

Immigration, Politics and Democracy: The World Jewish Congress in Europe, 1936-1939.

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Zohar Segev; University of Haifa

The founded convention of the World Jewish Congress (WJC), which was attended by 280 delegates from 32 countries, took place in Geneva in August 1936. While the organization itself was new, its ideological roots lay in the transformations experienced by the Jewish communities in the United States and Europe in the wake of World War I, and in the Balfour Declaration. The lead founder and first president of the WJC was the Reform rabbi Stephen S. Wise, among the foremost Zionist leaders in the United States. The WJC defined itself as an international organization, although, in fact, it operated as an American Jewish organization. Its headquarters were located in the United States and its European and South American offices were financed by American sources and reported on their activities to the Congress Directorate in New York.

Studies of the American Jewish leadership of the 1930s and '40s deal extensively with top WJC executives, whose activities are closely examined and often severely criticized. They are sharply criticized for such minimal rescue projects during the Holocaust and their failure to draw broad segments of the Jewish community in the United States into their organization and activities. Indeed, one cannot ignore the questions that emerge from the study of American Jewish leadership in the 1930s and 1940s. Nevertheless, the World Jewish Congress archive reveals a far more complex reality that I shall try to present here.

During the 1930s WJC leadership, tried to turn the question of European Jews into an international political issue that transcended traditional philanthropic assistance to Jews in need. In the paper I would present examples of a broad political activities that demonstrates the desire of the WJC's founders to deviate from the patterns of conventional philanthropic activity traditionally adopted by American Jewish

organizations in the latter half of the 1930s, and to work on behalf of Europe's Jews and Jewish refuge in Europe by political means that involved blending the Jewish issue into Europe's international political and economic texture.

The important philosopher and sociologist Professor Horace M. Kallen and other founders of the WJC noted on numerous occasions that the aggravation in the situation of European Jewry had served as a catalyst for the establishment of the organization. The reality of the 1930s required organized, unified Jewish action of a political nature. They believed that international recognition of the necessity of a Jewish national home in Palestine as manifested in the Balfour Declaration and in resolutions of the League of Nations indicated a fundamental willingness to recognize the rights of the Jewish minority, and therefore in no way weakened—but even reinforced—international willingness to recognize the rights of Jews as a minority in Europe as well. This worldview was reinforced in a memorandum submitted by the directorate of the WJC to the institutions of the League of Nations in 1936. The memorandum reviews the traditional Jewish support for peace and international cooperation, and emphasizes the organization's contribution to the struggle for these ideals. The memorandum was intended to secure the League of Nations' support for the rights of minorities in general and of the Jews in Europe in particular, and to position the Congress as the exclusive representative of the Jewish people in the Diaspora. Thus, they clarified their worldview: advocating a complex Jewish reality that combined a Jewish national existence in the Diaspora with the founding of a national home in Palestine. Despite the League of Nations' significant inherent structural problems, in the latter half of the 1930s, the WJC's leaders went out of their way to operate in this arena. The grave state of Europe's Jews left them no choice in the matter; they sought every available channel through which to improve their situation. They thus made energetic efforts at the League's September 1938 assembly in Geneva. They held meetings with the British deputy foreign minister, senior members of the Romanian regime, and League of Nations functionaries responsible for addressing the refugee issue, among others.

In 1937 WJC representatives in Europe held an internal meeting in Vienna. The participants felt that the situation of Polish Jews was the worst in Europe and termed it tragic. Following the meeting WJC leaders extended their political activity in Europe. Of

particular interest are the secret meetings that Nahum Goldmann and other WJC representatives held with the French Prime Minister Leon Blum and his staff during the second half of 1937. They maintained that the Jewish question in Poland had become a yardstick and a symbol of the struggle between the fascist and democratic forces in the country, and that the French government was therefore obliged not merely to support Polish Jews on moral grounds, but also to assist the democratic forces there. As to Romania, the Congress representatives asserted that Romania's Jews were preparing to submit a memorandum to the League of Nations requesting League protection because of their intolerable situation. They supposed that such a step would lead to a rift between the regime in Romania and the League of Nations and would reinforce fascist tendencies in the country. Thus, in this instance too, it was in the French government's supreme interest to moderate the Romanian government's anti-Jewish policy in order to prevent a widening of the rift between Romania and the democratic forces. At their meeting with the minister and his assistants, WJC emissaries stressed the political advantages that would accrue to France if it supported the Jews of Poland and Romania. In attempting to persuade the French government to take action on behalf of the Jews of Poland and Romania, they did not raise moral aspects or invoke the fundamental right of Jews to equal civil rights. They probably felt that such arguments would not spur the French to take action of this kind, and were thus obliged to create a political world picture in which action to assist Jews would serve French interests. This approach provides an additional perspective on the terrible situation in which European Jewry found itself, and the stern and complex challenge entailed in the conduct of political lobbying on their behalf.

The meeting with the French foreign minister was not the only occasion on which WJC functionaries in Europe, especially Goldmann, tried to turn the question of East European Jews into an international political issue that transcended traditional philanthropic assistance to Jews in need. Goldmann's meeting with the Polish ambassador to Paris in mid-January 1939 is a case in point. Goldmann began by telling the ambassador of the close ties between Polish and American Jews, stressing that the condition of the Jews in Poland was causing deep concern among the American Jewish public, which could take action toward harming Poland's economic and political interests in the United States. He stated that the WJC and other Jewish organizations were prepared to cooperate with the Polish government only on

condition that it ceased the systematic discrimination against Polish Jews and desisted from pressuring them to migrate against their will. Goldmann preempted the ambassador by saying that any claim that the Polish constitution contained nothing that discriminated against the Jews was of no significance since no one took this constitution seriously. Goldman categorically rejected the ambassador's proposal that he travel to Poland to meet with Beck, Poland's foreign minister, (Jozef Beck was a member of the troika that governed Poland following the death of Jozef Pilsudski in May 1935. Beck led a pro-German policy in Poland and opposed the minority's contract) and requested that the ambassador make it clear to the foreign ministry in Warsaw that he, Goldmann, as the representative of the WJC, expected Beck to announce a change in Poland's policy toward the Jews in one of his forthcoming speeches. Should the Polish government fail to make such a declaration, "American Jewry would go to war against Poland "against Poland".

