No Haven for the Oppressed

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6. A Partnership of Silence

Stephen S. Wise was the most important Jewish leader in the United States during the Second World War. In his quest for justice for his people, the Budapest-born rabbi wore many hats during this critical period—president of the American Jewish Congress, chairman of the American Emergency Committee for Zionist Affairs, chairman of the Executive Committee of the World Jewish Congress, cochairman of the Zionist Organization of America, chairman of the United Jewish War Effort, chairman of the American Jewish Conference, and cochairman of the Commission of Rescue of the American Jewish Conference. Wise had long been a leader in the fight to establish a Jewish homeland in Palestine. He took pride in the fact that he had sensed the danger inherent in Hitler’s rise to power in 1932 when German-Jewish leaders were saying, “Er wird nie zur Macht Kommen.” Wise advocated boycotts and protest demonstrations against Hitler long before such tactics became stylish in the U.S. He championed relief and rescue of refugees during the 1930s and was instrumental in bringing about the short-lived unity among Jewish groups on the eve of the war. His well-publicized friendship with FDR, whom he addressed affectionately as “Boss” or “Chief,” dated back to the president’s unsuccessful senatorial race in 1914. The doors of the White House were always open to Wise, whom Roosevelt had appointed to his Advisory Committee on Political Refugees. To his comrades at the American Jewish Congress, Wise was a “hero” who labored night and day to organize fifteen massive rallies at Madison Square Garden and who constantly badgered the State Department, Roosevelt, and Treasury
Secretary Henry Morgenthau for more action on behalf of his tortured people in wartime.²

Because of his power and prestige Wise was the man with whom anyone receiving confirmation of the rumored Nazi extermination plot against the Jews in 1942 would wish to communicate.³ Once in possession of such catastrophic news, European Jews hoped Wise might influence the president to force the Allies into taking decisive measures to save the rest of Europe’s doomed Jews. Failing this, perhaps Wise would be able to rally the American public to break down existing immigration barriers. Perhaps the rabbi, in desperation, would implement Gandhi’s well-known techniques of Satyanagraha, lead a march on Washington like that threatened by Negro leader A. Philip Randolph, engage in a hunger strike, or call for civil disobedience to effect some outward expression of concern for the Jews on the part of the United Nations. To preclude such activism, Arthur Morse intimates, the State Department deliberately deceived the rabbi and withheld information confirming Nazi genocide from Wise for three months in the fall of 1942.⁴

State Department records seem to bear out Morse’s contention that Wise personally, and the American Jewish community collectively, were at first kept unaware of the department’s terrible information. On August 10, 1942, Howard Elting, Jr., American vice-consul in Geneva, mailed Hull a two-page memorandum on a discussion held with Gerhart Riegner, secretary of the World Jewish Congress, in Switzerland. Riegner claimed that an unnamed German businessman, who had supplied him with accurate information on two previous occasions, had verified the Nazi plan to exterminate all four million of Europe’s surviving Jews that fall through the use of Zyklon B gas—Prussic Acid. Riegner, in what Elting termed “a state of great agitation,” requested that all Allied governments and Jewish organizations, particularly the World Jewish Congress which Wise led, be informed of his report. Elting, although astonished by Riegner’s statements, emphasized that the young Jewish attorney appeared to be “a serious and balanced individual, and that he would never have come to the consulate
with the above report if he had not had confidence in his informant’s reliability and if he did not seriously consider that the report might well contain an element of truth.” Elting recommended that Riegner’s request to relay this news to Wise be honored.\(^5\)

However, Elting’s superior in Bern, Leland Harrison, was more skeptical. When he cabled the essence of the Riegner message to the State Department on August 11, Harrison attached a disclaimer, attributing the report to “war rumor inspired by fear and what is commonly understood to be the actually miserable condition of these refugees who face decimation as a result of physical maltreatment, persecution, and scarcely endurable privations, malnutrition and disease.”\(^6\) The State Department’s European Division director, Elbredge Durbrow, went further. He recommended that Wise and other Jewish leaders not be informed of Riegner’s “fantastic” allegations. Even if true, he reasoned, the United States could do nothing at the present time to help the victims.\(^7\)

Paul T. Culbertson, Durbrow’s assistant chief in the European Division, took a different view. He drafted a communication to Wise along the lines indicated in the Riegner message.\(^8\) This note, which attempted to dismiss Riegner’s tale as “unreliable war rumor,” was never sent. The original is still on file, bearing three pencil slashes across the body with the statement “Do Not Send” and the initials “ED” of Durbrow.\(^9\) Instead of provoking the American Jewish community into fits of frenzy over an atrocity tale, the State Department wired Geneva on August 17 to “recommend” that no further unconfirmed reports be transmitted by “third parties” and that all reports be limited to information involving “definite American interests.” This cable was signed by Sumner Welles and Cordell Hull, and initialed by Durbrow and J. H. Hickerson of the European Division, among others.\(^10\)

Despite this admonition, American officials in Switzerland felt they could not sit on information supplied by Riegner in the fall of 1942. On September 28, Paul C. Squire, American consul in Geneva, mailed a set of reports to Hull. They did not arrive until October 23, indicative of a slowdown in the trans-
mission of such information at this critical juncture. In these
documents Riegner identified his source as a man called “Frank,”
someone who maintained close political and military connec-
tions in the Government-General of Poland. By this time Rieg-
ner had received additional confirmation of the extermination
scheme from several other sources. From a Swiss university
professor, he had obtained a memorandum of a German officer
attached to the OKW (Wehrmacht High Command), detailing
how the Nazis were proceeding against the Jews. This Wehr-
macht officer, allegedly a member of a group opposed to the
Hitler regime, told of cattle trains from the West streaming
through Germany loaded with Jews, many of them already dead
due to suffocation or starvation. He told of mass killings, often done
by physicians who injected air into the veins of their victims, and
of research by other physicians, who were studying new uses for
corpses, such as in the production of soap, glue, and lubricants.11

