

Jewish Rescue Activities in Belgium and France

Lucien Steinberg

The term “rescue” refers to a very broad, complicated, and multi-faceted concept. In fact, the clarification of that term is one of the tasks of this conference. In my opinion, the term encompasses all activities carried out or attempted by individuals, groups, or organizations, whose objective was to ensure the physical survival of Jews. I specify “of Jews” rather than “of all the Jews” because to the best of my knowledge there was never a single attempt in France or Belgium to rescue all the Jews. There simply were no such practical possibilities.

Whereas relief activities in France and Belgium were at times conducted legally, rescue operations were invariably illegal, at least from the point of view of the occupying German authorities. At the same time, the circumstances under which rescue operations were attempted in France were different from those in Belgium. France was divided into several zones, each with a different status. The section which was called Free France (Vichy) was indeed free until 1942, while the second zone, which was divided into sub-zones, was subject to much stricter control as it was under military occupation.

I believe that we cannot apply generalizations, certainly not in the form of judgments, in evaluating the response of the Jews to the challenges they faced. Even the degree of success cannot be used as a criterion since it is not an indication whether the response was correct, just as failure is not proof that the evaluation which predicated the action was mistaken. In my opinion there is no place here for self-satisfaction or self-reproach.

In the area of practical activities, a Jewish Defense Committee (*Comité de Défense des Juifs*) was established in Belgium. It is noteworthy that this French name has two meanings – a committee to defend Jews, and a Jewish defense committee. In other words, the name implies that there was a need both to defend the Jews, and to give them the opportunity to defend themselves. The committee attempted to fulfill both roles. Almost all the Jewish organizations were represented on the committee. (The notable

exception was the Bund). In fact, the committee was recognized by the Belgian resistance movement, by the Belgian Government-in-Exile in London, and by the large organizations in the Free World as the representative body of the Belgian Jewish community. While most of the leaders of the committee were Jews, there were a few non-Jews in the upper echelons of the organization, and even larger numbers among the rank and file.

As I shall note in the course of my remarks, no such organization existed in France. Two additional phenomena which had a significant effect on the situation in Belgium should be mentioned. First of all, over 90% of the Jews living in Belgium in 1940 were not Belgian citizens. Second, upon the German invasion most of the Jewish leaders, among whom the percentage of Belgian citizens was higher than in other sectors of the community, managed to escape to London. It is true that these Jews took an active part in the struggle against the Nazis and played an important role in the resistance movement and the army, whether as intelligence officers or in carrying out other special assignments, but their leadership was nonetheless sorely missed in Belgium.

As mentioned above, the most important achievement of Belgian Jewry during the occupation was the establishment of the Jewish Defense Committee, which united Communists, Zionists of all persuasions, Belgian and foreign Jews, and most significant, a large number of Belgian non-Jews. One of the basic tenets of the C.D.J. and one which perhaps explains its effectiveness, was that the individuals and groups which joined the committee were allowed to preserve their own identities. Communists remained Communists, General Zionists retained their identities as General Zionists, and the members of Left *Po'alei Zion* continued to operate as such.

I have already dealt extensively with the history of the C.D.J. in my book, so I shall merely note the most important events in the annals of the organization. The Committee was established by the *Front de l'Indépendance* (F.I.), one of the major movements of the Belgian Resistance. One of its founders was the engineer Ghert (Herz) Jospa who had previously succeeded in persuading the F.I. leadership to establish a committee to defend Jews. At the same time, Aboush Werber, who had been a Left *Po'alei Zion* activist, endeavored to convince his fellow Belgian Communists, who at that time more or less

headed the F.I., of the need to establish such a committee. Thus, among the eight individuals who founded the C.D.J. in summer 1942 there were seven Jews and one non-Jew, a left-wing Catholic (Emile Hambresin), who later perished in one of the camps. Due to the fact that from its inception the C.D.J. constituted part of the F.I., a situation was created whereby the entire Belgian resistance – members of the F.I. as well as of other movements – viewed the rescue of the Jews as an act of resistance and an integral part of resistance work. This concept found expression after the war in a law passed in Belgium which officially recognized the attempts to rescue Jews as acts of resistance. In order to conduct its daily activities, the C.D.J. created the various units necessary to carry out its work. Special departments were established to supervise the distribution of aid to adults and children, press, propaganda, finances, and forged documents. There was a great deal of interdepartmental cooperation. In fact, several departments, for example the department for forged documents, quickly reached a level of production and efficiency that enabled it not only to supply all the local needs but also to engage in “export”. Thus is not only provided Jews with false papers, but also supplied the entire resistance movement, as well as various individuals, with forged documents. In Charleroi, the C.D.J. sold forged documents, and the profits were used to finance the Committee’s activities.

