

Ira Hirschmann Papers  
Box 2

Steinhardt Report on Evacuation of  
Jews from Axis Europe, 2/20/44

No. 574

Ankara, February 20, 1944

Subject: Evacuation of Jews from Axis Europe.

The Honorable  
The Secretary of State,  
Washington.

Sir:

Referring to the Department's telegram No. 68 dated January 25, and No. 118 dated February 11, 1944, requesting a report concerning the actual situation as it exists today in Turkey in respect of what is being done to rescue the Jews and other persecuted minorities from Hitler, including particularly (a) the extent to which these war refugees are not permitted to enter Turkey; (b) the extent to which Turkey actually encourages and cooperates in their entry, and (c) the extent to which such refugees are not able to enter Turkey because of Turkey's failure to cooperate in their entry, and requesting my recommendations as to what the United States Government can do to effectuate with all possible speed the rescue and relief of the victims of enemy oppression, including particularly what can be done to make the Turkish Government cooperate more fully in carrying out this policy, I have the honor to submit the following information and recommendations:

Over a period of the past two years the Embassy has made every effort to facilitate the transit of Jews from the Axis countries through Turkey en route to Palestine. Its efforts have been hampered by (1) the unwillingness of the Axis countries to permit Jews to depart therefrom, and (2) the difficulties of transportation. Further details with regard to these points are given below:

With reference to the specific points referred to above, under (a), (b) and (c), I may say that the Turkish Government has repeatedly given evidence of its willingness to grant a larger number of transit visas to Jewish refugees to pass through Turkey than the number of refugees who have been able to reach the Turkish frontier due to the fact that refugees have been unable to depart from Axis territory. Although willing to grant more visas than have been utilisable, the Turkish Government has thus far declined to authorize the charter of a Turkish boat to be used to bring refugees from Rumanian or Bulgarian ports to Turkey, fearing such vessel would be sunk in the Black Sea.

My recommendations as to what the United States Government can effectively do in this situation are (1) immediately promise the Turkish Government that should the latter permit a Turkish vessel to carry refugees from Rumanian or Bulgarian ports to Istanbul and should such vessel be lost, the vessel will be immediately replaced; and/or (2) arrange immediately to make a

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State Dept. Letter

By R. E. P. Supp. AUG. 1 1979

nesses available for the purpose in question; and (3) bring to the notice of the Axis governments and peoples, by use of the radio, the issuance of public statements and other means, that they will be held accountable in the final settlement for their mistreatment of the Jews and other minorities. In this connection reference is made to my telegram No. 258 dated February 19, 1944, containing a similar recommendation from Mr. Ivo Hirschmann to the Director of the War Refugee Board.

I submit for the Department's further information in connection with the foregoing the following data in respect to the problem of rescuing Jews and other persecuted minorities from the Axis countries:

The movement of Jews into Palestine from Axis countries has been divided in general into two categories: (1) Legal immigration into Palestine from the Axis countries; and (2) Illegal immigration into Palestine from such countries.

#### Legal Immigration into Palestine

The British Government at the beginning agreed to admit into Palestine from Axis countries two classes of persons:

(a) Persons who were granted immigration certificates before the rupture of diplomatic relations between Great Britain and Romania, Hungary and Bulgaria but were unable to depart therefrom for Palestine.

(b) Relatives of persons actually resident in Palestine.

Subsequently, in 1942, a third category was added, namely, 4,500 children plus 500 adults coming from Bulgaria, Rumania and Hungary, whose admission into Palestine was agreed upon. The plan involved the issuance of 5,000 immigration certificates which would be distributed as follows:

	<u>Children</u>	<u>Adults</u>
Bulgaria	1800	200
Romania	1800	200
Hungary		
(including Slovakia)	<u>900</u>	<u>100</u>
	4500	500

The proposal also included the issuance by the Swiss Consulates in the three capitals of visas to persons approved by the representative in each capital of the Jewish Agency for Palestine.

Later, in 1943, the British Government announced that 29,000 Jewish refugees from Europe would be admitted into Palestine. This figure was to include the 4,500 children and 500 adults referred to above.

