

CD-1075 Transcription

Discusses the Holocaust on "The Last Word with Phil Donahue &
Greg Jackson" (ABC News). 7 March 1983.

M: -- anyone who was responsible for the Holocaust, and they'll answer, naturally, "The Nazis were." But should others accept some of the responsibility? Here's Phil Donahue (inaudible).

PHIL DONAHUE: While six million of their brothers and sisters were going to their deaths in the Holocaust in World War II, what were American Jews doing about this? Perhaps not enough. [Saying?] a very powerful Jewish (inaudible) of this country. Not surprisingly, the suggestion that American Jewry did not rise to the emergency of the moment has created great divisions among Jews in this country and around the world. The commission's study [has very?] question (inaudible) no less a person than former Supreme Court justice Arthur Goldberg. We'll talk about both sides with a rabbi and a survivor of the Holocaust in a moment on *The Last Word*.

(music) [01:00]

M1: On ABC News, *The Last Word*. Late-night television with Phil Donahue in Chicago and Greg Jackson in New York: linking the nation to let you share the last word. Remember, call us with your questions tonight at 1-800-[MIDNIGHT?].

M2: Now is the time --

(break in audio)

M3: -- the rabbis marched on Washington, as seen here in the recent documentary, *Who Shall Live, Who Shall Die?* It was a political protest against what they said was a lack of US government action to save Jews who were being slaughtered in Europe. The protestors got little or no action in Washington or even much support from some of the established Jewish leaders who said those activists didn't represent the Jewish community. Now there's a controversial commission which has found that the American Jews who didn't listen to those protestors might share some of the [02:00] blame for what happened in the Holocaust. Here's Phil Donahue.

DONAHUE: First, this note: the commission on which former Supreme Court justice Arthur Goldberg serves exploring what Jews did or did not do in this country at the time of the Holocaust has released some preliminary findings, including

the fact that American Jews did not do all they could have. The commission quickly adds that it's probable they couldn't have done much more. How much did they know? How much power did they have? What was really expected of American Jews, who must have been having difficulty themselves surviving, many of them as foreign-born and first-generation Americans in this country. Jeff Eisner has taken as militant a position on this matter as anybody who's surfaced so far. In fact, he resigned from that commission because he felt that the commission itself was bowing to powerful American Jews who did not want this untoward publicity directed at Jews, especially at a time when the Jews are undergoing this painful self-examination regarding the Middle East and Lebanon now. [03:00] How do you know the American Jews didn't do enough, Mr. Eisner?

JEFF EISNER: Because it's quite obvious that -- we can state something from the outset that is deeply embedded in my mind and in my heart: that while millions were slaughtered in German death factories, the world was looking with indifference. The State Department of those days was outright anti-Semitic. The White House was indifferent; the British government was indifferent. But American Jewry was not indifferent. They were concerned -- they were deeply concerned, but they were divided, disorganized, in fear of

their own fate, and being what I call (inaudible), they (inaudible) of "lay low, don't rock your own boat, don't bring out (inaudible)." And that immobilized them, and they failed in rescuing efforts that could have saved hundreds of thousands.

DONAHUE: What could they have done in an anti-Semitic country administered by an anti-Semitic government, as you allege?

[04:00]

EISNER: It was not an anti-Semitic country. There were millions and millions of noble and beautiful Gentiles as the small, tiny (inaudible) has found allies in the Congress that were non-Jews. And the American Jewish community has failed to mobilize itself and failed to mobilize millions upon millions of beautiful, good Christians.

M: Meet one of the most influential spokesmen in the American Jewish community today. He's Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum, American Jewish Committee in New York, National Interreligious Director, considered one of the foremost Jewish ecumenical leaders. The Jews in the '40s in this country [you think?] rallied around the banner "Don't make trouble." That's what Mr. Eisner is saying. How do you feel about that?

MARC TANENBAUM: Well, given the magnitude of the Holocaust, the savage massacre of six million Jews, none of us did

enough. But American Jewish organizations, I think, did in the context far more than has been acknowledged.

M: [05:00] Well, he's already willing to grant that, Rabbi. So let us grant that a lot of courageous people did stand up, and there were wonderful signs of resistance and efforts to fix this in this country. But he's in effect saying a significant and an embarrassing percentage of Jews in this country stood there.

