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The Roosevelt Administration, David Ben-Gurion, and the Failure to Bomb Auschwitz: A Mystery Solved

Executive Summary

Since the early 1990s, defenders of President Franklin Roosevelt's response to the Holocaust have argued that the Roosevelt administration's failure to order the bombing of Auschwitz is mitigated by the fact that the leadership of the Jewish Agency for Palestine, including David Ben-Gurion, declared their opposition to bombing Auschwitz, at a meeting in Jerusalem on June 11, 1944. So why blame the Roosevelt administration, if Jewish leaders themselves did not want it bombed? But there was a mystery: a series of documents starting as early as June 30, 1944 show that other leaders of the Jewish Agency *did* ask Allied representatives to bomb the camp. How could they do so, given the declared opposition of the Agency's Executive? Yet there was no record of the Jewish Agency leadership reversing the position it took on June 11 against bombing--so do FDR's defenders have a legitimate point?

This mystery has at last been solved. Newly-discovered documents, found in a Zionist archival collection that had been closed to the public for more than 25 years, demonstrate that the Jewish Agency leadership, including Ben-Gurion, did change its position, and that efforts by Jewish Agency officials and other Jewish leaders around the world to bring about the Allied bombing of Auschwitz were more extensive than previously realized.

The Campaign to Absolve Roosevelt

For the past fifteen years, the Franklin & Eleanor Roosevelt Institute and its supporters have been working assiduously to undermine the widespread perception that the United States could have, and should have, bombed the Auschwitz death camp or the railway lines leading to the camp.

The Roosevelt Institute, which is closely associated with, and partially finances, the Roosevelt Presidential Library in Hyde Park, New York, defines its mission as "to inform new generations of the ideals and achievements of Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt."¹ The Institute's purpose is not to objectively examine the totality of FDR's record, for good or for bad, but specifically to highlight his (and Eleanor's) "ideals and achievements." The Institute has understandably concerned that FDR's name has been tarnished by evidence that the Roosevelt

¹ <http://newdeal.feri.org/FERI/index.htm>

administration had the ability to interrupt the mass murder of European Jewry but failed to do so. The administration's decision to refrain from bombing Auschwitz is perhaps the best known example of that failure.

Defending the Roosevelt administration on the bombing issue is not a simple task, especially since the publication, in 1978, of Prof. David S. Wyman's essay, "Why Auschwitz Was Never Bombed," in *Commentary*.² Wyman presented documents demonstrating that as of late spring 1944, the United States air force possessed the technical ability to strike both the railways to Auschwitz and the death camp itself; that in the summer and autumn of that year, U.S. planes repeatedly bombed other targets close to Auschwitz, some of them less than five miles from the gas chambers; and that the War Department's rejections of bombing requests made by Jewish organizations were based not on any feasibility study but on a previously-established policy of declining to expend even minimal resources on humanitarian objectives.

A Nuclear Engineer with an Agenda

One day in June 1994, an unusual item arrived, unsolicited, in the mailbox of William J. Vanden Heuvel, founder and president of the Roosevelt Institute. It was an essay titled "The Bombing of the Auschwitz Revisited: A Critical Analysis," written by one Richard H. Levy, a retired nuclear engineer residing in Seattle.³

The purpose of his paper, Levy wrote, was to counter the notion "that the failure of the Allies to bomb either [Auschwitz or the railways leading to it] was at best callous, and at worst amounted to complicity in the murderous crimes of the Nazis."⁴

Levy argued that bombing either target was militarily unfeasible, and that some Jewish leaders, most notably the leadership of the Jewish Agency in Palestine, were opposed to such bombings, because of the danger that some inmates would be harmed. If Jewish leaders themselves opposed the idea, how could anybody blame the Roosevelt administration for not doing so?⁵

² David S. Wyman, "Why Auschwitz Was Never Bombed," *Commentary*, May 1978, 37-46.

³ William J. Vanden Heuvel, "FDR did not abandon European Jewry," *Washington Jewish Week*, 27 February 1997, 21.

⁴ Slightly differing versions of the essay were privately circulated by Levy in June, August, and October 1994, and perhaps on other dates as well.

⁵ Dr. David Cesarani, director of the Wiener Library, writing in the journal *Patterns in Prejudice*, put it this way: "Levy ... [is] claiming that, if [Rabbi Stephen] Wise and [Caim] Weizmann seemed against the bombing project [actually Levy's claim pertained to the Jewish Agency leaders in Jerusalem, not Wise or Weizmann--RM], why should Churchill or FDR think differently?" (David Cesarani, "Paralysed by prejudice?," *Patterns of Prejudice* 32:1 [1998] 80.)

Vanden Heuvel evidently understood the potential impact of this argument, for he proceeded to cite the claim of Jewish Agency opposition whenever the opportunity arose in the years to follow, including in essays that he wrote for the *New York Times Sunday Magazine*, *American Heritage*, the Society of Historians of American Foreign Relations newsletter, and American Jewish weekly newspapers,⁶ and in speeches he gave at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and Roosevelt University, in Chicago.⁷

Levy, too, managed to secure numerous platforms from which to repeat the allegation concerning the Jewish Agency. His essay, "The Bombing of Auschwitz Revisited: A Critical Analysis," appeared in two books just six years apart, one of them published in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. It also appeared in the Museum's scholarly journal, *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, despite the journal's policy of not printing previously-published essays.⁸ He repeated the claim about the Jewish Agency in lectures delivered at such institutions as the U.S. Holocaust Museum and the Wiener Library, in England, in an essay he wrote for the *Journal of Genocide Research*, in letters to the editor in the *New York Times* and elsewhere, and in interviews he gave to the media.⁹

Levy's efforts spawned a small cottage industry. Not only did Vanden Heuvel frequently repeat Levy's allegation, but so did two subsequent books defending FDR's Holocaust record. William D. Rubinstein, in *The Myth of Rescue*

⁶ William J. Vanden Heuvel, "The Holocaust Was No Secret," *New York Times Magazine*, 22 December 1996, 31; *American Heritage*, July-August 1999, 50; "FDR did not abandon European Jewry," *Washington Jewish Week*, 27 February 1997, 21, "Guilt in America," *The Forward*, 27 January 1995, 15]; "Comments on Michael Beschloss' The Conquerors," *The SHAFR Newsletter*, March 2003, 32; "What the Allies Knew and When They Knew It," *The Forward*, 16 February 2001, 15.

