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MY OCCASIONAL PIECES

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 4, 2008

The Final Solution

I have never thought that much about anti-Semitism. It's like the fallout shelter my father built in the early 1960's in the basement of the house where I live now -- when nuclear obliteration was a stark possibility and massive retaliation the illogical strategy for preserving civilization -- the vestige of a shrouded past, the symbol of a shadowy evil that oscillates in my mind between fantasy and reality.

The difference, of course, is that I lived through the Cold War and remember the fearful uncertainties of superpower confrontation, while growing up mostly oblivious to any manifestations of anti-Semitism.

I have no recollection of any ethnic slur, derogatory remark, or prejudicial act ever directed at me because I was Jewish. Most of my juvenile contemporaries would probably have agreed with the conclusion drawn by one of them as he expressed it to me years later: he assumed that the synagogue was just another denominational church, where its own particular brand of religion (or Christianity) was practiced. After all, like him, that's where I could be found every Sunday morning, on the Christian Sabbath, although I was there for religious education, not for worship. Some of my Gentile friends were naturally envious of my Judaism when they discovered that it entitled me to Hanukkah gifts on eight consecutive nights, these in addition to the sackful bestowed upon me every Christmas morning by a beneficent Santa Claus, the belief in whom my ecumenical-minded, indulgent parents were loathe to shatter.

Later in life, when, for a thankfully brief period, I was required to sell on the floor at Schewel Furniture Company, I occasionally encountered a customer eager to "Jew me down," an infelicitous turn-of-phrase he expostulated as casually as "no way," to which I initially took silent umbrage but soon learned to turn a professional tin ear, chalking up his insensitivity to improper breeding and rustic naivete.

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ABOUT ME



MARC SCHEWEL

I try to write literary autobiographical essays that others will find interesting.

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Other than my elder son coming home one day and reporting that a fellow bus rider had called him a "kike" -- echoing the "dirty Jew" accusation hurled at my mother, she says, fifty years prior to that -- a term neither the giver nor the receiver probably knew the meaning of -- anti-Semitism has been refreshingly absent from my universe.

LINKS

Matt's Blog

Certainly -- as my mother could bear witness -- it was prevalent, though by no means rampant, in an earlier generation. Even in Lynchburg, which I have found to be remarkably free of any anti-Jewish sentiment -- excepting an occasional Falwell malapropism -- I have heard whispers from my elders of a time when Jews were excluded from elite neighborhoods and country clubs, barriers which collapsed long before I sought entry into either. My mother maintains to this day that a clandestine quota system denied me acceptance to an Ivy League college, while I attribute my rejections to a dearth of extra-curricular activities.

Even a stint on the State Advisory Board of the Anti-Defamation League -- an international organization which researches, investigates, and responds to acts of anti-Semitism -- could not convince me that these scattered incidents posed any serious threat to the well-being of American Jewry. At the time of my involvement, the two most troubling issues were anti-Semitism on college campuses and Holocaust denial, which often went hand-in-hand. Entering the proverbial lion's den, at the behest of the state director, I examined both topics in an address to a gathering of students and faculty at Virginia Tech.

As anti-Semitism has receded in the rear view window of American attitudes and behavior in my lifetime, awareness of its parallel phenomenon, the Holocaust, has grown proportionately. The destruction of European Jewry has come to be identified as the sole legacy of the Third Reich, the ideological foundation of its territorial ambitions, and the signature event of the war it launched in pursuit of those goals. "Unique and fundamentally different from the many other atrocities committed by the Nazis . . . it has found expression in several forms of remembrance and commemoration," including memorials dedicated to the millions who perished, museums portraying their way of life, and solemn observances, both religious and secular. It has become the subject of serious scholarly study and research in a growing number of colleges and universities and part of the history curriculum in many high schools. (Hamerow, pp. 463-464)

It is impossible to speak about the Holocaust without minimizing it. It pricks one's psyche on isolated occasions in the same way the name of a long-forgotten acquaintance -- whom one briefly knew or encountered in a life span of sixty years -- makes one sit up and take notice when it appears on the obituary page. While one usually remembers that person with poignant fondness, one is overcome momentarily with the same emotions evoked by the Holocaust: sorrow, emptiness, resignation, profound loss. And then one turns the page -- and moves on with the business of the day.

Most Jews, I think, other than survivors or their children, view the Holocaust with no less detachment than Gentiles. Of course we are shocked, saddened, sickened by the words and pictures that expose so nakedly man's cruelty and depravity -- and yet, other than a fleeting guilty acknowledgement that these poor creatures are co-religionists (with whom I, an unobservant Jew, really have little in common) and that we share some ancient ethnic bloodlines, I regard them as no more than the victims of some otherworldly historical tragedy.

One thought only transforms me from a sympathetic bystander into an empathetic participant. Alan Dershowitz wrote it in his memoir of Jewish self-analysis, *Chutzpah*, upon visiting the site of a concentration camp: There, but for the grace of God, go I. If our forebears had not had the courage, foresight, and energy to flee Russian persecution one-hundred-twenty years ago, some strange generational iteration of ourselves or our parents would most certainly have died at the hands of the Nazis. Or even more mind-bending, we might never have been born.

It is difficult enough to contemplate the number of Jews who perished during the course of World War II, 5,978,000, 38 per cent of the worldwide Jewish population of 15,748,000, 60 per cent of the European Jewish population. (Hamerow, p. 453) But also lost were millions of future lives -- a teeming multitude of scholars, teachers, writers, artists, musicians, inventors, entrepreneurs, engineers, scientists, parents, children, friends, lovers, leaders, ad infinitum. And with those lives, born and unborn, disappeared a one-thousand-year-old civilization, which, until 1939, had survived isolation, oppression, dispersion, discrimination, denigration, and marginalization, while gifting to the world its unique language, music, art, literature, food, theater, dance, religion, and philosophy --

all reduced to bones and ashes in the blink of an eye, in five years of unrelenting horror.

This unthinkable course of events assumes an aura of dispassionate inevitability in Theodore Hamerow's 2008 sobering study: *"Why We Watched: Europe, America, and the Holocaust."* Hamerow makes a persuasive case that varying degrees of anti-Semitism in Europe and America effectively foreclosed the prewar rescue of European Jewry and sealed its fate once the war started.

While the emancipation of European Jewry in the middle years of the nineteenth century released tens of thousands from the ghetto and offered them the promise of equal rights and equal opportunities, it signaled the evolution of a religious-based anti-Judaism -- in which Jews had been scorned and denounced for their refusal to accept Christianity -- into a more insidious, secularized anti-Semitism. Now Jews were condemned not only for their adherence to a false doctrine but also for their greed, materialism, and clannishness; their heresy was identified as moral and cultural, not merely theological.

(Hamerow, pp. 16-25)

All of a sudden, Jews were gaining acceptance in traditional social circles, acquiring influence in national and international affairs, and displaying a talent for enhancing their wealth and power -- often at the expense of non-Jews -- and, in the process, arousing uneasiness, resentment, and hostility. The secret designs of World Jewry for complete control over state and society -- whether by means of capitalism or socialism -- became a theme of the new anti-Semitism.

(Hamerow, pp. 23,25)

The German philosopher Eugen Duhring prophetically elucidated "The Jewish Question." He wrote: "The most pernicious qualities in the Jewish character were not the result of religious or historical experiences or cultural tradition; they were hereditary, rooted in the genetic composition of the Jews, reflecting an unchangeable racial character. They could not be overcome or modified by adaptation or acculturation or assimilation." Because "in their inner being Jews would always remain inalterably and incorrigibly alien . . . sooner or later Germans were bound to realize how irreconcilable with their best interest is the infusion of the Jewish race into their national environment." (Hamerow, p. 29)

That sentiment was not limited to Germans. Anti-Semitism was

persistent and pervasive throughout Europe and America in the prewar years.

