A Review of

THE DEPUTY by Rolf Hochhuth

Given by

Rabbi Sidney H. Brooks

Friday Evening, April 10, 1964

Temple Israel, Omaha, Nebraska

Wednesday night, the 26th of February, was Erev Purim. That night in traditional observance of the festival, Jews gathered in our synagogues all over the world to read Miggilat Esther, the ancient Biblical story of Haman, his hatred of our ancestors and his plan to annihilate them.

The same night that the Meggilah was read, Rolf Hochhuth's play, The Deputy, opened at the Brooks Atkinson Theatre in New York. Just six days later I went to the theatre in the unsuccessful attempt to get tickets. As had happened in Europe where the play had appeared, there had been demonstrations and picketing. And in the middle of the afternoon there were at least a dozen New York policemen, mounted and on foot, stationed in front of the theatre, across the street and at strategic places in the immediate neighborhood to control any further disorder. Isn't it remarkable that a play which has as its theme the deliberate annihilation of more than six million innocents by the Nazis could stir up more protest, more controversy and more discussion of public and inter-faith relations than did the brutality and killing of which the play speaks! I would dare to say that there was more passion voiced in front of the Brooks Atkinson theatre over the issue of whether the play ought to be produced or not than there was in the whole of New York City over the announced plans of Hitler to wipe out a people when he came to power in 1933! And thatsilence, that kind of apathy in the presence of evil is precisely the indictment and theme of the play.

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uled for six more this year. In Switzerland there were riots. In Paris the play is picketed each night. Billy Rose obtained the original rights to produce the play in the United States and he withdrew his sponsorship. Cardinal Spellman of New York condemned the play without either seeing it or reading it. With typical pandering to so-called 'good feeling and harmonious inter-faith relations', the Brooklyn division of the National Conference of Christians and Jews issued a resolution "deploring" the play as doing a "disservice to the cause of Christian-Jewish relations".

A distinguished Rabbi from New York declared that he had told Pope Paul VI that he and other Reform Jewish leaders in the United States would try to tell the "true story" of how Pope Pius helped Jews during World War II.

Strange bedfellows these, with the Brooklyn Veterans of Foreign Wars, the American Nazi Party and combinations of Protestants, Catholics and Jews who banded together to picket the play in New York branding it as Anti-Catholic and its author as a bigot and an anti-Christ hate-monger.

On the other side, the play has been hailed not as great theatre or outstanding drama, but as a true and proper account of the role played by the Vatican and in particular that of Pope Pius the XII in failing to denounce the atrocities of the Hitler Nazi regime as they set about deporting the Jews to the concentration camps, the forced labor camps and finally to the furnaces to be burned alive.

What are the facts of the matter? Is the play based upon historical truth? Is it anti-Catholic? Will it harm Christian-Jewish relations? What is its importance and what is its message?

First, we must distinguish between the play on Broadway, the play as produced in Europe and the original book.

The author, Rolf Hochhuth, is 31 years of age. He was, therefore, 14 years old at the end of World War II. He is old enough to remember the Hitler era, but he is too young to have had any active part in or against the Nazi regime. He declares in press interviews and elsewhere that his work is an historical play attempting to portray events that happened 22 years ago. "I hope",

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he said, "it will be received 'sine ira et studio' (i.e. without fear or favor)" which is to say: objectively.

In book form the play has more the length and scope of a novel than a drama. If performed in full, as it has been with slight alterations in Europe, the production takes some 6 or 7 hours. Included in the book, as introductions to the acts and scenes are lengthy descriptions of the main characters and comments on their historicity. Appended also to the book as a section entitled "Sidelights on History" which summarizes the historical data gathered by the author and is included to substantiate the accuracy of his play as the faithful rehearsal of actual events.

In New York, the play is condensed to be presented in 2½ hours.

