New Perspectives on Kristallnacht

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he historian and prolific author, Dorothy Zeligs, published *A History of Jewish Life in Modern Times for Young People* in 1938. Released by Bloch Publishing Company, one of the signature houses for American Jewish books, this volume told its story in a decidedly somber tone despite the generally upbeat voice common to this genre of writing, one which shared with Jewish youngsters the positive aspects of Jewish life and Judaism, stressing Jewish achievements. Zeligs had, however, no choice but to conclude her chapter, “The Story of the Jews in Germany,” in an ominous tone. “At the present,” she declared, “under the Hitler rule . . . anti-Semitism has reached such a high point that the future of the Jews in Germany seems very gloomy.” She advised teachers to stage a classroom drama for students to enact, “Elsa’s house before she leaves Nazi Germany for the United States,” hoping it would convey to these American Jewish youngsters that Elsa and her family could not remain at home. Yet despite these somber pronouncements, Zeligs, like so many writers of American Jewish texts published that year, strove to end on an optimistic note. “Jews have gone through difficult periods before. They will not lose hope now.”

1938, the year Zelig’s little book came out, from the point of view of the Jews’ recent history, could not have been worse. The horrors visited upon the Jews in Germany in November, 1938 with mass arrests, street attacks, invasions
of their homes, destruction of their businesses and communal institutions, and the burning of so many synagogues, followed a year-by-year unfolding crisis, starting in 1933 with Hitler’s accession to power.

The disturbing events of 1938, month-by-month, in particular captured the attention of American Jews, horrifying them and making them increasingly frantic about the fate of their co-religionists in Europe. Their horror at Kristallnacht’s fury served as a capstone to a half-decade of worry and almost a year of escalating anxiety. It in itself did not wake up these already worried American Jews, but rather served as an unmistakable, very real marker of the spreading threats which loomed against the Jews living under German domination.

The ways in which Kristallnacht, which took place near the very end of 1938—November—registered to American Jews reflected the growing realities which they had been living with for five years. They saw that each year after 1933 had chipped away at the lives of Germany’s Jews. But 1938 gave American Jews, the rank-and-file and the community leaders, much to terrify them. These included the German absorption of Austria, the Anschluss, in March, which immediately launched a coordinated set of actions against the Jews; the German incorporation of parts of Czechoslovakia in October; the November promulgation of the leggi raziali, the racial laws, which stripped the Jews of Italy of their citizenship, and that same month, the most dramatic moment of all in that terrible year, the “night of the broken glass,” Kristallnacht.

The last of these loomed largest but altogether the horrors of 1938, as well as the whole cascade of assaults upon the Jews which had begun earlier in the 1930s, left their marks on the Jewish people in the United States despite the ocean, which separated them from those living directly with these attacks. The changes which took place during 1938 can be less attributed to this one blazing event but rather to the steady accretion of recognition that the Jewish people faced a much altered, and for the worse, future.

Their newspapers, whether English or Yiddish, carried details of the evolving degradation of the status of Jews in Germany and they organized meetings, symposia, and public gatherings to ask how they could address the ever-growing specter. Some of them who came out of the labor movement, for example, formed as early as 1933 the Jewish Labor Committee to both rescue Jewish labor leaders and socialists from Germany and to inform the American unions about the threat emanating from Germany.

American Jews responded to the assaults engulfing the Jewish people in Europe. They issued direct political appeals to those who held the reins of power, including but not limited to members of congress, officials of the
Department of State, and President Franklin D. Roosevelt, whom the vast majority had voted for in 1932 and in the recent election in 1936, when he sought his second term.

How did these Jews, living so far away from the scenes of physical violence, lost rights, mass incarcerations in concentration camps, and stolen property, change their own institutional practices to respond to what they read about in the Jewish and general press and heard in their synagogues and other communal Jewish organizations? How did they rearrange their institutional practices and ideologies in the face of 1938?

BETWEEN RIGHTS AND FEARS

American Jewish actions in response to the events of 1938 in Europe, Germany most importantly, reflected both their increasing integration and the unmistakable proliferation of anti-Jewish rhetoric which resounded in their America. On the one hand they had experienced no diminishing of rights, legal or civic. They constituted one of the largest Jewish population centers in the world, generally enjoying the full privileges of white citizenship. While Jews experienced discrimination in a range of settings, whether private colleges and universities, social clubs, hotels, resorts, and residential neighborhoods, in the eyes of the law they possessed the full bundle of rights of all white people. In terms of their economic condition in 1938, while they had, like all Americans, suffered from the still raging economic depression, they could not be described as having been particularly stung by it. In some ways, Jews suffered less, given that farmers, African Americans, and laborers in the heavy industries like mining, steel, and automobile manufacturing felt its impact most severely. By 1930 a majority of Jews had been born in the United States and experienced, despite the economic downturn, a slow but measurable movement out of the working class into the middle class.

