

AMERICA AND THE HOLOCAUST

**What we did,
What we didn't do**

**The Southern Institute for Education and Research
at Tulane University
America and the Holocaust**

“To kill the Jews, the Nazis were willing to weaken their capacity to fight the war. The U. S. and its allies, however, were willing to attempt almost nothing to save them.

-- Historian David Wyman

The story of the Righteous Gentiles is the story of the non-Jews who defied the Nazi terror (and their own culture) to rescue those who were the objects of Nazi destruction. It is, in turn, the story of the moral dilemma that beset at least some non-Jews in Nazi-occupied Europe: Do I help? Don't I? Others, of course, didn't give the question a thought. To rescue a Jew, the person defined as “the other” long before the Nazis arrived, was a ludicrous thought, hardly within the boundaries of obligation.

The student reading about the behavior of non-Jews in Europe during the Holocaust is inclined to make moral judgements. It is instructive, therefore, to look at the behavior of non-Jews closer to home. What, for example, was the attitude of the U. S. government to the persecution of Jews before the war? What was the attitude of the government to Jewish rescue during the war? How did the American people feel about the plight of the Jews in Europe?

In sum, what was the role of the United States during the Holocaust?

DEPRESSION

The 1929 economic depression is a decisive event in terms of

understanding the attitude of the American people towards the persecution of Jews (and others) in Nazi Germany (and, later, in Nazi-occupied Europe).

Economic hardship (and the insecurity it inspired) had a profound impact upon Americans. It instilled a fear in the hearts of the average person, a fear that he or she would not be able to provide for loved ones. As a result, Americans became an increasingly inward-looking people who were concerned first and foremost with their own economic well-being and very little with the plight of the Jews (or the Poles, etc.) in Europe.

ROOSEVELT AND THE JEWS

Franklin Delano Roosevelt was inaugurated president in March 1933 (two months after Hitler was appointed chancellor of Germany). The presence of several high ranking Jewish officials in FDR's administration was seized upon by his enemies who popularized the notion that the president's "New Deal" was in fact a "Jew Deal." From the beginning of his presidency, Roosevelt had to contend with the view that he was pro-Jewish. His support among American Jewry was solid, and he did not have to worry about losing it. Paradoxically, the devotion of Jews to FDR was their political undoing. The president became much more interested in winning the support of his enemies, often conservative congressmen from the South who were not the least bit interested in offering shelter to refugees (i.e. Jews) or to any foreigners.

In the summer of 1937, the rug was pulled from beneath the modest economic recovery the Roosevelt administration had engineered. Recession set in, and unemployment soared anew. Eight to ten million Americans were out of work (fifteen percent of the work force). American confidence was shattered. The issue of jobs was paramount. The average American was unemployed, knew someone who was unemployed, or

both. Few American families were untouched by the economic collapse. During this time of economic hardship in the United States the Jews of Europe sought an avenue of escape from the Nazis. The visa [an official authorization appended to a passport, permitting entry into and travel within a particular country] became, literally, a ticket to survival. Dorothy Thompson, an American journalist who championed the cause of refugees, addressed the issue with plain words:

“It is a fantastic commentary on the inhumanity of our times that for thousands and thousands of people a piece of paper with a stamp on it is the difference between life and death.”

In Washington, strident opponents of immigration argued for a reduction of the U. S. quota by 90%. The quota is the number of visas (for entrance to the U. S.) allocated to residents of a given foreign country. The opponents of immigration demanded a halt to permanent immigration for ten years, or until unemployment fell to three million.

The U. S. quota for Germany and Austria was 27,370. Between 1933, when Hitler came to power in Germany, and 1938, when the Nazis seized neighboring (and fellow German speaking) Austria, a mere 10% of the U. S. quota was filled, despite the obvious danger to German and Austrian Jews. Until 1938, the debate in the U. S. was not about enlarging the quota. Far from it. The few proponents of the refugees realized this debate would jeopardize the existing quota. Instead, the debate was about whether the existing quota would be filled, or if it would be stretched beyond the existing 10%. In 1938, following Anschluss [the Nazi seizure of Austria], the friends of refugees won a victory. The State Department permitted the U. S. quota to be filled, although not enlarged. As it turned out, the quota was filled for only two years. The outbreak of war between the U. S. and Germany in December 1941 effectively closed the doors to U. S. immigration. State Department officials, never happy with the idea of Jewish immigration, argued that the threat of spies smuggling themselves into the country by the immigration process was too great. Better to close the door altogether.

ANSCHLUSS

On March 12, 1938, Hitler ordered the German armed forces to seize and occupy his native Austria, a task he had set out for himself in the first paragraph of his autobiography Mein Kampf [My Struggle]. The German troops were greeted by flowers strewn at their feet, giving the bloodless conquest the sobriquet of the “flower war.” The Jews of Vienna were treated to a different kind of war. The Jewish writer Stefan Zweig wrote,

“All the morbidly filthy hate fantasies orgiastically conceived in the course of many nights were released in broad daylight.”

Zweig later committed suicide in South America.