The British Government some time ago agreed to admit into Palestine during the period 1940-44 not in excess of approximately 75,000 Jews; very recently it announced that the period of time during which this number would be admitted would be extended.

In so far as Turkey is concerned, the problem has been one of transit across Turkey en route to Palestine.

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discussions between the American and British Embassies with the Turkish authorities concerning the transit of refugees across Turkey to Palestine, the Turkish Government declined to permit the proposed refugees to be carried on Turkish vessels (by reason of lack of coal and space, and other technical reasons). It agreed, however, to permit a limited movement by rail across Turkey. The question of the refugees being carried on other Turkish flag vessels was also raised but no definite decision has been reached due to the total lack of such vessels.

In April 1943 the Turkish authorities agreed to attach every ten days to a train from Haydar Pasa (Istanbul) to Aleppo one coach, on which a group of 75 refugees would be carried. It was stipulated that each such group must have departed from Turkey before the second group could be admitted. Subsequently, as the result of a conference between the American Ambassador and the Turkish Minister for Foreign Affairs, this stipulation was withdrawn. However, under this arrangement no single group of 75 persons has to date reached Haydar Pasa, because it has been impossible to arrange for the refugees to be released from Axis territory.

Endeavors were subsequently made, through the Swiss authorities, to arrange for the emigration from Bulgaria and Rumania of a considerable number of Jews who were about to be expelled to Poland. Since the collapse of Italy there has been a diminution in the movement to Poland.

Since late 1942, a system has been in force whereby lists of names of immigrants in the approved categories mentioned under (a) and (b) above are submitted to the Turkish Government with the request that transit visas be granted to these persons in Hungary, Rumania and Bulgaria. The Turks have made a restrictive limit of nine "persons" per country per week in order not to overload the Turkish trains, but this restriction has been so liberally interpreted as to constitute each "person" a family of not more than five individuals, or a total of 45 persons. The Hungarian and Rumanian Governments have allowed out a modest number of families under this scheme, but very few have come out of Bulgaria, the Bulgarian Government having, in April 1943, prohibited the exit from or transit through that country of Jews, thus bringing to an almost complete stop the emigration of Jews from Axis Europe, in view of the fact that the only means of exit by land to Turkey from Axis countries north of Bulgaria is through that country.

At the present time two groups of 75 children each in Rumania are being prevented from starting their journey because of the refusal of the Bulgarian authorities to allow them to transit Bulgaria. Consequently, efforts are now being made to have these two groups sent to Istanbul by boat from Rumania. The International Red Cross is working on this matter. Palestine has agreed to accept them. The Turkish authorities have assured the Embassy that they will furnish two railway cars if these children succeed in reaching Istanbul. The SS BELA CHITA, now at Constantza, is being considered as a vessel on which these children might be brought to Istanbul.

There is also under consideration a proposal for the departure of 300 children from Hungary under the Turkish transit scheme of 75 people every 10 days but their departure is also being prevented by Bulgarian transit difficulties.

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The Turkish Ministry of Communications has recently agreed with the Embassy to furnish two cars per week over a limited period of time to transport a limited number of refugees through Turkey.

In general, the German authorities have prevented the departure of large groups although small groups leave either with their consent or by means of bribery.

#### Illegal Immigration into Palestine

The illegal immigration began about 1940 when the Palestine immigration quota was very small. Bulgarian and Rumanian refugees obtained the use of unseaworthy vessels and sold space on them at exorbitant prices. The boats would start out for Palestine, passing through the Straits, which they could do without interference by the Turkish authorities. If the vessels succeeded in reaching Palestine, the passengers, not being admissible under the quota, were destined to be deported to the Island of Mauritius. One of the vessels, the S.S. PATRIAS, was sunk in the harbor of Haifa. The cause was never determined. A number of the ships which started from Bulgaria and Rumania for Palestine were wrecked on the Turkish Rumanian coast of the Black Sea. Others were wrecked in the vicinity of Beirut.

