
Jewish Internees in the American South, 1942–1945

Harvey Strum

Passing the heavily guarded compound containing German and Japanese prisoners of war (POWs), Rabbi Israel Gerstein of Chattanooga, Tennessee, arrived at “the room where the Jews were kept. It was a moving experience—it was a Tisha B’Av mood.”¹ This was not North Africa or liberated Europe—it was Fort Ogelthorpe, Georgia, in 1942.

Rabbi Gerstein had traveled to Fort Ogelthorpe to hold Sabbath services for a group of Jewish refugees interned as enemy aliens. After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Panama and several other Latin American nations had rounded up suspected enemy aliens, including a number of Jewish refugees who had fled Germany and Austria before the outbreak of World War II. The interned Jews were taken along with the others to the Panama Canal Zone and placed under the jurisdiction of the United States Army. In the spring of 1942, approximately sixty Jews and a much larger number of alleged German, Italian, and Japanese enemy aliens were transported to the United States for internment. Upon arrival at New Orleans, the Jewish women and children were separated from the men and sent to an internment camp at Seagoville, Texas, while the men were sent to several camps for enemy aliens and Axis POWs in the South. Altogether, 81 Jews and 4,707 enemy aliens from Latin America were interned in the United States during World War II.²

Over the next year, the Jewish men spent time in camps in Georgia, Florida, Tennessee, Oklahoma, and Texas before the military authorities decided to concentrate them at a camp in Seagoville, Texas, and then at Algiers, Louisiana. They would have remained in internment until the end of the war, but the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee and the National Refugee Service learned of their plight and pleaded their case to American military and civilian authorities. By the middle of 1943, the federal government reclassified most of the

Jews as internees-at-large who could live outside the camps for the duration.

The group from Latin America were not the only Jews interned in the United States during World War II. One hundred German Jews living on the West Coast, like the Japanese-Americans, were forced to relocate to internment camps in 1942.³ In addition, Jews constituted 93 percent of the 982 refugees brought to the United States from Italy in 1944 and confined in the Fort Ontario Refugee Shelter at Oswego, New York, until December 1945.⁴ However, the focus of this article will be on the Jewish refugees from Latin America who were interned in camps in the South. Their story is one of the forgotten episodes of World War II, and it adds to our understanding of American refugee policy during the war.

Anti-Semitism as a Factor

In the context of the widespread anti-Semitism and general indifference to the plight of European Jewish refugees before, during, and after World War II, what was surprising was not the fact that the Jews were interned as enemy aliens, but that most of them were released in 1943 as internees-at-large. Poll taken during the war indicated that Americans mistrusted Jews more than any other European immigrant group except Italians. Between 1941 and 1945 polls suggested that only 30 percent of Americans would have voted against anti-Semitic politicians. In 1943, a poll indicated that 78 percent opposed admitting additional refugees.⁵

Congress, as David Wyman has pointed out in two studies, reflected the anti-refugee feelings of the American public, and refused to either alter the quotas or admit Jewish refugees outside of the existing immigration laws. Officials in the State Department, particularly Assistant Secretary of State Breckinridge Long, who headed the Visa Division, used visa regulations to limit the admission of Jews. In addition, the State Department suppressed for months the underground reports of the Holocaust. President Franklin Roosevelt contributed to the problem by refusing to challenge the immigration restrictions and by failing to do anything to counter the State Department's anti-refugee poli-

cies until January 1944, when he established the War Refugee Board (WRB). The president established the WRB primarily because of a report detailing the State Department's anti-refugee policies that was drafted by members of the staff of Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau. Bowing to prejudice and political expediency, as he had with the internment of the Japanese-Americans, Roosevelt permitted the establishment of only one refugee camp in the United States, Fort Ontario, and confined the 982 refugees brought there for the duration of the war. Consequently, it is not surprising that Jews were confined as enemy aliens under American jurisdiction in the Canal Zone and the South for over a year and a half.⁶

The Situation in Britain and Canada

The inclusion of Jewish refugees with enemy aliens was not unique to the American internment program. In fact, the number of Jews interned in the United States was small compared to those interned by the British and Canadian governments. Britain interned thousands of German and Austrian nationals, including Jews, at the beginning of the war, and then deported 2,250 enemy aliens, mainly Jews, to Canada. The Canadian government reluctantly accepted them, because Canada had adopted an even more restrictive refugee-admission policy than the United States. During World War II, both the United States and Canada closed their doors to the victims of Hitler's Final Solution.⁷

The experiences of the Jews interned in Canada were similar to those of the internees in the United States. They were held for long periods of time, some for three and a half years, at camps in Ontario, Quebec, and New Brunswick. Between May 1941 and December 1943, the Jewish internees were released, but they remained in limbo, like the American internees, until the end of the war. In fact, the Canadian government agreed to release the Jews only after it became apparent that the United States would not accept them because of "a hostile U.S. State Department."⁸ In both Canada and the United States hostile government officials resisted efforts to release the internees and objected to admitting them as immigrants. Eventually, both governments allowed the internees to become immigrants.