At least once, the C.D.J. carried out an armed action. I am referring to the attack on the twentieth convoy of Jews deported from Belgium, which took place on the night of April 19-20, 1943. As a result of this attack, many Jews were able to escape from the train which was on its way to the East, and were thus saved. According to a survey I conducted, more than 200 persons were rescued.

The C.D.J. also succeeded to a large extent in paralyzing the activity of the *Association des Juifs de Belgique* (A.J.B.), the local *Judenrat* which played a role similar to that of the Jewish Council in Holland. The A.J.B. notified the Jewish community of the Nazi directive ordering Jews to report to the Dossin barracks in Malines for forced labor (*Arbeitseinsatz*) in the East. The order was of course accompanied by threats of punishment by the police and

warnings that the entire community would be held responsible if certain Jews did not report. As a result, several thousand Jews reported as ordered.

The member of the Belgian *Judenrat* who was responsible for the recruiting of the Jews for forced labor was a German Jew name Holzinger. Although he prepared the lists of deportees conscientiously, he did endeavor to save individual Jews with special qualifications. On a number of occasions, the Gestapo acceded to Holzinger's requests and released the individuals he recommended. The *Judenrat* was attacked twice – not by the C.D.J. but by the group called *Armée Belge des Partisans*. The first time they attacked the building in Brussels in which there was a card-index of the Jewish population in Belgium and set fire to the records. When this proved insufficient, the *Armée* executed Holzinger. A young Jew carried out the verdict. Incidentally, the young man chosen for the task was beset by grave doubts about the sentence. I mention this only because to this day there is a controversy among the members of the Belgian underground whether or not Holzinger should have been executed. In any event, it is certain that after Holzinger was murdered, the Gestapo no longer requested lists of Jews from the Belgian *Judenrat*, and it carried out the roundups itself. While the Gestapo succeeded in seizing many people, the number of victims in Belgium was smaller than in Holland.

The C.D.J. save a large number of children – according to various estimates between 3,000 and 4,000 – and helped more than 10,000 adults. In most cases, the initiative for relief came from the Jewish members of the C.D.J. This was the case in Brussels, Antwerp, Liège, and Charleroi. In other areas, however, rescue operations were initiated by non-Jews, such as Father Joseph André of Namur, who recently passed away, and Father Henry Reyndeers, who was known as Bruno of Louvain. Shocked by the distress of the Jews, both began to act on their own initiative. As far as Father Bruno is concerned, it can be assumed that before the war he was an anti-Semite – in any event so he claimed in one of his statements. Once he saw the yellow star, however, he underwent an ideological conversion and upon his own initiative began to participate in relief activities. Within a short time, the C.D.J. made contact with these two men, thus ensuring coordination between the

various elements and maximum exploitation of the possibilities. Bruno managed to enlist the aid of an important Belgian bank, and various leading social and cultural institutions also took part in the operations, among them religious and secular boarding schools, hospitals, sanatoria, monasteries of all types, and institutions such as a school for the blind in which quite a few young Jews, who were not in the least bit blind, were hidden.

It is obvious that such a diversified range of activities could not have been undertaken without the aid of many non-Jews who were willing to endanger their lives for the cause. Yvonne Névejan, who headed the *Oeuvre Nationale de l'Enfance*, should be mentioned in this context. If not for her dedicated work, it is certain that the number of children rescued in Belgium, would have been much smaller.

