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RABBI STEPHEN S. WISE'S ACTIONS UPON RECEIPT OF THE RIEGNER TELEGRAM: WHAT MORE COULD HE HAVE DONE?

Abstract

Though Rabbi Stephen S. Wise was known as one of America's foremost religious leaders during the first half of the twentieth century, in the recent historiography of America's role during the Holocaust, he has been heavily criticized. Much relates to the actions he took following receipt of the Riegner Telegram. However, analysis shows that Wise, understanding the social and political climate of the era, was simply following the strategy he deemed best to achieve the most help for Europe's Jews.

Słowa kluczowe: Stephen S. Wise, Gerhardt Riegner, telegram Riegnera, USA, Holokaust, Sumner Welles, Departament Stanu.

Key Words: Stephen S. Wise, Gerhardt Riegner, Riegner Telegram, United States, Holocaust, Sumner Welles, State Department.

During the first half of the twentieth century, Rabbi Stephen Samuel Wise was known as one of America's foremost religious leaders. His creation of the American Jewish Congress, founding of the Jewish Institute of Religion, ardent support of Zionism, and creation of the Free Synagogue made Wise a well-known name in the Jewish community outside of his native Manhattan, where he had lived since he was a year old. However, what is not taken into account by most historians when examining Wise's life is the fact that even though Wise was known as a Jewish leader, his popularity extended far beyond the Jewish community due to his strong support of progressive causes, such as campaigning for an end to child labor, lending his support for granting women suffrage, in addition to his belief in the need for interfaith cooperation to make America better. By the 1930s, Wise was not only known as *the* repre-

sentative of American Jewry, but also as one of the most influential men in the United States.

Therefore, when Adolf Hitler assumed power on January 30, 1933, Wise was primed to take on this fight, which was the most important in his lifetime for he believed that Hitler represented not only a threat to worldwide Jewry, but also to the ideals of democracy and civilization. From the beginning, Wise spoke out against the threat of Hitlerism, which led to many ordinary Americans branding him as an alarmist or warmonger. Yet Wise persisted and continued to constantly speak out against the policies of Hitler and his National Socialist Germans Workers Party, both at the Free Synagogue and at pulpits, both Jewish and Christian, across the United States. Using the connections he had made over the past three decades, between 1933 and 1945, Wise constantly pushed for the United States to take action in order to help European Jews.

However, for all of Wise's activism, in the current historiography of America's role during the Holocaust, he is often denounced for not doing enough during this era or for being ineffective in the measures that he did take. As David Kranzler noted, "Stephen S. Wise who had publicly served the cause of justice for over a half century, became a tragic figure during the years of the European Holocaust."¹ Henry Feingold stated that during the Holocaust "...there is also evidence that...Wise increasingly reined in his passion and allowed his voice to still."² How could a man who was known for being so passionate in his desire to save European Jewry be subjected to such modern day criticism? There seems to be several reasons for this: first was Wise's friendship with President Franklin D. Roosevelt, which his critics allege prevented him from taking more radical actions to help the Jews of Europe, believing that Wise would not want to do anything that could potentially embarrass his friend. Second, Wise has been accused of having political ambitions with the actions taken during the Holocaust reflecting the "American", rather than Jewish, mindset at the time because of his fear of losing his popularity and prestige. Third, Wise was charged with refusing to work with other American Jewish leaders. Finally, Wise, who had an admittedly large ego, was blamed with only wanting to follow his plans for rescue and relief, and was accused of ignoring suggestions made by other Jewish leaders.

Most of these charges levied against Wise came from the decisions he made after receiving the Riegner Telegram. On August 8, 1942, Dr. Gerhard Riegner, a representative of the World Jewish Congress in Geneva, Switzerland, sent a telegram detailing new information about Hitler's plan for the mass extermination of the Jews. The telegram read:

¹ D. Kranzler, *Stephen S. Wise and the Holocaust*, [in:] *Reverence Righteousness, and Rahamanut: Essays in Memory of Dr. Leo Jung*, ed. Jacob Schacter, Northvale, New Jersey 1992, p. 192.

² H. Feingold, *Crisis and Response: American Jewish Leadership during the Roosevelt Years*, "Modern Judaism", Vol. 8, No. 2 (May 1988), p. 112.

RECEIVED ALARMING REPORT THAT IN FUHRER'S HEADQUARTERS PLAN DISCUSSED AND UNDER CONSIDERATION ACCORDING TO WHICH ALL JEWS IN COUNTRIES OCCUPIED OR CONTROLLED BY GERMANY NUMBERING THREE AND A HALF FOUR MILLION SHOULD AFTER DEPORTATION AND CONCENTRATION IN THE EAST BE EXTERMINATED AT ONE BLOW TO RESOLVE ONCE AND FOR ALL THE JEWISH QUESTION IN EUROPE STOP ACTION REPORTED PLANNED FOR AUTUMN METHODS UNDER DISCUSSION INCLUDING PRUSSIC ACID STOP WE TRANSMIT INFORMATION WITH ALL NECESSARY RESERVATION AS EXACTITUDE CANNOT BE CONFIRMED STOP INFORMANT STATED TO HAVE CLOSE CONNECTIONS WITH HIGHEST GERMAN AUTHORITIES AND HIS REPORTS GENERALLY SPEAKING RELIABLE³

Riegner received most of the information detailed in this telegram from Eduard Schulte "an anti-Nazi German businessman who had sat in on a meeting of high Nazi officials in Silesia who freely talked about the murder of the Jews."⁴ Schulte subsequently expressed his concerns to Riegner hoping some action could be taken to stop this atrocity.

