By Efraim Zuroff

Following the Soviet invasion of eastern Poland on September 17, 1939, and the decision by the Soviet Union to turn over the city of Vilna and its environs (which had been part of Poland during the interwar period) to the independent and neutral republic of Lithuania, hundreds of rabbis and yeshiva students fled the Nazis. It is impossible to calculate how many thousands of Jews were eventually murdered by the Nazis. Inevitably, news stories and reviews contained extensive quotes from Zuroff himself.

In my book *Thy Brother’s Blood: The Orthodox Jewish Response during the Holocaust* (Brooklyn, NY, 1987) as well as in my review in *Jewish Action* of Zuroff’s book, I demonstrated at length that far from being indifferent to the fate of their brethren in Europe, American Orthodox Jews were the segment of American Jewry most involved in rescue. The “Orthodox response” was in sharp contrast to what leading Holocaust historians have called the mainstream Jewish leadership’s “complete paralysis” (Raul Hilberg) and inability “to break out of a business-as-usual pattern” (David Wyman). In my review, I made ten points—which I recap below—each cutting directly to the heart of Zuroff’s thesis of Orthodox indifference, and each extensively documented. In his lengthy, but largely irrelevant response, Zuroff fails to respond to any of my arguments or to challenge any of the facts cited in support.

Rather he confines himself to two arguments. The first is that an assessment of the Orthodox response to the Holocaust must focus almost exclusively on the Vaad ha-Hatzala. The second is that the only relevant measure of concern and cooperation is money given to the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) during the Holocaust. Both claims are implausible upon examination.

As a historian and retired professor at CUNY, Zuroff presumably knows that the Vaad ha-Hatzala was only one aspect of the Orthodox response. As I pointed out in my review, many of the rabbis who led the Vaad—such as Rabbis Aharon Kotler and Reuven Grozovsky—were also active in Agudath Israel.

In the latter capacities, each was involved in numerous general rescue initiatives. True, the Vaad ha-Hatzala was initially formed for the purpose of rescuing 3,000 Torah scholars trapped in Vilna in 1939, a task in which no other group envisioned more than a minimal contribution.

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efore we scrutinize the Vaad’s rescue activities, it is important to take a closer look at the decision to establish a separate agency for the rescue of Torah scholars and yeshivah students. When a situation occurs—when the surface, it appears to be quite logical. In the wake of the emergency situation following the escape of hundreds of rabbis and yeshivah students to Vilna, it was only natural for the American Orthodox rabbinate to rush to the rescue. And since those in need were the elite of the Torah world, establishing a special rescue agency and fundraising campaign seems justifiable.

In reality, however, this decision was much more complicated and controversial. First of all, the decision to establish an Orthodox relief and rescue agency for rabbis and yeshivah students was not made in a vacuum. Ever since 1915, there had been a Jewish relief and rescue agency that assisted Jews in distress all over the world on behalf of the American Jewish community. I am referring to the American Jewish Distribution Committee (JDC), which was established in the course of World War I by three different groups, one of which—the Central Relief Committee—was founded almost four decades previously. The Vaad haRabbanim for the sole purpose of rescuing refugee rabbis and yeshivah students. A special fundraising campaign was also launched. Since the Emergency Committee, which later became known as the Vaad haRabbanim, was the primary relief and rescue agency for American Orthodox Jewry throughout World War II and even afterwards, it is particularly important to closely follow its development and examine its policies. As we shall see, in complete contradiction to the claims made by Kranzler, this organization insisted on assisting rabbis and yeshivah students exclusively until the end of 1943.

While the ideological basis of the rabbis’ decision was perhaps understandable, the practical implications of establishing a rescue agency and launching a fundraising campaign made these steps highly controversial. Ten months earlier—in January of 1939—the American Jewish community had, for the first time ever, created a unified fundraising campaign called the United Jewish Appeal (UJA). Whereas previously, each major Jewish charity had conducted a separate fundraising campaign, unity was finally achieved when the JDC, United Palestine Appeal (UPA), and the National Coordinating Committee for Aid to Refugees and Emigrants (NCCCR) agreed to join forces to raise funds. Thus, there was a single unified fundraising campaign for all the major Jewish causes—for Jews in distress (JDC had been rescuing yeshivah students and to devote sufficient resources to their rescue. Therefore, they opted to establish their own rescue agency, which would devote itself exclusively to saving rabbis and yeshivah students in general and those in Vilna in particular. The rabbis explained their decision by stressing the critically important role played by the yeshiva in Jewish history, comparing it to the famous Torah academy at Yavneh, which was spared by the Romans when they destroyed the Second Temple, thanks to the Rabbis Yochanan ben Zakai. In the words of one of the resolu-

versal. The December 1945 issue of the newspaper Yiddishke Tsendl that includes a memorial notice for the losses of the Holocaust in Europe. It indicates 5,700,000 victims in Poland.