It is noteworthy that a large number of private companies and governmental or semi-governmental institutions in Belgium continued to pay the salaries of their Jewish officials and employees who hid or joined the underground, a factor which also helped in the rescue of these persons. The last rescue attempts took place on the final day of the German occupation. At the time of the liberation, there were still several hundred Jews in the camp at Malines. The Germans retreated leaving the Jews in the camp. According to rumors, the Germans received a considerable sum of money as ransom for these internees.

In summation, it should be noted that after the liberation, hundreds of Belgians were awarded the status of resistance fighters for their activities to help Jews. Moreover, the number of those who deserved the designation but refused to request it was much larger.

In addition, we should mention an important point which was typical of the situation of the Jews in both France and Belgium. The majority of the Jews who survived either did not need the help of the Jewish and non-Jewish rescue organizations, or turned to them very infrequently. It is obvious that these organizations could not save the entire Jewish population. Most of the Jews who survived did so thanks to their own initiative. The majority supported themselves illegally, but on an individual level, they received help

from the local population in both France and Belgium. This phenomenon is not the subject of the lecture, but is nonetheless noteworthy.

As mentioned above, the C.D.J. saved between 3,000 and 4,000 children, and extended assistance to more than 10,000 adults. The total number of Belgian Jews, who survived, however, was more than twice this figure.

France

The situation in France was different from that in Belgium. Before the war, there was no organization which united all or even most of the 350,000 French Jews. This is not the place to deal with the reasons for this state of affairs, but it should be noted that the absence of such an institution and the fact that no card-index of the Jewish population existed, were undoubtedly beneficial for French Jewry.

One of the first acts of German authorities in France was an attempt to establish a sort of *Zwangsgemeinde*, similar to the *Judenräte* established in Germany and Poland. These efforts were only partially successful. While we will not deal with the question of why there was no organized Jewish community in France before the war, it is important to clarify the implications which this fact had during the occupation. One of the important consequences was that there was no population register of the Jewish community which could be used by the Nazis to round up the Jews. Another important point is that the Third Republic was a secular state, and as a result, official documents made no mention of an individual's religious affiliation. In addition, since no distinctions were made on the basis of religion in the general school system, many teachers were profoundly shocked by Nazi anti-Semitism and by the yellow star, and thus a large number helped hide Jewish children. The teachers were a very important group which was highly motivated to participate in rescue work. Hundreds of male and female teachers in Paris and in other cities and villages constituted a network of active rescue workers. We will now examine the makeup of the Jewish community in France. As I have already noted, there was no institution or organization which represented all of French Jewry. The veteran French Jews constituted a separate group and they were not organized in any Jewish framework. The Jewish

immigrants, particularly those from Eastern and Central Europe, established their own *landsmannschaft* associations, which were united in two umbrella organizations. One was the *Fédération des Sociétés Juives de France*, which had Zionist members, but the majority of whose membership was not necessarily Zionist. The second organization included a considerable number of active Communists.

In the summer of 1940, the first problem that the French Jews – those in the occupied zone as well as those in Vichy – faced was the food shortage and the consequent danger of dying of starvation. The only leader of the *Fédération* who remained in Paris, and in fact in the entire occupied zone, was David Rappaport. He continued his activities, established a medical clinic for the needy, and opened a soup kitchen. Although these activities were of a limited scope, they were nevertheless significant for tens of thousands of Parisian Jews. Rappaport's activities were approved by the officials. The clinic and kitchen he opened were recognized by the authorities and even received food allotments. Of course the amount of food supplied through official channels was insufficient and had to be supplemented by purchases on the black market. The Communists established an organization called *Solidarité*, whose original aim was to assist the families of prisoners of war, but shortly after it was founded began to engage in political activities.

The group headed by David Rappaport, which was known as *Rue Amélot* (after the street where it was located), eventually expanded its activities. Besides providing food and medical aid to the needy, it began producing forged documents for Jews. The documents, however, were not always enough. Even if a Jew received papers proving that he had a name with a clear French ring to it, had been born in France, was the child of Catholic parents and was himself of the Catholic faith, if he were caught speaking Yiddish, the documents were useless – and such incidents did occur. In any event, the clinic founded by *Rue Amélot* continued to exist until the end of the war. Even wounded partisans, who could not be treated elsewhere, received medical attention in that clinic.

