

CD-1051 Transcription

Address at Holocaust conference, Kent State University. 22 April 1985.

M1:

At this time, it is an honor and a pleasure to introduce to you the keynote speaker for this evening, Dr. Marc Tanenbaum. Dr. Tanenbaum is a director of international relations of the American Jewish Committee. He is also on the president's Commission on the Holocaust. As a matter of fact, if I would read to you all of the accomplishments of this gentleman, we would be here for [chakras?]. Needless to say, this man has accomplished a great deal. It is a sincere pleasure to introduce to you Rabbi Dr. Marc Tanenbaum. Dr. Tanenbaum.

Marc Tanenbaum:

Those of you who were present this afternoon, [01:00] will have some idea about my state of orientation, or disorientation. As I indicated, during this afternoon's session, I found myself in an absolutely absurd situation of having to fly eight hours yesterday in order to give a public lecture in the cultural capital of America, Las Vegas, Nevada (laughter), and to fly eight hours to Law Vegas and give a lecture before one-armed robots with quarters tinkling in the background, [02:00] if you're fortunate. And then to find out that the only way to get

to Akron, Canton, Kent State University is by catching an airplane at 12:30 in the morning, in order to get to Chicago, in order to make another connection, in order to get to Akron. I've developed a profound appreciation of the exodus into the wilderness at Sinai (laughter). In any case, I finally, after surviving this afternoon, a very stimulating session with my good friend, Dr. Eugene Fisher, had a chance to sleep two hours. And I'm not sure, now, whether I was better off then or now. Anyway, I began feeling that in the warmth [03:00] and thoughtfulness of the introduction that was made, about the only thing that was missing is that I should have been introduced as "the late Marc Tanenbaum." (laughter) It is -- not a pleasure, but a genuine sense of privilege to share this evening with this community, and I want to express my own -- hopefully it is your own -- gratitude to the leadership of Kent State University for making possible these several days of reflection on the whole issue of the Holocaust, its meaning, its implications for all of us. [04:00] I tried this afternoon to sketch out, from my perspective, why I believe that the issue of the Nazi Holocaust must not remain, for Jews themselves, must not remain, what some have called it, "a Jewish obsession," "a Jewish problem." I recall during the course of the period of time when I served as a consultant to NBC TV, to Gerry Green and the people who put together the miniseries of *Holocaust*, traveling around the

United States, [05:00] meeting with people in the media, teachers, educators, students, Christian leaders. And periodically, people would come and say to me, "Look, you know, it's painful and we understand that, but why every year? What is this, every year, *Yom Ha'Shoah*; what is this about Jews, every year, come together to remember? Well isn't that really obsessive behavior? Why is it that Jews cannot forget? Forgive and forget? Let's go on to other business." It's not as crudely stated, always, that way. But there is an extraordinary resistance among many of us, [06:00] I daresay at times, even among some of the Jewish community -- to want to try to cope with the magnitude of the trauma that the whole Nazi Holocaust represents. Let me begin with something that my longtime dear friend and colleague, Rabbi Abraham Feffer. He and I had been close friends during the days in seminary in New York. It's a way of looking at the question of the relationship of religion to society, religion and state, religion and government. This is [07:00] a real story; it is carved out of the flesh of our daily lives. It is a story still in being, whose end, whatever it will be, is yet to be determined. Rabbi Feffer referred in his invocation, only fleetingly, to the name of someone -- [Loluch?] Erlichster -- who is Loluch Erlichster? Who knows Loluch Erlichster? If we feel haunted, [08:00] as indeed I believe we ought to be by the legend, as well as the life, of Raoul

