

Joseph W. Tkach - God's New Rep on Planet Earth (Part 1)

(shortened version)

March 1989

On January 7, 1986, Herbert W. Armstrong, the former advertising man who founded the Worldwide Church of God and Ambassador College, lay grievously ill in his Pasadena, California mansion. Sensing that his end was near, the 93-year-old, named his top aide, evangelist Joseph W. Tkach, as his successor.¹ Nine days later, Armstrong was dead and Tkach became the Pastor General of the Worldwide Church of God (WCG), the Chancellor of Ambassador College, the President of the Ambassador International Cultural Foundation, the Publisher (now Editor in Chief) of the *Plain Truth* magazine, and the Chairman of the Board of the WCG and its subsidiary corporations.

From his executive suite on the top floor of Ambassador College's opulent Hall of Administration building in Pasadena, Tkach (pronounced Ti kotch4) today rules over a religious empire with yearly revenues of well over \$170 million. With the WCG's corporate jet providing him a second office in the sky, Tkach travels almost constantly throughout the U.S. and abroad to speak before church audiences and to meet with influential business and political leaders. He has been photographed meeting with then President Reagan and the First Lady, former President Richard Nixon, industrialist Armand Hammer, former Chief Justice Warren E. Burger, Senator Robert Dole, Jordan's King Hussein, and many other newsmakers. Tkach's monthly magazine, the *Plain Truth*, is published in seven languages and has a circulation last reported at over seven million. The WCG's "World Tomorrow" television program, on which Tkach is not a speaker but of which he has total editorial control, is regularly rated by the Nielson organization as among the top three religious programs in the United States. And while the *Plain Truth* magazine and "World Tomorrow" broadcast cover many religious topics, both also deal extensively with important issues in the areas of national politics, military preparedness, international relations, economics, crime, morality, health, public welfare, and virtually every other area of major public concern.

Tkach's monthly editorials in the *Plain Truth*, while very short, invariably touch on wide-ranging matters of great consequence. And through his oversight of all WCG publishing and broadcasting operations Tkach's views are disseminated not only throughout the United States, but far beyond. For instance, the *Plain Truth* maintains

12 foreign offices, the WCG has over 50 foreign congregations, and Tkach's organization maintains close relations with political leaders in many foreign countries including Israel, Jordan, Japan, Sri Lanka, and Thailand. Where Tkach's influence is most keenly felt, however, is in the lives of the WCG's more than 80,000 devoted members.

The Followers and Their Faith

In order to carry out "the Work of God," the WCG, with its more than 725 local congregations, has molded itself into an organization as well-coordinated as most armies (an observation not lost on Tkach who enjoys referring to the members as his "troops").² And like most armies, membership in the WCG is no casual thing. The WCG claims to be, and is, "a way of life." And that "way of life" is one that is highly structured and carefully monitored by the WCG's ministerial hierarchy.

Like most fundamentalist Christian churches, the WCG teaches the infallibility of the Bible and the divinity of Jesus Christ. But beyond that, many religious scholars see the WCG's belief structure as eclectic, with various doctrines paralleling those of Jews, Seventh-Day Adventists, Identity groups, Quakers, Mormons, and Jehovah's Witnesses.

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Such regimentation is seen by the WCG hierarchy as not simply a requisite for salvation but as necessary for one of the church's supposed functions - warning the peoples of the United States, Great Britain, Canada, and Australia ("modern Israel" to Worldwidiers) that we will soon be conquered by a United States of Europe led by a militant Germany (and with the Pope's blessing). Not surprisingly, in the last fifty years the prophetic timetables of Worldwide's seers have repeatedly had to be altered. The WCG's numerous failed prophecies, however, have not significantly deterred the organization's continuing growth.

Motivating "the Troops"

For most people who must struggle today just to earn a living and support their families, it is mind-boggling that anyone would willingly put himself under the kind of bondage offered by the WCG. But even a few rather bright and well-educated individuals have, over the years, been lured into Worldwide's indoctrination process and have gone on to become WCG true believers.

Getting fascinated by the "World Tomorrow" program is easy. It's well-produced, newsy, not too religious-sounding, and it's often on interesting and timely topics. The telecast offers the FREE *Plain Truth* magazine. You subscribe. And then you order the FREE "Bible Correspondence Course," and the many FREE booklets that are offered in the magazine. Pretty soon you feel guilty for getting all this incredible "knowledge" for FREE, and so you send in a couple of contributions. Now you're a "co-worker." A few more contributions and you're invited to attend WCG services - a real honor because until now you never even heard there was this group secretly meeting in your very own town. (The WCG's Sabbath services are held without public notice in rented halls. The time and place are not advertised. The general public is not invited. And the phone numbers of local WCG pastors are usually unlisted.) By now, your family thinks you're behaving a little strangely. But at WCG services you meet people who actually believe some of the same things you do. You're then encouraged from the pulpit to avoid the ways and ideas of Satan's world (which encompasses just about everything). You spend less and less time reading about, or thinking about, anything that contradicts WCG dogma ("The Truth"). Before long the WCG doesn't just make complete sense to you - it's your whole world.

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And that brings us back to Tkach. As the one cleric sitting at the very apex of the church hierarchy, Tkach - like Herbert W. Armstrong before him - is seen by Worldwidens as God's chief spokesman on earth and one whose authority is so great that he is answerable only to God. Indeed, like Herbert Armstrong before him, Tkach has declared himself "*the* Apostle of Christ." That being the case, the influence (and even control) that Tkach exercises over the lives and minds of his followers is absolutely enormous.

It is no wonder then that since Tkach took over the WCG's reins, has received a steady stream of mail from relatives of Worldwidens asking us for more information about Tkach. A few current members, too, have apparently found official WCG pronouncements about Tkach unsatisfactory and have asked us to look into his background.

Getting the Facts about Tkach

Putting together a biographical sketch and assessment of Tkach's life has not been easy. First of all ... Tkach has provided the public with very little information about himself. The closest thing to a Tkach biography is a short one-half page article ("Passing the Baton" by Jeff Zhorne and Michael Snyder) that appeared in the Jan. 27, 1986 *Worldwide News*, the official church newspaper. That article, which introduced

the new Pastor General to the WCG's members, contained many gaps in Tkach's story and left many questions unanswered.

Second, the WCG's top leaders refused to cooperate on the research for this article. While certified letters were sent to Tkach, his wife, his son Joe Jr., his executive secretary, his attorney, and numerous associates asking for interviews or for specific information, neither Tkach Sr. nor anyone employed by his organization ever responded.

