INTRODUCTION TO THE TESTIMONY OF

Gerhart M. Riegner

By Gil Rubin, Yale University

HVT-0764

Introduction

On August 8, 1942 the thirty-one-year-old Gerhart M. Riegner, then Secretary of the World Jewish Congress (WJC), sent a short telegram to the US Foreign Office in which he shared confidential reports he had received that Germany planned to exterminate all Jews in Nazi-occupied Europe. This telegram, widely known today as the "Riegner Telegram," was the first report that claimed that the Nazi were intent on systematically exterminating all of European Jewry. The telegram read:

Received alarming report stating that, in the Fuehrer's Headquarters, a plan has been discussed, and is under consideration, according to which all Jews in countries occupied or controlled by Germany numbering 3½ to 4 millions should, after deportation and concentration in the East, be at one blow exterminated, in order to resolve, once and for all the Jewish question in Europe. Action is reported to be planned for the autumn. Ways of execution are still being discussed including the use of prussic acid. We transmit this information with all the necessary reservation, as exactitude cannot be confirmed by us. Our informant is reported to have close connexions with the highest German authorities, and his reports are generally reliable. Please inform and consult New York.

In May 1980, Riegner provided video testimony about his life and work for the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies. The details surrounding the production and dissemination of the Riegner Telegram, as well as the international response to it, have been recovered and analyzed in detail in scholarship.[1] Riegner's testimony adds significantly to this story by offering

[1] See Walter Laqeuer, The Terrible Secret: Suppression of the Truth about Hitler's "final solution" (Boston: Little, Brown, 1980) as well as Laqueuer and Richard Breitman, Breaking the Silence: The German who Exposed the Final Solution (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1986). See also Laqueur's recent reflections on his relationship with Riegner and the history of "Riegner Telegram," Lacquer "The Riegner Cable, and the Knowing Failure of the West to Act During the Shoa," Tablet Magazine, August 10, 2015, available at: https://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-arts-and-culture/books/192421/riegner-cable-shoah. On the dissemination of news about the Holocaust in the Allied capitals

a personal point of view. One of the major threads that runs throughout Riegner's testimony, as we shall see, is his contention that learning about the Nazi extermination plan did not necessarily imply comprehending its meaning. One required a certain psychological disposition and political acumen, his testimony suggests, to be able to conceive of the inconceivable. Moreover, Riegner's testimony offers insight into the perspective of a group of Jewish leaders who spent the war years collecting information on the events in Europe, fighting to rescue Jews and planning for the Jewish future after the war.

⋆⋆⋆

Gerhart M. Riegner was born in 1911 in Berlin into a highly acculturated German-Jewish family. In his autobiography, first published in French in 1998, *Never Despair: Sixty Years in the Service of the Jewish People and the Cause of Human Rights*, he described his family's strong German cultural and civic identity. "I come from a cultivated, middle-class Jewish family, of which there were so many in the German Empire before World War I, and in particular in the Weimar Republic. I belong to what is conventionally called the post-assimilationist generation. Our acculturation to German life had been a *fait accompli* for a long time," he wrote; "If we were conscious of our Jewishness, this was the result of a deliberate choice."[2] The son of a lawyer and an educator, Riegner's family line boasted various luminaires of German-Jewish cultural life. His maternal grandmother was the niece of Louis Lewandowski, a pioneer of German synagogue music who served as musical director at the Neue Synagogue in Berlin. Riegner was related to German-Jewish philosopher Hermann Cohen, "one of the glories of German Jewry of the era" and one of the most important philosophers and public intellectuals in turn-of-the-century Germany. Riegner would regularly spend Sunday evenings with his family attending gatherings with other notable intellectuals in Cohen's house.[3] Riegenr was also related to Oskar Cohen, a prominent German-Jewish socialist politician and member of parliament who served as undersecretary in the Ministry of Justice following the November Revolution. Riegner's upbringing appears a classic example of the German-Jewish cultural symbiosis.

Still, it seems that from a young age Riegner regarded the German-Jewish symbiosis as precarious. In his autobiography he recalls how he and his siblings pushed his parents to celebrate Jewish holidays and more fully embrace a Jewish identity. Riegner remembers being called a "dirty little Jew" by a classmate; a friend who refused to invite him over to his house

---

see Yosef Gorny, The Jewish Press and the Holocaust, 1939–1945: Palestine, Britain, the United States, and the Soviet Union (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012) as well as Deborah E. Lipstadt, Beyond Belief: The American Press and the Coming of the Holocaust, 1933-1945 (New York: The Free Press, 1986).

[2] Gerhart M. Riegner, Never Despair: Sixty Years in the Service of the Jewish People and the Cause of Human Rights (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2006), 3.

[3] Ibid., 4.

because, Riegner intuited, his parents did not want a Jew as a houseguest, and also a sense of hostility from some of his teachers who longed for the monarchy and rejected the Weimar Republic.[4] The assassination in 1922 of Weimar's German-Jewish Foreign Minister, Walter Rathenau, revealed to the then ten-year-old Riegner the "depth of anti-Semitism on the German extreme right. For the child that I then was, the effect was profound."[5] These and other events were part of what Riegner describes as the story of his "gradual discovery of anti-Semitism" and "the awakening and deepening of my consciousness of being Jewish."[6] Hinting in his autobiography at his later role in providing the first news of the Final Solution, Riegner writes that "it is as if the world planned that from my youngest years I should be increasingly aware of being a Jew."[7]

In Riegner's telling, the rise of Hitler to power in 1933 confirmed his earlier suspicions about the future of Jews in Germany. As he states in his testimony, "I decided immediately when Hitler came to power that I would leave Germany," for "I saw as a young man of 20 or 21, that, uh, this was the end of German Jewry." This was a radical decision. As Riegner recounts, the majority of people, Germans and non-Germans, Jews and non-Jews, insisted that this "episode was a passing period. This wouldn't last very long.… we will survive this." "Neither the Germans, I said, nor the German Jews, nor the foreign countries, understood the character of the Nazis."

How does Riegner explain his ability to see things more clearly than others? He suggests that this was not a result of some unique access to knowledge of what was happening but rather was based "on a political sentiment, political understanding of what was going." Riegner thus argues for a difference between knowing and understanding. The facts, as Riegner notes in his testimony, were well known already in the first few months after the Nazis rose to power. Hitler had spelled out his plan in *Mein Kampf* – "it is terribly difficult to understand why nobody believed what he said." Many Jews were dismissed from their jobs – including Riegner himself, who worked as an assistant judge, his father who worked as a lawyer in Berlin and his sister who worked as a teacher. The *New York Times*, the *London Times* and other papers reported on the first concentration camps, Oranienburg and Sachsenhausen, in which opponents of the regime were imprisoned. Nazis won majorities in student bodies across Germany – in one instance, Riegner recalls, Nazi students stormed an auditorium and chased out a Jewish professor and Jewish students, Riegner among them, and they were forced to jump through the windows to escape. Nazis gathered under homes that belonged to Jews – including Riegner's family home –

---

[4] Ibid., 12-13.

[5] Ibid., 12.

[6] Ibid., 14.

[7] Ibid., 12.

and shouted "Juden Raus!".[8] Still, Riegner remembers how he pleaded with his friends to leave. On his last day in Germany, 16th or 17th of May, 1933, he attended a 50th birthday party of a family friend. He recalls pleading with the guests to leave Germany or at least let the younger generation leave. "I have never forgotten – forgotten this last evening when I told them, don't you see that this is the end of German Jewry?"

Riegner was not alone in describing the future in such ominous terms. In his testimony, he recalls the sermons of Rabbi Joachim Prinz who repeatedly urged young Jews to leave Germany and immigrate to Palestine. Prinz's book, *Wir Juden* ("We Jews"), written in 1933 and published in 1934, argued that liberalism and Jewish emancipation in Germany had irrecoverably failed.[9] Still, in his testimony Riegner seems to overlook how his personal circumstances made it more plausible for him to leave. Riegner was 22 years old in 1933 – a lawyer at the beginning of his career who planned to work in government or academia, positions that were completely closed to him in Germany. Riegner had no spouse or children to uproot, nor major personal assets such as home or savings. Personal and material position no doubt influenced people's way of thinking about the future and their assessment of risks.

⋆⋆⋆

In May 1933 Riegner left Berlin for Paris. Though Riegner was a Zionist and attracted to Palestine, he knew that immigration to the *Yishuv* meant joining a kibbutz and becoming a peasant, "you had to give up your career as an intellectual, and I know this wouldn't work." Riegner continued his legal studies in France and planned to practice law, but the French government soon passed a law forbidding immigrants and refugees from working as lawyers for the first ten years after they were naturalized.[10] While in Paris, Riegner approached professor Hans Kelsen, one of the most influential legal theoreticians of the 20th century and a strong defender of the Weimar Republic, asking for professional help. Kelsen eventually offered Riegner a two-year fellowship in his international law institute in Geneva, the Swiss Graduate Institute of International Studies. In his testimony, Riegner describes these years of immigration and his experience of loneliness and financial and professional uncertainty in traumatic terms: "… nobody told me what immigration means, and nobody told others what immigration means, because that's one of the most terrible things which someone has to go through when one decides to leave one's country."

---

[8] See also Ibid., 22.

[9] For more on Joachim Prinz see footnote 26.

[10] For more on French policies toward Jewish refugees see Viki Caron, Uneasy Asylum: France and the Jewish Refugee Crisis, 1933-1942 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).

Geneva was a major center of political activity in the interwar period. It was home to the League of Nations, an international organization established by the Great Powers in the aftermath of World War I with the goal of maintaining peace in Europe. The League oversaw two institutions that were enormously consequential to the Jews. The first was the international minorities protection regime. After the war, the League conditioned its recognition of several states in Eastern Europe, such as Poland, Romania, Hungary and others, on their committing to protect a set of limited political and cultural rights for their minorities. Those rights included provisions such as a guarantee of equal treatment and protection by the state, the use of minority language in public institutions, such as the courts and elementary schools, and a guarantee of proportional state funding for educational, religious and welfare services. Several mechanisms were established by the League to oversee these guarantees.[11] The second was the mandates system – a legal instrument designed by the League to administer former territories of the German and Ottoman empires. The British Empire was designated by the League to manage the Palestine mandate and develop it as the national home of the Jews. British policies in Palestine were to be reviewed by a permanent mandates commission in Geneva.

Jews throughout the world celebrated these new international guarantees. Many Jewish political leaders and thinkers envisioned the guarantees of the League as the basis of a new and lasting political order that would promise equality and security to Jews throughout the world. In Western Europe and the United States, Jews would be protected as equal citizens; in Eastern Europe, millions of Jews would be protected as a national minority, and Palestine would develop as a Jewish national center through the gradual immigration of Jewish pioneers.[12] Several Jewish organizations were established, first to fight for guarantees for Jewish rights at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, which oversaw the establishment of the League, and then to oversee their successful implementation. Most prominent among these were the American Jewish Congress and the Comité des délégations juives (Committee of Jewish Delegations) which functioned, respectively, as representative bodies of Jewish communities in the United States and Eastern Europe. In 1936, to confront the rise of Nazism and the erosion of Jewish rights throughout Eastern Europe, the leadership of these organizations founded the World Jewish Congress (WJC) to serve as a unified political organization and diplomatic arm of the Jewish people. The WJC was led by Stephen S. Wise, a prominent American reform rabbi and Zionist leader, and Nahum Goldman, a German-Jewish Zionist leader. On the eve of the founding assembly of the WJC, Wise and Goldman sought recommendations for a young lawyer interested in Jewish

---

[11] See David Engel, "Minorities Treaties", YIVO encyclopedia, at: https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Minorities_Treaties.

[12] See James Loeffler, Rooted Cosmopolitans: Jews and Human Rights in the Twentieth Century (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018) and James Loeffler "'The Famous Trinity of 1917': Jacob Robinson and the Lost Tradition of Zionist Internationalism," Simon Dubnow Institute Yearbook 14 (2015): 211-38.

affairs to work at the WJC. Riegner's professors at the Graduate Institute strongly recommended him. In 1936 Riegner assumed the position of legal secretary of the World Jewish Congress.[13]

Riegner's new role placed him at the center of Jewish political activity at a moment when Jews faced an unprecedented crisis. As he recalls in his testimony, "I felt that I couldn't resist this call to fight against the Nazis from an international platform." Riegner's main responsibility was, as he observed in his testimony, "writing briefs and memoranda concerning the Jewish position in the Eastern European countries, where the minority treaties were, uh, in force, and where there was a special procedure of complaint to the League of Nations." "[T]his was a very important function, of course, but, of course, you couldn't separate. And more, and more, the question of the fight against Germany was in the forefront, and my major part was, uh, really shifting to, uh, Germany, the city of Danzig. It's in-- in in the forefront, Austria, Czechoslovakia, and so." The major aim of the organization became to "attack the Germans, to create difficulties, and to put the German Jewish questions in the forefront of, uh, international consideration."

In his testimony, Riegner especially recalls two advocacy efforts that led to very modest results. The first was WJC advocacy on behalf of Jews in Danzig. After World War I, Danzig had been accorded the status of an autonomous "free city," with its existence and constitution guaranteed by the Council of the League. Because of its unique political status, tens of thousands of Jewish refugees from Eastern Europe passed through and temporarily resided in the city, where they were aided by the local Jewish community as they awaited immigration visas. From 1933 onward, the Nazis had won increasing power and ultimately a majority in the local senate. The Nazis introduced antisemitic legislation and persecuted Jews. In his testimony and memoir, Riegner recalls his efforts to fight to protect Jewish rights in Danzig. The WJC repeatedly advocated for the suspension of anti-Jewish legislation before the High Commissioners appointed to Danzig by the League and in various other League bodies. These efforts did not prove very successful. Riegner notes that the only achievement was to delay the introduction of the "Aryan paragraph" in the Danzig bylaws by about a year.

