

VT-859 Transcription

Kurt Waldheim meeting with Pope John Paul II news clips. 25 June 1987.

PETER JENNINGS: -- of a predominantly Catholic nation. He felt the audience was appropriate. Others disagree. ABC's David Ensor is in Rome.

DAVID ENSOR: It was a full ceremonial welcome at the Vatican, nothing was left out. Even better for Waldheim, when he met with Pope John Paul, there was no public mention of charges that he was involved in war crimes and has lied about it.

POPE JOHN PAUL II: (inaudible)

ENSOR: Instead, the pope praised him as a man, quote, "Always dedicated to securing peace," while at the United Nations and previously as foreign minister of Austria. Though the US and many other countries sent low-level diplomats to shake hands with him instead of ambassadors, Waldheim was clearly delighted.

KURT WALDHEIM: It took place in an extremely friendly atmosphere. [01:00] It was a very cordial meeting.

ENSOR: Waldheim told Italian television he is the victim of a Jewish campaign.

WALDHEIM: I was drafted into the German army like millions of others. So why should I take any consequences from this smear campaign against me?

ENSOR: Outside, kept well away by police, Italian survivors of Nazi death camps protesting against the pope's decision to meet Waldheim.

MARC TANENBAUM: That sends a message to every criminal and murderer and terrorist around the world. You can destroy human lives, you can participate in the destruction of human beings, and if you lie and deny about it and wait long enough, you may even end up getting an audience with the pope.

ENSOR: As for Catholics, their views about the meeting are mixed.

M1: I think it's horrible that the leader of our church is meeting with somebody who's accused of such atrocious crimes.

M2: Well, that's the whole point of the Christian religion, isn't it? Forgiveness? And that's what it's all about.

ENSOR: Vatican officials refused to say whether or not in their private meeting [02:00] the pope called on Kurt Waldheim's conscious about the past. The Austrian leader says they spoke, but only briefly, about the controversial nature of their meeting. The pope has helped Waldheim out of his diplomatic isolation, but in so doing, he may have created new problems for his church. David Ensor, ABC News, Rome.

(break in recording)

DAN RATHER: The Vatican today. For the Austrian president, it was the pat on the back he'd been hoping for. But for Jews and many other people, it was the slap in the face they'd been fearing. Mark Phillips reports.

MARK PHILLIPS: Kurt Waldheim's brief encounter at the Vatican today was far more than a routine state visit. It was the end of almost a year in which Waldheim was welcome nowhere, shunned internationally because of accusations of involvement in Nazi crimes. Yet the pope today not only broke the diplomatic ice by receiving Waldheim, he praised him as a peacemaker. He lauded his diplomatic skills. He made no mention of the controversy the visit had caused. Waldheim was pleased. [03:00]

WALDHEIM: The fact alone that the pope did receive me in such a cordial way speaks for itself.

DEMONSTRATORS: (inaudible)

PHILLIPS: The demonstrators were speaking for themselves outside, chanting "shame" and "assassin." They were Jews, and they were others who had been inmates in the camps. They couldn't stop the visit, but they wanted to make their point.

BEATE KLARFELD: To show it to the pope that it was a big mistake to receive Waldheim.

PHILLIPS: The pope's explanation that Waldheim's visit was a normal diplomatic event was not accepted here.

ELIE WIESEL: I think he is insensitive to Jewish pain. I think he's insensitive to Jewish fears. And what is worse, in receiving Waldheim, he shows that he's insensitive to Jewish memory.

PHILLIPS: The protests were not all in Rome. There was a demonstration at the Vatican Mission to The United Nations, and a candlelight vigil last night in Washington, where the names of 30,000 war criminals were read out. Diplomatic sources at the Vatican say that some adverse reaction to the visit was anticipated. [04:00] But the extent of the outcry from Jews and from non-Jews took the church by surprise. For Kurt Waldheim, it was a day of vindication, and a chance to make his case.

WALDHEIM: I can assure you, there's nothing behind those stories, and I'm sure the truth will come through and settle the matter.

PHILLIPS: But there was plenty of evidence on the streets of Rome tonight that Waldheim's defense was not believed by many, and evidence as well that the pope has now been

dragged firmly into the dispute. Mark Phillips, CBS News, the Vatican.

(break in recording)

TOM BROKAW: -- and outside, there were chants of "Shame." The meeting was widely criticized by Jewish groups because of allegations that Waldheim was involved in Nazi war crimes. But as NBC's Stan Bernard reports tonight, that issue was not addressed today.