This meeting demonstrates that in representing the WJC, Goldmann did not approach the ambassador of the Polish government as a representative of a persecuted minority seeking the ambassador's favor, but rather as the spokesman of a formidable organization that wielded economic and political power. He refused the ambassador's invitation to visit Poland and laid down an ultimatum that obligated the Polish government to alter its policy toward its Jewish citizens as a pre-condition for stopping American Jewry's political and economic campaign against Poland.

The political campaign waged by the WJC on behalf of the Jews of Eastern and Central Europe coincided with an attempt at conducting a radical political and organizational shakeup within the internal Jewish sphere worldwide. The organization's leaders believed that the dramatic reality of the late 1930s necessitated a far-reaching change with regard to Jewish migration. In closed meetings and documents circulated to a restricted circle, Congress leaders expressed their opinion that the campaign for the individual and communal rights of Jews in the countries of Eastern and Central Europe was, in the long run, destined to fail, and that only a well-planned and organized program of migration could solve the Jewish problem there. Its leaders believed that it was impossible to change the situation of German and Austrian Jews, and that the WJC should focus on the long-term organized migration of these Jews, while working to preserve their rights until they emigrated. Thus, the only way to attempt to modify the German regime's anti-Jewish policy and to facilitate the

migration of German Jews in as orderly a manner as possible was to exert public pressure through the media, mass meetings, and the movement to boycott German products throughout the world and particularly in the United States.

By contrast to the situation in Germany and Austria, the Congress leadership believed that it was feasible to set up a long-term, structured migration process in the remaining countries of Central and Eastern Europe by means of quiet diplomacy. Alongside preparations for migration, political and organizational arrangements were to be established in these countries that would enable individual and communal Jewish life as long as the Jews remained there. Congress leaders were aware that conducting Jewish migration in the second half of the 1930s presented a stern challenge because Palestine was closed to immigration and severe restrictions on immigration were also applied worldwide, certainly in the United States. They nevertheless believed that well-organized international action could resolve the problems because of the pressing nature of Jewish distress and the desire of Eastern and Central European countries to encourage the Jews to leave. They noted that despite the current closing of its borders, Palestine was the preferred and natural destination for Jewish migration in the late 1930s. The migration enterprise would be funded by an international loan program subsidized by the various states, according to which the Jewish migrants would undertake to repay only the interest at a future date.

Summary

In September 1938, in the wake of the Munich agreement that forced Czechoslovakia to hand the Sudetenland over to Germany, Stephen Wise as president of the World Jewish Congress sent a Jewish New Year letter to the Jews of Czechoslovakia, which included the following passage:

In this fateful hour we urge you not to despair and not to let your courage sink. The history of the Jewish people is full of trials inflicted upon our forefathers. They lasted through, as you will do. In the long run justice is stronger than injustice, and liberty stronger than oppression. He who does not renounce his faith in the victory of justice, will triumph over the worshippers of violence and tyranny . . . We are at the threshold of a new year. However dark its prospects, we yet wish and trust that it may be for you, dear brothers, and all

the peoples of Czechoslovakia, a year of life and peace. More than ever we are with you and send you our brotherly greeting.

This letter indicates—as does the Congress activity in Europe in the latter half of the 1930s—the organization’s deep commitment to act in the interests of the Jews of Eastern and Central Europe. Wise’s use of the term “brothers” in his letter is likewise indicative of the Congress leadership’s strong commitment to come to the assistance of their brothers in their time of need.

Wise’s letter demonstrates that while Congress leaders recognized the severity of the crisis of Central and Eastern European Jewry, they had yet to grasp the full immensity of the transformation. Wise could thus address the Jews of Czechoslovakia and offer encouragement on the strength of past Jewish experience of confronting crises, which he considered to have been essentially similar to what was occurring in 1938. This disparity between the Congress leadership’s perception of the Jewish aspects of European reality and what would actually occur following the outbreak of war—and especially upon the beginning of mass murder of European Jews—created a false impression among contemporaries and scholars alike of the essential nature of the Congress’s work in Europe in the late 1930s. The efforts undertaken by the Congress prior to the outbreak of World War II and before first reports about the final solution appeared, in retrospect, to have been muted and irrelevant, and to have made little impact on the terrible situation of the Jews of Eastern and Central Europe. This perception was widespread in spite of the fact that the actions taken were significant, and that in many cases Congress functionaries sought to break out of the conventional mold of Jewish philanthropic activities that pertained in Europe prior to the founding of the WJC in 1936.

The story of the World Jewish Congress during the 1930s is part of an organizational, political and ideological process whereby American Jewry gained ever increasing importance in the Jewish world after the First World War. This development became all the more apparent following the Holocaust and the loss of the Jewish communities in most of the European countries that occupied by the Nazis.

WJC's leaders promoted activity directed at supporting and assisting the various Jewish communities, while striving to mold the Jewish world according to their views as American Jews.