

Golda Meir and the Campaign for an Allied Bombing of Auschwitz

by Rafael Medoff

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

During the Holocaust, Jewish leaders in British Mandatory Palestine received detailed information about the mass murder of Europe's Jews. Golda Meir, a leader of the powerful Histadrut labor union, forwarded the information to the union's American representative, Israel Mereminski, and repeatedly pressed Mereminski to lobby the U.S. government and others to respond more forcefully to the plight of European Jewry, including urging the bombing of Auschwitz. For years, defenders of President Roosevelt's response to the Holocaust have claimed that important Jewish leaders opposed bombing Auschwitz; but now we know that one of the most revered figures in modern Jewish history, Golda Meir, was among those who tried to bring about the bombing of the Nazi death camp.

I WHAT JEWISH LEADERS IN PALESTINE KNEW ABOUT THE HOLOCAUST, AND WHEN

During the Holocaust years, the Jewish leadership in British Mandatory Palestine (the Yishuv) received a steady stream of reports from Europe about Nazi atrocities against Jews. These reports reached the executive board of the Jewish Agency, the Labor Zionist-dominated shadow government of Palestine Jewry; the Histadrut, the powerful Jewish labor federation controlled by the Labor Zionists; and Mapai, the Labor Zionists' political party. The reports from Europe were routinely shared among leaders of all three institutions.¹

Many of the reports originated with the Jewish Agency's representatives in Geneva, Budapest, and Ankara, who had compiled them from escapees and other sources they considered credible. Some of the reports came from their own comrades, that is, Labor Zionists who were trapped in Axis territory and had first-hand knowledge of the situation there.

¹ Dina Porat, *The Blue and the Yellow Stars of David: The Zionist Leadership in Palestine and the Holocaust, 1939-1945* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 7.

"Separated from you by sea of blood and continents heaped with corpses, we send you fraternal greetings," one message in 1944 began. "We live work fight under incessant threat of death...We want you to know and tell Palestine workers that Jewish workers Poland did their duty to the last...strengthened by belief in future Jewish labour socialist Palestine."²

Reports that reached the Jewish Agency leadership in Palestine were handled by the Agency's Rescue Committee, chaired by Yitzhak Gruenbaum, a former Polish Zionist leader. Some of the reports were also discussed at meetings of the Jewish Agency Executive, chaired by David Ben-Gurion. Gruenbaum often forwarded the information, together with appeals for Allied intervention, to Jewish Agency representatives and other Jewish leaders in Europe and the United States.

Reports from Europe that reached Histadrut headquarters, in Tel Aviv, were usually handled by the Histadrut's general secretary, David Remez, and Golda Meir (then known as Goldie Myerson), chair of its Political Department. Mrs. Meir, who had grown up mostly in the United States, had become a member of the Histadrut's executive in 1934 and was also responsible for the Histadrut's ties to the United States, including contacts with its American representative, Israel Mereminski.

The German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941 was followed almost immediately by machine-gun massacres of thousands, and sometimes tens of thousands, of Jews in Nazi-overrun towns. Reports about some of these early atrocities began reaching Palestine and the United States in late 1941 and early 1942. However, at this stage the information seemed to indicate that the killings were random outbursts, rather than a systematic campaign to annihilate all of Europe's Jews.

A turning point in Palestine Jewry's awareness of the mass murder came in November 1942, when 69 Palestinian Jews who had been trapped in Europe at the start of the war finally returned home, as part of a prisoner exchange with the Germans. The returnees presented the Yishuv leadership with detailed, eyewitness reports about Nazi atrocities, including some of the earliest solid information about the death camps of Treblinka and Sobibor (but not Auschwitz, which was still known to the outside world as a forced labor camp). A few weeks later, on December 17, 1942, the Allied governments publicly confirmed that there was a "German policy" to carry out the "extermination of the Jewish race" in Europe, and that "many hundreds of thousands" had already been slaughtered.³

² Reiss to Labor Federation, 15 August 1944, File IV 104-113-89, David Remez Papers, Pinchas Lavon Institute, Tel Aviv (hereafter DRP).

