

CD-1022 Transcription

American Jewish Committee seminar-meeting [4]. 10 March 1980.

John Danforth:

Reach out to those people, no matter how different, just because God created them, is a testimony, a witness, to what we believe is important. Therefore, for the sake of saving them, and for the sake of witnessing to what we believe we must continue to help them, and not just for a few days or a few weeks, but for a long, long time ahead. Thank you very much. [01:00]

Francis Mugavero:

The senator will answer a few questions before he has to leave. Any questions or comments or reactions among the group? Marc, yes?

Marc Tanenbaum:

I would be remiss if the senator were to leave and not to receive acknowledgement on our part, of how central and critical a function he played in setting the stage for the Cambodian march for survival, which took place during the second week of February. It was in fact, after Senator Danforth came back from that mission and appeared on the *Today Show*, and was the first to make the proposal for organizing a truck convoy to bring food

and medicine [02:00] to Cambodia, that the idea was planted in the minds of the International Rescue Committee and of many other people, and that became the inspiration for this activity, which made, I think, a decisive impact, in Thailand and other parts of the world. With all the conversation that takes place about the moral atmosphere in Washington, knowing that a Senator John Danforth is there on this issue, as I've had occasion to see him, express a similar depth of conscience on the issue of responsibility for facing the facts of the Nazi Holocaust and what that means for us, in his chairmanship of a commission, of the President's Commission on the Holocaust. It's a very reassuring thing, [03:00] to know that there are Senator John Danforths in the United States Senate, and for me personally, it's one of the hallmarks of our work in this field, to know him and to be able to count him as a friend, not only of the Jewish community, but of all people in God's human family. It's been a great privilege to have you with us, senator.

I don't think we're going to take questions, other than to express our deep appreciation to Senator Danforth for being with us today. Thank you very much. In addition, we have here, on the dais, a gentleman, Mr. [Chang Sang?], who is the executive director of the Cambodia Affairs Institute. I think perhaps, Mr. Sang, if you would like to say a few words to us on this

subject, would you care to at this time? Fine, please do, come.

[04:00]

Chang Sang:

Thank you. It's been very moving to listen to Senator Danforth. It's very difficult to add anything. I'm very happy, privileged, to be asked to speak here. We have, for the past four years, been looking at the Cambodian tragedy and tried to publicize it through the American people and the people by and large, hoping that by doing so, the form of Holocaust would not take place from time to time, without what is noticed. It has been a great honor and privilege for me to know Rabbi Tanenbaum, [05:00] a very steady supporter of the Cambodian cause, in assuring to make sure that the Cambodian people will continue to survive. As I came here this morning, I'm still very confused on the issue. This morning, I received a dozen letters again, from my friends from Thailand, from refugee camps. It's one of those moments that you are afraid to open them, and I have not opened them, I had not read them, hoping that after this, I will go back and read them in the evening. The letters come from the refugees in Thailand, which have been sent to me for the past two months, and hundreds and hundreds of them. Many of them come from personal friends who have escaped Cambodia, [06:00] and are living in the Thai camps.

My concern at the moment, although there are so many other things that we're doing at the moment, but my concern at the moment is attempting to have these refugees in Thailand. Two years ago, in 1978, I spoke to the American Jewish Committee annual meeting in New York, a meeting during which we wrestled to adopt a resolution calling for the admission of the 15,000 Cambodian refugees in Thai camps, into the United States. That resolution was a stepping stone toward the successful campaign for helping those Cambodian refugees, who otherwise would not have been able to be admitted into this country. There are now some [07:00] 750,000 Cambodian refugees, as Senator Danforth pointed out, most of them roaming in the border areas. Others are sheltered in what you call the holding centers. However, these refugees, although they have managed to escape the terrors in Cambodia, these survivors of the so-called Cambodian Holocaust, are not even recognized as refugees. They are called illegal immigrants and could be returned back to Cambodia any time, by either Thailand or the authority of United Nations. I come here again, ladies and gentlemen, to plead to you, that you have direct help to these people. I am working on this issue and will be seeing a few other Senators [08:00] and Congressmen, church groups, and I've been happy to speak to any other groups which would be concerned on this issue. I think the people who

suffer so much from the Nazi Holocaust, I think you understand more than anybody else, the plight of the refugees.

