

Our World: History's unsettling verdicts

Caroline Glick , THE JERUSALEM POST

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Compare and contrast two separate actions taken last month by the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington and Yad Vashem in Jerusalem.

Last month, after a five-year campaign by the David S. Wyman Institute for Holocaust Studies which culminated in the publication of a petition signed by some 100 Holocaust scholars, the US Holocaust Memorial Museum decided to add to its permanent exhibition the story of the Bergson Group's efforts to rescue European Jewry during the Holocaust.

The Bergson Group, named after its leader Peter Bergson, who served as the Irgun Tzvai Leumi's representative in the US during the war, was formed in 1943 to pressure the Roosevelt administration to take active measures to save the Jews of Europe from annihilation.

Bergson, whose real name was Hillel Kook, arrived in the US in 1940 as part of Revisionist Zionist leader Ze'ev Jabotinsky's delegation to the US. Jabotinsky formed the delegation to ramp up US support for Zionism against the British government's illegal decision to block Jewish immigration to the Land of Israel.

In 1943, as news of the slaughter of European Jewry began filtering into press reports, Bergson decided to put his Zionist efforts on hold and devote all his energies to saving Europe's Jews. His efforts ran afoul of the American Jewish establishment, led by American Jewish Congress leader Stephen Wise, who felt that an activist response to the genocide would increase anti-Semitism in the US and alienate the Roosevelt administration.

Rather than pressure President Franklin Delano Roosevelt to do something to save Europe's Jews, Wise acted as an apologist for the administration to the Jewish community. He embraced the administration's line that the best thing for European Jewry was for American Jews to support the war effort and not make waves about the genocide.

BERGSON WOULD have none of it. He organized a group of supporters that spanned the political spectrum, from Communist fellow travelers to Southern reactionaries. With the help of Hollywood screenwriter Ben Hecht, he galvanized the great stars of Hollywood to the cause of European Jews. His organization, the Emergency Committee to Save the Jewish People of Europe, published more than 200 full-page advertisements in major US newspapers to promote awareness of the Holocaust and motivate politicians to act.

Though constantly undercut by Wise and his allies, Bergson's group carried out a massive national campaign that included a Broadway play written by Ben Hecht and composer Kurt Weil, starring Marlon Brando, which demanded action to save European Jews; a march of some 400 rabbis in Washington to demand that Roosevelt do something to save European Jews, and a major lobbying effort on Capitol Hill among both Democrats and Republicans to force the Roosevelt administration to act on behalf of European Jewry.

IT WAS the large-scale support of Republicans, and the threat of losing Jewish support for the Democratic Party in the 1944 elections, that finally prompted Roosevelt to take action. As a result of Congressional pressure, in 1944 Roosevelt formed the War Refugee Board, which ultimately saved the lives of 200,000 Jews, mainly in Hungary. It was the only significant effort Roosevelt took throughout the war to save European Jewry, and it came about only because of the tireless efforts of the Bergson Group.

That the American Jewish establishment was unforgiving of the Bergson group's activities is made clear by the fact that it took 14 years and a public pressure campaign to convince the museum to recognize the group's efforts. Indeed, press reports of the museum's decision make clear that even today there remains an underlying hostility toward Bergson's activities.

Speaking to the Jewish Telegraphic Agency, University of Toronto historian Michael Marrus complained that there is "an unspoken political dimension" to the debate about Bergson. He alleged that in lobbying the museum to recognize Bergson, the Wyman Institute was trying to advance the right-wing agenda of Jewish activism that Bergson and the Revisionists embraced.

So even 70 years after the Holocaust, when it is clear that the Bergson's group's efforts led to the only US action to save Europe's Jews, supporting and upholding those efforts is considered a provocative political act. Yet memorializing men like Wise, who actively sought to undermine those efforts in order to maintain his warm relationship with Roosevelt, is considered uncontroversial.

As irksome as the lingering attempts to push Bergson into a political cubbyhole are, at least the public campaign launched by the Wyman Institute succeeded in convincing the Holocaust Museum to give his efforts the institutional recognition they deserve.

