

Rabbi Wall  
Friday, August 21, 1987

Mark Greenberg  
Interviewer

MG This is Friday, August 21, (truck going by) 1987, Burlington, Vermont on an interview with Rabbi Max Wall about the Novicoff case and McCarthyism in Vermont. If we could start Rabbi Wall; if you would just make a statement that of who you are so that I have that on tape.

RW I am Rabbi Max B. Wall and I am Rabbi \_\_\_\_\_ now of the \_\_\_\_\_ Synagogue Congregation which I served actively from August of '46 until the end of June, 1987.

MG What was your involvement with the Novicoff case at UVM?

RW I knew Alex Novicoff because I was involved with the hospital and with the University, I used to occasionally lecture to students at the medical school as well. So I got to know a lot of the Jewish faculty on campus. I had no very close relationship because he wasn't very religiously, institutionally religiously orientated individual. I think his children may have gotten some education, I'm not positive. But in the first thing that I knew was when I heard that he had refused to answer questions of the ??? committee. It wasn't the McCarthy. Shortly after that I was called by the late Bishop Peter Van Dyke who was the Episcopal Bishop for the State of Vermont who was very much upset with this, as I think he said, persecution. And he got together with me and with Bishop Robert F. Joyce who is now retired, whom I think you have already interviewed and the three of us, I was sort of made an unofficial Bishop of the Jewish community and the three of us were in agreement that this was an outrage. We issued some kind of statement, I don't remember the details I'm sorry. But we issued a public statement and we got I think most of the clergy who we contacted in the area to support this. And Alex became especially friendly with Bishop Robert F. Joyce who is a very wonderfully human being. He loves people and he is a people person. That's how we became involved. As the news media began to expand upon this; this is a big holiday thing you know. I don't recall the local newspapers. There may have been two at the time. The News and the Free Press did not exactly feel very upset because they found a commi on the campus. But what was interesting to me as I look back upon it, then even as I was current at the time, was the remarkable almost humanity of all the clergy, most of whom were native Vermonters. There is a large Catholic clergy in this area. It was almost unanimous support and the Bishop was not a Bishop at the time. But shortly thereafter he was appointed and the next year he was consecrated as Bishop and by that time the hearings had already been held at the UVM campus and the trial in front of the faculty as such on Saturday morning and I was so upset because it was held on

Saturday because I wanted to be one of the character witnesses and they wouldn't change it. I didn't go to services that day. I felt that was more ??? than going to conduct services. We all spoke and we all said in a sense the same thing that but for the grace of God, hundreds of thousands of Americans might have been in his place simply because in the '30's people were looking for solutions to problems that noone seemed to have and if there was a promise which turned out to be a false promise, I think Kessler refers to it as a God that failed then fine, so many of us said wait a minute this is the wrong door. I made a mistake. I am going out and going into another door. He was a man who was fundamentally dedicated scientist. No other concern whatsoever. He fulfilled his \_\_\_\_\_ humanist by his scientific dedication. He was recognized internationally as a very prominent researcher in this. In fact when he was expelled from here, he took his big grants with him and shortly afterwards he ended up at \_\_\_\_\_, Einstein where my brother-in-law who teaches now is also a biochemist at Harvard was at that time at Einstein, Paul Gallop and he knew and worked with Alex on the same faculty and in the same general department. That's what I know. That I was opposed to the persecution and that the clergy in this area were opposed to the persecution, but lots and lots of people were very upset by this and felt that the University had lent itself to being used.

MG Used by who?

RW By, I am going to put this in quotes, "By the McCarthyists". In other words, they had fallen under the fear of being identified with communism. This was the real thing you know. Until a Vermonter stood up on his hind legs and said to McCarthy sit down, it was a Vermont senator.

MG Senator Flanders?

RW Senator Flanders. Everybody was afraid to move. Just like the emperors garments. That's the way things develop along these lines. You instill a little bit of fear and that fear begins to work, so you don't have to work any longer. You go to the next person and there is still a little bit of fear there and that's what frightened us.

MG Were there "McCarthyists" in Vermont who were identifiable as such forces people who were bringing pressure to bear in this case?

RW Yes, unfortunately my memory no longer recall individual names, but there were people at the State House who may have

been a little bit concerned about what would happen to the University. I am not sure, that's why I don't want to mention any specific names, but the newspapers were not overly sympathetic to our efforts. But the people in my congregation, the people in the general community of the religious community in Burlington was to a Jewish boy from the east side in Manhattan remarkably encouraging because they weren't afraid to stand up. That hearing was packed. I would say 95% of the people in that hearing came because they wanted him exonerated.

