

PRESIDENT DOTI'S ADDRESS

(Chapman University)

As president of a university I have occasion to give many speeches. But now as I stand before such a large group of Holocaust survivors, I cannot think of a time when I have been in greater awe of an audience. I am grateful and honored, however, for your invitation for me to speak today and to explain why Christoph Meili, his wife, Guissipena, and daughter, Mirjam, and son, Davide, will soon become members of our Chapman community.

The story begins when a chance encounter helped inspire a very special person by the name of Marilyn Harran toward a goal of never letting others forget the lessons of the Holocaust. While working on her dissertation in a hot, cramped office one night in New York, Marilyn was approached by the weekend janitor, who was from Poland. Mentioning that he wanted to show her some drawings, she agreed to take a look. And what she saw - rough, charcoal drawings of chimneys and bodies - haunted her. Drawn by the janitor's wife, who had been a death camp inmate, the sketches brought home to Marilyn the horror of the Holocaust. Researching the topic, she found plenty of fuel to keep the flames burning for her search for more information about the Holocaust.

Those flames still burn bright at Chapman University, where Marilyn Harran became a professor of religion and history and founded our program in Holocaust Studies. In a course outline for one of the student-packed classes she teaches on the Holocaust is the statement: "The Holocaust challenges us to ask many questions about society and about ourselves as human beings. To keep the promise 'never again' we must understand how National Socialism drew so many people into its orbit, some as fervent believers, some as silent but compliant bystanders. We will reflect together on the choices that people had during that time - and the choices that we have before us today as we face new challenges from neo-Nazi and other hate groups in the United States and abroad."

It was that janitor and his wife's charcoal drawings that reinforced Marilyn Harran's conviction that hearing directly from the source would be a vitally important component in teaching about the Holocaust, the lessons to be learned from it and the choices we have before us today. That is why in her Holocaust courses, Professor Marilyn Harran has had people like the following speak in her class: Mel Mermelstein, Leon Leyson, Michael Berenbaum and Leopold Page, all of whom I am pleased and honored to say are with us today in the audience.

I'm sure you all know the story of Leopold Page, who was born as Poldek Pfefferberg in Poland. He became a university professor, but ended that career when he joined the Polish Army to fight the Nazis. Wounded in the leg in 1939, he managed to return to his home in Cracow. That same

year he met Oskar Schindler, who decades later become famous as the hero of Steven Spielberg's Schindler's List.

Leopold Page had our students laughing at anecdotes about his plight to get Schindler's story told. He recalled how he would offer cut-rate discounts on the fine handbags sold in his shop to relatives of filmmakers. He told about the one producer who bought the story in the mid- 1960's and came back with a script so badly written that Page felt compelled to buy back the rights. While the stories he recounted must have brought to mind the unimaginable atrocities he endured in his life, the only hint of tears in Page's eyes came when about 100 of our students sang "Happy Birthday" for his 83d birthday that year.

Leopold Page is still euphoric over getting his story of Schindler to Thomas Kineally, who wrote the book, and to Stephen Spielberg, who directed the Academy Award winning film that millions have seen.

As Leopold Page ended his talk at Chapman, he said something I'll never forget. He said, "I can't explain or analyze anti-Semitism or prejudice of any kind. I can only present myself to students like you and say that love is easier than hate." This mirrored the statement I heard a Sobibor survivor, Thomas "Tovi" Blatt, make to another of Professor Harran's Holocaust classes: "I don't hate the Germans. I don't hate the Poles. I hate the idea of hate." What amazing statements from people who endured so much hate.

Around the time that Leopold Page visited Professor Harran's Holocaust course, a young man by the name of Christoph Meili was working as a guard for a Swiss bank. Christoph knew not a single Jew when he was growing up in Aargau County, Switzerland. In his schooling, he had been taught almost nothing about the Holocaust, but he sensed that something was wrong when one day at work he walked into the bank's shredding room and noticed two large boxes that overflowed with books and documents dating back to World War II.

Christoph, who had been deeply moved by the motion picture, Schindler's List, decided to save those documents. When he was later asked why he did what he did, Christoph said, "Oskar Schindler was only a businessman, but when he saw what was happening to the Jews, he began to act. I was only a bank guard, but I also knew there was something I had to do." As a result of doing what he did, Christoph lost his job, and after receiving vicious telephone calls and death threats, he and his supportive and encouraging wife, Guissipena, were granted permanent residency in our country.

When we at Chapman learned about what Christoph had done and learned of his dream of gaining a university education, we felt, as Christoph felt when he saved those documents, that we, too, had to do something. I contacted William Elperin, president of the "1939 Club," who was already working on introducing Christoph to other California schools. Mr. Elperin was devoting an incredible amount of time to visiting these schools, and giving many more hours of careful, attentive and considerate thought to finding the best possible place for Christoph and his family. So I was surprised that he was willing to traipse out to yet one more school to see what Chapman had to offer. But he did. And after several more visits with Christoph and his family, we were elated to hear that Christoph and Guissipena decided to join our Chapman community.

At the heart of Chapman University's mission is the development of ethical lives. Although we certainly value knowledge, our commitment is to an even greater purpose, to inspiring students to care and to translate what they are learning into awareness and ethical action. Education at Chapman means not only career preparation, but preparation for life, as we encourage students to learn from the past in order to meet the challenges of the present and thereby be better able to shape the future.

Christoph Meili is someone who has already made that connection between the lessons of the past and the challenges of the present. That is why we are so fortunate to have Christoph at our university. He will be a living symbol within our community of the fact that one person's decision to act in the cause of justice and humanity can make a difference. As one of the students in Professor Harran's Holocaust course wrote in a final paper: If we sit back and ignore, or choose not to act, when we see others suffering there will come a time when we will be the ones to suffer. At that time, who will act on our behalf? One person, no matter how small, can make a difference and when several individuals do what they can, the effect increases. We must not surrender our personal responsibility for the sake of obedience or personal safety. Empathy, put into action, can stop the power of hatred.

When it was announced that Chapman had granted Christoph a four-year tuition scholarship, I received a moving and inspiring book by Flory Van Beek in the mail. It is a remarkable autobiography, both tragic and uplifting, about Jews living in hiding in the Netherlands under Nazi occupation. In the book she wrote the following to me: "To President James Doti, with heartfelt gratitude to you for giving Christoph Meili a scholarship at Chapman." Flory Van Beek.

I hope you know by now that Flory Van Beek shouldn't be thanking me. The people to thank are Thomas Kineally and Stephen Spielberg, who through telling of Schindler's story inspired Christoph Meili to action; to Leopold Page, for bringing Schindler's story to Kineally and Spielberg; to Marilyn Harran, for bringing Leopold Page to Chapman; and to that Polish Jew, for bringing his wife's charcoal drawings to Professor Harran, inspiring her to bring the lessons of the Holocaust to our learning community.

So you see, it's one full circle with no beginning and no end, but you who survivors of a brutal annihilation and cataclysm of human history are the fuel that gives that circle its energy. All of us owe you a tremendous debt of gratitude for the courage you show in your lives, for sharing your experiences with new generations and for teaching them that they must always strive to find the courage to speak and to act in the cause of justice and humanity.