The internees from Latin America were brought to the United States under a program for enemy aliens established at the Conference of Foreign Ministers of the American Republics, held in Rio de Janeiro in January 1942. With the exception of Chile and Argentina, all of the Latin American nations broke relations with the Axis powers and agreed to cooperate in regard to the detention of enemy aliens. Most of the Latin American countries accepted an American offer to temporarily intern Japanese, Italian, and German enemy aliens until they could be repatriated to their countries of origin. Laws and customs in most Latin American nations permitted governments to expel aliens, and no alien had an "absolute guarantee of a right to remain."⁹

After December 7, 1941, most Latin American nations rounded up "dangerous" Axis nationals. In the spring of 1942, they began sending them to the United States. Most of the enemy aliens arrived via New Orleans although 525 came from Peru, Ecuador, and Colombia via San Francisco. Most Latin American nations did not round up Jews or quickly released those taken into custody, but Panama and British Honduras, because of the influence of anti-Semitic officials, proved especially eager to include Jews. Additionally, a few Jews from Bolivia, Costa Rica, Honduras, and the Dominican Republic ended up interned.

The Special War Problems Division of the State Department assumed responsibility for the program. Initially, some of the internees were housed in Army camps and POW camps in the South. Eventually, the United States established seven internment camps for civilian enemy aliens in New Mexico, Texas, Idaho, and North Dakota. Several hundred others were held at Ellis Island or in Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) detention centers around the country. None of the aliens brought to the United States had the right to remain after the war. To prevent their gaining any legal rights, the State Department denied them admission visas, and the internees did not go through formal immigration procedures. Rather, as soon as they arrived they were sent to internment camps. While the State Department expected quick repatriation to their home countries, 2,100 of the 4,707 enemy aliens brought to the United States remained until the end of the war.¹⁰

Panama

The ordeal of the Jewish internees began two days after the Japanese bombed Pearl harbor, when Panama rounded up enemy aliens, including at least 250 Jewish refugees, and sent them to the Balboa Internment Camp in the Panama Canal Zone, where they came under the jurisdiction of the United States Army. Unfortunately, the Panamanian government, especially under President Arnulfo Arias (October 1940—September 1941) adopted anti-Semitic policies. According to Latin American expert Richard Behrendt, fascist and anti-Semitic groups “became very powerful” in Panama. Because “some of them . . . remained in office” after the Panamanian military deposed Arias, they were in positions of power to use the outbreak of the war to harass and intern Jewish refugees.¹¹ The Panamanian authorities quickly released local fascists and refugees of Czechoslovakian, Polish, and Italian origin but kept German and Austrian Jews confined. In contrast, the governments of Guatemala and Costa Rica did not make mass arrests of Jewish refugees.

Most of the refugees had left Germany and Austria with their families but without funds because of German government restrictions. Some of the men had been in concentration camps. For example, Gerhard Schlesinger was arrested in 1938 and sent to Buchenwald. He was released on the condition that he leave Germany. Because of the outbreak of the war in 1939 when the Germans invaded Poland, Gerhard Schlesinger and his wife, Charlotte, had to travel via the Soviet Union and Japan before reaching Panama in September 1940. As another example, Fred Kappel was residing in Berlin in 1938 when the Gestapo, the Nazi secret state police, ordered him to leave Germany within a month. After going to Denmark, he obtained a visa for Panama and arrived there in December 1938.¹²

The refugees made new lives for themselves in Latin America. Many had been professionals or businessmen in Europe, but in Panama they had to take other kinds of work to support their families—they worked as butlers, laborers, and servants. In fact, one refugee served as a servant to the American governor of the Canal Zone. Once interned, most lost their jobs. Although well treated by the American military in the Canal Zone, the refugees eagerly sought to regain their

liberty. The wives of some of the internees tried unsuccessfully to persuade the Panamanian and American officials to release their husbands and other male relatives.¹³

Desperate to get their relatives released, several of the women contacted Rabbi Nathan Witkin, a representative of the Jewish Welfare Board and American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, who lived in the Panamanian city of Balboa. Through the intervention of Witkin and the JDC, the Panamanian authorities agreed to release most of the Jewish refugees by the end of January 1942. However, at least twenty-nine men remained in custody, and they continued to be held in the Balboa Internment Camp until April, when American military authorities shipped them, nineteen family members, and 560 non-Jews to New Orleans for transfer to internment camps in the United States.¹⁴

In the United States

Upon their arrival at New Orleans on April 18, 1942, the women and children were separated from the men and sent to the Seagoville Detention Center, near Dallas, Texas. Two hundred and fifty women and children, including the nineteen Jews, were transported aboard a special train (under armed guard) to Seagoville. Because the State Department had no facilities of its own, the Immigration and Naturalization Service and the Army shared the responsibility for interning the "enemy aliens." The INS took over the Seagoville facility, a former federal prison for women, for use as a detention center. The Seagoville Detention Center consisted of six dormitories, a hospital, a school, and an industrial center. Additional housing was constructed to prevent overcrowding. Compared to the camps where the males were sent, Seagoville was an attractive and pleasant place. The personnel proved more sympathetic to the situation of the Jewish internees than the personnel at the male detention camps¹⁵

However, this did not lessen the pain of confinement. Both the separation and the continued internment surprised the Jewish women because they had believed that the American government would set them free upon arrival in the United States. Moreover, detention center officials would not or could not tell the women where their male relatives were interned. Consequently, it is not surprising that one of the women, Irene Wolff, wrote to the JDC that "we are the loneliest Jewish people who are in the USA."¹⁶