Third, by no means the least of my problems was that a fair number who have known Tkach over the years adamantly refused to discuss what they know about him. Some appeared to take this position out of Christian benevolence (misplaced, I think), some because they wish to place the agony of their WCG experiences completely out of mind, and some out of fear of reprisals.

Fourth, among those who have known Tkach over the years (and who are not reticent), there is a very wide spectrum of views on what he is really like. Former WCG evangelist, college professor, and church administrator, Ronald Dart, for instance, has privately described Tkach as "tough as nails, not very bright, a liar, and - a true believer."³ One Orange County, California AR reader wrote me, "My memories of Mr. Tkach, in particular, are horrifying. He was cruel, hateful, uncaring, and idiotic. I pray for him." Others who've known Tkach have described him as "fanatical," "bullheaded," "oppressive," and "ruthless."

On the other hand, there are a few people who have described Tkach in terms that are quite flattering to him. Richard Plache, Ambassador College Dean of Students during the late '60s and for a time one of Tkach's superiors at the WCG's San Marino, California congregation, told me his recollections of Tkach were that of a decent man who did his job properly and was never involved in any scandals. Dr. Robert Romagnoli, a college professor of physics and a current WCG member who has known Tkach for over twenty-five years, views Tkach as a humble Christian who "sincerely believes he sits in Moses' seat" and is making an honest attempt at reforming the WCG.⁴ Another scientist, Dr. Stig Erlander, a former WCG member and former Ambassador College faculty member, who now resides in Altadena, California, emphatically told me he thought Tkach was "a great guy" who, as far as he knew, was always humble, courteous, and caring.

Clearly, there are among those who have known him opinions that differ greatly as to what Tkach is really like.

Finally, after more than two years of sifting through data for this article, it has become clear that much of what the WCG disseminates about Tkach is not just inaccurate

information - but consciously created disinformation. And just as happened with Herbert Armstrong, there is now a great deal of mythology about Tkach that the WCG membership has come to accept as absolute truth. Separating the fact from the fiction has been fun, but it has also been time-consuming work.

The "Official" Tkach Story

According to the *Worldwide News* article by Zhorne and Snyder, Tkach served in the U.S. Navy during World War II and afterward returned to his native Chicago to work at Hupp Aviation. On March 31, 1951, Tkach married Miss Elaine Apostolos⁵ and in the next few years the young couple had three children: Joe Jr.,⁶ Tanya, and Jennifer.⁷ Tkach was baptized into the WCG (then the Radio Church of God) by WCG evangelist Dean Blackwell on March 1, 1957. On June 7, 1961 Blackwell ordained him a deacon, and on June 3, 1963, WCG evangelist Roderick C. Meredith ordained him a local elder. About this time, Tkach resigned from Hupp and started working full-time in the ministry. For three years Tkach served in a number of the WCG's midwest congregations and in 1966 was transferred to Pasadena, where he took a few classes at Ambassador College and served in the local ministry. Not until 1974 was he raised to the rank of preaching elder. In 1979 he was assisting evangelist Herman Hoeh at the WCG's "Pasadena A.M. church." All of a sudden in 1979 Tkach became personal assistant to church founder Herbert W. Armstrong, was raised in rank to evangelist, and was named director of Ministerial Services (now called Church Administration). In March 1981, Armstrong appointed him to the WCG's Advisory Council of Elders. And just before his death, HWA named Tkach as his successor.

Origins

The above paragraph provides the highlights of the official Joseph Tkach "biography." At least, that is as much of the official story I feel we can trust. Beyond that skeletal outline, however, there is a lot of contradictory information circulating about Tkach and a lot of fiction.

Take, for instance, the simple matter of Tkach's age. For some odd reason the WCG doesn't want to reveal Tkach's exact birth date. Church employees currently refuse to provide that information over the phone. And those who write to WCG headquarters asking for information on Tkach are sent a WCG form letter that claims Tkach was born in 1926.

In reality, Tkach was born March 16, 1927. That is the birthdate on his California driver's license and that is the date on his birth certificate.⁸ Why the Tkach organization gives out the phony 1926 birthdate I have no idea.

Then there is the matter of Tkach's ethnic background. Here again fictions abound. Perhaps because he often begins his sermons with greetings in Hebrew, some are convinced Tkach is Jewish.⁹ Even WCG evangelist Gerald Waterhouse has called Tkach a physical "Levite" - that is, a descendant of the tribe of Levi, a branch of the ancient House of Judah. However, I have found no evidence whatsoever that Tkach or either of his parents were ever, by any reasonable definition of the term, Jewish.

While many seem to know that the surname Tkach is somehow Russian, the rumor that Tkach, himself, was born in Russia is not true. According to Tkach's birth certificate, Tkach was born at his parent's home at 5038 South Rockwell in Chicago, Illinois. The birth certificate also states that Joe's parents both immigrated to the United States from Czechoslovakia.¹⁰

A great deal of insight into Joseph Tkach's background was graciously provided by Joe's last surviving sister, Mrs. Anna Bregin¹¹ of Oak Forest, Illinois. In a lengthy phone interview last August, Mrs. Bregin related how Joe (Senior) was the youngest of five children and the only son of Vassil and Mary Tkach. Mrs. Bregin said that although her parents had emigrated from Czechoslovakia, her parents were, in fact, of Carpathian Russian stock. Students of geography and history will recall that the Carpathian Mountains, part of which separate Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union, "have been a whirlpool of races where Germans, Magyars, Slavs, Gypsies, and various Asiatic tribes have mingled for centuries."¹²

Mrs. Bregin, Joe Tkach's sister, said that their mother, Mary Tkach, had been from the village of Svidnik (in what is now the northeastern corner of Czechoslovakia).¹³ Their mother came to the U.S. at about 17 years of age, their father at about age 21. Mrs. Bregin said their parents met and married in the United States. Their father died in 1963, their mother in 1984.

Russian Boy in Chicago

That the Tkach family would settle in Chicago is not surprising. Besides its large Irish, Italian, German, and Scandinavian ethnic populations, Chicago has, since the turn of the century, attracted large numbers of working class immigrants from eastern Europe. Probably no other area of the United States has such a large concentration of Czech, Slovak, Ukrainian, and Polish Americans. And perhaps no other big city in America has such a large number of ethnic neighborhoods.

The neighborhood where Joe Tkach grew up was one such ethnic neighborhood. With St. Peter and St. Paul Eastern Orthodox Church located there, the neighborhood, I have been told, was composed then mainly of blue-collar working people of Russian origin. Many of the men who lived there undoubtedly worked in factories located in

the nearby Central Manufacturing District and the Kenwood Manufacturing District. Some may have also worked at the nearby Imperial Accordion-Star Concertina Company or at the Italo-American Accordion Company.

