

“Relief is a political gesture:” The Jewish Labor Committee’s interventions in war-torn Poland, 1939-1945

Catherine Collomp



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/6942>

ISSN: 1765-2766

Publisher

AFEA

Electronic reference

Catherine Collomp, « “Relief is a political gesture:” The Jewish Labor Committee’s interventions in war-torn Poland, 1939-1945 », *Transatlantica* [Online], 1 | 2014, Online since 29 September 2014, connection on 08 September 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/6942>

This text was automatically generated on 8 September 2020.



Transatlantica – Revue d'études américaines est mis à disposition selon les termes de la licence Creative Commons Attribution - Pas d'Utilisation Commerciale - Pas de Modification 4.0 International.

“Relief is a political gesture:” The Jewish Labor Committee’s interventions in war-torn Poland, 1939-1945

Catherine Collomp

1

Introduction

- 2 The Jewish Labor Committee was founded in New York in February 1934 as a movement to combat Nazism and Fascism in Europe as well as their possible influence in the United States. Situated at the crossroads of organized Labor and American Jewry it assembled the American working class forces of the non-communist Jewish left mostly represented by the garment trades unions (International Ladies Garment Workers’ Union, ILGWU, and Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, ACWA) and by the fraternal order of the Workmen’s Circle and other socialist and secular Jewish organizations (Left Poale Zion, Jewish Socialist Verband, the *Jewish Daily Forward* association). Together these organizations represented half a million persons, which only constituted a fragment of the US labor movement, and a fraction of the total Jewish-American population. Yet the JLC stood at the vanguard of American labor’s position in the fight against Nazism and Fascism. The JLC’s self-ascribed mission was multiple as subsumed in its title as defending both Jewish and labor interests. As expressed in its constitution, the JLC had come into existence to “give aid to Jewish and non Jewish labor institutions overseas; to assist the democratic labor movement in Europe; provide succor to victims of oppression and persecution and to combat anti-Semitism and racial and religious intolerance abroad and in the United States”.¹ This multiple vision came from the Bundist history of the JLC’s founders. Nearly all of them (certainly the initial leaders B.C. Vladeck, Sidney Hillman, David Dubinsky), before they

emigrated to the United States, had been actively engaged in the struggle for the defense of the Jewish working class in the Zone of settlement of the Russian Empire. The Bund, founded in 1897, had made it its mission to defend Jewish workers as workers but also as Jews, to fight for their political and economic rights, defend their language (Yiddish) and secular culture against the tsarist repression.

- 3 In the interwar years, in independent Poland, the Bund, a non-communist but socialist workers' party, had maintained these objectives of cultural autonomy and defense of the Jewish proletariat. Since 1930 its affiliation with the Labor and Socialist International connected it to the whole European non-communist left.
- 4 Because of their background as former political refugees themselves, the JLC leaders who had had to seek refuge in the United States, were acutely sensitive to the two-pronged aspects of the Nazi persecution exerted against Jews and the labor movements in the countries under German domination. In that sense their movement diverged from mainstream American labor organizations whose tradition of political neutrality isolated them from European labor institutions. In addition the JLC also diverged from the major Jewish organizations in America, most of which represented more middle class and Zionist interests.² Often cooperating with them against anti-Semitic prejudice and Nazi propaganda, the JLC nevertheless stressed that the struggle against anti-Semitism should not be fought only as a Jewish concern but should be part of a larger combat borne by the solidarity of international labor forces.
- 5 This paper explores the relationship between the humanitarian and the political motivations underlying the JLC's operations. In other words it represents an attempt to probe the relationship between its Jewish and Labor motivations. In the course of their action, the JLC officers emphasized one or the other dimension of their struggle. The first phase of the JLC's operations, clearly political, has already been explored in previous publications (Collomp, 2003, 2004, 2005; Jacobs; Malmgreen). These highlight how the JLC was able to save prominent anti-Nazi and antifascist leaders and political activists from certain arrest by the Gestapo in the advance of the German army in Poland and in France. On the whole, some 1500 European labor and socialist leaders, whether Jewish or not, and family members, were thus brought to a safe haven in the United States or to other countries in the western hemisphere in 1940 and 1941. This operation, which saved cadres of the European socialist and social-democratic labor movements, however, was drawing to a close during the last months of 1941 and had ended by the time the United States entered the war. After this first and political phase of its interventions, as the Nazi onslaught against Jews became massive, systematically destructive, and final, the JLC's commitment to save Jewish lives became predominant. At the same time, the JLC gave political support to the underground labor and social-democratic organizations in Nazi-dominated countries. Concerning the combatants in the Jewish ghettos of Poland, no distinction contrasting Labor to Jewish concerns would make sense. In the JLC's own administrative language the distinction was often posited as between "rescue" (of political leaders) and "relief" (of the Jewish masses) or between the support of "underground labor" and "aid to the ghettos".³ Yet in the tragic and extreme situation of Polish Jews during World War II, both the humanitarian support of the ghettos and the financing of their resistance against the German forces were necessary.

The JLC as a relief organization?