Wallenberg, who has special meaning for me, because, as he has for tens of thousands of people -- because my wife was born in Budapest, and her mother was in a concentration camp with the famed [Rannasenech?]. And my wife's cousin was a freedom fighter in Hungary. And when we went back to Budapest last summer, on a search of roots with my wife and my mother-in-law, my wife's cousin [09:00] took us through the streets Raoul Wallenberg literally plucked lives out of the fire. He is a living inspiration to this day; God knows what his fate is in that cruel, that cruel society called the Soviet Union, which rewards humanitarianism with enslavement. God knows what his fate is. But Raoul Wallenberg has the [srut?], the merit, of his name already having become immortal. His name will remain alive, as long as there is a Jewish people; as long as there is a state of Israel [10:00]; as long as there is conscience in the world. But who knows Loluch Erlichster with a letter I received from Rabbi Feffer several years ago, telling me of the desperate need for my organization, the American Jewish Committee, and myself, to make some intervention. He writes and tells me that there is an elderly couple, an elderly Jewish man and woman -- Warsaw, Poland survivors -- living in Queens in New York; they are in their seventies, elderly, sickly, [11:00] and before they die, they said, they wanted, once again, to see their Loluch. And so, like yourselves, I asked, who is this Loluch? And the mother and

father who visited with me told me the story. In Warsaw, during the height of the war, the mother one day was riding on a trolley car in Warsaw with her child, Loluch, who must then have been, what, seven, eight years?

M2:

Seven and a half.

Marc Tanenbaum:

Seven and a half years old. An accident ensued. Loluch fell off the trolley car, apparently fell under the wheels of the trolley car, and one of his legs were amputated. He was immediately [12:00] rushed to a hospital; it was a hospital run by a group of Catholic nuns, sisters, an order in Warsaw, where he was taken care of. In the meantime, the mother was apparently confronted by someone who said to her, "I know you are Jewish, and if you are not careful, I will turn you over to the Nazis, if you make too much noise." Apparently was related to the accident, as a way of intimidating her into silence. The mother, beside herself, raced off to the hospital to find her Loluch. And on that first day, she was able to see the child being taken care of. She came back the next day or so [13:00] to look for Loluch, and he was gone. Disparu. Disappeared. And so she became frantic and began asking about Warsaw; "Where is my Loluch? He

needs me! I must be with him! I must help heal him!" And everywhere she began to face silence. Some of the nuns, some of the administrators in the hospital, suddenly said, "We don't know what happened to him! Someone took them away! We don't know what happened to them!" And then they went to government officials, Communist Party Operachniks, among whom anti-Semitism was an article of ideological faith. "Arrogance of Jews, demanding to see their child!" And they dismissed her, as if she were some [14:00] intruder from outer space. And so the mother and the father, in desperation, searched everywhere they could go throughout Warsaw. Loluch was not to be found. Wherever they could look outside of the city of Warsaw, wherever they could ask -- they reached the point of absolute despair. They thought perhaps he had died. No one, either in church or state, was prepared to respond to their appeal for simple, elementary human response to the cry of a mother to take care of her child. And finally, they were somehow able to escape from Warsaw, someone told me -- I don't know it for a fact, but I can certainly assume it would be true -- that some Christian friends who had [15:00] concern for their wellbeing, helped them escape from Warsaw to leave the country across the borders and get out, and finally, they came to the United States with another son. They lived their lives out here, in the United States, in New York. The son, whose name is Joseph, grew up to go to school, went

through law school; he's now a lawyer in New York. And frequently, as often as they could, poor, simple merchants eking out a living, whenever they were able to accumulate enough money after the war, they went off to make an annual, biannual, triannual pilgrimage to Warsaw: "Where is our Loluch?" [16:00] And never a sign. Frequently confronted with abuse. Often deeply anti-Semitic abuse, hostility. And I must say in all candor, often from part of the church, as well as from part of the government officials. And then the letter came from Rabbi Feffer. Pope John Paul II was about to make a visit to the United States to be in New York City. Rabbi Feffer knew that a good part of my life's work had been devoted to Vatican Council II, to building relationships with Roman Catholic, as well as Protestant, other authorities, in this country and abroad -- [17:00] that we had a very close relationship with many people in the Vatican. Would I intercede with Pope John Paul II on his visit? Could I arrange, perhaps, for the late Cardinal Cooke, who has been a longtime dear friend, to make an intervention? Well, I don't want to go into all of the details; we could spend the rest of the evening on just that incredible story itself, but I wrote a letter to Cardinal Cooke; he responded at once and said that he would make available the copy of the letter that Rabbi Feffer gave me, describing the details of what went on in Warsaw, what happened to Loluch, the last that was known of him,