In the succession states of Hungary, Romania, Czechoslovakia, and Poland, hunger and suffering brought on by the Great Depression and the rise of right-wing authoritarian governments resulted in the Jews being singled out as targets for blame and reprisal. Jews were accused of being too clannish, ambitious, covetous, and radical; of becoming too influential in political and economic life; of seeking to rule the native populations through the power of money and the promotion of Communism; and of trying to dominate the professions of business, law, and medicine. Laws were promulgated restricting membership in these occupations. Outbreaks of anti-Semitic violence were frequent and intense. (Hamerow, pp.47-63)

Even a moderate statesman like Jozef Retinger, personal secretary to the Polish government in exile in London, believed that "there were too many Jews in his country and that most of them were and would always be unassimilable, and that their role in economic life was excessive and detrimental." In the minds of other succession state officials, Jews were an alien and disruptive element in their national communities. According to Retinger, "The only solution to this burning question is emigration." (Hamerow, p. 59)

Each of these countries instituted measures to limit the immigration of Jews and began to explore ways to expel or resettle their indigenous populations. But when their policies of civic exclusion and deprivation proved to have a minimal effect and the international powers, especially Britain, showed little interest in providing areas for resettlement and colonization, the Jewish question loomed larger than ever.

In France, a debate raged between those who, motivated by compassion and benevolence, felt a moral duty to help Jewish victims of cruelty and injustice and those who argued that these immigrants would compete with Frenchmen facing the hardships of the Great Depression.

The well-known playwright, novelist, and essayist, Jean Giraudoux, complained that "the hundreds of thousands of Ashkenazis" who had escaped from "the Polish and Romanian ghettos" were now forcing "our compatriots" out of various artisan occupations and undermining the time-honored customs and traditions of those

occupations. (Hamerow, p. 75) "Many tradesmen and shopkeepers felt threatened by foreigners who were competing, often successfully, with native-born workers . . . In the last years preceding the second World War . . . there were growing protests, demonstrations, marches, and sometimes riots directed against Jews, especially Eastern Europeans." (Hamerow, p. 77)

These were refugees who would not and could not be assimilated. They would always be alien, different in culture, language, spirit, and collective character. Even the assimilated Jew, wrote one patrician Frenchman, despite his "impeccable appearance, his elegant manner, and his refined tone, would remain unalterably foreign, because of his genetic make-up, his essential nature." (Hamerow, pp 64-89)

The spokesmen for this highbrow variety of anti-Semitism targeted Jewish academics, journalists, musicians, writers, and film producers, whom they saw as competitors in fields traditionally dominated by non-Jews. (Hamerow pp. 78-79) They claimed that the French national character was being corrupted by Jewish greed and aggressiveness. (Hamerow, p. 81)

Furthermore, the qualities that made the Jew a threat to the country "were inherent and therefore ineradicable. They could not be overcome by gradual assimilation and acculturation. They were incorrigible because they were biological in nature; they were racial." (Hamerow, p. 82)

At a meeting at the Quai d'Orsay on November 24, 1938, Georges Bonnet, the French minister for foreign affairs, explained his government's position on the matter of Jewish refugees. With 40,000 already in the country, "France could not stand a Jewish immigration on a large scale." The country was "saturated" with foreigners within its borders. The limit to what it could do -- and would do, in the next two years -- had now been reached. (Hamerow, pp. 87-89)

Because of Great Britain's long-standing commitment to the ideals of religious tolerance and ethnic inclusivity, its Jewish population enjoyed a generally unqualified acceptance into the country's economic, political, and social life. There seemed to be little overt hostility toward Jews -- no reports of mass demonstrations or street riots, no vandalized stores, no broken windows, no assaults against shopkeepers or tradesmen.

Yet an undercurrent of anti-Semitism flowed beneath "the placid surface of public conduct." Its blunt spokesperson was the celebrated author, H. G. Wells. He wrote that the Jews' tradition -- Biblical, Talmudic, economic -- held them together. "It is a tradition that stresses acquisitiveness." (Hamerow, p. 98)

"The Jew's rapacity, according to Wells, reflected his profound estrangement from the society that had provided him with asylum and opportunity: 'He is not a good citizen . . . He does not give his allegiance to the institutions, conventions, and collective interests and movements of the community in which he finds himself . . . He is an alien with an alien mentality.' " (Hamerow, p. 98)

"What Wells found objectionable in Jews was not their race or religion or conduct or appearance. It was their Jewishness . . . The ultimate source of his criticism was that they refused to identify with non-Jews; they insisted on following a path different from that of the rest of mankind." (Hamerow, p. 100)

To the French economic, xenophobic, and cultural arguments against Jewish immigration, the British attached three more. First, it would intensify anti-Semitism in the United Kingdom. "It would stir up the elements that batten on anti-Semitic propaganda," wrote the *Daily Express*. Sir Samuel Hoare, secretary of state for the Home Office, noting the difficulty "for many of our fellow countrymen to make a livelihood at all and keep their industries and businesses going," warned that "an unchecked flow of impoverished immigrants into Great Britain" -- who would compete with the native population for jobs and opportunities -- "would inevitably lead to the growth of an anti-Jewish movement which we all wish to see suppressed." (Hamerow, p. 108)

In 1938 Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain told his French counterpart, Edouard Deladier, that the current admission of five hundred Jewish refugees a week into Great Britain was fraught with "the serious danger of arousing anti-Semitic prejudice." (Hamerow, p.112)

Secondly, postulated the *Daily Express*, these asylum-seekers were very likely the authors of their own misfortune, having aroused ethnic hostility by their anti-social mentality and conduct, by becoming too prosperous. (Hamerow, p. 104) A third concern was the fear that an open door policy would only encourage the states of Central and

Eastern Europe -- Poland, Romania, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania -- to pressure more Jews to leave, dumping millions of refugees in England's lap, a frightening possibility. (Hamerow, p. 114)

One possible solution to such a mass exodus was overseas settlement. A substantial influx of Jewish refugees might prove of benefit to the underpopulated (at least by whites), underdeveloped, and entrepreneurially deficient British colonies and dependencies. But most Jewish emigrants were reluctant to leave Europe -- even Germany or Poland -- for Kenya, Guiana, Australia or New Zealand. Nor were the members of the British Commonwealth eager to receive them. (Hamerow, pp. 116-117)

Lord Bledisloe, the governor-general of New Zealand, feared their detrimental impact during a "period of acute economic depression," and their Communist and revolutionary sympathies. The Kenya Settlement Committee stated that "it would be impossible for any considerable number of artisans, clerks, and professional people to be absorbed into the economic life of the country without seriously jeopardizing the interests of existing residents." The Australians violently objected. Palestine was "out of the question," in view of "the failure of the British Mandate to attain some *modus operandi* between Jews and Arabs." (Hamerow, pp 117-118)

During the course of the war Britain accepted many refugees from allied countries occupied by the Third Reich -- Poles, Czechs, Serbs, Greeks -- but was reluctant to admit large numbers of Jews. The reason was that while the former could be expected to return home once victory was achieved, the Jews had no wish to go back to the communities where they had been regarded as aliens, parasites, and subversives. The likelihood that they would stay in Great Britain, in a more tolerant social environment, was alarming to the British authorities. (Hamerow, p. 193)