- 6 After the German invasion of Poland in September 1939, understanding that the war had placed the 3.5 million Polish Jews "in a virtual hell," the JLC wondered whether it should not transform itself into another relief institution. The situation was appalling. By 1940, Polish Jews had been turned into refugees in the region of the General Government controlled by the Germans as well as in the East under Soviet rule. By November, all major cities had Jewish ghettos; 400,000 persons were crammed in the Warsaw ghetto, an area formerly designed to house 150,000 people. Jews were deprived of their property, means of livelihood, and forced into slave labor. Poverty was extreme, disease widespread. In the spring of 1941, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC or Joint) recognized that it could hardly alleviate the hardship of half of the 1.8 million Jews in the part of Poland controlled by the Germans. Another 1.3 million Jews were unreachable in the Russian controlled area (Bauer, 94-103; Engel, 1987). If the Joint could not alleviate such misery, independent JLC funding would have been even less adequate. Collaboration with the Joint and with the United Jewish Appeal, rather, was advocated and endorsed. Yet, the JLC did not simply become a branch of the JDC, it maintained its particular political goals as an independent organization. "The funds we raise are not only for relief, but also for labor aid, for underground work, and for defense work in America," JLC executive director Isiah Minkoff asserted.⁴
- 7 The JLC position concerning relief had been reinforced by the appeal made to it by the delegation of the Polish Bund in the United States. Three of its members had reached New York in 1938-1939: former secretary of the Party's Central Committee Emanuel Nowogrodzki, as well as Jacob Pat, and Benjamin Tabachinsky, both formerly engaged in the Party's social work. The latter two were to play a central role in the development of the JLC's relief activity. Upon their reports on the conditions in Poland in September 1939, the Bund representatives and JLC executive leaders decided to combine their relief activities under the aegis of the JLC in order to maximize their resources. Jacob Pat was appointed general secretary of the JLC and Tabachinsky responsible for fund-raising in American cities.⁵ According to these delegates, "relief [in Poland] as practiced by the Joint will not save the 3.5 million Jews. We cannot permit that the political, economic and cultural activities of the Jewish masses should stop. We must organize our relief work in America so that these activities should be strengthened and even broadened."⁶ Such words meant that the JLC would develop its cooperation with the Joint, but would direct it in view of saving the political and cultural institutions created by the Bund. Under this interpretation, relief would not come only in the form of material aid but was also to be aimed at the political and intellectual institutions of the movement. As expressed by members of the Executive Committee, "the JLC assumes responsibility for the labor movement of Poland and for the emigration of labor people."⁷ In the latter part of this sentence "emigration" referred to the rescue operation which was to take place in 1940-41. It must be recalled here that the JLC supported Bundist leaders and scholars who had found refuge in Lithuania, and again in July 1940 when they were trapped in this country now annexed by the Soviet Union, it financed the rescue of about 100 of them. The JLC provided money, affidavits and visas for their perilous escape through the USSR, Japan (before Pearl Harbor) and across the Pacific, and welcomed them when they reached the American West Coast in

the first months of 1941. When the rescue operations from France and Lithuania came to an end, the JLC devoted its energy and resources to direct relief and support of the Jewish population in occupied Poland.

- 8 Evidence from the first years of the war is fragmentary and conjectural. Information from the provinces under German control only came from underground sources. Even less information leaked from the zone under Soviet domination. But from July 1941, when the German-Soviet Pact ended, the question of JLC aid to Jewish Polish refugees under Soviet control was put in renewed political and geographic terms. With the Soviet Union now part of the Allied forces, overt cooperation and direct action was possible. The JLC, in its historic opposition to Communism, however, had not done relief work in the USSR so far. This position prevented its leaders from sending relief to Jewish people fleeing the advance of the German army eastward. Yet not cooperating would have isolated the JLC from the anti-fascist "united front" with Communist organizations that was forming in the USA to combat Hitlerism. Had the JLC remained out of that front, it would have shirked its responsibility toward Jewish masses. Raphael Abramovitch (former head of the Russian Workers' Social Democratic [Menshevik] Party), who had been rescued from France by the JLC in the fall of 1940), in spite of his ardent opposition to the Soviets, was of the opinion that the JLC must be part of a "united front" with Communist forces. "Every relief work is political work," Benjamin Tabachinsky said when other JLC members argued that, contrary to the Joint, the JLC was not a relief organization or feared negative reactions to their fund-raising activity if they cooperated with Communist organizations. Isaiah Minkoff summed up the Committee's discussion affirming that "the JLC is really a political organization," and as such "we must be part of the relief organizations which will be organized. Only the Communists [so far] and the Joint are now able to work in Russia," he said, enjoining the JLC to be part of that effort.⁸
- 9 Upon this recommendation, the JLC stepped up its campaign to collect clothing, tents, medicine and food for "Russian relief." In agreement with the Russian consulate, the transportation of these parcels was to be shipped from Los Angeles to Vladivostock on Soviet ships. Between October 1941 and March 1942, the JLC sent 22 transports of clothing, an expense of \$ 10,645. By the end of 1942, it had spent 104,347 dollars in its relief for Russia.⁹ In September 1944, the JLC collaborated with the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA), asserting that since 1941 it had collected clothing delivered to the Polish relief organizations for distribution among refugees in Russia. Clothing certainly was within the province of garment workers who thus donated a part of their labor for relief purposes, which came in addition to their financial contributions. By 1945 JLC president Adolph Held recapitulated that since 1941 the JLC had donated millions of pounds of clothing to Soviet Russia, amounting to \$ 1,500,000.¹⁰ Communication with the Polish Embassy in Kuybishev (USSR) made information about humanitarian needs and the transfer of goods possible. Such contacts also allowed the tracing of hundreds of individuals to whom the JLC had sent remittances and food packages.¹¹ This did not mean, however, that Polish Jews (let alone known Bundists) by then forced to become Soviet citizens, were always protected by the Soviet authorities.¹² In March 1943, the release of the news of the assassination on Stalin's order of the two internationally known leaders of the Polish Bund, Henryk Erlich and Viktor Alter, did nothing to alleviate the JLC's fears concerning other Bundist refugees and the Jewish civilian population in the USSR.¹³ In addition, Soviet-Polish relations continued to deteriorate over the Katyn affair in 1943.¹⁴ In this context

