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## Imagining the “Day of Reckoning”: American Jewish Performance Activism during the Holocaust

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Imagining the “Day of Reckoning”:  
American Jewish Performance Activism during the Holocaust

A Thesis Presented

By

MAYA C. GONZÁLEZ

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ABSTRACT

IMAGINING THE “DAY OF RECKONING”:

AMERICAN JEWISH PERFORMANCE ACTIVISM DURING THE HOLOCAUST

SEPTEMBER 2023

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Scholars of American Jewish history have long debated the complicity of the American Jewish community in the loss of six million Jewish lives in Europe during the Holocaust. After Hitler took power in 1933, American Jewish leaders took to the streets to protest the Nazi Party’s abuse of German Jews. Two central figures in this history are Reform Rabbi Stephen Wise and Revisionist Zionist Ben Hecht because of their wide-reaching protest movements that operated in competition with each other. Although the historiography presents Wise and Hecht's inability to unite as the product of difference, my examination of their protest performances presents a novel picture of similarity. Despite their ideological antagonism, Wise and Hecht's shared cultural identities, as both Americans and Jews, produced pageants with decidedly similar elements. The three productions studied here – *The Case of Civilization Against Hitler* (1934), *Stop Hitler Now* (1943), and *We Will Never Die* (1943) – were reflective of these identities. Appealing to their Americanness, they performed rituals of democratic justice. Appealing to their Jewishness, they presented Jewish prayer, iconography, and ritual related to divine justice. In highlighting the parallels in the performances, I read their actions as successful insofar as they appealed to a diverse American Jewish audience.

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

American Federation of Labor (AFL)

American Friends of a Jewish Palestine (AFJP)

American Jewish Congress (AJCongress)

American Jewish Committee (AJC)

Committee for a Jewish Army (CJA)

Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO)

Irgun Zeva'i Leumi (Irgun)

Joint Consultative Council (JCC)

Joint Emergency Committee on European Jewish Affairs (JEC)

World Jewish Congress (WJC)

Zionist Organization of America (ZOA)

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## INTRODUCTION

One year after Hitler's ascension to power in Germany, tens of thousands of New Yorkers gathered at Madison Square Garden to hear the words of Rabbi Stephen Wise. "Despite the oceanic tragedy which has befallen us," Wise pronounced, "we Jews tonight, joining in the chorus of civilization, indict Hitlerism as humans, as members of civilized society before the high court of human judgment."<sup>1</sup> Wise's words resonated for audience members attending the rally that March night. Over the course of the evening, they heard from a chorus of voices representing the American public, self-identifying across different racial, religious, and ideological lines. Framed as a "court," the speakers at the rally gathered to indict Hitler for his crimes against civilization, an intentionally pointed term that would offend Nazi ideologues claiming to protect civilization through Aryan supremacy. This mock trial was part of a larger trend of American Jewish protest performances staged during the Third Reich that intended to garner support for the rescue of European Jews.

At age sixty, Rabbi Stephen Wise (1874-1949) was one of the loudest advocates for German Jews immediately after Hitler took power on January 30, 1933. Wise, a prominent Reform rabbi born in Hungary with a history of human rights advocacy, served as the president of the American Jewish Congress (AJCongress) from 1928 until his death in 1949. With the support of the AJCongress, Wise staged his first anti-Hitler rally in 1933 and went on to stage many more. Although Wise believed his friendship with FDR gave him unique opportunities to plead his case to the White House, neither his public

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<sup>1</sup> Bainbridge Colby, Samuel Seabury, John Haynes Holmes, Stephen S. Wise, et al. *The Case of Civilization Against Hitlerism: Presented Under the Auspices of the American Jewish Congress at Madison Square Garden New York, March 7, 1934* (New York: American Jewish Congress, 1934).

demonstrations nor private pleadings made a significant impact toward saving the Jews of Europe.

Rabbi Wise was not the only Jewish American to confront the public and the Roosevelt administration on a grand scale. Ben Hecht (1894-1964), a successful Jewish screenwriter from Chicago, joined forces with the Committee for a Jewish Army (CJA) to produce propaganda for the rescue cause. The CJA was made up of delegates from the Irgun Zeva'i Leumi, the underground military arm of the Revisionist Zionist movement in Palestine. After their arrival in the United States in 1940, the CJA focused their efforts towards raising funds for illegal immigration to Palestine. However, with the release of information confirming the systematic extermination of the Jews of Europe in 1942, their efforts shifted toward rescue. These newcomers from Mandatory Palestine were a threat to Rabbi Wise, who had been rallying for the cause for nearly ten years and refused to let them overpower his efforts. The two groups, rhetorically charged by Wise and Hecht, competed for the attention of the President and the American public with protest rallies and performances.

Over the course of ten years, Wise and Hecht staged three major protest productions that this thesis will examine: *The Case of Civilization Against Hitler* (1934), *Stop Hitler Now* (1943), and *We Will Never Die* (1943). These are by no means the only American protest performances that dealt with Jewish rescue during the Third Reich. However, they are the most significant for revealing internal struggles within the American Jewish community during the Holocaust, considering the effects of Zionism on diaspora issues, and studying how large personalities like Wise and Hecht influenced the outcome of their activism. This thesis will engage with the planning and production of these three rallies at-



length to argue that despite their differences, their public representations of what we now know as the Holocaust were similar dramatically in their rhetoric and imagery.

To understand the significance of the rallies, it is important to clarify the transforming relationship between Nazi Germany, the United States, and Jews in these countries between 1933 and 1945. January 1933 brought a rapid, far-reaching attack on the Jews of Germany. The Third Reich protected and encouraged German citizens to target Jews, and anything perceived as Jewish, for intimidation, degradation, or violence. German Jews faced detainment in concentration camps, professional purges, social ostracization, and public humiliation even before 1934. From 1933 to 1938, over 1,200 anti-Jewish legal measures were enacted in Germany and Austria.<sup>2</sup> As Chapter One will detail, in response to Hitler's program against enemies of the Reich, American protest groups sought consequential action by the American government.

Despite the mass persecution of Jews, scholars like Stephen Norwood argue that during this period "Western actions could still have precluded the ensuing catastrophe to Jewry and Europe."<sup>3</sup> In these early years, the most likely route to rescue was a relaxation of immigration laws. During the Holocaust, the United States upheld a strict quota system that limited the number of European Jewish refugees who could be admitted to the country.<sup>4</sup> Over the course of the Third Reich, over 190,000 quota spaces that could have

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<sup>2</sup> Alon Confino, *A World Without Jews: The Nazi Imagination from Persecution to Genocide* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 43-46, 67.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen H. Norwood, *Prologue to Annihilation: Ordinary American and British Jews Challenge the Third Reich* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2021), 1.

<sup>4</sup> Rafael Medoff, *The Jews Should Keep Quiet* (Lincoln: Jewish Publication Society of America, University of Nebraska Press, 2019), 283.

saved Jews in Axis-occupied countries went unused.<sup>5</sup> The White House’s ability to respond was also hampered by individual actors within the State Department, such as Breckinridge Long. Long was responsible for the State’s rescue policy and “viewed his fight against the refugees as primarily a battle against Jewish Communist agitators”<sup>6</sup> At every opportunity, he quashed potential rescue solutions presented by other parties.

Returning to the fate of European Jewry, November 9 and 10, 1938 marked a historical turning point. *Kristallnacht*, or the “Night of Broken Glass,” involved Nazi-incited pogroms across Germany, Austria, and the occupied Sudetenland. These pogroms killed hundreds of Jews and sent 30,000 Jews to concentration camps. The violence did not go unnoticed by the press or news-informed Americans. On November 11, the *New York Times* front-page headline read, “Nazis Smash, Loot and Burn Jewish Shops and Temples Until Goebbels Calls Halt.”<sup>7</sup> From this moment, Americans – especially New Yorkers – could no longer plead ignorant regarding the Jewish problem.

From 1938 to the end of 1941, Americans continued to speak out against the growing threat of Nazism but remained wary of warmongering. With the German invasion of Poland in September 1939, World War II had begun. The public maintained contradictory desires to both stop the Nazi menace and avoid going to war. The traumatic memories of the Great War fought on European soil still lingered in the American imagination, compounded by the Great Depression. Isolationists viewed World War II as

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<sup>5</sup> Medoff, 283. In 1938, the United States facilitated the Evian Conference on the subject of “political refugees.” For more on this conference, see Paul R. Bartrop, *The Evian Conference of 1938 and the Jewish Refugee Crisis* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

<sup>6</sup> Henry Feingold, *Bearing Witness: How America and Its Jews Responded to the Holocaust* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1995), 81.

<sup>7</sup> “All Vienna’s Synagogues Attacked,” *New York Times*, November 11, 1938, accessed February 10, 2023, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1938/11/11/503871402.html?pageNumber=1>, 1.

a dispute between foreign nations and believed it was best for the United States to remain neutral. Despite President Roosevelt's inclination toward an active foreign policy, he passed Neutrality Acts to keep American assistance away from the anti-Nazi coalition in Europe.<sup>8</sup> Still, American Jewish protest groups continued to seek the White House's attention for Jewish rescue, while American groups that identified as anti-Nazi (rather than Jewish) pushed universal demands against Hitler's fascist politics.

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941 brought the United States into the war. Action groups no longer feared being accused of warmongering, and as Chapter Two will explain, amplified their protests to connote the urgency of their crisis. In Germany just one month later, Nazi officials constructed the "Final Solution" at the Wannsee Conference and the ongoing persecution of Jews became a campaign of annihilation. In November 1942, Wise released information to the American public that confirmed the systematic extermination of European Jews. It was in this atmosphere of catastrophe that action groups prioritized Jewish rescue by any means. This thesis will examine how protest rhetoric changed from 1934 to 1943 as Jewish rescue became increasingly urgent.

To understand the significance of the rallies and the individuals behind them, we must first examine the communal context within which they operated. In the 1930s, the "American Jewish community" as we understand it today did not yet exist. Regional, religious, and class divisions from the "Old World" remained at play in the United States and mapped themselves onto Jewish American organizations. As historian Peter Novick describes, most American Jews no longer connected with "international ties of Jewish

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<sup>8</sup> Nicholas Smedley, *A Divided World: Hollywood Cinema and Émigré Directors in the Era of Roosevelt and Hitler, 1933-1948* (Bristol: Intellect Ltd, 2011), 33-34.

peoplehood” from Europe, replacing the feeling with “loyalty to America.”<sup>9</sup> However, being American did not mean ignoring the plight of German Jews. Instead, as historian Henry Feingold argues, American Jews adopted a multileveled identity that allowed them to respond to the Jewish crisis “both as Jews and as Americans,” rather than exclusively as Jews.<sup>10</sup> Especially in the 1930s, Jews saw themselves reflected in the fabric of American democracy.

With FDR in office, the American public saw more Jews working in the White House than ever before. He selected for his White House counsel Samuel I. Rosenman, David K. Niles, and Benjamin V. Cohen. He placed Felix Frankfurter on the Supreme Court in 1939.<sup>11</sup> The visibility of Jews in the White House was exciting to American Jews, including Rabbi Wise. Novick writes that it was said that American Jews believed in three worlds, “*die velt* (this world), *yene velt* (the world to come), and *Roosevelt*.”<sup>12</sup> Their belief in Roosevelt and trust of the American government had a resounding impact on rescue efforts from the United States.

The deeply rooted internal tensions of the American Jewish institutional world intensified with Hitler’s rise to power in 1933. Leaders like Wise urgently sought an appropriate response to communicate the outcry of their Jewish constituents to the American government. However, others saw different paths to rescue. In part because they feared reactions fueled by local antisemitism, competing American Jewish institutions attempted to stifle public protest efforts in 1933 and beyond.

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<sup>9</sup> Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), 31-32, advanced reader copy.

<sup>10</sup> Feingold, 213.

<sup>11</sup> James Rudin, *Pillar of Fire: A Biography of Stephen S. Wise* (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press: 2015), 295.

<sup>12</sup> Novick, 42.

In the 1930s, there were more than one hundred organizations espousing explicitly antisemitic doctrines active across the United States. Homegrown groups, such as Father Charles E. Coughlin's Christian Front and William Dudley Pelley's Silver Shirts, offered community to Americans based solely on a shared disdain for Jews. Others, such as the German American Bund, brought Aryanism into American politics and publicly supported the Nazi Party – in the very same venue that our Jewish protagonists held their public demonstrations. These groups also published pro-Nazi materials, organized youth groups mirroring the Hitler Youth, and generated antisemitic violence across the country, particularly concentrated in the urban Northeast.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to the currents of antisemitism carried by explicitly hateful groups, isolationism threatened the European Jewish cause. In 1934, the insistence of various Congressmen that the United States remain detached from German political affairs forced FDR to state clearly that “the United States cannot take part in political arrangements in Europe.”<sup>14</sup> With the start of World War II in 1939, America First spokesman and aviator Charles Lindbergh convinced the American public that speaking against Hitler's antisemitic policies would again bring the United States into the conflict abroad.<sup>15</sup> Antisemitic religious leader Father Charles E. Coughlin advocated for isolationism in his radio sermons. Often, accusations of warmongering were rife with antisemitism.

A 1940 investigation by the House Un-American Activities Committee charged that Jewish studio heads in the motion picture industry were guilty of producing films in

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<sup>13</sup> David Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews: America and the Holocaust, 1941-1945* (New York: The New Press, 1984), 9-10; Feingold, 211-212.

<sup>14</sup> Wise in Richard Breitman and Allan J. Lichtman, *FDR and the Jews* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 80.

