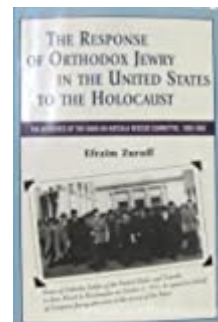


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Efraim Zuroff. *The Response of Orthodox Jewry in the United States to the Holocaust: The Activities of the Vaad Ha-Hatzala Rescue Committee, 1939-1945.* New York: KTAV Publishing, 1999. 316 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-88125-666-6.



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Introduction: A Lasting Contribution to the field of Shoah Studies

Efraim Zuroff's expertly researched, well documented, and well written work *The Response of Orthodox Jewry in the United States to the Holocaust: The Activities of the Vaad Ha-Hatzala Rescue Committee, 1939-1945*, is an important, unique, and significant addition to Shoah Studies. This illuminating, balanced, and insightful work draws on previously unpublished hitherto unused archival documents, interview testimony, private papers, manuscripts, reports, correspondence and dissertations as well as published books and articles in Holocaust Studies. The integration of written, archival, and oral testimony into a critically astute narrative makes this work unique. The well organized, coherent, and thoughtful narrative account that emerges is one bound to serve as a lasting contribution to the field, bringing more clarity, revealed knowledge, insight, and understanding regarding the history of a key orthodox organization and troubled time. This fascinating and seminal work holds the reader's interest in a captivating, spell-binding, and highly readable narrative. In his Foreword to the book, Yehuda Bauer comments, "His descriptions make fascinating reading; his analysis is thought provoking and innovative. A panorama unfolds that is new in Holocaust historiography..." (p. xiv). Bauer continues,

"This book unlocks another important facet of Jewish responses during the Holocaust, and I hope its story will be included in future teaching about the subject, to Jews and non-Jews alike."

Zuroff is one of the leading Israeli Shoah studies scholars. He completed his undergraduate studies in history at Yeshiva College of New York and obtained his masters and Ph.D. in Holocaust studies at the Institute of Contemporary Jewry of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem where he was a student of Yehuda Bauer. Zuroff has published close to one hundred articles on the Holocaust and its contemporary implications. His previous published books include: *Nazi Hunter: The Continuing Search for the Perpetrators of the Holocaust* (KTAV) and (as editor) *Rescue Attempts During the Holocaust* (Yad VaShem). Zuroff is currently the Director of the Israel office of the Simon Wiesenthal Center and the coordinator of the Center's Nazi war crimes research worldwide.

Zuroff's book is organized chronologically and spans ten chapters: I. "Historic Ties"; II. "The Establishment of the Emergency Committee for War Torn Yeshivot"; III. "The Mission of Dr. Samuel Schmidt"; IV. "Visas to Curacao and Rescue via the Far East"; V. "The Tickets Campaign"; VI. "Entry Permits to Shanghai"; VII. "Visas to Canada"; VIII. "Relief to Central Asia and Shanghai"; IX. "News of the Final Solution and Attempts to Achieve

Unity”; and X. “Internalization of the Disaster and A Change in Perspective”; followed by an Afterword, Bibliography, and Indices.

The book deals with five major topics- the pre-WWII ties between American Orthodoxy and the elite Polish yeshivot; the establishment of the VH and the emigration via the Far East; news of the Final Solution and the ensuing political efforts; relief and rescue efforts to Central Asia and Shanghai 1942-1943; activities 1944-1945. Thematically, the book covers the war relief work by Orthodox rabbinical groups in the United States during World War I on behalf of Jews in Eastern Europe and the period from the Vaad’s establishment as an organization for the rescue of Torah scholars until the rabbinic rescue agency decided in January 1944 to change its official policy and start trying to save all Jews. This change was a marked transformation of the Vaad “from a small rescue organization with limited and highly particularistic objective to a full fledged relief agency which ultimately conducted negotiations with SS leader Heinrich Himmler for the rescue of all surviving Jews living under Nazi occupation.” Zuroff writes, “Given the plethora of documentation and sources regarding this latter period and its historical importance, I believe that it deserves to be dealt with in a comprehensive fashion in a full length study which hopefully will be written in the near future” (p. xxiii).

Zuroff presents the first comprehensive history of the association and examines its success and failures in fulfilling its goals. Zuroff notes, “this book is the first scholarly account and analysis of American Orthodoxy’s rescue efforts during the Holocaust – the successes, the failures, the bitter debates within the community, the anguish and the recriminations in the wake of the realization of the horror of the Final Solution- on the background of the response of American Jewry and U.S. rescue policy during WWII.” Zuroff brilliantly analyzes and reviews some of the rescue decisions made by the Torah giants of the day, and how these decisions effected the fate of the Yeshivot communities. Although Zuroff is an orthodox Jew, he has not allowed his own personal biases and views unbalance this work. Instead, Zuroff objectively and with dispassion honestly offers the findings of his meticulous research presented as an academic historian in an unbiased and responsible way. Woolf comments, “Zuroff does not allow sentiment to blind his judgement and portrays both the achievements and failures, selfless sacrifice and selfish short-sightedness which characterized the Vaad Hatzalah at various times. This unique vantage point is a refreshing break from the

politicized hagiography of the Holocaust which is regnant in the Orthodox Jewish community.”

Accessible to scholars and laymen, this work is a must read for those interested in the Holocaust and American Jewish history. This work should be included in all history collections, particularly those that focus on the Shoah, as well as Jewish history collections interested in religious Jewish communities of Eastern Europe before WWII. University, synagogue, seminary, and Jewish communal organization libraries will want to include this book in their collections.

Overall Summary and findings of the book

The book recounts the history of the Vaad ha-Hatzala rescue committee, established in the United States by Orthodox rabbis in November 1939 which initially focused on the rescue of rabbis and yeshiva students, but later expanded its efforts to include all Jews regardless of their religiosity. Zuroff recounts how during World War II the Vaad ha-Hatzala rescued approximately 625 Polish rabbis and yeshivah students from Lithuania via the Far East, and how it helped keep alive hundreds of refugee Torah scholars living under difficult conditions in Central Asia. Zuroff documents that the Vaad raised money to support the Yeshivas in their temporary place of haven in Vilna, Lithuania, and then as the war continued they raised money to pay for transit visas to the East. The Vaad enabled an elite group of rabbis and yeshivah students of the Mir Yeshiva and other Yeshivot to survive, while continuing their Torah studies, despite the numerous hardships of living under Japanese occupation in Shanghai. In regards to statistics, a total of about 2,200 Polish refugees left for the Far East, among whom were 625 rabbis and yeshivah students. Twenty-nine went to Canada, and one hundred and seventy to the U.S. and Israel. The rest remained in Japan and were brought to Shanghai during the war.

Zuroff notes that “The establishment of the Vaad aroused considerable controversy in the American Jewish community, because it violated the organizational unity for fundraising purposes that had been achieved for the first time ten months previously. The Vaad’s insistence on rescuing only rabbis and yeshiva students was also a source of conflict and debate within American Jewry. These problems were reflected in the problematic relations between the Vaad and the Joint Distribution Committee and local federations throughout the United States. The difficult dilemmas and the controversies regarding rescue efforts are a major focus of this book.” The work considers the politics of separatism whereby

the Vaad chose to conduct an independent rescue policy rather than cooperating with the veteran American more mainstream Jewish establishment. Zuroff believes that because of the Vaad the number of Yeshivah students saved was larger, but without the help of the JDC such Yeshivah students could not have been rescued as well.