The second was WJC advocacy on behalf of Jews in Romania. In December 1937, a pro-fascist government was formed in Romania under the leadership of two right-wing leaders, Octavian Goga and Alexander Cuza. This government advocated an alliance with the Third Reich and pursued antisemitic policies modeled after Nazi Germany. The party vowed to establish a regime based on the dominance of the Romanian "race" and to exclude Jews from public life. It pursued a policy aimed at stripping some 250,000-500,000 Jews of their citizenship. After World War I,

---

[13] For scholarship on the World Jewish Congress see Zohar Segev, The World Jewish Congress during the Holocaust: Between Activism and Restraint (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014); Loeffler, Rooted Cosmopolitans; Nathan Kurz, "A Sphere above the Nations?: The Rise and Fall of International Jewish Human Rights Politics, 1945-1975" (Doctoral dissertation, Department of History, Yale University, 2015); World Jewish Congress, Unity in Dispersion. A History of the World Jewish Congress (New York: World Jewish Congress, 1948).

the League required Romania to grant citizenship and minority rights to hundreds of thousands of Jews from territories newly awarded to Romania in Bessarabia, Bukovina and Transylvania. Successive Romanian governments tried to prevent Jews from acquiring their rightful citizenship, and the Goga-Cuza government sought to annul the citizenship of hundreds of thousands of Jews. In his memoir and testimony, Riegner describes the efforts of the WJC to fight these antisemitic policies. In January 1938, Riegner prepared a petition in which the WJC demanded that the League adopt an urgency clause to protect Jews in Romania. In the following weeks, Riegner and other WJC officials met with leaders such as the French Minister of Foreign Affairs, Yvon Delbos, the British Foreign Secretary for Foreign Affairs, Lord Cranborne, and Soviet Ambassador Yakov Suritz, while Stephen Wise obtained a declaration from US President Roosevelt in which he expressed his distaste for the persecution of Jews in East Central Europe. The League rejected the WJC demand to invoke the urgency clause but immediately appointed a Committee of Three charged with dealing with the problems raised by the petition ahead of the next session. Ultimately, pressure from the British and French government led to the resignation of the Goga government in February. Britain and France had substantial foreign policy and economic interests in Romania and they opposed a government aligned with Nazi Germany and the fascist axis. By engaging in public advocacy, the WJC succeeded in drawing sustained international attention to the illegitimacy of the Goga government. Riegner observes in his testimony: "this was my first, real, great political fight in-- in my career. It was '38. I had joined in '36, in the end of '36. But this was a real, great fight. And led to the, uh, resignation of that government."[14]

Six weeks after the Goga-Cuza government resigned, Hitler marched into Austria. Riegner recalls in his testimony how he and the WJC tried to help, for the most part unsuccessfully, Jewish refugees from Austria and later Czechoslovakia secure visas. A year later, Nazi Germany invaded Poland, starting the Second World War. Based in neutral Switzerland, Riegner occupied an important position during the war – he was in a unique position to gather information from across Nazi-occupied Europe and transmit it to Jewish organizations and leadership in the Allied capitals.

***

As Riegner recalls in his testimony, wartime Geneva "was really the center … the center of information." "My major job at that time became to inform the headquarters of the Congress, which had moved to New York, to inform what was going on in Europe." Riegner gathered information through contact with Jewish communities across Europe; interviews with Jews who

[14] For more on this topic see footnote 32.

passed by or escaped to neutral Switzerland; access to the library of the League, which gathered legislation from across Nazi-occupied and fascist countries in Europe, and through conversations with officials who worked for other organizations and governments in Geneva.

At the end of July 1942, Edward Schulte, a German industrialist and director general of the complex of German mining companies Georg von Giesche's Erben, traveled to Switzerland to relay information on a Nazi plan to exterminate all of European Jewry. Schulte met with Benno Sagalowitz, the press officer of the Swiss Jewish community, and Isidor Koppelmann, a businessman, who subsequently shared this information with Riegner. This information served as the basis of the telegram Riegner sent at the beginning of August to New York and later London.

As Riegner recalls in his testimony, "[t]his was the first report on a plan of total extermination. And I want to make it clear that the difference of this report to other reports was that there is a concept, a total plan … there was a whole concept, that the intention was to kill everybody, to wipe out everybody, this came for the first time in this message." This report differed markedly from previous reports that informed that "terrible things happen, that Jews were deported, that Jews there killed, that thousands and tens of thousands were dying in the camps and-- and dying in-- in some ghettos. This we knew, that they were killed in the thousands. This we knew …." As Riegner further explains in his testimony, "we were faced with the question, is this possible? Is it possible that such a thing is being decided and is being contemplated? Our, uh, Sagalowitz and I, uh, we kept the whole story for ourselves. The greatest, uh, danger was that this is getting into rumors, and then it's not being taken seriously…. our problem is-- was, can one believe it? … And I struggled with myself for several days, whether one could … And I came to the conclusion, they are capable of doing it."

It is important to emphasize Riegner's point that the information from Schulte introduced an entirely new concept and thus, even if he believed it accurate, was nonetheless still difficult to comprehend. Other genocides in history involved mass killings of members of a certain group but the Nazi genocide of the Jews was the first instance where the intention was to annihilate all members of a certain group. Other genocides were carried out in a way that, for the most part, served and was consistent with a group's war objectives. In the Nazi genocide alone, the murder of Jews was carried out even as it impeded the Nazi war effort and diverted necessary resources.[15] Riegner argues in his testimony that it was his German background and his specific experiences in Germany that made him understand the meaning of these reports. "Now, here my German background probably was very decisive. I knew they were capable. I knew their brutality. I knew their lack of mor-- moral principles, their have complete recklessness, their-- this determination

[15] See Dan Diner, Beyond the Conceivable: Studies on Germany, Nazism and the Holocaust (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

to-- to-- to-- to-- to-- to finish with the Jews wherever they could." "I did not only remember Mein Kampf. I remembered, several, very clear statements by Hitler and by Goehring ...whatever will happen, uh, this-- in this war, one thing is certain. This will be the end of Germ-- of European Jewry. And he said it." Riegner connected this report with other reports he had received about Jews being rounded up for deportation across Europe and concluded that the Nazis were now in the process of "the implementation of a total extermination."

As Riegner notes in his testimony, when his reports first arrived in New York and London they were met with disbelief. Part of the disbelief, he acknowledges, was related to anti-Jewish sentiment. The British and US governments strictly limited immigration of Jewish refugees and feared that these policies would be further challenged if news of the extermination became widespread. British and US officials also opposed creating the impression that the war was fought for the Jews – either because of their own anti-Jewish prejudices or because they wanted to cater to the prejudices of others. Part of the disbelief, Riegner argues, was also a result of legitimate questions about the credibility of the news. As Riegner observes in his testimony, when British officials first learned about the news "they were puzzled, who is Riegner?" – was his information reliable? But above all, Riegner suggests, their failure to believe the news was because, "in reality, this went beyond human understanding. This is a real-- the only explanation." Only after several additional reports and confirmations arrived in London and New York, did the Allied governments issue, on December 17th 1942, a declaration stating that Nazi Germany was carrying out a plan of mass extermination of European Jewry. But even after the declaration, Riegner argues, the full meaning and implications of the extermination had not registered in the Allied capitals. Indeed, from late 1942 the press in the Allied capitals regularly published news of massacres of Jews in Europe. Some observers regarded these reports as exaggerated and inaccurate while many became desensitized to them through the sheer volume of horror. As the London based *Jewish Standard* put it, "Jewish slaughter became an every day affair and the senses of non-Jews were dulled into indifference." "The whole thing is so starkly tragic," wrote Harold Ickes, British Secretary of the Interior, in response to a report on massacres of Jews in Poland, "that it saturates the imagination." One Jewish observes spoke about the "feverish competition" between Jewish bodies "each seeking to anticipate the other" by publishing "still newer and larger horrors."[16]

Even among Jewish leaders privy to this knowledge there remained a wide conceptual gap between knowing that extermination was taking place and understanding its meaning and implications. During the war, WJC leaders planned for the future of Jews in Europe after the war. Many WJC leaders, including Goldman, planned to demand new guarantees for minority

---

[16] For a reporting of these examples see Joseph B. Schechtman, "More Circumspection!" Zionews IV, nos. 23-24 (February 28, 1943): 16-18. For studies on reportage on the Holocaust in the Jewish and general press see Gorny, The Jewish Press and the Holocaust, as well as Lipstadt, Beyond Belief.

rights for Jews in postwar Eastern Europe. In June 1943, Jacob Robinson, head of the postwar planning institute of the WJC, lambasted Goldman and other WJC leaders for embracing this vision. After the war, "the number of Jews left in Europe after the war ... will be so small," he argued, that any political program aimed at securing collective rights for a sizeable Jewish minority in Eastern Europe was disconnected from reality. Similarly, Richard Lichtheim, head of the Jewish Agency office in Geneva, who worked closely with Riegner during the war, argued in September 1942 that Zionist leaders did not comprehend the news of the extermination. In May 1942, Zionist leaders espoused a plan for the mass immigration of millions of Jewish refugees from Eastern Europe to Palestine after the war. But Lichtheim argued that too few Jews would survive to justify a mass immigration plan to Palestine." The vast extent of the Jewish catastrophe, he declared, meant that the "basis of Zionism as it was understood and preached during the last 50 years has gone." "Whatever number of Jews will be after this war ... there will be no need for [a] mass emigration" of Jews to Palestine. Both Robinson and Lichtheim continued to advance these argument throughout the war, insisting that Jewish leaders – even as they learned about the extermination – had not adjusted their political thinking to the new postwar reality it entailed.[17]

Riegner's overall testimony offers an important perspective and insight into the history of the production of knowledge about the extermination and the Jewish and Allied response to it. Riegner's testimony underscores the difference between learning about the extermination and comprehending its meaning and implications for the Jewish future.

[17] For a discussion of this topic see Gil Rubin, "The Future of the Jews: Planning for the Postwar Jewish World, 1939-1946" (Doctoral Dissertation, Columbia University, 2017).

Transcript

INTERVIEWER: OK. We want start, Mr. Riegner, by asking you to give your name and where you were born and your life, a little bit, in Germany, before the Nazi regime.

GERHART RIEGNER: I am Gerhart

Riegner. I am born in Berlin. I went to school in Berlin. I studied at various universities in Heidelberg, Freiburg, and Berlin. I made my state examinations in law and became what is called in German a Gerichtsreferendar, which a new lawyer at the tribunal who assists the judge, but cannot yet write the judgments himself.

When Hitler came to power in 1933, I was such a referendar at the Amtsgericht Wedding in Berlin. And on the 1st of April, 1933, we were all dismissed as state employees, state, uh, persons in the employment of the state. We were not dismissed definitely, but suspended. And the dismissal came later, when I wasn't anymore in Germany.

I decided immediately when Hitler came to power that I would leave Germany.

INTERVIEWER: Were you married or were you a single person, or--

GERHART RIEGNER: My family, uh, my father was a lawyer in Berlin. On the 1st of April, he was dismissed as a lawyer. My older sister was a teacher in high school in Frankfurt am Mein and was dismissed on the 1st of April as a teacher. I said, I, myself was dismissed as a young, uh, lawyer at the tribunal, assistant judge. My youngest sister was still in school.

So the career of f-- four of members of my family of five was completely changed from one day to the other. Now, I was always personally interested in politics, and I was always interested in, uh, Jewish affairs. I have, uh, two kinds of, uh, what should I say? Heritage. The heritage, Jewish heritage, and political heritage.

My father was associated as [with] a member of the Reichstag as a social democratic deputy, was a minister of justice in 1919-- '18 during the revolution.[1] My mother was active in the Democratic Party, the great tradition, Jewishly, in my family, is that my grandmother was a

---

[1] Riegner is referring to his relative Oskar Cohn (1869-1934), a German Jewish lawyer, Zionist and socialist politician. After the November Revolution, Cohn served as undersecretary in the Ministry of Justice. It seems that Riegner saw in Cohn a role model. In his memoir, Riegner describes Cohn's devotion to fighting for Jewish causes with admiration. Riegner specifically mentions Cohn's activities in the Committee of Jewish Delegations, a non-governmental organization founded in 1919 that represented Jewish interests first at the Paris Peace Conference and later in the League of Nations in Geneva. The Committee of Jewish Delegations was the precursor of the World Jewish Congress. See, Gerhart M. Riegner, Never Despair: Sixty Years in the Service of the Jewish People and the Cause of Human Rights (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2006), 6.

Lewandowski, descendant from the famous cantor Louis Lewandowski, who was the founder of the modern synagogue music.[2]

And his son-in-law was a famous Jewish-- German-Jewish philosopher, Hermann Cohen, who was the, uh, founder of neo-Kantian school of philosophy, and at the same time, one of the classical authors of modern Jewish writing. His *Religion of Reason from the Sources of Judaism* is one of the classics of modern Jewish writing.[3]

So you see, I have, uh, influences on all sides, which, uh, probably predestined the career which I finally have chosen.

INTERVIEWER: When you decided to leave Germany, this must have been a wrench? I mean, you have long heritage in Germany. Did you leave by yourself? With other members of your family? And where did you go?

GERHART RIEGNER: Well, I think, uh, uh, the decision which I took, it was of course, um, based on a political sentiment, political understanding of what was going on. Uh, I saw, as a young man of 20 or 21, that, uh, this was the end of German Jewry. I remember very clearly the last day which I spent in Germany. It was a celebration of the 50th birthday of a good friend of our family. When we were all there for this celebration, when I saw, there, for-- practically, for the last time all the friends of my family and relations and so on. And I remember that evening, when I took leave from everybody, going--

INTERVIEWER: When-- when was this, sir? What--

GERHART RIEGNER: This was the 16th or 17th of May, 1933. And we-- and I pleaded. There's dozens of them. At least, to allow their children to leave Germany. Now, uh, very few believed, then, that at that time, and very few allowed. But I have never forgotten-- forgotten this last evening when I told them, don't you see that this is the end of German Jewry?

Now, why did I believe this? First of all, we had witnessed what was going on in Germany and how the whole Nazi period prepared itself. I was personally involved as a student in some of these fights. I studied, as I mentioned before, several terms in the south-- in southern Germany. And I recall my first term in Freiburg-im-Bresgau and my third term in Heidelberg. There, elections to the student body still took place. In Prussia and Berlin and other places, this was already stopped, because the Nazis had earned, everywhere, majority in these bodies. In southern

---

[2] Louis Lewandowski (1821-1894) was a pioneer of synagogue music and served as musical director at the Neue Synagogue in Berlin.

[3] Herman Cohen (1842-1918) was a prominent German-Jewish philosopher, founder of the Neo-Kantian school of thought that dominated academic philosophy in Germany at the turn of the twentieth century, and a public intellectual and religious philosopher who defended Judaism as a system of ethics.

Germany, these fights still-- these elections still took place. And I took an active part in some of these elections.