Riegner, though not fully convinced of the veracity of Schulte's claims, decided to send Wise this information because the two men were friends and also because Wise was "a well-known public figure and a friend of President Roosevelt" and Riegner believed that he would take the appropriate steps to alert high ranking governmental officials as well as the American public of the Nazis' murderous plans.⁵ Riegner was worried that the United States government would prevent Wise from seeing this telegram so he sent a second copy to Samuel Silverman, a Member of Parliament in the British House of Commons. In the copy he sent to Silverman via the British Foreign Office, Riegner added "INFORM AND CONSULT NEW YORK" believing that this would allow Wise to receive the information even if the American government refused to give him the original telegram.⁶ As Riegner remembered, "I was not mistaken; things turned out exactly as I had foreseen...the message to Wise was never sent on by the State Department" and Riegner received a letter stating that his message was not forwarded to Wise due to "its unsubstantiated character."⁷

However, by sending the telegram to Silverman in addition to Wise, Riegner ensured that Wise would learn about Hitler's plans for the extermination of the Jews. This was not an easy process during wartime because any communication outside of Britain required authorization from the War Office. When Silverman first asked for permission to contact Wise, he was denied, even though he was

³ Telegram from Gerhard Riegner to Stephen S. Wise, Papers of Stephen S. Wise at the Stephen S. Wise Free Synagogue.

⁴ Y. Bauer, *Rethinking the Holocaust*, New Haven, Connecticut 2001, p. 219.

⁵ G.M. Riegner, *Never Despair: Sixty Years in the Service of the Jewish People and the Cause of Human Rights*, Chicago 2006, p. 42.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 43.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

a Member of Parliament, and was forced to find another way to get the information to him. As Riegner recalled, “finally Silverman succeeded in sending the telegram through the intermediary of the War Office” and Wise received the information on August 28, 1942, three weeks after Riegner had sent it.⁸ Wise, through his work with the American and World Jewish Congresses, had heard many of the accusations present in Riegner’s telegram from other sources.⁹ However, he had never been able to receive official confirmation, and hoped that by asking for verification he might be able to finally have the United States government authenticate these atrocities, which he hoped would force the Roosevelt administration into taking action to help rescue Europe’s Jews.

Upon receiving the telegram, Wise immediately contacted Undersecretary of State Sumner Welles asking if Riegner’s information was valid. Wise had no idea that the State Department had been in possession of this same message for several weeks. Welles asked Wise not to make the information public until the government could verify it and Wise agreed. This is a decision for which Wise has been widely criticized. As Yehuda Bauer noted, “in American Jewish historiography especially, Wise has been accused of obeying government instructions, when what he should have done was go out and arouse the public, Jewish and non-Jewish.”¹⁰ However, it should be remembered that with the contents of Riegner’s report, there was the following disclaimer, which read, “we transmit information with all necessary reservations as exactitude cannot be confirmed. Informant stated to have close connections with highest German authorities and his reports generally speaking reliable.”¹¹ With this type of qualification included in the telegram itself, was it unreasonable for Wise to agree to wait for confirmation from official sources? Riegner did not disagree with Wise’s decision to follow Welles’ request not to immediately inform the public and believed Wise agreed “in order not to cut himself off from sources of information in the State Department.”¹² Though Wise trusted Riegner, and knew him to be a cautious man, he realized that he too had to proceed with prudence if he were to have any credibility.

This decision of whether or not to release the information publicly before receiving official confirmation was likely made more difficult for Wise because of the exaggerated reports of German atrocities that were used as propaganda

⁸ *Ibidem.*

⁹ Wise had wanted a World Jewish Congress since the 1920s, but it was not until 1936 that his idea came to fruition. Wise felt that this organization should unite world Jewry, promote Zionism, and to work against Hitlerism. The goal was to deal with issues that impacted all Jews; localized issues were meant to be dealt with by regional Jewish leaders. Wise served as head of the World Jewish Congress in addition to the American Jewish Congress.

¹⁰ Y. Bauer, *Rethinking the Holocaust...*, p. 220.

¹¹ Telegram from Gerhard Riegner to Stephen S. Wise in the Stephen S. Wise Papers at the Stephen Wise Free Synagogue.

¹² G.M. Riegner, *Never Despair...*, p. 31.

during the First World War, such as reports that the Germans had Kadaver factories, where they used corpses from the battlefield to make soaps, candles, lubricants, and other products from fats. This myth was widely reported in newspapers throughout Europe and the United States. When these stories were found to be false during the 1920s, the war-weary public saw them simply as a cause for American participation in a war, which they felt the country did not belong. Any reports of atrocities during World War II were initially viewed by the American public with the same skepticism especially when Dewitt MacKenzie told his readers in mid-September 1939, “from long experience on the battlefronts of the World War, I am convinced that ninety per cent of the atrocity stories are pure propaganda...”¹³ This skepticism, combined with a desire for revenge against the Japanese for the bombing of Pearl Harbor, and anti-Semitic feelings sweeping the nation, led ordinary Americans to have little interest in wanting to help the Jews. Knowing how the public felt, Wise hoped that confirmation from the government would cause the American people to feel horror, not disbelief and certainly not further antisemitism. Instead of having the public believe that Jews were asking for special considerations, especially at this time when it was widely accepted that all groups under the control of the Nazis were suffering equally, Wise wanted genuine outrage. It is understandable that Wise would be cautious given the wording of the telegram so Wise even asked Riegner “whether we were absolutely sure ‘deportation’ meant ‘extermination.’”¹⁴

Though Wise complied with the State Department’s request not to disseminate the information to the public, he did not keep the news to himself, which is something that his critics fail to recognize. Upon receipt of the telegram, he notified other American Jewish leaders, even ones with whom he had previously been engaged in deep conflicts, and “convoked the most important American Jewish organizations to two confidential meetings” where “they discussed the contents of the telegram as well as a telegram received a few days later by Agudah...reporting the killing of 100,000 Warsaw Jews.”¹⁵ Wise shared the contents of the telegram with those outside of the Jewish community including President Franklin Roosevelt, a number of members of Roosevelt’s Cabinet, and some Christian ministers. He also conferred with his colleagues on the President’s Advisory Committee on Political Refugees, and made a point to disseminate some of this information to his students at the Jewish Institute of Religion. Wise

¹³ D. MacKenzie, *Monumental Lies Mark Hostilities. War Atrocity Tales Branded 90 Per Cent Pure ‘Humbug’*, “Charleston Daily Mail”, September 12, 1939, p. 4.

