

“The Holocaust, America, and American Jewry” Revisited

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“Nobody really understood the reports about the Nazi mass killings until it was too late... There was little or nothing the Allies could have done to rescue the Jews... American Jewry was powerless to influence Allied policy.” So stated Prof. Yehuda Bauer, in his essay in *The Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs* (VI:1, 2012). If his claims sound vaguely familiar to readers of a certain age, it is because Bauer’s line was, in fact, the conventional wisdom in the first decades after World War II. Then, in the late 1960s, everything began to change. A wave of new scholarship, beginning in 1968 and continuing to this day, irrefutably documented the Allies’ abandonment of the Jews and the Jewish leadership’s inadequate response to the crisis. Prof. Bauer’s IJFA essay is a valiant but thoroughly unconvincing throwback to an era that has been bypassed by the yeoman work of an entire generation of historians.

A thick layer of circumstances shielded Franklin D. Roosevelt from criticism for many years—his four landslide election victories, his leadership in bringing America out of the Great Depression and to the threshold of triumph in World War II, and his tragic death in office. Postwar biographies of FDR and public discussions of the Roosevelt era tended to reflect this aura of reverence. Criticism of Roosevelt’s response to the Holocaust was almost non-existent during the first two decades after the war. For a long time, the American Jewish leadership, too, enjoyed near-immunity from criticism for its response to the Nazi genocide. Autobiographies by Jewish leaders in the 1950s and 1960s naturally painted a rosy portrait of their wartime record. Serious scholarly studies of American Jewry’s response to the Holocaust were nowhere to be found.

All of this began to change in 1968, with the publication of *While Six Million Died: A Chronicle of American Apathy*, by the investigative journalist Arthur Morse, and *Paper Walls: America and the Refugee Crisis 1938–1941*, by Prof. David S. Wyman. They were soon followed by *The Politics of Rescue: The Roosevelt Administration and the Holocaust, 1938–1945*, by Prof. Henry L. Feingold (1970), and *No Haven For the Oppressed: United States Policy Toward Jewish Refugees, 1938–1945*, by Prof. Saul

S. Friedman (1973). These studies found that the Roosevelt administration knew of the Nazi genocide early enough to have made a difference, and that the administration consciously neglected opportunities to find Jewish refugees a haven in the 1930s and to rescue some Jews during the Holocaust itself. Feingold and Friedman were also moderately critical of the American Jewish leadership for not setting aside internal disputes to focus on rescue. They cited the publicity campaigns by the dissident activists known as the Bergson Group as evidence that louder protests by American Jews might have moved the rescue issue forward.

Interestingly, the scholar who was most critical of American Jewry at that time was none other than Yehuda Bauer himself. In an essay titled "When Did They Know?" in the American Jewish magazine *Midstream* in April 1968, Bauer argued that the famous Riegner telegram of August 1942, the message alerting the West about the Nazis' plan to annihilate European Jewry, was actually preceded by a more important report from the Jewish Socialist Bund of Poland about the murder of 700,000 Jews. "[I]t is somewhat difficult to put all the blame for complacency on British and American statesmen," Bauer wrote, "when Jewish leaders made no visible attempt to put pressure on their governments for any active policy of rescue. The Jewish leadership could hardly plead lack of knowledge. From the early part of June 1942, they ought to have known, from a Jewish source fortified by the prestige of the Polish Government in Exile, of what was going on in Europe..."

The next wave of scholarship came in the late 1970s. Prof. Wyman's 1978 essay in *Commentary*, "Why Auschwitz Was Never Bombed," revealed that US planes repeatedly bombed German oil factories adjacent to Auschwitz, but did not hit the death camp because of the Roosevelt administration's policy of refraining from using even minimal resources for humanitarian objectives. Walter Lacquer (*The Terrible Secret*, 1980) recounted how the Allies learned about the Nazi genocide, while Martin Gilbert (*Auschwitz and the Allies*, 1980) focused on their knowledge of, and response to, Auschwitz. Monty N. Penkower (*The Jews Were Expendable*, 1983) added more information about the Allied response. David Wyman's *The Abandonment of the Jews*, which reached the best-seller lists in 1985, presented the full scope of the US response in a volume that was widely regarded as the definitive work on the subject. ("Wyman is unsurpassed in his analysis of the US administration," Prof. Bauer wrote in his review.¹)