And I knew practically from day-to-day work, how the Nazis were organized, how they tried to, uh, brutally-- to throw us out from the universities. I recall an incense-- incident in the university in Berlin, when they stormed one of the make halls, uh, auditoriums of a Jewish professor and tried to chase him out and all the Jewish, uh, students. And we were forced to jump through the windows in order to avoid clash with somebody. Didn't want to be beaten up. They were in such, uh, overwhelming majority. There was no sense of resisting.

Now, this we knew. This I lived through. The great, uh, mistake, which was made in 1933, both by the Germans and by the German Jews, and finally, also, by the, uh, foreign countries, was not to understand the character of the Nazi movement and what has happened. The majority of the people, Germans and non-Germans, believed that this was an episode that was a passing period. This wouldn't last very long. Uh, let them be in power. They will have to show what they can do. And we will survive this.

One of my last discussions in Berlin, a few days before I left, was a discussion was a non-Jewish professor in Berlin who was one of the top, uh, specialists in constitutional law, public law, at the Berlin university, who pleaded with me not to emigrate. This cannot last. This was a German nationalist, not a Nazi, but a German nationalist. These people cannot last. You know that I am not a Nazi, but I am a German, and you know my, uh, convictions.

And, uh, he pleaded for an hour and a half. And I must say, he said, one of the things which nobody else ever said to me, and that was, you know what immigration means. That's a terrible thing. And thanks, God, nobody told me what immigration means, and nobody told others what immigration means, because that's one of the most terrible things which someone has to go through when one decides to leave one's country.

Neither the Germans, I said, nor the German Jews, nor the foreign countries, understood the character of the Nazis. They believed this would, uh, they would use the democratic world and, uh, this would be a passing thing. They never understood the brutality, the complete uh, a-- uh, uh, the complete ignoring of any moral, basic, fundamental principles. They u-- they-- they didn't understand that this was a ruthless group, power-hungry, out to dominate first Germany and then Europe and then the world.

INTERVIEWER: I find this perplexing. I've asked this question many times. The book, Mein Kampf, was a-- an outline, a-- a map of what he was going to do.

GERHART RIEGNER: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Yet you say and others say they-- no one understood the ruthlessness of this man and his followers.

GERHART RIEGNER: Mm. You're absolutely right, and it's a-- it is terribly difficult to understand why nobody believed what he said and what the people said. And not only what the people said, what he did. Let's not forget that when I left in 1933, in May, this means three or four months, 3 and 1/2 months, after he came to power. He came to power on the 13th of January. February, March, April.

On the 1st of April, I decided that I would certainly go, and I had to wait a few weeks to arrange my, uh, affairs, and, uh, because I felt at a certain moment my parents were in danger. We was living in a house, a little bit isolated, and there was a, uh, [? [GERMAN], ?] you know, uh, of the Nazis who, uh, tried to intimidate us. And so-- [4]

But then I decided to go. Now, in-- when I left, I said, after three months, I knew one, that there were concentration camps. Everybody knew it. Don't tell me that this was found out after the war. Look up your papers. In 1933, look at the New York Times. L-- look at the London Times. Look at the-- the [INAUDIBLE]. Look at all the papers. I knew where they knew concentration camps were. There was Oranienburg and there was Sachsenhausen.[5] There was not yet, uh, uh, Auschwitz. This not. They didn't get killed, the people, systematically. They killed them individually and tortured them.

I knew when I was a-- I-- when I left, that, uh, the-- the-- the, uh, house, which was before, uh, in the hands of the Communist Party, there was a printing press in the-- their-- their party headquarters. The house was used as a torture chamber of the Nazis. And there, they brought the people in the cellars and tortured them. This was known.

Uh, when-- in-- on-- on-- on February-- I don't remember the exact date, 25 or something, the-- the Reichstag, the German parliament, was burned. I knew this was the Nazis, and not Mr. van der Lubbe, or what they made the-- believe.[6] Anybody who had some political understanding or political education could know this. There's nothing new.

---

[4] In his memoir Riegner expands on this episode: “Our situation was all the more urgent as my father was then experiencing health problems. His physician had ordered him to live outside the city in order to get a change of air and recommended that he avoid exerting himself. Thus we had moved into a house in a Berlin suburb. The evening of the famous first of April I was alone at home with my little eleven-year-old sister. Tired from the day’s events, I was going to have a bath. No sooner was I in the tub when I heard the Brown Shirts shouting, a whole chorus of them. We were the only Jewish family in the neighborhood, and they knew it. They had gathered under our windows in order to intimidate us, and for a good quarter of an hour they chanted – or rather shouted – “Juden ‘raus (“Jews out!”). I didn’t stir from the bathtub, but this made a traumatic impression on me.” Riegner, Never Despair, 21-2.

[5] The Oranienburg concentration camp was established in 1933 and held political opponents of the Nazi party from the Berlin region, mainly members of the Communist party, social democrats, homosexuals and individuals classified as undesirable. The camp was located in the middle of Oranienburg and was highly visible. It was closed in 1934. The Sachsenhausen concentration camp was established in 1936 and at first held primarily political opponents of the Nazi regime.

[6] Marinus van der Lubbe (1909-1934) was a Dutch communist who was tried, convicted and executed by the Nazis for setting the Reichstag on fire. Most historians agree that Van der Lubbe did set the Reichstag on fire, though dispute remains whether he acted alone or as part of a plot.

The treatment of the Jews on the 1st of April was obvious. They organized in the whole of the country a boycott of the Jews. Before every Jewish uh, shop, before every Jewish lawyer's office, before every Jewish dentist's office, before every Jewish uh, uh, doctor's office, and so on and so on. There was an SS, uh, uh, guard or two and prevented people to get in or to get out with a p-- poster, uh, inviting people to boycott the Jews.

While did this went on, we saw the parades in the streets. We saw that-- how some individual Jewish men are thrown by-- by the hairs in the streets, and-- and incited, and I don't know what. This all happened before our eyes. This was already in the beginning, in 1933.

Now, the world cannot- cannot tell me that they didn't know [INAUDIBLE], but they didn't understand that they would go uh, uh, to-- to the end of their-- their dream of power. And they should. I mean, I have not know the time to give you the-- [CHUCKLES] the history of the Nazi movement, but the characteristics, they're clear.

And I, as a young boy, a young man, I-- I understood it. I saw. I was convinced. I did not [INAUDIBLE] when I said, at the end of the Germ-- of German Jewry was there, I didn't believe, and I didn't imagine extermination at Auschwitz. This, at this time, nobody had in his mind. But th-- th-- there was no future for Jews. There was no future for young Jews, that the, uh, young Jews had to leave, and this was our-- our theory. We had, of course, we were also-- in error.

My family said, all right, you'll go to first, and then you try to get a job, and so on. And we-- we come after. Now, we had illusions how easy it was to get jobs and to bring a-- the others after, and so on. But this was-- the concept was the right concept, of course. And there were Jews who understood it. A man like Rabbi Prince, Joachim Prinz who is in-- living in this country, uh, uh, was one of those who, uh, uh, courageously, every Friday evening in the services, in his temple, preached to the young Jews, get out.[7] But unfortunately, the majority of the Jews didn't understand.

Now, neither the Germans understood it nor [CHUCKLES] the-- the-- the-- the German Jews understood it. Nobody--

INTERVIEWER: You keep saying that. You keep saying the Germans didn't understand it.

GERHART RIEGNER: Yeah.

---

[7] Joachim Prinz (1902-1988) prominent German-Jewish and later American-Jewish Rabbi who became a leader in the fight for Jewish rights and the Civil Rights movement in the United States. His book Wir Juden ("We Jews"), written in 1933 and published in 1934, argued that liberalism and Jewish emancipation had failed and urged Jews to emigrate to Palestine. His book and speeches were highly controversial among German Jewish leaders at the time.

INTERVIEWER: You're implying something. I'm-- I'd like to understand what that means, that the Germans didn't understand it, the Germ--

GERHART RIEGNER: [SHARP INHALE]

INTERVIEWER: Which Germans didn't understand?

GERHART RIEGNER: Well, I gave you the example of the professor, for instance, who was a very decent German. But told me, don't leave. This cannot last. Uh, the-- the, uh, Germans, uh, didn't resist. [INAUDIBLE]. Or those that resisted at least they didn't resist strongly enough. This is a great tragedy. Probably, it was too late in '33. Probably in '32 it could have still been done.

But could, many, many Germans certainly had illusions about this-- this regime. And they said to me, don't forget this was a Germany in a big crisis. And in fact, in-- in three crises. There was a political crisis. There was an economic crisis. And there was a social crisis. And the combination of the three made Hitler possible.

The political crisis was the, uh, terrible experience of the disappearance of the Kaiserreich for the Germans. I'm not speaking awful for you and me. For the K-- for the German bourgeoisie, for the German people, the complete, uh, disaster, uh, for nearly-- near victory, to complete, uh, uh, defeat, which the Germans afterwards never wanted to admit. And they always tried to say there was a treason, and it was not, uh--

But in the-- the acceptance of the conditions of the Treaty of Versailles, which the Germans considered as a humiliation of. And this created a deep political crisis, which in the 15 years or what, of the Wiemar Republic, was never overcome.

The economic crisis, starting with, uh, in 1929, was a big crisis here. But, uh, the big crisis which developed after the Wall Street. uh, uh, how did you call it?

INTERVIEWER: Crash.

GERHART RIEGNER: Crash. Wall Street crash, and, uh, had enormous precautions all over Europe, of course. And in Germany, had the special significance when it came after the German inflation, where a great part of the-- of the people, and of the bourgeoisie and the small bourgeoisie, had really lost their reserves. They really paid in the inflation the loss of the First World War. This is what was happening. But this, they-- they didn't want to admit. They just realized that they had lost their-- their-- their reserves and their fortune, and so on.

Now, the economic crisis falling upon a country which has not since these reserves was, of course, terrible. And there were terrible repercussions. And for Jews, then, uh, seven million unemployed. Now, seven million unemployed? Uh, this produced the third crisis. That means the social crisis. The whole German small bourgeoisie, which was absolutely ruled in this

economic crisis, struggled against what-- what we call the proletarianization of this class. They didn't want to be workers. They didn't want to be proletarians.

And they jumped on Hitler, who promised them to resurrect Germany, to find the, uh, new dignity for the Germans, to find jobs, and so on and so on. It is the small bourgeoisie. It's not the royals and the-- the-- the workers. And you look at the-- at the votes for Hitler, it's from there that great wave came and nearly-- of w-- where he got the support.

Now, this, and-- and-- and he used all this, with his, uh, antisemitic policies, which he was, uh, imbued of with-- in-- since his youth in Vienna. And-- and-- and the party showed, there is a scapegoat. This was the foreign enemy, and this-- this scapegoat. And if this is disappearing, then everything will be all right. This was the the force of the argument.

Now, the-- the-- I said something, which you didn't take up this, uh, I said the foreign countries didn't understand what was happening. The foreign countries made all the concessions to Hitler, which they had refused to the, uh, uh, Democratic governments in Germany. This was the third tragedy. And they believed that Hitler would be a gentleman. Either they believed it, or they wanted to believe. And this was, of course, the basis of the appeasement policy in the years to come.

INTERVIEWER: When you left, where did you go? To Switzerland immediately?

GERHART RIEGNER: No. I went, uh, I was very attracted, then, to go to Palestine. And, uh, but-- when you went--

[PHONE RINGS]

CREW: Just a moment, please.

[CHUCKLING]

CREW: OK.

INTERVIEWER: You said that you were attracted to Palestine?

GERHART RIEGNER: Yeah. I-- I really wanted to go to Palestine. But at that time, uh, you had to become a peasant. You had to go to a kibbutz. You had to give up your-- your career as an intellectual, and I knew this wouldn't work. Uh, I had very good Zionist friends. I-- already, in my student days, some of them did it. Some of-- of-- the others tried it. Uh, I knew it wouldn't work.

So I just decided to continue my legal studies and went to France and took up legal studies in France. They allowed us, uh, every few months, to present ourselves to an examination, an annual examination, so to speak. Uh, but, uh, when I had passed the second examination, the French government passed a law which would forbid uh, people to exercise the profession of-- of

a lawyer or any legal profession, uh, before 10 years after the naturalization. So, uh, this was out, too. I finished it, the-- the examinations, but I knew there was no sense in continuing.

And I went to, uh, Geneva, attracted, by, uh, very illustrious professor of jurisprudence, who had founded the Vienna School of Law was later in Cologne, and who-- whom I, uh, liked to work with, uh, already in my student days. But I had never had an opportunity. And he was teaching, then, in Geneva. And he, uh, encouraged me. He was once in Paris when I approached him with a couple of lectures.[8]

And he remembered some of the correspondence which we had and encouraged me to come to Geneva, which wasn't so easy, because, you know, you have to have a basis. And he said, well, you can just hold out for a few months? I guarantee you, you will get in a fellowship, and then you have to get another fellowship, and we will see from there.

And this is what happened. And I went to Geneva, and, uh, took up, uh, there, international law. My real specialty was theory of state and law. In normal times, I would have become a professor of jurisprudence in Germany. [CHUCKLES] But it wasn't normal times, and so my real career was brought to an end.

And I was working in this-- in the Institute of-- Graduate Institute of International Studies in Geneva, uh, for about a year, year and a half, when the World Jewish Congress was created. And, uh, at the eve of this formal assembly, founding assembly of the World Jewish Congress, uh, Dr. Steven Weiss and Dr. Nahum Goldmann, who were the two, uh, founders of the World Jewish Congress, uh, consulted a few, uh, people in Geneva, whether they wouldn't recommend them a young law-- lawyer who would be versed in international law and who would be interested in Jewish affairs.[9]

And they consulted three people. One was my illustrious teacher, Professor Hans Kelsen, who later teached-- uh, taught here in this country, ended in Berkeley. A very famous internationalist, Kelsen.[10]

INTERVIEWER: Can you spell that for me?

GERHART RIEGNER: K-E-L-S-EN. Hans Kelsen. He, uh, taught in Harvard and several other places, and at the end of his life, in Berkeley. He published lots of things. The-- one of the great legal spirits of this century.

---

[8] Riegner is referring to Hans Kelsen (1881-1973), a jurist and one of the most influential legal theoreticians of the twentieth century. While in Paris, Riegenr approached Kelsen and asked him for professional help. Kelsen invited Riegner to join his law institute in Geneva and offered him a two-year fellowship. See Riegner, Never Despair, 25-6.

