Index: RG-50.030.0189

Title: Oral history interview with Gerhart Riegner

Interviewee: Gerhart Riegner

Interviewer: Richard Breitman

00:00:00

**Q: Well, on the vatican I have once given a great lecture on the vatican and on the World Council of Churches. Uh they have...there has been very little done. Uh I spoke, I believe, of the memorandum which we gave to the in Bern in nineteen hundred forty-two, and the only result of this was uh that some action was taken with regard to Slovakia and the deportations of Slovakia were interrupted, stopped for a certain time. This was a Catholic priest who was at the head of the government. Uh in all the...I have spoken on the action taken in in Hungary by the Vatican and here I believe that the vatican and the the Nuncio who was in Budapest has tried to and cooperated with the general effort to preserve the Jewish community, and even the local bishops and uh were influenced in this way. But generally speaking, the situation depended on this the personal courage and the personal determination of the leaders in the various countries. And you have examples of courage and determination and you have examples of complete uh laissez-faire. Some of the bishops and archbishops...you have beautiful examples in France like Cardinal of Toulousse, who went to the station where the deportations from where the deportations took place, and his presence was an act of protest. There were some other bishops...Bishop , Bishop .. , but there were also other cardinals who supported the vichary regime fully, and the Vatican never interfered even in the French anti-Jewish legislation when it was asked whether..of his opinion. the Vatican in my opinion, and there there are twelve or thirteen volumes of vatican documents what uh what they were doing l 53 during the War, I believe that the real problem in the catastrophe of the...which happened to us was never taken seriously by the Vatican until the War was practically over, and I believe that there was no real realization in the highest uh levels of the Vatican bureaucracy, uh no real evaluation of the out...of of the the the dimensions of the catastrophe, and I believe that the Vatican was better informed maybe than we believe. There are hundreds and hundreds of priests. and we were not prevented from and there are books who report on this, on these reports. In the official documentation, it shows that some uh priests reported very clearly about the about the elimination of the Jews and the http://collections.ushmm.org Contact reference@ushmm.org for further information about this collection This is a verbatim transcript of spoken word. It is not the primary source, and it has not been checked for spelling or accuracy.killing of Jews. When prohibited Wise to publish my famous it was agreed that they should ask opinion of the Vatican and the opinion of the Vatican was very wishywashy. They said we have also reports but uh it doesn't...on on that treatment, but they didn't confirm the elimination. Astonishingly, because , the who reports regularly to the Vatican and who writes about the same time the new things are the bombardments of the state, of the cities, and the uh increased elimination and extermination of the Jews and there are already more than two million exterminations. So one cannot tell me they didn't know. Uh in some places, the local bishops helped. The action of the vatican centrally was practically limited to Hungary. There they tried a certain influence, but otherwise I wouLd say there was no real great concern. And uh I often uh thought that my long conversation with uh with Monseigneur Montini 54 in 1945 when the war was over and I was asked to plead with him the Catholic authorities should help us to recuperate the Jewish children who had been hidden by Catholic authorities or Catholic individuals and when I argued with him...this was November 1945...and said that we had...we were very grateful to the Catholic Church for what it had done in order to save some Jews, Jewish children especially, but we had lost in the war one and a half million Jewish children, and we couldn't loose one more child. He questioned me, he questioned this statement and was absolutely astonished when I gave him the statistical background to my \_ . For twenty minutes we argued. I told him, you know, there were in Poland...the birthrate...was a birthrate...a Jewish birthrate of sixty thousand every year. Multiply by 16, 16...you can...you arrive at 960,000 children, up to the age of sixteen. We should have in 1945 at the end of the War, found 960,000 Jewish children in Poland. Do you know how many we found? Something like 3,640 kids. There is a report by uh Jewish leader, Louis Seeger who comes back from Poland and brings these figures. take Hungary. Hungary with Transylvania, territories which belonged...we call to Romania, about eight hundred thousand Jews. There were about four hundred thousand in the Hungarian provinces. On an average, there should have been a hundred thousand Jewish children. http://collections.ushmm.org Contact reference@ushmm.org for further information about this collection This is a verbatim transcript of spoken word. It is not the primary source, and it has not been checked for spelling or accuracy.Maybe a little less...eighty thousand. When the war was over, how many Jewish children did we find? Eight children. He was shaken when I told him and I continued. I was well prepared to go on. He said they they they left. There was immigration. 55 | I said where was immigration. Perhaps a few hundred, for there I were still was to the mountains of Romania, but it's terribly difficult. Not thousands...for twenty minutes we argued. It was one of my most unsuccessful diplomatic \_ in my whole career. I shook him, there's no doubt. He...for the first time he realized that six million Jewish dead meant a million and a half Jewish children, but if the number two or three in the uh... Q:Hierarchy...**