⁷ William J. Vanden Heuvel, "America, Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Holocaust," lecture at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 24 October 1996, 13-14; "America, Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Holocaust," keynote address of the fifth annual Franklin & Eleanor Roosevelt Distinguished Lecture, 17 October, 1996 at Roosevelt University in Chicago.

⁸ Richard H. Levy, "The Bombing of Auschwitz Revisited: A Critical Analysis," in Verne W. Newton, ed. *FDR and the Holocaust* (New York: St. Martin's, 1994), 219-220, 225-226; "The Bombing of Auschwitz Revisited: A Critical Analysis," *Holocaust & Genocide Studies* 10:3 (Winter 1996), 271-272; and "The Bombing of Auschwitz Revisited: A Critical Analysis," in Michael J. Neufeld and Michael Berenbaum, eds. *The Bombing of Auschwitz; Should the Allies Have Attempted It?* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 110-126.]

⁹ Richard H. Levy, "Did Ben-Gurion Reverse His Position on Bombing Auschwitz?," *Journal of Genocide Research* 3:1 (2001) 89-96; for his letters, see *Holocaust & Genocide Studies*, Winter 1999; *American Jewish History* 85:1 (March 1997), 101-102; "The Crucial Moment," *Jerusalem Report*, 4 May 1995, 4, and "Jewish Leaders Opposed Bombing Auschwitz," *New York Times*, 31 January 1995, 27; for an example of a media interview, see "Why the Allies Didn't Bomb Auschwitz," *Jerusalem Report*, 12 January 1995.]

(Routledge, 1997),¹⁰ used the Jewish Agency claim and cited Levy as his source. So did Robert Rosen, in his book *Saving the Jews: Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Holocaust*, published by Thunder's Mouth Press, an arm of *The Nation* magazine, in 2006.¹¹ At least two important reviewers of Rubinstein's book, in the *New York Times* and *The Forward*, mentioned the Jewish Agency's alleged opposition to bombing as if it were a fact.¹² Rubinstein and Rosen also repeatedly cited the claim in interviews that they gave and in articles and letters that they wrote in connection with their books.¹³

A Startling Change at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum

The circulation of the claim about the Jewish Agency was important for several reasons.

First, it constituted a serious attempt to reshape public opinion regarding FDR's response to the Holocaust. The allegation, which in effect absolved the Roosevelt administration of any responsibility for the failure to bomb Auschwitz, appeared, usually without being challenged, in some of the most important publications, and from some of the most important podiums, in the world.

Second, the Jewish Agency allegation was important because it led to a decision by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum to alter its permanent exhibit concerning the bombing issue. When the museum first opened, in 1993, it included an exhibit panel about the failure to bomb Auschwitz which read, "American Jewish organizations repeatedly asked the U.S. War Department to bomb Auschwitz. Their requests were denied."¹⁴ According to the *Washington Jewish Week*¹⁵, the wording of the panel was changed, in May 1996, after Richard Levy, whom it erroneously described as "a historian," "raised a question"

¹⁰ 179-180.

¹¹ 475-476 and 635-636.

¹² Michael Sherry, "The Prison That Was Europe," *New York Times Sunday Book Review*, 12 October 1997, and Edward S. Shapiro, "Why the Allies Didn't Abandon the Jews," *The Forward*, 9 January 1998, 12.

¹³ See, for example, Rubenstein, "The Myth of Rescue," *Prospect*, July 1997 24; Rubinstein letter, *American Jewish History* 85:3 (September 1997), 333; Rubinstein letter, *Commentary*, January 1998; interview with Rubinstein on SalonMagazine.com, 2 October 1997; Robert N. Rosen "FDR Was A Hero, Not A Villain," *Jewish Press*, 27 October 2006, 4; and Rosen's letters in the *Jewish Press* (10 November 2006, 83 and 1 December 2006, 75), *The Forward* (6 October 2006, 14) and the *Philadelphia Jewish Exponent*, 20 July 2006, 22.

¹⁴ Marcia Kay, "Museum head marks one year," *Washington Jewish Week*, 25 July 1996, 8.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

about the wording.¹⁶ "As a result," the *Jewish Week* reported, "the facility has revised the explanation of why the Allies in World War II did not bomb the Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland." The article quoted Levy as saying he was "substantially satisfied" by the change. Another source, however, has revealed that not only Levy, but William Vanden Heuvel of the Roosevelt Institute, was involved: Prof. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., who at the time of this episode was co-president of the Roosevelt Institute along with Vanden Heuvel, wrote in his diary on August 21, 1996 (which was published in 2007, after his death) of "Bill [Vanden Heuvel]'s successful campaign to persuade the Holocaust Museum to revise a most tendentious account of the failure to bomb Auschwitz."¹⁷

The revised text that the Museum installed reads: "A few Jewish leaders called for the bombing of the Auschwitz gas chambers; others opposed it. Like some Allied officials, both sides feared the death toll or the German propaganda that might exploit any bombing of the camp's prisoners. No one was certain of the results."

The new text almost completely reversed the meaning of the original text. The original passage essentially put Jewish leaders on one side of the bombing issue and the Roosevelt administration on the other. The revised passage depicts Jewish leaders as more or less equally divided between supporters and opponents, and suggest that Jewish leaders were not unlike "Allied officials" in their assessment of the bombing idea.

This was a startling change to be made by an institution that prides itself on accurately portraying the history of the Holocaust. The original text, which was correct, was discarded. A new text, which was inaccurate, replaced it.

The Jewish Agency Debates Bombing

What actually transpired at that much-cited meeting of the Jewish Agency leadership?