MG That does sound remarkable. My impression, I was quite young at the time, but my impression still is that most places people kept quiet or looked the other way. Do you think Vermont was unique in that or just this area of Vermont was unique in that respect?

RW The very fact that one of the most conservative elements in this areas social structure, the religious stood up and spoke out clear and sharp. I say okay, three people, an Episcopal Bishop who was ready to retire, and a Rabbi who figured nobody listens to Rabbis anyways and a priest who was a very popular priest, but when this popular priest became a Bishop and he was being consecrated, the two people who sat in the front row in that Church by his special invitation at his consecration as if to say to the whole American society, heh folks this is what I think were Alex Novicoff and his wife.

MG What do you think accounted for this kind of unusual support?

RW Well first of all I think that when I came to Vermont, there were a lot of Vermonters here. And Vermonters are quite independent, have always been. They don't like to be told; in fact they refused to join the union until a year later because they weren't ready with the conditions. The reluctant republic. They just don't like to see injustice. There are individual Vermonters who think Ollie North is a god, but you have that class of humanities stretched throughout the world. There are individual Vermonters who send money to the Bakkers. What are we going to do. But by in large, the thinking people who express themselves, who are concerned about things are the people who built the University in 1791, that kind of person. People who live in Vermont, but live in the world too. Who is as the late Warren Austin said "Who have a near look and a far view". Those people couldn't take what was happening. I just read an interesting book by a fellow who plays the mouth organ, Larry Adler, an autobiography of what happened to him in that period.

Rabbi Max B. Wall  
Page 4

MG Do you think that there was an anti-Semitism attached to this?

RW No, the lawyer who was trying the case against him was a Jewish lawyer in town, who still he and his brother and his son are still in active practice. He was the University attorney at the time. I didn't sense any, coming from New York, where you are super sensitized, anything. We are professional paranoids. No question about it. I didn't sense the slightest degree of anti-Semitism.

MG This gets us a little off the Novicoff case, but what about at other times or in general. I guess Burlington is probably has more Jewish people than any other part of Vermont. It is almost urban in that regard, but have you ever encountered forms of either institutional or individual anti-Semitism in Vermont?

RW I personally have not. There have been some incidents on University students in painting \_\_\_\_\_ occasionally or writing a dirty letter, but by enlarge, well for what its worth, I, there was a letter printed in the Free Press written by somebody who was a Professor at St. Michael's College years ago. And the President of St. Michael's had his secretary call me to apologize for the letter. And I said well why should the President apologize, he didn't write the letter and he says to me well you know, come on Max, the President feels terrible about this. I said why don't you get rid of the guy if nobody likes him. He says well he says he's got tenure. So I couldn't resist and I said I suppose anti-Semitism is not cause. So he said let go. I am doing a nice thing. I said let's be serious for a minute I said. I'm positive the President means this because in knowing President Dupont, I'm positive that he feels terrible about this. But since you are a religious institution, it was an Edmondite order, and since you are not concerned and have no problems about separation of church and state and since there is a person whom you can't get rid of who does preach misinformation, wouldn't it be sensible to have someone who can provide at least a greater semblance of truth on the same area of information and since many of you are priests who teach, wouldn't it be nice to have a Rabbi teaching and I know just the Rabbi and he said wait a minute it is a wonderful idea. I'll get back to you. He called me the next day and said I spoke to the President, he's very enthusiastic about it. And in 1964, I began to teach at St. Michael's College. Courses in introductions to Judaism. And now they have a Rabbi Max Wall Judaic Endowment for the teaching of Judaism and for the study of Jewish Christian relations and so on. So my experiences of anti-Semitism were very little. As a Rabbi, people

Rabbi Max B. Wall

Page 5

occasionally called me about what I call picky-une, little things, not every person who doesn't get into medical school doesn't get in because of anti-Semitism. Some are stupid. Others have their own idea, but very little. This is, I think, Vermont gets an A+ really.

MG That's good to hear. You referred to Senator Flanders before.

RW Yup.

MG Probably one of the programs we will also, possibly this same one, but maybe a separate one will deal with his speech and what he did. Do you recall that time and what the impact of that was?