At this time the British Legations in Bucharia and Bulgaria asked the respective governments to put a stop to the immigration but the governments in question refused or failed to do so. The Turkish authorities threatened to return to the country of origin such of the refugees as had landed in Turkey. The British Government requested the Turkish authorities to delay such action. Eventually many of the refugees were sent to Cyprus where some are still living; however, the absorptive capacity of Cyprus was soon exhausted and it soon became impossible to send more there.

This illegal immigration ceased some time ago. It is possible it may be resumed, particularly should the procedure for legal immigration break down. Confidential information indicates the possible use for such illegal immigration of the following vessels; the S.S. MILA, now understood to be at Varna, which can carry about 200 passengers; and the S.S. BERTHA, now understood to be at Constanta, which can carry about 250 passengers. These vessels are of about 200 and 250 tons, respectively, and would, of course, be very overcrowded, were the number of passengers indicated taken aboard. Furthermore, their seaworthiness is in doubt.

In this connection, I may add parenthetically that as a result of the STREIBA disaster (February 24, 1942), I have approached with certain my proposals for the use of questionable vessels for the further evacuation of refugees from Hungarian or Bulgarian ports and have insisted as a precondition that any vessel in Turkish waters which might be available must receive the prior clearance of the American or British naval authorities in Istanbul as to the seaworthiness.

#### Number of persons actually moved

Late in 1942 two groups of children transited Turkey en route to Palestine, 50 from Hungary and 50 from Rumania.

According to information furnished by Mr. Barlas, the representative in Turkey of the Jewish Agency from Palestine, the total number of Jews to transit Turkey in 1943 en route from

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Axis Europe to Palestine was 1,165. Details as to points of origin are set forth below:

January-September 1943

Children up to 16 years of age and accompanying adults from Hungary	125
Children up to 16 years of age and accompanying adults from Rumania	<u>74</u> 199
Refugees from Bulgaria	<u>150</u>
Total	349

October-December 1943

Individually from Budapest	125
" " Bucharest	50
" " Sofia	82
" " Athens	<u>312</u>
Total	564

Refugees sent to Cyprus from:

Rumania	180
Bulgaria	<u>72</u>
Total	<u>252</u>

1,165

The Jews listed above as coming from Athens consisted of persons who had escaped from Greece in small boats, most of which landed their passengers at Ismir where they were able to obtain visas for Palestine under the Schedule of the Jewish Agency and to cross into Syria en route to Palestine.

In addition to this movement of Jews in transit through Turkey, 2,138 Jews left Turkey for Palestine during 1943, according to information supplied by Mr. Barlas.

The situation appears to be that the German control over the exit of Jews from the various countries in southeastern Europe is more stringently exercised in respect of the countries more remote from Germany than those nearer to Germany. Thus at the present time there are practically no Jews permitted to leave Greece, although a few escape illegally. Occasionally, despite the general prohibition, a few are permitted to depart from or transit Bulgaria (53 Jews arrived in Istanbul on or about February 15 from France); the Rumanian authorities appear to be willing to allow Jews to depart from Rumania in some numbers; and the Hungarian Government's attitude appears from here to be more liberal than that of the Rumanian Government (although transit to Turkey from both Rumania and Hungary is hampered by the Bulgarian attitude and the lack of transport).

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According to information furnished me by Mr. Barlas, the number of Jews in the Balkan countries at the beginning of the war is estimated as follows:

Bulgaria - 68,000 (of whom about 40,000 still remain in Bulgaria);  
 Rumania - 800,000 (of whom about 266,000 are still living in "Old Rumania");  
 Yugoslavia - 75,000;  
 Greece - about 72,000 (of whom the vast majority were deported to Poland).