Let me point out another factor, that the Vietnamese people for instance, have benefited from the generosity of the American people, are being sent here, but the Cambodian refugees who also escaped the same rulers, the same Vietnamese rulers, not in Vietnam but in Cambodia, we put Cambodia under the same Vietnamese rulers. So in fact, the Cambodians escaped not only the horror under Pol Pot, starvation, famine and disease, but also the Vietnamese people, the Vietnamese ruler that the Vietnamese boat people are fleeing. They are not recognized as refugees. [09:00] I think we will probably get that, I ask you directly, to have -- we'll be working on new legislation, attempting to rally popular support in this country, to have these 750,000 Cambodian refugees. The position taken by the State Department has been that they do not consider themselves refugees, that they want to return to Cambodia and that they don't want to come to the United States. I think this position has been based on their honest interpretation of the events. Of course all the Cambodians want to go back to Cambodia. I do want to go back to Cambodia too, but that is not the case. The survival of Cambodia as a nation, as entity, I think depends on the survivability of individual Cambodians [10:00] and if we

could assure them, we could give them a new home, if not all of them, at least those who want to come to the United States, I think it will be a tremendous achievement in the history of mankind, not only for Cambodia but for other unfortunate people which suffer the tyranny of their own rulers. And I hope you help them, maybe you will help me. I will be working on that and I hope I could have further connection with Rabbi Tanenbaum, which I respect greatly and that perhaps tonight, I could go back and read those letters in peace and quiet, because as I said, again, there's hundreds and hundreds of people who write to me directly and ask me to help them, and I just have no means [11:00] to help them. I feel very, very defeated because of tragedy there, the people are there. Those are not just Cambodian but they're friends to a classmate, we played together, we learned together, and I have no ways to help them and I hope to help, and I thank you.

Francis Mugavero:

Thank you very much, thank you. Mr. Sang, we thank you. I think I can assure you that this organization has and will continue to support the efforts that you're undertaking. I'd like to spend a moment or two now, just telling you about the rest of the luncheon session and then this afternoon and the schedule that we're on. As you know, we're very honored this afternoon, to

have Ambassador Ghorbal of Egypt as our principal speaker, and also Ambassador Evron of Israel. I think courtesy calls for us to be in the room when they arrive. They are scheduled [12:00] at 2:30, and therefore, I think we'll break from this room at 2:15, to give people a few moments of leisure before we go in there. I would like everyone though, to be back in the next room, where we started, promptly at 2:30.

Let me cover a couple of other items of business and other information. First of all, in the kits that were handed out this morning and perhaps some of you haven't received them, but let me tell you about it. There is a resolution that was adopted by the board of trustees of the American Jewish Committee, and also subsequently, by the board of governors. The essence of that resolution is that anyone who has a position of leadership in this organization, whether it be as a chapter officer or a member of a chapter board, whether it be as a national officer, or as is the case here, those of you who are members of a national commission, a policymaking body, anyone who has the leadership positions has an obligation [13:00] to support the organization financially. There is no indication, nor any effort made, to indicate the extent or anyone's financial contribution. That would be inappropriate. But I do think you should bear in mind that the organization needs the financial support of each

of you who has a leadership position, and I would like to be able to go back and report to the board of governors now, and also at our annual meeting in May, at the commission meeting, that it is the sense of this commission that we support wholeheartedly, the effort to ensure that leaders help the organization financially, as well as in terms of their time and effort. I think unless there's any discussion or objection to it, I will go back and say that it is the sense of this commission, that we support that effort to maintain this viable organization.