In sermons, Tkach and some of his underlings have insinuated that Tkach grew up in a very rough neighborhood. Some have painted Tkach's childhood as having required pugilistic skills for survival. Tkach, himself, has even jested how he wanted to learn the violin as a child but that carrying violin cases in his old neighborhood had gangland connotations.

But the area west of Gage Park, where Tkach grew up, is *not* the rough and tumble "Back of the Yards" area of South Chicago! Nor is it Cicero where the Capone gang was once centered!¹⁴ Father Semkoff, of St. Peter and St. Paul¹⁵ told me that the neighborhood where Tkach grew up had always been, and still is, clean, quiet, and free of gang violence. Former WCG minister Arthur Mokarow, who grew up in the same area and at the same time as Tkach, agrees that the neighborhood, although blue collar, was a relatively good one. Business people and educators familiar with that part of Chicago and its history all told me the same thing. Most said it still is a quiet neighborhood. And when I commented to Tkach's sister, Mrs. Bregin, that I had heard that she and her brother had grown up in a rough part of town, she replied incredulously, "No way! Who could ever have said that?" I didn't have the heart to tell her it was her brother and some of his fellow ministers.



The center house in the above photo is 5038 South Rockwell in Chicago where Joseph Tkach was born and where he lived during childhood. The house was owned by the Tkach family until a few years ago.

What's in a Name?

For many years, most Worldwidiers in Pasadena knew the current Pastor General only as Joe Tkach. But when Herbert W. Armstrong died, some observers noticed that something new was immediately added to Tkach's name - a middle initial. For a few days in January 1986 Tkach's middle initial was a K.¹⁶ Shortly thereafter, however, in public announcements, the WCG replaced the K with a W, and before long the WCG's ministers began saying the W stood for "William."

Not surprisingly, some are the suspicious type. Recalling how Herbert W. Armstrong had not been given a middle name by his parents, but had himself adopted the W for effect,¹⁷ some wrote and asked if Tkach had done the same thing. Knowing that William is not a common name among Russians and that working-class eastern European immigrants in the past often did not give their children middle names, I, too, wondered. So I checked the Tkach birth certificate provided me by the Cook County Department of Vital Statistics. The document gives Tkach's name as simply Joseph Tkach. There is no W or William. However, Tkach's marriage certificate of March 31, 195 , reveals that by that date Tkach's name had acquired a W. Why, I don't know. Nor do I have a clue as to why Tkach appears to have begun publicly using the W only after HWA's passing.

But, some may ask - what's in a name? To many people, not much, perhaps. But in Worldwide some see great mystical significance in such things. Notice what evangelist Gerald Waterhouse, the WCG's leading preacher, had to say about Tkach's name:

So in Mr. Tkach's case, Joseph William Tkach - it all has meaning to his calling! Joseph means "add to," so God provided through Mr. Armstrong the foundation and the guidelines that he adds to. Now, the name William comes from Wilhelm - means "strong will," with a helmet, which typifies authority, and the general needs a helmet to lead the soldiers. He's the pastor general over the soldiers - we're soldiers, you know. Christian soldiers. And then Tkach, in Russian, means "weaver." And he's been assisted by Robin Webber, and in German, Webber means "weaver" too. So he's been weaving with his assistant, and they're weavers.¹⁸

Is there any validity in what Waterhouse says about the meaning of Tkach's name? In the course of researching for this article, I phoned each of the dozen or so Tkach's listed in the Chicago phone directory. None are related to the WCG's Tkach and most didn't seem to feel their family name had any special significance. However, one lady told me that she had done a bit of research on the etymology of her family name. The name Tkach, she said, is fairly common in Russia, the Ukraine, and in

Czechoslovakia. While the name Tkach appears to mean "weaver" in Slavic tongues, she said, it also means "tailor" or "spider."

The WCG has made a big deal out of the "weaver" definition of Tkach. WCG ministers have even gone so far as to routinely refer to *God* as "the Master Weaver."¹⁹ WCG ministers, however, never seem to bring up the "spider" definition. As one long-time WCG observer, paraphrasing poet Mary Howitt, told me, "Welcome to my parlor said the spider to the fly. Herbert [Armstrong] used to call his followers sheep. Are Herbert's sheep now flies?" Obviously, being "the Master Weaver's master weaver" is more desirable than being simply "God's little spider." "Spider" brings to mind Sir Walter Scott's famous analogy of the liar ("O, what a tangled web we weave, when first we practice to deceive") and the "spider's web" metaphor of Isaiah 59:5.

Stretching the Facts

Calling someone a liar, as evangelist Ronald Dart and others have called Tkach, is not nice. "Liar" is a strong word. It's harsh. It's unpleasant. And in a society such as ours where politicians, lawyers, advertising men, and televangelists are often respected and compensated in direct proportion to their ability to bend words, we should perhaps not be too critical of an "Apostle" who likes to stretch the truth. Nevertheless, it is amusing to compare some of Tkach's claims with stark reality. For instance, the Jan. 27, 1986 issue of Tkach's *Worldwide News* (p. 3) stated: "The pastor general established churches in South Bend, Fort Wayne, and Indianapolis, Ind.; Rockford and Peoria, Ill.; Davenport, Iowa; Grand Rapids, Mich.; Milwaukee, Wis.; Cincinnati, Ohio; and St. Louis, Mo." (Whew! Did even St. Paul start that many congregations?) Actually, with his list "the Apostle" is stretching things quite a bit. Ministers who were in the WCG in the early '60s say that while Tkach may have preached in those congregations occasionally or assisted the pastors in charge there, they don't recall that Tkach "established" *any* of those churches (as the word "established" was always used in the ministry). In the '60s, as now, the work of establishing, or starting up, new local churches was almost always delegated to Ambassador-trained ministers of higher than local elder rank. In actuality, the WCG's churches in Cincinnati, Indianapolis, Milwaukee, and Grand Rapids were established by evangelist Dean Blackwell. And the WCG congregation in St. Louis was actually established by Gene Carter, the brother-in-law of former WCG evangelist Raymond Cole.

When HWA died and Tkach took over as Pastor General, Tkach's PR people told the press that their boss had once been a "Chicago-area businessman."²⁰ Yet, not only is there no evidence that Tkach ever owned or managed a business in Chicago, the WCG also has claimed that before *Worldwide*, Tkach had really been a "supervisor" (over "several hundred employees," no less) at a Chicago manufacturing plant. But as will be shown below, even that claim by Tkach is untrue!