It was at about this time that the question of American Jewry's wartime behavior began to receive focused attention. Prof. Bauer's sympathetic study of the Joint Distribution Committee's relief work, published under the sweeping title *American Jewry and the Holocaust*, appeared in 1981. The following year, Melvin Urofsky authored the first biography of Rabbi Stephen S. Wise (the most influential Jewish leader of the era), *A Voice That Spoke for Justice*. Two special issues of the

scholarly journal *American Jewish History*, in 1979 and 1981, presented cutting-edge research that, overall, did not reflect well on the Jewish leadership. They included such topics as the ultra-cautious response of the American Jewish Committee to the plight of German Jewry (Fred Lazin), intra-organizational rivalries (Aaron Berman, Efraim Zuroff), the plenitude of Holocaust news in US Jewish newspapers (Alex Grobman), and the achievements of the Bergson Group despite opposition by Jewish leaders (Monty Penkower). An unflattering documentary film on the subject, *Who Shall Live, Who Shall Die*, by Laurence Jarvik, released in 1982, further stoked public debate.

All this set the stage for the development that really catapulted the issue to serious public attention: the creation, in 1981, of the American Jewish Commission on the Holocaust. Commonly called the Goldberg Commission, after its chairman, former Associate Supreme Court Justice Arthur J. Goldberg, the commission brought together thirty-four Jewish community activists, journalists, and officials of Jewish organizations to assess American Jewry's response to the Holocaust. In late 1982, however, the project imploded when the commissioners rejected a draft final report that they deemed excessively critical of the Jewish leadership's response to the Holocaust. The commission's major financial backer withdrew; the commission dissolved, and the subject of US Jews and the Holocaust was suddenly on the front page of *The New York Times*. By early 1984, new financing and a new research team produced a somewhat less critical final report. The rise, fall, and revival of the commission set off a torrid debate in the early 1980s in the pages of *Midstream*, occasionally spilling over into *Commentary*, *The New York Times Sunday Magazine*, and other publications.

In that debate, the most vociferous defenders of the Jewish leadership were the writer Marie Syrkin; Prof. Bernard Wasserstein, author of a book about the British response to the Holocaust; Lucy S. Dawidowicz, author of *The War Against the Jews*; and Prof. Bauer. Their passions did not always bring out their best side: One recalls, for example, Syrkin's unsettling accusation that critics of the Jewish leadership were guilty of "necrophilia."² Their camp argued that American Jews enjoyed little or no political power, that the Bergson Group's accomplishments were more smoke than fire, and that the Jewish leaders were as active as could reasonably have been expected, given the antisemitic temper of the times.

The main problem this camp encountered was that many of their key claims were soon discredited by new research. Syrkin, for example, made much of a 1943 diary entry by State Department official Breckinridge Long complaining that one faction "under the leadership of Rabbi Stephen Wise" had been "assiduous in pushing their particular causes" through "public meetings [and] full page advertisements." Aha!, Syrkin concluded, apparently Jewish leaders were "uncomfortably active—

in fact, pushy—rather than the reverse.”³ But the subsequent publication of the full diary entry⁴ revealed that Long was actually referring to meetings and ads sponsored by the Bergson Group, and had mistakenly attributed them to Wise—something Syrkin should have realized, especially since one of those ads appeared in the *Washington Post*, and thus was no doubt on Breckinridge Long’s breakfast table the very morning he composed that entry.

Prof. Wasserstein had a similar experience. He mocked what he called the contemporary claim that “if 1,000 rabbis had marched up and down in front of the White House...some practical result might have been achieved.” It was “a picturesque scenario—and one which would no doubt earn the warm approval of Ariel Sharon—but, alas, is unaccompanied by any supporting evidence that might raise it to the level of a serious political proposition.” Shortly afterward, research by Professors Wyman, Penkower, and David Kranzler chronicled the march by over 400 rabbis that had in fact taken place in front of the White House in 1943. The “practical result” the march achieved was that it further publicized the plight of Europe’s Jews and helped galvanize congressional action on their behalf.⁵

Lucy Dawidowicz’s sand trap was her account of the creation of the War Refugee Board. In her version (published in *The New York Times Sunday Magazine* in 1982 and *Commentary* in 1983), Roosevelt decided to establish this new government agency in early 1944, solely as a result of pressure from Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau, Jr. It was just “a coincidence of timing” that the Bergson Group had recently brought about the introduction of a congressional resolution urging the president to create just such an agency. The Bergsonites “falsely claimed credit” for the Board’s creation, she insisted. Little did Dawidowicz know that as she was writing those words, Prof. Wyman was mining the recently opened Morgenthau Diaries in the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library. Just one year later, Wyman’s *The Abandonment of the Jews* revealed that it was Morgenthau, not the Bergson Group, who gave Bergson’s congressional resolution credit for facilitating the creation of the Board. “After all, the thing that made it possible to get the President to act on this thing,” Morgenthau remarked in a staff meeting, “[was] the resolution [promoted by Bergson] to form this kind of a War Refugee Committee.” The treasury secretary referred to it as “the Resolution in the House and in the Senate by which we forced the President to appoint a [War Refugee] Committee.”⁶