On June 11, 1944, twelve members of the Agency's Executive convened in Jerusalem to discuss a variety of matters related to Zionism and the Holocaust. During the course of the discussion, the question of whether or not to ask the Allies to bomb Auschwitz arose. The protocols of the meeting constitute the only

¹⁶ The reporter for the *Jewish Week* apparently was not aware that in late 1994, the director of research for the museum, Dr. Michael Berenbaum, sent Levy's bombing essay to Prof. David S. Wyman for his comment. On January 12, 1995, Prof. Wyman sent Berenbaum a detailed refutation of Levy's arguments, including Levy's claims concerning Jewish leaders' views of the bombing idea. Despite Wyman's rebuttal of Levy, the original panel text was changed. [Berenbaum to Wyman, 29 November 1994; Wyman to Berenbaum, 12 January 1995; and Luckert to Wyman, 1 July 1996, from the files of The David S. Wyman Institute for Holocaust Studies, Washington, D.C.]

¹⁷ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *Journals: 1952-2000* (New York: Penguin), 799.

extant transcript of a conversation among Jewish leaders, during the Holocaust, on the bombing issue.

Established by the World Zionist Organization in 1929, the Agency was created at the request of the British Mandate authorities in order to serve as an intermediary between the British and the Palestine Jewish community. It soon evolved into a virtual shadow government for the future Jewish state. As such, the Jewish Agency was one of the most important and influential Jewish bodies in the world, and the position it took with regard to bombing could be characterized as representing a very significant segment of the international Jewish or Zionist leadership. David Ben-Gurion, who in four years would become the first prime minister of Israel, chaired the Jewish Agency Executive and participated in the June 11, 1944 meeting. Ben-Gurion's participation in the meeting has been highlighted by Vanden Heuvel and his colleagues on many occasions, presumably in order to lend weight to their claims about what transpired at the meeting. Evidently they sought to emphasize that the Executive members who expressed opposition to requesting bombing were not some obscure Zionist functionaries, but included a widely-admired future head of state.

The bombing issue was raised at the June 11 meeting by Yitzhak Gruenbaum (pronounced Greenbaum), chairman of the Jewish Agency's Rescue Committee as well as a member of the Executive. Gruenbaum, 65, was a Polish Zionist leader and former member of the Polish parliament who settled in Palestine in 1933. He would later become a signatory on Israel's Declaration of Independence and would serve as Minister of the Interior in Ben-Gurion's first administration.

“Auschwitz is a Labor Camp”

Gruenbaum described to the Executive members a recent meeting he held with the U.S. Consul in Jerusalem, Lowell Pinkerton, at which Gruenbaum urged the Allies to bomb both Auschwitz and the railway lines leading to it.

Five of the participants in the Agency meeting responded, all of them negatively. Ben-Gurion said, "We do not know the real situation in Poland, and it seems to him [the Agency's recording secretary often presented the comments in the third person] that we cannot propose anything in this matter." Rabbi Yehuda Leib Fishman "agreed with Mr. Ben-Gurion." Dr. Emil Schmorak remarked: "It is said that in Oswiecim [the Polish name for Auschwitz] there is a large labor camp. We cannot take on the responsibility for a bombing that could cause the death of even one Jew." Dr. Dov Joseph "also opposed the idea of asking the Americans to bomb the camps and thereby kill Jews." Joseph added: "Mr. Gruenbaum does not speak as a private person, but as a representative [of a committee of the Jewish Agency]. It seems to him [to Joseph] that nobody connected to us should propose such a thing." Dr. Werner Senator "agreed with

Dr. Joseph and regretted that Mr. Gruenbaum discussed the matter with the American consul."

This section of the transcript concluded: "Chairman Ben-Gurion summarizes: it is the position of the Executive not to propose to the Allies the bombing of places where Jews are located." There is no reference in the transcript to any vote on the subject. (By contrast, the next topic for discussion ended with a 3 to 2 vote, with the voters named in the transcript.) The lack of a vote on the bombing question may help explain what happened next.¹⁸

A Zionist Mystery

The records of the Jewish Agency for the period following the June 11 discussion, as preserved in the Central Zionist Archives in Jerusalem and elsewhere, present historians with a mystery.

The protocols of meetings of the Jewish Agency Executive, as well as the protocols of the Jewish Agency Rescue Committee, and of an affiliated body, the Smaller Zionist Actions Committee, show that in the weeks and months following the June 11 meeting, Jewish Agency representatives in a number of countries -- including Agency president Chaim Weizmann, in London-- did try to persuade Allied officials to bomb Auschwitz. How could they do so, given the declared opposition of the Agency's Executive? On the other hand, there was no record of the Jewish Agency leadership reversing its June 11 position on bombing--so does that prove FDR's defenders have a legitimate point?

The answer is to be found in the papers of Yitzhak Gruenbaum. This collection, housed at the Central Zionist Archives in Jerusalem, was closed to the public in the early 1980s in preparation for a complex and time-consuming digitalization project. They were reopened to the public in June 2009. The statements, developments, and events described below are based on documents located in the Gruenbaum papers in June 2009, together with related materials found in the records of the Jewish Agency and its affiliates (or elsewhere, as indicated).

For nineteen days following the June 11 meeting, there are no records of Gruenbaum promoting the bombing idea. Evidently he was honoring the decision of the Jewish Agency Executive to refrain from asking for such action by

¹⁸ Protocols of the meeting of the Jewish Agency Executive, Jerusalem, 11 June 1944, 4-5 and 5-7.

the Allies.¹⁹

On June 30, however, Gruenbaum resumed his efforts to advance the idea. How can this be explained, in view of the June 11 decision? Either Gruenbaum chose to defy the Jewish Agency Executive--or something happened shortly before June 30 that resulted in the Executive changing its position.

As noted above, the June 11 decision against asking for bombing was based on the Executive members' erroneous belief that Auschwitz was "a large labor camp," rather than a death camp. Bombing the camp would presumably result in the deaths of Jewish slave laborers, and the Executive did not want to "take on the responsibility for a bombing that could cause the death of even one Jew." Ben-Gurion's summary at the end of the June 11 discussion specified that the Executive should not "propose to the Allies the bombing of places where Jews are located." But what would happen when the Executive learned the truth about Auschwitz, that it was not a labor camp but rather a death camp, where all the inmates were scheduled to be slaughtered in short order?

