

## Chapter 13

# The role of External Parties like Britain, FDR, or Jewish Groups as Bystanders

*The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference. What hurts the victim most is not the cruelty of the oppressor, but the silence of the bystander.*<sup>444</sup> – Eli Wiesel

Regarding the rescue efforts, it seems that more could have been done to stop the trains carrying the Jews to Auschwitz during these critical weeks. Under the leadership of Miklos Horthy, the Hungarians acted mainly out of their own interests, and we saw that American pressure helped force them to stop these trains in July 1944. How come this did not happen before? Was it possible to achieve more in negotiations with the Germans without providing them with means to continue the war? Could the British and the Jewish Agency have done more to stop the daily transportation to Auschwitz?<sup>445</sup> many questions remained open, and presumably, more could have been done. Eventually, the Nazis succeeded in exterminating the majority of Hungarian Jews within just a few weeks. On May 15, the deportation of Hungarian Jews to Auschwitz began and within a few weeks, over 400,000 Jews were deported to Auschwitz.<sup>446</sup> When transportation stopped, in July 1944, there were no more Jews in Hungary outside of Budapest.

Criticism of America's inadequate efforts to save European Jews is reflected in certain ways the Holocaust is taught, including through the USHMM's approach. In this context, Avner Segal examines the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) to illustrate different pedagogical approaches to presenting difficult histories.<sup>447</sup> Segal highlights contrasting perspectives: while the NMAI tends to offer less criticism of the American government and the U.S. Army, the USHMM places greater emphasis on critiquing actions that might have saved more Jews. This difference in approach

---

<sup>444</sup> This insight was among other remarks by Wiesel mentioned by President of the Israeli Supreme Court, Esther Hayut, at the memorial gathering for the late Prof. Elie Wiesel on December 20, 2018. See News1. “**אידישוֹת מסוכנַת יוֹתֵר מְכֻעָס וּמְשַׁנְּאָה**” [Indifference Is More Dangerous Than Anger and Hatred], <https://www.news1.co.il/Archive/004-D-131562-00.html>.

<sup>445</sup> For example, in the case of Joel Brand.

<sup>446</sup> The advance of the Red Army towards the borders of Hungary led the Germans to speed up the extermination of the Jews in all the territories that were still in their hands.

<sup>447</sup> Avner Segal, “Making Difficult History Public: The Pedagogy of Remembering and Forgetting in Two Washington, DC, Museums,” *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* 36, no. 1 (2014): 55–70.

may stem from the distinction between addressing a domestic versus a foreign issue. Notably, the USHMM does not focus exclusively on portraying America as a liberator; it also highlights instances where the United States could have done more to assist European Jewry. For example, while President Roosevelt initiated the Evian Conference to address the plight of Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi Germany, neither the U.S. Secretary of State nor any undersecretary attended. Moreover, the U.S. Coast Guard turned away the *St. Louis*, a ship carrying Jewish refugees, preventing it from entering U.S. waters and forcing the passengers to return to Europe, where many faced concentration camps and death. The Museum further criticizes the U.S. for denying immigration permits to most Jews fleeing Germany, attributing this to restrictive immigrant quotas, anti-immigration sentiment, and pervasive anti-Semitism. It questions why the U.S. didn't bomb Auschwitz's railway tracks or crematoria, citing a letter from John McCloy, Assistant Secretary of War, who expressed doubts about the efficacy and resource allocation for such an operation. This critical stance toward U.S. policies is balanced by images of individual American demonstrators protesting Nazi terror and signs urging a boycott of German goods for humanity's sake.<sup>448</sup> Amid these contrasting views of the U.S.—as both a liberator and a bystander—the museum subtly shapes how visitors perceive the Holocaust in relation to America's history and values. It raises questions about what visitors learn and don't learn during their visit and how they might apply this knowledge in their lives after leaving the museum.<sup>449</sup>