The males were split into two groups. Nineteen of them were sent to

Camp Blanding, Florida, and the other ten to Fort Ogelthorpe, Georgia. Both camps were run by the Army as internment camps for Axis POWs and Nazi sympathizers. At Camp Blanding and Fort Ogelthorpe, the Jews were housed with Axis sympathizers and “exposed to their outrages, shunned, and outlawed by them.”¹⁷ Appeals to camp officials for protection from the “petty persecution” by Axis POWs and Nazi sympathizers proved fruitless. Consequently, the Jews appealed to Rabbi Witkin and the Joint Distribution Committee to secure their release from detention or separation from the Axis POWs and Nazi sympathizers.

Efforts to Aid the Internees

Because the refugees were now in the United States, the Joint Distribution Committee contacted the National Refugee Service to provide assistance to the internees. Joseph Chamberlain, the director of the NRS, pleaded with Attorney General Francis Biddle and Edward Ennis, the director of the Justice Department’s Alien Enemy Control Unit, but neither had the authority to release the Jews. Chamberlain then met with Secretary of War Henry Stimson in June, but Stimson refused to make a decision. He turned the problem over to Colonel B. Bryan, chief of the Aliens Division of the Office of the Provost Marshal, but Colonel Bryan informed the NRS that only the Panamanian government had the authority to arrange the freedom of the Jewish internees. As an alternative, Bryan suggested contacting the commanding officer of the Caribbean Defense Command. In other words, American government officials passed the buck and the Jews continued to be held in internment camps.

Meanwhile, the Jews at Camp Blanding were transferred to another POW facility at Camp Forrest, just outside Tullahoma, Tennessee. Camp Forrest was also used as an Army training facility. While Chamberlain was meeting with government officials, Rabbi Gerstein met with the Jews interned at the camp and later drove down to Fort Ogelthorpe to hold religious services for the internees. “It was like Yom Kippur because of the tears and outcries,” Rabbi Gerstein recalled, when the internees saw him for the first time.¹⁹

Upon returning to Chattanooga, Rabbi Gerstein informed the Jewish community of the internees’ plight, and the Refugee Committee in Chattanooga did what it could to assist the internees at Camp Forrest

and Fort Ogelthorpe. In addition, members of the Nashville Jewish community tried to help the refugees. Rabbi S. B. Yampol of Nashville went to Camp Forrest to hold religious services and “learned of their uprightness and worthiness, as well as of their plight and misery.”²⁰ Unfortunately, the rabbinical visits and the expressions of concern by the Chattanooga and Nashville Jewish communities did not lessen the deep despair felt by many of the internees by the middle of the summer of 1942. The refugees were tired and frustrated after eight months of confinement and five months of separation from their families.

Jewish “Spies” in British Honduras

While the Jewish internees at Camp Forrest and Fort Ogelthorpe sought to regain their freedom, another group of Jews from Central America lost theirs. They were rounded up on June 22, 1942, as part of the well-publicized capture of a Nazi spy ring operating from British Honduras and the Canal Zone. Headed by George Gough, a British merchant and shipper known as the “king of Belize,” the spy ring provided information and supplies to German submarines operating off the Central American coast. Nineteen people in British Honduras and one in the Canal Zone were apprehended. Four of the seven enemy aliens arrested were Jewish. What the press failed to report was that they had been included in the round-up by the British colonial governor, Sir John Adams Hunter, in an effort to purge the colony of its few remaining Jews.²¹

Originally, a Hungarian Jewish organization, the Kalman I. Weisz group and the Refugee Economic Corporation of New York City had planned to settle eighty Jewish families from Hungary at El Cayo in British Honduras to establish an export-oriented handicrafts industry. The British government gave preliminary approval in August 1939, and the Jewish organizations purchased land in the Cayo district. Governor Hunter opposed the project and succeeded in persuading the government to reconsider. As a result, the British delayed permission to settle in El Cayo until 1942 and then formally rejected the plan. A few Jews, helped by the Jewish Refugee Committee of London, had arrived in British Honduras, but Governor Hunter quickly “eased” them out of the colony. Hunter did not hide his “fierce anti-Semitism,” and used the Nazi spy ring case as an opportunity to make the colony “Judenrein.”²²

After arresting the four Jewish men, the British colonial authorities in Belize sent them and their families, a total of twelve people, to the Balboa Detention Center in the Canal Zone. Army intelligence questioned the men and held them in the Balboa Detention Center for five and a half weeks before shipping them to New Orleans. When the ship arrived, two of the men, Eric Joseph and Dr. Wilhelm Stein, were separated from the others and sent to Camp Forrest while the remainder of the group went to the Seagoville Civilian Detention Center. News of their confinement reached the National Refugee Service, and in the fall of 1942 Cecilia Razovsky, representing the NRS, went to Seagoville to meet with the Panamanian and British Honduran Jewish internees.²³