RW Out of my experience it was a sense of pride that a Vermonter got up off the floor and stopped that terrible thing. Very very little, I don't recall any voice raised against Senator Flanders. There are times he scared me because he had some other ideas. He wanted some changes in the constitution about United States being a christian nation and so on and we had long conversations and occasional correspondence. But a rugged individualist. He wasn't out to try to really mold everybody toward his opinion. This was his personal belief. A great guy.

MG I was unaware of these ideas that he had. Can you fill me in on it?

RW I don't recall very clearly. This is one of my problems. I can't give you dates and facts. It seems that he was interested in making some kind of a change to affirm. He was a little unhappy about the degree to which separation of church and state was being interpreted by some bodies. Especially by the you know the group that defense people who are unpopular.

MG The American Civil Liberties Union

RW The American Civil Liberties Union and people like that. And he was a devout christian. Today he would have been in the right wing group you know, a little left of the Jimmy Bakkers. (Laugh) By the way, I hope you send in a couple dollars to make sure that the...

MG Tammy doesn't run out of mascara.

RW That's right.

MG Was, did Senator Flanders speech receive a lot of press and

Rabbi Max B. Wall  
Page 6

attention in Vermont?

RW Yes.

MG Generally supportive feeling the way you felt?

RW Yup.

MG Do you think that people were generally aware, to jump back again, were people generally aware of the Novicoff case?

RW With decreasing amount of awareness as one moved away from the Burlington Free Press area. No question about it. The academic community whether it was here or in Lyndonville, all these people were aware of it. But in this area because of the clergy involvement of this area, these were local except for the two Bishops, but basically it was the local ministerial association and things like that that came to active support. So this was obviously, and this is the center. I sound chauvinistic, but Burlington is the cultural center of Vermont. So anything that happens here. I know, okay. Next to Montpelier (Laugh) or Waitsfield?

MG Montpelier

RW I don't know if you realize to what degree we have combined smallness of size with greatness of mind. We are not a bedroom community. New Jersey is a bedroom community. With all of its schools and everything, it is a bedroom community.

MG Meaning what?

RW Burlington is an independent culturally independent community. And it has grown in the last 30 - 40 years tremendously.

MG You've been here since 1949 you said?

RW '46

MG '46. Can you describe those changes, the changes it has gone through?

RW I think, first of all, the changes in population. Beginning with the '60's middle '60's and moving in, people began to be very unhappy about living in bigger cities. The IBM came in. When IBM came in not making jeans, but having sophisticated kind of material which requires highly educated people, that means bringing in a large mass of people with much higher education exposed to all kinds of

large cultural centers in their prior job areas. And they were coming in here. They changed a great deal. The University has grown. Now when I came here, the University was about 3,000 students. Now you've got close to 10,000. That adds to the cultural level of the number of faculty if you want to consider the faculty culture. Sociologically they are of course. The growth of other schools. St. Michael's has grown and developed. It's become not just a little edmondyte institution, it has become a very significant liberal arts college. Champlain College has grown and giving in Vermont an opportunity to develop levels of job excellence in many areas of our society. Other colleges, independent colleges, all kinds of pursuit of knowledge and the pursuit of excellence is found all through this entire area. So I say and the so-called formal culture of concerts and theater and drama, this is, you can come to Vermont and spend a year and not miss the Sunday New York Times, because you can buy it here to. And you get just as dirty when you finish reading it.

MG If you finish reading it.

RW Yea, but who can?

MG Right. Was there any kind of support rallies, meetings, anything like that in Burlington at large for Professor Novicoff?

RW I seem to recall a public gathering of clergy and I don't recall whether there was any other public activity because some of us felt that if we were to push it to hard, it would put almost the clergy in an oppositional sense to the gown people, the different gown people. We didn't want to do that. We didn't want to alienate. We wanted to give the President and the trustees an environment in which they could comfortably and safely feel they could thumb their nose at the gender committee. We weren't successful to that extent.

MG So are you saying that there was not faculty support?

RW I'm sure there was. I'm sure there was, but we felt that our support was singularly special because it had no direct axe to grind. Faculty is faculty in the College University Professor Association or whatever came in with all kinds of things to do, but well this is self-protection. But here we are, clergy, who have no direct axe to grind. Of course we had. We are human beings living in the same environment. But to that extent, we felt we had a stronger voice and we didn't want to dilute by just becoming a part of a larger thing. We felt that the voice could be heard more clearly

Rabbi Max B. Wall

Page 8

because we were people who certainly had no background of particular interest in or friendship with communists.