STAN BERNARD: This was the meeting that has caused so much anguish to Jews all the over the world, but the Vatican said the pope could not deny any request for a meeting with a democratically elected head of state, despite the accusation of Waldheim's complicity in Nazi war crimes. John Paul [05:00] praised Waldheim as a man whose diplomatic career has been dedicated to securing peace. Waldheim called the pope a "recognized moral authority, the conscience of this world." Waldheim said later there was only a passing reference at the meeting to his war record. The Jewish protestors outside thought that pope had tarnished his moral authority by meeting with Waldheim. The protestors were kept hundreds of yards from St. Peter's Square.

DEMONSTRATORS: (inaudible)

BERNARD: That is Italian for "butcher" or "assassin." Reaction elsewhere was also angry.

YITZHAK SHAMIR: The visit of Waldheim in the Vatican could be interpreted as a justification for the crimes of which Waldheim is accused.

ABRAHAM FOXMAN: His Holiness talked about the Austria of Mozart and Schubert and Haydn. There was no reference to the Austria of Hitler. Almost as if it didn't happen, [06:00] almost as if six million Jews and six or eight million others never perished.

BERNARD: At a diplomatic reception for Waldheim, some countries were not represented by their ambassadors. At least two countries, the US and the Netherlands, sent lower-ranking officials. Despite the snub, Waldheim insisted he has not been diplomatically isolated.

WALDHEIM: There is no diplomatic isolation. This was something which was invented.

BERNARD: And Waldheim again denied he committed war crimes. It was John Paul who made the first ever visit by a pope to the synagogue. It was seen as a bright moment, perhaps a turning point in Catholic-Jewish relations. The Waldheim visit has turned that around. Now there is a sense of great damage. Some are saying the Waldheim visit is a wound that

will take decades to heal. And at the synagogue, hundreds gathered to demonstrate this evening. They walked to the Vatican to voice their displeasure with the pope. Again, they were kept far away from the papal ear. Stan Bernard, NBC News, Rome. [07:00]

BROKAW: General --

(break in recording)

F: Next tonight, we explore the controversial meeting today between Austrian President Kurt Waldheim [08:00] and Pope John Paul II. Waldheim's reputed Nazi past has been the rallying point of Jewish groups opposed to the meeting. Vatican spokesmen defended the Waldheim visit on the grounds that the pope routinely receives all heads of state requesting an audience. Today, American Jewish leaders condemned the Waldheim visit, while American Catholic bishops defended the pope.

HENRY SIEGMAN: Is it possible that this man, who has become the symbol not only of an evil Nazi past, but of current efforts to diminish, falsify and forget the Holocaust; is just another unpleasant head of state for the supreme leader of the Catholic church? Is it possible, Your Holiness, that in Waldheim's forgetfulness there is an

echo, however distant, of the church's forgetfulness as well?

JOHN O'CONNOR: I think that the Holy Father does what he believes to be in the best interests of all people. Clearly there are those who question his judgment in this case, [09:00] and that's perfectly legitimate, but I couldn't begin to question his intentions for a moment, or his passionate commitment to the human rights of peoples of all backgrounds, races, creeds, colors and so on.

F: For more on the Vatican meeting and the fallout, we have Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum, Director of International Relations at the American Jewish Committee, and Father Vincent O'Keefe, Director of the Jesuit Community at Fordham University in New York. Starting with you first, Rabbi Tanenbaum, you heard what Archbishop O'Connor just said, that the judgment, the intentions, the passionate commitments of people of all races, what is it that your -- is it all three that you're questioning, or what?

TANENBAUM: I don't think that any of us in the Jewish Community question the intention of Pope John Paul II. I think one thing ought to be made clear, that there is the greatest respect for Pope John Paul [10:00] as a person. I've had the privilege of taking part in three separate audiences with him, that's not the issue. The issue is that



the pope, as Waldheim himself said today, is the highest moral conscience of the world. He said that he is the conscience of mankind, and in many ways I think he is. For the pope, who represents such high moral standards, to receive Kurt Waldheim, an unrepentant Nazi, a man who has lied and denied his involvement as a Nazi war officer, who participated in the deportation of thousands of Greek Jews to certain death Auschwitz, who was involved in the Yugoslav situation where three villages were burned and thousands of Christians, partisans, were burned, or killed, and then for that audience to take place and for Pope John Paul II not to say a single word about the Nazi Holocaust, not a single word about Waldheim's past, and then, in effect, to talk about him [11:00] and present him to the world as being an architect of international peace, a kind of moral hero in the world, is really mind-boggling.

F: If the pope had mentioned the Nazi business and some condemnation and remembrance of the Holocaust, would that have meliorated the outrage that is being heard across the country and the world?

TANENBAUM: No, I don't think it's a matter of simply being nice to the Jews and, you know, saying the right words to them. The pope has repeatedly condemned the Nazi Holocaust and atrocities and anti-Semitism, and we honor him for

that. But the Jews really do not have to hear that from the pope. We understand the meaning of that and how to deal with that. Waldheim is the person who needed to hear that from the pope. And he heard nothing of that in that audience today. And we really are deeply upset over that reality.