and that he would see to it that it would be given to the aide of Pope John Paul II. In any case, after that was made available, it went to some [18:00] people in the Vatican secretariat of state. Vatican Secretary dealing with Catholic-Jewish relations. It's just sort of wandered around for a while, in limbo; no one knew how to take hold of it. And then one day, Mrs. Erlichster came to my office with her husband, and really in a state of desperation. She said, "I'm very sick; I don't know how long I'm going to live. We have heard that our Loluch, apparently, was taken away from the hospital by some of the sisters. That he was, as happened often after the war, during the war and after the war -- that he was baptized as a Catholic and was raised to be either a priest or a nun, a brother, some kind of church official." What did I say?

M2:

A nun.

Marc Tanenbaum:

I said a nun?

M2:

(inaudible) (laughter) [19:00]

Marc Tanenbaum:

Some of my best friends were nuns, and I guess that's...any case, the point that I want to make is that this woman, who was very much like my own mother, who came out of the Ukraine, who went through those kind of agonies in the Ukraine -- that kind of deprivation -- turned to me, and she said, "Look, whatever the will of God is -- he may be a Catholic -- we no longer care what his religion is; let him just be well! Let him be! We promise that if we are allowed to come to Warsaw, we simply want to see him once more before we die, as our son. And let him remain a Catholic, if he is happy as that, God bless him. We simply want to be able to [20:00] say 'goodbye' to him before we pass away." Several weeks after that, I had need to go to a conference in Paris, and I called on Cardinal Lustiger of Paris. As some of you know, Cardinal Lustiger was born of Jewish parents, also in Poland, Warsaw. He was raised in a secular Jewish household in Poland, and in his early youth, when he also was about 14, 15 years old, he became a Catholic, a devout Catholic, and a priest. He also became a close friend to Pope John Paul II when he was a priest; later, an Archbishop in Krakow. [21:00] It was, in fact, Pope John Paul II who designated Cardinal Lustiger to be the Cardinal Archbishop of Paris. And one of the charming things that goes on in France today, is that if you talk to leaders of the Jewish community,

France now has a Chief Rabbi, Chief Rabbi Sirat, who comes from North Africa, I think he comes from Algeria, and he speaks only French, Hebrew, and Arabic. And Cardinal Lustiger speaks fluent Yiddish, as well as French and other languages. In fact, the first time I ran into Cardinal Lustiger was in Heppenheim, Germany, at a conference held at the Martin Buber house. And he knew of me, and I knew of him; he had just been designated. And when we saw each other across the room, we walked over to each other [0022:00] to embrace each other, and I said "[*Shalom mallerchum vos moks said?*]" . You know. Traditional Jewish greeting: "How's a Jew doing?" And he smiled, and said back to me, "[*Alechum shalom?*]" -- you know, we're going to talk in Yiddish. Sings of the times. We would say, in the United States, "Only in America" -- this was Heppenheim, Germany. In any case, now the words that is around Paris is that the French-Jewish community now has two Chief Rabbis, one of them is Ashkenazic, the other is Sephardic; one of them speaks Yiddish and the other doesn't. In any case, Cardinal Lustiger, with however much ambiguity this represents for many in the Jewish community, in terms of identity and clarity and rootedness -- Cardinal Lustiger, who feels painfully, in his bones, [23:00] the trauma that he suffered as a Jew in Poland, and the pain that he suffered as a victim of anti-Semitism in Poland at the hands of others, ostensible Christians. I came to him, in light of his

