

The Bergson Group: Hillel Kook and the Effort to Save European Jewry from Extermination during the Shoah

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Abstract

Etsel delegation members operating in the US during World War Two were nicknamed 'the Bergson Group'. Headed by Hillel Kook, who adopted the name Peter Bergson, the group went to the US to gather support and resources for the establishment of a Jewish army to fight Nazism, but soon turned its activity into a well-publicised effort to save European Jewry from extermination by the Nazis. The Bergson Group succeeded in garnering the support of the American public via the press, who joined the group's efforts in demanding that President Roosevelt's administration organise a coalition of allies to save European Jewry from further destruction. As more news arrived of the existence of extermination camps for the purpose of murdering Jews, the Bergson Group's activities became more intense and more widely publicised. Despite active opposition from the leaders of Zionist organisations, the US government established the War Refugee Board (WRB). As a result, some two hundred thousand Jews were saved.

Keywords: *Etsel*, Bergson Group, saving European Jewry, Hillel Kook, Ben Hecht

Introduction

About a year after the outbreak of World War Two, a group of volunteers from Mandatory British Palestine appeared in the United States with the intent of establishing a Jewish army to fight against Nazism. The group's members were official representatives of the *Etsel*, a Jewish right-wing underground movement in Palestine and an instrument of the Revisionist movement which believed in the use of force to establish a Jewish state in Palestine on both sides of the Jordan River. This group would later be nicknamed the Bergson Boys, or The Bergson Group—inspired by its leader and driving force, Hillel Kook, who, as a political activist, adopted the pseudonym Peter Bergson. Although the members of the group came to the United States on behalf of the Revisionist movement and the National Military Organisation [*Irgun* or *Etsel*], they decided to abandon their mission of establishing a Jewish army and join the activity to save the Jews of Europe. The members of the Bergson Group were outsiders in American society and were rejected by the American Jewish community. Nevertheless, the group operated on many levels and succeeded in positively influencing public opinion to create support for and

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sympathy with their struggle. In retrospect, it seems that the group was wise to give up its ideological position and its goal of establishing a Jewish army, in favour of promoting actions that would potentially save the Jews of Europe. This article outlines the story of the Bergson Group and perspectives on the effectiveness of the group's efforts. It is important to state that this research is not based on new findings, but modern readers may be unfamiliar with the Group's history and, in view of this fact, this article aims to bring this story to the attention of a new generation of readers and lead them to a renewed understanding of this aspect of the relationships and geopolitical interests concerning the Holocaust and related rescue efforts.

The Bergson Group was an unusual phenomenon in the American Jewish landscape. Immediately upon beginning their activities, they succeeded in recruiting a number of public figures, statesmen, and intellectuals to their ranks, not necessarily Jews, who agreed to support and join their struggle. The members of the Bergson Group worked in innovative and original ways to garner support among the public, and these innovations became their main weapon. The members of the group encountered opposition from American Jewish institutions from the beginning of the group's activities in 1940 until the end of their mission, often suffering harsh attacks from the leaders of the Jewish community and the Zionist establishment. The group's strategy was different from that adopted by the local Zionist leadership in the Jewish community in the United States, its freedom of action lying in the fact that it was not subject to the dilemma in which the interest of the Zionist enterprise was diminished in the face of the rescue of the Jews in Europe, since the ideological Zionist dimension was not a component that they had to preserve or prove: they had already fulfilled their Zionist position and built their lives in the Land of Israel. The main efforts of the Zionist leadership in the United States focused on strengthening the Zionist message. The leaders of the American Jewish community made sure to emphasise the gaps between the Zionist characteristics of European Jewry and those of Judaism in other countries. Therefore, the leaders of the local community sought to clarify, even during World War Two, their support for the Zionist idea on the ideological level, which did not necessitate taking active action to settle in the Land of Israel (Bauer 1979, 5-6). When the imminent danger to the lives of European Jews became known, the Zionist leadership was unable to change its position for fear that the heads of the American administration would question the strength of the American identity of the Jewish community in the United States—specifically in times of war. This insight can be reinforced by the decisions of the Biltmore Conference.

The Biltmore Conference was held at the Biltmore Hotel in New York on 11 May 1942, with the participation of representatives of all the Zionist organisations in the United States. At the end of the conference, the Biltmore Declaration was published ("Biltmore Declaration", n.d.), which included eight clauses: support for the goals of the war as defined by the United States

and its allies; a prayer for the liberation of the Jews from the ghettos and camps of Europe; support for the leadership of the Yishuv [pre-state Jewish community] in the Land of Israel and their right to defend themselves; a call for cooperation with the Arab population in the Land of Israel, as well as support for the Balfour Declaration¹ and the establishment of a Jewish Commonwealth and an appeal to the British Mandate government to allow the emigration of European Jews to Palestine. All this without referring to reports of the genocide of the Jewish people on European soil and without a demand for active action to save them. The dissonance between the news that came from Europe and the approach of the American Zionist leadership is one of the prominent elements that led the Bergson Group to such an intensive and well-publicised action later on.

The *Etzel* delegation in the United States, 1939-1943

Towards the end of 1940, a number of *Etzel* activists from British Palestine—Yitzhak Ben Ami, Shmuel Merlin, A. Hadas, and Ari Jabotinsky—arrived in New York to raise funds for Jewish refugees from occupied Europe (Kaplan 1980, 115). Two additional and central *Etzel* activists joined the delegation in the US: Ze'ev Jabotinsky, who served as head of the Revisionist movement, and Hillel Kook, who was head of the Revisionist movement in Europe and worked for illegal immigration to British Palestine alongside Avraham Stern (see: Penkower 1981, 282-283). They referred to themselves as the '*Etzel* Delegation in the United States'.

