

# The Nation's Capital and the National Jewish Response to the Holocaust

by

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"I am constantly amazed by man's inhumanity to man."

—Primo Levi

During World War II, the silence of Americans—and particularly American Jews—as the Nazis murdered millions of innocent people is a horrifying offense that still haunts our nation. Though it is human nature to fear change and uprising, the American Jewish community still bears some responsibility for the Holocaust death tolls. It was the responsibility of Jewish community leaders and Jews who worked either for or closely with the American Government to tirelessly advocate for aggressive intervention in Europe. The well-established Jewish community in Washington, DC, had such an opportunity, but community leaders neglected their responsibility. Over six million Jews died in Germany, and, had the many Washington Jews heavily involved in government work taken action, more than half of those deaths could have been prevented.

My subject fascinates me because I am a Jew who struggles with her faith, and because my family has ties to the war.<sup>1</sup> I believe that following a religion, any religion, is not easy. It was especially hard for American Jews to maintain their faith and identity during the Holocaust, when anti-Semitism was rampant, not just abroad, but in the United States. Laws that seemed to help the Jews, such as the Freedom of Religion in the Bill of Rights, were countered by laws such as the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924, which limited the number of European immigrants allowed into the United States as a result of

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<sup>1</sup> My grandfather's brother liberated the Concentration Camp Dachau, though none of my family were part of these European victims.

growing anti-immigration sentiment. In context, the complex and multi-faceted reasons for American Jews' silence begin to emerge, and, in particular, the Washington Jewish community's response reveals much about the social, historical, racial, political, economic, and emotional context of the Jewish United States at that time. The ways we respond to similar crises now—such as Holocaust denial and genocide in Darfur—will answer future generations' questions of whether or not we have learned from this silence.

Anti-Semitism is not a new concern; in fact, as long as there have been Jews, there has been anti-Semitism. Jewish history chronicles countless anti-Semitic episodes, such as the Spanish expulsion and the massacres of Jews in Europe during the Middle Ages, but none have been as far reaching in today's modern society as the Holocaust and the fight for a home in Palestine. The pervasive anti-Semitism in Washington, DC, was especially dangerous: sentiments in the town that was both the capital of the United States and arguably the nexus of the Allied Forces translated into domestic and foreign policy, Washington, as a place where crucial deliberation and decision-making took place, attracted powerful organizations outside of the United States government. Peter Bergson, a Zionist who lobbied continuously for the Jews in the Holocaust, created the Hebrew Committee for National Liberation in Washington, D.C. Additionally, "the Bnai Brith moved its national offices to Washington D.C., recognizing that from now on, the nation's capital would be the center of Jewish decision making, too" (Diner, *Fifty Years* 27). New York also had a significant amount of influence. It was where Bergson opened his pageant "We Will Never Die," written by the famous Hollywood luminary Ben Hecht. After opening their show at Madison Square Garden, Hecht and Bergson moved it to Washington, D.C., where they put on a special performance for

government members. Hecht and Berson chose New York and Washington as their main venues because they knew it was in these cities that the fate of European Jews would be decided.

Did the Washington, D.C. Jewish community have a greater moral culpability than other Jewish communities? The answer is yes. This is not to say that other Jewish communities, such as in Denver or Chicago, are not liable for their silence. The fact is, though, that they did not command the ears of the government like the community in Washington. Felix Frankfurter, a Jew, was a Justice on the Supreme Court, and Rabbi Stephen Wise was a friend of President Roosevelt. Saul Friedman, a historian of the Holocaust, is quoted as saying, "The doors of the White House were always open to Wise" (qtd. in Morrison xi). In addition, Jewish organizations with the closest ties to the government were also located in Washington. The American Jewish Congress (AJC), headed by Rabbi Stephen Wise, was instrumental in reaching the federal government:

Although active in protesting Nazi mistreatment of German Jews, the AJC abstained from publicly calling upon the U.S. government to admit additional refugees from Germany. In this stance, they shared the views of other American Jewish organizations, which feared that such a demand would lead to further restrictions on immigration and an increase in American anti-Semitism. (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, *Permanent Exhibit*)

In Denver and Chicago, the communities did not have this opportunity to picket and protest the men in charge continuously. They did not have the same power over the unfolding events as the Jews in the capital. The Washington Jewish community chose to ignore this heightened accountability.

