

Excerpted Transcript of:
America & the Holocaust—Deceit & Indifference
(PBS, 2005)

DAVID McCULLOUGH, Host: On November 25, 1942, more than three years after Adolf Hitler ignited World War II, *The New York Times* carried the first authenticated report that the Nazis had established a policy to exterminate Jews. The front page of *The Times* that day was taken up with mostly war news and such other items as a minor scandal in City Hall. The story of the slaughter of the Jews -- a report confirmed by the State Department that more than two million Jews in Nazi-occupied Europe had already been systematically murdered -- that appeared on page 10. The President, Franklin Roosevelt, could have made much of this appalling news had he chosen to, but he said nothing; nor, in the months following, did any reporter ever ask him about it. And though *The Times* and other major papers did carry further infrequent reports, such popular magazines as *Time*, *Life*, *Newsweek*, had little or nothing to say. It was as if the country preferred not to know. But . . .it's important to understand, too, how pervasive was anti-Semitism at the time here in America. Jews then were unacceptable to many employers, unwelcome at business and social clubs, vacation resorts. Jokes about "kikes" and "yids" were commonplace, and such supposed champions of American values as members of Congress -- people like Senator Bilbo, Representative Rankin -- openly spewed anti-Semitic poison in the very halls of the nation's capital. In a public opinion poll taken in 1942 in answer to the question, "Which groups menace the country most," Jews were listed third, just behind the Germans and the Japanese. That, tragically, was the atmosphere.

That was the outlook. "America and the Holocaust: Deceit and Indifference."

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NARRATOR: November 9, 1938 - *Kristallnacht*, the night of broken glass, the night the campaign against the German Jews turned violent. Across Germany synagogues burned. Jewish businesses, homes destroyed, thousands arrested and sent off to prison camps -- the shattering climax of Nazi policies designed to force Jews out of Germany. As Jewish life crumbled, tens of thousands -- including Kurt Klein's parents, Ludwig and Alice -- would look toward America as a haven of safety, and the question becomes, "What would America do?"

In June of 1937, more than a year before *Kristallnacht*, Kurt Klein at age 17 had his first glimpse of America.

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KURT KLEIN: Each year after Hitler came to power, the situation grew worse for the Jews in Germany. By 1935, the Nazis passed the Nuremberg laws which effectively stripped many Jews of their jobs and their positions within schools and universities, and generally restricted our lives.

NARRATOR: The campaign to force Jews out of Germany gathered momentum. Jews were expelled from professions, their property and savings confiscated, Jewish businesses boycotted.

KURT KLEIN: My family knew there was no future for us in Germany, and we began to make preparations. We children would leave first for the U.S. and our parents would follow. My sister, who was a nurse, could no longer practice her nursing because she was Jewish and was, in fact, the first one who left in 1936. That made it possible for me also to follow her in 1937 and by 1938 my brother had also arrived in the U.S. We hoped at that point, of course, to establish ourselves to the point of where we could support our parents and also have them come over.

NARRATOR: But the sudden violence of *Kristallnacht* ignited a new urgency for the Kleins, for all German Jews. In Washington, the response was immediate.

1st NEWSREEL ANNOUNCER: Reporters rushed the news to the nation and the President's statement is read by Felix Belair of *The New York Times*.

FELIX BELAIR, "The New York Times": [reading] "The news of the past few days from Germany has deeply shocked public opinion in the United States. I myself could scarcely believe such things could occur in a 20th-century civilization."

NARRATOR: Newspapers played up the story and American Jews organized large rallies.

RALLY SPEAKER: We say to the President, "You spoke alone among the world leaders. That was good."

NARRATOR: It was hoped Washington would do more than condemn the Nazis. In Germany, thousands of Jews looked to America to save them.

HERBERT KATZKI, Refugee Relief Worker: Overnight the American consulate and other consulates were inundated by people who felt, "Well, now it's time, really, we ought to do something about making plans for leaving the country." They didn't expect that they would have to leave the day after tomorrow, but certainly they wanted to have a form of insurance in their pocket so that when the time came to leave that they might be able to do so.

