

MS-603, Box 112, Folder 10.01 Transcription

Speech in honor of Raoul Wallenberg [1]. 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's 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 [1:00] for *shacharit*. 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.  
(applause)

Marc Tanenbaum:

For those of you who were present this afternoon, 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 [2:00] 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 Las Vegas and give a lecture before one-armed robots with quarters tinkling in the background—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 of Sinai. (laughter) [3:00] 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 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.

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 [4:00] for making possible these several days of reflection on the whole issue of the Holocaust, its meaning, its implications for all of us. 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.

[5:00] I recall during the course of a period of time when I

served as a consultant to NBC-TV, to Gerry Green and the people who put together the miniseries *The Holocaust*, traveling around the United States, meeting with people in the media and teachers, educators, students, Christian leaders and periodically people would come up and say to me, "Look, you know, it's painful and we understand that. But why every year? What is this every year Yom HaShoah? What is this to them, Jews every year coming together to remember. [6:00] Isn't that really obsessive behavior? Why is it that Jews cannot forget? Forgive and forget. And 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 -- I daresay at times even amongst some in the Jewish community -- to want to try to cope with the magnitude of the trauma that the Nazi Holocaust represents.

Let me begin with something that my longtime dear friend and colleague Rabbi Abraham Feffer -- he and I have been close friends during the days of seminary in New York -- it's a way of looking at the question of the relationship of religion to society, [7:00] religion and state, religion and government. This is, this is 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 [8:00] someone, Lolek Erlichster. Who is Lolek Erlichster? Who knows Lolek Erlichster? If we feel haunted, as 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 Hannah Szenes [9:00] 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 took us to the streets where 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 society called the Soviet Union which rewards humanitarianism with enslavement. God knows what his fate is. [10:00] But Raoul Wallenberg has the *sechut*, the merit of his name having already becoming immortal. His name will remain alive as long as there is a Jewish people, as long as there is a state of Israel, as long as there is conscience in the world. But who knows Lolek Erlichster? The story of Lolek Erlichster begins 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 [11:00] in Queens, in New York. They're in their seventies, elderly, sickly and before they die they said they wanted once again to see their Lolek. And so, like yourselves, I ask, "Who is this Lolek? And the mother and father who visited with me tell me this story:

In Warsaw, during the height of the war, the mother one day was riding on a trolley car in Warsaw with her child, Lolek, who must then have been about what seven--eight [12:00] seven and a half years old. An accident ensued. Lolek fell off the trolley car apparently fell under the wheels of the trolley cars and one of his legs were amputated. He was immediately 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 it 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 Lolek. And on that first day she was able to see the child being taken care of. [13:00] She came back the next day or so to look for Lolek and he was gone.

Disparu. Disappeared. And so she became frantic and began asking about Warsaw, "Where is my Lolek? 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 him away. We don't know what happened to him." And then they went to government officials, communist party apparatchiks among whom antisemitism was an article of ideological fave. Arrogance of Jews demanding to see their child! [14:00] And they dismissed her as if she were some intruder from outer space.

And so the mother and the father in desperation searched everywhere they could go throughout Warsaw. Lolek was not to be found wherever they could look outside of the city of Warsaw, wherever they could ask. They reached a 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. [15:00]

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

concern for their well-being helped them escape from Warsaw to leave the country and cross 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 was 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 [16:00], biannual, triannual pilgrimage to Warsaw. Where is our Lolek? And never a sign, frequently confronted with abuse--often deeply antisemitic 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 Pfeffer 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 and other authorities in this country and abroad, that we had a very close relationship with many people in the Vatican. [17:00] Would I intercede with Pope John Paul II on his visit? Could I arrange perhaps for the late Cardinal Cook who had 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 Cook. 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 Lolek, the last that was known of him, and that he would see to it that it got to the aide of [18:00] Pope John Paul II.

In any case, after that was made available it went to some people in the Vatican Secretary of State, the Vatican Secretary dealing with Catholic-Jewish relations; it 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 in really 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 Lolek 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 [19:00] official.

**M1**: (inaudible)

**TANENBAUM**: What did I say? I said a nun?

**M1**: (inaudible)



**TANENBAUM:** Some of my best friends are nuns and I guess that's a-

In 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. [20:00] And let him remain a Catholic if he is happy as that. God bless him. We simply want to be able to 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 in Paris. 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 fourteen-fifteen 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. It was, in fact, Pope John Paul II who designated [21:00] 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 [22:00] 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 to embrace each other and I said, "*Sholem Aleichem. Vos macht a Yid?*" You know, traditional Jewish greeting, "How's a Jew doing?" And he smiled and said back to me "*Aleichem Sholem. Wie gehst sie [sic]?*" and we began talking Yiddish. Signs of the times. As we would say in the United States "only in America" but this was Heppenheim, Germany.