Riegner also supplied Squire with photostats of two letters
written in code from Jews in Warsaw to friends in St. Gallen,
Switzerland. The first was dated September 4, 1942. Translated
from the broken German, it reads:

I spoke to Mr. Jaeger. He told me that he will invite all rela-
tives of the family Achenu with the exception of Miss Eisensweig
from Warsaw to his countryside dwelling Kewer. I am alone
here; I feel lonely … As to the citrus fruit I hope that I shall re-
ceive them in time (for Sukkos) but I do not know whether I
shall then find anybody of my acquaintances. I feel very weak. A
week ago I yet spoke to Mr. Orlean. Mrs. Gefen telephones very
often. Uncle Gerusch also works in Warsaw; he is a very capable
worker. His friend Miso works together with him. Please pray for
me.12

State Department interpreters confirmed that there were
numerous code words in the above message, including Mr.
Jaeger (Germans); the family Achenu (our brethren, the
Jews); Miss Eisensweig (probably those working in the iron in-
dustry); Kewer (tomb, grave); Zitrus fruchte (citrus fruits used
on Sukkos near the end of September); Gerusch (deportation);
Miso (death); Mrs. Gefen and Mr. Orlean (references to
the countryside). The implication which these government
officials gave to the message was that Jews in Warsaw, with the exception of those in vital industries, were being deported to be killed in the countryside of Poland and that this was to be accomplished before Succos.\textsuperscript{13}

Riegner’s second letter, dated September 12 read in literal translation from the garbled German:

I too was in sorrow, for I am now so lonely. Uncle Achenu has died. Excuse my fashion of expression. I suppose that I shall receive the advised citrus fruit these days. As the Uncle is now dead, I do not know to whom to give them. I am very sad that I cannot use them and that they will have to dry miserably. Those fine fruits. My regards to Mr. Tschlenoff and please tell him that all his work and pains are in vain completely. I shall write about it in my next letter.\textsuperscript{14}

Once more State Department translators noted that the Mr. Tschlenoff referred to was the representative of the Jewish OSE, specializing in medical support for the ghettos in Poland. The import of this letter, then, was that few Jews remained alive in Warsaw and that those who did survive were doomed anyway.\textsuperscript{15}

The U.S. government, in conjunction with eleven other nations engaged in the struggle against the Axis, formally acknowledged the existence of this mass murder plot on December 17, 1942, in a declaration which warned that “those responsible for these crimes shall not escape retribution.”\textsuperscript{16} Any thought that this might change the prevailing attitude at the State Department was dispelled early the next February. For the previous five months Riegner had continued to supply Washington with verified accounts of atrocities in Poland and Rumania, contributing to this government’s realization of the horrid reality of Nazi genocide.\textsuperscript{17} On February 10, however, Harrison received another cable signed by Welles for Hull which ordered, not merely recommended, that all further communications from Riegner be barred from official correspondence. This cable, bearing the code number 354, read:
In the future we would suggest that you do not accept reports submitted to you to be transmitted to private persons in the United States unless such action is advisable because of extraordinary circumstances. Such private messages circumvent neutral countries’ censorship and it is felt that by sending them we risk the possibility that steps would necessarily be taken by the neutral countries to curtail or forbid our means of communication for confidential official matter.\footnote{18}

Who actually devised this cable and why he was so concerned about Swiss sensitivities about genocide cannot be determined. Two months after it was sent Welles cabled Bern again, asking for additional reports from Riegner, precisely the kind of material Harrison had been ordered not to send earlier. From discussions with Hull, Henry Morgenthau concluded that neither the secretary nor Welles had been responsible for Cable 354.\footnote{19} Nevertheless, this cable, issued two months after the United States had officially condemned Nazi genocide, typified the desultory manner in which the State Department treated news of Jewish persecution during the war.

Twice—on February 16 and 23, 1940—Assistant Secretary Adolph A. Berle, Jr., tried to prod Hull to action, basing his claim of brutal deportations of Jews to concentration camps on reports from Alexander Kirk in Warsaw. Berle said, “We should register a protest. We did so during the far less significant, though more dramatic, riots of a year ago November; and I see no reason why we should not make our feelings known regarding a policy of seemingly calculated cruelty which is beginning to be apparent now.” Berle stressed that the U.S. had protested Nazi oppression in 1933 and 1938 and had even spoken on violation of American commercial rights by the British blockade in the early days of World War II. All the more reason, he argued, to register an impartial protest in the face of the current pogrom.\footnote{20}

Berle’s request for such a protest was squelched by Breckinridge Long. In a two-page memorandum to Hull, initialed by the European Division’s J. H. Hickerson, Long expressed “every sympathy with the poor people involved,” but went on to point out that such a formal protest would be redundant. The United States had through its admission of “a great many of these poor
people” already registered its tacit disapproval of this persecution. “It is hardly necessary for us to make public expressions of our feelings. Everyone in this country already knows, and the civilized governments of the world are already cognizant of, our feelings in the matter,” Long said. Far from doing any good, he reasoned, such a protest would only embarrass the U.S., would be exploited for political gain in the Allied camp as a condemnation of Germany, and would impair any opportunity the U.S. might still have to help the victims. He noted further that Germany might take offense at what he, Long, agreed was purely an internal affair. “We have known since the publication of Mein Kampf, and since the accession of Hitler to power, that these poor people would be subjected to all kinds of improper treatment,” he added.

