

DOUBLE VICTORY

A Multicultural History of
America in World War II

RONALD TAKAKI

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Jews

darkness"?² This was the question a father raised in a 1956 letter to the "Bintel Brief," an advice column of the *Jewish Daily Forward*:

Years have gone by since the sharp fangs of the mad beast destroyed a third of the Jewish people. Thanks to the Allied armies, the beasts in human form were defeated, but with those who were saved by a miracle the nightmares and aftereffects of the destruction remain.

When the living, the lucky ones, began to come out of their hiding places and regained a bit of their normalcy, they began to rebuild their shattered lives. So it was with me and my present wife. The murderers killed my first wife and our two children, and my present wife lost her husband and child. When we met, we decided to marry, establish a home, and start to build a new life, since this was the thing to do.

Now we are here in America, we already have two children . . . and my wife and I often discuss whether we should tell them about the tragic past. I mean, about our personal losses, because I have told them about the general destruction. I feel we should not tell them yet about the loss of our own children, but wait until they are older. My wife, however, thinks the opposite, and sometimes she comes out with a half statement and the children are disturbed.

Now I ask you, who is right, I or my wife? Should the children be told everything now, or is there time yet? I believe you will give us the right answer.

Respectfully,
H. S., Brooklyn

The editor advised the parents to wait until their children had grown old enough to understand the "horrible massacres" of six

STRUGGLING FOR A WORLD OF "NO RACE PREJUDICE"

Jewish Americans and the Holocaust

THE ATOMIC BOMBING of Hiroshima greatly dismayed Robert Frost. In a burst of moral outrage, he declared that America had "invented a new Holocaust" and had been "the first with it to win a war."¹ The poet's reference to the Nazi genocide in his condemnation of the instant transformation of a Japanese city into a crematorium revealed a razor-sharp recognition of the role of race in World War II.

"The Horror, the Horror": What Should We Tell the Children?

For Jews everywhere, the Holocaust was the most horrendous event in their tragic past of exile and persecution. After the war, the still molten memory of their near extermination as a people made the living wonder: what should they tell their children about the ghastly terror that Jews had experienced in the Nazi "heart of

million Jews. "Certainly we should tell our children about the holocaust," he answered, "and about the fact that the whole world was silent."³

"Preferring to Die on My Feet"

There was another fact the children should know: 550,000 Jewish Americans had fought against the evils of Nazism by serving in the U.S. Armed Forces, proportionately more than Americans as a whole. Their awards included one Medal of Honor, 74 Distinguished Service Crosses, 37 Navy Crosses, 47 Distinguished Service Medals, 344 Legions of Merit, 1,627 Silver Stars, 2,391 Distinguished Flying Crosses, 6,090 Bronze Stars, and 26,009 Purple Hearts.⁴

Jews had a particular reason for serving in the military: they wanted to fight Nazism, with its racist ideology. Writing to the "Bintel Brief" editor in 1943, a mother related a story about her son, "the doctor," who had enlisted in the U.S. Army. After first describing her life as an immigrant, she wrote: "We worked hard to make a living, and we were happy with our children, who were studious and obedient. Even when they went to college they helped us in the store. You can't imagine our joy when our eldest son graduated as a doctor." But because of Hitler, he decided to volunteer for military service. "Our children were always interested in world affairs and were concerned with the Jewish problems. I tried to talk him out of it, and told my husband to discourage him but my husband told me that our son knew what he was doing." Then her second son enlisted. "My heart is breaking, but I know I am not the only mother whose sons went to war. I know they must fight now for our dear country and we must make sacrifices to destroy our enemies. If it were not enough that our sons went away, now our daughter wants to join the Wacs." The editor advised her to recognize that her children were demonstrating the "fact" that "we were all patriotic and loyal to our country."⁵

Another Jewish doctor, Bernard Ehrenpreis, explained his rea-

Struggling for a World of "No Race Prejudice"

son for enlisting. "I wanted to fight the Nazis," he said. "Maybe this doesn't sound like a medical man, but ever since 1933, I had been very much aware that I, for one, preferred to die on my feet rather than live on my knees."⁶ Dr. Bernard S. Feinberg made the same choice. "You may wonder why I, a practicing dentist, volunteered to go in as a private," he told an interviewer many years after the war. "I was and am a very patriotic American and also a Jew who had no use whatsoever for that Nazi bastard Hitler and his overall plan of genocide for my people."⁷

Fred C. Patheiger joined the army so that he could return to Germany to fight Nazism. A year after he was born in Rastatt, Germany, in 1919, his parents were divorced. "When Hitler got into power, my mother, grandmother, and aunt had to join the [Nazi] party," he recalled. "I discovered one day while a youngster crawling in the living room and listening to them speak that much to my amazement, my grandfather on my mother's side was Jewish." When Patheiger's aunt decided to marry, she confided to her lover that her father was Jewish, and her groom-to-be reported this family background to the Nazi authorities. Worried about her son, Patheiger's mother arranged to have him live with a distant cousin in America. "I had read a lot as a youngster and had always dreamed to come to America. . . . I came over here in April 1938. The others remained over there. We tried to get them over here, but the Nazis kept bringing one obstacle after another. . . . They succumbed in the concentration camps later on." Patheiger tried to join the U.S. Army, but was rejected as an "enemy alien." He then wrote to J. Edgar Hoover, explaining why he wanted to fight the Nazis, and the F.B.I. director encouraged him to appeal his case to the draft board. Patheiger tried again, attaching Hoover's letter, and this time was classified as 1-A. After basic training, he was assigned to military intelligence because he spoke German fluently and could interrogate prisoners of war. In Europe, Patheiger experienced combat action in Normandy, fighting in the Battle of the Bulge.⁸

Many Jews were aware of the need to fight not only anti-

Semitism in Europe but also racism in America. One of them was Murray Shapiro of Los Angeles. In 1943, he decided to leave his studies at U.C.L.A. and join the U.S. Army. At basic training, he was distressed to witness segregation in the military. In a letter to his parents, the young soldier wrote on May 16, 1943: "Camp Roberts is the biggest place you've ever seen. . . . It continuously trained 100,000 men in the West Garrison, which was on one side of US 99 . . . while on the other side of the highway at the East Garrison, 60,000 more Negro troops were being trained in a segregated setting. . . . Looking at the daily camp newspaper, we found a movie we had missed just across the highway in the East Garrison. We knew nothing about the segregated setup. It was not advertised. Jumping off the bus in front of the theater we were immediately met by an MP 1st Sgt. 'Where you men think you're going?' he thundered. 'Right here to the movie,' we responded quietly. 'No you're not. This is a Negro training area. Get right back on the bus and don't come back on this side of the highway.'"9

On June 10, Shapiro commented on events back home: "The zoot suit warfare is still going strong. Have you heard that the L.A. City Council was considering a bill to ban zoot suits from the county?" The next day, he wrote to his family: "Glad to hear that Dad [Paul] is defending one of the zoot-suiters. They need someone who is able and brave enough to take their case. There are quite a few stinkers among their group, but there are a lot of innocent ones also and the environment they have been forced to live in all their lives has hardly been conducive to making them honor citizens." On June 14, the son added: "Am very much interested in the zoot-suiters, as I was on the UCLA Committee to Defend American-Mexicans."¹⁰

On September 17, 1944, Shapiro wrote to tell his family that he had arrived at Liverpool, England. On November 9, the soldier sent a letter from "somewhere in Germany." "Well, here I am knocking on Hitler's doorstep." On May 10, Shapiro wrote: "I guess by now you and Dad will really believe me when I tell you there is nothing to worry about. The Germans are completely defeated."¹¹

Like Shapiro, Corporal Harold Katz was also in Germany when he wrote a letter explaining why he was serving in the U.S. Army. Addressing "Dear Mom," he wrote:

Mom, I want you to know that I asked for a combat assignment. I did so for several reasons. One is that I had certain ideals within my own mind, for which I had often argued verbally. I didn't feel right to sit safe, far behind the lines, while men were risking their lives for principles which I would fight for only with my lips. I felt that I also must be willing to risk my life in the fight for the freedom of speech and thought I was using and hoped to use in the future.

