

Speech to National Polish American-Jewish American Council

Chicago, Illinois

June 9, 1998

Delivered by: Eli Rubenstein

National Director, March of the Living

I want to begin by stating that your interest in the March of the Living is well founded. Currently, the March of the Living is the largest youth program of its kind in the world. More Jewish students in North America visit Israel through the March of the Living than through any other single Israel experience. It is therefore right that we should be concerned that the program is teaching our children positive and constructive lessons.

What is the purpose of the March of the Living?

To answer this comprehensively would take an entire afternoon. But, briefly to my mind, when looking at the Poland portion of the program, here are its major goals in broad strokes:

1. To remember those who perished thus denying Hitler a 'posthumous victory'.
2. To never again allow for the unchecked rise of the menace of anti-Semitism.
3. To never again allow any kind of racial discrimination directed *by* any group in society *against* any group in society to gain strength. This also includes racism expressed by Jews towards others.
4. To bolster the Jewish identity of the next generation of Jewish youth by acquainting them with the rich Jewish heritage that existed in Eastern Europe, and is now lost.
5. To understand the importance of the existence of Israel and to learn the lesson that Jews 'never again' allow themselves to be defenseless.
6. The last goal is quite different from the previous objectives in that the purpose is not to derive a specific lesson, but to achieve a certain kind of experience. The final goal is no so much to learn *from* or *about* history, but to enter *into* history. By participating in the March of the Living young Jewish students are taking part in a commemorative act, which tells themselves, their people, the entire world, and perhaps even those who have perished that their martyrdom has been marked and will never disappear into the mists of history.

But as we enter history - and as important as it is to do so - we also cannot forget or ignore the present and the future. Simply stated, it is a 'sin' for our young people to visit Poland and not meet up with its local population, and not connect with the young people who live in Poland in the 'here and now'.

In the past two Marches, Canadian students have held very successful interactive sessions with their Polish counterparts. Last year, after one such session, a Canadian student rose out of her seat to say: 'I came to Poland not wanting to like the Polish people. Now that I have met you, and spoken with you, I can no longer feel this way.'

This year groups from Toronto and Coast to Coast Canada (which was comprised of students from Vancouver, Calgary, Edmonton, Winnipeg, Ottawa, Halifax and other small communities) each held individual meetings with Polish students. The encounters were open, honest and filled with the earnest desire by both parties to learn about each others cultures. At the close of the Toronto session in Cracow, the students broke into spontaneous singing and dancing. Upon the conclusion of the Coast to Coast encounter, some of the Polish students decided (on their own) to join the Canadian students on a Saturday afternoon walk through the streets of old Warsaw.

One of the songs we sang at the meeting in Cracow contains the following words written by a Hasidic rabbi about 200 years ago: 'The whole world is a very narrow bridge. But the important idea to remember is not to be afraid at all.' The relations between our two cultures has sometimes been fraught with difficulty. But with the courage and determination of both the Polish and Jewish peoples we can cross even the narrowest bridge.

Let me close with a last story from the vast repository of Jewish myth, legend and values:

When G-d decided to create human beings in the Divine Image, the angels were jealous. So they plotted to hide the Divine Image from human beings. One angel suggested burying it in the depths of the sea; another in the crag of a jagged mountain. But the most clever of the angels suggested, 'No. Let us hide the Divine Image within each person. It's the last place they will ever look.'

All human beings are created in the image of G-d, and all are possessed of an infinite, eternal and immeasurable quality. If all we manage to do on the March of the Living is teach this lesson to our students, if the only value that the students assimilate is an understanding of the sacred dignity of every member of the human family.....then we will have perhaps not accomplished all our goals, but we will have achieved a great deal nonetheless.