

COMMENTS MADE AT AGPA LUNCHEON IN HONOR OF S. R. SLAVSON,  
JANUARY 10, 1953, HENRY HUDSON HOTEL, NEW YORK CITY

Mr. Alt

. . . members of the staff of the Jewish Board of Guardians who have been privileged for some eighteen years, I think, to have Mr. Slavson as one of our most distinguished co-workers and representatives. I'm here in a pinch-hitting role for Mrs. Schulte and I can hardly say to this audience that I feel very adequate to represent, even in some small way, her relationship to Mr. Slavson. I have had the privilege of seeing it, of observing it over a period of ten or more years and it represents, to me at least, one of the finest partnerships in human relations that I have ever observed or even envisaged. It's been a truly fruitful and extraordinary experience and I feel sure that both Mrs. Schulte and Mr. Slavson treasure it and see in it something that has been of great value to the program that we are here to speak of today.

There are many things that I could say about Mr. Slavson, and I warn you, some of them I won't. But I could tell you what it means to work with him, day by day, to absorb all the little incidents that must take place in any kind of dynamic relationship - and nobody can have one with Mr. Slavson that isn't dynamic and isn't creative. But I am not going to do that. I would like to touch on only one or two things, because of the time and also because I would not feel adequate to do more.

Dr. Hadden has referred to the beginnings of group therapy in the Jewish Board of Guardians and has spoken of Mr. Slavson as a volunteer. I think that should be emphasized. I was attracted to the Agency and undertook the responsibility of organizing

recreational facilities for children who could not, with any kind of comfort, participate in the usual group activities that were available to them in the community. The story has been told over and over again and I think it is familiar to all of you who are friends of Dr. Slavson's, who are here in the audience. I think there is one point though that might still be repeated here and that is the way in which Dr. Slavson treasured and rather protected these beginnings. As I look back on that period, and I was not part of the Agency then, I see Mr. Slavson first extracting the full meaning of the thing that was happening among those children - of the socialization that was taking place, of the healing that was taking place. I also see him searching and finding gifted, imaginative, sensitive human beings - naturals like himself - whom he taught to continue the same kind of activity for other children. I can see him with a certain persistence, which I also have had occasion to encounter, saying "Unless I protect it with all that I have, it may be lost." And I can see that for a period of at least eight years, from 1934 to the early forties, Mr. Slavson protected, safeguarded the autonomy of that development until he felt ready to share it; until he felt ready by reason of the adequacy of his formulations and his development of this particular skill and function, to begin communicating it and sharing it, which I think he did in activity group therapy.

I won't dwell on the period from 1942 to the present, the last decade, which has already been referred to and during which we saw tremendous expansion, differentiation and extraordinary degree of dissemination of knowledge about group activity in various forms - not only in this country, but throughout the world. I will not speak



of the effort I have seen Mr. Slavson invest in the last decade in professionalization of that function; the tremendous personal investment in the development of training, in interesting people in training and in building a new profession.

There is one more observation that I would like to share and this perhaps comes very close to what I have just said. This development took place in the Jewish Board of Guardians, which is basically an agency devoted to service to troubled children; an Agency facing financial problems, a great many community pressures for service and many other restrictions. In a measure this became possible, or was possible, because of the vision of people like Mrs. Borg, Mrs. Schulte, Dr. John Slavson and his wife Ada. But after having said that, and after having paid full tribute to those in the Agency who helped to sustain this development, I must go back to Mr. Slavson, because I do know that it would not have been possible, in spite of the positive goodwill, interest and encouragement, without the most extraordinary human sacrifices and the most extraordinary investment of himself, unceasingly, in the development of this extraordinary kind of function and service to all of us.

You know, people have talked about Mr. Slavson and some of his qualities, and as I say, I have seen him from day to day. Sometimes we are members of the same group; sometimes I'm the Chairman - not necessarily the leader in his sense, but I am the chairman of those groups and I won't tell you about all the things I learned, nor all of the feelings that I have sometimes experienced, positive almost always, sometimes a little threatening, but always along, terribly worthwhile and terribly satisfying to myself. I looked over this

morning his first publication on activity group therapy and there on page 119 were all the types of children whom he lists as members of the group and all of you who are pupils and co-workers remember: Social neuters, . . . and then there are instigators. He goes on to say that there are both constructive and destructive instigators. I think if I were to characterize Mr. Slavson in his own terms, he has been, beyond all, a constructive instigator in all groups of which he is a member. (Applause) And he certainly has achieved new levels of integration for all of us. I could go on and on but I think I could not express with any degree of adequacy what we all in the J. B. G. feel about Sam. Mrs. Schulte should have been here and she should have said it, and she would have said it well. But she can't be here, but she did send a little token, which I am going to take the privilege of presenting to Mr. Slavson on behalf of all of us. On one side it says, "With admiration, appreciation and deep affection, Slavie, from Louise Schulte, January 10, 1953." In the note she sent with it she said "I hope this will be presented to Slavie in an appropriate and dramatic way." Well, frankly, I am not given to dramatic presentations and I know how Mrs. Schulte would have presented it and I'll do the second best. Stand up, Slavie! (A kiss on each cheek - much laughter!) (Applause!)



