

HOWARD'S END

WHY A LEADING JEWISH STUDIES SCHOLAR GAVE UP HIS ACADEMIC CAREER

A FEW DAYS BEFORE HOWARD EILBERG-SCHWARTZ was scheduled to launch the Jewish studies program at San Francisco State University, he was persuaded by the school's director of human resources to attend an all-day seminar for select faculty members, students, and local Jewish leaders. It was to be Eilberg-Schwartz's introduction to the school's Jewish community, and, understandably, he was nervous. As part of the program, participants were asked to respond to a series of provocative questions by moving to a designated area of the room. When the question "How central is Israel to Judaism?" was posed, he self-consciously took a spot among the smallish group that answered "Not terribly." And when attendees were asked if they thought the statement "Zionism is racism" was anti-Semitic, Eilberg-Schwartz—who sees the movement to create a Jewish state within the broad context of European colonialism—shuffled over toward the corner designated "No." This time he stood virtually alone.

"I remember people coming up to me afterwards and saying how disappointed they were that I had been named head of Jewish studies," Eilberg-Schwartz recalls now, more than two years later. "That's when I knew I wasn't in sync with the local Jewish community. From that moment on, I was branded." Indeed, that fateful morning in the summer of 1994 would set the stage for a year of conflict between Eilberg-Schwartz and the local Jewish community, one that would culminate in his precipitous departure from the university—and academia altogether—in the fall of 1995. The forty-one-year-old ex-scholar says that the pressure to defend Israel and blunt his critique of Jewish traditions made him feel more like a Hillel rabbi than a professor. For their part, critics on and off the campus accuse Eilberg-Schwartz of being insensitive to the unusual environment at San Francisco State, a deeply politicized school with a vocal

BY JONATHAN MAHLER

union. When the ten-foot-by-ten-foot work was unveiled in May, it was greeted with gasps from many students, like himself, for Israeli intelligence. At one point, Bazian and a band of twenty-five students stormed the offices of the school newspaper, the *Golden Gate*, after its editors refused to publish an unsubstantiated quote from a student claiming that he had been a campus spy for the Anti-Defamation League. "The mural was just one more chapter in an assault on Jewish students at San Francisco State," said Doug Kahn, director of San Francisco's Jewish Community Relations Council (JCRC). The JCRC, along with a handful of local Jewish agencies, played a key role in the creation of the school's Jewish studies program; as a result of cuts in state support for education in California, the administration had approved the launch of the program only on the condition that its entire annual budget of some \$100,000 eventually be covered by community dollars. Naturally, the prospective donors had their hopes for the program—in particular, that it would provide a dose of pride to the school's embattled Jewish student body. As Kahn puts it, "For those of us who had seen this recurring pattern of anti-Semitism, the decision to start a program of Jewish studies meant the potential leveling of the playing field." This attitude, admirable though it may seem, generated tensions almost immediately once Ellberg-Schwartz was chosen to lead the fledgling program. Community leaders suggested that, at least in public, Ellberg-Schwartz emphasize the distinctiveness of Jewish traditions—an approach that ran counter to the professor's scholarly instincts. "Whenever I was in a situation where I was expected to make a case that Judaism was unique, everything in me wanted to resist that

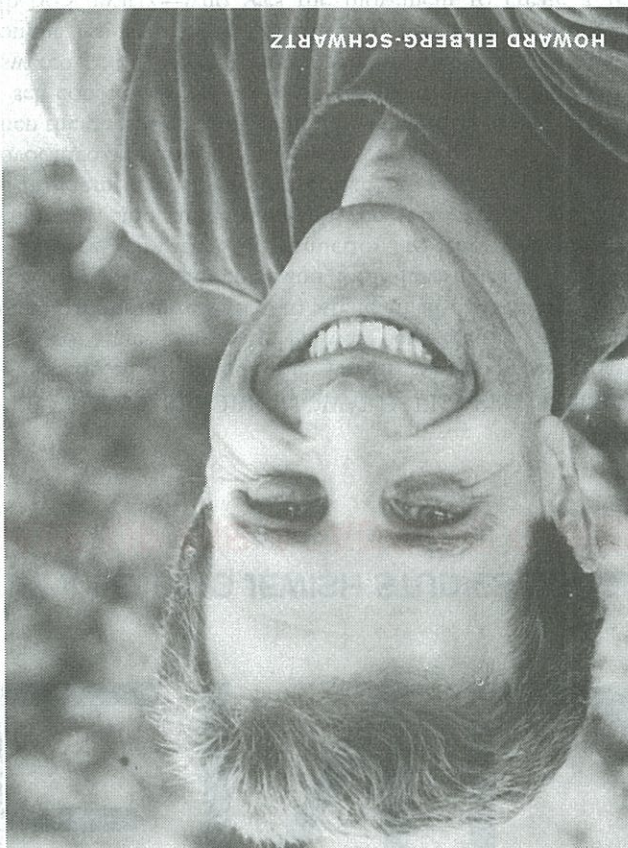
surprise: Local Jewish leaders had chronicled a number of disturbing activities on campus dating back to the mid-Eighties. In April 1992, for example, Palestinian students protested a Hillel gathering memorializing the Holocaust by distributing fliers equating Israeli treatment of Palestinians with Nazi treatment of Jews. And in 1993 student-association leader Hatem Bazian led a yearlong attack on

long-simmering ethnic tensions at San Francisco State bubbled to the surface only weeks after Ellberg-Schwartz agreed to become the school's first director of Jewish studies. It was the spring of 1994 and the student government had just commissioned a local artist to paint a mural of Malcolm X on the wall of the student

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at the heart of this disagreement is a quarrel over the role of Jewish studies in the academy and the prerequisites for leadership of such programs. It's argued that the director should be a "role model" to Jewish students—an impossible task, they contended, for someone outside the faith. For Ellberg-Schwartz, whose scholarly investigations into Jewish identity had only made him more skeptical of many community beliefs, the San Francisco State community's demand that he transform himself from rebel to role model proved too much to bear. But the tale of Ellberg-Schwartz is about more than campus politics. It's also a lesson in the difficulty of reconciling two often contradictory impulses within the multicultural academy: the desire to reach out to other communities while also strengthening feelings of identity among one's own people. Ellberg-Schwartz ultimately felt there was no way he could walk this tightrope—and so he simply cut the cord.

Francisco State, the incident came as no surprise: Local Jewish leaders had chronicled a number of disturbing activities on campus dating back to the mid-Eighties. In April 1992, for example, Palestinian students protested a Hillel gathering memorializing the Holocaust by distributing fliers equating Israeli treatment of Palestinians with Nazi treatment of Jews. And in 1993 student-association leader Hatem Bazian led a yearlong attack on