



THE JACOB RADER MARCUS CENTER OF THE
AMERICAN JEWISH ARCHIVES

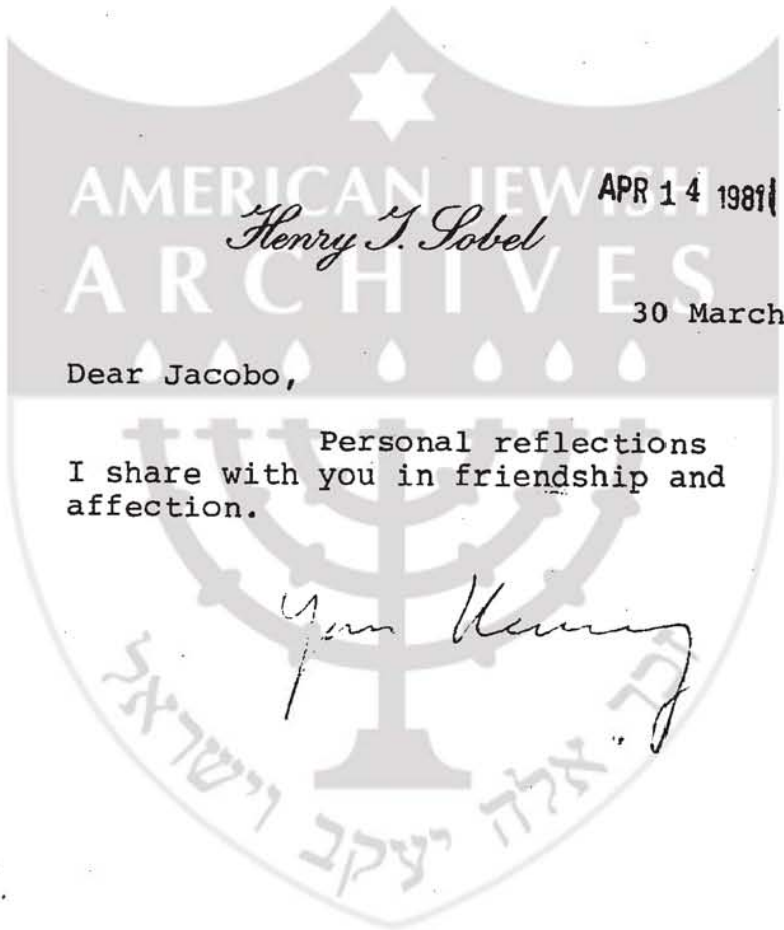
Preserving American Jewish History

MS-603: Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum Collection, 1945-1992.

Series E: General Alphabetical Files. 1960-1992

Box 90, Folder 10, Sobel, Henry, 1981.





APR 14 1981

Henry T. Lobel

30 March

Dear Jacobo,

Personal reflections
I share with you in friendship and
affection.

Yon Henry

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A MEMORABLE DAY AT THE VATICAN

Rabbi Henry I. Sobel

São Paulo, Brazil

March 1981

Some personal reflections I share with you after our private audience with Pope John Paul II, last January 24th. In one word, it was an emotion to mark a lifetime.

We received the invitation from our loyal friend, Cardinal Paulo Evaristo Arns, Archbishop of São Paulo, while Amanda and I were in Jerusalem attending the Plenary Assembly of the World Jewish Congress. We flew from Tel Aviv to Rome "very high in the clouds", in more ways than one. Upon our arrival at the Vatican, we were received by the Mayor of the Pontifical Residence, who made us feel most welcome. At 12:30 sharp, we were personally escorted to the Pope's private library. I do not remember ever being so punctual in all my life! Neither so choked with emotion! I was going to meet the greatest contemporary world leader. I was mindful of the moment.

The door opened, and there he was, the Holy See, in all his solemnity and simplicity. A warm smile, with a very intent gaze. "You are so young to be a rabbi," he said. To which I replied: "And Your Holiness is so young to be our Pope." He was pleased. And so was I to have broken just a little bit of the ice.

The Pope graciously invited us to sit with him. Amanda and I presented John Paul with a "mezuzah" made of Jerusalem stone. When I spoke of the Holy City as "the eternal and indivisible capital of the Jewish people", the Pope added: "Jerusalem is the City of Peace for all religions." We read together from the parchment affirming the unity of God and the fraternity of all men.

We spoke of the Holocaust which took so many human lives. The Holy See was visibly moved. He recounted his life in Nazi-occupied Poland during World War II, and reaffirmed his commitment "so that never again will there be victims of hatred, prejudice, and persecution among the Jewish people in particular and all minorities in general". We commented that periods of distress, social unrest, and economic depression are often preliminary to outbreaks of anti-Semitism. In hard times people find it comforting to have a scapegoat. And more often than not, they look in the direction of the Jews. Referring to recent anti-Semitic manifestations in Europe, North and South America, the Pope agreed with me that "anti-Semitism begins by attacking the Jewish people, but ultimately destroys the foundations of all society".

When John Paul II declared his "profound admiration for the Jewish people", I felt sufficiently at ease to suggest his visit to Israel. "Soon," he held my hand assuringly. When I asked whether the Vatican would recognize officially the State of Israel, he answered: "Rabbi, you have my understanding." Rather evasive insofar as the Jewish issues are concerned... On the other hand, very firm and committed on the social and revolutionary

processes at work. He expressed his grave preoccupation with recent developments in Poland. He remarked that Moscow has already made accommodations with Polish farmers, with trade unions, and with the Catholic Church. But now there is an actual challenge to Communist power from the proletariat, who are calling into question basic Marxist and Leninist ideological principles. And therein lies the great danger, of course. How long will the Kremlin be able to resist intervening directly? The Holy See manifested his personal doubts. Many Poles believe that the system can be improved only by economic reforms. But the Brezhnev regime refuses even to contemplate them. It remembers Czechoslovakia, where economic reforms led to demands for political reforms. "Confrontation is unavoidable," said the Pope. "We can only hope it will be a peaceful and orderly confrontation."

We also discussed the conflicts in East-West relations, Church/State tensions, and more specifically, the situation in Brazil. John Paul II recalled his recent visit to our country, saying it was a most meaningful and moving experience. He asked that we convey his warm greetings to "the great Brazilian people", our leaders and ecclesiastical authorities, especially to Cardinal Arns, of whom the Pope spoke with great respect and admiration.

At the end of our meeting, which lasted 35 minutes, we made an "ecumenical" prayer of thanksgiving on behalf of the 52 American hostages who had been released only two days earlier from Iran. John Paul spoke of "Shalom", peace, for all men of all faiths. And together, Pope and Rabbi, with hands clasped, we prayed that never again will acts of barbarism, terrorism, and fanaticism repeat themselves.

It was an altogether personal, touching, and heartwarming encounter. More than an encounter, it was a commitment to promote Jewish-Christian relations in a spirit of mutual respect. We stand together, Christian and Jew, while not unified, but together, in a time of general unbelief and ideological triumphalism. Ours is a search for new territory, new space, new vision, and a new dimension. And from that search must come greater security and greater tolerance.

Simple, modest, kind, human, intelligent, conservative in doctrine, but very open and sensitive to the great social issues of our times. The Jewish people has a friend in John Paul II.

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