The work explains how Orthodox rabbis made policy decisions such as issues as rescue priority and the views towards U.S. regulations which they found to be hazardous to rescue and relief initiatives. Regarding priority, the Vaad placed utmost importance on the possibility of preserving Rabbinic scholarship and the sages who represented it, so as to ensure Torah scholarship for the future, thereby preserving Jewish traditions. The Vaad regarded the Rabbinic scholars of the Yeshivot network as the very *Kiyum* (very existence) of the Jewish people. The Vaad thus was motivated in terms of Rabbinic categories such as: *pidyon shevuyim* (redemption of captives), *pikuach nefesh* (saving of life), comparison of the crisis situation to that faced by Rabbi Johanan ben Zakkai who pleaded for the Academy of Yavneh (p. 32), and mishnaic passages such as found in Horayot that rabbinic scholars take precedence and priority for being saved in situations of danger. Rabbi Kotler indicated to Rabbi Ashkenazi around March 25 that a list of names of students for emigration to Shanghai (p. 149) would be compiled in accordance with the directives in the mishnah of the tractate Horayot (chapter 3 mishnayot 7 and 8) which states the question of priority as follows:

A man must be saved alive (rescued) sooner than a woman and his lost property must be restored sooner than hers. A woman's nakedness must be covered sooner than a man's and she must be brought out of captivity sooner than he. When both stand in danger of defilement, the man must be freed before the woman. The next mishnah reads:

"A priest precedes a levite, a levite an Israelite, an Israelite a bastard, a bastard a Natin (descendant of the Gibeonites), a Natin a proselyte, and a proselyte a freed slave. This applies when they are all (otherwise) equal, but if a bastard is learned in the Law (talmeed khakham) and a High Priest is ignorant of the Law the bastard that is learned in the Law precedes the High Priest that is ignorant of the Law."

While those who compiled the lists of candidates for Shanghai permits did not precisely follow the guidelines prescribed in Horayot, it is interesting to note the importance with which *Halakhic* principles governed the language and thought process of those involved in the

details of the rescue process. Zuroff makes clear that the Vaad and the yeshiva community it sought to save was immersed in Torah and such a way of life found its *raison d'être* in rabbinic culture in general which looked to the Torah for guidance in all decisions. While according to Rabbis Pantel, Milner, and Czezyk the criterion of academic excellence was taken into consideration in accordance with the mishnah (p. 161), some of the other decisions taken by the committee do not appear to conform to the directives in Horayot. For example, the mishnah determined that in matters of life and death males should always be given rescue priority over females, yet according to Asher Czezyk who compiled the list for the Radin Yeshiva, the wives and children of the *roshei yeshiva* were put at the top of the list immediately after their husbands and ahead of all the students (p. 161). Zuroff notes, "There is a possibility that Rabbi Kotler's decision to compile the lists in accordance with the mishnah in Horayot was not rendered as a halachic decision and was therefore not considered binding by the bnai Torah committee."

The influence of the Vaad's immersion in Torah culture is further seen in the way messages were coded based on the first chapter of Shemot. Zuroff writes, "Each of the patriarch Jacob's sons listed as having gone down to Egypt was given a numerical value in ascending order: Reuven, Shimon, Levi, Yehuda, Isaachar, Zevulun, Binyamin, Dan, Naftali, Gad, and Asher. Reuven became the code for \$100, and each name after that represented an additional \$100. In addition various terms such as skins, bales, and rabbis were used to refer to money, and Hebrew words were often substituted for numbers" (p. 211). The playful influence of Torah culture is seen in the following example in a cable of January 16, 1942: "Ponevejskys Epsteins Shmoinogud visit Feldman 235 West 29." The explanation of the coded message is as follows, "David Ponevejsky (a resident of Shanghai) is willing to give the refugee Torah scholars \$8,000 (*shmona* is the Hebrew word for the number eight) in return for the same amount which was raised in Chicago by Efraim Epstein. In order for the transaction to be carried out you are to give the said sum to Aaron Feldman, whose address is 235 West 29th Street, New York City." Confirmation of the transaction and instructions regarding the distribution of additional funds raised were contained in Rabbi Kalmanowitz's reply, which was cabled to Rabbi Milewsky on January 22, 1942: "Aron well. Stop. Epstein regards everybody Stop. Also brothers Gud (sic) Reuben regards Mirsky Yisochor Kotler regards Kletzker Judah Grosovski regards Kamienietzky Shimon regards

Telz Lubliner Beth Jacob Rabonim. Everybody Reuben regards Nawaredok Slonimer. All well cable health." These coded instructions meant, "The money has been deposited as per your request (Aron well). The \$8,000 raised by Rabbi Epstein is to be distributed to all the refugee Torah scholars (Epstein regards everybody). In addition, the following sums were raised on behalf of various yeshivot: \$1,100 (Gud Reuben) for the Mir Yeshiva (Mirsky); \$500 (Yisochor) for the Kletzk Yeshiva (Kotler regards Kletzker); \$400 (Judah) for the Kamenetz Yeshiva (Grosowski regards Kamienietzky); \$200 (Shimon) each for the students of Telz, Lublin, Beth Jacob girls school, as well as for rabbis; and \$100 (Reuben) for the yeshivot of Navardok and Slonim." That the first verse of Shemot served as the secret for the conversion into Torah code language again represents the importance of Torah and its internalization by the Vaad.

In Chapter Ten, together with the "Afterword," Zuroff argues that there was a shift in focus of the Vaad from intending to save only Torah scholars to the broader rescue agenda, when news of the Final Solution was more fully realized, to making an attempt to save all Jews regardless of religiosity or affiliation. Zuroff agrees that this shift in focus from attempting to save only the yeshiva elite to rescue the Jewish population in general deserves a lengthier treatment, and should receive further examination in a further scholarly study. Zuroff shows how these efforts led to the release of 1,210 Jews from Theresienstadt, the direct rescue to Switzerland of several hundred Slovak Jews, relief programs to several concentration camps, and negotiations with the Nazis which may have in some way favorably affected the fate of hundreds of thousands of concentration camp inmates.

Zuroff assesses the accomplishments and failures of the Vaad ha-Hatzala with much clarity and insight in an brilliant and balanced narrative. Zuroff notes that the orthodox rabbis march to Washington was "the only public protest on behalf of European Jewry by Jewish leaders in the American capital during the Holocaust" (p. 286). Zuroff argues that this is especially noteworthy because it marked "the rabbis growing awareness of the need for general rather than particularistic rescue efforts" (p. 286). It further "symbolized the effective manner in which the Orthodox rescue activists had learned to use the American political system" (p. 286). Zuroff remarks, "For an agency dominated by East European-born and bred rabbis, most of them not fully fluent in English, this was no small achievement" (p. 286). Zuroff suggests, "In fact, it could be said that besides the practical successes in the rescue of Jews achieved by the Vaad ha-Hatzala, the orga-

nization was an effective tool for the Americanization of the local Orthodox leadership" (p. 286). Zuroff concludes that it is probably the Vaad ha-Hatzala's deep dedication to the rescue of Jewish lives is probably the Vaad's most lasting legacy to the Jewish people.

Zuroff, however, asserts that "had the Vaad joined forces with the Joint Distribution Committee, the overall results would probably have been more beneficial to the Jewish people than those achieved individually by each organization" (p. 287). He notes the conflict of the Vaad with national and international groups such as the Joint Distribution Committee and the United Jewish Appeal, that were also trying to mobilize support for Nazi victims throughout Europe, and funded the Torah scholars in Eastern Europe and Shanghai. Zuroff concedes that there is no way of knowing how many more Jews might have been saved had the Vaad joined forces with the JDC instead of competing for money and support. Zuroff said in an interview, "Perhaps people could have been saved that weren't saved because funds were sent to enable Torah scholars, who were out of physical harm, to sit and learn Torah, for example, rather than that money being sent to Europe to finance schemes that could have saved the lives of Jews under Nazi occupation." He continues in the same interview, "The question is why money should be sent to these people at a time when Jews are being mass-murdered in Auschwitz and places like that. Now, there was no scheme that could have gotten Jews out of Auschwitz, but there were certain things that were being done that could have reduced the number of Jews perhaps taken to Auschwitz." In a lecture at the United States Holocaust Museum in Washington D.C. on 1/28/02, Zuroff indicated that "it was questionable" that the money that was sent to Shanghai to allow students to study was perhaps needed more as a matter of getting other Jews out of a dangerous life and death situation in Europe. Zuroff questions if funds from the Vaad that were given to people to sit and learn Torah might have been sent to try to save more lives. While the Vaad had many accomplishments such as it was the first group "to internalize" the final solution and the first group to politically march on Washington to protest the Holocaust, Zuroff admits that some of its practices were questionable. Zuroff considers that if the Vaad maintained Torah study at perhaps the expense of trying to save more Jewish lives in Europe so that the value of learning was made more important than the value of Jewish life regardless of the level of a Jew's religiosity, then we must question such priorities when pekuah nefesh is involved.