Let me go on to another item now, and that is the board of governors tour, which we took a couple of weeks ago, to Egypt and Israel. It was a fascinating trip [14:00] and because of the time limitations, I'm not going to spend a great deal of time on it, other than to mention that one of the high points in Egypt was an evening when we had Egyptians as our guests for dinner. Among them were Mr. and Mrs. [Shaukot?], he is the press attaché at the Egyptian Embassy, and we welcome you back today, it's a delight to see you back in the United States. Very nice to have you.

The only other thing I want to add is that from strictly a personal point of view, the last time that I had been in Israel

before this trip, was in 1965, and at that time, I was unable to go to the Old City and to the Western Wall. I don't think I could leave this podium without saying to you that in terms of religious attendance, I'm not particularly religiously oriented in that sense, but the overwhelming emotion, to go to the Western Wall, on Sabbath Eve, it brought tears to your eyes, no matter what your religious affiliation or the extent of your participation. [15:00] And I think that feeling, which was shared by the entire group, those who had never been to the Western Wall before, serves as a suitable prologue or introduction to a report on something that's of vital concern to all of us, and that is the National Council of Churches Mideast Panel, and for a report on that, I'd like to call on Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum.

Marc Tanenbaum:

Well, this is intended to be just a very brief updating on a matter that has been of great concern, not only to the American Jewish Committee, but to all of the major Jewish religious and committal organizations. Indeed, it's been a matter of some concern as well, to many friends in the liberal Protestant denominations, [16:00] who constitute the National Council of Churches, foremost among them, our long-time friend and associate, Dr. William Weiler, who is here with us today. Dr.

Weiler has served as the director of the Christian-Jewish relations desk of the National Council of Churches, here in Washington now, representing the Episcopal Church on the Hill and in the Washington area.

The problem for us and perhaps hopefully later on today, we may have an opportunity to hear from my colleagues who have been centrally involved throughout the whole discussion, with the National Council of Churches. My colleague, Rabbi James Rudin, Judy [Banky?] and Inga [Gobell?], grew out of an initiative that was taken by a representative of one of the member churches of the National Council of Churches, namely the Antiochian Orthodox Church. [17:00] I think as is generally recognized by all fair-minded people within the National Council of Churches, that particular body apparently has demonstrated, in the activity of one of its representatives, that it is a single politics issue agency. It has come repeatedly, to session after session of the general board of the National Council of Churches, introducing resolutions of the most extreme character, seldom seeking to be a force for reconciliation between Israelis, Jews, Christians and Muslims, between Israelis and Arabs, but rather seeking to introduce resolutions that scapegoat Israel for all of the ills of the Middle East. The latest initiative [18:00] was taken last October, I think Jim, wasn't it? When Dr. Frank Maria, who

represents the Antiochian Orthodox Church, a very small body, incidentally, with a very small membership and very modest participation in the affairs of the National Council of Churches, financially and otherwise, introduced a resolution in which Israel was singled out in most intemperate and provocative language, as being somehow, as the impression comes through, being single-handedly, uniquely singularly responsible for the grossest violations of human rights, of Christians and Muslims in the Middle East, allegedly responsible for systematic torture of people. The occupied territories, one would think that there are torture chambers, [19:00] in the language that comes through that resolution.

It is to the credit of the leadership of the National Council of Churches, in particular Dr. Claire Randall, but others associated with her, that they were as much offended by the grotesqueness and the single mindedness of that resolution, that they determined that a process had to be found that would prevent that resolution from somehow being maneuvered or manipulated, to become the policy of the National Council of Churches, which by no stretch of the imagination, could be held to represent any broad spectrum of American Protestant public opinion. Using the existing administrative and other procedures of the National Council of Churches, the [20:00] resolution of

that body was deferred, put aside, and in its place, another resolution was introduced, calling for a Middle East panel on human rights to be established, under the auspices of the National Council of Churches, whose purpose would be to go to the major Arab countries in the Middle East, including Israel, for the purpose of examining the condition of human rights of all peoples in the Middle East; Christians, Muslims, Jews, in all the surrounding countries.