[9] See the introduction for context on the creation of the World Jewish Congress.

[10] See footnote 8 for more on Kelsen.

And the second was, uh, Professor William Rappard, who was the head of this Institute of Graduate Studies. He was the Swiss member of the Mandates Commission of the League of Nations. And the Mandates Commission was supervising body for the Mandate of Palestine, also.[11]

And, um, he was, in fact, the first director of the Mandates Division in the League of Nations in 1919, a friend of Wilson. It's due to him that the, uh, the, uh, League of Nations came to Geneva at that time. He was a-- as a young professor, in Harvard, professor, and they-- they met, uh, at that time, Wilson, and they became friendly, and so.

And the third was Paul Guggenheim, a Jewish professor also at the Institute, younger man.[12] Was, uh, uh, was the only one who, in the last 50 years, wrote in international law treaties in-- as a Swiss lawyer, and a very esteemed, uh, uh, lawyer, international lawyer. And they all three, uh, recommended me to-- to Nahum Goldmann.

And, uh, and that is how I came into this field. I felt, uh, I was always interested in these affairs. I felt that I couldn't resist this call to fight against the Nazis from an international platform. Although my family, at the time was still in Germany, and I had to be very careful about my name not being used and too much known. Um, I accepted. Although, I had another fellowship which was running, still, for 18 months, and for a refugee, that was a colossal thing.

Uh, so I accepted, in '36, to, uh, uh, to become the, uh, legal secretary for this new office of the newly-created World Jewish Congress in Geneva. With the main responsibility of, uh, of writing briefs and memoranda concerning the Jewish position in the Eastern European countries, where the minority treaties were, uh, in force, and where there was a special procedure of complaint to the League of Nations. Uh, this was a very important function, of course, but, of course, you couldn't separate. And more, and more, the question of the fight against Germany was in the forefront, and my major part was, uh, really shifting to, uh, Germany, the city of Danzig. It's in-- in in the forefront, Austria, Czechoslovakia, and so.

INTERVIEWER: When were you able to convince your family to leave?

GERHART RIEGNER: Well I had, uh, the problem of my family, it was really a financial problem. They would have left earlier, but you have to find, uh, you couldn't-- you couldn't, uh, move your property, uh. During the Hitler years, where you didn't earn anything, you were eating up what you had. Uh, so it was really to find some way of-- of existence.

---

[11] William Rappard (1883-1958), a prominent supporter of internationalism in the interwar period, co-founder of the Graduate Institute for International Studies in Geneva and director of the Mandate Section of the League of Nations Secretariat.

[12] Paul Guggenheim (1899-1977), was a prominent Swiss-Jewish scholar of international law who served as the legal counsel of the World Jewish Congress. As Riegner tells later in the testimony, Guggenheim took part in writing and editing the famous “Riegner Telegram.”

Uh, my father conveyed to me already in-- certainly at the beginning of '38, that the atmosphere was absolutely, uh, uh, impossible. He couldn't stand it anymore. And he said that he wanted to leave. And they registered, then, for the United States. But you know, there were terribly long delays. And when the, uh, when the, uh, pogroms and-- and the Kristallnacht. During-- after the Kristallnacht took place. And then, the great rush on the American consulate started.

Um, the-- we're is still not far from being on the-- in-- in-- in-- uh, able to get the visas. And we made desperate efforts to get them out after this. And I had an uncle in Holland who was, uh, quite, uh, uh, well-settled, uh, businessman who got them out with his personal guarantees, since he-- my family, uh, status-- uh, moved in-- in the end of '38 to Holland.

And, uh, from there, luckily, already during the war, in the first months of 1940 to America. A few weeks before the Germans marched into Holland.

INTERVIEWER: Were you-- your job, at this point, in 1938, '39, were you a listening post? What were you doing? You, yourself, what w-- was your work, at that point, when the war began and the Germans--

GERHART RIEGNER: Well, the-- the office was directed by Nahum Goldmann, who had-- who headed two offices, the World Jewish Congress office and the Office of the Jewish Agency at the League of Nations. One directed, uh, Palestine, and the other for, uh, questions of, um, uh, diaspora problems.

Now, uh, some of-- as I said, some of the major aims was to, uh, attack the Germans, to create difficulties, and to put the German Jewish questions in the forefront of, uh, international consideration.

INTERVIEWER: Did you feel safe in Switzerland?

GERHART RIEGNER: [INAUDIBLE] no, no.

INTERVIEWER: No concerns?

GERHART RIEGNER: Well, uh, but there were some cases of-- famous case of Jakob, Professor Jakob, who was, uh, uh, conducted over the-- from Switzerland to Germany by, uh, secret agents, but he was restored. He was. No, uh, I-- I-- had no problems in this. And I never felt-- a-- a question of being afraid is a question of temperament, also. [CHUCKLES] Maybe also of imagination. [CHUCKLES]

In any case-- so we attacked the Germans on the case of Danzig. We fought for the rights of the Jews in Danzig, which were in the guarantee of the League of Nations.[13] We fought for the, uh,

---

[13] After World War I, Danzig had been accorded the status of an autonomous “free city” with its existence and constitution guaranteed by the Council of the League of Nations. Because of its unique political status, tens of thousands of Jewish refugees from Eastern Europe passed through and temporarily resided in the city, and were

Jews in Austria, before-- for the refugees. We all participated in the conferences which deliberated on the status of refugees from Germany. And we tried to improve the status of people, get passports, and people get facilities to move and so on. People who came out without any passport was a great problem.[14]

The greatest action which we undertook was against the Romanian antisemitic government, Goga-Cuza, in 1938. That was, uh, when-- when they came to power under the leadership of, uh, Mr. Goga and really anti-Semitic government, which introduced, uh, anti-Semitic legislation all over in Romania. And we brought the question before the League of Nations.

And then thanks to the political action, uh, which I, as young-- this was my first, real, great political fight in-- in my career. It was '38. I had joined in '36, in the end of '36. But this was a real, great fight. And led to the, uh, resignation of that government, by, uh supported, then, by the British and by the French governments, who used the Jewish case as, uh, the-- the-- the-- the pretext for strong pressure, because they had political and economic interests of great, uh, order. Uh, Goga's government was forced to resign.[15]

---

aided by the local Jewish community, as they awaited immigration visas. From 1933 onward, the Nazis won increasing power and ultimately a majority in the local senate. The Nazis introduced antisemitic legislation and persecuted Jews. In his memoir, Riegner notes that the fight to protect Jewish rights in Danzig constituted one of the greatest lobbying efforts of the WJC in the interwar years. The WJC repeatedly advocated for the suspension of anti-Jewish legislation before the High Commissioners appointed to Danzig by the League and in various other League bodies. These efforts were not very successful. Riegner notes that the only achievement was to delay the introduction of the "Aryan paragraph" in the Danzig bylaws by about a year. Danzig was occupied by Nazi Germany on the first day of the Second World War. See Riegner, Never Despair, 174-6.

[14] In his memoir, Riegner describes as unsuccessful the efforts of the WJC to fight for Jews in Austria after the Anschluss and for Jews in Czechoslovakia after the Nazis occupation of Bohemia and Moravia: "we were quite active during this whole crisis. But despite the protests we raised at the League of Nations and with the governments of the great powers, we could not achieve important results. After these events we concentrated our efforts on bringing relief by any means possible to the vast number of Jewish refugees from Austria and Czechoslovakia." Riegner, Never Despair, 173.

[15] In December 1937, a pro-fascist government was formed in Romania under the leadership of Octavian Goga and Alexander Cuza. This government advocated an alliance with the Third Reich and pursued antisemitic policies modeled after Nazi Germany. The party vowed to establish a regime based on the dominance of the Romanian "race" and to exclude Jews from public life and pursued a policy aimed at stripping some 250,000-500,000 Jews of their citizenship. After World War I, the League of Nations required Romania to grant citizenship and minority rights to hundreds of thousands of Jews from territories newly awarded to Romania in Bessarabia, Bukovina and Transylvania. Successive Romanian governments tried to prevent Jews from acquiring their rightful citizenship, and the Goga-Cuza government sought to annul the citizenship of hundreds of thousands of Jews. In his memoir, Riegner describes the efforts of the WJC to fight these antisemitic policies. In January 1938, Riegner prepared a petition in which the WJC demanded that the League adopt an urgency clause to protect Jews in Romania. In the following weeks Riegner and other WJC officials met with leaders such as the French Minister of Foreign Affairs, Yvon Delbos, British Foreign Secretary for Foreign Affairs Lord Cranborne, and Soviet Ambassador Yakov Suritz while Stephen Wise obtained a declaration from US President Roosevelt in which he expressed his distaste for the persecution of Jews in East Central Europe. The League rejected the WJC demand to invoke the urgency clause but immediately appointed a Committee of Three charged with dealing with the problems raised by the petition ahead of the next session. Ultimately, pressure from the British and French governments led to the resignation of the Goga government in February. Britain and France had substantial foreign policy and economic interests in Romania and opposed a government aligned with Nazi Germany and the fascist axis. By engaging in public advocacy, the WJC succeeded in drawing sustained international attention to the illegitimacy of the Goga government. Riegner wrote:

When he resigned, this is not anymore known, uh, he-- he-- he-- he said [SNORTS] which was, uh, was very, uh, very, uh, uh, exciting at the time. Judah, du hast gesiegt. You there, you-- you have vanquished.[16]

Now, the tragedy of this, this was really the possibility-- that only really occasion where our action against the wave of antisemitism all over Europe had a success, and where we forced them back. But the great tragedy was that six weeks later, Hitler marched into Austria. And the whole thing was forgotten.

INTERVIEWER: You were in a key position then. Of course, the book, While Six Million Died,[17] starts with your action, your-- the information which you relayed to the United States government, that Zyklon B gas was going to be used for--[18]

GERHART RIEGNER: Mm-hmm.

"This arduous effort constituted one of our great political actions. We won because we succeeded in convincing the Western powers that their interests coincided with ours." See Riegner, Never Despair, 173. See also Dov B. Lungo, "The French and British Attitudes towards the Goga-Cuza Government in Romania, December 1937-February 1938," Canadian Slavonic Papers 30, no. 3 (September 1988): 323-41. For more on this episode and other WJC activities in the 1930 see Zohar Segev, "Immigration, Politics and Democracy: The World Jewish Congress in Europe, 1936-1939," Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism 17, no. 2 (2017): 209-26.

[16] More properly translated: Judah, you have won.

[17] The interviewer is referring to Arthur D. Morse, While Six Million Died: A Chronicle of American Apathy (New York: Hart Publishing Company, 1968). Morse's study was the first book to discuss the response of the US government and President Roosevelt to the persecution of Jews in Europe and the Holocaust. It caused a sensation upon its publication as it shed a shameful light on American action and inaction – limiting immigration quotas and turning away ships with Jewish refugees as persecution in Europe mounted, suppression of reports on the mass murder of Jews and failure to bomb extermination camps. The book was the first in a broader scholarly examination of the US policy toward European Jews during the Holocaust; see for example David S. Wyman, The Abandonment of the Jews: America and the Holocaust 1941-1945 (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984); Deborah E. Lipstadt, Beyond Belief: The American Press and the Coming of the Holocaust (New York: Free Press, 1986); Henry Feingold, Bearing Witness: How America and its Jews Responded to the Holocaust (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1995); Peter Novick, The Holocaust in American Life (New York: Mariner Books, 1999) and more recently Richard Breitman and Allan J. Lichtman, FDR and the Jews (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2014) and Rafael Medoff, The Jews Should Keep Quite: Franklin D. Roosevelt, Rabbi Stephen S. Wise and the Holocaust (Pennsylvania: Jewish Publication Society, 2019).

[18] The interviewer is referring here to the famous 'Riegner Telegram.' On August 8, 1942 Riegner sent a telegram through the US consulate in Geneva, addressed to the US Foreign Office and to Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, in which he relayed a Nazi plan aimed at the complete extermination of European Jewry. A few weeks later Riegner sent a subsequent telegram to British Jewish parliament member and World Jewish Congress leader Sydney Silverman. Riegner's telegram was the first report that contended that the Nazi were intent on exterminating all of European Jewry (as opposed to previous reports of widespread and sporadic massacres of Jews in Nazi occupied Europe). The telegram read: "Received alarming report stating that, in the Fuehrer's Headquarters, a plan has been discussed, and is under consideration, according to which all Jews in countries occupied or controlled by Germany numbering 3½ to 4 millions should, after deportation and concentration in the East, be at one blow exterminated, in order to resolve, once and for all the Jewish question in Europe. Action is reported to be planned for the autumn. Ways of execution are still being discussed including the use of prussic acid. We transmit this information with all the necessary reservation, as exactitude cannot be confirmed by us. Our informant is reported to have close connexions with the highest German authorities, and his reports are generally reliable. Please inform and consult New York."

INTERVIEWER: --extermination purposes. How did that all come about, that you were the recipient of this information, that you were the ear?

GERHART RIEGNER: Well, well, you come now to the war years. Uh, during the war, we were really the center-- the Switzerland, Geneva, if you want, the center of information. My major job at that time became to inform the headquarters of the Congress, which had moved to New York, to inform what was going on in Europe. And, uh, we were, of course, in contact with all kinds of people, with all Jewish communities, as far as we could maintain the contact. And, um, we tried to help-- be helpful, as far as we could be.

Now, uh, uh, of course, we followed, day by day or months by months, what was going on in Europe. When once the, really, the files of the World Jewish Congress will be opened, it will be-- uh, they are open. I mean, they will be published some of this, you will, uh, see how well we were informed.

I-- I have recently, uh, uh, seen some of the things which, uh, looked up some of the cables, which have-- from time to time, uh, how we reported, uh, about the state of affairs of the Jewish community. Not a one-- of the totality of Jewish communities. And, uh, it shows how e-- excellently where-- we-- we-- we-- we followed, in spite of all the difficulties.

Now, we were very informed, of course, of all the terrible things which were going on. Uh, here, again, today, and to the younger generation, it appears as this comes in one day, with a one day conference. This was not so. These things are developing, stage by stage.

Terrible things had happened that the-- when the war broke out, when Hitler marched into Poland, for instance. Uh, thousands and thousands of Jews were slaughtered in Western Poland. Now, that's also, have now forgotten, but it was known, uh, in whatever, the books or yellow books, by governments, which-- which-- which published it.