If the State Department recognized Hitler’s plan to persecute European Jewry in 1940 after the mere reading of Mein Kampf, it is difficult to explain the department’s skepticism of the verification of genocide in 1942. Even before the first Riegner message had been relayed in August, sufficient evidence existed to establish at least a prima facie case for the existence of a plan to exterminate the Jews. On June 2, 1941, Jan Ciechanowski, ambassador of the Polish Government-in-Exile in Washington, delivered a White Paper to Hull, charging the Nazis with “compulsory euthanasia” against the Jews. A year later, in June 1942, the same Polish government in London, drawing its information from reports smuggled out of occupied territory by underground channels, broadcast the news that 700,000 Jews had been murdered in Poland and Lithuania that year. On June 17, the Jewish Telegraphic Agency announced the execution of hundreds of Jewish and Russian war prisoners in poison gas experiments at the Liebenau Monastery in Wurttemburg. In July the same agency confirmed that 20,000 French Jews and more than 100,000 Austrian Jews had been deported to the East, half of them dying enroute to Poland. Israel Goldstein, president of the Synagogue Council of America, submitted a long report to Hull on July 17 which detailed the slaughter. Goldstein supplied Hull with information on the machine-gunning of masses of
Jews in Galicia, on mobile gas chambers used to exterminate thousands “in a less painful fashion” in the region of Lublin, on the forced starvation of a half million Jews in Warsaw, on 25,000 Jews murdered in the Pinsk-Vladimir-Vitebsk region of Russia, on another 25,000 dead in Odessa, on the cleansing of Slovakia of its last several thousand Jews. Four days later Herschel V. Johnson of the American legation in Stockholm sent Washington a résumé of a discussion held with Wieclaw Patek, director of the Consular Section of the Polish Legation in Stockholm. According to Patek, 60,000 Jews in Vilna, another 100,000 in Kiev, and 84,000 in White Ruthenia had been massacred by special Nazi battalions of death. Patek’s figures were corroborated by Soviet Commissar for Foreign Affairs, V. M. Molotov, in an official note to the Allied governments a few days later. On August 6, four days before Riegner met with Elting, the reliable American Friends Service Committee through its operatives in Vichy France reported that thousands of Jews were being transported from occupied regions of France to southeastern Poland, “where conditions of life are such that few can survive.”

Through the summer of 1942 scores of reports poured into the State Department from refugees, Swedish businessmen, the WRN (the leading Polish underground newspaper), the Jewish Telegraph Agency; the Jewish anti-Fascist Committee in Kuibyshev even monitored radio broadcasts from Berlin, all telling of the same thing—that the Jews were “spurlos” (missing), that they were being transported to Poland in the most inhumane of conditions, that “their fate was no mystery.” Far from publicizing such communications, the State Department consistently elected to suppress them.

On September 1, 1942, Shloime Mendelsohn, the representative of the American Jewish Congress in London, tried to contact Rabbis Wise and Perlzweig by cable to urge them to hold a press conference at which the rabbis would confirm the existence of the Nazi extermination plot. Mendelsohn suggested that the Allies issue a formal condemnation of genocide, that the Vatican be asked to intercede on behalf of the captive
Jews, and that, failing all this, Hitler be warned that the Allies would engage in reprisals against the person and property of German nationals abroad. The cable, sent through State Department wires, was stopped at the desk of Foreign Activity Correlation. Appended to it were two notes. The first read, “We will suppress if you approve.” The second read, “Here is a cable message somewhat in line with ones I have previously referred to you. Pass or suppress?” These queries were directed to Berle, who had wanted to speak out against Nazi persecution two years before. For unknown reasons, the Mendelsohn cable was never sent.

Even after American officials in Stockholm verified the existence of the death camps in the so-called Lublin Reservation on November 25, 1942, the American government issued no formal pronouncement on the extermination of the Jews for three more weeks. The reason for this procrastination, Morse implies, was anti-Semitism in the State Department. Such an answer is, however, an oversimplification of the problem, as well as an insult to many officials engaged in the decision-making process. Morgenthau’s memoirs leave little doubt that the Secretary of Treasury considered Hull, Welles, and Long genuinely sympathetic to the plight of the Jews, if somewhat incompetent to meet the problem. Some of the lesser officials in the department perhaps harbored anti-Jewish feelings, but such personal feelings likely were of secondary importance when compared with other factors that led to a suppression of atrocity reports.

For one thing, the nation had already waged one great crusade in this century and suffered extreme disillusionment in that humanitarian cause. Only too late did the American public realize that stories of German rapine and death factories in Belgium were propaganda tales spun by the British. The historical revisionism of the 1920s had left Americans with a greater sense of skepticism where atrocity stories were concerned. It is noteworthy that in January 1943, a month after the Allies condemned Nazi genocide, fewer than half of the American people believed the Nazis were deliberately killing the Jews.
As late as December 1944, when Allied troops had already overrun some camps, most Americans still believed that fewer than 100,000 Jews had been exterminated.  

Even if the reports coming from Europe were partially true, what difference could that make to people hardened by the massacre of 500,000 Armenians in World War I, 150,000 Ukrainian Jews during the Russian Civil War, millions of Russian Kulaks who starved to death or were exterminated in Stalinist purges in the Thirties, thousands of Spanish Republicans bombed to death in 1937 and 1938, and millions of Chinese victimized by the Japanese since 1931? It was generally believed that in this war the Jews had no monopoly on suffering. As late as July 10, 1942 the Times (London) charged that the Germans were “aiming at extermination” of Poles, whereas what the Jews were suffering was a “plight.” The idea that the Nazis would truly attempt to eliminate six to ten million people in a concerted plan of human slaughter, however, seemed absurd. That it was rejected as implausible by staid government officials 6,000 miles from the death camps should not seem remarkable; the victims did not even believe it to the very end.

