

## Remembering the mission of a “nuisance diplomat”

By Shoshana Kordova

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November, 1942: The New York Times reported on page 10 that Adolf Hitler had begun a campaign to systematically annihilate all the Jews of Europe, and that two million Jews had already been killed.

November, 1942: Hillel Kook, known in the United States as Peter Bergson, began pounding on the doors of U.S. legislators, putting advertisements in major newspapers and organizing a rabbis' march on Washington to save the Jews of Europe -- despite the opposition of Jewish leaders in America and mandatory Palestine.

January, 1944: U.S. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt gave into pressure to establish the War Refugee Board, responsible (according to the Simon Wiesenthal Center).

First half of 1944: 500,000 Hungarian Jews were shipped to Auschwitz.

“The only activity of significance in attempts to save what could still be saved of Europe’s Jews was taken by Hillel Kook and his group”, said former foreign and defense minister Moshe Arens (Likud), who spoke on Wednesday [August 27, 2003] at a memorial conference in Jerusalem sponsored by the AU Israel Center and the Root & Branch Association. Kook, whose Yahrzeit [anniversary of his death] was this week, died in Israel on August 18, 2001, at the age of 86.

But Kook’s success in saving European Jews was mitigated by the failure of Jewish and non-Jewish leaders to respond to his pleas early enough to have saved even more. The antagonism between Kook and Jewish leaders in America and in the Yishuv [the pre-state Jewish community in Palestine] was partly due to American fear of calling too much attention to the Jews and partly due to his close association with

Ze’ev Jabotinsky and the underground Etzel movement [Irgun Zvai Leumi, “the National Military Organization”].

“Too much in awe of President Franklin Roosevelt, in fear of being accused of interfering with the war effort, too hesitant and hidebound, [American Jewish leaders’] feeble efforts to get the Allies to take action to stop the murder of Europe’s Jews was completely ineffective”, said Arens.

Kook himself, who was the nephew of the first chief rabbi of pre-state Israel, Abraham Isaac Kook, had much difficulty understanding the Jewish communal fear of linking Jews with the war.

“Who will say it’s the ‘Jewish war? Hitler?” Kook responded to an interview question in a 1978 movie called “Who will live and who will die” that was screened at the commemoration conference. “The people who were afraid of the ‘Jewish war’ were the Jews, then and today. Wasn’t it one war, or was Hitler’s war against the Jews something outside the pale of humanity?”

Kook, was born in Lithuania in 1915 and immigrated to Palestine with his family at the age of 10, worked as an Etzel emissary bringing Jews from Europe to Palestine before moving to the United States in 1940. Once in the U.S., Kook agitated for the creation of a Jewish army to fight the Germans, hoping that the military training would later serve the Jews in fighting for their own state. But when Kook found out about Hitler’s extermination plans, his Committee for a Jewish Army became a committee to rescue the Jews of Europe, and he lobbied legislators to ultimately convince the Roosevelt administration to create the War Refugee Board.

Kook appeared dissatisfied with the extent of his accomplishments, thinking instead of all he could have done if Jewish and American leaders had been willing to act earlier.

“The Jews [as a whole] couldn’t have been saved”, even if Jewish leaders took up Kook’s call to aid their release as soon as he found out about the extermination plan, Kook said in the movie. “But could many, maybe even most of the surviving Jews of Europe of November 1942 have been saved? In my opinion, definitely yes”.

“It haunts me”, said Kook. “This is my conviction, and I wish I didn’t have it”.

An article published in the New York Jewish weekly The Forward reviewing a book called “A Race Against Death: Peter Bergson, America and the Holocaust”, by David S. Wyman and Rafael Medoff, indicated that Kook’s affiliation with Jabotinsky had an effect on Jewish leaders’ disenchantment with him: “The campaign aroused intense hostility among the mainstream Jewish leaders of the day, headed by Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, who regarded Bergson as a hothead likely to provoke a public and governmental backlash. In important way the hostility was an extension of the often-violent feud between Wise’s allies in the world Zionist movement, Chaim Weizmann and David Ben-Gurion, and Bergson’s mentor, the right-wing Zionist opposition leader Vladimir [Ze’ev] Jabotinsky”.

Indeed, Hillel Kook’s daughter Becky, 44, said at Wednesday’s conference that her father has yet to be sufficiently recognized by Israel, and that she never studied her father’s role in the Holocaust while taking history classes in Israeli schools. In her father’s case, “politics and pettiness triumphed over courage and truth”, said Becky Kook, a political science professor at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev.

Nonetheless, history’s silence in the face of Hillel Kook’s activism was “not really a source of bitterness” for him, his daughter said.

“For my father, the past was only as important as the lessons we learned from it for the present or for the future”, Beck Kook said. From the stories Hillel Kook told about his life, his daughter learned that it is

necessary to speak up and protest wrongdoing. “Being a ‘nuisance diplomat’, as my father was often called, is always the moral option”.