Tkach: My Early Life

Here is the way Tkach has had his writers portray his early life:

Before coming into God's Church, Mr. Tkach served in the U.S. Navy, receiving a certificate in basic engineering in 1945.

He then attended the Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago, studying industrial management, industrial safety and human factors in industry.

In 1950 Mr. Tkach was hired by Hupp Aviation, where he worked in the apprentice program. Before resigning in 1963 to serve in the ministry, he advanced to supervisor and obtained journeyman credentials.

He was once fired by Hupp Aviation for keeping the Sabbath, an incident he described to the combined Pasadena churches Jan. 18.

"I was threatened if I didn't come in on that Sabbath for a special meeting that I would be fired," Mr. Tkach recalled. "Upon coming home from Church services there was a telegram waiting for me stating that I was fired."

"Monday morning I received a telephone call from the personnel manager saying, 'Management would like you to come in immediately, as fast as you can get here.'

"I didn't know what to expect," the pastor general continued. "But after arriving at the plant, out in the parking lot there were almost 2,000 people milling around on a wildcat strike because they heard that I was fired.

"You see, we serve a God who fights our battles for us. My job was given back to me."²¹

Out of curiosity, I phoned Hupp Aviation in Chicago. The company's receptionist told me that Hupp is now officially called Aircraft Gears Corporation. "Your company must be very large," I said. "Oh, no," she replied. "We're very small. We've never had more than a few hundred employees at the very most." I told her a little about the article for which I was researching and she transferred my call to an older engineer who had been with the company since at least the early fifties.

"Do you remember an employee by the name of Joe Tkach?" I asked. After a moment's reflection the gentleman told me he did. He not only remembered Joe, but he also clearly remembered Elaine, who had worked in the company's office and who had become Tkach's wife. "Had Tkach been a manager or supervisor at the plant?" I asked. "Oh no," he said. "What was his position then?" I inquired. "He was just one of the guys - just one of the guys who worked in the plant," he answered. The engineer said he was sure his memory was accurate. Tkach had not been a manager or a supervisor, or even a union leader, for that matter. He was "just one of the guys."

"But surely you must recall the incident when two thousand Hupp employees demonstrated at the plant on Tkach's behalf," I said. Not only did the engineer not recall such an incident, but he was sure nothing of the sort had ever taken place. First

of all, he explained, the company had never been so large as to have such a large number of employees demonstrating. And second, he said, even an incident involving a handful of employees would have been very big news at the small plant and he would have known of it. "I'm sure nothing like that ever happened here," he told me, "but if you don't believe me, check with the front office."

I had my call transferred to the company's personnel department. At my request, a helpful employee went to get Tkach's file. Returning to the phone, she said, "Let's see - oh yes, he started working here in February 1947 and he quit September 20, 1963.²² You know, for someone who worked here that long there is very little in his file." I then asked her, "Was he ever a supervisor?" "Oh no," she replied. "It says here he was just an hourly wage employee." The company's records clearly reveal that for the 16= years Tkach was at Hupp he did one thing and one thing only: "assembly work." Do the company's records show that he was fired and rehired after two thousand employees demonstrated? No.

WORLDWIDE CHURCH OF GOD

PASADENA, CALIFORNIA 91102

PERSONAL CORRESPONDENCE DEPARTMENT

Dear Friends:

Thank you for your recent inquiry about Mr. Thach. It is our pleasure to be of service.

Joseph W. Thach, born in 1926, is pastor general of the Worldwide Church of God and publisher of The PLAIN TRUTH magazine.

Mr. Thach, an experienced administrator, succeeded the late Herbert W. Armstrong in January 1988 as leader of the Church and its related organizations.

A member of the Worldwide Church of God since 1957 and an ordained minister since 1963, Mr. Thach was named director of the Ministerial Services Department by Mr. Armstrong in July 1979. He was ordained an evangelist--the second highest ministerial rank in the Church--that same year. Mr. Armstrong named Mr. Thach to serve on his personal advisory board in 1981.

In addition to his duties as temporal head of the Church, Mr. Thach serves as Chancellor of the Ambassador College campuses in Pasadena, California, and Big Sandy, Texas. He is also chairman and president of the Ambassador Foundation.

A native of Chicago, Illinois, Mr. Thach served in the U.S. Navy during World War II. Following his military service, he took part in a government-sponsored educational program for veterans, where he studied industrial management, industrial safety, and human factors in industry. In 1944, he was employed by a midwestern manufacturing corporation, where he began his management experience. Before Mr. Thach resigned to assume a full-time role in the ministry, he supervised several hundred employees.

After helping establish and pastor several midwestern congregations of the Worldwide Church of God, Mr. Thach attended Ambassador College in Pasadena for three years.

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Married since 1951, Mr. Thach and his wife Elaine have one son, two daughters, and several grandchildren.

Thank you for your interest. Whenever we may be of additional service, please feel welcome to let us know.

PERSONAL CORRESPONDENCE DEPARTMENT

WORLDWIDE CHURCH OF GOD
PASADENA, CALIFORNIA 91123

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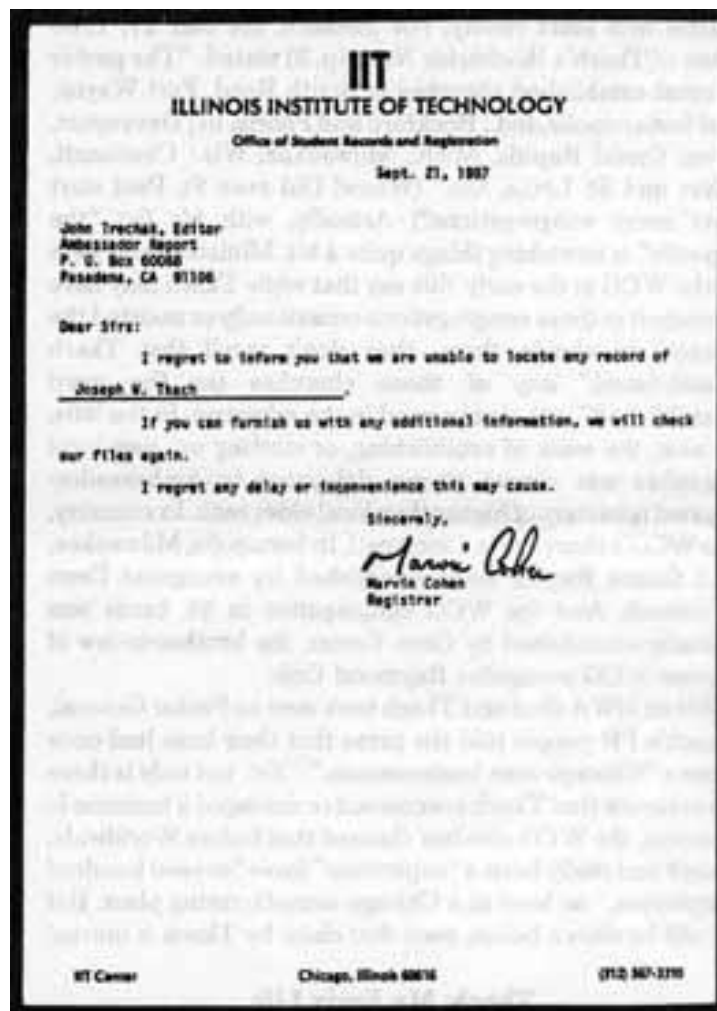
Thank you for your interest. Whenever we may be of additional service, please feel welcome to let us know.