Through 1942 the Nazis took extraordinary precautions to guard against any disclosure of the truth about “resettlement in the East.” They sent forged postcards from relatives long since gassed to the ghettos of Poland, telling of the glories of nonexistent pastoral wonderlands. It is a testimonial to Nazi security that few persons succeeded in escaping from the death camps. Those who did failed to rouse the remaining Jewish populations, lacking in arms and will, to resistance. The doomed Jews, programmed for their own destruction by centuries of social antipathy and abuse, broken by disease and hunger, but still dedicated to the principle of the essential goodness of man, simply would not believe that such an inhuman plan could spring from German civilization.

The State Department alone cannot be faulted for failing to condemn Nazi genocide in 1942, when everyone in the world had already witnessed a decade of this same brutality, when Dachau was transformed from a quaint village in Bavaria to the symbol of concentration camp ruthlessness, when the world
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had witnessed three years of Nazi rule in Poland where Jews were rationed fewer than 200 calories of food a day, when the world had known for one year of Nazi slaughter in Russia and Rumania where, as Ambassador Franklin Gunther had reported to Hull, thousands of Jews were massacred and strung up on meat hooks. The final act of the Jewish tragedy in Europe was being performed in the open, and yet the global audience seemingly needed a printed libretto to comprehend this fantastic scene.

The cautious bureaucrats who surrounded Cordell Hull in 1942 reasoned that nothing could be done to help Europe’s Jews. Publication of such unconfirmed reports could only evoke frustration and hysteria and ultimately detract from the war effort. Too late, with several hundred thousand Jews dead, did these functionaries realize that they had miscalculated in their evaluations of the reports. Too late did they realize that they had overrated the emotional level and preparedness of the American Jewish community. Nothing had to be concealed, nothing feared, from this relatively docile group, for it had already possessed piecemeal confirmation of Nazi genocide plans. Wise had received Riegner’s message long before December 1942, and he and the leaders of the Jewish community had remained silent.

To argue that the American Jewish community and Wise had deliberately been kept uninformed by the State Department, that Jewish organizations operating independently of official cable lines had gathered sufficient data to submit a twenty-page report on German atrocities to the White House on December 8, 1942, and that this dramatic report ultimately impelled the government to take action in concert with its allies would make relatively pleasant reading—if true.

But it is indisputable that Wise, like many other Jewish leaders in America, not only knew about the death camps in the summer of 1942, five months in advance of the forementioned petition, but actively collaborated with the department
in keeping verified accounts of mass murder from the public. Wise admitted as much when he wrote Roosevelt a “Dear Boss” letter on December 2, 1942. Requesting a word of solace and hope for the Jews, Wise said, “I have had cables and underground advices for months, telling of these things. I succeeded, together with the heads of other Jewish organizations in keeping them out of the press, and have been in constant communication with the State Department, particularly Under-Secretary Welles.”

The rabbi had been equally well-informed, though somewhat less laconic, earlier that summer when he addressed a cheering throng at Madison Square Garden in one of the now-famed “Stop Hitler” rallies. Three weeks before Elting had his first meeting with Riegner in Switzerland, Wise and other Jewish leaders protested the murder of “more than a million Jews already brutally done to death by the Nazis.” Hitler, they argued, would not be satisfied till every Jewish community in Europe was transformed into a vast cemetery, and they even detailed his scheme for gassing the Jews in a resolution which concluded “The Jewish people will not permit itself to be exterminated.” The resolution read, in part:

In the whole long history of man’s inhumanity to man, there is no record of persecution more charged with brutality and horror than the record of the special persecution of the Jews by the Nazis. The extermination of the Jews has been the first goal of Hitler in his mad race to dominate the world. He has waded through Jewish blood and tears. Jews have been branded, segregated in ghettos, made the inevitable victims of hunger and plague, deprived of all possibilities of life and labor. Multitudes have suffered the agonies of a slow and painful death by the methods of forced labor, in concentration camps, or as victims of experiment in poison gas factories (Italics added). Such comments were not mere exercises in rhetoric. The choice of the word “extermination” was deliberate, for the very first sentence of the underground report of the Jewish Socialist Party in Poland smuggled out of Europe in May, 1942 read: “From the day the Russo-German war broke out, the Germans
embarked on the physical extermination of the Jewish population on Polish soil, using the Ukrainians and the Lithuanian fascists for this job.” This report went on to detail the massacres of 50,000 Jews in Vilna; 30,000 in Lwow; 25,000 in Lublin; 15,000 in Stanislawow, Rowne, and Brzezany; 9,000 in Slonim; 6,000 in Hancewicze; and 5,000 in Tarnopol in the fall of 1941. It revealed the first primitive forms of execution used: men were driven to cemeteries or fields where they were forced to dig trenches and then were shot by machine guns, and women and children were shot down in the streets. And it told of the gassing operations of Nazi death camps at Chelmno (“twelve kilometers from the town of Kolo”) and Maidanek (“Majdanek Tatarowy, a suburb of Lublin”).

The report so startled Shmul Zygelboim and Ignacy Schwarzbart, Jewish representatives on the Polish National Council in London, that they pressed the Exile Government and Great Britain for a condemnation of what Schwartzbart called “the threatened annihilation of European Jewry.” On July 9, 1942, Stanislaw Mikolajczyk, minister of home affairs in the Polish government in exile, finally told the press of the systematic destruction of the Jewish population of Poland, but his claim of 700,000 deaths was not readily accepted by other segments of world Jewry. Yitzhak Gruenbaum, head of the Jewish Agency’s Department for the Diaspora in Palestine, discounted the stories of mass murders in Poland and Lithuania because the numbers reported were larger than the known number of Jews in those areas. At a conference of Jewish publicists held in August 1942 under the auspices of the World Jewish Congress, Leon Kubowitzki of the WJC dismissed the report of the Bund, saying, “Such things do not happen in the twentieth century.” A week later, the editorial board of the militant Jewish Frontier also rejected the idea of a Nazi extermination scheme as “the macabre fantasy of a lunatic sadist.” Marie Syrkin later called this reluctance of American Jews to recognize genocide in the face of overwhelming testimony “a monument to our gross stupidity.”

