

CD-1053 Transcription

International Council of Christians & Jews Interfaith Medallion

Award, AJC Annual Meeting. 11 May 1988.

M1:

It's an unusual event that's been scheduled for today, and it gives me great pleasure that I have the opportunity to preside at this. Every major community effort and organization has depended upon individuals who devote themselves, and all of their efforts and energy and talents, to its purposes. AJC has been fortunate, we've had many laypeople who've done this, and we have many devoted people on our staff. But it's only rarely that any one person stands out as has Marc Tanenbaum, and brought the recognition, the attention, and honor to an organization, that Marc has brought to us.

It's truly regrettable that after 37 days in the hospital, he went back again and came out yesterday, fortunately in time for this occasion. We all know of his work in Catholic-Jewish relations and inter-religious affairs in general, the high regard in which he is held in the Jewish and Christian community, and the honors [01:00] we've shared with him. It's therefore fitting that he is to be honored today by the International Council of Christians and Jews, which, for more

than 40 years, has promoted mutual respect and cooperation between our two faiths. The council's brought to bear the moral and religious principles basic to both Judaism and Christianity, as it has fought prejudice and discrimination and dealt with diverse problems of interfaith, interracial, and international affairs.

Clearly, we of the AJC share many goals and values and have many common interests with the Council, and we've cooperated and participated in a number of consultations with them. One ICCJ asset we do not share, alas, is the distinguished leadership of Sir Sigmund Sternberg, who has served as the Chairman of the Council's Executive Committee since 1979. He is a pillar of the British-Jewish community and has added to a successful personal career as a business leader in Great Britain and a philanthropist. [02:00] His extraordinary diplomatic skills and profound commitment to inter-religious understanding and cooperation, which has led to pioneer dialogues at Eastern as well as Western Europe. We are pleased and honored to have him with us on this very happy occasion. Sir Sternberg. (applause)

Sigmund Sternberg:

Thank you, Mr. President, for these very kind words, and I shall try to live up to it. I must tell you that I cannot remember an

occasion when I was happier to be than I am here now because when I arrived from New York, from London to New York, I wasn't sure that this presentation will take place at all because [Rita?] told me that, "I'm sorry to tell you that [03:00] Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum is in hospital." So, that was quite a shattering blow to me because I was so much looking forward to it. And I thought if perhaps that I make the presentation in the hospital. Then, another message, "No, he's going to come out, he's going to be there, on Wednesday, he's going to be let out." (laughter) So, that was good. So, I prayed and it's not very often that a [bardos?] prays for the rabbi, it's usually the other way around, there are (inaudible) who pray for the (inaudible), but I really did pray, and it looks to me that my prayers were answered because here is Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum! So... (applause)

Thank you. Before, I'd like to tell you about [04:00] myself. I was born in Hungary, and I spent my childhood in the '30s in Hungary, which was not a very happy place. And during those days, there was no dialogue between Christians and Jews. When I was a child, the only dialogue that existed, that in school, I went for a time in a Christian school, they told me that the Jews killed Jesus, and you've got to suffer because Jews killed Jesus. I mean, that was my first introduction to Christianity. Of course, when I saw the priests in the street, we went the

other way, and we did not have anything to do with priests because we were very afraid of them. And I thought to myself, "This can't be right. I mean, why should that be so?"

And -- [05:00] I don't want to take up your time, but -- what happened, I started to get interested in interfaith dialogue, and I must tell you, this was one of the most rewarding experiences in my life because I have seen so much change during the last few years between Christian-Jewish dialogue and in particular, Catholic-Jewish dialogue, and this change took place because there are people like Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum. I must tell you, since I got this honor of having been made a Knight Commander of Saint Gregory the Great, I'm consulted by cardinals, when I come to London last week, Cardinal Willebrands, who came to the London for the funeral of the late Archbishop Fisher, had a phone call to [06:00] meet him and talk to him. And the first thing he asked me, "How is Marc? Have you heard about Marc?" I just had to say, I said, "Yes, I know about Marc, he's all right, he's been in hospital, but he's well, I am going to see him." Cardinal König, the week before, I met him in London. He said, "Tell Marc I got a letter from him; I'm not going to answer his letter. I'm going to speak to him." Some of you have seen that Marc's letter to Cardinal König.

I'm just giving you time to illustrate how highly Marc is thought of in Vatican circles. I mean, he is a person who is consulted, and his advice is taken. Of course, you see that the Vatican have their own protocols, and it's very difficult for us to have [that mentality?], but I mean, to have someone like Marc who is listened to, I mean, this is a great asset to the Jewish community. And there's really much hope, this is going to [07:00] continue. I had the notes about Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum, many notes, which I thought I'm going to mention in the presentation, how distinguished he is, but it's completely unnecessary because everyone knows me -- when I arrived in London, I was just telling Marc, that the taxi chauffeur asked me, he said, "Why, what are you doing here?" I said, "I'm giving a presentation to a rabbi." He said, "Who?" I said, "Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum." He said, "Oh, yes, I listened to him on the radio," (laughter) so whoever I speak to, I don't have to say anything because he's been listened to, to the radio! So, it's a very easy task.