Zuroff suggests that a lesson to be learned from the Holocaust is that Jews under certain circumstances must unite, transcending ideological and political differences, to act in harmony to save Jews who need our help rather than submit to divisive squabbles that only serve to strengthen our enemies rather than champion our people. Rochelle L. Millen ends her review of Zuroff's book in *American Jewish History* (December 2000, vol. 88, p. 570) with the remark, "An indictment? No. A wish for unity and cooperation? Yes."

Zuroff's study ends in January 1944, except for a brief recounting of the Vaad's activities in 1944 and 1945 in an afterword which Zuroff admits is "only the proverbial tip of the iceberg for a period which is of unique interest not only to scholars and students of the Holocaust, but also for those interested in American Orthodoxy, religious Jewry and the internal rifts in the Jewish world" (p. xxiii). Zuroff acknowledges that further studies should be written to deal with the later activities of the Vaad ha-Hatzala. Nonetheless Zuroff's groundbreaking work begins to fill in important gaps in Shoah studies. While there exists Bauer's study of the Joint Distribution Committee (*My Brothers' Keeper, A History of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, 1929-1939; American Jewry and the Holocaust; The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee 1939-1945*), Naomi Cohen's study of The American Jewish Committee (*Not Free to Desist The American Jewish Committee 1906-1966*, Philadelphia, 1981), Pinsky's study on attempts to unite the community by establishing umbrella organizations ("Cooperation Among American Jewish Organizations and Their Efforts to Rescue European Jewry During the Holocaust, 1939-1945," Diss., New York University, 1980), Zuroff notes that "we still lack research on significant community bodies such as the American Jewish Congress, The Jewish Labor Committee, The Emergency Committee to Save the Jewish People of Europe, B'nai Brith, and others, without which it would be impossible to present a comprehensive and exhaustive account of the response of American Jewry to the Holocaust" (p. xvi). Zuroff's work is an important step towards shedding more knowledge on the Holocaust period, but much more work needs to be done.

Zuroff "takes the reader through each stage of the uncertain journey followed by refugee yeshiva students, rabbis, and accompanying families between 1939 and 1943." Special attention is made to the way in which visas were procured. For example Zuroff sheds much light on the Curacao visas acquired through Dutch consular officials as well as the payment of transit fairs, entry

permits obtained, and maintenance of funds transferred from America to the Far East and to Soviet Central Asia. Not all the Polish Jewish refugees who emigrated via the Far East had Curacao visas. A total of 1,100 Polish Jewish refugees were forced to relocate from Japan to Shanghai by the Japanese authorities.

Zuroff clearly presents to his reader the case of the Curacao visas and the Soviet exit permits, which enabled rabbis and yeshiva students and their families to transit Russia and reach Japan and ultimately Shanghai. Mizrahi leader Zerah Warhaftig counseled many Jews to take the Curacao option. 2,200 Jews took this chance and reached Japan. About 1,400 stayed there until they were able to continue to the free world. 1,000 remaining Jews were permitted by Japan to enter its section of Shanghai, to survive the war. Interestingly the majority of Polish refugee yeshiva heads who had escaped to Lithuania, and were the primary focus of the rescue efforts of the Vaad Ha-Hatzala throughout the war, were staunchly opposed to the use of Curacao visas and strongly advised their students against obtaining them. For example Kletzk yeshiva head Rabbi Aron Kotler, who later established the Lakewood Yeshiva in New Jersey, and Rabbi Elchanan Wasserman, the Rosh yeshiva of Baronowitz, both feared that the Soviets would not honor the Curacao visas, and would deport the yeshivot to Siberia. The reason Rabbi Kotler and Rabbi Wasserman were opposed to getting visas was because (1) they feared the Soviet Communists would close the Yeshivot, (2) they had visas to America, and (3) they felt responsible for their students and it was impossible to immigrate as a whole school. Rabbi Kotler went to America while Rabbi Wasserman remained behind and was murdered by Lithuanians in Kanaus. Only Rabbi Eliezer Yehuda Finkel, head of the Mir Yeshiva, took Warhaftig's advice. Thus only the Mir Yeshiva was rescued in its entirety. Of the 20 additional yeshivot which also escaped from Eastern Poland to Lithuania (Slobodka and Telz are Lithuanian yeshivot), the overwhelming majority were murdered at the hands of the Nazis and their collaborators. The activities and fate of the students of the Yeshivot besides Mir, such as Radin, Slutzk, Navardok, Lomza, Slonim, Brisk (Torat Chesed), Baranowitz (Ohel Torah and Torah Chesed), Bialystok (Beit Yoseph), Grodno (Sha'ar ha-Torah), Kamenetz (Knesset Beit Israel), Kletzk (Etz Chaim), Kobrin, Mezritch, Lubavitch, Ostrava, Lutzk, Volozhin, Lublin, Warsaw-Beit Shmuel, and Pinsk (Beit Yoseph) clearly places guilt upon the Nazis and their willing executioners. Zuroff notes, "Only the Mir Yeshiva emigrated in its entirety, and among the

rest of the refugee scholars the percentage of rabbis and roshei yeshiva (as opposed to students) was relatively large, which meant a higher number of wives and children" (p. 196).

Zuroff gives his readers a glimpse of the separatist devotion to study by distancing themselves from the distractions of "big city life" when in the words of Rabbi Chaim Ozer Grodzinski (ztsl) who related the matter of relocation of refugee yeshivot to Vilna and its travails to chief Rabbi Herzog communicated, "The roshei yeshiva themselves want to leave (Vilna) because living in cities is spiritually difficult for the yeshivot, as in a small town they are not bothered and can study with particular diligence" (p. 47). "The Yeshivah bucherim "ate bread with salt and drank water in small measure" (a classical term for learning Torah under adverse physical conditions) under the difficulties of extremely cold weather. Among the leading community rabbis who escaped to Vilna were Rabbis Yitzchak Ze'ev Soloveitchik (Brisk), Chizkiyahu Mishkowsky (Krinski), Aryeh Shapiro (Bialystok), David Lifshitz (Suwalk), and Moshe Shatzkes (Lomza). Zuroff recounts the report of Dr. Samuel Schmidt of Cincinnati who relayed accounts of heroism of the Yeshiva Bochurim in fleeing to Vilna who managed to maintain study during such times of crisis. Dr. Schmidt brought complete lists of the refugee rabbis and yeshiva students in Lithuania and praised their boundless *mesirut nefesh* (Self sacrifice) for Torah study.

Zuroff notes that "the choice of Shanghai as a refuge was dictated not only by geographic proximity but also by necessity. It was one of the only places to which Jews could still obtain entry at that time." The affluent and influential local Jewish community also served as an asset providing assistance in obtaining the necessary documents. Community leaders were willing to help bring additional refugees to Shanghai even when its resources were strained by the influx of approximately 17,000 Jewish refugees from Central Europe. Rabbis Shatzkes, Yaphin, and Lifshitz were three of the leading rabbinic figures in the Far East. The obtainment of permits to Shanghai were in much demand. Sometimes tension mounted between those from Lithuanian versus Polish Yeshivot over the procurement of visas (p. 159). Rabbi Baruch Sorotzkin of the Telz (Telsiai) Yeshiva which was located in Lithuania, as opposed to Polish refugees, bitterly protested the Kobe committee, which was made up of representatives of the Polish refugee yeshivot who in some cases did not want to recognize the right of Telz to obtain visas.

Elie Sternbuch, a representative of the Vaad Ha'hatzala in Switzerland obtained Latin American protective passports which the Germans respected despite their dubious legality. Sternbuch's method was later imitated by other Jewish organizations including Raoul Wallenberg working in Hungary for the Swedish government, the Papal Nuncio, and Red Cross.