A:Hierarchy...the the Catholic hierarchy, had to learn from me to realize in November when it was 1945, what this meant, this shows that uh not very high priority was given to these problems in the Vatican, and uh the other example is I mentioned already several times. He went to the Vatican in August nineteen hundred forty-two...uh '45, supported by some very important Catholic uh scholars, including Jack who became later the cardinal, became the French Ambassador to the Holy See, a very important, very distinguished Catholic scholar, including uh the uh priest in in in uh who became a cardinal later whose name escapes me at the moment, who has written a very important book also in Catholic-Jewish relations, including uh a prelate of Egyptian-Jewish origin. A whole series of very uh distinguished Catholic theologians and they argued that this was a time for the Holy See to issue a Jewish on the relations with the Jews. There was no reply, and it took twenty years until vatican Council 56 II that the church really found that it had to issue a statement on the future of Christian-Jewish relations, a very important statement . It's a beginning of a new approach to the Jews, but you see here the.. all these indications show that certainly the Jewish catastrophe was not seized in all its terrible dimensions and it had certainly not priority in the considerations of the vatican at the time. http://collections.ushmm.org Contact reference@ushmm.org for further information about this collection This is a verbatim transcript of spoken word. It is not the primary source, and it has not been checked for spelling or accuracy.Q:What about the role of the International Red Cross?