Across the Atlantic, prejudice against Jews was dying a slow death. On the one hand, "Jews were playing an increasingly important role in American society; on the other, they were still excluded from prestigious social clubs, banned from many hotels, and subject to unwritten quotas at private and public universities." (Hamerow, pp. 135-136)

Those wishing to restrict Jewish immigration added four new rationalizations to an already intimidating list. Skeptical of accounts

of persecution, they raised the red flag of Jewish alarmism. They asked, "Weren't Jews always complaining about discrimination, oppression, bigotry, and injustice? Accusations against the Third Reich had to be carefully studied and evaluated. They might prove to be exaggerated, greatly exaggerated" -- like the reports about the atrocities committed by Kaiser Germany during World War I which had turned out to be mostly propaganda. (Hamerow, p. 140)

Reluctant to challenge or provoke Nazi Germany, they accused American Jews of intriguing to drag their country into a "ruinous military conflict" in which it had no serious stake, subordinating national interests to ethnic solidarity, and willing to risk war to help their co-religionists. (Hamerow, p. 140)

Third, they feared "that any substantial influx of Jews from abroad would strengthen their role in government, business, and the professions, and increase their influence in national life" -- an undesirable outcome and a tangible threat to other Americans. (Hamerow, p. 144)

And finally, in a curious contradiction that had plagued Jews since the turn of the century, they asserted that these foreigners would become either traitorous communists preaching a subversive ideology or successful capitalists accumulating disproportionate riches.

Not all opponents of liberalizing immigration policies were conservatives or nativists. Henry Pratt Fairchild had been described as "socialistic" or "Marxist" in his political leanings, and was a proponent of closer relations between the United States and the Soviet Union. To the common refrain that admitting too many persecuted Jews would ignite "the powerful undercurrent of anti-Semitism that smoldered beneath the surface of openly expressed public opinion," he added this bizarre postscript: by its readiness to accept the victims of European prejudice, the United States might unintentionally increase the extent and intensity of that prejudice, since countries as a result would step up their efforts to force them out. (Hamerow, p. 227-228)

"Some exclusionists were motivated by anti-Semitism pure and simple. To them the inherent character or collective mentality of the Jews made them a threat to any non-Jewish community willing to accept them. The difference between Jew and Gentile was so deep-

rooted, so fundamental, that no amount of tolerance on one side or assimilation on the other would overcome them. They were ineradicable." (Hamerow, p. 232)

In Canada, xenophobia, ethnic prejudice, and anti-Semitism were more widespread and intense than in the United States -- and all were compounded by the Great Depression. Jews were regarded as fundamentally different from non-Jews in character, outlook, and conduct. (Hamerow, p. 160)

"Jewish quotas were the rule in universities, the professions, and many industries. Jews were barred from acquiring property in certain neighborhoods, from vacationing in certain resorts, and from joining certain private clubs. They were excluded from the governing boards of many charitable, financial, and commercial organizations. There were even occasional street fights in large cities like Toronto and Winnipeg between Jews and militant anti-Semites." (Hamerow, p. 159)

In 1939, in a petition submitted to the House of Commons, 127,000 Canadians protested vigorously "against all immigration whatsoever, and especially against Jewish immigration," and insisted that the nation maintain its rigorous policy against the admission of foreigners. (Hamerow, pp. 157-158)

Nor would Latin American countries offer much of a haven, where barriers were imposing, and made more insuperable by a world conflict that disrupted their economies, shrinking both their traditional export markets and their importation of essential goods from abroad. Restrictionists preached a familiar sermon, warning that a sudden flood of immigrants might aggravate class tensions and even produce mass riots, that newcomers, once established in the host country, would become successful businessmen, financiers, professionals, or publicists -- at the expense of the native population -- and lead to the spread of anti-Semitism. (Hamerow, p. 378)

As Hitler's insatiable appetite for lebensraum pushed Europe to the brink of war, Americans began to view Nazi totalitarianism as a threat to their national security. "Yet growing U.S. opposition to Nazi Germany did not translate into growing sympathy for those whom its policies endangered the most." (Hamerow, p. 201) Eighty-three per cent of those surveyed in an April 1939 Fortune magazine poll said they would be opposed to a bill increasing current immigration

quotas. (Hamerow, p. 208)

While a modicum of central European Jews found asylum in Western Europe and North America in the prewar years, the outbreak of World War II and the rapid territorial expansion of the Third Reich turned the slow-burning refugee problem into a raging firestorm.

On January 20, 1942, at the Wannsee Conference, the Third Reich gave official approval to the Final Solution to the Jewish Question. "Since the danger to Aryan society that the Jews represented was essentially racial -- that is, inherent in their collective genetic character -- it could not be overcome by education or assimilation or acculturation. The only answer was extermination." (Hamerow, p.294)

Hamerow contends that the Third Reich's prosecution of total war and the resultant gradual shift in its military fortunes were what transformed its violent anti-Semitic prejudice into institutional genocide. Its single-minded adherents blamed world Jewry -- especially influential Jews in the United States and the Soviet Union -- for ceaselessly plotting against them and for continued foreign resistance to their government's policies and goals. (Hamerow, p. 293)

Despite learning about German atrocities early on, authorities in London and Washington were slow to publicize them. They feared that the Jewish community and like-minded humanitarian organizations would pressure them to do something to stop the slaughter -- like destroy railroad tracks leading to the death camps, or bomb German cities, or warn those responsible that they would be tried as criminals. But, they argued, no country engaged in a struggle for survival could afford to divert scarce resources from military to humanitarian efforts. (Hamerow, p. 305)

Furthermore, wouldn't acceding to those demands spark a complaint from the exiled leaders of other endangered ethnic communities -- Poles, Czechs, Serbs, and Greeks -- that the Jews were receiving preferential treatment? And wouldn't the knowledge that Christian lives were being jeopardized to save a small but influential minority of non-Christians reinforce the notion that this war was being fought at the instigation of the Jews? (Hamerow, p.307) Perversely, they shuddered at the thought that rescue efforts might prove so successful that the Nazis would lift their floodgates and expel a deluge

of refugees. (Hamerow, p. 309)

Sadly, revelations about the Holocaust had little effect on prevailing attitudes about the refugee problem and the "Jewish question." While persecution and potential genocide on a large scale aroused a great deal of sympathy, as would-be immigrants, the victims were still seen as outsiders, competing with the native populations for food and shelter, aggravating the hardships caused by war. (Hamerow, p. 310)

During the early war years, American officials, including the President, were reluctant to display too much sympathy for Holocaust victims. They wished to avoid doing "anything that might divert public attention from the war effort and impair the nation's collective resolve to keep fighting until victory had been achieved." (Hamerow, p. 355) Roosevelt, ever the astute, experienced politician, recognized that paying special attention to persecuted Jews might reinforce long-standing complaints that he was too much under the influence of his Jewish aides and advisers. (Hamerow, 363)

"As it became increasingly clear that the Allies were likely to win, statements of support became more frequent and explicit." (Hamerow, p. 358) Unfortunately, they were too little and came too late.

Military action to save Jewish lives faced such formidable obstacles that it was rarely proposed. The realization that even the most heroic efforts could save only a small fraction of the victims -- one to two per cent -- discouraged all but a few minor initiatives. A general skepticism about reports of mass murder persisted; many people found a planned, systematic genocide hard to believe. Military operations to rescue Jews risked undermining the official position that the war was being waged in defense of all persecuted national and ethnic communities. They might prove detrimental to the total war effort -- by diverting resources, endangering American lives, and fostering domestic dissension. The best way to save the remnants of European Jewry, it was argued, was to defeat Nazi Germany as quickly as possible. (Hamerow, pp. 391-406)

Hamerow doubts that armed force would have been effective. He writes: "The available evidence strongly suggests that the obsessive anti-Semitism of the Third Reich . . . was too strong to be overcome by aerial bombardments or paratrooper raids. Even after the concentration camps were liberated by the Soviet Union, the Nazi

genocide continued in the form of starvation, disease, exhausting labor, death marches, brutal beatings, and mass executions.