President Franklin D. Roosevelt could have exerted pressure on Horthy earlier to halt the deportations, which only ceased on July 9, 1944, by which time more than half of Hungary's Jews had already perished. This is just one example among other missed opportunities. Israeli scholar Moshe Berent goes on to highlight the role played by FDR's Jewish advisors—such as Reform Rabbi Stephen Wise and Samuel Rosenman—in shaping the administration's response. The collective evidence suggests more could have been done to rescue Jews, as shown by the illustrative example of the 40,000 Romanian Jews discussed by Berent.<sup>450</sup> As the war neared its end, these Jews were on the brink of annihilation. However, due to pressure from Hillel Kook, the American representative of the War Refugee Board confronted the Romanian ambassador in Turkey with a direct question: why were they allowing the Nazis to kill the Jews? The response was telling—“*We did not know*

---

<sup>448</sup> Ibid, p. 63. This rather critical stance toward U.S. policies is amended by images of individual American demonstrators holding signs stating, “Catholics protest Nazi terror” or “Stop Hitler’s bloody pogroms on Jews and Catholics,” and a sign on a food store front that says, “For humanity’s sake do not buy German made goods”.

<sup>449</sup> Ibid.

<sup>450</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hzNi5lOaclg&t=341s>.

*you care about it*". As a result of this intervention, the Jews were relocated to a different area and were saved. Moshe Berent makes two important claims. Firstly, he suggests that if there had been pressure on FDR, either by Stephen Wise or the Jewish Agency, more Jews could have been saved. Secondly, by not taking such actions, it sent a message to others that America did not care, potentially encouraging further atrocities against Jews. This aligns with the findings of this study. It demonstrates how around 40,000 Romanian Jews were "easily" rescued. In a different scenario in Denmark, nearly all Jews were saved, illustrating the significance of leadership. Had a different leader been in charge, such outcomes might not have been possible. This highlights the substantial influence leaders like FDR wielded.

In numerous interviews, Berent emphasized Stephen Wise's and the American Jewry's responsibility, highlighting the potential for further action. In one instance, he recounted a frustrated Christian senator questioning the desires of the Jewish community: "What do these Jews want? We devise plans to rescue Jews in Europe, and they decline". Berent also underscored the impactful work of Hillel Kook, contrasting it with the lack of action from others. Kook's successful efforts stood out, along with groups like the Orthodox rabbis who marched to the White House. However, FDR's close Jewish advisors such as Samuel Rosenman advised against FDR meeting with them.<sup>451</sup> Figure 22 on page 157 shows the rabbis participating in that march.

Berent contends that Reform leaders like Stephen Wise and other American Jewish groups prioritized their identity as Americans before Jews. They identified Polish Jews primarily with their country and did not actively assist.<sup>452</sup> In contrast, American Orthodox rabbis saw themselves as Jewish first. Hitler rejected all these American groups' approach, categorizing all Jews as Jews first. Wise and Rosenman were concerned about fueling antisemitism by intertwining the Jewish problem with the war mission, portraying the war as being about Jews and for them. Unfortunately, they wielded significant influence over FDR, potentially hindering efforts to save more Jews. On the other hand, figures like Hillel Kook applied pressure, leading to the establishment of the War Refugee Board. Arthur D. Morse delves further into this in his book, highlighting that much more could have been done

---

<sup>451</sup> Here's a link to one of Dr. Berent's interviews in Hebrew <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hzNi5lOaclg> minutes 10–15. See more at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PrdjXy-Rh5JY> and on the role of Hillel Kook at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H0iwgYvUjdg>.

