

Ira Hirschmann Papers

Box 3

Summary of War Refugee Board Operations in  
Turkey, 6/18/44-10/4/44

Ankara, October 4, 1944.

No.

Subject: Forwarding summary report from Mr. Ira A. Hirschmann, Representative of the War Refugee Board, to Mr. John Fehle, Executive Director of the War Refugee Board.

The Honorable  
The Secretary of State,  
Washington.

Sir:

I have the honor to forward herewith a summary report from Mr. Ira A. Hirschmann, Representative of the War Refugee Board, to Mr. John Fehle, Executive Director of the War Refugee Board, Washington, covering efforts made by Mr. Hirschmann and the Embassy to rescue oppressed minorities from axis-occupied Europe.

Respectfully yours,

Enclosure:

Report as described.

Ankara, Turkey  
October 4, 1944

  
Mr. John V. Fehle, Executive Director  
War Refugee Board,  
Washington.

Dear Mr. Fehle:

The following is a summary of the operations of the War Refugee Board in Turkey from the date of my second incumbency, June 18, until my departure on October 4, 1944. Most of the material condensed herein has been fully elaborated in my report dispatched to you by Ambassador Steinhardt on September 11, but I deem it desirable to offer a resume of the Board's operations in a final report, which includes the activities in Turkey up to and including October 4, immediately prior to my departure for the United States.

1. Joel Brandt.

Following my interview of Joel Brandt in Cairo, a report was submitted to Ambassador Steinhardt and dispatched to you on July 3, covering Brandt's visit to Turkey and subsequently to Cairo. No further action was taken in this matter, following the receipt of telegrams of instruction from the Department.

2. Coordination of Organizational Activities in Istanbul.

Due to the influx in Turkey of numbers of representatives of various relief and rescue agencies, a situation had arisen which resulted in confusion, overlapping of efforts, embarrassment to Ambassador Steinhardt, and an unfavorable reaction in the Turkish Foreign Office. At Ambassador Steinhardt's initiative, a single overall committee was organized which includes representatives of all interested agencies in Turkey. This committee has met on several occasions, for the purpose of interchanging information.

In addition, a small working committee, which includes the leading representatives of the most active organizations here, was established to deal with day-to-day problems. Both committees were established under War Refugee Board leadership, and continue to act under our direction. This procedure resulted in the concentration and definition of the activities of the various organizations, and placed the Consulate in Istanbul and the Embassy in Ankara in a more effective position to lend their aid and influence to the rescue work recorded hereinafter. At the same time, it added to the effective liaison and cooperation of the Embassy with the Turkish Foreign Office in these matters.

3. Rumania.

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### I. Rumania.

A. Two informal conferences with Mr. Alexander Cretzianu, Rumanian Minister to Ankara, led to the following results:

(1) The Rumanian Government, and particularly Mihai Antonescu, Rumanian Vice President of the Council of Ministers, was informed again of the outraged opinion in the United States with respect to the treatment by Rumania of the minorities and Jewish citizens in that country. As the result of our representations and the stated desire of the Rumanian Government to win some measure of good-will in the United States, it became apparent that a relatively more humane approach to the problems of the Jewish people in Rumania was resulting;

(2) In connection with the foregoing, Mr. Cretzianu was helpful on several occasions in securing information for me relating to Jewish affairs in Rumania. Impetus was given to the general relaxation of strictures against the Jews. This abatement manifested itself in a willingness and permission on the part of the Rumanian Government to condone the clandestine entry into Rumania of refugees coming from Hungary, and to grant transit facilities to Hungarian refugees. It was reported that approximately 3500 to 4000 Hungarians entered Rumania with the tacit consent of the Rumanian Government during this period, in spite of an official edict issued by Baron von Killinger, German Minister to Rumania (since deceased) to execute any refugees who have succeeded in escaping from Hungary into Rumania.

B. Without the strong representations of Ambassador Steinhardt, the War Refugee Board would not have been able to succeed in its operations in bringing 2672 persons who arrived in Istanbul by sea from Rumania during the period of January-August, 1944. These refugees arrived without Turkish visas. Such visas were issued to them upon their arrival, enabling them to continue their emigration without delay to Palestine. Part of the arrangement made by the Ambassador with the Turkish Ministry of Communications resulted in the provision of special trains to transport these refugees from Istanbul to the Syrian border.

C. In the instance of the Madagasc disaster, the Turkish Foreign Office instructed the Turkish Red Crescent to care for the safe arrival of the Madagasc survivors and the Bulbul passengers, who were permitted to proceed overland from Igneada to Istanbul under Foreign Office and Red Crescent auspices and protection. In view of the apparent dangers lurking in the Black Sea, it was essential that the passengers of the Bulbul were not exposed to further dangers of sea transport, and were provided with the means for their removal to Istanbul by land.