(continued from page 1) renowned sage and community leader who headed the local Vaad haYeshivot. Rabbi Grodzinsky mobilized the local community to help feed, clothe and house the newcomers and enable them to resume their studies. However, he was unable to marshal sufficient resources for this task and consequently turned to American Orthodox Jewry, particularly its rabbincic leaders, for assistance.

At this time, the Agudath haRabbanim (Union of Orthodox Rabbis of the United States and Canada) was the leading local Orthodox rabbinic association, and its members had been the key rabbincic figures in the community since the organization had been founded almost four decades previously. On October 17, 1939, the leaders of the Agudath haRabbanim, who had closely followed the developments in Vilna, decided to launch a special organization for the rescue of rabbis and yeshivah students, as well as to support the American Jewish community in western Europe. They established the Agudath haRabbanim in November, which would also serve as the rabbinic association’s semi-annual convention. Thus, on November 13 and 14, 1939, the Emergency Committee for War-Torn Yeshivot was officially established by the Agudath haRabbanim for the sole purpose of rescuing refugee rabbis and yeshivah students. A special fundraising campaign was also launched. Since the Emergency Committee, which later became known as the Vaad haRabbanim, was the primary relief and rescue agency for American Orthodox Jewry throughout World War II and even afterwards, it is particularly important to closely follow its development and examine its policies. As we shall see, in complete contradiction to the claims made by Kranzler, this organization insisted on assisting rabbis and yeshivah students exclusively until the end of 1943.

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The tragedy in that has befriæn us the people at the present day sober complete destruction shocking the very life of the Jewish people, it should be our sacred duty to save our Yavnehems of today—the Holy Yeshivot—in which the only salvation of Judaism and Jewish life lies. In the continuation, therefore, resolves to launch a national campaign for the war-torn yeshivot.

Had the Vaad haRatzala adhered to those principles, it would be much easier to agree to Kranzler’s assertion that the Orthodox were always ready to cooperate with other groups when the rescue of Jews was concerned. In truth, however, the opposite occurred. When the Vaad’s leaders realized that they would never be able to achieve their goal if they were forced to depend solely on the largesse of the regular contributors to the yeshivot—and it did not take them long to reach that conclusion—they initiated appeals to many of the unified community campaigns being conducted all over the United States and did so in a rather aggressive and divisive manner.

The way that the Vaad operated could be summarized as follows. An approach was to be made to each Jewish community federation by either the local Orthodox rabbi, a delegation of rabbis from outside the city or via correspondence from the Vaad’s New York headquarters in which an ultimatum would be made. Either the local federation allocate the sum designated by the Vaad for the rescue of the rabbis or the scholars or the rabbis would conduct a separate fundraising campaign in that community. It is important to note that the sums demanded by the rabbis were usually far larger than the community intended to allocate for that purpose, and constituted a larger percentage of the community allocations than would normally have been designated for an overseas Orthodox cause. The Vaad’s campaign resulted in crises and bitter debates in one community...
The incontrovertible fact is that... every penny spent by the Vaad was sent to two groups of Torah scholars... neither of whom was in acute danger of mass murder by the Nazis or their allies.

The debates between the JDC and the Vaad ha-Hatzala continued throughout the course of World War II.

Contrary to Kranzler’s assertion that the Orthodox always cooperated with others when the rescue of Jews was concerned, the historical record clearly proves otherwise. All one has to do in this regard is examine the relations between the JDC and the Vaad ha-Hatzala, both of which were actively involved in rescue efforts, to understand that the Orthodox would only cooperate with those willing to accept their dictates and support their policies. Although Orthodox rhetoric was somewhat different, and there were political efforts by Orthodox groups to attempt to work together to support rescue initiatives, when it came to spending money raised by the Vaad—and in my opinion this is the real test of Orthodox intentions—the separatist path that was consistently followed by the leaders of the Vaad ha-Hatzala.

This was also true regarding rescue priority. Despite Kranzler’s obsessive efforts to portray Orthodox relief and rescue efforts as inclusive, historical evidence shows that the Vaad, whose policies clearly reflected Orthodox priorities as understood by the prominent rabbis and yeshivah students until late 1943, in fact, was only in early 1944 that the Vaad officially expanded its mandate to include Jews who were neither rabbis nor yeshivah students. Yet even this change, which was clearly justified by the overwhelming evidence of the mass annihilation of European Jewry, and was fully publicized in the United States in late 1942, did not bring about a complete change of priorities for the Vaad ha-Hatzala, which continued to send considerable sums to rabbis and yeshivah students in Central Asia and Shanghai, despite the far worse plight of Jews in Nazi-occupied Europe.

This is a critical point in assessing the activities of the Vaad ha-Hatzala. The historical record indicates two interrelated cases in which the Vaad’s policies are questionable at best, if not severely flawed, and cannot be ignored. The first is that for at least a year following the revelation in the United States of the implementation of the ‘Final Solution,’ the Vaad spent all its funds on relief for rabbis and yeshivah students in Central Asia and Shanghai. The incontrovertible fact is that from the fall of 1942, when news of the ‘Final Solution’ became public, the type most commonly used on the Trans-Siberian Railroad (connecting Russia to the Far East) from the mid-1930s to the mid-1940s. It was probably used by the Me’uchad students that got to Shanghai.

