

# For Rabbi Manfred Swarsensky

A Sermon Preached

By

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The First United Methodist Church  
203 Wisconsin Avenue  
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## FOR RABBI MANFRED SWARSENSKY

Early on Tuesday of this past week, a monumental event occurred in the life and history of Madison. In the dark hours of the night the black angel of death drew near and lifted from this earth the saintly soul of Rabbi Manfred Swarsensky. Perhaps few men in the history of this colorful and unique community have been as loved and honored as he. Few have contributed as abundantly and beautifully as he to the moving stream of our humanity. It is likely that never will one like him pass this way again.

Not only enshrined in the heart and memory of Madison, he was a dear and beloved friend of First United Methodist Church. I speak now for my predecessors who have ministered here during the past forty years and for a host of lay admirers who cherished his friendship, his teaching, his leadership, and his prophetic presence. I speak especially, too, for many young people of this church who during the last several years sat spellbound during his visits to our confirmation classes. Last year especially was memorable because he spoke twice to our confirmation class. As he spoke I had the feeling that he was giving to these young people a kind of last will and testament. Frail of body, his words often choked by a deepening digestive disorder, he poured forth a stream of intimate detail concerning his early life in Germany, his career as a young rabbi in Berlin, his arrest by the Nazis and his humiliation and ill treatment in concentration camps. He knew that the days of his life were growing fewer, and he wanted these Christian young people to know of his experience and concerns. During the following months I visited him several times in the hospital, talked to him on the phone, exchanged letters, and prayed constantly for his precious soul. And then on Tuesday, he died. Ever since I have felt a great absence in my heart, a deep sorrow in my life.

Yet he is not absent from my memory. Ever since Tuesday morning when I learned of his death I have been absorbed in the meaning, the message and the mission of his life. If one such as he may never pass this way again, it behooves us to ponder his treasured wisdom, to savor his compassion and goodness, and to take seriously the scrolls of prophetic warning he has left behind. And we must do these things as Christians, and to do so, as Christians, will be unnerving and unsettling.

- I -

In the past year Rabbi Swarsensky has shared with me two great

haunting concerns. One was his fear that this generation would forget the horrors of the Holocaust that blackened and degraded what we call "civilization." Manfred Swarsensky struggled for life during those nightmarish years, suffered under their fiendish fury, became a victim - albeit a survivor - of this incredible wickedness on earth. In the most recent months he was aghast at the monumental efforts raised either to forget or to declare that these horrors never occurred. Several big attempts have been made to "prove" that these horrors never happened, with one professor at Northwestern University writing a book labeling the Holocaust a hoax. On September 11, 1981, Rabbi Swarsensky wrote me a letter and enclosed an article which he had taken from the Hadassah Magazine. The article was by the great Jewish writer, Elie Wiesel, and it has to do with an event of unspeakable human depravity. On September 29, 1941, thousands of Jews were driven through the main streets of Kiev as Ukrainians looked on. They were being marched by the Nazis, and with the help of Ukrainian police, to a ravine called Babi Yar. There they were machine-gunned and buried in a huge pit. When the mass killing was finished with methodical madness, tens of thousands of human beings had been killed - most of them Jews. Some estimates say 100,000 were savagely slaughtered. In the article that Rabbi Swarsensky sent me, Elie Wiesel, himself a survivor of the Nazi horrors, wrote:

I returned to Kiev in August 1979. Of course I asked to visit Babi Yar. Since I was on an official visit - as the head of the delegation of the President's Commission on Holocaust - I obtained satisfaction. City officials, followed by television cameras and reporters from the local and foreign press, accompanied us there. Why not? Now they thought they could boast of a monument at Babi Yar. In fact, there it is - a monument large and grandiose, as only the Soviets are capable of producing. Impressive from all points of view, except ... except the word "Jew" does not appear on it anywhere! This monument is supposed to be in memory of the Soviet citizens assassinated by the Fascists ... And then (says Elie Wiesel) I lost my temper, as never before. In my address, I said everything that had been weighing on my heart.

"In 1965, I stood on this very spot and I felt anger; now it is shame which I feel. I am ashamed for you ... You know perfectly well that the men and women who are lying in this grave were killed ~~by~~ Jews! By what right do you deprive them of their identity? They lived as Jews, worked as Jews, dreamed as Jews, and it is as Jews that they were isolated and designated by the executioner; it is as Jews that they

were subjected to fear and torture and death. By what right do you now cast them into anonymity? In the name of what do you mutilate their being? Why don't you grant to them the place that, when alive, they claimed in Jewish history?"

(Hadassah Magazine, Aug./Sept. 1981, p.15)

And I believe that that is a message that our dear friend, Rabbi Swarsensky, left with us. I believe he shared it with me so that I would share it with you. We have no right under God to deprive these tortured souls of their identity! We have no right to cast them into anonymity, to mutilate their being!

