VI. Refugee Migrations

By Milton Himmelfarb*

It was during the period under review that Prime Minister Churchill saw "the end of the beginning"; others saw the beginning of the end; the year may be reckoned as favorable in Jewish chronicles. At the same time, those very developments, military and political, which inspired hope for victory not too long delayed, in part prevented immediate ameliorative and rescue work, and thus deepened Jewish misery in Europe.

Four months before the Allied landing in North Africa the mass deportations to the east had started from France. After July 1942, no exit visas were issued to Jews in that country. This was the situation even before the Nazis occupied the whole country in November. Some Jews, however, managed to escape. About eight thousand crossed the Pyrenees into Spain, eight or nine hundred reached Portugal, and some eight thousand found shelter across the Alps in Switzerland. How many died in the attempt and how many committed suicide when they were turned back, we do not know.

Surrounded by Axis territory, dependent on the Axis for vital imports, Switzerland nevertheless tried to give the fullest possible effect to her traditional policy of asylum. Private reports from Jewish organizations in France do not condemn her for not accepting all those who tried to enter.

For those Jews who did succeed in reaching the neutral and non-belligerent countries, further emigration was possible only from Spain and Portugal. The Iberian peninsula, therefore, replaced France as the principal center of relief and emigration work. About three thousand were able to leave for the United States, Latin America, Great Britain and other countries, and Palestine. Since the total was so small, no one country received any substantial number of refugee immigrants.

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Although some hundreds of Palestinian entry certificates had been made available in Spain and Portugal, difficulties of shipping and itinerary very drastically limited the number of refugees that finally arrived in Palestine. When the Portuguese showed they were unwilling to extend any considerable number of transit visas for Lourenço Marques in Mozambique, Jewish organizations worked out an ingenious route, involving steamer, river boat, airplane and railroad, through the Belgian Congo to Egypt and Palestine. This plan was not used much, however, and we may assume that it is no longer needed now that Allied troops have rid North Africa of the Axis.

In Spain where the very large majority of the Jews in the Iberian peninsula were found, the difficulties and complexities of rescue work were enormous, largely because of the clandestine and “illegal” nature of the refugees’ entry into that country. Most of the arrivals had destroyed their documents; their claim to the citizenship of various countries was conditioned not by fact, but by desire and by their estimate of the difficulty which would confront authorities to prove that citizenship non-existent. Almost to a man they were penniless, since what money they had left after the expenses involved in crossing the Pyrenees had been confiscated by the Spanish Government because it had not been declared upon entry. That that declaration was impossible because the entry itself could not be regular was no obstacle to confiscation.

In Portugal the problem was not so acute, if only because there were so many less Jewish refugees there. Emigration, however, was especially difficult for Russian Jews and those who had Nansen passports, because Portugal had no relations with Russia and there was no representative of the Nansen office of the League of Nations in the country.

For many of the Jews in Axis Europe, their plight was aggravated by illusory hopes of escape, continually recurring and constantly—often at the last moment—frustrated. In France, for example, it frequently happened that just as negotiations seemed to be progressing fairly smoothly, and convoys of emigrants were being formed, malice and ineptitude prevented the success of great efforts, carried through under the most trying, complex and humiliating
stresses. As six hundred adults and children were on the point of leaving France for Portugal after all the necessary documents — exit visas, transit visas, entry visas and the like — had been secured, they were suddenly deported by the Germans, "destination unknown." Two thousand Jews who had rejoiced at receiving American visas were deported eastward by the Nazis. As five hundred of one thousand children approved for emigration and immigration to the United States were on the point of leaving France, the North African invasion took place and their departure was prevented.

Argentina's announced plan to give refuge to one thousand Jewish children trapped in France, although not definitely abandoned, has so far not resulted in the rescue of any children.

Early in 1943 there were rumors that Rumania was willing to release seventy thousand Jews from Transnistria (Rumanian-occupied Ukraine) to Palestine, if the necessary expenses were covered. Nothing came of these rumors, and it is difficult to determine their origin and purpose.

The negotiations for the transfer of some four thousand children and five hundred adults from Bulgaria to Palestine were still hanging fire as the period under review ended. At one point the International Red Cross had refused to approve the unseaworthy ships chartered for the transfer.

Reports show that parents abandoned or surrendered children in order to save them. It was a feeble consolation for some that their children actually did reach countries where they would be brought up in schools and not in concentration camps; but many parents had given up their children to no purpose, because their escape was later cut off.

Even those few adult Jews who finally found themselves out of the reach of the Nazis carried away unhappy memories of their flight. An eyewitness in France, overlooking the commonplace dangers, privations and physical suffering, says: "A new industry was created, in which smugglers, passers, conveyers, intermediaries and even sellers of useful addresses played their part. This was a clear case of demand evoking supply; but it is impossible to condemn strongly enough the mentality and the cupidity of these modern devourers of the dead. They speculated in human wretched-
ness, and, in the guise of rescue, shamelessly exploited unfortu-
tunates who were haunted by a frequently well-founded fear... Consulates, prefectures, police offices and private individuals, all gave free rein to their lust for gain. There were to be found, however, decent people who helped with all their heart those who called upon them for help....”