In any case now the word that is around Paris is that the French Jewish community 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 the trauma that he suffered as a Jew in Poland [23:00] and the pain that he suffered as a victim of antisemitism 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 Cook and the exchange with the Vatican Secretary of State.

And he said, "This is not a matter of doing a favor [24:00], not a 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 synod 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 Lolek Erlichster can be found. Cardinal Lustiger went to Paris, 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 [25:00] 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 die. 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, [26:00] whatever is allowed still to them as well as a letter from the 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 toward 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 Lolek 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 moral, 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 of manipulation, where everything exists just for the sake of the preservation of the autonomy of the state. We are all its servants rather than the converse democratic proposition [28:00] that the state exists for the sake of serving the common welfare of all of 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 [29:00] the will of God by snatching this Jewish soul 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 never mind the consequences of what this might mean for that child's distraught parents who have 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 human and Jewish condition.

I thought about that as I sat in the very simple and modest office of Cardinal Lustiger [30:00] and it was not his own turmoil because subsequently I discussed this same issue with Monsignor Mejia who is the secretary of the Vatican secretariat on Catholic-Jewish relations—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 Jews, the desaparecidos, the snatching away off the streets of Buenos Aires by the right-wing death squads hundreds and hundreds of

young people among them some seven, eight hundred Jewish children most of whom have disappeared and never been found.

[31:00]

And so Monsignor Mejia who as a result of his moving out of the formalism, the church-iness, 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 and that civil war struggle between the left-wing revolutionaries, the Montoneros, and the right-wing death squads, Monsignor Mejia was put on the death squad list in Buenos Aires. [32:00] 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 antisemitism and for mutual respect between caring Jews and Catholics.

In any case, when I discuss 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 19<sup>th</sup> century with its facing up to the hard questions of teaching of contempt, of anti-ecumenical attitudes, of its denigration of religious liberty, of its removal of itself from the modern world, and a sense of responsibility for justice, [33:00] social justice, economic justice of the world, but had the church played that role in the 19<sup>th</sup> century if one speculates that way, it would've been a very different world in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

We see the fruits of it now everywhere. The spontaneity, the instantaneousness with which Christian friends are prepared to respond in situations not just of extremists in the case of Lolek Erlichster, everyday reality the 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 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 Jewry. It's that sense of a whole new community of concern and conscience where people identify with the fate [34:00] 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. While we'd often played golf, swam, enjoyed ourselves, the world is a pleasure place, a paradise.

This is what is beginning to emerge-- always [35:00] 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'd still be in Sinai languishing and it probably would've ended up being called the eleventh 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. Who are the great embodiments of the great ideas that are transforming? Always small groups. And then as Durkheim tells us 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 20th century not simply to indulge ourselves in guilt trips or relieve ourselves easily of moral responsibility, but to help us understand that what [37:00] this is about is not Jewish obsession. It is to help us understand in ways which 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 even to 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 was a death skull and who lived by that emblem.

[38:00] People in the White House I've been talking with, people this week, today, this afternoon in calls here. 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 a whole deeper. And

apparently one needs to find ways to 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. 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. Thirty-five million perhaps altogether.

The war had its disasters [39:00] 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, Auschwitz did not happen in Uganda. Auschwitz and Treblinka were not constructed in Burundi. They were not even built in Afghanistan. Those hundreds of concentration camps which systematically [40:00] 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 Hohenzollerns and the Hapsburgs and all of that extraordinary list of great emperors and great

imperial achievement. It was also constructed in a country in which the Protestant Reformation took place. [41:00]

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 be born Jews. 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 [42:00] 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 accountability?

As I said earlier today as I study the literature and talk to survivors, it's simply incredible to me [43:00] even to this day

as one reads the burgeoning literature that Nazi Germany was not the creation of mad men 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. 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? [44:00] What is the nature of an educational system that can produce educated literate savages, barbarians whose behavior is no different from those in Uganda and Burundi who have had no concerning conscience? (break in audio) 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 this evening, the honoring of Raoul Wallenberg, the great Christian man, whatever form his faithfulness took, human being who was prepared to act out his beliefs, his values, [45:00] in real life at real personal risk..

END OF AUDIO FILE