In Vienna, life changed overnight. Local Nazis [the SA men] seized Jews in the former imperial capital and forced them to scrub the streets and walls with toothbrushes. Crowds gathered, hissed, and spat abuse at the helpless and often elderly Jews. The American journalist William Shirer witnessed the abuse and humiliation meted out to the Jews of Vienna and described it as “an orgy of sadism.” Jewish stores were plundered by SA men who sometimes (cynically but with a pretense of legality) left a receipt. Hundreds of Jews committed suicide. The Nazis listed the deaths in the newspapers under the title of “Traffic accidents.” Jewish businesses were Aryanized, that is, Jewish owners were forced to sell their businesses to Germans (or Aryans) in a transaction that was decidedly one sided and invariably a big financial loss to the Jew. In Vienna, an estimated thirty-five hundred Nazis, completely untrained for the job, grabbed Jewish businesses and acted as commissars, or managers, of the establishments. The greed in Vienna ran out of control. The Nazis stepped on one another to get at the Jewish wealth. In an ominous development, the SS officer Adolf Eichmann (an Austrian) established the Reich Central Office for Jewish Emigration in Vienna, at the seized Rothchild palace,

whereby Jews, alarmed by the terror, found their emigration out of the country much facilitated by Eichmann's diligent bureaucrats. This was one of Eichmann's contributions to Jewish annihilation: an assembly line process through which the forsaken Jew passed in a day's time, relinquishing one document (and piece of property) at every step of the way until he and his loved ones had the prized possession, a visa, the ticket of life. Eichmann also employed the services of the local Jewish leadership to facilitate the emigration, as he would later use their services to facilitate the destruction. Eichmann later became the SS officer in charge of organizing the "evacuation" of Jews by trains to the death camps in Poland. It was an easy switch for him and his team of experts, virtually all of whom were Austrians. The demands of forced emigration were not so different from the demands of mass murder: terror; identification; expropriation; concentration; expulsion; extermination. Extermination, like emigration, was a logistical problem and nothing more.

THE EVIAN CONFERENCE

The events in Austria and the subsequent pressures for immigration led the Roosevelt administration to call for an international conference to deal with the refugee crisis.

The American invitation to the foreign governments was cautiously worded. "No country," the invitation read, "would be expected or asked to receive a greater number of immigrants than is permitted by its existing legislation."

On this basis thirty-two nations of the world gathered at the French resort town of Evian to discuss the plight of the European Jews. Poland and Rumania, interested in the prospect of getting rid of their Jews, sent observers to Evian.

The U. S. Government refused to send a high ranking delegation to Evian. Its representative was the president's friend Myron C. Taylor. At the opening of the conference, Taylor said, "The time had come when governments...must act and act promptly." At the end of the conference, reporting on its paltry results, a reporter for *Newsweek* magazine answered Taylor's call with bitter sarcasm: "Most of the governments represented acted promptly by slamming their doors against Jewish refugees."

The conference was held in July 1938. Its ostensible purpose was to facilitate the flow of Jewish emigration from Nazi Germany and Nazi-occupied Austria, and to put pressure on the German government to permit the Jews to take with them a reasonable amount of property and wealth. No foreign country was interested in taking on impoverished Jews. However, the U. S. government called the Evian Conference with a different purpose in mind. A 1938 memorandum from the State Department referred to the increasing pressure on the U. S. Government to assume the leadership of world efforts to deal with the refugee question. The pressure, the memorandum stated, emanated from journalist Dorothy Thompson and "certain Congressmen with metropolitan constituencies" [i. e. Jews]. As a result, U. S. Secretary of State Cornell Hull and Under-Secretary Sumner Welles concluded that a strategy far preferable to trying to hold off this pressure would be "to get out in front and attempt to guide" the pressure, mainly in order to forestall moves for more liberal immigration legislation. In other words, the State Department felt that the best way to handle the refugee crisis would be to seize the initiative before pressure became too strong and to spread the responsibility for doing something among the thirty-two nations instead of upon the U. S. With this rationale, the State Department recommended that President Roosevelt call the Evian Conference.

At the Evian Conference, U. S. representative Myron Taylor stated that the U. S. would make the German and Austrian quota fully available. Delegates from other countries despaired of admitting more refugees. With an eye towards placating the Arabs, the British delegate did not

mention the prospect of British controlled Palestine (present-day Israel), the most logical place for the Jewish refugees. Instead, he asserted that the British Commonwealth was largely unavailable because it was already overcrowded and, in any event, the climate in the British colonies was too severe. Britain itself, the delegate continued, was completely out of the question as a place for refugees because of the high rate of unemployment. The other countries uttered similar pleas for understanding of their difficulties. The chief concierge at the Hotel Evian reflected on the proceedings:

“Very important people were here and all the delegates had a nice time. They took pleasure cruises on the lake. They gambled at night at the casino. They took mineral baths and massages at the Etablissement Thermal. Some of them took the excursion to Chamonix to go summer skiing. Some went riding; we have, you know, one of the finest stables in France. But, of course, it is difficult to sit indoors hearing speeches when all the pleasures that Evian offers are outside.”

KRISTALLNACHT

In March 1938, after the flight of Polish Jews from Vienna to Poland, the Polish government promulgated a decree to annul the Polish citizenship of Poles living abroad for more than five years unless those Poles received a special stamp in their passports by October 31, 1938. This was clearly an attempt by the thoroughly anti-Semitic Polish government to free itself of the Polish Jews living in Germany. The special stamp necessary for the passports, predictably enough, was denied the Polish Jews. As a result, over fifty thousand Jews became state-less. Not to be outmaneuvered, the Nazis made arrangements to expel the Polish Jews forthwith. In brutal fashion, the Jews were uprooted and dumped in a no-man's land on the German-Polish frontier. In Paris, a seventeen year old Jewish student named Hershl Grynszpan, outraged at the expulsion of his

parents from Hanover, Germany, shot and fatally wounded the third secretary of the German Embassy, a man named Ernst vom Rath who, ironically, was said to have been an anti-Nazi.