One of the main reasons for this silence was that anti-Semitism was especially rampant during this period. The Ku Klux Klan was active in both the North and the South. Although their main target was blacks, these groups terrified and tortured Jews as well. This atmosphere of fear and anxiety made the American Jews even more fearful of stirring up hostility. By the end of the 1930s, "anti-Semitism in America itself became a matter of communal urgency" while at the same time "the fate of Germany's Jews hung in the balance" (Diner, *Fifty Years* 30). In a letter written in 1940 to Washington Zionist Edward Kaufmann, J. Edgar Hoover, leader of the FBI, stated: "While I knew that there were strong anti-Semitic forces within the United States, I never for a moment suspected that they were as deeply grounded or as vicious and venomous as I have seen evidenced." This idea of rampant anti-Semitism is important to stress. It was the main reason why American Jews, and why Washington Jews specifically, were reluctant to speak out. Americans were under extreme emotional duress, and they were anxious and frustrated by unemployment and poverty of the Great Depression. Vulnerable from and consumed by their own troubles, Americans generally did not invest in the plight of Europeans. The American Jewish community was loath to increase its emotional stress and call too much attention to world-wide anti-Semitism, lest the result be a Holocaust in the United States.

The political context of this anti-Semitic era is manifested through the commonality of discriminatory episodes at this time. For example, Congressman J.E. Rankin of Mississippi, a white supremacist, "sputtered vitriolic anti-Semitic remarks on the floor of the House of Representatives" (Diner, *Fifty Years* 37). Around the same time, Minister Gerald L.K Smith, the head of the Christian Nationalist Crusade, tried to rally in Washington against the Jews. Initially, Washington's Jewish community responded with

the "silent treatment" (*Diner, Fifty Years* 41). However, the Jewish Community Council began picketing and leafleting, eventually killing the movement so that only 350 people showed up at the rally. Father Coughlin, a popular radio priest at this time, is another important example. His fiery tirades against the Jews reached many homes in America. "Coughlin's targets included Roosevelt, individual Jewish leaders, and Jewish institutions, all branded as Communists" (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "Charles Coughlin"). He viciously argued against democracy and was a proponent of Fascism. He was a strong supporter of the Nazis and of isolationism. He felt that involvement in the war would be helping the Jews. Another strongly anti-Semitic force was the German-American Bund, which openly disseminated Nazi Propaganda. The German-American Bund was constituted of Germans living in the United States and headed by Fritz Kuhn, who many consider the leading anti-Semite at the time.

Anti-Semitic incidents in the United States were especially troubling given that many Jews viewed America as their "savior." As a Proclamation to the Zionist Jews declared, "The role of leader has fallen to America. The eyes of all the world's oppressed and heavy-laden are on Washington" ("A Proclamation"). Ironically, the Jewish community did not realize that it was responsible for prodding the American government into action; instead, community members believed that the American government would rally the American public. This reliance on secular America inhibited strong internal Jewish leadership, which made it even harder to initiate Jewish support. The Jewish community was lost without unified Jewish leadership. As Hasia Diner, a member of the Washington Jewish community during the Holocaust, testifies, "American Jews believed passionately in democracy...but on the other hand, American Jews have also felt the need to foster unity and have regularly bemoaned

the lack of a single voice to represent Jewish interest both locally and nationally" (*Fifty Years* xii). The lack of Jewish leadership made it virtually impossible for American Jewry to unite. They were unable to protest anti-Semitism that existed in America, much less Nazi Aryanism.