We knew. We followed this. I followed the points. I had, the, uh, legislation of all the-- the legislation of all the occupied countries. I got regularly. Too slow, and not always in most, uh, normal channels. Some were from the library of the League of Nations, which, uh, with which I, uh, had an agreement, secretly, and by which I got. Uh, so we-- we knew what was going on, and we knew, also, some of the terrible the news of violence in a number of places.

Uh, this went on, 1940, '41, and so on. In, uh, '42, we knew, even, some also news about experiments. Experiments-- with med-- medical experiments, injections. Or, uh, s-- some moment, I believe in May 1942, we heard, for the first time, of, uh, buses, in which people there gassed, experiments with gas in buses.

All this came from time to time through the one or the other source. And you had to evaluate how serious is this, or not? There were a number of, uh, people, you know, in such extraordinary times, extraordinary people appear. I have, uh, I remember some of them.

One was a Danish Jew, who, uh, came from time to time. You didn't know a businessman, why-- why-- what? Who had apparently some protection from the German Ministry of War, and who came with exact information. For instance, on the Jewish community in Berlin, he showed me the first time the bills which the government sent to the Jewish community in Berlin for the transports, for the deportation, of the Jews from Berlin. The absurdity. But--

INTERVIEWER: [INAUDIBLE]

GERHART RIEGNER: The-- the-- the-- such reports I saw with my-- my-- my eyes, which he had somehow copied. And-- and, uh, he showed me. There was another--

INTERVIEWER: Transportation for their own death? But they didn't know that--

GERHART RIEGNER: No, no. The-- the-- the community was forced to send s-- so many Jews to Liegar, to Lodz, and so on, deportation. And then they got the bill for this, from the government. From there-- from the-- from the railway administration of the government. I mean, the absurdity, uh, and the chutzpah of the government. [CHUCKLES]

The-- the-- the, uh, there was another wonderful person, a young man, a Belgian Jew, who suddenly came. He was, uh, was traveling, clandestinely, from Belgium to Holland, from Holland to France, from France to Switzerland, in order to get support for a youth movement, resistance, and immigration of young Jews towards Spain and towards other countries. Such people appeared. They-- they-- they came by themselves. And they found their way.

INTERVIEWER: To your office?

GERHART RIEGNER: To my office, to other offices. Now, we-- the ma-- the famous story which you-- of the telegram to which you referred. This is already summer, 1942. And, uh, you ask, uh, how did this message come? And how did it find, uh, the way to my office?

Now, this message, this was really, and this was the important thing to know. This was the first report on a plan of total extermination. And I went to make it clear that the difference of this report to other reports was that there is a concept, a total plan, that terrible things happen, that Jews were deported, that Jews there killed, that thousands and tens of thousands were dying in the camps and-- and dying in-- in some ghettos. This we knew, that they were killed in the thousands. This we knew from [INAUDIBLE].

But that there was a whole concept, that the intention was to kill everybody, to wipe out everybody, this came for the first time in this message. And this message came from a German industrialist who was a decent fellow, a man who wanted to, uh, relieve his conscience. And I pay tribute to him. That his-- that he-- he-- he was motivated by this. B-- I cannot keep this to myself. This has to be known, and then this was his-- his purpose coming. He left, uh, came to Switzerland, and, uh, to, uh, to tell the-- the story.

And he went to-- to some business friends of his, and, uh, asked them, uh, to, uh, establish contact, some, some Jew, some-- some Jewish representative.

INTERVIEWER: How did he know?

GERHART RIEGNER: Huh?

INTERVIEWER: How did he know about the plan?

GERHART RIEGNER: He knew about it. He was, uh, a man, uh, at the head of, uh, enormous German enterprise, a great concern. Uh, they occupied about 30,000 people for the war effort. And having such an enterprise, he had access to Hitler's headquarters.

INTERVIEWER: Do you know the name of the enterprise?

GERHART RIEGNER: Uh, yeah. I have never given the name, neither of the enterprise nor of the man, because I promised him. The man risked his life for us, and the only request he ever has made is, uh, keep my name out. Now, he is not anymore alive. I have been often asked, uh, but, uh, the time hasn't come.

Recently, a professor Walter Laqueur wrote a whole article about-- speculated about it. He hasn't found the name, I must tell you. Nobody else has, for the time being, in all the other speculation, and several books are all, uh, not correct. I am probably, today, the only one who knows the name, and I feel a bond to my word not to reveal it.[19]

And I don't consider. I say, this was an important German businessman. The credit goes to a German. There were also decent Germans. And this shows it. He risked his life for us. But, uh, I don't think that the name would add anything to you, to anybody, because the name is not a well-known name.

Uh, he got in touch, as I said, with his business acquaintances, and they called in the Secretary of the, uh, Press Office of the Swiss Jewish community, Dr. Sagalowitz.[20] So an intimate friend of

---

[19] Riegner did ultimately reveal the identity of the informant in his autobiography and in an interview in Der Spiegel, both published in 2001. The informant was Eduard Schulte, director general of a complex of German mining companies Georg von Giesche's Erben. The information was relied from Schulte to Riegner through two intermediaries: Benno Sagalowitz, the press officer of the Swiss Jewish community, and Isidor Koppelmann, a businessman. Riegner had also revealed the identity of Schulte during the war to American diplomats in Switzerland who made it a condition for transmitting his cable to Washington. Walter Lacqueur had rightly speculated that Eduard Schulte was the informant in a series of books including a biography of Schulte, see Laqeuer, The Terrible Secret: Suppression of the Truth about Hitler's "final solution" (Boston: Little, Brown 1980) as well as Laqueuer and Richard Breitman, Breaking the Silence: The German who Exposed the Final Solution (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1986). See also Laqueur's recent reflections on his relationship with Riegner and the history of

The 'Riegner Telegram,' Lacquer "The Riegner Cable, and the Knowing Failure of the West to Act During the Shoa," Tablet Magazine, August 10, 2015, at https://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-arts-and-culture/books/192421/riegner-cable-shoah.

[20] For more on Sagalowitz see footnote 15.

mine, he works for, uh, so to speak, in the Swiss Jewish community, where I did, in the world Jewish community in-- in Geneva. He fought against anti-Semitism on the local level, and, uh, was, uh, active in this field. And, uh, I was, and I cooperated with him very intimately in-- in very close contact. He was in Zurich. I was in Geneva.

And when he heard this story, he immediately called me and said, I have to meet with you. And we met the next day or the, uh, day after. And he told me this story. And the story was, as it has been often described, that this, uh, businessman had access to headquarters. And he had heard-- he wasn't yet sure whether there was an order, the first time he came. Six weeks later, he confirmed that there was an order.

Uh, but, uh, at that time, he said he-- I have heard this is being discussed, to wipe-- to-- to exterminate, after the deportation into the East, totality of European Jew.

And they discussed it some ways on, but, uh, this is the-- the plan. And, uh, they speak, and this was the only detail which he-- he gave, this, uh, talk of prussic acid. *Blausäure* prussic acid. Now, uh, today we know that the Zyklon gas was based on prussic acid. At that time, nobody knew it. I couldn't understand it. I must say, in my wildest imagination, I couldn't. And that-- I-- I didn't know how they would do it.

Uh, I-- I-- but, uh, we were faced with the question, is this possible? Is it possible that such a thing is being decided and is being contemplated? Our, uh, Sagalowitz and I, uh, we kept the whole story for ourselves. The greatest, uh, danger was that this is getting into rumors, and then it's not being taken seriously, and, uh, uh, we, uh, and we, uh, dis--

And quite a little bit about the man, what we could get out from his friends and business. And it showed that he was a quite serious person. Sagalowitz knew of him already, before, but he had never had-- hadn't met him at that time. And, uh, we just-- uh, and I decided-- I only consulted one person. This was Professor Guggenheim, whom I mentioned before, who at the time, was a legal advisor of the Congress in Geneva. And when Nahum Goldmann had left at the beginning of the war, the downfall of France, uh, he asked me to be in contact with him. And after all, I was a very young, [CHUCKLES] relatively very young person, and not with political experience, and so on.

And, uh, the famous cable, even the reservations at the end, its really the influence of the-- all the men of Professor Guggenheim, why would, uh, have perhaps, been a little bit more straight. But nevertheless, this f for the first time, communicated to the outside world what, uh, what happened.

Now, our problem is-- was, can one believe it? This was a provocation. This is a [INAUDIBLE] as the Germans said. Well, can that be real. And I struggled with myself for several days, whether one could [INAUDIBLE]. And I came to the conclusion, they are capable of doing it.

Now, here my German background probably was very decisive. I knew they were capable. I knew their brutality. I knew their lack of mor-- moral principles, their have complete recklessness, their-- this determination to-- to-- to-- to-- to-- to finish with the Jews wherever they could.

I remembered, of course, that they-- you mentioned before, Mein Kampf. I did not only remember Mein Kampf. I remembered, several, very clear statements by Hitler and by Goehring and the [INAUDIBLE]. It's, uh, in January 4-- in 1940, in January of '42, and other occasions. I had this pleasant in my mind. But you said, whatever will happen, uh, this-- in this war, one thing is certain. This will be the end of Germ-- of European Jewry. And he said it.

Now, nobody took that serious, either, as nobody took serious Mein Kampf. But moreover, I remembered these-- these speeches, and I-- and the whole study gave sense to what has happened a few weeks before. In the middle of July, and in fact, on the 14th of July, there were arrests all over Western Europe, arrests of Jews, mass arrests of Jews, in Paris, in Leone, in, uh, provincial towns, in Amsterdam, and in Antwerp and Brussels, all over Western Europe. And one day, it started, and, uh, thousands and thousands of Jews were arrested, were put into camps, and were deported to the East.

Now, this had happened before in Germany. It had happened before in Czechoslovakia and in Vienna. And on the eastern side, we didn't know very much, and we knew it was terribly important. But at-- at this moment, with this, uh, news, this industrialist, you understand, now understand what is going on. This is really the-- the-- the implementation of a total extermination.

And so I convinced myself, then I went to the-- to the, uh, Americans and to the British. And I said, uh, three things. I said, uh, number one, this is in news as it comes from a very reliable source. I have investigated a little bit and I-- I believed him. Number 2, inform your govern and investigate yourself. You have Secret Service. I have no Secret Service. You have the means to-- to do it. And number 3, give this message to Rabbi Weiss in N-- New York and-- and to the British, I said to the Sydney Silverman, who was at the head of the World Jewish Congress in-- in London, and was a member of Parliament.

And in fact, um, it was very sad. The-- the-- the telegrams, absolutely equal, but the British telegram says, uh, what was obvious. Please consult and-- inform and consult New York. So somewhere in my inner conscience, uh, I must have felt I wasn't sure whether the American message would go through. I cannot rationally explain it, by the way. And I relied on a member of Parliament, the British wouldn't dare suppress a message to a member of parliament. And it worked out this way.

Steven Weiss never got the message. I got, uh, two weeks later, uh, a reply from the council in Geneva who relayed the message from the Legation in Berlin that they hadn't, uh, communicated

the telegram to Dr. Weiss Because of-- you have it in the book. [SNORTS] It's obviously unsubstantiated character.

Well, what should I substantiate? I could rep-- represent the corpses of the people who were dead. W-- w-- what that meant-- meant, I never understood. The British didn't believe very much, either. They-- today, the-- the, uh, archives are open. Uh, one historian has written about this chapter, how they were puzzled. They didn't believe a word. Uh, they were puzzled, who is Riegner? For the first fortnight, they, uh, inquired what-- what-- who I was. And then, uh, take it in other reports, both from me and from others, which finally they couldn't any more not takes seriously.

And this, uh, according to this article, which I've read last-- last year, somebody who I have never seen in my life, but he worked on the archive, [CLEARS THROAT] has said that this, uh, finally made a colossal impact and changed, completely, the British policy on the question of war crimes, for instance.

Now, uh, we were, of course, when we had communicated, I-- I knew, uh, this was not enough. I had to get this much confirmation and s-- evidence as possible. And there, uh, we had, uh, two or three, uh, new sources of information. One was--

[ELECTRICAL WHIRRING]

Well?

CREW: [INAUDIBLE]

GERHART RIEGNER: [INAUDIBLE]

INTERVIEWER: Hm.

GERHART RIEGNER: Uh, it's all right?

INTERVIEWER: Yes, in just one second. They're just putting down some what they call for us.

GERHART RIEGNER: Yeah, this is what I have-- I see my voice is again very covered.

INTERVIEWER: OK.

CREW: Give it five and then--

GERHART RIEGNER: What-- what did I say? I said the new reports which came in.

INTERVIEWER: Yes, you were talking about the new reports that came in and what happened.

GERHART RIEGNER: Yeah. Yeah, there were three news sources, which confirmed, each in its way, the plan. The first was several letters which came from Warsaw, from a Jew outside Warsaw, the Warsaw ghetto, addressed to an orthodox Jewish organization in Switzerland.

The Aguda, in which the correspondent reported of the deportation of the Jews of Warsaw starting the 25th of July '42. And he, in a language which was coded but understandable, he used Hebrew words here and there, he made us understand in this letter that since the 25th of July, every day 6,000 Jews were sent to-- to a camp in Treblinka.

I don't know whether he mentioned Treblinka. It's also so important. And were killed in Treblinka. These were the first direct news from Warsaw, which came either in August or beginning of September.

Number two, in August '42, a young man escaped to Switzerland, who had been the eye witness of the extermination of the Jews of the city of Riga in November and December 1941. This young man, who had parents, relatives in-- in Switzerland, he came from a very, very fine Jewish family in Riga. He had witnessed the total extermination of the Jews, had escaped somehow to Germany, was employed as a non-Jew in a German hospital in Stettin for a couple of months and finally made his way to Switzerland.

And I questioned him in my office for I don't know how many hours, six, seven hours, about what-- what he knew, about events which the world completely ignored and which were-- which had happened nine months before.

And he described with all the details the-- the extermination in two nights of 36,000 Jews of Riga. Amongst whom one of the most famous Jewish historians, Professor Simon Dubnow, of the great Jewish scientists of our generation. He was also founder of the Congress, by the way.

There they used not gas yet, but they killed by machine guns. And so a detailed description how this was done, with names and all that. And for me, what was a revelation was that such things could happen, and in nine months, 10 months, you couldn't-- you didn't know anything. It was completely unknown to the outer world.

