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Fort Ontario Emergency Refugee Shelter sermon. 14 October
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Saturday, October 14, 1944

Maniche

seminar material

My friends, I should like to devote the time of my talk this morning to an informal report of a trip that I made last week to the Emergency Refugee Shelter at Fort Ontario, Oswego. I should like to give you as exact a picture as possible of what I discovered at this refugee shelter, for I feel sure that while most of us have some vague comprehension of what has happened to European Jewry at Oswego, we have a fair example of the terrible scope of the tragedy that has really devastated the spirit of that European Jewry. We have heard a great deal about the physical annihilation of millions of E. Jews - we have heard how men, women and children have been brutally sheltered and put to death - but at Oswego we are given a fair example of what we must expect to find of the remains of that part of E. Jewry which will be left once the Allies have succeeded in liberating the continent. And if the 900 odd Jews who are living now at Oswego are to be considered a fair sampling of the remains of E. Jewry then I must say that woe and grief are to be ours, my friends, for Hitler has definitely succeeded in accomplishing what he set out to do - he has crushed the Jew, he has destroyed their minds and their souls, if not their bodies, and he has left spiritless people as a testimony to his immoral brutality.

Several of us travelled to Oswego together last Sunday. As we approached the camp from the outside, we saw a huge army camp converted into a temporary shelter for the refugees. Walking about everything looks quite attractive and quite hopeful, quite healthy on the surface. There are the huge army barracks which have been fitted out very simply for the people who have been brought to this camp; there are the formidable looking administration buildings, five very modest kitchens which accommodate about 200 people each, who serve themselves cafeteria style and there is one kitchen which has been set aside for kosher purposes exclusively. Besides this we find at the camp two synagogues, one synagogue which is set aside for the orthodox Jewish worshippers, and the other synagogue for those of conservative leanings - and all around the physical plenty one can see lots of open land, grown fields, wonderful free fresh air coming in from Lake Ontario on which the camp is situated. At first glance the camp itself seems more than suitable to the needs of the people; the physical

set-up, while it is not exactly luxurious is more than satisfactorily comfortable and I am sure it will be made more so as time and efforts are devoted to its improvement.

While walking about the camp one gets the feeling that he is in attendance at an international conference. There are all sorts of people from all different backgrounds seeking a new existence in America. 95% of the refugees here come from all parts of Europe and are of the Jewish faith. Most of these Jewish refugees speak several foreign languages and since very few of them know English well, they find that Yiddish is probably the most popular and common medium of expression. I saw quite a large number of young children and women walking about and there were a few patriarchal faces of East European Rabbis well dressed in their orthodox garb and sporting their long flowing beards. There were young people and old people at the camp, but what one most missed and what was a most obvious lack were representatives of the young men and women who would be in their 20's or 30's today - a whole generation of Jews, those of my own generation seemed to have disappeared from the face of the earth and here one senses for the first time a significant note of the tragedy that has happened to European Jewry - a whole generation of virile, energetic, young men and women seemed to have been destroyed.

Externally, most of the people whom I did see looked well physically - For while although I heard that when they were first brought to Oswego, most of the refugees were wan and sick looking physically, but after a few months of reasonably good care, they seem to have recuperated somewhat and except for their shoddy, ill-fitting clothing, I had the feeling as I walked about that other visitors observing the camp might have mistaken me as one of the refugees living there had they not known otherwise, for physically there didn't seem to be too great a distinction between the outward bearing of the refugees and the outward bearing of an average group of American people - other than that which I have already commented upon - that an entire generation of young people seemed to have pathetically disappeared.