The basic plot centers upon a young Jesuit priest, Ricardo Fontana, a diplomat of the Vatican in Berlin. In his presence a young German SS officer and under-cover anti-Nazi, Kurt Gerstein, forces his way into the Papal legation in Berlin. Gerstein demands that the Pope be informed of the mass deportations and exterminations of Jews and speak out against them. Father Fontana is horrified. After listening to the ghastly details which Gerstein reports of the development of the use of a new gas, Cyclon B, because the gassing of Jews with diesel fumes was not going fast enough, Fontana cannot believe that the Pope and his Church will not denounce the horror. But when he speaks with the Nuncio, the Cardinal and even at first with his father who is a lay advisor to the Vatican, he realizes that the Church will not forthrightly and clearly condemn Hitler and his Nazis. He is obsessed with shame and guilt and a passion to convince the Pope to do so. He believes that if the Pope does denounce Hitler, many lives can be saved. When, finally, the young priest meets with the Pope in the presence of the Cardinal and his father, he pleads with the Pope to condemn Hitler and his atrocities. The Pope refuses. Instead he writes an innocuous statement calling for peace and for men to work righteously for the common welfare. Seeing that the Pope has no intention of specifying the Jewish victims nor of denouncing the extermination policy of the Nazis, Ricardo takes out the yellow

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Star of David which he had gotten from a Jew he had earlier sent out of the country in his own priest's garb and pins it upon his cassock saying: "Your holiness, what you have set your name to grants Hitler unrestricted license to go on treating the Jews as he has always done." Voluntarily wearing the yellow Star of David, Father Fontana joins the Italian Jews in their journey to Auschwitz where with them he meets his own violent death.

Now to our basic questions. Dramatic considerations aside: Is the play based on historical truth?

From all indications, yes. Hochhuth himself has done a prodigious amount of research. His documentation is complete and detailed. It is an incontrovertible fact supported by other researchers into the same matter that the Pope did not speak out. There are those who say that he could not have done so, that he should not have done so, and that had he done so there would have been horrible reprisals and even greater loss of human life. But the fact remains that the Pope, spiritual leader of the Roman Catholic Church was in this matter more statesman than spokesman for God. Pope Pius had concluded a Concordat with Hitler which stated that the Vatican would maintain diplomatic relations with the Nazis. It can safely be surmised that this was judged by the Vatican as the prudent thing to do to prevent the advance of Communism. This is not to say that the Pope was as insensitive or cold or detached from the sufferings of Jews under the Nazis as the play might lead us to suppose. In truth it must be noted that the Pope was responsible for saving many Jewish lives in many countries thru his instructions to his Bishops. Many Jews found sanctuary in monasteries and convents. But the Pope did not speak out against the deportations of Jews within the shadow of St. Peter's Church in Rome. In this matter the play is soundly historical.

Is the play anti-Catholi ? Of course not. The protagonist of the play, the hero, the exemplar of conscience is Father Ricardo Fontana. One must not yield to the temptation to regard anything which criticizes the Pope or a Catholic prelate as anti-Catholic. Such a view is as unwarranted as if one were to regard any criticism of a Rabbi or a Jewish institution as being anti-semitic per se.

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In The Deputy, quite the reverse is true. The play memorializes for instance the Polish priest Fr. Maximillian Kolbe and Provost Bernhard Lichtenberg of St. Hedwig's Cathedral in Berlin, both of whom were killed by the Nazis. Fr. Fontana is the composite character of them both. The drama pays homage to all catholics who at peril of lives saved the hunted Jews.

Who then is the target of the indictment and what is the meaning of the play?

The indictment is not directed against the Pope alone but against one and all, then and now, who refuse to speak out against brutality and injustice for whatever reason!

Of course, there are rationalizations for any human action. Isn't it time we learned that there are prices to be paid for decency and honor and the defence of the helpless and the freedom of the enslaved. From whence comes the insane idea that every action must be totally safe, totally without risk, totally advantageous?

The Deputy is not the Pope alone. The Deputy is not simply Der Stellvertreter (as the original title has it) The Representative of Christ. The Deputy is every single human being who understands that he is his brother's keeper, that in the decisions of life he is "Deputy" for his fellowman. And in this neither the Pope at Rome, nor presidents of nations, nor ministers of government, nor judges, nor law enforcement officers, nor the elected representatives of the people are exempt from their moral obligations or immune from criticism or damnation for their failure to use their power morally or to defend the right as every man should.