of doubts and opposite forces shaping public opinion,¹⁵ the JLC pursued its policy of privileging its own sources of information and political choices for the distribution of its support.

Money and weapons for the Warsaw ghetto

- 10 The JLC's support of Jewish organizations in the Polish ghettos went beyond strictly humanitarian concerns. In the extreme context of violence, want and terror in which the Jews were placed in the ghettos, the little support exterior organizations could provide was utterly and tragically inadequate. The complete isolation of the ghettos destroyed the channels through which philanthropic organizations, such as the Joint, transmitted funds. The ghettos were abandoned to the savagery of Nazi cruelty. Yet if the JLC's action cannot be measured by what would have been even minimally necessary, the JLC leaders never forsook their "sacred sense of duty" as they learnt step by step the reality of final destruction. The question in this context was not only to direct help for survival, but to help the survivors fight in their insurrection against the final assaults of the occupant.
- 11 Their sources of information and transmission certainly belonged to political networks.
- 12 The incredulity with which the Allied powers learnt about the destruction of European Jewry and their absence of specific response to it has long been established (Lacqueur; Wyman, 42-58; Breitman and Kraut, 146-66). The following paragraphs only intend to point out that the Jewish Labor Committee never doubted the reality of the information coming from Poland and acted accordingly either on its own or in conjunction with other Jewish organizations. Through its contacts with the underground organization of the Bund resisting in the Warsaw ghetto, the JLC was among the very first American organizations to be informed of the systematic destruction of Jews in Poland. The Bund was the first political party to reorganize itself in the ghetto and it remained the most influential one (Blatman, 74, Edelman, 1946, 1). The active members of its Central Committee transmitted news to Szmul Zygielbojm who since April 1942 represented the Bund in the Polish government in exile in London, and who forwarded them to the Bund delegation in New York. Directly involved in the reception of couriers and messages from underground Jewish organizations in Poland, Zygielbojm became the source of information for the Western world on the fate of the Jewish population in Poland.¹⁶ The responsibility on his shoulders was also tragic for him. When the Warsaw ghetto uprising ended, its people having been massacred or deported, to protest against the Allied nations' lack of response to the systematic annihilation of the Jews, on May 12 1943 Zygielbojm committed suicide.
- 13 Information on extermination started reaching Zygielbojm in the spring of 1942; it came from Leon Feiner, a member of the Central Committee of the Bund who was also in contact with the Polish Socialist Party underground. Able to work in and outside of the ghetto, Feiner became the agent of the Bund's contacts with the exterior world. Leon Feiner's first letter in May 1942 stated that over 700,000 Jews had been assassinated. It reported on the massacres in Vilno and Lvov, the deportations from Lublin, the gassing in sealed trucks at Chelmno, and the April 17 attack in Warsaw which had decimated the ranks of Bundist resistance.¹⁷ Indignant that the Polish government in London downplayed the news, and that the American press hardly mentioned it, the JLC joined the American Jewish Congress and other Jewish

