

Ira Hirschman Papers

Box 3

Hirschmann-Pehle Press Conference

Transcript 10/17/44

**TREASURY DEPARTMENT**

**War Refugee Board**

**PRESS CONFERENCE**

**Room 3414 Treasury Department**

**October 17, 1944**

**11:00 a. m.**

**PRESENT:**

**Mr. John W. Pehle, Executive Director  
Mr. Ira A. Hirschmann  
For the War Refugee Board**

**The Press**

**Reporter: Mrs. A. R. Brown**

Mr. Pehle: Mr. Ira Hirschmann, who has been the War Refugee Board representative at Ankara, Turkey, has been just called back for consultation because of the completely changed military and political situation throughout the Balkans. He has been telling me something about the way our work has shaped up out there, and I thought some of you would be interested in hearing about it. After he does that, we will both answer any questions that you people have that we can answer.

I just want to say that I am very proud of the work that Mr. Hirschmann has been able to do out there. It is the most difficult area to operate in, and the problem has been a terribly pressing one which has demanded every imaginative device that anybody could dream up and all the energy and pressure and sympathy that could be used. I thought you would like to hear from Mr. Hirschmann what the Board's activities have been.

Mr. Hirschmann: Well, I just have a few words to say. As long as Mr. Pehle threw a bouquet at me, I want to say that I couldn't have done anything at all without the complete, undivided support that he gave me out there, and that was pretty important when you were out there alone.

The problem given to me when I went there was to try to make Turkey, which was a window into the Balkans, into a door so as to try to get some of the people that were being pushed around into a place of freedom and security. And we managed somehow or other to

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get a number of them through Turkey and save their lives and give them a chance.

The thing -- the section that we were working on divided itself into three countries. Hungary, of course, now is a subject that we won't talk about. It is all tied up in the political, complex situation now. Rumania and Bulgaria: In Rumania we managed to bring out a fairly large number of people, and in Bulgaria we brought some people out but there the political and military situation changed and so we changed our tactics a bit. But what happened was that the military and political situation that Mr. Pehle mentioned changed rapidly while I was there and in view of that I think that Turkey became pretty much sealed up as a source of rescue. It may open up again and there may still be some possibilities, and we have left an organization there to function for the Board. I think the instrument of the Board in being used to save people at a time when a lot of people were being killed is certainly a valuable thing at a time like this in our history.

I think that is about all I can say.

Question: Have you any estimate of the numbers of people that were brought out through Turkey from all the countries -- the total?

Mr. Hirschmann: Yes, I think so.

I do not like to quote a direct figure on that because I haven't it fresh in my mind. It runs into thousands.

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Question: Can you tell us a little bit more about the changed tactics in Bulgaria, what you were doing there and what happened to it?

Mr. Hirschmann: Well, in Bulgaria there were a number of people coming out that we were pulling out through a railroad and a few ships, and it is an extremely difficult job out of war zones to do that, and the population of Bulgaria there, the problem of the minorities and the Jews, ran to something like 45,000 people that were being persecuted and were subject to Nuremberg laws, which were pretty severe. And the Board changed its strategy there and while I was there we decided to save the people inside of Bulgaria instead of bringing them out in dribbles. And the Bagrianov Government, which was then in power, was prevailed upon to call a special session of its parliament -- which had been not called, I think, for about a year -- specifically to revoke the anti-Jewish laws. And they did it, which means that a population of some 45,000 people were reestablished, reinstated, put back on their feet and given their property rights back and given a chance to rebuild their lives and to help rebuild the country.

I think that in my report to Mr. Pehle he -- as a matter of fact, he authorized my efforts in that direction, to save the people inside the country instead of taking them out.

Question: Was that action a direct result of the activities of the War Refugee Board in Bulgaria?

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Mr. Hirschmann: Well, specifically so, yes. Yes, we managed to have this Government call this special meeting of parliament together for that purpose. It wasn't the only thing it did but it did revoke the laws. These people today -- I had a report just before I left from some of the military people who had gone into Bulgaria and they reported that the people had been absolutely restored to their full rights; they were entirely free people, free to move; their funds had been unlocked; they were free to exercise any profession, go into any business, schools, and so forth.

Question: When was that session of the parliament called?

Mr. Hirschmann: I think that was some time in the latter part of August.

Question: This August?