Kook and Jabotinsky came to the US intending to raise funds and donations for the establishment of a Hebrew army to fight the Nazis (Medoff 2008, 4), planning for it to be an organic part of the British army. At the time, Kook and Jabotinsky were unaware of the debate taking place among the leaders of the *Etzel* over the dilemma of whether to join the British army in order to fight the Nazis and thus cease opposing the British Mandate (Niv 1965, 115). In August 1940, Jabotinsky died while still in the US. Nonetheless, his collaborators decided to continue their activities, and Hillel Kook became their leader. At this point, Kook decided to adopt a local name, Peter Bergson, as a gesture to sever all ties to his family member Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak HaCohen (Ra'i'ah) Kook, known as one of the fathers of Zionism. The group was nicknamed 'the Bergson Group'.

Baumel provides a sociological analysis of the group's characteristics and functioning, emphasising that the Bergson Group was endowed with a high level of self-confidence concerning the chances of successfully saving European Jewry from extermination (Baumel 2005, 46). These were six young people who operated in a foreign arena and in a foreign language, and who brazenly adopted a method of action that focused on public relations. Bergson, like the other members of the delegation, believed that only an independent Jewish army could convince the world of the necessity of saving European Jewry and fighting the Nazi enemy in order to prevent the

extermination of the Jews, without being dependent on the interests of the Allies (Penkower 1981, 283). Thus, the Bergson Group initiated the conference of Jewish organisations on 4 December 1941, at which the establishment of a Committee for a Jewish Army of Palestinian and Stateless Jews was officially announced. The committee was joined by many American Jews and non-Jews, including statesmen, public figures, religious figures, and intellectuals. It was also decided to establish a Jewish Legion of between eighty thousand and two hundred thousand Jewish soldiers who would serve in the Middle East under the Allied flag (Niv 1965, 116). It should be noted that the conference and the special declaration occurred just three days before the Japanese attack on the American naval base at Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941 which triggered the US decision to join the war.

The activities of the Committee for a Jewish Army focused on garnering the support of American public opinion, in the hope that this would influence the administration and Congress to support the establishment of a Jewish army. Therefore, the committee organised activities to gain mass support with mass rallies expressing support for the idea, signing petitions demanding the implementation of the idea, and even campaigning in major mass media—the press and radio. An advertisement, published in *The New York Times* on 5 January 1942, bore the headline ‘Jews fight for the right to fight’ (“Committee for a Jewish Army, New-York”, 1942-44, 21). This call was joined by a significant number of rabbis from the Jewish communities in the United States. Congressman Andrew Somers became an outspoken advocate for the committee’s activities, urging President Roosevelt that the administration negotiate with the British government to promote the establishment of a Jewish army that would fight within the framework of the British army. The committee also initiated an operation in which many American senators sent telegrams to British members of parliament, expressing their support for the establishment of a Jewish army designated to fight the Nazis under the British army.

These actions received great publicity and public support from American leaders; the inclusion of well-known figures contributed greatly to promoting the public reverberation surrounding the demand for the establishment of a Jewish army. However, despite the publicity and support, after two years of intensive and focused activity the committee leaders were unable to bring about a US governmental decision to establish a Jewish army (Penkower 1981, 297). Still, Kook had natural leadership qualities, and the group rallied around him (Baumel 2005, 46). The delegation was able to garner broad public support and sympathy, and the issue continued to be present on the political and public agenda. The members of the delegation appeared in various forums and managed to break into the public consciousness in the United States.

Activities of the Committee for a Jewish Army between December 1942 and July 1943

During the summer months of 1942, the first news of the murder of two million Jews in Europe began to reach the Jewish leadership in the United States. Although the Jewish community leaders made considerable efforts to keep the difficult news under wraps, this painful news spread widely in October 1942 and became public knowledge (Feingold 1970, 170). Upon learning this devastating news, and in light of the inadequate efforts of the established Jewish community in the US, the leaders of the Committee for a Jewish Army decided to change the priorities of their activities and engage in focused and intensive efforts to prevent the continued extermination of their brothers in Europe by the Nazis.

From the end of 1942 and throughout 1943, Kook and his *Etzel* delegation continued to work for the establishment of a Jewish army, but concentrated their efforts mainly on mobilising American public opinion in favour of saving the Jews. In Baumel's opinion, this was 'heroic behavior' by a group that fought to save Jews despite the opposition of the Jewish community itself (Baumel 2005, xii). Baumel maintains that the *Etzel* delegation followed a clear pattern of adhering to a narrow interest, generating protest activity, and excellent and innovative tactics (Baumel 2005, xxi). Her claim is based on a comparison between the nature of the group's actions and those of other American groups that hold a central ethnic identity, such as Cuban- and Irish-Americans. The Bergson Group adopted two prominent political skills: coalition-building together with innovative advertising and media tactics. These led to the mobilisation and support of a sympathetic general public (Medoff 2008, 5). Medoff went so far as to call their operation 'mission impossible' (Medoff 2008, 7).

In December 1942, the Committee launched an operation entitled Breaking the Walls of Silence (see: Kaplan 1980, 116). Aided by the mass media, this campaign intended to bring knowledge of the Nazis' actions against the Jews to the general public. On 8 February 1943, the committee placed a huge advertisement in *The New York Times*, pleading for action, under the headline: 'Action—not pity, can save millions now' (Niv 1973, 124; "Committee for a Jewish Army, New-York", 1942-44, 20). The advertisement detailed the Nazis' atrocities against the Jews, and the fact that two million Jews had been murdered by the Nazi regime. The Committee strove to ensure that the American public was kept informed and focused on the murder of Jews that was taking place on European soil.