Therefore, I would like to say something about the International Council of Christians and Jews. I do appreciate that I have to be short because we're quite busy, but we don't see Marc as often as we used to, but you're very fortunate in seeing [Judith Banky?]. She's here today and I would like to pay tribute to you

for all the work [08:00] that you are doing for the
International Council of Christians and Jews. (applause)

And I hope you will continue coming. And I must also refer to
Madame Bishop. She just got a very important award. She's here
especially for this occasion. Identify yourself, Madame.

(applause)

She's one of the former presidents of the International Council
of Christians and Jews, and I'm particularly pleased to have
here the consul general because the assistance which the
International Council of Christians and Jews receives from the
West German government, I mean, we couldn't carry on this work
which we are doing, and having let us have the Martin Buber
house -- because that's where the International Council of
Christians and Jews [09:00] is situated, in West Germany, in
Heppenheim, which is very near Frankfurt -- I mean, they gave us
the house and they're looking after it. And when you are in
Germany, when you are in Frankfurt, you are very welcome to
visit the place that Martin Buber spent a great part of his
life. And the work which we are doing is not only interfaith
relations between Christians and Jews, but also between
Christians, Jews, and Muslims, and the end of this month, we are
having a conference and trying to get the Muslims involved as

well because I think, eventually, they will have to come into the dialogue.

And not only that, I mean, the [Soviet bloc?] countries, I think we are the first international organization who started having dialogue with the Soviet bloc countries. I mean, we have conferences first [10:00] in Hungary and in East Germany, and in Poland, and I'm very much looking forward at the time, will not be very far away, but we'll be able to have a conference in the Soviet Union. I see Rabbi [Greenberg?] just walked in here. Identify yourself, Rabbi Greenberg, please. I'm very pleased that you could manage to come because you had a very busy schedule. I mean, some of you have seen the wonderful occasion of the Cologne conference, which we took part yesterday.

Now, as I said, too, I mean, our time is rather short, and I don't think it's necessary for me to say anything about Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum because you all know him. But what I would like you to know, what I would like you know, is that a book has been published now, *50 Years of Catholic-Jewish Dialogue*, which I would like you to buy because this book illustrates to you exactly what happened in the last [11:00] 50 years. Because we Jews, we have got this angst complex, and maybe things are not happening quick enough, why doesn't the Vatican have diplomatic

relations with Israel, why this, why that -- I know that it takes a long time, but if you read this book, my reference is made into Marc Tanenbaum, you will see what happened in 50 years, and what happened in 50 years is absolutely significant if you come, if you look back. Of course, it isn't enough, and of course, we are not satisfied, but I mean, we are on the right road. Now, it gives me great pleasure, Rabbi Tanenbaum, to present you... (laughter, applause) ...with the interfaith medallion, the interfaith medallion. The last person who received it [12:00] was in London, was a Speaker of the House of Commons, Bernard Weatherill, so you share that with Bernard Weatherill, but that is for your leadership and outstanding contribution to interfaith relations. Also -- (applause) And with the award goes the check of £1,000.

M2:

Wow. First time in London.

Marc Tanenbaum:

Take a moment to put this away, safe trip. Sir Sigmund, [13:00] my dear friends, [Ted Allenoff?], [Leo Nebbitz?], [Burke Holde?], my rabbinic colleagues who have done me the honor of coming here today, my dear family and friends. I was going to start off saying something about thanking my lucky stars.

(laughter) But since this week's events, I'll have to find another set of metaphors. This would be a meaningful and moving moment in my life under normal circumstances. Given my recent hospitalization, this event, the receiving of the prestigious Interfaith Award of the International Council of Christians and Jews in your presence, [14:00] people who mean a very great deal to me, assumes a very special and even a rare quality of grace. I must confess that an element of its special-ness derives from the fact that this is one of the few events in my life that I did not have to arrange myself. (laughter) That adds to why I'm so touched and grateful for today.

Sir Sigmund Sternberg, one of the most distinguished leaders of British Jewry, and a statesman of the Jewish people, and the International Council of Christians and Jews, perhaps the most representative body devoted to the improvement of relationships between Christians and Jews on an international basis, quite spontaneously informed me, several months ago, that I had been selected for this distinction in recognition of my more than 25 years of service [15:00] in the advancement of Jewish-Christian understanding. And that spontaneity lends the luster of authenticity to this tribute. With your permission, I should like to take just a few minutes to reflect on some of the meaning of this occasion and award to me.

