

Holocaust Resistance in Europe and America

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New Aspects and Dilemmas

Edited by

Victoria Khiterer with Abigail S Gruber

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*Dedicated to the memory of my grandparents,
who survived World War II and the Holocaust:*

Boris Yakovlevich Khiterer,

Vera (Dvoira) Moiseevna Feldman,

Ilia Vladimirovich Brovarnik and

Evgeniia Karpovna (Gitsel Kalmanovna) Brovarnik

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	ix
------------------------	----

Introduction	xi
Victoria Khiterer	

Chapter One: Resistance to Nazi Anti-Semitism in America

Do the Words Matter? Congressional Resistance to Nazi Anti-Semitism during the 1930s	2
Jeffrey Scott Demsky	

Chapter Two: Armed Resistance to the Holocaust

Why They Fought: Soviet and Other Jewish Soldiers in World War II ...	26
Zvi Gitelman	

Chapter Three: Resistance in Ghettos and Concentration Camps

Strategies for Jewish Survival in Ghettos and Forced Labor Camps	38
Martin Dean	

The Keeper of Words: Herman Kruk as Diarist, Archivist, and Librarian of the Vilna Ghetto	50
Amy Simon	

Four Women: Different Approaches to Resistance in the Concentration Camps during the Holocaust	62
Paul R. Bartrop	

The Realm Outside Operation T4: Jewish Utilizations of Mental Institutions during World War II	70
Kobi Penland	

Chapter Four: Commemoration and Memorialization of the Holocaust

Traumatic Memory and the Nature of Commemoration in Contemporary Germany	86
Holli Levitsky	

Memorialization of the Holocaust in Minsk and Kiev	95
Victoria Khiterer	

Chapter Five: Representation of Holocaust Resistance in Literature and Film

Grossman's Resistance	134
Maxim D. Shrayer	

Resistance and Representation in Alfred Radok's "Daleka cesta" (Distant Journey)	164
Stuart Liebman	

Jewish Resistance Depicted in the Popular Culture with a Focus on the Warsaw Ghetto Revolt	190
Michael Rubinoff	

Notes on Authors and Editors	219
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I would like to thank my colleagues for their innovative essays that constitute this volume and for their advice and encouragement. I want to especially thank Professor Emeritus of Holocaust Studies, Brandeis University, Antony Polonsky, with whom I consulted numerous times during preparation of the manuscript.

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My graduate student Abigail Gruber helped organize the 2016 conference and co-edited this volume of proceedings with me. I really appreciate her superb editorial work.

My husband James Danaher devoted many hours to perfecting the text and illustrations of this work; I am very grateful for his enthusiastic support and daily encouragement.

My parents Ludmila Brovarnik and Mikhail Khiterer, and my aunt Elena Sokolovsky shared with me family history about my grandfathers' participation in World War II and how my grandmothers survived the Holocaust with their children. This family oral history made even more personally meaningful for me the many events described in the volume. I am very grateful indeed to my parents and aunt for sharing with me our family history.

Without the collaborative work of many people, the preparation of the volume would certainly have been impossible. I appreciate their contributions, support, and encouragement throughout this endeavor.

Victoria Khiterer
Millersville University

INTRODUCTION

VICTORIA KHITERER

Never say this is the final road for you,
Though leaden skies may cover over days of blue.
As the hour that we longed for is so near,
Our step beats out the message: we are here!

Hymn of the Jewish Partisans
Hirsh Glik¹

Hirsh Glik, the author of the lyrics of the song “Zog nit keynmol az du geyst dem letstn veg” (Never say that you are walking the final road), also known as the *Hymn of the Jewish Partisans*, perished during the Holocaust at the age of twenty-two. Glik was born in Vilna, Poland (now Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania), in 1922. Before World War II, he was a Yiddish poet and a member of the Jewish Socialist-Zionist youth movement *Hashomer Hatzair*.²

During the Nazi occupation, Glik was imprisoned in the Vilna ghetto and in various labor camps. He joined the United Partisans Organization (FPO) in the Vilna ghetto, and continued to write and recite Yiddish poetry. Glik wrote the lyrics to the song “Zog Nit Keynmol” under the influence of two events: the fighting of “a group of Jewish partisans and an SS detachment in the forests near Vilna in 1943” and the Warsaw ghetto uprising.³ The lyrics were set to the music of the popular Russian song “Terskaia pokhodnaia” (“The Terek Marching Song”), which was first performed by the Jewish Soviet star Leonid Utesov in the film *Syny trudovogo naroda* (Sons of the Working People, 1938). The music to the song was written by Jewish Soviet composers Dmitrii and Daniil Pokrass, based on the tune from the Yiddish lullaby “Oyfn Pripetchik.”⁴

“Zog Nit Keynmol” was recognized as “the official hymn of the FPO soon after it was written in 1943.”⁵ The song soon became popular among other Jewish partisan groups as a symbol of resistance against the Nazi regime and the Holocaust. The renowned American singer Paul Robeson performed this song at his concert in Moscow in June 1949 to publicly

demonstrate his solidarity with Soviet Jews, who suffered from devastating state anti-Semitic campaigns and political repression in the late 1940s - 1953.⁶

There were many forms of resistance to the Holocaust: armed and passive resistance, uprisings in ghettos and concentration camps, partisan and underground movements, the rescue of Jews, spiritual resistance, and the preservation of Jewish artifacts and memories.

