

## REVIEW ESSAY

*Benjamin Eilbott*

Benjamin Eilbott left Germany in 1939 as a young boy. Currently active in Jewish communal work, he is a retired school principal.

### FROM DECEIT TO INDIFFERENCE: THE HOLOCAUST IN REVIEW

*The Abandonment of the Jews*, by David S. Wyman (Pantheon, 1984), 444 pp., \$19.95

*Beyond Belief*, by Deborah E. Lipstadt (Free Press, 1986), 370 pp., \$19.95.

*The Deafening Silence*, by Rafael Medoff (Shapolsky Books, 1987), 233 pp.

*The Jews Were Expendable*, by Monty Noam Penkower (University of Illinois Press, 1983), 429 pp.

*Legacy of Silence*, by Dan Bar-On (Harvard University Press, 1989), 338 pp., \$25.00.

*Thy Brother's Blood*, by David Kranzler (Mesorah Publications, 1987), 338 pp.

*Were We Our Brothers' Keepers?* by Haskel Lookstein (Vintage Books, 1985), 287 pp.

In the titles you have the review.

*The Deafening Silence*, response to *The Abandonment of the Jews*.  
*Were We Our Brothers' Keepers?*

No.

*The Jews Were Expendable*. *Thy Brother's Blood*, its stain a trace to a  
*Legacy of Silence*.

*Beyond Belief*.

Seven books—six on abandonment, betrayal, deceit, inaction, indifference, and inertia. The seventh on the legacy of the others.

Arthur Wyman's *Abandonment*, perhaps the best-written, is relentless in its lack of passion. In *Beyond Belief*, Lipstadt, a fine historian, illumines the forces, still grinding today, that shaped the American press'

cold-hearted, manipulative, and almost malevolent coverage of the genocide between 1933 and 1945. Rabbi Lookstein's account, objective, superior, focuses on the nature of the general American Jewish response to the events demanding it. Monty Penkower's volume, the earliest published of the seven, gives us diplomacy's failure in the larger universe of disbelief and inattention. In *The Deafening Silence* Medoff presents the leaders of the American Jewish community, exposing what they did, and what they did not do. David Kranzler, passionately concerned with Orthodox Judaism's obligation under "Pikuach Nefesh," the saving of life, has produced a study that, locating and emphasizing obscure silver linings in the tragedy of the Jews' destruction, unintentionally limns the enormous, unforgiving size of the cloud. Dan Bar-On's *Legacy* deals not with the lack of response to the Holocaust in progress, but, like Sichrovsky's earlier *Born Guilty, Children of Nazi Families*, with the response he encounters forty years later, as he interviews his "Children of the Third Reich."

The focus of the research of these seven authors—historians, rabbi, journalists—differs; the conclusions are inescapably the same. Reading the six books that deal with the lack of rescue means rereading the same accounts, viewed each time from a slightly different perspective. Most of the appalling documentation has the same sources, and the substantiation buttressing the conclusions draws from overlapping bibliographies, reinforcing what thousands of articles and books on the Holocaust have stated or implied. The most devastating finding, however, must be made by the informed reader, who knows that even casual attention to today's headlines and broadcasts can continue to produce such books. Only the names change.

There IS no history, said Emerson. Or, as someone else has stated, History is self-interest; it is just a few reasons why. Let us look at the conclusions in these books, and at the unforgiving truth:

FDR really did not care, except when needed votes were at risk in 1944. The most charitable interpretation to be made is that he was not prepared by *his* history to understand what had never been explained, or to believe what he had never heard. Perhaps Roosevelt made no connection between anti-Semitism and Jews; certainly, like all too many, he never understood or accepted that Hitler's mania throughout was to assure the death of all Jews *as* Jews—even with all lost and his own end a certainty. Yet hero-worship of FDR, led by Rabbi Stephen Wise, abetted the President's do-nothing policies, and, far more tragic, precluded the successful initiation of any early rescue strategy.