KURT KLEIN: In December of 1938, my father writes, "Unfortunately, things aren't moving that fast, even if you have the best of papers. To obtain an appointment to apply for a visa, you have to receive a waiting number. At present, the American consulate in Stuttgart is being besieged to such an extent that the waiting number for Mother and me indicates there are 22,344 cases ahead of us."

That meant that possibly two and a half years would elapse before it would be my parents' turn, unless the authorities would ease or change the immigration procedures.

NARRATOR: The Kleins and tens of thousands of others were now facing America's formidable system of immigration laws.

2nd NEWSREEL ANNOUNCER: The dream of almost every one of Hitler's victims is to emigrate to the United States.

NARRATOR: In 1938 while Americans held dear the traditional image of the nation as a haven for the oppressed, they were also secure knowing the doors would not be too widely opened. U.S. immigration laws reflected blatant bias and prejudice. From 1924 on, yearly quotas allowed four times as many people from Britain and Ireland as from all of eastern and southern Europe. In the midst of the Depression, many Americans called for further restricting immigration, even to extremes.

REP. MARTIN DIES: Our unemployment problem was transferred to the United States from foreign lands, and if we had refused admission to the 16,500,000 foreign-born in our midst, there would be no serious unemployment problem to harass us.

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NARRATOR: "Keep refugees out, they'll take American jobs," was the argument, but often the real concerns went deeper than employment.

HARVEY STOEHR, Patriotic Order Sons of America: The main thing that we thought of was not economics. It's a moral responsibility, as we call it, of America to have America for Americans. And anything that disrupts that by having masses of immigration disrupts the whole idea of the nation.

NARRATOR: This was the threat for many Americans -- the growing number of refugees, including tens of thousands of children. From time to time, a handful squeezed through the quota system. In 1939, a bill proposed special sanctuary for 20,000 children outside the quota. The Wagner-Rogers Bill would become a litmus test for how Americans really felt about Jews.

VIOLA BERNARD, M.D., Non-Sectarian Committee for Refugee Children: The need for this kind of legislation was desperately pressing. The children being smuggled out of Austria and Germany were already separated from their parents, which was traumatic enough, and it was essential to get them into individual homes and a sense of wellbeing.

NARRATOR: But there was immediate opposition to the bill.

HARVEY STOEHR: The law that we had from 1924 that we thought was good. Why don't we just support the written law and not seek for ways to circumnavigate around it and-- just to benefit certain large groups of immigrants.

Dr. VIOLA BERNARD: They were afraid, for example, of the argument that Europe was trying to dump all its Jews on the United States and anti-Semitism certainly was a powerful ingredient...

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3rd NEWSREEL ANNOUNCER: Sign posts at city limits bear the legend, "Jews not wanted," "Jews keep out." Even in parks, if Jews are allowed at all, special yellow benches are set apart, labeled, "For Jews."

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NARRATOR: Nazism was now marching on local soil ...

ARNOLD FORSTER, Anti-Defamation League: As Hitler became important, imitators grew up here in this country, and a lunatic fringe frightened the entire American people into the possibility that [what] was happening in Europe could happen here.

NARRATOR: The German-American Bund never totaled more than 25,000 people, but it added fuel to the anti-Semitism smoldering in American society. These years would see anti-Semitism reach its peak in American history.

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NARRATOR: The anti-Semitic campaign was conducted by over 100 organizations across the country, blaming Jews for all the ills in America.

LEWIS WEINSTEIN, Attorney: Here in Boston, I heard anti-Semitic remarks by a speaker and I heard yelling by the group around him, "We've got to get rid of the Jews. They don't help us, they kill us. They kill us financially, they own everything, and we're stuck with their victims."

NARRATOR: Father Charles Coughlin, a Roman Catholic priest, was the most influential anti-Semitic spokesman in the country. His weekly radio broadcasts reached more than three million people.

Father CHARLES COUGHLIN, Roman Catholic Priest: The system of international finance which has crucified the world to the cross of depression was evolved by Jews for holding the peoples of the world under control.

KURT KLEIN: On Sunday nights we would always listen to Father Coughlin and it brought back shades of what I had recently experienced within Germany, but there was one difference. People could and did speak out against that, and also it wasn't the official policy of our government to be anti-Semitic.