A week after the first advertisement was published, another was published in the same newspaper revealing a Romanian government proposal in which Romania would allow the emigration of seventy thousand Jews from its Transnistrian region in exchange for a payment of US \$3.5 million ("For Sale to Humanity: 70,000 Jews", 1943; see the details of the proposed deal:

Feingold 1970, 178). The source of the news was the renowned Jewish playwright Ben Hecht, who was active in the Jewish Committee. Hecht spoke out vociferously against the leaders of the Jewish community in general, and particularly against the Reform rabbi Stephen Wise, who was the chair of the American Zionist Emergency Council at the time. Hecht claimed that there were no signs of any organised endeavours to raise the funds needed to save the Jews of Romania (Kaplan 1980, 117). Some believe, however, that Rabbi Wise was unaware of the Romanian government's proposal because the US State Department had adopted a policy of compartmentalising the leaders of the Jewish community in all matters concerning the fate of European Jews. In fact, the US State Department even denied that such a proposal existed; it was not until March 1943 that the US State Department confirmed its existence (Feingold 1970, 180-181).

With the intensive activity of the Bergson Group, many American politicians joined the effort. Senator Edwin Johnson published an advertisement in *The New York Times* in March 1943, making three main demands of the American government—two involved a demand that the government save European Jewry from extermination, and the third was a demand for the establishment of a Jewish army (Niv 1973, 125). This powerful advertisement was published the day after the performance of a new play by Ben Hecht at Madison Square Garden in New York, entitled *We Will Never Die*, a dramatic pageant dedicated to the 'Two Million Civilian Jewish Dead of Europe'. The play was a success and resonated widely with American public opinion.

The Bermuda Conference was convened by the US and Great Britain on 19 April 1943², with the purpose of dealing with the issue of wartime refugees. The Conference failed to save European Jewry from further destruction. The Conference saw representatives of Britain and the US discussing the issue of refugees in the war in Europe with Germany and its allies but unable to reach agreements. In fact, the failed Bermuda Conference was further proof that the Allies were not committed and were more likely alienated from the issue of refugees and the rescue of Jews. Niv claims that not only did the Bermuda Conference fail to produce a solution to save the Jews, but that the delegates avoided discussing the reality of the ongoing daily persecution and murder of the Jews on European soil, and in fact, the Conference served as a cover to distract attention from the Holocaust that was taking place (Niv 1973, 126). The American delegation refused to consider adjusting their strict immigration quotas to let more European Jewish refugees enter the US, and the British delegation refused to consider allowing European Jewish refugees to go to Palestine as a safe haven. Adler contends that the failure of the Bermuda Conference served to accelerate the organisation of Jews in general and particularly in the US, to save European Jews from impending extermination (Adler 1974, 20).

The institutions of the Jewish community in the US began to work for the rescue of European Jews and to focus their efforts on achieving that goal. Before the discussions at the Bermuda Conference ended on 20 April 1943, the Bergson Group placed a huge advertisement in *The Washington Post* under the title “An Open Letter to the Gentlemen in Bermuda” and a demand to the government for “Action Instead of Mercy” (see the quotation from the open letter: Niv 1973, 126). Immediately after the conference ended, the committee placed another advertisement in *The New York Times* sharply criticising the participants and the results of the Conference. Published on 4 May 1943, this advertisement stated: ‘To 5,000,000 Jews in the Nazi Death-Trap, the Bermuda Conference was a “Cruel Mockery”’ (“To 5,000,000 Jews”, 1943).

During that time, the committee began publishing a biweekly called *Answer* as part of the overall effort designed to create a supportive public opinion, demanding that the United States and its allies save European Jews from extermination. This biweekly loudly heralded the committee’s position in favour of the establishment of a Jewish army, but the circumstances that arose surrounding the extermination of European Jews forced it to become a tool in the hands of the Emergency Committee. Its editor was Shmuel Merlin, one of the leaders of the *Etzel* delegation and a member of the Bergson Group.

The Emergency Conference for the Rescue of the Jewish People in Europe

Following the failure of the Bermuda Conference and the inaction of the American administration regarding the rescue of European Jews, Bergson felt he had to increase awareness among the American public to exert pressure on the administration in favour of actions to rescue European Jews. Bergson and his group therefore initiated the convening of an emergency conference for the rescue of European Jews, scheduled for 20-25 July 1943 in New York. The leaders of the American Zionist establishment opposed the emergency conference, claiming that Bergson’s group was sabotaging the efforts of American Zionist organisations to convene their conference planned for August 1943.

Stephen Wise and other Zionist leaders tried to exert pressure on statesmen invited to the emergency conference and prevent their participation but these attempts were unsuccessful and the conference opened as planned with the participation of 166 delegates, including members of Congress and clergy, heads of trade unions, writers, artists, and intellectuals (Wyman 1984, 144). The conference directorate included the former president Herbert Hoover, Bishop George Tucker, and Senator Edwin Johnson. The chair was Bergson, who initiated and organised the conference. Messages of support poured into the conference from public figures including President Roosevelt and his wife, Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau, Secretary of State Cordell Hull, and even a blessing from the Chief Rabbi of British Palestine, Yitzhak

Halevi Herzog, as well as from the Chief Rabbi of British Jewry Joseph Zvi Hertz (Niv 1973, 128). The conference dealt with a variety of issues, including international relations, means of transport, military issues, religious issues, and influence on public opinion. The discussions were intended to formulate a practical plan for rescuing the Jewish people in Europe without harming the Allied war effort (Zaar 1954, 47).