<sup>15</sup> Medoff, 15.

support of American intervention in the war. In his opening statement for the investigation hearings, Senator Gerald Nye of North Dakota read a list of Jewish industry names aloud in caricature before blaming those “born abroad [who] came to our land and took citizenship” for “entertaining violent animosities towards certain causes abroad” and blaming “those of the Jewish faith” for raising the issue of antisemitism.<sup>16</sup> Lindbergh, Coughlin, and Nye's antisemitic, isolationist, and nativist expressions led many Americans to become suspicious of outright protest on behalf of European Jews.<sup>17</sup>

Despite the social taboo on publicly supporting Jewish rescue, resistance groups formed across the United States to advertise anti-Nazi beliefs that disguised their support for European Jews. Notable for this work on performance activism was the multi-pronged anti-Nazi movement in Hollywood. The most famous collective of Hollywood screenwriters, actors, and industry workers fighting against Nazism was the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League for the Defense of American Democracy (HANL). Founded in 1936, HANL gained a membership of over five thousand and staged a protest rally titled “Quarantine Hitler” after Kristallnacht in 1938. The rally took place at the Philharmonic Auditorium in Los Angeles, bringing prominent voices such as director Frank Capra, actress Joan Crawford, and German émigré novelist Thomas Mann to the forefront of the

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<sup>16</sup> “Moving-Picture and Radio Propaganda (1941), U.S. Senate, Subcommittee of the Committee on Interstate Commerce,” in *The Movies in Our Midst: Documents in the Cultural History of Film in America*, ed. Gerald Mast (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 480-481.

<sup>17</sup> The study of Hollywood warmongering encompasses many layers of the industry. For an overarching study, see Steven Alan Carr, *Hollywood and Anti-Semitism: A Cultural History up to World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) and Thomas Doherty, *Hollywood and Hitler, 1933-1939* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013). To read about the involvement of the studio “moguls” in anti-Hitler actions, see David Welky, *The Moguls and the Dictators* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008). To read about émigré directors’ contributions, see Nicholas Smedley, *A Divided World: Hollywood Cinema and Émigré Directors in the Era of Roosevelt and Hitler, 1933-1948* (Bristol: Intellect Ltd, 2011).

increasingly public anti-Nazi movement.<sup>18</sup> In contrast to the AJCongress and the CJA, HANL and action groups like it formed in direct response to news from Germany.

### A. Historiography

The American Jewish response to the Holocaust has long been divided into two camps dependent on their treatment of President Roosevelt's relationship to the Holocaust. In defense of FDR, historians Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., Richard Breitman, and Allan J. Lichtman elucidate the constraints on FDR to act on behalf of European Jews. By contrast, Arthur Morse, Rafael Medoff, and David Wyman find fault in FDR's intentions and inaction. Wyman and Medoff are the most influential scholars for this project, because of their attention to FDR's relationship to Rabbi Wise and their treatment of the CJA.<sup>19</sup>

In his seminal work, *The Abandonment of the Jews* (1984), Wyman paints President Roosevelt and the American State Department as "passive accomplices" in the murder of five to six million Jews.<sup>20</sup> He attributes American indifference toward the refugee crisis to heightened antisemitism and the anti-immigration and nativist attitudes of the 1930s. In *The Jews Should Keep Quiet* (2020), Medoff builds on Wyman's work, portraying FDR's relationship with Rabbi Wise as evasive and manipulative. He traces the source of what Medoff claimed to be Wise's inaction to his fear that asking for too much would result in receiving nothing from the White House. While Wyman condemns the divided approach

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<sup>18</sup> Doherty, 99, 210.

<sup>19</sup> The works referenced include: Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Age of Roosevelt* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1960); Breitman and Lichtman, *FDR and the Jews*; Arthur D. Morse, *While Six Million Died: A Chronicle of American Apathy* (New York: Random House, 1968); Medoff, *The Jews Should Keep Quiet*; Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews: America and the Holocaust, 1941-1945*.

<sup>20</sup> Wyman, ix.

of the American Jewish community, Medoff makes a generative comparison between Wise's apparent paralysis and the provocative actions of the Irgun group.

The third foundational text in this project is a *New York Times* essay by Lucy Dawidowicz which examines the actions taken by the American Jewish community to aid European Jews. She wrote the essay in response to Lawrence Jarvik's 1982 documentary film titled *Who Shall Live and Who Shall Die*, refuting the filmmaker's critique of the American Jewish community's apathy toward the European crisis as "laughable and outrageous."<sup>21</sup> She argues that American Jews made a great effort against the genocide, but their actions were no match for the circumstances. She argued that the internal conflict that did exist within the American Jewish community was caused by the CJA, "the most serious disturbers of American Jewish solidarity."<sup>22</sup> In these works, we see how Wise and Hecht's political efforts were treated on this intense binary of success and failure, as American Jewish scholars weighed the complicity of their own community in the deaths of European Jews.

This project also relies on scholarship on pageantry, theater, and spectacle. Few works that provide an in-depth treatment of American Jewish performance activism across ideological spheres. A successful example of this holistic approach is Stephen H. Norwood's *Prologue to Annihilation: Ordinary American and British Jews Challenge the Third Reich* (2021). Norwood examines Jewish grassroots efforts to alert the world to Hitler's violence against the Jews in the early years of Nazi rule. He argues that there was a "persistent refusal" of the State Department to condemn the persecution of Jews in

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<sup>21</sup> Lucy S. Dawidowicz, "American Jews and the Holocaust," *New York Times*, April 18, 1982, accessed May 26, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/1982/04/18/magazine/american-jews-and-the-holocaust.html>.

<sup>22</sup> Dawidowicz, "American Jews and the Holocaust."



Europe, despite Western media's coverage of the subject.<sup>23</sup> Unfortunately, Norwood's exceptional treatment of the subject extends only to 1939.

Stephen Whitfield takes a broader temporal scope in "The Politics of Pageantry, 1936-1946" to consider three pieces of Jewish performance activism. While his evaluation of *We Will Never Die* over relies on Hecht's memoir, his overall claim that each performance piece valued both universalism and Jewish particularity is useful to elucidate similarities between American Jewish efforts.<sup>24</sup> Whitfield treats each text as both dramatic literature and history, a rare approach for historians and theater experts alike. For example, despite focusing solely on *We Will Never Die*, Robert Skloot dismisses the possibility that there could be dramatic meaning in the pageant's script because it falls under the genre of spectacle. Although the article begins a significant discussion on the "aesthetics of the spectacle," his analysis is limited. He emphasizes the identity politics at play in the pageant and in Hecht's political engagements with Wise. Although he vacillates between support and rejection of the pageant, in the end he affirms the conclusion previously made by Hecht's biographers and historian Lucy Dawidowitz that Hecht's efforts split Jewish Americans when they needed unity, writing, "*We Will Never Die* was a flashy and short-lived phenomenon full of distortion, self-serving ignorance, and political risk."<sup>25</sup> While

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<sup>23</sup> Norwood, 6. The first work to define the relationship between the American press and the Holocaust was Deborah Lipstadt's *Beyond Belief: The American Press And The Coming Of The Holocaust, 1933-1945* (New York: The Free Press, 1993). She argues that despite their continued coverage of the violence incurred against Jews under the Nazi regime, the print media failed to convey the depth of Nazi antisemitism or Hitler's genocidal plan even after it had become clear. Rather, Lipstadt indicts the press for treating the Jews as another persecuted group struggling against the Nazi regime. Laurel Leff's *Buried by the Times: The Holocaust and America's Most Important Newspaper* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) is a recent standard in the historiography, which builds upon Lipstadt's work by focusing on the *Times*' underreporting and distortion of Nazi crimes against European Jewry.

<sup>24</sup> Stephen J. Whitfield, "The Politics of Pageantry, 1936-1946," *American Jewish History* 84, no. 3, (September 1996), 222, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23885531>.

<sup>25</sup> Robert Skloot, "'We Will Never Die': The Success and Failure of a Holocaust Pageant," *Theatre Journal* 37, no. 2 (1985): 178-179, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3207063>.

Skloot's analysis results in condemnation, I will consider how Hecht used spectacle intentionally as a departure from Wise's methods.

To inform my approach to dramatic literature, Marvin Carlson's *The Haunted Stage* (2001) is most useful. Carlson argues that the dramatic stage is a site of memory because the presence of recycled material – texts, production elements, actors, stories – is inherent to the artistic mode. As is evidenced in the theatrical material at hand, rhetorical elements and visual signs are used intentionally to conjure images that are politically, religiously, and culturally relevant to their audiences.<sup>26</sup> Louis Anthes exemplifies Carlson's argument in "Publicly Deliberative Drama: The 1934 Mock Trial of Adolf Hitler for 'Crimes against Civilization,'" where he shows how the authors of *The Case of Civilization* instrumentalized cultural meanings and aesthetics of law to embed political significance into their rally.

This thesis will examine *The Case of Civilization Against Hitler* (1934), *Stop Hitler Now* (1943), and *We Will Never Die* (1943) for their expressions of intersecting religious, cultural, and political identities. At the center of identity expression is the individual. While greater institutional and identity politics are at play, this essay will emphasize the actions and rhetoric of individuals for two reasons. First, much of the preparation, creation, and production of the performances was the product of efforts by key players. Wise was able to assemble influential and diverse groups of people because of his background as a trusted religious leader and liberal political activist. With his background as a screenwriter, Hecht

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<sup>26</sup> Christopher B. Balme, *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 78-80. The Peircean model of signs refers to visual symbols that reference (without explanation) something off-stage. There are three types of signs: iconic signs (based on similarity between sign and object), indexical signs (based on spatial or temporal connection between sign and object), and symbolic signs (based on meaning established by conventions and customs).

succeeded in rallying thousands of Jews inside and outside of organized politics. Their shared characteristics as charismatic orators and gifted writers placed them in a unique position to engage with the public. Their shared identities as Jews and Americans drove them to spread the same message.

The second reason I emphasize the individual was their unwillingness, on a personal level, to cooperate with one another. Their politics divided them on the surface, but personal animosity also kept them from joining forces. Wise believed he held sway with FDR and the State Department, so he sought to avoid public demonstrations that were not conducted in a "reserved dignified style."<sup>27</sup> He openly challenged what he believed was the undignified strategy of the CJA. The two groups had multiple opportunities to collaborate but avoided doing so. When considered in comparison, Wise and the AJCongress were the most successful in gaining the attention of the President, but Hecht and the CJA captivated the imaginations of their American audiences.

Although the historiography presents Wise and Hecht's inability to unite as the product of difference, my examination of their protest performances presents a novel picture of similarity. Despite their ideological antagonism, Wise and Hecht's shared cultural identities, as both Americans and Jews, produced pageants with decidedly similar elements. The three productions studied here – *The Case of Civilization Against Hitler* (1934), *Stop Hitler Now* (1943), and *We Will Never Die* (1943) – were reflective of these identities. Appealing to their Americanness, they performed rituals of democratic justice. Appealing to their Jewishness, they presented Jewish prayer, iconography, and ritual

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<sup>27</sup> Medoff, 29.

related to divine justice. In highlighting the parallels in the performances, I read their actions as successful insofar as they appealed to a diverse American Jewish audience.

Informed by and appealing to their American identities, both groups relied on the familiar rituals of the courtroom to make meaning out of their fraught present. The aesthetic of the court was familiar to middle-class Americans during this period due to its heightened presence in film, popular literature, and theater. The rallies examined in this paper were not the only performances that used a trial format to make sense of World War II or of the Nazi rise to power. In 1943, Jewish legal scholar Max Radin published *The Day of Reckoning*, a novel that predicted future Nazi murder trials. In the same year and under the same title, the Auspices of the Council for Democracy put on a series of six radio plays that put dictators on trial, including "The People vs Adolph [sic] Hitler," "The People vs Benito Mussolini," and "The People vs Tojo." In 1944, Hungarian filmmaker André De Toth directed a post-war tribunal drama titled *None Shall Escape*, which put a fictional Nazi officer on trial.<sup>28</sup> As this essay will show, Stephen Wise's 1934 rally was ten years before this trend's peak, yet his rally utilized the rituals of criminal court trials perhaps even more authentically than *We Will Never Die* would in 1943.

In both rallies, the setting of the court imbued their claims with authority and authenticity and encouraged audiences to act against the Nazi perpetrators. Both groups placed their faith in judicial authority as a mechanism for intervention on behalf of the Jews. By holding their rallies in the public sphere, rather than solely appealing to the White House, they revealed a shared belief in the power of a popular voice that saw the intrinsic

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<sup>28</sup> "Public Relations Work February to May, 1943," American Jewish Congress, digital archive, accessed November 10, 2022, <https://ajcarchives.org/ajcarchive/DigitalArchive.aspx>, 3-4. "The People vs Adolph Hitler," "The People vs Benito Mussolini," "The People vs Tojo," American Jewish Congress, digital archive, accessed November 10, 2022, <https://ajcarchives.org/ajcarchive/DigitalArchive.aspx>.

link between the rescue of European Jews and the values of democracy. This reverence to systems of justice demonstrated how inextricable American ideals were from their protest movement, regardless of the specifically Jewish and diasporic nature of their cause.

Appealing to their Jewishness, the rallies also imagined divine justice through Jewish prayer, iconography, and rituals. The creators behind the scripts were familiar with Jewish perspectives on justice to different degrees. With his training in the rabbinate and career as a Reform rabbi, Stephen Wise used touchstone Jewish texts and histories in his oratories to show how Jewish values can inform a universal ethic. Although Ben Hecht was never religiously observant, the persecution of German Jews inspired him to dive intensively into study of Jewish history over a few short years.<sup>29</sup> The vastly different Jewish educational backgrounds of these two Jewish thinkers produce surprisingly similar results. Both men called upon Jewish texts, rituals, and traditions that emphasize righteousness in their performance pieces. Their Jewish culture provided them—and their audiences—with a shared vocabulary to discuss justice independently from its national conceptualization. Wise and Hecht also incorporated Jewish culture into their themes of mourning, civilization, and remembrance.