No, the Pope at Rome cannot be singled out apart from all others. For when the millions were led to slaughter the whole world was silent. Yes, even the United States, and even England and, sadly, for much too long, many American Jews. The civilized world was silent witness to the slaughter. England and America refused to believe the reports of what was happening in Europe.

We cannot help but recall the famous message smuggled out of the Warsaw ghetto pleading: "Where are the Jews of America during our greatest need? Why are they not picketing the White House?"

And can you forget the shameful incident when a "deal" was suggested to exchange one million Jews to be released from Germany

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for 10,000 trucks which Hitler desperately needed? And an English member of parliament said: "What will England do with one million Jews?"

The Catholic Church should be the first to recognize that confession is good for the soul. This play arouses shame and guilt and horror and disgust as well it should. It lays bare the truth that no man is to be excused from sin because of his lofty station or his lowly opportunity. Decisions for righteousness are made within the heart and soul of each man. And the sin of silence, the arrest of conscience in turning away from the issues of human life and liberty is the greatest sin of all. "Thou shalt not stand idly by the blood of thy neighbor.....Thou shalt surely rebuke thy neighbor and not sin because of him."

Kurt Gerstein, also a hero of the play at one point says: "A Christian in these days cannot survive if he is truly Christian." And Father Fontana's last comment on the Pope's refusal to act is: "God shall not destroy his Church only because a Pope shrinks from His summons."

The message of this play is a universal one. It is that the pomp and circumstance of religion or of politics or of statecraft or national safety or diplomatic expediency or personal self-preservation are as nothing when weighed in the balance of human life and human liberty and human dignity.

Which is the prior value? Which is the first choice? Indeed what is our answer to such questions in these days when indignities and abuses are heaped upon our fellow citizens, **this time because their skin is darker** than ours.

We do not, thank God, as a nation, with the sanction of governmental force, kill and torture and shame and annihilate. But never let it be forgotten that the road to Auschwitz began with the petty discriminations, the second class status of the Jews in Germany the accepted prejudices that had been smouldering for generations. The road to Auschwitz began with the SILENCE that allowed disdain to grow into contempt and from contempt to hatred and from hatred to bestial brutality and unleashed fury.

<u>The Deputy</u> needs to be shown everywhere and read everywhere so so that our world may remember and be ashamed and purge our souls and mend our ways.

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The author of The Deputy struggles to make the horror of those hellish days real to us. He knows he must fail. He writes in the introduction to Act 5: "For even the fact that today we can go sightseeing in Auschwitz as we do in the Colosseum scarcely serves to convince us that seventeen years ago in our actual world this gigantic plant with scheduled railroad connections was built especially in order that normal people, who today may be earning their livings as letter carriers, magistrates, youth counselors, salesmen, pensioners, government officials or gynecologists might kill other people."

And Albert Schweitzer in a letter used as preface to the play says: "To stay on the right path of history we must become aware of the great aberration of those days, and mus t remain aware of it, so as not to stumble further into inhumanity. It is significant, therefore, that The Deputy has made its appearance. Not only is it an indictment of an historical personality who placed upon himself the great reponsibility of silence; it is also a solemn warning to our culture admonishing us to forego our acceptance of inhumanity which leave us unconcerned."

Finally, it has been suggested by some that the appearance of this play will damage Christian-Jewish relations. Well, if it doss then there were no sound Christian-Jewish relations to begin with. No Faith, no people, no race, no individual needs, in my judgment, to purchase good feeling from others with the coin of self-abasement deception or falsehood. This too is a kind of silence. In order for men to be brothers we must be able to speak to each other, to point out our failings, our sins, our strengths and our goodness.

If by any,the judgment of Pius XII is too harsh, let him search his own soul. Indeed, we Jews have never shrunk from the judgment of our greatest prophets, kings, sages or rabbis. For we know that no man is perfect only perfectible. Our socity is not perfect, but we must believe it to be perfectible. To that end let history be the teacher of us all and a hope for harmony and peace the goal of us all.

May God give us the grace, the spirit and strength to reach it.

Rabbi Sidney H. Brooks