NARRATOR: But during the 1920's and '30s, anti-Semitism was a way of life in much of America. Many places open to most Americans were closed to Jews.

RUTH FEIN, American Jewish Historical Society: When I was maybe seven, eight years old, we had recently moved to Washington and on a hot day, we decided to go to the beach. And people told us that there was a lovely beach somewhere in Chesapeake Bay, and we drove down there. And I still remember the sign, because as we drove up, we saw the sign, which said, "No Jews or dogs allowed."

NARRATOR: There were restrictions in job opportunities. "Dear Miss Cohen, We are sorry to inform you that it is our policy not to accept students of Jewish nationality."

SOPHIE WEINFELD, Secretary: I had just finished college. The first position I was sent to was a one-man office and he hired me immediately. And then, at about 11 o'clock, he said to me, "What church do you go to?" I said, "I don't go to a church, I go to a synagogue." He said, "I wouldn't hire a Jew. You're fired." And I went back to school, crying, and Mrs. Kerwin, who was the teacher who sent us out on positions, said, "You're going to find that out a lot. You might as well get used to it."

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NARRATOR: ... In Washington, FDR's New Deal seemed to offer hope the country might be moving towards a more equitable society. Many of the new government agencies had hired Jews. Even some of the President's close advisors were Jewish.

EDWARD BERNSTEIN, U.S. Treasury Department, 1941-45: By the time that we came to the late 1930's, there were a considerable number of Jews, but not in the old-line agencies. In the old-line agencies, it had been hard to get in and the Jews had in one way or another been restricted.

NARRATOR: The State Department was an old-line agency. Staffed with career diplomats, it reflected a conservative bias forged before World War I. These crafters of U.S. foreign policy believed in the superiority of white, northern European stock. In the atmosphere of an exclusive gentlemen's club, they often reflected the anti-alien sentiments of American society. The fate of tens of thousands of Jews, including Ludwig and Alice Klein, would be directly tied to the attitudes of these people.

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NARRATOR: For those trying to escape Europe, piling up at embarkation ports, the State Department's attitude proved a

deadly obstacle. In the field, the American consulates held the final word on visas.

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NARRATOR: May 1939 - while the Kleins were still awaiting their visas, other German Jews were able to board a ship for Cuba.

5th NEWSREEL ANNOUNCER: And so over 900 of these unfortunate people, all with visas for Cuba and many with quota numbers for the United States, leave Hamburg on the *St. Louis* happy in anticipation of a new life far from Germany where their experiences under the Nazi regime will only be a sad, sad dream.

NARRATOR: But when the ship arrived in Havana, the Cuban government refused to honor the refugees' landing certificates. Friends and relatives watched as despairing passengers waited aboard ship during a week of futile negotiations. The passengers telegraphed President Roosevelt, requesting temporary haven. Their plea fell on deaf ears. Finally, the ship was forced back to Europe, sailing first for days along the Florida coast. America would make no exception to its rigid immigration laws.

The most logical haven for Jewish refugees was now Palestine, the historic homeland of the Jews. Britain controlled Palestine and until the late '30s had allowed Jewish immigration. But as German Jewish refugees increased, so did longstanding tensions between Arabs and Jews. To keep peace with the Arabs, who controlled the area's vast oil reserves, in 1939 London decided to issue a white paper that strictly limited Jewish immigration: 15,000 a year for five years, then no more. For Jews trying to escape the Reich, the door to Palestine was now virtually shut.

With the German invasion of Poland, the situation grew ever more dangerous. In the spring of 1940, the fate of European Jews now fell into the hands of a new Roosevelt appointee, assistant Secretary of State [Breckinridge Long](#).

Long's policies would directly control the future for...all those cramming into consulates across Europe. Long endorsed the anti-alien bigotry of the times and also feared German agents might enter America, posing as refugees.

Pres. FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT: Today's threat to our national security is not a matter of military weapons alone. We know of new methods of attack: the Trojan horse, the Fifth Column that betrays a nation unprepared for treachery. Spies, saboteurs and traitors are the actors in this new strategy.