- II -

The other grave concern of the Rabbi was for the rising tide of anti-Semitism, visible and audible all over the world. Many times we talked of this. All over the world, and in our own culture, indeed, are these ominous signs seen and heard. With what anguish and sorrow are these signs heard and seen in the ears and eyes of a Jewish man or woman who has suffered from this malignant disease! Rabbi Swarsensky was a dear friend of Christians and he blessed them constantly with his counsel and gifts. But can you not imagine that often in his heart he wondered about this persistent malady that still ravages the hearts and minds of many who call themselves Christian? How many of us, the victim of anti-Semitism might want to know, would stand by Jewish people in the continuing ordeal of hatred that ravishes them?

Riveted in my memory is a drama by a German playwright, Rolf Hochhuth, called The Deputy, produced as "the most controversial play of our time" in 1964. The story of the play is based upon a large and substantial judgment of historians that contended that Pope Pius XII did very little to exert his mighty influence against the crimes being committed by Hitler against the Jews. Even noting its fictional character, one is deeply moved and troubled by the anguish of one German Roman Catholic priest, Father Riccardo Fontana, who was so horrified by what he saw happening to the Jews at the hands of the Nazis that he made his way to Rome and demanded an audience with the Pope. There he pleads with the Pope to speak out against these unspeakable horrors. The Pope replies that he has already done much to protect the Jews and that he can do no more. The priest, Riccardo, is appalled by this indifference. In a most telling moment in the drama Riccardo, while the Pope is signing a proclamation that the priest considers utterly innocuous, takes out the yellow Star of David and pins it to his cassock. When the Pope sees what he has done he is struck dumb. A Cardinal of the court, in breath-

less fury, orders Riccardo to remove the yellow star, Refusing, Riccardo speaks:

This star which every Jew must wear  
as soon as he is six years old,  
to show he is an outlaw - I shall wear it too  
until . . .

Then the Pope, quivering with rage, interrupts:

He will not! We forbid him - forbid - on a cassock - this ...

The Pope stops, his voice failing him. Then Riccardo speaks, quietly, soberly:

I will wear this star until  
Your Holiness proclaims before the world  
a curse upon the man who slaughters  
Europe's Jews like cattle.

(The Deputy, p.217,218)

Many times have I read that passage, but as I re-read it now I think of a great and good man like Rabbi Swarsensky. Our honoring of his memory today will be no more than empty sentimentality if we do not as Christians dedicate our lives to contending against every shred and sediment of anti-Semitism, in our own hearts and in the hearts of those around us. If we want truly to honor his name, and the names of countless martyrs like him, we too will wear that yellow Star of David in our hearts until the last evil trace of anti-Semitism is washed from our humanity.

- III -

An aspect of this dear man that none of us shall ever be able to forget, therefore, is his endurance of suffering. Our minds are often numbed and paralyzed when we contemplate the intense suffering that seems to fall upon some human beings. Perhaps we don't like to think of it for long, because we fear that it could all happen to us. But here was a man who not only suffered through what he was pleased to hear me call once "a hurricane of horror," but who also was ravaged in his own physical body by repeated maladies. Five years ago he underwent critical open heart surgery. After what seemed like a fine recovery from that he developed a serious malfunction of the esophagus. For a long time he was actually starving to death. Often I had wondered if these severe bodily ailments borne by a man of small physical stature could not be attributed in part at least to the spiritual, physical, mental and emotional abuse he had suffered under Nazi torture. But after the most delicate and critical surgery seemed to give the promise of his recovery from the esophagus malfunction, it was discovered that he was stricken with cancer. During the long years of all of that intense suffering and af-

fliction I am sure that he often felt the anguish and sense of abandonment expressed by Job in the Old Testament. And certainly he must in his own heart have cried out as did our Lord on the Cross, speaking as Jesus did the words of the 22nd Psalm: "My God, my God why hast thou forsaken me? Why art thou so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but thou dost not answer; and by night, but find no rest. Yet thou art holy, enthroned in the praises of Israel."

Obviously there was in this man a grace that enabled him to transcend the hurts, the humiliations, the bodily afflictions. Several years ago Manfred gave me a record album of a sermon he had delivered to his congregation at Temple Beth El on Christmas Day, 1970. He had just returned from Berlin where he had been invited to attend the 25th anniversary of the reestablishment of the Jewish Community after the collapse of the Nazi regime. The mayor of Berlin, on behalf of the City, had invited him and several others who at onetime had served the Jewish community in various capacities to take part in this historic occasion. As a young rabbi in Berlin he had watched the smoldering ruins of the synagogue he had served, that house of worship having been torched by the Nazis. The house where he had lived had been reduced to rubble. On two nights in November, 1938, the glass window panes in every store owned by Jews in Germany had been shattered. The night in history is now known as "Kristalnacht." Rabbi Swarsensky told our Confirmation Class last February how he had been shoved into a crowded truck and carried off to a hell-hole for assignment to a concentration camp. He remembered that two boys clutched his hand in fear. He had confirmed them in his synagogue. The nightmare of imprisonment followed. I have wondered as he lay dying if he still felt the frightened clutching of these young hands in his; the stomping of the S.S. boots, the clicking of heels; the sight and stench of smoke rising from gas ovens; the snapping of necks on the Gallows; the taste of corpses in the death camp soup.