Some critics, however, argue that anti-Semitism in the United States was not as malicious as people describe. David Wyman and Rafael Medoff, Holocaust historians, state, "troubling though the anti-Semitism of the 30s and 40s was to American Jews, those who were hurt most by it were the Jews of Europe" (Wyman & Medoff 5). These critics believe that the situation in Europe should have superseded the concern for anti-Semitism in the United States. Other critics take this argument even further. Richard Steele, a political scientist who wrote about Roosevelt and his policies during the war, says in a journal article published in *Political Science Quarterly* in 1979:

As early as 1934 President Roosevelt had directed the Federal Bureau of Investigation to investigate the Nazi movement in the United States. The object of this investigation was an obnoxious conglomeration of groups dedicated to building and preserving cultural ties with Germany. Despite their anti-Semitism and the efforts of the German government to use the "movement," they posed little threat to American security. Their sometimes frightening, sometimes comic, antics helped, in fact, to intensify American awareness of the Nazi menace. (3)

It is true that the Nazi threat was probably of more immediate concern than anti-Semitism in the United States; however, Steele's view that American anti-Semitism was laughable is an erroneous and ridiculous claim. Anti-Semitism anywhere cannot be

termed "comic," and it affected Jews in the United States a great deal. Clearly there was more to the threat than Steele claims if it caused most Jews to stay silent.

This anti-Semitic atmosphere was exacerbated by the increased anti-immigration legislature. Americans did not trust the foreigners who were gradually filling up their cities and responded by cutting immigration drastically; America "replaced [the] tradition of hospitality to refugees with annual immigrant quotas" (Medoff 18). As Rafael Medoff shows, in 1920, the House of Representatives voted to suspend immigration altogether, in order to stop the influx of European immigrants. The Senate refused to allow this, but did accept the Immigration Quota Act of 1921, which imposed a numerical restriction on people from Europe. Also, obtaining a visa became increasingly difficult as the war progressed. On September 8, 1930, Hoover announced a new policy dealing with immigration; if someone thought that an applicant could become a liability at *any* time, the visa was to be refused. In 1933, there was an attempt to revoke this order, but it was not successful. Applicants also needed police certification of good character, and candidates could not have received funding from a source outside of their family. To make things harder, immigration officers were extremely specific with the requirements and used the slightest excuse to send away European hopefuls. This last money requirement came to be nearly impossible as the war continued. Originally, Jews coming out of Germany were allowed to take \$100,000, which got cut down to \$6,000, then to \$800, and finally to \$4 in October of 1939. Jews were effectively trapped. Adolf Hitler himself discusses the difference between German and American immigration laws in an interview with *Collier's* magazine in June 1933: "The United States has vigorous anti-immigration laws while Germany has none thus far, and certain American universities have long since excluded Jews" (Morse 146). Hitler's

diabolical plan to kill all the Jews left him with no right to laud Germany for its immigration laws; however, his view on American anti-Semitism and anti-immigration is correct. America criticized Germany for its treatment of European Jews, but meanwhile America did nothing to help them.

The two main reasons why American Jews refused to take the European immigrants were that they could not support so many refugees, and because they were afraid that anti-Semitism in America would grow exponentially, even though there “was substantial public support for Hitler’s Jewish victims” (Medoff 27). As a spokesman for the American Jewish Congress said in April of 1933, the goal was to “help re-establish the position which the Jews have occupied in Germany rather than foster the emigration of the German Jewish community” (qtd. in Medoff 28). At this point in time, the Jewish community was not aware of the true situation in Europe; but by 1943, when the community did know the truth, response to immigration continued to be negative.

Jews in America during the mid-1930s were also under the mistaken belief that the situation in Germany was temporary. Their primary aim was not to transplant Jews from Europe to America, but to help Europe return to its former Jewish zenith. The American Jewish Appeal allocated funds abroad to achieve this goal. Although the funds were going to a worthy cause, the local Washington community was unhappy with this decision, as the Appeal was only funding three projects. Many felt that the money should be used for local gain and that fewer funds should be sent abroad. This squabbling amidst the Jewish community hurt the war relief effort considerably. In addition, many people became more concerned with the fight for a Jewish homeland, which turned into a national debate.