DAVID WYMAN: National security was, of course, a legitimate issue, but what Breckinridge Long did was to exaggerate the problem, then use it as a device to put into force the anti-alien policies of the State Department. To what extent anti-Semitism was involved, we're not clear, but what we do know is that as a result immigration was sharply cut. In 20 years of research, probably the most disgraceful document that I've ever run into is this memorandum written by Breckinridge Long in June 1940 in which he outlines the means by which consuls secretly and illegally can cut very sharply into immigration.

"...We can delay and effectively stop, for a temporary period of indefinite length, the number of immigrants into the United States. We could do this by simply advising our consuls to put every obstacle in the way which would postpone and postpone and postpone the granting of the visas."

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HERBERT KATZKI: It was a technical nightmare to get out of France. You had to have a French visa to sortie - that's an exit visa from France. You had to get a Spanish transit visa, you had to get a Portuguese transit visa. You had to have your American visa either promised or stamped into your passport, and you had to have a boat ticket or onward transportation. All of these things had to happen within a four-month period. If any of it fell by the wayside, you had to start over again in order to get everything lined up.

DAVID WYMAN: By the end of 1940, Long's "postpone and postpone" directive was having its full impact. During the year that followed his order, immigration was cut in half.

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DAVID WYMAN: Early in Roosevelt's third term in 1941, the refugees in Europe still held hopes of coming to the United States. They had the illusion that they might perhaps find safety here. But at the same time, Long and the State Department once again were devising even higher barriers: more regulations, more documentation, more paper walls that meant the difference between life and death. In the summer of 1941, using the exaggerated issue regarding subversion among the refugees, the State Department set up yet another group of regulations. Among these, all immigration decisions were

centralized in Washington, processed through an impossibly complex system of review committees. In a matter of months, immigration was so severely curtailed that it was virtually shut down.

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NARRATOR: That the trains were heading to killing centers fully operating by spring of '42 was still a well-guarded secret, but that summer in Switzerland, the Nazi plan to exterminate all the Jews of Europe were leaked by an anti-Nazi German industrialist. His information was passed to [Gerhart Riegner](#), the representative of a Jewish organization in Geneva. Horrified, Riegner relayed it to the State Department, requesting they alert Rabbi Stephen Wise in New York. But skeptical State Department personnel dismissed the report as a wild rumor inspired by Jewish fears and suppressed the information. Two weeks later, Wise received the same information through an independent source in London and approached the State Department. He was asked to remain silent until the department verified the reports that millions were slated for death.

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NARRATOR: By November, the horrifying puzzle was pieced together by the State Department from press accounts, refugee workers, the Red Cross, the Polish government in exile, the Vatican: 60,000 Jews deported from the Netherlands; 3,600 Jews from France sent eastward, exact destination unknown; 16,000 arrested in Paris. Two trainloads of Jews departed toward their doom without anything further heard from them. "Evacuated whole Warsaw ghetto, murdered 100,000 Jews. Mass execution of Jews continues, killed by poison gas in chambers. Convoys of Jews led to their death, seen everywhere." The State Department had finally confirmed the systematic annihilation of European Jews.

November 24, 1942 - Stephen Wise, after three months, was released from his pledge of silence. At a press conference, Wise revealed the Nazi plan to exterminate all the Jews of Europe. The news was carried by major newspapers, but not prominently. Over two million people were already dead.

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Near the end of 1942, with four million Jews still alive in Europe, Stephen Wise and other Jewish leaders presented a document to President Roosevelt detailing the Nazi plan for extermination. The President acknowledged he was well aware of what was happening to the Jews. His response was a statement threatening the Nazis with accountability for war crimes. Spotlighting the tragedy for the public remained the burden of American Jews.

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NARRATOR: Wise's American Jewish Congress and other major Jewish organizations challenged the government's position that nothing could be done short of winning the war... They called for revised immigration procedures and actions at an international level. In coming weeks, 40 rallies were mounted across the country by Wise and allied organizations.

In early 1943, reports on the ongoing extermination of the Jews continued to arrive at the State Department to be passed on to American Jewish leaders, but in February, the department ordered its Swiss legation not to accept any further reports intended for private citizens. Vital information about the death of tens of thousands was cut off for 11 critical weeks.