On Friday of this week I listened to the impassioned sermon, recorded on these phonograph records, that he had preached on his return from Berlin. He called that sermon "You Can't Go Home Again." In that sermon he told his people:

Twenty-five years ago I would have said never again shall I set foot on that cursed soil. But twenty-five years ago no one would have invited me.

Nothing, of course, is forgotten; nothing, of course, can be forgiven. But as a Jew I have no right to push away a hand stretched out in reconciliation. Hatred, unbending, unending

hatred is neither an emotion by which I can live or a philosophy by which I want my children or my children's children to live.

So Manfred Swarsensky came to our Confirmation Class and taught us how we can live by the law and the love of Christ. For having known this rabbi neither can we go home again - not home again to the same old selves in which we betray Christ with indifference and ill will.

For some Christians - some Christians, I emphasize - the life of a Jewish man like the rabbi poses a problem. Some cannot believe that such a Jew can find true salvation. Though Rabbi Swarsensky had more Christian virtues than many of us Christians, he was not a Christian. He did not acknowledge as do we that Christ is the Messiah. Hence there are certain Christians who say that such a man cannot be received by God in Eternity. Indeed, one highly placed official, the President of a huge Protestant denomination, boldly declared about a year ago that "God does not hear the prayers of a Jew." When I wrote a letter to a newspaper protesting the ugly absurdity of that view, another minister in the community responded in another public letter, not in anger at what the world had done to Jews, but with the judgment that I was scarcely entitled to such an opinion because I had not baptized 2600 people as had the minister who had made the original charge. Manfred wrote me a note thanking me for my letter. No, I have not baptized, and will not baptize 2600 people in this church, but neither will I ever baptize my parishioners with a sense of arrogant and unbiblical superiority over Jews. And if that same point of view that declares that God does not hear the prayers of Jews also means that Jews have no chance of being received by God in Eternity, then I would not want to be received in that kind of Eternity myself. On occasion Manfred Swarsensky enjoyed the words of Jesus: "In my Father's house are many mansions. If it were not so, I would have told you." (John 14) I cannot visualize the Eternity Christ has pictured without a mansion for Manfred. Surely the great prophet Isaiah was a comfort to Manfred, as he has been to us this morning as we listened to his words framed in our anthem, "Say to them that are of a fearful heart, Be strong, fear not; behold, your God will come and save you . . . A highway shall be there, and it shall be called The way of holiness; the redeemed shall walk there; And the ransomed of the Lord shall return with songs and everlasting joy: and sorrow and sighing shall flee away." (Isaiah 35:3-10, RSV)

About thirty years ago there was an auxiliary Catholic bishop in Chicago by the name of Bernard J. Sheil. He was a courageous and prophetic man. One night against the objections of his colleagues he went

to a hall full of hate to attend a meeting of the so-called Christian Front. For 15 tense moments he took the floor and denounced anti-Semitism, white supremacy, and every vile lie that had been bellowed that night by a demagogue. The audience listened with intense hostility. When Bishop Sheil had finished he started slowly to walk down the center aisle. Suddenly there was a scream of rage. An old woman, seething with hatred, stepped out to block his path. She shrieked, "I'm a Catholic, but you, you - you're not a Catholic bishop. God damn you! Nigger lover! Jew lover! A Bishop! Ha, ha! Rabbi Sheil!" Then, completely hysterical, she cleared her throat and spat over one side of the bishop's face. The bishop did not raise his hand to wipe it off. By this time, most of the people were standing on their chairs, roaring with wrath. But the bishop stood silently, and waited. The old woman froze, as did many others. Then she began to shake violently as though a sudden chill had gripped her. The mob of snarling faces became a group of lowered heads. The bishop waited for another moment, then spoke softly. "Rabbi? That is what they called our Lord." He walked out in silence. (from Christian Friends Bulletin, October, 1951, originally printed in THE PROGRESSIVE, Madison, WI.)

For the rest of my life, whenever I confront any kind of evil or hatred, I shall have to remember my dear friend, Rabbi Manfred Swarsensky. I shall never forget the pains that he bore, the suffering he endured. And as I think of him as Rabbi, I shall always be aware that the twelve disciples often referred to the man I call Lord as Rabbi, too. And always as I read the words of the great Prophet of Israel, Isaiah, I shall ponder especially the picture of the Suffering Servant, a word picture summarizing the Ideal Israel, and later used to portray Christ. I can associate it as well with a rabbi who was a dear friend on earth:

Yet the lord took thought for his tortured servant  
and healed him who had made himself a sacrifice for sin;  
so shall he enjoy long life and see his children's children,  
and in his hand the Lord's cause shall prosper.  
After all his pains he shall be bathed in light,  
after his disgrace he shall be fully vindicated;  
so shall he, my servant, vindicate many,  
himself bearing the penalty of their guilt.

(Isaiah 53:10,11, NEB)





