

The Palm Beach Post

Commentary: As we turn 100,

Anti-Defamation League has more work to do

By Abraham H. Foxman

For many of us, it is hard to imagine a time when Jews were openly discriminated against in America.

But there was a time in recent history when the doors were closed to anyone who had even a Jewish-sounding name. There was a time when being Jewish meant automatic and enforced exclusion from universities, hotels, resorts and social clubs across the country.

This was as true in South Florida as it was anywhere else.

In May 1957, the Anti-Defamation League released a first-of-its-kind national survey, which concluded that about one in every four resort hotels routinely discriminated on the basis of religion. Florida ranked high on the list. Through the efforts of ADL and others, these statistics dropped to 9.8 percent of all national resorts in 1964, and to 2.1 percent of winter resorts in 1965.

How was this important achievement in the fight against prejudice and discrimination accomplished? Regular surveys of hotels — and public shaming of offending establishments — were just one piece of a public relations, legislative and legal campaign.

In 1955 ADL successfully advocated for a Florida law prohibiting hotels and resorts from advertising that a prospective guest “is not welcome” or is objectionable because of religion. Also, based on an ADL survey reflecting that three out of 10 Automobile Association of America-approved hotels in Michigan barred Jewish guests, the league publicly challenged AAA to withdraw its approval from hotels or motels that denied accommodations to Jews. ADL broke through the religion barrier at such well-known resorts as the Camelback Inn of Phoenix, Ariz., The Cloister of Sea Island, Ga., and The Breakers in Palm Beach.

In 1963 ADL lobbied for what would become the landmark 1964 Civil Rights Act. Following the act’s historic passage, ADL filed the first complaint of religious discrimination under the new law.

The complaint alleged that The Breakers had violated the Civil Rights Act by refusing to reserve rooms sought by applicants whose names sounded Jewish. Our complaint was based on testing conducted over a three-month period in 1964 and 1965. Six pairs of letters requesting room reservations were sent to the hotel, each set containing a letter signed by an individual with a Jewish-sounding name and one signed by an individual with a non-Jewish-sounding name.

In each case, The Breakers refused the request of those with “Jewish names,” claiming a lack of space, and suggested that arrangements be sought at two other Palm Beach hotels that accepted

Jews. The letters from non-Jewish-sounding names received replies confirming their reservations, adding that “everything possible would be done to make your visit most enjoyable.”

At first, The Breakers balked at the notion that it routinely discriminated against Jews. The establishment claimed that it had provided rooms to more than 100 Jewish guests, including Wall Street banker Bernard Baruch and department store heir Bernard Gimbel. But eight months after the complaint was filed and a federal investigation was completed, The Breakers changed its discriminatory policy. The resort pledged “to provide services, facilities and accommodations and to serve food to all persons on an equal basis without regard to religion, national origin, race or color.”

ADL, which is celebrating our centennial in 2013, returns this month to The Breakers for our annual meeting and gala, as we have done for many years since the glass ceiling that kept Jews out of that resort, and many others, was shattered.

It is gratifying that a hotel that once routinely discriminated against Jews today plays host to a large Jewish clientele,

and even welcomes the annual meeting of ADL’s National Executive Committee, our highest policymaking body. Most people have forgotten the history. It is a measure of how far we have come as a society.

But the battle for equal treatment continues. We still receive a steady stream of complaints from Jews alleging discrimination in the workplace and schools. There are lingering concerns about private clubs, including on Palm Beach, that may engage in bias but do not qualify as public accommodations and so are not subject to Civil Rights Act protections.

So the fact that we are able to gather at The Breakers to celebrate our centennial is cause for celebration — but not an occasion to rest on our laurels. In the 21st century, we are confronting new, virulent forms of anti-Semitism, on the Internet and in conspiracy theories blaming Jews for virtually all of society’s ills. Recent surveys have revealed that at least 12 percent of Americans are still deeply infected with anti-Semitic beliefs. As ADL enters our second century, there is still much work to be done.

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