DAVID WYMAN: The State Department was actively blocking information about the genocide. Roosevelt refused to focus on the issue. The American churches were largely silent, ... and the press had little to say and buried that little on the inner pages. So it fell to Jewish activists to bring the information to the American public. ...

NARRATOR: ...The government attempted to quell the Jewish outcry by announcing a joint British-American rescue conference.

ARNOLD FORSTER: And we Jews became very excited that finally two great governments were meeting to solve the problem, if indeed it could be solved.

NARRATOR: The closed-door conference met in a remote Bermuda hotel. The American delegation arrived with secret directives from the State Department.

JOHN PEHLE: The Bermuda conference was a conference set up to not accomplish anything, and the people who represented the United States there were given those instructions...

ARNOLD FORSTER: The Bermuda conference was a failure because the real result was that they decided, the two powers, that first the war had to be won and then Jews could be taken care of. I must tell you it discouraged the American Jewish community. It broke the hearts of the leaders who had been involved in trying to make it happen. It made us feel once and for all that all was lost.

DAVID WYMAN: Jewish leaders, after the hoax at Bermuda, were plunged into despair. They now recognized that America and Britain -- the two great western democracies, Hitler's enemies -- were deeply committed to a policy of not rescuing Jews.

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NARRATOR: In the second half of 1943, the government's longstanding policy of not rescuing European Jews was challenged simultaneously on two fronts, the first in a branch of government normally not involved with refugees, the Treasury Department. Secretary of the Treasury [Henry Morgenthau](#), a Jew, had a 30-year working relationship with Franklin Roosevelt and was a close personal friend.

DAVID WYMAN: It would be Henry Morgenthau and some non-Jewish Treasury Department staff members who would eventually uncover the State Department's deliberate obstruction of rescue.

NARRATOR: It began when Stephen Wise came to Washington with a plan for the U.S. Jewish community to put up funds to rescue 70,000 Romanian Jews. To prevent funds from falling into enemy hands, Washington required a special wartime license to be approved by both State and Treasury.

DAVID WYMAN: The State Department stalled the license for 11 weeks, but when the request finally reached the Treasury Department, it was approved within 24 hours.

NARRATOR: Henry Morgenthau and his Treasury Staff assumed that the first meager steps toward saving European Jews were under way. At the same time, the persistent Bergson group launched an all-out campaign calling for the establishment of a government rescue agency. In October they held an unprecedented demonstration in Washington. Four hundred orthodox rabbis arrived from around the nation, two days before the most holy day in the Jewish year, to present a petition to the President.

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NARRATOR: The petition called for the establishment of a special government rescue agency. The rabbis expected to meet with the President, but Jewish leaders opposed to the Bergson group advised Roosevelt against it. Vice President Wallace received the petition. White House spokesmen claimed the President was too busy, but a look at his appointment calendar reveals he was free that afternoon. A few weeks later, the campaign for a rescue agency intensified.

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NARRATOR: Back at the Treasury Department, Morgenthau's inner staff -- the general counsel to the Treasury, Randolph Paul, his assistant [Josiah DuBois](#), and the head of foreign funds control, John Pehle -- discovered shocking information about the license they'd issued five months earlier to rescue the Romanian Jews.

JOHN PEHLE: When we issued the license and gave it to the State Department to transmit it, we assumed that it would be carried out. And when we heard from the Jewish agencies that were involved the license had never been received, and when we discovered they had been held up, we of course made inquiries and they were told they were consulting with the British.

NARRATOR: ...The staff at Treasury uncovered the smoking gun when they pressed the State Department and the British to explain the license delay.

JOHN PEHLE: And the American embassy went to the British authorities and received a letter saying the reason the British were opposed to issuance of the license was of the difficulty of disposing of any considerable number of the refugees should they be rescued.

"The Foreign Office is concerned with the difficulties of disposing of any considerable number of Jews should they be rescued from enemy-occupied territory."

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DAVID WYMAN: Finally it was out in the open, the real reason the British and the State Department were obstructing rescue -- the fear that large numbers of Jews might actually be released.