PERSONAL CORRESPONDENCE DEPARTMENT

So Tkach was not born in 1926, was never a Jew, did not establish churches during the sixties, was never a Chicago businessman, was never an aviation industry production supervisor, and never had thousands of fellow factory workers demonstrating on his behalf. What about his claim of having attended the respected (and long accredited) Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT)?

In late 1986 I phoned IIT and asked a clerk in the college's records office if IIT could verify Tkach's claimed attendance at the institute. After a lengthy search through their records they informed me that they had no record of a Joseph Tkach ever having

attended IIT. Being concerned that perhaps they were mistaken, I wrote formally to the registrar of IIT requesting a careful check of their records to verify whether or not Tkach had ever attended. After many months Registrar Marvin Cohen wrote me: "I regret to inform you that we are unable to locate any record of Joseph W. Tkach...." Unwilling to believe that "master weaver" Tkach would not only fabricate lies out of whole cloth but would also publish them nationally, I once more phoned IIT and asked that they *again* carefully check their records. My insistence was no doubt irritating, but once more the polite folks at IIT made a thorough records search. When I called back they were emphatic: "There has never been a Joseph Tkach at this institute!" What's more, they informed me that from a careful review of past school catalogs it was clear that the courses Tkach claims to have taken at IIT - "industrial management, industrial safety and human factors in industry" - had *never ever* been offered at IIT!²³



ILLINOIS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY
Office of student Records and Registration

Sept. 21. 1987

John Trechak, Editor
Ambassador Report P. O. Box 60068
Pasadena. CA 91106

Dear Sirs:

I regret to inform you that we are unable to locate any record of Joseph W. Tkach.

If you can furnish us with any additional Information, we will check our files again.

I regret any delay or inconvenience this my cause.

Sincerely,
Marvin Cohen
Registrar

Tkach's claim of having attended an accredited college (IIT) leaves the impression he at least graduated from high school. But did he really? Having gotten to the point that I did not trust *anything* the man said, I decided to investigate this matter also.

From a number of sources I learned that Tkach had, at least, attended high school in Chicago. And by phoning school officials there I was able to get verification that Tkach began his secondary school education at Gage Park High School (then a modern public boys' school) where he was a student from September 7, 1940 to June 27, 1941. Records at the school show that Tkach then transferred to nearby Tilden High School (another boys' school).

Officials at Tilden High, however, say they have no record of a Joseph Tkach ever attending there. One school employee told me that had Tkach ever completed even one class at Tilden his name would be in their school's records.²⁴ Tkach's loving sister, Anna Bregin, assures me her brother *did* attend Tilden High and she seems to recall he may even have graduated. However, Garner Ted Armstrong, for many years Tkach's superior in Worldwide and therefore someone with probable access to Tkach's education history, claims Tkach is an eleventh grade dropout. Whether Tkach dropped out in the eleventh grade or whether he dropped out before even finishing the tenth grade at Tilden is unclear. But either way, one thing is obvious. Ambassador College Chancellor Joseph Tkach, like Chancellor Herbert Armstrong before him, never made it through high school.

The Tough Guy

Pick up a copy of the *Plain Truth*, and on page one you'll see the official portrait of Joseph W. Tkach. He looks kind. He looks understanding. He looks friendly. He looks personable. That is the way Tkach and his handlers want him to appear to the general public. That is also *one-half* of Tkach's image before his *followers*. However, another facet of the Tkach image, not projected to the general public, but often projected to "the sheep" is that of a tough guy. Notice the following quote taken from the 3/1/86 sermon by evangelist Gerald Waterhouse:

So God had to have a tough man - a fighter. Mr. Tkach used to just love to fight. He'd fight anyone that looked like he wanted to fight. If he didn't look like he wanted to fight, he'd make sure they looked like they wanted to fight. So he'd get a fight. Very unusual man.... Up in the office the other day he said, "I don't even fear demons." One time one came into the office there, I heard, and tried to get him to move out. And he just leaped over the table and grabbed him, and on the way down, I'm sure, that demon was fightin' about that. He just leaped over the desk, grabbed him on the way down, shook him [and said], "You don't say that in my office." Man, that demon went back and he said, "Satan, there's one guy down there - he's tough! He scared me!" I imagine that really shocked him. Most of 'em kind of recoil, you know, and get out of the way. Here's one that came over the desk at him! [Waterhouse then quoted Joshua 1:5.] "There shall not any man be able to stand before you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not fail you nor forsake you." Now, he didn't add this responsibility to a man that didn't have a base for it, 'cause he adds to our talents. See, he had to make sure this man was born of right lineage, grew up in South Chicago among tough individuals, a fighter, fearless, so he could then add to that, like Saul, who was a strong individual. When he was going up to Damascus, he wasn't going in saying, "Oh, I think I'll tiptoe up through the sand over here. I'll go up and see if I can reason with these Christians up in Damascus and see if I can convert some of them to Pharisiasm." No, he was breathing out threatenings! He's already caused people to blaspheme and to - well, put some to death even!

For now, let's put aside the question of whether being from Chicago really shows "right lineage," and let's also, for the time being, overlook this business of Tkach chatting with demons. Let's just ask ourselves: Does having a belligerent, physically combative spirit really indicate the presence of righteous character? Gerald Waterhouse thinks it does. So too, it seems, does Tkach, who, while projecting a "nice guy" image via church publications, often plays a not-so-subtle "tough guy" before his "troops." Now notice the following quote taken from a taped holy day sermon (10/25/86) given by Tkach on the subject of ruling "da masses."

When we are gods we will be given the responsibility to judge da masses. How will we deal with people? What will be the tools of our trade? Will it be the rod of iron? Or soft-headedness?....