Another reason is the fact that I am Jewish. I felt, again, it wasn't right for me to be safe behind the lines, while others were risking their lives, with one of their goals the principles of no race prejudice. I knew this meant fighting for me and my family because if Hitler won, my family — you, Rolly and Pop — would certainly suffer more than the families of other soldiers who died in the fight.

I felt that I must risk my life, on that point, so that I could earn the right of my family to live in peace and free from race prejudice.¹²

Katz's letter was found on his body after he was killed in action in the German town of Attweilmann on March 30, 1945, only five weeks before the end of the war in Europe. Katz had given his life fighting for a world free of the racial prejudice that had resulted in the Nazi murder of six million Jews.

Were They Their Brothers' Keepers? Jews in America

When Hitler came to power in 1933, four and a half million Jews were living in the United States. Many of them were the descen-

dants of German Jews, who had come in the early nineteenth century. Most, however, had origins in Poland and Russia. As immigrants arriving around the turn of the century, they had fled terrible pogroms — the destruction of their synagogues and the violence of anti-Semitic hatred. "I feel that every cobblestone in Russia is filled with Jewish blood," an immigrant bitterly recalled. "Absolutely every year, there was a *pogrom* before *Pesach* [Passover]." The pogroms, observed Abraham Cahan, had forced Jews to realize that "Russia was not their homeland and that a true home must be found for Jews. But where?"¹³

Spreading from *shtetl* to *shtetl* across Russia, a song pointed the way to the "Promised Land":

As the Russians, mercilessly
Took revenge on us.
There is a land, America,
Where everyone lives free.¹⁴

After arriving at Ellis Island, the refugees pursued a hopeful dream — to become Americans. "Oysgrinen zikh," the newcomers said, "Don't be a greenhorn."¹⁵ In Russia, few Jews made an effort to speak the dominant language, but in America most of them were eager to learn English. "Today," observed a resident of New York's Jewish community in 1905, "English is more and more the language spoken on the East Side, whereas eight years ago it was rare to hear that tongue." In a letter to the *Jewish Daily Forward*, a mother complained about her daughter who had preceded her family to America: "During the few years she was here without us she became a regular Yankee and forgot how to talk Yiddish. . . . She says it is not nice to talk Yiddish and that I am a greenhorn."¹⁶ Pressures to assimilate also came from mainstream society: the hegemonic idea of the "melting pot" promoted disdain for ethnic cultures and languages as foreign and un-American.

The sites for the transformation of Jewish immigrants from "greenhorns" into Americans were the workplace and the school.

The Jewish colony of the Lower East Side was the industrial center of garment production. From block after block of sweatshops came the "whirl of a thousand sewing-machines, worked at high pressure from the earliest dawn till mind and muscle [gave] out together."¹⁷ This work was punishing and humiliating. "We were like slaves," recalled Anzia Yezierska. "You couldn't pick your head up. You couldn't talk. We used to go to the bathroom. The forelady used to go after us, we shouldn't stay too long."¹⁸ Facing exploitation and degradation, the workers resisted. Beginning in 1909, waves of strikes swept through the Lower East Side as laborers organized into unions, demanding higher wages and better working conditions. By 1920, the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union had 100,000 members. The labor "uprisings" opened doors of economic mobility in the promised land.¹⁹

In their quest to become Americans, Jewish parents pushed their children to get an education in order to prepare for occupations other than grueling factory work. Describing the Jewish commitment to education, the *Daily Forward* editorialized: "The Jew undergoes privation, spills blood, to educate his child. In [this] is reflected one of the finest qualities of the Jewish people. It shows our capacity to make sacrifices for our children . . . as well as our love for education, for intellectual efforts."²⁰ Jewish students began crowding into the colleges and universities in New York and elsewhere on the East Coast. "The thirst for knowledge," the *New York Evening Post* reported in 1905, "fills our city colleges and Columbia's halls with the sons of Hebrews who came over in steerage." By 1916, they were ubiquitous on college campuses, especially at New York City College. A government report noted that the school was "practically filled with Jewish pupils, a considerable proportion of them children of Russian or Polish immigrants on the East Side." Jewish students were also entering Harvard, and by 1920, they constituted 20 percent of this elite school's student body.²¹

The increasing presence of Jewish students at Harvard provoked a backlash, however. On campus, anti-Semitic murmurs and com-

plaints swept across the yard. A dormitory at Harvard was labeled "Little Jerusalem" because of its large number of Jewish students. Ethnic epithets circulated: "Jews are an unassimilable race, as dangerous to a college as indigestible food to man." "They are governed by selfishness." "They do not mix. They destroy the unity of the college."²² President Abbott Lawrence Lowell announced that the college had a "Jewish problem." In a private letter to a member of the Board of Overseers on March 29, 1922, Lowell wrote that Harvard should limit the enrollment of Jewish students by imposing a quota for them. "Experience seems to place that proportion at about 15 %."²³

The very success of Jews in America was fueling anti-Semitism. The Jews "reaped more and more dislike as they bettered themselves," noted historian John Higham. "The more avidly they reached out for acceptance and participation in American life, the more their reputation seemed to suffer." Indeed, as second-generation Jews became educated and began seeking white-collar employment, they often encountered discrimination. Classified job listings sometimes specified "Christians only." Quality hospitals turned away Jewish doctors for internships, and prestigious law firms refused to hire Jewish lawyers. The doors to university faculty appointments were often closed to Jews.²⁴

By the early 1930s, the Jewish striving to become American through economic and educational success was contributing to the decline of a Jewish identity. "The cornerstones of Judaism have always been its religion, its culture and its way of life," observed Max Baker and Paul Masserman in *The Jews Come to America* in 1932. "These cornerstones are crumbling in America." The authors predicted the disappearance of Jews as they assimilated into the mainstream. "The future of the Yiddish tongue, of Yiddish literature, of the Yiddish press is dark. The older generation, the Yiddish-speaking generation, is dying out. Yiddish itself, is spoken by a constantly diminishing portion of unassimilated Jewry, and is eschewed almost entirely by the younger generation." The "new Jew"

was "entirely an American product," knowing little and caring less about Jewish affairs either in America or abroad.²⁵

As they anxiously watched the rise of Nazism in Germany, however, Jewish Americans found themselves facing an agonizing dilemma: how should they respond to the unfolding crisis their brethren were experiencing in Europe?²⁶ They were also nervously looking over their shoulders at the escalating anti-Semitism in America. In Royal Oak, Michigan, Father Charles E. Coughlin was publishing a weekly tabloid, *Social Justice*, with a circulation in the hundreds of thousands, and broadcasting Sunday radio programs regularly reaching 3.5 million listeners. The Catholic priest was making inflammatory charges, claiming that Jewish-controlled international finances were responsible for the Great Depression and the economic suffering of the American working class. Hostile sentiments also shamelessly surfaced in elite circles. At elegant dinner parties, businessmen joked about the "chosen people" deserving what they were getting in Germany. Financier Jack Morgan, the son of J. P. Morgan, told a friend that he did not like Hitler "except for his attitude toward the Jews," which he considered "wholesome." The presence of Jews in prominent positions in the Roosevelt administration prompted nasty remarks. In a letter to the President written in 1934, a New Yorker complained: "On all sides is heard the cry that you have sold out the country to the Jews, and that the Jews are responsible for the continued depression, as they are determined to starve the Christians into submission and slavery. You have over two hundred Jews, they say, in executive offices in Washington, and Jew bankers run the government and [Bernard] Baruch is the real President." Roosevelt's New Deal was being characterized as the "Jew Deal."²⁷