In April 1944, as the Germans prepared to deport hundreds of thousands of Hungarian Jews to Auschwitz, two inmates, Rudolf Vrba and Alfred Wetzler, made one of the very few successful escapes from the camp. After an eleven-day, eighty-mile trek through southern Poland, Vrba and Wetzler reached Slovakia, where they met with Jewish leaders and dictated a thirty-page report that came to be known as the "Auschwitz Protocols." It included details of the mass-murder process, and warnings of the impending slaughter of Hungary's Jews. The report also provided maps pinpointing the huge gas chambers and crematoria, which were located in an area called Birkenau, at the western edge of the extensive Auschwitz complex.

The Truth About Auschwitz

In mid-June, a copy of the report reached Richard Lichtheim, the Jewish Agency's representative in Geneva. On June 19, he compiled a five-page summary for the Agency leadership, addressed to Gruenbaum, as chairman of the JA Rescue Committee. Lichtheim, like his colleagues in Jerusalem, had mistakenly thought Auschwitz-Birkenau was a labor camp. The Vrba-Wetzler report revealed the truth. "We now know exactly what has happened and where

¹⁹ Gruenbaum did mention the bombing issue in a June 23 telegram, but not in a way which involved asking the Allies to bomb the camp. On that day, he cabled Anselme Reiss and Ignacy Schwarzbart, two senior representatives of the World Jewish Congress in London with whom he was in frequent contact, requesting that they "ask Jewish National Committee [the Jewish section of the London-based Polish government in exile]'s opinion about bombing death camps in order to slow down annihilation Hungarian and other countries Jews." This would not have been in violation of the June 11 Jewish Agency decision, since he was merely asking the opinion of another Jewish body, not urging the Allies to take action. (Gruenbaum to Reiss and Schwarzbart, 23 June 1944, A127/1863, Yitzhak Gruenbaum Papers [hereafter YGP], Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem [hereafter CZA].)

it has happened," he wrote. "There is a labour camp in Birkenau just as in many other places of Upper Silesia, and there are still many thousands of Jews working there and in the neighbouring places (Jawischowitz etc). But apart from the labour-camps proper [there are] specially constructed buildings with gas-chambers and crematoriums...The total number of Jews killed in or near Birkenau is estimated at over one and a half million....12,000 Jews are now deported from Hungary every day. They are also sent to Birkenau. It is estimated that of a total of one million 800,000 Jews or more so far sent to Upper-Silesia 90% of the men and 95% of the women have been killed immediately..."

It is not known exactly which date Lichtheim's report reached Gruenbaum. Lichtheim evidently utilized some sort of expedited and confidential method, because he wrote, "I cannot forward this report by ordinary mail because it contains too many details and names." Presumably he was able to send it via courier in a diplomatic pouch. That being the case, it seems reasonable to conclude that the Lichtheim report reached Gruenbaum before June 30.

Although neither the Gruenbaum papers nor the Jewish Agency's records indicate exactly what he did with Lichtheim's report, it may be assumed that Gruenbaum shared this important information with his colleagues in the Agency Executive. There is no record of the Agency Executive formally discussing the report, nor of any vote regarding whether or not, in view of this new information, to ask the Allies to bomb Auschwitz. On the other hand, there had been no vote at the June 11 meeting, either --recall that Ben-Gurion, at the end of the meeting, simply summarized the consensus position against asking for bombing-- so there would not have been a need for a vote at this point, either. Was there, then, a verbal agreement among Agency leaders to now proceed with requests for bombing? Clearly something happened in late June to cause a drastic change in the Agency's actions on this issue, as subsequent events would demonstrate.²⁰

The Lobbying Campaign Begins

On June 30, Gruenbaum suddenly resumed pressing for Allied bombing of Auschwitz.

That day, he met with Julian Meltzer, the Jerusalem correspondent for the *New York Times*. Gruenbaum provided him with details about Auschwitz and the deportation of Hungarian Jews that he had culled from Lichtheim's report and other sources. He also gave Meltzer statements, on the record, urging the Allies to bomb Auschwitz. In the article Meltzer wrote, which he sent by telegram to the London office of the *New York Times* later that day, he reported:

²⁰ Lichtheim to Gruenbaum, 19 June 1944, A127/1856, Yitzhak Gruenbaum Papers [hereafter YGP], CZA.

isaac gruenbaum member jewish agency executive who [i]s probably best informed person living palestine upon developments among martyred jewish people under nazi heel europe...asserted that death factories inside poland like those at notorious places named oswiencim tremblinka must be demolished as effectively [a]s armaments plants or petrol refineries stop similarly all railwaylines highways leading poland must be wrecked adding quote when these deathdealing areas which have daily murder capacity thousands people no longer exist [i]t will be difficult perhaps impossible for germans outcarry their foul designs to outwipe hundreds thousands jews next couple months stop anything that [i]s done rescue even surviving jews europe today wont have iota value s[o] long [a]s systematic murders arent halted stop those wishing rescue these unfortunatate remnants jewry must at all cost forestall this organized carnage stop

In other words, Gruenbaum was trying to have his statements urging the Allies to bomb Auschwitz published in the most important newspaper in the world. It hardly seems plausible that Gruenbaum would have taken such a step if the Agency's opposition to asking for bombing was still in force; at the very least, he would have asked Meltzer to refrain from citing him by name as the source of the bombing request. Clearly he made no such request.²¹

The same day that he met with the *New York Times* correspondent, June 30, Gruenbaum wrote to the Agency's representative in Istanbul, Chaim Barlas, reporting that he had "relayed to Moshe [Shertok, the London-based head of the Agency's Political Department] a proposal from Krausz and us to bring about the bombing of the rail lines connecting Hungary with Poland and of the death camps in Poland."²²

²¹ Meltzer to New York Times London Office, 30 June 1944. This document was located in the Central Zionist Archives by Prof. Laurel Leff, and cited in her book *Buried by The Times: The Holocaust and America's Most Important Newspaper* (p.275). The author is grateful to Prof. Leff for providing a copy of the document.