And the third was the most fantastic. The third was equally an eye witness. A man-- one day-- let me put it the other way around. One day, a Jewish doctor in the hospital in Geneva called me and said, "I want you to come immediately. there's something very strange here, which I want you to see." And I come to the hospital, and the doctor received and says, "listen, I am not allowed to do what I do. There is a man under police supervision. And in reality, nobody should see him. But he tells such fantastic stories that I feel you have to speak to him."

And he lets me in into the room, and I meet a young man in his 30s, who tells me his story. A Jew, Polish Jew, a mechanician. You say "mechanician" in English?

INTERVIEWER: A mechanic?

GERHART RIEGNER: Mechanic, who worked in Belgium. I think it was Antwerp. And on the same 14th of 15th of July was arrested, brought into the camp, Malines, deported to the East. And he tells me the story of the trains, and where the train stopped, and where they got food, and

where they finally ended. He ended up near Stalingrad. In Rava-Ruska not very far from Stalingrad. And there takes place a selection, and he is taken for work. And after several weeks or days, a young officer needs a driver and chooses a driver amongst the deported workers. And he chooses him.

A younger officer, who is fed up with the war, has lost already two of his brothers and decides to help this young Jew and to save him. They go around with the car and they have long conversations. And the Jew asks him, the officer, what is happening here? What happens when were selected there? What happens there? What happens there?

And the officer gives him in three sentences the whole story. Those who are fit to work are taken to work. Those who are not fit to work are killed by various methods. Gas killed, other ways. Those who were not anymore fit to work are killed the same way. This was the story.

Now, he helped this Jew. That such things are possible even. He put him in a train. There's a train from near Stalingrad. He hides him on the train with food and all kinds of things and gives him occupation mark, so that when he steps out somewhere, he would be able to-- to-- to-- to pay. And he remains in this train for four or five days. And finally the train stops. And really stops. Doesn't go further.

And then the night, early morning, he goes out of the-- the-- the--

INTERVIEWER: The car.

GERHART RIEGNER: The train, which is, by the way, loaded with uniforms of people who died at the front. And he gets out, and he finds himself at the Gare de L'Est in Paris. Yes?

CREW: Give me five seconds. OK.

GERHART RIEGNER: He finds himself at the Gare de L'Est. And he somehow gets out of the train and gets out of occupied France. This is the part of France which is occupied at the time. You know, there was half of France was occupied, half was not occupied before the invasion of North Africa.

And he finds its way to Switzerland over the mountains, and he is somehow accepted and is brought into the hospital, because he has swollen feet, the typical camp disease. And the doctor says, is this possible? And I spent-- again, I spent eight to 10 hours with him. Very simple person, very straightforward.

And there's a hundred details, which are absolutely, obviously reliable. He tells me this story. All these stories I communicate to the Americans and the others. And in the meantime, what happened, well, that I know only from second sources. In the meantime, Wise got the story from

Silverman,[21] and he goes then to Goldmann to Sumner Wells. And Sumner Wells asks him not to publish the story and says, we will check with the Vatican.

And they check with the Vatican, and the Vatican is very wishy-washy. Doesn't confirm and doesn't infer. In the meantime, our friends in London go from one government to the other. And in reality, nobody believes it. The only one who believes it is the Russian ambassador, Maisky. Maisky is the only one who admitted such things is possible, probably because he knew from Russian experience that such things are possible. Historically, a highly interested detail.

But basically, nobody believed. And then the next step is finally when Wise and Goldmann press Wells further. We are invited to-- to the ambassador, the minister was it? The American minister in Bern. And they asked me, and they asked the head of the Jewish agency office, Richard Lichtheim[22] who had his office on the same floor with me, to-- to appear before the-- the minister and to give him all our-- our, um, evidence, whatever we had.

And that we did. And we submitted at that time a report of about 30 pages with all the annexes. And-- and that arrived in Washington, they finally believed it. Among these documents is also something which had also its significance. That is a confirmation from the head, or one of the heads of the International Red Cross, Professor Carl Burckhardt, that he had similar reports from independent sources of ours about the total extermination plan.

Now, when all this arrived in-- in-- in-- in Washington, then they allowed the release of the story, and then-- and then started really the great apathy. Then nothing happened, except the declaration of the United Nations.

And on the 17th of December 1942, the United Nations, then the Alliance, not yet the United Nations of today, the governments of all the Allied gover-- countries published this denunciation of the Hitler's crimes. This was published both in London and in Washington, and even in Moscow, simultaneously.

And even with the declaration of the House of Commons, which was very moving, and the House of Commons stood in silence for three minutes in honor of the victims, but then it stopped. And the negotiations happened, which led to the Bermuda's Conference, which the Jews expected would now produce a program of action. And nothing happened.[23]

---

[21] Samuel Silverman (1895-1968), a British Jewish Labour politician, member of parliament and chairman of the WJC's British section.

[22] Richard Lichtheim (1885-1963), a Zionist Revisionist activist who headed the office of the Jewish Agency in Geneva. Like Riegner, he gathered news on events in Europe and sent it to the Jewish leadership in Palestine, London and New York. For a study of Lichtheim's knowledge and perception of the extermination of Jews in Europe see Raya Cohen, "Confronting the Reality of the Holocaust: Richard Lichtheim, 1939-1942," Yad Vashem Studies XXIII (Jerusalem, 1993): 335-68.

[23] The Bermuda Conference was an international conference held between the United States and the United Kingdom in April 1943 with the goal of formulating policy with regard to Jewish refugees liberated by Allied forces

INTERVIEWER: What were you doing? I mean, nothing was happening. There you had told the world that there was this extermination, not policy, but happening. It was happening already. And you told--

GERHART RIEGNER: Now it was happening. Now you saw it. Every day brought you other evidence.

INTERVIEWER: OK.

GERHART RIEGNER: What I thought? Well, these are the years which made me much older than I am.

INTERVIEWER: But what did you do?

GERHART RIEGNER: No, I continued to press, to report, to see, to-- to-- to convince the people that it was happening. As I said, I sent the reports. I sent whatever I could. I made suggestions. I made suggestions for help. Very few were realized. I tried hundreds of things. The true-- in fact, the idea for the declaration, collective declaration of all the Allied countries, was suggested by me a year before it happened. You can read up in the files of the world Jewish Congress. A letter, I think, of August 1941 to Nahum Goldmann, in which I suggested exactly that.

I reported-- I reported, and some of these cables have become very well known. And I suggested rescue approaches. For instance, I sent, in I believe it was April 1943, a long cable to the American embassy delegation to Dr. Wise or Dr. Goldmann. it was the longest, one of the longest cables. And I tell you, it was the most expensive cable, expensive cable which I ever sent in my life, because at a certain moment, the American consulate asked me to pay for it.

And the reason for that was that there was something strange in the relationship between Washington and Bern about my communications. But the real story is, we know today, they didn't understand either what had happened. What had happened was that they had understood that they were entitled to send my messages through the diplomatic pouch and through the wire, diplomatic wire through-- the code.

And then suddenly they got a telegram in a very general way, without mentioning my name, that such things should be stopped. And the [INAUDIBLE] consul and the minister were very embarrassed, because they saw that what I was reporting was very serious and was very substantiated and so on.

And they didn't know what to do. And finally, they decided to ask me to pay for this, but they would send it. And I think it cost us, this cable cost 700 francs, Swiss francs, which was quite an

---

and those who remained under Nazi rule. The conference had no positive results as both the US and Britain refused to raise immigration quotas to Jews to the US and Palestine.

amount at that time. Anyhow, this cable was in fact the cheapest cable I ever sent. Because this cable led to the first-- the granting of the first license to me by the American government to use-- or to the world Jewish Congress to-- to-- to send to me $25,000 as a first experiment to help and rescue victims of Nazi persecution in Europe and the conditions, which we negotiated for eight or nine months.

And this led then to the creation of the War Refugee Board, the first months of January[24]. So January 1944. And in the last year of the war, more than $20 million were used for rescue of Jews and non-Jews, victims of the Nazi persecution in Europe due to the establishment of the War Refugee Board and the clauses under which it operated.

INTERVIEWER: Did you--

GERHART RIEGNER: So this-- this telegram, which in reality it was such an expensive one, really broke through, finally, the financial blockade, the blockade against sending money in order to help. And this is perhaps the greatest practical contribution which one has finally made to the rescue effort.

INTERVIEWER: You mentioned eight or nine months. And if I recall correctly, that was the delayed time. Thousands of people were dying in those eight or nine months.

GERHART RIEGNER: Sure, for sure. For the first three months, too. Don't forget. I spoke to-- nobody believed it on the 25th of July. The people were killed in Treblinka. Over 6,000 people.

INTERVIEWER: Your own, uh, I don't know. Your own state of mind, your own ability to cope with this, I mean, you can't call it a frustration because it was life and death. And yet you perceived that there was this--

GERHART RIEGNER: Well, I was terribly frustrated, certainly. And to sit in Geneva in a beautiful office at the lake, looking at the lake of Geneva and the Mont Blanc and the blue sky around it as if nothing happened in the world, although the Germans sat on all the hills around us. Don't forget. We were also not in such a state of mind that nothing could happen to us.

Several years, I had a packed rucksack in case I had to disappear, if the Germans would-- would-- would come here. But this was terrible. And the country, the beauty of the nature was even more provocative when you knew that the world was collapsing everywhere.

You have to have very serious nerves. I, on the one hand, I was terribly distressed about the weakness of the effort to help and the incapacity to convince the others how serious the problem

---

[24] The War Refugee Board was established by US President Franklin Roosevelt in April 1944 with the goal of carrying out rescue and relief activities for Jews in occupied Europe. It assisted in the rescue of some tens of thousands of Jews.

was. But my only choice was to-- to go on with suggesting, go on with making proposals, and this I did until the end.

INTERVIEWER: What was your day to day activity during that time? I mean, you were obviously trying to make people believe you and press on them the urgency.

GERHART RIEGNER: No, no. Well, we kept in touch with all kinds of communities. We had, for instance, there were relations with Prague through the underground, the Czech underground. And we saw. There came some employees of certain consulates, legations or embassies who brought messages and so on.

We organized some help. We sent thousands and thousands of-- of parcels to all kinds of people. We-- we tried to influence the Red Cross to intervene. We tried to influence others to intervene. We tried to influence the Vatican to influence.

Here and there we had some success. I know the Vatican, for instance, once responded to some of our presentations on Slovakia and there was a temporary stop in something. In the last couple of months, I succeeded in having regular meetings of all the Allied-- it was a Jew to have this idea-- all the Allied governments in Geneva and the Red Cross societies to make collective or concerted representation to the Red Cross, which led to the last visit of the boycott in the camps and-- and to Kaltenbrunner and so on.

There were such activities went on, and we tried to help. The last few months, I was absolutely obsessed with the question that they would kill at the last moment all the camps, all the inmates of the camps, which were still there. So our major effort was to prevent that, to bribe some Germans, if necessary, to try to-- to bring pressure and otherwise in order to prevent. This was daily work.

Now, why the people didn't believe it? That's the other great question. And in reality, I believe that the inaction was not antisemitism. That's too simple. There were some antisemites in the governments here and there. And you are terribly shocked when you read, for instance, the account by Wasserstein about the British Foreign Office and the British Colonial Office about some of the reactions and some of the foreign civil servants, that a man, when we desperately tried to save a few Jews from Romania and-- and-- and asked them to protect this boat which was sinking-- [25]

INTERVIEWER: The Struma?

GERHART RIEGNER: Yeah, is considered by British officers as a Jewish conspiracy against England. Absolutely unimaginable. But this was a fact.

---

[25] Riegner is referring to Bernard Wasserstein, Britain and the Jews of Europe, 1939-1945 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember who those people were that reacted in this way?

GERHART RIEGNER: What did you say?

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember any particular people, persons that you know that reacted in this way, this was a conspiracy?

GERHART RIEGNER: No. I have-- no, I don't know. I-- my people, the people with whom I had to do, I cannot complain. They were perhaps not so friendly than others, but I cannot say that I met them. But I see from the documents, for instance, that-- that when the-- when the American government established the War Refugee Board, which I said before was one of the most important mechanisms, finally, to rescue still and probably hundreds of thousands owed their life to this.

The reaction in some circles in the British government, and you see it and Wasserstein quotes it, says that this is a new gimmick of Roosevelt to gain the elections. Now, this is one year before the elections. Or nearly 11 months before the elections. This says he wanted to-- to get the Jewish vote. Not a moment's idea that somebody perhaps would really like to help these people. Unbelievable, such a thing.

Now, what I'm saying is, this-- there was, there were such antisemites of course. There are also people of whom whose humanity I really have no explanation. But in reality, this went beyond human understanding. This is a real-- the only explanation.

INTERVIEWER: The Red Cross did not, according to what I've just read, did not behave so admirably in terms of what they might have done, a rescue. You were dealing with the Red Cross.

GERHART RIEGNER: Well, I'm-- the Red Cross, I don't defend the Red Cross. I had a long discussion, many discussions with them. I pressed them, also. I pressed them very hard to make a public declaration. And they didn't make it. We know today quite a lot about this. From recent discussions and recent publications, even.[26]

I know also that there was a discussion in the Red Cross. There was a formal meeting on it. And two or three of the members of the Red Cross, whom I had worked, fought for such a declaration or appeal, or in any case something which-- which should make it known that they are concerned about the extermination, and-- but it was finally refused for the not-- they had some excuses.

---

[26] The failure of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to act to protect Jewish victims of Nazi persecution and genocide is well documented in the scholarship. Riegner may have been referring specifically to the following article that discussed his activities vis-á-vis the ICRC: Monty Noam Penkower, "The Jewish World Congress Confronts the International Red Cross During the Holocaust," Jewish Social Studies 14 no. 3/4 (Summer-Autumn 1979): 229-256. For the most recent comprehensive study see Gerald Steinacher, Humanitarians at War: The Red Cross in the Shadow of the Holocaust (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

And I'm not saying that this has ever satisfied us, but you have to state their case, too. They said to me, we have a mandate for prisoners of war. We have 4 and 1/2 million or more prisoners of war in our care.

We have a clear mandate, the Geneva Convention and entrusted as mandate to us. It is not our fault. It is not our responsibility that we do not have the same mandate for the civilian population and the people in the camps.

We made proposals before the Second World War for an international convention to deal with such cases, too. And the states refused to ratify this. We cannot risk political-- a political declaration of which-- the results of which are hazardous and may be harmful on the-- and-- and-- and endanger the position which we have with regard to the prisoners of war. This was their position.

