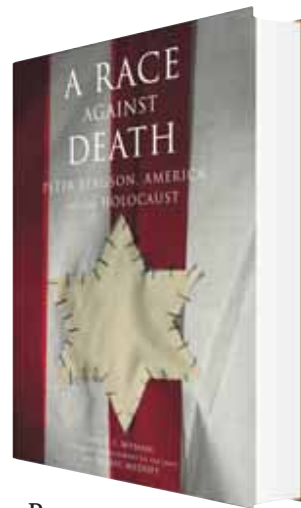


A Race Against Death: Peter Bergson, America, and the Holocaust

By David S. Wyman and Rafael Medoff



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Reviewed by Rebecca Kook

What is the capacity of single individuals to influence the course of history? *A Race Against Death: Peter Bergson, America, and the Holocaust*, by David S. Wyman and Rafael Medoff, tells the story of Hillel Kook and his efforts to pressure the Roosevelt administration to rescue European Jewry. The story of Kook is that of a group of individuals who took on history. It is the story of the deafening silences that made the extermination of the Jews and the abomination called Auschwitz possible—a story of the moral bankruptcy of the free world, and of the

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courage of those who spoke out. The publicizing of this story leads to the inevitable, and necessary, reckoning of the free world. A number of books published in recent years have stirred a debate on this emotionally charged and politically controversial issue.¹ *A Race Against Death* is an important, if not an essential and long-overdue, contribution to this debate. It is both a fascinating read, and an invaluable historical document.

A Race Against Death is constructed around an edited transcript of a twelve-hour interview conducted by Wyman, back in 1973, with Kook—better known in the United States under his nom de guerre, Peter Bergson. Wyman, a historian, first came across Kook's name while researching what would become his seminal book, *The Abandonment of the Jews*. At that time, little had been written about Kook and his activities in the United States during World War II. Kook, Wyman discovered, was a key player in the tragedy of America's halting response to the Holocaust. The book is organized into six segments, each of which focuses on a different aspect of Kook's activities. Interspersed throughout the book are interviews with other main actors in the historical drama, such as former congressman Will Rogers, Jr., journalist Max Lerner and Kook's principal colleague, Samuel Merlin.

Hillel Kook—my father—was born in 1915, in Lithuania. In 1924, he traveled with his family to Palestine. (His father, Rabbi Dov Kook, was the brother of Rav Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook.) In 1933, Kook, along with his childhood companion, David Raziell, became part of the founding group of the Irgun Zvai Leumi. In 1937, Kook left for Europe to help bring Jews to Palestine within the

framework of Aliyah Bet, the illegal immigration campaign organized by Ze'ev Jabotinsky. In August 1939, on the eve of the German occupation of Poland, Kook left Poland for London, and then, at the request of Jabotinsky, went to New York in 1940. At the time, he was twenty-five years old, and barely knew English.

When news of the extent of the extermination of Europe's Jews finally reached the American press in August 1942, Kook and his colleagues abandoned their other political activities (such as campaigning for

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a Jewish army) and dedicated themselves exclusively to the cause of rescue. For the next three years, this was their job, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Kook, together with his young colleagues from Europe and Palestine—Samuel Merlin, Alex Rafaeli, Aryeh Ben-Eliezer, Mike Ben-Ami and Jabotinsky's son Eri—as well as his American supporters, created the first political lobby in the United States. They mobilized the support of scores of congressmen, cabinet secretaries, Hollywood celebrities, journalists and writers; placed full-page advertisements in major American newspapers and staged major pageants across the United States, such as *We Will Never Die*. Theirs was the sole voice in the wilderness of shock and bewilderment that consumed the American Jewish community, and they almost single-handedly generated the public pressure that ultimately led to the estab-

lishment of the War Refugee Board, the single American government agency aimed at rescuing Europe's Jews.

Kook was not the only individual who fought for rescue. Stories of magnificent courage and outstanding character abound; both within Europe and beyond, numerous individuals battled the indifference and worked ceaselessly for rescue. Nonetheless, what is unique in Kook's story is the focus of his energy and activity. Early on, he realized that taking on a government-sponsored campaign of murder would require the resources and power of an opposing government, and that charitable organizations could only do so much. Only a country, with a focused political and military strategy, could combat a military policy of extermination. Kook did not buy into the American government's mantra that winning the war was the best way to save the Jews; he insisted that saving Jews would enhance, not obstruct, the pursuit of victory. Kook dismissed the claim that putting pressure on the Allies would alienate the British and bias them even further against the Zionists when the scramble for Palestine began.