On November 8, 1938, at the annual celebration of the 1923 beer hall putsch, Hitler was overheard telling Goebbels that the “SA should have a fling.”

Hitler left the beer hall before giving his traditional speech. This was an obvious effort to disassociate himself and the government from what would later be described as a “spontaneous” outburst of German anger against the Jews. That night the order went out to Nazi party offices throughout Germany instructing the local SA in the details of what became known as Kristallnacht, or Night of the Broken Glass. The instructions were blunt: burn synagogues; smash windows of Jewish businesses; ransack Jewish homes and businesses; arrest all Jewish males and take them to concentration camp. SA men dressed in civilian clothing, but with the tell-tale black boots, led the assault. Crowds of Germans invariably gathered, including the curious, the delighted, and the appalled. Virtually all of the synagogues in the Greater German Reich (Germany, Austria, and the newly incorporated Sudeten territories) were torched (a few were spared because they were located next to Aryan buildings and the dutiful fire department, as instructed, was on hand to prevent the damage to German property); Jewish homes were raided; seven thousand Jewish businesses were destroyed, the glass from their windows littering the sidewalks and giving the pogrom its name. Thirty thousand Jewish men were sent to concentration camps; many perished but those with a visa to another country found the rare exit from the camps. Over a hundred Jews were killed that night, and thousands were subjected to sadistic torture. Not surprisingly, Goering and Heydrich (a leading SS general and the future “engineer of the final solution”) were angered by Goebbels' call for the pogrom. They saw it as an effort by him and the SA to get a piece of the immense wealth involved in the expropriation of Jewish property. Goering and Heydrich wanted the anti-Jewish action to be done in an orderly way; mob violence was not the

answer. It was too costly: who was to pay for the six million dollars worth of plate glass that was shattered on Kristallnacht? German insurance companies? No, that would exhaust Germany's precious foreign currency reserves. The glass represented half the yearly output from Belgium, the country whence it came. Goering decided that a one billion Reich mark fine would be levied on German Jews. This fine would pay for the destruction wrought on November 9-10, 1938. This was an ominous precursor. There would be no budget for the destruction of Jews. In the end, the Jewish wealth would pay the costs of Jewish destruction.

“Incidentally,” Goering said at a meeting to decide who would pay for the destruction that resulted from Kristallnacht, “I'd like to say again that I would not like to be a Jew in Germany.”

Kristallnacht was the last occasion when violence was meted out to Jews on the streets of Germany. When the physical destruction of Jewry began, the German Jews would be escorted to the train stations and whence to their unknown future “in the east” [i. e. Poland].

WAGNER-ROGER'S BILL

In the Greater German Reich, an estimated 20,000 Jewish children had been left both homeless and fatherless by the Kristallnacht destruction and the imprisonment of Jewish men. In the U. S., Senator Robert F. Wagner and Representative Edith Rogers proposed the Wagner-Rogers bill that would allow these children to immigrate into the U. S. outside of the existing quota. The bill would permit the admission of only these children. It would not permit the admission of other children at a later date. It was a one-time only affair. According to a Gallup poll conducted at the time, two thirds of the American public opposed the bill. In the end, the bill did not even reach the floor of Congress for debate. It was squelched in committee hearings. During the debate on the Wagner-Roger's bill, President Roosevelt remained silent. When the president

was on a cruise in the Caribbean, his wife Eleanor telegraphed him to ask if she might state publicly that both of them supported the bill. The president answered, "You may, but it's better that I don't for the time being." The "time being" did not change. The president never voiced an opinion, one way or the other, on the Wagner-Roger's bill. He signed an internal memorandum on the bill, "File. FDR."

In 1940, when Nazi Germany attacked western Europe and German bombs began to fall on England, great numbers of Americans offered refuge to British children who had been displaced by the bombings. This was in great contrast to the lack of shelter offered to Jewish children just two years before.

The type of British child most typically requested by American families was "a six year old girl, preferably with blond hair."

THE ST. LOUIS

In May 1939, one month before the outbreak of World War II, the ocean liner St. Louis sailed from Hamburg, Germany, bound for Havana, Cuba, with several hundred Jewish refugees, not all of whom had legitimate landing permits. The St. Louis docked in the harbor at Havana but were refused entry. The St. Louis sailed up and down the Atlantic coast of the U. S. but was not permitted to dock at any port. In the end, the St. Louis sailed back to Europe. Its passengers disembarked at Antwerp, Belgium. Less than a year later, the German armies swept across Western Europe and many of the former passengers on the St. Louis were murdered during the following years. For his efforts on behalf of the Jews on his ship, the German captain of the St. Louis was later honored as a Righteous Gentile by Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Memorial organization in Israel.

Only one place in the world did not require a visa for Jewish refugees to

disembark: Shanghai. It became a refuge for thousands of Jews who otherwise would have perished.

THE AMERICAN PUBLIC IN 1938

In 1938, four different polls indicated that between 71% and 85% of the American public opposed raising the quota to admit refugees. An estimated 67% of the American public wanted to keep all refugees out of the country.