Zionism is the movement to establish a Jewish state; Jews at the time of the Holocaust felt that a Jewish homeland would ensure that Jews were not tortured as they were in other countries. Zionism was both a way in which to save European Jews and the reason many Americans did not focus on helping the European Jews. The Zionist movement was the “last frontier against Nazi hate” (“4,000 Attend”). Zionism and American Nationalism were conflicting loyalties for many American Jews. As Isadore Breslau states in a 1941 letter to members of the Zionist Organization of America, “We will be fighting on many fronts. Palestine is one of them. The Jews of Palestine are contributing to America’s war effort” (“Zionist Organization”). Zionists created The Emergency Committee to Save the Jewish People of Europe and a paper called *Zionnews*, based in the Louis D. Brandeis District of Washington D.C., which became known as the “Washington Zionist District.” At the same time, many Zionist groups identified more with the *Yishuv* effort in Palestine rather than the war effort.<sup>2</sup>

A good portion of the community, however, felt that Zionism was a false dream, and the Jewish community fractured because of this crucial difference in opinion. The Jewish Community Council sent a telegram to President Roosevelt in 1944 asking him to open up Palestine to Jewish refugees. The effort failed, but the anti-Zionist faction within the JCC still severed ties with the group. In 1943, Washingtonian Joseph D. Kaufmann, a strong anti-Zionist, wrote to Judge Proskauer, president of the non-Zionist American Jewish Committee, stating: “I gather that the committee is opposed to Jewish nationalism, of which, so far as I can see, Zionism is one expression...I am anti-Zionist and feel, moreover that a proper defense of the American Jewish position calls for an anti-Zionist educational campaign.” Kauffman clearly believed that the preservation of the

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<sup>2</sup> The *Yishuv* effort focused on the establishment of the early Jewish settlements in Palestine.

American Jewish community was more important than a Jewish homeland because America was the new Jewish home. People were also opposed to Zionism on the grounds that the creation of a state for the Jewish people was impossible and preposterous to even suggest, which is clear from what Rabbi Norman Gerstenfeld, a Minister of the Washington Hebrew Congregation, said in a sermon: "I have been opposed to Zionism because I thought its concept of Jewish nationalism a false view of the past and a defeatist view of the future" ("Speech Delivered").

The Jews struggling for control of Palestine were fighting mainly against the British government, who imposed harsh laws on the Jewish immigrants. This can be seen from the following example of British border control. On the order of the British High Commissioner of Palestine, a ship loaded with Rumanian refugees was not allowed to enter Palestine after a long, risky voyage. The ship was forced to turn back and sank off the coast of Turkey, killing around 750 Jews. At this deliberate act of anti-Semitism, "Washington Jews seethed with anger" (Diner, *50 Years* 39). Some wanted a massive protest meeting to show "that American Jews as Americans can no longer tolerate the incompetence and blindness of the British colonial bureaucrats" (Diner, *50 Years* 39). However, there were others who were afraid of confronting America's closest wartime ally and just sent "strongly worded" letters of rebuke to the American and British governments (Diner, *50 Years* 41).

Jews at this time period were afraid of speaking up against unfair government action. They feared the "consequences of Jewish community criticism of the British government or, indeed, the United States government during war time," while ironically, "the allies seemed almost perversely concerned that they would have to act to aid Jews" (Diner, *50 Years* 42; Lipstadt 284). The dynamic between the frightened American

Jewish community and the Allies, reluctant to initiate saving the Jews in Europe, only served to create a standstill. Although America was involved in the war, its main focus was not saving the Jews. Rather, it was a war of necessity, since Hitler's armies were threatening the existence of the Western World. America's closest ally was being bombed heavily, and it seemed like Germany would take over the world unless it was stopped soon. This impending danger caused America to look inward when it should have been addressing the German problem. Instead of responding to the oncoming terror, America and President Roosevelt pretended for as long as was possible that America had no part in the war. As FDR said in a fireside chat on September 3, 1939, "I hope the U.S. will keep out of this war and I believe that it will. Every effort of the U.S. government will be directed toward that end" (National Portrait Gallery).

This integration of Jews into Western culture most likely started as soon as Jews began to populate America. Eighteenth century Jews "did not stand out as terribly different from other early Americans" (Diner, *Jews* 23). "After 1924, life in Europe faded to a distant memory," and European Jews became "American Jews" (Diner, *Jews* 77). Jews assimilated to the extent that they seemed almost a regular part of the American community, an oddity considering the Jews' long history of intolerance and persecution, and the fact that their lifestyle in Europe was so different from their lifestyle in America. In Europe their main focus was strictness of religion, and in America, it was reforming religion so it better facilitated Jewish participation in American society. The fact that American Jews had become so much a part of American society contributed to the reasoning behind their silence. America was silent, and so the Jewish sector of America did not want to disagree with the mainstream response.