Now, I'm not saying, no-- that-- that-- that there is something in it. It is clear that of course they would have had much more difficulties if they would make such declarations. But I have never accepted this. And I have said to them, this is also on public record, and some of the documents have been published in various places.

I've said, in a very important discussion with Professor Burckhardt in November '42, said you have not made the declaration.[27] You have not made the protest. When you said you cannot do anything, I said then you have to speak up. Not to act and not to speak up, this I cannot tolerate. Either act or speak out.

And this, then, caused them to take again some initiatives to act. I'm not saying that they were too daring in this, but the more the political situation and the war changed, the more daring they became. This is clear.

INTERVIEWER: In retrospect-- in retrospect, there were people like this Ira Hirschmann,[28] for example, who were able, by force of personal persuasion and just the willingness to take those bold steps, who did save people, especially as the war was turning and yet you worried that the world was going to allow the Germans to exterminate the people in the camps on the last days.

GERHART RIEGNER: Which was not-- it was not a fantasy.

INTERVIEWER: I know it was not a fantasy. Now, how did you-- how did you perceive that at the time? What were you--

---

[27] Carl Jacob Burkhardt (1891-1974), Swiss diplomat and historian. Served as League of Nations High Commissioner to the Free City of Danzig and president of the International Committee of the Red Cross during the war.

[28] Ira Hirschman (1901-1989), a Jewish American businessman who helped rescue Jews during the Holocaust. See https://www.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%206413.pdf.

GERHART RIEGNER: No, no. I really believed that they were capable of doing such a thing in the general Stimmung or Goetterdammerung, ja? That was not impossible. And the World Refugee Board helped us in certain ways to-- to bribe people, to interest people, to promise them in some way, well, we may look at you differently after the war if you behave, in this you help. You know these deals which came about.

But you know, the whole thing, you had not to deal with normal people, nor with normal times. I'll give you an example. One day, the same Professor Burckhardt called me in and said, this was Hungary. We have a frantic appeal from our mission in Budapest. Give out more protection papers. There were protection papers by the Swedes, the famous ones, Burckhardt did this, by the Swiss and by the Red Cross.

In each of these centers, they gave out hundreds, thousands of papers, passports, whatever. So he said, "Riegner, what advice do you give me? Should I or should I not? The more I give out, the less valuable. They lose their value."

So I said to him, "listen, you argue and think like a Swiss citizen in normal times. These are not normal times. These are not normal people. Understand that you don't have to deal with normal, civilized people. What happens is the following. A Jew has a paper or not. He goes on the street. He is stopped by a policeman or by Iron Guard man.

He has a paper, the policeman can do either respect it or destroy it and arrest. Depends not on the word. Depends whether he had good breakfast this morning or bad breakfast, whether he slept with his wife or he didn't sleep with his wife, whether he was in good mood or in bad mood. This is the fate of this Jew, depends on this. There's nothing rational in this. Give him at least a chance. If he has no paper, he will arrest him immediately. If he has a paper, he may respect it."

This was, see, the extraordinary mood in which we were living. Everything what was legal wasn't legal and what was not legal was legal. And you had to get-- you had to educate people in a country like Switzerland to understand. He was very fair. He listened to my advice and he gave instructions to give as many papers as-- as-- as they thought they should give.

This was-- this was not normal. And our whole-- our whole difficulties were that the world didn't understand. They dealt with the question as normal relief problems, and this was extraordinary rescuing. You see, what Steven Wise obtained in the last years of the war, something from Roosevelt which is extraordinarily important, and which should have been done a hundred times before.

There was a shipment of a group of 1,000 Yugoslav Jews, which were-- who were left in-- in a free port against the legislation of the American and so on. We should have had free ports all over the country. But this imagination wasn't there. We-- we dealt in the routine way, and we had not this-- this-- we couldn't save-- let's not have any illusion. We couldn't save the six million. This is nonsense. But we could have saved hundreds of thousands.

INTERVIEWER: But in that respect, you were involved in the rescue mission of the Romanian and the French Jews. You talked about it. It was money and papers that was missing at that time. I mean--

GERHART RIEGNER: There was money, yeah.

INTERVIEWER: But--

GERHART RIEGNER: Now, nobody can tell you whether the Romanians would have lived up to this. But we should have had the money. This is what I'm saying. And the-- the-- the-- the-- I cannot vouch that this plan from Transnistria would have worked, but at least we should have tried in such a desperate situation.

With the-- with the Frenchmen and so on it worked. We saved thousands and thousands of young Jews. We organized in France. They didn't even know where the money came from and who-- who-- who helped them. We-- we-- we-- we-- we-- we organized the-- the whole-- the production of false papers in the tens of thousands.

INTERVIEWER: Were you involved in that?

GERHART RIEGNER: Well, sure. I gave money for this.

INTERVIEWER: Money, but I mean were you actually in the--

GERHART RIEGNER: I didn't go in, but I knew for what this was. And I was in contact with these people. And some in the morning at 6:00 from time to time they came in a locomotive driver from the railway station from France to my secretary's home and knocked at the door and brought in the letter from the underground.

We were in contact with them. We got the reports. We knew what was going on. They brought to us-- I never said I was involved. We brought thousands of Jewish children to Switzerland. I couldn't tell the Swiss I was involved in it, but we were involved in it. The-- the-- I come back.

The daily things, we tried hundreds of things. And some of them worked. Very few worked, I admit. But the great tragedy is the reality that nobody believed it. That is the only explanation. Not to the non-Jews and the Jews either. The Jews were so damned optimistic in their basic concept that they couldn't--

The Jewish optimism, this has given us hope and has led us to survive. There's no doubt about it. Otherwise, we would have disappeared for a long time. But even then this moment, there was a kind of schizophrenia. One knew that things happened, in almost one didn't believe it. And in fact, a paradoxical situation is that the fact that one couldn't believe is in reality the greatest, what should I say?

The most positive thing is that the human-- there is some human basic beliefs which-- which cannot accept the absolute evil. This is only what it comes to.

INTERVIEWER: Did you know what was going on at the Palais des Sports in France, in Paris? Did you know whether people were being rounded up in--

GERHART RIEGNER: '39?

INTERVIEWER: Yes.

GERHART RIEGNER: Oh, sure. Certainly.

INTERVIEWER: You knew what happened to those people? What? How did you know?

GERHART RIEGNER: We knew immediately. We intervened immediately. We tried to help. Goldmann went in to-- to [INAUDIBLE] for this, to a certain minister of the interior. He knew that the same thing happened in England, by the way. Not in the same way in the Palais des Sports with all the-- the German Jews were arrested together with the Germans. And it took quite some time to get them out.

INTERVIEWER: I-- I didn't know about this. Can you-- can you explain?

GERHART RIEGNER: Listen, this is a tragedy for the people whom-- who-- who were touched by it. The-- the-- the governments both in France and in England, when the war broke out-- broke out arrested all the nationals, enemy nationals. And they didn't make any differentiation between Jews and non-Jews. I mean, Germans and non-Germans and Jewish Germans or of Jewish origin. The same happened in-- in England.

And we worked very strenuously to obtain from the governments to-- to make the differentiation. At least a Jew which came here as a refugee and is a bona fide refugee is probably not a Nazi, yeah? And you cannot treat him like a Nazi. So he said, yes, but some may be. All right, so then examine the cases. But you-- you-- you-- you-- you have to make a basic difference. Then this took a couple of months, but then it was more or less a settled question.

INTERVIEWER: Were any German Jews shipped back to Germany from England?

GERHART RIEGNER: No, no, no, no, no. Not under the Third Republic, no. No, they let them out. Some of them took longer. They investigated.

But you see, we had the same problems in Switzerland later. And they complained about being in camps and so on. At that time, I was already glad, and the people were in Switzerland in camps. I know it wasn't very pleasant, but at least they were safe. And they were crying about the very bad treatment. And it wasn't so very nice. I admit, I was fighting with the Swiss to let more people in. It was more important than-- than whether they was a little better treated or not.

Now, it may be a little cynical when I say these things, because I wasn't in the camp, although I went often to-- to visit them. But you have to have your priorities in this matter.

INTERVIEWER: What was your role after the war when there was no inclination to let these people out of what were then called displaced persons camps, but were very often the same place and not much improved circumstances?

GERHART RIEGNER: Displaced, we were in contact. I organized, in fact, the first confluence of the three, four displaced persons when they came to the Anglo-American Inquiry Commission. We organized the-- the various-- the various Jewish communities, adopted the resolution and statements which took place for the Jewish state. And we had the-- I remember, we had all the displaced persons organizations, I believe, in Geneva. About this I'm not so sure anymore.

From the three zones of Germany, from Italy, from-- from other places, who together, worked together and listened. I was in touch with all of them.

INTERVIEWER: But the reluctance of other nations to take them or to allow them to go to Israel or Palestine.

GERHART RIEGNER: Yeah, that's no good. This we dealt with the international refugee organization, and we had quite some something to do even with establishment of the International Refugee Organization, which was established immediately after the war, and which took over in fact after UNRWA, the care of the refugees, the Jewish organization had a very small part in it.

INTERVIEWER: The war--

CREW: I had a--

INTERVIEWER: Go ahead.

CREW: Couple of questions, which you should answer to her and not to me. Is there any one thing or series of things do you think that might have been done, looking retrospectively, to galvanize world opinion or change the situation in some way if it were to be done over?

GERHART RIEGNER: Well, there were lots of things which could have been done, which I said I-- I'm not convinced-- well, let me say it Otherwise I'm convinced we could not have saved 6 million Jews with Hitler's determination. We may have prevented Hitler. We may have stopped the war. In 1932, you could prevent Hitler. In 1935, you could have stopped Hitler.

This is certainly what the democratic world did not do. I, personally, am not convinced that Hitler was necessary to come to power. After 1932, in November, his was the first election where he lost one million votes. And under certain circumstances, maybe he would never have come to power. But that's speculation in-- in-- on the past. All this is very speculative.

At certain moments, I could have told you-- and you said that I could have told you, let's try this and this. And what we lacked, this is what I'm saying and accusing all of us. Some of us more,

and some of us less. Some of us had more imagination or not, that we hadn't enough imagination for that.

I gave you one example about the-- this is not how a normal person argues, how I argued to Professor Burckhardt about Budapest. One day, I get a telegram. You had to be a little bit meshuggah in these days. It's a telegram from Yitzhak Gruenbaum.[29] I don't know whether you know who he was. Very famous fighter for Jewish rights in Poland, member of the parliament, Polish parliament.

And he was the head of Hatzalah, of the Rescue Department of the Jewish Agency in Jerusalem, in Palestine. Whether I could find his son in Poland. Now, I thought I'm crazy when I heard the story. This was one of the most respected Jewish leaders, and he was the head of the Hatzalah department of the Jewish Agency. But he had a personal tragedy, he had the son he didn't know where he was. He asked me whether I could find him.

What did I do? A crazy thing. I sent 20 little packages to a man named the name of the son to 20 different camps, and I found the son.

INTERVIEWER: Because a receipt came back.

GERHART RIEGNER: It was the real son. Now, that's crazy, yeah? I tell you, it's crazy. But this is the kind of craziness you needed in order to rescue people. You couldn't argue with them, and so I wasted 19 packages. But we found the man and Gruenbaum knew that his son was alive.

These things, you had to be imaginative and-- and, finally, determined to do whatever you could under any circumstances.

INTERVIEWER: How did you, at that time, judge the Jewish community of the United States? Do you remember--

GERHART RIEGNER: I didn't judge them.

INTERVIEWER: Well, how did you perceive them?

GERHART RIEGNER: Let me very clearly say, that we had definitely the feeling that the responsibility, the political responsibility was outside the continent at that time. Be it in London be it in Washington be it in Jerusalem. We were too much involved inside. We were not living.

---

[29] Yitzhak Grunebaum (1879-1970) was a prominent Zionist leader and member of parliament in interwar Poland. In 1933 he became a member of the Zionist Executive and immigrated to Palestine. During the Second World War he headed the Jewish Agency's Rescue Committee, which was charged with saving Jews from Nazi occupied Europe. The committee's actions and failure to save a substantial number of Jews became a topic of great controversy during and after the Second World War. See the entry on 'Grunebaum Yitzhak' in The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe at https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Grunbaum_Yitshak.

Even though I was living in a free country like Switzerland, I was not living under normal conditions, and I didn't know enough on the political scene. I didn't know what was going on.

Thanks God, maybe I didn't know. For me, Roosevelt and Churchill were also the heroes. I had in my office a photo of Roosevelt and a photograph of Churchill. And this was the inspiration that we will win the war. You understand what I mean?

Therefore, I didn't judge. I couldn't judge. I'm not able to say whether Steven Wise could have done more, as some people say today, or Silver or the others, or not. We cannot judge all this with the notions of the '60s or the '80s. The mentality was so different, and the-- the-- the factors in our way. I mean, that you needed two years? You cannot imagine that today, that from 1940 1942 nobody spoke of the fate of the Jews. Nobody.

The first time-- you don't understand what I mean. The press was completely blacked out of anything of the Jewish fate in Europe. After Poland in 1939, there the whole world knew. After the collapse of France in 1940, the Jewish question was practically out of the press. And nobody wanted to mention it. And nobody wanted to lead a war for the Jews, which meant that the poison of Hitler had affected the democratic countries already in a way that they were afraid to mention that they are standing up for the Jews.

This you cannot understand today anymore. But these were the factors in which the Jewish leadership at the time had to count.

INTERVIEWER: But they wouldn't open the doors. They wouldn't change the immigration. That's different than fighting a war for the Jews. They wouldn't give them refuge. And that was known.

GERHART RIEGNER: Yeah, but the-- the-- the-- no. That's not defending-- but they tried. You cannot say they didn't try. They tried very hard. They didn't use the message-- the message to go to the White House and sit at the White House and-- and-- and-- try and-- and-- and-- make-- these were not the-- the-- the methods which we used.

But you could look up some of the-- some of the proposals which were made. I mean, there was a proposal at a certain moment by Nahum Goldmann that the British government and the American government should each give $5 million and the Jews $2 million for rescue activities. And it was partly the Jews who didn't want to. A respectable Jewish organization said, maybe we shouldn't depend on the government and we should-- we should pay for ourselves. This is a mentality which you can't understand today anymore.

