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12. The United States and Great Britain

If horses were being slaughtered as are the Jews of Poland, there would now be a loud demand for organized action against such cruelty to animals.

—Rabbi Meyer Berlin to
U.S. Senator Robert P. Wagner

Most of the world's free nations did little or nothing to aid the Jews of Europe as they were being destroyed. They cannot claim ignorance, because they knew all or most of the truth fairly soon into the war if not before. If they had chosen to act, from early on at the first signs in Germany to later when the death camps were in full operation, they could have saved many thousands and possibly millions of lives. But they did not.

There are exceptions to this, both among governments and people, and they will be described in the next chapter. This chapter is devoted to a few of the most important actions—and lack of actions—of the United States and Great Britain.

THE FIRST YEARS

The anti-Jewish character of Hitler's government was known by all the world and made plain by its actions soon after it came into power. The Nuremberg Laws and the boycott of Jewish businesses received worldwide publicity, almost all of it extremely critical of such "uncivilized"

behavior: It was during this period, from 1933 until the outbreak of war, that Jewish emigration increased from Germany and Austria.

The European countries allowed Jews entry up to a certain point, as did the United States and Great Britain. No country, with two exceptions mentioned later, accepted them without serious restrictions.

The United States allowed only a certain number of people from each country to come to her shores. The quota for Germany was 25,957 a year. Yet from 1933 to 1938, it was never filled. In 1933, Hitler's first year in power, only 1,445 emigrated here from Germany. In 1937, the number permitted to enter reached only 11,536—and that was after the Nuremberg Laws, the boycott and the growing severity of anti-Semitism in Germany. The would-be immigrants were kept out perfectly legally.

American immigration law stated that a person could be refused a resident's visa if he or she was "likely to become a public charge" and therefore a financial burden. In order to live here, the immigrant had to prove he had enough money to support himself, or produce proof that his support was guaranteed by family or friends. This LPC clause, as it was called, was rarely enforced—possession of a hundred dollars was usually enough to allow entrance—until 1930, when unemployment was very high in this country. After then it was rigidly enforced.

This effectively kept the number of Jewish immigrants low. The German Jews were gradually being driven to poverty by the Nazi schemes against them. They had been removed from most well-paying professions, their property and businesses were being taken from them, they had to pay several "taxes" when they left, and they were allowed to take very little money with them.

And unfortunately there is solid evidence that officials who made the decisions about who would be allowed a visa were applying the LPC clause more harshly than its framers had intended.

Their actions reflected the reality of feeling in the United States. According to a survey in 1938, 67 percent of the American people wanted to keep the refugees out; over 70 percent were against increasing the quota. Economic reasons were set forth—they would put Americans out of work—but the reasons are probably based on something less pleasant than that. Anti-Semitic feeling was high in this country during the 1930s. This was partly because of the propaganda unleashed here by the Nazis and their sympathizers. But much of the propaganda fell on fertile soil.

The several anti-Semitic newspapers and magazines in the country had

SMOKE AND ASHES

a good-sized readership, and anti-Semitic radio programs were widely popular. Another survey found that the Jews were considered among the "least desirable" residents of America. As late as July 1939, over 30 percent thought that the Jews had "too much power," and 10 percent believed they should be deported.

Nonetheless, the number of people wanting to leave Germany, and then Austria, grew in number every year. It was truly an international problem. By 1938, the estimate was 660,000. Although officially it was called "the refugee problem," its Jewish character could not be denied: 300,000 were Jews, and 285,000 were Christians married to Jews. The remaining 75,000 were Catholics, fleeing Hitler's first—and unsuccessful—attempt to persecute the churches.

At the initiation of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, an international conference was called to deal with the problem.