D. Preliminary steps were taken to secure permission to dispatch Turkish passenger vessels to Constanta for the

evacuation

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evacuation of refugees from Rumania. The change in the political scene during early August, especially the Turkish-German diplomatic break, brought this initiative to a halt.

4. Bulgaria.

A. Jewish population in Bulgaria. There are about 45,000 Jews in Bulgaria. About 12,000 to 14,000 Jews have been deported, mostly from Thrace and Macedonia.

B. The exchange of Jewish Refugees for German Nationals. On July 6, 1944 an exchange of 113 Germans for 223 Jewish refugees took place in Istanbul, under the auspices of the Turkish Red Crescent. The 223 Jewish refugees were chosen by the Gestapo from a list submitted by the Jewish Agency. We are informed that there are three to four thousand such exchange certificates still outstanding.

C. Rescue by land from Bulgaria. 408 persons, including 46 children under the children's scheme, entered Turkey from Bulgaria during the first six months of 1944. The Turkish Foreign Office, at the intervention of the British and American Embassies, agreed to admit all refugees to enter Turkey in transit to Palestine.

D. Several informal conferences were arranged through Simond of the International Red Cross with Monsieur Balabanoff, Bulgarian Minister to Ankara. The apparent desire of the Bulgarian (Magryanov) Government to win the good-will of the American people at that time and the obvious impediments in the way of sea-transport of Jewish refugees from Bulgaria, suggested the possibility of saving the Jewish population within Bulgaria, instead of continuing the sporadic efforts to bring out a relatively few victims.

With the aid of Ambassador Steinhardt, Balabanoff was pressed during these conversations and through the intervention of other intermediaries to the elimination of the Bulgarian anti-Jewish laws and the immediate, complete reinstatement of the Bulgarian Jewish population to its former rights and liberties. These views were placed before the Magryanov Government. Although it was reported at one time, through most reliable sources, that this question would be considered secondary to the major ones under discussions, at the special convocation of Parliament on August 17 we succeeded in having the question included on the agenda. On August 28, the famed Nuremberg Anti-Jewish laws were formally withdrawn. This constituted the first revocation of anti-Jewish legislation by any Axis country or satellite, since the nefarious campaigns preceding and following the war.

During the conversations above-mentioned, a statement in writing was secured from Balabanoff, setting forth that the Magryanov Government was categorically opposed to the anti-Jewish activities of the preceding Bulgarian governments, and promising that steps would be taken to annul the anti-Jewish laws at the first opportunity. Permission to

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publish this statement was also later secured from Balabanoff.

2. The steps in principle taken by the Bagryanov Government in connection with the reinstatement of the Jewish Bulgarian population were implemented and enforced by the succeeding Bulgarian Governments. On September 22 the present Georgieff Government issued the statement quoted below, in the radio and press:

"(1). The Bulgarian Government takes a positive attitude regarding the establishment of a Jewish State in Palestine.

"(2). 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.

"(3). The Government has annulled all exclusive laws of anti-Jewish character. Such an exclusive law was that establishing a surtax to the extent of 30 to 35 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.

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

"The following procedure will be applied to the property falsely sold and confiscated:

"Property, firm rights, and other assets still owned by the State will be returned to the Jews. There will remain to be settled the question of assets about which legal obligations have arisen between the State and private interest, that is, where property or firm rights have been transferred to third parties, or where other obligatory relations have been created during the course of the last few years. The solution of this problem is a question of time. The Government will find the means to solve it in such fashion as not to disturb the traditional friendship and mutual understanding between Bulgarians and Jews. The Government is being assisted in this matter by Jewish people who have confidence in it. The Government will solve the problem in accordance with national relations between a democratic State and its citizens.

"In cases where fictitious property transfers have been made by Jews to Bulgarians, such property will be automatically returned to its lawful owner. In cases of fraudulent transfers, the public authorities will make investigations and will proceed in favor of the injured party."

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F. On August 23, agreement and permission were secured for the Bulgarian vessels Vita and Pirin to make several voyages to carry refugees from Bulgaria to Istanbul. The realization of this scheme was interrupted by political events in the Balkans. Ultimately, the Vita was sunk, reportedly on August 24, while en route from Baltschik, Bulgaria, to Burgas, to embark passengers at the latter port. The voyage of the Pirin is now uncertain. Thus far, all emigration from Bulgaria has taken place via railroad.