Dually informed by their American and Jewish identities, these rallies utilize the historical and biblical pasts to imagine what the future of European Jewry might become under Hitler's ideological reign. The dramatic format of the pageant, Hecht's guide for *We Will Never Die*, was a centuries-old American tradition.<sup>30</sup> In essence, the pageant is a community-based production that depicts a dramatic narrative based on the development

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<sup>29</sup> Ben Hecht, *A Child of the Century* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1954), 517.

<sup>30</sup> Hecht had prior experience writing pageant scripts before *We Will Never Die*, including "Fun to be Free," a 1941 pro-war pageant co-written with Charles McArthur and a 1942 AFL "Labor Pageant." These scripts can be accessed in the Ben Hecht Papers at the Newberry Library.

of the community. Historian David Glassberg writes that American pageant-masters viewed history as “a source of timeless, universal moral principles that could be summoned rhetorically” for use in shaping their community.<sup>31</sup> If pageantry shows how Americans call upon the past, present, and future to unify a community, Jewish rituals also do so for Jewish Americans.

The past is omnipresent in Jewish life and culture. Judaism’s holidays, rituals, and texts all contain mechanisms for creating, maintaining, and interacting with Jewish collective memory. A prime example is the Passover holiday, during which religious and secular Jews alike attend seders that narrate the biblical story of Exodus. The annual repetition of the story invites contemporary Jews to consult the past as they determine their actions in the present. For instance, in “A Passover Message” from 1943, Rabbi Wise wrote,

Tears will be in millions of Jewish eyes when, at the Seder table in Conformity to the custom of our fathers, we recite ‘this year in bondage, next year in freedom.’ For we shall be thinking of a bondage that has led to death and while it has lasted has been worse than death. And still we dare not forget – next year freedom and the year to come the land of Israel!<sup>32</sup>

First, Wise acknowledges the pain of his contemporaries, Jewish Americans watching Hitler’s campaign against European Jewry in 1943. He notes how their pain will deepen as they are faced with memories of biblical persecution at the Passover seder. As they embody the journey of these biblical Jews and say, “this year in bondage, next year in freedom,” they are simultaneously inhabiting the past and the present to gain perspective on the future of the Jewish people. Drawing from the American tradition of pageantry and the Jewish

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<sup>31</sup> David Glassberg, *American Historical Pageantry: The Uses of Tradition in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 14.

<sup>32</sup> Stephen Wise, *As I See It* (New York: Jewish Opinion Publishing Corporation, Marstin Press, Inc., 1944), 64.

connection to the past, the dramatic protests of the 1930s and 1940s considered what the future might hold if Hitler's war against European Jewry continued, representing first an America trapped under fascist rule and then a world without Jews.

## CHAPTER I

### AMERICAN “CIVILIZATION” CHALLENGES HITLERISM

Hitler’s seizure of power on January 30, 1933 began a month of debate among American Jewish institutions about whether public protest over Hitler’s antisemitic, racist, and fascist actions was appropriate. Unfortunately, their united desire for rescue action by the American government did not facilitate a united approach. When Rabbi Stephen Wise said, “I am afraid of meetings we cannot control. We want neither Communist nor Socialist nor Revisionist meetings. We want Jewish meetings,” his words expressed what many other Jewish leaders were also thinking.<sup>33</sup> However, their ideas of a “Jewish meeting” differed. How could these ideologically distinct groups agree on one vision of Jewishness that would be powerful enough to enact change but discreet enough not to provoke backlash?

This chapter will discuss the initial struggle between institutional Jewish groups to produce a public response to Hitler’s takeover. Stephen Wise and his American Jewish Congress (AJCongress) fought the American Jewish Committee (AJC) and the B’nai B’rith for their approval to protest openly in New York City. The outcome of this debate was a 1933 rally titled *Stop Hitler Now*, which catalyzed a second rally in 1934 to be examined in detail in this chapter. The 1934 rally, *The Case of Civilization Against Hitler*, featured twenty-three prominent speakers in a mock trial against the German leader. Wise took center stage in preparation and presentation, so his remarks and the overall dramatic set-up of the rally will be covered in this section. Through analysis of the script and pageant elements in the mock trial, I argue that Wise's cultural identities as an American and a Jew

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<sup>33</sup> Rudin, 307.



inform his thematic and representative approach to his protest performance. He employs familiar rituals from courts of justice while representing justice as a Jewish value in order to advocate for German Jews, who were dually Othered by American xenophobia and antisemitism.

### **A. Stop Hitler Now, 1933**

With their eyes on Germany in January 1933, the three most influential Jewish communal organizations, the American Jewish Congress, American Jewish Committee, and B'nai B'rith met to form the Joint Consultative Council (JCC). The purpose of the JCC was to facilitate unified action on behalf of the Jews of Germany without impeding on the individual work of each organization.<sup>34</sup> Established in 1906, the AJC was run by wealthy, influential, “older-stock” Jews of German descent.<sup>35</sup> Their approach to Jewish problems was informed by their historical relationship with the American government. In the early 1900s, they lobbied against restrictive citizenship laws against Russian-born, naturalized American Jews. Through a combination of “strategic planning, public relations, and political pressure,” the AJC claimed partial success on this effort by convincing President Taft to terminate the associated treaty. After this small victory, however, a series of failures relying on the same tactics caused the AJC to commit to “backroom diplomacy and self-censorship.”<sup>36</sup> Established in 1843, B'nai B'rith was a fraternal service organization that focused on issues of education and Jewish rights. Like the AJC, their founding constituency was Jewish men of German origin who found themselves excluded from gentile fraternal

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<sup>34</sup> Henry Feingold, *A Time for Searching: Entering the Mainstream, 1920-1945* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 238.

<sup>35</sup> Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews*, 67.

<sup>36</sup> Breitman and Lichtman, 47-48.

organizations like the Free Masons.<sup>37</sup> Both groups preferred the quiet resistance methods practiced by the AJC.

At a meeting of the JCC on February 22, 1933, the AJC and B'nai B'rith expressed their opposition toward public protest over the Hitler issue. Both groups feared that speaking out would mean losing their credibility, risking violent retaliation from Hitler, and spurring antisemitic backlash in the United States.<sup>38</sup> Rabbi Wise blamed their hesitation to act on their members of German descent, who he felt believed that “they owe[d] it to their German past to disbelieve in the stories of Hitlerish barbarism and brutality.”<sup>39</sup> With this national divide limiting them, the JCC became the first failed attempt at united action during the Third Reich in the American Jewish community.

As President of the American Jewish Congress and lifelong member of the Jewish institutions of New York, it was not the first time Wise found himself resisting the desires of the conservative AJC. Wise was born on March 17, 1874 into a wealthy and prominent rabbinical family in Hungary. In 1875, the Weisz family packed up their life in Hungary and moved to New York, when Stephen was only 17 months old. He descended from a long line of rabbis (seven generations), his father being the chief rabbi of Erlau, Hungary for 56 years. Destined for a life in the rabbinate, Wise was a strong orator from a young age who studied privately with Rabbi Alexander Kohur, faculty member of the newly established Jewish Theological Seminary of America, before attending the Community College of New York. In his final year of undergraduate studies, he transferred to Columbia

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<sup>37</sup> Hasia Diner, *A Time for Gathering: The Second Migration, 1820-1880* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 109-111.

<sup>38</sup> Wyman, 67; Medoff, 25; Norwood, 76; Breitman and Lichtman, 52.

<sup>39</sup> Stephen S. Wise, *Servant of the People: Selected Letters*, edited by Carl H. Voss (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1969), 187.

where he specialized in advanced Jewish studies, participated in debate club, and won awards for his skills in Greek and Latin. After receiving his degree in 1892, Wise traveled to Austria and worked with Rabbi Adolf Jellinek, receiving his rabbinical ordination in only a year. Wise's biographer notes how Jellinek imparted great significance onto the Talmudic quote, "*Kol Yisrael arevim zeh bazeh* (All Israel is inner connected, responsible to one another)." <sup>40</sup>

Returning home, Wise worked as an assistant rabbi until founding his own Free Synagogue in 1907. As he rose in prominence as a reform rabbi, Wise made a name for himself advancing Progressive causes like workers' rights, poverty, child labor, civil rights, and women's suffrage. He publicly targeted auto manufacturer Henry Ford as his publication, *Dearborn Independent*, spread antisemitic conspiracies around the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, writing, "He is as guilty of pogroms himself as any murderer in Poland." <sup>41</sup> Wise's work in the political sphere brought him together with future president Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1914, and by the 1920s they maintained a friendship. Wise's relationship with FDR solidified his status as the most influential Jewish leader with access to the political sphere during the Holocaust. As the following pages will reveal, his prominence in the public sphere further strengthened his political influence and solidified his image as "Rabbi USA." <sup>42</sup> In the early 1930s, Wise eagerly praised FDR and the New Deal, yet his enthusiasm faltered as the President failed to address the alarming reports detailing crimes against European Jews. <sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Rudin, 26.

<sup>41</sup> Rudin, 228-229.

<sup>42</sup> Rudin, 289.

<sup>43</sup> Medoff, 4.

Afraid that the backroom diplomatic efforts of the AJC and B'nai B'rith would fail, Wise and his AJCongress mobilized for a public demonstration. The AJCongress was founded in 1916 by lawyer Louis D. Brandeis, who, in Wise's words, "recognized the inexorable necessity of ending the reign of the *Hof-Juden* in America and of substituting for it a democratic organization of Jewish life in a democratic land."<sup>44</sup> Hof-Juden, literally meaning "court Jews," refers to the generation of German immigrants who arrived in the United States in the mid-nineteenth century. The term, used here derogatorily, derives from historical Jewish bankers who lent money to European elites in the early modern period. The AJCongress was born out of a desire for an American style of representation that Wise believed was lacking with Jews of German descent representing the community at large.

Because they saw themselves as authentic representatives of the Jewish masses who were clamoring for "organized boycotts [and] tremendous street scenes," the AJCongress could not handle the situation quietly as the AJC and B'nai B'rith wished. AJC member Irving Lehman spoke on behalf of his organization when he said, "Hot-headed Jews should be suppressed," but the AJCongress could not be silenced.<sup>45</sup> After their initial disagreements at the February 22 meeting, the AJCongress held another conference on March 19 which was attended by 1,500 representatives from American Jewish organizations.<sup>46</sup> They decided to move forward with planning a mass meeting for March 27. The next day, the AJC and B'nai B'rith released a retaliatory statement condemning

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<sup>44</sup> Stephen Wise, *Challenging Years: The Autobiography of Stephen Wise* (New York: GP Putnam's Sons, 1949), 204-207.

<sup>45</sup> Medoff, 25-26.

<sup>46</sup> Medoff, 28; "55,000 Here Stage Protest on Hitler Attacks on Jews; Nazis Order a New Boycott," *New York Times*, 28 March 1933, accessed November 17, 2022, 1, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1933/03/28/issue.html>.

public demonstrations and encouraging the American government to make “proper representations to the government of Germany.”<sup>47</sup>

On March 27, the AJCongress successfully staged a rally titled *Stop Hitler Now* to an audience of twenty thousand Jews in Madison Square Garden.<sup>48</sup> Outside of the Garden, thirty-five thousand people stood protesting and ten thousand more marched through Brooklyn in solidarity. Simultaneous protests also occurred in major cities across the country. The United Press estimated that one million protesters participated in the nationwide demonstration that day.<sup>49</sup> In retaliation to the American uproar, Hitler threatened a one-day boycott against German Jewish businesses, to be resumed three days later if “international protests” did not cease.<sup>50</sup> Wise, after speaking with Undersecretary William Phillips at the State Department, agreed to a brief silence on the matter.<sup>51</sup> Despite his compliance, Wise was struggling with his conscience. He wrote to a friend on March 29,

I am going through days and nights of hell, for I am mindful of our awful responsibility. But if you had seen the documents that we have seen, you would know that you would have had to choose between virtual silence—and silence is acquiescence—or supporting this tremendous protest.<sup>52</sup>

Months later, Wise traveled to Europe and met with Jewish exiles. They overwhelmingly agreed that his “great protest in America [played] the largest part in saving German Jewry

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<sup>47</sup> Breitman and Lichtman, 53.

<sup>48</sup> “Other Faiths Join In,” *New York Times*, 28 March 1933, accessed November 17, 2022, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1933/03/28/99216792.html?pageNumber=1>, 1. To read Wise’s remarks, see “We Ask Only for the Right, Says Wise,” *NYT*, accessed November 17, 2022, [https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1933/03/28/99216913.pdf?pdf\\_redirect=true&ip=0](https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1933/03/28/99216913.pdf?pdf_redirect=true&ip=0).

<sup>49</sup> Breitman and Lichtman, 53-54.

<sup>50</sup> “55,000 Here Stage Protest on Hitler Attacks on Jews,” *NYT*; Medoff, 34.

<sup>51</sup> Medoff, 17.

<sup>52</sup> Wise, *Servant of the People: Selected Letters*, 182.

from the direst things.”<sup>53</sup> They confirmed Wise’s suspicions – Hitler was watching him and the AJCongress. They could not stop now.