organizations in a petition to obtain a declaration by the President of the United States: "We respectfully request you, Mr. President to again raise the voice of America and its Allies in the defense of the most defenseless people in Europe."¹⁸ In August of the same year the JLC's Executive Committee was informed of the beginning of the German "action" aimed at eliminating the whole Jewish population from the Warsaw ghetto and received the news of the suicide of the president of the *Judenrat* Adam Czerniakow in July. With members of the Bund delegation, they held an evening of commemoration and mourning and now understood that protest was not enough. They perceived that Adam Czerniakow's suicide was "a call for combat and resistance, and that the fight for a new world would be led with the Polish underground labor movement."¹⁹ By the end of September, according to their sources, 256,000 Jews had been deported from Warsaw to Treblinka. On September 24, the JLC Executive Meeting met to share the news which had reached the Bund Representation in New York, from "underground movements in Poland" which raised the hope that "the walls of the ghetto [had] been unable to separate the Jewish and Polish underground movements in the preparation for armed resistance together."²⁰ Acting upon the underground movements' demand that "knowledge about the Nazi massacres of the Jewish population in Poland, and the heroic resistance of the Jewish socialist movement be transmitted to American public opinion and especially to the organized working class", the JLC held a special informative session during the American Federation of Labor's Convention in October 1942. A long report prepared by the JLC was therefore read to the convention in which not only the latest information about the massacres in Poland was given but also facts and figures about deportations from France, Holland, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia.²¹ Recognizing that the cause for the Jews of Poland was linked to that of their brethren in the other occupied countries, the JLC internationalized its vision of resistance against Nazi tyranny. In late November 1942, the JLC received the contents of Leon Feiner's second letter (written in August 1942) to Zygielbojm which further confirmed the massive deportation from the Warsaw ghetto: "300,000 Jews were slaughtered in Warsaw between July 22 and October 2 [1942]. No more than a handful of our family [the Bund] remained alive. Medem sanatorium demolished. [...] We are helpless and unless immediate relief is forthcoming we shall all perish. Deposit money with Polish Government which will forward it to us."²² Simultaneously, JLC leaders received news of Jan Karski's report to Zygielbojm in London. A courier for the underground Polish government and for the underground Army (*Armia Krajowa*), Karski reported *verbatim* his encounter with two Jewish leaders in Warsaw - one of whom was Leon Feiner - and of his clandestine visit to the Belzec extermination camp. Unable, like the other Jewish American organizations with which it appealed to President Roosevelt, to move the US Administration and the Allied Powers beyond their strategic goals, the JLC did not harbor illusions about the fate of the few surviving Jews resisting in Warsaw, as well as in other ghettos.²³ The words transmitted by Karski had been unequivocal: "The ghetto is going to go up in flames. We are not going to die in slow torment, but fighting. We will declare war on Germany, the most hopeless declaration of war that was ever made" (Karski, 356). The JLC pursued its own course of action, committing itself to the transmission of money, not only for survival, but also for the support of armed resistance.

¹⁴ To some extent, the JLC's channels of action defied American wartime legislation. It had been able to circumvent the US Trading with the Enemy Act which forbade the sending of relief in cash or kind to territories controlled by the enemy. Since 1942 with the US

entry in the war, the Joint had thus been unable to pursue its activity in support of Polish Jews in the region of the General Government. And the destruction of its Warsaw agency had put an end to its official presence there. It was finally by aligning itself with the Jewish Labor Committee's method of transmission of funds through Zygielbojm and the Polish government in London that the Joint was able to resume its relief activities in 1943 (Bauer, 332).

- 15 Indeed since 1941, the JLC had regularly sent money in increasing amounts to the organizations of the Warsaw ghetto, via the London government which parachuted these sums to Poland.²⁴ Its records contain the list of checks sent to London, month after month from 1941 to 1944.²⁵ These sums added up to 18,455 dollars in 1941; \$ 28,393 in 1942; \$ 113,000 in 1943; \$ 182,000 in 1944. In addition, the JLC stated having transmitted \$ 500,000 for the Joint in 1943-1944. Sometimes, the JLC could directly deliver the money when a visitor from the Polish government in exile came to the United States. Such was the case in September 1943, when \$ 33,000 were given to the Finance Minister of Poland on a visit in New York, "for aid to the Jewish People in Poland and for the Jewish underground anti-Nazi labor movement."²⁶ The JLC generally received news that its money had been received. In 1944, Jacob Pat asserted that "the Jewish underground movement in Poland confirms the receipt of \$ 81,000 remitted for rescue and relief."²⁷ Mail between Jacob Pat and various Polish representatives reveals that money was generally sent in monthly installments (\$ 5000, \$ 7000 or \$ 10,000 sums) via London, and specifically destined to certain political groups, such as Bund, Polish Socialist Party, Left Poale Zion, Zionist Youth Organization, Polish Labor Underground. In July 1944, Jacob Pat sent a check of \$ 40,000 for the Polish Underground movement.²⁸ In a 1944 memo recapitulating financial assistance to Poland, Jacob Pat stressed that this aid had served both humanitarian and political objectives, and supported several Jewish groups:

16

The largest amount of money collected by the Jewish Labor Committee was shipped to help the Jews in the ghettos, for Jewish rescue, and to give assistance to the underground movement in the occupied countries in general. As an illustration, we merely wish to cite the expenditures of the JLC in 1944. Out of an income of half a million dollars, the JLC appropriated \$ 360,241 for this purpose. One quarter of a million dollars of this money went to the Jews in the ghettos.

The general Jewish budget in Poland in 1943 and 1944, was covered by the Jewish Labor Committee to the extent of 50%. I emphasize "general Jewish budget". That means for all Jewish needs, such as hiding, as well as rescuing Jews, and providing them with food, etc. In the city of Warsaw alone, the JLC was instrumental in giving sustenance to 10,000 Jews. One half of the resources for this purpose was provided by the JLC, and the remainder by other Jewish funds.