Jewish resistance to the Holocaust faced many obstacles and difficulties. Jews had lived in the diaspora for 2,000 years and had a long tradition of compliance with the authorities.⁷ The Nazis did not begin to murder all Jews until their invasion of the Soviet Union. So many Jews hoped to survive the war in spite of the rabid anti-Semitism of the Nazis. In many places, Jews had limited help from their Christian neighbors. It was exceedingly dangerous for gentiles to help Jews. The Nazis threatened to summarily execute anybody who helped or hid Jews. An important factor was also the long standing anti-Semitic sentiment of a significant part of the Eastern European gentile population, some of whom denounced Jews and collaborated with the Nazis in the Holocaust.

In many cases, resistance fighters risked not only their own lives, but also the lives of others. The Nazis used collective punishment and, in revenge for acts of resistance, executed Jewish and gentile civilians. One of the most notorious examples of such punishment was the destruction of the Czech village of Lidice in retaliation for the assassination of Reinhard Heydrich, the Deputy Reich Protector of Bohemia and Moravia, by Czech resistance fighters. All 173 men from the village older than 15 years old were executed on 10 June 1942.⁸ Another example of collective punishment of innocent civilians for partisans' actions was the massacre of 149 inhabitants of the Belorussian village Khatyn' (near Minsk) on 22 March 1943 by the Nazi organized Ukrainian Auxiliary Police and a Waffen-SS battalion.⁹ Per Anders Rudling wrote: "Between 1941 and 1944, the German invaders carried out 140 major 'punitive' operations similar to the one that resulted in the destruction of Khatyn. In the spring of 1943 alone, 12,000 partisans and civilians were killed in similar *Aktionen*."¹⁰

Thus, there was a serious dilemma over whether to resist and over what methods of resistance should be used, because armed resistance could further harm the civilian population. However, Jews, Roma, communists, and mentally ill people were in any case doomed in the Nazi occupied territories. Very few of them could have expected to survive the war whether they resisted or not. So Jews created resistance organizations,

fought, and perished as heroes during the Vilna, Kovno, Bialystok, Warsaw, and other ghetto and death camps uprisings and revolts.¹¹ There were also acts of individual Jewish resistance that are described further in this book.

Many Jews voluntarily joined partisan units or fought in the armies of the anti-Nazi coalition. The participation of Jews in armed resistance had an important moral impact on the Jewish and gentile populations. Jewish veterans of World War II were and are very proud of their contribution to the victory over Nazi Germany. They believe that they saved the world from the “brown plague,” as Nazism was called in the Soviet Union, and stopped the further Holocaust of the Jewish people.

The methods of resistance were often defined by circumstances. Armed resistance was not always feasible and sometimes could only result in the immediate death of its participants. Alternative methods were often necessary to survive the war. Sometimes Jews successfully disguised themselves as gentiles. For example, the military unit where my grandfather, a senior lieutenant of the Red Army, Boris Yakovlevich Khiterer served, was encircled in Western Ukraine in the first days of the Nazi invasion. My grandfather knew that as a Jew he would not survive Nazi captivity. So he decided to try to escape from the encirclement with his soldier - friend Semen Bublik, who was also Jewish. They came to a Ukrainian village and asked a peasant to provide them with civilian clothes. The Nazis were already in the village, but the Ukrainian peasant did not denounce my grandfather and his friend, and gave them the clothes. Then, my grandfather and his friend dressed as peasants and passed the Nazis, bowing and lifting their hats in the Ukrainian peasant manner, and they later crossed the front line. My grandfather recalled that he asked his friend to pretend that he was dumb, because Semen was from a shtetl and he spoke Russian and Ukrainian with a strong Jewish accent, mispronouncing the Russian letter “r”. After his successful escape, my grandfather rejoined the Red Army and later fought the Nazis in Stalingrad, Ukraine, Poland and East Prussia. He was awarded the Order of the Red Star and several other medals. After the victory in Stalingrad, he drove the captured German Field Marshal, Friedrich Paulus, from one place to another.¹² But all of this would not have happened, if at the beginning of the war Boris Khiterer had not used his creativity to save his and his friend’s lives.

In many cases, only passive resistance was possible. This took the forms of hiding or escaping from the Nazis, secret disobedience of Nazi orders, preserving Jewish artifacts, saving memories by writing diaries, and the creation of clandestine archives. Many Jews did not have arms or



Boris Yakovlevich Khiterer, senior lieutenant of the Red Army, with his medals.

military training, so they could not participate in armed resistance. But some were able to escape from the Nazis and save their lives and the lives of their loved ones. My grandmothers fled with their four and two-year-old children (my father and mother) from L'vov and Kiev on trucks and freight trains. During their long way to evacuation to Votkinsk in the Urals and Krasnoyarsk in Siberia, the trucks and trains were attacked by Nazi aircraft and my grandmothers covered their small children with their bodies during the airstrikes. My grandmothers and their children were very lucky to escape the Holocaust, while many Jews did not have such an opportunity.

There were countless examples of passive and active resistance to the Holocaust and the Nazi regime. The effort to resist was not in vain, regardless of whether the resistance participants survived or perished. To such fighters, resistance was seen as a moral victory over the Nazi regime.