³ Porat, 36-38; David S. Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews: America and the Holocaust 1941-45* (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 73-75]

II AN UNKNOWN LOBBYIST FOR RESCUE

Prof. David S. Wyman and other historians have amply documented the many unsuccessful attempts by American Jewish leaders, beginning in late 1942, to persuade the Roosevelt administration to intervene on behalf of European Jewry. In meetings with officials of the State Department and War Department, and on several occasions with President Roosevelt himself, Jewish representatives proposed numerous steps that could be taken to rescue refugees. Administration spokesmen replied that rescue was impossible because it would divert resources from the Allied war effort. It was only near the end of the war, under strong pressure from Jewish activists, Congress, and the Treasury Department, that FDR reluctantly created the War Refugee Board, the ostensible purpose of which was to rescue Jews from Hitler.

Scholars who have examined American Jewish organizations' responses to the Holocaust have seldom come across Israel Mereminski's name in the deliberations of American Jewish leaders or in their contacts with U.S. government officials. Since he represented an organization focusing on Palestine Jewry's social and economic issues, not matters of foreign policy, it was natural to assume that Mereminski would have been preoccupied with fundraising and the like.

In fact, however, the correspondence between Histadrut headquarters and Mereminski during 1943-1944 reveals that Meir and Remez repeatedly enlisted Mereminski to lobby for U.S. action to save European Jewry.

Mrs. Meir was one of the more vocal advocates of activism within the Palestine Labor Zionist hierarchy. For example, she often pressed reluctant Jewish Agency officials to allocate larger sums of money for rescue activities. At one point, over the objections of the Agency leaders, Histadrut officials created a separate committee, headed by Meir, to raise funds for rescue operations. "Are we going to say that we shall rescue such and such a number and no more because we have no money?," she berated an Agency colleague on one occasion.⁴

As early as January 1943, Meir and Remez were peppering Mereminski with telegrams pressing him to act. A January 7 cable urged him to promote "idea Jewish mass demonstration urging immediate [Allied] action stop according latest news every delay fatal." Five days later, they wrote: "Greatly astonished lack public mass actions American Jewry for saving Jews Europe...Why don't we hear from you stop Resolutions meetings only not sufficient American

⁴ Porat, 76-77, 80-81; Tuvia Friling, *Arrows in the Dark: David Ben-Gurion, the Yishuv Leadership, and Rescue Attempts During the Holocaust* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), Vol. I, 150; Vol. II, 99, 109-110, 145.

Jewry must change ordinary way of life and mobilise all and everything to save brethren Nazi occupied territory."⁵

Bemoaning the "lack of real effort [by the Allies] to save any number Jews," Meir and Remez wrote Mereminski in May 1943 of the need to "stir public opinion England and the United States [to] force governments act before too late." Even an ordinary message of solidarity to Mereminski for a U.S. conference of Histadrut supporters, in November 1943, ended: "In conclusion one more sentence more yet than last year we feel now entire Jewish people including us didn't do enough to save our persecuted exterminated masses..."⁶

Many of the telegrams from Meir and Remez urged Mereminski to seek the intervention of American labor leaders on behalf of European Jewry. The Histadrut officials hoped that prominent labor movement figures such as Philip Murray, president of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) and United Steel Workers of America, and William Green, president of the American Federation of Labor, would extend their "fraternal devoted help" if asked to do so by their fellow-labor activists in the Histadrut. Meir and Remez hoped Murray and Green would "fulfill holy human labour duty saving innocent beings," by using their influence with the Roosevelt administration to bring about "material rescue actions" by the Allies. "Honour conscience labour movement facing great trial," Meir and Remez pleaded.

Mereminski's contacts with the AFL and CIO evidently played at least some role in galvanizing the labor leaders' response to the plight of Europe's Jews. On numerous occasions between 1942 and 1944, Green, Murray, and their colleagues issued public statements urging rescue, presented rescue proposals directly to Roosevelt administration officials, called for temporary suspension of U.S. immigration restrictions in order to shelter refugees (a significant departure from traditional labor positions on immigration) endorsed congressional measures to aid European Jewry, and even helped finance the Swedish rescue of thousands of Danish Jews.⁷

Following the establishment of the War Refugee Board in early 1944, Mereminski maintained regular contact with senior officials of the board, both by telephone and occasional visits to the board's offices in Washington, D.C. Mereminski gave the WRB the reports from his

⁵ Myerson and Remez to Mereminski, 7 January 1943, 12 January 1943, and 8 April 1943, File IV 208-2-404, DRP.

⁶ Myerson and Remez to Mereminski, 10 May 1943, File IV 208-2-404, DRP; Remez and Myerson to Mereminski, Schlossberg, and Hamlin, 19 November 1943, File IV 208-2-404, DRP.