In the Camps

Meanwhile, additional Jews from Panama and Central America arrived in the United States, and the refugees at Fort Ogelthorpe and Camp Forrest were transferred to other internment camps. By the middle of the summer of 1942, most of the internees at Camp Forrest and Fort Ogelthorpe, along with additional Jewish males, primarily those without families, were sent to the Stringtown Internment Camp at McAlester, Oklahoma. In September, the NRS arranged with government officials for the transfer of most of the married men to the Seagoville camp. Those that remained at Stringtown grew increasingly more depressed because they did not know what the NRS was doing for them, and they sought transfer to Camp Kenedy, Texas, another internment camp where Jewish internees from Latin America were confined.²⁴

Some of the Jewish refugees ended up at the Kenedy Detention Center, a former Civilian Conservation Corps camp in southern Texas. Most of the detainees in the camp were German, Japanese, and Italian enemy aliens from Latin America. Internees were housed by nationality, and there were frequent line-ups and bed checks to discourage escape attempts. Mounted guards and night guards patrolled the facility. Anyone who tried to get through the barbed-wire fence surrounding the camp would set off an alarm. The INS ran the Kenedy Detention Center, and both the INS and the Army were quite serious about not permitting any of the civilian detainees to escape.²⁵

While the single men at Camp Forrest, the Kenedy Detention Center, and the Stringtown Internment Camp had little to look forward to

in September 1942, most of the married men were reunited with their families at Seagoville in time for Rosh Hashana, the Jewish New Year holiday. The Dallas Refugee Committee, representing the Dallas Jewish community, and the NRS provided services to the internees at Seagoville. However, the joy proved shortlived. The months of confinement dragged on. The refugees divided into three groups: German, Austrian, and British Honduran. Internal quarreling developed between the three groups because of the frustration of continued confinement. Eventually, the three factions established a committee to resolve disputes between the detainees. A rabbi from Dallas who served as a visiting chaplain to the detainees mediated any conflicts that the committee could not resolve.²⁶

The Algiers Quarantine Station

Once again, however, the refugees were relocated. By the spring of 1943, all the Jewish detainees at Seagoville, except for the group from British Honduras, were sent to the INS Quarantine Station at Algiers, Louisiana. Because of the increasing number of pro-Nazi Germans kept at the Kenedy Detention Center conditions . . . were rapidly getting worse and it would be dangerous to keep the Jewish detainees there."²⁷ Therefore, the camp superintendent arranged the transfer of eleven of the thirteen Jews to Algiers. In addition, the remaining Jews at Stringtown and Camp Forrest were also sent to Louisiana.

The Quarantine Station at Algiers was located four miles south of the town on the west bank of the Mississippi River across from New Orleans. It consisted of ten large southern-style houses. Twenty to thirty people were assigned to each house, and there was separate housing for single men. Field reports by NRS representatives described the camp as well kept and with ample space for recreational activities. The refugees were free to roam around the camp grounds. The camp superintendent, Raymond Bunker, was "fair, sympathetic, and understanding," but he lacked the authority to release the internees.²⁸ Understandably, although the Algiers Quarantine Station may have been a gilded cage, it remained a prison to its inmates, who had grown weary of their long confinement, especially since they had done nothing to warrant it.

The New Orleans Jewish community did what it could to lessen the burdens of confinement. Members of the New Orleans Council of

Jewish Women brought the refugees food and tried to assist them in other ways. They tried to make the refugees feel that they were not alone and that they were connected to Jews outside the camp. A local rabbi held services for the residents. Once a week, David Fichman, executive secretary of the New Orleans Committee for Refugee Service, visited the camp. A teacher went to the camp twice a week to teach the internees English. In addition, the New Orleans Council of Jewish Women provided the women with knitting supplies and the men with garden tools. These actions helped ease the refugees' feelings of isolation by demonstrating that someone cared about them.²⁹

The Struggle to Get the Internees Released

Meanwhile, efforts by the NRS to obtain the release of the internees were complicated by the Justice Department's insistence on background checks in Panama for each of them and the State Department's dragging its feet on the refugee issue. A representative of the State Department visited the internees from British Honduras at Seagoville in early 1943, and he told them that the State Department had not interned them and therefore could not free them. According to the State Department's representative, the group from British Honduras "will not be released either now or *after* the war."³⁰ The State Department argued that only the British government could release the refugees, since it was the British government that had interned them in the first place. Moreover, if the British government agreed to release them, they could not remain in the United States. This was very upsetting to the internees, because they feared that even if they regained their freedom they would be deported to Germany. Moreover, the State Department's position contradicted what they had been told by British officials. According to Wilhelm Stein, one of the refugees, the British told them that they would remain interned for the duration of the war but would then be allowed to apply for American citizenship.³¹

Ironically, it was the desire of the British authorities to get rid of them that saved the Jews from continued internment. The British government agreed to change their status to internees-at-large as long as they remained in the United States. Over the opposition of the anti-Semites in the State Department, the NRS succeeded in persuading the Department of Justice to parole the refugees. After two investigations of their background and a hearing, the Justice Department released

twelve of the fourteen Jews confined at Seagoville in April 1943. However, the internees from British Honduras had no legal status and could not apply for immigration to the United States. At the end of the war, they were told, the group from British Honduras would be required to leave the United States. The National Refugee Service accepted responsibility for the refugees, and with the help of the Dallas Emigre Service Committee and the Jewish Welfare Federation the refugees were resettled in Dallas and Houston, Texas. Initially, they were placed in private homes and hotels in Dallas, and the Jewish Welfare Federation advanced funds to the refugees to pay for living expenses. In Dallas, and later in New Orleans, the local Jewish communities assisted paroled refugees and helped them integrate into American society.³³

