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### **MS-4787: Abba Hillel Silver Papers, 1902-1989.**

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Seeing America with open eyes, 1941.

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SEEING AMERICA WITH OPEN EYES

Impressions of a Transcontinental American Tour

WRHS

By  
Dr. Abba Hillel Silver



At  
The Temple

On  
Sunday morning, March 30, 1941



One thinks so much these days about American defense conditions in the world, its position, it is good to see this world sized up, as it were, given an account of. And when one sees this physical America, from coast to coast, one has his imagination stretched. One loses his provincialism. One has his perspective corrected on many things in relation to America. For one sees vistas instead of war.

The mere fact of traveling for hundreds, thousands of miles without getting outside of the border, as it were, is in itself a powerful lesson in Americanism. You get a sense of oceanic vastness, power and permanence. You can allay all the frets and worries that you may have about American life. You see a continent bastioned by mighty mountains, washed by vast oceans, traversed by mighty rivers, great, rich, fertile beyond the imaginings of man.

When you travel over this country by air as I have done recently, steadily for weeks, you grasp something of the titanic circumference and sweeping configurations of this land of vast spaces and diverse climes. You come to feel a certain encompassing security in the very magnitude of this land. Everything about it speaks of eternity. You come to realize that political storms and revolutions may sweep over this world, this continent, but it will endure and so will the people within the space. A bird's eye view of America from the magic carpet of a flying airplane causes one to lose many fears and apprehensions about this country's strength and its future. It helps to iron out many a wrinkle in the souls and in the minds of Americans.

When you traverse this country, as many of you have undoubtedly done, you get a feeling not only of its spaciousness, its vastness, its colossal territory. You also get a sense of its emptiness. You may



travel for hours and hours on end in some of the states in our Southwest and in our Northwest without actually seeing human habitations. If you traverse the state of Texas you realize that that one state of the Union in area is as great as Great Britain, France and Italy combined. You travel through a state like Oregon, which is almost the exact size of Italy -- some ninety-five thousand square miles -- then you suddenly realize that while the Italian population is 44 million, the population of Oregon is a little over a million. Oregon is a richer state in natural resources than the country of Italy. So when you hear people talking about America being already over-crowded and there is no more room in it for immigrants, you realize that these people simply do not know their America. There is room in this pleasant land of ours for ten times its present population with ample living space for all. God has been generous, oh, so generous to the people of this country.

While it may be true that the last physical frontier is actually reafhed at the shores of the Pacific, too much ought not to be made of this fact. The West and the Southwest -- vast empires -- are still really empty and unsettled and that vast empire still waits upon the pioneer, the builder, the interpreneur in business, in industry, in trade and in commerce far more than you are able to see in the Middlewest and in the East. You still see out there new towns/springing up and new cities rapidly developing, great areas suddenly springing into life because of the new irrigation projects, the discovery of oil and other minerals. Everywhere one sees comparatively new and gleaming cities, full of power, energy and richness, and all about one are the solid things. All about one <sup>is</sup> ~~are~~ stupendous labor. Out there America is still growing! Out there the pioneering spirit and pioneer memories are still fresh and green.



And out there one sees not only the utterly dramatic in nature -- canyons, caves, the amazing water falls, the towering mountain ranges, the deep river gorges -- one sees not only the utterly dramatic in nature, but one sees the utterly dramatic in man's handiwork -- A Boulder Dam or a Coulee Dam, tremendous irrigation projects which have converted deserts to green and blessed lands of fruits and flowers. And man has has given startling and dramatic evidences of how he has be able to wrest from the mountains and desert sand, gold, oil, wealth, power. He has built tunnels and has spanned rivers with marvellous bridges, as though man had tried to match in daring and in grandeur the handiwork of nature.

If you see all that, you bless America.

The population out there is as truly American, because it is as truly cosmopolitan as is the population of America in this part of the country <sup>or</sup> on the Atlantic Seacoast. The cities of San Francisco and Los Angeles are as cosmopolitan as Cleveland and New York. Italians, Spaniards, Swedes, Chines, Indians, Germans -- men from a hundred lands are massed, and fused. They learn to live together and to work together. There are large and thriving Jewish communities on the Pacific Coast. The city of Los Angeles is today perhaps the fourth largest Jewish community in the United States. The same mosaic, the same diversity of reaching out and achieving a common spiritual unity based on loyalty, classic American ideals is found in that part of the world. You find in that part of the world of course the same out-croppings of prejudices among groups not fully assimilated with American tradition, old world prejudices, incited by old-world political and racial animosities. But I find that much of that over there and over here is going underground today due to the growing demand for unity made doubly necessary by America's defense needs. Racial and



religious intolerances of all kinds are coming to be regarded over there as over here as a deadly form of sabotage of national defense, of fifth column activity.

