

Dissenting Voices in America's  
Rise to Power

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Despite Jewish resistance, aid from non-Jews, and non-compliance of Germany's allies, Nazi-dominated Europe was scene to executions for the crime of existence: six million Jews, half a million Roma. This destruction of one-third of world Jewry (per 1939 censuses) by the Third Reich was abetted by non-German accomplices. They included a collaborationist government in Vichy, venal informers, and anti-Semites from the Atlantic shoreline to Ukraine who lusted for the blood and property of their neighbors.<sup>60</sup> In the absence of this cooperation, Germany's genocidal machine would have worked slower, less thoroughly.

Governments and supranational institutions outside the Nazi realm did relatively little to prevent the murders. Papal silence and the reticence of the International Red Cross were cases in point. Pius XII never threatened Catholic persecutors of Jews with excommunication or ordered them to desist. He never urged non-cooperation upon German/Austrian Catholics, who comprised a third of the Reich's population. (Hitler, Heinrich Himmler, Joseph Goebbels, and Hoess were nominally Catholic.) Pius remained mute in October 1943 as SS troops invaded Rome's Jewish quarter. Red Cross inspectors did not demand to examine conditions at Auschwitz or any other such camp.<sup>61</sup> As a result of wartime operations against Germany, Soviet forces did end the assaults on Jewry in eastern Europe. Their discontinuance, though, was never an aim of Joseph Stalin. As for the Anglo-American governments, rescue of European Jewry was, at best, a low priority. Hardly anyone noticed or pretended to care about the Roma.

Before Europe's war began, Nazi persecution of Jews in the Third Reich, exemplified by the 1935 Nuremberg Laws, had created disquiet in America. At Roosevelt's behest an international conference convened at Evian, France (July 1938) to devise means of succoring thousands of German/Austrian Jews fleeing Hitler. FDR also recalled Ambassador Wilson from Berlin for "consultation" after the *Kristallnacht* mayhem (November 9–10, 1938).<sup>62</sup> Alas, neither Wilson's recall nor the Evian meeting bore results. The administration did not cut diplomatic ties with Germany in the late 1930s or, contrary to Jewish-American hopes, impose economic sanctions. Evian resulted in the issuance of tepid pronouncement against anti-Jewish discrimination in the Third Reich. No country, the United States included, then awash with anti-Semitism and anti-alien feeling, eased the plight of German Jewry by relaxing immigration codes.<sup>63</sup> The president did not extend his prestige or support to the Wagner-Rogers bill in Spring 1939. Passage by Congress would have let 20,000 Jewish-German children, under age fourteen,

enter the United States without reference to the immigration quota in effect for Germany. The demise of Wagner-Rogers by nibbling amendments and parliamentary dickerings comforted Laura Delano, an FDR cousin and wife of the immigration commissioner. She predicted: "Twenty thousand charming children would all too soon grow into twenty thousand ugly adults."<sup>64</sup> Senator Borah, who helped smother the legislation, was told by a P. G. Ingram of Chicago that the last thing needed in the economically strapped United States was a new influx of undesirables, no matter their age. Ingram suggested that Borah examine the benefits of Jewish removal: "America can be made . . . a thousand times better by loading all the Jews in the land onto cattle boats for deportation to some point within the antarctic circle . . . Why must the gentiles of America be forever exploited, baited, and persecuted by the brutal Jews?"<sup>65</sup> The president, no less, once confidentially stated that American Jews – like Catholics – enjoyed civil rights by "sufferance" of the Protestant majority.<sup>66</sup>

Eleanor Roosevelt told a friend – after Evian, *Kristallnacht*, and the Wagner-Rogers decision – that Jewish attainments probably deserved rollback. The problem with Hitler sprang from his methods, she opined. His goals were understandable: "I realize quite well that there may be a need for curtailing the ascendancy of the Jewish people, but it seems to me it might have been done in a more humane way . . ."<sup>67</sup> Unsurprisingly, in view of such sentiment, actions in prewar America on behalf of German Jewry were nugatory or aborted. Only later did the First Lady realize the scope of Nazi malice and Jewish vulnerability, by which time she also despaired of Jewish survival. She wrote in her syndicated column, *My Day*, in August 1943: "I do not know what we can do to save the Jews in Europe . . . [but] we will be the sufferers if we let great wrongs occur without exerting ourselves to correct them."<sup>68</sup>