Internees on Parole

The release of the British Honduran group acted as a catalyst to move the United States government to free most of the Panamanian Jews. First, however, they had to overcome the obstacles created by the State and Justice departments. Attorney General Francis Biddle met with Breckinridge Long in early 1943 to discuss the internee issue. Long had played an instrumental role in establishing the internee program "to rid Latin America of thousands of unfriendly aliens by interning them in the United States."³⁴ Also, he was a known anti-Semite who had used his authority to reduce severely the number of Jewish refugees allowed to enter the United States before and during World War II. As expected, Long strenuously objected to Biddle's proposal to parole the interned Jews, but he finally agreed to it because they would have to leave the United States after the war.³⁵

Because of Justice Department procedures it was months before the Jews from Panama left Algiers. Representatives from the Justice Department went to Panama to investigate the detainees. In addition, the refugees needed to provide evidence of affiliation with Jewish organizations in Latin America or Europe. Ideally, the Justice Department wanted evidence from relatives in the United States that would prove that the detainees were Jews. Each refugee had to sign an affidavit of loyalty stating that he was (1) Jewish (by religion or "race"), (2) loyal to the democratic cause, (3) opposed to National Socialism, and (4)

had committed no crimes. In mid-February, the Justice Department held hearings in New Orleans, and the report to Biddle recommended the release of most of the detainees. Fifty-four of the detainees held at Algiers were paroled in August 1943, but six remained interned for the duration of the war.³⁶

Jewish organizations played an important role in the resettling of the refugees. The Justice Department required the NRS to find sponsors for the parolees to assure their good behavior. Where possible the NRS found sponsors in cities close to relatives of the refugees. With the help of local Jewish communities, the former detainees were resettled in Denver, Chicago, Detroit, St. Paul/Minneapolis, Memphis, Cleveland, Cincinnati, Milwaukee, Pittsburgh, Kansas City, St. Louis, and Youngstown. In St. Louis, for example, Self-Aid St. Louis assisted in the resettling of the Jews and members of the local Jewish community volunteered as sponsors. Three of the nine refugees sent to St. Louis were soon drafted into the armed forces of the United States.³⁷

As parolees the refugees enjoyed an ambiguous status. They could live outside internment camps and were free to resettle wherever they could find sponsors. The internees could find jobs or obtain schooling and were subject to the draft. Those who served in the armed forces could get their status changed, but those who did not serve were liable to be deported at the end of the war. The INS kept tabs on them through the Parole Unit, because all the refugees had to register with the Alien Registration Division of the Justice Department upon their release from detention. The Jews interned at large were part of a larger group of Latin American detainees who were released between 1943 and 1945. In addition to the Jews, thirty-two Italians and 243 Germans were given the status of internees-at-large.³⁸

Efforts by the NRS between 1943 and 1945 to change the status of the refugees failed, primarily because of the opposition of the State Department. Even the establishment of the War Refugee Board in January 1944 did not help. The arrival of 982 refugees at Fort Ontario in Oswego, New York, in August 1944 detracted attention from the plight of the far smaller group of from Latin America. The Roosevelt administration did not want to alter the status of the Latin American Jews because it feared setting a precedent that would apply to the Fort Ontario detainees.³⁹

For the few Jews who remained interned at Algiers, Seagoville, Ellis

Island, and elsewhere, some of the old problems reappeared. In the middle of 1944 a group of pro-Nazi German aliens who had been transferred to Algiers elected a pro-Nazi to head the committee of internees. The man, Kurt Ludecke, was the author of *I Knew Hitler* and had advised Hitler in the 1920s. Although he had broken with Hitler in 1933, Ludecke retained his loyalty to National Socialism. After World War II, Ludecke was tried as a Nazi collaborator, and he was deported from United States in 1948. Under his leadership, the pro-Nazi elements at Algiers persecuted the few remaining Jews and non-Jewish anti-Nazis. Once again, Jews who had entered the United States as enemy aliens were subjected to "petty" discrimination by pro-Nazis in American internment camps.⁴⁰

The Threat of Deportation

As soon as the war in Europe ended, the State Department advocated the deportation of the enemy aliens brought from Latin America. Officials in the State Department argued that the resolutions adopted at the February/March 1945 Inter-American Conference on the Problems of War and Peace held in Mexico City required the United States to protect the security of the Western Hemisphere and deport the enemy aliens to Germany, Italy, and Japan. Because of unsettled conditions in Germany, the War Department objected to this proposal. The Justice Department also opposed the deportation, because it lacked the authority to force the aliens to leave the United States. In response to these objections, the State Department drafted an executive order, issued by President Harry Truman on September 8, 1945 (Proclamation 2662), permitting the repatriation of the Latin American internees.⁴¹

