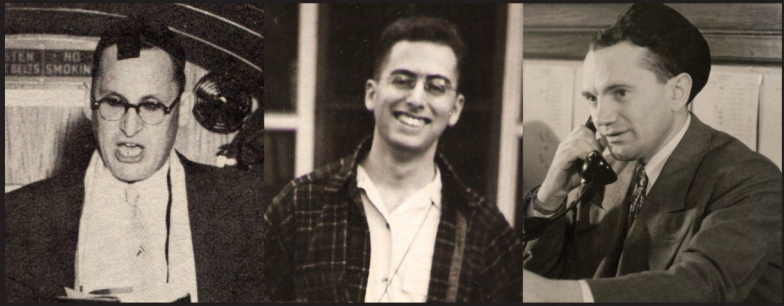


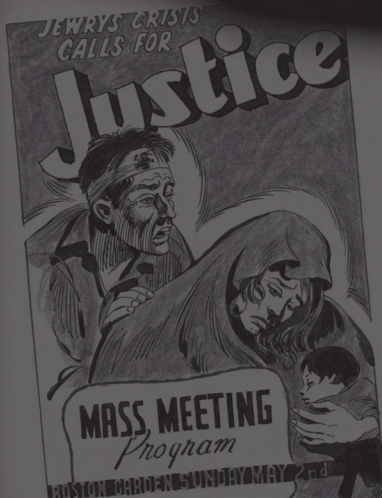
# The Student Struggle Against the Holocaust



by Rafael Medoff and David Golinkin

Foreword by Aryeh Rubin

Introduction by Irving (Yitz) Greenberg



## JEW S MOURN PERSECUTION S

## FOREWORD

Shortly after graduating from college, I bought a car in Paris and traveled across Europe for six months, not in the tradition of the European Grand Tour, but as a very personal exploration of a destroyed world. It was 1974-75 and I felt compelled to retrace part of my parents' escape routes from the furnaces of Hitler's Europe, to visit eleven former concentration camps, and to familiarize myself with devastated Jewish communities behind the Iron Curtain.

At that time, my endeavor was practically unheard of; it was long before the March of the Living made such sojourns commonplace. In fact, the Holocaust was not a major topic of discussion among American Jews.

The community simply had not yet found a serious and consistent means of integrating knowledge of the Holocaust into its consciousness or into public discourse. As a consequence, most American Jews, whether members of the general community or officials of Jewish organizations, generally steered clear of Holocaust-related topics. When I was educated at Jewish day schools and yeshivas in the mid and late 1960s, the Holocaust was never mentioned in any formal sense, even though we were aware that many of our teachers were survivors. At Yeshiva University, my alma mater, the subject matter was so novel that there was no course explicitly dedicated to it – instead, the pioneering Rabbi Dr. Irving (Yitz) Greenberg taught one of the first university-level courses on the Holocaust in the United States, under the rubric of a seminar on totalitarianism and ideology. A further indication of the lack of American Jewish interest in the subject was that in some of the shtetls I visited during my travels, I was told that I was the first Jew to visit since the late 1940s and early 1950s.

If American Jewry's response – or rather evasion – even thirty years after the Holocaust was puzzling and disturbing, its lack of action during the Holocaust was nothing short of devastating. In *The Student Struggle Against the Holocaust*, Dr. Rafael Medoff and Rabbi Prof. David Golinkin do us the great service of introducing an exception to the rule, and it is a striking exception. In this important

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book, we learn of the remarkable actions of three young rabbinical students at the Jewish Theological Seminary who *did* act, despite the collective lack of will of the larger community. In the story of Noah Golinkin (the father of co-author David Golinkin), Jerry Lipnick, and Moshe "Buddy" Sachs, we find much to admire. In learning of their activities, readers may experience both hope and despair: hope because their story shows us that action *is* possible, despite great odds, indifference, and outright hostility; despair because if there had been more like them who were willing to take a stand and act on behalf of Europe's Jews, perhaps collectively they could have made an even greater difference.

The months I spent traveling through post-Holocaust Europe had a profound effect on me. The psychological trauma and emotional stress I experienced as a consequence of visiting the sites of atrocities, and the cities and villages that had once been home to vibrant Jewish communities, helped shape the direction of my life, my philosophy, and my thought processes. At the time, and certainly since then, I have increasingly believed most of American Jewry to be guilty of silence and deserving of criticism. That the world let this happen is inconceivable. That American Jewry was generally silent is a travesty.

There is no question that American Jewry could have done more. *The Student Struggle Against the Holocaust* clearly shows us this; in reading about the accomplishments of three young rabbinical students, it is impossible not to imagine all that might have been accomplished if the larger American Jewish establishment had stepped up to the plate.