The conference demanded the establishment of a government agency to handle the rescue of European Jews, proposing that it be composed of diplomats and military experts and would have the authority to outline a rescue policy and care for the Jews, while allocating the resources necessary to implement the policy. The conference defined European Jews as hostages and not as refugees (Friedman 1984, 117). The resulting work plan emphasised the Jewish nature of the rescue problem and avoided mentioning Palestine as the national home of the Jewish people (Feingold 1970, 211). Therefore, the wording of the proposal involved the Jews leaving the countries of Nazi-occupied Eastern Europe and being absorbed in neutral countries, or alternatively, arriving in the Middle East on ships sailing under the flags of neutral countries. According to the conference delegates who formulated the proposal, it would be possible to help fifty thousand Jews to leave the countries of Nazi occupation without harming the Allied war effort (Niv 1973, 129). The conference delegates formulated three main conclusions (Kaplan 1980, 121-122):

- A. The rescue of European Jewry is a unique issue and requires separate treatment.
- B. Most of the four million Jews still alive in Europe can be saved from extermination without harming Allied success in the war.
- C. A special government agency must be established to deal with the rescue of Jews.

During the conference discussions, the US congressional representative William Rogers flew to London to present the plan to the British government and parliament. His efforts were unsuccessful, as he was unable to convince the British to support the plan. He then returned to the US and proposed pressuring the American government to adopt the conclusions of the conference; it was decided to establish the Emergency Committee for the Rescue of the Jewish People in Europe as an institutionalised body designed to work continuously to save the Jews of Europe.

The Emergency Committee for the Rescue of the Jews of Europe

The establishment of the Emergency Committee for the Rescue of the Jews of Europe was a clear result of the conference of July 1943; without intending so, it led to the final abandonment of the idea of establishing a Jewish army that had been long advocated by the Bergson Group. The conference's demand that the government establish a government agency to save the Jews of Europe from extermination was supported by key figures in the American

public, including 33 senators, 109 representatives of the House of Representatives, 14 state governors, 14 ambassadors, 55 judges, 60 mayors, and many others, most of them non-Jews (Friedman 1984, 239). These became the official representatives of the Emergency Committee confronting the government, thereby expressing the legitimate desire of the American people, loyal to human conscience, to act for the saving of European Jewry. In this way, the issue became part of the discourse within American society without the members of the Bergson Group having to lead it, thus allowing the members of the group to sharply criticise the government as they continued to mobilise public opinion sympathetic to the struggle for saving European Jewry from annihilation.

Although President Roosevelt refused to meet with a representative of the Emergency Committee, the Committee representatives, led by journalist Max Lerner, managed to get a meeting with Secretary of State Cordell Hull on 12 August 1943, to discuss their proposal. This proposal was to send representatives of the Emergency Committee to neutral countries in Europe to promote the rescue of Jews by transferring them to places of refuge. Although the Secretary of State's consent was obtained, the US State Department refused to issue the required visas, delaying the implementation of the plan (Wyman 1984, 148).

Bergson was determined to meet with President Roosevelt and present him with the emergency plan for the rescue of European Jews, so when Roosevelt met with Churchill in Quebec, Canada, on 19 August 1943, the Emergency Committee representatives tried to meet with the leaders of the Allies, without success. The Committee members then decided to appeal to the president through public opinion, and published an open letter signed by the renowned writer Pierre van Paassen, expressing the urgent need to implement an urgent and effective rescue plan (see: van Paassen 1943, 16).

Interestingly, the efforts to create a sympathetic public opinion were strongly supported by William Randolph Hearst, the owner of 34 major newspapers across the United States. That month, August 1943, he ordered his newspaper chain to publish editorials supporting the Emergency Committee, detailing all the proposals approved at the conference. In September, the newspapers owned by Hearst resumed publishing articles supporting the Emergency Committee and the plans approved at the conference (Wyman 1984, 4). Wyman argues that Hearst stood out in his support for the Committee more than any other person or newspaper. In one editorial, Hearst urged: 'Remember, Americans: This is not a Jewish problem, it is a Human problem' (Wyman 1984, 148).

The President's wife, Eleanor Roosevelt, who had offered her assistance to the Emergency Committee as early as March 1943, met with Bergson in August, after which he sent her the proposals for the Emergency Conference. Bergson stressed to her the urgent need to establish a government agency to deal with the rescue of the Jews but was unable to convince her, as she

believed that the most effective way to save the Jews would be a quick victory over the Nazis (Wyman 1984, 148). She did, however, initiate a radio broadcast aimed at European Jewry in which she expressed her country's commitment to extricate and rescue them (Wyman 1984, 149).

As part of continued efforts to meet with the U.S. President, Bergson and the Emergency Committee organised a march of about 400 American rabbis to the White House, on 6 September 1943, three days before Yom Kippur. They marched to Capitol Hill, where they met with Vice President Henry Wallace and a group of Congressmen, and delivered a petition to the vice president demanding the establishment of a government agency to handle the rescue of Jews. The rabbis also called on free nations to open their doors to Jewish refugees (Wyman 1984, 152). The petition opened with the phrase 'You shall not stand in the blood of your neighbor', and included the main clauses approved at the Emergency Conference (Niv 1973, 131). Bergson had managed to enlist the support of the rabbis under the promise that they would meet President Roosevelt at the march, but he was unable to keep his promise. When the march reached the gates of the White House, they were informed that the president was absent; instead, they were greeted by his secretary to whom they presented the petition. Wyman claims that the heads of Zionist institutions in the US pressured Roosevelt against meeting with the rabbis because the march was organised by Bergson (Wyman 1984, 152-153). Bittelman also contends that the Jewish community leaders refused to engage in joint efforts with the Emergency Committee (Bittelman 1943).

Despite receiving widespread media coverage, the rabbinical march failed to achieve its goal of placing the Emergency Committee's demand at the top of the American agenda. Therefore, on 10 October 1943, six thousand Christian churches across the United States declared a 'Day of Intercession', dedicated to praying for the rescue of European Jewry. Two weeks later, a rally in honour of Sweden and Denmark was held at Carnegie Hall in New York, with the aim of honouring and identifying with Swedish and Danish actions that contributed to saving Jewish lives from the Nazis. These countries organised an unprecedented convoy in which eight thousand Jews were transferred from occupied Denmark to Sweden, with the assistance of both governments. Although the ambassadors of the two countries did not attend the evening of appreciation, personalities and politicians did take part. The next day, *The New York Times* published an article under the headline: "It can be done" ("It Can Be Done", 1943).