A further avenue opened up by the Orthodox rabbis was the transfer of dollars to enemy occupied countries. Rabbi Abraham Kalmonowitz, a Vaad Ha'hatzala leader, personally arranged financial transfers in Shanghai and by maintained contact with the Axis territory. The State Department was persuaded to permit such transfers to Shanghai and European countries. The Joint Distribution Committee followed suit and also sent large sums to occupied Europe and Shanghai.

It is tragic that during the spring and summer of 1942 while the Vaad was focusing exclusively on the welfare of refugee scholars in the Soviet Union and Shanghai, the implementation of the Final Solution was rapidly intensifying as large-scale deportations were carried out from the Warsaw Ghetto and numerous other locations and newly constructed death camps at Treblinka, Sobibor, and Belzec stepped up operations. Zuroff comments, "These developments were still unknown in the United States, however, and as a result the Vaad ha-Hatzala, as well as other American Jewish organizations, continued their regular activities unaware of the scope of Nazi atrocities and the urgent need for emergency rescue initiatives" (p. 213). Zuroff asserts that it was toward the end of the summer of 1942 that news from Europe regarding the Jews under Nazi occupation became increasingly alarming.

Zuroff treats the Sternbuch cable from Montreux, Switzerland, in early September as confirmation of the former two reports of mass murder of Polish Jewry in 1942. The Bund and Riegner preceded the Sternbuch cable. The Sternbuch cable reported the German evacuation of the last Ghetto in Warsaw, the bestial murdering about one hundred thousand Jews with mass murders continuing in the production of corpses from which soap and artificial fertilizers were made. Sternbuch's cable read to the effect:

According to recently received authentic information, the German authorities have evacuated the last Ghetto in Warsaw, bestially murdering about one hundred thousand Jews. Mass murders continue. >From the corpses of the murdered soap and artificial fertilizers are produced. The deportees from other occupied countries

will meet the same fate. It must be supposed that only energetic reprisals on the part of America could halt these persecutions. Do whatever you can to cause an American reaction to halt these persecutions. Do whatever you can to produce such a reaction, stirring up statesmen, the press, and the community. Inform Wise, Silver, Lubavitcher, Einstein, Klatskin, Goldman, Thomas Mann and others about this. Do not mention my name. Please acknowledge receipt of the present dispatch.

Sternbuch who apparently doubted that his cable would reach its destination quickly also called Rabbi Avraham Kalmanowitz at the Vaad ha-Hatzala who according to the testimony of Alex Weisfogel, fainted in the middle of the conversation due to the horror reported. Rabbi Kalmanowitz asked Rabbi Stephen Wise to meet with Orthodox leaders as soon as possible, and thus on September 4, Rabbis Kalmanowitz, Silver, and Aron Kotler joined with Rosenheim, met with Rabbi Stephen Wise who was accompanied by Dr. Aryeh Tartakower and Dr. Leon Kubowitzki of the World Jewish Congress.

News of the atrocities had been conveyed in two previous cables. The first cable was by the Bund in May of 1942. The second was a cable in August 8, of 1942 from Dr. Gerhard Reigner, the representative of the World Jewish Congress in Switzerland. While Rabbi Wise only learned of the Riegner cable on August 28, Zuroff accounts Rabbi Stephen Wise's caution in publicizing news of these cables to the attitude of the State Department officials (p. 222). Welles of the State Department had requested that Rabbi Wise not publicize the information of the cable until the State Department could "confirm its authenticity." Zuroff notes that initially the Orthodox representatives "believed that quiet behind the scenes lobbying (shtadlanut) would prove more effective than the standard mechanisms of modern political protest" (p.223), but this tact was reversed when the tables would be turned with the Orthodox organizations sponsoring a protest march by hundreds of rabbis in Washington and the leader of the World Jewish Congress working behind the scenes to mitigate its impact (p. 223).

Some are critical of Rabbi Stephen Wise who did not take immediate action with regards to the above first two reports. According to Kranzler, it is the Orthodox rabbis of the Vaad, after the receipt of Sternbuch's cable, which reached New York through the use of secret Polish channels in September, who galvanized action. According to Kranzler, the Sternbuch cable pressured Rabbi Stephen Wise into calling a meeting of thirty-four major American Jewish organizations, but according to Zuroff,

Kranzler falsely attributes exclusive credit for Wise's action to the Sternbuch cable, when there is no doubt that the American Jewish leader was also deeply influenced by the report he had received several days earlier from World Jewish Congress Swiss representative Dr. Gerhard Reigner. Zuroff remarks, "And, in fact, based on that information, he had immediately contacted the State Department to determine its veracity." Zuroff notes, "In that respect, Sternbuch's cable only confirmed the terrible news that Wise had already received from his own sources. It was helpful in convincing him of the urgency of the situation, but under no circumstances does this message deserve all the credit for the positive developments which followed its receipt." The implications of Kranzler's interpretation of events, suggests that Rabbi Stephen Wise's reluctance to act on the first two reports and communicate their content, as well as Rabbi Wise's obedience to United States Department's sluggishness in responding to the murder of European Jewry by demanding verification of genocide, was counteracted by the Orthodox Vaad which refused to be so unreactive in delaying action in trying to prevent the atrocities against European Jewry despite their knowledge of such atrocities.

The U.S. administration's indifference to the fate of European Jews was rejected by Revisionist Zionist activist Peter Bergson who inspired the Orthodox rabbinic community to join him in the sole public protest in Washington against the murder of European Jewry. The march on Washington which took place in October 1943 sponsored by the Vaad and the Bergson group is presented by Zuroff as "a crowning political moment of the Vaad's history." While Bergson invited "clergymen of all faiths" to march on Washington on October 6, 1943, only about 400 Orthodox rabbis, two days before Yom Kippur, responded in participation. Roosevelt who had a light schedule that day, refused to meet with the orthodox rabbis for political and ideological reasons. Roosevelt favored more liberal Jews as the true spokesmen of American Jewry. Zuroff reports "In the words of one of the participants, a prominent rabbi from Brooklyn, FDR's absence was 'a slap in the face not only to the delegation but to American Jewry'" (p. 260). Zuroff surmises the importance of the march by noting, "Those supportive and sympathetic to the rabbis and the Emergency Committee wrote in glowing terms of a unique and highly significant political achievement, whereas the opponents attacked the march in cynical terms as an irrelevant or even negative event" (p. 260). Zuroff however recognizes the march as a crowning achievement when he writes, "The rabbis march in Washington projected the Vaad ha-Hatzala and

its leaders into the larger rescue picture in a meaningful way for the first time, reflecting their growing desire to play a key role to rescue all Jews and not just rabbis and yeshiva students“ (p. 264). Zuroff sees the expansion of the Vaad ha-Hatzala rescue activities to include all Jews regardless of religiosity or religious affiliation as an important fact that defends against the claim that the Vaad was too insular and separatist in taking care only of its own like minded religiously faithful community.