### **B. The Case of Civilization Against Hitler**

In 1934, Stephen Wise returned to Madison Square Garden to stage his second rally, formatted as a mock trial: *The Case of Civilization Against Hitler*. This effort was met again with resistance from the German Foreign Office, who pressured the American Ambassador to Germany to stop the mock trial. Although the Ambassador failed to halt preparations for the first performance in New York, he succeeded in canceling a subsequent performance in Chicago.<sup>54</sup> Hans Luther, the German Ambassador to the United States, called Secretary of State Cordell Hull on February 20<sup>th</sup> to protest the rally. Hull, already frustrated by the AJCongress’ determination to stage mass meetings such as those of the prior year, struggled to make Luther understand that his government could not suppress free speech.<sup>55</sup> Luther contacted Hull once more before the mock trial, but was met with the same response. In protest, Luther rejected the AJCongress’ invitation to present a defense of Hitler at the mock trial, claiming that the German people were likely to interpret a mass demonstration of this nature as official.<sup>56</sup> There was a sustained resistance effort at home as well. In their continued refusal to support the AJCongress, B’nai B’rith sent a petition

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<sup>53</sup> Medoff, 42.

<sup>54</sup> Medoff, 51-54.

<sup>55</sup> Norwood, 167.

<sup>56</sup> “NAZIS 'CONVICTED' OF WORLD 'CRIME' BY 20,000 IN RALLY,” *NYT*, March 8, 1934, accessed July 28, 2022, <https://nyti.ms/3bbf9NN>, 1; “Dr. Luther Protested Hitler ‘Trial’ Here,” *New York Times*, March 9, 1943, accessed July 28, 2022, <https://nyti.ms/3zPDodX>; “Luther Protest on Garden Trial is Thrown out,” *JTA*, March 9, 1934, accessed February 8, 2023, <https://www.jta.org/archive/luther-protest-on-garden-trial-is-thrown-out>; Norwood, 166.

to FDR with a quarter of a million signatures protesting Germany's treatment of Jews. He gave no response.<sup>57</sup>

Despite resistance from German representatives and contradictory actions from B'nai B'rith, the trial went on bolstered by massive Jewish grassroots support. Hundreds of members of the press were in attendance and multiple New York City radio stations broadcast the trial live.<sup>58</sup> The trial began with an American Legion bugler blowing taps, issuing in a moment of silence for "those killed by the Nazi regime in Germany."<sup>59</sup> Bainbridge Colby, the former Secretary of State, presided over the "court" and framed the evening's speeches with reverence for God, love of justice, and "abhorrence" of cruelty and oppression.<sup>60</sup> He introduced the speakers of the evening as "Pleaders," noting that "Every party, every creed, every section of public opinion [was] authoritatively present" at the trial.<sup>61</sup>

This was not an overstatement. The Pleaders were a representative roster of twenty-three American leaders speaking on behalf of constituencies including Protestant Churches, Physicians, Socialists, Sports, Women, Jews, Eye-Witnesses, and the American Public.<sup>62</sup> Among them were Roger Baldwin, director of the Civil Liberties Union, Reverend Dr. Arthur Brown, chairman of the American Committee on the Rights of Religious Minorities, Samuel Margoshes, editor of the Yiddish newspaper *Forverts*, and

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<sup>57</sup> On the day of the rally, Roosevelt left the White House for a fishing trip in Florida. See "Roosevelt Starts Week's Fishing Trip," *NYT*, March 28, 1934, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1934/03/28/issue.html>, 1; Breitman and Lichtman, 78-79.

<sup>58</sup> Norwood, 167-168; "Adolf Hitler to Be 'tried' Here Tonight," *JTA*, March 7, 1934, accessed July 28, 2022, <https://www.jta.org/archive/adolf-hitler-to-be-tried-here-tonight>.

<sup>59</sup> "NAZIS 'CONVICTED' OF WORLD 'CRIME' BY 20,000 IN RALLY," 14.

<sup>60</sup> Colby, et al., 4.

<sup>61</sup> "NAZIS 'CONVICTED' OF WORLD 'CRIME' BY 20,000 IN RALLY," 14; Colby, et al., 3-4.

<sup>62</sup> Colby, et al., 1-2; "NAZIS 'CONVICTED' OF WORLD 'CRIME' BY 20,000 IN RALLY," 14.

Fiorello LaGuardia, mayor of New York City.<sup>63</sup> Of the twenty-three speakers, only four were Jewish.

Although the trial covered many topics, the following analysis will focus on the threads of American and Jewish identity that also arise in the March 1943 productions of *Stop Hitler Now* and *We Will Never Die*. First, I will detail how the mock trial mimicked processes of democratic justice to lend their cause legitimacy. Second, I will explore how they portrayed Judaism as a universal moral code. They showed that the history of the Jews, not their religion, made them exceptional and worthy of rescue. Through both of these themes, I touch upon representations of the future as their tool for inspiring their audiences.

### **C. Imagining Justice as an American**

Informed by Wise's engagement with justice in American cultural, political, and judicial contexts, the trial featured specific procedural details that imbued the performance with a sense of authority that could only come from their audience's familiarity with the notion of the court.<sup>64</sup> The mock trial began with the court crier's framing words as the "court" filed in and took their seats: "Hear ye! All those who have business before this court of civilization give your attention and ye shall be heard. May I ask you to rise while the Court takes its place?"<sup>65</sup> Although the speakers were not actually representing any federal authority, many of them were connected professionally to the legal world. For example, Arthur Garfield Hays, a lawyer and presenter of "The Case of an Eye-Witness

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<sup>63</sup> Colby, et al., 1-2; "NAZIS 'CONVICTED' OF WORLD 'CRIME' BY 20,000 IN RALLY," 14.

<sup>64</sup> This line of thinking was inspired by Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001). In theater, the recycling of scripts creates an effect that Carlson calls "ghosting." It "presents the identical thing [audience members] have encountered before, although now in a somewhat different context. Thus, a recognition not of similarity, as in genre, but of identity becomes a part of the reception process" (7).

<sup>65</sup> "NAZIS 'CONVICTED' OF WORLD 'CRIME' BY 20,000 IN RALLY," 14.



II,” had recently attended the Reichstag Fire trial in Germany and collaborated with the defense.<sup>66</sup> With their professional backgrounds and personalities as orators, it did not require much imagination to see these men as prosecutors.<sup>67</sup>

Their arguments were further legitimated by the incorporation of witness testimony coming directly from Europe. Many of the Pleaders discussed the Jews’ victimization under the Nazi threat, but two had seen it with their own eyes. Samuel Margoshes, editor of *The Day* and vice president of the American Jewish Congress, presented the “Case of the Eyewitness—I.” He shared testimony from Europe including one German Jewish spokesperson who was quoted as saying, “We are not only declassified, deprived of our liberties and of all means of livelihood, but we are utterly without protection under the law. We are at the mercy of every Nazi official and every Storm Trooper.”<sup>68</sup> By sharing this quote, Margoshes reminded the audience about the fall of the German democracy which had only been in place since the end of the Great War. Believers in the American democratic system would sympathize with the Germans’ loss of recently gained political freedom. Margoshes, a Jewish leader himself, translated the fears of German Jewish leadership authentically. These Jews saw no future for themselves in a Germany under the Nazi thumb and Margoshes refracted that fear toward his audience by arguing that Americans would soon be victims too if not for their immediate action.

Following Margoshes’ speech, Arthur Garfield Hays presented “The Case of an Eye-Witness—II.” As previously mentioned, Hays was a distinguished lawyer, having

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<sup>66</sup> Louis Anthes, “Publicly Deliberative Drama: The 1934 Mock Trial of Adolf Hitler for ‘Crimes against Civilization,’” *The American Journal of Legal History* 42, no. 4 (1998), <https://doi.org/10.2307/846041>, 397-398.

<sup>67</sup> Anthes, 402.

<sup>68</sup> Colby, et al., 69.

served as a defense attorney in multiple high-profile cases including the Scopes case (1925), Sacco-Vanzetti case (1927), and the Scottsboro case (1931). He discussed his involvement in the recent Reichstag Fire trial, describing how Hitler “rode into power through the crime of arson.”<sup>69</sup> On February 27, the Reichstag (German parliament) building burned down. Nazi leadership blamed Communists for the fire and responded to the threat they had fabricated by suspending a number of civil rights. In his speech, Hays applauded George Dimitroff, one of the accused Communists, for braving imprisonment in a concentration camp after the trial. By applauding a Communist revolutionary, Hays pointed to Nazism as the most dangerous ideology of their time, not Communism. Discussing the Nazi trial and Dimitroff’s imprisonment under the guise of the American mock trial juxtaposed the national processes of justice against each other and made it clear who was living in a fair democracy.

Despite his stature as a religious leader, Wise also made an argument on the secular subject of justice for German Jews. He focused most of his speech on the experiences of Jews in Germany. Under Hitler’s “anti-civilization” program of *Gleichschaltung*, the removal of Jews from Aryan society, he stated that, “Life is denied to the Jews.”<sup>70</sup> On its most basic level, the purpose of the mock trial was to argue for the reinstatement of rights, and therefore humanity, to the Jews of Germany. The Pleaders interchangeably used terms like “humanity,” “civilization,” “judgment,” and “justice” as stand-ins for American values. In doing so, they rhetorically contrasted the United States to Hitler’s Germany, despite the shared characteristics between their white supremacist societies.<sup>71</sup> Wise

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<sup>69</sup> Colby, et al., 74.

<sup>70</sup> Colby, et al, 113-115.

<sup>71</sup> James Whitman, *Hitler’s American Model: The United States and the Making of Nazi Race Law* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

degraded the Nazi Party using a propagandistic term from the Great War, “Hitler’s Huns,” conjuring a familiar image of Germans as barbarians and enemies of the United States. Although the Versailles Treaty disarmed the German military, Americans remembered the violent methods of the German “Huns” and feared their return.<sup>72</sup> With these rhetorical tools, Wise positioned the Nazi Party as the enemies of civilization and the United States.

Through judicial pageantry, Wise built opportunities for his audience to judge Hitler for his crimes. After the final speech, Samuel Seabury presented the Summation and John Haynes Holmes presented the Judgement. Holmes concluded with a universal prayer that the day would soon come when all German people have their rights returned to them, but “until that day arrives the German government stands convicted by its own acts of a crime against civilization.”<sup>73</sup> After the final verdict was read, Colby prompted a vote from the audience and was met with a “roar of approval,” save for one dissenting woman who shouted in protest before being escorted out by police.<sup>74</sup> In their attempt to be perceived as legitimate, Wise had prepared for counter-protesters. The city had stationed 325 police officers at the Garden, in addition to the “honor guard” of 200 uniformed members of the Jewish War Veterans organization and 200 members of the Youth Division of the American Jewish Congress.<sup>75</sup> The sponsors promised “a fair trial,” which meant inviting both sides to sit at the table of justice. While Ambassador Luther’s chair sat empty onstage, other resisters were present in the audience to defend Hitler.<sup>76</sup> In addition to the vocal

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<sup>72</sup> Colby, et al., 119.

<sup>73</sup> Colby, et al., 144-145.

<sup>74</sup> “NAZIS ‘CONVICTED’ OF WORLD ‘CRIME’ BY 20,000 IN RALLY,” 14.

<sup>75</sup> “Veterans’ March Will Precede ‘trial,’” *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, March 4, 1934, accessed February 8, 2023, <https://www.jta.org/archive/veterans-march-will-precede-trial>.

<sup>76</sup> “Expect Crowded Courtroom at Hitler ‘trial’ Tomorrow,” *JTA*, March 6, 1934, accessed February 8, 2023, <https://www.jta.org/archive/expect-crowded-courtroom-at-hitler-trial-tomorrow>; Norwood, 166.

dissenter, there were fifty Silver Shirts in ticketed seats. They retained their mild demeanor throughout the rally, apart from two individuals who engaged in a physical altercation.<sup>77</sup>

The rally's architects transformed their audience of 20,000 into the largest jury New York City had ever seen. Before the start of the trial, petitions circulated in support of their cause with twenty signature lines and a timely return request. At the end of the night, the final vote from the audience "passed" the court's verdict and turned the admission-paying audience into participants in a democratic process. With their vote, Wise and his court had successfully transformed the Garden, the most recognizable theater in the nation in 1930, into a courtroom of their own.<sup>78</sup>

#### **D. Imagining Justice as a Jew**

In addition to appealing to the audience's desire to serve democratic justice, the Pleaders made a case for Jews through universalizing their religious values. Rabbi Wise began his "Case of the Jews" with the quote with which I started this paper:

Despite the oceanic tragedy which has befallen us, we Jews tonight, joining in the chorus of civilization, indict Hitlerism as humans, as members of civilized society before the high court of human judgment. We protest, not for our own sake, for we have always been watchmen at the gate who at the cost of life itself safeguarded the ineffably precious values of threatened civilization.<sup>79</sup>

As this quote makes evident, Wise deftly navigated between the specific and the universal when making his case. To keep his religiously Jewish identity from dominating his Americanized message, Wise dressed in a suit without any traditional rabbinic garb. He claimed the role of spokesperson for the Jewish people, aware that they were but one group

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<sup>77</sup> "NAZIS 'CONVICTED' OF WORLD 'CRIME' BY 20,000 IN RALLY," 1, 14.

<sup>78</sup> Anthes, 403.

<sup>79</sup> Colby, et al., 114-115.

in the American collective uniting to mobilize against Hitlerism. He reminded the audience of their shared humanity, combating the imagery of parasites and rodents propagated by the Nazi Party and their ideological kin in the United States. Wise emphasized that the Jewish protest was “not for [their] own sake,” but for the protection of civilization, which the Jews have historically and biblically intervened on behalf of as “watchmen at the gate [of civilization].”<sup>80</sup> As he worked to represent their struggle through an American lens, Wise was cognizant of the correlation between Jews and warmongering that he had to overpower to make a strong case for intervention.

