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FOR JTA

NEW FILM ON POPE JOHN PAUL II IS POSITIVE
CONTRIBUTION TO CATHOLIC-JEWISH RELATIONS

by Marc H. Tanenbaum

(Rabbi Tanenbaum, director of international relations of the American Jewish Committee, served as Jewish consultant to the film on Pope John Paul II.)

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A just-completed film on the life and waxx career of Pope John Paul II is, in my judgment, good for the Jews. The two-and-a-half film was previewed last week before a predominantly Catholic audience in New York's Lincoln Center and received sustained applause.

Titled simply, "John Paul II," the film dramatization will be shown in Vatican City on Nov. 12, and will be aired over CBS-Television network during February 1984 (exact date not set yet.) According to Allen Morris of Taft Enterprises Company, co-producers with Alvin Cooperman-DePaul Productions, the Pope John Paul film will in time be shown throughout Europe, Africa, Asia, and Latin America in diverse languages and therefore its potential impact is global in scope.

Acted brilliantly by the British actor Albert Finney, this Papal lifestory contains a number of dramatic scenes of special interest to Jews. The script deals forthrightly with the pervasiveness of anti-Semitism in pre-World War II Poland, the horrors of the Nazi holocaust, and the response of Pope John Paul II both as youth, prelate, and later as Archbishop of Cracow.

The first encounter with crude anti-Semitism takes place in a cafe in Wadowice, the Pope's birthplace. A drunken Polish policeman

named Moljek rants about the oncoming Nazis:

"We beat the Germans in 1918. We beat the Russians in 1920. We did the work of ten, each of us did. We ate starving dogs--more value to us than the Jews, I can tell you."

Karol Wojtyla, then a teen-ager, identified strongly with his close Jewish friend and classmate, Theodor Krawich. In a subsequent poignant scene, Karol and Theodor are picnicing in a ~~meadow~~ meadow, and Theodor talks with pain about being taunted as "Jew Boy," by other Polish youths who tore his coat. Karol, in a burst of anger responds:

"It's ignorance! The exact opposite of what Christ taught! Feel sorry for him. He's ignorant."

Then Theodor says: "I can't wait to leave this place...You've been like a brother to me, Lolek. I mean it."

Catholics, and other Christians, will be able to understand the bestiality of the Nazis as Jews understand it - perhaps even he helped to identify with Jews and join in solidarity with Jews - as a result of such brutal encounters with the Nazi Governor General of Poland, Hans Frank, who arrogantly proclaims to Archbishop Sapieha his plans for the ~~same~~ fate of Poles and Jews:

"Poles, like Jews, are Untermenschen, sub-humans. They have no right to life. But we intend to use some of them...the Slavs, not the Jews...as a work force of the German Reich...Every educated person will be regarded as an enemy and marked down for destruction. Jews will be done away with." ~~Stundant~~ We shall make the name of Poland a long-forgotten name on the ancient maps."

The most explicit - and moving - involvement of Karol Wojtyla ~~takes~~ in the fate of Jews takes place in two scenes. One is in a stone quarry where he comes to the defense of a Jewish laborer from Auschwitz

and saves his life as a Nazi guard is about to beat him to death. The other portrays Wojtyla joining an underground Polish group that saves the lives of a Jewish family. There are several long dramatic scenes showing the future Pope handing out forged passports and leading the Teitlebaum family through Nazi guards to safety.

Capping that emphasis in Wojtyla's life under the Nazis is a scene where his girl friend complains that he does not have enough time for her. She says: "Everyone knows what you're doing...taking Jewish families out of the ghettos, finding them places to hide. Is that what's keeping you away?"

That sensitivity to Jews, his opposition to anti-Semitism, continues into his later career. Toward the end of the film, Cardinal Wojtyla calls a meeting of the Curia, the bishops, of Cracow to discuss the struggle with the Polish Communist government. The cardinal asks his bishops to join him in supporting the struggle of the students and academics in their struggle against the government. One of the bishops complains that many of the academics are Jews, therefore, why support them? Cardinal Wojtyla replies: "The government uses that to deflect attention from the issues."

It should be made clear that this film is devoted overwhelmingly to the life and career of Pope John Paul II, and that his attitude towards Jews and anti-Semitism is a secondary, even tertiary theme. But precisely because this is a film made for Christian audiences primarily, and such a well-made and impactful story of heroic proportions, its strong positive references to this Pope's attitudes and behavior toward Jews can only be a derivative, and important benefit in affirming Catholic friendship for the Jewish people.