WORLD WAR II

With a method of warfare known as Blitzkrieg, or Lightning War, the German Army quickly destroyed the valiant but antiquated and hopelessly outgunned Polish Army. On September 17, 1939, the Soviet Red Army crossed Poland's eastern frontier and occupied Poland's eastern territories. The Soviet action was undertaken in accordance with the Nazi-Soviet Pact signed a week before the Nazi attack on Poland. Though mortal enemies, Hitler and Stalin put aside their differences on the matter of Poland: the pact, in a secret protocol, allowed for the division of Poland between the two totalitarian powers. Warsaw, the Polish capital, fell to the Germans on September 27, 1939, after a terrific pounding by artillery and by the vengeful German air force, which appeared to delight in singling out the Jewish Quarter of the city for punishment.

Following immediately behind the German troops were mobilized units of SS killers known as the Einsatzgruppen, or strike commandos. As the German army general Franz Halder noted in his diary, the mission of these killers was "cleaning out: Jewry, [Polish] intelligentsia, clergy, nobility."

The first targets of the Nazis were the representatives of the Polish elite, the ones perceived as most likely to organize underground resistance to

the Nazis. The best and the brightest of the Polish nation were murdered at killing sites such as Palmiry outside of Warsaw: doctors, lawyers, teachers, university professors, police, army officers, priests, etc. The Poles were viewed as “sub-humans” by the Germans. They would be treated as slaves of the “master race.” It would be enough, said Himmler, if the Poles knew enough to count to ten in German.

On September 21, 1939, as the Polish campaign came to an end, the Nazi leader Heydrich held a conference to map out Nazi policy in occupied Poland. He ordered that lists be prepared with the names of all top and middle level Polish leaders, including teachers, clergy, nobility, and army officers. As for the Jews in Poland, Heydrich's memorandum of September 21, 1939, provided a blue print for the “final solution.” Heydrich instructed that the Jews be concentrated in city ghettos “for a better possibility of control, and later possibility of deportation.” He made a distinction between the “ultimate goal,” which required a certain period of time to implement, and the short-term measures “leading to the fulfillment of the ultimate goal.” Heydrich called for the establishment of Judenrats, or Jewish councils, to facilitate the flow of orders from the Germans to the Jewish populace. The Jewish owners of small businesses were to disappear. Jewish property was to be handed over to Aryans.

THE HOLOCAUST

In late 1941, the murder of European Jews entered a new phase, a phase in which the death camps were utilized. Hitherto, the Jews of Eastern and Central Europe had been subjected to disease, starvation, and violence in the Nazi ghettos. In fact, an estimated 20% of Polish Jewry died in the ghettos. With the invasion of the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, mobile squads of Nazi murderers known as Einsatzgruppen (cooperating with the German Army) swept the Baltic states (Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia) as well as Ukraine and Byelorussia. The Einsatzgruppen commanders included a former opera singer, a university professor, a Protestant

pastor, and a large number of lawyers. In excess of one million Jews were murdered by the Einsatzgruppen. Typically, the Jews (men, women, and children) were shot in the back of the head and dumped in ditches the Jews themselves had been forced to dig. There was, however, a problem with German soldiers killing unarmed Jews (who were labeled communists, partisans, or simply “enemies of the Reich”). The shootings had a devastating psychological toll. The Jews were dead, but the men who killed them were also, in a sense, dead. As well, the expenditure of millions of bullets did not sit well with the economy-minded Germans. There had to be a change in tactics if Hitler's instructions for “a final solution of the Jewish question” was to be realized. The decision was taken to establish death camps in which Jews were destroyed by, first, carbon monoxide, and, subsequently, by Zyklon B, a poisonous gas whose original purpose was the extermination of rodents.

On December 8, 1941, the Nazis opened the first death camp at the village of Chelmno, in western Poland. Here the Jews were murdered in gas vans (the size of large moving vans) by carbon monoxide. The bodies were burned in pits dug by Jews at a nearby forest. In the spring of 1942, the Nazis established death camps in Eastern Poland outside the villages of Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka. In June 1942, the Nazis expanded Auschwitz-Birkenau, the largest and most infamous death camp. It was located approximately thirty-five miles west of the Polish city of Krakow.

AUSCHWITZ-BIRKENAU

In the beginning of the war, the Nazis established a prisoner of war camp at the former Polish cavalry barracks in the town of Oswiecim, known as Auschwitz in the German language. In February 1941, prior to the Russian campaign, Himmler visited Auschwitz and saw the potential for expansion in a nearby field (a marsh, really) at the village of Birkenau. Jewish slaves were forced to build a new camp there. Architects from Germany designed and built four large (underground) gas chambers and

(above ground) crematoriums. In the summer of 1941, two civilians from Hamburg arrived at Auschwitz to familiarize the SS staff, including the medical doctors (who basically ran the place) with the killing agent Zyklon B, an industrial poison used to kill rodents. Pellets of Zyklon B, dumped through a small hole in the ceiling of the gas chamber (transported in a truck marked with a red cross), would be used now to kill human beings, succeeding diesel exhaust as the prime killing agent. In September 1941, the first gassing of human beings was conducted in the notorious Block 11 at Auschwitz. The victims were two hundred and fifty patients from the camp hospital and six hundred Russian prisoners of war.

Jewish people from all of the countries in Europe were sent on trains to Auschwitz. Ninety percent were gassed immediately, having been told they were going to take a shower and to breath deeply. Some of the young and healthy Jews were “selected” by an SS doctor to live, in other words, to live long enough to be worked to death. The average life expectancy of a slave at Auschwitz was three months. The vast camp was also the site of the extermination of tens of thousands of Polish prisoners.