According to Kranzler, however, the march on Washington, despite the snub leveled by Roosevelt's refusal to meet with the rabbinic sages, had an impact on saving European Jews, in that in reaction to it, The War Refugee Board came into being in January 1944. However, Zuroff counsels caution in attributing the formation of the American War Refugee Board to the Orthodox rabbis march. Zuroff writes, “Yet, it was the Emergency Committee to Save the Jewish People of Europe that deserves most of the credit for forcing the US government to set up its own rescue agency. And while the rabbis' march in Washington (which was organized by the Emergency Committee) was undoubtedly a dramatic event, its political impact was unfortunately not as powerful as Kranzler would have us believe. In fact, no reputable historian gives the Vaad Ha-Hatzala or the Union of Orthodox Rabbis major credit for this important development, although the symbolic significance of the rabbis march is acknowledged.” According to Lederhendler, Zuroff sees the importance of the march “not in terms of results, but attitude and commitment” (“Of Integrity, Rescue, and Splinter Groups,” *Yad Vashem Studies* XXVIII, p. 384)

Zuroff's book successfully meets the primary objectives of the book spelled out in the Introduction. There Zuroff writes, “The primary objective of this book is therefore to present the first comprehensive history of the Vaad ha-Hatzala, and examine the extent to which it succeeded in fulfilling its objectives (a subject bitterly debated between ultra-Orthodox spokesmen who magnify and glorify its achievements and others who are skeptical about the role it played in rescue efforts). It will also analyze the Vaad's rescue philosophy and modus operandi and describe how they differed from those of their counterparts at the Joint Distribution Committee and how these differences affected the relative success achieved by each of these relief agencies. It will also seek to assess the attitude of Orthodox leaders to the attempts to unite American Jewry in order to facilitate rescue efforts, a subject which reflects not only on the policies adopted in the Orthodox community, but also on the re-

sponse of American Jewry as a whole to the Holocaust and its efforts to assist European Jewry. To what extent were Orthodox leaders willing, for example, to make compromises in order to achieve communal unity on relief and rescue issues? Which points did Orthodox leaders consider negotiable in this debate and on which issues were they unwilling to compromise?” (p. xviii). These objectives and other concerns of Zuroff's book enhance the narrative with a multi-faceted quality that opens up many questions that should be confronted if we are to better understand the workings of the Vaad and the Holocaust period.

Reception History so far: A Storm of Controversy

It should be noted that the publication of Zuroff's book has stirred a storm of controversy because the independent activities of the Vaad were accused of “breaking Jewish Unity” and “taking care only of their own,” i.e., the Yeshivah community. Both of these claims must be qualified. The book also has “touched a sensitive nerve” in the Haredi communities. The book has an interesting reception history because of the antagonism between religious and non-orthodox groups that played a role in Holocaust rescue. Zuroff in addressing the controversial reception his book has received from Haredi groups remarks, “Rather than leading to a frank and open discussion of these issues which could perhaps pave the way for the beginning of a healing process, the book—or to be more precise, the press reports generated by its appearance—has sent the haredi apologists scurrying into their bunkers. As usual, the accuracy of the historical record becomes irrelevant, and the main objective is to delegitimize any information which can in any way reflect negatively on the *gedolim* (Torah greats) and thereby possibly undermine the faith of their community in the infallibility of their rabbinic leadership. Precisely because the haredi community can point with pride to certain achievements in the field of rescue, it should have been able to deal with the less successful aspects of its record during the Holocaust. This, unfortunately, has not taken place. Thus, what could indeed have been a fine hour for Orthodoxy, in terms of its willingness for the first time to confront its true record and deal with past mistakes, is in rapid danger of deteriorating into another totally superfluous and harmful war of words that will not benefit any of us, haredi or non-haredi.”

Mark Lavie for the Associated Press wrote an article titled, “Book Blasts WWII Rabbis” asserting that Zuroff's book charges that “during the Holocaust, ultra-Orthodox American rabbis focused on saving hundreds of Polish

scholars, ignoring the suffering of millions of other Jews who were eventually murdered by the Nazis". Lavie interprets Zuroff to argue that "the group's narrow goal brought it into conflict with mainstream American Jewish groups working to rescue as many Jews as possible and to influence reluctant American politicians to take action." Lavie wrote, "Zuroff documents how the rabbis funneled scarce funds to scholars already safely in exile so they could maintain full time Talmud studies, even as other Jews were being killed in death camps." Lavie surmised, "According to Zuroff's book, the Rescue Committee extorted money from mainstream Jewish groups, employed shady practices to transfer funds to Europe and even violated the Jewish Sabbath for its cause." Lavie conceded that Zuroff "did not go so far as to blame the Rescue Committee for the deaths of Jews." Zuroff rightly notes, "What actually cost the lives of Jews was the Nazis and their collaborators (who) murdered them." Lavie cites an interview comment of Zuroff however that "the Rescue Committee's 'tunnel vision' hindered rescue efforts."

An April 30, 2000 article for Zenit.org News Agency titled, "Book Accuses World War II Rabbis of Ignoring Suffering of Jews" also flamed controversy in its accusation that "Zuroff argued that in order to save a few hundred scholars, millions were sacrificed." The Zenit article accused ultra-Orthodox elements of the Jewish community in the U.S. with saving the lives of a small group of Talmudic scholars, "while ignoring the cries for help of millions of other less religious Jews."

Yair Sheleg on Monday July 31 in an article titled, "Storm in a streimal" which appeared in *Ha'aretz*, notes the absurd charge from Haredi attackers that Zuroff's book "has unleashed cries of blood libel accusations that the author, cares only about publicity, and comparison between Zuroff and Holocaust denier David Irving."

Mark Matthews in a May 2, 2000 article for the *Baltimore Sun* titled, "U.S. Jews accused of hurting Holocaust rescues; Orthodox rabbis' effort to save scholars cost other lives, book says" identified a central thesis of Zuroff's book that "American Orthodox rabbis went to strenuous lengths to support and rescue Jewish sages, rabbis and religious scholars in Eastern Europe during WWII, but their success hampered efforts to save others..." Matthews notes that the book argues that the Vaad was "exclusively geared to helping Jews who would keep Orthodox Judaism alive," and the rabbis got into bitter disputes over fund raising and tactics with mainstream Jewish leaders that undermined the overall struggle to protect European Jews from the Nazi killing machine.

The controversy over Zuroff's book is also playing itself out in the *Jerusalem Post*, which has published articles by Marilyn Henry ("New Book slams US Orthodox WWII rescue efforts", April 27, 2000), David Kranzler ("One for All", May 5, 2000), Judy Lev ("Zuroff Criticism Unfair" May 11, 2000), and Jonathan Rosenblum ("Who should be Embarrassed?", May 12, 2000). Marilyn Henry asserts that Zuroff "charges that the American Orthodox rabbis set up a rescue system that, until the last year of the war, ignored the plight of other endangered Jews." She notes that the Vaad "did not want to leave the fate of the rabbis in the hands of the leaders of the Joint, whose *weltanschauung* and lifestyle were so different from their own." Zuroff wrote that the Joint, whose resources were strained, came to see the Vaad "primarily as an unwelcome nuisance which was creating more problems than it solved." Henry interprets Zuroff to charge that the Vaad was obsessive and parochial and that their resources and fund-raising also were weak, leaving the Vaad both a rival and a dependent of the Joint Distribution Committee, at which it looked askance. David Kranzler defends the Orthodox Vaad from critique when he writes, "The Orthodox leader's efforts were extraordinary, relative to their social, economic, and political power in the US at that time, which was minimal." Kranzler wrote, "Efraim Zuroff's claim that 'during the Holocaust, American Orthodox rabbis insisted on preferential treatment for the Torah elite at the expense of rescue projects aimed at other Jews' is utterly objectionable. The rabbis in no way diminished the chances of rescue of the masses of Jews. Rather they opened up entire new vistas of rescue, not hitherto explored by any Jewish organization." Kranzler argued that because of their limited financial means and political influence in the American and general Allied world, naturally the Vaad was forced to focus rescue efforts on their own group, but in so doing, they blazed trails and opened new avenues of rescue for the wider Jewish world. Kranzler asserts that it is a principle that every group is entitled to look after its own followers. He writes, "Thus, Zionist organizations tried to rescue Zionists, socialists (Bundists) looked after their own, as did associations of intellectuals and artists." It should be noted that Kranzler's 1987 book, *Thy Brother's Blood: The Orthodox Jewish Response During the Holocaust* was critiqued in the journal *American Jewish History* in a review by Zuroff. In Lederhendler's review of Zuroff's book she further notes the tension between Kranzler's orthodox "apologist" ideologically infused position and Zuroff's academic objectivity that attempts fair balanced less ideologically biased presentation of ideas. Lederhendler writes in reference to Kranzler's *Thy Brother's*

Blood: The Orthodox Jewish Response During the Holocaust (Brooklyn, Mesorah, 1987), "In that sense, and compared with far more egregious examples that have unfortunately, been published, Zuroff's book may almost be seen as a timely corrective" ("Of Integrity, Rescue, and Splinter Groups," p.388). As an academic trained in University scholarship, Zuroff is committed to fair balanced treatment of the Holocaust from a perspective more detached from his own personal faith and personal opinions and views. History as a discipline as Leopold von Ranke formulated tries to present "wie es eigentlich gewesen war" and this desire to report the facts objectively with insightful analysis is seen throughout Zuroff's outstanding work. Zuroff does not take the position that the Torah giants' actions of that troubled time are beyond question.