MORE IRKSOME than the abiding hostility toward Bergson is Yad Vashem's decision last month to hold a ceremony where it accepted the personal archive of Rudolf Kastner and extolled as a "hero" the man who served during the war as the deputy head of the Labor Zionist-affiliated Relief and Rescue Committee of Hungarian Jews.

Kastner may have been many things, but he certainly was not a hero.

The annihilation of Hungary's 800,000 Jews began only in 1944. In early 1944, Kastner was warned by two Jews, Alfred Wetzler and Rudolf Vrba, who had escaped from Auschwitz, that the Nazis planned to deport Hungarian Jewry to Auschwitz. The men's "Auschwitz Protocol" provided a detailed account of the Nazis' plans.

Rather than alert his fellow Jews to the coming dangers, Kastner made a deal with Nazi chief Adolf Eichmann to buy the freedom of some 1,685 Hungarian Jewish notables, including his relatives.

Kastner maintained close relations with Nazi war criminal Kurt Becher, who played a major role in the genocide of Hungarian Jews. He went so far as to testify on Becher's behalf during the Nuremberg War Crimes Tribunals.

After the war Kastner moved to Israel and ran for Knesset on the Mapai slate. In 1952 he was working as a spokesman and party official at Israel's Industry Ministry when Malkiel Grunwald self-published a pamphlet in which he accused Kastner of having collaborated with the Nazis. The state sued Grunwald for libel.

In the course of a 10-month trial, the facts of Kastner's collaboration became clear. Presiding Judge Binyamin

Halevy dismissed the suit in 1955. He ruled that "Kastner sold his soul to the devil." Kastner was murdered in 1957. In 1958, the government appealed Halevy's verdict to the Supreme Court. While accepting much of the evidence of Kastner's betrayal, including his post-war testimony on behalf of Becher, the court ruled, in a split 3-2 decision, that Kastner had not collaborated with the Nazis.

The debate over Kastner's role in the genocide of Hungarian Jewry continues to this day. While historical and court evidence as well as survivors' testimony clearly point to the conclusion that he collaborated with the Nazis, the Labor Zionist establishment in Israel has never accepted the allegations against him. And now, the establishment, in the form of Yad Vashem, has decided to uphold this man, who refused to warn his fellow Jews of the danger, as a hero.

SPEAKING TO *The Jerusalem Post's* Elliot Jager last week, Yad Vashem president Yosef Lapid argued that Kastner was acting honorably by testifying on Becher's behalf because during the war he had pledged to the Nazi that he would defend him.

Lapid excused Kastner's failure to warn his fellow Jews that the trains they were being placed on would take them to Auschwitz and not to a labor camp in Rumania, as the Nazis said. In Lapid's view, warning them, and so giving them a chance to fight for their lives would have been deadly.

"A revolt by Hungarian Jewish women and children would have resulted in an immediate massacre. (The men had already been taken for forced labor.) The object was to buy time in any way possible," he said.

Lapid has apparently decided to ignore the simple fact that these innocent women and children were murdered at Auschwitz. The only ones who benefited from the "bought time" were the Nazis. Due to Kastner's refusal to warn his fellow Jews of the fate that awaited them, the Nazis were able to carry out the deportations to Auschwitz without risking a repeat of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in Budapest.

Yad Vashem's execrable decision to honor Kastner on the one hand, and the controversy over the US Holocaust Museum's decision to belatedly give the Bergson Group the recognition it deserves on the other demonstrate two things. First, they show that in times of crisis it may be necessary to buck the establishment in order to save lives. Second, they show that the establishment will not embrace success or acknowledge perfidy if it believes that doing so will harm its reputation.

The stories of the Bergson Group and Kastner could not be more relevant today as the Jewish people again faces the prospect of annihilation at the hands of an Iranian nuclear bomb. The stories of the men and women who confronted the establishment during the Holocaust, and that of the establishment man who enabled it, should serve as a warning as the Israeli government today insists on taking a back seat to others in contending with Iran's threat to commit a second Holocaust.



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