With further reference to the Jews in Rumania, it is understood that of the 180,000 who were expelled to Transnistria (mostly from Bessarabia and Bukowina) only 75,000 remain alive. The present distribution of the balance of the 266,000 mentioned above is estimated as follows:

Bucharest	100,000
Galatz	25,000
Jassy	25,000
Bukowina	16,000
Elsewhere	25,000

Various efforts made by the Embassy to assist in the matter

On April 23, 1942, I received the Department's telegram No. 164, April 22, 4 p.m., requesting, at the solicitation of an interested organization in the United States, that I endeavor to obtain permission from the Turkish authorities for certain Jewish refugees who had arrived in Istanbul from Rumania on the SS MICHAEL on March 18 to land in Turkey in order to obtain visas to enter Palestine. I ascertained, as reported to the Department in my telegram 326, April 27, 12 noon, that the vessel mentioned had already sailed from Istanbul for Haifa with her refugee passengers on board and all her papers in order. I subsequently telegraphed that it had been impracticable to comply with the Department's request, contained in its telegram above referred to, that the Embassy inform it of the names of the refugees in question, as the names were unknown at Istanbul (Embassy's 327, April 27).

In February 1943 the Department telegraphed to me regarding a story which had appeared in The New York Times of February 13 to the effect that the Rumanian Government had, according to neutral sources, advised officials of the United Nations that it was prepared to cooperate in transferring 70,000 Rumanian Jews from Transnistria to any Mediterranean ports selected by the Allies. (Department's 145, February 17.) I replied to the Department on February 27 (my 337) that a representative of the Jewish Agency for Palestine, Mr. Joseph Golden, had informed me that the New York Times despatch above mentioned was based upon the following:

Mr. Golden was visited on December 6, 1942, by a Dutchman who resided in Bucharest and who was temporarily visiting in Istanbul. This Dutchman, whose name was Schmitt and who was the Balkan and Turkish Director-in-Chief for Philip's Radio, had stated that he brought a proposal from a person named Lecca who was said to be the Rumanian Government official in charge of Jewish matters in Rumania. This proposal was to the effect that the Rumanian Government was prepared to consent to the departure of and provide ships

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for the transportation to Palestine or other Allied ports of the 72,000 Rumanian Jews who remained from those previously transported to Transnistria, provided that the American and British Governments agreed to a safe conduct for the vessels and to issue the necessary visas. According to Schmitt, the representative of the Jewish community in Bucharest who was appointed by the Gestapo, was familiar with this proposal and favored it. Schmitt also stated that the Catholic Bishop of Bucharest had expressed his readiness to permit the use of the Vatican flag on the ships and would endeavor to obtain permission to use the International Red Cross emblem. Golden forwarded the proposal on December 6 to the Jewish Agency for Palestine in Jerusalem.

I reported subsequently (my 362, March 8, 1 a.m.) that I questioned the bona fides of the proposal described if for no other reason than that the Rumanian Government obviously did not possess the shipping facilities with which to transport 72,000 individuals.

On April 5, 1943, I called upon the Minister for Foreign Affairs and informed him that the American and British diplomatic representatives in Ankara had been requested by their governments, in view of the reported persecution of the Jews in Bulgaria and the intention of the Bulgarian Government to deport them to Poland, to address an urgent appeal to the Turkish Government to permit approximately 30,000 Jews to enter Turkey provided the Bulgarian authorities would permit them to leave Bulgaria. These Jews, the Minister was informed, represented that part of the Jewish population of Bulgaria which was concentrated in towns and it was suggested that they be accommodated in temporary camps in a suitable area in Turkey, acquired and set aside for the purpose. The Minister was informed that the American and British Governments were ready to assure the Turkish Government that all costs connected with the entrance of these refugees and their maintenance in Turkey would be defrayed by the two governments, which, in addition, would supply to Turkey any additional food required to feed them. It was stated further that the two governments also would undertake to repatriate the refugees upon the conclusion of the war.

On July 17, 1943, I telegraphed to the Department (my telegram No. 1245, July 17, 3 p.m.) that a representative of the Embassy had contacted Mr. Jacob Griffel who stated that he was an official representative of the Agudas Israel Organization in Palestine and also the representative of that organization to the Associated Jewish Rescue Committee. Mr. Griffel informed the Embassy representative that the main purpose of his mission was to rescue Jews from Europe; he added that he was interested in two projects:

(1) To locate 700 Jews, families of persons already in Palestine for whom the organization which he represented had received a blanket visa for Palestine. He stated he intended to work through the Swiss Government and the International Red Cross with a view to locating these families and endeavoring to bring them to Palestine; and

(2) To assist about 80,000 Jewish families concentrated in Transnistria. He thought that the best way to help these people was to send them money. He said that his organization in New York would like to send funds to Switzerland either for the purchase of food and clothing to be sent to Transnistria or for the obtaining of money to be sent there.