⁷ Wyman, 63, 68, 93-94, 150, 199, 230, 263; Myerson and Remez to Mereminski (containing text of their cable to Green), 10 January 1943, File IV 208-2-404, DRP; Myerson and Remez to Green, 8 February 1943, File IV 208-2-404, DRP; Myerson and Remez to Mereminski, 17 June 1943, File IV 208-2-404, DRP; Mereminski to Remez, 22 April 1943 and 30 April 1943, File IV 208-2-404, DRP; Myerson and Remez to Mereminski, 2 July 1944, File IV 104-87-268, DRP; Brophy to Mereminski, 28 May 1943 and Mereminski to Brophy, 1 June 1943, File IV 208-2-404, DRP; Mereminski to Remez, 13 August 1944, File IV 104-113-89, DRP.

Histadrut colleagues about the situation in Europe, presented them with the Histadrut leaders' specific proposals for rescue steps.⁸

III APPEALS FOR BOMBING

Until the late spring of 1944, the rescue steps proposed by the Histadrut, the Jewish Agency, and American Jewish groups, typically asked the Allies to provide temporary shelter for refugees; to press Axis satellites to permit their Jewish citizens to emigrate; and to open Palestine to Jewish immigration.

Beginning in late May 1944, Jewish leaders in Europe, Palestine, and the United States often added another proposal--to bomb the Auschwitz death camp and the railway lines leading to it. Two developments led to this demand: the Allies finally controlled the skies over Europe, making such bombing attacks feasible for the first time; and new information furnished by two escapees from Auschwitz, Rudolf Vrba and Alfred Wetzler, revealed important details of the mass-murder process as well as the precise location of the gas chambers and crematoria. Until they received the Vrba-Wetzler report in late June 1944, the Jewish Agency leadership had mistakenly believed that Auschwitz was only a slave labor camp.

Jewish leaders who asked U.S. officials to bomb Auschwitz usually received a stock reply from Assistant Secretary of War John McCloy, claiming it was "impracticable" because it would require "diversion of considerable air support essential to the success of our forces now engaged in decisive operations." Research by Prof. David S. Wyman later revealed that, in fact, U.S. planes in 1944 repeatedly bombed German oil targets adjacent to Auschwitz, some of them less than five miles from the gas chambers. Hence the claim that bombing the mass murder facilities would have been a "diversion" was untrue.⁹

Between May 1944 and January 1945, proposals to bomb the camp or the railways were made to American, British, or Soviet government officials by representatives of the Jewish Agency in London, Geneva, Budapest, Istanbul, Jerusalem, Cairo, and Washington, D.C.; the World Jewish Congress; the Orthodox group Agudath Israel; and the Emergency Committee to Save the Jewish People of Europe (the Bergson Group).

⁸ Mereminski to Remez and Myerson date unclear (1944), File IV 208-2-404, DRP; Remez and Myerson to Mereminski, 8 February 1944, File IV 208-2-404, DRP.

⁹ Wyman, 288-307.

What was not known until now is that Golda Meir and her Histadrut colleagues were also involved in promoting the bombing of Auschwitz.

On July 29, 1944, Meir and another Histadrut executive committee member, Heschel Frumkin, cabled Mereminski "horrible details concerning Hungarian Jews deported to Poland," which they said were provided to them in "a letter from Lvov [Poland] underground." They reported that "four trains arrive at Oswienzim [the Polish name for Auschwitz] daily, consisting of forty-five coaches each containing twelve thousand people to be exterminated." The message asked that the Allies be urged to undertake "the bombing of Oswienzim and railway transporting Jews" to the death camp. (Typographical error in the original; "Oswiecim" was the Polish name for Auschwitz.)¹⁰

Mereminski replied that he had contacted the U.S. government's War Refugee Board, which in turn had submitted "to competent authorities" the Frumkin-Myerson request for "destruction gas chambers, crematories, and so forth."¹¹

Almost simultaneously, *Jewish Frontier*, the monthly magazine of the U.S. Labor Zionist movement, published (in its August 1944 edition) an unsigned editorial calling for "Allied bombings of the death camps and the roads leading to them..." This is the only known instance of an official organ of an American Jewish organization publicly calling for bombing the camps; other organizations confined such appeals to private channels.¹²

Mereminski is not known to have been involved in writing editorials for *Jewish Frontier*, but he was a senior figure in Labor Zionist activity in America and he was closely acquainted with its editors. It seems likely that as a result of his contacts with Myerson and Frumkin, he discussed the topic with his colleagues at *Jewish Frontier*, leading to the editorial.¹³

¹⁰ Frumkin and Myerson to Mereminski, 29 July 1944, Box 42, War Refugee Board Papers, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, NY.