Albeit engaged against Germany as of December 1941, FDR's government did not exert itself much to "correct" these "great wrongs." Initially, Washington officials did not comprehend the extent of Hitler's eradication policy.<sup>69</sup> When in late summer 1943 Jan Karski (Polish Catholic army officer) told Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter (Jewish) of cattle cars crammed with people and of death factories, he responded in disbelief. Neither did Karski convince in his interviews with FDR or Stimson.<sup>70</sup> The legal scholar Raphael Lemkin (Polish Jew), who coined the term genocide, reported frightening tales to FDR and Vice President Henry Wallace. Lemkin advised prompt condemnation. Neither Roosevelt nor Wallace grasped the man's urgency, however. Lemkin should be "patient."<sup>71</sup> The American public was anyway not unduly concerned or brilliantly informed by the press. It chose, the *New York*

*Times* included, to downplay the annihilation, which tended to blur into other news of wartime suffering. Touchy about his own Jewishness, Walter Lippmann never mentioned the distress of European Jews in his newspaper columns, not even after personal briefing by Karski. Recollection of exaggerated reports of German misbehavior in 1914, meanwhile, inclined readers toward skepticism of grisly stories.<sup>72</sup>

Jewish groups repeatedly expressed alarm about Nazi persecution. They sponsored days of prayer and giant rallies. These included New York's Madison Square Garden demonstration (March 1943), when 75,000 people, Jews and Christians, vowed to "Stop Hitler Now."<sup>73</sup> Five hundred rabbis went to Washington in 1943 to petition FDR and Congress to adopt measures: warning German leaders to halt or face retribution, welcoming refugees, bombing feeder railways to Auschwitz. But disunity among Jewish activists prevented them from speaking with one voice about methods of rescue (witness the bitterness between Rabbi Stephen Wise of the American Jewish Congress versus Peter Bergson of the Emergency Committee to Save the Jewish People of Europe). FDR himself felt constrained in speaking strongly against Germany's homicidal policies, lest rascals – like Representative John Rankin (Democrat, Mississippi) or Father Charles Coughlin – ridiculed the war as one fought only to advance Jewish ends, thereby intensifying anti-Semitic feeling, which had earlier been mobilized to malign the New Deal (the Jew Deal). Roosevelt wondered about, but did not investigate deeply, the possibility of converting the Cameroons or Paraguay into Jewish havens. He spoke glibly of conveying European Jews to Palestine and moving Arab inhabitants out.<sup>74</sup>

State Department officials charged with paving the way for Jewish immigration or organizing rescue wound up subverting their task. Assistant Secretary of State Breckinridge Long, the FBI, and army intelligence thought that German agents might enter America via the Jewish refugee stream. In any case, Long thought, a horde of Jews and other foreigners bode no good for the future of US domestic tranquillity and so strove to slow or thwart their arrival. Compounding matters, the War and Navy departments were unwilling to divert men or *matériel* from fighting Germans to executing risky rescue missions. Rather, as Stimson held (a man not drawn to Jews), the best way to help Hitler's victims was to defeat Germany as quickly as possible. For this purpose no military assets could properly be spared.<sup>75</sup>

Apathy, hoary anti-Semitism (genteel to crude), and concentration on routine military objectives spelt disaster for Jewry. The country best able to help stood aloof. The Anglo-US conference at Bermuda in 1943, overlapping with the Warsaw ghetto uprising, met ostensibly to invent

ways to aid Europe's Jews. This meeting produced platitudes while camouflaging the paucity of State Department and Foreign Office initiatives. Bermuda gave further confirmation, were one needed, for Hitler's earlier prediction: the Western powers might complain or preach but at the fateful hour would not move on behalf of deicides and money swindlers. Propaganda Minister Goebbels entered in his diary (December 1942): "At bottom . . . I believe both the English and Americans are happy that we are exterminating the Jewish riff-raff."<sup>76</sup>

Niebuhr reviled the Bermuda charade, as did the CIO's president Philip Murray, and a smattering of congressmen. Rabbi Wise called Bermuda an evasion of humanitarian duty.<sup>77</sup> Szmul Zygielbojm, attached to the Polish National Council in London, committed suicide (May 1943) to protest Anglo-American inaction. "I was unable to do anything during my life," he wrote in his last letter, "perhaps by my death I shall contribute to destroying the indifference of those who are able and should act."<sup>78</sup>

Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau, Jr., was preoccupied by the wartime demands of his portfolio. This preoccupation involved planning for the postwar international economy. His role at the Bretton Woods conference (July 1944) won him deserved praise. He and his aides were pivotal in creating institutions to ensure economic stability: the International Monetary Fund, the Bank for Reconstruction and Development. Not without feeling for European Jewry, Morgenthau nevertheless paid slight attention and grasped nothing of the disaster's scale until late 1943. He qualified before then as indictable for indifference by Zygielbojm's standard.