In October . . .

In October 1943 the Embassy received information from the American Embassy in London of a rumor indicating that a ransom traffic in refugee children through Turkey existed. Upon investigation of this rumor it was ascertained that there was no foundation for it. I had confirmation of the lack of foundation for this rumor from Dr. Golden of Istanbul, head of the Jewish Relief Organization charged with assisting all Jewish refugees who enter Turkey. Dr. Golden suggested that this rumor might be the result of certain exasperating delays which were being experienced in negotiations with the Bulgarian authorities for permission for Jewish children to leave Bulgaria.

#### Turkish Jews in France

Another category of Jews in whom the Department and the Embassy have been interested is the large number of Turkish Jews in France.

It appears that Mr. Barlas, local representative of the Jewish Agency for Palestine, received about the middle of December, 1943, a telegram from Mr. Feizman, Jewish Agency representative in Lisbon, stating that 10,000 Jews of Turkish origin in France, having lost their nationality owing to the provisions of Turkish law, were in danger of deportation to Poland. Mr. Barlas was asked to appeal to the Turkish authorities not to withdraw recognition from these Jews. Mr. Barlas stated, upon going onto the matter, that the Jews in France fall into two categories:

(A) Jews whose Turkish nationality is uncontested; these Jews have been given full Turkish protection and have either been repatriated to Turkey or have escaped persecution.

(B) Jews descended from Jews who emigrated from Turkey several generations ago and whose Turkish nationality has been annulled as a result of the provisions of a Turkish law adopted in 1928 providing that Turkish nationals residing abroad who fail to register with the Turkish consulates for a period exceeding five years may be deprived of their citizenship by the Turkish Government (see NATIONALITY LAWS by Flournoy and Hudson, Oxford University Press, New York 1929, page 571).

This second category of Jews (B) to whom it is understood Turkish representatives in France have so far accorded a certain measure of protection, is now threatened with deportation to Poland.

In view of the fact that these Jews no longer have Turkish nationality and in view of the Department's recognition (Department's telegram No. 67 dated January 25, 1944) of the fact that as a consequence the Turkish Government is in no position to extend protection to them, it is not to be expected that the Turkish Government can officially make representations to the Vichy Government on their behalf. It is understood, however, that an official appeal is being made to the Vichy authorities by the Turkish Ambassador to Vichy France, Nevki Berker, who has shown himself sympathetically disposed in the past in regard to Jewish matters. Possibly as the result of Mr. Berker's representations a party of 55 Jews arrived in Istanbul on or about February 16th from France, having travelled by rail by way of Milan, Vienna, Nish and Belgrade.

On January 10, 1944, the Department was informed (my telegram No. 48, January 10, 3 p.m.) of an informal conversation

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which I just had with the Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs regarding several thousand Jews of Turkish origin reported to be in jeopardy in France. The Minister informed me that he would take whatever steps he found possible to afford protection to these Jews and that, in so far as concerns those who were able to establish Turkish citizenship, he would demand the same treatment for them as is accorded other Turkish citizens. With respect to those who were unable to establish Turkish citizenship, he said that he was doubtful that the Vichy authorities would recognize his right to intervene on their behalf.

In compliance with the Department's instructions of January 25, 1944, (Department's telegram 67, January 25, 11 a.m.) that I express to the appropriate Turkish officials the Department's hope that for humanitarian reasons they would be able to afford protection to as many as possible of those Jews of Turkish origin in France and would be liberal in defining their citizenship status, I discussed this matter with the Minister of Foreign Affairs (as reported in my telegram No. 151, January 26, 10 p.m.) and urged him to extend to them the maximum protection of the Turkish Government. He assured me that on humanitarian grounds the Turkish Government would exert itself to the utmost to afford protection in these cases.