THE MEETING AT EVIAN

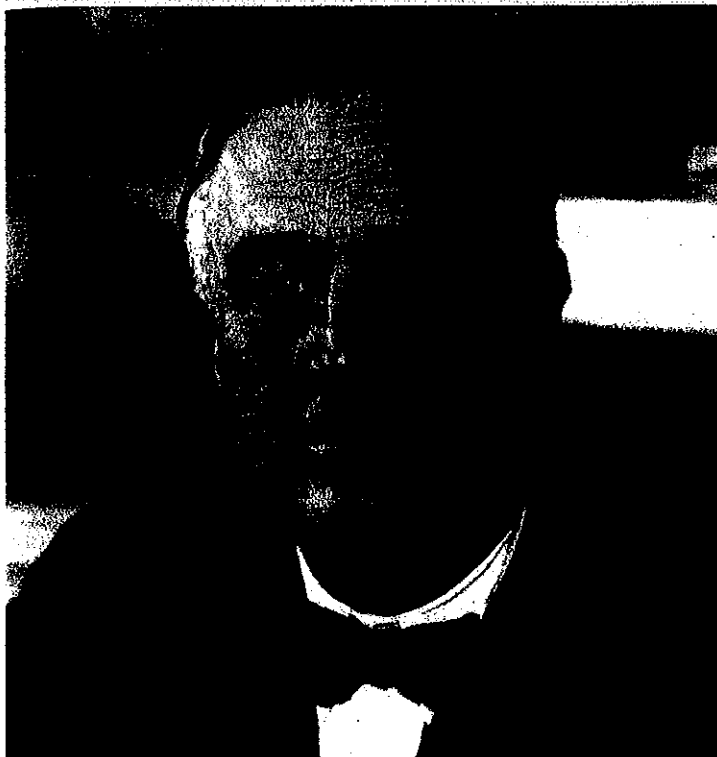
In July 1938 the representatives of thirty-two countries met at a luxury hotel in the French town of Evian on Lake Geneva. The United States said it would allow its full immigration quota to be filled from then on. The small countries of the Netherlands and Denmark, already burdened with refugees out of proportion to their size, said they would continue to allow them entry.

Aside from that, almost no changes in existing refugee policies were made. In one way or another, the countries at the conference echoed the words of the representative from Australia: "As we have no real racial problem, we are not desirous of importing one."

A group called the Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees was appointed, which had two primary aims. First, it would seek out places for the refugees to settle. Since almost all countries had already made known their unwillingness to accept them, that aim was doomed to failure. Second, it would attempt to negotiate with Nazi Germany. The committee called them refugees; the Nazis rightly called them Jews. Negotiations about easing their plight, one can imagine, would not have gotten very far.

No one took the committee very seriously. At its first meeting after the Evian conference not all countries bothered to send a representative, and those who came were of very low government rank.

After Crystal Night on November 9, 1938, Roosevelt said, "I could



Franklin Delano Roosevelt,
President of the United States,
1933–1945.

scarcely believe that such things could occur in a twentieth-century civilization." The United States withdrew its ambassador from Germany in protest. That was all. No changes were made in the immigration laws at that time.

In 1940 and 1941, the American laws were made much more restrictive by the addition of a strict security test. Each immigrant had to prove a clean police record for the past five years. In other words, a Jew had to ask Nazi-controlled police for proof of good behavior. Few did, or could.

Another obstacle stood in the way of immigrants from countries opposed to the United States—which meant the nations overrun by the Nazis. If they had left close relatives behind, that was considered a situation possibly harmful to America's interest and public safety. Such people were rarely granted permission to enter. Refugees from countries considered "unfriendly"—Germany and her allies—faced even greater hurdles to immigration.

The flow of immigrants fell to a trickle.

Then England helped to close things down. Palestine had been under British control since the end of the First World War and was considered the Jewish National Home. Britain granted permits to Jews to live there, and some 550,000 had settled in Palestine. In 1939, England decided to limit immigration to Palestine to 75,000 at the rate of 10,000 a

SMOKE AND ASHES

year; the surrounding Arab states would have to give approval for any change after that number was reached.

The meeting at Evian had influenced no one.

THE RIEGNER TELEGRAM

By September 1941, all Europe and Britain were at war with Germany. In October, Jews were forbidden to leave German-occupied territory. The Special Action Groups moved through Eastern Europe, and Jews were gassed for the first time on December 8 in Chelmno. Their systematic murder had begun.

The Allies knew what was happening. Through 1941 and before, reports had come to the United States and Great Britain about mass murders. Items had appeared in the newspapers, but they were short, inconspicuous and placed far inside. The public was not concerned. Neither were the governments.