By the 1930s the Jews of the United States constituted the largest, freest, richest, and institutionally robust Jewish population in the world, with more organizations, institutions, and communal bodies than any other Jewry at the time. Their economic resources, channeled through global bodies such as the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee provided most of the funds to aid the Jews of Europe and the Middle East during and after World War I. In the 1920s American Jewish money rebuilt Jewish communal life in eastern
Europe. Hadassah, among other American Jewish philanthropic bodies, raised millions of dollars for the Jews of Palestine in the interwar years. Jewish women in America under Hadassah’s auspices enabled the work of Youth Aliyah, which as of 1935 sent youngsters from Germany, Austria, and Czechoslovakia to Palestine. HIAS (the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society) and subsidiary offshoots of the Joint facilitated Jewish resettlement out of Nazi-dominated Europe to far flung global havens, even before 1938 when the refugee crisis mushroomed to previously unimaginable proportions. Their communal coffers facilitated the movement of Jews to Shanghai, the Dominican Republic, Portugal, parts of Africa, indeed wherever refuge could be located.  

No other Jewish community in the world could accomplish this. As the situation of Jews in one European nation after another deteriorated with the economic depression, fascism and antisemitism, Jews in America raised money. Their ability to function like this depended on the efforts of both the very wealthy elite at the top and the masses below who contributed small but not irrelevant amounts of money. It also required that they marshal the support of powerful non-Jews to speak for and with them. Yet in 1938 much gave them pause. An opinion poll taken in 1938 found that sixty percent of Americans considered Jews “pushy” and “greedy” while other surveys revealed sizable percentages who declared that Jews had too much power and benefitted from the suffering of others. The mid-1930s catapulted the radio priest, Father Charles Coughlin, into celebrity status with audiences numbering by some estimates to eleven million. His publication, Social Justice, like his airwave broadcasts, spewed hatred of Jews as parasites and exploiters of the poor. He expressed great admiration for Hitler, claimed that Jews pulled Roosevelt’s strings, and might himself be one. Coughlin, like other, lesser demagogues, labelled the New Deal the “Jew Deal,” charging that Roosevelt acted for the Jews, at their behest.  

Commenting on Kristallnacht, Coughlin insisted that the Jews of Germany had brought it upon themselves. “Jewish persecution,” he declared a few weeks later, “only followed after Christians first were persecuted.” The following month the radio priest fired up over two thousand followers to join a protest march in New York, demanding that the United States government not open its doors to Jewish refugees. Their banners warned, “Wait until Hitler comes over here!”  

Coughlin alone did not create the anti-Jewish barrage of the mid-1930s. William Dudley Pelley with his Silver Shirt Legion of America and Gerald Winrod, founder of the Defenders of the Christian Faith, along with other
local hate-mongers, sent a collective shiver down the backs of American Jews. So, too, members of the German-American Bund, founded in 1936, took to the streets in Nazi uniforms and filled auditorium halls in New York, Newark, Milwaukee, Cincinnati, St. Louis and elsewhere, bringing Berlin’s message to America’s main streets.6

Anti-Jewish activities of the 1930s followed the spectacular rise of the 1920s Ku Klux Klan, which enrolled millions nationally. The Klan whipped up Americans in every region with arguments about the Jews’ pernicious ability to control the media, entertainment, Wall Street, and the government. It ran and elected local and state candidates, registering successes well beyond its initial base in the South.7

The American Jewish Yearbook, a widely distributed compendium of Jewish news and statistics published since 1898, noted in its 1938–39 volume that, “the past year saw attempts on the part of the various native Jew-baiting organizations to unite,” and warned that they managed to “join forces with the foreign provocateurs, chiefly the German American Bund.” It commented that, “the Nazi infiltration among the native anti-Jewish groups,” had become so dense, “that it is . . . increasingly difficult to separate one from the other.”8

American Jews, as articulated in their publications, the reports of organizations, statements and deeds of communal bodies, and pronouncements of religious institutions, found this frighteningly real. While they lacked an official, central agency that could issue authoritative statements and despite sharp organizational competition and heated differences of opinion as to how to address the problems they faced, a near unanimity pervaded community life. Across deep divisions a consensus prevailed that American Jews had to do something and that understanding spanned women and men, Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, Reconstructionist, socialist, Communist, Zionist, anti-Zionist, English-speaking, Yiddish-speaking, American born, immigrant, of Central European background, of east European background, rich, middle class, and working class Jews, who converged on a few facts.