²² Gruenbaum to Barlas, 30 June 1944, A127/544, YGP. Back on June 19, Krausz had also sent a cable to the Agency Executive in Jerusalem, urging bombing of Auschwitz and the railway lines leading to it. That was before the Agency leaders in Jerusalem had received the Lichtheim report and reconsidered their position on bombing. It is not clear if Krausz knew about the June 11 decision, and was expressing his dissent; or if he did not know about it, and was simply providing his opinion in support of asking for bombing. Krausz to JAE, 27 June 1944, S26/1251A, CZA.

Keeping Ben-Gurion Informed

Shertok and Jewish Agency president Chaim Weizmann met on June 30 with the British Undersecretary of State for Foreign Affairs, George Hall, to discuss the situation of Hungarian Jewry. Among other things, they urged that "death camps should be bombed," citing Gruenbaum's telegram. Later that day, Shertok cabled Ben-Gurion to describe the meeting. He reported that he and Weizmann had urged the British to take steps to aid the Jews in accordance with "Gruenbaum's two telegrams."²³ If the Jewish Agency's June 11 position against bombing was still in force, it is highly unlikely, to say the least, that Shertok and Weizmann would have proposed to a senior British official that the camps be bombed; nor would he have informed Ben-Gurion, presumably an ardent opponent of bombing, what he and Weizmann had done.

Two days later, on July 2, at a meeting of the Jewish Agency Executive, the bombing issue arose briefly. It came about in the context of a suggestion by Gruenbaum to hold a press conference for Jerusalem-based foreign correspondents to discuss the plight of Hungarian Jewry and to call for rescue "at any price." Dr. Schmorak, Dr. Senator, and Ben-Gurion expressed doubts as to the efficacy of a press conference and asked if "any price" included holding negotiations with the Nazis? Gruenbaum responded: "It is clear that there is no intention of an approach to the Nazis, and if this or that journalist does not want to be persuaded, the question will not interest him. At the moment there is also talk of destroying transportation lines in Yugoslavia. Why not also destroy transportation lines between Hungary and Poland?" There were no recorded responses to that statement. Ben-Gurion's next comment was that "It seems to him [to Ben-Gurion] that there should not be a press conference. West European journalists have a completely different mentality, and we will not achieve anything with a press conference."²⁴

Although the reference at the July 2 Executive meeting was only to bombing railway lines, as opposed to bombing camps where there might be inmates, Ben-Gurion was well aware that there was a growing circle of Jewish Agency officials in various countries who were advocating bombing both the railways and the camps. On July 6, Weizmann and Shertok met with British Foreign Minister Anthony Eden, in London, and urged the bombing of both the railways and "the death-camps at Birkenau and other places."²⁵ After the meeting, Shertok sent a telegram to Ben-Gurion informing him, *inter alia*, that he and Weizmann had asked that "deathcamps and railwaylines leading to Birkenau should be

²³ Shertok to Ben-Gurion, 30 June 1944, A127/1856, Gruenbaum Papers, CZA; "Record of an Interview granted by Mr Hall to Dr Weizmann and Mr Shertok," 30 June 1944, FO371/42807, British Foreign Office Records, Public Record Office, London.

²⁴ MInutes of Jewish Agency Executive meeting, 2 July 1944, CZA.

²⁵ "Note of Interview with the Right Hon. Anthony Eden, Foreign Office, Thursday, July 6th, 1944, at 3.15 p.m.," and "Aide-Memoire" (that Weizmann and Shertok left with Eden), Z4/14870, CZA.

bombed"...and Eden "already asked airministry explore possibility bombing camps will now add railways."²⁶

Six days later, on July 12, the British Mandate government gave Ben-Gurion a July 10 letter from Lichtheim describing the latest deportations to Auschwitz and urging "bombing of railways in line leading from Hungary to Birkenau" and "precision bombing of death camp installations."²⁷ That was not the only occasion Lichtheim advocated bombing. For example, in a June 26 letter to Joseph Linton, secretary of the Jewish Agency's London office, he summarized the Vrba-Wetzler report and listed a number of suggestions for rescue action, including "bombing of railwaylines leading from Hungary to Birkenau" and "precise bombing of death camp installations."²⁸

There is no record of Ben-Gurion expressing any objections to these statements or lobbying by Shertok, Weizmann, Lichtheim, Krausz, or Greunbaum, which would have directly contravened the June 11 Jewish Agency Executive position, if that position still stood.

Lobbying in Washington

Meanwhile, in Washington, the Jewish Agency's chief representative, Nahum Goldmann, was also busy promoting the bombing idea. In a July 3 letter, Goldmann, who also co-chaired the World Jewish Congress, informed Czech Foreign Minister in Exile Jan Masaryk that "We have discussed with the War Refugee Board the idea that the Russian and American Governments be asked to look for a way to destroy these camps by bombing or any other means....The War Refugee Board will follow up the matter in Washington." Goldmann asked Masaryk to urge Czech president in exile Eduard Benes to "discuss this idea with the Russians."²⁹

Actually, there had already been some discussions in Washington about the bombing idea. In mid-June, Jacob Rosenheim, president of the Orthodox advocacy group Agudas Israel, wrote to the War Refugee Boar (WRB), a U.S. government agency, urging bombing of the railways leading to Auschwitz, based on appeals he had received from rescue activists in Europe. At about the same time, the WRB's representative in Switzerland, Roswell McClelland, likewise wrote to the War Refugee Board's director, John Pehle, recommending bombing the rail lines. The War Department's Operations Division rejected the request as "impracticable," claiming "[it] could be executed only by the diversion

²⁶ Shertok to Ben-Gurion, 6 July 1944, Z4/14870, CZA.

²⁷ Chief Secretary, Govt of Palestine, Jerusalem, to Ben-Gurion, 12 July 1944, S25/5209 CZA.

²⁸ Lichtheim to Secretary Jewish Agency, London 26 June 1944, L22/56, CZA.

