

CD-1055 Transcription

Response to Elie Wiesel regarding the TV miniseries "Holocaust."

17 May 1978.

M1:

This is a question which I suspect we may address to Rabbi Tanenbaum: what is your response to Elie Wiesel's criticism of the program, especially with the regard to factual accuracy?

Marc Tanenbaum:

It's a difficult, and in some way, personally painful question for me to answer because Elie Wiesel has been a friend, and in many ways, a moral hero to me for decades, because he was one of the few messengers out of Auschwitz who was determined that the world would not repress the magnitude of that trauma, which our people and the world suffered. Nevertheless, I think that [01:00] he made a very bad error in judgment. I don't want to take too much time to respond to this, but I did a little checking on what impact the Holocaust scholars, for whom I have great reverence and deference -- I was not a Holocaust survivor. My wife and her family were. And so, I approached this whole discussion with great trepidation and inhibition. I really stand in fear and trembling before that reality. Anyone who spends an hour with someone who lived a day in Auschwitz or Bergen-Belsen

simply cannot imagine the magnitude of the dehumanization that went on. [02:00]

But having said that, I did some checking on how many copies of books by Elie Wiesel, Lucy Davidowicz, Nora Levin, Raul Hilberg, and all of those scholars who have been writing since the end of World War II have sold, in all of their forms, to America. If the figure over the past 30 years or so is more than 10 million copies, that is an awful high figure. Which is to say that if one had to count on those serious works reaching the conscience of 220 million Americans, not to speak of nearly four billion people around the world, whom I believe have to face what was fundamentally being raised by issue of *Holocaust*, [03:00] namely the growing callousness to human suffering throughout the world today, if one had to count on those studies decisively heightening the consciousness of human beings so that people will stand up before that tyranny and that dehumanization, then I'm afraid we would wait centuries before that kind of slow filtering process would penetrate into human consciousness.

The plain fact of the matter is that *Holocaust* has reached more people, in terms of confronting even some fundamental elementary data, that this took place in this form in this way, than all of the studies that have been produced up to this time by that

group of scholars. I have a sense there's almost a kind of death wish at work among some scholars, who want to snatch defeat from victory. This was an extraordinary moral watershed in the consciousness [04:00] not only of America, but what will be in Germany, in England, in Australia, in New Zealand, and all the countries we've been talking about. And I think it's a decisive issue to raise. Let me conclude with this: I've just come back this past February from a mission with 14 prominent American citizens, among them James Michener, two undersecretaries of state, former president of the Export-Import Bank, an American ambassador, Bayard Rustin, and others, on a fact-finding mission of Indochinese refugees and Vietnamese boat people in South China Sea. The indifference of the world to the fate of those people is a moral outrage that cries out to heaven for a response.

And one of the reasons I'm persuaded that the world is standing by while 60% of the Vietnamese boat people are sinking into the South China Sea is because we have learned how to stand by the Holocaust, evade it, repress it, have amnesia about it, and act as if, [05:00] at the very least, it's a Jewish obsession which has no meaning for anyone else. We learned one permanent, universal lesson out of the Nazi Holocaust, and that's why I put everything aside, and the American Jewish Committee gave its

highest priority to this, as unpaid consultants. One permanent, universal lesson: you shall not stand idly by while the blood of your brothers and sisters cry out to you from the earth. We have not learned that about Cambodia, where last year, 2-3 million people have been massacred in genocide before the eyes of the earth. We are not learning it now in Uganda, where 300,000 black Christians have been destroyed, and you don't hear great outcries about that. We're not even learning it in Ireland, where every day, dozens upon dozens of Catholics and Protestants, brothers and sisters of many of the people in this room, certainly in this country, are being liquidated!

We have learned to conform with an incredible indifference and spectatorship of the world, [06:00] and that's why, to me, with all of its failings and all of the problems with commercials and all of the limitations, *Holocaust* is what we would call in Jewish tradition an act of *kiddush hashem*, it was an act of sanctification of God's holy name, and I think, potentially, a turning point in the moral consciousness of America and in many parts of the world. (applause)

M1:

I think on that note, we will draw the luncheon to a close. On behalf of the International Radio and Television Society, I want

to express our thanks to Herbert Brodtkin, Buzz Berger, [Jerry
Greene?], Marvin Chomsky, [Paul Klein?], Irwin Siegelstein, [Bob
Howard?], [Kevin O'Sullivan?], Rabbi Tanenbaum, [07:00],
Reverend [Brusset?], Reverend [Weiler?], for joining us today.
Don't forget, two weeks from today, our Eric Sevareid luncheon.
Many thanks for coming. (applause)

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