This book is based on conference presentations at the 33rd Millersville University Conference on the Holocaust and Genocide (April 2 - 4, 2014), which was devoted to the theme of resistance. The volume contains eleven selected essays, which analyze different aspects of well-known and lesser-known cases of resistance to the Holocaust. **Jeffrey Scott Demsky's** essay *Do the Words Matter? Congressional Resistance to Nazi Anti-Semitism During the 1930s* shows that some US Congressmen condemned Nazi anti-Semitism in their speeches long before World War II. These speeches raised the awareness of American society to the dangers of the Nazi regime and ultimately may have helped decrease the level of bigotry and anti-Semitism in America.

Zvi Gitelman, in his essay *Why They Fought: Soviet and Other Jewish Soldiers in World War II*, points out the opposite tendencies in American and Soviet societies before, during, and after World War II. While anti-Semitism was quite strong in America in the interwar period, it decreased with time. In the Soviet Union, state anti-Semitism developed during the war and reached its peak in the late 1940s – early 1950s. Thus, Jewish Soviet soldiers who rarely faced anti-Semitism at the beginning of the war, more often encountered it from 1943 and in the postwar years.

Martin Dean's essay *Strategies for Jewish Survival in Ghettos and Forced Labor Camps* discusses different methods of resistance used by Jews in the ghettos and concentration camps. Among these methods were uprisings, mass escapes, using a false identity (there were Jews who pretended that they were gentiles or even “Aryans”), bribing the authorities and preserving memories by writing diaries about life in the ghettos.

Amy Simon's essay *The Keeper of Words: Herman Kruk as Diarist, Archivist, and Librarian of the Vilna Ghetto* is a further discussion of the preservation of the memory of Jewish life in the ghetto as a form of resistance to the Holocaust. Herman Kruk was the head librarian in the Vilna ghetto. He recorded in his diary daily accounts of life in the ghetto, and he also saved some documents and literary responses to Nazi rule. Kruk, like most ghetto inhabitants, perished during the Holocaust, but his diary has preserved for us invaluable information about Jewish life in the Vilna ghetto.

Paul R. Bartrop's essay *Four Women: Different Approaches to Resistance in the Concentration Camps During the Holocaust* discusses four cases of resistance in the Nazi concentration camps, contrasting the initiatives and actions of four women: Franceska Mann, Roza Robota, Sylvia Salvesen, and Alma Rosé, who were involved in active and passive resistance actions. Bartrop argues in his essay that "resistance took numerous forms beyond that of combat," but none of the forms of resistance guaranteed the survival of its participants.

Kobi Penland's essay *The Realm Outside Operation T4: Jewish Utilizations of Mental Institutions During World War II* contrasts the use of mental institutions by the Nazis and Jews. The Nazis considered mentally ill people "unfit for living," and "transformed institutions for the mentally ill into places of death." Jews used these institutions for medical care and the rehabilitation of mentally ill patients in the Otwock, Lodz, Theresienstadt, and Kovno ghettos.

Holli Levitsky's essay *Traumatic Memory and the Nature of Commemoration in Contemporary Germany* examines commemoration and memorialization of the Holocaust in Germany. Levitsky shows that using metaphors for the commemoration of the Holocaust has become more problematic with time, because "the further away from historical reality we are, the harder metaphor has to work to suggest meaning." The metaphorical meaning of Berlin's Holocaust Memorial or the vanishing of the Jewish citizens from the town in the children's picture book *Die Straße* (The Street),¹³ may not be obvious for younger Germans.

Victoria Khiterer's essay *Memorialization of the Holocaust in Minsk and Kiev* compares the memorialization of the Holocaust in these cities. The essay shows that in spite of the general policy of the Soviet government toward Jews, the level of state and popular anti-Semitism varied in different Soviet republics, which affected the memorialization of the Holocaust. In the capital of Belorussia, Minsk, a monument to the victims of the Holocaust was erected in 1946. Ukrainian Soviet authorities did not allow any monument to be built in Babi Yar (Kiev) until 1976. The

author argues that strong state and popular anti-Semitism in Ukraine was the main reason for the delay in the memorialization of the Holocaust in Kiev for many years.

The last chapter of the book focuses on the representation of resistance to the Holocaust in literature and film. **Maxim D. Shrayner's** essay *Grossman's Resistance* shows the impact of World War II and the Holocaust on Vasily Grossman's "transformation into a major Jewish literary figure." Grossman was deeply traumatized by the Shoah and specifically by the murder of his mother in the occupied Berdichev. So the war and the Holocaust became the central themes in his writings. Shrayner shows that Grossman's principled approach toward these themes, as well as his sharp critique of Stalinism in his novel *Life and Fate*, brought the writer into conflict "with the Soviet system, paving the way for his literary immortality."

Stuart Liebman's essay "Resistance and Representation in Alfred Radok's *Daleka cesta* (Distant Journey)" discusses the early Holocaust film, *Daleka cesta* (1949), made by the distinguished Czech stage and film director, Alfred Radok. The film represents Jews as the primary victims of the Holocaust, and forthrightly shows the role of the collaboration of anti-Semites in Eastern Europe in Judeocide. *Daleka cesta* also "highlighted the Czech Jewish community's passive response to ghettoization and deportation." Radok rejected the socialist realist aesthetic and shot his film in an expressionist style.

Michael Rubinoff's essay *Jewish Resistance Depicted in the Popular Culture with a Focus on the Warsaw Ghetto Revolt* shows how Holocaust-genre literature and films have dramatized and fictionalized historical events and Holocaust resistance. Many historical accounts, novels, and films have depicted the Warsaw ghetto revolt, "because it was the most spectacular example of Jewish resistance." In his essay, Rubinoff analyzes the reliability of the historical novels and films about the Jewish resistance, and provides some baselines for the evaluation of films and fiction on the topic.