Dr. Charles McCormick

I want to tell you a story about Dr. Slavson. To tell you I must emphasize what Dr. Abbate has said and that is that I have known him a long time. This began back in 1938. Which means that it is about fifteen years, just about this time of the year as a matter of fact and as Dr. Abbate said, I worked under his direct supervision for three years at the Jewish Board of Guardians as a group psychotherapist in addition to the fact that I had studied with him and since that time have been associated with him both as friend and colleague in the American Group Psychotherapy Association. Now with all of that Mr. Slavson came to me just before this luncheon to make sure that I knew at least one good thing to say about him. (Laughter) Now Mr. Slavson, next to myself, is the most truthful person I know so you've got to believe that's true. (Laughter) There is one other story I would like to tell you about Dr. Slavson. A man with whom he was associated, probably ten or fifteen years ago, heard that I had been working with Dr. Slavson for three years, as I say under direct supervision, which means that I had conferences with him once or twice a week, every week, from September until June for three years. This man heard that I had been working with him and he said, "How do you get along with Slavie?" I said, "Wonderfully. I've never enjoyed work or learned more in less time in my life." (of course, at that time my life was only about thirty years long) The man said to me "You must be a genius." (Laughter) Now that is, I think, probably one of the things that Slavie didn't know that I felt about him and he thought that I was more like you - that is, that you'd be surprised at some good things about him, in the sense that it is possible to enjoy him as a friend. I am going to say something

about the opportunity of him as a genius. But I think there is something that most of you as professionals are deprived of by virtue of being professionals in the field of psychiatry and psychotherapy, and that is that you don't first come to know him as a friend. If you did, psychiatry and psychotherapy would benefit much more quickly than it has although it has been benefiting quickly as a result of Mr. Slavson's influence.

My first impression of Dr. Slavson, of Slavie to me, was when I was attending a "Boy's Clubs of America" Conference. He sat at a table like this with just about as many men at the table and each man on the panel had I think five minutes to say something to some subject. I sat someplace back there. Slavie got up in his turn and said just a few words. Among them was, in his modest way, a reference to the book he had just published. Now it wasn't the fact that he was modest enough to refer to the fact that he had a book published that impressed me (laughter) but something about Slavie himself, so that I bothered to go and find that book and read it. I say many times about myself something that I think is particularly true and much more true of Slavie. I say about me, considering how good I am, I'm awfully modest. Considering how good Slavie is, I think he has false modesty. But on this occasion I was impressed by something that I wouldn't try to describe now. I will leave it up to your different interpretations and on the strength of it, when the opportunity to study with him in 1939 was presented, I took it - at a College in a beautiful setting up on Silver Bay - that's Lake George. And there for the first time, I had an experience in education where I learned by experiencing what the teacher was teaching.



As a matter of fact, I think it is the only time I had that experience. In other words, Slavie did what he was talking about. And he didn't talk about it until we had felt it. So we knew what happens. From 1942 to 1945 I worked with Slavie in group psychotherapy. Now I had to have a way of getting to work with him. You see I had studied with him. I had no psychiatric background whatsoever. All I knew was that here was somebody who, if he were foolish enough to permit me to do it, could provide me with something I was looking for and I didn't know what it was. So, when I was coming to do graduate work in New York City, I approached Slavie and I said "Will you take me on in your work with you?" He asked me only one question and that was "Why do you want to do it?" My answer was, "You have knowledge and you can teach me." He said "I'll take you." Now that to me tells the story of S. R. Slavson. He is a man who relentlessly has been pursuing and disseminating knowledge. He doesn't care where he meets it, from whom he gets it or how he distributes it. He is not concerned about prestige or privilege and one more thing. He is not concerned about telling the truth. I think I'm going to have to stop because we have other work to do but this is the point of S. R. Slavson - that he is interested in knowledge too, and he has gained a great deal. His truths of tomorrow may not be his truths of yesterday but you can be certain that he will speak what he knows to be the truth today. You can count on that. He will not withhold it in the hope that tomorrow you will agree with him. Greater status or stature than this, no man has. So on the other side of what Dr. Kilpatrick has said about Slavie, where he said that Slavie represents the best that America likes to believe that it has to provide - that

is somebody coming from nothing and becoming a success - I should like to say this, that Slavie represents the promised of America. It's not something that we have fulfilled. It's some kind of accident and inevitability that he is here today in the position that he occupies. But the promise of America is implicit in this occasion. And that is sometime in the future, you and I and the generations to come after us, as those who make up this America of ours, will be able to capitalize upon the genius that is borne to us. (Applause)