Paradoxically, those who maintained that only victory on the battlefield could save the Jews were in essence right. The tragedy was that by the time victory came, so few were left to be saved." (Hamerow, p. 418)

Anti-Semitism did not disappear with the unprecedented massacre of 62 per cent of prewar European Jewry. Gentiles were as hostile as ever to returning Jews, fearful they would demand the restoration of their homes and businesses, their savings accounts and investments, the positions they had held in journalism, education, and the arts. To the East, where the Soviet Union was imposing satellite regimes, Jews were suspected of being Communist agents and of supporting and engineering the shift to the far left. (Hamerow p. 425)

Nor did the decimation of the Jewish community in Europe end with Germany's defeat. It continued for at least another decade, as 500,000 survivors -- one-quarter of the remaining population -- reluctant to return to the sites of past hardships and suffering, fled West and South. Between 1938 and 1955, a flood of immigrants swelled the population of Israel from 400,000 to 1,600,000. During the same period, about 600,000 Jewish refugees entered the United States (80 per cent after the war), increasing its Jewish population from 4.7 million to 5.2 million. Despite this growth, the Jewish percentage of the overall American population fell from a high of 3.6 in 1927 to 3.1 in 1955 and to 2.5 in 1986. (Hamerow, p. 449)

Accompanying this decline in proportionality was a diminishing of the notion that the national character of the United States would be stained or corrupted by an unending flow of Jews from Eastern Europe. Jews found it easier to assimilate, to achieve "Americanization." The social and cultural barriers that had confronted them before the war began to shrink and disappear.

"There were no longer serious restrictions on the admission of Jews to higher education, either as students or teachers. They became eligible for membership in almost all social clubs and organizations, even the most exclusive ones . . . In growing numbers they were becoming congressmen, senators, and cabinet members." (Hamerow, pp. 449-450) Overt -- and even latent -- anti-Semitism seemed an anachronism.

This development was confirmed by any number of polls. Whereas in 1940, 21% of respondents thought Jews had too much control of "business, property, and finance," by 1959 that number had dropped to 6%. Those who thought Jews had too much power in the U. S. dropped from 56% in 1945 to 17% in 1962. Before the war, 63% of respondents thought Jews had "objectionable qualities"; two decades later the per cent was 22. In 1940, 43% of respondents indicated they would prefer not to have a Jewish employee or coworker; in 1962 only 6% objected to sharing the workplace with Jews. (Hamerow, pp. 456-459)

This is the environment I grew up in.

This process would not mature until 1960, the same time that the Nazi Genocide emerged from the shadows of memory, planted solid roots in the public consciousness, and was transformed into the Holocaust. This was not a coincidence, says Hamerow. It took that long for the Gentile world to realize that the Jewish question -- a source of concern and controversy in Western society for one thousand years -- had finally been answered and that it was now safe, proper, and even necessary to mourn and memorialize the dead.

The problem of "what to do about an ethnic minority which had remained stubbornly different, unwilling to accept the faith and tradition of the national community it was part of, and yet able to play an important role in the economy, culture, and politics of that community . . . had ceased to be an issue. It had at last been resolved -- or rather eliminated." (Hamerow, p. 469)

What the old monarchial order had tried -- and failed -- to attain by isolation, segregation, and discrimination, and the democratic system by toleration, emancipation, and assimilation, Nazi totalitarianism had accomplished by mass murder. (Hamerow, p. 469)

Large numbers of European Jews had been killed, and for those who remained or who found themselves anywhere in harm's way, the state of Israel beckoned. The pitiful remnant of world Jewry no longer represented a threat. "The rabid horde of hungry, impoverished, desperate victims of persecution . . . pounding on the gates of the prosperous democratic countries on both sides of the Atlantic" had either expired in the fires of the crematories, sought refuge in the newly-established national homeland, or been gracefully assimilated into the majority culture. (Hamerow, p. 473)

In its singular, horrific denouement, the Final Solution had forever silenced the Jewish Question and indeed all those carefully calibrated rationalizations as to why more had not been done to prevent its execution.

REFERENCES

Hamerow, Theodore S. *Why We Watched: Europe, America, and the Holocaust*. New York: W. W. and Norton & Company, 2008.

POSTED BY MARC SCHEWEL AT 1:21 PM

3 COMMENTS:

James W. Wright said...

A powerful piece, Marc. Like you, I grew up thinking of the Synagogue as another church, and my Jewish friends as fortunate to have holidays that I did not. It wasn't until I was much older that I realized that I had been raised in a relatively tolerant family and community. Not entirely so, though; much work remains to be done to overcome the really stupid biases such as race and sexual orientation that continue to divide.

NOVEMBER 7, 2008 8:54 AM

AndreaP said...

Marc, I'm a freelance reporter whose work has appeared in USA Today and the Washington Post. I'd like to talk with you about a story I'm researching now. Your blog doesn't have a way to contact you other than the comments section. If you get a chance, please email me at andrea.pitzer@gmail.com, and I'll give you the details. Thanks much, Andrea

NOVEMBER 21, 2008 8:34 AM

scheweldog said...

very nice...i guess lynchburg proves to be a good place to assimilate for jews. but important to keep in mind that you've lived there all your life and it's hard to equate that experience to the general jewish experience in america.

Nov 2010 P

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MY OCCASIONAL PIECES

MONDAY, JULY 12, 2010

A Shameful Legacy

On an August morning in 1944, an Army troopship returning from the European theater docked in New York City, its hold filled with an unusual cargo. Nine hundred eighty-two foreigners disembarked, boarded a special overnight train, and were whisked to a vacant Army camp in Oswego, New York -- Fort Ontario -- where they would be sheltered until the end of the war.

"Most of the 982 . . . had endured years of persecution, flight, and camp life; nearly a hundred had survived Dachau or Buchenwald. They came from seventeen different nations . . . Their ages ranged from three weeks to eighty years, but people in their twenties were scarce, as were men of military age. The group was 89 per cent Jewish. Most of the rest were Catholic." (Wyman, p. 268)

On March 24, 1944, responding to appeals from the War Refugee Board (WRB), which he had instituted by executive order two months earlier, President Roosevelt issued a war crimes declaration, in which he condemned the "wholesale systematic murder" of the Jews as one of "the blackest crimes in history," and pledged to find "havens of refuge" for "all victims of oppression." (Wyman, p. 256)

But when the WRB proposed to the President that the United States offer "temporary asylum to all who could escape Hitler," Secretary of War Henry Stimson -- who opposed any compromise of the current immigration laws -- and Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau -- who feared antagonizing Congress and incurring political damage -- would accept only a weakened declaration, which omitted the word "all."

On June 1st, in spite of burgeoning support in the press and among refugee organizations for "free ports," the President finally blessed the establishment of one -- Fort Ontario.

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ABOUT ME



MARC SCHEWEL

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"While the immigration quotas allotted to the occupied countries of Europe were 91 per cent unfilled (a number equivalent to 55,000 in 1944), America had, belatedly, opened its doors to 1000 fugitives from extermination." Journalist I. F. Stone described this pusillanimous gesture as "a kind of token payment to decency, a bargain-counter flourish in humanitarianism." (Wyman, p. 266.)