But my friends the great tragedy that has taken place, and it is a terrible tragedy, has not happened to these Jews physically, so much as it has

happened to these Jews underneath the skin. For I felt that the soul of this camp, that the spirit of this camp was sick, deathly and tragically sick. I felt that I was walking around in a world that was completely foreign to me, a world that was spiritually, morally and emotionally bankrupt. It is a world, which I am sure you would have found difficult to comprehend, as I found it difficult to comprehend, and the only way I believe that I can give you in any respect some idea of what is really brooding underneath the surface of this camp, the only way that I can give you some idea of what has happened to these refugees, to this sample group of European Jewry that has lived under the terror of Hitler during the last few years - the only way that I can give you some insight into the inner life of the camp at Oswego, is to report to you in some detail the conversation which I had with Rabbi Tz., the spiritual head of the refugee camp. Rabbi T was a man in his early forties ~~xxx~~ I should guess, with a magnificent ~~xx~~ head, a fine black beard, very brilliant and dynamic eyes, truly a noble specimen, the refugee Rabbi from Belgium was. T and I walked over to the conservative synagogue and there within the shelter of the synagogue we talked for several hours - I plied him with dozens and dozens of questions and when T. finished talking, I felt for the first time that I had some comprehension of what a terribly horrible blow had been dealt to E. Jewry - a blow from which they may never be able to recover.

T. spoke Yiddish to me and while I am no great Yiddish linguist, I had no difficulty understanding what he was trying to say, for he was a man who was talking not with his tongue, but with his soul, and it would only have been a calloused person who would not have been able to respond to the cry of T.'s soul. And T. told me in his patient Yiddish, the story of his life under the Nazis. The story of the way his fellow Jews had to live and when he got through telling his story - well, I will let you draw your own conclusions as to its significance by reporting his words to you now.

T. described his life to me as a Rabbi in Belgium. He made his living as a diamond merchant, worked on the Bourse for two hours a week in order to support himself and in order to enable him to conduct his Yeshivah in Antwerp,

his Yeshivah at which he had over 120 Jewish boys and girls. He said that their life in Belgium was very happy and free and gay until the Nazis moved into Antwerp, and the first thing they did was to close down the doors of his Yeshiva and T. said that when his Yishevah was closed, his non-Jewish friends met him at the gate and grieved with him and said, "You mean we will no longer hear your young Jewish children singing and laughing and dancing?" T. told me that if they grieved at the incipient tragedy imagine how he must have felt. T. lived in Antwerp after the Yeshivah was closed. He lived there more or less in hiding until the Nazis asked him to work in Todt Camp in a Nazi Labor Camp. At the same time, he was warned as were other Rabbis and leaders of the Jewish Community by representatives of the Belgium Government that to accept an invitation to work in a Todt camp meant sure death because it really was a subterfuge for deportation and so T. and his wife decided to flee from Antwerp. They took some of their diamonds, bribed a smuggler to smuggle them into Paris and paid \$5000 in order to get away. In Paris T. shaved off his beard, was supplied with false papers claiming that he was a French Catholic which were given to him by the underground and he continued to live in Paris as a French Catholic until the Nazis moved in and occupied Paris and from then on his life was the life of continuous flight.

He left the northern part of Paris and fled to the South which was still unoccupied. He fled from the South of France when that was occupied and moved into North Italy where he told me that curiously enough that Mussolini even though he was a ~~partner~~ partner in Hitler's nefarious war against the Allies, still had enough decency to shelter the Jews in relatively decent concentration camps in the north of Italy. But when Mussolini's hold on the Italian Govt began to weaken, when the Allies began to win success after success in N. Africa, Hitler moved in with his Nazi Army and there was no safety for the Jew even in Italy. Thousands of Jews were deported from Mussolini's camps and he, T. and his wife managed to escape once again.

T. fled to Rome and when he went to Rome he did a bold and daring thing. He moved right in to a home where Italian anti-semitic fascist Catholic indust-

trialists were living and he asked them to give him shelter as a French Catholic fleeing from the Nazis. They were taken in by T.'s story and he said that he lived in Rome safely for a while right in the teeth of his a.s. fas. enemies.