For many Jews in the United States, the Nazi persecutions underscored the need for a Jewish nation in Palestine. Before the rise of Hitler, the immigrants and their children had little interest in Zionism. They viewed their ethnic identity as religious, not political. In 1898, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations artic-

ulated this view when it declared: "We are unalterably opposed to political Zionism. The Jews are not a nation, but a religious community. Zionism was a precious possession of the past, the early home of our faith, where our prophets uttered their world-subduing thoughts, and our psalmists sang their world-enchanting hymns. As such it is a holy memory, but it is not our hope of the future. America is our Zion." In 1930, the Zionist Organization of America had such a dwindling membership that Rabbi Stephen Wise observed: "There is a complete lull in things Zionist in America."²⁸

But the lull was not to last. The "dire developments" of Nazism, historian Henry Feingold noted, would do for "the Zionist movement what it had been unable to do for itself."²⁹ "Many . . . young Jews, as myself," wrote a contributor to *New Palestine*, "have been startlingly awakened to the threat to our existence by the horribly persistent forward march of Hitlerism abroad and by the rise of American Hitlerism through the medium of Coughlinism. . . . We should like to be some sort of American Zionists enjoying Zionism in an American way."³⁰ They were not necessarily thinking of following Theodore Herzl's call for mass emigration to Palestine. Rather they would remain here: their citizenship would be American and their ethnic identity would be Jewish.

One of the intellectual leaders of this newly aroused ethnic nationalism was Chaim Zhitlowsky, author of *The Future of Our Youth in This Country and Assimilation*, published in 1935. The Nazi persecution of Jews, he argued, was demonstrating that assimilation as a remedy against anti-Semitism was a "bankrupt" strategy for acceptance. In Europe, Jews had been "swallowed up" by assimilation, only to find themselves "vomited up and thrown out on the Jewish shore, battered up, injured, robbed of [their] economic means of existence, and [their] human esteem deeply insulted and degraded." Zhitlowsky criticized Jews for embracing an "American" rather than a "Jewish" identity. Anxious to be accepted into the larger society, many of them had smothered their Jewishness and even tried to hide behind non-Jewish names. But the "catastrophic collapse of assimilation in Hitlerized Germany,"

Zhitlowsky argued, had sent a grim message: "Everywhere" there was "one Jewish problem, everywhere one great danger." There was only one solution — the restoration of a Zionist nation. A separate state for Jews, Zhitlowsky concluded, would allow them to become again "a normal respectable people, worthy of being a member of equal standing in the family of nations constituting humanity."³¹

In growing numbers, Jewish Americans began embracing Zhitlowsky's view: membership in the Zionist Organization of America jumped from 18,000 in 1929 to 52,000 in 1939, and would reach 136,000 by 1945. The Zionists focused on the 1917 Balfour Declaration, the British government's promise to create "a national Jewish home for the Jewish people" in the British mandate of Palestine. However, the effort to resettle Jews in their ancient homeland was suddenly stalled in 1939 when the British government, responding to Arab pressure, announced that it would allow only 75,000 Jews to enter Palestine over a five-year period.³² American Zionists denounced this change in British policy. At the Extraordinary Zionist Conference in New York in May 1942, Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver argued that the foundation of anti-Semitism in Europe and elsewhere, including America, had been Jewish statelessness. He pointed out that Hitler was the most recent example of an affliction that had begun with the Roman destruction of the Jewish state. The basic fact in the Jewish tragedy was their "national homelessness." Thus, Silver concluded, the establishment of a Jewish nation in Palestine would be the "ultimate solution."³³

Meanwhile, however, Jews in America had been forced to turn their attention to the Nazi darkness descending on their brethren in Europe. In 1933, representative Samuel Dickstein of New York offered a Congressional resolution for the admission of all German Jews who were related to American citizens and were fleeing from Hitler's persecution. The resolution called for the suspension of the 1924 Immigration Act's quota of 27,370 immigrants from Germany and also the requirement that prospective immigrants prove they were not likely to become public charges.

However, Dickstein encountered opposition from Jews themselves. The American Jewish Committee voiced the strongest criticism of his resolution for the admission of Jewish refugees. Founded in 1906 by wealthy German-Jewish immigrants, the Committee believed that Jews in this country should simply be loyal Americans. Representing the committee, Max J. Kohler warned that Dickstein's proposal was provoking the anti-Semitic charge that Jews in America were willing to sacrifice American interests in order to help Jews in Germany. Defending the immigration quotas, B'nai B'rith agreed that the restrictions should be enforced to protect American labor. The American Jewish Congress also called for keeping the gates closed. Composed of Eastern European Jews, the Congress was led by Rabbi Stephen Wise of New York City. In his testimony in Congress on March 22, 1933, he spoke against the passage of "special amendments to American immigration laws" or "new legislation" for Jewish victims of Nazi Germany. He argued that the existing restrictions were needed to keep out immigrants who would take jobs away from American workers. Jews in this country, Wise declared, were "Americans, first, last, and all the time."³⁴

In *Opinion*, published by the American Jewish Congress, Harold Fields explained: "To allow aliens, Jew or non-Jew, to enter this country without funds, seeking employment where no employment is to be found, or coming to families already destitute, would be economical folly and unfair to the alien, his family and to us as Americans." But a more important concern, Fields added, was not economic. The admission of "too many" Jews would agitate anti-Semitism in America. "Is it desirable," he frankly asked, "to insist upon the admission of possibly 25,000 more Jews from Germany (and later from Poland, Austria, etc.) and thus give fuel to the claims of anti-Semites here that we, the Jews, were seeking to bring all the unfortunates to this country in these unfortunate times, or is the wiser policy to safeguard the mental, physical, and social happiness of the four million Jews now in the United States by refraining from bringing too many more Jews here?"³⁵

Worried about the rising resentment against American Jews, Wise advised Representative Donald O'Toole of New York not to introduce legislation offering asylum to refugees. "I wish I thought that it were possible for this measure to be passed without repercussions upon the Jewish community in this country," the leader of the American Jewish Congress wrote in 1937. "I have reason to believe, unfortunately, that any effort that is made at this time to waive the immigration law will result in a serious accentuation of what we know to be a rising wave of anti-Semitic feeling in this country." Similarly, the American Jewish Committee warned in 1938: "While humanitarian accomplishments in bringing . . . victims of persecution to the United States and finding work for them cannot be highly enough praised, this is helping to intensify the Jewish problem here. Giving work to Jewish refugees while so many Americans are out of work, has naturally made bad feelings." The plight of the refugees was debated at a meeting of the General Jewish Council, an umbrella organization composed of representatives from the American Jewish Committee, the American Jewish Congress, B'nai B'rith, and the Jewish Labor Committee. Unable to choose between "the imperative necessity" of mass immigration and "the fundamental wrong of such a policy," the Council decided "that, at least for the time being, nothing should be done with regard to this matter."³⁶

But many other American Jews felt that to do "nothing" was morally wrong. After seizing power in Germany, the Nazis had begun excluding Jews from government and professional employment. Then, in 1935, they enacted the racist Nuremberg laws. "A citizen of the Reich," the legislation declared, "is only a subject of the state who is of German or related blood, who demonstrates by his behavior that he is determined and suited to serve faithfully the German Volk and Reich."³⁷ Now "blood" determined citizenship in Germany.

