



Hidden in the Archives: James Parkes Responds to the Holocaust, 1943

This is a remarkable document both in content and tone (the capitalisation and underlining reflect the moral energy and anger with which Parkes typed it out). The article was never published for reasons that can only be speculated about. It is not clear which journal or newspaper James Parkes had in mind. Perhaps it was regarded as too hard hitting and critical of the British government? Carolyn Sanzenbacher suggests that because of an ongoing dispute with his own Church of England and its refusal to abandon conversionism at the same time that Parkes was less in favour, including with his mentor, William Temple, the archbishop of Canterbury. Frustratingly, we will never know the exact reason it failed to appear in the public domain.

But it is a document that deserves to be well-known. In late 1942 more and more information was coming to Britain from a variety of sources – Jewish and Polish – about the fate of the Jews and what was becoming clearer to those concerned was an actual Nazi plan of total extermination of the Jews. On 17 December 1942 the House of Commons stood in a minute's silence as the Allied Declaration on the Jews was read out. Debate, however, was curtailed and only post-war retribution rather than action to save the Jews now was promised by the British government.

Activists such as the MP Eleanor Rathbone, the publisher Victor Gollancz and James Parkes (1896-1981) himself, a campaigner against antisemitism since the 1920s and the person who did more than any of his contemporaries to improve Jewish/non-Jewish relations, were appalled at the British government's response, or lack of response to the crisis of European Jewry. On Christmas Day 1942 Gollancz wrote an impassioned

pamphlet, *Let My People Go*, to urge the British people to demand action from its government. Later in 1943 Rathbone, and the body she had created and in which Gollancz, Parkes and others were activists – the National Committee for Rescue from Nazi Terror – published another: *Rescue the Perishing*.

If Parkes's unpublished article is added to those of Gollancz and Rathbone, they reflect a profound understanding of the scale of the Nazi crime and the destruction of European Jewry – they assimilated the news as it was happening from often obscure sources and responded immediately and passionately to this humanitarian crisis. There are small elements of detail that reveal some minor misunderstandings – including electrocution as a means of mass murder – but what is more surprising is how detailed and accurate these accounts are.

Equally, they attempt in their different ways to make ordinary people in Britain understand what was happening and feel a responsibility to save as many of them as was possible. To Parkes, there was no ethical excuse to do otherwise.

Source commentary provided by:

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And in the horror of this death families were not allowed to die together. Husbands and wives were taken away separately. And little children, none with them to comfort or console them, were herded into their own trains to perish by themselves.

By the ghastly passions of this madman, and the brutality of those who had been specially trained to become his executioners, it is believed that one third of the whole Jewish population of Europe - two millions of men, women and children - have already perished.

STATEMENT
THE DEBATE IN PARLIAMENT OF DECEMBER 17, 1942.

On December 17 there was read in both Houses of Parliament a solemn statement prepared by the United Nations, recording their horror at this appalling and cold-blooded massacre. But all that the Government offered to do was to execute vengeance after the war. Vengeance after the war will not save a single Jewish life. Rarely has a man of great reputation for his humanity made so poor a showing as did the Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden, in that debate. To any request that something should be done come only such answers as: "My Hon. friend knows the immense difficulties in the way of what he suggests, but he may be sure that we shall do all we can to alleviate these horrors, though what we can do at this stage, I am afraid, is slight." "Naturally I should be glad to see anything of the kind (co-operation with neutral governments) but the hon. member will understand the circumstances." "... the House will understand there are immense geographical and other difficulties in the matter." And a debate on possible measures to be taken was refused. Mr. Eden doubted "whether public discussion would help very much". With all these qualifications, and with the lack of all evidence during the month that followed, either that the Declaration of Vengeance had had any effect on Hitler and his associates, or that any practical steps had been taken, it is difficult to see in the attitude of the Government the determination, the humanity, or the generosity which alone would be adequate to so terrible a human catastrophe. The promises of Mr. Eden that he would see what could be done ring pitifully hollow.

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WHY?

Not openly in Parliament, but privately in discussion with deputations or individuals, high officials have betrayed the reason for this attitude. It is not a pleasant one for British honour. It is that these people are not regarded just as men or women, not even as children, but as Jews. It is said that if we offered unlimited asylum in our own country or the territories we control, it might lead to a dangerous increase of antisemitism. It is even said - as though the idea should terrify instead of rejoicing us - that Hitler might take us at our word and send us all the Jews still alive in Europe, several million of them.