This collection of essays significantly contributes to our understanding of resistance to the Holocaust, as well as its dilemmas and difficulties. The book discusses unheralded aspects of resistance and strategies of Jewish survival. The essays also show the difficulties in the preservation of memories about the Holocaust, and the challenges which arise in the representation of Holocaust resistance in film and literature.

Notes

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- ¹ Hirsh Glik, *Poet/Songwriter - Hymn of the Jewish Partisans*, <http://jewishpartisans.blogspot.com/2011/09/partisans-in-arts-hirsh-glik.html>
- ² Shirley Gilbert, *Music in the Holocaust. Confronting Life in the Nazi Ghettos and Camps* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 70.
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Victoria Khiterer, "The Jewish Songs of Leonid Utesov," *On the Jewish Street*, 2, no. 1 (2012): 30.
- ⁵ Gilbert, *Music in the Holocaust*, 70.
- ⁶ *The Hymn of the Jewish Partisans*, <http://jewishpartisans.blogspot.com/2012/04/hymn-of-jewish-partisans.html>
- ⁷ Antony Polonsky, *The Jews in Poland and Russia. Volume III: 1914 to 2008* (Oxford, Portland, Oregon: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2012), 476-477.
- ⁸ Jan Kaplan, Krystyna Nosarzewska, Brenda Updegraff, *Prague: The Turbulent Century* (Köln: Könemann, 1997), 241.
- ⁹ Per Anders Rudling, "The Khatyn Massacre in Belorussia: A Historical Controversy Revisited," *Holocaust Genocide Studies* (Spring 2012), 26 (1): 29-58; Aleksandr Nesterov, *Istoricheskie "nestykovki" presleduiut Khatyn' dazhe spustia 70 let posle tragedii*, 03/22/2013 <http://www.interfax.by/article/100164>.
- ¹⁰ Per Anders Rudling, "The Khatyn Massacre in Belorussia," 29.
- ¹¹ Leni Yahil, *The Holocaust: The Fate of European Jewry, 1932-1945* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 457-485.
- ¹² Oral history told to me by my aunt Elena Sokolovsky, the daughter of Boris Khiterer.
- ¹³ Gerda Raidt, Christa Holtei, *Die Straße: Eine Bilderreise durch 100 Jahre*. (Weinheim: Beltz & Gelberg, 2011).

CHAPTER ONE

RESISTANCE TO NAZI ANTI-SEMITISM IN AMERICA

DO THE WORDS MATTER? CONGRESSIONAL RESISTANCE TO NAZI ANTI-SEMITISM DURING THE 1930S

JEFFREY SCOTT DEMSKY

This paper re-considers the value of American discursive resistance to Nazi anti-Semitism. Specifically, it examines rhetoric chronicled in the House of Representatives during the early and middle 1930s. The reason this sort of analysis can help experts who specialize in American Holocaust memory is the current trend in historiography, to more or less ignore congressional goings on, and hammer away at State Department obstructionism, enabling a forgetful atmosphere about all those officials that tried to help. This chapter remembers congressional utterances less in terms of how many Jewish lives they helped to save, but rather their intentions. Going public in support of a foreign Jewish minority, especially in an atmosphere of heightened isolationism, indicates the worth that some elected officials attached to defending their pluralist idea of Americanism. Not all experts may agree that this sort of language is worthy of greater retrospective analysis. As the familiar adage holds, “talk is cheap.” However, words cannot be undone. One may try to explain them away, but if enough language exists, and the rationales they explained persist, they may constitute a form of resistance.

Introduction

During the 1930s, most Americans knew little about Adolf Hitler and his Nazi Party. They were unsure how, if at all, his racial views might impact their lives.¹ In newspapers, plays, and films, a series of public discourses helped citizens learn more.² These conversations also occurred in the U.S. Congress. Some lawmakers, like the constituents they represented, worried that Hitlerism threatened Jews and other non-Protestant minorities.³ In a heterogeneous society—such as the one struggling to emerge in America during the early twentieth century—they wanted to discuss whether or not German bigotry also posed a threat to domestic stability.

Of course, not everyone agreed. Isolationist members saw no reason to worry about Hitler's racial ideologies.⁴ If anything, prominent Americans reported that Nazi Germany was a placid land.⁵ This was the message many university faculty members taught their students.⁶ Businessmen in cities spanning Hollywood to Detroit—even some Jewish executives—overlooked German anti-Semitism.⁷ Such divergence in opinion, between those Americans willing to accommodate Nazi Germany, and those rejecting what Hitlerism represented, remains a source of debate in modern public memory.⁸

My paper explores this contest in the House of Representatives. Shortly after Hitler's appointment as German chancellor, some members took to the chamber floor to repudiate Nazi bigotry.⁹ Ensuring that such prejudices did not flare-up domestically was one reason they spoke out. However, their rhetoric also pointed to a subtler truth. Americans, too, maintained a legacy of human inequalities borne from ethno-racial and religious hatreds. By focusing light on Nazi racism, these pluralist lawmakers sought to fashion a new epoch in which all forms of social injustice were taboo.¹⁰ For citizens that followed congressional affairs, or learned about it from newspapers, or their neighbors, this discourse explained why intolerance earned one social acceptance in Nazi Germany, but in the United States, placed one outside the pale.