TANENBAUM: The major problem the Jewish leadership faced was the indifference -- in some cases, deception -- of an otherwise-great president, FDR. And Secretary Cordell Hull, who refused to register any protest, saying "We haven't the right to interfere in the internal affairs of Nazi Germany." A Jewish organization had only the American government to rely on to make those (inaudible).

M: Are you here to say, then -- let's not worry about this, this is not worth exploration?

TANENBAUM: No, I'm saying that in fact, this issue has begun to be explored seriously and responsibly by Jewish scholars. And my protest against the most recent attack [06:00] on Jewish leadership is that it's reckless, irresponsible, and in some cases demagogic.

M: In fact, I [want?] Jewish leadership. (inaudible)?

TANENBAUM: Well, first of all, it has been said without any evidence that my group, for example, the American Jewish Committee, the American Jewish Congress, B'nai Brith, etc. brought pressure to bear on Justice Goldberg to revise the report in order to show them looking better than they did. Nobody has submitted a scintilla of evidence that that has happened.

M: And that's why you quit, Mr. Eisner. You said that you felt that the people on the committee were buckling to all of the American Jews who didn't want another negative commission report regarding Jews.

EISNER: The main symbol of the -- the main (inaudible) was "let the chips fall where they may." Later it turned out, as I saw it happening: "Let the chips fall where we want them to fall."

(overlapping dialogue; inaudible)

M: Now, why did you quit, Mr. Eisner? Why would a man --

EISNER: (inaudible) [who cares?] --

M: -- a man who is seeing the darkest side of life as a Holocaust survivor hang in there with them? Why quit?

EISNER: I refuse to [07:00] finance a committee or a commission that is -- [Tremlin -- Iva Tremlin?] declared that he will not hire any research team of commissions and historians -- (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) Justice

Goldberg, and he himself will write a paper. Now, that was not the aim, and I definitely refuse to finance it.

M: Here are the findings: American Jews did not do all they have. That doesn't sound like a whitewash. That's a preliminary finding.

EISNER: That is one small, tiny segment of what the American Jewish community failed at. We weren't let to condemn or convict anybody. I, as a survivor, want my grandchildren to learn the mistakes of their grandparents --

M: That's the reason for this, is it?

EISNER: -- and (inaudible) to learn from history.

EISNER: Rabbi has suggested -- have you not, Rabbi? -- that there may be a shade of anti-Semitism here, and the media focus on this issue may itself be anti-Semitic. What do you think?

TANENBAUM: Well, I've been concerned about that. I think one of the consequences already that has come out of these sweeping charges that American [08:00] Jewish leaders in the first draft of their report knew everything that was going on and did virtually nothing has led to a situation where several Christian leaders who have been confronted with the issue of "What did the Vatican do, example, what did the Catholic Church do?" have come back to me now, and in writing have said -- "Since American Jewish leaders have

done nothing, how can you prove (inaudible) about the Christian world?" I don't think we realize the consequences of the damaging aspect of that report as it came out in this first draft.

M: We are in Chicago for *The Last Word* and we'll be back in just a moment.

(break in audio)

F1: I want to know really what the (inaudible) investigation is. It sounds to me like it's laying a lot of guilt on the Jews for what they didn't do. Why isn't the point simply why -- what happened and what can we do in the future so that it doesn't happen again?

EISNER: That is a point. First thing we must do is to diagnose what happened and how did we behave, what did we fail to do -- in order for the future to learn to prevent, you must know what you did and what you failed to do.

F1: Well, that is a point [09:00] -- how Jews are accountable does not sound like it's making that point. It sounds really, once again, like it's trying to lay a lot of guilt on the Jews for what happened.

TANENBAUM: I think that's exactly what happened in the first draft of the report.

F1: I think that sounds -- that's really bad PR, and I think it's a very important issue to avoid (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) --

EISNER: The (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) nation does not need PR. We can face our ethics and morals squarely (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

M: But your timing couldn't have been worse. Do we have agreement on that, Mr. Eisner? We've got the Jews out there in public with all kinds of self-examination and acknowledgment of guilt at a time when the [Phalangists?] are apparently not examining anything, and they're the ones that pulled the trigger in there.

EISNER: That's why the Jewish nation has (inaudible) years of history and ethics of morals -- the timing is perfect.

