

## Reactions of the Allies

Excerpt from interview with Professor Yehuda Bauer

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Interviewer: Amos Goldberg

Q - I want to ask about the bystanders, especially the Allies. How would you explain the lack of action by the Allies to stop the Holocaust?

B- One has to be realistic regarding what happened in the early 1940s. Clearly, the Western Allies decided not to help the Jews. However, between the decision to mass-murder the Jewish people in Europe (which was taken sometime in 1941, in stages probably) and 1944, the Americans and the British could not have done anything militarily, or in any other way, to stop the Germans from killing Jews. The millions of Jews whom the Germans decided to kill were lost, because the Western Allies didn't have the air power or soldiers in Europe. They were fighting for their lives.

In 1941, the Germans seemed to be winning the war in the Atlantic; they were sinking many more Allied ships than the Allies were producing. In 1942, the Japanese conquered the whole of East Asia. There is no doubt that the American Air Force could not bomb Eastern Europe until the repair of the airfields in Foggia, in Italy, in late 1943.

As we know, by late 1943 all the death camps in Poland (except for Auschwitz) had already been closed. Regarding Auschwitz, one knew that some terrible things were going on there. But details were unknown until the escape of two Slovak Jews, Rudolf Vrba and Alfred Wetzler, in early April 1944. The details of the gas chambers and so on were not known until the late spring of 1944. Something could have been done then. But by that time, most of the Jews killed in the Holocaust were already dead.

The Allies received detailed knowledge about the Holocaust (but not about Auschwitz) from the summer of 1942 on. The killing of a whole people was unprecedented in history. It is not really surprising that people had difficulty in accepting the notion that that was happening in Europe. The Americans didn't particularly hurry in finding out the details, but in early November 1942, they received confirmation of the information received from Jewish sources in August 1942. In early December 1942, the United Nations, or the Allied nations, made the famous declaration acknowledging the fact that the Germans were killing the Jewish people in Europe.

In December 1942, as I said, the Western Allies had no means of stopping the Holocaust. Now they could have helped, but they didn't do it. So the argument against the Allies is not that they didn't rescue the Jews from the Holocaust, but that they didn't help to the small extent that they could have – by providing havens in neutral countries, and by promising the neutral countries that they would pay for any Jewish refugees who would enter countries like Switzerland, Sweden, Portugal, Spain, Turkey, and so on.

The Allies could have dropped leaflets on German cities together with the bombs, informing the German population that they would be held responsible after the war for murdering the Jews. The Poles asked the British to do that for Poles and Jews in 1943, but the British refused. The British said that they were not in the business of dropping leaflets, but of dropping bombs, as though the two were contradictory. They could have smuggled money in, but they refused to do that. Money that could have rescued people, saved people – not millions, but thousands. In other words, there were things that could have been done, that weren't. Although they could not have rescued all the Jews from the Holocaust, they could have rescued some people.

Q- Why wasn't that done?

B- There were a number of reasons. There was an element of antisemitism, especially of course in the foreign offices of the two Western powers. I don't

think that this element was really crucial, even though it certainly contributed. What was crucial was the fact that the Allies were afraid that if their struggle were in some way identified with the rescue of Jewish people, they would be accused by their own home constituency of fighting for the Jews and not for themselves. This may have been true for the United States, where antisemitism increased during the Second World War. But I don't think it was true for Britain, where antisemitism decreased during the war.

This was the perception of the leaders of the Western Allies. The Jews were an unpopular minority who were pestering them to help, and the Allies decided that their purpose was to win the war, and anything that diverted them from that was bad. They completely ignored the fact that there was no contradiction between pursuing the war and helping the few thousands that could have been helped (or the tens of thousands that could have been helped by the steps that I outlined before).

The Western Allies themselves said that they were fighting against the most inhumane regime that had ever disfigured the face of this earth. By not helping the Jews, they ignored their own purposes. So in the end, it is a moral issue. And on the moral front, I think the Western Allies failed as far as the Jews were concerned.

Q- When did the Allies internalize that something very different was happening to the Jews compared to other atrocities that took place in the Second World War?

B- This only happened after the war. I don't think that they internalized this difference while the war was going on. They didn't want to internalize it, because then they would have been faced with moral and political issues that they didn't want to see. It was a repression of something that was increasingly streaming in from late 1942 on. One can see that very clearly in the death marches at the end of the war. The Allies most certainly knew what was happening, and they refrained from bombing the trains that were carrying

behind them endless wagons with suffering humanity. They could have done that.

There is one case, when a pilot – and we don't know why, and why that particular pilot and not others – quite obviously saw, when flying very low, that a train was carrying victims, and he bombed the engine, and the train stopped. As a result, some people, at least, managed to escape. So there is proof that they knew, but they didn't react. They knew... they didn't know... they refused to know. It was only when the Western Allies liberated the concentration camps that it suddenly hit them, and then they changed their attitude.

Q- Were there chances of rescuing Jews by negotiations that were missed because of this attitude?

B -The question of negotiating with the Nazis to rescue Jews is an extremely complicated issue. The Jews were caught in a trap. The Allies couldn't accept the German demands, because the Germans wanted a separate peace with the Western Allies, and this was out of the question. The Allies couldn't have supplied the Nazis in 1944 with thousands of trucks to help them fight against the Soviet Allies of the West. In other words, these were impossible situations.