Mr. Hirschmann: Yes.

Mr. Pehle: Yes.

Question: Just why and how has the situation changed in Turkey so that you can no longer operate through there as you did?

Mr. Hirschmann: Well, the situation hasn't changed in Turkey. The change in the Balkans, in Bulgaria. Bulgaria and Rumania are not allies of the Germans any more and there are military zones.

Question: There is no need to bring people out of there now?

Mr. Hirschmann: On the whole, I would say not.

Question: Well, Mr. Hirschmann, do you intend to go back to Turkey again?

Mr. Hirschmann: I think Mr. Pehle can answer that.

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Mr. Pehle: No. We called Mr. Hirschmann back because the active work in that area is over. We still have people out there to follow up on what is left but the big job in Turkey that can be done through Turkey is over with. The remaining Balkan country which is the rest of the problem is Hungary, which is hanging in the balance right today if you read the press this morning, and the Hungarian thing is touch and go.

Question: Is he going over there, though, some place again real soon?

Mr. Pehle: No. We haven't plans of that kind. We drafted him to do a special job and he has done the job.

Question: He finished it up and is going back to private life again?

Mr. Pehle: Yes.

Question: You mentioned people to follow through in Turkey. Is that special representation of the War Refugee Board itself --

Mr. Pehle: That's right.

Question: -- or work through some other agency?

Mr. Pehle: Well, we have a representative out there, Mr. Katski.

Question: In Bulgaria?

Mr. Pehle: No. In Ankara and Istanbul, Turkey.

Question: Do you contemplate moving your work up into Bulgaria and Rumania to affect the situation in Hungary if possible?

Mr. Pehle: No. Between those areas there is a battle on and

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any work that has to be done in Hungary or that can be done in Hungary today could only be done through places such as Switzerland. You couldn't get in through the Turkish avenues any more.

Question: Mr. Hirschmann, could it be said that as a result of the extremes to which the Germans have gone in the Balkans that in some of those countries which for many, many years have been quite anti-Semitic there has been an improvement of the public feeling in those areas generally as a result; plus the work of the War Refugee Board, that the public psychology on that subject has improved?

Mr. Hirschmann: I don't know whether you could sense that at this date at all. On the Bulgarian thing we thought that was important because we hoped it would establish a precedent or blueprint for the next steps and peace so that your first move before Bulgaria signed an armistice -- the first thing they did was to revoke their anti-Jewish laws. The first people who were worked off, were pushed around, the first people who were given back their freedom, so it seems to be pretty logical.

Mr. Pehle: That government that revoked those laws fell and was replaced by another government which fell, and then there is a third one which is now in power. That government issued on September 22nd this year a statement which may already have appeared in the papers here -- I am not sure. We have copies of it if you want it. That statement, I think, characterizes the change that has come in that area where you had very severe persecution of minorities. And here is a new government that says in an official statement,

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"The Bulgarian Government has no objection and will make no difficulties for those Jews who wish to emigrate to Palestine. Regarding them as Bulgarian citizens who enjoy full rights, the Government will require of them merely that they comply with all laws or regulations obligatory for all citizens of the country.

"The Government has annulled all exclusive laws of anti-Jewish character. Such an exclusive law was that establishing a surtax to the extent of 20 to 25 per cent of the value of all Jewish property. This tax, being the result of a vicious law, was discriminatory against the Jews. The excess amount will now be returned, but because of Bulgaria's difficult financial situation, such amount will be transferred into a state loan of definite maturity.

"The Jews now enjoy full equality of rights, and live under the same conditions and in freedom as do other Bulgarian nationals."

In other words, they have gone all the way around the circle. Now, whether you can say, as you suggest, that due to the extremes to which the Germans have gone there has been a revulsion from anti-Semitism, nobody can really tell that. Nobody can tell whether that is what is going to happen, whether the seeds of that will remain in those countries. There has always been a considerable amount of anti-Semitism in the Balkans, anyway.

Question: Mr. Hirschmann, did you have any assistance from the Turkish Government when you were helping those people get out of the Balkans?

Mr. Hirschmann: Oh, yes. The Turkish Government -- the people

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that came through required the aid of the Turkish Government in permitting them to come into Turkey and to be transported through Turkey, and the Turkish Government while I was there was most cooperative. Those arrangements were made through our Ambassador Steinhardt. We worked very closely with the Embassy. In fact, I was attached to it. And they were extremely cooperative.