<sup>452</sup> Ibid. For further insights, see Moshe Berent's book, *A People Like All Peoples: On the Path to Establishing an Israeli Republic*, translated into English (Carmel Publishing House, 2009). In his book, Berent argues that Israel uniquely defines identity based on religion rather than territorial or civil nationality, emphasizing Judaism as both a religious and national identity, with the state primarily belonging to the Jewish people rather than its citizens. He further examines the fluctuating stance of American Jewry towards the Zionist movement throughout history, revealing that many identify primarily as Americans and do not fully align with Zionist ideologies.

while six million Jews tragically perished.<sup>453</sup> It is clear that they all received information about the annihilation and gas chambers, as it was also reported in the press. For instance, the *New York Times* published an article on May 10, stating that Hungary was preparing for the annihilation of Hungarian Jews using the most fiendish methods. This was followed by additional reports in the days that followed, providing more details on the horrifying plans in motion.<sup>454</sup>

The Jewish Agency held the potential to exert pressure on FDR and contribute more to the rescue efforts for European Jews. The case of Joel Brand and the “blood for goods” deal, discussed in Chapter 2, serves as an illustrative example.<sup>455</sup> Eichmann sought Brand’s assistance in brokering a deal with the SS, proposing the release of up to one million Jews in exchange for trucks, soap, tea, and coffee. Despite *The Times* describing the proposal as one of the most loathsome stories of the war, the Jewish Agency collaborated with the British to thwart the deal, leading to Brand’s arrest. Brand testified at Eichmann’s trial and at the 1954 libel trial in Jerusalem involving Malchiel Gruenwald, a Hungarian Holocaust survivor who accused Rezső Kasztner of collaborating with the Nazis. While testifying for Kasztner, Brand accused the Jewish Agency, whose officials later formed the first Israeli government, of aiding the British in scuttling the “blood for goods” proposal.<sup>456</sup> This study has discussed the intricate challenges associated with negotiating with Eichmann and the unexpected British cooperation in providing assistance that potentially could have supported the Nazis in the war. Despite this, perhaps there could have been an exploration of Eichmann’s initial offer to free 100,000 Jews with no demands. In addition, as a potential condition for negotiation, they could have sought to halt the daily transports to Auschwitz, which were already claiming the lives of approximately 12,000 Jews each day. The story remained secretive but was exposed during the Kasztner trial. That was a significant revelation that surfaced during the trial, one that Ben Gurion and the leaders of the new Jewish state sought to conceal. It exposed their failure not only to take adequate action to save Hungarian Jews but also their collaboration with the British, which sabotaged an opportunity during a crucial period when 12,000 Jews were being slaughtered daily. This was the impression as it appeared in the public eye.

---

<sup>453</sup> Ibid., and Arthur D. Morse, *While Six Million Died*, The Overlook Press, New York, 1998.

<sup>454</sup> Richard Breitman and Allan J. Lichtman, *FDR and the Jews* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013), p. 275.

<sup>455</sup> For additional details, see Chapter 2.

<sup>456</sup> See Chapter 2 for further discussion, and Hecht, *Perfidy*, pp. 208–253, and “The ‘Blood for Goods’ Deal, April 1944,” Jewish Virtual Library, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/the-quot-blood-for-goods-quot-deal-april-1944>. The term “blood for goods” or “blood for trucks” refers to Joel Brand’s 1944 mission to negotiate with the Nazis for the release of Jews in exchange for goods, including trucks, but it was ultimately unsuccessful and controversial.