There is only one answer for men who still believe there is any nobility in the cause for which we are fighting: WE WILL RECEIVE THEM. AND IF THERE REALLY BE THREE MILLION OF THEM WE WILL THANK GOD THAT WE HAVE BEEN ABLE TO SAVE SO MANY FROM HITLER'S CLUTCHES. AND IF THERE BE A JEWISH PROBLEM TO SOLVE, WE WILL SOLVE IT AS CIVILISED MEN AND NOT AS MURDERERS.

ACTION NOW.

It is only in the spirit that we desire to save ALL whom we can reach that we can even undertake action that will save any. Once we hedge even the smallest hopes with innumerable qualifications and delays, even the few who might be saved are lost.

Men can escape from Europe, even if it be only in small numbers. And we must see that nothing allows the tragedy of the "Struma" to be repeated. Or have we forgotten that just a year ago 769 Jews did escape from Romania in an old leaky ship which sank off the coast of Turkey, and that all died? They might have been saved if we had taken responsibility for them with the Turkish government. In Spain and Portugal there are still some thousands. Need we leave them till they share the fate of those who might have escaped - many thousands of them - from Vichy France before the German total occupation?

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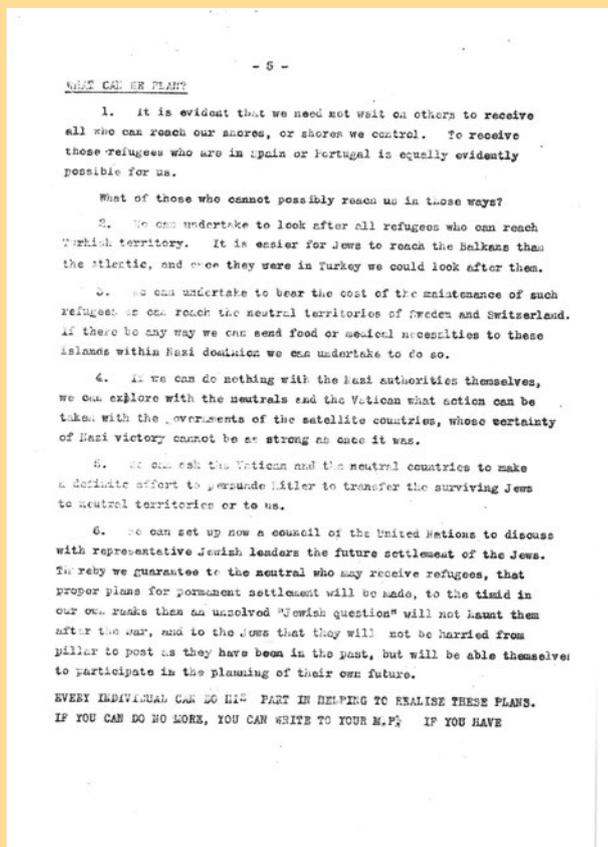
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WHAT CAN WE PLAN?

1. It is evident that we need not wait on others to receive all who can reach our shores, or shores we control. To receive those refugees who are in Spain or Portugal is equally evidently possible for us.

What of those who cannot possibly reach us in those ways?

2. We can undertake to look after all refugees who can reach Turkish territory. It is easier for Jews to reach the Balkans than the Atlantic, and once they were in Turkey we could look after them.

3. We can undertake to bear the cost of the maintenance of such refugees as can reach the neutral territories of Sweden and Switzerland. If there be any way we can send food or medical necessities to these islands within Nazi dominion we can undertake to do so.

4. If we can do nothing with the Nazi authorities themselves, we can explore with the neutrals and the Vatican what action can be taken with the governments of the satellite countries, whose certainty of Nazi victory cannot be as strong as once it was.

5. We can ask the Vatican and the neutral countries to make a definite effort to persuade Hitler to transfer the surviving Jews to neutral territories or to us.

6. We can set up now a council of United Nations to discuss with representative Jewish leaders the future settlement of the Jews. Thereby we guarantee to the neutral who may receive refugees, that proper plans for permanent settlement will be made, to the timid in our own ranks than an unsolved "Jewish question" will not haunt them after the war, and to the Jews that they will not be harried from pillar to post as they have been in the past, but will be able themselves to participate in the planning of their own future.

EVERY INDIVIDUAL CAN DO HIS PART IN HELPING TO REALISE THESE PLANS. IF YOU CAN DO NO MORE, YOU CAN WRITE TO YOUR M.P. IF YOU HAVE A PULPIT, SPEAK FROM IT; IF YOU CAN CALL A MEETING, DO SO. WHEREVER YOU HAVE INFLUENCE USE IT. OUR HONOUR AND SINCERETY ARE AT STAKE AS MUCH AS THE LIVES OF MILLIONS OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE.