Prof. Bauer’s central argument was that “Jewish political power” during the Hitler years was “paltry.” American Jewish leaders were “almost completely powerless.” Wyman’s documentation of the crucial role played by the Bergson Group in bringing about the creation of the War Refugee Board pulls the rug out from under Bauer’s claims of Jewish powerlessness. Melvin Urofsky, in his biography

of Stephen Wise, provided another telling example of Jews exercising political power. He recounted how in 1936, alarmed by reports that the British were about to restrict Jewish immigration to Palestine, Wise skillfully employed the political leverage Bauer believed he did not possess. Visiting President Roosevelt at his Hyde Park home two months before the presidential election, Wise asked him to pressure London to keep Palestine open. "Roosevelt, alert to the potential political benefits, quickly agreed to Wise's request," Urofsky noted. FDR leaned on the British, and the British backed down. As a result, Urofsky concluded, "more than 50,000 Jews, mostly from Germany and Austria, were able to join the *yishuv* — men, women, and children who would undoubtedly have perished had the 1939 White Paper been issued three years earlier."⁷ So much for Jewish "powerlessness."

After a long absence from public debates concerning American Jewry and the Holocaust, Prof. Bauer returned to the fray in July 2011. The occasion was a conference cosponsored by Yad Vashem and The David S. Wyman Institute for Holocaust Studies, held at Yad Vashem's International School for Holocaust Studies, on the seventieth anniversary of the founding of the Bergson Group. Although Prof. Bauer was unable to attend the conference in person, a long letter he had composed was read aloud from the podium. An edited version of that letter became the basis of his essay in *The Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs*.

The unedited version of that document, however, was, in one respect, more revealing. The letter began, as did Bauer's IJFA article, by referring to Rabbi Wise's suppression of a telegram he received from Europe, in August 1942, revealing the Nazis' intention to systematically annihilate the Jews. In the letter that was read aloud at the event, Prof. Bauer complained that speakers at the conference had unfairly criticized Wise for adhering to the State Department's request that he keep the telegram secret. Bauer's complaint raised more than a few eyebrows, however, because, as reporters later noted, not a single speaker had mentioned Wise's decision. Bauer had apparently assumed they must have done so, perhaps because he had sparred with critics over the issue back in the 1980s. "It sounds as if Prof. Bauer is still fighting the battles of twenty-five years ago," Prof. Judith Baumel-Schwartz, a panelist at the conference, commented.⁸

According to Bauer, "the oft-heard accusation 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." Actually, that accusation was never "oft-heard." In fact, if one carefully examines the many public debates over the years, one finds that it seldom has been heard. It does not appear in the books by Wyman, Penkower, Feingold, or Gilbert. It was not proffered by any of the critics of the Jewish leadership in the many exchanges in *Midstream* or *Commentary*.

In fact, it came up only because Bauer dug out a sentence from a short essay by Prof. Saul Friedman in the appendix to the Goldberg Commission's final report. After noting Wise's agreement to suppress the cable, Prof. Friedman, partly quoting Walter Lacqueur, noted that 5,000–10,000 Jews were deported from Warsaw to Treblinka during the weeks that Wise held the cable back. According to Bauer, this statement was not only a "preposterous piece of irresponsibility" but "come[s] very close to a blood libel" because it implies that if Wise had spoken out, those Jews would not have been killed. Friedman denied it was his intention to blame Rabbi Wise for the deaths of those Jews and the issue did not come up again. Where else Bauer has heard this "oft-heard" allegation is not clear.⁹

The remainder of Prof. Bauer's essay likewise seems stuck in the pre-1968 mindset. He dismisses the possibility that Allied military intervention, such as bombing the death camps or the railways leading to them, would have made a difference. After all, he points out, the Allied forces in Europe did not have fighter planes capable of reaching Poland "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." Except Auschwitz-Birkenau. That is quite an exception—especially because the mass deportation of Hungarian Jews to Auschwitz did not begin until May 1944, by which time Allied planes not only were capable of reaching Auschwitz, but were already being sent on reconnaissance missions over the camp to locate German oil factories and other industrial targets nearby. The first bombing requests were received in Washington in late May. Had they been heeded—or even if later appeals had been heeded—some of the 437,000 Hungarian Jews deported to Auschwitz might well have been saved. Even if an Allied attack had taken place only late in the summer, after the Hungarian deportations had ceased, the mass murder of Jews who were deported from other countries might have been impeded.