Question: All your negotiations as American Government agents were carried on through the good offices of the Turkish Government?

Mr. Hirschmann: Negotiations with whom?

Question: With Bulgaria.

Mr. Hirschmann: No, no. No, they were carried on directly, as a representative of the American Government, the War Refugee Board, with the ministers of the enemy country. Mr. Pehle and his Board gave me authority to deal with the enemy.

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Question: I see.

Mr. Hirschmann: And I did deal with them right along.

Question: You dealt with them directly?

Mr. Hirschmann: In Rumania and Bulgaria.

Mr. Pehle: And to some extent through the International Red Cross.

Mr. Hirschmann: The International Red Cross acted as the intermediary in arranging the meetings.

Mr. Pehle: And the meetings were solely on the problem that the War Refugee Board was set up to further. It had no relation to other activities whatsoever.

Question: Mr. Hirschmann, did you ever have any direct talks with the German Ambassador in Turkey?

Mr. Hirschmann: No.

Question: Or any of the German authorities there at all?

Mr. Hirschmann: No.

Question: How did you arrange to get to them with your problems?

Mr. Hirschmann: I didn't deal with the Germans. I was dealing with Bulgarians and Rumanians and I dealt with them through their ministers, the Bulgarian Minister and the Rumanian Minister.

Those countries, you see, were not occupied. There was a kind of cooperation, not occupation, in those two countries. That wasn't true of Hungary. And it was because they weren't occupied that I was able to deal with those ministers, who had authority to deal

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with their domestic problems.

Question: Did you at any time attempt to reach the German —

Mr. Hirschmann: No.

Question: By the "Bulgarian Minister" and the "Rumanian Minister" you mean their diplomatic ministers in Turkey?

Mr. Hirschmann: Yes.

Question: Do you feel anything further can be done by way of Turkey, Mr. Hirschmann?

Mr. Hirschmann: Yes. I think there may be possibilities. It is very difficult to know that. That is why an organization has been left over there to explore the matter further.

Question: Did all refugees go to Palestine or did some come over here and other places?

Mr. Hirschmann: The refugees that I was dealing with — most refugees went to Palestine when I was there.

Mr. Pehle: None came over here.

Question: Mr. Hirschmann, what happened to the war refugees that were rescued from the Transdnistria Camp?

Mr. Hirschmann: Transdnistria, as you know, I think, was the most celebrated disease-infested camp in Rumania, and through our talks with the Rumanian Minister we managed in March to have that camp broken up.

Mr. Pehle: It wasn't located in Rumania; it was in parts of Russia that Rumania had taken over.

Mr. Hirschmann: That's right. It was right at the border.

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We broke that camp up. The Rumanians agreed to break that camp up. The reports that we had show thousands of people died every day. Originally, 150,000 people were in the camp and it was reduced to 48,000 by the time I got to it. They broke that camp up and we had confirmed reports on that from the Red Cross, that those people were all released and had their freedom in Rumania and had gone to Palestine. On the way back, I stopped at Palestine and one of my purposes was to see some of those people, especially the youngsters. There were a number of children that were in the Transdnistria Camp that we were especially interested in and I saw hundreds of those children in Palestine, in colonies in Palestine, becoming rebuilt as citizens and very healthy and active. And I think they will be among the great freedom-loving citizens of the world. They have earned the right to it.

Question: Did you by any chance see the little boy you spoke about at your last conference?

Mr. Hirschmann: No. I didn't see him but I saw hundreds of others.

Mr. Pehle: Of this group that came back from Transdnistria, the 45,000, only a fraction went on to Palestine. The rest are in Rumania today.

Mr. Hirschmann: Just a few that went in there. And the rest of them are free in Rumania, principally in the big cities like Budapest.

Question: Did you have a handicap at any place for lack of

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a place to take these people and transportation facilities since the American-British agreement?

Mr. Pehle: Not related to Hungary. More specifically.

Question: In general.

Mr. Hirschmann: No, we haven't been handicapped, but it couldn't have been done without an instrument of this kind of the Government, which impressed on other governments the interest that we had in that subject. And they saw that our government was interested in saving people whoever they are and wherever they are and they opened up the facilities. Prior to that, they had not done so.

Question: Have you any idea how many Jews there are in Rumania now?