What they could have done was to drag out the negotiations more than they did, to promise the Nazis to talk on condition that the Nazis stopped the murder. They didn't do that; had they done so, they might have had trouble with their Soviet Allies. The Soviets were completely oblivious of any Jewish issue whatsoever, and completely refused to negotiate with the Germans, although they did maintain some kind of contact with the Germans behind the West's back.

This fear was quite strong, especially among the Americans. In such a situation, the only thing that might have helped was what Moshe Shertok (later Sharett), at that time the head of the political department in the Jewish

Agency, had suggested to the Western Allies: Talk to them, promise them whatever they want, but don't give it to them; drag it out until the war is over. That was very wise advice, but they didn't listen. Yes, possibilities may have been missed, but in a situation where the trap was almost completely closed.

Q- Did the Allied governments prevent the media from popularizing the notion of the Holocaust?

B- The media in Palestine was very strictly controlled by British censorship: The British opposed any kind of publication that would have caused an emotional reaction among Jews in Palestine. So quite a lot of what the newspapers knew, and tried to publish, was censored. In fact, there is a book on the material that the Palestine Jewish newspapers tried to publish, and couldn't.

Nevertheless, the main stories were published. Certainly, at the end of 1942, as massive information flowed in, there was no hindrance in terms of censorship in Britain and America on what was happening to the Jews. It was an editorial choice. The editors did not hide the information; it was never hidden. They put it in a place in the newspaper that indicated either that the information was not 100 percent certain, and/or that it was relatively less important than the main news about the war. It is incorrect to say that the media in the West hid the facts of the Holocaust, but it is true to say that it was not given the prominence that, with hindsight, it might have been given.

The Jewish newspapers – and there was a Jewish press – went on a kind of exercise of not knowing what to publish and when. There's a famous case of a very important Jewish weekly in the United States, the Jewish Frontier. In June/July 1942, it published original information, transmitted by the Bund to the West, about 700,000 Jews who had already been killed by the Germans in Poland. After a heated discussion by the editorial board, they decided to publish it – but on the last page of the newspaper, indicating that they were not certain if it was true. At the time, they believed that the story couldn't be

true, because nothing like that had ever happened before. But what if it were true? They published it in this stupid way. I think this indicates a problem that one has with hindsight and with reading it with the eyes of the period itself. With hindsight, it was stupidity, but from their point of view, this was something that was so impossible to believe that one couldn't put it on the front page. It is only we who know that they made a mistake.

Q- Our last question of this section deals with the bombing of Auschwitz, or the railroad story that you mentioned before. We know that Winston Churchill approved it, and that the railroad was purposely never bombed. Why?

B- The final answer to the question of why the Allies didn't bomb Auschwitz, is not quite clear. We know, from David Wyman's research, that in January 1944, the Chief-of-Staff of the Western Allies in Washington made a decision of principle that had nothing to do with Jews. They decided that military means should not be used to satisfy civilian needs. And killing Jews in gas chambers represented "civilian needs."

In addition to this decision not to divert, as they put it, bombers to civilian targets, there were two other considerations. First, the demand to bomb the railways and/or Auschwitz came after D-Day. They had bombed railways in France, which was much nearer, of course, than Poland. It was a massive bombing campaign that didn't really completely succeed. The Germans managed, within 24 to 48 hours, to repair every kind of damage that the Allies managed to inflict on the railway system in Northern France, or in France generally. According to their logic, if they couldn't do it in France, then they certainly couldn't do it between Hungary and Poland.

Second, the bombing of the gas chambers would have been a very complicated operation. It could have been done with 500-pound bombs, and there were planes that could, at that point, deliver those bombs. Nobody could tell what the losses might have been. Whether they would actually have hit the gas chambers is a moot point, because the chambers were on the bottom

floor of buildings built with concrete. It would have required very direct hits; even then, it is not certain whether the gas chambers themselves would have been hit.

There's no doubt that the surrounding area, which included the women's camp, and "Canada," the place where they sorted the clothes of the victims, would have been hit. Clearly, there would have been many casualties amongst the victims. However, that is what the victims wanted – for the gas chambers to be bombed. And even had they not been destroyed, it would have made a statement that the world cared.

The practical outcome is not the important thing there. The Nazis had other means to continue the destruction of the Jews. Had only three or four of the gas chambers been destroyed, they would have reverted to the old one in Auschwitz I. They could have killed Jews in pits – they had done it before, and could have done it again. Gas chambers were useful for the Nazis, but it wasn't the only way of killing the Jews. They would have gone back, presumably, to what they had been doing all the time. It was the symbolic meaning that is important. The fact that the Allies, although they were asked to, did not bomb the railways, didn't bomb Auschwitz, makes a moral statement that ultimately turned against those who refused to bomb.

The peculiar thing is that the deportations to Auschwitz from Hungary were stopped largely because of a massive raid of American bombers on the railway yards of Budapest on July 2, 1944. The Hungarians interpreted these bombings as American intervention against the deportation of the Jews. This obviously wasn't the case, but that is how the Hungarians perceived it. This raid was one of the main reasons behind the decision of the Hungarian government to stop the deportation of the Jews a week later. So, inadvertently, and without any decision to do so, the railways were bombed, and they did stop the deportation to Auschwitz, which stands in contradiction to what I just said. The contradiction is a reality; it's not a logical contradiction. The Allies didn't believe that the railways could be bombed. They were

probably right that they couldn't have stopped it, and yet they did stop it because they bombed the railways.

**Source: The Multimedia CD *'Eclipse Of Humanity'*, Yad Vashem, Jerusalem 2000.**