I think it is evident to anyone who reads the newspapers, certainly anyone deeply involved in human rights concerns, as many of the people in this room have been, who would read the annual report of Amnesty International, among others, who would know that the problems of violation of human rights are extensive, tragically extensive, in many parts of that world. The situation of the Kurds and a number of the countries of the Middle East, the situation of Maronites, the situation of Armenians, the situation of Khaps, are in many cases far more precarious than is the situation of human rights of Christians and Muslims in Israel. This is not to say that there are not problems of human rights, but in relative terms, one simply has to conclude that the intention of this resolution that was introduced was far more propagandistic, polemical, than it was a

serious effort to have some comprehensive understanding of the actualities of human rights in the Middle East. [22:00]

And so, the National Council of Churches, determined to have a series of hearings prior to the Middle East panels going out to the Middle East, and arrange for some hearings in New York and also some hearings here in Washington. The American Jewish Committee and the Synagogue Council of America, had intended to testify before those hearings, raising what we thought were appropriate questions, about the way in which some of the issues have been formulated, and a statement of some five issues, but nevertheless, hoping to make a contribution to the opening up of the horizons of the group, with whom we have some common concerns in trying to bring about conditions for peace and justice in the Middle East.

Through the initiative of one Jewish organization, an action was taken that led to a decision for Jewish groups not to participate [23:00] in those hearings. We regarded that as unfortunate, but in view of the fact that a precedent had been established and there was some sense of solidarity which emerged as a result of the concerns raised, quite frankly, we did not want to have to spend the rest of the six months or the rest of the year defending ourselves with the Jewish community, of why

we were the only Jewish group to break Jewish ranks, to go and testify, when 14, 15 other Jewish groups determined not to take part, as through the leadership of another Jewish agency. We knew that there were other ways of which to communicate our concerns. At any rate, we determined that we would participate with other Jewish bodies, at least for the present time, in not appearing before those hearings. We did however, send a letter to Dr. Tracey Jones, who was the director of that Middle East panel, [24:00] and made available to him, two very substantial documents which stated our position. One was prepared by Rabbi James Rudin, which was a constructive analytic critique of the issues that that body was considering, and the other was a document prepared by Inga Gobell, dealing with the historic, profoundly religious and moral relationship of the Jewish people to Israel, ancient Palestine, the holy land, and to the holy city of Jerusalem. Both of those documents were made available to all of the members of the Middle East panel, and from our subsequent conversations with them, they welcomed both of those documents as important contributions to the substantive discussion of the issues.

In any case, we've had a series of meetings with members of the panel, prior to their leaving for the Middle East. [25:00] They determined to ask not governments, but voluntary agencies, to

help arrange their itinerary as they go to the Middle East. And so the Middle East panel of the National Council, asked the Middle East Council of Churches to serve as their body that would arrange for them to meet with key people, both in government and in the churches, in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan. I'm not sure, are they going to Egypt as well? And Egypt as well. And then they asked the American Jewish Committee if we would help arrange their itinerary for them, with counterpart people; government and people from the voluntary religious and communal sector in Israel, which we have done. Through the ongoing consultation between all the members of our staff, we have tried to provide as fair and balanced an objective, a series of contacts in Israel, [26:00] so that people have an opportunity to see for themselves, indeed the problem, but also the extraordinary progress that has been made in the growth of relationship between Jews, Christians and Muslims in that country.

The panel, I understand from my colleagues who are in close touch with friends at the National Council of Churches rather regularly, is scheduled to return tomorrow from the Middle East. Some have in fact already returned. We have agreed to have a joint meeting with all of the Jewish agencies and the National Council of Churches shortly, I think it's the 23rd, 24th of

March, with a view toward looking at the data that they bring back, and to determine how we can try to be not a polarizing force, -- God knows there's enough of that already -- but to try to become a healing, reconciling force in the Middle East.

[27:00] Where there are problems in Israel, we want to do whatever we can to lift up those problems and to see to it that constructive resolution of those problems are dealt with. We have every expectation that where problems of denial of human rights are found in Arab countries, that there will be the same standard of probity and justice required there, and namely that they will look to their Arab, Christian and Muslim friends and contacts, to make the same kind of interventions to assure that the human rights of human beings, who may be suffering that deprivation in their countries, are also dealt with.