Not all experts may agree that this language is worthy of greater retrospective analysis. Legislators' calls did not compel the Nazis to change their behaviors. It did not provoke Congress to widen its quota limits.¹¹ As the familiar adage holds, "talk is cheap." Particularly, this is true with regard to American condemnations of European anti-Semitism. Well before Hitler's rise to power, U.S. government leaders learned they could mollify Jewish pleas with eloquent but empty words. In 1902, Secretary of State John Hay received a petition from American Jewish leaders concerned with Czarist pogroms. His sentiments were fulsome and vacant. "In the future when students of history come to peruse this document," Hay exclaimed, "they will wonder how the petitioners, moved to profound indignation by intolerable wrongs perpetrated on the innocent and helpless, could have expressed themselves in a language so earnest and eloquent...It is a valuable addition to public literature, and it will be sacredly cherished among the treasures of the Department."¹² The approbations led to nothing. Not until 1911, when Congress abrogated a trade treaty, did the U.S. government punish Russia for their anti-Jewish activities.¹³

Such boosterism encapsulates the question of how seriously scholars should treat congressional speechifying during the 1930s. Why are

condemnations of Nazism unique from this earlier pattern? Given the extent of the historiography that over the last fifty years has highlighted the limits of American good will,¹⁴ of knowledge and interest,¹⁵ in reckoning with the issue,¹⁶ the first challenge this study faces is explaining why the words matter. It is true that the Allied willingness to reduce the magnitude of German bigotry was never remotely able to match the German desire to damage Jews. The claim that words have resistance value, when set against the legacy of Nazi violence, faces a rather high barrier to scale. However, I am arguing that to understand the breadth of American resistance to Nazism, we must also study the language of those that mounted a developing case for the damage anti-Semitism does to democracy. These were not offhand remarks. Several dozen legislators seized on reports of German prejudice as a way to help transform the American national identity, making it more secular.

Words cannot be undone. One may try to explain them away, but if enough language exists, and the rationales they explained persist, they may constitute a form of resistance.¹⁷ My study does not assess congressional words in terms of how many Jewish lives they helped to save.¹⁸ Rather, I am focused on intention. Going public in support of a foreign minority, especially in an atmosphere of heightened isolationism, indicates the worth that some elected officials attached to defending their idea of Americanism. This legislative story is different from the field's dominant tales, rooted in Executive Branch activities.¹⁹ It is not a counter-narrative as much as it is a forgotten conversation. Nevertheless, I submit that it is important to understand how congressmen linked the issue of German bigotry to discussions of what Gunnar Myrdal called the era's emerging creedal identity.²⁰ It is perhaps not possible to determine with certainty what prompted such words. For some, negative sentiments undoubtedly persisted. However, there is also a story involving the ways both Jewish and Christian lawmakers saw in their discursive fight against Nazi prejudice an opportunity to reaffirm commitment to domestic equality.²¹

Part One: Congressmen Rising in Objection to Anti-Semitism

On June 4, 1941, Congressman Michael Edelstein rose before the House of Representatives. His intention was to rebut a recent round of anti-Jewish invective delivered by Congressman John Rankin, a Mississippian known for making inflammatory statements. In this particular instance, Edelstein responded to the charge that Jewish banking interests wished to steer the United States into war. "I deplore the idea," Edelstein informed

his colleagues, “that men in this House and outside this House attempt to use the Jews as their scapegoat. . . . It is un-American.” “We are living in a democracy,” he proclaimed, “all men are created equal, regardless of race, creed or color.”²²

These impromptu remarks would be Edelstein’s last. Shortly after exiting the floor, he suffered a fatal heart attack and expired in the House cloakroom. Fellow New Yorker Samuel Dickstein, who had observed the entire episode, eulogized Edelstein almost immediately after his passing. Representative Dickstein directed his fire at Rankin and praised Edelstein’s willingness to “protect his people, his integrity and his Americanism.” Congressman Edelstein, Dickstein continued, died a “martyr” to the cause of promoting liberal ideals.²³ The significance of this event lies more in the resonance of, rather than the reasoning for, Edelstein’s assault on anti-Semitism. Negative Jewish stereotypes, Edelstein had argued, were blatantly “un-American” in that they did violence to the national creed. A number of other lawmakers also praised their fallen colleague for his valor. Due to the uproar, Rankin quickly backtracked, apologizing profusely for his intemperate statements.²⁴

The Edelstein incident was a tragic chapter in an ongoing legislative conversation. Only weeks after Hitler’s rise to power in Germany, congressmen from varying regions, religions, and parties spoke out against anti-Semitism. Lawmakers, or *representatives*, are elected to express their constituents’ concerns. They are the governmental officials perhaps most sensitive to public attitudes owing to the electoral pressures associated with their short tenures. While the U.S. Constitution assigns primary responsibility for the handling of foreign affairs issues to the executive branch, each component of the executive-legislative-judicial triad exercises so-called checks on their governing partners. This practice facilitates institutional communication, and allows those officials outside the direct locus of authority to signal their preferences.²⁵