Morgenthau, son of Woodrow Wilson's ambassador to Constantinople, was not an observant or religiously minded Jew. He felt entirely comfortable in mainstream society. He wanted never to be misidentified with the two million exotic East European Jews – Orthodox, impecunious – who made their way to the United States around the turn of the century and embarrassed their secular cousins of German origin. Heir to privilege (b. 1891), he attended Phillips Exeter Academy and Cornell University (where he compiled mediocre academic records). He enjoyed a lark as "office boy" to his father during his Constantinople tenure, and, upon US intervention in World War One, served as a naval officer. Young Morgenthau thereafter led the life of a gentleman farmer in New York's Dutchess County, where he became obsessively friendly with the local squire, debonair Franklin Roosevelt. Morgenthau lacked his friend's insouciance. He had nothing of FDR's charisma or gift for repartee. Deliberate to the point of graceless, and mentally plodding, Morgenthau's redeeming quality was loyalty to FDR. He, in turn,

accepted Morgenthau as an intimate – the only Jew ever personally close to Roosevelt – and rewarded his devotion with handsome positions. As governor of New York (1928–1932), FDR appointed Morgenthau to posts dealing with agriculture and forest/wildlife conservation. President Roosevelt named Morgenthau to head the Farm Credit Administration in 1933, and used him in exploratory talks with Maxim Litvinov on normalization of Soviet–US relations.<sup>79</sup> The president subsequently appointed Morgenthau to the Treasury (November 1934), thus recruiting the second Jew to serve in cabinet. The first had been Theodore Roosevelt's secretary of Commerce and Labor, Oscar Straus.

Morgenthau, as court Jew, avoided overstepping on behalf of his coreligionists in America or abroad. Berlin's anti-Jewish violence nevertheless shook him. He recommended in cautious tone to FDR (1938) that London and Paris be pressed to offer their Guiana colonies as sanctuaries for dispossessed German Jews. Roosevelt's breezy disapproval of this idea did not elicit response from Morgenthau: "It would take the Jews five to fifty years to overcome the fever."<sup>80</sup> Upon war's outbreak in 1939, he became the most outspoken interventionist in FDR's government, and so remained until Stimson joined the cabinet in summer 1940. Still, Morgenthau couched his interventionist arguments only in reference to saving Britain and preserving US security. He did not allow, perhaps not even to himself, that Hitler's anti-Semitism colored his longing to see the Nazis overthrown.

Immersion from December 1941 onward in waging war along the financial front let Morgenthau, for a while, to bear lightly the tug of Jewish misery. But he could not ignore it entirely. Rabbi Wise urged him to take official notice, to use his presumed influence with FDR for humanity's sake. Morgenthau's confidential secretary, Henrietta Klotz (Jewish), also tried to sway her boss in meaningful direction. The example, meantime, of his father's efforts in Turkey for Armenians gnawed at his conscience.<sup>81</sup> The senior Morgenthau's chairmanship of a presidential commission to investigate anti-Jewish violence in post-1918 Poland also haunted the son. Most dramatically, Protestant lawyers on the Treasury staff (Josiah DuBois, John Pehle, Randolph Paul) presented him in autumn 1943 with irrefutable evidence, acquired in fragments, of State Department obstruction: thwarting disbursement of dollars by the World Jewish Congress to spring tens of thousands of French and Romanian Jews from Nazi clutches. Morgenthau consequently called a meeting with Hull and Long. It was a tense confrontation that confirmed him in his sad conclusion: the State Department was guilty of ineptitude, or worse, in its handling of refugee matters. Morgenthau thus became, against his will and slowly, the sole resolute proponent of rescue in

FDR's inner circle. He was prepared to sacrifice cabinet position and friendship with the president for a cause mostly ignored by the responsible class.<sup>82</sup>

The denouement occurred on January 16, 1944 when Morgenthau delivered to FDR a report penned by DuBois: "Acquiescence of this Government in the Murder of the Jews." The paper detailed State Department dereliction:

One of the greatest crimes in history, the slaughter of the Jewish people in Europe, is continuing unabated.

This Government has for a long time maintained that its policy is to work out programs to save those Jews of Europe who could be saved.

... certain officials in our State Department, which is charged with carrying out this policy, have been guilty not only of gross procrastination and willful failure to act, but even of willful attempts to prevent action from being taken to rescue Jews from Hitler ...