In May 1942, a report came through from the Jewish Labor Bund in Poland. It traced the Nazi path through the country, region by region, month by month. It described the Special Action Groups, the mobile killing vans and the killing operation begun at Chelmno. It estimated that 700,000 had already been murdered, and concluded that the destruction of the Jews of Europe was the Nazis' purpose.

In England the public was informed and, along with the churches, spoke up in outrage. The government did nothing. In America, only one newspaper—the *New York Herald Tribune*—gave the story accurate front page prominence; Jewish organizations held protest rallies. The government did nothing.

In August 1942 a telegram was received by England and the United States. It was sent by Gerhardt Riegner, a refugee from Germany living in Switzerland and chief of the Geneva office of the World Jewish Congress. It said:

“Received alarming report that in Führer’s headquarters plan discussed and under consideration, according to which all Jews in countries occupied or controlled by Germany numbering 3.5–4 million should, after deportation and concentration in the east, be exterminated. . . . The action planned for autumn; methods under discussion including prussic acid. . . .”

It was learned only in 1986 that the source of the information was a German anti-Nazi named Eduard Schulte. More about him appears in chapter 13.

The telegram arrived at the U.S. State Department and British Foreign Office. Riegner asked that a copy be sent to Rabbi Stephen Wise, America's most prominent Jewish leader, and to Member of Parliament Sidney Silverman in England. Silverman got the information. Rabbi Wise did not. The State Department not only stopped it, a few months later they asked the Geneva consulate not to forward news from such sources again.

Silverman sent a copy to Rabbi Wise. The State Department asked the rabbi not to publicize it until they could confirm its contents. They did so. In November, four months after the telegram was received, Rabbi Wise was permitted to hold a press conference.

The news was reported throughout the country, but once again not very conspicuously. The American public did not seem able to understand it as true, or possibly even to care. (In July 1942, a poll showed that 44 percent still believed the Jews had too much power.)

The British public did respond, however. Perhaps because they were being bombed and felt the effects of war firsthand, they could accept the report as reality. Demands by members of Parliament, the clergy and other groups resulted in an English-sponsored international declaration denouncing the murder of Jews in the name of eleven Allied nations. It was released in Washington, London and Moscow.

They were talking to themselves. Nothing was done.

WHAT WERE THE REASONS?

There are at least five decent reasons why the Evian meeting accomplished nothing, and why the Bund report and Riegner telegram that came later also caused no action.

First, at the time of Evian in 1938 a worldwide depression was on. Unemployment was very high and the economies of most countries were not in very good condition. It is understandable that the entry of several thousand new residents would be considered a very bad idea.

Second, the information about the Jewish mass murders that began to reach the West was just not believed. Nothing like such horror had occurred in the modern world, and it was simply beyond the ability of most people to grasp it as the truth. Even many Jews called the reports irresponsible.

Third, there was a basis in history for the disbelief as well. During World War I, stories of terrible German atrocities in Belgium had made headlines all over the world. German soldiers were accused of bayoneting small babies and shooting helpless nuns. Those stories were false; they

SMOKE AND ASHES

were circulated to whip up fighting spirit, particularly in America and England. The new, and now true, stories appeared little more than twenty years after the lies. People old enough to remember were not ready to believe atrocity stories again; they had been fooled once, and that was enough.

Fourth, the Arabs in Palestine and surrounding areas had revolted against the Jewish presence in 1936. The violence went on for two years, reaching a climax in 1938. Britain was afraid the Arabs would support the Nazis in the war she knew was coming. That is the major reason given for hardening immigration rules in 1939.

Fifth, World War II began in earnest when the United States entered on December 7, 1941; England had been fighting since 1939. From then until 1943, the Allies were in serious danger of losing the war. Even when the mass murder reports were believed, it was felt that little could be done because all energies had to be directed toward winning the war. Help for the Jews would have to take central place if it was to be successful. There was not enough Allied power, nor belief in victory, to allow that shift in armed strength.

And after 1943, when it was clear that the Germans were losing? What then? The officially given answer was "The positive solution to this problem is the earliest possible victory over the Germans."

The only thing wrong with that, of course, was that at the rate the Nazis were killing them, there would be no Jews left in Europe at the end of the war.