In that deal, Eichmann proposed sparing one million Jews and facilitating their departure from Hungary alive in exchange for a thousand tons of tea and coffee, along with ten thousand trucks.<sup>457</sup> But what was Eichmann's underlying motive for making this offer, and why did he propose releasing 100,000 Jews beforehand? Did he initiate the deal himself? Why did he choose to send Brand instead of Kasztner on the mission? Many of these questions remain unresolved. Yehuda Bauer, in his book *Jews for Sale?*, addresses these issues and provides further insights, yet the questions largely remain open. Bauer suggests that the selection of the adventurous Brand over the seasoned politician Kasztner may have been influenced by the Nazis' prior knowledge of Brand's background—or it may have been purely coincidental. When asked where he wished to present the proposal, Brand chose Istanbul. Bauer also notes that, according to Becher—who was responsible for the economic exploitation of the Jews—either Eichmann or his nominal superior, Winkelmann, instructed him to investigate these Jewish proposals. Becher subsequently reported to Himmler that he had heard from Eichmann and Winkelmann that the Jews had offered goods, primarily 10,000 trucks. Himmler reportedly approved the idea and sent Becher back to explore these possibilities further. Bauer concludes that the likelihood of Becher—who handled economic affairs—discussing with Himmler the prospect of sending someone to Istanbul was reasonably high.<sup>458</sup> Eichmann met with Brand again a few days after their initial meeting. According to Brand's account, high-ranking Nazis—Edmund Veesenmayer (Reich Plenipotentiary) and Otto Winkelmann (SS and Police Leader)—were present, which would lend extraordinary significance to the meeting.<sup>459</sup> While this study does not provide definitive answers to these questions, it offers a suggestion based on the assessment in the previous chapter. Given that Eichmann played a pivotal role in the decision-making process regarding the annihilation of Hungarian Jews—driven by four key factors, one of which was the inaction of world leaders—it is possible that offering such a deal and sending Brand to negotiate with the Jewish Agency and British authorities was a strategic move to gauge their response, and indeed, it may have confirmed to him that they did not care.<sup>460</sup> This could further explain why he even offered to save 100,000 individuals upfront at no cost and perhaps provide a better perspective on why he chose to send Brand on the mission instead of Kasztner.

---

<sup>457</sup> Hecht, *Perfidy*, p. 212.

<sup>458</sup> Bauer, *Jews for Sale?: Nazi-Jewish Negotiations, 1933–1945*, pp. 163–164.

<sup>459</sup> Ibid. See also Bauer, *A History of the Holocaust*, pp. 349–351. Bauer further discusses the role of another key figure in the mission, Bandi Grosz.

<sup>460</sup> The previous chapter analyzed his decision using Strauss's forest-fire metaphor, depicting Eichmann as the one about to ignite the first spark. One of his primary concerns was ensuring that those capable of extinguishing the fire would not intervene.

Eichmann likely recognized that Kasztner was part of the influential group within the Jewish Agency, and their response would have been different with him, possibly not collaborating with the British to apprehend him. Additionally, this maneuver likely left an impression on Kasztner and other members of the Jewish Council in Hungary that they were not simply collaborating with Eichmann to facilitate the extermination of Jews, but were actively working to save them. They likely believed their negotiations were part of a larger plan to rescue all Hungarian Jews—and potentially beyond—thereby fostering greater compliance and cooperation. In this way, Eichmann also ensured that he would receive more cooperation from Kasztner and the Jewish leadership in Hungary, giving him reason to keep him there. This aligns with the portrayal of Eichmann depicted in this study, and it's unsurprising that he demonstrated cunning in devising such strategies. The study does not conclude who initiated the plan. While it is possible that Eichmann initiated it, possibly informing his superiors to gain credit for aiding the war effort, it is more likely the plan came from above, possibly Himmler, to achieve several goals, such as creating division among the Allies by transferring military procurement to the Germans.<sup>461</sup> Eichmann, however, had significant autonomy in implementing Nazi policies and knew how to navigate the plan to his advantage, potentially earning further credit. This aligns with Doris Bergen's analysis, which suggests that, at this stage of the war, some of the last-minute brutalities of the Final Solution were driven by a shared motivation of self-preservation. Many German units and officials involved in civilian attacks worked tirelessly to prove the importance of their roles.<sup>462</sup> Eichmann may have obtained his superiors' approval while maintaining control over the key details of the proposal. It presented a win-win scenario for him: if the deal succeeded, they would acquire the trucks and other requested items; if not, it would highlight the inaction of those in power as mere bystanders. Others suggest that another purpose was to instigate a conflict between the British and Soviets by negotiating with the Nazis, ostensibly to bolster their efforts against the Soviets. Additionally, Ben Hecht proposes that offering the deal could have been a tactic to whitewash the image of the Third Reich by sparing the lives of millions of Jews, potentially improving the postwar judgments of its leaders.<sup>463</sup>

Moshe Berent delves deeper into the actions of the Jewish Agency, shedding light on Ben Gurion and his associates' choice to keep their Holocaust-era activities confidential after the establishment of the Jewish state. In Chapter 5, the study highlights Berent's reference to an original excerpt from Elie Wiesel's *Night*, which

---

<sup>461</sup> See Hecht, *Perfidy*, p. 230.