It is a lie to say that the Jewish Labor Committee gave support to only ONE group in Poland. As pointed out above, the JLC covered 50% of the general Jewish budget, for general relief purposes. In addition, it gave assistance to the underground groups of the Bund, Right and Left Poale Zion and Hashomer Hatzoir [sic]. The Youth of the Hashomer Hatzoir played an important role in the fight of the ghettos.²⁹

- 17 The contents of Pat's letter confirm that the JLC provided relief to surviving Polish Jews in or out of the ghetto on an equal basis with the Joint. Secondly the letter highlights Pat's distinction between the "general Jewish budget" for relief and the JLC's support of Jewish political organizations for their preparation for the defense of the ghetto.

- 18 In the fall of 1942, the survivors in the ghetto organized themselves for combat. They formed the Jewish Fighting Organization representing every Jewish ideological group in the ghetto.³⁰ Among them members of the youth organizations - Tsukunft (Bundist) and Hashomer Hatzair (Left Poale Zion) - were predominant. Young Marek Edelman represented the Bund in this coalition (Goldstein, Edelman, 1946, 1993). The whole ghetto turned towards preparing for battle. The problem of obtaining weapons was crucial. They hoped for the support of the underground Polish parties to help them in this crucial mission. "We bought stolen arms from guards at army dumps, from German soldiers, from Poles who worked in arm factories. With restless hysteria, we explored every avenue, tracked down every lead, knowing that the end was close and that we must be ready"(Goldstein, 174). Obvious sources were the official underground Polish Army (Armia Kryova), and the Polish Socialist Party (PPS). In its hope that Jewish and Polish militants would fight for their common liberation, and out of political solidarity with the PPS, the JLC from its end contributed to financing the Polish Socialist organizations through their New York representatives as well as in Poland.³¹ It had consistently contributed to *Poland Fights*, a publication launched by the Polish Labor Group in New York. It offered to support the underground Polish socialist party, especially when it sensed that unity could be reached on the two sides of the wall. Jacob Pat specified to Wladyslaw Malinowski (the PPS representative in New York) that "the Jewish Labor Committee's assignments for aid to Poland were made on the basis of the appeal from the Jewish underground movement in Poland through the Representation of the Bund in America. We had reasons to believe that the Jewish underground movement in Poland gives certain sums to the Polish underground movement when necessary for their purposes."³² Exchange between the Jewish and Polish underground organizations went both ways. In early 1943, when four groups of fighters in the ghetto had been able to stop a new SS raid on January 18, and killed some 20 German soldiers in the action, the Polish Army (AK) in recognition of such efficiency, sent a number of rifles, hand grenades, plastic charges, and one machine gun to the ghetto combatants (Krakowski, 176; Edelman 1946, 31).
- 19 The desired unity between the Jewish and the Polish resistance did not materialize. At least not in combat. When SS battalions attacked the ghetto on April 19 1943 with armored cars, machine guns, and tanks, the "remnants" of the Jewish population found themselves alone. They were able to resist longer than the time forecast by the German army which had planned a three-day operation to liquidate the ghetto. With what military armament the Jewish fighters had been able to gather, their determination and desperate use of every strategic point and bunker enabled them to resist for four weeks and allowed some of them time to escape to the Aryan side.
- 20 When only rubble and smoke remained from the burning ghetto, the struggle continued for surviving Jews hiding among Aryans. Vladka Meed, a young woman who worked with Leon Feiner and served as a courier for the Jewish Coordinating Committee and the Jewish Fighting Organization has given evidence that JLC money was received and provided material help for survival:
- Funds eventually began to reach us through the same underground channels. First mainly from the Jewish Labor Committee in the United States. Subsequently from other Jewish organizations and to some extent from the Polish government in exile as well. The money reached the Coordinating Committee in American dollars which were exchanged for zlotys on the black market.

The primary objectives of the Coordinating Committee were to supply material aid for Jews hidden in the Aryan sector, provide them with the necessary documents, finding hiding places, aid for the children, establish contacts with inmates of slave labor camps, with Jewish partisans and with friends abroad. And to keep constant touch with the Polish underground. In Warsaw alone and nearby areas we ministered to some 12,000 persons. (Meed, 182; see also Edelman 1993, 96; Goldstein, 251).

21 Reporting its activity for 1944, the JLC stated that it had sent "large sums of money to the ghettos. This money was distributed for relief and rescue, for aid in the labor and concentration camps, for the underground movement and for the necessary preparations for resistance".³³

