

# ORTHODOXY'S FINEST HOUR

## Rescue Efforts During the Holocaust

By David Kranzler

In his widely publicized book, Efraim Zuroff claims that the Orthodox only saved “their own” during the Holocaust. In the pages ahead, Holocaust historian David Kranzler asserts that Zuroff’s accusations “are baseless and irresponsible.”

*Photo of Rabbis' March on Washington, October 6, 1943. From right to left (front row): Rabbi Dov Aryeh Leventhal, vice president of Agudath Harabbanim; Rabbi Israel Rosenberg, co-president of Agudath Harabbonim and Rabbi Eliezer Silver, co-president of Agudath Harabbanim. Behind and to the left of Rabbi Silver, Rabbi Abraham Kalmanowitz.*

*All photos and clippings are from the Agudah Archives except where indicated.*

**W**hen Efraim Zuroff's book, *The Response of Orthodox Jewry in the United States to the Holocaust: the Activities of the Vaad Ha-hatzala Rescue Committee, 1939-1945*, first appeared in the spring of 2000, it created quite a stir with its accusations against Orthodox Jews and their rescue attempts during the Holocaust. My own far more extensive research on rescue operations during that period and on the specific role played by the Orthodox has convinced me that Zuroff's accusations are baseless and irresponsible.\*

From the very outset, the Orthodox (referred to here as the Vaad Ha-hatzala and Agudath Israel) served as a major catalyst for the rescue of European Jewry. Driven by Torah values, specifically *pikuach nefesh* (the saving of life at all costs) and *pidyon shevuyim* (the ransoming of captives), the Orthodox did what they could to rescue the Jews of Europe, even if it meant, at times, breaking the law. Unlike the secular Jewish establishment, they were not hindered by fears of appearing "disloyal" to the American government—their primary concern was saving lives. And save lives they did, not just from the Orthodox camp, as Zuroff contends, but from every segment of Jewish society. Indeed, the Orthodox followed a dual track for rescue: the first track involved the rescue of all *Klal Yisrael*, regardless of affiliation; the second track involved the specific rescue of Torah scholars and yeshivah students. These efforts, which began in 1940 and accelerated by mid-1943, peaked in 1944-45.

## Breaking the Blockade of 1941

Zuroff asserts that "It was only during the last year [of the war] that the Vaad [Ha-Hatzala] attempted to save all Jews regardless of religiosity or religious affiliation."<sup>1</sup> This is patently false. With the establishment of the ghettos in Eastern Europe, it was clear that the Nazis intended to starve the Jews. Many Jewish organizations, including Agudath Israel (the Agudah), began sending food packages and clothing to the ghettos, to be distributed to all

*A historian and retired professor at CUNY, Dr. Kranzler has written ten books and numerous articles on rescue and rescue attempts during the Holocaust. His books include Japanese, Nazis and Jews: the Jewish Refugee Community of Shanghai, 1938-1945 (Yeshiva U. Press, 1976) and The Man Who Stopped the Trains to Auschwitz: George Mantello, El Salvador and Switzerland's Finest Hour (Syracuse U. Press 2000). He is just completing Holocaust Hero: the Untold Story of the Rescue Exploits of Rabbi Dr. Solomon Schonfeld, the Orthodox Rabbi Who Rescued 4,000 Jews During the Holocaust (Ktav, 2002). With appreciation to Jeanette Friedman for her editorial assistance.*

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Jews, irrespective of affiliation. In fact, the Agudah program worked so well that even the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) in New York made use of it to send *matzot* to Poland in the spring of 1941.<sup>2</sup>

But in mid-1941, when Lord Halifax, the British ambas-

### Agudas Israel Offices Picketed For Sending Food to Nazi Lands

**By Jewish Telegraphic Agency**  
**NEW YORK, July 24.**—The offices of the Agudas Israel of America were picketed here by the Joint Boycott Council for refusing to submit to the demand of the Council that the Agudas Israel discontinue acting as agent for sending private food packages to relatives in Germany and German-held territories.  
 A letter addressed last week to the Agudas Israel by Dr. Joseph Tenenbaum, chairman of the Joint Boycott Council, warned that Jewish orthodox organization that pickets would be stationed at its offices if it failed to comply with the demand of the Council.  
 A statement issued by the Agudas Israel urges the Council to accept arbitration. The statement asserts that the Council refused to have the issue settled by an impartial committee.  
 "We shall therefore take the necessary steps to compel the Council to prove that the Agudas Israel is helping to feed the Nazis by sending food packages to relatives of American Jews," the statement says, adding that the sending of food parcels "is approved by leading Jewish religious authorities in America."  
 The Federation of Polish Jews in America which has been accepting orders from American Jews to deliver food packages to Poland natives in Nazi-controlled territory announced that it has discontinued doing so.  
 The World Jewish Congress has similarly discontinued sending food packages to people in Nazi-held countries on the ground that "it is against the interests of Britain to indulge in such transactions."

From JEWISH HERALD  
 Providence, R. I.