The Pacific Coast is busily engaged in the production of airplanes and the building of ships and the production of many other materials which are required by our national defense program. There is an active and alert Americanism among our people. The hatred of Hitler and Hitlerism is as great there if not greater than in this part of the country. And the alliance of Berlin with Tokyo has intensified that hatred.

A few weeks ago, I put a few things in my bag and left for the West. I required no passport and though I traveled over a dozen states, I needed no visa. No custom official stopped me in my travels. I was subjected to no regulations. I traveled in a free land among friendly people. I was not afraid of espionage. I was not afraid to talk to my neighbor, nor was my neighbor afraid to talk to me. There were no blackouts. I carried no gas mask. This is the way of life which American democracy has made possible for the American people and which dictatorship has destroyed in the Old World and threatens to destroy here. And I found that the American people are anxious and determined to preserve this orderly, peaceable, neighborly, kindly, friendly way of life which they and their fathers before them enjoyed and which they and their children after them will enjoy. Because they have realized that this way of life is being threatened today, they have rallied together, mobilized. Evidences of this physical and spiritual mobilization you see everywhere when you travel about. The process of converting this country into an arsenal is becoming more and more apparent. The American people approve heartily of all that



their Congress has done. They want to be free and to preserve the ideals of freedom in the world and of human dignity, and "the banner of the divine pride of man in himself." Everywhere they sacrifice for that freedom and they are prepared to fight for it.

I do not mean to say that all of the American people are conscious or clear-thinking about it. They haven't thought all this out clearly or logically. Nor have they reasoned it out. But they have sensed it very keenly. They have sensed what is going on in the world and the meaning of the struggle in the world. They are instinctive, true reactions. The President of the United States, yesterday, summed up this reaction of the American people which I found everywhere I went:

"We Americans realize how tenuous would be the existence of our party system, our freedom of election, our freedom of living if the doctrines of dictatorship were to prevail. For if they were to prevail, it would not be in Europe alone.

"The history of nations betrayed during the past year, the history of nations conquered during the past year, should show us and the rest of the world what it means to live in a world organized and ruled by the Gestapo.

"Let us ask ourselves, frankly and seriously: How long could we maintain our ancient liberties under these terrible conditions? How soon would we have to accept the doctrine that one must fight fire with fire?

"How long would it be possible to maintain a semblance of our two-party system, with free elections, in a Nazi-dominated world?"

"We Americans have already weighed these questions carefully and thoughtfully. We Americans have announced our determination that, with all our resources and all our power, we shall help those who block the dictators in their march toward domination of the world.

"The decision we have reached is not the partisan decision. The leader of the Republican party himself -- Mr. Wendell Willkie -- in word and in action, is showing what patriotic Americans mean by rising above partisanship and rallying to the common cause. And now that the plain people of America have spoken their determination, Republicans and Democrats in the Congress and out of the Congress are patriotically co-operating to make that determination take positive form.

"The enemies of democracy are now trying, by every means, to destroy our unity. The chief weapon they now use against us is propaganda.

"The propaganda comes in ever increasing quantities, with ever



increasing violence, from across the seas. And it is disseminated within our own borders by agents or innocent dupes of foreign powers.

"It is directed against all Americas -- Republicans and Democrats --"

Another thing which read during my travels as I went from city to city was Walt Whitman, perhaps the greatest poet of America. I reread his "Democratic Vistas". (Quote Walt Whitman's 'Democratic Vistas' - p. 315)

That ideal the American people is still prepared to sacrifice for and to fight for. These American people as you meet them on the street, in the restaurant, anywhere are not great idealists. They are not blind worshipers of democracy. They are not unmindful of the imperfection of the government in which they live. They realize that there is much to do and they must go much farther. They ~~are~~ have a strong sense of realism. Our American people are ruthlessly self-critical, more so than any people on earth. They understand that there is more than they would like of corruption and inefficiency in government. They see about them slums which make them ashamed. They realize the menace of unemployment, insecurity and strife in their midst. They know, and many of them from their own personal experience realize that many people are on the verge of penury in this blessed land of abundance, that they have inadequate purchasing power. These prejudices which mar and arouse passions.