22 From the winter of 1943, the JLC enlarged the scope of its action in the United States and made it more public. First it started publishing a monthly magazine, *Voice of the Unconquered*, which regularly reported on events concerning Jewish people, the resistance movements in European countries, and finally on the progress of liberation. The organ's coverage of the Jewish question to some extent filled the void left by the main commercial press which often "ignored" news on the subject or relegated it to back pages (Lipstadt, 218-240). Every month the pages were filled with news from Poland; very often they reported on the situation in France, and also on Holland, Belgium and Norway. In 1945, the JLC organized the first exhibition on "Martyrs and Heroes of the Ghetto"; its opening on April 19 commemorated the beginning of the uprising of the Warsaw ghetto two years before. The JLC cooperated with the War Refugee Board from its inception in 1944, and contributed to the rescue of a number of Hungarians by offering channels of evacuation for them and providing visas for admission in the United States or in another country. In April 1945, JLC president Adolph Held participated in the United Nations founding conference in San Francisco where he presented "a 13 point program on reconstruction of Jewish life in Europe". The world labor leaders in attendance pledged their full backing and support of the JLC document.³⁴ When the war was over in Europe, the JLC collaborated with the UNRRA (United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration) for the resettlement of Displaced Persons. And from 1946 it was active in funding reconstruction programs for the surviving Jews of Poland and in France (Pâris de Bollardière, 2012, 2013). In the winter of 1946, Jacob Pat made a journey to his native Poland. From town to town, where he had once organized relief networks and the system of Yiddish schools, Pat learnt about the tragedy in each community. In collaboration with the Central Jewish Committee, which spoke for the approximately 80,000 survivors, he defined the most urgent needs, and how they could be met. Upon his return in the United States, Pat proposed a \$ 250,000 budget (for 1946) for the support of workers' cooperatives, housing, cultural institutions, immediate relief (food and clothing), the preservation of historic archives. That sum was part of a 1 million dollars budget to cover all such expenses in Europe.³⁵

23 ...

24 An enormous gap remained between what help was provided to the forsaken ghetto fighters and what would have been necessary to save more lives. The subject has become an intense subject of deploration by American historians and by the Western World. In these few lines, by looking at the JLC's work on behalf of Polish Jews, I have tried to impart the notion that the Jewish Labor Committee never abandoned its Jewish brothers in their tragic destiny. Although its leaders were well aware of the insufficient

amount of the support they could offer, they never tired of organizing campaigns to collect money among their constituency of American workers, Jewish or not, who belonged to the sectors of organized labor from which they sprang. The political links historically existing between the JLC in the United States and the (non-communist) left-wing Jewish organizations in pre-war Poland and then among survivors in the ghetto defined the axis of their support, which served both humanitarian and political causes. And if one looks back a few decades earlier in time, it is because these JLC leaders had been Bundist militants in their youth in the Russian empire fighting against a tyrannical power, or had cooperated with the interwar Polish Bund, that they were politically, culturally and linguistically connected to the Jewish parties and organizations which ordained life in the ghetto. Neither immigration to the United States nor the Americanizing effect of their prominent leadership in the US labor movement had diluted the political dimension of their involvement. As demonstrated by the case of their support of Polish Jews, they were able to become the interlocutors of a Government in exile, and of underground political parties and labor movements.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Archival sources:

Records of the Jewish Labor Committee, Holocaust Era, Part I, 1934-1947, Robert Wagner Labor Archives, Elmer Holmes Bobst Library, New York University, New York.

Bibliography/ Works cited

BAUER, Yehuda, *American Jewry and the Holocaust, The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, 1939-1945*, Detroit, Wayne State Univ. Press, 1981.

BLATMAN, Daniel, *Notre Liberté et la vôtre, Le mouvement ouvrier juif Bund en Pologne, 1939-49*, Paris, Editions du Cerf, 2002.

BREITMAN, Richard, and KRAUT, Allen, *American Refugee Policy and European Jewry, 1933-1945*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1987.

COLLOMP, Catherine, "Le Jewish Labor Committee: Deux générations de réfugiés politiques", in Catherine Collomp et Mario Menéndez, dirs., *Exilés et réfugiés politiques aux Etats-Unis, 1789-2000*, Paris, CNRS Editions, 2003.

COLLOMP, Catherine, "I nostri compagni d'America: The Jewish Labor Committee and the Rescue of Italian Antifascists, 1934-41", *Altreitalia*, 28, gennaio-giugno 2004, 66-83.

COLLOMP, Catherine, "The Jewish Labor Committee, American Labor, and the Rescue of European Socialists, 1934-1941", *International Labor and Working Class History*, Fall 2005, 112-133.

EDELMAN, Marek, *The Ghetto Fights*, New York American Representation of the General Jewish Workers Union in Poland, New York, 1946.

EDELMAN, Marek, *Mémoires du ghetto de Varsovie, Un dirigeant de l'insurrection raconte*, Paris, Liana Levi, 1993.

ENGEL, David, *In the Shadow of Auschwitz, The Polish Government in Exile and the Jews, 1939-42*, Chapel Hill, Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1987.

ENGEL, David, *Facing a Holocaust, The Polish Government in Exile, 1943-45*, Chapel Hill, Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1993.

FEINGOLD, Henry L., *The Jewish People in America, A Time for Searching, 1920-1945*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992.

GOLDSTEIN, Bernard, *The Stars Bear Witness*, New York, Viking Press, 1949.

JACOBS, Jack, "A Friend in Need: The Jewish Labor Committee and Refugees from the German Speaking Lands, 1933-1945", *Yivo Annual*, 23, 1996, 391-417.

KARSKI, Jan, *Story of a Secret State, My Report to the World*, (1944), Penguin Books, 2012.

KRAKOWSKI, Shmuel, *The War of the Doomed: Jewish Armed Resistance in Poland, 1942-44*, London, Homes and Meier, 1984.

LAQUEUR, Walter, *The Terrible Secret, An Investigation into the Suppression of Information about Hitler's "Final Solution"*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1980.

