

Ira Hirschman Papers

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"Saving Refugees Through Turkey," Address
by Ira Hirschmann Over CBS 10/22/44

Delivered by
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Now returned to his civilian
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SAVING REFUGEES THROUGH TURKEY

During a war the main necessity of people connected with it, by the nature of the job, is to kill people. This may sound blunt and horrible, but none of us can avoid the fact that we have some twelve million Americans devoted to that job now, because it has to be done and, God willing, as quickly as possible.

In the light of the terrible need for destroying the enemy, which must take first place in the job of war, we seldom stop to think of the other essential job, and that is of saving people. Among the victims of the indescribable horrors of war -- and I have just returned from seeing them in the flesh -- are the innocent by-standers, who are loosely termed refugees. Millions of these people, men, women and children, are caught between the vise of war and die slow, painful deaths from malnutrition, exposure, persecution, and just plain homelessness.

You have read a lot of statistics and some rather heart-breaking stories, I am sure, of refugees. And it is no criticism of anyone that it is impossible to picture, sitting in our comfortable security in America, what actually goes on in the countries that have been over-run by the Nazis. Nor would I attempt to open wounds by any graphic description of the things I have seen, especially where children are the hapless victims. But it never hurt anyone to face reality, so we may as well know the truth.

Turkey is a window into the Balkans. As one of the few neutral countries prior to the break in relations with Germany in August, it became a hotbed of secret agents from all the countries of the world. Espionage and counter-espionage was the most active business in Ankara, and especially in Istanbul, which directly faces the Balkans across the Bosphorus and into the Black Sea. You could almost throw a stone out of the window of any leading hotel and hit an agent -- (in fact, we should have). Here was the grand opportunity of reaching out somehow into the Balkan countries and pulling out of the fire some of the helpless victims of the Nazi wrath.

On last January 22nd the War Refugee Board was set up as an emergency war agency by President Roosevelt. The Board consists of the three Secretaries of State, Treasury and War, and chose for its Director the dynamic, sympathetic and extraordinarily able young American, John W. Pehle, about whom I think America will be hearing a great deal more. I was designated by the Board as the Special Representative in Turkey, with diplomatic status and authority to deal with the enemy. It was a privileged assignment, - and rather like leaping into the dark.

Arriving in Turkey I found that some of the spade work for rescue activities had begun. A few organizations, especially the able and efficient Joint Distribution Committee and the Jewish Agency of Palestine, were pulling out handfuls of victims from the millions of agonized human beings who were dying at the hands of the Germans, Bulgarians, Rumanians and Hungarians. It was a frightful situation, begging description. Only to see some of the children who managed to escape was a spur to generate whatever energy and resources one could command to set up the means for pulling more of these people out of the fire.

I will not dwell on the intricacies and obstacles put in the

way of such a task. After all, we were dealing with our enemy at war, and a very ruthless enemy who seemed to be concerned first with killing its own citizens -- the minorities in those countries even taking priority over the military enemy. My job was somehow to find the means of rescuing as many of these people as possible - whoever and wherever they were.

Clothed with the authority of our Government and the backing of our people, we were able eventually to bring out thousands of these victims. They came on little boats, trains, kayaks -- any means of transportation that we could dig up for them. All of these people went to Palestine, which was the only open door from Turkey. The Turkish and British Governments eventually cooperated, working with the vigorous aid of our Ambassador in Turkey, Lawrence A. Steinhardt. The refugees as they were extricated from the Balkans were given protection and the necessary formal documents to move immediately through Syria into Palestine. About a thousand were brought out of Greece from the adjacent islands on boats that could hold from twenty to forty people -- crossing on hazardous waters. These refugees eventually landed on the Turkish shores, were escorted to Smyrna, and given transportation also to Palestine.

I saw many hundreds of these people. I shall not shock you with too much detail about them. It serves no valid purpose to attempt to picture over the radio hundreds of little boys and girls -- who are unlike any other little boys and girls in any other part of the world -- walking with legs as skinny as sticks - with distended bellies - faces with the lines of age creased into the skin - staring, bulging, empty eyes -- walking along in columns under the protection of the Turkish police into special trains which moved them

into Palestine. As one train left the station, across the sea from Istanbul, these children out of pent-up emotion began to sing. I have heard a lot of music in my time, but never any sound just like this. Here was emotion pouring out of little hearts and souls that were unlocked.

Later, on my way back to the United States, I stopped off in Palestine and saw a number of these children in the colonies where they were being nourished and reconstituted to normal life. Already they looked healthy and optimistic, were becoming a part of the community and gave promise of becoming freedom-loving citizens of the world. They had earned that right.

How did we manage to rescue these people, and why? That is a question that was put to me by numerous people in Turkey, and when I would suddenly find myself alone in the midst of a strange world, applying the resources of our great Government to bring out nameless people whom no American had ever heard of and probably never will, sometimes I would ask this same question of myself. Why did we go to rescue them?

What is there in the nature of a people like us -- the people of the United States of America -- which inspires us to say: "Let us stretch out our broad arm of mercy across fourteen thousand miles of sea and earth to save human lives who have no direct connection with the immediate problems of the United States"?

In answer to these questions, I was able to say that the great heart of the American people is wide enough and open enough to beat for others -- that our concern with life and liberty is not something that is confined to the borders of a state or a nation, but that we the people know somehow that what happens to one of us affects all

of us -- that the pain of one is the suffering of the other -- that if some one soul in a camp in Transnistria on the Dniester River is saved for freedom, the sum total of freedom in the world is just that much more.

And so, in a time when the whole world is in a convulsion - when madness and misery had swept from Germany and Japan over mankind, the indestructible love and sympathy of the American people expressed itself when it was needed most, where it was needed most, - saving people many miles from its shores.

I had a letter one day in Ankara from one of our military men in which he took me lightly to task for what turned out to be a misunderstanding connected with some overlapping of activities dealing with our operations in the Balkans. I had occasion to say to the General in my reply that the military was composed of some twelve million men whose essential job is to kill the enemy. My organization was composed of three people besides myself, and it was designed not to kill, but to save people.

In the light of the wide gap of the odds of twelve million to four, I knew that the General would be tolerant - and he was. But that very thought gave me pause. The fact that a Government in war time would set up any agency with extraordinary powers to save people was in itself a significant expression of the American people - that mean you! And it ought to serve as a precedent.

When Turkey broke off diplomatic relations with Germany last August, there were caught, especially in Istanbul, hundreds of anti-Nazis who had fled from Germany and who were in danger of being deported to Germany. Many of these people came to my office in the American Consulate in Istanbul for refuge. They wanted security and aid. They got both. What was gratifying to me was that these people - former German citizens who opposed the Nazi