A:The International Red Cross, you have today a very important study by Professor , uh the Geneva historian who has...is the only one who had access to all the files, and the result of this study is not very positive to say the least. There are two positive things which I have to say sbout the Red Cross. The one is the fact that uh , Vice President, concerned to us in 1942 that he had also news about uh the final solution and that he had heard from several German diplomatic witnesses that the final solution was in in execution. This was a positive, a very positive fact for us to determine and to inform the Allies that this was a reality. The second is the negotiations which I mentioned before with and certainly contributed to to help prevent the extermination of the people who were still in the camps at the end of the war, but apart from this, the attitude of the Red cross was uh not very helpful, and not very uh courageous. There was a moment when some of the members of the Red Cross really 57 felt they had to make an open protest against amongst other things the treatment of the Jews. Uh or at least an appeal in which these matters would be open...openly denounced but uh it never came to this appeal or public protest. It's...although I must admit there was a majority of the members of the International Committee who were in favor of such . But here the Swiss government intervened and prevented any such declaration. Uh I've been often asked whether this should have happened or not. In my opinion, there are moments for international organizations, welfare organizations, where you have to speak out, and I was asked by the Red Cross at the time...I clearly recommended and pushed and was very active in order to that such a statement of denunciation should happen, but it didn't happen and was prevented, as I said, by the swiss government which was afraid of the Germans. Uh but nevertheless, at certain moment our insistence of decisive action had some result. There was in 1942, in September '42, and the dates are very important because this is the moment where we http://collections.ushmm.org Contact reference@ushmm.org for further information about this collection This is a verbatim transcript of spoken word. It is not the primary source, and it has not been checked for spelling or accuracy.informed uh \_ that we knew about the final solution and he confirmed to us that he knew too. Uh there the Red Cross sent a memorandum to their delegation in Germany in which uh they left it to the decision of the delegation if they should uh submit to the German authorities uh a request for the extension of the basic rules of Red cross protection to the intern...interned people in the various camps and not in the camps of prisoners of war and the other camps. Uh this activity, this action had no consequences. That was the most serious. They kept me in the belief for two I 58 years that they were pushing on this constantly and there were always new interventions in this sense. This is just not true. 's book makes it very clear that until the uh situation developed in Hungary in 1945 which we have described, practically nothing has has happened, and this is in my opinion a very serious mistake and uh very serious failure of the Red Cross. Moreover, the book of \_ brings out a number of very unpleasant facts. For instance, the Red Cross accepted without protest a request of the German Red Cross that...I think it's 1941...it could be '42...that in the future inquiries about people who are lost...who are searched for, should in the future be submitted separately for aliens and non-aliens. That they accepted this distinction is certainly a scandal and certainly not in the line of uh Red Cross principles, and there are a number of other such incidents which are certainly not very good and show also the the very limited courage which the Red Cross had in countering the Germans. There's a historian who has...a Swiss historian, Mr. Paul Stouffer, who has denounced this attitude in an article concerning the case of . The twelve thousand Polish officers were murdered by the...by Russians. At the time, the uh German government and the Polish government in exile both asked the International Red Cross to establish an inquiry commission in order to determine who was responsible for this act. Uh behind all this was the government...was the propaganda ministry and uh the Red Cross could not accept the proposal because the third party hadn't and the third party were the Russians, and according to the principles of ! 59 the Red Cross only when all involved could agree...could such a question could such an inquiry commission be established, but Mr. http://collections.ushmm.org Contact reference@ushmm.org for further information about this collection This is a verbatim transcript of spoken word. It is not the primary source, and it has not been checked for spelling or accuracy.Stouffer refers in this respect to the diaries of . Uh of course, the Germans were very upset that this inquiry commission didn't happen. Uh but in the diaries of uh he defends himself and says we couldn't make a big fuss about this case. We are much too much depending on the International Red Cross concerning our own interests with regard to prisoners of war and other other interned people in Allied countries and so on, which shows exactly that the Red Cross disposed of higher prestige and status in Germany when they believed themselves and all their hesitations not to insist too much with the Germans because of the overwhelming power of the Germans, uh it..at the time is here really contradicted by one of the greatest witnesses one could produce in which it said we depend on the good will of the Red Cross. This has never been taken serious and never been realized but by the responsible people in in Geneva. So the Red Cross today doesn't anymore really defend this position. For the first time under the new president there, , I saw recently articles in which they said yes, we didn't do enough at the time, but now we have another policy and so on so. And this is in a not the attitude uh of the deal on these matters much more in detail in my own autobiography. I was very much involved in the whole theater of Red Cross activities, and the book by you see day by day for how I pressured the Red Cross into action in the Hungarian uh case and uh also in 's book, there are I think 45 references I 60 to my activities uh but it was certainly a very important activity also from our side and some of it produced results but, of course, much too limited. Q:We have a little less than ten minutes to go. I was going to ask you about uh relations with the Jewish agency and the Joint, but if you have something that you would rather say that has not come out yet, please feel free to take this time.