From JEWISH CHRONICLE  
 Milwaukee, Wis.

**Agudath Israel**  
 In all lands of its activity the Agudath Israel has been a disinterested element, rarely identifying itself with the whole Jewish community.  
 Contempt for the piety of the community has been the basic attitude of the Agudath. There

**Agudath Offices Picketed for Sending Food to Nazi-Held Territories**  
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*Article on the picketing of the Agudah offices, the American Jewish Outlook, Pittsburgh, Pa., July 24, 1941.*

sador, ordered Jewish organizations to stop breaking the British blockade of Hitler-occupied Europe, the entire Jewish establishment, except the tiny Agudah, knuckled under. Indeed, contrary to Zuroff's charge that the Orthodox only saved "their own," the Agudah understood that feeding starving Jews—regardless of religiosity—was more important than adhering to legalities. For three weeks, representatives of the American Jewish establishment picketed the powerless Agudah for defying Lord Halifax and feeding their starving brethren. Dr. Joseph Tenenbaum, a major Zionist leader and head of the Jewish organizations in support of the blockade, led the picketing against Agudah for breaking Jewish solidarity, and

called the *roshei yeshivah* "a sickly weed transplanted on these liberal shores" and "recent arrivals in this land of freedom and opportunity, who, though they speak of Torah and prayer with pious glances, yet...a dollar is a dollar."<sup>3</sup> This sad chapter, oddly omitted by Zuroff, was played out in the pages of the Yiddish as well as Anglo-Jewish press.

Despite the opposition, the Agudah continued to send packages until Lord Halifax threatened Yaakov Rosenheim, the president of the World Agudah, with the arrest of thousands of Jewish refugees in London. (Interestingly, the British never stopped the International Red Cross from sending shiploads of grain to Nazi-occupied Greece and Yugoslavia.) By 1942, the Agudah discovered new legal channels, enabling them to send \$12,000 worth of food to Poland per month.<sup>4</sup>

## Protective Papers

The Orthodox frequently set the pace for rescue by creating new rescue schemes which were subsequently emulated by other relief organizations, such as the protective Latin American papers. Zuroff makes no mention of these papers in his book, despite the fact that they were used to save thousands of Jewish lives, Orthodox and non-Orthodox alike. The scheme was initiated by Eli Sternbuch (of the heroic Orthodox Sternbuch family that represented the Vaad in Switzerland). When Sternbuch heard that a Polish Jew with a Swiss passport had been exempt from wearing a yellow star and being incarcerated in the ghetto, he realized that a passport from a neutral country would protect the holder. He acquired Paraguayan passports for his future fiancée, Guta Eisenzweig and her family.<sup>5</sup> Subsequently, the Orthodox and other groups such as the Relief Organization for Polish Jews (RELICO), and even non-Jews, used Latin American passports to save tens of thousands of Jews of every affiliation. (George Mantello, the Jewish Salvadoran diplomat in Geneva, utilized Salvadoran citizenship papers to rescue about 30,000 Hungarian and other Jews during 1943-44.) But Saly Mayer, the Swiss representative of the JDC, refused to consider using Latin American passports since they were bogus. Zuroff makes no mention of this highly effective, Orthodox-initiated ploy as well as the Vaad's successful efforts to have the Latin American countries officially recognize the papers.

## Breaking the Silence

Zuroff maintains that "...Had the Vaad joined forces with the Joint [JDC], the overall results would probably have been more beneficial to the Jewish people than those achieved individually by each organization."<sup>6</sup> His charge that the Orthodox refused to cooperate with the rest of the American Jewish community is clearly refuted by the

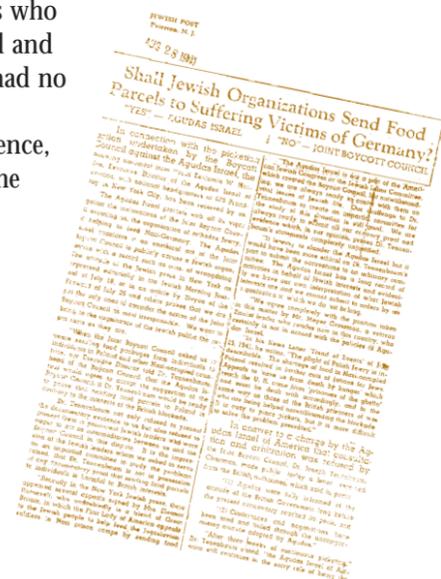
story of the Sternbuch cable.

In August 1942, the Polish underground sent news to leaders in Switzerland of the first mass deportations of Warsaw Jews to extermination camps. Dr. Julius Kuhl, an Agudist, received the Polish underground report and sent it on to Recha and Yitzchak Sternbuch, the Vaad representatives in Switzerland, as well as to other major Jewish leaders including Mayer of the JDC. Upon receiving the report, the Sternbuchs immediately sent cables to Rosenheim and Rabbi Abraham Kalmanowitz of the Vaad, who were in the US, and demanded help in averting further mass murders. (The Sternbuchs' cable was sent September 2, 1942 through secret Polish diplomatic codes, in order to circumvent US State Department censorship. The Polish government-in-exile offered the use of these codes to all the Jewish organizations, but only the Orthodox used them, while the others refused to engage in illegal activity.)