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David Kranzler’s Response (continued from page 2)
Unlike the mainstream Zionist leadership, the Orthodox were always ready to put aside internal differences to further the cause of rescue.

Jews in Polish ghettos through 1941, despite weeks of picketing by the entire American Jewish Conference. In addition, it was the Orthodox who broke the silence on the Nazi extermination campaign in Europe and who pushed for a unified stand of all Jewish groups to pressure the American government to act. On August 28, 1942, Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, the pre-eminent American Zionist leader, received a cable from Gerhard Riegner of the World Jewish Congress detailing the Nazi plan to exterminate European Jewry. Wise did nothing other than send the information to the State Department for confirmation.

On September 3, Jacob Rosenheim, head of World Agudah, received similar information from Orthodox representatives in Switzerland describing the deportation of 100,000 Jews from Würzburg to the cre- matoria. On the basis of this cable, Rabbi Abraham Kalmanowicz immedi- ately pressured Wise into calling an emergency meeting of thirty-four Ameri- can Jewish organizations. At that meet- ing, Wise accused the rabbis of spread- ing “atrocity tales,” and did not divulge the Riegner cable that fully corroborat- ed, the rabbis and Orthodox lay lead- ers Irving Bernstein and Michael Breslau con- tinually pressured it to participate in various “ransom” schemes developed by Orthodox Jews in Europe—Rabbi Michael Bet-Weissmandl in Slovakia, Isaac and Regina Shapira in Switzerland and Dr. Yaakov Griffel in Turkey—by permitting the necessary money transfers.

Through the war, the Orthodox were willing to use any means, regard- less of legality, to save Jewish lives— any Jewish life. Those illegal means, which were eschewed by mainstream Jewish groups, included the diplomatic codes of the Polish govern- ment-in-exile (to ensure the fastest pos- sible information from Europe that was free of American government censor- ship), making illegal wire transfers to starved Jews in Axis-controlled territo- ries, procuring fake South American passports for Jews in Nazi captivity (which eventually proved the difference between life and death for tens of thousands of Jews) and engaging the Nazis in ransom negotiations. Rabbi Weissmandl used such negotiations to delay the deportation of Slovakian Jews for nearly two years and to halt the deportation of Hungarian Jews.

In the summer of 1944, the Orthodox pressured the JDC into paying for forty tractors demanded by the Nazis as the “ransom” for releasing the Kaстрер train— with its human cargo of nearly 1,700 people—from Bergen-Belsen to Switzerland. (Originally, places on the train were to be held by the $10 million dollars sent by the United Jewish Appeal in 1944 to build agricultural settlements in Palestine, though the Yishuv was not under physical threat. That year the Jewish Labor Committee and the World Jewish Congress spent $300,000 each on rescue, while the former raised $500,000 to combat anti-Semitism and the latter an equal amount to obtain a congressional resolution sup- porting the creation of a post-war Jewish state in Palestine. Meanwhile the Vaad spent $1,135,000 in 1944 on rescue, mostly on the type of efforts with which his book, The JDC, for instance, allocated only $5,000 for the transport of Mir Yeshiva students from Vladovostok to Japan. The remaining $45,000 was raised by Irving Bunim and others in an emergency Shabbat fundraising effort.

The picture of yeshivah students blindly learning in summer camp conditions could not be further from the truth. The students in Siberia were in forced labor camps, not hovering over their attendents. Far from being out of danger, many of the students were left behind. Unbeknownst to many, the Soviet government clamped down in constant peril that the Japanese masters of the city would adopt the racial policies of their German allies. Allied bombing was another perpetual threat. By 1944, conditions in the Jewish centers of Siberia and Shanghai were very difficult. People were living on near-starvation rations and disease was rampant. For the refugees from Polish yeshivot the situation was even worse. Unlike refugees from Germany and Austria, the several hundred yeshivah students arrived without any personal resources. They learned fourteen to eighteen hours daily despite being affected at times with raging dysentery and living with the knowledge that, in most cases, they were virtually the sole survivors of their families. Even had they closed their eyes, the thought that Zuroff urges they should have, was there no work avail- able nor any way to support themselves, other than joining 3,000 German refugees in the miserable camps ironi- cally described in Zuroff’s book as “ideal.”

In his afterward, Zuroff calls the “dedication to saving Jewish lives” the greatest legacy of the Orthodox to the Jewish people. Too bad that is not a story he now chooses to tell.

Notes
1. The major grassroots support for the Vaad ha-Harzlata, which is the focus of Zuroff’s book, came from Agudath ha-Rabbanim, most of whose members were affiliated with Mizrahi. By his own admission, “Orthodox” rabbi, Zuroff shows himself unaware of the close affiliation between the Vaad and the Mizrahi-dominated Agudath ha-Rabbanim.

Jewish Action