The effects of assimilation were a main reason for the weak American response to the Holocaust. As Seymour Finger argues, “most assimilated Jews were preoccupied with American problems such as the Depression and World War II” (11).<sup>3</sup> Rabbi Gerstenfeld, like other critics of the time, did not see religious freedom as an excuse for assimilation into American society and the subsequent loss of millennia-old Jewish culture. He argues that “the cold-blooded murder of the majority of the children of the faith of Israel in one of the most ‘civilized’ areas of the old world has proven to me that religious freedom is still in the far-off future” (“Speech Delivered”). In response to the Reform Movement that began in America, Abraham Rice, the first ordained Rabbi in the country, says, “the religious life in this land is on the lowest level, most people eat foul food and desecrate Sabbath in public...I wonder if it is even permissible for a Jew to live in this land” (qtd. in Diner, *Jews* 39).<sup>4</sup> The Reform Movement made it even easier for Jews to be included in American society by taking away many traditions that made them noticeable. The fact is that there was no unified group working together to save the European Jews. The assimilated Jews of America were largely focused on their separate local communities and not the American Jewish community as a whole. For Washington Jews, many of whom had direct or indirect influence on the government, this focus on local affairs over national and international concerns came at a great cost.

To their credit, the American Jews’ priorities reflected the news media’s. The press hid most of the news about the Holocaust, and the main focus of newspapers at

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<sup>3</sup> In the context of this paper, Holocaust refers to the destruction of the Jews; the term World War II represents the actual fight against Germany.

<sup>4</sup> There are three main branches of Judaism—Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform. The three branches differ in which aspects of the Jewish Bible they hold to be true and follow. Of the three, Reform Judaism is the most lenient.

the time was the military and strategic aspect of the war. As Deborah Lipstadt succinctly states, "the gap between information and knowledge (about the events of the Holocaust) is striking. The shortcomings in press coverage, even after the news was verified and confirmed by the Allies, are legion. Even when the press has information it often buried it in inside pages where it could easily be missed" (288). J. Edgar Hoover illustrates this point by saying, "such newspapers as *the New York Daily News* and the *Washington Times-Herald* have been particularly offensive in their position in this matter, ridiculing and minimizing the action which had been taken by the FBI." Hoover is most likely referring to the orders from the President to investigate anti-Semitism in America, which grew into a broad-range investigation of critics of FDR. Hoover is discussing how the press ridiculed the FBI's efforts to root out anti-Semitism.

The press' bias against the Jews was also manifested in the way newspapers relegated information about Jews and information about the Holocaust to the inside pages of the paper. Hyman Goldman stated in 1942,

You cannot wake this sleeping giant (public opinion) by calling a meeting of 200 or 300 Jews in the community center where at best they will help you sigh and as a result thereof, you may be fortunate enough to find a little notice on the 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> page of the next morning's newspaper stating something like this: "Jews gather to protest this or that." (qtd. in Diner, *50 Years*, 39)

The bias of the American press against the Jews is striking, and tells of the anti-Semitism that pervaded many aspects of American Society and caused the Jewish community to fear speaking out about its concerns. The press bias is abundantly clear from the headlines of a Washington newspaper over the five-year time span of the war. By

looking at the front page of newspapers from important dates throughout the war it is clear that the press purposely did not mention Jews in the front section of the paper. Two days before the war officially began, on September 1, 1939, *The Washington Post* trumpets Hitler's forceful entry into Poland. The main headline of the paper screams, "Use 'Force,' Hitler Orders; Gets Danzig; Poles Bombed." The front page is filled with information about the upcoming war; however, there is no mention of the people who were already Hitler's victims. As Lucy Dawidowicz, a leading historian on the Holocaust, argues, "By 1938, 'emigration' was a euphemism for expulsion. Once war began, 'evacuation' became euphemism for 'deportation,' which in turn, signified transportation to a place of death" (106). There is not even any euphemistic mention of the "evacuation" of European Jews in the September 1<sup>st</sup> edition of the *Post* or in the *Post* from official date of the start of the war, September 3, the day that Poland fell. Instead, the paper delivers information about the declaration of war and American sports.