The National Refugee Service sought to prevent the deportation of the Jewish refugees. Because of the peculiar status of the twelve from British Honduras, the State Department exempted them from immediate repatriation. However, the NRS remained concerned about the refugees from Panama and other Latin American countries. Joining with the American Christian Committee for Refugees and the Catholic Welfare Conference, the NRS sent representatives to meet with Albert Clattenburg, Jr., assistant chief, Special War Problems Division of the State Department, on September 20, 1945, to discuss the Latin

American internees. At the meeting, Clattenburg informed the representatives of the social service agencies that the internees would have to leave the United States within the next six months. Moreover, Clattenburg argued that the Justice Department had failed to sufficiently investigate the internees and none of them should have been released from the internment camps.⁴²

The meeting grew bitter as the agency representatives defended the rights of the internees and Clattenburg defended the State Department's right to deport all the internees to Germany, Italy, and Japan. When Chamberlain pointed out that Jews could not be described as pro-Nazi, Clattenburg "became quite excited and he said that in the Panamanian group everyone of them had pro-Nazi feelings."⁴³ He went on to add that German Jews wanted to return to Germany because no anti-Semitism existed in that country. Although Clattenburg's observations were utter nonsense, they reflected the views of many State Department officials who shared the prejudices of Breckinridge Long and who had worked for years not to aid refugees but to protect the United States from them. While the meeting provided an opportunity for representatives of the social service agencies to express their concerns about the future of the Latin American internees, they could not budge Clattenburg, who remained adamant that the internees (Jewish, Catholic, or whatever) must leave the United States. Because of the unsatisfactory outcome of the meeting with Clattenburg, the NRS decided to go around him. On October 24, 1945, the Alien Enemy Control Section (AECS) of the State Department was established to deal with the Latin American internees. Immediately, the NRS contacted the AECS to persuade them that the Jews should not be deported to Germany. In addition, two members of a Detroit affiliate of the NRS, Ted Benuitt and Fred Butzel, contacted Senator Homer Ferguson, a refugee advocate. The senator, a Republican from Michigan, met with Undersecretary of State Dean Acheson to lobby for the refugees and to persuade the department to grant the internees hearings.⁴⁵

A combination of outside pressure from the NRS, Catholic groups, and the American Civil Liberties Union and divisions within the State Department on the internee issue led to a partial victory for the refugee advocates. Detainees would get hearings, and those not considered a threat to the security of the Western Hemisphere would be assisted in

returning to Latin America or settling in the United States as immigrants. A new problem soon emerged, because several of the Latin American nations did not want any of the enemy aliens back or did not want those of Japanese ancestry. Added to the muddle was the question of what to do with the Jews.⁴⁶

Meanwhile, the threat of deportation had a severe psychological impact upon the refugees, and the uncertainty made it impossible for them to plan for the future. As Fred Kappel told the NRS, "the nervous strain, imposed upon us is greater than we are able to endure."⁴⁷ None of the refugees wanted to return to Europe, and only a few wished to go back to Latin America, because the Latin American countries, especially Panama, had rounded them up and expelled them. The only real option that the internees desired was to become Americans. The problem was to convince the American government that they should be allowed to remain.

The Final Resolution

Unlike the refugees interned at Oswego, no single government action determined their fate. On December 20, 1945, President Truman informed the NRS that the Oswego internees could remain in the United States as immigrants, and two days later he issued a directive to the secretary of state and the attorney general to admit the Fort Ontario refugees as immigrants under existing quotas. The Truman directive allowed refugees and displaced persons to file for immigrant visas under existing immigration quotas. Only two groups, the internees at Fort Ontario and a small group of Polish orphans in Mexico, were able to expedite their entrance into the United States as immigrants. The from Latin America were able to use the Truman Directive to change their status and remain in the United States, but only on an individual basis.⁴⁸

It took two more years for the cases of most of the Latin American Jews to be resolved. On November 29, 1945, the Justice Department lifted the parole supervision over the refugees, and between January and March 1946 they were released from the status of internees-at-large. Then, in early 1946, the last of the Jewish refugees still in internment were set free. Of the eighty-one Jews interned from Latin America, two voluntarily returned to Latin America, four died (one in in-

ternment and three as internees-at-large), and seventy-five sought to remain in the United States. By the end of 1947, the NRS (it became the United Service for New Americans after merging with a section of the National Council of Jewish Women in 1946) had succeeded in changing the status of all but ten of the refugees. As of 1951, all but three of the cases were resolved. Finally, the Refugee Relief Act of 1953 permitted any alien brought to the United States from Latin America before July 1, 1953, to request a change of status to immigrant. This settled the few remaining cases involving Jews and allowed the several hundred Peruvian Japanese who had been interned to stay here and become American citizens.⁴⁹

Summary

The confinement of the Jewish refugees was a story that never should have happened. Anti-Semitism in Panama and British Honduras, as well as bureaucratic incompetence in several Latin American nations, led to the arrest and internment of the Jews. Only Franz Kafka could have created a tale of German Jews being arrested as pro-Nazi enemy aliens and then being sent to the United States for internment with real Nazi sympathizers. Once caught in the bureaucratic web, the Jews found it difficult to escape the absurdity of their situation. Most of the refugees were interned from December 1941 until August 1943 in the Canal Zone and, after being sent to the United States, in camps in Florida, Georgia, Tennessee, Texas, Oklahoma, or Louisiana before their release to the status of internees at-large.

