

# Father Walsh (1953) on Nuremberg Thanksgiving (1945)

*John Q. Barrett\**

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In summer 1953, Justice Robert H. Jackson wrote to an old friend, Father Edmund A. Walsh, S.J. He was a Catholic priest, the Vice-President of Georgetown University, and the Regent of its School of Foreign Service. Father Walsh then had been hospitalized for many months, and Justice Jackson was writing, actually while on vacation in California, to inquire about Walsh's health and to wish him well.

Justice Jackson and Father Walsh had been friends for many years. They had become acquainted in the 1930s, in Washington, D.C., and elsewhere.

In 1945, they formed a close bond when Walsh, then a United States Army Captain, served on U.S. Chief of Counsel Jackson's staff prosecuting the principal Nazi war criminals before the International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg. Walsh performed a number of significant tasks before and during the trial, including supervising the gathering of evidence on Nazi religious persecution.

At Nuremberg in November 1945, the second trial day had been, for many of the participants, simply that. It was a Thursday, November 22. But in the U.S., that was Thanksgiving Day. And around the world, that month was the first November of peace following years of world war.

So in Nuremberg at 1715 hours that afternoon, after the trial day had concluded, hundreds of military and civilian Allied personnel—from

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\* Professor of Law, St. John's University School of Law, New York City, and Elizabeth S. Lenna Fellow, Robert H. Jackson Center, Jamestown, New York ([www.roberthjackson.org](http://www.roberthjackson.org)). I emailed an earlier version of this essay to The Jackson List on November 26, 2019.

For an archive of selected Jackson List posts, many of which include document images or photographs, visit <http://thejacksonlist.com>. This essay is posted there as a PDF file with "live" hyperlinks.

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France, the U.K., the U.S., and the U.S.S.R.—remained in Courtroom 600 to observe the American holiday.<sup>1</sup>

Eight years later, this occasion was still vivid to Father Walsh. He wrote to Justice Jackson that

[a]mong other things preserved in my memory one will always stand out very prominently, the day you said to me: “Father Walsh, this is Thanksgiving Day and I intend to convene all the personnel of the American Delegation in the courtroom for an appropriate ceremony. The ceremony will include the reading of the President’s proclamation after which you will please give an interpretation of the document, after which the Protestant chaplain will do the same to be followed by a spokesman of the Jewish faith.” I have a picture of that occasion and I often look at it to study the look of puzzlement on the faces of the Russian Delegation. They would probably understand that the name of God would be mentioned in church, but that the legal fraternity, headed by your distinguished self, should openly thank God for the graces and benefits of the past year was something outside the tenets of the Communist Manifesto and surely alien to any protocol contrived by the Kremlin.<sup>2</sup>

Father Walsh was, in July 1953, remembering the November 1945 ceremony quite accurately. Justice Jackson had, opening it—as his trial opening statement a day earlier had begun the prosecution cases—explained briefly the U.S. history and tradition of Thanksgiving.

Jackson had then called on Captain (Father) Walsh, who offered an opening prayer.

Lieutenant Commander Harold Leventhal (U.S. Coast Guard Reserve), a prosecutor on Jackson’s staff and Jewish, then read from the Book of Psalms.

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<sup>1</sup> For additional detail on this day’s courtroom events, see this 2014 Jackson List post, “Thanksgiving in Nuremberg (1945)”: <http://thejacksonlist.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/20141126-Jackson-List-Thanksgiving-1945.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Letter from Edmund A. Walsh, S.J., to Justice Robert H. Jackson, July 25, 1953, at 1-2 (original), in Robert H. Jackson Papers, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Washington, D.C., Box 21, Folder 6.

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*FATHER WALSH (1953) ON NUREMBERG THANKSGIVING (1945)*

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Lieutenant Henry F. Gerecke (U.S. Army Chaplain Corps), newly appointed as chief Protestant chaplain at the Nuremberg prison to minister to defendants and other there, gave the closing benediction.<sup>3</sup>

At least three photographs capture the Thanksgiving 1945 observance in Nuremberg's Courtroom 600.

Here is Pastor Gerecke speaking. Justice Jackson (in dark suit) and Father Walsh (in military uniform), both seated at far left, are watching and listening to him:



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<sup>3</sup> See generally TIM TOWNSEND, *MISSION AT NUREMBERG: AN AMERICAN ARMY CHAPLAIN AND THE TRIAL OF THE NAZIS* (2014).

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A second photograph, taken from the other side, also shows Pastor Gerecke speaking. Harold Leventhal is seated behind him. Justice Jackson, center, is leaning on the edge of a table. At the far end of the table, seated along the bench inside the courtroom's well, are, from left to right, Judge Norman Birkett (U.K.), Colonel Robert J. Gill (U.S. Army, Corps of Military Police and Jackson's Executive Officer, in uniform); General Iona T. Nikitchenko (U.S.S.R. judge, in uniform), interpreter Oleg Troyanovsky (U.S.S.R.), and Lieutenant Colonel Alexander F. Volchkov (U.S.S.R. alternate judge, in uniform):



I suspect that this second photograph is the one that Father Walsh had in his possession in 1953 and described in his letter to Justice Jackson. Walsh himself is not in the photograph—he was seated to Leventhal's right, off camera in this shot.

This photograph does seem to show the Soviet personnel, and especially General Nikitchenko, staring straight ahead, perhaps in puzzlement.

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But in my view, Father Walsh, who in the years following the Nuremberg trial held very strong Cold War/anti-Soviet views, seems to have been seeing in 1953 too much of his own thinking in his 1945 photograph.

I cannot know that, of course. But I think that my interpretation is supported by a third photograph, an aerial shot of the courtroom. It too shows Pastor Gerecke speaking. Justice Jackson's head again is bowed respectfully—perhaps in keeping with his assignment from President Truman and U.S. representational role, his general irreligious nature notwithstanding. And throughout the courtroom, many other heads are bowed too, including perhaps General Nikitchenko's and perhaps Colonel Volchkov's:



In the United States, Thursday, November 28, 2019, will be Thanksgiving Day. Whether you are in the U.S. or not, I hope that you will gather with others, have things to be thankful for, and do that in the way that is meaningful to you.