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Rescued from the Reich: How One of Hitler's Soldiers Saved
the Lubavitcher Rebbe (review)

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Rescued from the Reich: How One of Hitler's Soldiers Saved the Lubavitcher Rebbe, by Bryan Mark Rigg. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004. 284 pp. \$26.00.

Bryan Mark Rigg has written the improbably true story of how the leaders of a small, but internationally well-connected Jewish group—one of several Hasidic groups among the millions of Jews caught in the Nazi seizure of Eastern Europe—were rescued from destroyed and occupied Warsaw by Nazi intelligence officers and enlisted men, several of whom, including the group's leader, *Abwehr* Major Ernst Bloch, were *Mischlinge* "Aryanized" by Hitler. The Hasids were transported to the United States through the complicity of Nazi diplomats and American State Department officials not generally known for their sympathy toward Jews in general.

This feat was made possible through several intersecting but unrelated circumstances in both Germany and America. The first was the chance acquaintanceship of State Department European Affairs specialist Robert Pell and German Four Year Plan administrator Helmut Wohlthat, who met briefly at the infamous 1938 Évian World Refugee Conference. Wohlthat, along with some other Nazi officials including *Abwehr* head Admiral Wilhelm Canaris, hoped that a gesture like this might offset negative impressions in neutral America of German extremism during the early days of the war. On the American side, in the run-up to the 1940 Presidential election some American officials, pressed by prominent American Jews including Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau and Associate Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis, wished to make a gesture toward an important electoral constituency that would not alienate other groups. And finally, American officials, ignorant about the nature and organization of American Judaism, allowed the *Rebbe* of a single Hasidic group (called the *Chabad* of the United States and Canada) to be cast as a figure of global religious importance for Jews comparable to that of the Pope for Catholics.

The rescue took place despite the murderous intent of the S.S. in Poland toward Poles and especially toward Jews. It was hampered by the attitudes of the *Lubavitchers* themselves: their well grounded fear toward their *Abwehr* rescuers and their fatalistic faith that God would provide for them. Other factors working against the rescue were the multiple sclerosis of the *Rebbe* himself (which made his travel difficult and itself might have barred him from U.S. immigration status), indecision within the Hasidic communities in America and divisions within the American Jewish community (about which more should have been said by the author) about how to respond to the growing threat to European Jewry, and the institutionalized antisemitism of the State

Department itself, personified by Visa Division head Ava Warren and Assistant Secretary of State Breckinridge Long, whom Roosevelt appointed in January, 1940 to oversee European refugee policy.

But it finally happened because of the visibility of the *Rebbe* himself, who had been hounded out of the Soviet Union and had visited the United States in the 1920s. He was able to command the dogged dedication of a small group of American supporters and lobbyists (most importantly Max Rhoades, who continued beyond the point of physical, economic, and mental exhaustion to press for the rescue despite his largely unsuccessful and growingly exasperated pleas for payment by the *Chabad* and its supporters). Also, most fortuitously, the *Rebbe* had adopted Latvian citizenship when he was expelled from the Soviet Union, and the rescue was accomplished before the Soviet conquest of the Baltic republics closed off both the rationale and the means of exit from Nazi (and Soviet) occupied Poland.

Rigg, the author of *Hitler's Jewish Soldiers: The Untold Story of Nazi Racial Laws and Men of Jewish Descent in the German Military* and a member of the History faculties at Southern Methodist University and at American Military University, provides a clearly written and detailed account of the rescue, briefly setting it within the contexts of Hasidic Jewish history and its Messianic expectations; the establishment of the *Chabad* in the United States and its visibility despite its small number of adherents; interwar Soviet and Eastern European relations with their Jewish communities; growing German antisemitic laws and actions in the 1930s; the reactions to this of the rest of the world, especially the United States, mired in Depression and in a wave of isolationism and wary of foreigners; the outbreak of war and the conquest of Poland; and the reactions to it by the American government and by the American Jewish communities not yet aware of the horrors this conquest portended. Throughout the course of the narrative, he considers the views of post-war historians and commentators on the motives for and outcomes of the attitudes and policies adopted both by Jewish leaders and by the U. S. government as this crisis developed and, in a revealing "Afterword," describes the limitations on his ability to explore fully the complex actions of the *Lubavitchers* themselves in the rescue effort created by their own defensiveness and secrecy. He also briefly traces the post-rescue history of *Chabad* itself and of wartime Jewish reactions to the roundups, concentration, and reported annihilation of their co-religionists, and the fates of the Nazi officials and *Abwehr* officers who precipitated, facilitated, and carried out the rescue as the Nazi war against the Jews enveloped and devoured them. Rigg does an excellent job of recounting this singular event. It is clearly presented, and the question it raises about its tragic singularity are dealt with in a nuanced and appropriately contextualized

manner. But given the complexities of cooperation within the American Jewish community (including the fatalistically Messianic view of the *Chabad* itself during the war), the then incomprehensibility of the Holocaust that the Nazis perpetrated during the war, and the ongoing resistance of the American government to anything that might “taint” the war effort with a “Jewish” motive, I’m not sure that the story he tells really supports the implication of his conclusion that “All [the rescue of Jews] took was letter writing, a few thousand dollars, and the courage to speak up.”

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The Treatment of the Holocaust in Hungary and Romania During the Post-Communist Era, edited by Randolph L. Braham. Holocaust Studies Series. New York: The Rosenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies, distributed by Columbia University Press, 2004. 215 pp. \$45.00.

This collection, like most others of this type, is made up by articles of greatly varied size, importance, ambition, and quality. Rita Horváth’s piece on Hungarian family novels is no more than a catalog of titles uneasily wedded to literary theory à la Hayden White. Kinga Frojimovics’ short article is a useful description of the role of Joint and the World Jewish Congress in helping Hungarian Jewry after 1945. She is, however, far from convincing in arguing that the ironic result of the good work of foreign organizations was that, unlike in the rest of Eastern Europe, at least half of the survivors decided to stay in their country of birth. Surely the main reason for Hungarian Jews’ deciding to stay was that they had been far better integrated into the life of their country than, let us say, Polish or Romanian Jews. By contrast, Ivan Sanders’ short article on Kertész’ *Fateless* is a brilliant analysis of the Nobel Prize winning author’s ambivalence toward his Jewishness and Hungarianness. It is the best short appreciation of Kertész’ art I have seen anywhere.

Andrei Pippidi’s work is harmed by his carelessness as a historian (he seems to think that Lenin died in 1921 and Birobidzhan was established in 1928 [p. 145]) and a convoluted style, which makes me uncertain that I understood his points correctly. I think he is arguing that while extreme antisemitic expressions can be found in Romanian publications, they make little impressions on the Romanian people. When they vote for an antisemitic demagogue, such as Vadim Tudor, they vote for him not because of his opinions about the