On October 7, 1944, Jewish slaves (“sonderkommandos”), whose task was to burn bodies in the crematorium, blew up a crematorium and staged a short-lived revolt. It was brutally suppressed by the SS. Jewish revolts also occurred at Treblinka and Sobibor. In those instances, SS men were killed, and scores of Jews fled to the forests. Jewish slaves attempted a (little known) revolt at Belzec; the effort was discovered and the conspirators hanged.

German industry fully participated in the Holocaust. Auschwitz-Birkenau was not only a large factory of death, it was the site of major German industries, like Krupp and I. G. Farben. Jewish slaves provided a vast reservoir of free labor.

Auschwitz-Birkenau had the capacity to exterminate 17, 280 persons a day. The SS doctor Mengele described the destruction process at the

camp as “applied biology.”

REIGNER'S TELEGRAM

In July 1942, a German industrialist living near Auschwitz-Birkenau learned of the camp's existence through friends and contacts in the Nazi high command. The industrialist, Dr. Eduard Schulte, also learned of Hitler's determination to destroy all of the Jews in Europe. In an effort to alert the leaders of the Western democracies about the genocide, Schulte traveled to neutral Switzerland (ostensibly on war-related business). In Geneva, he relayed information (through an intermediary) about the destruction of Jews to Gerhardt Reigner, an official of the World Jewish Congress. Reigner transmitted Schulte's information (by way of the American consulate in Geneva) to the British Foreign Ministry and to the U. S. State Department. Reigner specifically requested the State Department to forward the information to Rabbi Stephen Wise, president of the World Jewish Congress. In August 1942, Reigner's telegram describing Schulte's information reached both London and Washington. Before this information reached the West, it was generally believed that terrible atrocities had been perpetrated against the Jews (and others) in Nazi-occupied Europe. However, no one seemed to understand that the atrocities were a mere prelude to the total destruction of the Jews. Hence the importance of Schulte's message: he provided the Western leaders with the information that there was a Nazi plan at the highest levels to eliminate all Jews and that all the ghettos and deportations and other individual measures were only steps along the way to total extermination.

When Reigner's telegram reached the State Department in Washington, officials described its contents as “fantastic allegations” and refused to pass on the information to Rabbi Wise. In an interview, Richard Breitman, author of Breaking the Silence, has said that the State Department officials felt that forwarding the information to Rabbi Wise

would cause Jewish officials “to react in ways which the State Department did not think helpful. That is to say, to put pressure on the government to do things they believed not in the government's interest to do. In other words, to try to save Jewish lives.”

Later, a State Department official wrote an internal memorandum explaining U. S. policy regarding refugees: “There was always the danger that the German Government might agree to turn over to the United States and to Great Britain a large number of Jewish refugees.”

For three months, the State Department refused to publish the information contained in the Reigner telegram. Indeed, the State Department instructed the American consulate in Switzerland to stop transmitting information about the destruction of the Jews because “it would expose us to increased pressure to do something more specific to aid these people.”

By the late autumn of 1942, sources in Europe had confirmed the contents of Reigner's telegram. One source was the Polish underground courier Jan Karski. He entered both the Warsaw Ghetto and the Belzec death camp to witness the Nazi destruction policies so that he could authoritatively report that Jewish annihilation was not a rumor and that he himself saw it. Karski then smuggled himself out of Nazi-occupied Poland to Britain from which he traveled to America. He informed the Western governments of what was happening to the Jews in Poland.

It was impossible to keep a lid on the story. On November 24, 1942, Under Secretary of State Sumner Welles informed Rabbi Wise, “I regret to tell you, Dr. Wise, that these (documents) confirm and justify your deepest fears” about the annihilation of European Jewry. The same evening, Rabbi Wise gave a press conference in which he detailed the destruction of the Jews in Europe based upon information the State Department had confirmed. Wise estimated that two million Jews had already been murdered. Sadly, that estimate was less than the actual

number of murdered Jews. The following day, November 25, 1942, *The New York Times* published an account of Wise's press conference. Rabbi Wise was quoted as saying: "The State Department finally made available today the documents which have confirmed the stories and rumors of Jewish extermination in all Hitler-ruled Europe." The article, describing the U. S. government's first acknowledgment of the Holocaust, appeared on page 10 of the *The New York Times*. Only five of the nineteen most widely circulated newspapers in the U. S. put the story of Jewish destruction on the front page. None of the articles in any of the nineteen papers were prominently placed. Two of the nineteen papers did not include information about Rabbi Wise's press conference.

During the three months between the arrival of the Reigner telegram in Washington and the confirmation of the Holocaust by the State Department, an additional one million Jews had been murdered.

BERMUDA CONFERENCE

On April 19, 1943, the same day as the outbreak of the Warsaw Ghetto revolt, British and American diplomats (of a relatively low rank) met on the island of Bermuda ostensibly to discuss what might be done to relieve the plight of European Jews. It should be noted that tens of thousands of Jews were still alive in countries beyond the reach of the Germans: Bulgaria, Spain, Hungary, and Rumania. The Bermuda Conference was held largely as a result of growing public pressure in England.

However, as historian David Wyman ([Abandonment of the Jews: America and the Holocaust 1941-1945](#)) has said, "Rescue was not the purpose of Bermuda. The purpose was to dampen growing pressures for rescue." In a word, Bermuda was "a facade for inaction."