Dr. Abbate presents leather bound copies of International Journal of Group Psychotherapy as gift of International Universities Press, Inc., the publishers. Dr. Abbate also kissed Mr. Slavson. (Applause)

Mr. Slavson Introduced: (Much applause)

I think what you witnessed a few minutes ago was worth my coming here. (laughter) As I was sitting there I wasn't quite certain that these very good friends of mine were talking about me. And I was constantly asking myself, is it really true? Well, of course, not all of it is. I don't think that my friends here are actually prevaricators but I think they are seeing things in a very brilliant light. If I told you, and Herschel could have, my friend Herschel Alt, my faults, I can assure you they outweigh by many, many times the virtues I have, if I have any. Naturally I would not follow Charlie McCormick's description of me if I didn't tell you I'm pleased. But I also know that you my friends have come here, and I see many of them, I see my children, I see a friend who has been my friend since 1904, I see some friends whom I feel have been my friends for twenty-five, thirty and thirty-five years. These perhaps are the most precious things a person can have in his life and



that is his friends - in a way, even more important than his relatives and I do appreciate your coming here, although I know that part of the motive was the meal. I am very gratified and all of us in the Association are gratified by what's happened in group therapy in the last ten years. We speak of the Association as the American Association. Actually, I have asked my associate, who is known as my secretary, he is really a friend and associate, because he bawls me out just as often as I bawl him out, Bert Kauffman - I have asked him to prepare, to list some of the activities we have in other countries. And I have here a list of names in the following countries: Belgium, Brazil, Canada, England, France, Holland, Israel, Sweden, Venezuela, Puerto Rico and Hawaii. What is more impressive is that people have come to us to consult on group therapy and techniques from twenty-nien other countries and I hope you would not be bored if I read you the list. South Africa, Argentina, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Guatemala, China, Denmark, England, France, Germany, Greece, Hawaii, Poland, Holland, India, Indonesia, Israel, Japan, Norway, Mexico, Peru, Chile, Sweden and Switzerland. It is very gratifying because we know that so many people are being helped - not necessarily because any one person in a group of people has achieved anything. Someone used the word success and I shivered, actuallyx did physically. I couldn't stand that word. There is nothing worse in the world for any human being in the world than being successful in the sense in which the word is employed. To achieve is another matter. To be effective is another matter. To help evolve something is another matter - but not to be successful. It's not original with me. I think it was James, the psychologist, who in the last century

or early in this century spoke of the bitch-goddess, success. She is a bitch-goddess. The greatest joy in my life - there are two things that I am most satisfied with. One is that I was born in poverty and went to work at the age of fourteen and worked ever since. It would have been terrible not to have had that opportunity. The second is that I am not successful, the greatest gratification that I have. I should be very depressed and unhappy if I felt that I was successful. I observe people around me who perceive success. I don't want to be successful.

My working in group therapy has been in an exaggerated way, described to you. I don't think that I should be either honored or thanked. It's just ~~thankxxxxxxx~~ the reverse. I should thank the opportunity that I have had to do something which is worthwhile, which is useful in helping people. And what fun it was! I don't think life would have been worth anything to me, if I had continued in business and had made several million dollars which I could easily have done. I was a business man. And just while we were talking I said to her, the most costly thing in the world is money. A person never paid so high a price for anything as for money. I think as therapists and psychologists you know what I mean.

So that I had a lot of fun and I am very grateful to all of you who worked with me and with whom I worked, who helped me and whom I had the privilege and opportunity of helping. I've been irascible at times. I have lost my temper frequently. But when you are busy and you want to get things done and life is short and time is brief, you become a little impatient and those of you who worked with me in the Association on the various committees, particularly Mr. Alt who stood a lot of brow-beating. He had implied it, but I'm telling it to



you (laughter) The . . . I am not apologizing, I am trying to explain, and I hope you will accept my explanation. It was not evil within me. It was just an impetuous desire to go to the next thing - with so much to be done.

Well, I want to thank you all. I am so honored, particularly by my friends here who spoke about me and who said so many generous things but you will allow me to particularly express my gratification at having Dr. Kilpatrick here. He wouldn't mind it because it is public knowledge. Last year I went to his 88th birthday celebration. And he took the trouble in this weather to come and be with us. To me that is the greatest tribute that I have ever had. (Applause) The younger men were good too and I appreciate (by the way younger men it's alright for them to get out in the cold) so I do thank you all very, very much for arranging this affair, for you coming here and for the speakers, speaking in such a very friendly tone.

I'm terribly sorry, I would like to thank Prof. Kagan for his wonderful gift and I would like Dr. Kagan to stand up and take a bow