¹¹ Mereminski to Myerson and Frumkin, 18 August 1944, File IV 104-113-89, DRP.

¹² There were also several calls for bombing, or at least sympathetic references to the idea of such bombings, in independent publications such as the *Independent Jewish Press Service*, the *National Jewish Ledger*, the Yiddish daily *Morgen Zhurnal*, and *Opinion* magazine. But *Jewish Frontier* was the only organizational mouthpiece to do so. ("We and Hungarian Jewry" (editorial), *Independent Jewish Press Service*, 7 July 1944, 1-A; "Horthy Promises Leniency" (editorial), *National Jewish Ledger*, 28 July 1944, 6; Jacob Fishman, "From Day to Day," *Morgen Zhurnal*, 27 June 1944, 1-2; Theodore N. Lewis, "Men and Events," *Opinion* 14:11 (September 1944), 33-34.]

¹³ "Last Chance for Rescue" (editorial), *Jewish Frontier* 11 (August 1944), 4.

IV CONCLUSION

The question of Jewish leaders and the failure to bomb Auschwitz has been at the center of much public debate and controversy in recent years.

Since the early 1990s, officials of the Franklin & Eleanor Roosevelt Institute, in Hyde Park, NY, have attempted to mitigate the Roosevelt administration's refusal to bomb Auschwitz by claiming that some Jewish leaders themselves were against bombing. The evidence they have cited is a Jewish Agency Executive meeting in June 1944 at which David Ben-Gurion and other Agency officials opposed asking the Allies to bomb Auschwitz. Because Ben-Gurion is so well known and revered in the United States, the Roosevelt Institute was able to make effective use of his alleged opposition. For example, in 1996, Roosevelt Institute officials used that information to persuade the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, in Washington, D.C., to change the text of its exhibit panel on the bombing issue. That text now erroneously portrays Jewish leaders as approximately evenly divided between supporters and opponents of bombing.

In 2009, new research by The David S. Wyman Institute for Holocaust Studies proved that Ben-Gurion and his colleagues were opposed to bombing for a period of only about two weeks, because they believed Auschwitz was a labor camp. In late June 1944, they learned the truth about Auschwitz (from the aforementioned Vrba-Wetzler report) and Jewish Agency officials in Europe, Palestine, and the United States repeatedly sought to convince the Allies to bomb Auschwitz.¹⁴

The role of Golda Meir adds an important new layer to this story.

To begin with, the Meir-Mereminski documents demonstrate that at least three additional Jewish leaders --Meir, Mereminski, and Frumkin-- were involved in promoting bombing. That brings to 28 the number of Jewish officials known to have urged the Allies to bomb Auschwitz or the railways leading to it. (By contrast, only one official of a Jewish organization, A. Leon Kubowitzki of the World Jewish Congress, opposed bombing.) This further discredits the notion that there were approximately the same number of supporters and opponents of bombing among Jewish leaders.

It is also significant that these additional advocates of bombing were leaders of one of the most influential and prestigious institutions in the Jewish world. The Histadrut played a dominant role in the Yishuv (and would soon play a central role in Israeli society as well).

¹⁴ Rafael Medoff, "The Roosevelt Administration, David Ben-Gurion, and the Failure to Bomb Auschwitz: A Mystery Solved," <http://wymaninstitute.org/Report-Bombing-Auschwitz.pdf>

Finally, the fact that Mrs. Meir, an individual of such renown, advocated bombing, underscores the fact that Jewish leaders regarded the proposal as reasonable and viable. Roosevelt apologists trumpeted David Ben-Gurion's alleged opposition to bombing because the fact that it was Ben-Gurion gave credibility to the anti-bombing position; by the same token, Golda Meir's support for bombing demonstrates that individuals who enjoyed the respect of the mainstream Jewish leadership, the Jewish community at large, and important segments of the wider public such as the American labor movement leadership, favored bombing the death camps. The fact is that the idea of bombing Auschwitz was not some latter-day invention, nor was it the handiwork of some fringe element. Rather, it was promoted, at the time, by individuals of the greatest stature in the Jewish world.

