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Report to 78th Meeting of American Jewish Committee:  
Commission on International Relations. 1984.

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The 78<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of the American Jewish Committee, tape 5.  
Commission on International Relations.

Leo Nevas:

We're meeting this morning and we have a tight schedule, so we would appreciate your settling down as quickly as possible. I know that if you look at your program, I don't look like [Jordy Sacks?], but he had to leave down, and may be back this evening, so I'm substituting for him this morning. I'm Leo Nevas. Under the direction of Dr. Marc Tanenbaum, the new Director of the International Relations Commission, the department has embarked on some new and vigorous programs, or rather not necessarily new, but revitalized some of our programs, and have been very energetic in [01:00] moving forward. You have before you a summary of some of the activities of the department, some of the recent ones. And I know that particularly since I'm only a second-stringer here, and a substitute, you don't want to hear from me. But I'm going to let you hear from Marc Tanenbaum for a brief summary of some of the highlights of the recent activities

of this department, before we go in to listen to the two main speakers. I do tell you now that we will try to move along rapidly, so we can give them plenty of time for their discussion, and to give you an opportunity for some questions after they've concluded. Marc, would you please cover some of the highlights for us?

**Marc Tanenbaum:**

Each of you has [02:00] before you a copy of this document of international briefs, which is a summary of the highlights of our program and activity on a number of levels, in various parts of the world. I hope that you will take the time during the course of this annual meeting to read through the document, and let us hear from you about any areas of concern that you may want to have further information about, or would want to become involved in. We are intensifying, strengthening the work of the International Relations Commission, and our lay body plays a decisive role in shaping the policy and program direction for us, and we are interested in having persons, especially those who have competencies, experiences, in the various regions of the world in which we are now actively engaged [03:00] programmatically. I think it is clear that on our agenda, our major preoccupations of course, as it has been with the Foreign Affairs Department, now through the International Relations

Department, and for AJC generally, is a profound concern over the security and welfare of our three million brothers and sisters in Israel. And in addition to our ongoing program in that area, we have been sponsoring, under direction of my colleague Dr. George Gruen, who directs our Israel and Middle East desk, a series of high level academic conferences, which are reported in this document, on the Persian Gulf, and early one on Lebanon. It is an effort to get into a penetrating understanding of the dynamics of that area, with a view toward helping us be more relevant and useful in relating to those concerns of the Jewish people, as well as the American government. In addition, our activity with regard to [04:00] our brothers and sisters in the Soviet Union, as well as other oppressed peoples there and Eastern Europe is of profound concern to us, and under the really extraordinarily committed leadership of Leo Nevas, who serves as Chairman of the Task Force on Soviet Jewry, we have been engaged in a series of significant efforts, which become all the more significant in light of the decline in East-West relationships, which requires all the more creative strategies and movement to seek to keep alive the issue of the human rights of the Jews in the Soviet Union. There is a report on a recent consultation that Leo Nevas led in Washington of our top leadership, who met with Ambassador Walter Cecil, with people on the National Security Council, the

State Department, the White House, exploring what avenues might be open to us, what new strategies might be developed in terms of helping support the right of the [05:00] Jews in the Soviet Union and others to leave, as well as to maintain their religious and cultural identities within the Soviet Union.

I want to take just one moment to refer to the two major areas in which we have moved with particular intensity during the course of the past nine months since new leadership has assumed the direction of the International Relations Commission. First has been our work in Western Europe. We have had a series of missions to Western Europe, one building on activity that was started by Bill [Trostin?] some years ago, and we now have probably the most extensive exchange of relationships between the West German government and any voluntary organization, certainly Jewish organization, in the United States. It is not telling tales out of school that on May 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup>, our President, Howard Friedman and Bill Trostin will be meeting with Chancellor Helmut Kohl of West Germany and members of the West German Foreign Ministry, and [06:00] other officials, to discuss a whole range of German-American relationships, as well as specific issues outstanding between the German government and the Jewish community. Recently, we concluded what for us we believe was a path mark mission to France, led by our president.