No one has yet recounted how American lawmakers used the legislature to begin a public discourse resisting Nazi anti-Semitism. Admittedly, studying congressional rhetoric is dicey. The body is deliberately unwieldy, with several hundred legislators juggling party, constituent, and institutional pressures.²⁶ When members take to the floor for special order speeches, they are permitted to speak on whatever topic they wish. Consequently, remarks about Jews, either supportive or damaging, may appear absent context. Congresses also convene every two years. Such volatility warns against placing too heavy a value on what lawmakers say. There are existing studies of congressional reactions to Nazi anti-Semitism. The authors primarily select rhetoric that supports the

view legislators—joining their Executive branch colleagues—demonstrated scant amounts of sympathy.²⁷ This finding perpetuates a wider belief, embedded in historiography and public memory, that the American government and its people did little to help European Jews resist Nazi attacks.²⁸

Nevertheless, contradictory evidence remains hidden in plain sight. Members issued remarks, authored resolutions, provided committee testimony, and entered submissions to the *Congressional Record*. The theme that racism was deplorable, both in Nazi Germany and domestically, unifies what might be seen as disparate speech. The language persisted throughout the 1930s, and sharpened during the war's final years. Laying out snippets of compassionate feelings, however, is not enough to demonstrate its value. This language's potential contribution is explaining how it enabled lawmakers to signal additional preferences about what type of society they hoped the U.S. would become. The words I will present did not change the course of history. Their added weight comes from the manner in which they reveal snapshots of legislators utilizing the issue in an attempt to sculpt pluralist attitudes.

In March 1933, two months after Adolf Hitler became Germany's chancellor, some legislators debated H. Res. 24 calling on the U.S. State Department to express strong displeasure with the Nazi mistreatment of its Jewish citizens. "Once again humanity is aroused from its lethargy by the persecution of a member race of the human family," thundered Representative Joe Gavagan, a Catholic Democrat from New York. He connected his support for the resolution to what he saw as a defense of American civic values.

A people of ancient culture, possessed of a heart of peace and love, are deprived of the rights of citizenship, denied freed speech and assemblage...Is there a more appropriate legislative body in the world than the House of Representatives to send forth an appeal against this injustice and iniquity? This House, where sat the great Patrick Henry, where trod the illustrious and immortal Thomas Jefferson, is a fitting place whence to send an appeal to Germany for justice and equality for the Jew.²⁹

If this activity hinted at a burgeoning congressional concern for German Jews, an intriguing conversation that took place eight days later points to a phenomenon of larger significance. Indeed, the open floor debate provides a portrait of the ways in which some officials tied their outrage over anti-Semitism abroad to disgust with anti-Semitism at home. On March 27, 1933, William Sirovich, a Jewish American representing New York,

addressed the House for ten minutes. In stirring remarks, Sirovich declared,

my purpose in taking the floor this afternoon is to boldly, fearlessly, and courageously protest against the foul, iniquitous, and brutal treatment of the nationals of Jewish extraction by the cowardly, sadistic, paranoid madman in modern Germany, Adolf Hitler.³⁰

Sirovich leveled an ecumenical defense. “When I rose to address the membership of this House,” he assured, “I did not rise as a Jewish citizen. I am rising here as an American, and a member of Congress, appealing for justice for racial and oppressed minorities. My sense of justice would compel me to appeal for any class, creed, or color that would ever be humiliated or punished in any part of the world.” Following this unabashed declaration of support for the period’s liberal ideas, the *Congressional Record* noted that “applause” filled the chamber.³¹

Additional lawmakers—Christian Americans from states with small Jewish constituencies—joined with Sirovich in discovery. What followed was a conversation in which statements initially tailored to condemn Nazi intolerance evolved into a discussion of American bigotry. Thomas Blanton, a representative from the 17th District in Texas was especially explicit. He stated, “I feel just as the gentleman [Sirovich] does, and am unalterably opposed to any and all kinds of persecutions against any people because of their race. It should not go unchallenged.”³² Representative Blanton went on to note that anti-Jewish discrimination existed in the United States as well.

I must call the attention of my friend to the fact that there are unreasonable, foolish and cruel persecutions of the Jews right here in the nation’s capital. I do not stand for that. I am against all persecutions. I have some very close personal friends of lifetime standing who are Jews. Why should we tolerate without protest Jewish persecution here in Washington?³³

Listening to this discussion was fellow Texan, Wright Patman. He interposed to ask if anyone considered how legislative posturing might stoke inter-branch tensions. “I am very much in sympathy with what the gentleman [Sirovich] has said, but I feel this matter should be left to the State Department. I feel it is now being handled in a very masterful and diplomatic way by the Secretary of State, Mr. Hull.”³⁴ Patman’s attitudes reflected the mainstream view in Congress. Most members agreed the issue was an Executive Branch concern. My point, however, is that Patman believed his colleagues’ words possessed real authority. This was

resistance language. Congressman Sirovich certainly believed his words mattered. That was why he decided to speak out. "While I have the greatest respect, admiration, and consideration for my distinguished friend, Mr. Hull," he replied to Patman, "I think the floor of the House is the proper place for a member of Congress to voice and express his thoughts regarding any nation that oppresses minorities."³⁵ "The cry of humanity," he exclaimed, "wherever it may be found appealing for assistance, should know that America, the land of liberty, freedom, and justice, is willing to listen and help."³⁶ Since the House of Representatives provides the most credible record of public discourse in the United States, such remarks may be said to capture the beginnings of a nascent discursive resistance. It is true that the majority of members did not join this effort. However, for those that did stir, they planted the seeds of what later blossomed as the dominant national view that Nazi bigotry threatened for more than just Jews.