The campaign to influence and form supportive public opinion among the American public continued until November 1943 while the Allies advanced towards victory in the war but the killing of millions of Jews continued.

It can be understood that the method used by the group was both aggressive and innovative. The use of mass media was intended to mobilise the general public in the country in order to exert pressure on the state administration and its leaders. This method proved to be effective without a doubt—not only did

they succeed in creating a supportive public opinion, but statesmen, intellectuals, and even the President's wife mobilised in favour of the demand for the establishment of the War Refugee Board (WRB). The Bergson Group decided not to deal with the dilemmas of the local Zionist leadership but to bypass them.

We cannot ignore the fact that, during the years 1933-1934, there was an antisemitic trend in American society—during this time more than one hundred antisemitic organisations were founded in the United States and engaged in spreading their views to the general public (Dinnerstein 1994, 112).

In addition, it should be noted that among the general public, discussion about the war focused on the issue of the very participation of the United States, especially against the background of Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941, which led to the administration's decision to join the war alongside the Allies in Europe. Therefore, the question of the genocide against the Jews by the Nazis was not the focus of general public concern. To this it should be added that the increase in immigration from Europe to the United States during the first 20 years of the twentieth century sharpened popular sentiment against immigrants. Anderson presents some of the US anti-immigration beliefs of the day (Anderson 2021, 2-3):

1. the belief that immigrants have socialist ideological positions;
2. the belief in a correlation between immigration and an increase in crime and poverty in the big cities where immigrants were absorbed;
3. the belief that the unemployment trend that increased with the economic crisis of 1929 stemmed from competition for jobs between immigrants and the American public.

Therefore, the discourse around rescuing Jews by granting 'refugee' status was perceived as a threat by some of the American public. We cannot ignore the data emerging from those surveys on which Stember relied, which indicate a growing increase in the American public's hostility towards the idea of increasing refugee quotas in order to save European Jewry—both children and adults—after the *Kristallnacht* events of 9 November 1938 (Stember 1966, 149-158).³

The playwright Ben Hecht and his contribution to promoting the activities of the Emergency Committee

The playwright Ben Hecht was Jewish but was not connected to his roots until the public knowledge of the Nazis' actions against European Jews awakened his Jewish soul (Penkower 1981, 285). As early as 1942, Hecht responded to Bergson's appeal to join the intellectuals who supported the struggle for the Emergency Committee, and became one of its main activists.

On 16 February 1943, Hecht wrote a newspaper article about the Romanian government's willingness to allow emigration of Jews in the Transnistrian region in exchange for a payment of \$50 for each Jew (Penkower 1981, 288).

Around the same time, Hecht's play, *We Will Never Die*, intended to influence American public opinion to support the struggle of the Emergency Committee, was performed, on 9 March 1943 at New York's Madison Square Garden, under the auspices of the Committee for the Jewish Army, after the heads of the Zionist organisations refused their support. The play pointed an accusing finger at the US government and President Roosevelt for their silence and passive cooperation in the murder of two million Jews in Europe (Niv 1973, 125). Staged in many major cities in the US, over one hundred thousand people—including Eleanor Roosevelt—watched the play, which, in Kaplan's evaluation, aroused interest in public opinion (see: Kaplan 1980, 117).

The day after the play was first performed, the chairman of the Committee for a Jewish Army, Senator Edwin Johnson, published an advertisement in *The New York Times* expressing three demands: the appointment of an interdepartmental government committee to determine a practical policy that would stop the extermination of the Jews; the establishment of a Jewish army composed of stateless Jews and Jewish residents of British Palestine; and the rescue of European Jews by creating places of absorption in British Palestine and elsewhere in the world ("The People Have Spoken", 1943). When Roosevelt refused to meet with the heads of the Emergency Committee who sought to present him with the decisions of the Emergency Conference of July 1943, Hecht published a poem titled "Ballad of the Doomed Jews of Europe" in *The New York Times*, where he accused the US government of inaction while four million Jews in Europe were about to be murdered (Hecht 1943a). At the tribute rally in honour of the governments of Sweden and Denmark, Ben Hecht's work "The Battle of the Warsaw Ghetto" was read ("Moscow Conference Urged to Take Measures to Save the Jews of Europe", 1943; Eisler 2025).

On 5 November 1943, Hecht published an allegory entitled "My Uncle Abraham Reports" as a protest against the omission of the Jews from the publicised Allied Moscow Declaration that threatened punishment for the Germans' war crimes against the French, Italians, Dutch, Belgians, and Norwegians, despite the Jews being the main victims of the Nazis (Hecht 1943b). Hecht's allegory was a reminder of the fact that two million Jews had already been murdered, and a warning that four million more were about to be murdered if the free world did not act to save them. As part of the allegory, Hecht wrote 'Yesterday, when we were killed, we were changed from Nobodies to No-bodies' (Wyman 1984, 154).