One morning - and significantly enough it was a year ago today for T. remembered that it was on Shebat B'rashet which is the sabbath we celebrate today on the morning of S. B. a year ago, T. and ten other Jews were conducting secret services in a little room of a building in Rome. During the services, footsteps were heard coming up the stairs and before the Jews could flee they were taken into the custody of the Gestapo. T. when he was telling me about this was almost overcome with emotion. He said that he felt that he was meeting his God, that his number was up, that he was finally completely lost. The Nazis took him and the others to the Gestapo offices in Rome. And while he was sitting in the office, he said a Catholic Priest, a padre Benedetti quietly walked in and sat down among the prisoners. T. knew P. B. P. B. knew that T. was a Jew. And when the Nazi called T. up to the desk to give him his third degree, P. B. jumped up and ~~after~~ ^{after} some very clever manipulating and insisting that it was a mistake and that T. was really a Catholic, managed to take T. out of the grasp of his capturers. T. and P. B. fled to the Vatican where T. hid for the rest of his stay in Rome until the Allies marched in and liberated the city.

I asked T. whether a P. B. was a fair representative of the attitude on the part of the Catholic Church. He answered with some hesitancy and said, "That while the Catholic Church and the Catholic Priests did offer to help the Jews, too many of them did so with ulterior motives, with a cavanah ra. The Catholic Clergy did offer to support the Jew, but at a price, at the price of conversion. And T. continued by saying that he did not know how many E. Jews saved their lives by accepting the protection of the Church this way and that question will never be answered for such forced conversion will be buried in the heart of those who saved themselves that way. I enquired whether there were any among the refugees at Oswego who had resorted to that means for self-preservation. T. said he did not know nor would anyone know because all those who registered as Jews in Italy when the allies took over will never ever reveal to anyone what

means they utilized to keep themselves alive.

At this point I turned our conversation into another theme. I was anxious to find out from T. what we as Americans can expect from Those E. Jews who have survived. Well their common suffering provided them with a symbol around which they will unite their destiny? Had their common tragedies given them an insight into the common future that exists for all Jews? Were these refugees who came to America, were they eager to be Jews, were they proud to be Jews? Would they become strong and ardent Jews of the future? T. looked at me with sorrowful and hurt eyes. "You do not understand, he said, you do not really understand what has happened to the E. Jew. How can you expect us who have gone through so much to be the builders of a new Judaism? How can you expect us ~~to be~~ who have ~~gone~~ gone through so much hell, through so much horrible pain and suffering, how can you expect us to be the vanguard of a new Jewish renaissance? I am worried. These Jews are filled with doubt. They are confused, they are shocked beyond comprehension. You expect us to be strong Jews? We are the same as we were before, only worse because we are thoroughly bewildered. People say to me, these refugees, "Rabbi the bible tells us that God is supposed to love us that we Jews are his chosen people, come can you explain what has happened to us, why has this happened to us?" I could not answer them, I can not answer them nor myself for we are a doubtful people now. We have profound tearing doubts rending our hearts. If the future of Judaism is to be built on our shoulders, woe, woe, woe to that future, for we are, I am afraid, mortally sick as Jews.

This hurt me more than anything else. I turned my eyes away. Every impossible futility and tragedy of all was becoming more and more unbearable. The surface health of Oswego, the health of all E. Jewry was severely impaired. There was something terribly cruel and bitter and sick lying underneath whatever physical well being there was left. We Jews in America may think that suffering might have brought into the consciousness of the E. Jew what it has served to do for the American Jew, make us want to go back, and make us want to become better Jews, make us want to become intelligent and strong Jews.

But while the trials of European persecution may have served to awaken our self consciousness as Jews, it has only served to destroy the desire on the part of E. Jewry to unite themselves any further to their unshakeable destiny.

I then asked T. where do these people want to go? Do they want to say in America, or do you think they would like to go back to Europe, to Belgium, to France and Holland, if they are able? And are they strong Zionists, would they like to go to Palestine?