Rappaport did not consider leaving his post even though he knew he was in constant danger. An elderly man, he was eventually arrested and deported to

Auschwitz. His friends in the camp, other French prisoners, tried in vain to save his life. I believe that one of the reasons he did not survive was that while he was still a prisoner in France, Rappaport participated in a month-long hunger strike which weakened him considerably.

The Communists adopted a different approach. They believed that the French Jews – those in the occupied zone as well as those in Vichy – should disperse and try to mix in with the general population as much as possible. Their approach was based on the assumption that the French population would cooperate with those Jews concealing their identity. In this respect, their faith in the French non-Jewish public was stronger than that of other Jewish groups in France. In any event, the Communists were in favor of closing all of the existing institutions which served the Jewish community.

In my opinion, one of the main reasons that the Communists adopted this position is the fact that they operated in the underground. Their viewpoint, however, was never accepted by the rest of the Jewish underground who for understandable reasons refused to adopt such a position. It is only natural for members of a persecuted group to attempt to unite and maintain themselves as a cohesive group, particularly when the outside environment symbolizes danger and insecurity. For many Jews, the mere fact that they could converse among themselves in Yiddish was a tremendous boost for their morale. In spite of the danger, and the calamities which were caused as a result, the Jews continued to congregate and speak Yiddish in public.

The Communist organizations in the occupied zone, managed to place about 1,200 children in non-Jewish homes. In Vichy, during the early stages of the war, they established the “*Mouvement National contre le Racisme*” (M.N.C.R.), which attracted many Frenchmen who were not Communists, such as Professor Debré, father of the future French Minister, and the well-known writer Colette. Another organization, *Les Amitiés Chrétiennes*, operated mainly in the Lyon area, and was headed by Olivier Harty de Pierrebouurg and Dominique Ponchardier, the famous author of murder mysteries, better known, at least in France, by his nickname *Le Gorille* (The Gorilla). The main goal of this group was to secure hiding places for Jewish

children. Among the members of this group were R.P. Chaillet and Father Glasberg, a priest whose Jewish origin was common knowledge.

At this point, we should mention the position adopted by the Catholic Church in France. It can be stated that Cardinal Gerlier was indifferent to the fate of the Jews. While he did state that what was happening to the Jews was bad, at the same time, he refused, due to political considerations, to create difficulties for the Vichy Government. We cannot generalize about the policy of the Catholic Church in Vichy, but it should be noted that at least in the beginning it supported the government. The circumstances under which Msgr. Saliège, the Archbishop of Toulouse, wrote his famous pastoral letter protesting against the deportation of the Jews are important. The document not only saved the honor of the Church, as many – for the most part Catholics – claim, but it also saved the lives of many Jews.

It is interesting to note that it was Charles Lederman, a young Jewish Communist lawyer who thought of appealing to the Archbishop. He was working for the *Oeuvre de Secours aux Enfants* (O.S.E.) relief organization in the Lyon area at the time, having been sent there by his party. The O.S.E. workers knew, however, whom they were dealing with. Lederman like many others, was aware of the urgent need to alert public opinion. During this period there was, of course, no free press, and the underground newspapers reached very few readers. In addition, due to technical difficulties, the preparation of a newspaper took a long time.

Lederman believed that the Catholic Church was the only institution which could express its opinions more or less freely. Indeed, in a Catholic state like France, the position adopted by the Church was significant. He therefore approached Father R.P. Chaillet, one of Cardinal Gerlier's assistants. Chaillet did not encourage Lederman to meet with Gerlier and instead referred him to Father R.P. de Lubac. The two of them arranged to meet again in a few days. During their final meeting, de Lubac suggested to Lederman that he travel to Toulouse and meet with Archbishop Saliège, and promised him that he would be received immediately. The Archbishop, who was quite ill at the time, listened intently to Lederman's tragic tale of arrests, kidnappings, and deportations to concentration camps for an entire day and when the latter had

finished, Saliège asked him one question – was he sure of his information. When Lederman replied affirmatively, Saliège said he would do what was necessary under the circumstances. Indeed. On the following Sunday he read his pastoral letter. It should be noted that neither Lederman nor any of his co-workers, believed that the appeal would have such significant results.

