



# THE JACOB RADER MARCUS CENTER OF THE AMERICAN JEWISH ARCHIVES

*Preserving American Jewish History*

MS-603: Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum Collection, 1945-1992.

Series C: Interreligious Activities. 1952-1992

Box 53, Folder 9, Zeffirelli, Franco, 1988.

VILLA TRE VILLE  
POSITANO (Salerno) ITALY

Via Fax  
August 7, 1988

Rabbi Mark Tannenbaum  
American Jewish Committee  
165 East 56 Street  
New York, NY 10022

Dear Mark,

I am writing to you today with a truly heavy heart and hope that our friendship, a friendship that I have always considered to be based on a mutual respect and sincere trust, will give me the right to speak to you frankly of my anger and outrage over the plethora of statements made against me by prominent members of various American Jewish organizations -- most particularly comments recently voiced by Rabbi A. James Rudin of the American Jewish Committee, who has publicly denounced me as an enemy of the Jews!

Surely a man in Rabbi Rudin's position should know that throughout my life I have repeatedly demonstrated my unwavering support for your people and relentlessly advocated greater understanding between Christians and Jews.

Rabbi Rudin says, "It is almost unimaginable that Franco Zeffirelli could have come forth with such gutter language and such barbaric, poisonous sentiment....." He's right. It is unimaginable. In fact Franco Zeffirelli never said anything even remotely like the words the PRASS so blithely attribute to him!! Why couldn't Rabbi Rudin take five minutes for the rudimentary courtesy of a phone call to corroborate such shocking allegations before lending the stature and prestige of the American Jewish Committee to the media attack against me?

Have your people forgotten that on April 13, 1986 I was the only person from my industry to accompany Pope John Paul II to the Synagogue of Rome, the first time in history that a Pontiff has ever entered a Jewish house of worship? That event was without doubt one of the most inspirational moments of my life, but its significance seems to have been blurred underneath this ludicrous mountain of hearsay and innuendo.



Rabbi Mark Tannenbaum  
August 7, 1988 (via fax)  
Page 2

Could you, dear Mark, have forgotten how hard I worked to make certain my production of 'Jesus of Nazareth' did not become merely more fuel for the fires of prejudice and hatred--treating this story, which has been so wrongly distorted and abused in the past, as a tragic moment in Jewish history rather than as yet another occasion to condemn the Jewish people?

I would have hoped that members of the American Jewish Committee, Haddassah, B'Nai Brith, the World Jewish Congress and the Jewish community at large had the ability to recognize who their friends are in the world.

At this point, I feel you must know the whole story of this charade.

Involved as you are in so many more important matters, you may not be aware that Venice has been a stronghold of the Communist party in Italy ever since World War II, and the Venice Film Festival an international showcase for their propaganda.

Many reporters started calling me, as the Director of the highly acclaimed 'Jesus of Nazareth' and perhaps the most prominent representative of the Catholic community in world cinema, inquiring as to what I thought of the fiery controversy going on in the States over a new film by Martin Scorsese entitled 'The Last Temptation of Christ' which Venice planned to feature at its next festival. One reporter wanted to know what I thought of Lew Wasserman, the man that a group of fundamentalists in the States referred to as being part of "that larger group of Hollywood Jewish Scum." That was the question posed to me. I said I didn't know anything about Mr. Wasserman being a Jew or being scum.

All I did know was that my Church, through the Bishop and other Catholic authorities in California whom I thoroughly respect, had expressed very severe judgment on this film which I had not yet seen. They described it as totally mistaken both theologically and cinematographically--a film which carelessly exploited a blatant misinterpretation of extremely sacred material. My statements to the Press were, therefore, very negative about the participation of such a slanderous film at the Venice Festival, and that is what unleashed the furor of all the Communist lead press in this country--which is to say about 80% of our papers. It is not simply coincidence that on the 2nd of August, L'Unita', the main Communist newspaper in Italy, triumphantly announced on their front page that Zeffirelli was a "Racist and an anti-Semite!"

Rabbi Mark Tannenbaum  
August 7, 1988 (via fax)  
Page 3

I hope you now can clearly see that we have all been the victims of a bunch of ruthless and irresponsible journalists.

Mark, I am asking you for your help to rectify this grotesque situation. I want an apology from your colleagues--not only for my sake, but for the sake of my many friends who, being Jewish, were deeply hurt and shocked by these reports. Most especially, I want an apology for the sake of the millions of people who know and respect me through my work.

Quite candidly, it seems to me that we are confronted with so many real issues of urgency in the world today that it is monstrous to invent more problems for those of us who devote our lives towards solving those that already exist.

Always affectionately,



Franco Zeffirelli





VIA LUCIO VOLUMNIO 37  
ROME 00178 ITALY

Via Fax  
August 9, 1988

Rabbi Mark Tannenbaum  
American Jewish Committee  
165 East 56 Street  
New York, NY 10022

Dear Mark,

I was so happy to see, upon my return to Rome from a short weekend in Positano, your cable waiting.

My grandfather was absolutely right when he said, "Friendships are made in heaven." Evidently a divine hand has guided both of us, who care so much for Truth and Peace, to seek reciprocal understanding at exactly the same moment and time; I was writing to you when you were writing to me. Both disturbed and anguished by a diabolical quandary which could have really created a deep breach in our friendship.