On September 3, the day he received the cable, Rabbi Kalmanowitz pressured Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, a leading Reform rabbi and president of the American Jewish Congress, to come to the Vaad office to discuss the ongoing slaughter. When Wise arrived the following day, Rabbi Kalmanowitz insisted that he invite representatives from all 34 major national American Jewish organizations to an emergency meeting to be held two days later on September 6.

Zuroff contends that the Orthodox were unwilling to cooperate with the rest of American Jewry. Yet the September 6 meeting, which was at the initiative of the Orthodox, marked the first and only time representatives from all of the major national American Jewish organizations gathered in one room together to discuss the rescue of European Jewry. At that meeting, Wise accused the Orthodox of "spreading atrocity tales," via the Sternbuch cable, and adjured the Jewish leadership to silence until the State Department confirmed the facts.<sup>7</sup> The Orthodox—generally first-generation Americans who lacked social, political and economic clout and had no access to the general media—broke the silence, decrying the fate of the European Jews in the

*Article debating the sending of food packages to the ghettos, the Jewish Post, Paterson, NJ, August 28, 1941.*



pages of the Agudah's paper, *Yiddische Shtimme*.

Wise's penchant for protecting his close friend and confidant US President Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR) regardless of the cost to the Jews of Europe, is further evidenced by the fact that the Sternbuch cable was not the first report about the mass murders to reach him. Earlier, in May 1942, the Bund (Jewish socialist party of Poland) in England reported the murder of 700,000 Polish Jews, infor-

cable was neither the first nor the second cable he received about the mass murders. It was the third, and it should have served as confirmation. By November 24—nearly three months after the Sternbuch cable arrived—the State Department “confirmed Wise’s worst fears,” that two million Jews had perished.<sup>10</sup> Zuroff fails to comprehend that Wise’s allegiance to FDR overrode his concern with saving Jewish lives. Wise wanted to avoid pressuring the president and endangering the New Deal, at all costs. (The New Deal was viewed by most Jews as the fulfillment of the messianic ideal.) Indeed, it was only because of the pressure from the Orthodox that Wise had the US president meet with an ad hoc committee of eight members, including an Agudah representative, on December 8, 1942. A press release issued by Wise on December 9 states that the president was “shocked” to hear of the loss of two million Jews. This was an outright lie. In fact, at the December 8 meeting, as Jacob Pat, the Jewish Labor Committee (JLC) representative on the committee attested, the president said no such thing but instead declared that he was “fully aware of your people’s tragedy.”<sup>11</sup> Predictably, Zuroff never mentions Wise’s lie.

Nor does he give credit to the Orthodox for the extraordinary publicity and results generated by the Sternbuch cable. And yet it was the Sternbuch cable and the Orthodox insistence on publicizing it—that were responsible for the Allies’ condemnation of the Nazis for the mass murder of Jews for the first time.<sup>12</sup>



Above: Rabbi Abraham Kalmanowitz, one of the dynamic and charismatic leaders of the Vaad. Right: Article lamenting the slaughter of European Jewry, The National Jewish Organ, December 11, 1942.



mation that reached Wise in June.<sup>8</sup> On August 28, Wise received another cable, this one from Gerhard Riegner, a representative of the World Jewish Congress (WJC), which spelled out Hitler’s plan to murder 4.5 million Jews with prussic acid.<sup>9</sup> Wise mentioned it to a few friends, sent it to the State Department for confirmation, and said nothing to FDR about the imminent danger to European Jewry. In contrast, as soon as Rosenheim of the Vaad received the Sternbuch cable on September 3, he sent a copy of it to FDR, with a plea to do something. Tragically, he never received a reply.

It was only after the war that the Orthodox became aware of the Riegner cable, but for Wise, the Sternbuch

## The Zionist Agenda

Zuroff accuses the Orthodox of not cooperating with non-Orthodox and Zionist organizations. However, the Zionist organizations’ top priority was not rescue; it was establishing a postwar Jewish state.

In January-February of 1943, as news of the extermina-

tion emanated from Europe, the Orthodox and the Jewish Labor Committee (JLC) pressured Wise into creating the Joint Emergency Committee (JEC), a rescue committee comprised of four major Zionist and four major non-Zionist organizations. (The JDC preferred not to join). During this time, the American Jewish Community was confronted with two issues: the foundation of a Jewish state and the rescue of European Jewry. David Ben-Gurion, the head of the Jewish Agency, along with most Zionists, felt that statehood superseded rescue. In fact, in May 1942, at a planning meeting for the American Jewish Conference (a meeting of all American Jewish organizations), Ben-Gurion succeeded in convincing all of the American Zionist organizations to support his goal of a postwar Jewish state. The tragedy of European Jewry was not on the agenda. At the planning meeting in January 1943 in Pittsburgh, it was decided that the entire American Jewish community should support the concept of a postwar Jewish state. Shockingly, until the Orthodox and the JLC pressured organizers of the meeting, the rescue of European Jewry was not even on the agenda. Because of the appalling indifference to rescue, the Orthodox, among other organizations, walked out of the Pittsburgh conference. Dr. Isaac Lewin of the Vaad and Agudah, bemoaned this fact in the *Yiddische Shtimme*. . . . *at the Pittsburgh Assembly which laid the basis for the American Jewish Assembly [later changed to Conference], I proposed that it should preoccupy itself with rescue work for European Jewry. It was then that the chairman [Henry] Monsky, declared that he can't even permit a vote on this issue, because the Assembly was called for a different purpose.*<sup>13</sup>