F: But is that the substance of your criticism, that he didn't -- that the pope didn't raise that, or that the pope met with Waldheim? [12:00] I mean, what is the most upsetting?

TANENBAUM: Well, I think first, the fact of the meeting itself. You know, somewhere, there's got to be some kind of statute of limits on who you meet with. The notion of indiscriminate meeting with any world leader, regardless of history of moral character, means that you have to own the consequences of that meeting. Waldheim will now take the results of this meeting and plaster it over the press of Austria and Germany, all German language press, that he now is Mr. Clean as a result of what the pope said to him.

F: Father O'Keefe, all of this that you've just heard from Rabbi Tanenbaum was telegraphed in advance. Why do you think the pope went ahead with the meeting?

VINCENT O'KEEFE: I think first of all, I'm very glad to hear Rabbi Tanenbaum say there's no questioning of John Paul II himself. His record is very strong on the condemnation of

such terrible evil. I think the pope has to be free, and he has to be independent to receive people. I think he counts on the understanding, [13:00] and a sympathetic understanding, of other people. If the pope begins to set limits according to certain standards on whom he can receive and not receive, that becomes a very, very difficult issue. I would add this, that there are many of these audiences; I lived in Rome for almost 20 years, and these happen, a number happen every week. There's some publicity, there's not much. However, it's the protocol of those visits that the Vatican does not report on what went on in those visits, nor does the other party, except where the other party will make outrageous statements, and then they are corrected by the Vatican.

F: So what are you saying, that there's a possibility that the pope did say something about the Holocaust, that --

O'KEEFE: I think that's a real possibility. I don't know how the Rabbi knows. I think maybe he's going by just the statement that was made. How anyone knows that no mention at all was made of these events that are so objected to.

F: Would it be your guess that the pope did?

O'KEEFE: Oh, I would guess that he did.

TANENBAUM: Father, what we have are the [14:00] two official texts and all the press reports. At least during that

formal part of it, there wasn't a single reference to the issue. I just make this point about the matter of receiving leaders indiscriminately. When Pope John Paul II received, it was not official audiences, as you well know, Yasser Arafat, it was a gerrymandered audience which Arafat pushed himself ahead of a line of a general audience, and then they maneuvered a photograph of it. Arafat took that photograph, splashed it over newspapers throughout the whole Arab Muslim world and third world nations, and the captions on it everywhere, "Pope Blesses PLO Program." There's a PLO which is committed to the destruction of Israel, has the blessings of the pope. That's the exploitation. Idi Amin did the same thing with Paul VI.

F: All right, let's just get Father O'Keefe in here.

O'KEEFE: I think, though, when such statements went out from Arafat or Arafat's followers, the Vatican clarified that. That he had been talked to during the audience on the question of terrorism, and in no uncertain terms. [15:00] Now, the Vatican makes it a principle that it does not discuss what went on of those discussions and conversations, unless, as I say, there's been some bad misuse or some outrageous misuse. If Mr. Waldheim does go back to Austria and tries to present himself as "Mr. Clean," you know, in the sense that you're referring to,

the Vatican would, I'm sure, would make the clarification of that. But I'm sure, also, that there was no statement made that would cover all the things that were discussed during that conversation between the pope and Mr. Waldheim. That's not the policy. So that --

TANENBAUM: But that's not true. As of today, that's not what the situation is. I mean, the press reports that I've seen, frankly, I think Waldheim hijacked the pope in the Vatican today. In his language, in effect, he said that the moral conscience of mankind, in effect, exonerated me by not making any acknowledgement at all of the past, is being presented as an international architect of peace. [16:00]

F: How do you respond to that, Father?

O'KEEFE: I say that refers simply to Mr. Waldheim's term as Secretary General at the United Nations. And that that was his --

F: But it can it taken in is-- sorry, Father, can it be taken in isolation?

O'KEEFE: I don't see how it can be. Because the language was very carefully formulated. Obviously, this was going to be a controversial issue, a controversial visit. I think the Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, realizing this, went ahead with it anyhow. I think that's the type of person he is. He feels he has to be free to receive these people. In his

mind, whatever his mind was, none of us can really penetrate that, but in his mind, it was a proportional good in doing this visit.

F: Do you agree with that, Father O'Keefe? Do you think generally that's what should have been done under the circumstances?

O'KEEFE: I find that very hard to say, because my viewpoint is much more limited and much more narrow than the Holy Father's himself. There have been other visits, for example, the Holy Father received Archbishop Lefebvre, [17:00] a French archbishop who was, as the rabbi knows, was in severe discord with the whole of Vatican II, which the Holy Father defends very much. I would have preferred that he had not made that visit, but I'm not the one to judge.