It also undermined the WRB's original objective -- an American offer of "temporary refuge for all oppressed peoples," which, if carried to fruition, might have encouraged other nations to follow suit. But as Charles Joy of the Unitarian Service Committee pointed out, the smallness of the offer destroyed its value. "If the United States with all its resources can take only one thousand of these people, what can we expect other countries to do?" (Wyman, p. 267)

While many greeted the President's decision with gratitude -- and disappointment that it had been so limited -- others were severely critical. They doubted the refugees would ever go back to Europe, because, in the words of one Colorado man, "What country would want a Jew back?" (They were right; in 1945, a directive by President Truman allowed the Fort Ontario internees to immigrate legally.) They "saw the thousand as the entering wedge for hundreds of thousands more . . . a precedent for breaking down the immigration laws." (Wyman, pp. 267-268)

Such reactions reflected a restrictionist sentiment and latent anti-Semitism embedded in prewar and wartime society -- attitudes which essentially sanctioned a shameful legacy: President Roosevelt's, the Administration's, and Congress's pattern of response to the Holocaust -- which consisted of skepticism, obfuscation, procrastination, rationalization, and paralysis.

These same attitudes legitimized a policy which allowed only 21,000 refugees -- ten per cent of the legal immigration quota -- to enter the United States during the three-and-a-half years it was at war with Germany. (Wyman, p. x) And this was a quota which itself had been sharply curtailed since the 1920's.

From 1880 to 1920, forty million "unfortunates of other countries," including 2.5 million Jews, had sought, in the words of George Washington, "a safe and propitious asylum" in the United States. (Morse, p. 131) But by 1929 -- impelled by a heightened distrust of foreigners, fear of a deluge of cheap workers, the hostility of nativist

Americans towards hordes of poor, illiterate Eastern Europeans, and a distaste for the squalid city slums where they settled -- Congress had reduced the annual immigration quota 80 per cent, to 154,000.

Furthermore, immigration by country had been allocated according to the ethnic background of the U. S. population in 1920. Thus, Great Britain and Ireland -- countries which provided relatively few applicants -- received 84,000 slots, while large numbers of potential immigrants from Germany (26,000), Poland (6000), Italy (5500), France (3000), and Rumania (300) were penalized. (Morse, p. 135)

Two other provisions of the immigration laws posed major obstacles for Jews fleeing the Nazis.

In September 1930, during the depths of the Depression, President Hoover -- invoking an 1882 stipulation which had excluded "any convict, lunatic, idiot, or any other person unable to take care of himself or herself without becoming a public charge" -- announced that consular officers "will before issuing a visa have to pass judgment on whether the applicant may become a public charge (at any time, even long after his arrival), and if the applicant cannot convince the officer that it is not probable, the visa will be refused." Immigration plummeted from 242,000 in 1930 to 36,000 in 1932. (Morse, pp. 132-135)

When Jews were forbidden to take no more than \$4000 with them from Germany, many had great difficulty proving they were not excludable under the public charge clause. (Morse, p. 145)

Section 7(c) of the Immigration Act of 1924 required the applicant to furnish a police certificate of good character for the previous five years, a record of military service, two copies of a birth certificate, and two copies of all other available public records. The incredulous notion of a Jew requesting his oppressors to furnish evidence of good behavior is testament to a stultifying bureaucracy divorced from reality.

"Restrictionists persistently asserted that refugees who came into the United States usurped jobs from unemployed workers." (Wyman, p.6) Veterans' organizations -- like the American Legion, which called for a virtual ban on immigration -- were intent on protecting employment for returning servicemen. Congressmen regularly introduced bills to suspend immigration until the end of the war or

terminate it when the war was over.

The State Department used its regulatory power to tighten the immigration process even further. Beginning in June 1941, any applicant with a parent, child, spouse, or sibling remaining in Germany, Italy, or Russia had to pass a strict security screening to obtain a visa. The next month it instituted a systematic security review of all applications by special interdepartmental committees. The visa application itself was four feet long and had to be filled out on both sides by a refugee's sponsor, sworn under penalty of perjury, and submitted in six copies. It took nine months for an application to move through the contorted bureaucratic machinery. (Wyman, pp. 125-128)

The chief enforcer of the immigration laws was Assistant Secretary of State Breckenridge Long; his anti-refugee sentiments were no secret. Years earlier he had praised "the efficiency, cleanliness, and morale" (Morse, p. 40) of Mussolini's Fascist state and the insight of Hitler's *Mein Kampf* regarding the connection between Communism and international Jewry. (Hamerow, p. 278) Yet he vigorously denied he was an anti-Semite or in any way prejudiced against the Jews.

Whether prejudiced or not, Long believed that aliens admitted to the country might prove to be a threat to national security, and that by barring the gates he was warding off an invasion by radicals and foreign agents. With him supervising the Visa Division, there would be no reform in the cumbersome process by which a Jew who had escaped the Nazis hoped to find a home in the United States.

National surveys lent support to the State Department's xenophobia. "In 1938, a year when the Nazis had intensified their persecution of the Jews, four separate polls had indicated that from 71 to 85 per cent of the American public opposed increasing quotas to help refugees . . . Asked in January 1943 whether 'it would be a good idea or a bad idea to let more immigrants come into the country after the war,' 78 per cent thought it would be a bad idea." (Wyman, p. 8)

Both a cause and corollary of restrictionism was anti-Semitism, which reached a peak in this country in 1944. (Wyman, p. 9)

Stoked by such agitators as fundamentalist preacher Gerald L. K. Smith -- who spread anti-Semitic propaganda from his pulpit and the pages of his magazine, "The Cross and the Flag" -- and Radio Priest

Charles Coughlin -- who excoriated Jews as both Communists and capitalists, moneylenders and crooks (Rosen, p. 88) -- wartime violence proliferated. Jewish cemeteries were vandalized; synagogues were damaged and defaced with swastikas; anti-Jewish graffiti was scrawled on sidewalks and stores; schoolchildren were attacked and beaten; and anti-Semitic literature was widely distributed. (Wyman, p. 10)

Brazen anti-Semites in Congress joined the assault. "Representative Louis McFadden of Pennsylvania denounced the 'Jew-controlled New Deal.' Senator Robert Reynolds of North Carolina contended that Jews would not have been forced out of Europe if they 'had not impoverished those lands or . . . had not conspired against their governments.'" (Rosen, p. 88) When Congressman John Rankin of Mississippi launched an anti-Semitic tirade against "warmongering international Jewry," Michael Edelstein of New York became so apoplectic while delivering his rebuttal that he collapsed and died of a heart attack in the Capitol lobby. (Rosen, p. 168)

Less blatant was a pernicious anti-Semitism that excluded Jews from social clubs, turned them away from hotels, and limited the number of Jewish students at private and public universities. A series of polls from 1938 to 1946 indicated that over one-half of Americans perceived Jews as greedy and dishonest, and that one-third considered them overly aggressive. Another survey showed that over fifty per cent of the public believed that "Jews had too much power in the United States." (Wyman, pp. 14-15) Three polls -- in August 1940, February 1941, and October 1941 -- placed Jews at the top of a list which included Negroes, Catholics, Germans, and Japanese in response to the question "What nationality, religious, or social groups in this country are a menace to society?" (Hamerow, p. 202)

Thus, it is not surprising that efforts to relieve and rescue the endangered Jewish populations of Europe garnered little momentum in government circles; in spite of a profusion of compassionate rhetoric, most expired in infancy.

Disturbed by Hitler's annexation of Austria in March 1938 -- which subjected its Jewish inhabitants to a savage outbreak of arrest, plunder, deprivation, and deportation -- President Roosevelt invited thirty-three countries collectively to address the issue of political refugees. The conferees, called to order three months later in Evian, France, answered Chairman Myron Taylor's plea to "act and act

promptly" by slamming their doors, one after another, against the victims of Nazi aggression.