Establishment of the War Refugee Board (WRB)

The Emergency Committee realised that, after garnering supportive public opinion, it would have to find a more accessible political source which would lead to the establishment of a government agency to rescue European Jews. Therefore, starting in November 1943, with efforts directed towards

Congress, Iowa Democratic Senator Guy Gillette agreed to bring before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee the Emergency Committee's proposal to establish a government agency to deal with the rescue of European Jews. On 9 November 1943, the fifth anniversary of *Kristallnacht*, identical proposals were simultaneously raised in the foreign affairs committees of both houses of Congress: in the Senate by Senator Gillette, and in the House of Representatives jointly by the Democrat William Rogers (OK) and the Republican Clarke Baldwin (IA) (Wyman 1984, 155). The proposed resolution in both houses of Congress included the demand that President Roosevelt establish a committee of military, economic, and diplomatic experts to plan and implement a plan of action that would lead to the rescue of European Jews (Friedman 1984, 246). The Senate Foreign Relations Committee approved the proposed resolution, but in the House Foreign Affairs Committee the proposal was met with opposition from the committee chair, the Jewish delegate Sol Bloom (Dem. NY), who had participated in the Bermuda Conference. Bloom sought to delay and prolong the deliberations by listening to the testimonies of numerous people including Bergson, the New York mayor LaGuardia, Rabbi Stephen Wise, and others. One of the most significant testimonies was that of Breckinridge Long, who claimed that following changes in US immigration policy since Hitler came to power, approximately five hundred and eighty thousand immigrants from Europe had arrived in the United States. He emphasised the difficulty in transporting refugees from Europe to the United States by sea, given the dangers of war. The heads of the Emergency Committee claimed that Long's testimony was inaccurate, and that only two hundred and fifty thousand refugees had arrived in the United States during that period, and that most were not Jews. It was the same Long who issued immigration visas to hundreds of rabbis and yeshiva graduates in Europe who came to the United States (Quotation from the letter. See: Friedman 1984, 264-265).

These discussions lasted about two months and were accompanied by the active involvement of the media, which increased the general public's awareness of the issue of rescue and even included casting doubt on Bergson's legal status in the US and with accusations against Bloom of opposing the rescue of European Jewry from extermination (Wyman 1984, 195).

The resolution proposals in the two congressional committees were publicly supported by the American Rabbinical Association, by Rabbi Herzog the Chief Rabbi of British Palestine, by many Christian leaders, and by most of the American press. The leaders of the American Zionist movement, however, did not support the proposal; they demanded that the resolution include Palestine as a political solution for the European Jews. Wyman claims that the American Zionist leaders' opposition to the Emergency Conference stemmed from their hostility towards Bergson and his group (Wyman 1984, 200-201). Bergson, with the support of members of Congress and the press, came out against Bloom, publishing an open letter in which he accused Bloom

of being 'a *Shabbos Goy* for the State Department'. Bergson ended the letter with the sentence: 'Blood on your hands, Mr. Bloom' (see: Friedman 1984, 264-265). The increased tension between Bergson's group and the leadership of the Zionist institutions was rooted in the fact that the former's Congressional resolution proposal did not address the establishment of a Jewish State in Palestine (Feingold 1983, 49). The Bergson Group members believed that saving Europe's Jews outweighed their own Zionist and Revisionist ideology, and that combining the demand for rescue with a demand for the establishment of a Jewish state would lead to opposition from the Arabs in the Middle East and ultimately jeopardise the chances of U.S. mobilisation for the rescue of European Jews (Feingold 1970, 237-238).

President Roosevelt understood that the efforts of the heads of the Zionist institutions to block and prevent the approval of the resolution proposal in both houses of Congress would not succeed. With the date for the vote in the House of Representatives set for 24 January 1944, President Roosevelt issued an executive order two days earlier establishing the War Refugee Board (WRB). Thus, the proposed resolution was removed from the Congressional agenda (Penkower 1980). Rabbi Stephen Wise and the leaders of the Zionist establishment saw the issue of rescue as an opportunity to prove to the world that, without a Jewish state, Jews worldwide were in existential danger, as European Jewry were. These leaders fought the efforts of the Emergency Committee and Bergson, who sought to convince Congress of the necessity of rescue (Erbelding 2018, 119-120).

It is important to note that another factor influenced President Roosevelt's sudden decision. On 13 January 1944, the Secretary of the Treasury, Henry Morgenthau, received a memorandum containing revelations and evidence that the State Department had prevented the rescue of Jews by rejecting requests and offers of cooperation with private organisations whose mission was to prevent the Nazis' plans to exterminate Jews, and even that the State Department was aware of Hitler's Final Solution plan (Feingold 1970, 239-241). Based on this information, Morgenthau submitted a secret memorandum to the president enclosing Senator Gillette's proposal for the establishment of a War Refugee Board (Penkower 1981, 296-297). The State Department's policy and conduct were threatening Roosevelt's image in the leadup to presidential elections; therefore, upon learning of the memorandum, the president decided to establish the WRB immediately, by signing Executive Order 9417 (see: Dobkowski 1982, 200-202). Roosevelt did act as expected, resulting in widespread public support for this step, with eight hundred and fifty thousand letters of support from the general public reaching his office (Feingold 1970, 244).

The presidential Order established three partners for the Board's activities: the Treasury Department, the War Department, and the State Department. It was determined that the departments should work together to achieve the main goal which was defined as rescuing Nazi victims and ensuring the

absorption of refugees in safe places (Breitman and Kraut 1987, 194). Upon its establishment, the Board received a budget of \$1 million, which came from the President's Emergency Fund, though many donations were soon added from diverse sources (Breitman and Kraut 1987, 191).

John Pehle, who was one of two Treasury Department employees who exposed the State Department's failure to Secretary Morgenthau, was appointed director of the WRB. Immediately upon taking office, he sent telegrams to all American missions overseas, stating: 'Action should be taken to thwart the Nazi plot to exterminate the Jews and persecuted minorities in Europe.... The facilities of communication should be made freely available ... to private bodies and for the purpose of transmitting messages related to the implementation of government policy' (Breitman and Kraut 1987, 194). Ironically, the telegram bore the signature of Cordell Hull, the American Secretary of State (Morse 1998, 241).