This escalating persecution generated an urgent call for action to rescue the victims of Nazi hate. "The Jews of Germany are doomed!" concerned Protestant minister John Hayes Holmes

warned members of the American Jewish Congress in *Opinion*. "There is only one thing that can be done about the Jews in Germany, and that is to get them out. They must be rescued, as the residents of a burning house, trapped by devouring flames, are rescued by firemen."³⁸

Roosevelt's Rescue-Through-Victory Strategy

In July 1938, the U.S. government responded to the cry for help by convening representatives from thirty-three Western nations in Evian, France. The purpose of this conference was to help facilitate the emigration of political refugees from Germany. Two days before the opening, Anne O'Hare McCormick of the *New York Times* made a passionate moral appeal: "It is heartbreaking to think of the queues of desperate human beings around our consulates in Vienna and other cities waiting in suspense for what happens at Evian. But the question they underline is not simply humanitarian. It is not a question of how many unemployed this country can safely add to its own unemployed millions. It is a test of civilization. . . . Can America live with itself if it lets Germany get away with this policy of extermination, allows the fanaticism of one man to triumph over reason, refuses to take up this gage of battle against barbarism?"³⁹

The conference, however, was designed to fail. The idea for the meeting had originated in the U.S. State Department. Worried that "certain Congressmen with metropolitan constituencies" were trying to revise the restrictionist immigration policies, Secretary of State Cordell Hull and Undersecretary Sumner Welles decided that the administration should "get out in front and attempt to guide the pressure, primarily with a view toward forestalling attempts to have the immigration laws liberalized." In his invitation for the conference, President Roosevelt stated that "no nation would be expected or asked to receive a greater number of emigrants" than would be permitted by its existing laws. Little wonder the delegates did nothing to assist the victims of Nazi persecution. Com-

menting on the Evian Conference, Vienna's *Volkischer Beobachter* stated: "We cannot take seriously President Roosevelt's appeal to the nations of the world as long as the United States maintains racial quotas for immigrants."⁴⁰

Four months after the effete effort at Evian, Jews in Germany suddenly became the targets of hate violence. During one terrifying night, rampaging mobs murdered scores of Jews. According to the *New York Times*, in Berlin "raiding squads of young men roamed unhindered through the principal shopping districts, breaking shop windows with metal weapons, looting or tossing merchandise into the streets or into passing vehicles and leaving the unprotected Jewish shops to the mercy of vandals who followed in this unprecedented show of violence." After the night of fear and breaking glass, known as "Kristallnacht," the Nazis arrested thirty thousand Jews and assembled them at a depot. "At the station a train arrived to collect the Jews from our area," one of them recalled. "After Karlsruhe, when the train branched off toward Stuttgart, the only word to be heard was the terrible name Dachau."⁴¹

At a press conference, Roosevelt condemned the night of mayhem and murder: "The news of the past few days from Germany has deeply shocked public opinion in the United States. . . . I myself could scarcely believe that such things could occur in a twentieth century civilization." The President announced that he had ordered the American ambassador in Berlin to return immediately and report on the grave situation. Asked if he had considered a possible mass transfer of Kristallnacht victims to the United States, Roosevelt replied: "I have given a great deal of thought to it." Then he added: "The time is not ripe for that." Roosevelt was also asked if he would relax the immigration laws for Jewish refugees. "That is not in contemplation," he answered; "we have the quota system."⁴² A Gallup poll conducted in November 1938, after Kristallnacht, showed that 77 percent of the Americans surveyed opposed increasing the immigration quota for Germany.⁴³ Although Roosevelt extended the visas for twelve thousand refugees already in the United States, he refused to open the gates to new

refugees. The *Nation* observed that the liberalization of immigration legislation was an idea that most politicians regarded as "too hot to handle."⁴⁴

Seeking an alternative to revising immigration policies, Congressman Dickstein offered a proposal for the resettlement of Jewish refugees in Alaska, still an undeveloped frontier region. This idea had been suggested to Roosevelt in 1938, but he had rejected it, saying that the project would "in effect make Alaska a foreign territory for immigration purposes, which would obviously be out of the question." In 1940, Dickstein and Senator William King introduced legislation for the admission of European laborers to help develop Alaska. Refugees, King explained, would be willing to relocate in this harsh, underpopulated wilderness in order to escape Nazi savagery.⁴⁵

Reactions from the Jewish-American community were mixed. Major Jewish organizations rejected the Alaska rescue project. Rabbi Wise feared that the plan would give a "wrong and hurtful impression" that Jews were taking over a region of the country for settlement. On the other hand, support for the bill came from the Labor Zionists of America: "As Jews, we are especially interested that the government should allow a larger number of European refugees to enter if not the United States, at least Alaska."⁴⁶ The proposed legislation for refugee resettlement in Alaska died in the subcommittees.

Meanwhile, Senator Robert Wagner of New York and Representative Edith Nourse Rogers of Massachusetts hoped that Americans would at least have the heart to save Jewish children. In January 1939, they jointly introduced a bill that would allow the non-quota entry of twenty thousand refugee children from Germany over a two-year period. The children would be admitted on the condition that they would be supported by responsible private agencies or individuals and would not become public charges. The bill quickly came under attack from restrictionists. John B. Trevor of the American Coalition of Patriotic Societies scolded Wagner and Rogers for sponsoring such legislation in view of the needs of

a million "neglected boys and girls, descendants of American pioneers, undernourished, ragged and ill."⁴⁷

The Wagner-Rogers bill needed support from the President. While on a Caribbean cruise in February 1939, Roosevelt received a cable from Mrs. Roosevelt: "Are you willing I should talk to Sumner [Welles] and say we approve passage of Child Refugee Bill. Hope you are having grand time. Much love. Eleanor."⁴⁸ Roosevelt replied: "It is all right for you to support the child refugee bill, but it is best for me to say nothing till I get back."⁴⁹ After he returned, Roosevelt maintained his silence. Trying to get the President to issue a statement on the proposed legislation, Representative Caroline O'Day wrote to ask him for his view on the bill. Instead, Roosevelt penciled on her letter the following instructions to Secretary "Pa" Watson: "File, no action. FDR."⁵⁰

Roosevelt was aware of widespread public opposition to the bill. A Gallup poll revealed that 66 percent of those questioned did not want the government to admit the children.⁵¹ Roosevelt realized that the situation was desperate. "But it was one thing to sympathize with the plight of the Jewish refugees," wrote historian Doris Kearns Goodwin, "and quite another to pit his presidency against the xenophobic, anti-Semitic mood of his country in the late 1930s and early '40s. This Roosevelt was unwilling to do."⁵² Eleanor Roosevelt understood her husband's sensitivity to the pulse of the people. "While I often felt strongly on various subjects," she wrote in *This I Remember*, "Franklin frequently refrained from supporting causes in which he believed, because of political realities."⁵³

The Wagner-Rogers proposal also turned out to be an extremely sensitive political issue for Jewish-American leaders. During the congressional hearings on the legislation, Rabbi Wise stated that he would be willing to admit "a rather limited number of children," but that he wanted the immigration restrictions to remain. "If there is a conflict between our duty to those children and our duty to our country, speaking for myself as a citizen, I should say, of course, that our country comes first; and if children cannot be helped, they

cannot be helped, because we should not undertake to do anything that would be hurtful to the interests of our country."⁵⁴ The Wagner-Rogers bill failed to leave the committees, and even terrified refugee children would not be saved.

