

# The Holocaust, America, and American Jewry

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Arguments about rescue attempts—or a lack thereof—by Jewish leadership groups and Jewish communities in the Holocaust period still arouse intense controversies. These are more often than not connected to present-day politics rather than politics of the past. However, there is a need to establish certain perspectives that will enable us to deal with these controversies in a somewhat more dispassionate fashion.

Such a perspective is needed when one deals with the decision of Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, head of the American Jewish Congress and the mainstream American Zionist movement, in late August 1942, not to publicize the cable sent from Geneva by Gerhard Riegner, the young secretary of the World Jewish Congress on August 8. According to that cable, in the Führer's headquarters a decision had been taken to murder 3.5–4 million Jews with prussic acid in the East, in the coming fall.

The oft-heard accusation leveled against Wise was, and is, essentially, that had he publicized the cable, a wave of public opinion might have changed American policies regarding the fate of European Jewry. What we tend to ignore is the fact that the cable contained the following sentence: "We transmit information with all necessary reservations as exactitude cannot be confirmed. Informant stated to have close connections with highest German authorities and his reports generally speaking reliable." In other words, Riegner himself cast doubt on the very information he was transmitting. Under Secretary of State, Sumner Welles, asked Wise not to make the cable public until it was confirmed by State Department sources.

The context of Wise's decision was a rise in antisemitism in the US—at least according to polls—and Jewish political powerlessness—hard to understand in 2011, but an indisputable fact in 1942. The war was not going well for the Allies. The Germans were racing towards the Volga; Rommel was poised at El Alamein for an invasion of Egypt, Palestine, and the Middle East; and the Germans were sinking Allied ships faster than the Allies could build them. Tens of thousands of

young American Jews were serving in the military; were there sufficient grounds for risk creating panic among them and their families? There seems to be no doubt that had Wise called a press conference in defiance of governmental pressure, the editors would have heeded the government and, at most, would probably have buried the item somewhere deep inside their newspapers. Action like that might have had serious consequences for any further attempt to secure the help of the government in trying to save European Jews. Should Wise nevertheless have tried to create a public outcry or demonstrations against the government that was fighting the Germans? This was not 1933, with meetings at Madison Square Gardens, but 1942. Wise showed the cable to Jewish leaders and made sure it became known to the people around President Franklin D. Roosevelt. And what if it then turned out that it was just a rumor, a possibility that the cable explicitly left open?

As it later turned out, Riegner had not met with the German anti-Nazi informant, Eduard Schulte, but had received the information via two intermediaries. In other words, the cable was based on hearsay. Schulte had heard high-ranking SS officers discussing the fate of the Jews, and told his Swiss contact what he remembered. Closer examination of the cable reveals that some of the information was, indeed, mistaken. The Germans did not plan to carry out the mass murder in the summer of 1942—it had been going on already since June 1941 on a horrendous scale. The murder of a limited number of Jews was not planned, but rather the annihilation of the Jewish people. I interviewed Riegner in Geneva in the 1970s. On that occasion, Riegner stated that he had been asked to put the disclaimer into the cable by his boss, the chairman of the Geneva office of the WJC, Prof. Paul Guggenheim.

I do not believe Wise had a choice; he had to agree to wait until the Americans had confirmed the report, which happened in November. Wise then called a press conference. It received minimal newspaper coverage and his message was basically ignored until the Bergson group, headed by Hillel Kook (originally an emissary of the Irgun in the US), went into action. The Bergsonites—and also the mainstream Zionists—took up the issue at the end of 1942. Kook then embarked upon a major public campaign designed to raise awareness of the Holocaust, in the hope that this might influence the US government.