We met with President Mitterrand and his senior aides. We met with Foreign Minister Cheysson and six members of the French government, the cabinet, as well as with all of the major Jewish leadership in France, as well as with the French archbishop, Cardinal Lustiger, the chief rabbi of France. And out of that has come a series of quite significant activities. Since that meeting took place, in which we discussed a whole range of foreign policy concerns, East-West relationships, Soviet Jewry, Middle East concerns, the role of France in Africa, the relationship with Israel and Africa. [07:00] Out of that has come a series of meetings which we have sponsored at AJC in New York, with Madame Édith Cresson, who is the minister of commerce, with whom we had a very productive session with AJC leadership and members of business, commerce, and the media. We've had a meeting with the minister in charge of women's rights of the French government, and an advisor to Foreign Minister Cheysson on the issues of UNESCO.

We are planning to intensify our work, because there are great new opportunities for us in terms of interpreting our concerns and seeking to find alternative strategies as the East-West deadlock continues, and we need to find new ways in which to advance some of the interests which have been the hallmark of AJC for many years. And so we will be looking forward to

defining a series of priorities for missions to other countries in Europe, and in particular with pan-European bodies. We now have invitations from the Council of Europe, from the EEC, the European Parliament, to have delegations to meet with [08:00] them to discuss the findings, the studies, the insights that we have developed as a result of what, for me, are the historic work of the Blaustein Institute on human rights, international human relationships. And we're planning this September to have some meetings in Strasbourg with key people in the European Parliament and in the EEC and elsewhere in the pan-European bodies. Our other major concern, about which we're going to hear more today, is the growth in our relationship with Jewish leadership in Central America, which is going through a period of great difficulty and stress and turmoil, and (inaudible) which requires great solidarity, and support, and understanding from us in the context of the broader problems of Central America. We're going to hear more about that today. But I would counsel you, and urge you to take this document with you and look at it, and we would benefit greatly by any comments, any responses that you might have, as this program unfolds [09:00] during the course of the coming weeks and months. Thank you.

**Leo Nevas:**

Thank you, Marc. Your usual insights form -- you've given us an overview of some of the work of the department, and we're grateful for it. I've been asked to make two announcements before we get into the remainder of the program. At 2:30 this afternoon, at the session which will be held in this room, Abba Eban, Foreign Secretary of Israel, is going to speak to us. This is not on your program, but we hope you will come. Also, our -- did I make a mistake? Oh. On Sunday at 12:00 noon, a march for solidarity with the Soviet Jewry is to start at 66<sup>nd</sup> Street and 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue. And the participants in this annual meeting have been invited to participate in that march. [10:00] It will end at Dag Hammarskjöld Plaza, the UN, with a rally there, and we hope that a significant number of you people, and of all of those attending these meetings will be able to participate.

Our first speaker on our formal program today is Moises Sabbaj of Guatemala City. He is the Vice President of Fedeco, which is the Federation of Central American Jewish Communities. Marc Tanenbaum addressed their convention last year in Guatemala City, and established an ongoing relationship with him. And they have continued with their consultations since then. The organization represents some 10,000 Jews who live in Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Panama, and Nicaragua. He will speak to us as the official spokesman of that body, and he will

tell us something [11:00] of the situation of the Central American Jewry under the present unsettled political and social conditions. Mr. Sabbaj? (applause)