That's fairly much where we stand at this moment. I would ask any of my colleagues, either Rabbi Rudin or Judy Banky, if they have any comment to make, to feel free to do so now, during the time we have between now and quarter after. Thank you.

Francis Mugavero:

Thank you, Marc. Jim or Inga? Any questions or any comments on the report? Yes? [28:00]

Male Speaker:

In our meeting last fall, at that time, we were having problems making global contacts in Israel. Has that all been resolved?

Inga Gobell:

Well, we are at least (inaudible). We haven't yet decided whether or not we're for or against them with that. The NCC panel was stuck in Imam for three days. Jim and I were on the phone in Imam, trying to get them out, and they agreed to extend their time in Israel (inaudible). [29:00]

Francis Mugavero:

Let me add one comment on that, which I didn't mention. In the course of the board of governors trip to Egypt and Israel, about half a dozen of us had a press conference with the *Jerusalem Post* toward the end of the trip, and one of the points which we made, which was printed up in quite some detail in the *Jerusalem Post* the next day, was the significance, from Israel's point of view, of the forthcoming, then forthcoming, visit, of the NCC panel. We made it very clear to them that this was a responsible organization, representing a significant number of Americans, unlike perhaps certain other [30:00] members of the clergy, who have been there recently, who may not quite fit the same pattern. There were one or two names thrown around. But we did

really implore them to use whatever influence they had, to make sure that at the appropriate governmental level, this was understood, and that this was not a group that came with the intention of destroying the state of Israel. This was a group that was serious and interested in the problems, and we hope that they would, as a result, meet with -- whatever sessions that were set up, that they would meet. I don't know yet, Marc or Inga or Jim or anyone, if you have heard any results of whether or not they have in fact met. I would hope that the governmental officials did do so, that that was one of the results of our trip there.

Any other questions or comments? If not, we have a few minutes and Inga, we have some found time, and I think you could take Mimi's place if you would, and give us a report on some women's issues. [31:00]

Inga Gobell:

First of all, I'm really sorry that Mimi Alperin, who is one of our leading lay people in New York, couldn't be here with us today. She is ill. She had wanted very much to speak to you on what we're doing in the women's area. It's not perhaps accidental. It seems to be most historic, that I had the opportunity to sit at lunch with the representative of the

Egyptian government here with us today, and his charming wife, and we were talking about a common friend we have, Madame Aziza Hussein, who those of you who heard in Egypt, I think, were very impressed by. When Jim and I called Bert Gold a few weeks ago, to check in with him on what was happening with the NCC, it was the night that Bert had just heard Madame Hussein speak, and he was very [32:00] enthusiastic and said that she had given the history of the women's interreligious dialogue groups that she had hosted in Cairo, in the last few years, and of course that was a result of our women's interreligious dialogue on the Middle East.

Those of you who do not have that activity in your home communities, where there are AJC chapters, I want to tell you that this experience, which we've had now in New York, in Philadelphia, in Rochester and in Miami and San Francisco, where they just began last year, it's been an extraordinary experience, bringing together American Christian and Jewish women, as well as Arab American women, to talk openly about their feelings about the Middle East and how, in spite of our different priorities and commitments, we can share the wish for peace with justice in the Middle East for all people. [33:00] We were talking before, about how on our first women's mission to Egypt, Syria, Jordan and Israel, we came back, the Jewish women,

the Christian women and the Arab women, so convinced that Egypt wanted peace, and those of us who felt that way, how thrilled we were when Camp David and President Sadat's very courageous visit to Jerusalem proved us right. This is an activity that is still going on, and I urge you to be in touch with Mimi or with Joan Dickstein or with me, if you'd like to start such a group in your community.