The first task of the U. S. diplomats was to locate a prominent American who would be willing to represent the U. S. at the conference. Myron Taylor, the U. S. representative at the Evian Conference five years before and the American with the most experience on the refugee issue, was rejected by President Roosevelt. Associate Supreme Court Justice Owen J. Roberts refused the offer. President Roosevelt lightheartedly replied, "I fully understand, but I am truly sorry that you cannot go to Bermuda, especially at the time of the Easter lilies! After my talk with you, the State Department, evidently decided (under British pressure) that the meeting should be held at once instead of waiting until June." The president of Yale University at first accepted the offer to represent the U. S. at Bermuda, but then rejected it under pressure from his board of directors. Finally, the president of Princeton University, Harold W. Dodds, accepted the appointment. Wyman has caustically observed, "It was not a good spring for finding distinguished Americans who could devote time to the tragedy of the Jews of Europe."

Bermuda was selected as the site of the conference because travel to the island was strictly limited under war-time conditions. There would be a few (hand-picked) reporters and no nettlesome Jewish representatives hovering over the shoulders of the diplomats, who stayed at the Horizons Oceanside resort "set among hibiscus and oleander and lily fields in bloom for Easter." The State Department made it very clear to the diplomats at Bermuda that there would be no special emphasis placed upon the suffering of the Jews. This was "strictly prohibited." In addition, it was made clear that the Roosevelt Administration did not have the power to relax or to rescind the immigration laws. It was not mentioned, however, that the administration did have the power to permit the quota to be filled to its legal limit. During the Second World War, the U. S. quota was virtually untouched: 21,000 refugees, most of them Jews, were admitted into the country. This number constituted ten percent of the quota. In other words, nearly 190,000 openings went unfilled while the slaughter of Jews continued unabated. The diplomats at Bermuda did not reach any conclusions regarding the rescue of Jews in Nazi-occupied Europe. Perhaps because of the "poverty" of their results, the diplomats

did not issue a final report. “Not even the pessimists among us expected such sterility,” said Sam Dickstein of the House of Representatives.

Several months after the Bermuda Conference, the Jewish newspaper *The Frontier* wrote, “The Warsaw ghetto is liquidated. The leaders of Polish Jewry are dead by their own hand, and the world which looks on passively is, in its way, dead too.”

A WHITE HOUSE MEETING

In March 1943, one month before the Bermuda Conference, Secretary of State Cornell Hull, President Franklin Roosevelt, British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden, and British Ambassador to the U. S. Lord Halifax, met at the White House. At one point in the wide ranging discussions, Secretary of State Hull raised the subject of the 70,000 Bulgarian Jews and the possibility of their rescue from the Nazis.

According to the transcript of the meeting, Eden replied, “The whole problem of the Jews in Europe is very difficult. 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 in Germany.”

In an interview, historian David Wyman offered this comment: “Eden was afraid that large numbers of Jews would be saved. This was his fear and everybody in that room knew then what was the fate of the European Jews. They had known for four months. In that room were the foremost leaders of the two great western democracies with the one exception of Winston Churchill. As far as the record shows, nobody objected to that statement.”

Elie Wiesel, Holocaust survivor and Nobel laureate, said this about the indifference of the West: “All those unused visas, all those unheeded appeals, all those useless screams.”

PALESTINE

The British, for their part, were not interested in the prospect of Jewish refugees from Europe finding their way to Palestine (present-day Israel), which was then a British mandate. In 1939, British authorities issued a White Paper placing a restriction on Jewish immigration to Palestine. The presence of additional Jews in Palestine would place immense pressure on the British policy of placating the Arab population of the region. The British interest in Arab oil is not to be overlooked. It is of note that after the Second World War the British tried to thwart Jewish emigration to Palestine, leading to the incarceration in British camps of Jews who had survived Hitler's camps.

THE WAR REFUGEE BOARD

Fourteen months after the State Department confirmed the Nazi extermination of the Jews, the Roosevelt Administration established the War Refugee Board, a government agency whose purpose was to rescue Jews still alive in Europe.

The Roosevelt Administration was reluctant to be seen as friendly to Jews even at this late date. The War Refugee Board was formed only begrudgingly. Public pressure had been growing, and it had become evident that the government, particularly the State Department, was avoiding the task of Jewish rescue altogether. The U. S. Treasury Department, under Secretary Henry Morgenthau, realized that the State Department was actually obstructing efforts to rescue Jews. Indeed, the State Department (led by Breckenridge Long) had issued secret instructions to suppress information about atrocities against Jews and to postpone issuing visas to Jews trying to escape the Nazis. Disgusted, Morgenthau had his subordinates at Treasury prepare a report detailing

the State Department's actions, or lack of actions, regarding the Jewish question. The report, titled "On the Acquiescence of this Government in the Murder of Jews," was sent to the president on January 15, 1944. David Wyman has written, "Roosevelt was finally cornered into the position that he had to do something or a scandal was going to break."

On January 22, 1944, the president established the War Refugee Board. The executive order the president signed establishing the War Refugee Board (known as the WRB) specified that it would have the support of every government agency, specifically the support of the State Department, Treasury Department, and the War Department (today's Pentagon).

The most notable achievement of the War Refugee Board was the successful transport of 982 refugees (89% of them Jewish) from unoccupied territories in Europe to the small community of Oswego in upstate New York.