These decent people included a large number of clergy, both Catholic and Protestant, who took risks beyond what could reasonably be expected and many of whom were punished with great severity when their rescue work was discovered.

Nor was malice confined to the European continent and to the Nazis, their satellites and the collaborating regimes. When almost one thousand Jewish children had finally succeeded in reaching Teheran after a terrible journey through and from Russia, the Government of Iraq, now one of the United Nations, refused them passage through its territory to Palestine. It felt that it should not assist in the strengthening of the Jewish settlement in Palestine in any manner. The children therefore had to take the sea route from Iran to Palestine, with all that it meant in delay and continued suffering.

In Cuba, too, it was discovered in 1942 that a lucrative traffic in Cuban visas had existed in France, and that many of the refugees arriving in Cuba had invalid documents. All entry visas for those not yet arrived in Cuba were retroactively suspended. How this affected holders of Cuban visas still in France, in money lost, frantic and obstinate work gone to waste and hope frustrated, can only be guessed.

Throughout the year, Jewish organizations continued their work wherever they could. Most of the rescues that were effected may be attributed to them. Often their representatives worked under conditions of personal danger; hardships, inadequate food and devoted exertion were considered normal.

The Bermuda Conference

As the year wore on, and especially after the Nazis took over the whole of France, the situation of the Jews trapped in Europe became so urgent that public opinion insisted
something had to be done about it. Organizations in this country and in Great Britain, Jewish, church and labor, persisted in calling for concrete rescue work while Jews were still alive to benefit from it. Especially in Great Britain, Christian public opinion was admirable. The highest prelates of the Established Church, the Catholic Cardinal, Nonconformists, Members of Parliament and Labor representatives joined in a steady insistence upon action.

On March 3, 1943, two days after a mass meeting in New York City protesting against Nazi outrages, the American Department of State made public an invitation to the British Government to participate in a "preliminary exploration" of the problem at Ottawa. This invitation was the State Department's reply to a communication from the British Embassy in January.

Lest the public be encouraged, however, to believe that drastic changes would occur in the immigration and rescue activities of Great Britain and the United States, the governments of both countries presented, simultaneously with the announcement of the refugee conference, data designed to show that they had not been remiss in assisting refugees since Hitler came to power. Thus, the State Department showed that from 1933 until the end of June 1942, almost 550,000 visas had been issued by American consuls in countries under Axis control, including 225,000 issued since 1939; and the British Embassy showed that in the same ten-year period about one hundred thousand refugees had been admitted into Great Britain itself, and during the war three thousand into Jamaica, and additional numbers in other parts of the Empire.

With reference to the American figures, students of the problem pointed out that the 325,000 visas issued before the outbreak of the war in Europe included those issued to persons outside of Germany. As for the figure of more than 225,000 visas issued since 1939, analysis showed that taken by itself this was deceptive, and that at the most only 92,000 persons had actually come to the United States in their escape from the Nazis during the years in question. It was further estimated that less than 165,000 Jews had entered the United States between 1933 and 1942.

For some people the British statement was somewhat
vitiated by its remark that "Mauritius has taken fifteen hundred emigrants from Palestine." It was remembered that these "emigrants" were in reality Jews who wished to be Palestinian immigrants, who had not stood upon the formality of quota and certificate in their attempt to enter Palestine and who were deported thence by the British to Mauritius. Doubt was also expressed, among others, about the figure of one hundred thousand for the United Kingdom, if the word "refugees" was to be understood in its accepted sense.

When the conference did take place, it was not in Ottawa. Not having been consulted before the suggestion was made, the Canadian Government had not taken very kindly to the proposal that the conference be held in that city, so Bermuda was substituted. There was some feeling, too, that neither the British nor the American Government regretted the subsequent choice of a place relatively inaccessible in wartime, difficult for the press to work in, and consequently shielded from the pressure of a public opinion which might have been more concerned with action than reasons for inaction.

The Anglo-American Refugee Conference (commonly called the Bermuda Conference) met from April 19 to April 30. The American representatives were Chairman Harold Willis Dodds, president of Princeton University; Representative Sol Bloom (Dem., N. Y.), chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee; and Senator Scott Lucas, (Dem., Ill.); the American experts were George Backer, formerly publisher of the New York Post, president of the American ORT and the Jewish Telegraphic Agency, and active in the Refugee Economic Corporation; Robert Post, assistant chief of the State Department's Visa Division; Julian Foster, shipping specialist; and George Warren, of the Office of Foreign Relief and Rehabilitation Operations, and executive secretary of the President's Advisory Committee on Political Refugees. The British delegation included Chairman Richard K. Law, Parliamentary Under Secretary for Foreign Affairs; Osbert Peake, Parliamentary Under Secretary for the Home Office, which is in charge of immigration; and George Henry Hall,
Parliamentary Under Secretary of the Admiralty, which would have to deal with shipping.