¹⁴ G.M. Riegner, *Never Despair...*, p. 44.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 51. It should be noted that during World War II the American Jewish community was deeply fractured. Though all organizations and leaders shared the common goal of wanting to help European Jews, they could never come to a consensus about the best way of achieving this goal.

also notified some of his closest friends. In a letter to Philip Slomovitz, Wise expressed his concerns:

You cannot imagine what frightful things are coming to us: one, a rumor that all the Jews in Hitler-Europe are to be exterminated at one time. Even the media are named; and, two, massacres of one hundred thousand at one time. This is not for publication. We are working like mad on the problem, but nothing must be allowed to get into the press. But I want you, as a good friend, to know.¹⁶

Though Wise does not specify why he does not want the information disseminated to the public, it is likely because he did not want to lose his influence in the Roosevelt administration not because he feared losing his power, but rather because he realized that by pushing Roosevelt too hard he would be unable to get him to undertake any rescue or relief efforts. Therefore, Wise made the calculated decision that some action was better than nothing so he used this strategy of cooperation to help him achieve some of his goals. His critics who insist that Wise releasing the information immediately would have made a difference are simply looking for a scapegoat for neither the Roosevelt administration nor the American public's primary concern was with the fate of the Jews; rather it was focused on achieving a swift and decisive victory. If anything, Wise would have lost what influence he had, thus shutting down direct access for Jews to the White House, for Wise, more so than any other American Jewish leader, could reach Roosevelt due to the two men's long-standing friendship beginning when Roosevelt was governor of New York.¹⁷

Wise's promise not to tell the public was not easy for him, and he was beside himself when he received the Riegner telegram. In a letter to John Haynes Holmes, one of Wise's closest friends and co-crusaders, and a Unitarian minister, Wise wrote:

¹⁶ Stephen S. Wise to Philip Slomovitz, September 8, 1942, SSW-AJHS Reel 74-53.

¹⁷ Wise and Roosevelt had a complicated friendship. Though Wise had initially supported Roosevelt when he ran for governor in 1928, the two men had a tumultuous relationship while Roosevelt was in office due to Wise's perception that Roosevelt was allowing corruption to continue to overrun New York City in exchange for gaining the political support of powerful Tammany Hall. During Roosevelt's first administration, Wise was pleasantly surprised by the president's efforts to end the Great Depression and his mistrust slowly turned into a grudging admiration. As the first New Deal led to the even more progressive second New Deal, Wise let go of the past and fully committed himself to publicly supporting Roosevelt, believing that he was the best hope for saving Europe's Jews. Roosevelt was not immune from Wise's charm. Dislike of Wise's tactics while Roosevelt was governor quickly turned into the realization that Wise could be extremely useful to the administration. In January 1936, Roosevelt invited Wise to the White House, which is where the two men reconciled. Though in private Wise often lamented the lack of concrete action Roosevelt took during the Holocaust, in public, he cheered the President's every move, hoping that this would encourage him to take further action.

I have had the unhappiest days in my life. Please remember...that in addition to all of your suffering over everything connected with the war, I have something more, namely the uniquely tragic fate of my people. You will be tempted at once to ask, why do I think of it as "uniquely tragic?" "Is it any worse than the fate of the Czechs or Yugoslavs or Poles?" Yes! Think of what it means to hear, as I have heard, through coded message, first from Geneva, then from Berne, through the British Foreign Office,-- that Hitler plans the extermination at one time of the whole Jewish population in Europe; and prussic acid is mentioned as the medium. The other day something came to me which has left me without sleep: that 100,000 Jews within the Warsaw ghetto have been massacred by the Nazis and their corpses have been used to make soaps and fertilizers... this war against us began even before there was war, had nothing to do with war, was not even a cause of war; and if you and I and Fosdick and any of us, who have some spiritual and moral power, had moved America and Britain and France really to intervene on behalf of the slain innocents, war might not have come...I am almost demented over my people's grief.¹⁸

While waiting for official confirmation, Wise continued to push the government for increased rescue efforts and relied on the connections he had made during the previous thirty years. His efforts were not in vane for some governmental officials were willing to speak out on his behalf. For instance, in a letter from Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes to Roosevelt, Ickes wrote:

Back in the Fall of 1940, there was some discussion about making the Virgin Islands, up to their capacity to support additional people, available for refugees. Would you feel like considering this matter afresh? In this connection, Rabbi Wise suggested to me the other day that some people are playing with the idea of bringing a thousand Jewish children across if they could maintain them in the Virgin Islands. But it might be possible too to provide a refuge for some adults who failing this are likely to be murdered by Hitler's brutes.¹⁹

Wise was thrilled that Ickes made this suggestion to Roosevelt though he noted, "of course I never said that the children could be maintained in the Virgin Islands. I wonder whether I ought to correct that or just let it go."²⁰ Wise realized that this proposal had to be treated confidentially owing to the antisemitism still permeating the nation. He warned, "no publicity is to be made of it, nor of the 5,000 children. I had word from George Warren yesterday that not even the figure of 1,000 children is to be used, only some children are to be brought over."²¹ Wise remembered the public reaction to the Wagner-Rogers Bill, which, when introduced in 1939, would have allowed for 20,000 German, primarily

¹⁸ S. Wise, *The Personal Letters of Stephen Wise*, Boston 1956, p. 260–261.

¹⁹ Harold Ickes to Franklin D. Roosevelt, October 7, 1942, Papers of Stephen S. Wise at the American Jewish Archives, p. 2–11.