Jonathan Rosenblum takes away from Zuroff's book a plan of action by the Orthodox rabbis of the Vaad which sparkles in contrast to the weaknesses of the other less religious Jewish agencies response to the plight of European Jewry. In the shadow of the findings of Wyman's *The Abandonment of the Jews* which characterized American Jewish leaders during the Holocaust as "unable to break out of a business as usual pattern," Rosenblum wishes that the American communal framework had been "as devoted" to the rescue of the Orthodox "or devoted at all." Rosenblum writes, "The attitude of the Orthodox could not have been in sharper contrast. The leaders of American Orthodoxy spared no effort. The greatest Eastern European rabbis then in America—Rabbi Aharon Kotler and Rabbi Avraham Kalmonowitz—and the leaders of Agudath Israel violated the Sabbath on numerous occasions for vital rescue activities having nothing to do with yeshivas." Rosenblum sees this devoted determination of the Orthodox rabbis of the Vaad as a great strength. He notes the important influence of Rabbi Kalmanowitz on Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau Jr in galvanizing Morgenthau to support the rescue within the Roosevelt Administration. This according to Rosenblum is in sharp contrast to Rabbi Stephen Wise, who according to Rosenblum "consistently wavered and hesitated in pushing for greater Allied rescue efforts out of his absolute devotion to FDR. Rosenblum is critical of Rabbi Wise's lack of action when he previously received information of the extermination of Polish Jewry from Bundist sources. Rosenblum contrasts Rabbi Wise's lack of action with Jacob Rosenheim, head of World Agudath Israel, who when he received a cable from Isaac Sternbuch in Switzerland, got the ball rolling in implementing action against the news of the Holocaust mass murders. He maintains that it was Rosen-

heim and Rabbi Kalmanowitz who pressured Rabbi Wise to call a meeting of all Jewish groups on September 6 which led to the creation of the Jewish Emergency Committee. Rosenblum is critical of Rabbi Stephen Wise's disbandment of the JEC. Rosenblum notes that the Orthodox protests succeeded in placing the response to the Holocaust on the agenda when it had been relegated to a backburner. Rosenblum is also critical of mainstream Zionist groups that worked behind the scenes "to scuttle the Rescue Resolution." Rosenblum concludes that "had mainstream leaders shared the absolute commitment to rescue as the highest imperative of Orthodox activists in American and Europe— a commitment which allowed no defeatism and caused them to explore every opportunity—hundreds of thousands more might have been spared..." Zuroff's book was released on the day set aside by Israel to remember the 6 million Jews murdered by the Nazis. The fact that many ultra-Orthodox refuse to observe the nationwide moment of silence on Yom HaShoah because they reject political Zionism as the answer to the Holocaust is evoked in Rosenblum's title, "Who should be embarrassed?" as noted when Rosenblum writes, "Zuroff charges that the Orthodox do not stand on Holocaust Remembrance Day out of embarrassment over the wartime failures. If so, one wonders, who can stand." Rabbi Haskel Lookstein who defends the Vaad's choice to save the Yeshiva elite in many ways is of like mind with Rosenblum when he commented, "Most Jews were doing nothing. I don't think a group that tried to save a particular community should have its efforts disparaged. American Jews were so disengaged from the tragedy of European Jewry during the Holocaust that any group that did anything should be given credit."

The Context of the Debate

Zuroff's book joins a growing number of works in the field of Shoah studies relating to America's relation to the Holocaust. This section of this review is indebted to Lederhendler in his review of Zuroff's book in *Yad Vashem Studies* (XXVIII, Jerusalem, 2000, ed. David Silberklang) titled, "Of Integrity, Rescue, and Splinter Groups" which touches upon those key works that form an important body of scholarship into which Zuroff's study enters. Lederhendler's identification of works is the basis of this section.

Lederhendler notes that Zuroff's book joins that of Aaron Berman. Berman's book, *Nazism, the Jews, and American Zionism, 1933-1948* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1990) in a measured way demonstrated that the Zionists' insistence on including a demand for Jewish

statehood in any proposal to aid European Jewry politicized the rescue issue and made it impossible to appeal for American aid on purely humanitarian grounds. He shows how the American Zionist response to Nazism also shaped the political turmoil in the Middle East after 1948. Berman's book attempted to try to understand the constraints within which they operated and what opportunities they had to respond to the Nazi policy of *Judeocide*. Berman offered an analysis of the Zionist understanding of the Holocaust as it was occurring, how it shaped the development of American Jewish policies and political activism on rescue and statehood. Berman praises Peter Bergson's group for mounting a campaign to promote Jewish rescue as an issue in American public debate. Like Berman, Zuroff considers whether Rabbi Stephen Wise might have adversely slowed the response of rescue. Also Zuroff like Berman, is not interested in only dwelling on the numerical results of rescue success, but interested in the motivation, intent, and attitudes of the rescuers. For example, Zuroff shows that the Vaad believed that by saving the Yeshiva elite, they believed that they were assuring the future of an authentic Torah true expression of Judaism. The intent to save Talmud scholars was motivated by an attitude that the network of Polish yeshivot was the highest form of Jewish scholarship that deserved higher priority for rescue.

According to Lederhendler, Zuroff's book also joins David Wyman's *The Abandonment of the Jews* (New York: Pantheon, 1984) which demonstrates that too little, too late was done on behalf of European Jewry annihilated during the Holocaust. Wyman's important study is a crucial indictment of the United States government's failure to bomb the tracks leading to Auschwitz and to respond in a timely way to reports concerning the mass murder of European Jewry. Wyman documents that rescue was prevented due to indifference in political Washington. This abandonment of the Jews of Europe, from Wyman's perspective, casts a shadow over the whole dark period, and is an indictment of American behavior in responding in a timely way to the plight of European Jewry. Lederhendler notes that Wyman admits that even if rescue attempts might have been futile, "such attempts should have been made to satisfy moral obligations" (p. 335), "which is questioned by Henry Feingold in *Bearing Witness* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1995)." Richard Breitman and Alan Kraut's *American Refugee Policy and European Jewry, 1933-1945* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987) treats American refugee policy under the Roosevelt administration. Wyman has argued that the state department actively blocked news of

the extermination camps and Roosevelt refused to focus on the issue. The U.S. government was thus deeply committed to a policy of not rescuing Jews from the Nazis. The hoax of the Bermuda conference in which the state department never intended to help, confirms the policy of indifference. The state department's restrictive immigration laws left millions of Jews to become the victims of the Nazis. The St. Louis is a case in point that after the ship of Jewish refugees reached Cuba and then sought entry to the U.S. on the Florida coast, the U.S. denied safe harbor. In the video "America and the Holocaust" Wyman suggests that Breckinridge-Long of the State department, according to Wyman, lied about the help the U.S. was giving to the Jews of Europe. Long enforced the anti alien policies of the state department that lead to reduction in immigration of Jews. Rabbi Stephen Wise was reluctant to press Roosevelt, and did not want to "rock the boat" according to Wyman. "The paper walls that meant the difference between life and death" created the indifference and deceit that led to the abandonment of the European Jews from Nazi Europe. Some suggest that the American State Department was an active accomplice in covering up, and trying to suppress the covering up of information. The acquiescence of the state department in the murder of European Jews is unconscionable for America according to some. The War Refugee Board was "too little too late." The only reason Roosevelt approved its formation according to Wyman was because he feared a scandal in congress with the Peter Bergson pressure in Congress to do more for European Jews. Bergson along with Ben Hecht who wrote the pageant, "We Will Never Die," tried to put pressure on the government to take a more active role in saving Jews from the Nazis. Roosevelt allowed the formation of the War Refugee Board "for political reasons not moral reasons" according to Wyman. If Roosevelt was acting on moral grounds he would have acted on early reports of the extermination camps and mass murder. Henry Morgenthau sought to expose the State Department's inaction and obstruction of rescue and administrative inaction. The obstruction of rescue may have been due to anti-semitism. The state department according to Wyman, suppressed information of the murder of European Jewry. For Wyman the conscience of the American nation was "compromised" during WWII as a result of its indifference in its "obstruction of rescue."