MG Was there any student support shown? This was a long time ago.

RW I don't recall. I wasn't on campus then. I was the \_\_\_\_\_ director for six months and I realized I couldn't do the job, so I resigned.

MG So there was, were there any attempts on, well let's leave that. Did you know Alex Novicoff?

RW Yea, I got to know him pretty well as the results of that.

MG Can you tell me a little bit about him? What kind of person he was, even a physical description?

RW I have a very poor physical description. He has sort of round face, slightly bulging eyes. When he spoke it was with a tremendous enthusiasm. Never, he was never New England. He spoke with, one of the things that kept, one adjective, not adjective, one national distinction that kept on appearing when his name was mentioned in the press, was Professor Novicoff of Russian extraction. Novicoff is certainly a Russian sounding name. An enthusiastic researcher. I mean if I made the mistake and asked him how's this particular thing going. For the next hour, I got a lecture on connective tissue or whatever it happened to be that he was working with. Very gentle, soft spoken, very strong. At the same time he was going through this, one of his children was going through a very serious kidney infection and he had been working in that field and he felt absolutely helpless because he couldn't help his own son. Fortunately, things worked out. So he was under double stress, double tension. And yet always polite. In any interview or anything else, there was never any any you know harassing, reactive kind of thing, angry. You could feel indignation and anger, but it was not at the person, but it was at the helplessness of knowing that he was choosing the right path by refusing to involve another single human being by mentioning a name. And this is what made him so admirable to the people who got to know him, that he was willing to risk losing his job and he didn't know losing the possibility of ever working again. That was Alex Novicoff. Also a lot of tremendous ego strength apparently, because when he came back later on for his honorary degree many years later and he called that he was coming and we had dinner here and so on, I found a change in him. He had become somewhat of an egotist. He was now bragging about what he had accomplished. And I felt sad because this

wasn't the same lovable, gentle teacher. What a wonderful teacher he was. He could explain as if he were teaching \_\_\_\_\_ . Really in his field a very patient, sometimes impatient when it came to medical students in terms of what he expected. Because he expected everybody to be as devoted and as totally committed to science and to service as he was. He was the example of a young kid from where, I don't know where he came from; the east side or wherever. He may have been born in Europe for all I know, I was, who came over and found these opportunities and he was going to take full advantage of them. And by golly he did.

MG What about after his dismissal? What was his...

RW I lost track of him. I heard afterwards that he had been appointed to the faculty of Einstein. And then periodically when I'd visit Einstein, because my sister worked there, we'd get together, we'd have lunch or something. It was sad when I heard that he was divorced. I think that was part also the change of personality. He was married to a very wonderful person who stood by him throughout this entire and they were as one. They worked together. As I look back, the stress that they must have lived under, not simply from the economic danger of losing a job and the job, but of a child. The possibility of dying. At the same time, this wasn't one after the other. This is all current. I can forgive him as his later egotism, his pride. He did something for us. He did something for us, not we for him. He reminded us that people are made to stand on two feet, not hang by their tails from tree branches.

MG Was there ever any attempt or did you actually, you and Bishop Joyce and other clergymen ever meet with the University, with the President of the University or...

RW I think we all, we all attended that trustees meeting where, that Saturday morning and we all spoke and I know that Bishop Joyce spoke with the upper level of the University privately because he was a former; he was a graduate of UVM and he had been a trustee. I don't know whether he was at that time or appointed later trustee. But he spoke, we all spoke with as many people as we knew.

MG Did you feel, you must have felt terribly frustrated by all this, especially when the committees were both in favor of retaining Professor Novicoff and then it would be overturned?

RW It was a terrible sense of frustration. For us it was minor. We had other jobs to do. We didn't live with it

Rabbi Max B. Wall

Page 10

every single minute. There was many an evening I couldn't go to sleep comfortably, but for him. As I look back, I can't understand the mind of the President, because in so many other areas he was a rather remarkable person. He later went on to become a big executive in the Ford Foundation.

MG And there was no attempt to take it further up than that, to the Governor for example?

RW No I don't think, I think the Governor at that time was Emerson. I don't think Emerson felt at all uncomfortable about the final decision.

MG Yea, Bishop Joyce was quite clear that the decision seemed to come directly from Emerson. He attended this trustees meeting. He had never attended a trustees...

RW He had never attended a trustees meeting.

MG Do you think it could happen again?