B. Hungary.

A. A flow of refugee emigration from Hungary gave promise of fulfillment as a result of the pronouncement of Regent Horthy on July 18, 1944. It stated that Jewish people in certain categories and under certain limiting conditions were to be permitted to emigrate to Palestine, Sweden, and elsewhere. The Board assisted the Swiss Legation in Ankara in the arrangement for 2500 people to have all of their documents put in order for emigration to Palestine. Transit through Rumania and Turkey had previously been arranged for them by the American Embassy. Bulgarian transit visas were also in the process of obtention. The Rumanian Government, through Gretsiam, had agreed, in principle, at our request, to permit the Hungarian refugees to remain in Rumania for a brief period, until transportation could be arranged. Meanwhile, investigations were made as to the feasibility of transporting the refugees from Budapest via Bulgaria to Istanbul (Transylvania had become a scene of Russian military operations). As result of Nazi interference none of the Hungarian refugees to date have been permitted to leave by this route.

B. Through Simand's intervention, an informal and confidential interview was held with Baron Thierry, Counselor of the Hungarian Embassy in Ankara. A broadening of the categories of Hungarian Jewish people who might be permitted to leave Hungary was sought. Baron Thierry informed me at that time (August 8) that it would be advisable, before requesting further concessions, to determine whether the first steps contained in the decree could succeed. He expressed some skepticism regarding the practicability of Regent Horthy's plan.

C. A small but steady stream of Jewish emigration had been taking place clandestinely from Hungary into Rumania. This required the development of complicated but secure underground agencies. It is estimated that 3500 to 4000 persons entered Rumania in this manner. Several hundred of them have already reached Palestine, via the Turkish boats sailing from Constantza. The Rumanian authorities, though aware of this movement, did not interfere with it.

B. Greece.

There has been a sporadic movement, which we have encouraged, of refugees from Greece to Turkey by sea. This has taken place on a more or less informal basis, as

opportunity afforded. Nevertheless, since October, 1943

approximately 900 Greek refugees have entered Turkey in this manner, and with the aid of the Turkish authorities have been expedited to Palestine. Inquiry disclosed that this movement from Greece might be accelerated and suggested if the Turkish authorities would be willing to designate a special base from which refugee rescue operations might be specifically undertaken. At our request, the Embassy discussed the matter with the Turkish Foreign Office, which agreed to issue the necessary instructions. With this assurance, inquiry into the practicability of establishing a base was made by Kestel at Izmir. Informed opinion there was that the establishment of a special base in Turkey at this time to direct the evacuation of refugees from Greece is not feasible because of indications of early evacuation of Greece by the Germans.

#### 7. Turkey.

Reference has been made previously to the cooperation of the Turkish Foreign Office in issuing Turkish transit visas to refugees who entered the country by sea. A number of other proposals were made to the Turkish Foreign Office by the American Embassy, the British Embassy, and both Embassies jointly, in which the cooperation and assistance of the Foreign Office was requested for the purpose of expanding rescue activities from Hungary, Rumania and Bulgaria. In order to consolidate in an overall agreement the various understandings with the Foreign Office, it was agreed that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs would issue Turkish transit visas to any number of Jews who might apply for them at the Turkish Consulate in Budapest, who were in possession of any one of four different documents, as enumerated in the agreement. Similar instructions were to be sent to the Turkish Consulates in Constanta and Burgau, authorizing them to issue up to 400 visas between them every ten days to applicants, bearers of similar documents. At first, the Turkish Foreign Office desired to limit entry into Turkey from Rumania and Bulgaria to persons arriving by ship, but this was subsequently amended to include rail transportation, until such time as it could be demonstrated that voyages by sea could be made with some degree of regularity. The Foreign Office also undertook to request the Ministry of the Interior to admit into Turkey without delay and without reference to Ankara any persons arriving at Turkey's land borders without Turkish visas, provided such persons were in possession of one of the four types of documents referred to above.

This broad concession on the part of the Turkish Foreign Office can be attributed also to a desire on the part of the Turkish authorities to cooperate with the United States Government program in the work under the aegis of the War Refugee Board and to the confidence and respect in which it holds Ambassador Steinhardt.

#### 8. United States Visa Instructions.

Instructions have been received by the American Consulate General in Istanbul, as a result of War Refugee

Board discussions with the State Department, authorizing the issuance of United States visas for which advisory approval had been granted subsequent to July 1, 1941, or the renewal of visas actually issued since that date, but which have expired. These instructions applied to visa applicants in Axis or Axis-dominated countries, and were to be issued under certain circumstances and conditions. They were subsequently amended to include specified close relatives of American citizens or of aliens legally admitted into the United States. The Turkish Foreign Office has been informed thereof, in connection with the issuance of Turkish transit visas, and such prospective visa-holders have been included among the categories of persons to whom the Foreign Office instructions, relative to the issuance of Turkish transit visas referred to above, apply. Developments in the Balkans, up to the present time, have precluded any substantial activity to implement the intent of the State Department's instructions.