Long before December 1942, however, Wise possessed the
Jewish Bund report and more. He actually received the first of Gerhart Riegner's messages on August 28, shortly after Elting's letter relating the discussions with the World Jewish Congress representative in detail reached Washington by mail pouch. Riegner had contacted Labour Member of Parliament Sidney Silverman, chairman of the British Jewish Congress. Silverman relayed Riegner's information to Wise while officials in the State Department debated the merits of notifying him.\textsuperscript{45}

According to Lillie Shultz, Riegner's "incredible" news was discussed in a closed session of the AJC's executive board. It was decided that Wise should go to Washington and attempt to verify Riegner's news through the State Department.\textsuperscript{46} In his autobiography Wise indicates that he did consult Welles shortly after receipt of the Riegner message and was asked not to release the story until the Allies checked further into the matter. On November 4, 1942, Welles called in the rabbi "to confirm and justify your deepest fears."\textsuperscript{47} Ten weeks had elapsed since Wise first received Riegner's report. Another month would go by before the Jewish leaders would request some formal condemnation by the American government.

Wise agonized between his responsibility to inform humanity that Jews were being singled out for expeditious slaughter and his promise to Welles to keep silent about it. In September 1942 he poured out his grief in a letter to longtime comrade John Hayes Holmes, minister of the Community Church in New York City:

I have had the unhappiest days of my life. Please remember, dear Holmes, that in addition to all your suffering over everything connected with the war, I have something more, namely the uniquely tragic fate of my people. You will be tempted at once to ask, why do I think of it as "uniquely tragic?” “Is it any worse than the fate of the Czechs or Yugoslavs or Poles?” Yes! Think of what it means to hear, as I have heard, through a coded message—first from Geneva, then from Bern, through the British Foreign Office—that Hitler plans the extermination at one time of the whole Jewish population of Europe; and prussic acid is mentioned as the medium.

The other day something came to me which has left me
without sleep: that 100,000 Jews within the Warsaw Ghetto have been massacred by the Nazis and their corpses used to make soaps and fertilizers. ... Moreover, Jews, unarmed and defenseless, have been unable to do anything for themselves; and the world has done little if anything for them. ...

...  
I don't want to turn my heart inside out, but I am almost demented over my people's grief.\(^48\)

Elie Wiesel, author of several volumes relating to the Holocaust and a graduate of the Nazi concentration camp system, addressed the forty-ninth General Assembly of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations in 1967 and asked: “How could he [Wise] pledge secrecy when millions of lives were involved? How was he not driven mad by the secret? How could other Jewish leaders pledge silence? How is it they did not cry out in despair?” And when Welles released Wise from his pledge, what happened then?

Not much. Not much at all. Did he and the other Jewish leaders proclaim hunger strikes to the end? Did they organize daily, weekly marches to the White House? They should have shaken heaven and earth, echoing the agony of their doomed brethren; taken in by Roosevelt's personality, they, in a way, became accomplices to his inaction.\(^49\)

Shultz dismisses Wiesel's arguments by claiming that no one who lived through incarceration in a concentration camp can have any patience or objectivity in dealing with the record of Jews who were not caught in the death-trap of Europe. “Human beings have only so much capacity,” she said, “and Wiesel and his kind cannot understand that. We were heroes, fighting Hitler. It is horrifying that we did not succeed, but wrong to judge us.”\(^50\)

One Jew, not caught in that death-trap, would have disagreed. Chayim Greenberg, editor of Jewish Frontier, was one of those like Kubowitzki, Syrkin, and Wise who originally dismissed the reports of genocide as rumor. Subsequently, however, he altered his view and authored a scathing indictment of American Jewry for the Yiddisher Kempfer. This article, en-
titled “Bankrupt,” appeared in the February 1943 issue of that journal, but was not translated into English until 1964. Hence, much of the hoped-for impact upon Greenberg’s contemporaries was lost.

Like Wiesel, Greenberg wondered how American Jews had managed to maintain their sanity in the face of the news from Europe. He wrote:

A horny shell seems to have formed over the soul of American Jewry to protect and defend it against pain and pity. We have become so dull that we have even lost the capacity for madness and—may God not punish me for my words—the fact that in recent months Jews have not produced a substantial number of mentally deranged persons is hardly a symptom of health.51

Greenberg chronicled the failures of all segments of the Jewish community in America to do its elementary duty toward the millions of Jews who were captive and doomed in Europe. Chief among these was the failure of American Jewry to organize some kind of general staff, to bridge the gaps between cliques of Zionists and anti-Zionists, Congressists and anti-Congressists, Orthodox and Reform, synagogue Jews and secularists, labor and management. “Every ‘Committee’ cherishes its own committee-interests, its sectarian ambitions, its exclusively wise strategy and its ‘power position’ in the teapot of Jewish communal competition,” he wrote (p. 8).

Greenberg blasted the American Jewish Committee, which had held its annual conference in January 1943 and had passed a number of resolutions but had said nothing about the massacre of the Jews in Europe. He blasted the Jewish Labor Committee for its “non-cooperation, non-action, and keeping apart from common attempts to accomplish something.” He blasted the Orthodox Jews who refused to collaborate with other groups unless one of their members was assigned an important post (p. 6). But most of all he lambasted the American Jewish Congress and Wise.