RW As a Jew, I must tell you anything can happen anywheres. So, sure it can happen. You can have world epidemics too. Look at aids. The only thing we have left to do is to live every day in the belief that what can happen needn't happen if sufficient remain awake when they are supposed to keep their eyes open. That's all and the history of our country since this is the 200 years of our constitution, with all of our sickness and all of our lunacies and all of the mistakes we made as a nation, I've got to tell you that there is more hope for human beings to live a freer and more creative life here than anywhere else. Our institutions guarantee a large degree of renewal of health. Whoever those guys were 200 years ago, they must have injected something that made this kind of durable.

MG I would like to take a second. One of the programs that we are thinking of doing will deal with the impact of the Civil Rights Movement in Vermont and Vermont's impact in the Civil Rights Movement. Various programs that took place. Vermonters going down to Mississippi and working down there. Did you have any involvement with any of that?

RW I didn't go down to Mississippi, but I did go on that great freedom march you know when Martin Luther King gave his famous " I Have A Dream" speech. I was standing about 20 feet from the lectern and I heard him.

MG Do you remember what your feelings were or what your reaction was?

RW I can't tell you even now without becoming emotional. You talk about hope. There was a quarter of a million people who dared for six hours to believe in the impossible. I can't talk about it without...it is like being present at a moment which is history. It's not really for that moment. It can be for that moment. It's a part of the universal intrusion of something special into history. Moses sees a bush burning. That's an intrusion I think into ordinary day by day history. Martin Luther King comes along as an intrusion. It's profit. I can't think of him without thinking of Lincoln and so to that extent yea, to some small extent I was involved in you know the integration process. I tried to work as you have seen in the last couple of issues of the Free Press, there wouldn't have never been to many black people in the State of Vermont and that the few that were to the extent then which we ran across each other, I tried, the congregation tried. We send money to you know to the Martin Luther King Fund. We send money to the various churches that were bombed. Members of the congregation went down.

MG Was it as a group from the congregation when you went to Washington for that march, or was it just as an individual?

RW I think it was, anything that I have done has always been with the understanding that alone I'm nothing. That I'm the Rabbi of the \_\_\_\_\_ Synagogue. An interesting anecdote from that march of three or four buses that went from Vermont. One of the people that went with a whole group of his priests was the Episcopal Bishop of the State of Vermont, Harvey Butterfield at the time. It seems, I'm not sure if I can recall the anecdote exactly but some woman who was not to happy with this said to him "Do you think that you represent all of the Episcopalians of the State of Vermont?" Oh he says, "I'm not representing them, I'm trying to lead them." (Laugh) Then I got a letter when I came back from a minister in Bethel, Vermont, Randolph, telling me that I was going against the Bible, because according to the Bible, Noah had cursed his son, Canan, his son, Ham and his grandson Canan because they had viewed him apparently in disrobe when he was lying asleep drunk. He said it's proof that God said that there is supposed to be a slave. I said not everything that the Bible tells you is a quotation from God. For example, the Bible tells us the reaction of Cain when God says where is your brother? He says am I my brother's keeper. So would you suggest that that's God word or the word of a murderer. The Bible contains all kinds of things. There was much more disturbance you know. Theoretically most Vermonters were in favor. Actually when they encountered a black minister coming into some small town, I forget the name, Irasburg.

The famous Irasburg incident. I don't know. I don't think there is any good or bad area of the country. I think basically people react on the basis of how it affects them personally. If it doesn't affect you personally, you're apt to be much more liberal. If you are affected very personally, then you measure how much it cost. That's the way of the world. What we try to do is make most people understand that when they are interested only in themselves, they're really not being very properly self-interested. That's the way you try to teach.

MG Okay. To go back to Novicoff. Anything that I haven't asked you that you think should be or you have to say?

RW I don't think so.

MG Then really the only thing that remains is for us just to sit quietly for about a minute while I record the sound of the room and the track which is needed for editing purposes. So just meditate for a minute.

MG That should do. Anyone else that you think I should speak to about this.

RW Have you spoken to Mert Landon?

MG Yea, I did.

RW He's about the closest. You might want to talk to Milton Nadwarney. He's just retired. He is the Professor of Economics at the University for many years. He has always been a thinking liberal person and he was here at the time.

MG Edwarney?

RW Nadwarney. Nad-warn-ey, a Jewish boy from Brooklyn or the Bronx. He went to the University of Wisconsin. I think that's where Alex Novicoff met his first wife, at the University of Wisconsin, as a student.