²⁰ Memo from Stephen S. Wise to Nahum Goldmann, James Waterman Wise, and Lillie Shultz, October 9, 1942, Papers of Stephen S. Wise at the American Jewish Archives, p. 2–11.

²¹ *Ibidem*. Wise believed this was for Roosevelt's protection and deemed members of Congress as the ones who would be opposed to this proposal.

Jewish, children under the age of fourteen to be admitted to the United States above the stated immigration quota. However, there was an immediate outcry against the bill from many prominent Americans, including former president Herbert Hoover, who worried that allowing any persons into the country above the set quota would lead to larger numbers of Jews seeking exile in America. In discussing this bill, a cousin of Roosevelt's reportedly remarked, "20,000 charming children would become 20,000 ugly adults," which seemingly summed up America's attitude towards any increase in immigration, especially that which benefitted Jews.²² Wise knew that especially now during this sensitive political time nothing should be done to provoke the outrage of the public.

While Wise was quietly alerting his colleagues about the telegram, Welles made good on his promise to have the State Department look into Riegner's claims. To verify the telegram's contents, the State Department contacted Leland Harrison, the American minister in Bern, about its veracity. As Raul Hilberg noted, "while the State Department was attempting to verify the contents of the Riegner telegram, reports of the Jewish catastrophe were multiplying in the press" demonstrating the apathy towards the Jews that many in the government felt for they took no further action during this process and were certainly not hurried in their efforts to confirm Riegner's report.²³ The American public too remained unmoved by this news and did not push the Roosevelt administration to take any further action. To expedite the process of confirmation, Wise stayed in near-constant contact with Welles and gave him any new information he received to help with the verification process. On October 4, Wise telegraphed Welles with details seemingly confirming Riegner's report, including discussions of deportations and exterminations, which he learned about through the London Branch of the World Jewish Congress. Welles also attempted to keep Wise informed of his findings. One telegram, which Welles passed on to Wise, stated:

There are indications that Jews are, without any doubt, being driven out systematically from the countries of Western Europe. Such indications are contained in numerous reports which have come to me from both Jewish and non-Jewish sources, supplemented by reports received from Consul Squire in Geneva, who has been in communication with Dr. Riegner. Jews are being moved, these reports indicate, to unknown destinations in German-occupied Russia and in Poland. It has been credibly reported to me, with regard to Polish Jews, that ghettos of Warsaw and other large cities are being cleared and the Jews sent eastward to a destiny unknown. My Polish colleague told me he was unable to confirm that former residents were being evacuated from the ghettos of Warsaw. I will make use of all available facilities in endeavoring to verify reports. Representatives of the

²² America and the Holocaust (VHS): Series: The American Experience PBS, 1994.

²³ R. Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews: Volume Three: Revised and Definitive Edition*, New York 1985, p. 1116.

Jewish Congress in Geneva are being communicated with by me and I shall be very glad to help them in any way that I can.²⁴

Welles also promised Wise “as soon as I receive the report from Mr. Harrison of his interview with Dr. Riegner and his associates, I shall of course let you know.”²⁵ Wise, rather than criticizing the State Department’s desire to wait for confirmation, instead believed that it was an expedient course of action so as to prevent accusations of overexaggerations as were made during World War I.

In November, Harrison sent back full documentation confirming the contents of Riegner’s report. Welles summoned Wise to Washington in a seemingly innocuous letter, which read “I should value the opportunity of seeing you the next time you pass through Washington in order to discuss with you certain information I have received from our Minister in Switzerland after his conversations with Mr. Lichtheim and Mr. Riegner.”²⁶ When Wise went to see Welles, Welles informed him “these documents confirm and justify your worst fears.”²⁷ Interestingly, Welles declined to officially confirm the information, but gave Wise permission to disseminate the report to the public, which Wise did. On November 24, 1942, Wise held a press conference releasing the contents of Riegner’s telegram. He stated, “the State Department finally made available today the documents which have confirmed the stories and rumors of Jewish extermination in all of Hitler-ruled Europe.”²⁸

Wise’s press conference led to an almost immediate backlash from the government. Part of the problem came from the fact that not all of the divisions within the State Department were aware of Welles’ meeting with Wise. Indeed, “the division of European Affairs...angrily attacked the Division of Foreign Activity Correlation for clearing and passing on the various messages from Geneva about mass murder.”²⁹ The Department of European Affairs was aghast that Wise implied in his press conferences that the State Department had confirmed the murders, thus leading to many telegrams urging the government to take action to save the Jews, which the government was unwilling and unprepared to do.

²⁴ Paraphrase of Telegram from American Minister, Bern to Secretary of State, Washington, October 6, 1942 in Folder: Wise, Stephen; 1942; Correspondence, 1920–1943; Papers of Sumner Welles; Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York.

²⁵ Sumner Welles to Stephen S. Wise, October 7, 1942, Folder: Wise, Stephen; 1942; Correspondence, 1920–1943; Papers of Sumner Welles; Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York.

²⁶ Sumner Welles to Stephen S. Wise, November 13, 1942, Folder: Wise, Stephen; 1942; Correspondence, 1920–1943; Papers of Sumner Welles; Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York.

²⁷ G.M. Riegner, *Never Despair...*, p. 51.

²⁸ Stephen S. Wise as quoted *Wise Gets Confirmations: Checks with State Department on Nazis’ ‘Extermination Campaigns’*, “The New York Times”, November 25, 1942, p. 10.

²⁹ R. Breitman, *The Allied War Effort and the Jews, 1942–1943*, “Journal of Contemporary History” 20(1), Jan 1985, p. 143.