One figure involved with this process was Emanuel Celler (D-NY). In remarks from April 1933, the first of many he would deliver about Nazism, Celler specifically analyzed German racism. "Hitler may not be murdering the Jews, but he is killing them economically and starving them into submission." He warned, "There are repercussions far beyond Germany's borders as anti-Semitism is rearing its foul head in other countries."³⁷ The sentiments of Edith Nourse Rogers (R-MA), recorded less than a week later, were expressed even more powerfully. "Mr. Speaker," she began, "I take the floor to protest the brutal and unwarranted treatment of the nationals of Jewish extraction in Germany by Adolf Hitler. Our forefathers fled from religious oppression to New England. We from that section especially sympathize with any persecuted race. Jews are being subjected to unwarranted treatment in Germany today."³⁸ In addition to expressing her constituents' and regions' concern, Rogers' words complemented the idea that American-style liberties could provide a bulwark against such persecutions.³⁹

John McCormack (D-MA) agreed. In June 1933, the man who later served as House Speaker stated, "I have watched with increasing anxiety developments in Germany since Adolf Hitler assumed controlling power." Like members throughout the session, McCormack concluded the "ruthless agonizing of the Jews" reflected a much larger Nazi hostility to such democratic principles as "liberty, justice, and equality."⁴⁰ A few days later, an official named Stephen Young (D-OH) echoed this theme.

The persecutions of Jewish people by Hitler and his Nazi followers trample underfoot the principles of racial, religious, and economic freedoms for which our forefathers fought...America should not be silent in the face of

Hitler's outrages and persecutions. This inexcusable degradation of a patriotic and law-abiding group excites the indignation and horror of fair-minded people everywhere.⁴¹

The most pertinent observation about this type of rhetoric—nearly two-dozen statements were recorded during the seventy-third Congress—is that members saw in German bigotry an American problem. In stark contrast to the earlier Judeo-Bolshevik construct that had depicted Jews a threat to American liberties,⁴² some lawmakers now saw in the task of resisting Jewish derisions a way to bolster democratic rights. One might both oppose Nazism and still harbor unseemly opinions about Jews, but that particular strain of thought would have seemed especially strained, and was not frequently apparent in 1933.

This does not mean the issue escaped politicization. Consider the case of Congressman Hamilton Fish (R-NY). An avowed isolationist,⁴³ alleged to have been anti-Semitic,⁴⁴ he was nevertheless someone that repudiated Nazi bigotry. In June 1933, Fish appeared on the House floor. In his remarks, Fish condemned what he termed the “humiliation” of German Jews. He further read a “dear colleague” letter he sent to Secretary of State Cordell Hull, imploring him to convey congressional dismay to the Nazi foreign office.⁴⁵ It is unknowable what stimulated Fish's step. His interest, however, was not passing. In February 1938, Fish submitted to the *Record* a transcript for a radio speech he gave about anti-Semitism. “The Jews of America have served our country loyally in time of peace as well as war. No one has the right to impugn their patriotism...I loathe and abhor all forms of racial and religious persecution.”⁴⁶ In these remarks, Fish reminded listeners that precedent also existed for the U.S. government to sustain Jewish welfare abroad. Fish's grandfather served as Secretary of State in President Grant's cabinet. During that tenure, Secretary Fish battled flare-ups of anti-Jewish violence in Rumania. “The repression and persecution of Rumanian Jews was so enormous as to import them to an international character.” Following firm State Department leadership, Fish broadcast, “all countries, governments, and creeds were alike interested” in safeguarding Jewish welfare.⁴⁷

Just a few months later, in discussions with Congressmen Frederick Biermann (D-MN) and Louis Ludlow (D-IN), Fish pushed this envelope a bit further. Discussing reports that Hermann Goering planned to confiscate Jewish Americans' property in Germany, Fish thundered,

I am serving notice as a member of the Foreign Affairs Committee of this House that if the German government seizes the property of any American citizen, be he Jew or Gentile, then the U.S. government has a definite duty

to act...I am willing at all times to uphold and protect the rights of our citizens in foreign lands...This is not a Jewish issue—it is a great American issue upon which we will not compromise or pussyfoot.⁴⁸

The context in which Fish delivered these sets of remarks is important. This was a period during which reports depicting European anti-Semitism frequently appeared in American media. Michael Marrus has described 1938 as a “crisis year” that raised American awareness about the threats to European Jews.⁴⁹

Although an isolationist, it is possible Congressman Fish saw in the issue a cudgel for damaging his district’s most famous resident, President Franklin Roosevelt. The two men had openly strained relations.⁵⁰ Fish’s prodding for a greater resistance had the potential to damage the president in several ways. Of course, he claimed the president was not taking effective action to quash European anti-Semitism. Such charges had the potential to stir up opposition within the Jewish-American community.⁵¹ However, there was another layer of risk. Should Roosevelt respond to Fish’s calls for greater action, he would meet with the scorn of those voters who believed he was already too favorably disposed to Jews.⁵²

Parochial concerns such as re-election and legacy may also have moved Fish. He represented a tony New York district that included prominent Jewish families.⁵³ Speaking out bolstered his reputation as a friend to that community.⁵⁴ It also pre-positioned favorable evidence for later historians to discover. Well into the forties, this most unlikely crusader pushed on. In December 1942, a few days before the president issued his first public statement condemning the Nazi extermination program, Fish penned another letter to the State Department. Referencing newspaper reports depicting the daily slaughter of thousands of Eastern European Jews, Fish pointedly asked, “Is there not some action to be taken...that will stop these pogroms?”⁵⁵