The Board dealt with issues related to rescue, transport, and nutrition for the survivors. It was given extensive powers vis-à-vis the various government agencies. Emissaries were sent on its behalf to neutral European countries, including Switzerland, Sweden, Portugal, Spain, and Turkey, to organise rescue operations (Erbelding 2018, 286). The first of these emissaries was Ira Hirschmann, sent to Turkey in January 1944, immediately after the Board was established (Erbelding 2018, 286). Morse estimates that Hirschmann was responsible for the rescue of about fifty thousand Jews, for accelerating the transport of Jews to Israel, and for facilitating the exit of the Jews of Transnistria (Morse 1998, 242-245).

On 25 January 2024, the US State Department published a statement of appreciation for those public servants in the government who stood valiantly in defense of humanity, while noting the contributions of Treasury Secretary Morgenthau, John Pehle, and Randolph Paul, who, with the support of President Roosevelt, established the War Refugee Board, thereby saving tens of thousands of Jews and assisting hundreds of thousands of people in Europe (US Department of State, 2024).

Emergency Committee activities following the establishment of the War Refugee Board, January 1944-May 1945

The word 'Jew' was not included in the President's order; therefore, the Bergson Group members were concerned that the government bureau would not realise that the main focus of its work was to save Jews. For this reason, the Rescue Committee continued its efforts to create positive public support among the American people. In coordination with the head of the WRB, John Pehle, on 7 December 1944 the Emergency Committee submitted a proposal for a work plan that emphasised two areas of focus: 1) The issue of rescuing the Jews is not only an interest of American Jewry; and 2) It is not possible to evacuate the four million Jews remaining in Europe; therefore, efforts must be made to establish a general understanding that the extermination of the

Jews is not worthwhile for the citizens of the occupied countries and for Germany (see: Kaplan 1981, 75-76). As part of that plan, legal rescue operations were proposed without reference to the possibility of increasing the visa quota or emigration to British Palestine. In an effort to maintain cooperation with Pehle and the WRB, Bergson and his group tried to find temporary places of refuge for Jewish refugees in neutral countries such as Spain, Portugal, Switzerland, and Palestine (Dobkowski 1982, 208). However, the main success of the WRB was in persuading the US State Department to obtain visas for European Jews to enter free countries and South American countries, since the Nazis honoured these visas and their holders were sent to prison camps instead of extermination camps.

The intention was to overcome the strict US immigration policy and thus allow Jewish refugees to enter the United States outside of the quotas. It was even proposed to establish free ports to which the refugees would arrive, an idea revived by journalist Samuel Grafton in *Press and Sun-Bulletin*, Binghamton, New York, on 5 April 1944 (Grafton 1944). The Secretary of the Treasury and Pehle suggested this to Roosevelt, but the idea met with opposition from the War Department. Once again, the Emergency Committee appealed through advertisements in the press and asked for public support for the idea of free ports, notably on Ellis Island. Ultimately, President Roosevelt decided to establish a free port for one thousand refugees at an abandoned military base in Oswego on the coast of New York (Dobkowski 1982, 212). Presenting humanitarian and military reasons in his proposal to Congress, Roosevelt promised that these refugees would return to their countries at the end of the war. The Emergency Committee saw Roosevelt's proposal as a success in terms of their efforts, even though it was only a symbolic step; after all, the absorption of one thousand refugees was not a solution for four million Jews whose lives were in danger. Jews from refugee camps in southern Italy and North Africa were indeed absorbed into the free port of Oswego, even though the living conditions there were extremely difficult (Dobkowski 1982, 219). Following this decision, the heads of the US government's WRB turned to Central American countries and asked them to emulate Roosevelt and establish free ports in their territories.

The Zionist establishment in the United States were strong opponents to the idea of free ports, claiming that their implementation would undermine the pressure exerted on the British government to open the gates of Palestine to Jewish refugees from Europe. This stance only added to the already-existing tension between the Emergency Committee and the American Zionist establishment (Feingold 1970, 265). The Emergency Committee thanked the US President for his decision, noting the need for additional similar rescue operations. Thus, pressure grew to demand the opening of Palestine to refugees for humanitarian reasons alone; this proposal was presented to both houses of Congress in September 1944, and once again the Zionist establishment protested against the proposal (Kaplan 1981, 83).

Efforts to save the Jews of Hungary, 1944

Admiral Miklos Horthy ruled Hungary from 1941; in June 1944, Horthy sought to find a possible way to stop the deportations of Jews to their deaths and announced his willingness to release all Hungarian Jews with entry visas to various countries. Upon learning of this, the Emergency Committee mobilised to try to save the Jews of Hungary, first by sending an urgent letter, on 5 June 1944, to the International Red Cross headquarters in Geneva, requesting assistance. The reply included a plan to evacuate all Jewish children under the age of ten who had an entry visa to another country or to British Palestine. In response, the Emergency Committee sent a telegram to all neutral countries, as well as to the Allies, demanding that they issue Nansen passports—passports issued by the League of Nations to people who had lost their citizenship—so that they could travel between the borders of the various countries. Britain was also requested to issue to Hungarian Jews certificates for entry into British Palestine beyond the White Paper quotas, but it refused to do so and only issued certificates within the existing quota (Niv 1973, 145).

On 2 April 1944, two weeks after the Nazi invasion of Hungary, the Emergency Committee convened a conference of the leaders of the Hungarian Jewish community in the United States to discuss saving the Jews of Hungary, at that time the third largest Jewish community in Europe. At the conference, Representative Dean Alfange (D, NY) proposed a four-point plan that included 1) An official warning to Hungary and the Balkan countries not to be complicit in crimes against Jews; 2) Broadcasting similar warnings over the radio; 3) Demanding that President Roosevelt and the neutral countries cooperate with the WRB in evacuating Jews and providing them with asylum; and 4) Demanding that an agreement signed between the United States and Great Britain on 2 December 1944, reinforce the validity of the Balfour Declaration of 1917 which established Palestine as the national home of the Jewish people. Thus, the conference demanded that the gates of British Palestine be opened to Jewish refugees from Hungary and that the other Allied countries establish government offices to handle refugees (Niv 1973, 79). Despite diplomatic attempts to reach an agreement to release Hungarian Jews in exchange for supplies to Germany, Hungarian Jews were being sent to their deaths in Auschwitz as early as 14 May 1944.