In order to assuage that part of the American public that was against the admission of refugees, President Roosevelt pledged that the 982 refugees bound for Oswego would return to Europe after the war's end. In fact, the refugees were required to sign a document promising to do just that, although the overwhelming majority of the refugees had lost their entire families to the Nazis and there would be nowhere to return. The refugees were met by hostility on the part of many residents of Oswego. After the war, President Truman (who became president when FDR died in April 1945) issued an executive order permitting the Oswego refugees to remain in the U. S.

The journalist I. F. Stone remarked that Oswego was "a kind of token payment of decency, a bargain counter flourish in humanitarianism."

John Pehle, a Treasury Department official who lent his full energies to Jewish rescue, said this to say about the War Refugee Board: "What we

did was little enough. It was late...late and little.”

WALLENBERG AND THE JEWS OF HUNGARY

The five hundred thousand Jews of Hungary were the last Jews to be deported to their deaths at Auschwitz-Birkenau. In the spring of 1944, the Nazis began the well-practiced task of rounding up and centralizing the Jews in ghettos and then loading them on cattle cars for “transport” to Poland. The Nazi annihilation of European Jewry had been going on for three years, but the Jews of Hungary (including the young Elie Wiesel) did not have the slightest idea that murder awaited them in Poland. Jews who listened secretly to the Voice of America radio or to the BBC (British Broadcasting Company) did not hear any references to the Holocaust. For the reception of Hungarian Jewry, the Nazis constructed a special railroad spur that led directly into the Birkenau camp. This facilitated the destruction process immensely.

In the autumn of 1944, as the Soviet Army approached Budapest, a “diplomat” from neutral Sweden named Raoul Wallenberg arrived in the Hungarian capital. He was sent by the War Refugee Board in Washington. Wallenberg began passing out forged Swedish identity cards to the beleaguered Jews, enabling them to pose as Swedish citizens and thus to avoid Nazi deportation. Wallenberg had managed to find a loophole in the Nazi destruction process: namely, the reluctance of even Eichmann to tamper with foreign policy by arresting citizens holding papers (even false papers) to a country enjoying diplomatic relations with the Nazis, or at least neutral relations. Wallenberg managed to save an estimated twenty thousand people. When the Soviets liberated Budapest in January 1945, Wallenberg was summoned to Russian headquarters in a nearby city. The Soviets possibly thought he was an American spy. Wallenberg disappeared into Soviet captivity, and was never heard from again.

THE BOMBING OF AUSCHWITZ

Leaders of the Jewish resistance in Europe and in Palestine petitioned the Western powers to disrupt the flow of death trains to Auschwitz. They urged bombing of the railroad lines leading from Hungary to Poland. The British and U. S. air force, stationed in Italy, followed precisely those railroad lines while navigating their way to the very region where Auschwitz-Birkenau was located, a region heavily populated by German industries that were availing themselves of the Jewish slave labor nearby. When the possibility of rescuing war refugees (i. e. Jews) was first raised, the War Department made the decision that the U. S. armed forces would not engage in rescue efforts at all. It refused to bomb the railroad lines or the Auschwitz-death camp itself, although U. S. bombers passed directly over the camp (and inadvertently photographed it) while on bombing mission to hit the nearby German industries. In fact, the Americans accidentally dropped a few bombs on the camp and damaged the rail spur, to the exultation of the Jews who prayed that the camp would be bombed and the machinery of death crippled. The official view of the American government on rescue was blunt: winning the war was the best way to rescue the Jews. This lackadaisical view did not take into account that there were two wars going on: a conventional war between armies; and a war the Nazis waged against the Jews. In the war against an undefended, unsuspecting civilian populace, the Nazis won.

During the period of time when the Jews of Hungary were being deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau, the German Army was fighting a desperate battle to hold back the Soviet Red Army on the eastern front. The German troops needed trains to bring arms and supplies to the front. Despite the urgency of the situation, Hitler ordered that trains carrying the Hungarian Jews to Auschwitz-Birkenau have priority over trains carrying the needed war material to the Eastern Front. In other words, the war against the Jews came first.

Historian David Wyman has written, "To kill the Jews, the Nazis were willing to weaken their capacity to fight the war. The U. S. and its allies, however, were willing to attempt nothing to save them."

FDR

In conclusion, Wyman had this to say about President Roosevelt's reaction to the Jewish catastrophe in Nazi-occupied Europe: "One of the key reasons Roosevelt didn't act, I'm convinced, and definitely the key reason the State Department wouldn't act, was the fear of the anti-Semites in Congress, and the hell they'd raise if any moves were made in that direction. The anti-Semitism in congress was reflective of the anti-Semitism in American society."

Evidently, FDR did not lose his political touch. In January 1943, when Polish Jewry had been destroyed and the rest of European Jewry was on the verge of destruction, a Roper poll asked Americans a simple question: "Would it be a good idea, or a bad idea to admit more refugees (i. e. Jews) after the war?" Seventy-eight percent of the respondents answered it would be "a bad idea." In a 1944 survey, Americans were asked to identify "the most dangerous group" to the country. The response: 1. Jews (24%) 2. Japanese (16%) 3. Germans (8%).