Concerning the War Refugee Board, Bauer says the claim "that the WRB rescued large numbers of Jews...is incorrect" and the Board had only "marginal success." Yet we know that by financing underground activities and aiding holders of Latin American passports, the Board helped save at least 10,000 Jews. It helped engineer the evacuation of another 15,000 Jewish refugees (and more than 20,000 non-Jewish refugees) from Axis territory. The diplomatic pressure and psychological warfare waged by the Board was crucial in getting 48,000 Jews moved out of parts of Transnistria that were in the path of the retreating German army, and in bringing an end to the Hungarian deportations, leaving 120,000 Jews alive in Budapest. That is a total of more than 200,000 lives saved due largely to the War Refugee Board. That is, to use Prof. Bauer's term, a "large number." It is far from "marginal."

Prof. Bauer's conclusion is startling. He writes: "The [Roosevelt] administration was not wrong: as it was powerless to save the millions, the only answer was to win the war and kill the murderers." If they could not save millions, they should not have saved anybody? Why not save thousands, or tens of thousands, or hundreds of thousands, if it was feasible and did not interfere with the war effort?

Dropping a few bombs, from planes that were already in the vicinity, would not have interfered with the war effort. Using troop supply ships, which were returning to the United States empty, to carry refugees for temporary haven would not have interfered with the war effort. Pressuring the British to quietly open Palestine to Jews fleeing Hitler would not have interfered with the war effort. Pressuring Turkey and other neutrals or countries sympathetic to the Axis to open their borders to refugees, for temporary haven, would not have interfered with the war effort. Providing an appropriate level of government funding to the War Refugee Board (90 percent of its budget had to be supplied by private Jewish organizations) would not have interfered with the war effort.

One would never guess it from Prof. Bauer's article, but numerous books and essays in recent years have yielded significant new information about America's, and American Jewry's, response to the Holocaust. We now know, for example, that Roosevelt administration officials undermined the settlement of Jewish refugees in the Dominican Republic because they feared Jews might sneak from there into the US (Wells, 2009). The State Department deliberately sabotaged Varian Fry's rescue mission in Vichy France in order to appease the Nazis (Marino 1999, Isenberg 2001). US consular officials in Germany often harbored antisemitic sentiments and administered the immigration laws far more strictly than necessary in order to avoid giving visas to Jewish refugees (Zucker, 2001). President Roosevelt repeatedly misled US diplomat James McDonald into thinking the US would find a haven for German Jews (Breitman et al., 2007 and 2009). Information about the Nazi mass murder reached the US earlier, and in more detail, than previously realized (Breitman, 1998). American pilots who bombed German oil factories near Auschwitz are convinced they were capable of striking the death camp or the railways leading to it (Stuart Erdheim's 2000 film, *They Looked Away*). Decades of racist and antisemitic teachings in US army officer training institutions probably influenced the War Department's staunch opposition to aiding Jewish refugees (Bendersky, 2000).¹⁰

As for American Jewry, researchers have documented how most leaders of Jewish organizations failed to break free of their daily business-as-usual routines despite the crisis in Europe (Lookstein, 1985). FDR's Jewish advisers seldom spoke to him about Jewish concerns (Shogan, 2010). Jewish leaders were unwilling to oppose the Roosevelt administration's internment of German Jews alongside pro-

Nazi German nationals (Zucker, 2009). The Jewish publishers of *The New York Times* deliberately downplayed news about the Holocaust for fear that it would be seen as a “Jewish newspaper” (Leff, 2005). Some Jewish organizations even pressured Hollywood producers to avoid the issue of German Jewry (Herman, 2001).¹¹

Rabbi Wise, whose good name Prof. Bauer is determined to defend, emerges quite poorly from the new research, not because of his suppression of the Riegner telegram but because of his record during the two years to follow (1943–44). Scholarly studies of the Bergson Group, Jewish student activists, and the Orthodox rescue group known as the Va’ad ha-Hatzala have revealed that Wise was almost fanatical in his efforts to stymie dissidents and protect President Roosevelt from Jewish criticism. The time and energy Wise and his colleagues devoted to attacking Bergson and other activists could have been used so much more productively had they focused on rescue instead of worrying about the competition.¹²

The story of American, and American Jewish, responses to the Holocaust is disheartening, often heartbreaking. But to learn the lessons of that dark era requires an honest and dispassionate appraisal of the subject, one that takes into account the latest findings. Reliving the tired quarrels of the 1980s adds nothing to our understanding of the important issues at stake.