But this is the essential fact. They have a will and a hope to surmount these things and they have not despaired of the democratic processes as a means of surmounting these things. They want security, but they also want to be free. They want unity, but they also want to protect their individual rights, their inalienable rights. They want to remain masters of their own destiny.



So one comes back, my good friends from a tour of these United States very much heartened. Oft-times during the past few weeks I traveled by plane at night. And as I looked out, I could see the beacons moving in the night pointing their long lighted fingers through the darkness guiding the pilot on his way. And all through the night these beacons burned on the highways, bright revolving beacons of light like so many unweary faithful sentinels watching over safety and security.

And I thought often then, as I thought often since that the luminous ideals which are American are today just such burning beacons in the darkness keeping their faithful vigil in the long night hoping to guide the world to safety and security. Having conversed with many people from many sections of our land, I have come away with the conviction now stronger than ever before that the American people is determined to keep these beacon lights burning through the night until the dawn will illumine the entire world -- a world re-awakened to freedom, liberty and peace.







and still oppose immigration - no more room. Crowded!  
This land of ours can maintain 10 times its  
present population - plenty other room plenty space  
for all.

3/ While it may be true that but phys frontier reached -  
at the shores, the Pacific - the West is still richly  
and largely unsettled - a whole empire still waits  
upon the pioneer, the builder the farmer, the settler  
and the entrepreneur in trade, industry & commerce. Far  
more in the more settled sections, the Middle West & the  
East - cities are new towns are still springing up,  
cities are developing, vast areas suddenly springing  
into life bec. of new irrigation projects, or bec.  
the discovery of oil & other minerals. The  
see comparatively new & gleaming cities full of  
power, energy and richness, and all about are deposits  
rich things and abundant labor! But the Am. is  
still growing! Pioneering movements are still going on -

4/ Out there one sees not only the utterly dramatic in  
nature's handiwork - the breath-taking canyons and  
caves - the towering Mt. peaks the deep wide canyons the  
forests and the giant redwood, one sees also the utterly  
dramatic in man's handiwork - a Boulder Dam or a  
Conlee Dam - vast irrigation projects which have  
converted desert into green fields blasted lands  
of fruits and flowers. Man has marked nature  
in daring & grandeur - has built tunnels & great  
river with marvelous bridges



5) Population as truly American - variety of origins - L. A.<sup>(3)</sup>  
as cosmopolitan a city as N. Y. or Chicago. Spanish, Italian,  
Chinese, Italian, Swedish and German - all races, all creeds.  
Large & thriving Jewish communities. L. A. - 100,000 - 4th largest in U.S.  
Same mosaic - diversity reaching out & achieving a  
common, fr. unity based on loyalty to classic Am.  
ideals & traditions. Same out-croppings of jealousy &  
prejudices - from groups not fully <sup>assimilated</sup> at home in them -  
- inspired from abroad. Fast going under-pinned with  
the growing demand for unity ~~more~~ made doubly  
necessary by Am's defense needs. Racial & Rl.  
intolerance is coming to be regarded as sabotage!

The Pac. Coast is busily at work on plane production  
and ship building & other vital ~~to our~~ <sup>to the national</sup> ~~defense~~ defense program. Hated, Hitlerism is as great if not  
greater - on part, country, and the alliance Berlin  
with Tokyo has not only unhindered that hatred.

I put a few things in my bag  
6) I left home a few weeks ago and left for the Pac. Coast. I  
required no passport, even tho I crossed a dozen states  
in my travels. No visa. No customs inspection  
traveled in a friendly land, among friendly people. No fear  
of espionage. No hesitancy to speak to my neighbors -  
there are no black-outs. I carried no gas mask!  
This is the way of life which democr. created in Am.  
or which dictates. has destroyed in the old world but  
seek to destroy also here. To prevent this way



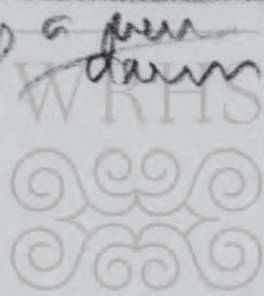
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of hfr. Americans have suddenly rallied & mobilized. - and  
evidence of it is seen everywhere. Process of converting Am.  
into Arsenal going on very rapidly. Am. people  
affirm heartily of all that Congress has done. They want  
to be free - preserve ideal of freedom & justice in world.  
"the banner of the divine pride / man in himself." They  
are prepared to sacrifice for that freedom - to fight for it!  
They are not all cowards or dis-thinking about it. They  
have not reasoned it out. But they know keenly what is  
going on in the world - and the meaning of the struggle. And  
as in previous crises - their instincts are true. (Pres  
(John Whitman) 315) Pres