Across fundamental divides, American Jews recognized that many Jews outside the United States lived under the sword of Nazism. Jewish life in Europe, especially Poland and Rumania, teetered on the brink of disaster, and American Jews believed their own security threatened. How, with the increasingly audible ugly rhetoric swirling around them, could they as Jews accomplish two ends: preserve their own security, and, fulfill their responsibilities towards Jews elsewhere, their literal and metaphoric kin? As they saw it, the two could not be disaggregated. To accomplish the latter they had to ensure the
former. Their political and communal actions in 1938 involved the mutuality of those concerns and while they did not agree how to accomplish these ends, they did all recognize their responsibilities.

Certainly millions of American Jews, regardless of class, ideology, gender, or region, lived undisturbed by European traumas. They went to work, ran businesses, invested in new enterprises, attended school, married, gave birth to children, raised them, enjoyed leisure, and participated in Jewish and general communal activities. Some contributed to American culture through literature, theater, the movies and music.

1938 proved a banner year for the latter of these endeavors. One American Jew, Irving Berlin, provided the nation with a stirring patriotic anthem, “God Bless America,” which revealed the difference between it and Europe, where, “the storm clouds gather far across the sea.” Berlin had originally written the song in 1918 as American entered World War I, but revised it in the year of Kristallnacht. The immigrant Jewish songwriter asked the popular performer Kate Smith to premier the song on the radio on Armistice Day, November 11, 1938. The hymn urged Americans: “Let us swear allegiance to a land that’s free,/ Let us all be grateful for a land so fair./ As we raise our voices in a solemn prayer:” “God Bless America” contrasted by implication the United States with Europe, a horror chamber defined by the Vienna pogroms and Kristallnacht.

The work of American Jews in the public sphere reflected their disturbed consciousness as they faced 1938 and that work operated on two levels. As they went about figuring out what they could do, American Jews sought ways to reach out to Americans of good-will to speak with and for them while at the same time they recognized a need to reshape Jewish communal life itself in order to act on their own behalf.

REACHING OUT

Jewish outreach to non-Jews, allies and potential allies whom they hoped to advocate for endangered Jews in Germany and elsewhere, reflected a reasonable assessment of reality. Knowing that they constituted less than five percent of the American people, Jews recognized that their own fate, and that of European Jewry, lay in the hands of others.

Engagement with non-Jewish comrades did not arise out of nowhere in 1938 or in the half decade after Hitler’s accession to power. American Jews,
rabbis and self-appointed leaders of local and national defense bodies had been doing so since the nineteenth century. When Jewish crises erupted in the United States or abroad, they consistently turned to non-Jews to speak with and for them. A monster rally organized, for example, by the American Jewish Congress on March 27, 1933, held at a packed Madison Square Garden in New York City, featured Catholic, Protestant and Jewish clergy, public officials, leaders of the labor movement and civic personalities. This rally in its own way resembled rallies they held in the first decade of the twentieth century after the Kishinev pogrom, when they had also sought out notable non-Jews to stand at their sides.9

The German crisis of 1938, however, accelerated such activity, rendering the task ever more critical. American Jewish publications and institutions widely publicized the deeds of their non-Jewish fellow Americans, Christian clergy or others, who supported the Jews of Europe and publicly opposed the spread of Fascist anti-Semitism, abroad and at home. Awareness of the larger American public's widespread good will and its aversion to the persecution of the Jews, they wagered, would inspire other non-Jews, unaware of the exigencies of the moment, to join. As more Americans awoke to the plight of the Jews in Germany, opinion makers among American Jews hoped the government would respond in kind. Those with power would realize that Jews did not stand alone in calling for vigorous action against Hitlerism.