The U.S. State Department, operating almost autonomously under a passive Cordell Hull, at best obstructed or refused to implement American policy, and at worst sabotaged it. Even after 1943, when the United States finally began to consider that rescue of some Jews was still possible, it

took the angry, if belated, intervention of Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau, Jr., to force State Department action that resulted in Roosevelt's executive order establishing the War Refugee Board, which may have assisted in saving more than 100,000 Jews.

Though more responsive to political and even personal pressure, and occasionally therefore trapped into positive action, the British government's almost exclusive concern was with its role in enforcing the cap it had put on Jewish immigration into Palestine in the White Paper it had issued in 1939. Wyman puts it well:

But the British government, which held the mandate over Palestine, had all but closed it to Jewish immigration in 1939. Arab anger and fear, aroused by the growth of the Jewish population there since World War I, had erupted in a series of riots. To allay Arab unrest and thus protect their own long-term interests in the Middle East, the British issued a White Paper in May 1939. It restricted future Jewish immigration to 75,000, to be spread over the *next five years*. This would limit the Jews to one-third of Palestine's population, assuring Arabs that no Jewish state would arise there. (P. 157; italics mine.)

Britain's perception that Arab support was also essential for an Allied victory was shared by the United States and other Western countries, a perception apparently uninfluenced by Arab leaders' applause of Axis triumphs, and by broad Arab encouragement of ex-Mufti el-Husseini's open plans for participation in Hitler's ultimate triumph.

Anti-Semitism, as always, was alive, subsisting on the usual excuses—as though it ever needed them. In the mid- and late thirties, however, special factors obtained. Depression's unemployment, and xenophobic isolationism in the face of an inevitable war, provided additional underpinning for scapegoating the Jews, much of it virulently spit out by Father Coughlin and Gerald L. K. Smith, all of whose thousands of listeners may have been mistaken for followers. As Penkower quotes Joseph Goebbels, perhaps the Nazis' most outspoken anti-Semite, “. . . at bottom, however, I believe both the English and the Americans are happy that we are exterminating the Jewish riff-raff” (p. 95). Inevitable in Jewish political behavior, of course, was the ever-present fear of provoking or increasing anti-Semitism (a fear of discrimination not limited to Jews as a distinctive group) that bred that most destructive of all enemies, self-destruction.

Old, old joke: Two Jews face the firing squad. Blindfolds are offered. One accepts. The other spits contemptuously at his executioners. “Don't make trouble!” cries the first.

It is perhaps the saddest of our weaknesses that even in the face of death some of us abdicate our right to life. Jews have always waited for history to punish the wicked.

For those Jews who saw their economic, social and quasi-political welfare threatened, for those who had worn the increasingly comfortable

trappings of assimilation for two or three generations, or, having just put them on, now saw them at risk, the perception of increased anti-Semitism produced, if not active interference in rescue efforts, then inaction bordering on paralysis. The calamity, of course, was that these were the Jews with influence, influence that could have made a difference. This was dramatically illustrated negatively in the instance of Samuel Rosenman, chief speech writer and adviser to Roosevelt (as amply documented in all of the books), and positively by Morgenthau, certainly an assimilated Jew. All of the authors comment on his “conversion,” with Penkower and Wyman giving it special emphasis in describing Morgenthau’s influence on FDR. Instrumental in achieving Roosevelt’s action was a memorandum prepared in late 1943 by Morgenthau’s non-Jewish staff. Labeled “Personal Report to the President” (changed from its original title of “Report to the Secretary on the Acquiescence of This Government in the Murder of the Jews”) it

began with a direct attack on the State Department for completely failing to “take any effective action to prevent the extermination of the Jews in German-controlled Europe . . . [and of being] indifferent, callous, and perhaps even hostile.” (Penkower, pp. 141, 142.)