Zuroff, like Wyman, is critical of the Roosevelt administration. Zuroff is particularly critical in regards to not meeting with the rabbis who marched on Washington soon before Yom Kippur. Zuroff also suggests that

the Roosevelt administration would have benefited by widening their circle of Jewish input from Rabbi Stephen Wise and others to include the intentions of the Orthodox Vaad. While Zuroff documents that the Vaad was successful in saving the rabbis and yeshiva students of the Mir Yeshiva who found refuge in Shanghai, he does not suggest a total “abandonment” early on by the Vaad of Jews outside the Yeshivot elite in its rescue priorities to save firstly the rabbinic scholars who were viewed as the most important chains in the link to future Jewish continuity because Zuroff notes the important shift later to expand its efforts to include all Jews for rescue regardless of their religiosity or affiliation.

Lederhendler also shows that Zuroff’s book also complements the work on the American press in the Holocaust period of Holocaust historian Deborah Lipstadt, who recently successfully sued David Irving for libelous Holocaust denial. Lipstadt’s important work documents the growing assault on truth and memory by those who claim that the murder of six million Jews in Nazi concentration camps is a hoax perpetrated by a powerful Zionist conspiracy. In her book *Denying the Holocaust* (The Vidal Sasson International Center for the study of Anti-semitism: A Plume Book, 1994) she offers a history of Holocaust denial. Like Lipstadt, Zuroff is committed to the factual record of Holocaust history, and the way that historical truth and meaning are transmitted from one generation to another. In her book *Beyond Belief: The American Press and the Coming of the Holocaust, 1933-1945* (New York and London: The Free Press/Macmillan, 1986), Lipstadt raised questions of journalistic anti-Jewish bias, factual awareness, accuracy, and concern regarding European Jewry during the Holocaust. Lipstadt showed the indifference in public opinion to European Jewry. Lipstadt suggests greater journalistic fairness and better intentions would have produced more beneficial results.

Another Holocaust historian’s work to which Zuroff’s work serves as an important addition is Yehudah Bauer, considered by many one of the most important Shoah researchers in the world today. Bauer’s books *Jews for Sale? Nazi-Jewish Negotiations, 1933-1945* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), *Jewish Reactions to the Holocaust* (Mod Books, Tel Aviv, 1989), *My Brother’s Keeper* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1974), and *American Jewry and the Holocaust* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1981) are all familiar to Zuroff who studied under Bauer and acknowledges his debt to his mentor. Zuroff’s book originated as a doctoral dissertation under Bauer’s supervision. In the Acknowledgements, Zuroff

writes, “First, and foremost, I owe a tremendous debt of thanks to my mentor in Holocaust studies Professor Yehuda Bauer of the Institute of Contemporary Jewry of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and Yad Vashem, who served as advisor for this research and never lost hope that it would be completed, despite the fact that for many years my efforts to track down and prosecute Nazi war criminals were accorded a higher priority. It was Professor Bauer who inspired me to immerse myself in the study of the Shoah and as a result I have devoted my career to recording its events, commemorating its victims and punishing its perpetrators. As the world’s leading expert on rescue efforts during the Holocaust, he provided much sage advice and insight regarding this extremely complex subject” (ix). The influence of Bauer on Zuroff is particularly seen with regards to Bauer’s work on the Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), an organization brought into conflict on numerous occasions with the Orthodox Vaad ha-Hatzala. Both Bauer and Zuroff, mentor and disciple, offer numerical specifics in terms of statistics. Both Zuroff and Bauer balance personal stories with statistics in the hopes and frustrations of the heroic individuals and small groups who worked for rescue. As Lederhendler argues, however Zuroff and Bauer “do not intend to rest their cases on the numerical calculus of rescue” (“Of Integrity, Rescue, and Splinter Groups,” in *Yad VaShem Studies XXVIII*, Jerusalem, 2000). Zuroff contends that “the success of the Vaad must be measured in different terms of integrity” that justifies its separatist path. For Zuroff “what matters is not only what you did but why you did it.” Torah was the *raison d’etre* of the Vaad ha-Hatzala and thus even the modest and partial successes of its results must be justified not in terms of numbers saved, but in terms of the Rabbinic way of life that it sought to continue. Zuroff’s description of the relation of the Vaad with the JDC and the conflicts between the two organizations is informed by Bauer’s *American Jewry and the Holocaust* which describes the efforts made to aid European victims of WWII by the New York based JDC. Lederhendler notes, “had it not been for the Vaad’s prodding, the JDC’s operation in Europe and Asia might not have addressed the particular plight of yeshivah students and Torah scholars with great dispatch, care, or efficacy” (p.384). Both Zuroff and Bauer draw on large masses of unpublished archival material for their research, as well as thorough knowledge of recent and continuing research into the Holocaust. Both Zuroff and Bauer address moral and historical questions such as: Who should be saved first?, i.e., priority issues; The relationship of the willingness of the Vaad to use illegal or extralegal means for rescue in order to save Jews?;

How did the refugee scholars respond to life in the places of temporary refuge such as Shanghai and Vilna?; Could the Vaad have done more if they had grasped the reality of the Holocaust sooner?; Is it better to cooperate with other organizations and preserve Jewish unity or to more effectively independently pursue the Vaad's limited priorities?

Lederhendler also points out that Zuroff's work also contributes to the foundations set by Lucy Dawidowicz whose "Could America Have Rescued Europe's Jews" (in Dawidowicz, *What is the Use of Jewish History?*, ed. by Neal Kozodoy, New York: Schocken 1992), serves as a background question to Zuroff's study. Dawidowicz, who was professor of social history at Yeshiva University, provided Holocaust studies with many important works including *A Holocaust Reader* (New York: Behrman House, Inc., 1976) and *The War Against the Jews, 1933-1945* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston) which demonstrated the importance for Jewish historians to draw on archival and other unpublished records, as Zuroff's methodology also engages expertly.

Lederhendler notes that William Rubenstein's *The Myth of Rescue: Why the Democracies Could Not Have Saved More Jews From the Nazis* (London: Routledge, 1997), like Dawidowicz, and Bauer has addressed the question of the potential for rescue and challenged the notion that many Jews might have been saved by the allies during WWII.

Lederhendler does not mention Novick's work. Peter Novick's *The Holocaust in American Life* (N.Y.: Houghton Mifflin) which treats the history of Holocaust consciousness in America and appeals to the notion of "collective memory," questions choices in what to remember as a result of ideological and pragmatic considerations. Zuroff's study does not serve what Novick disparagingly locates as "the barrage of awfulness" that may "anesthetize" Americans confronting the Holocaust to smaller scale suffering. Zuroff's work dispels Novick's questions whether centering the representation of Jewish experience on the Holocaust in the long run confirms the ancient stereotype of the Jew as a persecuted pariah. Zuroff's book does not belong to what is often condescendingly referred to as sensationalized "Holocaust industry." Rather Zuroff's work is an important scholarly contribution to the field that sheds much light on a dark time. However like Novick, Zuroff shows that conceptualization of the American Jewish community as one united monolithic block is specious, as the Jews in America represent a diverse group of varying ideological stances

that effected the way each group responded or did not respond to the European tragedy. In the instance of the Vaad, Zuroff refutes, although not intentionally, Novick's claim that American identity took precedence over Jewish identity and the desire to assimilate was more powerful than the desire to conserve East-European traditions, for the Orthodox group of rabbis of the Vaad that is the subject of Zuroff's magnificent study, sustained its position of separatism in many ways. It was in fact the desire to preserve the Eastern European learning of the Yeshivot network that defined the Vaad's separatist intentions that placed importance on rabbinic scholarship and rejected assimilation.