THE BERMUDA CONFERENCE

Pressure on the British government from the public, clergy and Parliament was constant. To reduce some of the pressure, they asked the Americans to hold a conference on the problem of finding places of refuge for victims of the Nazis. They wanted two restrictions. First, Palestine was not to be considered as a possibility. Second, it would not be discussed as a problem of Jews. That might arouse criticism from other Allies, and in addition the possibility of "too many foreign Jews" being brought to England might arouse anti-Semitism at home.

The Americans agreed. Palestine would not be mentioned. The conference would not deal with Jews but with refugees in general—despite the fact that both countries knew that only Jews were being exterminated, not any other people.

The delegates met at Bermuda on April 19, 1943 (the start of the War-



Winston Churchill,
Prime Minister of Great Britain,
1940-1945.

saw Ghetto uprising, though they did not know it.) Among the Americans was a member of the State Department who had tried to stifle all news of the extermination. Another believed that Hitler himself was really behind American-Jewish pressure for action.

Several paragraphs could be spent describing the conference. But since from the very beginning the purpose was to lessen some of the public disapproval of both governments, it is wasted space to do so. The report issued after the conference made it so obvious little was done that it was kept secret for as long as possible. In the end, the conference was responsible for saving 630 refugees at a camp set up one year later in North Africa.

Other than that, nothing was done.

THE OFFERS OF ROMANIA AND BULGARIA

Romania and Bulgaria were allies of Germany, not conquered nations. They kept a certain amount of independence. Jews faced at least some of the usual restrictions in both countries, and each had involved itself in the Final Solution to some degree. But the tide of the war had turned against Germany, and both wanted a little Allied sympathy when the war was over.

On February 13, 1943, Romania offered to cooperate in the removal of

SMOKE AND ASHES

70,000 Jews to a place chosen by the Allies, suggesting Palestine as the best. She asked about \$130 per Jew, more to be decided upon if Romanian ships were used. At about the same time, Bulgaria decided to separate herself from the Final Solution; she had begun carrying it out, but it had never been popular with the Bulgarian churches or people. They offered to allow 30,000 to leave.

The American State Department's response to the Romanian offer was that it was "without foundation" and that it probably came from the German propaganda machine, meant to "create confusion and doubt within the United Nations." The reaction to the Bulgarians was not much different. Britain's response was more blunt. Her foreign minister is remembered as saying, "If we do that, then Jews will want us to take similar steps in Poland and Germany. There simply are not enough ships and means of transportation in the world to handle them."

The reason, expressed again and again, was much more basic. There was no place to put them. The British had already noted that they were "concerned with the difficulties of disposing of any considerable number of Jews should they be rescued from enemy occupied territory." Now the government said it would not follow up these possible means of escape at least partly because it would "lead to an offer to unload an even greater number on our hands."

