

ORTHODOX RESCUE REVISITED

By Efraim Zuroff

The cover story of the fall 2002 issue of *Jewish Action* (“Orthodoxy’s Finest Hour: Rescue Efforts During the Holocaust”) is basically an unbridled attack on my book *The Response of Orthodox Jewry in the United States to the Holocaust: the Activities of the Vaad ha-Hatzala Rescue Committee, 1939-1945* (Hoboken, NJ, 2000). Under the guise of a review essay, Professor David Kranzler attempts to make two major claims, which he contends contradict the findings presented in my book. The first is that throughout the entire course of World War II, Orthodox Jewry in the United States, whom he identifies as “the Vaad ha-Hatzala and Agudath Israel,” attempted to save all Jews, regardless of religiosity or affiliation. The second is that during the same period, American Orthodox Jews always tried their best to cooperate

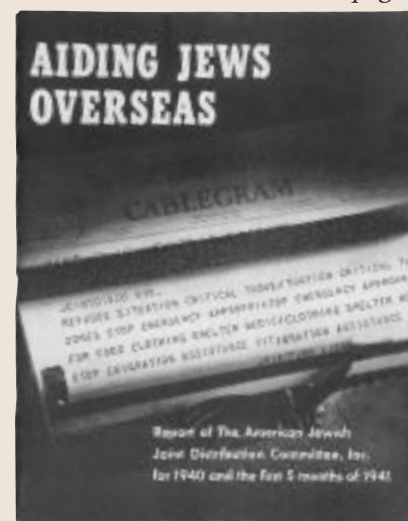
with other Jewish organizations in order to save Jewish lives. According to Kranzler, the Orthodox saved the lives of Jews from every segment of Jewish society following “a dual track for rescue: The first track involved the rescue of all Klal Yisrael, regardless of affiliation; the second track involved the specific rescue of Torah scholars and yeshivah students. These efforts, which began in 1940, and accelerated by mid-1943, peaked in 1944-45.”

Kranzler’s assertion that Orthodox rescue efforts commenced in 1940 is extremely strange in view of the fact that the Vaad ha-Hatzala, which was undoubtedly the major American Orthodox relief and rescue agency operating during World War II, was established in 1939. Yet, perhaps it is not surprising that Kranzler would ignore this fact because the circumstances surrounding the creation of the Vaad clearly show that his claims regarding American Orthodoxy’s rescue policies and priorities are extremely inaccurate and basically flawed.

Dr. Zuroff obtained his M.A. and Ph. D. in the history of the Holocaust at the Institute of Contemporary Jewry of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. His book The Response of Orthodox Jewry in the United States to the Holocaust was the winner of the tenth Samuel Belkin Literary Award and the 1999-2000 Egit Prize for Holocaust and Jewish Resistance Literature. A prominent spokesperson on issues relating to the Holocaust and postwar Jewish life, he has published more than 150 articles in publications all over the world. Dr. Zuroff is currently the director of the Israel office of the Simon Wiesenthal Center and coordinator of the Center’s Nazi war crimes research worldwide.

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 yeshivah students from the most important Polish yeshivot (Mir, Kletzk, Kamenetz, Radin, Baranowitz and many others) began pouring into Vilna. Practically all of these refugees were in dire need of urgent financial and logistical assistance, and upon their arrival they turned to Rabbi Chaim Ozer Grodzinsky, a world-

(continued on page 3)



“Aiding Jews Overseas,” the report of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee for 1940 and the first five months of 1941.

Illustration: National Archives, courtesy of United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) Photo Archives

As a result of a well-orchestrated publicity campaign designed to market Dr. 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* as an expose of American Orthodoxy, news media around the world reported how “ultra-Orthodox rabbis¹ ignored the suffering of millions of Jews who were eventually murdered by the Nazis.” Invariably, 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

A historian and retired professor at CUNY, Dr. Kranzler wrote 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 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).

By David Kranzler

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 of American Orthodoxy, Zuroff presumably knows that the Vaad ha-Hatzala was only one aspect of the Orthodox response. As I point-

ed 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 evinced more than a minimal

(continued on page 6)



Courtesy of Gura Stenbuch

The Orthodox and other groups...used Latin American passports to save tens of thousands of Jews of every affiliation.