The *Post* also failed to cover major events against the Jews, such as Kristallnacht, the Night of Broken Glass, which occurred on the 9th and 10th of November 1938. This was the biggest pogrom<sup>5</sup> of the war, and the *Post* had no information about it on the front page. Jews were killed and their synagogues were destroyed and burnt, as were their office buildings and homes, hence the name "The Night of Broken Glass." Looking through many other front pages of the *Post* throughout the war, there is no mention of the Jews. The text is limited to information about war strategy and battles and about domestic American issues. On D-Day, June 6, 1945, the day in which American troops landed in Normandy, France, the front-page is filled mostly with American news. There is

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<sup>5</sup> A pogrom is a massacre against the Jews.

an article about the New York Yankees, two articles about President Truman, and articles about Japan. There is very limited information about the war and the upcoming victory. The June 7 *Post* discusses the near end of the war. However, there is still no information about the Jewish victims wasting away in concentration camps.

This withholding of news even caused some Jews to disbelieve that the Holocaust was even occurring. Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter is one such example. Jan Karski, a Pole, tells the story of his meeting with Justice Frankfurter, obviously a well-educated and well-informed pillar of Jewish society. When Karski tells him about the true situation in Poland, Frankfurter responds, "I do not believe [Karski]...I did not say that [Karski's] lying. I said that I don't believe him. There is a difference. 'My mind, my heart, they are made in such a way that I cannot conceive it'" (qtd. in Greenberg 58). Frankfurter verbalizes this theme of disbelief. He could not comprehend that people could be committing such atrocities, like many other members of the American public. Karski was a singular individual, a Jewish Polish spy who took the mission of letting the world know the true situation of the Jews. Under great threat to his life, he traveled to England and America to meet with Churchill and Roosevelt. Frankfurter's reaction to Karski's claim was not unusual. Karski describes the reaction of government officials: "Almost every individual was sympathetic to my reports concerning the Jews, but when I reported to the leaders of governments they discarded their conscience, their personal feeling. They provided a rationale which seemed valid" (qtd. in Kauffman). No matter how sympathetic Americans might have been to the situation in Europe, to the victims, they were heartless. In fact, "in early 1943, a Gallup Poll asked Americans: It is said that two million Jews have been killed in Europe since the war began. Do you think this is true or just rumor?" Although Allied

leadership had publicly confirmed that two million Jews had been murdered, the poll found that only 47% believed it was true, while 29% dismissed it as a rumor; the remaining 24% had no opinion" (*Jewish Virtual Library*). These statistics signified the unwillingness of Americans to actively address the situation in Europe. They were far more involved with their own lives, and they excused themselves by claiming that they had no idea such atrocities were truly occurring.

This disbelief was also a result of the American government's cover-up of the Holocaust. For some American Jews, admiration for the federal government eclipsed any desire to be a part of the rescue effort. When asked to make a public statement about the "We Will Never Die" pageant that was produced to raise awareness about the conditions in Europe, and to serve as a memorial to the two million dead by 1943, Roosevelt refused to send a statement, deciding that any statement would be too strong a pledge to help the Jews. Even though Roosevelt had a fear of the "Jew-Deal," American Jews deeply admired the American system of government, and connected to this love of government a love of President Roosevelt.<sup>6</sup> American Jews wanted their European counterparts to "raise their voice with the voices of the other nations on earth in a new and supreme harmony, the harmony of mankind, which is that 'genuine world civilization' for which President Roosevelt calls" ("A Proclamation"). American Jews believed that Roosevelt would be the uniting force for the Jews and that the Jews in government were all the more nationalistic. Jews such as Justice Frankfurter and David Niles, an administrative assistant to President Roosevelt and President Truman, saw themselves primarily as patriotic Americans bolstering a president who had to deal with these issues.

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<sup>6</sup> "Jew-Deal" was a term used to taunt President Roosevelt. It was widely used around the country by Roosevelt's critics.