Some experts might determine this letter is thin in its substance, and questionable in its motives. Such judgments may be correct. The broader question, however, is how these activities reflected larger goings on within Congress. This sort of legislative jabbing occurred consistently during the early and middle thirties. If not for most, at least for some, resisting Nazi bigotry was a relevant issue. Whether Fish and the others saw in their opposition chances to aggrandize politically, re-sculpt social norms, or follow through on a genuine concern for Jews, is unknowable. This chorus of voices, however, empanelled in public discourse the idea that anti-Semitism damaged more than just Jews. Those perpetrating such derision, this line of reasoning held, placed at risk ideals laid forth in the U.S. Constitution.⁵⁶

Of course, not all legislators agreed. Louis McFadden was a Pennsylvanian Republican. He was also Judeophobic. While handfuls of his colleagues promoted Jewish welfare, McFadden did the opposite. During the early thirties, he disseminated excerpts from the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*; he publicly denied reports depicting Nazi violence; and he stoked fears that Jews sought to overthrow the U.S. government.⁵⁷ Representative McFadden was not alone. John Rankin,⁵⁸ Theodore Bilbo,⁵⁹ and Jacob Thorkelson⁶⁰ also filled Congress' chambers with anti-Semitism. That such chauvinism existed is well commemorated. What is murkier, however, is the backlash these views provoked.

In 1933, Congressman McFadden shared some prejudiced remarks. Among other items, he unwound an exposé of alleged Jewish perfidy.⁶¹ Standard narratives depict this nativism as a carryover from America's "tribal twenties."⁶² Left unexplained is how these calumnies elicited rebuke. This pushback did not come solely from Jewish Americans. For example, House majority leader Joseph Byrns repudiated McFadden's screeds. Using such words as "law abiding," "patriotic," and "loyal," the Tennessean called upon his colleague to withdraw the slurs.⁶³ As with the others, complete motivations cannot be ascertained. Nevertheless, that a chamber leader publicly chided a colleague for bigoted grandstanding appears significant. Among various possible factors, Byrns, who was elected Speaker in 1935, wanted to make clear that the House rostrum was an unacceptable place from which to peddle hatred of Jews.

That day, New York's Samuel Dickstein witnessed this oratory. Speaking directly after Byrns, the Jewish American lawmaker exclaimed it was "almost unbelievable... that the gentleman from Pennsylvania should stoop to such vulgar tactics in assailing the Jews." Dickstein proceeded to rebut his colleague's wide-ranging slander. He took direct aim at McFadden's claim that Jewish millionaires controlled the world's gold supply.

I only wish the congressman had occasion to read some of the latest books on Jewish life. They would prove to him, beyond possibility of a doubt, that far from being the "money power" of the world, Jews are really on the other side of the ledger... It is futile to speak of a Jewish money power because such a power does not exist and never existed... No sane person today believes there is a shred of truth to these allegations.⁶⁴

These sorts of debates occurred on and off again throughout the 1930s and 1940s. It was following one of these very contests that Congressman Edelstein died. Despite their frequency, however, no quantitative mechanism exists to demonstrate how many members drew connections

between battling Nazi and domestic intolerance. There is also no way to fully contextualize these sporadic, but recurring, legislative efforts. What does exist are the words and rationales lawmakers used. That the calls did not ultimately move the Congress to act should not entirely deflate their significance. There are still lessons to be learned from studying the words of those who genuinely cared. There are also lessons to be learned from studying the words of those that pretended. Although officials may not have known it at the time, their rhetoric foreshadowed social changes that would welcome Jews into the American mainstream.⁶⁵

Part Two: Forming Committees to Resist Nazi Anti-Semitism

The second session of the Seventy-third Congress opened in January 1934. Almost immediately, there were warnings about Nazi bigotry. Notably, the rhetoric of resistance audible during the first session now evolved into a more formalized effort. Representative Samuel Dickstein introduced a resolution proposing a new panel charged with investigating Nazi propaganda efforts in the United States. Since the Republic's founding, legislators have convened committees as a way to gather information and signal their policy preferences.⁶⁶ Dickstein's proposed committee was a special, rather than standing or permanent body, intended to study Nazi inroads into the U.S. The proposal carried overwhelmingly.⁶⁷ By so doing, it gave birth to the first House Committee on Un-American Activities. Ironically, a committee that would later become infamous for its so-called Jewish red baiting had its origins in an effort aimed at combating religious intolerance.⁶⁸

Familiar officials took leadership positions. Chairing the seven-member body was John McCormack. Serving as the vice-chairman was Samuel Dickstein. During 1934, they scheduled hearings in several locations including Washington, D.C.; Newark, New Jersey; Asheville, North Carolina; and New York City. In their investigations, the members focused on the domestic dispersion of Nazi propaganda, which in practical terms was wholly anti-Jewish material. The charge, leveled by Dickstein and others, that Nazis abroad were cultivating Nazis here at home was not without substance. In Germany, fascist leaders like Deputy *Fuehrer* Rudolf Hess and Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels concluded that racially-based arguments might very well appeal to Germans living in the U.S.⁶⁹ During the early and middle 1930s, more than 120 private organizations distributed anti-Jewish literature domestically.⁷⁰ The Committee on Un-American Activities represented an official step taken