own personal relationship with the Polish-Catholic Church, the Polish government, as well as the Holy Father -- I told him this story. He had tears in his eyes, and he said, "Please, give me the documentation." And I gave him Rabbi Feffer's letter, and my own covering memorandum, and the correspondence of the exchange with Cardinal Cooke, and exchange with the Vatican Secretary of State. And he said, "This is not a matter of doing a favor -- not a [24:00] matter of doing a favor to these poor people. What is at stake for the Church is its honor, its truth, its integrity. No one should be snatched away from his own faith commitments, against his or her will, without the knowledge of the parents, and I promise you that I will pursue this matter to its end." And then he said to me, "In two weeks, I am going to Rome for a senate of Bishops, and there, I will seek out Cardinal Glemp, who is head of the Polish Catholic hierarchy, and I will seek to persuade him to do everything possible to see if Loluch Erlichster can be found." And Cardinal Lustiger went to Paris, [25:00] went to Rome, and, as he told me subsequently, he sat down with Cardinal Glemp and a number of Polish Catholic bishops, told them the story, and insisted as a matter of the honor of the Church, that they must do everything possible to remove all of the obstacles, which have been placed in the way of the parents to see their child before they day. Cardinal Glemp went back to Warsaw and, some weeks ago, we received a

letter from a Polish Catholic priest, in charge of the national television in Poland -- the entire country, Polish Catholic television, whatever is allowed, still, to them, as well as a letter from the [26:00] Polish National Television Network, saying that they've had a number of cases such as this in the past, and that they have found the most effective way of trying to find people like this who have disappeared, has been to allow members of their family to come onto television, to tell the story to the entire nation at primetime, with a view towards seeing if anyone can identify who the person is. And literally, several days ago, before coming here, the son called me -- Joe Erlichster -- to tell me that his mother and father, in another two weeks, are preparing to go to Poland, and are going to go on national television as their last desperate hope of trying to find out, first, whether Loluch is dead or alive -- to finally put their conscience to rest on that issue [27:00]; and if, by some miracle of God, he is found to be alive, whether they could have a final meeting with him as their last encounter with him before they feel that they will leave this earth. That's some story. But it's a story not only because of its human emotion and drama, but because it says something to us about what can happen with the quality of life in human society, what happens with morals, spiritual human values, when certain kinds of governments are constructed on certain ideological systems, in

which human beings are expendable, in which human beings are the subject of the state, the object [28:00] of manipulation, where everything exists just for the preservation of the autonomy of the state -- we are all its servants, rather than the converse democratic proposition that the state exists for the sake of serving the common welfare of all the members of that society. The underlying democratic assumption, which this society at its best, embodies, incarnates, represents. Secondly, it says something to us, it seems to me, about the character of what constitutes authentic faith and authentic religion. I have no question that in the pre-conciliar mentality, the pre-Vatican Council mentality, of those devout Roman Catholic nuns in Warsaw, who felt that they were doing the [29:00] will of God by snatching this Jewish (inaudible) away from his Jewishness, away from his Jewish family, especially in his imperiled condition, and saving his soul by secretly taking him off and baptizing him -- that's what God wants, and that is to be the future of mankind, that way of salvation -- because otherwise the child is damned, outside of salvation, outside of any redemption. Doomed forever! And therefore, we're doing a very great *mitzvah*, and never mind the consequences of what this might mean for that child's distraught parents who had suffered enough in that country which had been steeped with so much hatred and denigration and dehumanization of Jews and Judaism. And I'm sure

they felt righteous in God's eyes, in having "saved" that child from that child's imperiled [30:00] human and Jewish condition. I thought about that as I sat in the very simple and modest office of Cardinal Lustiger, and it was not his own turmoil, because subsequently I discussed the same issue with the Monsignor Maria, who is the Secretary of the Vatican Secretariat on Catholic-Jewish relation, a Jesuit from Buenos Aires -- a great scholar of the Bible; knows perfect Hebrew, Aramaic; taught at the Hebrew University. Who, when he was in Buenos Aires when Jews were being attacked by right wing fascist groups -- he, as the editor of *Criterion*, of the Jesuit publication in Buenos Aires, wrote powerful editorials condemning these assaults on [31:00] Jews. The disparisados, the snatching away off the streets of Buenos Aires by the right wing death squads. Hundreds and 100s of young people, among them some 700, 800 Jewish children, most of whom have disappeared and never been found. And so Monsignor Maria, who as a result of his moving out of the formalism, the churchiness, the bureaucracy, the notion that somehow you exist as a timid soul governed by these large systems, and you must take all of your signals from that system, and you cannot somehow live a life in which your full humanity, and your full moral commitment emerges -- as a result of his standing by the Jewish community in Buenos Aires during the height of those assaults in that civil war struggle between the