Destructive to Jewish lives in Nazi-dominated Europe were major disputes in the American Jewish community. Tragically differing mutual perception—closer to deception—between the Orthodox and non-Orthodox over policy and action had each “side” accusing the other of discrimination based on religion. Inter-organizational strife over turf rights and prerogatives was seriously counterproductive. The argument over the campaign for an independent Jewish army under its own flag and leadership severely split the general Jewish community, and Zionists in particular. Many had a “deep-seated animosity toward the Bergsonites,” the group led by the charismatic Peter Bergson (nee Hillel Kook), which, influenced by Revisionist Zionist Jabotinsky, “pressed for militant policy toward British control in Palestine and aimed at the immediate establishment of a Jewish state there” (Wyman, p. 85). Most profound was the antagonism between those who disregarded the British White Paper, supporting illegal immigration into Palestine in the face of the British blockade, and those who wished not to alienate the British (or, in some instances, the Arabs) and therefore would do nothing until after the war had been won. Compounding the bitter dispute was that there were those among the latter who proposed alternate Jewish homelands. Destructive as this discord was in making impossible Jewish unity in the face of the greatest tragedy in its history, the consequences in the non-Jewish world were deadly. Even Hitler could have taken comfort from the Jews’ self-destructive drive. Wrangling among Jewish leaders over the issue of immediate rescue attempts versus long-range post-war efforts for the

establishment of a homeland for those who would survive extermination made both rescue and settlement moot.

Then there were the half-truths, the evasions, the rationalizations, and the lies:

Neither Auschwitz itself, nor the rail lines leading to it, could be bombed; the war effort could not permit diversion of planes or materiel. This, as carefully documented by Wyman, Penkower, Medoff, and Kranzler, while Allied planes effectively bombed targets less than fifty miles from that most murderous of all the camps.

No transport was available for Jews at hand for cash or barter in Yugoslavia and other occupied lands. This in the face of troop ships and other vessels returning empty from war missions.

There were those who contended that bringing out Jews available to be rescued would mean dealing with the enemy, would risk bringing in spies and saboteurs, would alienate Allied governments apprehensive about anti-Semitism, and would overcrowd rescue facilities. This even though temporary space specifically designed for refugees was available in North Africa and elsewhere, and, as has been repeatedly substantiated, there was very little hesitation about saving non-Jewish refugees of differing nationalities.

Cynicism led to disbelief and, in turn, to rejection and inaction. Cynicism was in part based on the memory of unfounded World War I horror stories about German atrocities; disbelief had many roots, among them the world's admiration for German *Kultur*, the victims' own long history of victimization, and, perhaps the only acceptable rejection, a suspension of belief about horrors attributed to civilized men and women. Here the press, in its role as narrator/reporter, must accept culpability, with Lipstadt's book a careful documentation of the role of the media in supporting or even initiating distortions, while confirmed graphic reports of all aspects of the Final Solution, known almost immediately, were diminished or even vitiated by superficial coverage or its total lack.

Perhaps the most reprehensible of all the do-nothing arguments was the palpably anti-Semitic contention that any successful approach to Hitler or one of his subordinates would, in saving a small number of Jews, encourage the Nazis to "unload" the remaining ones, and thus, we must infer, flood Western countries with presumably undesirable and certainly unwanted "elements."

There were successes, some consummated in 1943, 1944, and 1945 with U.S. help, aided in part by Britain, Franco Spain, Portugal, and several Central and South American governments, as well as, to a lesser extent, by Sweden, Switzerland, and Pope Pius XI. But, with the exception of individual and small-group acts of defiant heroism, notably by Raoul Wallenberg and by Orthodox men and women setting *pikuach nefesh* above all secular laws (see Kranzler for details), and even with the

Holocaust no longer incontrovertible, and Allied victory assured, wrangling over authority and petty legal concerns doomed hundreds of thousands whose rescue was still possible—most notably, as late as 1944 and 1945, in Hungary.