#### Observations

The rapid and radical political and military changes in the Balkans since the capitulation of the Rumanian Government on August 23, 1944, has fundamentally altered the possibilities of rescue through Turkey. It was hoped, when Rumania and Bulgaria became "liberated areas", that access to these countries would be available without too much delay, and that information regarding the precise status of the victimized populations of their own countries, and those who had immigrated to them, would be available. For reasons well justified such has not been the case.

Rumania has become a field of military operations. At the present writing, sporadic fighting is continuing in Transylvania, which promises to become a major battle-line of the Russians. For the present, this has sealed up the possibilities of emigration from Hungary through Rumania. No information has been forthcoming from Rumania, except an occasional letter from Klaus, representing the Jewish Agency, and Pilderman, of the Joint Distribution Committee. Pilderman has urgently requested basic supplies for an impoverished Jewish population. Since the Board's definition of our activities precludes relief work, we have not pursued any efforts in this direction, although Ambassador Steinhart is aiding, at the approved time, the efforts of Passman, the representative of the Joint Distribution Committee, to enter Rumania and Bulgaria for the purpose of surveying the situation for the purpose of introducing relief operations.

In Bulgaria, a few newspaper correspondents and informal representatives of Palestine agencies succeeded in arriving in Sofia. They reported a city, formerly populated by 300,000 people, reduced to a skeleton of some 45,000. The premises of the Bagryanov Government to the Embassy and the War Refugee Board to revoke the anti-Jewish laws was kept by the Geragist Government. In addition, the rights and properties of the Jewish population are

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being restored as rapidly as possible, under fairly chaotic conditions.

Under the above circumstances, it appears at this writing that the major program of the War Refugee Board, operating through Turkey, is concluding. There remains, in my opinion, further explorations in Bulgaria, Rumania and also Hungary when the latter is liberated. The possibility of any further operations from Turkey, however, are dependent on the newly oriented military and political situation, wherein Russia appears to be playing a dominant role, and in which our efforts must be guided entirely by the representation of missions in Bulgaria and Rumania and, it is hoped, eventually Hungary.

#### Conclusions.

As observed in my two previous reports, the establishment of the War Refugee Board and the dispatch of representatives to Turkey working with the sympathetic and resourceful aid of Ambassador Steinhardt resulted in the rescue of thousands of refugees who were admitted into Palestine. It is doubtful if these refugees would have been permitted to enter Turkey and proceed to Palestine without the personal intervention of the Ambassador and the Board representatives on the scene in Turkey. It bears repetition that it is regrettable that the Board, which has demonstrated its vitality and the success of its operations, was not created a year or two ago. There is no doubt from the evidence at hand that additional thousands of refugees could have been saved.

It is evident that the mere existence of the Board and its representatives in Turkey acted as a catalytic agent in spurring the morale of the destitute and terrorized citizens in the Balkans, who had reached a low ebb of existence. It is consistently reported by numbers of refugees who had come through Turkey that the existence of the Board and the work by the Embassy in Turkey was known throughout the Balkans, and that it provided for the victims a ray of hope which resulted in lifting their own morale and an eleventh-hour self-sustaining effort on their own part. In retrospect, and as a precedent, the establishment of the War Refugee Board can be viewed as a sharp and vitalizing instrument for rescue in the face of the mechanisms brought to bear in warfare against non-participating, innocent populations.

The example is cited of the abandonment of the disease-ridden Transnistrian camp, through the initiative of the Board with Cretzianu, in March, 1944. Several thousand of the children released from this camp have passed through Turkey into Palestine.

The final phase of the Board's program in establishing a supplementary program of saving the populations within their own country, instead of attempting the sporadic rescue of small groups during the closing days of the war

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should also be emphasized. While there is reason to believe that the anti-Jewish laws in Bulgaria, for example, would have been revoked at some stage in the liberation of these countries after their capitulation, it is stated on high authority from the Bulgarians themselves that the Jewish question was considered an incidental one, and was to be treated at a convenient later hour. It is believed that every day in which the 45,000 reinstated Bulgarian Jewish citizens were given back their freedom is a day won for freedom.

Finally, as a blue-print for peace, the precedent established by Bulgaria in making its first bold and dramatic steps in the direction of the freeing of the first victims of the war, the Jewish population, is one that may not be lost in the fall of the other satellites, and in Germany itself.

Respectfully submitted,

s/s Ira A. Hirschmann

Ira A. Hirschmann  
Attache