It may be mentioned in this connection that the American Consulate General at Istanbul received an inquiry from the Department in December 1943 (Department's 319, December 29, 10 p.m.) regarding reports that Paraguayan Jews confined in the concentration camp at Vittel, France, were threatened with deportation to Poland because of a report that the Paraguayan Government had revoked their citizenship. In reply the Consulate General telegraphed (the telegram No. 4, January 4, 1944) that the local Jewish representatives of Agostin Lerszel and of the Jewish Agency had been notified that the Paraguayan Government had agreed not to revoke the citizenship of Paraguayan Internees in this concentration camp.

Irrevocability of vessels to carry  
refugees from Rumanian or Bulgarian ports

As has been indicated above, one of the principal obstacles to the movement of Jews from the Axis countries to Turkey has been the problem of transport.

The Bulgarian authorities since April 1943 have practically prohibited the departure of Jews across the Bulgarian-Turkish frontier, presumably as the result of German action. As a consequence efforts have been made to arrange for the transportation of Jews from the Rumanian port of Constanta to Turkey by boat. Efforts which have been made in this direction have to date been without result. Two Rumanian flag vessels, the S.S. TRANSDANIA and the S.S. BESAHERA, which have been lying idle in the harbor of Istanbul for nearly three years, have been considered in this connection but to date their use has been precluded either by the attitude of the Rumanian Government—in fact, the German Government—or more recently by the unavailability of funds to effect the proposed purchase.

As a result of a request made of the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs by the British Ambassador and myself, the Turkish Government took up with the Rumanian Government the matter of obtaining these two vessels on charter for the purpose indicated. In due course the reply was received that the Rumanian Government

was not . . .

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was not willing to permit the vessels to be chartered for this purpose and the Embassy was given to understand that the refusal was the result of action by German authorities in Romania.

I have recently been informed by Mr. G. F. Simon, International Red Cross delegate in Turkey, that Colonel Fedorov, Rumanian Military, Naval and Air Attaché in Ankara, seems to see him early in February 1944 to propose that the International Red Cross purchase for the sum of 1,700,000 pounds sterling the two Rumanian vessels in Istanbul, the SS DIABOTYAZAKA and SS BRIGABAKI; that he had submitted the matter to the International Red Cross Headquarters in Geneva by teletype and that he has subsequently received a reply stating that funds for their purchase are not available.

The question of obtaining ships from the Anglo-American shipping pool, possibly by transfer to the UNRRA for donation to the International Red Cross which could man the ships with neutral crews, has been raised and Mr. Harry Garfield of the Office of Strategic Services called Erno Isakshel the suggestion, as a personal case, to Mr. Martin Goldammer, New York, at the end of January 1944. He suggested that such ships, the property of the International Red Cross under Swiss registry, could perform many errands of mercy in addition to the specific one of assisting in the proposal to evacuate 5,000 Jews, principally children, from Rumania, Hungary and Bulgaria.

It may be pointed out in this connection that the question of the nationality of the crews of vessels proceeding to a Rumanian or Bulgarian port to evacuate Jews is likely to present difficulties unless the crews of such vessels are citizens of neutral countries. The British authorities, for example, might object to a Rumanian crew bringing a vessel into Palestine in waters and it is to be expected that the Rumanian and Bulgarian authorities would similarly object to a crew of Allied nationality entering their waters.

On January 29, 1944 (my telegram No. 128) I advised the Department of receipt of information from the representative of the Jewish Agency for Palestine in Turkey, Mr. Ch. Barlas, that a Portuguese flag vessel under charter to the Joint Distribution Committee was then en route from Lisbon to Palestine with approximately 700 Jewish refugees and I suggested that the Department might wish, in view of the fact that the principal difficulty in procuring more than a limited number of Jews from Transylvania is being occasioned by the lack of transportation, to suggest to the Joint Distribution Committee that efforts might be made to combine the charter of the vessel with a view to its proceeding from Palestine to Constantinople in order to evacuate from Transylvania the Jewish refugees there.