Many will have to learn how to work during the White Throne Judgment. You are going to have to be responsible to insure that they learn these habits - that it becomes a part of them. And what Paul is saying - to see the benefit of doing an honest day's work and labor. In II Thessalonians 3:10 the apostle Paul said that if a man doesn't work neither shall he eat. Are we going to be softheaded enough to give in simply because we see the suffering of someone? Instead of insisting and upholding the law of God and enforcing it as God demands it to be done? Christ is going to come to rule with a rod of iron.

Of course, there are times in life when all of us must be tough. And toughness - at least when guided by law and intelligence - is an important executive characteristic.

But many who've observed him over the years say Tkach's crude brand of toughness is nothing more than misguided, insensitive, bullheadedness.

About a year ago, while having lunch with a long-time friend of Tkach, I mentioned how many perceived Tkach as violent and capable even of murder. A few weeks later, Tkach's friend wrote me a letter ending with the following paragraph:

Before he was made head of CAD [Church Administration Dept.], Joe Tkach said there were instances in which those over him would try to "set him up." Several said that he was free to divorce his wife. One even brought this to HWA's attention. On another occasion, one asked Joe if he would commit murder if asked to by HWA. Joe said that no matter how he would have answered, his answer would have been used against him. He said something like, "You ought to know what I will do." I wonder if this was the origin of the report that he would commit murder.

The Big Black Car

Quite a few people that I talked to told stories about Tkach's pseudo-gangland style. But there is one incident, in particular, that stands out in this regard. Jack and Rick (not their real names) were two Ambassador College (AC) graduates of the class of 1970. Like a lot of AC alumni since then, they found their unaccredited Ambassador degrees virtually worthless in obtaining meaningful employment, their insistence on strict Sabbath-keeping also cost them many job opportunities, and so both went through very hard times after AC. For Jack, the years 1970-73 were spent in mere subsistence-level jobs, alternated with periods of unemployment. In mid-1973 Jack was just getting by on the little he earned as a night-time liquor store clerk. Although he had tithed faithfully for years, there were few "blessings" to show for it. His clothes were old, he had no car, and then he lost his apartment. Rick, who had not long before gotten a job as a pressman at the Ambassador College Press, heard of Jack's situation, and, being a generous fellow, told Jack he could sleep on his living room sofa and share what little he had until he got back on his feet.

During the few months that Jack was staying at Rick's place there was much happening in the WCG. Numerous church theologians were circulating papers showing that there were serious errors in many Armstrong teachings. Jack, a zealous Bible student, became convinced that church leaders he had supported loyally for years were wrong on many key doctrines and that wrong teachings and policies were destroying the lives of thousands in the church. In November, he heard church founder Herbert W. Armstrong tell a congregation that he would never change his teaching on divorce and remarriage (actually, he later did when he decided to marry a divorcee) and that anyone who didn't agree with him had no business sitting in WCG services. Jack agreed; it was the last WCG service he ever attended. It was about that time that outspoken WCG pastor Al Carrozzo resigned from the WCG and started his own local congregation in Pasadena. Jack attended a few of Carrozzo's church

meetings and was reported to WCG headquarters by church spies (yes, the WCG has them).

On a Monday evening in early 1974, Jack answered a knock on the door only to find himself nose to nose with Tkach and, standing behind him, an associate named Elmer. "We've come to talk to you, Jack. It'll only take a few minutes," said Tkach. Jack wasn't feeling very sociable. For the last few weeks he had been hearing stories of how Herbert Armstrong had *known* for many years that his marriage-destroying doctrines were in error, but for ego reasons had refused to change them. But besides having all that on his mind, Jack could see in Tkach's bloodshot eyes that Tkach really wasn't interested in his concerns about the church or in his personal problems. Tkach only needed "a few minutes" because he had come to subject Jack to the "knuckle under or be disfellowshipped" ritual. Jack thought, "If anyone needs to be thrown out of the church, it's HWA, GTA, and goons like Tkach." Jack didn't move out of the doorway but looked Tkach in the eye and said, "I'm busy and you didn't make an appointment." A startled Tkach could only stammer, "But Jack, it'll only take a few minutes." "Good night!" said Jack, as he shut the door in Tkach's face.

Rick, who had overheard the brief conversation from the next room, said, "You know, if you leave here tonight, Tkach will be waiting outside for you. He's not used to being talked to that way." When Jack responded that he thought the suggestion was silly, Rick pointed to the guncase in the corner of the room - a case that held a doublebarreled, twelve-gauge shotgun. "Look," said Rick, "don't load the gun, but take it with you. When they stop you, they'll see it, and it'll give them a good scare."

Jack thought Rick was letting his imagination run amuk, "but what the heck," he thought. "Maybe Rick knows something I don't; it might give us a laugh." He waited ten minutes, then hung the guncase containing the shotgun over his right shoulder. He exited the building, turned left, walked twenty yards and, not seeing anyone, went back to Rick's apartment feeling very foolish for listening to Rick. But Rick was adamant. "No! No! I'm sure they're out there!" he yelled. "You should have turned to the right. They're out there waiting for you. I just know it!"

"Okay, okay," said Jack, rolling his eyes. "Just to show you what a nut you are, I'll go back out there." Jack walked out the door, again with the sheathed gun hanging from his right shoulder. This time he turned to the right. Halfway down the darkened street, he heard a car engine start up somewhere behind him. Then over his left shoulder he noticed a black Plymouth Fury showily following him. He walked a little faster. The car sped up. Suddenly, as he approached a driveway, the black sedan surged forward and pulled to the right, partly blocking his path. Before even coming to a complete stop the car's back door was swung open by a push from a shadowy figure in the front passenger seat.

It was Tkach. In an angry and authoritative voice, he commanded, "Get in Jack! Right now!" The thought flashed through Jack's mind that maybe he had made a mistake in not loading the shotgun. Jack glowered at Tkach and told him firmly, "No one's forcing me into any car. No one!" Jack instinctively reached up for the strap on the guncase. But then as the shotgun slid down into better view, Tkach screamed out in a panic to his driver, "It's a gun, Elmer! Get out of here!" Elmer's foot hit the gas peddle like it was made out of solid lead. Burning rubber for half a block, the black Fury sped away into the night.

Back at the apartment Jack and Rick had a good laugh. The next day Tkach never called for an appointment, but he had Elmer phone. And Elmer told Rick that if he didn't *immediately* order Jack out of the apartment, he'd be fired from his job. That evening Jack, penniless, found himself literally on the street.