Australia had no desire to import a racial problem. Britain could find no territory in its expansive empire suitable to large-scale settlement. (To appease the restive Arabs, it had capped total immigration to Palestine at 75,000 in its 1939 White Paper.) Canada, Columbia, Uruguay, and Venezuela wanted agricultural immigrants only. France, home to three million aliens, stressed that it had reached a saturation point. (Morse, p. 212)

The United States, "with its tradition of asylum, its vast land mass, and its unlimited resources," did make a concession. "It agreed, for the first time, to accept its full legal quota of 27,370 immigrants annually from Germany and Austria." (Morse, p. 213)

After the horrors of Kristallnacht, November 10, 1938 -- which witnessed the burning of 200 synagogues, the destruction or looting of 8000 shops, and the arrest of 20,000 Jews -- a delegation of Roman Catholic and Protestant clergymen presented a petition to the White House, calling upon the United States to open its borders to 20,000 German children. The subsequent bill, introduced in Congress by Senator Robert Wagner of New York and Representative Edith Nourse Rogers of Massachusetts, was the first serious attempt in fourteen years to liberalize the immigration laws -- since the refugees admitted would exceed the established quota.

While the Wagner-Rogers Bill had support from clergy, labor leaders, prominent New Dealers in the Administration, and Eleanor Roosevelt, opposition was strong, fueled by nativism, prejudice, and the perception that it was a Jewish bill.

Francis Kinnicutt, representing thirty organizations, testified that "this is just part of a drive to break down the whole quota system," and that "it is not a refugee bill at all because most of those admitted would be of the Jewish race." John Trevor, speaking for 115 patriotic societies of the American Coalition, cited the outcome of a Fortune magazine poll, in which 83 per cent of the respondents had said "no" to the question: Would you vote "yes" or "no" on a bill to open the United States to a large number of European refugees. (Morse, pp. 259-261) Laura Delano, a cousin of the President and wife of the immigration commissioner, said that "twenty thousand charming children would all too soon grow into twenty thousand ugly

adults." (Rosen, p. 85)

When the bill was amended so that the 20,000 visas would be counted against, rather than over and above, the German quota, a frustrated Senator Wagner withdrew it.

Nor would the immigration laws be bent to accommodate the 936 Jews condemned to an uncertain fate when their ship, the *St. Louis* docked in Havana harbor on May 27, 1939. Although they possessed landing certificates sold by the Cuban Director of Immigration, Manuel Benitez, the Cuban President, Laredo Bru -- determined to end the corruption or garner his share of the bribes -- refused to allow all but twenty-eight to disembark. On June 2nd, he ordered the *St. Louis* out of the harbor, neglecting, of course, to refund the \$150 each passenger had paid for his bogus certificate.

Flush with \$500,000 in pledges and cash from American Jews, Lawrence Berenson, former president of the Cuban Chamber of Commerce in the United States, was dispatched to Cuba to negotiate with President Bru. When Bru upped his price to \$650,000, and then to \$1,000,000 -- to cover bribes and food and lodging for the refugees -- Berenson balked, claiming he needed more time to raise the money. By the time Jewish sponsors deposited \$500,000 in a Havana bank, the deal had collapsed.

Cast adrift in the Caribbean, for four days the *St. Louis* awaited its destination -- hovering within sight of the lights of Miami and shadowed by a Coast Guard cutter charged with preventing any desperate passenger from jumping overboard and swimming ashore. While the American press lamented that "the cruise of the *St. Louis* cries to high heaven of man's inhumanity to man," none suggested that the United States "come to the aid of these men, women, and children floating across the Atlantic toward certain doom." (Morse, p. 283) One editorial writer warned that one exception to the law would set a dangerous precedent and surely "be followed by other shiploads." (Rosen, p. 99)

On June 6, the *St. Louis* set her course for a return to Europe -- and toward a more favorable denouement than might have been expected. In Paris and London, Jewish representatives worked around the clock to find safe havens for the abandoned 908. England agreed to take in 288, who were spared Hitler's wrath. The remaining 620 were scattered throughout France, Belgium, and Holland, of whom it is

estimated 392 survived the Holocaust. (Rosen, p. 103)

The *St. Louis*, of course, was just the tip of the iceberg. The number of potential refugees grew exponentially during the war years -- but there was simply no place for them to go.

In March 1943, Jewish leaders requested the assistance of British Foreign Minister Anthony Eden (then in the U. S.) and Under Secretary of State Sumner Welles in removing from Bulgaria 70,000 Jews who were threatened with extermination. Eden rejected the plan outright, stating that, "the whole problem of the Jews in Europe is very difficult, and we should move very cautiously about offering to take all the Jews out of a country like Bulgaria. If we do that, then the Jews of the world will be wanting us to make similar offers in Poland and Germany." (Wyman, p. 98)

"The whole problem" was where to put the Jews if they were rescued. For the British, their release would put tremendous pressure on their White Paper policy of limited immigration into Palestine. Other countries had resoundingly shut their doors between 1933 and 1941, when Jews could have left Europe.

Echoing British anxieties, Cavendish W. Cannon in the State Department gave this reason for not supporting the relocation of 300,000 Romanian Jews to Syria and Palestine: ". . . such a plan was likely to bring new pressure for an asylum in the western hemisphere . . . and open the question of similar treatment for Jews in Hungary and, by extension, all countries where there has been intense persecution." (Wyman, p. 99)

Such was the tone of the joint British-American Bermuda Conference held in April 1943; it had been initiated by Great Britain, where publicity about the Holocaust was more widespread and cries for action more forceful than in the United States. (Wyman, p. 104)

"Breckenridge Long saw to it that the business of the Conference would be circumscribed. He sent his friend and ardent opponent of immigration, Robert Borden Reams, to act as secretary to the U. S. delegation. Jewish organizations were not allowed to send advocates." (Rosen, p. 270) Long's memorandum to the delegates instructed them not to overemphasize the Jewish nature of the refugee problem, not to pledge any funds, not to propose changes in the U. S. or British immigration laws, and not to make any

commitment regarding trans-Atlantic shipping space for refugees.
(Wyman, p. 113)

A suggestion that the Allies approach Germany and the Axis satellites for the release of Jews was rejected as "impossible and outside the scope of the Conference." Sending food to the starving victims of the Nazis received no support. On British insistence, their Palestine policy was not discussed. (Wyman, pp. 114-115)

After two weeks of deliberations, the delegations delivered an innocuous joint report to their governments. It recommended the use of neutral shipping to transport refugees, the consideration of Cyrenaica and Madagascar as havens, and the reactivation of the Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees -- an organization which, since its inception before the war, had proved to be as useless as a Cuban landing certificate.

The Conference's sole accomplishment was the authorized transfer of 21,000 refugees (of whom 5000 were Jewish) from Spain to North Africa.

But respite for the Jews had not been, after all, the objective of the diplomacy at Bermuda. Rather it had been to alleviate the growing pressure for a rescue effort. (Wyman, p. 122) Richard Law, head of the British delegation, confirmed this years later when he said, "It was a conflict of self-justification, a facade for inaction. We said the results of the Conference were confidential, but in fact there were no results that I can recall." (Morse, p. 63)

There was, however, one indirect result. On May 12, 1943, three days after the adjournment of the Bermuda Conference, Samuel Zygielbojm -- a member of the Polish National Council, who had pleaded tirelessly to the Allied governments to come to the aid of the men and women he had left behind when he had escaped from the Warsaw ghetto -- committed suicide.