Even before starting, the Conference made it very clear that exaggerated hopes were not in order. Secretary of State Cordell Hull had already warned that the American Government “must be bound by legislation enacted by the Congress determining the immigration policy of the United States.” He also expressed the view that the solution to be arrived at could best be carried out by the international organization already in existence, the Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees. Representative Bloom pointed out that, in view of the probable indigence of most of the refugees, they would not be eligible for permanent entry visas. Dr. Dodds expressed the belief that “the solution to the refugee problem is to win the war.” In this he shared the sentiments of some prominent United Nations statesmen, among them Anthony Eden, the British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs. It was anonymously allowed to be understood that the possibility of feeding the Jews starving in Nazi Europe had been eliminated because the Nazis would try to divert to their own use any food that might be sent. The United Press reported the belief of the British delegation that there was “little possibility for any immediate relief for millions of hapless persons in Europe.” It was emphasized over and over again that the function of the Conference was not immediate and practical, but rather “exploratory.”

Many observers felt that Secretary Hull’s recommendation that the problem be considered as applying equally to all peoples was detrimental. They gave two reasons; it ignored the specifically anti-Jewish character of the Nazi exterminations in Europe, over and above the oppression imposed on all the conquered peoples; and it made the frame of reference of the problem so wide as in practice largely to preclude effective and concrete remedial work.

As the Conference proceeded, the New York Times could print a headline: “Scant Hope Seen for Axis Victims.” Every communication to the press spoke of the magnitude and the difficulties of the problem, and the implication was clear that no great expectations should be cherished. When the Conference finally ended, it announced that its recom-
mendations and results could not be made public because they "necessarily concern governments other than those represented at the Bermuda Conference." Only the following communiqué was issued:

The United States and United Kingdom delegates examined the refugee problem in all its aspects including the position of those potential refugees who are still in the grip of the Axis powers without any immediate prospect of escape.

Nothing was excluded from their analysis and everything that held out any possibility, however remote, of a solution of the problem was carefully investigated and thoroughly discussed.

From the outset it was realized that any recommendation that the delegates could make to their governments must pass two tests:

Would any recommendation submitted interfere with or delay the war effort of the United Nations and was the recommendation capable of accomplishment under war conditions?

The delegates at Bermuda felt bound to reject certain proposals which were not capable of meeting these tests.

The delegates were able to agree on a number of concrete recommendations which they are jointly submitting to their governments and which, it is felt, will pass the tests set forth above and will lead to the relief of a substantial number of refugees of all races and nationalities.

Since the recommendations necessarily concern governments other than those represented at the Bermuda conference and involve military considerations, they must remain confidential.

It may be said, however, that in the course of discussion the refugee problem was broken down into its main elements. Questions of shipping, food and supply were fully investigated.

The delegates also agreed on recommendations regarding the form of intergovernmental organization
which was best fitted, in their opinion, to handle the problem in the future. This organization would have to be flexible enough to permit it to consider without prejudice any new factors that might come to its attention.

In each of these fields the delegates were able to submit agreed proposals for consideration of their respective governments.

Jewish organizations were active, both before and during the Conference, in keeping the problem in the public eye and in submitting recommendations and suggestions. In the United States, the Joint Emergency Committee for European Jewish Affairs submitted a twelve-point program of relief and rescue to the Bermuda Conference. This program largely corresponded to the resolutions adopted at the March 1 mass meeting in New York City; an additional suggestion was made that in view of the refugees' lack of official documents—which in Europe had acquired a monstrous and obscene importance—the Nansen passport system should be extended to stateless refugees. The request of the Emergency Committee for representation at the Conference was refused. The World Jewish Congress also submitted a memorandum, largely in support of the Joint Emergency Committee proposals and of the virtually similar proposals of the British Joint Foreign Committee, representing the major Jewish organizations in Great Britain. The Jewish Agency for Palestine submitted a document emphasizing the importance of Palestine in the solution of the refugee problem and calling for abandonment of the British White Paper policy.

It is not surprising that the Conference was not universally hailed as having provided an adequate answer to the tragic problem. The Joint Emergency Committee felt that the time was premature for condemnation, since the results and decisions of the Conference had not officially been made public. Other Jewish organizations were less reserved and expressed their disappointment in strong terms. Most of the Jewish press in this country and abroad published blistering editorials. General public opinion differed from Jewish opinion largely in its lesser intensity of disapproval;
much of the press felt that Jewish rescue unfortunately had to be sacrificed to Allied military exigencies.

As the period under survey ended, therefore, it seemed that the Jews of Europe would have to wait for the definitive military defeat of Hitler and that they could expect no salvation before that time. How many would remain alive to rejoice in Hitler's downfall could not be foreseen. Many observers feared that a pessimistic estimate was the realistic one.