



Rabbi Schneier. When Solidarity Has No Space or Time

Marina Melchionda (April 24, 2009)

New York. On April 21 Rabbi Schneier was decorated Grande Ufficiale dell'Ordine della Stella della Solidarietà Italiana" (Grand Official of the Order of the Italian Star of Solidarity) at the Consulate General of Italy. With him, the new Archbishop of the City of New York Timothy Dolan

I love you God because you saved my life from death. I saw six million people, all part of my family, dying for their only fault: being Jewish. As I survivor I felt I had to pay back on a daily basis. If I survived, I survived for a reason. Because I was not better than those who perished. I had to give back.

This is how Rabbi Schneier started his speech on April 21 at the Italian Consulate General in New York, when he was decorated as a "Grande Ufficiale dell'Ordine della Stella della Solidarietà Italiana" (Grand Official of the Order of the Italian Star of Solidarity).

(The most significant moments of the ceremony)

"Rabbi Schneier is one of the most distinguished representatives of the Jewish-American Community," the Deputy Consul of Italy in New York Marco Alberti said for the occasion. "He has always been strongly committed to defending human rights in the U.S. as well as abroad, and he has also promoted several initiatives to support Holocaust survivors. Above all, he represents an important cornerstone for dialogue in the Jewish community, both on a domestic and international level. During Pope Benedict XVI's visit to the U.S. in April 2008, he received him at his synagogue on Park Avenue, where he has been a spiritual leader for over 40 years. In recent months he has been building a strong relationship with the Consulate General of Italy in New York. His collaboration has brought prestige to Italian initiatives and he has personally shown great appreciation for our country, which he has visited on several occasions for high-level meetings."

The ceremony could not have been held on a more significant day for the Christian and Jewish communities. On April 21, in fact, both Holocaust Remembrance Day and the anniversary of the foundation of Rome (753 b. C.) are celebrated. It may not be the case, but it could represent one more step toward reconciliation between the two religious groups. "I don't think that it's the case where the Italian government chose this day to honor a Holocaust survivor, one that has lived through this terrible experience and is now a symbol of hope. He is a spiritual leader who has dedicated his life to overcome intolerance and hate. Thank you Rabbi, because you have been a bridge among peoples, a pontifex as Ancient Romans used to say," said Consul General Francesco Maria Talò at the beginning of the ceremony.



His speech was immediately followed by a symbolic rite in which all the spiritual leaders present were invited to participate: the Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations Archbishop Migliore, the new Archbishop of the City of New York Timothy Dolan, and the Archbishop of the [Armenian Church in America](#) [1] Khajag Barsamian. Together they lightened one candle, only one flame to symbolize their commitment towards following one path, one aim: the building of future peace and fraternal unity among the religions of the world.

(The decoration at the Consulate - Courtesy of RAI Corp)

Rabbi Schneier, in particular, has always worked toward this end. Born in Vienna, Austria, on March 20, 1930, Rabbi Schneier lived under Nazi occupation in Budapest during World War II and arrived in the United States in 1947. Since 1962 he has been the spiritual leader of the Park East Synagogue, a historic landmark in New York City. In 1965 he founded and became president of the [Appeal of Conscience Foundation](#) [2], where he began fighting for religious freedom and tolerance throughout the world. Throughout his life he has received many honors such as the U.S. Presidential Citizens Medal in 2001. On that occasion he was defined as "a Holocaust survivor who has devoted a lifetime to overcoming the forces of hatred and intolerance and set an inspiring example of spiritual leadership by encouraging interfaith dialogue and intercultural understanding and promoting the cause of religious freedom around the world." He also holds positions of prestige in both national and international institutions and organizations, such as U.S. Alternate Representative to the U.N. General Assembly and Chairman of the [U.S. Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad](#) [3]. He was one of three American religious leaders appointed by President Clinton to begin the first dialogue on religious freedom with Chinese President Jiang Zemin, and is a member of the U.S. delegation to the [Stockholm International Forum for the Prevention of Genocide, Sweden](#) [4].

His deep commitment to increasing dialogue between religions can be summarized in a few, significant, figures: he has headed fifty-eight interfaith missions to the former Soviet Union as a leader in advancing mutual understanding and inter-religious cooperation in the Russian Federation, Caucasus, and Central Asia; he has convened six international conferences, including the [Dialogue Among Civilizations Forum](#) [5]; and he holds ten honorary doctorates from U.S. and European universities.

In spite of these many recognitions, he could not hide his emotions when Consul Talò handed him a plaque signed by the President of the Italian Republic Giorgio Napolitano and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Franco Frattini and when he finally received his medallion. "This is a moment of extraordinary joy for me," said the Rabbi. "I can tell you that when I survived, little did I know that God would give me the privilege to see, after the Shoah, the birth of the State of Israel. Little did I know that the Republic of Italy would give me this honor. Today I am proud to say that the Jewish people despite the persecution are still alive. [...] I want to thank the Italian government for many things. But, most of all, I want to thank the Italian government for denouncing the recent Holocaust denials. Do you know what it means as a survivor to encounter someone who says the Holocaust has never existed?"

His words and the memories they evoked touched many of those present, eminent representatives of the Jewish and Christian communities, among them Natalia Indrimi, Stella Levi, and Andrea Fiano from the Primo Levi Center of New York, Judge Dominic Massaro and Gabriela Shalev, Permanent Representative of Israel to the United Nations.

"It has been said that those who sing pray twice," said Consul Talò introducing soprano De Vito who with her warm voice intoned an ancient Yiddish prayer. It became a collective hymn, where words of peace and faith were dedicated to one and only God, a prayer welcomed by every one of us with respectful and meaningful silence.

(Edited by Giulia Prestia)



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- [1] <http://www.armenianchurch.net>
- [2] <http://www.appealofconscience.org>
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