Speaking as a member in the "chorus of civilization" and as a "student of Jewish history," Wise combined the secular and religious intentions of the rally in his remarks. He deemed the year since Hitler's rise to power as "the most tragic year in all the centuries of Jewish history."<sup>81</sup> For the Jews in the audience, such a statement would have been powerful. Jewish memory contains thousands of years of anti-Jewish violence, political persecution, exile, and enslavement. He explained to the court that while Hitler had committed crimes against the “civilized world,” the Jews “were the first to suffer proscription, humiliation, degradation” under his regime.<sup>82</sup>

However, he pointed out, they were also the earliest protectors of a universal humanity. He used the biblical Hebrew phrase, “*Mene, mene, tekel upharsin*” to caution Germans to take heed of the “writing on the wall” and stop their reign of terror.<sup>83</sup> He concluded with a quote from Psalm 121: “For centuries and centuries our Fathers sang:

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<sup>80</sup> Colby, et al., 114-115.

<sup>81</sup> Colby, et al., 115-117.

<sup>82</sup> Colby, et al., 113.

<sup>83</sup> Colby, et al., 118. The phrase used comes from Daniel 5:25, literally meaning, “Numbered, numbered, weighed divided.”

‘Behold the guardian of Israel doth neither sleep nor slumber.’ We say tonight, ‘Behold the guardians and defenders of civilization will not be silent nor yet afraid.’”<sup>84</sup> By inserting the audience as “defenders of civilization,” Wise combined the power of the divine and the individual citizen to help audience members realize that they too shared the responsibility to protect civilization.

Wise further empowered the audience to act with (universal) divine cause by referencing the cooperation between “all groups and factors within civilization *including* the great Catholic Church and the Protestant churches of the land.”<sup>85</sup> As a rabbi, Wise understood the power of a religious leader to influence their community. Two speakers at the start of the mock trial presented the “Case of the Protestant Churches” and the “Case of the Catholic” to appeal to non-Jews in the crowd. Arthur Brown, speaking for the Protestant Churches, explained that “the fundamental question is not one of Christians versus Jews,” because the Jews of Germany are not being persecuted by Christians “as such” and because the root of the violence is racial, not religious.<sup>86</sup> Apart from a note about German churches’ involvement in *Gleichschaltung*, Brown’s case is rooted in concepts of justice, remaining unexpectedly secular and collectively relatable. Michael Williams, speaking for “the Catholic,” approached the issue of Hitlerism differently, as a threat to the existence of the Catholic religion in Germany and to the Catholics living there.<sup>87</sup> To show Hitlerism as an enemy of any given audience member, Wise also claimed that Hitlerism was “the denial of Jesus and the negation of every type and manner of Christianity.”<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Colby, et al., 119.

<sup>85</sup> Colby, et al., 114. Emphasis mine.

<sup>86</sup> Colby, et al., 14.

<sup>87</sup> Colby, et al., 20-25.

<sup>88</sup> Colby, et al., 114.

## E. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have examined the origins of internal dissent at the beginning of Hitler's reign among American Jewish communal organizations. Despite their desire for a united front in 1933, willingness to compromise on a path forward quickly dissolved. Stephen Wise and the AJCongress planned public protests, against the will of the AJC and B'nai B'rith, as they would continue to do for the next twelve years. The main production examined in this chapter, *The Case of Civilization Against Hitler*, relied on rituals of the court to make a case for saving the Jews of Europe. Bringing Roosevelt's attention to this problem was crucial to protecting "civilization"—including the United States—from Hitlerism. Wise's balanced depiction of a just world drew upon both universalized Jewish notions of justice. To avoid repercussions for Jews at large, he kept Catholic and Christian voices at the front of his protest. He depicted the Jewish people and their Judaism as interconnected with Western ideas of civilization. He hoped this restrained approach would avoid upsetting his Jewish colleagues, the White House, or gentile America. Over the next ten years that separated *The Case of Civilization Against Hitler* from Wise's most impactful rally, *Stop Hitler Now 1943*, new adversaries forced Wise to shift his tactics within the Jewish world.

## CHAPTER II

### THE FIGHT OVER MADISON SQUARE GARDEN

Ten years after the first *Stop Hitler Now* rally, American Jewish organizations again rallied in protest after Stephen Wise announced to the press and the Anglophone world that Hitler had "ordered the annihilation of all Jews in Europe" by 1943.<sup>89</sup> This time, the Committee for a Jewish Army of Stateless and Palestinian Jews (CJA), also known as the "Bergson Boys," took center stage. Led by Lithuanian-born Palestinian Jew, Peter Bergson (1915-2001), the Committee shifted their focus from building a Jewish army to rescuing European Jews. They brought American Jewish screenwriter Ben Hecht onto their team as a propagandist and he staged a spectacular protest pageant, marketed as a "memorial to the dead Jews of Europe," at Madison Square Garden on March 9, 1943.<sup>90</sup>

Wise, at this point a seasoned rally producer, was compelled to halt the CJA's production. As he had finally secured the attention of President Roosevelt, maintaining control over the Irgunists and their propaganda was critical. He and the greater institutional Jewish American world went to great lengths to stop their pageant, *We Will Never Die*. As this chapter will show, the Bergson Boys peddled in provocation while the American Jewish Congress kept to their conservative ways, but both groups shared the same message. Informed by Hecht's American and Jewish identities, the themes of *We Will Never Die* matched those of the 1934 mock trial, *The Case of Civilization Against Hitler*. First, they reproduced rituals of criminal justice on their stages to legitimize their cause. Second, they merged secular visions of justice with religious iconography, prayer, and ritual to relate to

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<sup>89</sup> Wise quoted in Medoff, 133.

<sup>90</sup> Breitman and Lichtman, 217; Hecht, *A Child of the Century*, 564; Wise, *Servant of the People*, 257.



both Jewish and gentile audiences. In their representations of these two themes, the script traversed thousands of years of Jewish history in order to imagine what the Jewish future would look like after Hitler's predicted defeat. Despite their animosity with Wise and the institutional world, the CJA produced a far-reaching protest whose competition pushed Wise to produce his most successful pageant.

### **A. Enter: Peter Bergson and the Bergson Boys**

Across a Europe increasingly consumed by German occupiers, 1940 and 1941 were marked by the violence of full-scale war. Americans tracked the bloody events abroad through their newspapers, radios, and newsreels. In black and white, they watched “the war at sea, the fall of France, the Battle of Britain, the German invasion of the Soviet Union.”

<sup>91</sup> In these early years of the war, Wise and his group of activists continued their efforts to publicize the atrocities committed against Jews and struggled to get an audience with the President. At the end of 1941, their work was disrupted by the Palestinian-based newcomers led by Bergson.

Hillel Kook, under the pseudonym Peter Bergson, was born into a prominent rabbinic family in Lithuania in 1915. At age nine, he moved with his family to Mandatory Palestine. Rather than enroll in rabbinic study, as a young man Bergson joined the Haganah, the main Zionist paramilitary organization set up to defend the Yishuv (Jewish settlements in Mandatory Palestine). He rose through its ranks and in 1937, took a role as a high command member of the Irgun in Poland.<sup>92</sup> Only three years later, Yitzhak Ben-Ami, the Irgun emissary to Vienna, decided to send a delegation to the United States to

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<sup>91</sup> Novick, 22.

<sup>92</sup> Judith T. Baumel, *The “Bergson Boys” and the Origins of Contemporary Zionist Militancy*, trans. Dena Ordan (Syracuse, Syracuse University Press, 2005), 8.

raise funds for illegal immigration. The small group included Ben-Ami himself, Shmuel Merlin, Alex Rafaeli, Jeremiah Halperin, Aryeh Ben Eliezer, and their “undisputed leader,” Bergson.<sup>93</sup> It was upon his arrival in the spring that Bergson adopted his alias to detach his identity from his family’s.<sup>94</sup> Although the group called themselves the American Friends of a Jewish Palestine (AFJP), they forged no friendships with American Zionists.<sup>95</sup>

As new additions to the Jewish protest scene in the United States, the Bergson Boys had to situate themselves within a large and already complex network of Jewish political groups. Even before they touched down on American soil, the American Zionist movement opposed them with unmasked hostility. The existing American Jewish community perceived the AFJP as an aggressive group attempting to destabilize the status-quo, particularly their philanthropic network. As historian Judith Baumel argues, in 1940,

Not only were the American Friends of a Jewish Palestine ‘foreigners’ possessed of a ‘hostile ideology’—characteristics they shared with the American Zionist right wing—they also demonstrated striking ability in an area at which their Revisionist colleagues had been largely unsuccessful: fund-raising.<sup>96</sup>

In addition to struggles over maintaining philanthropic hegemony, American Zionist groups viewed the Irgun as a militaristic organization whose use of violence damaged the shared Zionist image. Wyman argues that “they resented and feared the break in world Zionist discipline initiated by [ideological revolutionary and founder of the Revisionist movement] Ze’ev Jabotinsky and perpetuated by the Irgun.”<sup>97</sup> These feelings led to

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<sup>93</sup> Monty Penkower, “In Dramatic Dissent: The Bergson Boys,” *American Jewish History* 70, no. 3 (March 1, 1981), 284, accessed July 20, 2022, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23881816>

<sup>94</sup> Adina Hoffman, *Ben Hecht: Fighting Words, Moving Pictures* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2019), 128-129; Baumel, 8.

<sup>95</sup> Wyman, 85; Penkower, 285.

<sup>96</sup> Baumel, 13, 78.

<sup>97</sup> Wyman, 85.

defamation campaigns by the Zionist and United Jewish Appeals, quiet diplomacy that would delegitimize the AFJP, and their near complete exclusion from the Jewish fundraising world.<sup>98</sup> The American Irgunist cadre deeply felt their ostracism in these early years. As the state of European Jewry deteriorated, the CJA's feelings of rejection festered because American groups continued to both prohibit their actions as an independent entity and exclude them from Jewish action committees.

In 1941, Bergson was not the only Jewish leader perceived as an enemy to the Jewish people. As Wise's protest rallies grew increasingly loud, the silence of the administration echoed louder in the public's ears. American Jews saw Wise's efforts through the eyes of the AJC: an unnecessarily intense broadcasting of the Jewish crisis in a society that was largely indifferent to the fate of European Jewry and fearful of entering another global war. During President Roosevelt's reelection campaign, Wise received a letter disparaging his dedication to the President that said, "It is a question in the minds of many of us as to whom may be said to be the worst enemy of the Jews, Adolph Hitler or Rabbi Wise."<sup>99</sup> The words stung Wise, and he would use them as ammunition against his enemies years later, saying that Bergson was "as equally great an enemy of the Jews as Hitler, for the reason that his activities could only lead to increased anti-Semitism."<sup>100</sup> Deep-seated fears of antisemitism and a disconnection from the concept of a singular Jewish people led American Jews to target these activists for their protests on behalf of European Jewry.

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<sup>98</sup> Baumel, 78-79.

<sup>99</sup> Wise, *Challenging Years*, 230.

<sup>100</sup> Rudin, 363-364.

Three days before the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor, the American Friends changed their name to the Committee for a Jewish Army of Stateless and Palestinian Jews (CJA). With the name change, their mission shifted from supporting *Aliyah Bet* (the illegal immigration of Jews to Palestine) to building a Jewish army.<sup>101</sup> At the same time, the general American public underwent a transformation from staunch isolationism to patriotic anti-fascism supported by an American war effort. The individuals staging protests no longer had to fear warmongering accusations. American Jews could now act decisively against FDR's unresponsive administration and demand their support, but their differences kept them from doing so under a united front.

### **B. The Riegner Cable**

1942 brought new devastating news from Europe. On August 8, the State Department received a cable from Gerhart Riegner, the World Jewish Congress (WJC) representative stationed in Switzerland. It reported the German plan in which "all Jews in countries occupied or controlled by Germany numbering 3 ½ to 4 millions should, after deportation and concentration in the East, be at one blow exterminated, in order to resolve once and for all the Jewish question in Europe."<sup>102</sup> The State Department deemed the Riegner Cable unreliable and withheld it from Wise, whom Riegner had asked it be passed onto. Wise received the note weeks later, sometime between August 25 and 28, from the head of the British division of the WJC. He called Under Secretary of State Sumner Welles about the cable (which Welles had seen three weeks prior) and asked him to verify the information within.<sup>103</sup> Welles agreed to get back to him with such information, with the

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<sup>101</sup> Wyman, 85; Penkower, 285; Baumel, 95-96.

<sup>102</sup> Medoff, 114.

<sup>103</sup> Medoff, 115-116; Wise, *Challenging Years*, 275.

understanding the Wise would refrain from publicizing the telegram until he did so. Welles responded to Wise three months later, on November 24.

In the meantime, Wise (and separately, FDR) received another emergency cable from Orthodox rescue activists Recha and Yitzchak Sternbuch. This telegram confirmed the evacuation of the Warsaw Ghetto and the bestial murder of one hundred thousand Jews. It continued: “Similar fate is awaiting the Jews deported to Poland from other occupied territories. Suppose that *only energetic steps from America* may stop these persecutions.”<sup>104</sup> Medoff argues that despite the mounting evidence, Wise passively relegated himself to his fate of silence. He “appears to have never considered the possibility of revealing the Sternbuch telegram to the public while awaiting word regarding Riegner’s.”<sup>105</sup> Rather, he believed his duty was “to explain to my fellow Jews why our Government [sic] cannot do all the things asked or expected of it.”<sup>106</sup> Regardless of his responsibility, the nightmarish events bearing down on Wise’s imagination took a toll. While he could not publicize the news, he shared his turmoil with close friends. He wrote to Fanny Mayer Korn on September 9, “I haven’t been able to sleep since that earlier cable to me telling me that the plan is to kill all the Jews in Hitler Germany, and prussic acid was mentioned as the method. It is all too unspeakable.”<sup>107</sup>

Finally, on November 24, he and Welles met to discuss the Riegner Cable. Welles confirmed the atrocities and released Wise from his oath of silence. However, as historians Richard Breitman and Allan J. Lichtman argue, Welles’ “authorization did not bind the

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<sup>104</sup> Medoff, 118. Emphasis mine.