left wing revolutionaries, the monteneros, and the right wing death squads, [32:00] Monsignor Maria was put on the death squad list in Buenos Aires, and I have a sneaking suspicion that the Vatican brought him to Rome literally to save his life before it was too late, because he stood by the side of Jews, and against anti-Semitism, and for mutual respect between [caring?] Jews and Catholics. In any case, when I discussed this issue with him, his heart was filled with anguish and pain: "What can we do to help?" Vatican Council II has brought about what one authority in Rome has called, for me, a revolution in mutual esteem. I have no question that, had Vatican Council II taken place in the end of the 19th century, with [33:00] its facing up to the hard questions of teaching of contempt, of its anti-ecumenical attitudes, of its denigration of religious liberty, of its removal of itself from a modern world, and a sense of responsibility -- for justice, social justice, economic justice in the world -- that had the Church played that role in the 19th century, if one speculates that way, it would have been a very different world in the twentieth century. We see the fruits of it now everywhere. The spontaneity, the instantaneous with which Christian friends are prepared to respond in situations -- not just of extremists -- of the case of Loluch Erlichster. Every day reality's a Roman Catholic nun coming to us, saying that she is prepared to offer herself up as hostage -- if Sharansky can

be released from prison, going to the Soviet embassy in [34:00] New York and saying, "It is intolerable for me, as a Catholic in conscience, to sit by idly while this human life is being destroyed by the great Soviet system." Another Roman Catholic [nun?] devoting her entire life to Soviet jury. It's that sense of a whole new community of concern and conscience, where people identify with the fate and the needs of others -- that has in fact led me, inspired me, to want to be concerned about Catholics in Lithuania, who are suffering from hell; evangelical Baptists in the Soviet Union who are suffering, frequently, as badly as Jews. To be prepared to go to Southeast Asia four times in the past three years, literally to help pull people out of the South China Sea, while the world stood by and allowed nearly a half million people to drown. Well, we'd often play golf, swam, enjoyed ourselves, the [35:00] world is a pleasure place, paradise. This is what is beginning to emerge: always, always small, modest ways. It is like Stuart Hughes' discussion of the emergence of the history of ideas; great ideas do not begin in the midst of a committee. If a committee ever had to draft the Ten Commandments, we never would have had the Ten Commandments; we still would be in Sinai languishing, and it probably would have ended up being called the 11th Amendment, in any case. But transforming ideas always begin in the minds of a few isolated individuals. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel,

Leah, Moses, Jesus, Marx, Freud. [36:00] Who are the great embodiments of the great ideas that are transforming? Always small groups. And then, as Durkheim tells us, it is these charismatic personalities and their charismatic ideas of transforming power that then become institutionalized, become part of a community -- transform a community into a vital whole, that is clear about its identity, clear about its moral purpose, its vision, its sense of meaning in the universe. And that's the transformation that is beginning: small, modest ways; few individuals; few groups; few schools. Holocaust education is part of that process of refining the conscience of plunging us into the most painful reality of the twentieth century, not simply to indulge ourselves in guilt trips, or relieve for ourselves, [37:00] easily, of moral responsibility. But to help us understand that what this is about is not Jewish obsession -- it is to help us understand in ways which, in this past week in Washington -- and I spent some time this past Tuesday with President Reagan, who was beside himself, literally in despair over what is happening, and not being able to take hold of it, not being able to really understand what Bitburg is all about, not being able to understand what it means to even be present in a cemetery, where the suggestion might emerge that he might be laying a wreath at the tombstones of 47 Nazi storm troopers, whose emblem [38:00] was a death skull, and who live by that