Implications of the book

Zuroff's excellent book has intensified the debate about the response of American Jewry during the Holocaust. It asks, "To what extent was it necessary to break ranks with the entire American Jewish community to save a small elite from one segment of Jewry?" It also highlights the antagonism and tension between ultra-Orthodox, Zionists, and more mainstream Jewish responses to the Holocaust. While recounting the good that the Vaad accomplished, Zuroff honestly urges his readers to consider the weaknesses in its response to the Holocaust. Zuroff's book is concerned further with the questions of "authenticity," "continuity," and "communal solidarity."

The reception history of this book shows the divisions between Haredi and non-Haredi Jews. While the reception history so far indicates that some wish to use this book as a way in which Orthodox Jews themselves can be proud of the Orthodox response in the United States to the Holocaust, some Orthodox reviewers have used this book in a devious way to antagonize the more liberal response to the Holocaust by reform Jews and their leaders such as Rabbi Stephen Wise. Some secular Jews reviewing this book are also susceptible to their own bias, and setting out to grind their own axe and promote their own liberal agenda. For example some secular reviewers are quick to point out that the orthodox Vaad "cared only about their own" to the detriment of other less religious Jews. Such statements must be qualified and as generalizations refute the findings of Zuroff's research. Such critics use the book to argue for the "selfish exclusivity" of the Orthodox. This also is a very one-sided representation of the findings of the book which contradict such accusations of continued exclusivity. To counter these liberal attacks that use Zuroff's book to criticize the Orthodox of taking care of only other orthodox Jews, Zuroff

writes, "Thus, for example, I clearly point out that, to the rabbis credit, they made an official decision in early January 1944 to expand the scope of their activities and henceforth attempt to save every Jew regardless of religiosity or religious affiliation." Zuroff, however, admits to some justified criticism of the Vaad when he notes that one cannot ignore the fact that during the years 1944-1945 (until the end of the war) the Vaad Ha-Hatzala sent considerable sums to Shanghai and Central Asia to enable refugee Torah scholars to continue their intensive studies and maintain their lifestyle which was in addition to the financial assistance sent by the Joint Distribution Committee. Thus Zuroff suggests that "the help sent by the Orthodox rescue agency enabled them to maintain a higher standard of living, which should hardly have been a goal, at a time that additional rescue operations were desperately needed in occupied Europe." Zuroff suggests that the rabbis knew full well that the funds they had raised were needed far more by the Jews still under Nazi yoke. Zuroff calls the Vaad's priorities "highly questionable at best, and detrimental to far more urgent concerns at worst." Zuroff admits, "I have no doubt that the leaders of the Vaad Ha-Hatzala yearned for the rescue of every Jew regardless of his or her religious beliefs and practices. Yet, when the time came to spend money to implement programs, rabbis and yeshiva students were given a priority that they often did not logically deserve." Zuroff presents the question of the Vaad's separatism as both something to be critical of and something to be praised. Zuroff presents both the good, and not so good aspects of political separatism. Interestingly on several occasions Chabad Lubavitch separated further by submitting separate requests to the JDC contrary to the wishes of the Vaad. Lederhendler in her review critically remarked, "Why internal splintering of this sort should have occurred within an already-small, traditional Orthodox camp, among people who shared the same passionate commitments and lifestyle, is a natural question here. Yet Zuroff offers us little in the way of an explanation" ("Of Integrity, Rescue, and Splinter Groups," p. 385). The book raises questions concerning the politics of separatism, separatism being "at the very root of the culture that the Vaad was trying to save." Lederhendler regarding separatism of the Vaad writes further, "In presenting the culture of religious separatism as a positive value in its own right, however, Zuroff finds it difficult to pursue such underlying critical questions very far. If religious separatism is a virtue and a culture worth saving-by resorting to separatist means, if necessary- how then can one criticize those involved for having thereby made the overall tasks of refugee assistance and rescue less

unified and perhaps less effective? ("Of Integrity, Rescue, and Splinter Groups," in *Yad VaShem Studies XXVIII*, Jerusalem, 2000, p. 386)."

The book raises the question of how far should a Jewish organization go in engaging in illegal rescue activities in the saving of life? It may be suggested that the Orthodox Vaad sometimes ignored the strictly legal regulations in order to follow the Torah dictates regarding the value of human life. The rabbis sometimes acted in the spirit of breaking secular regulations in order to save the religious law of *pekuach nefesh*, as the moral thing to do, when secular law in Nazi occupied Europe was devoted to the policy of Judeocide. The rabbis actions demonstrate that civil disobedience is necessary in order to resist totalitarian governments that may come into control and use state legal bureaucracies to implement their policies of evil. The Vaad, to the credit of the Vaad, did more to circumvent U.S. regulations to save Jews than did the JDC. Ultimately, the JDC saved far more Jews than the VH but, as explained in the book, refused to do anything that could be interpreted as violating even the spirit, let alone the letter of U.S. regulations. Zuroff writes, "It was true that the JDC in New York strictly adhered to U.S. regulations, even to the spirit, not to mention the letter, of the law. It was also true that this rigid policy had forced the JDC to adopt different tactics than the Vaad did in its negotiations with the Nazis and to limit severely the extent to which it was willing to cooperate with Sternbuch" (p. 284).

Perhaps the most alarming implication of this book is the role of the U.S. State Department to delay action and rescue attempts on behalf of European Jewry. The State Department's demand to Rabbi Stephen Wise that they "required confirmation of the reports of atrocities" is highly alarming, and the pressure that the State Department put on Rabbi Wise to maintain "silence" with regards to the publication of these reports morally questionable. In many ways Rabbi Wise was caught in the middle of an extremely difficult situation where time was of the essence with regards to initiating action to attempt to save European Jewry. Rather than that orthodox groups should blame Rabbi Wise for the delayed action once news of atrocities was known, perhaps we should better realize Rabbi Wise's dilemma. Perhaps it is the U.S. State Department that raises the most questionable behavior for slowness to react to the reports of genocide, and for not valuing the interests of saving Jews from Europe. It can be argued that it is ultimately not merely a benefit only to the Jewish community to save Jewish life, but to humanity at large as well, for the Nazis in their

legalized policy of Judeocide sought to exterminate the divine image of man in general as Emil Fackenheim has argued.

It is hoped that readers will learn from Zuroff's study that the dangers of internal squabbling over differences in ideology and outlook proves only divisive and non-beneficial to the Jewish communities interests at large. Rather the Jewish community can hope to be stronger when all of its members stand united to combat against the forces of evil that reigned implicit and explicit in the Nazi regime which would stop at no cost to murder every man, women, and child of the Jewish people. Zuroff's account of the Vaad ha-hatzala is an account that appeals to unity rather than search to posit accusation, divisive blame, and baseless hatreds that serve the enemies of the Jews rather than triumph the Jewish people. Zuroff himself certainly does not warrant to be accused of such extreme accusations as "blood libel" in his attempt to present in as fair, objective, and balanced a way the unique findings of his meticulous research and questioning. Zuroff concludes his book with this appeal to unity when he writes, "And it is this dedication to the saving of many lives that is probably the Vaad's most lasting legacy to the Jewish people. Yet while we acknowledge its importance, we should never lose sight of its pitfalls and the heavy price paid by others for its success. It seems likely that as successful as it was in practical terms, had the Vaad joined forces with the Joint, the overall results would probably have been more beneficial to the Jewish people than those achieved individually by each organization. And that too is a lesson that should be learned from the history of the Holocaust" (p.287).

To restate our conclusion, Zuroff's excellent book is a welcome addition to Shoah studies and will want to be read and pondered by those interested not only in the Holocaust and American Jewish history, but specifically American Jewry's relation to the Holocaust, Eastern European history during the war, and the relationship between American Orthodoxy to other more mainstream American Jewish communal organizations.

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