- 7) - They are not unmindful of the defects - imperfections.  
Strong sense of values. Ruthlessly self-critical.  
- Corruption & inefficiency in Govt -  
- Slaves -  
- Unemployment - unsecurity - Sticks -  
- Inadequate purchasing power - & low standard of living for many  
- Prejudices which war & arouse passions.  
But they have a will to surmount them - and  
they have not despaired of the divine process as a means  
of surmounting them. They wish security but also  
freedom! Unity but also ind. rights! They want  
to remain masters over their own destiny!
- 8). I travelled often as a guest in the air plane. And looking  
out I could see the heavenly world in the night -



15  
pounding their long lighted torches thru the darkness  
guiding the pilot on his way. All thru the night, then  
along the highways, ~~the~~ <sup>faithful</sup> ~~the~~ <sup>sentinels</sup> ~~the~~ <sup>as</sup>  
watches ~~the~~ <sup>as</sup>  
safety and security. They ~~hastened~~ and

Just so, <sup>that</sup> are the humanities, deeds & are still  
burning in the darkness, this world - Keeping their  
faithful vigil in the <sup>long</sup> night - guiding the world to  
safety and security. And, concerning with many problems  
from many sections, as land, I am as ever are  
strongly permeated that the Am. people is  
resolved to keep these human-right burning all  
thru the night, until a new dawn  
whole world





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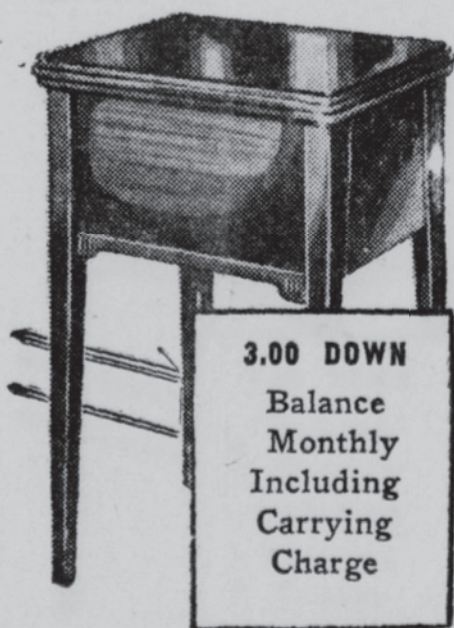
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### Dictatorships Would Swallow World

We Americans realize how tenuous would be the existence of our party system, our freedom of election, our freedom of living if the doctrines of dictatorship were to prevail. For if they were to prevail, it would not be in Europe alone.

The history of nations betrayed during the past year, the history of nations conquered during the past year, should show us and the rest of the world what it means to live in a world organized and ruled by the Gestapo.

Let us ask ourselves, frankly and seriously: How long could we maintain our ancient liberties under these terrible conditions? How soon would we have to accept the doctrine that one must fight fire with fire?

How long would it be possible to maintain a semblance of our two-party system, with free elections, in a Nazi-dominated world?

How soon would we decide to imitate Nazism, and abandon our two-party system, and regiment our people into one party—which would certainly be neither Democratic nor Republican?

Should that evil time come, we would no longer hold these friendly gatherings, either on Jackson Day or on Lincoln Day.

We Americans have already weighed these questions carefully and thoughtfully. We Americans have announced our determination that, with all our resources and all our power, we shall help those who block the dictators in their march toward domination of the world.

### Calls Willkie Leader of Republican Party

The decision we have reached is not a partisan decision. The leader of the Republican party himself—Mr. Wendell Willkie—in word and in action, is showing what patriotic Americans mean by rising above partisanship and rallying to the common cause. And now that the plain people of America have spoken their determination, Republicans and Democrats in the Congress and out of the Congress are patriotically co-operating to make that determination take positive form.

The enemies of democracy are now trying, by every means, to destroy our unity. The chief weapon they now use against us is propaganda.

The propaganda comes in ever increasing quantities, with ever increasing violence, from across the seas. And it is disseminated within our own borders by agents or innocent dupes of foreign powers.

It is directed against all Americans—Republicans and Democrats—