**Moises Sabbaj:**

Thanks. My dear brothers and sisters, some of you are already my friends. And I expect that by the end of this interesting meeting, all of you will become my friends. I'm going to speak this morning about the Central American crisis and its impact on Jewish communities. First, I would like to thank the American Jewish Committee for the especial interest it has shown in inviting Fedeco to this reunion. It is possible, and I will try to present you with [12:00] the latest thinking in relation to Central America, and the impact on Jewish communities in that area. Fedeco's membership has reached the conclusion that the destiny of its communities is intimately related to the foreign, as well as to internal politics, of the United States. Therefore this important influence must be mentioned in this presentation. The Central American crisis is discussed in all circles and in every level of our society. It is imperative that we examine the real origins of this crisis, in order to reach those conclusions that will allow an adequate solution. The strategic position of the isthmus no doubt constitutes a major factor of importance for this area to be in a severe crisis. [13:00] In his message



to a joint session of Congress of April 27<sup>th</sup>, 1983, President Reagan recalled the strategic value of the area. He recalled that during World War II, Hitler had already recognized this was a strategic area. He said that German submarines sank more (inaudible) in the Caribbean than in the Atlantic. And this was done without having a naval base anywhere in the area. President Reagan also reminded Congress that two-thirds of all foreign trade in petroleum passes through the Panama Canal and the Caribbean. In the case of a European crisis, at least half of the American supplies for NATO would also go through this area by sea. And the Soviet Union [14:00] has clearly recognized the vital importance of Europe's interest in the area. There are signs that the United States are beginning to recognize this importance too. It is therefore unnecessary to further insist on the geopolitical importance of this area.

The Central American crisis is views by different sectors in different ways. There are those who view it as just one more link on the East-West confrontation. And they attribute the revolution only to the direct interference of the Soviet Union and its Caribbean satellites. Others attribute the origin of the crisis to the extreme inequities existing in the matters of access to land, opportunity, and justice. But we must examine the problem from a realistic point of view, and not [15:00] by

one influence, by political convenience, political convictions, or personal convenience. Now, let us set the record straight. Inequities in access to land do exist in Central America. Inequities in access to opportunity do exist in Central America. Inequities in access to justice do exist in Central America. Violation of human rights do exist in Central America. These sad truths, however, are not exclusive of the Central American area. They exist in many other countries and regions of the world. But the fact is that in Central America, they do exist. And there is a crisis. So we must ask ourselves [16:00] a very important question: why? These unfortunate conditions have existed in our area for many, many years. And there has never been such a crisis as we have today. Can it be that the people in our area, all of a sudden, spontaneously, have become conscious of this truth of conditions? That may be possible. But then, why have other people in other areas not reacted in a similar way? Including such areas where the inequities are even greater. In Guatemala, my country, for example, there is poverty. But people do not starve to death as they do in northeastern Brazil, [17:00] where the hunger problem has reached alarming proportions. You must be aware of the countless assaults on supermarkets in that country, where the only purpose of the raiders is to obtain food to survive. But Brazil does not have a crisis problem like the one we have in Central America. Why not?

Mexico, which is the only country geographically located between the United States and Central America, also suffers from the same truths and conditions as we do in Central America. However, in Mexico, there is not such a crisis as we do in Central America. Why not? Are the Brazilians or the Mexicans more ignorant of their conditions and problems [18:00] than we Central Americans? It cannot be so. Then again, we must ask why is there a crisis in Central America? The answer, as we see it, is due to a conscious desire and interest of the Soviet Union to destabilize the area in order to gain political objectives, and to directly threaten the security of the United States. But do not misunderstand us. The foregoing does not mean a denial of the existing inequities. As Jews, we could not, and neither could you. As Jews, we care. And as such, we care for life and justice. If not, we would not be Jews. [19:00] As Jews, we have the responsibility to promote the wellbeing of humanity. We must, however, act in an intelligent way. There is no doubt that the Soviet Union exploits the existing inequities to promote subversion for its own end. And sadly, it also exploits the goodwill and liberal feeling of Jews everywhere. So that many of us here and elsewhere, in good faith, support subversive movements that only bring greater misfortune to the people of Central America.