Greenberg noted that the American Jewish Congress had established a special planning committee to deal with rescue activity and had assigned an emissary to stay in Washington on a more or less permanent basis to maintain contacts with
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various government departments. But the rescue committee itself had delegated responsibility to a subcommittee (chaired by “a very busy man”) which had met only once in more than two months, and the emissary in Washington was “a foreigner who cannot always exert the necessary influence in our capital,” according to Greenberg. Although one stated goal of the rescue committee was to enroll Christian clerics in the struggle to save Jewish lives, Greenberg pointed out that there had been little such effort in the United States and no effort whatever to seek the intercession of the Vatican to stop the slaughter. He concluded: “The AJ Congress, the only Jewish organization which did not remove the subject of the extermination of the Jews of Europe from its agenda has proven to be criminally slow and lacking in tempo and temperament in its rescue work” (pp. 8–9).

Indeed, Wise had had much difficulty in balancing his responsibilities as an American with his duties toward the Jewish people after 1938. Until then he had been the Young Turk among Jewish leaders, the most outspoken radical in condemning Hitler. But in June 1938 he altered some of the procedures and toned down publicity campaigns for the World Jewish Congress elections at the request of Roosevelt and Henry Messersmith, who worried that the affair might be construed by “someone in Des Moines” as proof of the existence of the Elders of Zion.52 Later that year, right after Kristallnacht, Wise wrote Holmes that “I am trying to keep Jews silent until after tomorrow’s funeral of the victim of the crazed Polish Jewish boy.”53 And during the debate over the Wagner-Rogers Child Refugee Bill in 1939, Wise again counseled silence on the part of the Jewish community.54 A Zionist News Service bulletin of October 13, 1972 has further charged that the American Zionist Emergency Council, headed jointly by Wise and Rose Halprin, was responsible for turning down a request for aid to Jews stranded in Rumania in November 1939. The refugees, who included twelve-year-old Albert Mandler, now commander of Israel’s Sinai forces, were turned down because the Zionist Council felt it could not assist “undesirable elements” to enter Palestine.
It was as if Wise preferred to throw verbal darts against other Jews, like “the Warburg Gang,” “Skunkolsky” George Sokolsky, and Jerome Frank, whom, Wise argued, was suffering from “dementia assimilata,” rather than to speak up on behalf of the troubled millions in Europe. At the same time Wise expressed concern that he, too, might be suffering from the malady which he claimed afflicted Frank. He wrote to Felix Frankfurter on September 16, 1942, “I don’t know whether I am getting to be a Hofjude, but I find that a good part of my work is to explain to my fellow Jews why our Government cannot do all the things asked or expected of it.” Wise’s actions throughout 1943 and 1944 did little to relieve him of that particular anxiety.

Wise was helpful in bringing about a short-lived unity among Jewish groups in the United States, much on the order of that suggested by Greenberg, by the end of the summer of 1943. But his domineering leadership of the American Jewish Conference (Greenberg had already chided the American Jewish Congress for its “own prestige ambitions” and its jealous attempts to corner all “credit” for relief and rescue operations) resulted in the collapse of this united front in a name-calling debacle two months later. When the conference took a strong stand in support of a Jewish commonwealth in Palestine, Judge Joseph Proskauer of the American Jewish Committee announced that body’s intention to withdraw. Because this decision had been reached by the AJ Committee’s executive council without consultation of the full membership, other Jews announced the severance of their ties with the AJ Committee. Thus, within two months of its formation, the American Jewish Conference had witnessed one act of secession within another act of secession. Such episodes typified the absence of American Jewish unity during the war.

Even more distressing from the viewpoint of the Jews in Europe was Wise’s consistent opposition to the American Friends of a Jewish Palestine, the Committee for an Army of Stateless and Palestinian Jews, the American League for a Free Palestine, and the Emergency Conference to Save the Jewish People of Europe. These committees all were organized in the
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United States after 1939 by two Palestinian Jews, Peter Bergson, whose real name was Kook, and Samuel Merlin. Members of the terrorist *Irgun Zvai Leumi*, these men succeeded in gaining the nominal support of thirty-three senators, 109 representatives, fourteen current governors, fourteen ambassadors, sixty mayors of important American cities, 400 rabbis of various degrees of orthodoxy, twice that number in Christian ministers, 500 university presidents and professors, a score of American generals, colonels, admirals, and rear admirals, hundreds of stage and screen personalities, and even several members of Roosevelt's cabinet by 1943.59

Nevertheless, Wise's American Jewish Conference condemned the leaders of these groups (including Ben Hecht, Max Lerner, Emil Lengyel, Louis Bromfield, Pierre Van Paassen, and Will Rogers, Jr.) as “opportunists” who represented a small political party in constant friction with the constituted Jewish leadership of the country and whose only purpose was to spread chaos and demoralization in Jewish life.60 For Wise, who shared the Jewish Agency's distaste for the Irgun's methods, Bergson’s manifold operations in this country were a distinct embarrassment, “a wretched plot,” as he told Sol Bloom.61

Wise thus served to buttress the State Department’s unwillingness to allow Bergson's Committee for an Army of Stateless Jews to send a field representative to Turkey to help with Jewish relief in the Balkans. Throughout the summer of 1943, Hull and Long tried to put off Bergson, Dean Alfange, and Joe Davidson with such excuses as the impossibility of dispatching a civilian to the Middle East when military priorities were yet to be handled or the argument that the U.S. already had a qualified ambassador in Turkey (Steinhardt) and did not need someone else peering over his shoulder. Meanwhile, the State Department was busily checking out Bergson's background to see if he should be deported.62

Ultimately, in October 1943, Breckinridge Long did agree to send a Jewish representative to Istanbul to unclog the flow of refugees.63 The excellent work which Bergson's choice, Bloomingdale Vice-President Ira Hirschmann, did was accomplished despite undermining by Emanuel Celler, Wise, and Nahum
Goldmann of the World Jewish Congress. Nine days before Hirschmann’s papers were approved, on October 6, 1943, the last two men sat in the offices of Breckinridge Long, and, in Long’s words, “excoriated” Bergson’s group as “a body composed of a lot of persons, many of whom were not Jews,” and all of whom failed to represent the thinking of most Jews in this country. That the State Department did finally approve Hirschmann’s mission is less a testimony to the efforts of Wise and his colleagues than it is to the discomfort caused by Bergson’s provocative newspaper advertisements. When Long agreed to send Hirschmann, he asked if the newspaper campaign, principally through the New York Times, would now cease. Bergson gave no guarantee that it would.