Too numerous to summarize, the itemized details are there in all of the books about every aspect of the world's lack of response. For an overview of what was *not* done to save the Jews, Lookstein, Medoff, Penkower, and Wyman are appropriate. Lipstadt and Kranzler write from a more narrow focus, from which extrapolation, however, cannot avoid being made to the world's culpability. Documented are "where," "when," "what," "who," and, and this is important, "why not," which, it should be noted, differs from "why," and may force us to posit a conclusion that may raise a perhaps unanswerable question, again in the light of history.

Though some of those interviewed in *The Legacy of Silence* have acknowledged the German past, and are the "living testimony of people struggling to come to terms with [it]," others are defiant, "children of heroes who overnight became children of criminals." Their defiance may take the form of exculpation or justification, or it may be no more than the world's now common plea for forgiving and forgetting. More disturbing is the defiance of those who see history as being what we choose it to be today. What they have learned is not that history must not be ignored, but that it is available to be shaped.

"Dear Fritz, the Jew lover," runs a reply to a letter written to *Der Spiegel* by one of the interviewees, the guilt-burdened son of an executed Nazi. "Your father died too early to let you know how the Jews made it in the Weimar Republic. If you don't believe me, look how they're doing it again in the U.S.A. now! Perhaps, as a real democrat, you would like to invite me to your class. Your students have probably not yet had a chance to meet a real enthusiastic and anti-Semitic Nazi." Or another reply: "Dear Sir, As an Englishman living in [Germany] for many years, I have to comment that you can't be a very sensitive person. . . . My children grew up here as Germans, and you want them to revolt against the roots of your, now their, own nation? . . . The broken pride of the German people is rising again. It is a slow process but a steady one, at the end of which I can imagine they might exterminate people like yourself. You are a rootless person. . . . I pray to God that you will regain a healthy soul." (Bar-On, pp. 309, 310)

These are letters of the 1980's, not to be treated as exceptions or aberrations, but to be taken in the context of today's news. Though all of the books lay out in cruel prose how the Jews were permitted to be first persecuted and then murdered, none of them answers our "why," despite all accounts, interpretations, conclusions, and incontestable footnotes and bibliographies. There is great distinction between "why" and "why not"; there is no blurring. When one has read all of the bizarre details, believed the unbelievable, and accepted the unacceptable, it becomes necessary to

question. We know why not but not why. Nor is the distinction one of sophistry.

Why anti-Semitism? Why inattention, indifference, apathy, cruelty? Why acts of omission and commission? The books have no answer; does the reader? Is history our servant or our master? When I do something, it is that I have chosen *that*. The end will always justify the means; it is as though God were on that side.

Buchenwald, in what is at this writing still East Germany, had 27,000 visitors in March of 1990, a number apparently average for monthly visits to that former concentration camp and important distribution center of death and death marches. East German guides provide *their* history of Buchenwald's role in the Holocaust: Hitler struggled to destroy Marxism. Russians and Poles must be remembered, and on the plaques are memorialized, as martyrs to the resistance. The collusion of big business spawned Hitler and permitted his growth. Jews are not mentioned. The memorial tablet to the Jewish dead of Buchenwald is not visited by the guides, who turn into other corridors.

In a recent novel, *Oldest Living Confederate Widow Tells All*, by Allan Gurganus, we may have an answer.

How soon, sugar, the terrible becomes routine. We've all got this dangerous built-in talent: for turning horror into errands. You hear folks wonder how the Germans could've DONE it? I believe part of the answer is: They made extermination be a nine-to-five activity. You know, salaries? Lunch breaks? And the staff came and did their job . . . and went home and ate their supper and slept and came back and did their job.—That's partly how you get anything done, especially a chore what's dreadful, dreadful.—Honey? we've all got to be real careful of what we can get used to. (Gurganus, pp. 262, 263)

History not just as banality, but as inertia and bureaucracy.