LEBOWITZ, Arie and MALMGREEN, Gail, eds., *Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University: The Papers of the Jewish Labor Committee*, vol. 14 of *Archives of the Holocaust*, ed. by Henry Friedlander and Sybil Milton, New York, Garland Publishing, 1993.

LIPSTADT, Deborah, *Beyond Belief, The American Press and the Coming of the Holocaust*, New York, Free Press, 1986.

MALMGREEN, Gail, "Labor and the Holocaust, The Jewish Labor Committee and the Anti-Nazi Struggle", *Labor's Heritage*, 3, Oct. 1991, 20-35.

MEED, Vladka, *On Both Sides of the Wall*, (1948), Washington D.C., US Memorial Museum, 1999.

PARIS de BOLLARDIERE, Constance, « Mutualité, fraternité et travail social chez les bundistes de France (1944-47) », *Archives Juives*, 45/1, 2012, p. 47-43.

PARIS de BOLLARDIERE, "The Jewish Labor Committee's Bundist Relief Network in France, 1945-1948", *Jewish History Quarterly*, , 246/2, 2013, 293-301.

PAT, Jacob, *Ashes and Fire*, New York, International Universities Press, 1947.

WALTZER, Kenneth, "American Jewish Labor and Aid to Polish Jews During the Holocaust", unpublished paper presented at the 17th Annual Conference on the Holocaust and the Church struggle, march 1987, United States Holocaust Memorial Council.

WYMAN, David, *The Abandonment of the Jews, America and the Holocaust, 1941-1945*, New York, New Press, 1984.

NOTES

1. "Jewish Labor Committee Constitution", Records of the Jewish Labor Committee Holocaust Era, 1934-1947, R1, Box 1, Folder 1, Robert Wagner Labor Archives, New York University, (hereafter cited as JLC, followed by microfilm Reel, Box and Folder numbers).
2. With the exception of the American Jewish Committee and the JLC, the major Jewish organizations in America were Zionist.
3. 3 « JLC Report for 1944 », JLC R2, B1, F18.

4. Meeting of the Office Committee, Dec. 26, 1940, JLC R1, B1, F6. By "defense work in America", Minkoff indicated the fight against anti-Semitism in the United States.
5. JLC Executive Committee, Nov. 8 1939, JLC R1, B1, F3; Blatman, 163-65.
6. "Situation in Poland", JLC Executive Committee, Sept. 7 1939, JLC R1, B1, F3.
7. Executive Committee, November 8, 1939, JLC R1, B1, F3.
8. July 8 1941, Office Committee, JLC R1, B1, F6.
9. May 14 1942, Executive Committee, JLC R1, B1, F7; R130, B44, F7.
10. Jacob Pat, to UNRRA, sept. 6. 1944, JLC R130, B44, F12; Jacob Pat stated that a total of \$ 170,807 had been spent on help to Soviet Russia between 1942 and 1944, this figure did not include the sending of clothing, JLC R2, B1, F17; A. Held, J. Pat and B. Tabaschinsky, "Memorandum", 1945, JLC R2, B1, F19.
11. Correspondence between Jacob Pat and Sylwin Strakacz, Minister plenipotentiary and Consul General for Poland (New York), 1943-44, JLC R 40, B17, F9; Embassy of Poland, correspondence with Lazar Epstein, JLC R40, B17, F10.
12. All Polish citizens on Russian territory were declared Soviet citizens by November 1939. But in July 1941, Soviet authorities restored Polish citizenship to all except minorities: Ukrainian Lithuanians, White Russians, and Jews (all "non Poles") who remained Soviet citizens.
13. In fact Erlich committed suicide in his cell in March 1942 and Alter was executed on February 17 1943. The information on their death was released at the favorable moment for USSR in international public opinion, that is after the Stalingrad victory. In New York, the JLC and representatives of the Bund led protest demonstrations on March 30 1943 (Engel, 1993, 55-62; Blatman, 101-24).
14. The discovery by German military forces, in the Katyn forest near Smolensk, of mass graves of executed Polish officers. The Soviets, whose responsibility was only officially recognized in the 1990's, had denied their role in the massacre attributing it to the German invaders.
15. David Engel suggests that it was doubtful whether there was a unity of interests between the Jewish and the Polish communities in the government in exile and remarks that in spite of the Katyn affair, world Jewish opinion remained favorable to the USSR, *Facing a Holocaust*, 72-74.
16. Zygielbojm shared this responsibility with Zionist leader Ignacy Schwarzbart who also represented Jewish interests in the Polish government in exile.
17. Leon Feiner's letter is mentioned in Blatman, p. 185-86.
18. President Roosevelt's response, July 17, 1942, expressed « sympathy with all victims of Nazi crimes, but will hold the perpetrators of these crimes to strict accountability in a day of reckoning which will surely come » JLCR40, B17, F1.
19. Refusing to apply the Gestapo's order of providing 10,000 victims everyday, including children, for the deportations, Czerniakow took his own life. Minutes of the Executive Committee, August 26 1942 JLCR 1 B1 F3 (I thank Erez Levy for his translation from the Yiddish). It is also in August 1942 that Geneva representative of the World Jewish Congress, Gerhart Riegner, sent a message informing the State Department of the massive extermination of Jews. The State Department however only allowed President of the World Jewish Congress Stephen Wise to divulge the contents of this message on November 24.
20. Minutes of the Sept. 24 1942 Executive Committee meeting, JLCR1, B1, F3 (transl. from the Yiddish).
21. JLC R1, B1, F3. American Federation of Labor, Proceedings of the 1942 Convention, October 5-14, Washington DC, p. 637-43.
22. Received from the Polish Embassy, JLC R40, B17, F7.
23. The JLC along with the American Jewish Congress, B'nai B'rith, the Union of Orthodox Rabbis and the American Jewish Committee obtained an interview with President Roosevelt on December 8 1942, JLC R2, B1, F17. Their demand contributed to the December 17 1942 joint