Let us assume for a moment that Kook, with or without Wise—who did everything he could to block Kook—had managed to see Roosevelt, say, at the end of 1942, when Kook began the campaign for rescue. And let us further assume that as a result, Roosevelt had emerged from the Oval Office, tears streaming down his face, and had announced that from then on, America would do whatever it could to rescue the Jews from the Nazis. By the end of 1942, at least three million Jews

had already been murdered, but the US would now (in our imaginary scenario) intervene forcefully. The question is what could America have done to save the millions still alive? We know now that the Anglo-Americans refused to do the little they could have done to save Jews, such as, for example, enabling the rescue of thousands who might possibly have fled to neutral countries and from the Balkans to Palestine. But could they have stopped the mass murder? There were no US armed forces present in Europe; the first American troops landed in Sicily, where there were no Jews, in July 1943. Even after D-day, Allied troops could not have done anything to save anyone under German rule. No Anglo-American bombers reached German-occupied Poland until well after the occupation of the Foggia airfields in Italy in late 1943. From Britain, only Lancaster bombers were capable of reaching Poland. There were no fighter planes available with an equivalent range until the arrival of the P-51 Mustang in late 1943—by which time all the extermination camps, except for Auschwitz-Birkenau, were no longer in operation. Without fighter escorts the big lumbering bombers would have been sitting ducks. In short, until the spring of 1944, the US, even had it decided to help, could not have done very much.

Historians have written about the Bergson group and its conflict with the Zionist establishment, as though the solution of that struggle would have had any impact on the fate of the millions of Jews whose lives were imperiled. The truth seems to be that had the American Jews presented a united front, it would not have made any difference to the millions being murdered in Europe. The Anglo-Americans could have helped in the rescue of thousands, and they refused to do so. On that point there was no disagreement between Kook and Wise—both acted. But they could not have stopped the Holocaust. The fact of the matter is simply, and cruelly, that the Holocaust happened in Europe, and not on American soil, and these controversies were basically akin to shadow boxing, totally removed from the reality of the Shoah. Jews were powerless, and so was the US, to stop the murder.

Whether the Bergson group was or was not the main factor that moved Roosevelt to establish (and very late in the day—January 1944) the War Refugee Board (WRB), which was supposed to rescue Jews, will continue to be discussed and debated. But the claim that the WRB was a major factor in the rescue, for instance, of 120,000 Jews in Budapest, or that, generally, the WRB rescued large numbers of Jews, as it claimed after the war, is incorrect. The WRB's budget came from the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC or "Joint"), an opponent of both Kook and Wise. To show the inefficacy of the WRB, consider the fact that the WRB did help persuade Roosevelt to issue a warning to Hungary not to maltreat its Jews, in March 1944. Six weeks later the Hungarians began deporting 437,000 Jews to Auschwitz. Roosevelt and the WRB had failed completely, and not because

they did not want to help, but because Germany, not the US, ruled Hungary. By June 26, 1944, the Hungarian leader, Admiral Miklós Horthy, realized that if he now wanted to withdraw from the Axis, it was not a good idea to send Jews to be gassed. So he stopped the deportations, leaving the Jews of Budapest alive. After Horthy was toppled in a coup in October, the Hungarian Nazis wanted to kill the Jews, but in early November the gas chambers in Birkenau had ceased operating. But thousands more died in death marches organized by Eichmann and the Hungarians. Most Budapest Jews were kept alive partly through the actions of neutral diplomats, and partly through the actions of left-wing Zionist youth movements. The WRB had very little to do with their survival. The WRB did try to send some Jewish money, and contributed \$100,000 of the funds it had received from the Joint to Raoul Wallenberg in Budapest. Wallenberg issued 4,500 protection documents and the Zionist underground forged tens of thousands more. The other diplomats who helped (the Swiss, who were the first to do so, an Italian fascist who pretended to be a Spanish diplomat, the Red Cross, and the Portuguese) were led by the Papal Nuncio, Angelo Rotta. To claim today that the WRB was responsible for saving lives in Budapest is little short of preposterous.

The WRB did try, and it did record some marginal success. Earlier efforts could have saved more lives, but Americans did not care much about Jews, despite the valiant efforts of the Bergson group. In 1944, 48 percent of Americans expressed anti-Jewish views. In a sense, the administration was not wrong: As it was powerless to save the millions, the only answer was to win the war and to kill the murderers. There is also a postscript to that story. At war's end, America did very little in terms of taking punitive measures against those responsible. In that regard, too, Jews were powerless to change the state of affairs.