While Zuroff accuses the Orthodox of being uncooperative, every time a unified committee for rescue was organized which was not entirely under Wise’s control, he would force the committee to dissolve. Thus, Wise dissolved the Orthodox-initiated JEC and created his own rescue committee at the American Jewish Conference, which he controlled.

## The Americanization of the Rabbis?

The Orthodox willingness to cooperate with everyone and anyone for the purpose of rescue is indisputable: they even joined the Peter Bergson (Hillel Kook) Group, a radical, outcast Zionist group that made rescue a priority. (Bergson was a nephew of Rav Kook.) The Orthodox, were, in fact, the only group to cooperate closely with Bergson to organize the Rabbis’ March on Washington. Wise, on the other hand, condemned Bergson in the strongest terms.<sup>14</sup> Bergson personally told me that he had envisioned not merely a few hundred Orthodox rabbis, but thousands of clergy of all faiths joining the march. Sadly, only the approximately 400 members of the Union of Orthodox Rabbis [Agudath Harabbanim] and the Union of Chassidic Rabbis [Agudath Haadmorim] responded. No

Catholic or Protestant clergy participated. None of the “Americanized” Reform or Conservative rabbis participated.

Held long before protest marches became popular, this unique protest by 400 bearded rabbis, held on October 6, 1943, just two days before *erev Yom Kippur*, was the sole protest against Roosevelt’s indifference to the extermination of European Jewry. Moreover, it was crucial in creating the climate in Washington that enabled Bergson, (with active help from the Vaad) to press for the very first hearings on rescue in Congress. These hearings called primarily for a governmental agency devoted to rescue, and served to prompt the politically minded president, preparing to run for an unprecedented fourth term, to create the War Refugee Board (WRB) in January 1944. Meanwhile, Wise and the entire assimilated American Jewish establishment, including the president’s other “Jewish advisors” criticized the Rabbis’ March. As FDR’s aide noted in his diary, “. . . he [Judge Samuel Rosenman]<sup>15</sup> had tried—admittedly without success—to keep the horde from storming Washington. [He] said the leading Jews of his acquaintance opposed the march on the Capital.”<sup>16</sup> The European-trained rabbis and Chassidic *rebbe*s would normally be the last ones to protest against any host government, let alone the US. Zuroff states that the European rabbis became “Americanized” when they marched on Washington; this is anachronistic reasoning—at the time, protest marches were practically unheard of.

## Organizational Self-Interest

While Zuroff claims that the Vaad was “obsessed with its own, losing track of the larger picture,”<sup>17</sup> he never discusses the self-interest of all Jewish organizations. Zionists rescued Zionists, the JLC rescued Bundists, Natan Schwalb rescued members of Hechalutz, the Marxist-Zionist youth group, and others tried to save their own as well. In fact, no Jewish group was more particularistic than the Zionists. For example, when 3,000 rabbis and scholars were stranded in Vilna, the Jewish Agency, in charge of over 90 percent of 75,000 Palestine certificates, did not issue a certificate to even one “unproductive” Torah scholar. Only Chief Rabbi Joseph P. Hertz of England and Isaac Halevy Herzog of the Yishuv were able to obtain Palestine certificates from the British Government for about two-dozen *roshei yeshivah*. Moreover, Moshe Krausz, head of the Palestine Certificate Office in Budapest during the war years, told me that with one exception he never gave a certificate to any Jew unless he was a bona fide Zionist. The exception was a *rebbe* with six children, all of whom spoke Hebrew.<sup>18</sup>

The truth is that the Orthodox project to rescue Torah scholars was part of an elitist rescue initiative that originated with the JLC, after the fall of France in mid-1940. The JLC was concerned for the safety of hundreds of politically

endangered Jewish and non-Jewish labor leaders, as well as artists, writers and intellectuals. With the help of the influential American Federation of Labor, the JLC pressured Roosevelt into creating “above-quota emergency visitors’ visas,” to enrich American culture by inviting these “valuable” (i.e., “elite”) personalities to American shores.<sup>19</sup> The JLC eventually rescued over 2,000 elite individuals including Marc Chagall, Jacques Lifschitz, Hannah Arendt and many others. The visas were only intended to rescue prominent personalities, each of whom required a three-page rationale detailing the reasons why the person was valuable to the world and the United States.<sup>20</sup>