<sup>105</sup> Medoff, 120.

<sup>106</sup> Medoff, 125.

<sup>107</sup> Wise, 250.

State Department to vouching for the reliability of reports on the Nazi slaughter of Jews," it only allowed him to speak to the public about their contents.<sup>108</sup> Without the State's backing, the public would interpret the source's authenticity based on Wise's reputation. Wasting no time, he called a "Temporary Committee" of Jewish leadership the next day. The Temporary Committee included the AJC, AJCongress, B'nai B'rith, Jewish Labor Committee, WJC, and two religious groups, the multid denominational Synagogue Council of America and the Orthodox Agudath Israel of America. They agreed upon a press release, including dispatching telegrams to over five hundred newspapers and to non-Jews inviting their public statements.<sup>109</sup> Wise headed the press conference, sharing the devastating news that Hitler had "ordered the annihilation of all Jews in Europe by the end of the year."<sup>110</sup>

The news reached Bergson, as it did many other Jews in the United States, over his breakfast the next morning. By a unanimous vote, all members of the CJA decided to shift their efforts away from building a Jewish army and toward the situation in Europe.<sup>111</sup> Bergson wrote to Stephen Wise and Judge Louis Levinthal, president of the Zionist Organization of America (ZOA) about forming alliances with the CJA. Both leaders refused.<sup>112</sup> Undeterred by the exclusion of the establishment, the Bergson Boys engaged in a new publicity campaign headed by Hecht.

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<sup>108</sup> Breitman and Lichtman, 205.

<sup>109</sup> Wyman, 70-71.

<sup>110</sup> Medoff, 133; Aaron Berman, *Nazism, The Jews and American Zionism, 1933-1948* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1990), 100.

<sup>111</sup> Baumel, 113; Breitman and Lichtman, 217. Baumel claims this meeting took place in early October, despite the Riegner Cable's delayed release until the end of November.

<sup>112</sup> Berman, 101, 130.

### C. Enter: Ben Hecht

In his own words, after Hitler's invasion of Poland in 1939, Ben Hecht "became a Jew."<sup>113</sup> Born in 1897 to Russian-Jewish immigrants, Hecht grew up in a Yiddish-speaking household and frequented Yiddish theaters where his *Tante* Lubi performed. He dropped out of the University of Wisconsin after three days there and moved to Chicago where he began reporting for the *Chicago Daily Journal* within a week. His career as a journalist brought him to Berlin in 1918 to report on postwar goings-on. This trip (his sole trip to Germany) revealed to him the realities of protest and violence; he witnessed the Spartacist Revolution firsthand, which biographer Adina Hoffman labeled as his "crash course in human depravity."<sup>114</sup> In 1924, Hecht moved to New York with his second wife, Russian-born screenwriter Rose Caylor, who deeply connected with her Jewish identity. Here, his career as a playwright flourished and he reconnected with his Jewishness for the first time.<sup>115</sup>

While Hoffman suggests that "Hecht's Americanness was arguably his true religion," Hecht became a prominent and reputable force within the secular Jewish world in the fight against Hitler.<sup>116</sup> In the early years of the war, while working for the New York newspaper *P.M.* as a daily columnist, Hecht reported on the "incredible silence of New York's Jews" around the massacre occurring in Europe.<sup>117</sup> In the spring of 1941, his provocative writing on Jewish subjects garnered Bergson's attention. Still acting under the auspices of the CJA, Bergson invited Hecht to join their cause. Though initially skeptical,

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<sup>113</sup> Hecht, 517.

<sup>114</sup> Hoffman, 18-21, 44-45.

<sup>115</sup> Hoffman, 49, 73.

<sup>116</sup> Hoffman, 3.

<sup>117</sup> Hecht, 520.

Baumel argues that Hecht was attracted to “the delegation’s nucleus, which he perceived as a blend of activity and mystique,” and emerged from their talks as the co-chairman of the CJA.<sup>118</sup>

In February 1943, *Reader’s Digest Magazine* printed Hecht’s article, “Remember Us,” which built upon Dr. Hayim Greenberg’s fragmentary documentation of the shocking and appalling crimes against Europe’s Jews, made up of eyewitness accounts and underground sources.<sup>119</sup> Inspired by his own work, Hecht assembled thirty famous Jewish scriptwriters and novelists, and one composer, at playwright George S. Kaufman’s home in early 1943. In his own words, these individuals “could command the press of the world.”<sup>120</sup> After Hecht’s passionate appeal for this influential crowd to take collective action on behalf of Europe’s Jews, half of them left without a word. Fortunately, two guests stayed; Kaufman’s collaborator Moss Hart and exiled German composer Kurt Weill, and another, impresario Billy Rose, joined shortly thereafter.<sup>121</sup> Intent on producing a stage production grand enough to convince the minds of Americans of the urgency of their cause, they considered their next avenue for fund-raising.

Aided by the Bergsonites’ social connections, Hecht, Weill, and Rose pitched the Jewish production to a new demographic in early February: “Jewish presidents, vice-presidents and secretaries... They represented thirty-two Jewish organizations ranging from the powerful B'nai B'rith to a society of Brooklyn rabbis.”<sup>122</sup> Hecht read excerpts from the

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<sup>118</sup> Baumel, 17.

<sup>119</sup> Penkower, 288; Hecht, *A Child of the Century*, 551; “Remember Us,” 1943, Box: 19, Folder: 590-591. The Newberry Library - Modern Manuscripts.

<sup>120</sup> Hecht, *A Child of the Century*, 548-551.

<sup>121</sup> An impresario is the stage version of a film producer. They organize, and often finance, plays, operas, or concerts.

<sup>122</sup> Hecht, *A Child of the Century*, 554.



production's script while Weill accompanied him on the piano, and when finished, the men asked if all organizations present would lend their support simply by placing their organizations' names on the same letterhead as an endorsement of the pageant. This request, as Hecht recalled it, caused the room to "erupt into a free-for-all, bitter as a Kentucky feud ... The thirty-two Jewish organizations were denouncing each other as Socialists, as Fascists, as Christians, as undesirables of every stripe."<sup>123</sup> Although factionalism trumped generosity among these philanthropists, Bergson's band of Broadway propagandists continued their intense preparations without financial support.

Throughout February, Hecht worked tirelessly on the pageant script, which would expand upon his "Remember Us" article. CJA delegate Yitzhak Ben-Ami recalled how Hecht "immers[ed] himself in research,... delving into Jewish history and lore with a vengeance, as if to punish himself for all the years during which he had ignored his heritage."<sup>124</sup> Meanwhile, Billy Rose requested a two paragraph statement from FDR to be read as part of the pageant. While the Office of War Information merely advised against sending a statement, State Department members preferred to block the pageant entirely. As denying these individuals their right to free speech would be unconstitutional, just as it was in 1934 when Wise staged *The Case of Civilization Against Hitler*, the White House simply declined to send a message.<sup>125</sup> Rose was successful with another lawmaker, Governor Thomas E. Dewey of New York, who agreed to proclaim March 9 as a Day of Mourning.

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<sup>123</sup> Hecht, *A Child of the Century*, 556; Hoffman, 145-146.

<sup>124</sup> Hoffman, 146.

<sup>125</sup> Breitman and Lichtman, 217.

Even this minor accomplishment was not without resistance from Stephen Wise, who brought a delegation of Jews to protest the matter to Dewey's office unsuccessfully.<sup>126</sup>

Since December 1942, Wise and the AJCongress had been making plans for another rally. About two weeks after the Riegner press release, on December 8, Wise and three of his colleagues from the Temporary Committee sat down for an overdue meeting with President Roosevelt. According to their accounts of the meeting, the President told a "semihumorous" story about his plans for postwar Germany before Wise read a prewritten plea stressing the need for immediate action. He presented FDR with a twenty-page document of extermination data. FDR agreed to issue war crime warnings to Germany and send press reports on the matter that stressed the two million already dead and the five million facing extermination.<sup>127</sup> Despite gaining a public statement from the President, the AJCongress feared their cause would suffer as they caught word of the CJA's pageant. To compete with the CJA, they urged Wise to hold another rally and he agreed.<sup>128</sup>

Wise and the American Jewish Congress booked Madison Square Garden for March 1, mere days before the oppositional rally was set to take place. While the accounts are contradictory, it is certain that Wise and Hecht spoke over the phone in February over the issue of the competing rallies. To avoid being upstaged, it is likely that Wise called Hecht and advised that he cease the production and his own involvement in the "Jewish

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<sup>126</sup> Hecht, *A Child of the Century*, 575-576; "40,000 Crowd Memorial Service in New York for Massacred Jews of Europe," *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, March 10, 1943, accessed August 17, 2022, <https://www.jta.org/1943/03/10/archive/40000-crowd-memorial-service-in-new-york-for-massacred-jews-of-europe>.

<sup>127</sup> Wyman, 72-73.

<sup>128</sup> Medoff, 149.

cause.”<sup>129</sup> In return, Hecht offered to merge the two demonstrations, but Wise turned him down.<sup>130</sup> Wise’s refusal of his offer only energized Hecht. Both rallies went on as planned.

#### **D. Stop Hitler Now, 1943**

On March 1, the American Jewish Congress’ *Stop Hitler Now* rally filled twenty-one thousand seats in Madison Square Garden, with ten thousand people waiting just outside the gates. Press reports claimed that police dispersed over seventy-five thousand people on the surrounding streets.<sup>131</sup> Medoff asserts that the overflowing audience "illustrated the strong sentiment in the Jewish community for a more forceful response to the European Jewish crisis."<sup>132</sup> The AJCongress, Free World Association, American Federation of Labor (AFL), Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), Church Peace Union, and other Christian and Jewish organizations, some of whom had likely turned Hecht down a month earlier, provided funding and support for the production.<sup>133</sup>

To usher in an atmosphere of restrained, respectable wartime protest, the rally began with the Presentation of Colors ceremony by the Jewish War Veterans and the American Legion. The audience united in singing “The Star-Spangled Banner,” declaring their patriotic allegiance, before shifting their attention to four local rabbis. One by one, the rabbis took turns to recite a psalm, say *Kaddish*, blow the shofar, and recite

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<sup>129</sup> Hecht, 564.

<sup>130</sup> Medoff, 149; Wise, to James Waterman Wise, Hollywood, California, February 16, 1943 in *Servant of the People: Selected Letters*, 257.

<sup>131</sup> “SAVE DOOMED JEWS, HUGE RALLY PLEADS; United Nations Must Halt Nazi Murders Now, Leaders Tell 21,000 at the Garden Huge Rally Demands Rescue of Doomed Jews.” *The New York Times*. March 2, 1943. Accessed July 28, 2022. Pg 1-4. <https://nyti.ms/3PHbAh6>; “75,000 Sought Entrance to New York Meeting Protesting Nazi Massacres of Jews,” *JTA*, March 3, 1943, accessed July 28, 2022, <https://www.jta.org/archive/75000-sought-entrance-to-new-york-meeting-protesting-nazi-massacres-of-jews>.

<sup>132</sup> Medoff, 157.

<sup>133</sup> “Stop Hitler Now,” 1943, Series: I, Box: 2, Folder: 22. Yale University Library, Manuscripts and Archives; “SAVE DOOMED JEWS, HUGE RALLY PLEADS,” *NYT*, 1-4; Wyman, 88.

*El Maleh Rahamim*, a prayer for the departed during Jewish funeral services. This display of religiosity and mourning moved the audience to tears.<sup>134</sup>

With his audience softened by the emotional musical introduction, the evening's Chairman, Herman Shulman, gave his introductory remarks. Shulman's tone and rhetoric was remarkably similar to that of the 1934 mock trial. He hoped that "the great democratic organizations" gathered that evening would "galvanize the American spirit into an effective instrument for immediate action to save those Jews who can still be saved from the Hitler slaughter house [*sic*]." <sup>135</sup> The term "democratic" was still being used as a catch-all term for anti-fascist, representative, and most importantly, American. Despite ten years of protest by the American Jewish community, the "American spirit" was still sleeping. In the hopes of awakening it, Shulman now presented the nauseating image of Hitler's human slaughterhouse.

Shulman concluded his remarks with a haunting rebuke of the Great Democracies installed to protect humanity: "[The United Nations'] declaration promised that immediate practical steps would be taken."<sup>136</sup> The declaration in reference was issued by three main Allies and the governments of eight occupied countries on December 17, 1942. They vowed to take "the necessary practical measures" to bring the Nazi perpetrators to justice.<sup>137</sup> Shulman continued, "No such steps have yet been taken. Now it is too late merely

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<sup>134</sup> "Stop Hitler Now," 1-2; "SAVE DOOMED JEWS, HUGE RALLY PLEADS," *NYT*, 1-4; "Huge Demonstration in New York Appeals to All Governments to Save Jews in Europe," *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, March 2, 1943, accessed July 28, 2022, <https://www.jta.org/archive/huge-demonstration-in-new-york-appeals-to-all-governments-to-save-jews-in-europe>.

<sup>135</sup> "Stop Hitler Now," 2-3.

<sup>136</sup> "Stop Hitler Now," 3.