Recently there has also been under consideration a proposal to obtain the use of a Turkish vessel for the purpose indicated. The vessel under consideration has been the SS VASDA. The possibility of obtaining the use of this vessel was discussed with me on February 9, 1944, by Dr. Isaac Harzog, Godef Habbot of Palestine, Dr. Horezol Alkash, who accompanied him from Palestine, and Mr. Barlas, the representative in Turkey of the Jewish Agency for Palestine. I suggested to them that they attempt to see both the Minister for Foreign Affairs and the Minister of Communications with a view to obtaining the use of the boat.

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stating that I thought the most feasible means of obtaining the use of the boat for a limited period would be to start with a request that it be made available for only one trip to Constanta. The Turkish Minister for Foreign Affairs was unwilling to see the Chief Rabbi, stating that as a matter of principle he could not receive him or any other ecclesiastical dignitary. The Foreign Minister suggested, however, that a call be made on Mr. Feridun Cemal Erkin, Assistant Secretary General of the Ministry, upon whom Mr. Eliash and Mr. Barlas called on February 11. When they first broached the matter of obtaining the use of a Turkish vessel for this purpose, Mr. Erkin's attitude was negative, the gentlemen named informed me, on the ground of the transport difficulties with which the Turkish Government is faced, and he suggested that they seek to obtain the use of a suitable vessel used by the Red Cross. Mr. Erkin's attitude was, however, somewhat more favorable when the proposal was made to him that the vessel be made available merely for one trip and he then promised to give a definite decision on this matter on February 15. In the course of his discussion with these gentlemen Mr. Erkin indicated, they informed me, that he is worried by the delays at Istanbul of refugees in transit because of a failure on the part of the British authorities there to issue promptly the necessary entry visas for Palestine. The Embassy has checked on this point and found that there have been very few cases of delay at Istanbul and these few have been for purely personal reasons on the part of the individuals concerned. Nevertheless, as a result of the statement made by Mr. Erkin to Mr. Eliash and Mr. Barlas and his suggestion that the British Embassy inform the Ministry for Foreign Affairs that visas for Palestine would be granted within 24 hours on arrival at Istanbul, an officer of the British Embassy has subsequently informed me that an oral statement to the effect indicated would be made to the appropriate official of the Ministry. As a result, it is expected that the number of visas granted by Turkish consular officers in Bulgaria, Rumania and Hungary will be increased and that the number arriving in Turkey will consequently increase, provided the Bulgarian bottleneck can be broken or provided evacuation by sea can be effected.

On February 14, 1944, a member of my staff interviewed the official in the Ministry for Foreign Affairs who is handling this whole question and, in the course of their conversation, informed him of the Embassy's interest in a Turkish vessel being made available--the VATAN was mentioned--for this purpose. The official in question said he thought, in view of the shipping shortage and the risk of loss involved, it was unlikely that a Turkish vessel could be made available. He raised the question of whether the American Government or Allied Governments could not make a vessel available to some international relief organization to carry out the proposed voyages.

The Turkish decision in the matter was in the negative. The Department will recall from my telegram No. 159 dated January 31, 1944, that a lack of transportation facilities rather than an unwillingness on the part of the Turkish authorities to cooperate was the chief difficulty in effecting the rescue of Jews from the Axis countries. The statement was also made in the telegram under reference that in my opinion unless the transportation facilities were augmented by vessels especially chartered for the purpose it was most unlikely that in present conditions the rail facilities could be materially increased. I reported also that the Turkish authorities had repeatedly assured me of their desire to cooperate but that they insisted that under existing conditions they were unable to increase rail facilities.

It will . . .