A few months later, 907 German-Jewish refugees tried to rescue themselves. They boarded the steamship *St. Louis* bound for Cuba, where they expected to find asylum. When their ship reached Havana, however, the Cuban government suddenly invalidated their immigration visas. Turned away at the dock, they remained on board while their ship steamed in circles between Cuba and Florida. The passengers saw the lights and beaches of Miami, but the U.S. Coast Guard escorted their ship out of American waters. Frantically, they pleaded for permission to land in the United States. Describing the *St. Louis* as "the saddest ship afloat today," carrying a "cargo of despair," the *New York Times* editorialized: "We can only hope that some hearts will soften somewhere and some refuge found. The cruise of the *St. Louis* cries high to heaven of man's inhumanity to man." The *Jewish Daily Forward* printed a scream for help from the passengers: "We appeal to world Jewry. We are being sent back. How can you be peaceful? How can you be silent? Help! Do everything you can! Some on the ship have committed suicide. Help! Do not allow the ship to go back to Germany!"⁵⁵

As the ship sailed along the U.S. coastline, a Jewish-American organization, the Joint Distribution Committee, tried to post a bond of \$500,000 guaranteeing that the refugees would not become public charges in Cuba. The Cuban government refused the offer. The rejected refugees now focused all of their hope on Roosevelt. "The desperate passengers on the *St. Louis* telegraphed the President," wrote historian Arthur Hertzberg, "but he ignored them."⁵⁶ Forced to sail back across the Atlantic, the passengers were resettled in the United Kingdom, France, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Denmark. Many of them would again face the threat of Nazi extermination. One of the passengers was Ilse Marcus,

who would be taken to a Nazi concentration camp. Years later, living in New York, she recalled that she had found it incredible that the passengers of the *St. Louis* had not been permitted to land. "This country was built on immigrants," declared Marcus, "and there was no room in this country for 900 people who were in danger of death."⁵⁷ The American-born daughter of Jewish immigrants remembered following the tragic fate of the ship through the newspapers. "It's something we should always be ashamed of," remarked Lena Friedman. "We should have given Roosevelt holy hell."⁵⁸

The *St. Louis* incident unleashed a sense of frustration within Jewish communities. "Let our leaders lead!" demanded Samuel Margoshes impatiently in the Yiddish daily *The Day*. "Let them not delay and postpone. Let the General Jewish Council meet and deliberate immediately. The Jewish masses are waiting to go out into the streets, to close their places of business, to stop all work, to declare a fast and to demonstrate to the entire world that we will no longer allow ourselves to be slaughtered by a barbaric regime." In the same newspaper, B. Z. Goldberg took readers to the razor's edge: "How can one sit quietly when one's flesh and blood is beaten? . . . Aren't [Jews] people too? Aren't they also Americans? Can't they also scream of their pain?"⁵⁹

The anguish intensified in September 1939 when Germany occupied Poland and three million more Jews came under Nazi rule. "In the matter of the treatment of Jews in Nazi-over-run Poland," Rabbi Wise wrote in *Opinion* in February 1940, "we face a spectacle of daily torture and horror such as men have not beheld since the days of Genghis Khan."⁶⁰

But what awaited the Jews of Europe would surpass the atrocities of Genghis Khan. When Hitler began his anti-Semitic campaign, he had declared that his goal was Jewish expulsion. In a 1939 circular sent to its consular officials, the German Foreign Ministry stated that the government's policy was to remove all Jews from German territory. Two years later, however, Hitler re-

versed this policy: suddenly, the Nazi government prohibited Jews from leaving German-held territory.

Hitler's homicidal plan was unshrouded during the German invasion of Russia. Following the advancing German army, Nazi execution squads, known as the Einsatzgruppen, had begun murdering Jews by the hundreds of thousands. The atrocities were reported in newspapers throughout the West. The shocking revelations forced Wise to reassess his reluctance to give special consideration to the Jewish victims. Only a year earlier, the Jewish-American leader had argued: "The greatest crime against the Jewish victims of Hitler would be to treat the crimes against the Jews differently from the treatment of crimes against French, Czechs, or Poles or Greeks."⁶¹ Now he was forced to recognize that Hitler was treating Jews "differently," and that the crimes against them were "different." In August 1941, Wise editorialized in *Opinion*: "Time may pass before the ghastly details come to be known. But certain it is . . . that the Nazis have most ruthlessly set the torch to the homes of all Jews in their martial path. Apparently Jews have suffered most, according to their own grisly tale, in such places in Roumania as Jassy, where, according to one report 700 Jews were led out and shot."⁶²

The purpose of the executions was extermination. "The discovery of the Jewish virus," Hitler told Heinrich Himmler in 1942, "is one of the greatest revolutions that have taken place in the world. The battle in which we are engaged today is of the same sort as the battle waged, during the last century, by Pasteur and Koch. How many diseases have their origin in the Jewish virus. . . . We shall regain our health only by eliminating the Jew."⁶³

News of the Einsatzgruppen mass murders continued to reach the United States, and on July 21, 1942, twenty thousand people gathered at Madison Square Garden to protest the Nazi atrocities. In a message sent to the rally, Roosevelt urged the people there to support his rescue-through-victory strategy. "Americans who love justice and hate oppression," he declared, "will hail the solemn

commemoration in Madison Square Garden as an expression of the determination of the Jewish people to make every sacrifice for victory over the Axis powers. Citizens, regardless of religious allegiance, will share in the sorrow of our Jewish fellow citizens over the savagery of the Nazis against their helpless victims."⁶⁴ At the mass meeting, Rabbi Wise endorsed Roosevelt's strategy when he declared that the "salvation of our people" could come only through a "speedy and complete" victory.⁶⁵ On August 12, in the Philharmonic Auditorium in Los Angeles, three thousand concerned citizens gathered at a meeting sponsored by the American Jewish Congress. Speakers denounced the Nazis for murdering more than one million Jews, and urged the United States to do everything it could to "insure that human liberty and human decency may once again triumph."⁶⁶

At this point, Americans were still unaware of the extent of the Nazi extermination effort — the systematic and complex apparatus of trains, barracks, factories, gas chambers, and crematoria.⁶⁷ But within weeks, they would no longer be able to claim that they did not know. On August 28, 1942, Wise received a cable from Gerhart Riegner, the World Jewish Congress representative in Geneva. The message stated:

Received alarming report that in Fuhrer's headquarters plan discussed and under consideration according to which all Jews in countries occupied or controlled by Germany numbering 3½-4 millions should after deportation and concentration in East be exterminated at one blow to resolve once for all the Jewish question in Europe stop the action reported planned for autumn methods under discussion including prussic acid stop we transmit information with all necessary reservation as exactitude cannot be confirmed stop informant stated to have close connections with highest German authorities and his reports generally speaking reliable.⁶⁸

The Riegner report made one thing absolutely clear: there was no longer a reason for doubting the genocide, or an excuse for hesitating to make every effort to rescue Jews. Hitler had, in fact, unleashed his ultimate pogrom — the "Final Solution."