The December 1945 issue of the newspaper Yiddishe Shtime 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 rabbinic 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 rabbinic 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 a national fundraising campaign to support this project. The official announcement regarding these steps was to be made, however, at an emergency conference of 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 Yeshivoh 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 ha-Hatzala, 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.

Before 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. On 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 justified.

In reality, however, this decision was much more complicated and contro-

versial. 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 Joint 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 and run by Orthodox Jews with the full support of the Orthodox rabbinate. Thus, at least in theory if not in practice, there already was a fairly large (by Jewish standards) and highly experienced Jewish relief agency in existence whose task was to assist the Torah scholars who had escaped to Vilna.

The problem was, however, that the American Orthodox rabbis did not trust the veteran Jewish relief agency—which was dominated by Reform Jews of German origin—to give the Orthodox rabbis in Lithuania the highest priority in its relief program and to devote sufficient resources to their rescue. Therefore, they opted to establish their own rescue agency, which would devote itself *exclusively* to saving refugee Torah scholars in general and those in Vilna in particular. The rabbis explained their decision by stressing the critically important role played by the yeshivot in Jewish history, comparing them to the famous Torah academy at Yavneh, which was spared by the Romans when they destroyed the Second Temple, thanks to the efforts of Rabbi Yochanan Ben Zakai. In the words of one of the resolutions passed at the conference:

*In the tragedy that has befallen our people at the present day when complete destruction threatens the very life of the Jewish people, it should be our sacred duty to save our Yavnehs of today—the Holy Yeshivoh—in which the only salvation of Judaism and Jewish life lies. The convention, therefore, resolves to launch a national campaign for the war-torn yeshivoh.*¹

Photo: Agudath Israel Archives, courtesy of USHMM Photo Archives

. . . The American Orthodox rabbis did not trust the veteran Jewish relief agency . . . to give the Orthodox rabbis in Lithuania the highest priority in its relief program and to devote sufficient resources to their rescue.

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 Coming from Germany (NCCR) agreed to join forces to raise funds. Thus, there was a single united fundraising campaign for all the major Jewish causes—for Jews in distress (JDC), for the Jewish community in Palestine (UPA) and for refugee assistance (NCCR).

In that respect, the rabbis' decision to initiate their own separate fundraising campaign naturally aroused communal concern. In fact, the rabbis were aware of the problem their decision would create and tried to minimize the damage by assuring community leaders that the Vaad's campaign would be a one-time affair and would only deal with the relocation of the yeshivot, a task that was far too expensive for the already overburdened resources of the JDC. In addition, Vaad officials indicated that they would direct their campaign only at the "regular contributors to the Yeshivoh," rather than at the general Jewish public, in order not to adversely affect the UJA's efforts.

Had the Vaad ha-Hatzala 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 would 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 Torah 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

after the other. Henrietta Buchman, the secretary of the JDC Cultural Committee, summarized the situation in a letter she sent to Rabbi Jacob Karlinsky of the Vaad a week after JDC officials met with Vaad leader Rabbi Abraham Kalmanowitz on June 4, 1940:

Doubtless, you are aware that the JDC fundraising efforts are this year included in the United Jewish Appeal. The JDC is not conducting a separate campaign for funds. The UJA arrangement has been agreed upon to meet the expressed desire of Jewish communities throughout the country that to the greatest extent possible the confusion and irritation of separate appeals be eliminated, and to marshal all our forces in order that the greatest response may be had from the good people here who contribute the funds.

As we tried to make clear to Rabbi Kalmanowitz, the introduction of additional separate fundraising efforts serves only to confuse and irritate the Jewish communities in the country and cannot



Illustration: Agudath Israel Archives

"The Word," a weekly for the Jewish Community in Shanghai.