It is most effectively synthesized for me in the writings of Dr. Ernest Becker, a brilliant but neglected cultural anthropologist. In his book, *The Denial of Death*, Dr. Becker states that human beings "do not, in fact, fear death. People, rather, fear dying in insignificance. That," he says, "is the real terror of death." He suggests that all of us, at least most of us, [16:00], have a need to live our lives in a way that makes a difference. Significant lives that give meaning to human existence. "That," Becker writes, "is our immortality." All of our art, literature, music, culture, even religion, are ways of making a statement, leaving a landmark that we have not simply endured as animal life endures, but that we have lived lives of purpose and meaning. "In short," Becker states, "each of us has a powerful need to make a difference through our living, to help ennoble the human condition." "That," he says, "is true immortality."

As I have thought about my past 27 years with the American Jewish Committee, I experience feelings of the deepest gratitude [17:00] for AJC's having made possible opportunities for living a life of such high meaning, enabling contributions to be made in many areas of importance to the Jewish people and to society at large. In some cases, contributions, I trust, of lasting,

even transforming value. In retrospect, if I may say this briefly, it is remarkable, should not be taken for granted, that AJC's lay leaders and professional leadership supported activities literally in every decade, at least during the time that I've been associated with AJC, that help changed the course of history for the better. In the 1960s, the AJC made possible the participation of my beloved colleague and mentor, Zachariah Shuster, and my precious teacher, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, [18:00] and myself, in Vatican Council II.

That council was a transforming event which has radically altered the course of 1,900 years of Catholic-Jewish relations, in many cases, much for the better. In the 1970s, we were able to pioneer, with Dr. Billy Graham and the Southern Baptist Convention, in opening a new world of Evangelical-Jewish relations, which thankfully continues to this day. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, AJC enabled my taking part in four separate missions to Southeast Asia. No other Jewish organization had been involved at that time in that concern. Coming to Southeast Asia, that literally resulted in the saving of thousands of lives of Vietnamese boat people and Cambodians, and led to the resettlement of a half-million hapless refugees in the United States. And earlier, [19:00] in the mid-1960s, we were able to engage in similar life-saving roles in the

Nigerian-Biafran conflict, and then in Ethiopia, and in drought-ridden Sahelian Zone of West Africa. In the 1990s, we were able to make significant gains with major European countries, both West and East, particularly with West Germany, for which all of us owe a debt of gratitude to [Bill Trostin?] and to his predecessors. As well as both Latin America, through (inaudible). All of which requires further serious and responsible cultivation. And now, in 1998, we're beginning to explore the possible importance to Jews and Israel of Japan and the Pacific Rim, in light of their powerful geopolitical and economic presence in America and in the world.

While these dramatic and historic highlights, [20:00] while these were dramatic and historic highlights, we conjured with those challenges while concentrating much of our energies on the priorities of Israel, Soviet Jewry, endangered Jewish communities in Ethiopia, Iran, Syria, Yemen, Central America, and elsewhere. We visited Oberammergau several times to bring about changes in their passion play, we implemented religious textbook studies, we taught to combat teachings of contempt against Jews and Judaism, to which Claire Bishop and others have made such important contributions. I will never be able to thank adequately Dr. [John Slosson?] and [Bert Gold?], who put up, first of all, with my idiosyncrasies, mishigas, all to my

specialized shtick, but also gave me the freedom and support, mostly wholeheartedly, sometimes reluctantly, to do what I thought had to be done in our common interest. [21:00] They instilled in me one crucial motto, which I take to be the continuing motto of the American Jewish Committee: [be affect?], know your facts, and do it right.

My dear friends, Ted Allenoff, Leo Nebbitz, our AJC officers, our eminent former presidents, our professional colleagues, for me, especially those in inter-religious affairs and international relations, our chapter leaders, our area directors, that is the moral and human framework without which none of this history could have been made, decade after decade. And I am confident that under Ira Silverman's leadership, as Executive Vice President, that tradition of significant accomplishment will continue and expand. In truth, I feel deeply that this award is to be shared with the American Jewish Committee, with the International Council of Christians [22:00] and Jews, and all those extraordinary Christian and Jewish leaders, many of them dear friends who collaborated with us to bring about -- one late friend of ours in Rome, called the "revolution of mutual esteem." Many of them honor me by their presence here today.

There is a Hebrew phrase, "*Acharone, acharone chaviv*," the last is the most beloved. My magnificent, beautiful, and brilliant wife, Georgette, has saved my life in many ways. (applause)

It is difficult to imagine [23:00] that any human being can give more to another than my wife has given to me. During our life together, Georgette has made me possible. And so, Sir Sigmund, ICCJ, AJC, and friends, for this memorable day, I thank you from the bottom of my heart. (applause)

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