In addition to the JLC, other organizations composed lists of their “prized individuals,” including the WJC, who listed 100 elite Zionist leaders. The Orthodox sought to add the names of 3,000 foremost Polish Torah scholars to these lists. However, as Professor Yehuda Bauer pointed out: “The Zionist Movement, the Joint, in fact all the Jewish organizations except for the Rescue Committee of Rabbis [Vaad] were not prepared to deal with this case, lest it increase the anti-Semitism widespread in the US.”<sup>21</sup> Bauer is wrong. What assimilated American Jewry truly feared was not so much that the Orthodox rabbis would “increase anti-Semitism” but rather that they would hamper their own acceptance as equals into society. Unlike the prominent intellectuals and artists who were championed by Varian Fry, a New York humanitarian, the Orthodox scholars had no such advocate. Sadly, only 40 designees of these visas ever made it to America. Among them were Rabbis Aaron Kotler and Elya Meir Bloch, whose leadership helped to revivify Torah learning in America.<sup>22</sup>

## “Safe” in Shanghai

Zuroff accuses the Orthodox of competing with other Jewish organizations for funds and rescue, particularly with the JDC, and charges, that “it is hard to justify spending money to let people who are out of physical danger sit and learn when masses of Jews were being killed.”<sup>23</sup>

Zuroff condemns the Vaad for squandering crucial rescue funds on the yeshivah groups already “safe” in Siberia and Shanghai, positing that the funds could have saved Jews in “real” danger.<sup>24</sup> Zuroff, however, is mistaken in assuming that the students were learning in yeshivot in Siberia, when in fact, they were conscripted to hard labor. Thus, the packages sent by the Vaad—with the aid of the JLC—to the starving and freezing students saved countless lives.

Zuroff also wrongly assumes that the refugees in Shanghai were safe. We now know that the Japanese and the Nazis were planning to put the Jewish refugees on ships and sink them. The plans were foiled.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, in February 1943, the Shanghai refugees were put into a ghetto. No one knew where this would lead. Rabbi

Kalmanowitz tried to bring the yeshivah group to neutral or Allied territory but was unsuccessful. In addition to the Nazi threat of extermination, the refugees, in Axis territory, were subjected to bombings by the Allies.

Zuroff also charges the yeshivah group in Shanghai of “double dipping”—that is, taking money from the Vaad and the JDC at the same time. However, according to the JDC representative in Shanghai, Laura Margolies, the amount the yeshivah group received even from two sources was no more than the JDC was providing to support the 3,000 Jewish refugees located in the refugee camp.<sup>26</sup> The yeshivah students were forced to double dip and work in order to survive. In



*A Jewish wedding that took place during the war years in Shanghai.*

any event, following the attack on Pearl Harbor, the yeshivah group ceased receiving JDC funds since the JDC, refusing to participate in any illegal activity, stopped sending money to their representative in Shanghai. The Orthodox however, refused to abandon the Jews in need, and, risking arrest, continued to send money illegally to Shanghai.

Zuroff distorts the story by omitting the fact that the JDC refused to send money to Shanghai after Pearl Harbor, regardless of the impact it had on the refugees. Once the US entered the war, in May 1942, Margolies sent a desperate cable to the JDC requesting funds. The JDC responded with a cable stating “We may not communicate with you in any way.” While Margolies was able to borrow locally, these funds extended only until November of 1942. From November of 1942, until the December of 1943, the refugees, starved and bereft of funds, were forced to sell all they owned for food.

It is only because of the efforts by the Orthodox, led by Rabbi Kalmanowitz and Mike Tress of the Agudah, that in December of 1943 the American government finally agreed to allow relief organizations to send money legally into Shanghai and Nazi-occupied Europe.<sup>27</sup> This new policy

enabled the JDC to send a large part of its \$15 million budget in 1944 to enemy-occupied territory. None of this, however, appears in Zuroff’s work.

Incidentally, while Zuroff is concerned about the Vaad’s sending money to rabbis “already safe in Siberia and Shanghai,” he has no problem with the United Palestine Appeal, which received 40 percent of the UJA’s budget and sent many millions (\$10 million in 1944) to build *kibbutzim* and *moshavim* for the Jews already safe in Eretz Yisrael. (From 1942 on, the German army posed no threat to the Yishuv.) None of these funds were used to rescue Jews from Nazi-occupied Europe.<sup>28</sup>

## The Auschwitz Protocols

While concentrating on the rescue efforts of the Vaad during 1939-1943, Zuroff only summarizes—in a meager 13 pages—the most crucial rescue work by the Orthodox which took place during the last year and a half of the war. Moreover, Zuroff entirely omits the extraordinary story of the Auschwitz Protocols, which illustrates how Rabbi Michael Ber Weissmandl struggled to alert world Jewry to the destruction of Hungarian Jews.