<sup>137</sup> Wyman, 75; Medoff, 137-138; "11 Allies Condemn Nazi War on Jews," *New York Times*, December 18, 1942, accessed May 26, 2023, [https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1942/12/18/85062953.pdf?pdf\\_redirect=true&ip=0](https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1942/12/18/85062953.pdf?pdf_redirect=true&ip=0), 1,10.

to protest. It is too late to merely threaten retribution.”<sup>138</sup> The decade of failed protest and American apathy bore down on the evening’s message for action. The speakers would no longer tolerate Roosevelt’s empty promises for a future day of reckoning. In Wise’s words, they wanted the United States to “take every human measure to rescue and save all those civilian populations whom [Hitler] would destroy.”<sup>139</sup>

As a recognized figure in Jewish circles and the public sphere, Stephen Wise was the first speaker of the evening. Unlike during the 1934 mock trial, he spoke with uninhibited urgency, saying, “It is very late; too late to save all; too late to save many and yet not too late to save some.”<sup>140</sup> Like Shulman, Wise placed the heavy burden of Jewish rescue on the Allied democracies, who “from ’33 to ’39...refused to stop or even try to stop Hitler, in part, alas, because only Jews were being exterminated.”<sup>141</sup> In contrast to the mock trial, in 1943 Hitler was no longer Wise’s only enemy. His anger, and the anger of the crowd, was directed toward the United States government for their inaction.

Furthermore, their anger extended to Britain for issuing the 1939 White Paper which limited Jewish immigration to Mandatory Palestine. When Lord Halifax, British Ambassador to Washington, delivered his remarks that evening by radio, they were met with hissing from the crowd.<sup>142</sup> Multiple speakers at *Stop Hitler Now* demanded that, in AFL President William Green’s words, “the doors of admission to tortured, distressed, maltreated human beings be thrown wide open, not partly but wide.”<sup>143</sup> However, they did

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<sup>138</sup> “Stop Hitler Now,” 3.

<sup>139</sup> “Stop Hitler Now,” 9.

<sup>140</sup> “Stop Hitler Now,” 6.

<sup>141</sup> “Stop Hitler Now,” 8.

<sup>142</sup> “Stop Hitler Now,” 13.

<sup>143</sup> “Stop Hitler Now,” 61.

not forget the complicity of their own nations in the refugee crisis. Journalist Sir Norman Angell decried the ironic complicity of Western powers who rejected refugees but supported the Zionist project: “We cannot say to the Arabs there or elsewhere: ‘You shall let in a flood of immigrants; but we won’t.’”<sup>144</sup> The question of Palestine lingered in the audience’s minds while Zionist leaders gave their remarks.

The speakers representing the Yishuv and their political project focused heavily on imagining a future without Jews. Dr. Chaim Weizmann, chairman of the World Zionist Organization, warned what “the historian of the future” would see in “the black record of these nightmarish days.”<sup>145</sup> Despite the atrocities of the present, he argued that after Hitler’s defeat, “the Jewish people [would] go on making its contribution to the common treasury of world civilization.”<sup>146</sup> Tamar de Sola Poole, president of the women’s Zionist organization Hadassah, also spoke with a prophetic impulse. She remembered the words of Stephen Wise from the early days of protest – *Mene mene tekel upharsin* – and said, “The handwriting was clearly indicated on the wall, the writing of the mystic words of the Jew, so clear to us. As far as the world was concerned, it was written in invisible ink.”<sup>147</sup> Now, she argued, the words remained “a prelude to justice for all the world.”<sup>148</sup>

The third speaker representing the Zionist project was Rabbi Meir Bar-Ilan (known as Berlin). Speaking in Yiddish, Berlin positioned himself as a representative of the Yishuv, portraying them as a people of action, unlike Americans. He said, “We in Palestine,” implying a contrast with American Jewry, “do not waste empty sympathy upon

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<sup>144</sup> “Stop Hitler Now,” 75.

<sup>145</sup> “Stop Hitler Now,” 20.

<sup>146</sup> “Stop Hitler Now,” 24.

<sup>147</sup> “Stop Hitler Now,” 91.

<sup>148</sup> “Stop Hitler Now,” 91-92.

[European] Jews.”<sup>149</sup> He criticized the American tendency to decry suffering without making an effort toward rescue action. More so than Rabbi Wise, Berlin sermonized and offered the audience a rabbi’s wisdom for the millions dying “with Sh’ma Y’isroel on [their] lips [who] knows that his life would be worse than death.”<sup>150</sup> Reflecting his focus on action rather than contemplation, Wise limited any remarks that would be too particular for a general audience. For example, he mentioned biblical persecution only once, referring to past examples of Pharaoh’s “evil dream of executing the Jewish people.”<sup>151</sup> With more Jewish speakers on the roster than 1934, the burden was no longer on Wise to speak for the Jewish people.

Also in contrast to 1934, the act of rallying was now an established practice in Wise’s community. He did not rely on pageantry to convince audiences of his cause. Audiences were ready to engage, singing along with the national anthem, rising to sing the Zionist anthem “Hatikvah” before Dr. Chaim Weizmann’s remarks, applauding and hissing in response to the speakers, and participating in an audience vote for the meeting’s joint resolution. Presenter Louis Lipsky gave the audience “a chance to vote unanimously for [the eleven points], but not to dissent from them,” and so they were passed with “much applause.”<sup>152</sup> The joint resolution proposed an eleven-point plan of action for President Roosevelt to rescue European Jews.<sup>153</sup>

In the months after its first performance, *Stop Hitler Now* rallies modeled after Wise’s swept the nation. Across twenty states, local Jewish organizations conducted a total

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<sup>149</sup> “Stop Hitler Now,” 87.

<sup>150</sup> “Stop Hitler Now,” 87.

<sup>151</sup> “Stop Hitler Now,” 8.

<sup>152</sup> “Stop Hitler Now,” 20, 41.

<sup>153</sup> “SAVE DOOMED JEWS, HUGE RALLY PLEADS,” *New York Times*.

of forty rallies with the cooperation of their local church groups, AFL unions, and CIO chapters.<sup>154</sup> With its broad reach and grassroots support, historian Aaron Berman marks *Stop Hitler Now* as the “most important” mass meeting in the American Jewish rescue effort.<sup>155</sup> Following the first performance, Wise revived the Joint Emergency Committee on European Jewish Affairs (JEC). However, in the following twelve weeks of activity, its members could not overcome their ideological divisions or unite behind a single leader to impact the Roosevelt administration’s approach.<sup>156</sup> The *Stop Hitler Now* rally, despite its solemn portrayal of the grave situation in Europe, “couldn’t hold a theatrical candle to the flamboyantly spectacular” production that took place the next week.<sup>157</sup>

### **E. We Will Never Die**

The thousand-member cast of *We Will Never Die* performed twice on the evening of March 9 for two separate audiences totaling forty thousand, the largest Madison Square Garden had ever seen.<sup>158</sup> The pageant stage was draped in black cloth and decorated with two forty-foot inscriptions of the Ten Commandments. From the ceiling hung multiple candelabra and an illuminated Star of David, giving the arena a dim light.<sup>159</sup> The first act, “The Roll Call,” opened with a powerful prayer-like tribute to “the two million who have been killed in Europe.”<sup>160</sup> After a rabbi “from the ghettos of Europe” recited the Sh’ma Yisrael prayer, an extensive eight-minute roll-call named 119 Jews from Abraham to

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<sup>154</sup> Wyman, 93.

<sup>155</sup> Berman, 101.

<sup>156</sup> Wyman, 328-329.

<sup>157</sup> Hoffman, 152.

<sup>158</sup> Hoffman, 152.

<sup>159</sup> “40,000 Crowd Memorial Service in New York for Massacred Jews of Europe,” *JTA*.

<sup>160</sup> Recording of Hollywood Bowl performance of *We Will Never Die* (1943), July 1943, NBC Radio, accessed May 20, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w3HqzOC1ZZ8>.



Emma Lazarus.<sup>161</sup> The next act, “Jews in the War,” married American patriotism with Jewish values in a dramatization of Jewish involvement in the armed forces of the United Nations.<sup>162</sup> The third and final act predicted scenes of peace-talks after the war, haunted by the ghosts of dead Jews from across Europe. Ten groups of gray-faced Jews presented the memories of their deaths to national representatives gathered at a table onstage. One such story went,

Remember us in Wloclowek. The Germans came when we were at prayer. They tore the prayer shawls from our heads. Under whips and bayonets they made us use our prayer shawls as knobs to clean out German latrines. We were all dead when the sun set – 100 of us. Remember us.<sup>163</sup>

The elaborate visualizations were supported by a remarkable cast (in both number and influence), including stars Paul Muni, Luther and Stella Adler, John Garfield, Edward G. Robinson, and Yiddish-theater star Jacob Ben Ami, cantors, rabbis, children from a New York Jewish orphanage, and the NBC symphony orchestra.<sup>164</sup> As previously discussed, *We Will Never Die* went on a national tour, with subsequent performances in Washington’s Constitution Hall (April 12), Philadelphia’s Convention Hall (April 22), the Chicago Stadium (May 19), the Boston Garden (June 6), and the Hollywood Bowl (July 21).<sup>165</sup>

At the Washington DC performance, attended by Supreme Court justices, senators, congresspeople and the like, the final narrator condemned the audience with his closing speech, saying, “The silence of our history makers has made them honorary members of

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<sup>161</sup> *We Will Never Die* (1943), July 1943; Skloot, 176.

<sup>162</sup> “40,000 Crowd Memorial Service in New York for Massacred Jews of Europe,” *JTA*.

<sup>163</sup> Skloot, 177.

<sup>164</sup> “MUNI, ROBINSON IN PAGEANT; Cast Completed for Tuesday’s Memorial, ‘We Will Never Die,’” *The New York Times*, March 4, 1943, accessed October 18, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/1943/03/04/archives/muni-robinson-in-pageant-cast-completed-for-tuesdays-memorial-we.html?searchResultPosition=1>; Hecht, 558; Hoffinan, 152.

<sup>165</sup> Skloot, 172. At the Hollywood Bowl, Hecht added a fourth act titled “The Battle of the Warsaw Ghetto,” which frantically dramatized three weeks of battle.

the German posse.”<sup>166</sup> This performance made no waves within the Capitol, but First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt gracefully acknowledged the pageant in her national column, “My Day.”<sup>167</sup> Although the CJA made efforts to continue their tour across four more cities in the summer, the AJCongress and other large Jewish institutional organizations canceled future stagings by pressuring local sponsors against supporting the pageant.<sup>168</sup>

Even before seeing the pageant, the AJCongress feared Hecht’s script because of his record as a solo writer and propagandist for the CJA. Since Hitler’s rise to power, Hecht had garnered significant amounts of attention in the press and in literary circles with his writings on the catastrophe of European Jewry. In 1939, he published “The Little Candle,” a prophetic short story written in the first-person collective that predicted the massacre of hundreds of thousands of European Jews by fascist regimes.<sup>169</sup> Writing for the CJA, he put antagonistic ads in the *New York Times*, including a February 1943 ad that announced: “FOR SALE to Humanity 70,000 Jews / Guaranteed Human Beings at \$50 a Piece,” in response to the Romanian government’s attempt to sell the safety of their Jewish citizens to the Allies.<sup>170</sup> Hecht’s controversial writing style ensured that the public heard the CJA’s message, whether they agreed with it or not.

Hecht’s script of *We Will Never Die* pulled from the same three elements as *The Case of Civilization Against Hitler* had in 1934. First, the CJA staged their event as an

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<sup>166</sup> Hoffman, 155; Penkower, 289; typescript “Remember Us,” 2.

<sup>167</sup> Eleanor Roosevelt, “April 14, 1943,” *My Day*, April 14, 1943, The Eleanor Roosevelt Papers, Digital Edition, accessed March 18, 2023, [https://www2.gwu.edu/~erpapers/myday/displaydoc.cfm?\\_y=1943&\\_f=md056470](https://www2.gwu.edu/~erpapers/myday/displaydoc.cfm?_y=1943&_f=md056470).

<sup>168</sup> Skloot, 172; Wyman, 92; “Report on Attempts to Stage ‘We Will Never Die’ in Kingston, Rochester, Buffalo, Baltimore, Gary, and Pittsburg,” in *America and the Holocaust: The Struggle for Rescue Action*, ed. David S. Wyman (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1990).

<sup>169</sup> Ben Hecht, “The Little Candle,” *A Book of Miracles* (Garden City, NY: The Sun Dial Press, 1941), 41.

<sup>170</sup> “For Sale to Humanity,” *New York Times*, February 16, 1943, accessed March 2, 2023, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1943/02/16/issue.html>, 11.

international war tribunal, demonstrating how systems of democratic justice had failed to save the Jews of Europe. Second, they relied on a confluence of Judaism and justice to argue their case. They represented particularly Jewish beliefs as universal moral codes. In their representations of these two themes, they traversed thousands of years of Jewish history in order to imagine the future. Unlike the AJCongress, the CJA choreographed this imagined future through scripted scenes, not verbal allusions.

### **F. Imagining Justice as an American**

Similarly to setting *Stop Hitler Now 1934* as a mock trial, Hecht set *We Will Never Die* at a postwar tribunal to imbue the event with democratic authority. He set the stage with a long table attended by actors playing Germans and sixteen "victims of the German adventure" from America, Russia, England, Poland, Greece, China, Belgium, Czechoslovakia, France, Serbia, and the Netherlands.<sup>171</sup> The third act, based on "Remember Us," began with this ominous provocation:

When the plans for the new world are being thrashed out at the peace table, when the guilts are being fixed and the color and shape of the future determined, there will be nothing for the Jews of Europe to say to the delegates at the sad, faint phrase – Remember Us. The dead of many lands will speak for justice through their spokesman around the table of judgment. The Jew alone will have no one to speak for him.<sup>172</sup>

This opening statement gave audience members a narrative transition to shift their perspective from looking back through Jewish history to imagining the future. He considered the "new world," which was born again through Hitler's defeat and through the

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<sup>171</sup> Ben Hecht, "We Will Never Die" script, *Liberal Judaism* (May and June 1943), 38-45 and 55-63 in *America and the Holocaust: The Struggle for Rescue Action*, ed. David S. Wyman (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1990), 189-205; "We Will Never Die," 1943, box: 31, folders: 793-795, The Newberry Library – Modern Manuscripts, 59-60.