Not many churches are headed by apostles who enjoy making zealous Bible students homeless, or who will sneak up to Christians on darkened streets to hustle them off in big, black cars. Such overbearing behavior has undoubtedly contributed to some of the sinister rumors surrounding Tkach. But it's important to notice that Tkach does not relish conversations with angry people toting shotguns. Perhaps that shows he isn't really the tough guy he often pretends - or maybe it shows he has a bit of sense after all.

Tkach the Warrior

In WCG circles much is made of Tkach's military career. Evangelist Gerald Waterhouse regularly paints Tkach as a born fighter. And Tkach's leadership skills have been compared to those of General George S. Patton.²⁵ While I don't doubt that Tkach was in the military service,²⁶ I have strong doubts about some of his claimed exploits.

Shortly after Tkach took over Worldwide in 1986, certain church members communicated to me how in sermons some WCG ministers were claiming that Tkach, during the second world war, had been a navy gunner who had gained fame for his relentless downing of kamikazes. I was told one minister had been so vivid in describing how Tkach had single-handedly decimated much of the Japanese air force that some church members had become physically shaken by the bloody accounts of Tkach's ravagings.²⁷

It is not my desire to disparage Tkach's military service, but I have a problem believing his "gunner Joe" claims.²⁸ According to *The Worldwide News*, during World War II Tkach was a crewman on the destroyer USS *Austin*.²⁹ Now here is what the U.S. Navy has to say about the USS *Austin*:

The second *Austin* (DE-15) was launched 25 September 1942 by Mare Island Navy Yard, Vallejo, Calif, as HMS *Blackwood*; sponsored by Mrs. W. C. Sprenger, wife of Lieutenant Commander Sprenger; taken over by the Navy and reclassified DE-15, 25 January 1943; and commissioned 13 February 1943, Lieutenant Commander H.G. Claudius, USNR, in command.

Attached to the Pacific Fleet, *Austin* operated with TF 51 during the recapture of Attu (11 May 1943). She then escorted convoys between San Francisco and Pearl Harbor until 14 September 1943, when she sailed once again for Alaskan waters. For the next year she escorted vessels between Alaskan ports, patrolled, and acted as a weather ship. From April 1945 until the end of the war, *Austin* was on escort and patrol duty in the Carolines (1 April- 10 June) and Marianas (12 June-August). Returning to San Pedro, Calif, she was decommissioned 21 December 1945 and scrapped in 1947.

The above quote is taken from the authoritative *Dictionary of American Naval Fighting Ships*, Volume I (1959), published by the Navy Department, Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, Naval History Division, Washington, D.C. This Navy publication lists *every* warship that has ever flown the U.S. flag. For instance, even the first *Austin* built in 1839 is listed. Furthermore, the publication details every naval engagement in which each ship participated. Notice that the *Austin* was not involved in the battle of Leyte in 1944, nor at Okinawa in 1945 - the two battles in which the Japanese used kamikazes.³⁰ The closest the *Austin* ever got to any action at all was during the landing of troops on Attu in the Aleutian chain on May 11, 1943.³¹

Even if Tkach was on the *Austin* then (he would have been only 16 and the Navy during WWII required all enlisted men to be 18 or over), the Japanese on Attu did not have kamikaze planes.

Going AWOL

Perhaps when the Navy Department finally gets around to digging out Tkach's service record for us it will somehow corroborate some of his claims.³² Be that as it may, however, evangelist Gerald Waterhouse has told congregations around the world how during World War II Tkach, fearing for his life, went AWOL. Here is how Waterhouse told that story in Pasadena (3/1/86):

[Mr. Tkach] was in the U.S. Navy on an aircraft tender, loaded down with aviation fuel.³³ He began to get the premonition the ship was going to be blown up, killing everyone on it. He had a close friend on the ship - a German person (not nationality, but extraction), and he said, "When we get to this island, you and I are going to jump ship." [His friend] said, "I'm not going to jump ship!" Mr. Tkach said, "If you don't jump ship, I'll beat you up!" So he decided better to fall into the hands of the Navy than Joe Tkach! So when they got to this island, they were still a mile off from the beach, and they packed their sea bags very full for flotation, tossed them over the side about midnight, slipped down the anchor chain, pushed the sea bags for a mile to the beach, went into the jungle, watched the ship until it left, and then turned themselves in to the local marine commandant. He said they were put in the brig, and they had fights with Marines every day. I'm sure Mr. Tkach enjoyed that! Telling those Marines, "I'm a swabbie. Come in here, boys, I'll show you!" So he had his recreation, his exercise, with Marines. Now if you think this is not of God's hand.... They could have been court martialed, and even shot, if you understand, when you jump ship in time of war. But God was dealing with him. So another [ship] comes in and these two men, with their identical ratings, [Mr. Tkach and his friend] transferred out without being court-martialed, and the other ship was hit

and blew up killing everyone on it. Now this very day the German calls Mr. Tkach up on that anniversary and thanks him for saving his life, 'cause he still appreciates it. That's respect. He's a fighter....

I'll make no attempt at reconciling the obvious contradiction between Waterhouse's story of Tkach going AWOL and Waterhouse's conclusion that Tkach is some type of super warrior.

Footnotes

1. The January 27, 1986 issue of *The Worldwide News*, which announced the death of HWA on page one, very clearly stated that HWA had named Tkach as successor on January 7, 1986. In the weeks that followed, WCG evangelist Gerald Waterhouse not only corroborated that fact in sermons throughout the United States, but he saw incredible significance in that date. Here are Waterhouse's exact words on the subject taken from his 3/1/86 sermon in Pasadena:

And then the baton was passed exactly 52 years from the day Mr. Armstrong began to preach the gospel. January 7, 1986 is when Mr. Armstrong signed the official document that transferred the authority to Mr. Tkach as deputy pastor general and in case of his death, he would assume the role of pastor general. Now he was gonna sign it on the 6th, Mr. Neff was telling me, but God didn't want him to sign it on the 6th. So he let a little problem come up, and Mr. Neff was involved, and he heard something through the telephone, and Mr. Armstrong's heart began to act up and he couldn't sign it on the 6th because God wanted it signed on the 7th. He doesn't always have to find a reason. He just makes someone - he just finds a reason. He made sure he found one. And he got so stirred up, his heart acted up so much, he couldn't sign it on the 6th, so he signed it on the 7th. Exactly 52 years from the time he began to preach the gospel to the world.

In the April 1986 I pointed out that January 7 is the traditional day of Russian Christmas. Since that issue some in the WCG have begun claiming that Tkach was actually named successor on January 8.