In his farewell note, he wrote: "I cannot live while the remnants of the Jewish people of Poland, of whom I am a representative of, are perishing . . . By my death I wish to make my final protest against the passivity with which the world is looking on and permitting the extermination of the Jewish people." (Morse, pp. 63-64)

Several months later, the State Department employed its well-honed

delaying tactics to sabotage another potential rescue effort -- the exposure of which led to a stunning reprimand from the Administration and a diminishment of its authority.

On February 12, 1943, New York Times correspondent, C. L. Sulzberger, reported from London that the Romanian government was willing to release 70,000 Jews who had survived deportation to Transnistria (60,000 had perished) "to any refuge selected by the Allies," preferably Palestine -- for a price of \$600,000. (Morse, p. 72) Responding to inquiries about the offer, the State Department summarily dismissed it, asserting that, "This story is without foundation." (Wyman p. 83)

In April, Gerhard Riegner of the World Jewish Congress, informed U. S. Ambassador Leland Harrison in Switzerland that funds were available to expedite this rescue and to feed and clothe 30,000 children hiding in France and to facilitate their removal to Spain. The funds would not fall into enemy hands because they would remain in a blocked account in Switzerland until the war was over.

For the next eleven weeks State Department officials stonewalled the proposal, waving red flags that it was "too vaguely phrased" to merit a decision, that it was merely a scheme to transfer money for ransom purposes, and that it might encourage other organizations to send relief funds to enemy territory. (Wyman, pp. 179-180)

It was late June before Robert Borden Reams met with the Treasury Department division charged with issuing the licenses required to transfer funds overseas. Reams argued the funds should not be transferred because the plan was unworkable. Later, though, he revealed the State Department's real objection: the plan might actually succeed. Reams considered it unrealistic to encourage large-scale rescue because only 30,000 openings remained under the British White Paper quota for Palestine and he "did not know of any other area to which the Jews could be evacuated." (Wyman, p. 180)

The Treasury was not convinced, and on July 16 agreed to issue the license.

Even after President Roosevelt's approval, Long and his colleagues delayed the license seven more weeks, this time alleging that the Riegner plan would provide the enemy with foreign exchange.

Four months months later Ambassador Harrison had still not issued the license, claiming again in contradiction of the Treasury that it needed British clearance, which had yet to be forthcoming.

On December 15, the British Foreign Office revealed in a statement their objection to the Riegner plan -- and the underlying fear that shaped their own and the State Department's response to the Holocaust. (Wyman, p.182)

"The Foreign Office are concerned with the difficulties of disposing of any considerable number of Jews should they be rescued from enemy occupied territory . . . They foresee that it is likely to prove almost if not quite impossible to deal with anything like the number of 70,000 refugees whose rescue is envisaged by the Riegner plan." (Wyman, p. 182)

Finally, on December 23, 1943, eight months after Riegner's first description of relief possibilities in Romania and France, bowing to directives from Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau and his hard-nosed assistant, John Pehle, Long sent the license, authorizing an initial \$25,000. But by then the plan was irrelevant and outdated; too much time had been wasted in a vacuous Cabinet war of words.

This deplorable episode did have two heartening outcomes. Secretary Morgenthau, now convinced that rescue operations needed to be removed from Long and the State Department, commissioned Pehle and Assistant Counsel Josiah DuBois to prepare a memorandum on State Department obstructionism. This "Report to the Secretary on the Acquiescence of this Government in the Murder of the Jews" was submitted to President Roosevelt on January 16, 1944.

"In nine pages, it detailed the procrastination, misrepresentation, suppression of the facts, deliberate interference with rescue efforts, and antisemitism of State Department officials, especially Breckenridge Long. It set out in detail the obstruction of the French and Romanian licenses, the cover-up of the obstruction, and Long's concealment of a State Department cable that ordered the suppression of information about the Holocaust." (Rosen, p. 344)

Among the misrepresentations was Long's statement to the President and subsequent testimony before Congress that the United States had admitted 580,000 refugees between 1933 and 1943. When challenged on those numbers by the American Jewish Committee, he made a

clarification: 580,000 visas had been issued, but only 210,000 refugees had actually entered the country. (Rosen, 292)

The Report concluded with the mandate: "The matter of rescuing the Jews from extermination is a trust too great to remain in the hands of men who are indifferent, callous, and perhaps hostile." (Morse, p. 92)

Six days later, on January 22, 1944, President Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9417, establishing the War Refugee Board and instructing it "to take all measures within its power to rescue victims of enemy oppression in imminent danger of death." (Morse, p. 97) The President allocated \$1,000,000 from his Emergency Fund; \$20 million was donated by private organizations, of which \$15 million came from the Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. John Pehle was named Director. (Wyman, pp. 213-214)

Although at first it seemed that the WRB might become a potent rescue machine, it was hampered from the outset by several factors. The Russians would not participate. The British were obstructive. The War Department had a standing order to reject any and all rescue operations. The State Department's deep-seated prejudices were evidenced in a remark made by one official to a friend of DuBois: "That Jew Morgenthau and his Jewish assistants like DuBois (who was Protestant) are trying to take over the place." (Rosen, p. 349)

One early WRB success can be attributed to the efforts of Ira Hirschmann, a former New York department store executive assigned to the U. S. Embassy in Ankara, Turkey. Hirschmann persuaded Turkish and British officials to make travel documents available in three weeks rather than sixteen to Jews en route from Bulgaria, Romania, and Hungary to Palestine. He found antiquated ships to ferry refugees across the Black Sea to Istanbul. Working through the Bulgarian Minister to Turkey, he convinced the Bulgarian government to rescind its anti-Jewish discrimination laws. He arranged a personal meeting with the Romanian Minister to Turkey, Alexandre Cretzianu, warned him of America's determination to punish war criminals, and secured the release of 48,000 Jews imprisoned in Transnistrian concentration camps -- which lay squarely in the path of Hitler's retreating army. (Morse, pp. 317-319)

Under the aegis of WRB representative Quaker Roswell McClelland, Switzerland became the focal point for a series of benevolent operations. McClelland shipped large quantities of medical and

sanitary supplies to France. He found guides to lead one thousand men, women, and children over the Pyrenees from France to Spain. He relayed funds to reliable underground groups in Slovakia, Italy, and Germany to aid the escape of Jews and other potential Nazi victims. (Morse, pp. 331-332)

The WRB played a key role in probably the most heroic saving of Jewish lives during the war.

By 1944, Hungary was sheltering 760,000 Jewish natives and refugees -- who had been spared the gas chambers by the lenient regency of Admiral Miklos von Horthy. But in March, Hitler, infuriated by Hungarian prevarication, intervened, forced the appointment of a more militant government, and, two months later, initiated mass deportations. Harassed by the WRB and the International Red Cross, cajoled by Pope Pius XII and King Gustav V of Sweden, Horthy garnered enough courage to resist the Nazis and order a halt to the death trains. Two hundred thirty thousand Jews remained alive in Budapest, destitute and facing impending doom.

A Swedish architect and businessman, Raoul Wallenberg approached the WRB representative in Stockholm, Ivor Olsen, and volunteered to go to Hungary. At Olsen's suggestion, the Swedish government appointed Wallenberg attache to its Budapest legation. The WRB placed \$100,000 at his disposal.