A:No, we can speak about the the the nations that say they cooperation of the Jewish organizations in Geneva. I'm not speaking now on the on the world. Uh there have been http://collections.ushmm.org Contact reference@ushmm.org for further information about this collection This is a verbatim transcript of spoken word. It is not the primary source, and it has not been checked for spelling or accuracy.very little described really. We were not very good. With the agency I had very good relations with the head of the agency in Geneva, , who was an old diplomat of the Zionist movement. He was even more pessimistic than I was, and so pessimistic that he really gave up doing things. He has written enormous amount of letters in describing his despair, which is...I didn't do this. I uh was afraid partly of the censorship. Everything which we wrote went through censorship and I didn't want the , but uh there was...cooperation was alright. There were all kinds of uh little offices between which there was a good deal of jealousy, but while I was at the time upset by some of these personal problems, when you see it as a whole and it didn't make any difference on the whole scene. Uh the the Germans were so uh powerful whether we would have \_ a little better together or not, wouldn't have made 61 any difference. The Joint is another chapter. The Joint gave instructions not to cooperate with . Had instructions from the Joint in in , New York, not to cooperate with us which was due to the uh competition between the World Jewish Congress in the United States which pursued rescue activities on its own and based on the collections in South America and the Joint. My criticism with regard to the Joint is very clear. Until very late they did not see that this was not just a general welfare undertaking which was necessary but a special political rescue action. This they understood very ...and rescue and philotropic (ph) welfare is quite a different thing. The Joint even opposed Martin Goldman's proposal to the...Goldman was a man who had great ideas and great schemes. He had..in the war, during the war, two great ideas. The one was to approach the Allies and to take...to ask them to ask them that the Allies should offer to the German government to take the totality of Jews into the Allied camp, and to evacuate and the other camp would care for them. This, of course, was a revolutionary idea. It was probably the only great idea uh that could be conceived, but it was immediately rejected by the British . The other idea was the constructive idea of a basic joint effort to rescue, and he proposed five...a fund of five million dollars of contribution from America, five million dollars contribution from uh United...from uh http://collections.ushmm.org Contact reference@ushmm.org for further information about this collection This is a verbatim transcript of spoken word. It is not the primary source, and it has not been checked for spelling or accuracy.Britain and two million from the Jews. This was sabotaged by the Jews. The Joint was against it. The Joint was believing that they had a kind of monopoly on Jewish defense and and and Jewish welfare activities, . \_1 62 and the government shouldn't interfere. It was an absolute basic mistake. When the war was over, our greatest asset was that we we succeeded in in convincing the Allied governments, the UN, to participate and take the responsibility for the surviving refugees. The was based was based and financed by the governments, not by the Jewish organization. The UNDRA effort was based and here the World Jewish Congress had an important role in in uh introducing this idea and this concept. The the fact that hundreds of thousands of people were in need was not the responsibility of private people. It was the responsibility of the uh world community, which had not conducted world affairs in the way which could have saved these people, and so uh both in number and both in the uh international refugee organization after the war, the responsibility of governments and the financial responsibility of the basic needs was recognized and we should have done it, of course, during the World uh World War II, but the the Jewish were not yet right for such a concept. Today it is absolutely obvious that private organizations, private citizens, can only contribute to it, but the the basic needs and the basic policies have to be financed by governments and international intergovernmental organizations in order to keep the basic needs covered. .. Q:We have about a minute left. Two minutes...I'm corrected. Uh Hillberg was once asked to describe the most fundamental lesson of the Holocaust and his answer was anything's possible. In your opinion, is anything still possible? 63

A:Well, let me say this...I believe that history doesn't repeat itself. That's the first thing. But uh the idea it cannot happen here is also gone. And what we are at this moment and I'm speaking now in uh May ;992, witnessing in all.. END OF SIDE ONE, TAPE THREE ...brought together and energetically mobilized new waves of anti-foreigner, anti-Jewish http://collections.ushmm.org Contact reference@ushmm.org for further information about this collection This is a verbatim transcript of spoken word. It is not the primary source, and it has not been checked for spelling or accuracy.activities of extremist chauvinists, and extremist nationalists have to be overcome and only a concerted effort of the...of governments and of the Jewish people, of other peoples will be able to prevent it. It hasn't to happen, but you have to work that it shouldn't happen. Q:Dr. Riegner, thank you very much. It's been a privilege to interview.

A:Thank you. TECHNICAL CONVERSATION http://collections.ushmm.org Contact reference@ushmm.org for further information about this collection This is a verbatim transcript of spoken word. It is not the primary source, and it has not been checked for spelling or accuracy.