Another problem of the Jews' relying on the American government was that the American government was not immune to internal anti-Semitism. Congress had an anti-Semitic faction, and the State Department blocked Jewish rescue efforts. Breckenridge Long, a top official in the State Department, used his political leverage to impede the immigration of many European Jews. In fact, he secretly cut immigration to less than 10% of the official quota (Wyman & Medoff 11). The War Refugee Board, created by Roosevelt in response to Bergson's ongoing appeals, received little support from FDR. There are some important examples of instances in which anti-Semitism in the U.S. government directly caused the deaths and suffering of thousands of Jews. One such instance was the Wagner-Rogers Bill. The bill was introduced into both houses and made a case for the allowance of 20,000 refugee children to enter the United States, which was above the quota limit. According to scholar Aaron Berman, there was "impressive support from Eleanor Roosevelt, Hollywood personalities, and Jewish humanitarian organizations" (23). However, the bill was amended out of existence. Another instance was when Sweden was prepared to take 20,000 Jewish children and shelter them. Sweden asked America and Great Britain to share the costs of food and medicine. While there were Jewish philanthropists who were willing to pay for the entire bill, the United States government finally decided that "limiting the rescue program to Jewish children might antagonize the Germans" (Berman 67). Eight months passed before the plan was revised to include a few Norwegian children. By then it was too late; the idea was abandoned.

On September 12, 1944, an American broadcast to Germany proclaimed, "Those who do not know, do now know because they do not want to know" (qtd. in *Who Shall Live and Who Shall Die?*). During World War II, America did not want to know.

America did not want to know about the bloody massacres of the Jews in Eastern Europe, the destruction of Jewish towns and villages, the uprisings in ghettos such as Warsaw, and the uprisings in concentration camps such as Sobibor.<sup>7</sup> America did not want to know about the gas chambers daily exterminating thousands of people, and America especially did not want to know about its potential role in stopping the carnage. Many historians, psychoanalysts, political leaders and Jews grapple with who to blame for this catastrophe. Roosevelt and his administration? Jewish leaders? The American people? Or was there one unifying issue in which they could have all come together to save the Jews? The issue of silence is pervasive in every possible source. The fact is that there is not just one party to blame; it was the silence of all of them.

However, the silence was especially deafening in Washington, D.C. The Jews in Washington were close to these political issues, as "Jewish Washington's uniqueness sprang from the uniqueness of the District of Columbia itself" (Diner, *Fifty Years* 18). Washington was the breeding ground for reforms that could radically alter the lives of both American Jews and Jews living in Europe and Palestine. The Washington Jewish community grew from about twenty-five people in its inception in 1847, to 16,000 by 1930, 18,350 by 1943, and 25,567 by 1946 (Jewish Historical Society). Washington was a different type of American Jewish community. It did not attract a lot of European immigrants during the Holocaust because it was not a town for low wagers. As Hasia notes, "Washington's Jews were overwhelmingly business people, rather than laborers" (*Fifty Years* 18). Also,

Politically, residents of the District of Columbia differed from all other

Americans, particularly after 1878 when, by act of congress, they lost their

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<sup>7</sup> The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising was the largest Jewish uprising. The Sobibor Death Camp uprising was when the inmates killed 12 S.S. guards and set the camp to flames.

right to elect their own officials, make their own laws, or vote for president or representatives to congress...not only did Washington's Jews not develop a local Jewish political structure...but, if they had local needs, they had to see national assistance. This blurring of local and national in Washington constitutes the most striking characteristic of public life, Jewish and non-Jewish, in the capital city. (Diner, *Fifty Years* 19)

The Washington Jewish community was literally run by the federal government. The deep-rooted connection between Washington and the nation should have helped the District spread the Jewish community's concerns and convince the public to fight for the democratic ideals, such as freedom, that America espouses.

Washington was the capital city and, thus, its Jews should have shouldered the brunt of the responsibility. Diner, a member of the Jewish Community Council (JCC) of Washington at the time of the Holocaust, claims that Washington Jews did respond to the best extent of their ability: they created organizations to help, made plans to save European Jews and picketed anti-Semitic rallies. This may be true. But words cannot stand in the place of action. As a Jewish American living in Washington, D.C., it is hard for me to comprehend the reasons for the lack of information about the Washington Jewish community at the time of the Holocaust. I cannot make any sense of the missing years. The number of Jews in high places in government, the 8% Jewish sector of the American army, and the growing population of American Jews show that there was enough potential to reach out a helping hand. The lack of literature on the Washington Jewish Society during the Holocaust years also proves that this potential was never realized. The Society's silence caused the Washington Jews, not the slaughtered Jews

of Europe, to be forgotten. Of them, we say, "they shall never die"; of the Washington Jews, we hear nothing (Hecht).