We were the first to ask, to say this is not only the responsibility of the Jews to do it, to rescue Jews. This is the responsibility of mankind to rescue also Jews, whether they're Jews or others. And they have to participate. The international-- the UNRWA is the first organization which used funds for-- for-- for-- for-- for such purposes. And the International Refugee Organization

then paid for the upkeep of the refugees, a major thing. Not the Jewish community. And there were hundreds of thousands.

It's only then that the Jewish community in this country understood that this was a general responsibility. Today, we say even Israel is a general responsibility. The mentality has changed enormously.

INTERVIEWER: The children.

GERHART RIEGNER: Hm?

INTERVIEWER: The children, the-- the refusals to take the children.

GERHART RIEGNER: The children? We have lots of such efforts. Some succeeded. Some didn't succeed.

INTERVIEWER: Did you know Wallenberg?

GERHART RIEGNER: Wallenberg I didn't know, no. I couldn't.

CREW: Why was Roosevelt willing to listen in '44, when Morgenthau came to him, and not before? Do you think? That was what was it about Roosevelt? Had he changed his mind, or had the right approach not been made to him?

GERHART RIEGNER: Well, no. It was before. You know this famous memorandum of Morgenthau's administration, when he accused the-- the administration in the collision, I think, he said it.

INTERVIEWER: With the State Department, the State Department.

GERHART RIEGNER: In the assassination of the Jews, extermination. That was very strong. I-- I'm sure that Roosevelt didn't know these details. I mean, I'm not sure whether he knew what Breckinridge Long did. Breckinridge Long was a supporter of his, but he was basically a politician. And the-- the-- the basic discussion with all of them was always "we have to win the war." And this nobody could contest.

And I said always, "all right, but you have to win the war, and the people for whom you have to win the war have to be living, alive still and not all dead. If you-- if you win the war and all your friends are dead, then-- then-- then-- then there's no sense in this victory.

INTERVIEWER: Was that in a cable that you sent? You were known for having said that. Was it in a cable that you said that?

GERHART RIEGNER: I don't know. I cables I don't use such things.

INTERVIEWER: Under what circumstances did you-- did you make that statement?

GERHART RIEGNER: I argued. I argued with the Red Cross. I argued with the British, with the French, with the-- with the Americans. I argued with a lot of people.

INTERVIEWER: From your vantage point, was there any jeopardy in-- in terms of the war effort, because there might have been a rescue effort with it? Was-- was the rescue--

GERHART RIEGNER: You see, the greatest, what-- what I have-- what for me is the greatest enigma still is the question of the bombing of Auschwitz. Now, I'm one of those who have suggested to-- to bomb Auschwitz in '44. I believe even earlier. But you know, my record in this is not very clear.

I can't find-- I have a recollection that this matter come up even earlier, but I have destroyed some of the things. You know, at certain moments we were not so sure whether the Germans wouldn't come in. So I didn't keep everything. But I definitely know that in 1944, when the famous reports on Auschwitz and so on came from the two Slovakian Jews and the 400,000 Jews who were already killed in the first few months, which, by the way, everybody could have foreseen, too. And there's a cable from me in March 1944, in which I say, they prepared a plant now for Hungary in a couple of months.

All right, but what did I--

INTERVIEWER: You said why-- the enigma of not--

GERHART RIEGNER: Yeah, the enigma why was the bombing. At that moment, others and I proposed the bombing of Auschwitz and the bombing of the--

INTERVIEWER: Tracks.

GERHART RIEGNER: The communications, the communications to Auschwitz and various-- the trains came from Greece and from Hungary and so on. And we cabled what should we bomb. Now, we know today-- not only I did it. There were others who did it. Weizmann pleaded personally with, I believe, with Churchill. And there is proof that Churchill gave positive instructions.

And Eden, who was not such a great friend, impressed by Churchill gave also such instructions. And it was never done. And you have several articles about this matter. One by Gilbert and one by-- which happened, appeared in the-- is it Finegold or one of the specialists in the commentary a year ago or so.[30]

---

[30] Riegner is referring to works by Martin Gilbert and Henry Feingold. See Gilbert, Auschwitz and the Allies (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1981) and Feingold, The Politics of Rescue: The Roosevelt Administration and the Holocaust, 1938-1945 (New Brunswick, NJ, 1970). For recent takes on this debate see Michael J. Neufeld and Michael Berenbaum eds., The Bombing of Auschwitz: Should the Allies Have Attempted it? (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000) as well as the review essay Rafael Medoff, "New Evidence Concerning the Allies and Auschwitz," American Jewish History 89, no. 1 (2001): 91-104.

And what was told to us? To me--

INTERVIEWER: You were talking about the bombing, and why we didn't bomb, and why that is such an enigma for you.

GERHART RIEGNER: Now here there's one thing I don't understand. In spite of Churchill and the-- and they sent the whole thing to the military, and then it comes back. Somewhere the thing is being stopped. And we are being told the whole time two major arguments. Technically, it cannot be done, because the bombers cannot return. This is what they-- we haven't enough-- we cannot send them from I don't know where, and they cannot come back. They haven't enough. This is too, too, too great a distance. That's one argument.

And the second argument is, yeah, we have to win the war, and we cannot. We have to win the war. We cannot distract from-- from-- from the major war effort and--

Now we know today-- this is documented in the files that during that same period during which we argued with the Allies about sending-- and I know it was not only in England. It was also in America. Goldmann argued here with [INAUDIBLE] over dinner with some of the highest--

And we get this kind of argument. The same moment, there are several bombings of several hundred bombers of the Allied forces bombing six kilometers from Auschwitz, the Buna-Werke and other fabriks and other enterprises. This has never been told to anybody, and it showed that there is absolutely bad faith in this story. They could have sent one or two to Auschwitz and it would have at least stopped, temporarily, the ovens. They would have killed maybe a few thousand people, too, but they would have been killed in any case.

There was an idea of Kubowitzki not to bomb them but to-- to bring in some commandos and to destroy the ovens from inside. Somebody made a big fuss about the difference.[31] The Congress in New York was not for bombing. It was for something else. This is nonsense. I mean, this is another method of stopping it. So on these refinements we could have had maybe different opinions, but we wanted to stop the ovens.

So in reality, this is an artificial argument. But why was this not done? And why is this not explained until to this day? Here you really have no answer. In spite of Churchill. Don't forget. This must be known by the military. Who stopped it? Here, really, you-- you-- your wisdom stops.

INTERVIEWER: You said you didn't know about the visa situation, that the State Department was in fact curtailing visas and weren't filling our quotas and so forth and so on. But you must

---

[31] Leon Kubowitzki (1896-1966), a socialist Zionist leader, a fighter for Jewish rights in Europe, one of the leaders of the economic boycott on Germany and a founder of the WJC. During the Second World War he was the Secretary General of the WJC and headed its rescue committee.

have known that ships were going back empty. I mean, there was the argument that there wasn't-- there weren't ships to take these people out of whatever ports they found their way to. There simply weren't the boats. You in your listening post, did you know that ships were plying the ocean back and forth empty?

GERHART RIEGNER: Yeah, but we-- no, first of all, I didn't know anything. In Switzerland, you didn't know about ships and the ocean. But I'm not speaking about that. I'm speaking that during the whole period, from '33 to '45, there were-- certainly until '39, there were, for instance, I believe there was a German quota of 12,000.

And the Moss book reviews that this German quota was never filled. Now, that, in my opinion, was completely unknown. I didn't know about it. And I thought, after all, we were always under the impression that it's really full. The quota is full. Maybe there are a few Germans who have to have been included. I mean real Germans. Not German Jews. That's possible.

But that the quota was not filled, and that the-- the department bureaucracy obviously had its fingers in it, is I don't know. Whether Roosevelt knew this, I don't. This I don't. No, it's not-- I really, with regard to the Allied administration, I can say very, very little. Because I really, in my place, I-- I didn't deal with him. These witnesses who lived in these countries are much better to judge whether-- where the criticism should be.

INTERVIEWER: But did you ever sense in your position that, in addition to the Nazi pro-- the Nazi anti-Semitism that there was antisemitism, a real war against the Jews from the good guys as well?

GERHART RIEGNER: I wouldn't say that. I knew that there was great antisemitism in this country, in America. And after all, there was a German Bund. There was Father Coughlin. There were Smiths. And what was this-- I forgot his initials, where everybody--

INTERVIEWER: Gerald K Smith.

GERHART RIEGNER: Huh?

INTERVIEWER: Gerald K Smith.

GERHART RIEGNER: Yes, K Smith and others. And this we knew. And this-- this. But how far this worked on the-- on the actual practice of the-- of the actual handling of individual cases in the department, this we didn't know. But that this was in the way of a better legislation or extraordinary Allied decision, this was known to us. But there was real opposition. It was not opposition in the bureaucracy. It was real opposition in the country.

INTERVIEWER: Were you getting-- what kind of orders were you getting? Not orders, but direction were you getting from Dr. Goldmann and others in the central office here in the United States? Directives. What were they telling you to do?

GERHART RIEGNER: Well, that came much later, more in the later years of the war, when they were organized. You know we had here organized exile governments of Jewish communities during the war. The so-called representative committees for Italy, for France.

When this was done, then I got a number of suggestions, because these people knew their countries and made suggestions. But otherwise, you had to see what is possible. Kubowitzky was the head of Rescue Department. He insisted all the time to fight for the recognition of the-- legal recognition by the Red Cross and of the camps and so on.

But I go through my files. You will see all kinds of suggestion, which I got, and which I took up, of course.

INTERVIEWER: Were you left pretty much to your own devices as to what you felt were your priorities during those years?

GERHART RIEGNER: I don't think there was any-- any doubt about priorities.

INTERVIEWER: Well, what were they?

GERHART RIEGNER: Well, rescue whatever you can.

INTERVIEWER: But I guess I'm not-- I don't understand how you personally were able, were expected to help rescue. I mean, what? By processing papers, by funneling money, by just sending communiqués? What is it that you were expected or were hoping--

GERHART RIEGNER: Listen, from time to time, you-- you-- you invented other-- first of all, there are political means, yeah? You asked the neutral governments to let people in. You asked the Allied government to guarantee. The neutral government, they will go out later and they will get the food and such thing, when they had nothing.

There-- there was a great part was in assistance. Purely-- purely material assistance to the occupied countries and so on. This was quite a-- we sent many dispatches and so on. This did-- you couldn't ask just send this and go to the post office. This was to be negotiated diplomatically. Even in the last few months of the war, the whole question of communications of trucks and so on, in the last few months, this was a long negotiation in the Red Cross, with the Red Cross and the Allied government, and in which we were involved, by the way.

I intervened for the mistreatment of Jewish prisoners of war. I sent in packages. I sent books, and-- and-- and Sidurim and so on into prisoner of war camps. I mean, there was a great variety of-- of activities, which [INAUDIBLE]. And trying to give-- to-- to take certain political actions which-- which could help.

I put pressure on the Red Cross. One day, I sent a cable to Dr. Yakov Herrman who was representative in South America. I said, mobilize all the Red Cross societies in South America to send cables to the international committees that they should do something on the Jews. 10 days

later, I come to the office of the Red Cross and they show me a bunch of telegrams. Suddenly, all this is-- well, there were lots of things. I can't--

Now, I think we should come to an end of this.

INTERVIEWER: Last question. I guess the-- the-- the information I was looking for is that many people, I have heard, say that the reason that no one could help the Jews is because they didn't have Israel. They didn't have a country to speak for them, and that there was no recognition of these various organizations because they felt they didn't represent the Jews of the world.

You were in a position where, in fact, you were representative of an organization that was supposedly speaking for all the Jews. And I just wondered what-- what acceptance there was of your role and what acceptance there was of the World Jewish Congress as the vehicle?

GERHART RIEGNER: Well, finally, everything of course is completely right. If there would have been a state, the whole thing would have happened differently. We would have accepted in 1936 the partition plan of Lord Peel, maybe it would have gone through. This is one of the things which I have never forgotten.

And then-- and here, by the way, even the leadership of the World Jewish Congress was divided. Wise was against it and Goldmann was for it. I was for it at the time. And I sometimes think, maybe we missed that opportunity at that time. We certainly could have saved much more, many more Jews before the war.

I think some of the mistakes, our mistakes, were done in the pre-war years. But we, of course, we don't forget that this was an antisemitic Europa. Europe was antisemitic. Which the world today also doesn't understand. Hitler was the crowning, the crown of the antisemitic system. With the exception of Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia, practically all of Central and Eastern Europe was antisemitic.

And this, and the major part of Jewry lived there. Poland was antisemitic, Hungary was antisemitic, Romania was antisemitic, Latvia was antisemitic, Lithuania-- And-- and-- and-- and-- and only then the-- the-- the-- Hitler and also the end. This is all forgotten. This is all forgotten.

Now, whether we had other possibilities, I don't know. Of course, we had, but the basic question is always, of course with a state the whole situation is absolutely different. Why you-- finally, it comes to the persons. Finally, your influence in some of these negotiations is due to two facts. The more antisemitic the people are, the more power they believe the Jews have. This is a fact.

A great part of our so-called influence is due to the overestimation of our power and our influence. Finally, and so people won't or do not want to help us. Finally, what you get, what you don't get is, to a great extent, due to the ability of some individuals, how they present the case

and whether they win and make the case stick. I don't think that in this case the personality had very much to do with it.

[INAUDIBLE] trusted me more perhaps than he trusted others. But in reality, the lack of success of this position was in built in the situation of our powerlessness, of the lack of a state, of a world which was basically antisemitic in Europe, and which was outside Europe basically interested to win the war.

INTERVIEWER: If there were no World Jewish Congress, if there were no organization formed not so long before this tragedy--

GERHART RIEGNER: It came much too late into being. This is clear. I don't know. I think we have shown in our activities, it's not important. We fulfilled a certain function. Nobody can say they didn't know what is happening. And that was basically our performance. Nobody can see we-- we didn't press them with hundreds of proposals to act. Because this is incorrect. And a certain number of things, which we have done, which has worked, has helped a little bit.

I am not one who is proud of this record. I think our generation has failed, basically. I think the new generation has to learn, also, that one can lose the wars. One cannot only win wars. One can also lose wars. And as far as the Jews are concerned with regard to Hitler, we lost the war. The Allies won it, but we lost it. And this we should never forget. Thanks God, we have today the state and the great compensation, which if you want, which we have won with this powerless, for this powerlessness, is today a factor which I hope will prevent in the future any such situation. OK.