Mr. Hirschmann: No.

Question: Mr. Pehle, would you say that the major work of the Board is over now?

Mr. Pehle: Well, of course, you can look at the map and see where our problems are that we have been dealing with. Certainly, the major task in Rumania and Bulgaria is over; the task in France is over because we are not taking up the problems that UNRA and the Inter-Governmental Committee and the private agencies are going to deal with in liberated areas. That is not our job. You can't say the work of the War Refugee Board is over when the situation in Hungary is what it is today -- it is very bad -- nor the situation in Slovakia, which is also today very bad, and while you have large numbers of persons in concentration camps and in German-occupied Poland and in

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Germany whose lives hang in the balance.

Question: Is the refugee quota to Palestine about filled now?

Mr. Hirschmann: I understand that it is not.

Question: It is not. Well, are there any plans on foot to bring more to this country?

Mr. Pehle: No, there aren't.

Question: There aren't at all?

Mr. Pehle: No. In other words, the Oswego Camp performed a function which we had in mind. It helped relieve the situation in Italy, which was very bad at that time and which is better today. Secondly, it created an example so that we were in a better position to go to other countries and to impress them, particularly in the Mediterranean area, with the importance with which this country regarded this problem. But today the situation on finding havens is, of course, much better than it was then at that time.

Question: Well, would you say, then, Mr. Pehle, it was purely a psychological move?

Mr. Pehle: I wouldn't say it was purely a psychological move because it did bring over people, even a small number, out of Italy, the number of people who were at that time hard to place. It started to relieve the tension but it had great importance as a psychological move.

Question: Well, then, that part of it is all finished. There won't be any more coming over. Is that it?

Mr. Pehle: There is no indication that more refugees will be

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coming to the United States because the problem of temporary havens, which is what we were fighting for, is eased very considerably in the Mediterranean area.

Question: Is the Philippeville Camp in operation?

Mr. Pehle: No, it isn't. There isn't any camp.

Question: That is one place where there was a sudden influx.

Mr. Pehle: That's right. In Philippeville alone there were plans to bring in 10,000 refugees. In other words, we had a place there ready to take up to that number, which shows that there is no need of additional havens here.

Question: What are the other havens?

Mr. Pehle: Philippeville was the primary one. The facilities in Italy have been extended considerably so a large number of people can be taken care of there. The Jugoslavia situation has been changed so that the flow from Jugoslavia to Italy and out of Italy has dwindled and as soon as Jugoslavia is liberated that situation will be over with.

Question: Is the idea to send all those refugees that came here and went to Palestine back to their original countries?

Mr. Pehle: I think on the whole the people that went to Palestine went there as a permanent haven. They went there with the intention of staying there for the rest of their lives. And they aren't living in camps; they are finding jobs, fitting themselves into communities. The only group that came here of any consequence is the group that are at Oswego. Those people were brought here with the

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understanding that they would be given a temporary haven and with the idea that after hostilities are over they would go back.

Question: Is that true of the Mediterranean countries which are opening up now?

Mr. Pehle: On the whole Mediterranean, all countries which are only taking these people temporarily and with the plan that they will go back after the war or find some place where they can be permanently settled, there are countries that would offer some haven to them permanently.

Question: Are you still sending people to those Moses Wells camps?

Mr. Pehle: I don't think there are many people going to those Moses Wells and those camps were largely havens for the Jugoslavs and the Greeks. That flow has pretty well stopped and, of course, with Greece and Jugoslavia rapidly being liberated the flow will soon be in the other direction. Those people will go back to their homeland.

Question: Oswego was partially an example to South America, wasn't it? Did you get any response?

Mr. Pehle: I wouldn't say it was very important with regard to an example for South America because Oswego was not an example of permanent settlement. It was an example of taking care of those people temporarily. The main place that could be done is in the Mediterranean area, although Mexico did go along and say they were willing to set up a free port too, and there may be some other Latin American countries. The principal problem with the Latin American

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countries would be a permanent resettlement problem.

Question: Do you think it is necessary now to set up temporary shelters in Palestine — I believe there is a resolution before the Congress to that effect — since a good many people —

Mr. Pehle: I doubt it.

(After a pause.) Is there anything else?

(No response.)

Thanks a lot.

(Whereupon, at 11:30 a.m., the conference ended in informal conversation off the record.)