emblem. People in the White House I've been talking with, with this week, today, this afternoon -- calls here, you know, "Help us find some way out, how do we say it right? The president's in a hole, and every time he opens his mouth up, he digs the hole deeper." And apparently, one needs to find ways, find formulation -- it is another discussion, I'll come to that at some point, but what we must seek to come to grips with, not in a spirit of mutual incrimination, but to understand the magnitude of the issue that is at stake -- is that, indeed, the Jewish people were singled out for the final solution [39:00]; they were the only people in the whole of Europe who were singled out as a matter of the official policy of state for total and complete extermination. Millions of others were killed as a result of the war -- 35 million, perhaps, all together. The war had its disasters, but what was intended for Jews was the ultimate crime itself, and the SS were the agents of that criminal activity. But what is significant in all that is that Auschwitz did not happen in Uganda. Auschwitz and Treblinka were not constructed in Burundi [40:00]; they were not even built in Afghanistan. Those hundreds of concentration camps which systematically destroyed the lives of six million Jewish men, women, and children, and then proceeded to kill millions of other *Untermenschen* -- Slavs, Poles, gypsies, gays -- was built, first and foremost, in Germany, a country of ancient Christian

civilization, a country in which Aachen was the seat of the Holy Roman Empire, the (inaudible), and the Hapsburgs, and all of that extraordinary list of great emperors, [41:00] and great imperial achievement. It was also constructed in a country in which the Protestant Reformation took place -- purification of Christian doctrine and teaching. And on top of that, it was constructed in a country that gave us Goethe, and Beethoven, and Heinrich Heine, one of the most advanced countries of Western Civilization. The capacity of that Nazi government to carry out its systematic -- first, demonization, then dehumanization, and finally, destruction of millions of men, women, and children who happened to have been born Jews [42:00] -- yeah, it's a Jewish problem. But I want to suggest to you, as Frank Littell has said over and over again, it is supremely a problem of civilization, it is supremely a crisis, or ought to be, for Christian conscience, because Nazi Germany took place on the grave of the entire moral value system of Western Christendom. What failed in that system of Western Christian values that enabled that kind of demonism to emerge? To be undergirded? By a value system and by a demonology that sustained, inhibited conscience, enabled people to feel free to carry out that human destructiveness without any sense of any ultimate [43:00] accountability. As I said earlier today, I've studied the literature and talked to survivors, it's simply incredible to me, even to this day, as

one reads the burgeoning literature, that Nazi Germany was not the creation of madmen and psychopaths; at the heart of its construction, its organization, its implementation, its maintenance, its daily work were thousands and thousands of PhDs, academics, the greatest doctors, surgeons, chemists, engineers -- the intellectual cream of Germany [44:00] -- they sustained that system and enabled it to work. And it raises a question: what is the role of morality, ethics, values, in relation to science and technology? What is the nature of an educational system that can produce educated, literate savages, barbarians, whose behavior is no different than those in Uganda and Burundi, who have had no concern in conscience? What kind of world of moral stability, order, civility, humaneness -- or will there be a world that is so vulnerable and unpredictable that life becomes anarchic and terrifying in its unpredictability, in terms of the value of human life? I am persuaded that, what goes on here [45:00] this evening -- the honoring of Raoul Wallenberg, a great Christian man; whatever form his faithfulness took, a human being who was prepared to act out his beliefs, his values in real life, at a real personal risk, represents for all of us a promise, and the hope for the future -- not simply as heroes, but simply as serious people who take the words that pass from our mouths as mandates for the lives we live, every day of our lives, in our relationship with one

another. And I pray to God that this institute and others like it will help widen [46:00] that circle of that community of conscience, which I believe is the hope for the survival of humankind, in a humane, loving, caring way -- we're all worthy to invest in our children, so they may have some prospect of a life of decency and civility and safety. Thank you. (applause)

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