The American Jewish Yearbook offers one source from which to survey this kind of wishful thinking. Its reliability as an historical record reflects its careful research, accuracy of reporting, meticulous statistics, geographic breadth, and wide circulation to government officials, academicians, libraries, and others. Its editors, as they prepared each volume, scanned the Jewish and general press, redacted articles and editorials, gleaning news nationally and globally.10

In the two volumes bridging 1938 and Kristallnacht, 1937–38 and 1938–39, its editors balanced news of the harsh realities of anti-Jewish violence abroad and anti-Jewish agitation in America with reportage on the many hopeful signs signaling that American non-Jews stood up to combat anti-Semitism. Upsurges in good-will, evidence of Americans’ revulsion against Nazi hatred of the Jews, allowed American Jews to claim that their nation occupied a very different and special place in the world. As the 1937–38 Yearbook’s section, “Movements for Better Understanding” noted, even after “appraising the influence of the forces of ill-will . . . and the anti-Jewish agitation promoted by them,” readers should recognize that, “the forces of good will are much more numerous and active, and the wholesome inter-group attitudes generated by
them are much more in harmony with the American spirit than the heresy of inter-group hostility.”

Pages upon pages listed meetings, publications, petitions, articles, sermons, radio broadcasts, and statements made in city councils, state legislatures, and the halls of Congress by non-Jewish allies in support of the Jews. The editors positively glowed describing anti-Nazi rallies held in New York and Los Angeles in January 1938, events that marked the fifth anniversary of Hitler’s accession to power. The Los Angeles meeting, it reported, brought ten thousand to the Shrine Auditorium to listen to the Jewish actor Eddie Cantor, but also author Dorothy Parker and Congressman Jerry O’Connell. It provided book titles of the year authored by non-Jews, which documented the hideous actions visited upon Jews in Germany and elsewhere under Nazi rule, hailing authors like John Haynes Holmes, Dorothy Thompson, William Harman Black, among many others, whose works like, *Through Gentile Eyes, Refugees: Anarchy or Organization*, and *If I Were a Jew*, empathized with the Jews.

Unitarian minister, Holmes, after all, declared himself in the title, a “Gentile,” who considered it his responsibility to issue a *Plea for Tolerance and Good Will*. Notably Holmes, a close collaborator with Stephen Wise, issued his book through the Jewish Opinion Publishing Company, an offshoot of Wise’s magazine, *Jewish Opinion*. Throughout 1938, Jews repeatedly sought out non-Jews to speak for them. William Harman Black, a justice of the Supreme Court of New York and Honorary Chairman of the Interfaith Movement, declared in his *If I Were a Jew*, that this organization had been founded with the aid of the Wall Street Synagogue. The movement and its official publication, “The Beacon Light,” existed to warn the American public that the “prairie fire of intolerance has been lighted in Germany,” where the Jews “find themselves again the almost helpless victims of the conflagration.”

The *Yearbook* lauded the ways Jewish notables, organization leaders, and communal figures turned to their Catholic and Protestant colleagues to write on behalf of the Jews, to speak at rallies, and to form organizations and committees to advocate for Jews abroad in distress. These same political acts, undertaken by Jews alone, Jews calculated, would have smacked of Jewish pleading, playing into the hand of the critics of the Jews who long argued that Jews had too much power and cared only for themselves. But outrage against anti-Semitism in Germany, articulated by a Catholic priest or a Protestant lay person, appeared humanitarian and selfless.

Larger and smaller pieces of writing by Christians in support of Jews merited attention. The 1938–1939 *Yearbook* highlighted magazine articles
and other pieces, which it claimed had “resulted in arousing public interest.” Among many, it ticked off:


The descent of hope embedded in these articles, essays, books, lectures and sermons represented wishful thinking about Americans’ good-will towards Jews and their sympathy for the Jews facing Nazism abroad. It constituted evidence, real or imaginary, that Americans would never behave like Germans, Austrians, Italians, and Czechs and turn on their Jewish fellow citizens. After all, as of December 1938, a few weeks following the devastation that took place in Germany, “an official joint Protestant-Catholic statement” went forth in America “denouncing religious and racial persecution.” Furthermore, “virtually every prominent Protestant communion condemned anti-Semitism during the year in official resolutions, through denominational publications or in other forms of action.”17