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It will be seen from the foregoing that despite the most strenuous and continuous efforts on the part of the Embassy to facilitate the movement of oppressed Jews from the Axis countries to Palestine, these efforts have to date met with only limited success, primarily because the persons whom it is desired to move are on territory controlled by the enemy who does not permit them to leave for abroad, and secondarily because of transportation difficulties. With regard to this second factor it may be remarked again that the Turkish authorities have been willing to grant more visas for persons to transit Turkey than have been utilized by persons able to leave enemy territory. Approximately three-fourths of the Jews arriving in Turkey from enemy territory have come by rail; the remainder have escaped from Greece by boat. (See page 5, supra.) If a vessel or vessels become available for the transportation of Jews by water from Rumanian or Bulgarian ports to Turkey, it is not improbable that last minute difficulties will arise in connection with their actual departure from enemy territory, since as yet there is no guarantee that they will be allowed to depart from such territory for Turkey.

It is to be remembered, in considering the Turkish attitude with regard to this matter, that Turkey's transportation system has never been adequate from the western viewpoint and is far from being adequate in the present situation when Turkey's entry into the war has until very recently been increasingly imminent. There is only one through single track main line from Haydar Pasa (Istanbul) to Aleppo via Ankara and this line has been overburdened with British and American (mostly Lend-Lease) shipments, consisting largely of war materials, moving in a northerly direction and of Turkish exports, consisting largely of Turkish products bought by the United States and the British Empire both for supply and pre-emptive reasons, moving in a southerly direction. The load which the locomotives have been carrying through the Taurus mountains, through which this line runs, has consistently been the maximum possible, with the result that the addition of even one extra car filled with refugees to a particular train has presented a difficult mechanical problem. Notwithstanding, as has been pointed out before, the Turkish authorities have actually agreed to furnish one car every 10 days to transport 75 children and accompanying adults from Haydar Pasa to Aleppo. With all rolling stock burdened to the maximum, it has been impossible--and in fact unnecessary since the small number of refugees arriving in Turkey has been readily handled--to increase the number of trains to haul refugees.

Should it become possible to move a large number of refugees from Rumanian or Bulgarian Black Sea ports to Istanbul their further transit beyond Istanbul will, of course, present difficulties but it is hoped that such difficulties can be overcome either by providing transportation by vessel beyond Istanbul to a Palestinian port or by moving them gradually by rail from Istanbul via Adana and Aleppo to Palestine.

If some scheme is eventually worked out by which the refugees can be moved by water from the ports in question, it may be found desirable to discharge them from the vessels at Haifa, rather than at Istanbul, thereby avoiding the difficulties which would arise out of a stay in Istanbul and the necessity of arranging rail or water transport beyond Istanbul. Any plans that may be drawn up for the use of vessels only as far as Istanbul should include provision for furnishing the refugees food and shelter while in Turkey.

Aside from . . .

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Aside from the Jews who have managed to reach Turkey from Axis countries (some legally and some illegally as set forth above) a considerable number of Greeks have succeeded in reaching Turkey from nearby Greek islands. The exact number is not known but it is considerable. Most of them have proceeded from Turkey to Syria. The movement of persons of this category is more or less continuous, although the number moving at any one time is small. The number of refugees of other national or racial groups reaching Turkey is negligible.

In the many discussions which I have had on this subject with the present Prime Minister and former Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr. Saracoglu; with the present Foreign Minister and former Undersecretary for Foreign Affairs, Mr. Menemencoglu; and with other high Turkish officials, I have invariably endeavored to persuade them to lend every possible assistance to achieve the desired end, emphasizing the vital humanitarian principles involved and referring to the self-interest involved (in that any assistance granted would tend to present Turkey in a favorable light abroad). The expressions and attitude of these officials have invariably been one of the desire to cooperate and aid in every way, despite the many and unavoidable difficulties with which their country has been and is faced.

As I informed the Department in my telegram No. 270 of February 16, 1944, I am delighted with the assignment to my staff in the capacity of attaché of Mr. Ira Kirshmann for the special purpose of handling matters pertaining to those refugees. I am most favorably impressed with his initiative and quick grasp of the situation, as well as with his general qualifications and personality. I shall of course extend every possible assistance to him in this work.

Respectfully yours,

Laurence A. Steinhardt

File No. 840.1  
LAS/mp

To Department in original and hectograph.