



# JEWISH EXPONENT

— WHAT IT MEANS TO BE JEWISH IN PHILADELPHIA —

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## International Holocaust Remembrance Day Commemorated With Morality Discussion

By **Liz Spikol** - February 1, 2017

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*Dr. Mark L. Tykocinski, Italian Consul General Andrea Canepari and Dr. Salvatore Mangione came together to commemorate International Holocaust Remembrance Day at Jefferson University's Hamilton Building. Photo provided*

The Dorrance H. Hamilton Building's Connelly Auditorium at 10th and Locust was a sedate landscape of blond wood desks under harsh fluorescent light — nothing out of the ordinary for a weekday afternoon in a medical school classroom.

But the presentation given by Thomas Jefferson University professor Sal Mangione, which ended with a large photo of the rings of Saturn, transported the large audience to a deeply philosophical moral universe, in which they were forced to confront their own inclinations and current behavior.

The topic? The problem of collective evil.

The talk by Mangione marked the first time Jefferson has collaborated with the Italian Consulate General of Philadelphia to commemorate International Holocaust Remembrance Day.

Andrea Canepari, consul general of Italy in Philadelphia, proudly noted that Italy was the second country in the world, after Israel, to make International Holocaust Remembrance Day a full-fledged national holiday — five years, in fact, before the U.N. declared it.

Over the phone from the consulate last week, Canepari explained that Holocaust Remembrance Day was common in Italy, marked throughout the country by plenty of school and community programming.

"[This day] is very dear to Italian people," Canepari said. "It is important to be aware of the history so we are aware of the dangers of not respecting human dignity ... and of racial discrimination."

Though the consulate does Holocaust Remembrance Day programming every year in Philadelphia — often in conjunction with Congregation Mikveh Israel — the new partnership with Jefferson was an effort to broaden the conversation.

"We really believe it is important to not just to talk to the same circle of people who are already aware, but to try to educate the general public," said Canepari, who added that the week's programming was part of Ciao Philadelphia, a cultural platform that aims to celebrate Italians' contributions to the region.

Canepari and the Anti-Defamation League's board chair Judith Meyer co-wrote an op-ed in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* celebrating Italy's commitment to human dignity, citing a history both "heroic and wrenching."

The complex nature of Italy's Holocaust history was commented upon again prior to Mangione's presentation, in remarks by Mark L. Tykocinski, provost of Thomas Jefferson University and dean of its Sidney Kimmel Medical College.

Tykocinski, the son of two Holocaust survivors, started by speaking about two of the 20 Italians who have been designated Righteous Among the Nations, including a poor laborer who gave Primo Levi bread.

"But it's more than that," he said. "The fact is that 80 percent of Italian Jews survived World War II — that is, of the 45,000 Jews counted in Mussolini's census of 1938, about 8,000 died in Nazi camps, about 7,000 managed to flee, about 30,000 lived in hiding before being liberated by Allied troops.

"That compares to 9 percent of prewar Poland's 3.3 million Jews surviving, 16 percent in Romania, 15 percent in Lithuania and so on."

What made the difference, said Tykocinski, were "individual acts of bravery by individuals isolated from each other who made this incredible human difference."

It was up to Mangione, an Italian-born pulmonologist who teaches humanities at Jefferson, to interrogate the question of why: What made the good Italians capable of doing the right thing? Where does moral courage come from? Why does it fail so many of us — especially those in the medical profession?

Mangione first became interested in this question of collective evil and personal responsibility after visiting concentration camps in Europe.

"When you do that, life suddenly changes," he said on the phone from his office last week, "because you realize this is what people do."

As a physician, he was especially interested in the way that doctors became perpetrators.

"We were the most Nazified profession in the Third Reich," he said.

He began to read voraciously on the Holocaust and found himself wondering, also, about those who rescued and resisted — a tragic minority, he noted. What made those rescuers tick? If we understood that, he thought, we might be able to prevent such evil from happening again.

Using video, photographs and written text on a large screen, Mangione took the audience on a journey through the worst of human behavior, demonstrating that though the Holocaust was unique in many ways, it was not an aberration in history.

Drawing on a wide variety of sources — from Euripides to Primo Levi, Spinoza to Camus, Thomas Hobbes to Calvin and Hobbes — Mangione demonstrated the way that humans are endlessly capable of committing atrocities against each other.

The Armenian genocide. The Cambodian Killing Fields. Argentina's Dirty War. Sabra and Chatila. Rwanda. Bosnia. The Trail of Tears — these and many more instances of human cruelty flashed on the screen to prove Mangione's point.

He also quoted Thucydides, who wrote, "It will be enough for me, however, if these words of

mine could be used by those who want to understand clearly the events that happened in the past, and which, human nature being what is, will, at some time or other and in much the same ways, be repeated in the future.”

Despite such dark conclusions, Mangione emphasized, that human beings are a combination of good and evil, and can choose to be good.

The question, then, is what makes some people choose evil while others choose good?

Mangione featured several studies about obedience to authority and showed a clip from the BBC's *The Nazis: A Warning From History*, in which a female Nazi tried to explain why she didn't object even though she knew what she was doing was wrong.

Her answer? “When the masses were shouting ‘Heil,’ what could one do?”

Mangione presented the audience with his “diagnostic criteria for genocide as a disease”—blind obedience to authority, a humiliated or threatened nation, a dehumanized minority, demagogic and evil leadership, and most importantly, the silence or inaction of the good guys.

He then listed the qualities that characterized the rescuers he'd studied: They were mostly social outsiders, they saw the world in a range of grays rather than in black and white, they were independent-minded in terms of religion and politics, and they shared “an amiable disregard for rules and authority.”

Such qualities are often lacking, Mangione said, in his target audience: people in the medical profession.

“Physicians tend to be instead primarily mainstream, often intolerant of ambiguity, usually conservative, prone to authoritarianism, and less empathetic as a result of going through schooling and training,” he said. “Although these traits make us ‘good citizens’ in normal times, in times of emergency, they may prevent us from doing the right thing.”

Can an allegiance to authority and rigid personalities explain human experimentation in Tuskegee and Guatemala? Can it explain why more than 90 percent of medical professionals in Germany were involved in some way in human experimentation during World War II?

Mangione posed the questions but did not give easy answers.

Still, the audience — which included Jefferson CEO Stephen Klasko and several staffers from the ADL — clapped long and loud after he was done. When Mangione presented the same talk at the national meeting of the American College of Physicians in May 2015, the audience gave him a standing ovation.

Despite having so much bleak content that it caused Mangione's daughter to say, “Thanks, Dad, I can go slit my wrists now,” his talk also inspires audience members to find the moral courage within to do the right thing.

After all, as Mangione pointed out, there is no one to save us but ourselves.

For those who missed Mangione's talk, a version of it is available on the YouTube account of Cooper Medical School at Rowan University.

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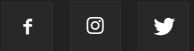
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