Robert Borden Reams, who worked in the Department of European Affairs, believed Wise never should have publicized the information. In an internal State Department memo he stated:

It should again be stressed that all of these reports are unconfirmed. It is obviously impossible to secure confirmation of German activities in the various occupied countries...It cannot be doubted that the Jewish people of Europe are oppressed and it is certain that considerable numbers of them have died in one way or another since the war started. Whether the number of dead amounts to tens of thousands, or, as these reports state, to millions is not material to the main problem... Our main purpose is the winning of the war and other considerations must be subordinate thereto.³⁰

Though Reams was especially blunt, he spoke for many in the Roosevelt administration. Therefore, the European Affairs division of the State Department vowed to take action so that a misunderstanding like this could not happen again.

After confirming that the atrocities were true, Wise was almost immediately attacked by other Jewish leaders, who had not previously been made privy to the contents of the Riegner Telegram, for not releasing the information to the public sooner believing that thousands of lives could have been saved if only he had spoken out. Wise was also chastised for not being forceful enough in his calls on the Roosevelt administration to take action. These criticisms were not limited to Wise's contemporaries. For example, several historians, including Conrad Black, believed Wise missed "an opportunity to assemble a broader coalition of outrage against Nazi atrocities" and argued that "virtually monopolizing the Holocaust was a tactical error" since Wise chose to focus exclusively on the Jewish victims of Nazi atrocities.³¹ Kranzler asserted that Wise deliberately "withheld information about the Nazis' "final solution," transmitted to the United States through various channels, and only when forced by vociferous declamations and other types of pressure from various groups did he reluctantly call for action on the part of the American government."³² From all of the evidence presented, Kranzler's claim is patently untrue and speaks of a man who is desperate to place blame for the inaction of the American government on someone, other than on whom it truly belongs.³³

³⁰ Robert Borden Reams as quoted in R, Brietman et al., *U.S. Intelligence and the Nazis*, Cambridge 2005, p. 26.

³¹ C. Black, *Franklin Delano Roosevelt: Champion of Freedom*, New York 2003, p. 817.

³² D. Kranzler, *Stephen S. Wise...*, p. 174.

³³ D. Kranzler, who escaped Nazi Germany with his family in 1937, spent most of his career researching rescue efforts by Jews during the Holocaust. He is especially critical of Wise, believing that his tactics were too soft. While complimenting people like Peter Bergson (Hillel Cook) for being outspoken in their maneuvers, Kranzler fails to realize that their efforts, other than shocking the public, had no real effect. Roosevelt ignored these leaders, and refused to meet with them. Wise's tactic of playing to the President's ego was much more effective and gained him access to the White House, where he pushed his agenda of rescue and relief. Though Roosevelt certainly did

However, even if Wise had released the information sooner, it likely would not have made a difference. Though Wise spoke of two million Jews being killed under the orders of Adolf Hitler, and explained that Hitler wanted to expand this campaign of extermination, demonstrated how the Jewish population of Warsaw diminished from 500,000 to 100,000, and detailed how approximately 80% of the Jews in Europe had been transferred to camps in Poland, his accusations were not well-received by the public even though Wise stressed he had governmental verification of his reports. As Deborah Lipstadt demonstrated, “despite Wise’s contention that the State Department and the White House had authenticated his information, most major papers treated this as a story released by a Jewish source and an interested party.”³⁴ Also, “the AP wire service report on Wise’s announcement, which was used by most of the dailies, was skeptical about Wise’s claims to have State Department confirmation.”³⁵ Likely, this is because in the aftermath of Wise’s press conference, the State Department, not wanting any type of pressure thrust upon them, distanced itself from Wise. This led many major publications, including *Time* and *Newsweek*, to ignore Wise entirely for when the State Department was asked to verify Wise’s claims, they refused to answer any queries and insisted that the media speak with Wise. Wise informed the press that the information he received came from various sources, not just the State Department. However, some of the accusations he levied, such as bodies being used to make soap, reminded the public of similar rumors that had surrounded the Germans during World War I, and were seen as nothing more than scare tactics.

Though Wise finally had the official confirmation he had wanted, America’s mass media were reluctant to publish the information he provided. When they did, it was in carefully worded terms often using such modifying words as “alleged.” Some publications, including the *Christian Century*, attacked Wise for publicizing the atrocities, while not denying that they were occurring. One article read:

We question, however, whether any good purpose is served by the publication of such charges as Dr. Stephen S. Wise gave to the press last week. In the first place, although Rabbi Wise went out of his way to place the responsibility for his charges on the state department, that branch of the government has conspicuously refrained from issuing any confirmation. In the second place, Dr. Wise’s figures on the number of Jews killed differ radically from those given out on the same day by the Polish government in exile... In the third place, Dr. Strasburger whose underground figures are used to support Rabbi Wise’s charges is the same Polish leader who is campaigning in this country for the complete destruction of Germany. And in the fourth place, Dr. Wise’s allegation that Hitler is

not take all, or even most, of Wise’s suggestions, he did not ignore Wise completely, thus showing that his methods worked.

³⁴ D. Lipstadt, *Beyond Belief: The American Press and the Coming of the Holocaust 1933–1945*, New York 1986, p. 181.

³⁵ *Ibidem*.

paying \$20 each for Jewish corpses to be “processed into soap fats and fertilizer” is unpleasantly reminiscent of the “cadaver factory” lie which was one of the triumphs of the First World War.³⁶

The criticism present in the *Christian Century* was so bad that *Time* contacted Wise for a statement. He responded:

If I had to make a statement, I would say that I took exception to the statement of the CHRISTIAN CENTURY because it set out not to deal with the guilt of Hitler in perpetuating crimes, but with my own sin of exaggeration. I have no hesitation in saying that this indictment of me for reporting, rather than of Hitler for committing the most awful crimes in history is of a piece with the distorted and thwarted mind of Dr. Morrison touching every Jewish question that is brought up for discussion...³⁷

In this way, Wise acknowledged the antisemitism present in American life, even within mainstream media. Wise also contacted the editor of the *Christian Century* and said “your magazine, dedicated to Christianity, is unique in apologizing for Hitler’s slaughter of European Jews and in failure to express protests or indignation.”³⁸ What is ironic, is that less than two weeks later when the Allies confirmed the Final Solution, the *Christian Century* never apologized for their attacks on Wise even though his claims were proved accurate.