Wallenberg battled valiantly over the next three months -- buying apartment buildings in Budapest, applying Swedish extraterritoriality to them, housing Jews there, and issuing protective Swedish passports. In October the Nazis deposed Horthy and replaced him with Ferenc Szalasi; Szalasi's anti-Semitic Arrow Party unleashed a new wave of terror against the Jews, slaughtering thousands. The Nazis, in desperate need of slave labor but now short of rolling stock, ordered 40,000 to march through bone-chilling rains to the Austrian border; eight thousand died. (Morse, p. 367)

Wallenberg carried food and supplies to the victims. By various pretexts, he rescued a thousand from the march. Receiving word of a mass arrest, "he would arrive at the railroad station, waving official documents and barking orders in Swedish and Hungarian," and manage to get several hundred prisoners released, once with German guns leveled at him. On another occasion he followed a train to a border station, jumped aboard, and bluffed German guards into

freeing those deportees who carried any papers at all. He confronted the S. S. commander of Budapest at the gates of the Jewish ghetto, threatened him with postwar punishment, and most certainly influenced his decision to withdraw. (Morse, pp. 368-369)

When the Russians finally captured the city in February 1945, about 120,000 Jews remained alive.

Wallenberg may have fared worse. On January 17th, he left the Jewish relief office in Budapest and headed for Russian headquarters 137 miles away, apparently to request aid for the besieged Jewish community. Suspected of espionage by the Russians, he was never seen or heard from again. (Morse, p. 370)

The Jews of Budapest named a street for Raoul Wallenberg, and paid him this tribute: "We witnessed the redemption of prisoners and the relief of suffering when Mr. Wallenberg came among the persecuted to help. In a superhuman effort, not yielding to fatigue and exposing himself to all sorts of dangers, he brought home children who had been dragged away and he liberated aged parents. We saw him give food to the starving and medicine to the ailing . . . He was a righteous man. God bless him." (Morse, p. 374)

Despite these noteworthy accomplishments, in his seminal work on the subject, *The Abandonment of the Jews*, David Wyman contends that the American government did not respond decisively to the plight of European Jewry.

In the forefront was President Roosevelt, whose actions were limited. He met with Jewish leaders in December 1942 when overseas cables confirmed Hitler's extermination program, but afterward refused requests to discuss the matter. He declined to challenge the State Department's arbitrary curtailment of refugee immigration. Pressed to establish the War Refugee Board by a Congressional Rescue Resolution and the threat of a scandal involving State Department obstructionism, he took almost no interest in it and failed to fund it adequately. By agreeing to only one free port, he demonstrated that little was expected of any country. (Wyman, p. 312)

Callousness prevailed in the State Department, where its officials embraced nativism. They effectively closed the United States as an asylum by tightening immigration procedures and influenced Latin American countries to do the same. (Wyman, p. 313)

The War Department determined early on that rescue was not part of its mission. "To the American military, Europe's Jews represented an extraneous problem and an unwanted burden." (Wyman, p. 307)

"Except for a weak and insignificant resolution condemning mass murder, Congress took no official action concerning the Holocaust." Restrictionism, especially opposition to the entry of Jews, was strong on Capitol Hill. (Wyman, p. 316)

Governmental apathy can be traced to the indifference of much of the American public. Christian churches were almost inert in the face of the Holocaust and nearly silent too. No major denomination spoke out on the issue, nor did liberals and intellectuals, who might have been expected to be righteously vocal. (Wyman, pp. 317, 320)

In their defense, it must be acknowledged that information about the systematic murder of millions of Jews was not readily available, because the mass media treated it like minor news. Most newspapers and major news magazines printed very little about the Holocaust. Radio coverage was equally sparse. During the war, American filmmakers released a number of films on refugees and Nazi atrocities, but none that dealt with the Holocaust. (Wyman, pp. 321-322)

Wyman identifies a series of steps that might have been taken -- and conceivably saved lives -- if the United States had been committed to a more vigorous response.

The War Refugee Board should have been created in 1942 -- with adequate funding and much broader powers.

The U. S. Government should have urged Germany and the Axis satellites to release Jews -- signaling, if nothing else, that this was one of its goals.

It should have put pressure on neutral countries near the Axis -- Spain, Portugal, Turkey, Switzerland, and Sweden -- to accept Jewish refugees.

It should have established a number of "free ports" in addition to Fort Ontario -- thereby setting an example for Latin America, Canada, the British Dominions, and Palestine.

It should have made ships available to transport Jews from neutral countries to outside havens.

It should have transferred larger sums of money to Europe -- which could have been used to finance escape systems, to assist Jews in hiding, to supply food and medicine, and to strengthen Jewish undergrounds.

It should have disseminated more publicity about the extermination of the Jews throughout Europe -- threatening the Nazis with punishment for their crimes, influencing others to aid the victims, and warning the victims of their fate.

Finally, Wyman contends that bombing of the Auschwitz killing installations and deportation railroads was feasible and should have been undertaken by the military. (Wyman, pp. 331-335)

All these suggestions were rebuffed. Instead, government officials developed four main rationalizations for inaction.

The most frequent excuse, the lack of shipping was a fraud. When the Allies needed ships for non-military projects -- like moving 1400 non-Jewish Polish refugees from India to the West Coast or 2000 Spanish Loyalists to Mexico or 250,000 Axis prisoners overseas -- they located them. But ships were never available to transport Jews -- because there was no country willing to take them. (Wyman, pp. 335-336)

The argument that the Axis planted enemy agents among refugees was flawed. As a possibility, it could easily be addressed through security screening. Army intelligence found not one suspicious person when it vetted the 982 refugees who arrived at Fort Ontario. (Wyman, pp. 336-337)

A third rationalization asserted that helping Jews would improperly single out one group for assistance among the many suffering from Nazi brutality, substantiate accusations that the war was being fought for the Jews, and, perversely, fan the flames of an already seething anti-Semitism. Only the Jews, however, were facing total extinction. The real problem, again, was finding a place for those fortunate enough to be saved. (Wyman, p. 337)

The fourth claim -- that rescue operations would detract from the military effort and prolong the war -- was also disingenuous. None of the proposals was extensive or involved enough to do either. In fact, resources were diverted from time to time to meet humanitarian needs. In 1944 the British used troop ships to transport 36,000 Yugoslav refugees from Southern Italy to Egypt. Between August 1942 and August 1943, they moved 40,000 Poles from Iran -- where they had been sent by the Russians after deportation to Siberia -- to camps in Africa and the Middle East. The Allies also provided sanctuary in those same camps to 25,000 Greeks fleeing the Nazis. (Wyman, pp. 337-339)

Even Wyman acknowledges that a concerted relief and rescue program could not have saved anywhere near a million victims. Peter Novick, author of *The Holocaust in American Life*, puts the number at 2%, or 120,000, and concedes that, tragically, "the perception that the overall impact of American efforts would be marginal probably served to inhibit action." That the "practical possibilities for substantial rescue" are slight does not, however, relieve one of his moral responsibilities. (Hamerow, p. 392)

After all, this was a republic founded on the principles of individual liberty, universal justice, equal opportunity, and spiritual compassion. For almost two hundred years it had been a safe haven for the downtrodden and oppressed of other countries. It had entered the war to preserve its humanitarian ideals and to defend them against the evils and brutality of a totalitarianism intent on world domination. Was it not morally bound to do all within its power to prevent the consummation of the greatest atrocity in history -- the institutionalized slaughter of an entire nation?

But there was another reason to act. Because this genocide was not just a crime against the Jews; it was a crime which, ultimately, contemplated no limits. There were no more than 3 million Jews left in Europe when the Russians overran the concentration camps in Poland in 1945. Yet they found enough Zyklon B crystals to kill 20 million people -- 10 million non-Germanic people in the next two years. In a world where none but Aryans were qualified to live, "it stood to reason that everyone else would be exterminated." (Dimont, p. 389) Since this Holocaust was but a prelude to an even greater conflagration, saving the Jews meant saving the future of the human race.

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