Jewish organizations and local Jewish communities played a significant role in helping the refugees. The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee helped bring their plight to the attention of the National Refugee Service. The NRS constantly lobbied for the internees and succeeded in convincing the Justice Department and the hostile State Department to release most of them from the internment camps. Eventually, it succeeded in getting their status changed to immigrants. Local Jewish communities in Dallas, New Orleans, Chattanooga, and Nashville played an important role in boosting the morale of the internees and demonstrating that someone cared about them. Other Jewish communities helped by providing sponsors and by joining in the post-war effort to get them classified as immigrants.

Refugee advocates and Jewish organizations faced a major problem in pleading the case of the Jewish refugees—widespread anti-Semitism in the United States. Between 1920 and 1950 the American public remained hostile to immigrants and refugees, especially those who were Jews. Polls taken during the war indicated widespread anti-Semitism, and even the full knowledge of the Holocaust did not eliminate anti-Semitism immediately. “As late as 1945 and 1946,” sociologist Charles Stember noted, “well over half of the population said they would not be influenced against a Congressional candidate by his being anti-Semitic.”⁵⁰ According to Leonard Dinnerstein, an expert on postwar refugee policy, anti-Semitism in the United States made Congress reluctant to accept the survivors of the Holocaust. Immigration restrictionists wrote the provisions of the 1948 Displaced Persons Act that prevented the immigration of significant numbers of Jews.⁵¹

In fact, during the war, the NRS and other refugee advocates used the example of the Latin American internees and the Fort Ontario internees to prod the State Department and President Roosevelt into taking more decisive action on the refugee issue, but they failed. The presence of ever 4,000 enemy aliens in the United States outside of existing immigration laws appeared a perfect example for the establishment of temporary havens for refugees, but the Roosevelt administration refused to go beyond Fort Ontario lest it antagonize congressional immigration restrictionists. After the Jews from Latin America were paroled, the NRS attempted to use this success as a precedent for the release of the Fort Ontario internees, but President Roosevelt refused to take the political risk it would have entailed. Because the Jews interned in the South only numbered eighty-one and there was no publicity when they were released, the Roosevelt administration could afford to grant them internment at large. The well-publicized case of the Fort Ontario refugees prevented their release because the antiimmigrant bloc in Congress would have attacked President Roosevelt.

Once President Truman took the political risk and liberated the Fort Ontario refugees by issuing the Truman Directive, he provided a loophole for the Jews from Latin America to use if they could get released from the status of internees-at-large. The Jews from Latin America were not admitted in a group, like the Fort Ontario refugees or the Polish orphans from Mexico, because they had been brought to the United States as enemy aliens and because President Truman had al-

ready taken a political risk. Officials in the Truman administration probably did not want the Truman Directive and his cautious program to admit refugees and displaced persons within existing immigration quotas to be identified in the public mind as a Jewish program. Instead, the admission of the Latin American Jews on a case-by-case basis generated no publicity and no negative reaction from Congress.

Are there any villains or heroes in this story? The heroes are clear—the Jews interned as enemy aliens or Nazi saboteurs (the British Honduras group). They endured what they should never have had to endure. The NRS, especially Joseph Chamberlain, Cecilia Razovsky, and Ann Petluck, deserve credit for the determination they demonstrated in pushing the cause of the internees through the bureaucratic web of the Army, State, and Justice departments. Long and Clattenburg deserve condemnation for using American refugee policy to prevent the admission of refugees and for attempting to prevent the liberation of the Jewish internees. Fortunately, common sense finally prevailed—most of the Jews were separated from pro-Nazis, sent to Seagoville and Algiers, released as internees-at-large, and finally admitted as immigrants.⁵²

Notes

1. Israel Gerstein to author, August 18, 1985.
2. Ann Petluck to Joseph Chamberlain, October 15, 1945, file 51, Joseph Chamberlain Papers, YIVO Institute for Jewish Research (YIVO).
3. John Christgau, *"Enemies": World War II Alien Internment* (Ames, Iowa: 1985), pp. 51–85. His book deals with internees at the Fort Lincoln Internment Camp in Bismarck, North Dakota.
4. Sharon Lowenstein, "A New Deal for Refugees: The Promise and Reality of Oswego," *American Jewish History* 71 (March 1982): 325–341; Ruth Gruber, *Haven* (New York, 1983); Lawrence Baron, "Haven from the Holocaust," *New York History* 44, no. 1 (January 1983): 4–34; Harvey Strum, "Fort Ontario Refugee Shelter, 1944–1946," *American Jewish History* 73 (June 1984): 398–421.
5. Charles Stember et al., *Jews in the Mind of America* (New York, 1966), pp. 31–155.
6. David Wyman, *Paper Walls* (Amherst, N.H., 1968); idem, *The Abandonment of the Jews: America and the Holocaust, 1941–1945* (New York, 1984). Other accounts are: Arthur Morse, *While Six Million Died* (New York, 1968); Henry Feingold, *The Politics of Rescue: The Roosevelt Administration and the Holocaust, 1938–1945* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1970); Walter Laqueur, *The Terrible Secret: Suppression of the Truth About Hitler's "Final Solution"* (Boston, 1981); Saul Friedman, *No Haven for the Oppressed* (Detroit, 1973); Sarah Feck, "The Campaign for an American Response to the Nazi Holocaust, 1943–1945," *Journal of Contemporary History* 15 (1980): 367–400.
7. Harold Troper and Irving Arbella, *None Is Too Many* (New York, 1983), expose the reasons

for Canada's reluctance to admit Jewish refugees. For details of the British position, see Bernard Wasserstein, *Britain and the Jews of Europe, 1939-1945* (Oxford, 1979).