Thank you. I anxiously await further word from you as to what additional steps you feel should be taken to heal this wound. I want to make certain everyone is informed of the truth of this situation immediately. News, as you know, grows old quickly, leaving scarred victims scattered in its wake! Please advise me about what we should do next.

More affectionately than ever,

  
Franco Zeffirelli

P.S. I include a letter I wrote days ago to my friends at Universal which you might find interesting to read.

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August 9, 1988

Mr. Franco Zeffirelli  
Via Lucio Volumnio 37  
Rome 00178, Italy

My Dear Franco,

It pains me that you have been placed so unjustly in a position of having to defend yourself against the ludicrous and unfounded charge that you are allegedly guilty of "pathological hatred" against the Jewish people. It pains me all the more that such a charge was made so impulsively by some of my colleagues.

For myself personally, I wish to apologize for that defamiation. To my knowledge, their statement is a personal one and does not represent the official views of the American Jewish Committee.

Having worked so closely with you in the preparation of the magnificent "Jesus of Nazareth" film, I can testify that I have never collaborated with any creative filmmaker who has shown as you have such reverence for Judaism and the Jewish people and such determination to uproot the ancient theological and historical canards that fed the demonic sources of anti-Semitism. The fact that "Jesus of Nazareth" has become a classic repeated regularly on national television is a testament to your monumental achievement in the struggle against anti-Semitism and your profound commitment to the advancement of Jewish-Christian understanding.

My feelings of friendship and appreciation of your convictions on this issue were reinforced for me when you attended in 1978 the seminar that the AJC co-sponsored in Munich with the prestigious Bavarian Catholic Academy on the subject of "Anti-Semitism in the Oberammergau Passion Play."

As you may recall, quite spontaneously and without prompting from anyone, you made the powerful statement to some 400 Catholic and Jewish scholars and leaders, as well as to the people of Oberammergau that "my 'Jesus of Nazareth' film makes it abundantly clear that it is possible to tell the story of Passion of Jesus without having it resort to any of the old anti-Semitic cliches." You then movingly urged the leaders of Oberammergau to follow your lead, and you offered to help them in any revision of their play.

In short, I accept completely your statement repudiating the absurdities falsely attributed to you about so-called Hollywood Jews. I believe you have gotten a terribly bum rap. You deserve better, and as one of your friends and admirers, I plan to do everything possible to see that this ugly defamation of Franco Zeffirelli, one of the great friends of the Jewish people and of truth in the twentieth century, comes to an end.

Fraternally, 

Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum, Director,  
International Relations  
American Jewish Committee



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AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE M TANENBAUM  
165 EAST 56 ST  
NEW YORK NY 10022

THIS IS A CONFIRMATION COPY OF THE FOLLOWING MESSAGE:

FRB TDMT NEW YORK NY 192/181 08-08 0316P EST  
INT FRANCO ZEFFERELLI  
CARE ITALIAN INTERNATIONAL FILM  
VIA DEGELI SCIALOJA 18  
00196ROME (ITALY)  
DEAR FRANCO

I HOPE THIS FINDS YOU IN GOOD HEALTH. PURPOSE OF THIS CABLE IS TO  
SEEK YOUR CLARIFICATION OF STATEMENT ATTRIBUTED TO YOU REGARDING  
--TEMPTATION OF CHRIST-- FILM. YOU ARE QUOTED AS SAYING THAT THE FILM  
IS THE WORK OF THAT JEWISH CULTURAL SCUM IN LOS ANGELES THAT IS  
ALWAYS LYING IN AMBUSH TO STRIKE A BLOW AT THE CHRISTIAN WORLD.

FROM WORKING WITH YOU ON YOUR GREAT FILM --JESUS OF NAZARETH--, I  
REFUSE TO BELIEVE THAT THESE ARE YOUR TRUE SENTIMENTS OR ACTUAL  
WORDS. THEY WOULD CONTRADICT EVERYTHING POSITIVE AND RECONCILING THAT  
YOU ACHIEVED WITH YOUR OWN PATHBREAKING CLASSIC FILM.

ASIDE FROM THE FACT THAT --TEMPTATION-- FILM WAS CONCEIVED, WRITTEN  
AND PRODUCED BY CHRISTIANS, THE RELIGION OF THE FINANCIAL BACKERS IS  
NO MORE RELEVANT THAN FACT THAT SIR LEW GRADE SUPPORTED FINANCIALLY  
YOUR --JESUS-- FILM.

WOULD DEEPLY APPRECIATE YOUR CLARIFICATION BY RETURN CABLE.  
WBEST REGARDS,

RABBI MARC TANENBAUM, DIRECTOR, INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS  
AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE FAX NUMBER 319-0975  
165 EAST 56 ST  
NEW YORK NY 10022

COL 18 00196ROME 319-0975 165 56 10022

15:16 EST

MGMCOMP



Rabbi A. James Rudin (interreligious affairs director of the American Jewish Committee,)  
~~him~~ Zeffirelli ~~states~~ outburst re Temptation of Christ:

"It is almost unimaginable that Franco Zeffirelli could have come forth with such gutter language and such a barbaric, poisonous sentiment. His words reek with pathological hatred, and we hope they will be utterly condemned by all civilized people."