Wise took the incriminating cable to Undersecretary of State Sumner Welles, only to be told that he should wait until the information could be confirmed. Wise agreed, but he shared Riegner's report with representatives of the major Jewish-American organizations. The wait for Welles's response was agonizing for Wise. "I don't know whether I am getting to be a Hofjude [court Jew]," he confided in a letter to a friend, "but I find that a good part of my work is to explain to my fellow Jews why our government cannot do all the things asked or expected of it."⁶⁹ Remaining silent tormented Wise, for he knew that Jews were being murdered by the thousands daily. "I have had the unhappiest days of my life," the rabbi wrote to the Reverend John Hayes Holmes. "Think of what it means to hear, as I have heard, through a coded message — first from Geneva, then from Berne, through the British Foreign Office, — that Hitler plans the extermination at one time of the whole Jewish population of Europe; and prussic acid is mentioned as the medium." Wise wrote in anguish: "I don't want to turn my heart inside out, but I am almost demented over my people's grief."⁷⁰

Three months later, after the Nazis had murdered an additional one million Jews, Wise was finally summoned by Welles. "I hold in my hands documents which have come to me from our legation in Berne," the undersecretary of state said. "I regret to tell you, Dr. Wise, that these documents confirm and justify your deepest fears." Welles suggested that Wise release the Riegner report to the press. "For reasons you will understand," he said, "I cannot give these to the press, but there is no reason why you should not. It might even help if you did."⁷¹

At once, Wise held a press conference to announce the confirmed evidence of the official Nazi policy of genocide. Incredibly, the press did not cover the shocking news as a major story. In order to arouse the American public from its moral lethargy, Jewish

leaders organized a Day of Mourning and Prayer on December 2, 1942. In New York City, half a million Jewish union laborers stopped production for ten minutes, and special services were held in synagogues. NBC broadcast a quarter-hour memorial service. "In every country where Hitler's edicts run, every day is a day of mourning for Jews," editorialized the *New York Times*. "Today has been set aside, by action of the chief Rabbinate of Palestine, supported by the Jewish organizations of the United States, as a day of mourning, prayer and fasting among Jews throughout the free countries of the world."⁷²

That day, Wise requested a meeting with President Roosevelt: "Dear Boss: I do not wish to add an atom to the awful burden which you are bearing with magic and, as I believe, heaven-inspired strength at this time. But you do know that the most overwhelming disaster of Jewish history has befallen Jews in the form of the Hitler mass-massacres . . . and it is indisputable that as many as two million civilian Jews have been slain."⁷³

Six days later, Wise and delegates from major Jewish organizations met with Roosevelt. The meeting turned out to be a great disappointment. The meeting lasted twenty-nine minutes, and Roosevelt engaged in casual conversation for nearly the entire time. Near the end of the meeting, the discussion finally turned to the Jewish crisis in Europe. But this "entire conversation [on the urgent issue] lasted only a minute or two," wrote one of the frustrated participants in his diary.⁷⁴

A few months later, in April 1943, American and British representatives met in Bermuda to discuss the Jewish emergency, but they simply reaffirmed Roosevelt's rescue-through-victory strategy. The inaction of the Bermuda conference angered Szmul Zygelbojm, a Jewish Socialist member of the Polish National Council. In a searing letter, he condemned the United States and Great Britain for their complicity in the mass murder of Jews:

The responsibility for this crime of murdering the entire Jewish population of Poland falls in the first instance on

the perpetrators, but indirectly it is also a burden on the whole of humanity, the people and the governments of the Allied States which thus far have made no effort toward concrete action for the purpose of curtailing this crime.

By the passive observation of the murder of defenseless millions and of the maltreatment of children, women, and old men, these countries have become the criminals' accomplices. . . .

As I was unable to do anything during my life, perhaps by my death I shall contribute to breaking down that indifference.⁷⁵

Shortly after writing this letter, Zygielbojm committed suicide.

The utter failure of the Bermuda Conference to address the refugee crisis provoked anger as well as action within the Jewish-American community. In a letter to Sumner Welles, the Joint Emergency Committee on European Jewish Affairs charged that relegating the fate of the Jews to "the day of victory" was "virtually to doom them to the fate" that Hitler had designed for them. At the August 10 meeting of the Joint Emergency Committee, Lilie Shultz of the American Jewish Congress declared: "The time has come . . . to be critical of lack of action and in view of the fact that this is the eve of a presidential election year, ways can be found to indicate to the administration, and possibly through the political parties that the large and influential Jewish communities will find a way of registering at the polls its dissatisfaction over the failure of the administration to take any effective steps to save the Jews of Europe."⁷⁶

Wise also criticized the Bermuda Conference as "a woeful failure." He had come to believe that the refugee crisis demanded action beyond the military effort to defeat Nazi Germany. "Children must be saved," Wise wrote in *Opinion*. "Havens of refuge must be provided for those who are able to escape. Immigration regulations must for a time be waived or suspended." In Detroit, he de-

clared in a speech: "I do not believe my country is so poor in spirit as to deny refuge to such handfuls as may escape the Hitler morgue and come to our shores."⁷⁷

The most militant criticism of Roosevelt's rescue-through-victory strategy came from the Committee for a Jewish Army of Stateless and Palestinian Jews. In an advertisement in the *New York Times* on May 3, 1943, the committee pointed to the Allied commitment to the Four Freedoms and then blasted them for their hypocrisy: "Wretched, doomed victims of Hitler's tyranny! Poor men and women of good faith the world over! You have cherished an illusion. Your hopes have been in vain. Bermuda was not the dawn of a new era, of an era of humanity and compassion, of translating pity into deed. Bermuda was a mockery and cruel jest."⁷⁸

To stir the moral conscience of America, the Committee for a Jewish Army turned to drama as a weapon of protest. Theater would be their fire bell in the night to break the screaming silence. In March 1943, they sponsored a tour of Ben Hecht's pageant "We Will Never Die." Forty thousand people attended the opening presentation at Madison Square Garden. The performance presented an enactment of the history of Jews, their contributions to civilization, and the genocide they were experiencing. Hecht's powerful dramatization of Hitler's war against the Jews conveyed a passionate plea to Americans: everything possible should be done to rescue the remaining four million Jews.⁷⁹ Moved by the pageant, Eleanor Roosevelt wrote in her "My Day" column: "No one who heard each group come forward and give the story of what had happened to it at the hands of a ruthless German military, will ever forget those haunting words: 'Remember us.'"⁸⁰

But, for Peter Bergson, a leader of the Committee for a Jewish Army, Americans had to do much more than remember the victims of Nazism. What was desperately needed was action — the transfer of Jews from Hitler-dominated countries to places of refuge or to Palestine. In October 1943, Bergson took his campaign directly to Washington. Seeking to confront Roosevelt, he led several hundred Orthodox rabbis to the White House. Shortly before their ar-

rival, however, Roosevelt slipped away, first to attend a ceremony and then to retreat for a five-day weekend at Hyde Park. Meeting instead with Vice President Henry Wallace, the rabbis presented a petition calling for a special intergovernmental agency with powers and means to rescue the remaining Jews under Hitler's control. But Wallace only reaffirmed Roosevelt's rescue-through-victory strategy.

Only a Remnant Remained

By then, an ominous question had emerged: after the Allied triumph would there be any Jews left alive?

Unwilling to wait for an Allied victory, Representative Will Rogers and Senator Guy Gillette decided to press for a rescue program. In November 1943, they introduced resolutions that urged the President to create a commission of diplomatic, economic, and military experts that would create and implement a plan of action to save the remainder of the Jews in Europe. During a hearing on the issue before a House committee in December 1943, Breckinridge Long of the State Department testified that the United States was already doing everything it could to rescue Jews, and that the government had admitted approximately 580,000 refugees from Nazi-controlled countries.