The Jewish leadership fantasized that an awoken American public would spur the United States government to intervene on behalf of the imperiled Jews. With no idea as to how this might happen, Cyrus Adler, President of the American Jewish Committee, the body responsible for the *Yearbook*, sounded an optimistic tone in his address to the AJC’s 1938 annual meeting. “America,” he declared, “will struggle for and I believe maintain, its system of civilization and that it may sometime again be willing to take the opportunity to spread democratic ideals throughout the world.” To Adler, that spread of consciousness among the American people would push the government to act and to “interfere in the domestic affairs of another State.” Naming Germany and Italy, Adler called upon the American people and government to act when foreign nations “force large numbers of people to migrate, create a great mass of refugees, émigrés, stateless people who with the best will find it difficult sometimes to adjust themselves in other States, or whom other States sometimes find it difficult to digest.”18
The *Yearbook* editors additionally noted that most German Americans, as well as Czech and Italian Americans, abhorred the actions of their old homelands, reporting that “many Americans of German origin openly disapprove and strongly resent the importation of Nazi doctrines in this country.” In the aftermath of the promulgation of the racial laws in Italy, the *Yearbook* highlighted the negative reaction of Italian Americans *vis-à-vis* the actions of their country of origin. That surely gave American Jews something to savor. The heretofore pro-Fascist “Generoso Pope, the most prominent and influential of the Italian-American publishers,” expressed disbelief that his country would act so brutally towards the Jews. Pope, it noted, broke ranks with the Mussolini government that had been funding his New York newspaper, *Il Progresso*. As “a concrete manifestation” of the Italian Americans’ revulsion against anti-Semitism back home, it pointed to the establishment of The Sons of Italy Grand Lodge in June 1939. Among its first acts, the Italian fraternal order with two hundred branches throughout New York State, created a bureau to foster good will between the two groups.¹⁹

The message here emphasized America’s essential difference and exceptionalism. They marshalled what evidence they had to prove American disgust at the anti-Jewish violence undertaken by Nazi Germany in 1938. All the New York daily newspapers, and in fact most papers across the country, editorialized against Nazi brutality. As Saul Friedman wrote, prominent American people and institutions, including, “the Catholic monthly *Wisdom*, the *Messenger* (national organs of the Evangelical and Reform Churches in the United States), the National Methodist Student Conference, the YMCA, the World Conference of the Society of Friends, Bishop William Manning of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York, Harry Emerson Fosdick, Al Smith . . . Vito Marcantonio, a New York Republican,” lent their public voices to the chorus.²⁰ The National Catholic Welfare Conference News Service broadcast a message on NBC and CBS on November 16, 1938, expressing solidarity with the Jews of Germany and revulsion against the actions of Hitler’s Reich.²¹

We cannot know to what extent the Jewish leaders actually believed in the beneficence of the American people and their government or if they manufactured their hopeful words to calm a jumpy Jewish population. Likely they veered between these two poles, clutching at straws as they cast their eyes across the Atlantic and as they heard the hoof beats of an anti-Jewish stampede at home. Either way the American Jewish world itself produced an avalanche of texts to educate itself on the crisis it faced.
1938, for example, saw the release of books such as Morris S. Lazaron’s, *Common Ground: A Plea for Intelligent Americanism*; Oscar I. Janowsky and Melvin Fagen’s, *International Aspects of German Racial Policies* (published the year before); Oscar Janowsky’s, *People at Bay: The Jewish Problem in Central Europe*—all written by Jewish communal insiders, and published by major American presses. All were intended to reveal the horrors of Jewish life in Europe and to try, through logic, rational arguments, and appeals to the nation’s core values, to enlist Americans’ sympathies and convince them to stand aloof from anti-Semitism. These represent just a small sampling of those books, let alone the virtual tsunami of articles printed in general and Jewish publications.

No issue of Chicago’s *Jewish Sentinel*, Wisconsin’s *Jewish Chronicle*, Boston’s *Jewish Advocate* or the hundreds of other papers around the country contained less than one or two articles on the deterioration of Jewish life in Europe under the Nazi menace. The daily Yiddish press covered the events in graphic harrowing detail.

The year’s events impelled American Jews to organize protest meetings in communities large and small, to which they invited local Jews along a broad spectrum as well as non-Jewish notables. Those meetings, like the ones that took place in such communities as New Haven and Waterbury, Connecticut, not only brought Jews and non-Jews together in outrage, but received press coverage, widening the net of those who knew of the plight of Germany’s Jews and of Jewish mobilization at home. Jewish spokespeople took to the airwaves, utilizing local stations and national broadcasting networks to answer the question, as posed by Rabbi Samuel Goldenson in an April, 1938 sermon on NBC, “What Shall We Jews Do These Days?”