I shall not mention the various Catholic organizations which participated in rescue work; suffice it to say that there were many such groups. I do, however, want to note a Protestant institution – or perhaps we should call it a network – known as Dutch-Paris, whose name gives us an indication of the nature of its work. It was headed by Jean Weidner, a Dutch industrialist and Seventh Day Adventist, then living in France. His activities eventually included not only the rescue of Jews, but espionages as well. The network he set up eventually spread out from Holland to Belgium, France, Spain and Switzerland. One of his chief assistants was a Jew named Benno Nykerek, who was one of the founder of the Belgian C.D.J. and who, like most of the members of Dutch-Paris, was arrested in 1944.

This network also enabled the smuggling out of a large number of Dutch personages and Allied soldiers. In fact, the Allied military authorities paid the network subsidies according to the number of soldiers it transferred to Spain. Thanks to these funds, Weidner's group was also able to extend aid to needy Jews, since the subsidies received from the Dutch authorities in London through Dr. Visser t'Hooft, then in Switzerland, were insufficient.

The activities of the Zionist youth movements which were organized in the *Organization Juive de Combat* have already been discussed so I shall only mention them briefly. It should be noted that their operations were financed with the help of funds received from the representatives of the JDC and the Jewish Agency in Switzerland. Marc Jarblum and Dr. Chaim Pazner, were among those active in extending this aid.

The important role played by O.S.E. in the rescue of teenagers and children is also well-known. It established a number of children's homes in which the residents posed as non-Jews. This ruse was effective only to the extent that the local population – including the mayor and the police – were willing to cooperate, which was indeed what happened.

Nonetheless, several tragedies occurred, the most famous of which was the disaster at Izieux (Ain), which cost the lives of about fifty children and youth workers. The question is why these hostels remained in operation and why the children were not evacuated. We must admit that there is no convincing answer. George Garel, as quoted by Anny Latour, ascribes it to the psychological routine.

I shall mention an operation, or more precisely an attempt to operate on a large scale in the Italian occupied zone, which was somewhat similar, though smaller in scope, to the “Europa Plan”, and which, like Rabbi Weissmandel’s efforts, proved fruitless.

Angelo Donati, an Italian Jew, worked out a plan to transfer 50,000 Jews, who were concentrated in Southern France near Nice, to Italy. The Jewish Communists opposed the idea because they considered Italy an enemy country and an occupier like Germany, and because from an ideological point of view they could not trust fascists. The fascist loyalties of most of the Italian soldiers and officials in France had by this time undoubtedly been weakened. It is noteworthy that a man like le Questeur Lospinoso, the Italian representative in charge of Jewish affairs in France, who helped the Jews with all the means at his disposal, was a high-ranking fascist policeman who had formerly played an active role in the Fascist party. The Communists also believed that after they had fought so hard to scatter the Jews, their concentration in the southeastern corner of France would prove dangerous. They were absolutely convinced that the Germans would react, but they did not expect the response to come when it did – on the day after the Italians declared a cease-fire.

The result was that the Germans arrived, and would have arrested and slaughtered all the Jews, if the Jewish organizations had not succeeded at the last minute in scattering most of the Jews who were in the area. It is a fact that 50,000 Jews were concentrated in that area and that they depended on the aid of the Italian Army. On the cease-fire was declared, however, the Fourth Italian Army Corps disintegrated. Not only were they unable to protect the Jews, but they did not even defend themselves, and were taken prisoners by the Germans.

In summation, I would like to cite several figures. Approximately 85,000 of the 350,000 Jews in France were deported to the East. A certain percentage crossed into Spain. According to a book which appeared recently in Spain and is based on official records, there were 50,000 Jewish refugees in Spain. In my opinion this estimate is an exaggeration, but in any event the number was relatively large.

I would like to emphasize that the majority of the Jews saved in France do not owe their rescue to Jewish organizations. The various Jewish bodies which worked with such great dedication manage to save only a few tens of thousands, while the others were saved mostly thanks to the assistance of the French population. In many cases, groups of Jews lived in small villages. Every one of the Jews was convinced that no one in that area knew their true identity; after the war it turned out that everyone knew that they were Jews.

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