In April 1944, two inmates escaped from Auschwitz to the Slovak Jewish Underground headed by Rabbi Weissmandl and Gisi Fleischmann. [Rabbi Weissmandl was instrumental in originating numerous rescue schemes including negotiating with the Nazis, the Kastner Train and the Auschwitz Protocols; it was his constant efforts that succeeded in saving thousands of Hungarian Jews.] The escapees related that the Nazis were expanding the death camp to accommodate the Hungarian Jews. The Underground debriefed the escapees and issued a 33-page report, which became known as the Auschwitz Protocols. Rabbi Weissmandl, whom Zuroff in his anachronistic mode would undoubtedly label an “arch-*Chareidi*,” condensed it to five pages in Hebrew, and added a desperate plea to bomb the track to Auschwitz and the crematoria. He then sent both reports to all the Jewish groups in Hungary and Switzerland. Rudolph Kastner, the representative of the Jewish Agency in Budapest and head of the Budapest rescue committee, was the first to receive the report. He never showed it to anyone. Nor did the Jewish Agency ever publicize the reports in the Palestine press.<sup>29</sup> From May 15, 1944, on, 12,000 Jews a day were deported to Auschwitz from Hungary. That same day, Weissmandl sent copies of the complete Protocols and his five page summary again via courier to key representatives in Switzerland, including Schwalb of Hechalutz; Mayer of the JDC; Riegner of the WJC and the Sternbuchs.<sup>30</sup> By the 17<sup>th</sup>, Schwalb had translated both reports into German. Schwalb personally gave me copies of these reports, and told me that within 48 hours all the Zionist organizations in New York, London, Istanbul and Jerusalem had received copies. No one responded. In

Istanbul, Dr. Yaakov Griffel, the Agudah representative on the Moetza, the Jewish Agency’s rescue committee, received Weissmandl’s plea and immediately informed the WRB through the US ambassador to Turkey, Laurence Steinhardt. When the Sternbuchs received the cable, despite the fact that it was Shabbat, they immediately traveled to Bern to see the American and British military attachés. But no help was forthcoming. Roswell McClelland of the WRB in Switzerland—who received the reports from all the Jewish factions—did not forward them to Washington.<sup>31</sup> Finally, on June 12, Recha Sternbuch sent the reports via the Polish diplomatic code to Rosenheim and Rabbi Kalmanowitz in New York.<sup>32</sup> On June 12, 1944, they received the Sternbuch cable and immediately pleaded with the WRB to bomb Auschwitz but were repeatedly ignored. It was only because of the efforts by George Mantello, the Jewish Salvadoran diplomat in Geneva, that the reports were publicized in the Swiss press, and succeeded in halting deportations by July 7. After he got his copy of the Auschwitz Protocols from Budapest, Mantello initiated an extraordinary Swiss church and press campaign that revealed the horrors of Auschwitz to the world for the first time. The international reaction forced Admiral Horthy, head of the Hungarian government under the Nazis, to halt the deportations. Although Eichmann attempted to continue the deportations, international interference prevented him from doing so, saving the lives of 140,000 Budapest Jews, Orthodox and non-Orthodox. This amazing saga of Rabbi Weissmandl and his ingenious and valiant attempts to alert the world to the horrors facing Hungarian Jewry are nowhere to be found in Zuroff’s book.

## The Kastner Transport

Zuroff’s version of the release of the Kastner Train—one of Orthodoxy’s greatest rescue achievements—is replete with distortions. In mid-1944, Rudolph Kastner, the Zionist representative in Budapest, negotiated with Adolph Eichmann for a train comprised of 750 Zionists to leave Hungary. [Note that the Kastner train started out as a particularistic Zionist venture.] Eichmann demanded \$2 million for the release of the train to Spain. To raise the money, Kastner was forced to sell seats to anyone who could pay—wealthy Jews, converts to Christianity, as well as 80 Orthodox personalities, including Rabbi Joel Teitelbaum (the Satmar Rebbe). The ransom was paid and the train of 1200 left Budapest. (At a later point, 484 inmates from a nearby labor camp climbed on board the train, making the total number of passengers 1,684.) In addition to the \$2 million, Eichmann suddenly increased his demand to include 250 tractors, with 40 tractors as a down payment. To pay for the 40 tractors, Recha Sternbuch required 750,000SF (Swiss Francs) but only had 150,000SF. Mayer of the JDC not only refused to pay the

necessary balance, but informed on Sternbuch to McClelland of the WRB who nixed such ransom and threatened to blacklist Sternbuch. As a result, instead of sending the train to Spain, Eichmann sent it to Bergen-Belsen, where the passengers were “kept on ice.” Sternbuch managed to get a letter of credit for 10 tractors to appease the Nazis. Therefore, on August 21, 318 passengers on the Kastner Train were released into Switzerland.<sup>33</sup> [To obtain the rest of the funds, the Vaad pressured the WRB to compel Mayer to pay. As the US Secretary of Treasury Henry Morgenthau Jr. noted, “The Rabbis put heavy pressure on us because Mayer won’t help rescue 1200 rabbis.”<sup>34</sup> (The early assumption was that the 1200 were all rabbis.) Ultimately, especially as a result of the provision of the tractors paid for by the reluctant Mayer, the train with 1684 passengers was released and an additional 17,000 Hungarian Jews—who were on the way to go to Auschwitz—were rerouted to Austria.