Unfortunately, Wise’s press conferences about the Riegner Telegram did not garner the attention or support he hoped they would. This did not deter Wise who insisted on keeping the American public aware of what was going on in Europe. To commemorate the victims of Nazi atrocities, he called for a Day of Mourning and Prayer to be held on December 2. This event was a success; over half a million New Yorkers stopped working for ten minutes to show their solidarity with Hitler’s victims, though they did add ten minutes to the following work day to avoid accusations of disloyalty.

A coalition of American Jewish leaders, led by Wise, hoped to meet with Roosevelt on December 2. Roosevelt initially refused to see the delegation and tried to pass them off to the State Department. In a strongly worded letter, Wise stated:

I do not wish to add an atom to the awful burden which you are bearing, with magic, and I do believe, heaven-inspired strength at this time. But you do know the most overwhelming disaster in Jewish history has befallen Jews in the form of Hitler mass-massacres. Hitler’s decision was to exterminate the Jewish people in all Hitler-ruled lands, and it is indisputable that as many as two million civilian Jews have been slain. I have had cables and underground advises for some months, telling of these things. I succeeded, together with the heads of other Jewish organizations,

³⁶ *Horror Stories from Poland*, “The Christian Century”, December 9, 1942, p. 1519.

³⁷ Stephen S. Wise to Miss Donohugh, January 18, 1943, SSW-AJHS Reel 85-7.

³⁸ Stephen S. Wise to Charles Morrison, December 28, 1942, SSW-AJHS Reel 74-38.

in keeping these out of the press and have been in constant communication with the State Department, particularly Under Secretary Welles. The State Department has received what it believes to be confirmation of these unspeakable horrors and has approved of my giving the facts to the press. The organizations banded together in the Conference of which I am Chairman, feel that they wish to present to you a memorandum on this situation, so terrible that this day is being observed as a day of mourning and fasting throughout the Jewish world... It would be gravely misunderstood if, despite your overwhelming preoccupation, you did not make it possible to receive our delegation and to utter what I am sure will be your heartening and consoling reply. As your old friend, I beg you will somehow arrange to do this.³⁹

Wise therefore utilized his position to force Roosevelt to allow these men to meet with him at the White House the following week, specifically mentioning his cooperation in not releasing the Riegner Telegram to the press prior to receiving permission from Welles, in order to discuss the information which they had even though it was clear that Roosevelt had little interest in doing so or in changing the war goals of the United States. These do not seem like the actions of a man who was afraid of losing the favor he had cultivated with Roosevelt or who was uninterested in working with other Jewish organizations outside of the American Jewish Congress and World Jewish Congress.

On December 8, 1942, a delegation of American Jewish leaders, which included representatives from the American Jewish Congress, American Jewish Committee, American Jewish Labor Committee, B'nai B'rith, the Synagogue Council of America, and the Union of Orthodox Rabbis of the United States, representing the wide range of Jewish interests in America, presented the "Blueprint for Extermination" to Roosevelt, which detailed the murder of Jews across Europe. In part it read:

Already almost two million Jews, men, women, and children, have been cruelly done to death, and five million more Jews live under the threat of a similar doom. The record of these heinous crimes against the Jews in Nazi Europe is detailed in the attached memorandum... In the midst of their suffering, however, the peoples of Europe are sustained by a hope that the victory of the Democracies will destroy the Nazi scourge and restore freedom to the world. European Jews share that hope. But will they live to see the dawn of this day of freedom? Unless action is taken immediately, the Jews of Hitler Europe are doomed... We ask you now once again to raise your voice- on behalf of the Jews of Europe. We ask you once again to warn the Nazis that they will be held to strict accountability for their crimes. We ask you to employ every available means to bring solemn protest and warning to the peoples of the Axis countries so that they may be deterred from acting as the instruments of the monstrous designs of their mad leaders. We urge that an American commission be appointed to receive and examine all evidence of Nazi barbarities against civilian populations, and to submit that evidence to the bar of public opinion and to the conscience of the world.⁴⁰

³⁹ Stephen S. Wise to Franklin D. Roosevelt, December 2, 1942, FDR-SSW.

⁴⁰ Stephen S. Wise, Maurice Wertheim, Adolph Held, Henry Monsky, Israel Goldstein, and Israel Rosenberg to Franklin D. Roosevelt, December 8, 1942, FDR-SSW.

The delegation pled with Roosevelt to publically acknowledge the atrocities present in their report and wanted the United States to take concrete action to stop these Nazi-sponsored killings. Unfortunately, as Feingold asserted, “they were pleading for their brethren who were legally not the responsibility of the United States and the request was put forward by the leaders of a group whom the polls indicated were an unpopular minority in America.”⁴¹

Though Roosevelt dominated the meeting, reportedly speaking twenty-three of the twenty-nine minutes allotted to the delegation, he, though admitting none of the information which they presented him was anything that he had not heard before, managed to somewhat assuage their fears. Roosevelt responded that he knew what Wise was telling him was true. However, Roosevelt stated, “We cannot treat these matters in normal ways. We are dealing with an insane man-Hitler, and the group that surrounds him represent an example of a national psychopathic case. We cannot act toward them by normal means. That is why the problem is very difficult.”⁴² Though Roosevelt would not give a new announcement on the atrocity for the delegation to release, he allowed his statement which was given at the July 1942 Madison Square Garden rally, which Wise had initially pushed him for, to again be released to the press. In this statement Roosevelt said, “the Nazis will not succeed in exterminating their victims any more than they will succeed in enslaving mankind. The American people not only sympathize with all victims... but will hold their perpetrators... to strict accountability in a day of reckoning which will surely come.”⁴³ Following this meeting, Wise told reporters that Roosevelt “authorized him to say that he was profoundly shocked to learn of the slaughter.”⁴⁴ Roosevelt also promised to give “full consideration” to the proposal which would create an agency to examine the atrocities occurring in Europe.⁴⁵ Though Roosevelt took no concrete action, Wise tried to remain optimistic at the end of the meeting, writing Welles “the President’s mind was ready, as indeed his great heart always is ready, to be of help to those who need help.”⁴⁶ In response, Welles told Wise “I am sure that the visit which you and your associates made to the President the other day will prove to be as helpful as any such step could be during the times in which we

⁴¹ H. Feingold, *Crisis and Response...*, p. 114.