TANENBAUM: I have great respect for Mr. Eisner. We have engaged in self-examination years before he came onto the scene. I can name you a dozen studies of Jewish leadership with scholars, chapter and verse -- I have a couple of them here. The point is that we have sought to examine what went [10:00] wrong with a view toward learning how we can not repeat that episode again now. But you don't do that on the front page of the *New York Times* with wild demagogic charges which make sweeping condemnations, which paralyze you from doing the job that needs to be done.

M: So you think the commission is a good idea; you're upset with Mr. Eisner (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) --

EISNER: I [serve on?] --

M: -- and you're upset at his leave-taking and his public denunciation of it.

TANENBAUM: I am upset over the whole issue being discussed in terms of whether Jack Eisner's (inaudible) or what Arthur Goldberg's going to pay for it: that is an obscenity in the face of the Holocaust.

EISNER: I must correct the rabbi: I did not bring this issue to the forefront of the *New York Times*. I have not reported at all.

M: Justice Goldberg at first suggested that you quit the commission and withdrew your financial support of the commission because you felt they were buckling to powerful Jews.

EISNER: That is correct, but I did not take it to the *Times* to publicize it. But I am not upset about publicity at all. I think the great tragedy of the German nation -- two tragedies. The first tragedy of the crime they perpetrated on millions of children in death factories; [11:00] the second tragedy of Germany is that they're failing now to look at themselves and teach their children the lessons of the past.

M: There are millions of faithful, proud Jews out there who want to know -- where is the *New York Times* with its detailed reports about the massacres in the other parts of the world? In the -- the suggestion is that somehow Jewish sins are the most public sins, are the most analyzed sins. And then throw in a (inaudible) within the Jewish community, and they said --

EISNER: There's nothing unusual about that. We have given (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) --

TANENBAUM: I'm very much dismayed by the tenor of this program. I don't really like the entire topic. The point is, the [Harden?] discussed it. The Holocaust has -- we should discuss the Holocaust. We should discuss what it means. We should discuss the fact that anti-Semitism kills. We can discuss the possibility that the Jewish community -- we should discuss what lessons we can learn that had there been a (inaudible), tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands might have been. The Jews [12:00] learned this lesson, and now know that (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) plenty about it.

M: What's wrong with discussing it, (inaudible)?

M1: Because it is fruitless to decide whether or not somebody really, back in 1942, really knew, understood, assimilated the entire matter. (overlapping dialogue; inaudible)

M: (overlapping dialogue; inaudible)

EISNER: (overlapping dialogue; inaudible)

M1: -- scholars --

EISNER: But we disagree that it's fruitless. I do not think the Jewish organizations that are so much, very much needed -- I don't (inaudible) the establishment have learned their lesson. They were [years? leaders?] and generations behind in the '40s. They have lived since then in a country club. That was where they are not prepared to adversity. Judaism knows in its 2,000 years of history --

(overlapping dialogue; inaudible)

M: The rabbi again.

TANENBAUM: The response of the Jewish community in the United States, to the defense of the state of Israel -- what we have done to help three million Soviet Jews, have gotten a quarter of a million out: all of that is what we have learned from the Nazi Holocaust. We're verging on, in this debate, scapegoating [13:00] Jewish leadership, which means paralyzing Jewish leadership. And incidentally, nobody has a monopoly on virtue, Jack. I will stake my life in terms of what my group and what I personally have done in terms of Israel and Soviet Jews and the lessons we have learned to deal with anti-Semitism in this country and Latin America, and I don't need anybody to stand in

judgment to tell me that I'm totally deficient. It --
really, Jewish -- (overlapping dialogue; inaudible)

M: (overlapping dialogue; inaudible)

M1: He did not say --

TANENBAUM: The response that is coming through is Jewish
organizations were bankrupt. They did nothing. And that's
(overlapping dialogue; inaudible) --

M1: -- (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) [a lie?].

M2: That they didn't do enough. The commission itself --
(overlapping dialogue; inaudible)

TANENBAUM: But nobody did enough.

M: All right, let's look at the other side of this. If you are
going to condemn those who attempt -- and let's give him
the benefit of his point here: he's not -- he doesn't get
any more joy than you do out of this kind of publicity, but
he thinks the exposure of the possibility that there may
have been inertia in the '40s insures that it won't happen
again. Now, that's not a bad point.