There could have been frequent mass protests. If ever in our history civil disobedience was justified, it was in response to the Roosevelt administration's abandonment of the Jews of Europe during the Shoah. Perhaps widespread protest efforts would have had only a limited impact; perhaps restrictions on quotas for entry of Jews to the United States would have not been lifted; we do not know if a massive outcry would have prevented the turning back of the *S.S. St. Louis* and its doomed passengers; nor we can know if organized action such as shutting down the major traffic arteries of New York, Chicago, Detroit, and Los Angeles would have convinced the United States government to bomb the railway tracks leading to Auschwitz. But American Jews could have tried, and if they had,

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they would have left a very different legacy. Their actions would have set a very different example, and the tone and precedent of righteous protest would have established a basis for an appropriate communal response to the existential problems facing world Jewry today. As Rabbi Haskel Lookstein wrote in his 1985 book, *Were We Our Brothers Keepers?*, "The final solution may have been unstoppable by American Jewry, but it should have been unbearable to them. And it wasn't." Instead, for most American Jews, life went on as usual at all levels: at the institutional level, at the communal level, and at the personal level. The Jewish organizations held their annual dinners, the synagogues held their dances, and the people held their wedding and bar mitzvah parties during the decimation. Life went on; Europe was a world away.

Many American Jews claimed not to have known what was going on during the early stages of the Holocaust. While that in itself is difficult to believe given the widespread press coverage of the massacres, certainly by 1944 when Hungary's Jews were being rounded up for deportation to Auschwitz, and the Allies were stepping up their bombing runs to Germany and Poland, the American Jewish community should have, at the very least, pushed and screamed for the bombing of the railroad tracks leading to Auschwitz. That did not happen.

Given the tenor of the times, the fact that Noah Golinkin, Jerry Lipnick, and Buddy Sachs did in fact rise to the occasion is notable. These students could not adhere to their daily routine while their brethren were being gassed in Auschwitz, massacred in the forests of the Ukraine, or waging a desperate rebellion in the burning buildings of the Warsaw Ghetto.

*The Student Struggle Against the Holocaust* demonstrates that a few individuals with conscience, grit, and determination can make a difference. They took on the establishment, they challenged the indifference of their countrymen, and they countered the sad apathy of their co-religionists.

I believe that if a victim from the Holocaust could rise up from one of the mass graves and speak, he would ask three questions: Why didn't the Jews of the world move heaven and earth to stop the massacre? Why wasn't more done to bring the Nazis to justice after the Holocaust? Why didn't we as Jews make a serious effort to find the mass graves, to discover where and how the Jews were killed,

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and to say *Kaddish*? We have no adequate answers to these questions. I am ashamed of the legacy of inaction we have left for future generations.

Many consider it impolitic to judge the Jews of that era. Our tradition teaches us to refrain from judging another person until you stand in his or her shoes. And we are all aware that it was a different time, a silent time, a time rife with antisemitism promoted by the likes of Father Coughlin. Yet the scope of the catastrophe negates all other factors. I believe that American Jews, their leaders, and their institutions made an insufficient effort to raise the alarm as one-third of world Jewry vanished in the crematoria of Auschwitz.

The story of these three individuals provides a sliver of light in a densely dark epoch. Whatever misgivings they may or may not have had regarding the success of their mission, they could at least face the rest of their lives knowing they took action, and they left for their children and grandchildren – and for us – a model not of inaction, but of caring, concern, and compassion, a model of being proactive. At a time when most of American Jewry went about their daily lives, with some tangled up in bickering with each other and intensifying the disunity among the various factions of Jewry, these three young rabbinical students tried to rally Jews and Christians alike to speak out against the destruction of European Jewry.

Had the Holocaust not occurred, today the worldwide Jewish population would be thirty-two million strong, according to demographer Sergio Della Pergola, of the Hebrew University. Instead, we number thirteen million. And yet today, even with these reduced numbers, the Jewish people face severe threats. There are regimes that threaten Israel with military destruction, terrorist groups that strike at Jews from Tel Aviv to Buenos Aires, boycott movements that seek to undermine Israel's economic well-being, and propagandists who try to undermine its legitimacy. Israel's army can stand up to the guns, tanks, and bombs; world Jewry must respond to those who use other means to assault the Jewish State.

It is my hope that as we read of and applaud the heroic actions of these three young rabbinical students, we just may become inspired to rally the Jewish masses of today so that the errors of our past are not repeated.

Aryeh Rubin

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