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.

but reduce the contributions to the UJA. It seems to us, therefore, that it would be more advantageous to all concerned if the Orthodox leaders sponsoring your appeal would lend their active assistance to the UJA to help raise the funds so sorely needed for the activities which derive their major support from the organizations included in the United Jewish Appeal. Such cooperation, we feel certain, would increase the funds that would be available to the JDC, which in turn would then be in a better position to allot a larger measure of help for yeshivot, as well as for other purposes.²

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—it was 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 who served on its presidium—Rabbis Eliezer Silver, Aharon Kotler, Abraham Kalmanowitz, Jacob

The "Joseph Stalin" diesel locomotive was 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 Mir Yeshiva students to get to Shanghai.

Levinson and Joseph Konvitz—devoted itself exclusively to the rescue of rabbis and yeshiva students until late 1943. In fact, it was only in early 1944 that the Vaad officially expanded its mandate to include Jews who were neither rabbis nor yeshiva 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 yeshiva 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 Nazis' Final Solution, the Vaad spent all its funds on relief for rabbis and yeshiva students in Central Asia and Shanghai. The incontrovertible fact is that from the fall of 1942, when news of the scope of the mass murder of European Jewry reached New York, until late 1943, every penny spent by the Vaad was sent to two groups of Torah scholars—in Central Asia and Shanghai—neither of whom was in acute danger of mass murder by the Nazis or their allies (such a danger existed at least in theory in Shanghai, but the situation of the Jewish refugees there was far more secure than that of their European coreligionists under Nazi occupation). Furthermore, since

both groups were receiving material assistance from other Jewish organizations throughout this period (namely, the JDC and the Jewish Agency in Central Asia and the JDC in Shanghai), the Vaad's policy appears questionable.

T rue, during most of 1943 the Vaad lacked the appropriate means of sending funds to assist Jews in Nazi-occupied Europe—and therefore continued to send its relief funds solely to Central Asia and Shanghai—but that was no longer true by the end of that year. At that point, the Vaad, to its credit, was able to find a means of transmitting large sums of money into Nazi-occupied Europe in order to finance rescue activities in Poland, Hungary and Slovakia. Yet despite this extraordinarily important development, the rabbis continued to send relatively large sums to the Torah scholars in Central Asia and Shanghai. Knowing that the rabbis and yeshiva students had their basic material needs covered by the aid received from other Jewish organizations, the wisdom of the Vaad's policy seems even more questionable. In effect, the funds sent by the Vaad ha-Hatzala enabled these

refugees to learn Torah at a time when these sums were desperately needed to help save lives in Nazi-occupied Europe. (During the first ten months of 1944, the Vaad sent \$420,000 to Europe, compared to \$155,000 transmitted to Central Asia and \$110,000 to Shanghai).

Why didn't the rabbis who headed the Vaad explain to the refugees that in view of the fact that the Jewish people were in the midst of the greatest tragedy in its history, they were forced to send funds elsewhere as long as lives could literally still be saved? This was never done, however, and thus the Vaad's policy during the years 1944 and 1945 is unequivocal proof of its particularistic ideology, which in practice supported the learning of Torah scholars with funds that could have possibly saved the lives of other Jews. It is true that the Vaad simultaneously initiated and supported various initiatives designed to save as many Jewish lives as possible, but the proverbial bottom line was how it spent the funds that it raised.

The ability to honestly and objectively study our history is extremely important, especially given the difficult issues which Jewish leaders have been forced to face over the generations. The Torah tells us "*Zechor yemot*

olam binu shenot dor vador, Remember the days of yore, understand the years of generation after generation" for good reason. It is by learning about the past trials and tribulations of the Jewish people that we hope to avoid the errors made by our predecessors. In that regard, contrary to Kranzler's assertions, Orthodox leaders and even prominent and learned rabbis, are capable of making serious, and in some cases, fatal mistakes. It is our responsibility to learn from those events so that they will not be repeated. Any attempt to portray the *gedolim* as perfect human beings, incapable of error, is not only inaccurate but an affront to our intelligence and an insult to the memory of those whose lives were not saved during those terrible times.

Notes

1. Resolution 2, "The Resolutions of the Agudath haRabbanim Convention," Archives of the Council of Jewish Federations and Welfare Funds I-69, box 149.