Let's look at a historical example. An American administration backs the Sandinista Revolution, and helps to overthrow a repressive regime, which had been imposed [20:00] formally by another American administration, and the American Jewish community supports its government. But the Nicaraguan people are worse today than before. And the Soviet Union, which suppresses all forms of Jewish life, even against its own laws, has now a foothold on the land bridge of the American continent. We believe that the policy followed by the Americans on both occasions mentioned above in Nicaragua, was unfortunate. The Nicaraguan people's problems were not solved, and the American people have today a serious situation caused by their own doing, even those it was done in good faith, and in the name of the highest human values. [21:00] The Democratic Party's policy clearly stated in Senator Christopher J. Dodd's response to President Reagan's speech of April 27<sup>th</sup>, 1983 in the name of all Democratic senators, stated, and I quote: "We will oppose the establishment of Marxist states in Central America. We will not accept the creation of Soviet military bases in Central America. And we will not tolerate the placement of Soviet offensive missiles in Central America, nor anywhere in this hemisphere. Finally, we are fully prepared to defend our security, and the security of the Americas, if necessary, by military means."

This is certainly a very reassuring policy, coming from [22:00] important Democrats. But we must not forget that it was a Democratic administration which allowed the Sandinista to come to power. And today, a Republican administration is involved in the mining of Nicaraguan ports. In the first place, a policy action was followed which did not anticipate future events. In the second case, an action was supported which violated international law. Recently, American policy toward Central America has been reexamined from a bipartisan point of view. We believe that foreign policy should not be a partisan issue. [23:00] It should not even be a bipartisan issue. What it should be is a nonpartisan issue. However, as we mentioned in the beginning, we should be realistic. And it is not realistic to expect a nonpartisan policy. The United States, because of internal politics, experiences constant opposition within both parties. Those party disagreements produce a foreign policy which has been inconsistent. In spite of this party difference, we must hope that the United States will formulate a Latin American policy of short, medium, and long term, supported by both parties. It is imperative and urgent [24:00] to do so. It is necessary for the American people to know that such a policy is clearly defined. It is necessary for the people of Latin America to know that this policy is clearly defined. And it is necessary for the Soviet leadership to know that this policy is

clearly defined. With no intention of being alarmist, we must state our feeling that the security of this hemisphere is at stake. And the security of all of us who live in it. It is necessary to act swiftly and firmly in order to adequately solve the Central American crisis, and to stop finally and completely the Soviet advance in this hemisphere. [25:00] Let us remember, when one spoke of the Soviet menace. Let us remember when one spoke of the Soviet-Cuban menace. Today, we have to speak of the Soviet-Cuban-Nicaraguan menace. Must we one day speak of the Soviet-Cuban-Nicaraguan-Salvadoran-Guatemalan-Honduran-Costa Rican-Panamanian menace? Who do you think would be next?

It is true, as clearly stated earlier, that there is injustice and other inequities in our area. And the United States must contribute in order to protect its own interests, to the solution of this problems. [26:00] It must not fall into the Soviet trap. In conclusion, it is not true that this revolution is a consequence of poverty. Poverty that we Jews believe should be abolished. It is not true that this revolution is a consequence of the lack of opportunity. Opportunity we Jews believe should be available to all. It is not true that this revolution is a consequence of the lack of justice. Justice that we Jews believe should always exist. It is not true that democratic elections are a solution to the problem. Elections we

Jews support. The crisis is generated by this tragedy of one of the two [27:00] superpowers, which has a representative in the Caribbean quite close to Central America. We are in the middle of a battle between the superpowers, each trying to assert its hegemony to retain all of the strategic positions in the area. Sunday, while we are still in New York, the people of El Salvador will be casting their votes in order to determine who shall be their next president. Great segments of the American people and its government have openly supported one of the contestants. They have also openly opposed the other one. The crucial question is, what will happen [28:00] if the contestant not supported by the United States should win? Will American democracy operate? Will the wishes of the people of El Salvador, as clearly expressed at the polls, do us better, and support us? Or will the people of El Salvador be chastised by cutting off all assistance, because they chose a government that is not what the United States wanted? What do you believe the Soviet Union would prefer? The same as you? Or the opposite? Think about this question when you hear of the returns from this election. We do not know the outcome of this election. Neither do we dare make a prediction. [29:00]