²⁹ Goldmann to Masaryk, 3 July 1944, Z6/2755, CZA.

of considerable air support essential to the success of our forces now engaged in decisive operations...." The Department did not conduct a feasibility study or consult with Air Force commanders in Europe. Its position was based on a February 11, 1944 internal policy meeting of the War Department, at which senior officials decided that no military resources would be used for humanitarian objectives such as aiding refugees.³⁰

In mid-July, there were indications that the bombing requests were making headway on several fronts. On the 15th, A.W.G. Randall, head of the Refugee Department of the Foreign Office, informed Shertok that he and Weizmann's suggestions "regarding bombing are receiving attention with the appropriate authorities, and that the suggestion of a special appeal to the Soviet Government has been accepted, and that a personal appeal has been made from Mr. Eden to Mr. Molotov."³¹

At a Jewish Agency Executive meeting the next day, July 16, Gruenbaum reported: "We have now heard about an order from the Hungarian Interior Minister concerning rounding up Jews on July 20. This proves that the roundups have not yet finished. The latest bombings of Hungary also damaged railroad stations. Perhaps this was done as a result of our proposals and demands." Ben-Gurion replied: "Mr. Shertok informs that in London they have agreed to our proposal in the matter of bombing railroad stations between Hungary and Poland."³²

The following day, Jan Masaryk replied to Nahum Goldmann's earlier request that he ask Benes to raise the bombing idea with Soviets: "In the meantime, my Government had already decided to approach all Allied Governments with the request to carry out the measures which you suggested." He said the request was drafted "after consultation with Jewish representatives in London."³³

In the weeks to follow, Jewish Agency officials continued to press Allied representatives to bomb Auschwitz. Goldmann received copies of letters from Lichtheim and Shertok to Ben-Gurion recommending bombing, and forwarded them to WRB director John Pehle on July 21. Four days later, Gruenbaum cabled Shertok, Goldmann, and World Jewish Congress chairman Rabbi Stephen Wise, urging them to again "approach allied Governments" on the bombing question. The following month, Gruenbaum again telegraphed Shertok (as well as Shertok's colleague in London, Selig Brodetzky), Goldmann, and Wise,

³⁰ David S. Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews: America and the Holocaust 1941-1945* (New York, Pantheon, 1984), 292-293.)

³¹ Randall to Shertok, 15 July 1944, Z4/14870, CZA.

³² Minutes of the Jewish Agency Executive meeting, 16 July 1944, p. 3, CZA.

³³ Masaryk to Goldmann, 17 July 1944, Folder D/107, WJC Papers, American Jewish Archives [hereafter AJA].

reiterating the demand that "railway line leading Oswiecim [the Polish word for Auschwitz] be bombed destroyed [and] that Oswiecim itself be bombed."³⁴

Allied Bombing Raids Near Auschwitz

What Jewish leaders at that point apparently did not know was that the area around Auschwitz had become a major military target for Allied air raids. German synthetic oil factories in southwestern Poland, which were crucial to Hitler's war effort, were repeatedly targeted by American heavy bombers. Between July 7 and November 20, the factories at Blechhammer, 47 miles from Auschwitz, were bombed ten times. The August 7 raid also included an attack on the Trezebinia industrial site, 13 miles from the death camp. On August 20 and again on September 13, U.S. bombers struck oil factories in the Auschwitz complex itself, less than five miles from the gas chambers and crematoria. During the latter raid, stray bombs accidentally hit an SS barracks, killing fifteen Germans, and a slave labor workshop, killing forty prisoners, and damaging a railroad track leading to the camp.

Despite this intense bombing activity in and around Auschwitz, Assistant Secretary of War John McCloy continued to claim that air power would have to be "diverted" from other areas to carry out a bombing of the death camp. On August 14, McCloy wrote to A. Leon Kubowitzki, head of the World Jewish Congress's rescue department, that "After a study it became apparent that such an operation could be executed only by the diversion of considerable air support essential to the success of our forces now engaged in decisive operations elsewhere." McCloy's language was almost identical to that of his earlier rejection letter, except in this instance he added the incomprehensible speculation that bombing the camps "might provoke even more vindictive action by the Germans."³⁵

Kubowitzki is an enigmatic figure in the history of the failure to bomb Auschwitz. While his boss, WJCongress chairman Goldmann, was urging U.S. and Soviet officials to bomb the camp, Kubowitzki wrote several letters to Assistant Secretary of War McCloy and others opposing the use of air power against the camps, arguing that ground troops, together with Polish underground forces, should be used so as to minimize the danger of harming inmates. Yet Kubowitzki also forwarded to McCloy the request by Ernest Frischer of the Czech government-in-exile urging "destruction of gas chambers and crematoria in Oswiecim by bombing," which is what triggered McCloy's August

³⁴ Gruenbaum to Shertok, Goldmann, and Wise, 25 July 1944, A127/1856, YGP; Gruenbaum to Shertok, Brodetzky, Goldmann and Wise, 31 August 1944, A127/1861, YGP; Perlzweig to Pehle 21 July 1944, in "Measures Directed Toward Halting Persecution - Hungary No. 1, Box 33, WRB Papers.

³⁵ McCloy to Kubowitzki, 14 August 1944, Folder D/107, WJC Papers, AJA.

14 rejection letter.³⁶ Later documents indicate additional ambiguity in Kubowitzki's position.³⁷

In the first week of September, Gruenbaum sent a flurry of letters to Jewish Agency colleagues and other Jewish leaders abroad, urging them to press the Allies to bomb Auschwitz and the railways. He wrote to Lichtheim on September 1 and again two days later;³⁸ and also sent separate but similar letters to Shertok, Barlas, Wise, and Goldmann, on September 3.³⁹

Also on September 3, Eliahu Epstein, a close aide to Ben-Gurion, wrote to him from Cairo to report on his recent attempt to influence a local Soviet diplomat on the bombing issue. Epstein wrote: "To Mr. Gruenbaum's proposal, which I presented to him, to bomb the centers of Jewish extermination in Poland, he replied that the legation in Cairo was not authorized to give strategic advice to military headquarters in Moscow. Furthermore, such an idea was out of the question politically, since the government of Russia would not adopt measures that were based on national grounds."⁴⁰

On September 5, members of the Smaller Zionist Actions Committee met in Jerusalem. The World Zionist Organization, which created the Jewish Agency, had also previously created two Actions Committees, a Greater Actions Committee to convene several times each year to consider major policy questions, and a Smaller Actions Committee to deal with managing the Zionist movement on a day-to-day basis. Gruenbaum was a member of the Smaller Actions Committee and participated in the September 5 session. The lengthy meeting included a discussion concerning rescue issues and the introduction of a resolution urging the Allies to aid Europe's Jews. A debate ensued as to whether

³⁶ Kubowitzki to McCloy, 9 August 1944 and McCloy to Kubowitzki, 14 August 1944, Folder D/107, WJC Papers, AJA); Kubowitzki to Pehle, 29 August 1944 (WJC-I, Box 29, WRB); Kubowitzki to McCloy, 30 August 1944, D109/1, WJC.