Again T. look even more forlorn - Palestine, Belgium, Holland? We don't know where we want to go to. We don't know where we belong. Sure some of us would like to go back. Some of us would say that we want to go to Palestine, some of us might say that we want to go to Belgium or to France or to the country from which we were exiled. That is what we say. But in our hearts I am afraid that we are ~~never~~, homeless, that we are ~~never~~ stateless people. When the war is over, Belgians, may go back to Belgium, French may go back to France, Yugo Slavs may go back to Yugo Slavia, for that is their home. But we Jews, God knows, where our home is, - for while Belgium was my home, it isn't my home any longer. Y. S. may be some of our homes, but we don't belong there any more, and Palestine - Palestine is the home for those who have gone there before this tragedy has happened, but for us here Pal. is also remote possibility.

Again my friends, the same note of infinite tragedy, the same note that these are symbols of the picture of the eternal Jew. These are true wanderers lost, believing no one, completely uprooted and left to wander spiritually as well as physically. I never felt that I understood the significance of the Jew without a homeland until T. described his feelings.

There was one final question which I asked - which was motivated by the talk that some of us here are now hearing about the possibility of offering the Germans a soft peace. I wondered how T. ~~was~~ felt about the Germans, and, so I raised the question, my final question, what do you think ought to be done with the Germans?

T. turned to me with almost fierce and uncontrollable passion. He an-

swered my question, but he gave me an answer which I am afraid that I can not report to you here. He told me stories of things that he saw, of the horrid and inconceivable brutality that he had witnessed, so horrible, I can not report it to you now, for it will only make you as ill, as it made me ill. But T. ended up by saying one thing, "Never could I understand as a Rabbi a verse which I read in the bible, a verse which says 'And a Molech must be completely obliterated off the face of the earth', I could not understand how my bible, the source of our religion could contain a note so vindictive and so brutal on the surface, but now I understand that verse in the bible. I understand what it means when the Jews of old said that a molech, the eternal enemy of the Jew, must be completely obliterated. After what the Germans did to our people, after what I saw the Germans do to the women and children of all peoples of captured lands. After ~~how~~ i saw them practically destroy every Jew they could put their hands on, there is only one thing that I can say, I would like to see every man, woman and child, every German man, woman and child, I would like to see everyone of them put to death mercilessly without consideration without any sympathy. I hate them all.

And so my friends when I left T., and left Ft. Ontario, I left with a feeling of complete depression and complete emotional exhaustion. I felt that I had a picture of what had happened to our European brothers that I had never understood before. In which a picture of the suffering of the terror and of the tragedy that they had gone through. I had seen inside their souls and I was hurt as they were hurt for they are truly deeply wounded. All the others at the Ont. camp whom I spoke to briefly gave me the same impression. Look well, they do, but spiritually psychologically and religiously condemned, that at this point they surely are.

And so my friends our task as American Jews, becomes greater, more trying and more challenging. The future of our people I am afraid rests upon us exclusively, remains in the hands of American and Palestinian Jewry. We are the ones who have to have new strength. We are the ones who have to build up our numbers. We are the ones who have to carry on and live out our faith. We are

the ones who have to build up a loving and a proud and a challenging irresistible
Judaism. We have to do that in the name of the martyred (murdered) European
Jewry, for E. Jewry has been destroyed and those who remain have suffered too
much and have been too brutally wounded ever to be able to be a decisive factor
in the near future. We must never think of looking to E. Jewry for strength in
redeeming our people's destiny. We ought to be ashamed if we should look in
that direction. For E. Jewry has sacrificed its body, its soul for the sanctifi-
cation of the name of Israel's God and it now remains up to us American Jews to
redeem and to restore and to reclaim that blessed name, and as we do so we must
remember that we preserve that blessed name on the crucified bodies of our bro-
thers and sisters and loved ones in Europe. I hope that God will give us Ameri-
can Jews the courage and the strength and the insight to fulfill our task for my
God the price that we have paid has already been much too great.

