when she and others were in the Soviet Union, however, "we found the addresses ourselves," she said. "We went to see those religious places.

"We could not go out into the countryside though to see the other places where we will sometimes hear that Baptists struggle six hours with the KGB (secret police) to keep a little prayer house open."

If Christians and Jews in the Soviet Union are to regain their religious and cultural identity, according to Sister Gillen, "we have to use the freedoms we have to throw the spotlight of public opinion on what's happened over there."

THE

INTERRELIGIOUS Task Force, she said, "invites both Jews and Christians to pray together, to politic together and to publicize together because we feel that

in view of the past and our non-communication, when we work together on a problem like this we

are saying human rights and human family in a special way while the Soviet Union is still trying to divide people."