I would like now to say something of the impact of this crisis on the Jewish community of the isthmus. In the first place,

there's no problem with the Jewish community of Nicaragua. This community does not exist anymore. However, the remaining communities would suffer a tremendous impact should any one of these countries fall. The effect on the remaining countries would be instantaneous. And the Jewish communities would be the first to feel its consequences. These communities, because of the fact that they are Jewish, would be subject to immediate repression, simply because the PLO would gain substantial influence. [30:00] The socioeconomic status of the members of the community would also make them targets, if not as Jews, certainly as individuals. The communities would undoubtedly disappear. This is a historical fact. The Jews of Central America are not great landowners. They are neither among the wealthiest families in their countries. And they do not have great political influence in the area. There are, to our knowledge, no Jews in the military structures of Central America. The pattern of the Jewish communities of Central America is quite similar of the American Jewish community. First generation immigrants, dedicated mainly to trade and small industry. The second generation [31:00] is constituted of a large number of professionals and progressive entrepreneurs. Because of our social status, the Jewish communities will be the first to feel the impact. The entrepreneurs would have to assume a defensive position, and the professionals would lose their



independence of action. The atmosphere of liberty that brought our ancestors to these countries is disappearing. And this alone gives us great food for thought. We would suffer deterioration in our economy, our security, and socially. We as Jews would also suffer from political violence and plain hoodlum-ism. This has already affected us, percentage-wise, much more than the rest of the community. [32:00] We believe that it is vital for these communities to survive. Remember that each one of these countries represents one vote in the international forums. And today, they have overwhelmingly supported Israel. Without a Jewish community in these countries, we do not know how these votes would be cast in the future. It is a proven fact that Jews contribute greatly toward the wellbeing of the countries in which they live. There are many examples. You here in the United States have greatly contributed in the direction in a praiseworthy manner. On the other hand, countries that lose their Jewish population regret it. [33:00] Spain, after 500 years, has not yet recuperated completely from the expulsion of her Jews in 1492.

We must recognize realistically the origins of the Central American crisis. We must also recognize the dangers to the security of the US in the continuance of this crisis. Let us touch on only one of the real tangible and imminent dangers, the

refugees. Actual and potential, but we'll truly look to the United States for new hope. Today, we talk of hundreds of thousands of Central American refugees. A few of those have already come to the United States. The question is, are you prepared to absorb [34:00] the millions of Latin Americans that would come walking to the United States? No boats are needed for this trip. Only shoes. And in lieu of them, bare feet are enough. There have been serious estimates as to the number of refugees that would flow. The figure has been set at 25 million. Do you not consider this a great threat? Even if only from a demographic point of view. It is imperative to foresee this, and in different ways to solve the problem. There are people, ignorant of the way of thinking of the American people, who suggest that a great wall should be built around the [35:00] southern border. Technology for such an enterprise is available. We know who has the best technology. This could be a solution, of course. However, those who think along these lines forget that the United States has always been a refuge to the persecuted. And that the wall solution would never be approved by the American people. A better solution would be to examine this problem objectively, leaving the internal political rivalry aside in order to establish a long term consistent foreign policy. Fedeco suggests to the American Jewish Committee that an ad hoc commission be formed to keep in constant touch of us,

[36:00] so as to be completely informed as to what is going on in our area. Having this credible information available to you, you can greatly contribute to a solution of our present problems. However much some of the ideas and opinions we have expressed here may coincide with positions taken in the US, I must emphasize and insist that you recognize that we are not the agents of any party or group. These are the opinions and conclusions of Jews who live in Central America. As Jews, we are asking the support of Jews, to help to solve the crisis. Do this in the great tradition of those values that makes Judaism eternal, [37:00] namely its ethics and its morals. As a result, you will also be guaranteeing the security of the American people. Thank you.

(applause)

**Leo Nevas:**

Thank you very much, Mr. Sabbaj.

**FI:**

That concludes this presentation.

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