NARRATOR: Then the Treasury investigators uncovered a copy of the State Department's cable ordering its legation in Switzerland not to pass along extermination reports.

JOHN PEHLE: We were advised by our friends in the State Department that the State Department not only was not interested in the refugee problem, but that they were actively suppressing information about the extent of the Holocaust by sending instructions to their legation in Switzerland not to permit private Jewish agencies to transmit any such stories. Suppress information? The government then becomes an accomplice to what the Nazis were doing by hiding information from the American public.

NARRATOR: The Treasury investigators next discovered a State Department attempt to cover up this cable.

JOHN PEHLE: When we discovered that not only had the State Department suppressed information of the extent of the Holocaust but had tried to cover it up, we then felt that this should be brought to the President's attention. What was so shocking had to be remedied.

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JOHN PEHLE: Secretary Morgenthau, who valued above all else his relationship with the President, nevertheless felt that he had to put himself on the line and be the spokesman on this issue.

NARRATOR: January 16, 1944 - the Treasury Report indicting the State Department was presented at an unusual Sunday meeting in the White House.

JOHN PEHLE: We met with President Roosevelt in the Oval Office, Secretary Morgenthau, Randolph Paul and I. The President didn't read the report, but Morgenthau asked me to outline why we were there and why we felt that a separate agency outside the State Department was essential. And at the end of the meeting, the President said, "We'll do it."

NARRATOR: Six days later, FDR officially reversed the government's policy of obstruction. He signed Executive Order 9417, creating the War Refugee Board, which was instructed to take all measures to rescue victims of enemy oppression in imminent danger of death.

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NARRATOR: Morgenthau, along with Secretary of State Hull and Secretary of War [Stimson](#), became the nominal heads of the War Refugee Board, and at Morgenthau's recommendation, John Pehle took charge as acting director... Pehle and the board faced a difficult road. Government funding was meager. Most costs were paid by private Jewish organizations. Other government agencies refused to cooperate, as in late 1944. The board endorsed a proposal from American Jewish leaders to bomb the gas chambers at Auschwitz, but the proposal was sabotaged.

JOHN PEHLE: The Jewish agencies themselves weren't sure that they wanted us to arrange this. Bombing railroad lines is not very effective 'cause they can be rebuilt overnight, so it involved wiping out the extermination facility. And finally after much soul-searching, we recommended this to the War Department.

NARRATOR: Auschwitz was located in a strategic oil-refining district in Poland. The refineries were no farther than 45 miles from these crematoria.

JOHN PEHLE: After we recommended to the War Department that the extermination facilities at Auschwitz be bombed, we were told that this was not possible. When we pursued this further, we were told that this would involve bombers being sent from England and that jet fighters could not escort bombers that far, and therefore it was not possible to do this. Later, perhaps after the war, we discovered that at the very time we were recommending this, bombing all around Auschwitz was going on from Italy, and we had been misled.

NARRATOR: Some 2,800 bombers targeted the oil refineries during the months when 150,000 Jews were being gassed. On two occasions, fleets of heavy bombers actually flew past the gas chambers, aiming for the I.G. Farben fuel factory less than five miles away. A few bombs accidentally hit Auschwitz itself, killing 85 prisoners, civilians and SS guards... These bombs flying toward I.G. Farben were targeted for the fuel factory, not the death camp immediately below. With almost no cooperation from other government agencies, the board still managed to truck critically-needed supplies to a few camps behind

enemy lines; helped evacuate 15,000 Jews from Axis countries to safety, many in rickety boats across war-torn seas; rescued 48,000 Jews in Romania by threatening its government with post-war punishments; and saved tens of thousands of Budapest's Jews through the efforts of its agent, [Raoul Wallenberg](#);

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DAVID WYMAN: In the end, the War Refugee Board played a vital role in saving the lives of 200,000 Jews, a very valuable contribution, to be sure, but the number is terribly small, compared to the total of six million killed. The board did prove that a few good people -- Christians and Jews -- could finally break through the walls of indifference. The great shame is that if Roosevelt had created the board a year earlier and if it had been truly empowered, the War Refugee Board could have saved tens of thousands -- even hundreds of thousands more and, in the process, have rescued the conscience of the nation.