2. Letter of Henrietta Buchman to Rabbi Jacob Karlinsky, 11 June 1940, Archives of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, file "Vaad ha-Hatzala."

David Kranzler's Response *(continued from page 2)*

interest. The Jewish Agency, for instance, with nearly 70,000 Palestine certificates to distribute, did not issue even one to any of these Torah scholars.

In order to rescue the Torah scholars, the Vaad sought to procure Above Quota Emergency Visitors' Visas. The special visas program came about as a result of the efforts of the Jewish Labor Committee, working in conjunction with powerful labor unions. These visas were only available to those who could show some special distinction, and each Jewish group attempted to rescue those affiliated with it. The Jewish Labor Committee and the

Emergency Rescue Committee, for instance, succeeded in rescuing 2,000 elite personalities—Labor leaders, artists and intellectuals—by procuring these visas, and the World Jewish Congress similarly saved 100 top Zionist leaders. At the same time, no more than forty Torah scholars were saved under the program. Why, then, does Zuroff condemn Orthodox elitism and particularism while sparing secular groups criticism for doing exactly the same thing?

More importantly, why should the Vaad ha-Hatzala be considered in isolation in evaluating the Orthodox

response? My review, ignored by Zuroff, was an extended effort to provide an overview of the full panoply of Orthodox rescue activities.

Rabbi Leo Jung and Zeirei Agudath Israel, under the leadership of Mike Tress, were among the pioneers of securing affidavits of financial support and immigration visas. Those visas saved several thousand Jews, religious and non-religious alike, from the flames of Europe. Agudath Israel of America was the only organization to defy the British boycott of occupied Europe and continue to send food packages to religious and non-religious



Photo: David King Collection, courtesy of USHMM Photo Archives

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 establishment.

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 telegram 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 Warsaw to the crematoria. On the basis of this cable, Rabbi Abraham Kalmanowitz immediately pressured Wise into calling an emergency meeting of thirty-four American Jewish organizations. At that meeting, Wise accused the rabbis of spreading “atrocious tales,” and did not divulge the Riegner cable that fully corroborated Rosenheim’s information. In addition, he adjured all present at the meeting to silence in order to avoid pressuring President Roosevelt.

Only the Orthodox placed rescue at the top of the communal agenda. At the May 1942 Biltmore Conference of all American Zionist organizations, the rescue of European Jewry was not even on the agenda. At a January 1943 planning session for the forthcoming gathering of the American Jewish Conference, rescue again was not on the agenda. Only at

the insistence of the Orthodox and the Jewish Labor Committee was it given a minor place. The resolutions of the American Jewish Conference—which took place a full year after Wise received proof of the destruction of European Jewry—focused almost entirely on the creation of a post-war Jewish state in Palestine. Rescue was referred to in only the most general terms.

Unlike the mainstream Zionist leadership, the Orthodox were always ready to put aside internal differences to further the cause of rescue. Among non-Orthodox groups, only the Revisionists, led by Peter Bergson, emphasized rescue. The mainstream Zionists fought Bergson, urging the Roosevelt administration to deport or draft him, and pressuring politicians to avoid him. Nachum Goldman of the World Jewish Congress told the State Department that Wise “regarded Bergson as equally as great an enemy of the Jews as Hitler.” An aide to Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau Jr. wrote that “every [Jewish] organization is more interested in their fight with some other organization than with the objective of saving Jews...I wouldn’t be surprised to see Bergson killed.”² Only the Orthodox worked hand in hand with Bergson. Together they planned the extraordinary march of 400 rabbis on Washington, D.C., on October 6, 1943, the sole public protest of the Roosevelt administration’s indifference to the fate of European Jewry. The Rabbis’ March was condemned by Wise and the entire Jewish establishment.

The March led to the introduction of the Bergson-sponsored Rescue Resolution in Congress. That Resolution, in turn, was the primary catalyst for the creation of the War Rescue Board (WRB). Historian David Wyman credits the WRB with saving between 100,000 and

200,000 Jews. Once the WRB was created, the rabbis and Orthodox lay leaders Irving Bunim and Mike Tress continually pressured it to participate in various “ransom” schemes developed by Orthodox Jews in Europe—Rabbi Michael Ber Weissmandl in Slovakia, Isaac and Recha Sternbuch in Switzerland and Dr. Yaakov Griffel in Turkey—by permitting the necessary money transfers.