³⁷ After the Allies' air raid on the Amiens Prison in German-occupied France, which freed some imprisoned French underground fighters but killed others, Kubowitzki sent McCloy a newspaper clipping about the attack and described it as "exactly the kind of assault which we have been asking for in order to free the doomed inmates of the German slaughter camps." (Kubowitzki to McCloy, 30 October 1944, D109/1, WJC)

In addition, Kubowitzki, together with his WJC colleague Dr. Lev Zelmanovits, met in London on January 2, 1945 with James Mann, the War Refugee Board's representative in England. Mann expressed himself in favor of bombing the "death camp installations" and said --as the WJC stenographer put it-- that if asked by British officials, "he would express his favourable opinion and support our suggestions." (Aide Memoire of a conversation held between Mr. James M. Mann of the War Refugee Board, Dr. A.L. Kubowitzki and Dr. L. Zelmanovits on Tuesday, January 2nd 1945," January 4th 1945, Folder D112/8, WJC Papers, AJA)

³⁸ Gruenbaum to Lichtheim, 1 September 1944, A127/1856, YGP; Gruenbaum to Lichtheim, 3 September 1944, S25/5209 CZA.

³⁹ Gruenbaum to Shertok, 3 September 1944, S25/5209 CZA; Gruenbaum to Barlas, 3 September 1944, S25/5209 CZA; Gruenbaum to Wise and Goldmann, 3 September 1944, S25/5209 CZA.

⁴⁰ Epstein to Ben-Gurion, 3 September 1944, S25/486, CZA.

the resolution should consist only of a broadly-worded request for "dramatic acts" and "unorthodox steps," or ask for specific steps such as ending the White Paper restrictions on Jewish immigration to Palestine. An agitated Gruenbaum interrupted the discussion to point out that large numbers of Jews in Europe were in immediate danger, "and if they are not kept alive, then even the cancellation of the White Paper is not going to save them." He continued:

Right now there are only two things that can save them: severing the transportation lines with Poland or destroying the death camps. The members of this committee sound as if they do not know anything. The first question is how to stop the slaughter, and we are talking about putting in 'dramatic acts' and 'unorthodox steps.' Bombing Osweicim, destroying Oswiecim, bombing transportation lines. But it is impossible to say such things explicitly and openly in a resolution passed by the Actions Committee. I suggest accepting the proposed [broad] wording, it is impossible to word it any other way.⁴¹

Gruenbaum's remark is significant because it helps to resolve a lingering mystery related to the June 11 Jewish Agency Executive meeting. Since the discussion on June 11 concluded with a summation opposing asking for Allied bombings, why was there no subsequent meeting, after the Lichtheim report arrived, to revisit the question and adopt a new position? Gruenbaum's statement at the September 5 Actions Committee meeting helps resolve this mystery. When he said "it is impossible to say such things [to call for bombing] explicitly and openly in a resolution passed by the Actions Committee," Gruenbaum must have been alluding to some kind of understanding within the Zionist leadership that the Jewish Agency and its affiliates would not go on record as calling for bombing. If there was no such understanding, Gruenbaum's September 5 remark would make no sense, and the failure of the other Actions Committee members to ask for an explanation would likewise make no sense. It was "impossible to say such things explicitly and openly" only if there was a previous decision not to say them--and there was, at the June 11 meeting. But not saying them in a resolution did not preclude saying them in private meetings and correspondence with Allied officials. And that is precisely what happened, behind the scenes, beginning in late June.

The absence of any recorded bombing debates in Jewish Agency meetings after June 11, and the September 5 remark about the impossibility of an explicit bombing resolution, demonstrate that the Agency leadership did not want to publicly call for bombings (probably for fear of being blamed for civilian casualties). But the seven months of private lobbying for bombing, carried out by senior Agency representatives in six different countries from July 1944 through January 1945, clearly shows that the Agency leadership did change its

⁴¹ Minutes of the Smaller Zionist Actions Committee, 5 September 1944, p.4663, CZA.

position and approve such private activities. During those seven months, the president of the Jewish Agency, the head of its political department, the chairman of its Rescue Committee, and its representatives in Washington, London, Geneva, Budapest, Istanbul, Jerusalem, and Cairo, repeatedly pressed American, British, and Soviet diplomats, as well as the Polish and Czech governments in exile, to bring about the bombing of Auschwitz. In addition, the fact that many of those senior Agency officials kept David Ben-Gurion informed of their activities, and the fact that Ben-Gurion never criticized or even questioned any of them for doing so, demonstrates that Ben-Gurion did not object.

Gruenbaum Reports to the Rescue Committee

On October 3, 1944, the members of the Jewish Agency Rescue Committee, meeting in Jerusalem, received their most detailed on-the-record briefing about the lobbying campaign. Gruenbaum reported:

Since June we have sent emergency telegrams to all the countries regarding the fate of the Jews remaining in Poland in labor camps and we made a number of demands. We demanded, first of all, that they bomb Oswiecim, that they should destroy the death camps. This is because the death factories facilitate the destruction of large numbers of Jews every day, whereas if they could not destroy them in this sophisticated industrial manner, it would require a long time and a large number of people, and in the situation which Germany now finds itself this would be very difficult for it. Therefore, if they would destroy the death factories it would be possible to save Jews. In the beginning, many months ago, when we made this proposal, the reply was completely negative. They asked if it was acceptable to us that when they bombed the death camps, Jews would be killed. Suddenly these people are worried about the Jews, that they would kill them in the bombings. At the time they bombed Budapest, they were not worried about that. They said: "Won't the Jews raise a cry that not only the Germans are killing them but also the British?" I said to them, the Jews in the death camps face only extermination, Jews do not reside there. Even among us there were people who thought this was impossible, who had similar reservations. Ultimately, these matters were brought to London, placed before the government and reached the High Command. And the High Command decided that it is not practicable. There are reports from London from our colleagues who are in contact with the Polish government, that this is not correct.⁴²

⁴² Protocols of Jewish Agency Rescue Committee meeting, 3 October 1944, p.4, S26/1240, CZA.