Long's figures, however, represented the number of refugees who were theoretically eligible. In fact, less than half of this number had been admitted. Long himself had been actively working to exclude refugees. Claiming that they represented a security threat, he had helped to erect a maze of bureaucratic requirements and procedures that effectively limited refugee immigration. Protesting the State Department's immigration practices, Albert Einstein had written to Eleanor Roosevelt in 1942: "A policy is now being pursued which makes it all but impossible to give refuge in America to many worthy persons who are the victims of Fascist cruelty in Europe. Of course this is not openly avowed by those responsible for it. The method which is being used, however, is to make immigra-

tion impossible by creating a wall of bureaucratic measures alleged to be necessary to protect America against subversive, dangerous elements."⁸¹

Long's misleading testimony provoked a storm of protest as the resolution headed toward Senate committee hearings. In its report, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee urged action for a moral reason: "The problem is essentially a humanitarian one. It is not a Jewish problem alone. It is a Christian problem and a problem for enlightened civilization. . . . We have talked; we have sympathized; we have expressed our horror; the time to act is long past due."⁸² Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau recognized that the controversy over the resolution was "a boiling pot on the Hill," and that it was "going to pop": either Roosevelt would have to do something very fast or the Congress would do it for him.⁸³

Morgenthau decided to nudge Roosevelt into action. At a meeting with the President on January 16, 1944, he presented a report on the mass murders of Jews. The opening sentence expressed moral indignation: "One of the greatest crimes in history, the slaughter of the Jewish people in Europe, is continuing unabated." Morgenthau called for immediate action. "The matter of rescuing the Jews from extermination is a trust too great to remain in the hands of men who are indifferent, callous and perhaps even hostile. The task is filled with difficulties. Only a fervent will to accomplish, backed by persistent and untiring effort, can succeed where time is so precious."⁸⁴ The concerned Jewish secretary of the treasury warned the President that "a growing number of responsible people and organizations" believed that there was "plain anti-Semitism motivating the actions of these State Department officials, and, rightly or wrongly, it [would] require little more in the way of proof for this suspicion to explode into a nasty scandal."⁸⁵

A scandal was exactly what Roosevelt wished to avoid in an election year. Six days later, he signed an executive order establishing the War Refugee Board, a government agency that would be responsible for "the development of plans and programs and the inauguration of effective measures for a) the rescue, transportation

and maintenance and relief of the victims of enemy oppression, and b) the establishment of havens of temporary refuge for such victims."⁸⁶ Morgenthau's assistant in the Treasury Department, John W. Pehle, was appointed executive director of the new agency.

Welcoming the creation of the War Refugee Board, Jewish leaders urged the government to create havens of refuge in the United States. "Every surviving Jewish man, woman and child who can escape from the Hitlerite fury into the territories of the United Nations," the American Jewish Congress declared, should have "the right of temporary asylum." Making an analogy between refugees and goods stored temporarily in ports free from custom duties, the *Congress Weekly* called for the establishment of "free ports." Supporting a Senate resolution favoring "free ports," Bergson's committee published a full-page advertisement in the *Washington Post*: "25 Square Miles or Two Million Lives, Which Shall It Be?"⁸⁷

Roosevelt rejected these proposals. He defended the administration's policies by explaining that the government was transporting to North Africa all of the refugees who had been able to escape from Nazi control. The President also argued that it would be "wasteful and unnecessary to bring these refugees across the ocean from Europe only to return them later."⁸⁸ However, Pehle bluntly informed the President: "The necessity for unilateral action by this Government lies in the fact that we cannot expect others to do what we ourselves will not do and if we are to act in time we must take the lead." In the end, Roosevelt offered a small concession: he agreed to create an emergency shelter near Oswego, New York, for one thousand refugees representing "a reasonable proportion of various categories of persecuted people."⁸⁹

One thousand was not even a token number. By then, Hitler had seized control of Hungary, and the Nazis had begun shipping that country's 800,000 Jews to the death camps in Poland. At Auschwitz the gas chambers were murdering 12,000 people daily. German scientists had designed and built a state-of-the-art processing plant for genocide. A firsthand account of the killing fac-

tory was given by Sarah Cander, who was twenty-five years old when she was taken to the death camp.

Upon arrival we were separated from the males and brought in front of a building where heaps of clothing were lying on the ground. We were ordered to undress quickly and naked we were pushed into a pitch dark chamber (what we naively and hopefully thought to be a bath facility — although no soap or towel were given to us).

The doors closed behind us. Anxious seconds and minutes passed. Nothing seemed to happen for a while. Only cries and laments and hysterical screams were heard from every corner of the chamber. . . .

Suddenly a tremendous rumble shook the place. In the few minutes we could not understand what had happened, but soon enough we recognized the familiar sound of over-flying bombers. The shattering noises and rumblings continued throughout the night. Exhausted, neither dead nor-alive, holding on to each other, cramped and entrapped we waited in darkness for the inevitable to come.⁹⁰

Those "rumblings" were American bombers. What was urgently needed to end the carnage was the immediate destruction of the machinery of genocide — the Allied bombing of the rail lines leading to Auschwitz and even the death camp itself. On July 6, 1944, representatives of the Jewish Agency for Palestine asked the British air force to carry out the bombings; a day later, Winston Churchill responded favorably. "Get anything out of the Air Force that you can," he wrote to Anthony Eden.⁹¹ But Churchill was informed that British air bases were too far away for their planes to reach the targeted rail lines or Auschwitz. American planes, however, were within striking distance.

On July 24, the Emergency Committee to Save the Jewish Peo-

ple of Europe asked Roosevelt to order the bombing of the railways and the gas chambers. The destruction of the railways, the committee argued, would disrupt not only the transportation of Jews but also military traffic. Roosevelt did not respond. A week later, a rally of forty thousand people at Madison Square Garden demanded that the United States stop the genocide by making every effort to destroy the Nazi extermination facilities.

On August 8, the World Jewish Congress forwarded to the War Refugee Board an urgent message from Czechoslovakian leader Ernest Frischer: "Germans are now exhuming and burning corpses in an effort to conceal their crimes. This could be prevented by destruction of crematoria and then Germans might possibly stop further mass exterminations especially since so little time is left to them."⁹² The next day, A. Leon Kubowitzki of the World Jewish Congress forwarded this plea to Assistant Secretary of War John J. McCloy. Five days later, McCloy replied:

Dear Mr. Kubowitzki:

I refer to your letter of August 9 in which you request consideration of a proposal made by Mr. Ernest Frischer that certain installations and railroad centers be bombed.

The War Department has been approached by the War Refugee Board, which has raised the question of the practicality of this suggestion. After a study it became apparent that such an operation could be executed only by the diversion of considerable air support essential to the success of our forces now engaged in decisive operations elsewhere and would in any case be of such doubtful efficacy that it would not warrant the use of our resources. There has been considerable opinion to the effect that such an effort, even if practicable, might provoke even more vindictive action by the Germans.

The War Department fully appreciates the humanitarian motives which prompted the suggested operation,

but for the reasons stated above, it has not been felt that it can or should be undertaken, at least at this time.