This affair did not mark the first time that Wise and other reputable Jewish leaders in the United States had attempted to derail a rescue scheme proposed by activist-minded pressure groups. In February 1943, Ben Hecht, the well-known playwright who served as cochairman of the Committee for a Jewish Army, received information from Switzerland that the Rumanian government had offered to allow 70,000 Trans-Dniestrian Jews (the survivors of a pre-Nazi population of 130,000 Jews in this region) to leave Rumania at a cost of 20,000 lei ($50) each for transport to the border. The total sum involved—$3,500,000—could easily be raised by several Jewish organizations. Hecht had Bergson and Merlin confirm the report through underground sources, and then he authored a four-column advertisement in the New York Times of February 16, 1943, which flashed in two-inch high letters: “FOR SALE to Humanity. 70,000 Jews. Guaranteed Human Beings at $50 apiece.”

Hecht’s advertisement was addressed to “the Four Freedoms, in care of the United Nations.” He argued that Rumania’s offer was bona fide “for this month only,” that it had been endorsed by the prestigious Manchester Guardian on February 9, that the inhabitants of Palestine (both Jews and Arabs) would welcome these troubled people, that no spies had been found among the 300,000 German Jews who had emigrated to Palestine since the rise of Hitler. If any spies were included in
the number in Rumania, Hecht said, “You can shoot them.” In fact, the only persons who could possibly object to the transaction were the Nazis and the Arabs who were collaborating with the Nazis in Berlin.

One week later, on February 23, an angry Wise released the following statement to the press: “The American Jewish Congress, dealing with the matter in conjunction with recognized Jewish organizations, wishes to state that no confirmation has been received regarding this alleged offer of the Rumanian Government to allow seventy thousand Jews to leave Rumania. Therefore, no collection of funds would seem justified.” Wise wrote a longer letter to the Reverend Holmes in which he referred to the publicized sale of Rumanian Jews no less than three times as “a hoax on the part of the Hecht group.” According to Wise, even if such a proposal had been made, the costs were prohibitive. Not $3,500,000, but a minimum of $30,000,000, would have been required to assemble these Jews in Bucharest, put them in trucks, and send them on their way.

Wise was wrong in this judgment. Bergson telephoned Assistant Secretary Berle for the desired confirmation, and Berle admitted that the State Department had received news of such an offer from its reliable source in Bern, Gerhart Riegner, on February 10, 1943. Despite its knowledge of what was transpiring in Eastern Europe, the State Department for reasons which are unclear did not act on the offer in the summer of 1943. One result of this delay was the development of a bitter rivalry between the State Department and the Treasury Department, in the course of which officials at the State Department dashed off caustic memorandums charging the Treasury Department with overreacting to the crisis, while Morgenthau and his associates charged the State Department with hypocrisy when it argued that ransoming the Trans-Dniestrían Jews would aid the Nazi war effort. Referring to an earlier conversation with Hull in which the secretary had indicated that such funds would remain blocked in Switzerland until the end of the war, Morgenthau recalled bitterly, “The State Department was usually among those who scoffed at economic warfare in other connections.”
While the subject of the Trans-Dnistrian Jews was being debated behind closed doors, Wise came to Washington in July to propose an amplification of the rescue scheme. Wise had been aware of the Riegner message since March 31, and he became a last-minute advocate of purchasing safe conduct for Jews of Eastern Europe. Where only months before he had done irreparable harm to the Trans-Dnistrian proposal by belittling the efforts of the activists, he now called for the removal of Jews from Poland to the relative safety of Hungary and Rumania in return for large sums of money deposited to blocked accounts in Switzerland. In his meeting with Roosevelt, Wise emphasized that the Nazis could not use the money during the war and that the victorious Allied armies would prevent them from using it after the war. According to Wise, Roosevelt called in Morgenthau to give his assent to the scheme and encouraged the rabbi to rouse public support.\(^7^1\)

On August 14, 1943, Roosevelt officially notified Wise that financial arrangements to save the Rumanian Jews had been made.\(^7^2\) It took the State Department seventeen more days to get a cable to Harrison in Bern notifying him that Washington desired to issue a license to the appropriate authorities in Europe. By now, however, the British had discovered the negotiations and had requested time to study the matter. It was not until December 17 that the State Department received a cable from its embassy in London giving the British view on this rescue proposal. The British Foreign Office, ever mindful of the explosive Palestine situation, was said to be concerned with the difficulty of disposing of large numbers of Jews, should they be released from enemy territory. For this reason it was reluctant to approve of preliminary financial arrangements with the Nazis, “though these were now acceptable to the Ministry of Economic Warfare.”\(^7^3\) Morgenthau commented, “The letter was a satanic combination of British chill and diplomatic double-talk, cold and correct, and adding up to a sentence of death.”\(^7^4\)

The State Department did not need the sanction of the British government in this affair, and this point was clearly indicated by John Pehle, director of the Treasury Department’s
Division of Foreign Funds, in a telephone conversation with Breckinridge Long in October. Pehle noted that the British had not asked our prior consent to spend £3,000 to feed British subjects on the captive Guernsey Islands. If the negotiations fell through, he charged, “the State Department will be held responsible for their failure.”