2. See, for instance, *The Worldwide News*, June 22, 1987, p. 1.

3. Ronald Dart in 1978 occupied the position of head of WCG church administration. With only the two Armstrongs over him, Dart was then the WCG's number three man. He is currently Garner Ted Armstrong's top executive assistant in the Church of God International, in Tyler, Texas.

The quote marks are a bit of editorial license as Dart did not say these words directly to me. It should further be pointed out that Dart's reputation among many former (and current) WCG ministers and AC alumni is that of a man of high intelligence and integrity. That being the case, I feel the quote is very significant.

4. Because WCG members, especially if on the WCG payroll, are so habituated to parroting the official WCG line, I usually assign very little weight to their opinions. Dr. Romagnoli, however, is not a church employee, has outstanding academic

credentials, and possesses a high level of independent thought. Therefore, although he is a WCG member (and I suppose because he is a rather interesting personality), I don't feel his comments should be carelessly slighted.

5. "Apostolos" is the Greek word for "apostle."

6. Joseph William Tkach Jr. was born in Chicago on Dec. 23, 1951. He is now Joe Senior's top aide, and many in the WCG acknowledge him as Joe Senior's heir apparent.

7. Tanya is married to WCG minister Douglas Horchak, who pastors the WCG congregation in Glendora, California. Jennifer is married to Paul Butter, a WCG member in Tasmania.

8. Copies of Tkach's birth certificate and marriage certificate may be obtained from the Bureau of Vital Statistics (for Cook County), 118 N. Clark Street, Chicago, Illinois 60602.

9. See, for instance, *The Worldwide News*, June 22, 1987, p. 3, where Tkach is quoted beginning a sermon with greetings in Hebrew.

Among those who claim Tkach is a Jew is Eureka, California minister Don C. Hall. Hall, who has labeled himself "The True Didache of the Worldwide Church of God" and distributes anti-Jewish literature, claims that Tkach is "an Oriental Khazarian Jew" and that "LeLom Tickach" in Hebrew means "always take." I find the "True Didache" unpersuasive.

10. Tkach's birth certificate reveals other family history some WCG members may find interesting. Joe's father, Vassil, was a laborer who at Joe's birth was 35 years old. Joe's mother (maiden name Mary Zavoda) was a housewife, then age 32. Joe was apparently born at home with no physician, but a midwife (Mrs. A. Soltis), attending. While Joe's birth brought the number of living children in the Tkach family to five, two other children had been born alive to the couple, but had died in early childhood.

11. Mrs. Bregin, recently widowed, is retired and has never been a member of the WCG. She, nevertheless, had nothing but kind words about her brother.

12. *Encyclopedia Americana*, 1958 edition, article "Carpathian Mountains." See also the article "Carpathian Ruthenia." Carpathian Ruthenia, formerly the eastern-most province of Czechoslovakia, was ceded to the Soviet Union in 1945.

13. Both of my own parents come from this same region of Czechoslovakia. My mother, Mrs. Helen Trechak, recalls that during her childhood, Carpatho-Russians in Czechoslovakia were very proud of their district ethnicity. In other words, they saw themselves first as Carpatho-Russians, not Czechs or Slovaks. My mother also recalls that the name Zavoda (Mary Tkach's maiden name, meaning "freedom") was a very common name in Svidnik, as were the Christian names of Mary and Vassil (a derivative of Basil, meaning "kingly").

14. For detailed descriptions of Chicago's neighborhoods and their history see *Chicago Magazine's Guide to Chicago* published by Contemporary Books.

15. The Eastern Orthodox Church where Joe Tkach and his parents attended before joining the Radio Church of God. Father Semkoff, now 71, has been at the church for 46 years and has vivid memories of the Tkach family.

16. See the *Pasadena Star-News*, Jan. 15, 1986; and the *Los Angeles Times*, Jan. 17, 1986, p. 34.

17. See our August 1986 *Ambassador Report*, p. 5.

18. From Waterhouse's taped sermon at Pasadena, California, March 1, 1986.

19. Tkach, himself, often uses the "Master Weaver" metaphor. For instance, in his 10/25/86 pre-recorded "Last Great Day" video, Tkach said, "Yes, the tapestry of humanity is now being completed by the Master Weaver." Tkach, too, has been called a "master weaver" in regard to his sermons. See *The Worldwide News*, June 27, 1988, p. 1.

20. *Los Angeles Times*, Jan. 17, 1986, p. 36.

21. *The Worldwide News*, Jan. 27, 1986, p. 3, col. 1-2. While the quote is taken from "The Passing of the Baton" by Jeff Zhorne and Michael Snyder, recall that Tkach is Editor in Chief of all WCG publications.

22. Notice that Hupp's records show that Tkach began working there a full three years earlier than he claims. Why Tkach wants to distort this part of his personal history, I don't know.

23. As will be shown in future parts of this serialized article, Tkach's chief mentor was WCG evangelist "Dr." Herman L. Hoeh.

24. Out of fairness to Tkach, I should mention that from the comments made by Tildon High administrators, I got the impression the school's records for the early forties were somewhat in disarray. It is therefore conceivable Tkach's file was misplaced, lost, or stolen. Tildon administrators say, however, that they made a thorough search.

25. *The Worldwide News*, June 8, 1987, p. 3, col. 4.

26. The Military Personnel Records section of the National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis has confirmed that Tkach did serve in the U.S. Navy. His service number is 728 00 41. Under the Freedom of Information Act a request for information on Tkach's service record has been filed with the Department of the Navy. After more than four months, however, the Department of the Navy has yet to respond.

27. I am told that the minister who repeated Tkach's war stories so vividly was Dennis Van Deventer speaking at Imperial School, Pasadena on or about February 1, 1986.

28. Previous to Tkach, the only other "gunner Joe" I was aware of was Senator Joseph R. McCarthy who, during his campaign for the U.S. Senate in 1946, inflated his meager service record and told Wisconsin voters to put a "tail gunner" in Congress. While McCarthy's contrived military record apparently helped him to enter the U.S. Senate, historians now say his whimpy military activities during the war had only been that of a self-serving "promoter." In the Senate he gained a reputation for manipulation, violent accusation, disregard for law and custom, and pervasive lying. He was censured by the Senate in 1954. See Robert Griffith, *The Politics of Fear: Joseph R. McCarthy and the Senate*, the University Press of Kentucky (1970), pp. 5, 9, 15, 24.

29. *The Worldwide News*, June 22, 1986, p. 3, col. 2.

30. See the Simon and Schuster *Encyclopedia of World War II* (1978), article "Kamikaze."

31. *Ibid.*, article "Attu."

32. See note 26 above.

33. This claim, of course, contradicts Tkach's other claim that he served his WW II hitch on the destroyer USS Austin.