The silence of American Jews, and particularly those in Washington, caused the destruction and torture that the Nazis wreaked on the Jewish people of Europe. I have been to many Holocaust museums: Yad Va-Shem in Israel, Auschwitz in Poland, and now The United States Holocaust Museum. I have visited some of the concentration camps where millions of Jews were murdered—Maidanek, Sobibor, Belzec. I have spoken to many survivors and heard many survivors speak. I have been inside the gas chambers and have seen the carvings on the wall from where people screamed and tried to claw their way out. I have been in the cattle cars that carried people to the concentration camps, but never back. Throughout all of this, there was one burning question in my mind: Why? As a Jew currently living in Washington, D.C., I could not understand the "German insanity," and I could not understand the lack of response by America and its allies to the slaughter of millions of Europeans (Friedman 427).

My questions only elicit more questions. As Lipstadt asks, "Why did the Jewish community continue to have such faith in F.D.R. when his record on rescue was so dismal? Had American Jewry spoken out forcefully could it have affected policy?" (289). The truth is that these excuses given in response to the silence of American Jews cannot account for American Jews' attempt to shift away their guilt. American Jews let another four million European Jews die by inaction. Could the Jewish community have saved them? Yes. Despite the fact that anti-Semitism plagued the American Jewish community, and it was difficult to locate a place for European Jews to live, it was still possible, with a loud rallying cry to make our voices heard. If we had raised funds, sent over diplomats, picketed the American government, or staged any attempt at rescue,

history would have been completely different. Could the consequences of speaking up have turned out badly? Yes. But we would not have to live with the shame of staying silent.

This shame should motivate us now into acting for others throughout the globe that are living the horror we went through. As Jews, how can we sit back and watch people in Darfur and Chad get massacred for religious reasons? As non-Jews, how is it possible to oversee yet another genocide of a race without stopping it? The Holocaust teaches us that the consequences are deadly. Chad, Darfur, Rwanda, Somalia – these countries and the real people within them are being torn apart even now, and people still stay silent. The only difference between what is occurring now and the events of the Holocaust is that we can still stop the genocide in Darfur and Chad. We have been given another chance to prove ourselves, and every second we waste not fighting for these countries makes for more blood on our hands. We need to raise awareness about world events, and we need to convince people to send money and soldiers to these parts of the globe. We have been brought back to life; we need to now change for the better. Even while fighting for the present, however, the past is still an important example. It is still important to combat Holocaust denial, and to study events such as the Holocaust in order to learn from them.

Even now, we still do not know everything that happened during those terrifying years in the early 1940s. There is still much debate and discussion about the Holocaust. There is now a discipline called Holocaust studies, and the Holocaust has been analyzed and methodologically sifted through using every possible academic lens. Jews teach their children what happened to their family during the war, and non-Jews teach about the genocide of a people. As Nobel Peace Prize Winner Elie Wiesel said,

“For the dead and the living we must bear witness” (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, *Permanant Exhibit*). However, there is now a Holocaust revisionism movement, otherwise known as Holocaust denial, which counters this positive learning from a tragic event. In Iran there is currently a *Holocaust International Cartoon Contest*, composed of anti-Semitic cartoon entries thinly veiled as refuting the Holocaust. The drawings depict such images as “a vampire wearing a big Star of David drinking the blood of Palestinians,” and a Jew with a big nose who is wearing a Star of David on which is written the word ‘Holocaust’ (Slackman). Holocaust Revisionism is a trend that can be stopped. We were silent to one travesty. Now the Jewish community of the United States, and the Jews of Washington, have a chance to respond instead of staying silent. I am now in the same position as the Washington Jews during the Holocaust. The question now is, will we accept our responsibility?

*This paper was written for Professor Diane Matlock’s course “City Stories: Washington, DC--Past, Present, and Future.”*

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