Evidently the State Department agreed, for on December 18, the day after the British made known their opposition to the Trans-Dniestr rescue plan, Long cabled Riegner that he could proceed with his operations in enemy territory drawing on a fund of $25,000, one-tenth the amount of money Riegner had originally requested.

Because of this eleven-month delay, most of the Jews who might have been extricated from Rumania were exterminated. Subsequently, Wise was to blame the State Department. “Let history, therefore, record for all time,” he wrote, “that were it not for State Department and Foreign Office bureaucratic bungling and callousness, thousands of lives might have been saved and the Jewish catastrophe partially averted.” The passage of years apparently had exculpated Wise and other Jewish leaders who had scoffed at the Bergson-Hecht group and denied the existence of a bodies-for-cash proposition for six vital weeks in the spring of 1943. Ben Hecht, however, challenged Wise’s statements when he wrote, “But in 1943, we, who called out the plight of the Rumanian Jews to the world, were discredited by the Zionist unions, the established Zionist leadership and their associated philanthropies, as scandalmongers. Our attempt to get the Jews out of Rumania before the Germans came was scotched.”

It would seem that Wise’s worst fears, that he might become a “court Jew” or shtadlan for the administration, were realized. This could be attributed in part to the concentration of so many chairmanships in his person. Wise more than any other figure represented American Jewry and as such he was patronized by Roosevelt, Hull, and other top-ranking government officials. Be-
cause of his longtime friendship with the president and Roosevelt's nodding approval of virtually everything Wise suggested, because he was privy to confidential information that smacked of policy-making, Wise naturally considered himself a person of importance and responsibility. In these crucial years to European Jewry, Wise believed that his larger responsibilities compelled him to silence.

Never a notably humble man, Wise had continually saluted himself for appreciating the true menace of Hitler long before others had gloatingly recalled the mob scenes that greeted his near-messianic appearance in Warsaw's ghetto in 1936. Wise also carried on a running feud with his ZOA co-chairman, Abba Silver, which, according to Silver's intimates, was as much a conflict of egos as anything else. When Silver called Wise “senile” in 1943, the latter retorted, “How charming it is. Working for a great people is to work by the side of the littlest men.”

No less an authority than Sigmund Freud had commented once, partly in jest, on Wise's self-image. Asked by Freud to name the five most important Jews in the world, Wise rattled off the names of Freud, Einstein, Weizmann, Brandeis, and Bergson. When Freud asked him, “What of you?,” Wise replied, “Oh, no, no, no, no.” Freud then commented, “I would have believed you if you had said ‘no’—but not ‘no, no, no, no.’”

It is still questionable whether Wise could have been as influential in shaping government policy as he or Elie Wiesel desired him to be. Certainly he was no more successful in keeping the gates of Palestine open to the Jews during wartime than he was in his belated efforts at rescue of the Jews of Poland and Rumania. Moreover, his decision to play down the persecution of Jews after 1938 and to cooperate with the State Department in suppression of the news of Nazi extermination plans are decisions open to legitimate challenge. They certainly confirmed government officials from Roosevelt through lower state functionaries in the view that Wise had no intention of creating public ripples during wartime.

Why didn’t Wise endure a hunger fast, or lead a march on Washington, or devise some other appropriate expedient, per-
haps even suicide, as Wiesel suggests, to dramatize the need for action for his people? Such alternatives must be assessed in their historical and cultural perspective. Were they feasible in 1943? Were they even considered by Wise? Gandhi and A. Philip Randolph had surely demonstrated that fasts and mass marches were within the range of possibility at the time. And the suicide in May 1943 of Shmul Zygelboim, one of two Jews serving on the Polish National Council in London, was intended to dramatize the passivity with which the world permitted the extermination of the Jews.84

But what were the practical results of these actions? Gandhi was thrown into prison by the British as a Japanese sympathizer. Randolph’s threatened march on Washington, before the United States entered the war, never reached fruition, and his Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters was bought off by tokenist concessions from the AFL. Wise could hardly have expected to achieve much more in an America which was at war in 1942–1943, where anti-Jewish sentiment was regenerate, where racism had resulted in the mauling of Mexican-American “Zoot Suiters” in Los Angeles and the killing of twenty-five Negroes and nine whites in Detroit.85 Civil disobedience on the scale advocated by Wiesel, who viewed these events twenty-five years later, when such behavior is not uncommon during peacetime, would have been regarded by Americans in 1942–1943 as seditious behavior designed to immobilize the government and thereby jeopardize the lives of American fighting men abroad.

Intimates of Wise indignantly reject the notion that he ever seriously considered suicide. The concept of self-immolation, originally an oriental concept, was not as widely known in 1942 as it is today. Moreover, the idea of taking one’s own life is not merely a violation of the Mosaic Code, but of subsequent Halakhic pronouncements, known well to Wise, against self-destruction except in times of grave personal peril. And finally, Wise could note that Zygelboim’s suicide was a futile act, one which failed to elicit any outpouring of sympathy from the democracies, let alone force marked changes in Allied policy toward the Jews of Europe.
What then was left for Wise? Personal intervention with the president, public rallies, fund-raising drives, and Zionism. That these were not enough was not necessarily the fault of Wise, who may or may not have been gullible in his dealings with government officials. Rather, the fault lay in the force of circumstances, the deep-rooted divisions in the Jewish community—among socialists, capitalists, assimilationists, Zionists, revisionists, reform and orthodox—which produced the feelings of antipathy demonstrated in Wise’s relations with the Hecht group and the American Jewish Committee. Perhaps the fault lay even more in a society which had created an atmosphere in which a leader of a minority did not feel free to speak the terrible news he had learned of persecution abroad for fear of generating that same persecution at home.