MAY 8, 1945

On April 30, 1945, ten days after his fifty-sixth birthday, as Soviet artillery shells landed in the garden above, Hitler (and his wife of several hours, Eva Braun) committed suicide in his underground bunker in Berlin. The German armed forces surrendered to the Soviets and to the Western allies on May 8, 1945. The annihilation of the Jewish people of Europe finally ground to a halt. Himmler, in disguise, was captured by the

British. When his identity was discovered, he promptly committed suicide. With the wealth of their victims as financial backing, the Nazi killers created a secret organization called Odessa which organized the escape of countless war criminals to friendly countries in the Middle East and South America. Eichmann, for one, fled to Argentina, where he worked as a mechanic under his own name until Israel agents kidnaped him in 1961. According to Nazi hunter Simon Wiesenthal, an Austrian priest located in an office near the Vatican in Rome was a critical link in organizing the flight of the Nazi criminals to post-war safety.

On November 20, 1945, the first of the war-crimes trials began in Nuremberg, the German city where before the war the Nazis had staged their annual rallies. The leading Nazis were tried by judges from the Allied countries. This was somewhat awkward given the fact that the Soviets had begun the war on the side of the Nazis. Indeed, the Soviets had their own crimes to account for, including the deportation of over a million Polish citizens from Eastern Poland to Siberia and the massacre of Polish officers at Katyn Forest and elsewhere. None of that history was raised at Nuremberg. Twelve leading Nazis were sentenced to death; in addition, three received life prison sentences; four received reduced prison terms; and three were acquitted. Goering managed to take cyanide a few hours before he was to hang. In general, the majority of Nazi criminals returned to normal life without a hitch. It was not a difficult transition from murderer to ordinary citizen. Indeed, in many cases the murderer was an ordinary citizen who, he or she pleaded, was just taking orders. The elite of German and Austrian societies were involved in Nazi crimes up to their necks. In the Who's Who of the war time generation, a curious gap exists between the years 1939-'45. In the post-war years, the Austrian judiciary has made a joke out of prosecuting Nazi criminals: the victims are ridiculed and the perpetrators are accorded deferential treatment. In contrast, Nazi criminals have often been pursued rigorously in (then West) Germany.

THE STATE OF ISRAEL

Jewish survivors of the Holocaust tried to leave Europe. The U. S. quota system was still intact. Palestine (present-day Israel) was a British Mandate, and the British blockade of Palestine was formidable. In the meantime, many of the survivors left Eastern Europe (particularly after the July 1946 pogrom in Kielce, Poland, when local Poles slaughtered forty-two Jews) and settled in Displaced Persons camps in Germany under the protective eye of the Western Powers. After the Holocaust and the almost total abandonment of the Jewish people, Jewish leaders (although not all) believed that a Jewish state was the only safe place for the Jewish people. The Jewish underground group Mossad secretly smuggled Jews out of Europe to Palestine. The Jewish refugees were often arrested by the British and the survivors of Hitler were placed in British camps behind barbed wire. The Jewish underground in Palestine fought a terrorist war against the British authorities until the government decided to withdraw from Palestine. On May 14, 1948, the United Nations voted for the establishment of the State of Israel. Shortly thereafter, six Arab armies attacked the infant state. The Israelis, the Arabs said, were stealing their land. The Arab armies were thrown back. This was the first of four wars between Israelis and Arabs.

AMERICA AND THE HOLOCAUST: QUESTIONS

America and the Holocaust

Name _____

1. In what ways did the 1929 world depression influence American public opinion regarding Jewish refugees from Europe? Explain.

2. "It is a fantastic commentary on the inhumanity of our times that for thousands and thousands of people a piece of paper with a stamp on it is the difference between life and death."

Who made this statement? What was this person's connection to the refugees? What does the term "a piece of paper with a stamp" mean? Explain the statement?

3. What was Anschluss? When did it occur? How did Anschluss impact the refugee situation? What impact did Anschluss have on American refugee policy?

4. What was the Evian Conference and what was the State Department's purpose in calling it? What was the result of the conference?

5. The statement "None is too many" was made by whom? Explain the meaning of the statement.

6. What was Kristallnacht and when did it occur? Jewish men taken into custody were released under what conditions? Give examples.

7. What was the quota? During the pre-war period, organizations working on behalf of Jewish refugees did not raise the subject of

enlarging the quota. Why?

8. What was the Wagner-Roger's Bill? When was it proposed? What did it propose? What happened to it?

9 How did the fate of the Wagner-Roger's Bill compare with U. S. legislation in 1940 concerning British child refugees? What was the difference?

10. What was the St. Louis? What was its fate? Explain.

11. Where was the one place in the world where Jews could land without a visa?

12. Who was Eduard Schulte? What was his role and significance in the history of the Holocaust?

13. What was the Reigner telegram? What was its importance? What was the response of the U. S. State Department to this telegram?

14. Who was Jan Karski? What was his role and significance during the Holocaust?

15. According to polls conducted before and during the war, what was the attitude of the American public towards the Jewish refugees in Europe?

16. What was the stated purpose of the Bermuda conference? Why did the State Department call for the conference? Why was the conference held on the island of Bermuda?

17. Compare and contrast the Bermuda conference in 1943 with the Evian conference in 1938?

18. What happened in Warsaw on the first day of the Bermuda conference?

19. What was the U.S. War Refugee Board? When was it created? Why did President Roosevelt create it? What were its accomplishments?

20. Why were the railroad tracks leading to the death camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau not bombed by the Allies? What was the U. S. military's policy in regard to refugees? Explain.

21. The historian David Wyman has said, "To kill the Jews, the Nazis were willing to weaken their capacity to fight the war. The U.S. and its allies, however, were willing to attempt almost nothing to save them." Explain and give examples.