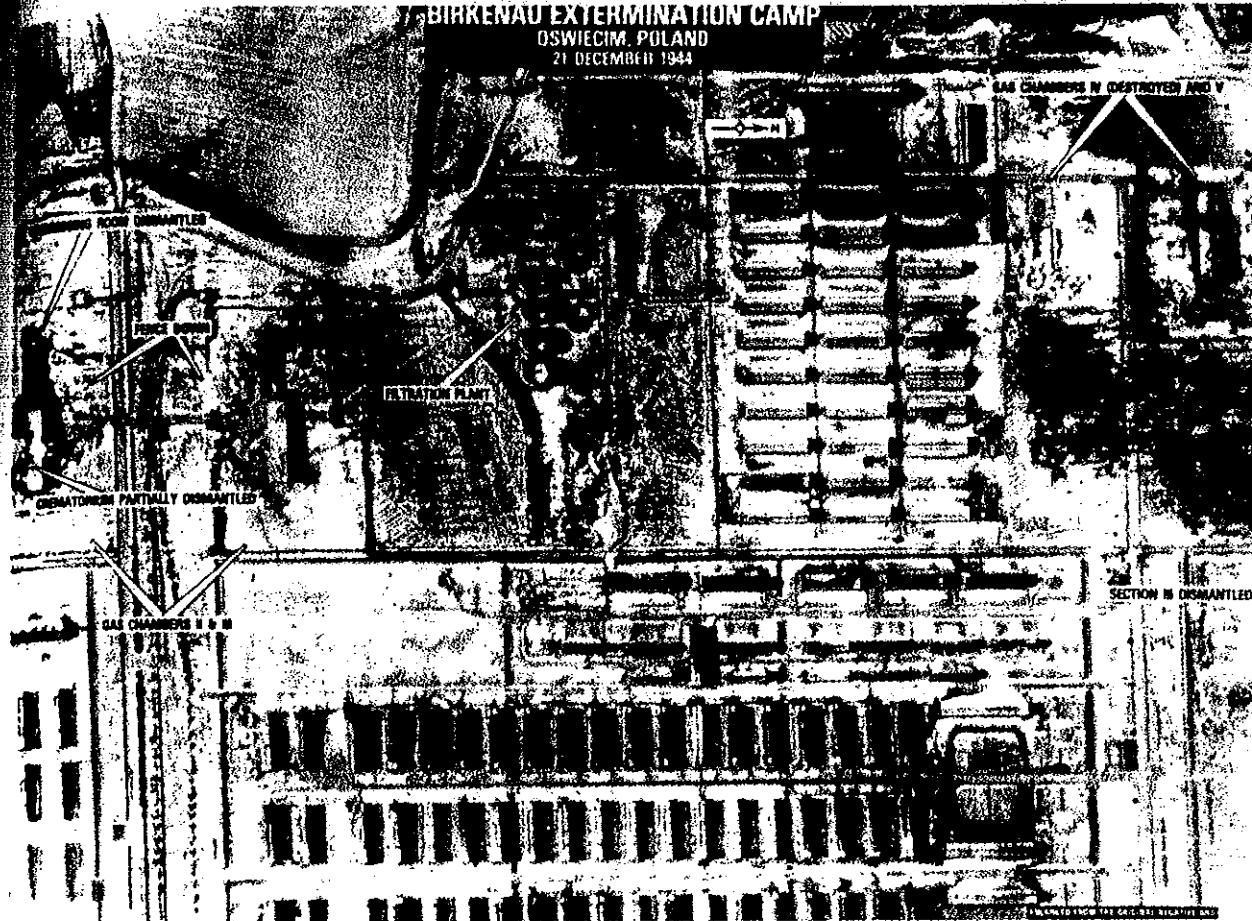
A spokesman for the U.S. State Department's Division of European Affairs wrote that to take up the offer was "likely to bring about new pressure for an asylum in the Western Hemisphere." He added, "So far as I know we are not ready to tackle the whole Jewish problem." A State Department official commented that the rescue proposals would "take the burden and the curse off Hitler."

Nothing was done.

THE BOMBING OF AUSCHWITZ

On April 10, 1944, two young Slovakian Jews escaped from Auschwitz. They reached the Jewish Slovakian underground and dictated a thirty-page report. They spared no details about the purpose of Auschwitz and how it functioned. They described the gas chambers that held "2,000 people" each, the "SS men with gas masks" who dropped in the poison and the removal and burning of the bodies.

By mid-June the information had reached Switzerland and the Allies. England and America had known about the existence of Auschwitz be-



Auschwitz and Birkenau were photographed by Allied planes. This photograph was taken in December, 1944. Oswiecim is the Polish name, which the Germans changed to Auschwitz.

fore, but not its purpose. Now they knew it was a killing center for Jews. News of it began to appear in the press, and by late June the truth about Auschwitz was known everywhere.

The report appeared at about the same time as the start of the mass deportation of Hungarian Jews to the camp. The Czech underground and several Jewish groups asked the Allies to bomb at least the railway lines leading to Auschwitz from Hungary. It was understood that this might not stop the mass killings, but at least it would slow them down enough to save thousands of lives.

Germany by this time was unmistakably losing the war. Heavy Allied bombing had already burned several of her cities to the ground.

The synthetic-rubber factories of I. G. Farben had been bombed, and they were only five miles away from Birkenau. Amazingly, Auschwitz I

SMOKE AND ASHES

and Birkenau had already both been bombed—by *accident*. More damage had been done by those few bombs—with greater damage to SS buildings and men—than had been done deliberately in the bombing of the factories, which were only slightly damaged.