Throughout the war, the Orthodox were willing to use any means, regardless of legality, to save Jewish lives—any Jewish life. Those illegal means, which were eschewed by mainstream Jewish groups, included using the diplomatic codes of the Polish-government-in-exile (to ensure the fastest possible information from Europe that was free of American government censorship), making illegal wire transfers to starving Jews in Axis-controlled territory, 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 Jewry for nearly two years and to halt the deportation of Hungarian Jewry.

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 Kastner train—with its human cargo of nearly 1,700 people—from Bergen-Belsen to Switzerland. (Originally, places on the train organized by Rudolph Kastner were limited to those with Zionist credentials, a bit of particularism that does not trouble Zuroff). In the last year of the war, the Sternbuchs cooperated with Swiss fascist Jean-Marie Musy as an intermediary with Heinrich Himmler in order to ransom a train with 1,210

inmates from Theresienstadt. The Musy negotiations came to an end after Saly Mayer, the head of the JDC in Switzerland, and Natan Schwab of Hechalutz publicly condemned paying a price to the Nazis, even to save Jewish lives.

This, then, is the larger context of Orthodox rescue efforts during the war outlined in my original review, and about which Dr. Zuroff is silent. With this context in mind, it becomes clear how misplaced Zuroff’s exclusive focus on the activities of the Vaad, and the destination of monies raised by it, is.

Essentially Zuroff’s complaints against the Orthodox boil down to two: 1. the Vaad should not have run a separate fundraising campaign but rather relied on the goodwill of the JDC; and 2. it was wrong for the Vaad to continue to send money to yeshivah students in Siberia and Shanghai “who [were] out of physical danger [to] sit and learn.”

Zuroff has been repeatedly challenged to provide one shred of evidence that even if the Vaad had contributed every penny it raised to the JDC a single additional Jewish life would have been saved. That he has been unable to do. The JDC’s fear of employing illegal means, not a lack of funds, was the major impediment to more lives being saved. Ironically, the JDC was only able to transfer millions of dollars to Jews in Axis-occupied Europe and Shanghai in the last year and a half of the war because the

Orthodox secured State Department permission for such transfers.

Zuroff is not the slightest bit troubled 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 supporting 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 mainstream organizations refused to dirty their hands. Yet only the monies sent by the Vaad to yeshivah students in Shanghai and Siberia, whom Zuroff blandly describes as being out of physical danger, irk him.

Had the Vaad ha-Hatzala not been created, many of the Torah giants who rebuilt Torah Jewry after the war might not have survived, a fact admitted by Zuroff himself in the afterword of his book. The JDC, for instance, allocated only \$5,000 for the transport of Mir Yeshiva students from Vladivostok to Japan. The remaining \$45,000 was raised by Irving Bunim

and others in an emergency Shabbat fundraising effort.

The picture of yeshivah students blithely 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 *shtenders*. Far from being out of danger, the students in Shanghai lived 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 ghetto of 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 afflicted 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 Gemarot, as Zuroff urges they should have, there was no work available nor any way to support themselves, other than joining 3,000 German refugees in the miserable camps ironically called “*heime*.”

In his afterword, 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. **JA**

Students and teachers of the exiled Mir Yeshiva study in the sanctuary of the Beth Aharon synagogue on Museum Road in Shanghai.



Photo: Rabbi Jacob Ederman, courtesy of USHMM Photo Archives

Notes

1. The major grassroots support for the Vaad ha-Hatzala, which is the focus of Zuroff’s book, came from Agudath haRabbanim, most of whose members were affiliated with Mizrahi. By his harping on “ultra-Orthodox” rabbis, Zuroff shows himself unaware of the close affiliation between the Vaad and the Mizrahi-dominated Agudath haRabbanim.

2. U.S. Department of State. Memo of conversation, “Attitudes of Zionists towards Peter Bergson,” May 19, 1944.