<sup>172</sup> Hecht, "We Will Never Die" script, 202; typescript "We Will Never Die," 60.

destruction of Europe. In the remains of a world war, who would build the future? Hecht argued that the only requirement for participating in this process was nationhood. The dead of “many lands” would have people to speak for them, while “the Jew alone” would suffer from statelessness, and thus, powerlessness.

Despite the disturbing content being represented, the court was an accessible and safe setting for American audiences to imagine the terrors occurring under Hitler’s rule. Actors playing Jewish victims crossed the stage and gave testimonies, based on witness reports from Switzerland, from the perspective of the dead. Instead of presenting a case against the Nazis, these narrators pled for the audience to remember and avenge the dead with a haunting refrain: "Remember Us."<sup>173</sup> They shared gruesome testimonies of Jews being "hanged and left dangling out of [their] kitchen windows,"<sup>174</sup> "dynamited," and killed by "German military cars running back and forth over our broken bodies."<sup>175</sup> After the final testimonial group crossed the stage, a "stream of Dead figures" entered the stage through the Tablets and formed a circle around the peace table.<sup>176</sup>

With a stage full of the "Dead," the narrator gave an impassioned call to action: “In allowing the slaughter of 4 million helpless people, in standing by without utterance, we who are the Four Freedoms of the world become honorary members of the German policy.”<sup>177</sup> By evoking Roosevelt’s Four Freedoms speech, given on January 6, 1941, the narrator reminded audience members that these murdered Jews had no right to any of their “freedoms”: freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom

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<sup>173</sup> Typescript "Remember Us," 21-26; Hecht, 549-550.

<sup>174</sup> Hecht, "We Will Never Die" script, 189-205.

<sup>175</sup> Hecht, "We Will Never Die" script, 189-205.

<sup>176</sup> Hecht, "We Will Never Die" script, 189-205.

<sup>177</sup> Hecht, "We Will Never Die" script, 189-205.

from fear. Rather, as Hecht had argued in his column for years, American Jews were self-serving and unwilling to sacrifice their status in the New World for Old World Jews. Notably, throughout the third act, the national representatives sitting around the peace table were not given the opportunity to speak at all. During and after the war, Germany's enemies would remain silent and unredeemed.

While Hecht's inclusion of Jewish testimony emphasized the need for timely intervention, it was perhaps to the detriment of the overall image of the Jewish people. As Robert Skloot argues, "By dramatizing the genius of the Jews' history and the terrible condition of their contemporary situation, he also validated the condition of Jewish helplessness and exclusion."<sup>178</sup> Hecht traveled through Jewish history and chose to forefront a lachrymose narrative in his pageant. Although his funding came from the CJA, whose explicit purpose was building a Jewish army, his text lacked a call for resistance. In fact, when Hecht signed up to work with the CJA he made clear that he was not interested in writing propaganda to bring American Jews into such an army.<sup>179</sup> In place of a battle cry, he wrote a sorrowful refrain for a lost cause. Ironically, his script continued the pattern of defeatism that he loathed in his American co-religionists.<sup>180</sup> While Hecht felt disconnected from his fellow Jewish Americans, he incorporated their shared religion into the pageant.

### **G. Imagining Justice as a Jew**

Even before the narrators spoke, the mise-en-scene of *We Will Never Die* established the connection between Judaism and universal justice. The six candelabras

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<sup>178</sup> Skloot, 180.

<sup>179</sup> Hecht, *A Child of the Century*, 536.

<sup>180</sup> Skloot, 170.

hanging from the ceiling brought the symbolic light of eternal life into the Garden. In Judaism, the unfaltering light of a candle holds many meanings. In every synagogue, the *Ner Tamid* (Hebrew for eternal light) illuminates the *bima* (pulpit) to symbolize the fire that burned on the altar in the Temple in Jerusalem. Below the eternal lights of Madison Square Garden there towered two tablets of the Ten Commandments. Inscribed in Hebrew, the tablets were a shared Judeo-Christian symbol that reminded audiences that the guiding moral principles of “civilization” were Jewish in origin.

The sounds of the pageant also contributed to its marriage of religious and secular values. Kurt Weill’s opening composition fused *Kol Nidre* with *Hatikva*, combining the mournful Yom Kippur melody with the Zionist song of hope.<sup>181</sup> As in *Stop Hitler Now*, they used a shofar blast to “aurally [italicize] knowledge or mortality and . . . to herald what is hoped will be a good year.”<sup>182</sup> All of these elements were present in *Stop Hitler Now* days before, but Weill’s artistic rendering offered more emotional poignancy. Draped in a *tallit*, Yiddish actor Jacob Ben-Ami opened the pageant by reciting the *Sh’ma Yisroel*, backed by the choir. A highly recognizable Jewish symbol, the tallit reminds its wearer of the ethical obligations of a Jew. The aesthetically Jewish elements of the pageant combined with the script to juxtapose Judaism with justice.

Finally, the scripted rhetoric portrayed Judaism as the original source of civilization's moral laws. During the Roll Call, the narrator made a universal prophet out of Moses, “who brought down from Mount Sinai the Ten Commandments which are the moral laws of today and which will be the moral laws of a tomorrow – rid of Nazis.”<sup>183</sup> A

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<sup>181</sup> Hoffman, 154.

<sup>182</sup> Albert Wertheim, *Staging the War: American Drama and World War II* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004), 92.

<sup>183</sup> Typescript "Remember Us," 6.

late addition to the script added "Jesus Christ of Nazareth, apostle of God and king of the Jews" to the first act Roll Call. Hecht directly referenced the Christian figure, whose absence would have gone otherwise unnoticed by the predominantly Jewish crowd. In doing so, he represented Christianity and Judaism side-by-side.

During the acted testimonials, Hecht also represented the Nazi threat to the Jewish religion. One of the Dead told their story:

On the morning of September 3rd, which is the day set aside for our Atonement, we were all in church praying God to forgive us. ... The Germans set fire to us. When we ran out of the flames they turned machine guns on us. They caught our women and undressed them and made them run naked under whips through the market-place. All of us were killed before our Atonement Day was done. Remember us.<sup>184</sup>

In this gruesome scene, he emphasized how atonement is a Jewish value, reconsidered every calendar year on Yom Kippur regardless of the year's events. In the days leading up to Yom Kippur, Jews are instructed to reflect on their wrongdoings from the past year in preparation to atone for their sins. As Rabbi Nina Beth Cardin writes, "The language of [Jewish] prayers imagines God as judge and king, sitting in the divine court on the divine throne of justice, reviewing our deeds. ... God considers [them], weighs the good against the bad, and ... decides 'who shall live and who shall die.'"<sup>185</sup> By invading on Yom Kippur, the Nazi stampede on the Polish town became a barbaric assault on virtuousness. The Jews could not complete their prayers before their gruesome deaths, and thus, would not be inscribed in the Book of Life.

Finally, Hecht transformed the fictional court into a prayer service – a space for mourning "the voiceless and the Jewish dead of Europe" – with a final invitation to sing

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<sup>184</sup> Hecht, "We Will Never Die" script, 203.

<sup>185</sup> Nina Cardin, *The Tapestry of Jewish Time: A Spiritual Guide to Holidays and Lifecycle Events* (Millburn, NJ: Behrman House Publishing, 2000), 57.

the Kaddish.<sup>186</sup> This choice granted the audience a voice through which to express their own Jewishness, their sorrow, and for those familiar with the Hebrew, their affirmation of life. The pageant was more than a protest rally, it was a safe place to mourn en masse. Kurt Weill famously said of the pageant, “all we have done is make a lot of Jews cry, which is not a unique accomplishment.”<sup>187</sup>

In the end, the project was funded solely by the CJA through fund-raising. Most donations to this cause came through newspaper ads and the CJA benefitted from no large donors. Ticket sales from the opening shows in New York made enough of a profit to allow the show to continue on to Washington DC, but during this first leg of their tour, the group began hemorrhaging money. All performers, of whom there were hundreds, volunteered their time.<sup>188</sup> After six tour stops across the country, most of the money the CJA raised went back into propaganda efforts, rather than to supporting European Jews.<sup>189</sup>

## H. Conclusion

In this chapter, I discussed the origins of the Committee for a Jewish Army, who provoked upset from the Jewish institutions of New York with their incendiary propaganda. In November 1942, the circumstances all groups operated under changed when Wise revealed the Nazi plan of systematic extermination to the American public. This event intensified the national stage the CJA and AJCongress operated on. Their animosity morphed into competition, and in March 1943 both organizations staged mass rallies to

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<sup>186</sup>Hecht, "We Will Never Die" script, 189-205.

<sup>187</sup> Hecht, *A Child of the Century*, 576.

<sup>188</sup> David S. Wyman and Rafael Medoff, *A Race Against Death: Peter Bergson, America, and the Holocaust* (New York: The New Press, 2002), 72.

<sup>189</sup> Barry Trachtenberg, *The United States and the Nazi Holocaust: Race, Refuge, and Remembrance* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 76.



garner support for the rescue of European Jews. Like *The Case of Civilization Against Hitler*, the main production examined in this chapter, *We Will Never Die*, also reproduced rituals of the courtroom, merged the familiar elements of secular justice with Jewish rituals, and narrated thousands of years of Jewish history to argue for their cause.

## Conclusion

Historian Stephen J. Whitfield despairingly writes about the events of 1943, “The flow of blood that neither the League of Nations nor the Atlantic Charter nor the Papacy could stanch could not be stopped by dramaturgical gestures. Stagecraft was no substitute for statecraft.”<sup>190</sup> Whitfield rightfully contrasts dramatic performance with government action, but prompts the question: did Wise and Hecht *intend* to substitute statecraft with stagecraft? Both parties understood that rallying was not an alternative to diplomatic or military action, but a path to it. By gathering the public, disseminating petitions, and practicing procedures of justice, Wise and Hecht intended to convey how significant statecraft was to rescuing European Jews but recognized their limitations performing outside of the political sphere.

In this thesis, I did not intend to label Wise and Hecht’s actions as successes or failures in regard to the six million Jews murdered in the Holocaust. Instead, I examined their rhetorical and theatrical efforts to uncover greater conclusions about American Jewish identity and its impacts on community cohesion during this time of crisis. To this effect, I showed how multiple divides – institutional, ethnic, and political – kept the players of this history segregated. Their performance protests show that their hope for saving the Jews of Europe may have been their only shared belief despite their intersecting identities.

The competition to garner public support between Wise and Hecht in 1943 fueled a larger campaign than either could have produced alone, or in tandem. Through a divided effort, they likely reached different segments of the American Jewish population. I have shown how Wise’s supporters refused to offer the CJA support. Yet, we know tens of

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<sup>190</sup> Whitfield, 234.

thousands of people witnessed *We Will Never Die*. By examining the parallels between *The Case of Civilization Against Hitler* and *We Will Never Die*, I revealed how both groups used similar messaging to communicate with a greater percentage of the public. The audiences of both 1943 rallies received the same message, but with two sources spreading it, individuals received the message they were most prepared to accept. By curating an air of legitimacy around the protest performances, Wise and Hecht also drew early blueprints for postwar justice that likely impacted how Americans would interact with future war crimes trials.

On July 17, 1942, President Roosevelt wrote to Wise, "The American people not only sympathize with all victims of Nazi crimes but will hold the perpetrators of these crimes to strict accountability in a day of reckoning which will surely come."<sup>191</sup> This prophecy was true, but only thanks to the great efforts of Wise and Hecht to shape the American Jewish public's expectations for the postwar day of reckoning. Because World War II produced the concepts used to convict Nazi criminals, Wise and Hecht were innovators of justice in the public imagination. In 1945, German criminals faced prosecution at Nuremberg under the London Charter. The London Charter established an International Military Tribunal and three categories of crimes: crimes against peace, war crimes, and crimes against humanity. In their staged performances of justice, Wise and Hecht used the term "humanity" frequently and intentionally. They emphasized the Jewish contributions to civilization at large and fought to bring the stories of persecuted

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<sup>191</sup> Wise, *Challenging Years*, 227.

individuals to the American public. In this way, they influenced how Americans would react to the Nuremberg Trials and even the televised trial of Adolf Eichmann in 1961.<sup>192</sup>

While the protest performances staged by Wise and Hecht contributed to immediate conceptions of postwar justice, they also informed contemporary representations of the Holocaust eighty years later. Today, performance art continues to be a primary source of American Holocaust memory. Although our technology has transformed since the 1940s, artists continue to represent the Holocaust with urgency and intention, whether it be through plays, films, or television. Before the Allies provided Americans with the first images of the liberated camps across Europe, Wise and Hecht offered them accessible and embodied testimony from Jewish victims of Hitler's genocide. By studying their works, we can trace the beginnings of the artistic and political vocabulary used to represent the Holocaust today. As scholar of Jewish history and memory Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi writes, the image of the Holocaust "is being shaped not at the historian's anvil, but in the novelist's crucible."<sup>193</sup>

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<sup>192</sup> For more on war crimes trials and the beginnings of Holocaust memory, see Donald Bloxham, *Genocide on Trial: War Crimes Trials and the Formation of Holocaust History and Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>193</sup> Yosef Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982), 98.

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