F: Sure.

O'KEEFE: Nothing came out of that visit.

F: Rabbi Tanenbaum, Jewish leaders today call this meeting a historic lack of respect for Jews and Judaism. Can you explain that criticism?

TANENBAUM: I was present at that meeting --

F: And do you agree with it?

TANENBAUM: -- and present at the other meetings and helped participate in writing our statement. Yeah, well, there's

something of a (inaudible) shift in character about what has happened, because what is implied in the meeting today is a kind of revisionism of history. And one of the great concerns we have is that there are elements in the world, the Soviet Union, East European blocks and neo-Nazi groups who have set about systematically to say that the Holocaust was a hoax, or it didn't happen, or the Jews invented it for their own purposes. To go through this experience with Waldheim [18:00] and not to acknowledge it in any way, his Nazi involvement and what his past was like and his denial and lying of that, in fact, confirms that lying and denying about the Holocaust is OK.

F: Do you see this as a watershed, Father O'Keefe?

O'KEEFE: No, I frankly don't. Maybe that's because all the time I was in Rome, there were so many of these visits. I think as the Rabbi said in the beginning, the record of John Paul II is clear on this. He's condemned this. He's been a victim, too. He suffered badly from it. I think relations have improved between the two communities, the Jewish community and the Roman Catholic community, doing his (inaudible)--

TANENBAUM: There's no question about that.

O'KEEFE: -- there's no question about that.

F: Well, what is this, then, I mean, the pope will be here for his first extended visit in eight years in just a few weeks.

TANENBAUM: In September.

F: Yes. And Archbishop O'Connor has said that Jews are on the top of the list for this meeting, but I see in the wires this afternoon that a lot of them are reconsidering this meeting. [19:00] Is that going to happen, now?

TANENBAUM: Well, two major Jewish groups have already made a decision they will not take part in the meeting with Pope John Paul in Miami in September, the American Jewish Congress and also the Synagogue Council of America. My own group, the American Jewish Committee, and as I understand the Anti-Defamation, they are still considering what our decisions are to be. We're going to have a meeting next week, at which we're going to think about it. You see, one of the problems that emerges for us, and I hope we're not overreacting to it, but just looking at the reality of it, we've been involved, for example, working in Germany for 18 years, with especially young German Catholics, young German Christians. And we recently, this past year, we began working in Austria with Austrian Christians, it's overwhelmingly a Christian country. Young people finally have begun to say in both of those countries, we are tired



about the silence about the Holocaust that our parents have inflicted on us, of people evading that issue. We are determined to learn the truth about what happened in Nazism, how our country and our churches were involved in that, [20:00] and we want to face that and learn from that. And now it is quite possible that as a result of today's meeting, one of the messages that comes out to them, look, the Nazi Holocaust, it means nothing. It is not even discussed with the Nazi army officer, who is now being presented as an architect of peace.

F: Father O'Keefe, how do you think the pope is going to handle this when he comes here, given this building resentment in the Jewish community?

O'KEEFE: See, I would disagree seriously with Rabbi Tanenbaum that this was not even discussed with Mr. Waldheim. There's no evidence for that. All we have is a very brief report, and this is the protocol.

F: But what people are responding to here in this country, as far as I have been able to determine, is what appears to have --

TANENBAUM: The press. The media, yeah. Yeah.

F: -- the appearances of it in the press. How do you think the pope can overcome this when he gets to this country? Is that going to --

O'KEEFE: I think he should do it before he comes, and I think on the ongoing conversations. Israeli leaders have open and easy access to the Holy Father. This goes on continually, [21:00] all the time.

TANENBAUM: We have a relationship with the Vatican secretary and the Catholic Jewish Relations.

F: Cardinal O'Connor -- Archbishop O'Connor -- I keep calling him different things.

TANENBAUM: I'm sorry, Father.

O'KEEFE: No, that's quite all right.

F: But he said earlier today that time is going to heal this rift. You said this was a watershed. Do you think the time will heal it, especially by the time the pope gets to the United States?

TANENBAUM: Well, I think there's a real strain in Vatican international Jewish relations, and it will not heal by itself. To say it colloquially, the ball is really in the pope's part, and the Vatican's secretary and States' part. They created this problem, they're going to have to help resolve it.

F: All right, well --

TANENBAUM: But the relationship with the American Catholic Church and the American Catholic Community is very strong

and very solid. And I think that will withstand this, in any case.

F: All right, well, on that note, Rabbi Tanenbaum and Father O'Keefe, thank you very much for being with us.

TANENBAUM: Thank you.

O'KEEFE: Thank you.

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