It should be repeated. Factories five miles away from the gas chambers had already been bombed. Birkenau and Auschwitz had been already accidentally bombed on the same raid.

Furthermore, other planes had flown over the camp at least twice to take photographs. The Allies knew what Birkenau looked like.

The British called the news of Auschwitz and the plea to bomb the rail lines “the exaggeration . . . of these wailing Jews.” Further, if the Royal Air Force were to be used, “valuable lives would be lost.” What were Jewish lives, then?

In America the request went to John J. McCloy, assistant secretary of war. Here was his response.

“After a study it became apparent that such an operation could be executed only by diversion of considerable air support essential to the success of our forces now engaged in decisive operations elsewhere. . . .”

But such a diversion or shift had already been made to within five miles, and accidentally to the death camp itself.

“[Such bombing] would in any case be of such doubtful efficacy that it would not warrant the use of our resources.”

It would have saved thousands of Jewish lives by temporarily slowing things down. That is no “doubtful efficacy.”

He said more.

“There has been considerable opinion to the effect that such an effort, even if practicable, might provoke even more vindictive action by the Germans.”

More vindictive—more terrible, bloodthirsty and cruel—than Auschwitz?

Nothing was done.

A LATE EXCEPTION: THE WAR REFUGEE BOARD

On January 22, 1944, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9417, and the War Refugee Board or WRB was born. He had been shocked into action by a confidential report from the secretary of the treasury that proved without a doubt the State Department's attempts to hamper rescue attempts and to cover up or delay information about the Final

Solution. The WRB was set up "for the rescue, transportation, maintenance and relief of the victims of every oppression." It mentioned in particular that it would attempt to slow down the "Nazi plans to exterminate all Jews."

A representative of the WRB in Turkey met with the Romanian minister and told him Romania would be held responsible for the 48,000 Jews in camps inside their territory. With the promise of American visas for the minister and his family, it was agreed to evacuate the camps. With the demand to withdraw the anti-Jewish laws in effect, the same tactic was used on Bulgaria. Helped along by considerable public and church opposition to those laws, they were withdrawn.

In Hungary, the WRB helped fund the rescue work of Raoul Wallenberg, a Swedish diplomat who saved over 70,000 Jewish lives. The board worked with and helped fund underground organizations all over Europe.

Against the wishes of the State Department and the British Foreign Office, and at the insistence of the WRB, President Roosevelt issued a statement that was printed and radioed all over Europe—dropped as leaflets from planes, read in foreign language broadcasts and printed by underground newspapers. It was one of the rare times that the Jews were mentioned as particular victims of the Nazis. Part of the statement said:

"In one of the blackest crimes in all history—begun by the Nazis in a day of peace and multiplied a hundred times since the war—the wholesale systematic murder of the Jews of Europe goes on unabated at every hour. . . .

"None who participate in these acts of savagery shall go unpunished. . . . All who share the guilt shall share the punishment."

The message may have helped push Romania and Bulgaria into action. There is no question that it boosted the morale of the conquered peoples. It may have given some of the imprisoned Jews the extra strength they needed to live until liberation.

In these ways and others, the WRB succeeded in saving the lives of over 200,000 Jews, and 20,000 non-Jews as well. This was accomplished in the several short months of its existence.

It is almost painful to think what the board might have done if it had been given enough money, which it was not; if it had had the support of the State Department, which it did not; if it did not have to fight British disapproval and opposition, which it did; and if it could have begun its work before the Final Solution was on its way to completion.

SMOKE AND ASHES

A POSSIBLE CONCLUSION

Much has been left out of this chapter, including the attempts of people in government and elsewhere to change the attitudes and help the dying Jews. But since the result was always the same—little was done—only the most important points and responses seemed necessary to mention. They show what government records reveal to be the overall attitude and reaction.

Perhaps the hideous enormity of the massacre could not be understood at first. Then it became clear that no one knew what to do with these Jews. It is also clear that some unspoken anti-Semitism lay at the bottom of much of what happened. That picture comes clearer with one simple question: If these had been one million—two million—six million Protestants or Catholics, then what would they have done?