The second thing I just want to briefly tell you about is that we are planning, and Judith Banky is working with me on this, as is Gladys Rosen, of our Jewish Communal Affairs Department, and Mimi and Chuck Holstein, on a women's conference for November 8th and 9th, I believe, 1980. We're calling it a women of faith in the '80s [34:00] conference and it will bring together leading theologians and scholars, and women involved in a variety of secular and religious activities as women of faith, to talk about how we can come together and not let ourselves be manipulated by some of the political things that are sweeping the country. Even a question for instance, like abortion. Many of us object to the fact that some people are calling themselves pro-life, which of us is anti-life? We want to be able to talk with women who have serious religious and human concerns about the question of abortion, and not see each other as enemies, and not be people who are manipulated by various political forces,

but see how our faith communities can help us to impact in a way that will help women to make their choices and for those [35:00] children who are born, to be born into homes where they can be raised in security. We want to be able to talk with women who don't agree with us, but in a civilized way, because it seems to me that we're facing a decade that in some ways doesn't look very civil, and we hope to make some contribution to that. So if any of you are interested and by the way, we want men to join our committee on women, we think it's important, so if you're a man and you think of yourself as a feminist, get in touch with us, we'd like to have you. I know that's what Mimi would have said and thank you for listening.

Q:

Question (inaudible).

Inga Gobell:

Right. Our interreligious affairs commission on women is just getting started. The WIDME group, that is to say the Women's Interreligious Dialogue on the Middle East, has of course been concerned primarily [36:00] with Middle East issues, so that we have not looked into that, but I think it's important that we do and I would be glad to discuss it with you at greater length some other occasion.

Francis Mugavero:

Thank you very much, Inga. Before we do adjourn, I'm going to ask Father Weiler of the Episcopal church, who wanted to make a comment or two, to take the mike.

William Weiler:

I'd just like to underscore, before you, the words you've heard from the two previous speakers, with whom it's been my privilege to work, both as a staff person of the National Council of Churches, and also representing the Episcopal church. I can only tell you that the new dynamic, which is brought to the interreligious women's participation, in Middle Eastern trips and other forms of dialogue, is a tremendous contribution to our common living together as community, and I hope that you will take Inga's advice and find ways to do that in your [37:00] own communities.

To refer to my colleague, Marc Tanenbaum's report on the National Council of Churches, I'd like also, to underscore the tremendous help that the American Jewish Committee has been to us in the ecumenical community, on these very difficult issues that Marc has reviewed for you. We're tremendously dependent upon all of our friends in the Jewish community and we do relate

to other Jewish organizations, but it's AJC who most intimately has joined in the National Council of Churches dialogue programs. It's AJC, which is present, usually in the person of Rabbi Jim Rudin, at every governing board session of that ecumenical body. And it's AJC, it's to AJC that we turn for help in research and in documentation and in such things as the National Council's present panel in the Mid East. So, I just wanted to inject that word from the ecumenical [38:00] community, to give you the non-Jewish perspective, so to speak, and to point to the tremendous contribution that your staff and your people are making to our common purpose in interreligious dialogue. Thank you.

Francis Mugavero:

Thank you very much. We'll be adjourning this session in just a moment. Before we do, first, on behalf of all of us, let me express the appreciation of the membership to the staff, both the national staff and the Washington staff, for the arrangements and for setting up this program and making it all possible. We appreciate it very much. Next, let me remind you, that the next meeting of the commission will be on the morning of May 15th, in New York, as part of the annual meeting, which will be held from the 14th to the 18th. I'd like to encourage all of you to come. Those of you from New York, of course will

be there. Those of you from outside New York, please make every effort to be there. We'd also like some thoughts and reactions from you between now and then, as to what you'd like to have on the program. [39:00] We'll probably have a report on the Middle East panel. It will have been back and there may have been some action taken, but other matters, really, we'd like to get the sense of what you'd want to discuss and hear about and talk about. Therefore, if any time between now and then, and the earlier the better in terms of programming, if you could get to me or to any member of the staff, and let us know what your preferences are and what areas you're particularly interested in, we'll make every effort to try to meet those in the programming. I think at this point, it is two-fifteen, we'll adjourn. We will meet again in 15 minutes, in the next room over. Thank you.

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