⁴² W.D. Rubinstein, *The Myth of Rescue: Why the Democracies Could Not Have Saved More Jews from the Nazis*, London 1997, p. 87.

⁴³ Franklin D. Roosevelt to Stephen S. Wise, July 17, 1942, Folder: Jewish Matters, Container 19, President’s Personal File; Franklin D Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York.

⁴⁴ “F.D.R. Repeats Pledge to Avenge Slaughter of 2 Million Jews” (no author, no newspaper), December 8, 1942, The Papers of Stephen S. Wise at the American Jewish Archives Collection 49, Box 5, Folder 6.

⁴⁵ Stephen S. Wise as quoted in: *ibidem*.

⁴⁶ Stephen S. Wise to Sumner Welles, December 9, 1942, Folder: Wise, Stephen; 1942; Correspondence, 1920–1943; Papers of Sumner Welles; Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York.

live.”⁴⁷ Though Wise has received criticism for not being more forceful during this period, he obviously understood the realities of wartime and realized even some acknowledgment about the atrocities from Roosevelt was better than nothing.

Nine days later, largely as a result of pressure from Jewish leaders during this meeting, the United States, along with eleven other nations including Britain and the Soviet Union, issued a statement that confirmed the atrocities reading:

That the German authorities, not content with denying to persons of Jewish race in all the territories over which their barbarous rule has been extended the most elementary human rights, are now carrying into effect Hitler’s oft repeated intention to exterminate the Jewish people in Europe.⁴⁸

Roosevelt subsequently declared that the United States would punish any perpetrators of war crimes. However, Roosevelt’s statement did not mention the “Final Solution” as detailed in Riegner’s Telegram or specifically mention crimes against the Jews, which was not surprising given the attitude of antisemitism still plaguing the United States, even in light of confirmation of the atrocities.

Wise tried to use the information from the Riegner Telegram, and the subsequent outpouring of shock to try and push the government to reconsider alternate plans for refugees, though he was largely unsuccessful. Building on the communication he had with Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes in October 1942, Wise again asked about the possibility of temporary resettlement of some Jews to the U.S. Virgin Islands. However, Ickes, who had previously been sympathetic to this plan, dismissed this suggestion due to the “depressed economic condition of the islands, and the difficulties of supplies arising out of the shipping shortage.”⁴⁹ Though people in the Virgin Islands were willing to accept Jewish refugees, the Roosevelt administration dismissed Wise’s proposal without further consideration, both because of logistics and wanting to focus on winning the war, thus shutting down another avenue to save the Jews.

The fallout from the Riegner Telegram was not yet over. On January 21, 1943, Welles received another telegram, known as Cable 482, from Riegner, detailing further horrors occurring in Europe. In this telegram, Riegner gave specific information including the fact that European Jews were being murdered at a rate of 6,000 per day in Poland. It stated that in Romania, 130,000 Jews were transported to Transnistria in Romanian occupied Ukraine and 60,000 of them had died. It concluded with the message that Jews in other countries were

⁴⁷ Sumner Welles to Stephen S. Wise, December 10, 1942, Folder: Wise, Stephen; 1942; Correspondence, 1920–1943; Papers of Sumner Welles; Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York.

⁴⁸ United Nations Declaration HC Deb 17 December 1942. Retrieved from: <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1942/dec/17/united-nations-declaration>.

⁴⁹ Harold Ickes to Franklin D. Roosevelt, January 13, 1942, FDR-SSW.

slowly starving to death and had their possessions taken from them. Welles, by this point convinced of the atrocities “passed on the cable to Wise and instructed Minister Harrison to keep sending full reports from Switzerland.”⁵⁰ Welles’s concern did not mesh with the goals of others within the government, especially the European Affairs Division of the State Department, who felt that telegrams such as Riegner’s had to be squashed in the interest of national security and the greater goal of winning the war. In response, Secretary of State Cordell Hull sent telegram 354, which read:

In the future we would suggest that you do not accept reports submitted to you to be transmitted to private persons in the United States unless such action is advisable because of extraordinary circumstances. Such private messages circumvent neutral countries’ censorship and it is felt that by sending them we risk the possibility that steps would necessarily be taken by the neutral countries to curtail or forbid our means of communication for confidential official matters.⁵¹

Though the wording of this telegram is seemingly innocuous, it was designed to prevent non-governmental leaders, such as Wise, from receiving information from Europe. Sumner Welles is the one who signed this document, though it seems likely he gave his signature without being fully aware of the contents or realizing its connection to cable 482. However, this telegram had serious repercussions. Welles, in March 1943, tried to get more information for Wise from Harrison to which Harrison replied that he had been told- via telegram 354- that he was not to forward on any further information about this issue. Welles seemed bewildered by this and once again opened up the channel of communication between Wise and Harrison. However, the fact that cable 354 was introduced, even though it was later circumvented, demonstrates how some members of the United States government worked to ensure that word of the atrocities in Europe would not continue reaching the public. The irony remains how private corporations could receive messages regarding their property, but that cables about the murder of the Jews were seen as being dangerous to the official system of communication. No matter what actions Wise would have taken, he would not have been able to stop the government from enacting these measures, which they felt best given the realities of wartime.