Sincerely,

John J. McCloy⁹³

But how could German actions be "even more vindictive"? And would bombing the rail lines and crematoria have been much of a "diversion"? At that time, American planes were dropping bombs near the death camp itself. On August 20, they attacked munitions factories in the city of Auschwitz less than five miles east of the gas chambers. On the ground, Shalom Lindenbaum and a group of Jews were being moved into a "bath house," which he knew was a gas chamber. "I remember how I ran ahead of my father in order to be together in what seemed to be our last hour," he later wrote. "At that time Allied bombers appeared in the sky. It will be difficult to describe our joy. We prayed and hoped to be bombed by them, and so to escape the helpless death in the gas chambers. To be bombed meant a chance that also the Germans will be killed. Therefore we were deeply disappointed and sad when they passed over, not bombing."⁹⁴

Hitler's factories of death continued to emit their sorrow-filled smoke. Determined to do what they could to destroy the killing facilities, a group of desperate prisoners blew up one of the crematorium buildings in a suicidal uprising. They used some explosives stolen by Jewish women working at one of the munitions factories that American planes were trying to bomb.⁹⁵ By then, as Roosevelt's rescue-through-victory strategy was coming to a conclusion, only a remnant of the Jews in Europe remained alive.

"Scratches" on the Door: Remember Us, Please

Rescue came, finally, when Allied troops advanced into Germany in April 1945. The first death camp liberated was Ohrdruf. On April 12, General Omar Bradley and General Dwight Eisenhower

toured the extermination facility. Bradley was overwhelmed, physically sickened by the smell of death. "More than 3,200 naked, emaciated bodies had been flung into shallow graves," he recalled. "Others lay on the streets where they had fallen. Lice crawled over the yellowed skin of their sharp, bony frames." Eisenhower thought his troops should see the gruesome evidence, and ordered all nearby units that were not engaged in combat to tour Ohrdruf. "We are told that the American soldier does not know what he is fighting for," he declared. "Now, at least, he will know what he is fighting *against*."⁹⁶

At Dachau, Japanese-American soldiers of the 442nd saw directly the ghastliness of ethnic cleansing rooted in the Nazi ideology of racial hatred. "When the gates swung open, we got our first good look at the prisoners," Ichiro Imamura wrote in his diary. "Many of them were Jews. They were wearing black and white striped prison suits and round caps. A few had shredded blanket rags draped over their shoulders. . . . The prisoners struggled to their feet [and] shuffled weakly out of the compound. They were like skeletons — all skin and bones."⁹⁷

Initially, the Jewish prisoners were surprised and confused to see soldiers of Japanese ancestry. "When they first came in, we thought they were [the Japanese] allies of the Germans," a survivor recalled. "We believed they were there to torture us." The inmates thought that their liberators did not look like "Americans." When she saw the Nisei soldiers, Janina Cywinska, a Catholic woman who had been sent to Dachau when her family was caught smuggling weapons to Jewish resisters, exclaimed: "Oh, no, you're a Japanese and you're going to kill us." And a Nisei soldier replied: "We are *American* Japanese. You are free."⁹⁸

The gaze into Hitler's chamber of horrors was particularly dreadful for Jewish-American soldiers. Entering one of the barracks at Buchenwald, Chaplin Rabbi Herschel Schacter saw hundreds of survivors lying on shelves from the floor to the ceiling. They were "strewn over scraggly straw sacks," looking down at him out of dazed eyes. Schacter then shouted in Yiddish, "Sholem

Aleychem, Yiden, yir zent frey!" "You are free." Schacter felt a special empathy for this pitiful humanity before him: "If my own father had not caught the boat on time, I would have been there."⁹⁹

David Malachowsky of the 104th Infantry Division was stunned when he saw "row upon row of bodies just stacked like cordwood maybe five feet high." The rotting bodies had created a smell that saturated the countryside for miles around. Then Malachowsky came across the living — emaciated souls with huge sunken eyes. One of them, looking like an old woman, turned out to be a seventeen-year-old girl. Speaking Yiddish, she kept asking for water, "wasser." Malachowsky recalled the rage he felt: "I know that as a Jew, I was more incensed, I feel, than many of the other soldiers, even though they also were terribly upset by this regardless of what religion they had. I heard that there were special camps just for Jews like myself. And I could just visualize what had happened to them. And so seeing this, I mean, just the bestiality — what kind of mentality would permit this?"¹⁰⁰

Dr. Philip Lief of the 3rd Auxiliary Surgical Group, First Army, wondered how this murderous madness could come out of a highly civilized society. "I had studied German literature while an undergraduate at Harvard College," he told an interviewer. "I knew about the culture of the German people and I could not, could not really believe that this was happening in this day and age; that in the twentieth century a cultured people like the Germans would undertake something like this. It was just beyond our imagination."¹⁰¹ In the apartment of Buchenwald's commandant, Lief had seen a pocketbook and a lampshade made out of human skin.

At Dachau, Walter J. Fellenz realized that the Nazi facility represented "an organized scheme of destruction of a whole race of people!" During an inspection of the camp, he had entered a storage warehouse. "This large building contained the naked, dead bodies of over 4,000 men, women and children, thrown one on top of the other like sacks of potatoes," he reported. "The odor was terrific. I vomited three times in less than five minutes; it was

the most revolting smell I have ever experienced." Fellenz then visited the gas chamber. Over its entrance, written in Yiddish, was the word "Showers." The room itself was inlaid with high-quality brown tile and had 200 chrome shower nozzles. How could the Nazi guards have lived with themselves, asked Fellenz, after herding people into the chambers, turning on what appeared to be showers, and then piling the bodies in stacks to be burned? The executioners, he thought, must have initially found their actions abhorrent, but then the killing had become "an everyday thing."¹⁰³

Chaplin Judah Nadich tried to picture what it was like to be in the gas chamber. The rabbi had noticed thousands of scratches on the inside of the door, "scratches that must have been made by the fingernails of so many men and women and children." Outside of the crematorium, he inspected what looked like potato sacks, stamped with the German word for fertilizer. Suddenly, Nadich realized that the sacks were filled with human ash from the furnaces, ready for shipment to German farms. "I plunged my arm into one of the sacks up to the elbow," he recalled, "and pressed the 'fertilizer,' the human ash, with the fingers of my hand into my palm and ground it into my palm so that I might never forget what I had seen there."¹⁰³

Also witnessing what they would never forget were African-American soldiers. When they entered the Nazi killing fields of Buchenwald and Dachau, many of them broke down emotionally. "I was seventeen, and my life was almost extinguished," recalled Buchenwald prisoner Ben Bender. "For me, it was an instant awakening of life after a long darkness. . . . I was seeing black soldiers for the first time in my life, crying like babies, carrying the dead and the starved and trying to help everybody." "It was the morning of April 11," recalled Elie Wiesel, an inmate of Buchenwald. "I will always remember with love a big black soldier. He was crying like a child — tears of all the pain in the world and all the rage."¹⁰⁴

At Dachau, black soldier Paul Parks experienced a sickening sensation as he scanned the horror — the survivors looking like

ghosts, the ovens still warm. "Why Jews?" asked Parks, who three years earlier had witnessed the sadistic murder of a fellow black soldier in Louisiana. "It doesn't make sense. Why were they killed?" A prisoner explained: "They were killed because they were Jews." Parks commented: "I understand that." Then he added: "I understand that because I've seen people lynched just because they were black." Parks compared the experiences of African Americans and Jews: "There's one other great incident of humanity that I'm very familiar with, the three hundred years of slavery in my own country, where people for generations were not allowed to be free, subject to the dictates of another race. Held in bondage, forced to work, and forced to do what another person wanted you to do. And if you didn't obey, there were no laws against killing you and destroying your family. So I said, 'As you talk, I see there's a close parallel between the history of my people in America and what's happened to the Jews in Europe.'"¹⁰⁵

At Dachau, African-American soldiers like Parks understood a valuable lesson: the war for "double victory" was a cross-stitched struggle for victory over anti-Semitism in Europe and over racism in America.