Gruenbaum's presentation and its reception were remarkable for several reasons. First, because none of the committee members expressed any concerns or objections. If the June 11 position regarding bombing was never changed, surely members of the Agency's Rescue Committee would have complained about Gruenbaum's flagrant violations of Agency policy. Second, because Gruenbaum referred to the opposition by some Agency figures as something which manifested itself "in the beginning, many months ago." He was clearly characterizing the opposition as a phenomenon of the past, not as something that continued or still existed.

By the late autumn, the Jewish Agency's efforts to promote bombing tapered off. The Allies' repeated rejections of the bombing requests created a stone wall which the Jewish leaders seemingly could not penetrate. At the same time, the retreat of the German army and the approaching end of the war compelled rescue advocates to shift their focus from trying to stop mass killings in the camps to preventing the Germans' reported plan to wipe out the camps in order to kill the last inhabitants and eliminate evidence of their crimes.

“We Can’t Waste Bombs on the Camps”

Nahum Goldmann made one last try, apparently in October. Meeting in London with General Dill, the British representative to the Allied High Command, Goldmann again recommended bombing the camps. To which Dill replied, "No, we can't waste bombs and airplanes on bombing the camps. We must use it all for winning the war and the Jews of Europe will be saved by the Nazis being defeated."⁴³

By the end of October, the gassings at Auschwitz came to an end, although that was not known in the West.

There were additional Allied raids on German oil refineries in the Auschwitz industrial area on December 18 and December 26, 1944. Future U.S. Senator and Democratic presidential nominee George McGovern, then a young pilot, took part in the latter mission. The Soviets also carried out air attacks on German oil targets during this period, including an attack on December 23 which destroyed a large portion of the SS barracks at Birkenau and cut the railway connecting Auschwitz and Birkenau. There were additional Soviet raids on January 16 and 19, the latter striking the Monowitz slave labor area of Auschwitz one day after the prisoners were taken by the Nazis on a "death march" out of the camp. There was also a U.S. bombing of oil targets near Auschwitz on January 19, as well as an Allied bombing raid on the Blechhammer refinery on January 20, which

⁴³ Laurence Jarvik interview with Nahum Goldmann, 11 February 1979, transcript in the possession of the author. Goldmann repeated the anecdote in a letter to Martin Gilbert which was reprinted in Gilbert's *Auschwitz and the Allies* (New York: Holt Rinehart & Winston, 321.)

enabled forty two slave laborers to escape.⁴⁴

Gruenbaum, for his part, made one last attempt to influence the Soviets. On January 18 --nine days before the Russians liberated Auschwitz-- he cabled Berl Locker, a Jewish Agency emissary in London, again recommending an Allied attack on "death camps Oswiecim and Birkenau." In the hope of "stopping this organised mass murder would respectfully suggest these camps be effectively bombed by Red Air Force," Gruenbaum wrote. Locker replied, a week later, that in response to Gruenbaum's request, he and a colleague met with a Soviet representative in London, "showing your cable and suggest also special action to eliminate danger places mentioned by you." The Soviet diplomat "promised to convey" the request to Moscow.⁴⁵

Conclusion

The reconstruction of historical events must be anchored in a careful, thorough, and unbiased examination of the relevant documents. An individual document, such as the minutes of the June 11, 1944 Jewish Agency Executive meeting, may not provide an accurate or complete picture of the events in question. The leaders of the Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt Institute and their supporters had an obligation to examine a wide range of documents before reaching conclusions about the significance of the June 11 meeting. Instead, they selectively quoted only from the June 11 session, thus providing a profoundly misleading portrayal of history. That they were able to persuade a major Holocaust museum to accept and to display this misrepresentation of history is remarkable and troubling.

The Yitzhak Gruenbaum papers and other Jewish Agency documents have now revealed the truth about the Jewish Agency's position regarding asking the Allies to bomb the Auschwitz death camp and the railway lines leading to it. The Roosevelt Institute should acknowledge its error, and the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum should correct its mistaken panel, as soon as possible.

⁴⁴ J.R. White, "Target Auschwitz: Historical and Hypothetical German Responses to Allied Attack," *Holocaust & Genocide Studies* 16:1 (Spring 2002), 59.

⁴⁵ Gruenbaum to Locker, 18 January 1945, and Locker to Gruenbaum, 25 January 1945, S26/130, CZA.

Titled "The Roosevelt Administration, David Ben-Gurion and the Failure to Bomb Auschwitz: A Mystery Solved," it is an 8,000-word narrative of the events surrounding one meeting of the Jewish Agency executive committee meeting, on June 11, 1944, in Jerusalem, where the idea of bombing the camp was discussed and rejected. It appears that the Yishuv leaders were under the mistaken impression that Auschwitz was "a large labor camp," not a death camp. A few weeks later they found differently, and from that point on, the institute reports, some key figures began advocating bombing the camp, including "The issue of the failure to bomb Auschwitz never seems to go away, because in many ways it sums up America's refusal to make even a minimal effort to interrupt the mass-murder process. U.S. planes were flying just a few miles from the gas chambers, hitting German oil factories." "The reasons for the failure to bomb Auschwitz, and the ways in which the Roosevelt administration misled the groups requesting such bombing, offer many important lessons for dealing with today's global problems." Medoff concludes: "Roosevelt deserves credit for lifting America out of the Great Depression and his leadership in World War II, but he was not the humanitarian and champion of 'the forgotten man' that he claimed to be" at least not when it came to the Jews.