To achieve his goal, Kook walked the corridors of the Congress, knocked on doors and organized fundraisers, among other activities. His strategy: the passage of a rescue resolution, his objective: the establishment of a government agency for rescue.

Sadly, however, the story of Hillel Kook is also a tale of others' silence. It is the story of the timidity of the mainstream Jewish and Zionist leadership in the United States during the Holocaust—the American Jewish Committee, the American Zionist Emergency Council, the World Jewish Congress and the American Jewish Congress. The major Jewish leaders of the time, such as Rabbi Stephen Wise, Judge Joseph Proskauer, Nahum Goldman and, from afar, Chaim Weizmann, bought into the American mantra lock, stock and barrel. Unwilling to question the American non-strategy for rescue, they spent most of their energy obstructing the efforts of those few individuals who did. Thus the story of Kook is also the story of Wise's

attempts to get Kook deported; of Jewish leaders convincing the few Jews in the administration to obstruct the passage of rescue resolutions; of letters sent to Kook's backers, urging them to withdraw their support; and of Jews standing on street corners, handing out fliers maligning Kook's activities. The few organizations that did cooperate with Kook were the Orthodox ones; Vaad ha-Hatzala played an important role in Kook's famous 1943 march of Orthodox rabbis on Washington.²

The story of Hillel Kook is a tale of others' silence and the timidity of the mainstream Jewish and Zionist leadership in the United States during the Holocaust.

The Zionists' efforts against Kook did not end with the war. The activities of the Emergency Committee to Save the Jews of Europe—the organization that Kook established upon his arrival in New York—were written out of the official history books of the period, and the few brief references to them that did appear were derogatory and belittling.³ Moreover, Kook never wrote his own memoirs. Although numerous attempts were made to tell Kook's story,⁴ and he was an articulate and charismatic speaker, Kook was ambivalent about his past. His past was important to him only to the extent that it could shed light on the present and chart a more hopeful future. Despite his accomplishments, he harbored a deep sense of failure—a sense that more could, and should, have been done. In a letter to Merlin in the late 1960s, Kook wrote:

... the history you have been writing is not merely the most important thing for you and me—I think it is of national importance. Without the history of our activities concerning the rescue of European Jewry, the internal reckoning concerning the response of the Jewish/Zionist leadership [to the extermi-

nation] will never take place. ... The only chance for an Israeli national renewal lies in this reckoning. Otherwise, Israel will continue to be a haven for Jews who see themselves as potential candidates for a new Shoah, and instead of a national renewal, there will be a ghetto with an army; a ghetto which will become increasingly "ghettoish" and increasingly brutal.⁵

There are phrases in the letter that reverberated throughout my childhood. The response of the Jewish and non-Jewish leadership to the extermination of Jews was not a chapter in the history books I learned in school. It was a piece of history that I learned at home from my father. For Kook, who passed away in August 2001, the importance of honestly recording the politics of rescue was not to point a finger at non-Jewish indifference amid the slaughter, but to learn from the conspiracy of Jewish silence and its implications for national Jewish renewal. For Kook, the future of the Jews—both within Israel and without—had to be based on a serious examination of the response of Jewish communal leaders to the tragedy that befell European Jewry. Uncovering the unhappy reality that belied the slogan of "Jewish unity" was, and remains until this day, an essential step towards normalizing Jewish and Israeli existence. **JA**

Notes

1. Most notably, David Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews* (New York, 1984). See David Kranzler, "Orthodoxy's Finest Hour: Rescue Efforts During the Holocaust," *Jewish Action* (fall 2002):30-39; Efraim Zuroff and David Kranzler, "Orthodox Rescue Revisited," *Jewish Action* (spring 2003): 32-39 and Tom Segev, *The Seventh Million: The Israelis and the Holocaust* (New York, 2000).

2. *A Race Against Death*, 115.

3. See, for example, Arthur D. Morse, *While Six Million Died: A Chronicle of American Apathy* (New York, 1968) and Yehuda Bauer, *American Jewry and the Holocaust: The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, 1939-1945* (Detroit, 1981).

4. See in particular Louis Rapoport, *Shake Heaven & Earth: Peter Bergson and the Struggle to Rescue the Jews of Europe* (Jerusalem, 1999) and Joseph Agassi, *Liberal Nationalism for Israel: Towards an Israeli National Identity* (Jerusalem, 1999).

5. Letter in possession of the author.