<sup>462</sup> Bergen, *War & Genocide: A Concise History of the Holocaust*, 2016, pp. 212–214.

<sup>463</sup> Hecht, *Perfidy*, p. 230.

was omitted at the request of David Ben-Gurion to avoid criticism of the Israeli state. Berent argues that what makes the document particularly chilling is Wiesel's sharp criticism of Jewish leadership both in the Land of Israel and worldwide:

We knew nothing, while in the Land of Israel they knew; in London they knew, and in New York they knew. The world was silent, and even the Jewish world was silent. Why was it silent? Why did it not see fit to inform us of what was happening in Germany? Why did we not warn it? Why? I also blame the Jewish world and its leaders for not warning us, at least of the danger that lurked for us, so that we could seek ways of salvation.<sup>464</sup>

Berent further claims that by omitting this criticism—whether intentionally or not—Wiesel himself becomes complicit in the silencing of issues concerning the conduct of the Zionist movement and the *Yishuv* during the Holocaust.<sup>465</sup> Another example of this silencing is discussed in Chapter 11, where Joel Palgi's memoir as a paratrooper is revisited, presenting a version that differs from his previously published book and offering new insights into his experiences.

While the motives behind the wartime actions of the leaders who sought to establish the Jewish state may warrant broader research beyond the scope of this study, it is plausible that their primary focus was on creating a democratic state, potentially shaped by concerns over demographic shifts. The influx of close to a million Hungarian Jews, or even 100,000, could have posed challenges for Ben Gurion's electoral success and the stabilization of the state. On the other hand, Rabbi Michael Dov Weissmandl, through the Working Group, joined efforts to save Hungarian Jews and appealed to world leaders for assistance. They took actions to inform Jews and other nations about Nazi atrocities and succeeded in delaying the mass deportation of Slovakian Jews for two years (1942–1944) by bribing German and Slovak officials.<sup>466</sup> Weissmandl also clandestinely communicated with individuals to seek help in saving European Jews from Nazi destruction. He also begged the Allies to bomb the rails leading to Auschwitz, but to no avail. Weissmandl believed that if the Hungarian Jews would resist, then only a small number of them would be deported, as the Germans in 1944 couldn't garner enough soldiers to leave the front and deal with the Jews simultaneously.<sup>467</sup>

---

<sup>464</sup> Translated from Hebrew in Berent's article, available at: <https://mosheberent.wordpress.com/177-2/>. Wiesel mentioned that they knew nothing, yet it's interesting that the news had already reached the press. As noted earlier, *The New York Times*, for example, reported on May 10 that Hungary was preparing to annihilate Hungarian Jews using horrific methods. See Richard Breitman and Allan J. Lichtman, *FDR and the Jews*, p. 275.

<sup>465</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>466</sup> In 1942, Weissmandl initiated ransom negotiations, resulting in a \$50,000 deal with SS official Dieter Wisleczeny, temporarily halting the transportation of Slovak Jews.

<sup>467</sup> See Lichtenstein, *Witness to History*, pp. 279–282.