1938: A YEAR OF AMERICAN JEWISH ACTION
Rabbi Goldenson’s sermon asked his co-religionists, “What Shall We Jews Do,” and in asking this he reflected the reality that Jews in 1938, should not sit back and wait for American non-Jews to act for them. Indeed it did not take Kristallnacht to motivate them to act. Rather American Jewish organizations geared up for heightened outreach work, preparing texts to foster positive American support. In 1938 the American Jewish Committee hired Richard Rothschild, of the Walter Thompson and the Lord and Thomas advertising
agencies to organize and supervise a broad coalition of Jewish and non-Jewish opponents of Nazism and anti-Semitism. Rothschild generated a steady stream of propaganda materials, using every genre at his command, to deliver the message to the American people that anti-Semitism was wrong, that Jews did not differ from other people, and that hatred of the Jews violated American norms and harmed America in the process.26

Other Jewish organizations added their voices. The Jewish Theological Seminary, under the leadership of Cyrus Adler, organized in 1938 the Institute for Religious and Social Studies, creating the first ongoing forum for Jewish, Protestant and Catholic clergy to engage in dialogue to lessen tensions based on faith traditions. The previous year Professor Abraham Katsch at New York University created the Jewish Culture Foundation, specifically to disseminate positive and truthful information about Jews and Judaism to the non-Jews on his campus and beyond. The Jewish Culture Foundation brought together a distinguished group of Jewish and non-Jewish public figures to contemplate how the Nazi government tried to influence “Americans of German origin.” The Foundation published the papers in a book “intended to expose the purposes of National Socialist propaganda outside the Reich,” in order “to inform the American public of the attitude of the German government toward American institutions and particularly toward American principles of citizenship.” The following year, 1939, the newly created National Federation of Temple Brotherhoods, an arm of the Reform movement, prepared materials, including booklets, radio shows, articles, and films for distribution to libraries, churches, Christian summer camps and universities about Judaism, to spread good-will for the Jews. It also took over the somewhat moribund Jewish Chautauqua Society, and through it sent out rabbis to lecture to Christian groups in hopes of shattering the lies being spewed forth by Coughlin and Hitler.27

Joining this Jewish-inspired chorus, Jewish Opinion Publishing Company convened a symposium of Jews and non-Jews in its magazine, Jewish Opinion. The symposium was based on an essay contest, launched in 1937, “How to Combat Anti-Semitism in America.” Jewish Opinion published the six winning submissions. All the contest participants referred to the looming threat of Germany and the danger it posed to Jews everywhere.28 The Anti-Defamation League of the B’nai B’rith did its work, producing pamphlets in 1938 for use in its chapters around the country and for its “Fireside Discussion Group” activities. Women and men sitting around a table or in a living room, with sympathetic non-Jews invited to participate, contemplated such topics as, “The Aryan and Nordic Myths,” “The Myth of Jewish Economic Dominance,”
“Hitler’s Communism Unmasked,” and in light of the recently enacted racial laws under Mussolini, “The Jews of Italy.” These discussions never strayed far from the tragic events unfolding almost daily in the lives of Europe’s Jews, set against a fear that maybe they could happen in America too.29

Such work infused American Jewish organizations and institutions, each working to spread the message. Maurice Karpf, a faculty member of the Graduate School for Jewish Social Work New York, made a direct connection in his 1938 compendium, *Jewish Community Organization in the United States*, between all the outreach activity and the “present German government’s activities against the Jews.” The American Jewish campaign of “propaganda against the Nazis,” according to Karpf, focused on “the identification of the type of discrimination against Jews, with discrimination either immediate or ultimate against other minority groups; the stimulation of labor and other liberal groups to the realization that Nazi Germany and its program represent a threat to them.” This work had been undertaken to combat, “the German influence in this country,” set against, “anti-Semitism and intolerance in whatever guise.”30

Karpf, writing in the year of Kristallnacht could only speculate on the efficacy of such actions. “It is,” he almost sighed in conclusion, “impossible to estimate these activities” and their impact, adding a cautionary note, perhaps directed at those Jews who felt frustrated at the limited weapons in their arsenal. Some Jews “believe that were Jews to present a united front to the world in these and other efforts, however much they might differ internally,” they could make a real difference as they faced the hostile situation of the 1938 moment.31

That quest for unity and the widely shared assumption that a less fractious and fractured American Jewish polity could more effectively combat Nazism at home and abroad than a complex, multi-vocal, chaotic, disorganized, and anarchic American Jewry, provides a second way by which they responded to the Nazi persecution of the Jews. American Jews, through communal bodies, began to redefine how they did their work and initiated a series of changes which informed their subsequent work. They did so by taking on new functions, creating more united fronts, and working to lessen previously held divisive beliefs.