Though much of the criticism leveled against Wise for his actions during the Holocaust insists that he could- and should- have done more following receipt of the Riegner telegram, it seems unlikely that he could have taken any more meaningful action or achieved any greater results. While it is true that during the period between when Wise received the telegram and when the information was disseminated that close to a million European Jews were murdered, Wise, even if he had released this information, could not have stopped this from occurring.

⁵⁰ R. Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews...*, p. 1120.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*, p. 1120–1121.

During these three months, Wise constantly went between his home in New York and Washington DC where he pushed the President, members of Congress, and other high-level civil servants to take action to stop the extermination of the Jews.

However, this begs the question, had Wise not waited for confirmation, is there anything that he, or any other Jewish leader, could have done to either stop the killing or to convince the United States government to take further action? The answer is no. Roosevelt was interested in accomplishing one goal during World War II: a quick and decisive victory for the United States. Had Wise chosen to publicize the information without confirmation, he likely would have been dubbed a warmonger, someone who was intentionally spreading misinformation in an attempt to deceive the public. Reports of the atrocities were mounting in the press yet America remained silent. The American people were wary to believe any reports of atrocities largely because of the propaganda spread near the end of the First World War, much of which was later found to be untrue. Judging from the reactions of the time towards Wise's pronouncement, it is obvious to see that many within the mainstream press felt that he was exaggerating. Also, while many Americans believed Jews were being treated badly and perhaps a number killed, few were willing to accept that millions were being murdered in such a systematic way.

Therefore Wise's strategy in getting President Roosevelt to condemn the atrocities, while still pushing for increased rescue and relief, was the most effective course of action he could take. Since Jews were a minority in America, vocal as they were, and it is well known that America was anti-Semitic during this era, it was intelligent of Wise not to cut himself off from the White House entirely for the sake of a few more headlines, which would not have made a difference to Roosevelt. Instead, by working within the system, Wise was able to use his position to get Roosevelt to later take concrete action, as wartime conditions allowed.

Yet, posthumously, he has received tremendous criticism for not doing more to save European Jews once Hitler assumed power in Germany and often has been relegated to a footnote in history books. However, the charges levied against Wise for not doing enough during the Holocaust, or against specific actions that he took during this era, especially in regards to the Riegner Telegram, appear to be largely without merit. Wise, more than any other American, and perhaps even worldwide, Jewish leader did more to help the Jews of Europe by publicizing their suffering and eventual murder. He was viewed by European Jewry as their possible savior for the work he did in promoting a Jewish homeland in Palestine as well as directing the attention of the world to Hitler's special war-of-terror on the Jewish people. Wise did all that he could do to raise awareness of the Holocaust, pressure the Roosevelt administration to take action, and to help European Jews, yet over six million Jewish men, women, and children were murdered by Hitler's henchmen. Instead of laying the blame on Wise and other

Jewish leaders, who wielded little political power during this era, the blame for this atrocity should go where it belongs: on the Nazis. Leaders such as Wise, who gave their all to help the Jews, even if their methods are viewed as ineffectual today, are not at fault. In the circumstances of the era, Wise did what he believed to be right.

Therefore, criticisms of how Wise handled this information can be attributed to the desire for a scapegoat, more so than having any concrete way in which he could have helped save Europe's Jews. Indeed, Wise understood the social and political realities of the era and worked within these established perimeters to achieve the best results. It is clear that Wise was not so concerned with his ego that he was unwilling to work with other American Jewish leaders, was not worried about maintaining his power and prestige, and did not kowtow down to Roosevelt. Instead, this episode with the Riegner Telegram confirms that Wise, as upset as he was with these atrocities, did not let his emotions best him and kept working toward the same goal he had since 1933- providing rescue and relief to Europe's Jews and defeating Hitlerism.

Elizabeth Bryant

REAKCJA RABIEGO STEPHENA S. WISE'A NA TELEGRAM REIGNERA: CZY MOŻNA BYŁO ZROBIĆ WIĘCEJ?

Streszczenie

8 sierpnia 1942 dr Gerhart Riegner, członek Światowego Kongresu Żydów w Genewie, w Szwajcarii, przesłał telegram do rabiego Stephena S. Wise'a, przywódcy Amerykańskiego i Światowego Kongresu Żydów, w którym wydawał się potwierdzać plany Hitlera eksterminacji europejskich Żydów. Po otrzymaniu rzeczonego telegramu Wise skontaktował się z podsekretarzem stanu Sumnerem Wellesem, prosząc o potwierdzenie informacji zawartej w raporcie Riegnera. Działanie to spotkało się z olbrzymią krytyką we współczesnej historiografii badającej rolę Stanów Zjednoczonych w historii Holokaustu.

Jednakże badając ów incydent, nie sposób nie zauważyć, że Wise miał konkretne powody, aby nie rozpowszechniać swojej wiedzy natychmiast. Wise rozumiał polityczne i społeczne realia owych czasów i wiedział, że priorytetem administracji Roosevelta nigdy nie będzie ratowanie Żydów, a raczej możliwie szybkie i całkowite zwycięstwo w wojnie. Wise rozumiał ponadto, że w celu bycia wiarygodnym potrzebował potwierdzenia swoich informacji przez rząd USA. W przeciwnym przypadku opinia publiczna uznałaby jego rewelacje za fałszywe oskarżenia, podobnie jak traktowano szereg oskarżeń Niemców podczas pierwszej wojny światowej, co wykazano w latach dwudziestych XX wieku. Zdawał on sobie sprawę z faktu, że bez wsparcia i pomocy rządowej nie jest w stanie zrobić nic, aby powstrzymać te okrucieństwa. Dlatego przekazywał posiadane informacje wśród przyjaciół i znajomych, równocześnie próbując wywrzeć nacisk na administrację Roosevelta, aby podjęła odpowiednie działania. Dlatego też, jak się wydaje, większość krytyki działania Wise'a jest nieuzasadniona.