This rescue effort led by the Orthodox saved approximately 20,000 lives. In his book, Zuroff omits mentioning that Mayer refused at first to pay the necessary balance and that moreover, he informed on Sternbuch to McClelland of the WRB. Nor does Zuroff mention that it was only due to Orthodox pressure on the WRB that the JDC finally consented to release the funds to save the Kastner passengers. These facts are critical in understanding the true story behind Orthodox rescue: the Orthodox were not only fighting the Nazis; they were fighting obstructionists within the Jewish and non-Jewish worlds who consistently thwarted their attempts to achieve rescue.

## The Musy Negotiations

Zuroff once again distorts the record with regard to the Musy Negotiations, the negotiations Recha Sternbuch initiated with the Nazis to save Jewish lives. Sternbuch began these negotiations in 1944 through Dr. Jean-Marie Musy, a fascist and friend of Himmler. Himmler, who was simultaneously negotiating with Mayer, had grown frustrated with the JDC representative who was simply stalling. Fed up with Mayer, Himmler agreed to negotiate with the “rabbi Jews” (i.e., the Sternbuchs) and as a good faith gesture, permitted the release of 1210 inmates from Theresienstadt, a camp in

Czechoslovakia, as the first of many such trains.<sup>35</sup> The Nazis demanded \$1 million from the Sternbuchs and even more importantly, positive publicity about the release of the train from Theresienstadt, to improve Germany’s image. Following the release of the train, the Sternbuchs cabled the Vaad in New York urging favorable publicity for Germany. Through the efforts of the Vaad, several major newspapers wrote up the story of the release in favorable terms, which angered Mayer and Schwalb. The latter filled the press in Switzerland with negative articles



Above: *The Sternbuchs in St. Gallen, Switzerland, standing next to the train from Theresienstadt which brought 1210 inmates to safety, the majority of whom were not Orthodox. From right to left: Recha Sternbuch, her husband, Yitzchak, unidentified woman and Chaskel Rand, a refugee who helped the Sternbuchs in their rescue work.* Left: *Handwritten letter (in German) from Dr. Jean-Marie Musy to the European Executive Council of the Union of Orthodox Rabbis of the USA and Canada, dated March 6, 1945. In the letter, Musy states, “Last week, I was told in Berlin, ‘You may thank Mr. Sally [sic] Mayer that no [more] convoys of Jews from German camps have reached Switzerland.’” Photo and letter courtesy of Dr. David Kranzler.*

criticizing the negotiations with fascists. (One headline read “We Do Not Want Any Favors from Germany” and another stated “Himmler is Getting a Good Price for Every Released Jew.”) Once Hitler found out about this, he put an end to all of the negotiations.

According to Zuroff, the negotiations were halted due to internal competition between two SS groups—one which worked with Mayer and the other which worked with Sternbuch. This is simply untrue. I have in my possession a note from Musy to Sternbuch, explaining why no more trainloads of Jews would be leaving Nazi-occupied Europe. In the note, Musy, who did not know Mayer, wrote, “You have to thank Mr. Sally [sic] Mayer that no [more] convoys of Jews from German camps reached Switzerland.”<sup>36</sup> Zuroff is also dishonest when he states that the JDC was willing to “give” the rabbis \$937,000 to send to Switzerland” (money needed to release trains). They absolutely refused to do so. Only after the Orthodox applied heavy pressure on the JDC, did they finally agree

to “lend” the Vaad the funds to save the remnant of Jews.

Instead of the guilt-trip Zuroff tries to inflict upon the Orthodox for being particularists and for “saving rabbis at the expense of other Jews,” Zuroff should recognize that even during the early period of 1940-1943, this tiny, economically and politically powerless group performed extraordinarily well not only for their own but on behalf of all *Klal Yisrael*. Orthodox Jews can be justly proud that this tragic period ultimately proved to be Orthodoxy’s finest hour.

\*Sources for much of the material presented here can be found in my book, *Thy Brother’s Blood: The Orthodox Jewish Response During the Holocaust* (ArtScroll, 1987). **JA**