TANENBAUM: The question is how the discussion is done. If
the discussion is done on the basis of scapegoating --

M: But can you possibly --

TANENBAUM: Yeah, you can do it --

M: Can you examine [14:00] something this incendiary without
inevitably having (pause)?

TANENBAUM: Well, I think there's a responsibility of leadership to try to do that.

F: Excuse me. Do you know what you've done, Mr. Eisner? You've shifted the focus of the attack from those who were guilty directly and indirectly to the safe scapegoat, a traditional scapegoat, of the Jew. And this directly -- that's a very safe scapegoat. And we've seen --

EISNER: I [do not agree?] with you.

F: And when you see the general mentality, that is definitely a general mentality.

(overlapping dialogue; inaudible)

EISNER: I disagree with you, because the state of Israel has now done the most healthy, the most finest moral thing that it could do in looking at itself. It does not shift the guilt towards the Christian Phalangists (inaudible) who did the killing, actually.

(overlapping dialogue; inaudible)

TANENBAUM: But look how it's (inaudible) in this report and look how this is being done.

M2: The difference is that a sovereign state with power can make those kinds of statements.

M: And they didn't have one in the '40s.

M2: They did not have that in the '40s. There was a weak community in the United States. There's no question that

they'd have to appeal to a government that was foreign to itself to save its own people somewhere else.

EISNER: They did not pressure the government enough. We did not see hundreds of thousands of Jewish people marching down the streets [15:00] of New York or Chicago or (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

M: Phil --

EISNER: We did not see that.

M: Is it possible that your decision to publicly disassociate yourself from this commission --

EISNER: I --

M: -- given the natural consequences of its inquiry and the emotional shock wave that it generates: aren't you sorry you did that?

EISNER: I did not publicly disassociate myself.

M: Well, how are you going to leave the commission without that inevitably winding up on the front page of the *New York Times*?

EISNER: The -- Arthur Goldberg [did?] justice for the proceed of finding on the (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) --

M2: Did you pull your money out? Did you --

EISNER: Yes, I did financially pull out. But that is not announcing to the press at all.

M: These people are saying -- this is painful enough about this kind of future [Nicene?] squabble.

TANENBAUM: Well, with the larger issue, it is the question of the role of our government, of the State Department, of the British, of the Vatican, of the whole world that had the capacity to save Jews who failed. And the (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) --

EISNER: (overlapping dialogue; inaudible)

TANENBAUM: -- by concentrating on the Jewish community, we are in fact saying to the Jewish leadership that it is primarily responsible --

EISNER: And you (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) --

TANENBAUM: -- for what you did (inaudible) the victim --

M: Yes. [16:00]

TANENBAUM: -- you're responsible for your victimization.
(applause)

EISNER: You have failed to have served --

M: Let's give Mr. Eisner a (inaudible).

EISNER: You have failed to examine, to put pressure on the State Department, the President, the --

TANENBAUM: You were (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) --

EISNER: -- [all of them?]. You --

TANENBAUM: You [weren't?] -- I was here then. I don't know what went on in the United States.

(overlapping dialogue; inaudible)

EISNER: I wonder whether tomorrow or five years from now the United States government will give Israel how much (inaudible) support you will have --

TANENBAUM: (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) -- issues. I regret to say that.

EISNER: You know, once you have the experience of the (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) --

TANENBAUM: We are not going (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) this way. This is (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) --

EISNER: This is (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) --

TANENBAUM: You will paralyze the Jewish community.

EISNER: No, no, no.

TANENBAUM: You will.

EISNER: I think this self-examination is the healthiest way to (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) --

TANENBAUM: What we're doing [in that?] is kind of this protocol, but --

EISNER: We no longer have the Jew for free (inaudible) state that they're afraid of (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

TANENBAUM: The American Jews, thank God, have learned from the Holocaust.

DONAHUE: I have time only to thank all of our guests. This is Phil Donahue for *The Last Word* (inaudible) greater New York.

M: Thank you, Phil. Now, no connection to that commission, but you may recall plans were [17:00] announced in Washington just last week for a major museum and monument to honor the victims of the Holocaust. We'll be right back --

END OF AUDIO FILE