This study emphasizes a key factor: how the indifference of powerful leaders, along with bystander behavior, influenced Eichmann's decisions to proceed with genocide. It also highlights the immigration policies of Britain and the USA, which created an impression of neglect towards Jews under Nazi rule. Both nations acted in their own interests, with the British, who controlled Palestine, being cautious not to upset the Arabs. An illustrative example is the Alaska offer proposed by Harold Ickes, the Secretary of the Interior. In a 1938 Thanksgiving eve news conference, Ickes suggested using Alaska as a refuge for Jewish refugees to bypass immigration quotas. He toured Alaska that summer, hoping to attract European Jews for economic development and security. Despite support from Senator William H. King and Representative Franck R. Havenner, the plan faced opposition from American Jews like Reform Rabbi Stephen Wise, fearing a wrong impression. Roosevelt's suggestion of a limit of 10,000 immigrants annually for five years, with a maximum of 10 percent Jews, led to the plan's demise, which he never publicly mentioned.<sup>468</sup>

Regarding FDR, the study cannot conclusively determine that his decision not to save many Jews was driven by antisemitic motives. Rather, it is known that he was surrounded by individuals who held such views or had Jewish advisors who influenced him in that direction. Arthur D. Morse delves into this, noting, for instance, that Morgenthau, despite being a member of a distinguished Jewish family, had not shown a particular interest in Jewish matters.<sup>469</sup> Perhaps one of the primary reasons for FDR's inaction was his advisor on Jewish matters, Stephen Wise, whose caution stemmed from his fear of stoking antisemitism in America and the potential blame on Jews for causing the war. Wise favored projecting American patriotism, thinking that by ending the war, the Jews would be saved. However, the extent to which he pursued this approach was misguided. Furthermore, he hindered groups advocating for Jewish rescue. These groups included rabbis, Rabbi Weismandel, Hillel Kook and his associates, and occasionally individuals like Mayer Lansky, who was perceived as one associated with the mafia. At one point, a boat of refugees arrived in America, but FDR denied them entry. Thankfully, Lansky's ties to the Cuban dictator allowed them to land there, saving their lives. However, the fate of many other refugees on other vessels, such as the Struma, was not as fortunate, as they tragically perished.<sup>470</sup>

---

<sup>468</sup> More can be found at <https://www.uaa.alaska.edu/news/archive/2014/04/alaska-denies-asylum-wwii-jewish-refugees.cshtml> and <https://www.americanjewisharchives.org/snapshots/r-stephen-wise-letter-to-president-franklin-d-roosevelt-regarding-the-holocaust/>. Steven Wise, born in Budapest, Hungary, in 1874, immigrated with his family to New York as an infant. He became one of the most renowned American Reform rabbis of the 20th century.

<sup>469</sup> Morse, *While Six Million Died*, pp. 76–80.

<sup>470</sup> Several Hebrew sources discuss Lansky's contributions to the Zionist project and his efforts to rescue Jews during the Holocaust. See <https://www.makorrihon.co.il/nrg/online/54/ART2/460/763.html>.

I agree with Deborah Lipstadt who argues that bombing Auschwitz would have sent a message to the Germans that “we know what you are doing, we cannot abide what you are doing, this is our response to what you are doing”.<sup>471</sup> The fear of reprisals on nearby populations did not deter the US from bombing other railways as part of the war effort. Concerns about diverting resources from broader war efforts, along with other logistical challenges like precision bombing limitations, may have influenced the decision-making. However, even one bombing mission, even if accuracy was compromised, could have sent a powerful message, signaling America’s deep concern to the Nazis and other nations, potentially making a significant impact. Importantly, the approach of employing aerial bombardment might have circumvented the risk of Nazi retaliation against local populations, which was a distinct possibility had civilians undertaken such efforts.



**Figure 21:** President Roosevelt signing the declaration of war against Germany, Dec. 11, 1941. Credit: Library of Congress.

---

<sup>471</sup> *Time Magazine*, September 17, 2022. Sometimes, other factors influenced the Nazis, such as the Sobibor revolt, which led them to close the Sobibor death camp, rather than an Allied bombing.



**Figure 22:** In October 1943, 400 prominent Orthodox Rabbis marched in Washington, urging to meet with FDR to discuss saving European Jews. However, FDR did not meet with them, following the counsel of his Jewish advisers, who argued that Bergson and his group of rabbis did not represent the mainstream Jewish opinion. Photo Credit: Courtesy of The David S. Wyman Institute for Holocaust Studies – <http://www.WymanInstitute.org>.