### Notes

1. Zuroff, *Response*, (Hoboken, NJ, 2000) 287.
2. Rabbi Asher Rand, secretary of Agudath Israel, interview by author, tape recording. He was directly involved with the food package project.
3. Dr. Joseph Tennenbaum, “A Lezt Vort Veges Peklach Kain Poilen,” *Der Tog*, Aug. 10, 1941. The primary targets of this vicious verbal attack were Rabbis Aaron Kotler and Elya Meir Bloch, both recent arrivals from Soviet-occupied Vilna, who were leaders of Agudath Israel as well as the Vaad.
4. See David Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews: America and the Holocaust 1941-1945* (New York, 1985), 285.
5. Prior to the deportations from Warsaw, Guta Eisenzweig (and a group of 162 other Polish Jewish holders of such papers) was sent to Vittel, the detention camp in France, where she survived the war. Although all but six members of this group in Vittel were later deported to Auschwitz, this was due to a change in German policy vis-à-vis the recognition of such papers. This situation was rectified by the rabbis of the Vaad on Pesach 1944, too late for preventing the deportation from Vittel.
6. Zuroff, *Response*, 287.
7. This was conveyed to me by Mr. Meir Shenkolewski of the Agudah and Dr. Isaac Lewin of the Vaad and Agudah, both of whom attended this meeting. Zuroff, who totally misunderstands Stephen S. Wise, and what made him tick, attempts, in his book, to justify Wise’s nasty outbursts against the Orthodox.
8. See Yehuda Bauer, “When Did They Know?” *Midstream* (April 1968).
9. Arthur Morse, *While Six Million Died* (New York, 1967), 8.
10. Wyman, *Abandonment*, 51.
11. Wyman, *Abandonment*, 72.
12. The crucial pronouncement made on December 17 served as the new category of “crimes against humanity,” which became the basis for the postwar Nuremberg Trials. See John Fox, “The Jewish Factor in British War Crime Policy in 1942,” *English Historical Review* (Jan. 1977): 91-2.
13. *Yiddische Shtimme*, Nov. 23, 5. Lewin notes that his copy of the text was based on a stenographic copy of the minutes.
14. See Wyman, *Abandonment*, 144.
15. He was an important Jewish advisor to the president.
16. William D. Hassett, *Off the Record with FDR 1942-1945* (Rutgers, NJ, 1958), 209.
17. Interview in *The Jerusalem Post* on his book, *Response*, Marilyn Henry, April 28, 2000, 11.

18. Moshe Krausz, interview by author, tape recording.  
19. For the best overview of this program, see David S. Wyman, *Paper Walls* (Amherst, Ma. 1968) Chap. 7.

20. I own the three-page affidavit written on behalf of the Gerrer Rebbe, when some of his *Chassidim* sought to bring him from Eretz Yisrael to America, since during 1941, there was a real danger to the Yishuv from General Rommel’s advances across North Africa.

21. *American Jewry and the Holocaust* (Detroit, 1981), 123.
22. [Yaakov Rosenheim] *Fifth Agudah Report*, Agudah Archives.
23. See JP, 11.
24. Ibid.
25. See my book, *Japanese, Nazis and Jews: the Jewish Refugee Community of Shanghai, 1938-1945* (New York, 1976), 350.
26. Margolies Correspondence, Joint Distribution Committee Archives, NY, NY.

27. Dr. Joseph Schwartz, head of the European JDC in Europe, interview by author. When I asked him why the American government finally permitted money to be sent into enemy-occupied territory, he responded, “There was a rabbi, with a long white beard [i.e., Rabbi Kalmanowitz]. When he cried, even the State Department listened.” Subsequently, I discovered documentary evidence of the efforts by the Orthodox. See memo by William I. Riegelman, Jan. 21, 1944 and Jan. 26, 1944, in which he concluded that, “... it would no longer serve any useful purpose to attempt to prevent the Germans from acquiring small amounts of foreign exchange...” Papers of the War Refugee Board, The World Jewish Congress Papers, Jan.-July 1944, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, NY.

28. For the budget of the UJA, see Samuel Halperin, *The Political World of American Zionism* (Detroit, 1961), esp. 195-217.

29. See *Der Kastner-Bericht*, ed. Ernest Landau (Kindler, 1961), 125, 345; Raphael Vago, *The Destruction of Hungarian Jewry as Reflected in the Palestine Press* (Hungarian Jewish Studies, vol. 3), ed. Randolph Braham, 291-324; and Randolph Braham, *Politics of Genocide* (New York, 1981), 715-18.

30. Schwalb, interview by author, tape recording. Copies of the Auschwitz reports sent to the various individuals can be found in the Sternbuch Papers in my possession; Saly Mayer Papers in the Joint Distribution Committee Archives in NY, NY; the Natan Schwalb Papers in Machon Lavon, Tel Aviv; the McClelland Papers in Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, NY.

31. The first cable sent by McClelland to the WRB, was on June 24, a day after Mantello distributed copies of the Protocols to all embassies and newspapers. I have a copy of the cable.

32. See Sternbuch’s note of June 12, to McClelland, asking why no response came from America and Sternbuch’s note to Rabbi Kalmanowitz via the secret Polish code. All in the Sternbuch Papers in my possession as well as in the Agudah Archives.

33. See Schwalb Papers in Machon Lavon, Tel Aviv; letters from Kastner to Schwalb, July 15, July 28, 1944.

34. See Morgenthau Diaries, vol. 760, Aug. 1, 1944, p. 3, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, NY.

35. See “Report to the Union of Orthodox Rabbis of the United States and Canada Concerning Action Taken toward the Freeing of Jews Detained in German Concentration Camps,” by Dr. Jean-Marie Musy in Sternbuch Papers in my possession/Agudah Archives.

36. See Sternbuch Papers in Agudah Archives.