In some cases, Jewish agencies reorganized or refined their organizational structure so as to respond more quickly to the rapid-fire events in Europe. The Joint Distribution Committee, conscious that in the face of 1938 and of “an emergency of huge proportions,” demanded that familiar structures for fundraising and disbursement of monies be refined. Since it would “have to render assistance without delay,” the Joint needed a more efficient structure.
became much less driven by a handful of wealthy and well-placed individuals. Instead it took “several notable steps toward increasing the opportunities for community leaders throughout the country to participate in its work,” setting up regional offices, and expanding its board in response to the “anti-Jewish outrages throughout Germany and Austria on November 10, 1938.” Similarly the Jewish War Veterans took on tasks it had never assumed before. In 1938 it picked up responsibility for aiding in the resettlement of the veterans who came to America among the German Jewish refugees, ironically providing aid to their former battlefield foes. The B’nai B’rith established a Washington, DC office in 1938, making it the first American Jewish organization to set up a permanent presence in the nation’s capital.

From the perspective of the ideological changes inspired by the German horror, the decision of the Reform movement’s Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) in 1937 to alter, however gingerly, its position on Zionism generated much attention. At its meeting in Columbus, Ohio, the CCAR announced that it now looked positively on the project of, the “upbuilding of a Jewish homeland and the rehabilitation of Palestine,” thereby reversing its stance adopted at the end of the nineteenth century. Similarly the American Jewish Committee moved itself closer to the Zionist position. So, too, the Joint Distribution in 1939 began cooperating for the first time, although without discord, with Zionists, easing the gap that had divided them since the end of World War I. The Jewish Labor Committee (JLC), founded by anti-Zionist Bundists in 1933 as an anti-Nazi organization, also shifted focus in 1938. While it had always co-operated with the Zionist left, in 1938 it broadened its vision by drawing attention to and actively supporting Jewish workers of Palestine; it also started participating in other kinds of Zionist projects. In 1939, the JLC joined with a broad coalition of American Zionists in protesting the British issuance of the White Paper, which severely curtailed Jewish migration from Germany. The emergence of a consensus on Palestine among American Jews, including those previously lukewarm or hostile to Zionism, made 1938 a turning point as American Jews focused on rescue and resettlement for the beleaguered Jews of Central Europe.

As late as 1937, Jewish women’s groups like National Council of Jewish Women, the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods, the Women’s League of the United Synagogue of America, and the Women’s Branch of the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations, along with some of the male-dominated bodies, still publicly identified with the agenda of the American peace movement. Within a year, that support withered as pacifism seemed a less compelling
ideology, peace a less persuasive agenda, and a belief that only military force 
would topple Nazism in Germany.\textsuperscript{36}

That ability, or willingness, first manifest in 1938 among American 
Jews to co-operate along previously profound ideological and organizational 
divides also inspired some notable local and national innovations. Some 
proved short-lived and failed. The National Council of Jewish Federations and 
Welfare Funds, whose origins lay in the early twentieth century along with the 
American Jewish Committee, helped launch the General Council for Jewish 
Rights. While the AJC, the B’nai B’rith and the Jewish Labor Committee ini-

tially balked at the idea of a single defense agency to represent American Jewry, 
the forces in favor of such a coordinated body prevailed. They considered that 
it might help “mobilize the strength of American Jews in the struggle against 
Hitlerism.”\textsuperscript{37} The former naysayers overcame their opposition and in June, 
1938, signed on to the Pittsburgh Agreement which led to the founding of the 
General Jewish Council. Organizers of the Council envisioned a broad-based 
forum for all American Jews to share in the fight against Nazism. They decided 
that after paying a ten-cent fee, any adult Jew could cast a ballot for delegates 
to the Council, which in turn would hammer out a general consensus on the 
momentous events of the day.

It never worked. The Council disbanded two years later, but even in its 
failure it demonstrated how 1938 compelled American Jews to consider the 
impact of their scattered communal structure and to search for antidotes to it.\textsuperscript{38}

Of greater longevity and more measurable achievement, the United 
Jewish Appeal (UJA) also owed its birth to the global Jewish crisis of 1938. 
In January 1939, the United Palestine Appeal, the fundraising body of the 
Zionists, along with the Joint Distribution Committee and the National 
Coordinating Committee Fund, which had been formed to address the needs 
of the German Jewish refugees who made it to America, banded together to 
create the United Jewish Appeal for Refugee and Overseas Needs. To show 
that the fissures of the past paled in the face of the Hitler menace, the newly 
born body functioned under the tripartite joint leadership of Rabbi Abba Hillel 
Silver, a Zionist, William Rosenwald, son of the philanthropist and decidedly 
non-Zionist Julius Rosenwald, who represented the National Coordinating 
Committee, and Rabbi Jonah B. Wise, head of the Joint. Wise in 1938 served at 
President Roosevelt’s request as a delegate to the international refugee confer-
ence in Evian, France. The initial goal of the UJA, to triple or quadruple the 
money which the three partners had raised individually in 1937, succeeded 
and the UJA went on to become a powerhouse of fund-raising for the Jews
of Europe over the following decades. It is no exaggeration to say that nearly every penny used to fund the flight of Jews from Nazi-dominated countries, to resettle them in places on nearly every continent, and to provide food and other supplies to Jews still in Europe and who during the war languished in the ghettos, came from the UJA. Despite internal dissension, organizational competition, and territorial squabbling, it served as the rallying point for large, medium, and small Jewish donors who considered giving money to the UJA a way to help their sisters and brothers under the threat of Hitler and Germany.39