Unless remedial steps of a drastic nature are taken ... to prevent the complete extermination of the Jews in German controlled Europe [then] this Government will have to share for all time responsibility for this extermination.<sup>83</sup>

Specific State Department officers were censured in the Treasury report, Long particularly. They had not used government machinery at their disposal but employed it to hinder Jewish rescue. They had not cooperated with other organizations trying to mount authentic rescues and had even tried to foil them. State Department people were also upbraided for preventing dissemination of information on Nazi murder policies. Finally, the State Department had tried to hide its guilt by providing misleading explanations to Congress and blunting press inquiry.<sup>84</sup>

Morgenthau told FDR that failure to respond to the report's findings would invite awkwardness. Congressmen fed-up with delay, and preparing legislation (Gillette–Rogers) to organize a rescue commission independent of the State Department, would drive in directions sure to embarrass the White House. Morgenthau intimated that Thomas Dewey and Wendell Willkie, contenders for the GOP presidential nomination in 1944, would reap benefits in New York and elsewhere if voters perceived FDR as obdurate. Alert to the danger of appearing apathetic or callous, FDR mollified Morgenthau via executive order and established the War Refugee Board (WRB) on January 22, 1944.<sup>85</sup> Its compass, though made without specific reference to Jewry, virtually repudiated previous policy. The WRB would do everything possible to "rescue the victims of enemy oppression who are in imminent danger of death and ... afford such victims all possible relief and assistance consistent with the successful prosecution of the war."<sup>86</sup>

The WRB fell under the joint direction of Hull, Stimson, and Morgenthau. Only the Treasury secretary felt deeply committed to it. He had to contend with Stimson's skepticism about the feasibility of rescue and hapless Hull, who was lukewarm to the WRB and whose connection to public events anyway was becoming attenuated as his health failed.<sup>87</sup> Morgenthau got his own man, Pehle, named as executive director of the WRB. With a small staff (not more than thirty), using funds primarily collected from private agencies, and mostly ignored by FDR, Pehle headed a belated campaign to save condemned people. It included the employment of Sweden's Wallenberg in his effort on behalf of Hungarian Jews.<sup>88</sup>

The WRB could eventually claim credit for saving 200,000 Jews and 20,000 additional persons. Morgenthau ultimately got Roosevelt to issue a public statement (March 1944) that referred explicitly to Germany's war on Jewry. The secretary also joined that small body of protestors that urged Anglo-US bombing of Auschwitz and the railroad network that fed it. They were overruled by Stimson's War Department in summer 1944, a judgment upheld by FDR, who worried over the advantages to Nazi propagandists of prisoners killed by Allied bombs. Against the advice of Morgenthau and Pehle – against the fervent wishes of Auschwitz's living dead, including Wiesel and Primo Levi – this reasoning still trumped: "The suggested air operation is impracticable for the reason that it could be executed only by diversion of considerable air support essential to the success of our forces now engaged in decisive operations . . . it is considered that the most effective relief to victims of enemy persecution is the early defeat of the Axis, an undertaking to which we must devote every resource at our disposal."<sup>89</sup> The result, even as synthetic oil refineries in or near Auschwitz were struck by Allied planes (late 1944, early 1945), was that no military actions – from bombing to landing paratroopers – were taken against the camp's gas chambers, crematoria, or Hungarian-Polish railway junctions.<sup>90</sup>

Morgenthau cherished postwar words of gratitude by rescued Jews for his WRB role. Previously content in his secularism, indeed disconcerted by expressions of Jewish piety, the assimilated Morgenthau also converted after 1945 to traditional religiosity and later support of Israel.

Yet he was staggered by the Shoah's dimensions. He derived no pride in a policy that came too late for countless people.<sup>91</sup> Adding to his sorrow, he had to cope with rejection in 1945 of his blueprint for a "pastoralized" Germany, the so-called Morgenthau Plan. Harry Truman, who later fired Morgenthau from Treasury, thought his German scheme "crazy." Stimson reproved it as a Carthaginian peace; a better solution to the postwar German problem would be a tonic of "Christianity and

kindness."<sup>92</sup> To such argument, Morgenthau answered that his idea, admittedly rough, would preempt German rearmament and risk of Berlin's starting war again. Implementation of his proposal would also punish the gas-chamber nation: "We didn't ask for this war; we didn't put millions of people through gas chambers . . . They (Germans) have asked for it."<sup>93</sup> After briefly accepting the secretary's Germany plan (at the September 1944 Quebec conference), FDR dropped it as too vindictive. He opted for moderation to reintegrate Germany into Europe.

Maybe Morgenthau, given to brooding, ruminated thus in the years after 1945. His idol, Roosevelt, had been too distracted or uninterested to push for a robust Jewish rescue. The president, more than his inglorious State Department, bore responsibility for inadequate response. Only 21,000 Jews gained entry into the United States during the Shoah years, 10 percent of those eligible under tight immigration law. FDR voiced no objection or gave much utterance of cosmopolitan complaint.<sup>94</sup> As commander in chief, he, not the generals or their civilian supervisors, had the power to authorize the bombing of Auschwitz's facilities or related targets. He decided oppositely.