On 17 June 1944, the heads of non-Jewish Hungarian organisations in the US gathered at a conference whose purpose was to assist in saving the Jews in Hungary. They decided to appeal to Pope Pius XII to condemn the actions of the Hungarian government and enlist the help of all Catholics in Hungary to save the Jews (Zaar 1954, 93-94). The conference also determined that on 9 July 1944, all Hungarian churches in the United States would dedicate their prayers to the saving of Hungarian Jewry. The conference also appointed a permanent representative on its behalf to cooperate with the Emergency

Committee, and sent a message to the Pope on 29 July, asking him to contact the Hungarian government and express his opposition to the murder of Jews. The Pope's response was that he had already taken action to save the 'non-Aryan Hungarians' and had addressed Horthy in an open telegram on 25 June in which he personally requested assistance to those suffering because of their race or nationality. Although these actions may have temporarily slowed down the deportation of Jews to Auschwitz, it did not prevent their murder (Dinnerstein 1986, 281-282). Roosevelt, King George VI of England, and King Gustav V of Sweden all exerted pressure on Horthy but by then four hundred and thirty thousand Hungarians had been sent to their deaths (Zander 2024).

Bergson suggested to Pehle on 14 August 1944 that the US initiate issuing Nansen visas for the Jews of Hungary after he had tried unsuccessfully to convince the government to bomb the bridges and roads leading to the extermination camps (see correspondence between Bergson and Pehle in Kaplan 1981, 82). Pehle replied to Bergson that the government had agreed to the visa initiative and was ready to promote its implementation. Medoff claims that the efforts of the Emergency Committee resulted in the rescue of only two hundred thousand Jews during the last 15 months of the war (Medoff 2008, 6), of which about one hundred and twenty thousand were from Budapest (Zander 2024).

In May 1945, after the Allied victory over the Axis powers, the Emergency Committee for the Rescue of the Jews announced its dissolution. In a statement dated 14 May 1945, addressed to the Jewish survivors and refugees, the Committee summarised and published its activities for the rescue of the Jews of Europe, while expressing pain and disappointment in the unwillingness of the many governments to cooperate in saving them, laying blame on Britain for blocking the only way to save European Jewry by locking the gates of British Palestine and adopting a 'cruel and inhumane policy' (see: Niv 1973, 146-147).

Mara Sonnenschein writes that we will never know how many lives could have been saved if the American government had taken practical steps earlier to save European Jews (Sonnenschein 2022). But the administration's slow response to aid Jews in Nazi Europe will be remembered as one that led to grim results (Sonnenschein 2022).

Conclusion

The Bergson Group operated as an independent body alongside the Jewish community in the United States. Their foreign citizenship and independence from official institutions allowed them to act without fear, to express themselves sharply, and even to make demands on the American government to act to save the Jews in Europe. However, this independence was also their weak point, as their main opposition came from within the American Jewish community and its leaders, who tried to prevent Bergson's activities on a

political level. The American Zionist community leaders took advantage of their closeness to President Roosevelt to harm the Bergson Group's members and their efforts, agreeing with the administration that the way to save European Jewry from extermination was to defeat the Nazi regime (Ambrose 1986, 341).

The Bergson Group was able to establish the Emergency Committee for the Rescue of European Jewry, whose members were mostly non-Jews, although it was identified as a Jewish body. The inclusion of many figures from outside the American Jewish community gave the Committee significant power and influence in its work to save the Jews of Europe.

The Bergson Group's goal was to convince the US president and government that saving the European Jews required separate and focused attention, and that it was a unique problem and not just another war issue. The Bergson Group succeeded in creating supportive public opinion, and recruited many public figures who joined in the work to advance their cause. Although it cannot be definitively determined that the Bergson Group's activities were the catalyst for President Roosevelt's decision to establish the government's War Refugee Board, it is known that the group had great influence on those close to the President, his wife, and many members of Congress.

Despite the polling data among the American public that attest to opposition to making changes to the law that would allow the absorption of Jewish refugees from Europe in order to prevent their extermination by the Nazis, the WRB was founded with the aim of saving Jews. According to Rosen, the combination of public pressure exerted by the Bergson Group and the efforts of some government officials led to the fact that in 1944 Britain agreed to implement the idea of establishing a Jewish Brigade intended to fight Nazi Germany (Rosen 2006, 337). The same brigade later formed the basis for fighting for the establishment of a Jewish State in the Land of Israel, as part of the War of Independence.

The Bergson Group's activities for rescuing European Jews focused on the political sphere. Its goal was to get the American government and the Allied governments to act in a focused and determined manner to save Europe's Jews from extermination. In a bitter twist of fate, the Bergson Group encountered difficulties and resistance not only from the American government, but also from the leadership of the American Jewish community, which acted to weaken the group's voice and influence, though not always successfully.

It is possible that, without the opposition of the leaders of the local Zionist organisations that led to the delay in decisions for the rescue operations of the United States government, the Bergson Group would have been able to motivate the administration to act sooner, thus saving more Jews from the Nazi extermination machine.

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Endnotes

¹ Balfour Declaration, 1917. The British Foreign Ministry promises to set up a Jewish National Home in Palestine with no harm to non-Jewish populations or to Jews living elsewhere who might want to support a Jewish home.

² Bermuda Conference, 19-30 April 1943.

³ According to a Gallup poll, 66% of Americans surveyed opposed a bill in the US Congress intended to admit child refugees from Germany (Stember 1966, 149).