So, too, against the specter of 1938, the Jewish communal service activists, donors, administrators, and social workers who provided direct assistance to Jews in need formed themselves into the National Refugee Service (NRS). Although it also assisted non-Jewish refugees and adopted a religiously neutral name, its purpose could not have been more decidedly Jewish. Within months of its founding in early 1939, it created liaison relationships with Jewish social service agencies in five hundred communities around the country, standing ready to provide housing, jobs, legal advice, and other services to the German, Czech, Austrian, and Polish Jewish refugees coming to the United States. NRS facilitated their settlement in New York and their dispersal to cities beyond which could accommodate the newcomers. Wherever they went, the local Jewish social service agencies, assisted by the New York office of NRS, worked with potential employers to provide jobs, while local bodies like the Associated Jewish Charities of Chicago or the Jewish Child and Family Services of Milwaukee secured and helped subsidize housing, clothing, medical care, and other essentials.40

On the local level, a number of Jewish communities formed themselves into community councils in 1938. Seeking a way to be able to speak authoritatively for all, or at least most Jews, community councils, some of which had started before 1938, got a boost in the face of the events of that year. These councils, in which all Jewish organizations sent representatives and collectively forged a communal consensus, heralded the fading of a significant divide between the American-born Jews of central European origins and the more recently arrived eastern Europeans, particularly their children. These two segments of American Jewry recognized a common enemy—Hitler abroad and Hitlerian anti-Jewish activity at home—and in cities like Washington, DC, they came together precisely in 1938, to do what they could.

Indeed, its first organizational meeting in Washington took place after Minnie Goldsmith, long a patron of the city’s Jewish Social Service Agency, assembled a group because of the arrival of German Jewish refugees to
Washington. She understood that JSSA could meet some of their material needs, but the Jews of the city needed a constituent body “to speak for the Jewish community in matters of community concern.”

The proliferation of councils in 1938 and 1939 caught the attention of the editors of the American Jewish Yearbook, who deemed the increase “one of the most significant trends in the field of social welfare.” The forty new such bodies represented a way “to cope on a unified basis with the greater needs at home and abroad.”

Kristallnacht sparked those “greater needs,” although the events of 1938 that preceded it, also caused them to act. But it loomed most dramatically in their minds. As the editors of the Yearbook declared, “the single event which shocked American public opinion more profoundly than any other . . . since the rise of Hitlerism, was the campaign of pillage and destruction let loose against the Jews of Germany, on “Thursday, November 10, 1938.” The editors, careful observers of the American Jewish scene, may very likely have deliberately chosen to declare that “the American public,” and not just America’s Jews had recoiled in horror. By putting it this way, they could confirm at least to themselves the support they understood they needed from the non-Jews with whom they had to work with. Kristallnacht burnt into their awareness the truth that they had to restructure community life so as to be able to respond to the grave challenges they faced and to shoulder the desperate chores thrust on them. But it alone did not put them on that course. The events of the half decade before got them started.
Notes


4. Ibid., 109.

5. Ibid., 115.


10. The *AJY* followed the Hebrew calendar rather than the general one and therefore a year on the Gregorian calendar, 1938, split into two volumes, September 1937 to September 1938 (Volume 39) and then September 1938 to September 1939 (Volume 40).


1938: American Jews Respond to a Very Bad Year

15. Black, If I Were a Jew, 277.
17. Ibid., vol. 40, 222–23.
18. Ibid., 651–52.
19. Ibid., 126; AJY, vol. 41, 199.
31. Ibid.
33. AJY, vol. 41, 205–08.
34. Ibid., 229.
35. AJY, vol. 40, 229.
42. AJY, vol. 41, 226–27.
43. AJY, vol. 40, 190.
1938: American Jews Respond to a Very Bad Year

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