Notes

- ¹ Yehuda Bauer, “New Challenges to Holocaust History,” *Jerusalem Post*, October 25, 1985.
- ² Marie Syrkin, “What American Jews Did during the Holocaust,” *Midstream* (October 1982), 6.
- ³ *Ibid.*, 8.
- ⁴ By this author, in the November–December 1987 issue of *Tikkun*.
- ⁵ Bernard Wasserstein, “The Myth of ‘Jewish Silence,’” *Midstream* (August–September 1980), 13; David S. Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews: America and the Holocaust 1941–1945* (New York, 1984), pp. 152–153; Monty N. Penkower, *The Jews Were Expendable: Free World Diplomacy and the Holocaust* (Urbana, IL, 1983), pp. 136–137; David Kranzler, Letters, *Midstream* (March 1981), 59–60. For a compelling first-person account of the march, see Arthur Hertzberg, “Marching with the Bergson Group: A Memoir,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 40 (Fall 2003), 390–392.
- ⁶ Lucy S. Dawidowicz, “American Jews and the Holocaust,” *The New York Times Sunday Magazine*, April 18, 1982, 47 ff.; *Idem.*, “Indicting American Jews,” *Commentary* (June 1983), 36–44; Wyman, *op. cit.*, p. 205.
- ⁷ Yehuda Bauer, *The Jewish Emergence from Powerlessness* (Toronto, 1979), p. 58; *idem.*,

American Jewry and the Holocaust (Detroit, 1980), p. 456; Melvin I. Urofsky, *A Voice That Spoke for Justice: The Life and Times of Stephen S. Wise* (Albany, 1982), p. 284.

- ⁸ Jason Maoz, "Bergson Group Activists Recognized at Yad Vashem-Wyman Conference," *The Jewish Press*, July 29, 2011.
- ⁹ Yehuda Bauer, "The Goldberg Report," *Midstream* (February 1985), 28; Saul Friedman in "The Goldberg Report Debated," *Midstream* (October 1985), 44.
- ¹⁰ Allen Wells, *Tropical Zion: General Trujillo, FDR, and the Jews of Sosua* (Durham, NC, 2009); Andy Marino, *A Quiet American: The Secret War of Varian Fry* (New York, 1999); Sheila Isenberg, *A Hero of Our Own: The Story of Varian Fry* (New York, 2001); Bat-Ami Zucker, *In Search of Refuge: Jews and U.S. Consuls in Nazi Germany 1935–1941* (London, 2001); Richard Breitman, Barbara McDonald Stewart, and Severin Hochberg (eds.), *Advocate for the Doomed: The Diaries and Papers of James G. McDonald 1932–1935* (Bloomington, 2007); Richard Breitman, Barbara McDonald Stewart, and Severin Hochberg (eds.), *Refugees and Rescue: The Diaries and Papers of James G. McDonald 1935–1945* (Bloomington, 2009); Richard Breitman, *Official Secrets: What the Nazis Planned, What the British and Americans Knew* (New York, 1998); Stuart Erdheim, *They Looked Away*, 2000; Joseph W. Bendersky, *The "Jewish Threat": Anti-Semitic Politics of the U.S. Army* (New York, 2000).
- ¹¹ Haskel Lookstein, *Were We Our Brothers' Keepers? The Public Response of American Jews to the Holocaust, 1938–1944* (New York, 1985); Robert Shogan, *Prelude to Catastrophe: FDR's Jews and the Menace of Nazism* (Chicago, 2010); Bat-Ami Zucker, *Cecilia Razovsky and the American-Jewish Women's Rescue Operations in the Second World War* (London, 2008); Laurel Leff, *Buried by The Times: The Holocaust and America's Most Important Newspaper* (New York, 2005); Felicia Herman, "Hollywood, Nazism, and the Jews 1933–1941," *American Jewish History* LXXXIX (March 2001), 61–89.
- ¹² David S. Wyman and Rafael Medoff, *A Race Against Death: Peter Bergson, America, and the Holocaust* (New York, 2002); Judith Tydor Baumel, *The "Bergson Boys" and the Origins of Contemporary Zionist Militancy* (Syracuse, 2005); Rafael Medoff and David Golinkin, *The Student Struggle against the Holocaust* (New York, 2009); Efraim Zuroff, *The Response of Orthodox Jewry in the United States to the Holocaust: The Activities of the Vaad-ha-Hatzala Rescue Committee, 1939–1945* (New York, 2000).