declaration by the Allied Nations who condemned Hitler's « bestial policy of cold-blooded extermination ».

24. Marek Edelman, one rare survivor of the Ghetto combatants recalled "these parachuted dollars with which we were able to buy weapons" (*Mémoire du ghetto*, 152, 171); Waltzer.

25. JLC R 40, B17, F6; these sums are corroborated by Blatman's sources, 208-09; see also Waltzer; Bauer, 329-34.

26. Adolph Held, Sept. 1943, to Jan Kwapinski, Vice Premier of the Polish Government, London, JLC R40, B17, F7.

27. Jacob Pat to Louis Berman head of the Left Poale Zion in Warsaw, New York, April 6 1944, JLC R130, B44, F12; the JLC donated \$ 115,000 for 1943 and stated that \$ 50,000 had been transferred to Poland in the first six weeks of 1944, *Voice of the Unconquered* (the JLC organ), June 1944 p. 6, JLC R159; memo on JLC sums sent to Poland, JLC R40, B17, F6.

28. Jacob Pat to Polish Embassy in Washington, JLC R 40, B17, F10.

29. JLC R2, B1, F17, see also Lebowitz and Malmgreen, 310.

30. Zhidowska Organizatzia Boyova (ZOB).

31. Malinowski to Jacob Pat, August 23 1943 ; Dec. 13 1943 ; February 9 1944, JLC R40, B17, F6.

32. Pat to Malinowski, June 23 1943, JLC R40, B17, F6.

33. "From Gas Chambers to a New Life", JLC Report, 1944, JLC R2, B1, F8.

34. *Voice of Unconquered* June-July 1945, p. 1.

35. Pat, *Ashes and Fire; Voice of the Unconquered*, May-June 1946, 1, 5. In addition to the approximate number of 80,000 Jewish survivors in Poland, some 150,000 Polish Jews were to return from Russia.

ABSTRACTS

This paper describes the role of an American organization, the Jewish Labor Committee (JLC), in the support of Jewish people in Poland during World War II. In the context of the division and occupation of Poland by the USSR and by Nazi Germany, the JLC's help materialized in two ways: relief (generally in kind) was sent to Jewish refugees in Russia; money was sent for relief and for weapons to Jews in the General Government region under German rule. In the latter situation, the JLC contributed to support the preparations for the insurrection of the Warsaw ghetto. The channels of information and transmission by which the JLC acted are described in both cases. The common Bundist political culture shared by both the leaders of the JLC in New York (former political refugees themselves) and the most influential political organizations in the ghetto explains the JLC's ability to come into contact with leaders of the ghetto and to react immediately to the news of the systematic destruction of the Jewish population. In this extreme case, the nature of the JLC's interventions, a bridge between two worlds, is defined as being political as well as humanitarian.

Cet article décrit l'aide apportée aux Juifs de Pologne par une organisation américaine fondée à New York, le Jewish Labor Committee (JLC) pendant la Seconde Guerre mondiale. Dans la situation de la division et occupation de la Pologne par l'URSS et par l'Allemagne nazie l'aide matérielle du JLC se concrétisa de deux manières : aide humanitaire (généralement en nature) pour les réfugiés en URSS, et envoi d'argent pour la survie alimentaire mais aussi pour l'achat d'armes dans la région du Gouvernement général sous contrôle nazi. Dans ce dernier cas, le JLC

contribua au soutien de l'insurrection du ghetto de Varsovie. Les voies de l'information et de la transmission de biens sont analysées dans les deux cas. La culture politique bundiste, partagée par les dirigeants du JLC à New York (anciens réfugiés politiques eux-mêmes) et par les dirigeants les plus influents du ghetto explique la capacité du JLC à entrer en contact avec la direction du ghetto et à réagir immédiatement dès que les nouvelles de la destruction systématique de la population lui parvinrent. Dans ce contexte extrême, la nature de l'aide apportée par le JLC fut à la fois humanitaire et politique.

INDEX

Keywords: Jewish Labor Committee, Bundism, Poland, Warsaw Ghetto, World War II

Mots-clés: Jewish Labor Committee, bundisme, Pologne, Ghetto de Varsovie, Deuxième Guerre mondiale.

AUTHOR

CATHERINE COLLOMP

Université Paris-Diderot, France