8. Paula Draper, "Politics of Refugee Immigration: The Pro-Refugee Lobby and the Interned Refugees, 1940-1944," *Canadian Jewish Historical Society Journal* 7 (Fall 1983): 78. Her article was based on her "The Accidental Immigrants: Canada and the Interned Refugees" (Ph.D. diss., University of Toronto, 1983).

9. Harvey Gardiner, *Pawns in a Triangle of Hate: The Peruvian Japanese and the United States* (Seattle, 1981), p. 12.

10. Graham Stuart, "Special War Problems Division," *Department of State Bulletin* 11 (August 6, 1944): 146-147.

11. Richard Behrendt to Dr. Ernest Fraenkel, November 23, 1942, Cecilia Razovsky Papers, American Jewish Historical Society (AJHS). For the internment of non-Japanese Americans, see Paul Spickard, "Injustice Compounded: Amerisians and Non-Japanese Americans in World War II Concentration Camps," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 5 (Spring 1986): 5-22. Anti-Semitism continues to exist in Panama, *Albany Jewish World*, August 13, 1987.

12. Statement of Gerhard and Charlotte Schlesinger, November 30, 1942, Statement of Fred Kappel, December 12, 1942, Cecilia Razovsky Papers, AJHS.

13. Fred Kappel to the Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), April 12, 1942, file 411; Olga Kohlman to Agro-Joint, December 29, 1941, file 783; Leo Fuchs et al. to JDC, December 20, 1941, file 783, Panama, JDC Archives.

14. Fred Kappel to JDC, April 28, 1942, file 411, Nathan Witkin to Robert Pilpel, January 39, 1942, file 983, Robert Pilpel to Nathan Witkin, February 2, 1942, file 983, Moses Leavitt and Mrs. Samuel Friedman to Nathan Witkin, January 15, 1942, file 783, Panama, JDC Archives; Joseph Chamberlain to Francis Biddle, June 1, 1942, file 49, Joseph Chamberlain Papers, YIVO.

15. *New York Times*, April 7, 9, 1942; *Dallas Morning News*, April 11, 1942, June 25, June 27, 1942, Mrs. Lucile Boykin, Local History Specialist at the Dallas Public Library, provided me with the Dallas newspaper clippings. For a description of the Seagoville Civilian Detention Center, see Gardiner, *Pawns in a Triangle of Hate*, p. 36. "By May, the camp held 319 enemy aliens." Most were the Latin American internees, and about a third were Japanese-Peruvians.

16. Irene Wolff to Cecilia Razovsky, June 5, 1942, file 49, Joseph Chamberlain, YIVO. See also Irene Wolff to Robert Pilpel, April 27, 1942, file 411, JDC Archives.

17. Fred Kappel to JDC, April 12, 1942, file 411, JDC Archives. Also, see Joseph Chamberlain to Francis Biddle, June 1, 1942, file 49, Walter Wolff to Nathan Witkin, June 18, 1942, file 49, Joseph Chamberlain Papers, YIVO.

18. Joseph Chamberlain to Francis Biddle, June 1, 1942, Joseph Chamberlain to Edward Ennis, June 12, 1942, Joseph Chamberlain to Colonel Bryan, June 18, 1942, Colonel Bryan to Joseph Chamberlain, June 9, 1942, file 49, Joseph Chamberlain Papers, YIVO; Edward Ennis to Joseph Chamberlain, June 15, 1942, file 411, JDC Archives.

19. Israel Gerstein to author, August 18, 1985.

20. S. B. Yampol to Cecilia Razovsky, April 5, 1943, file 537, Internees from Latin America, National Refugee Service, YIVO; Otto Mannheimer for the Jewish Internees at Camp Forrest to George Berke, Cecilia Razovsky Papers, AJHS.

21. *New York Times*, June 26, July 3, 4, 12, 1942; Joan Van Mattsahn to Ben Whitman, July 5, 1942, file 451b, British Honduras, JDC Archives.

22. Wilhelm Stein and Kelman Lowenthal to W. M. Citron (editor of *Aufbau*, a German-Jewish newspaper published in New York City), September 9, 1940; Cecilia Razovsky to Walter Weiss, July 5, 1942, Memorandum on Refugees, Refugee Economic Corporation, 1944, file 451b, British Honduras, JDC Archives.

23. Eric Joseph to Walter Weiss, August 25, 1942, Walter Weiss to Eric Joseph, September 22, 1942, Eric Joseph to Walter Weiss, October 17, 1942, file 451b, British Honduras, JDC Archives; Jack Gershtenson to Cecilia Razovsky, February 2, 4, 1943, file 538, National Refugee Service, YIVO.

24. Cecilia Razovsky to Joseph Chamberlain, June 12, 1942, file 49, Joseph Chamberlain Papers, Wilhelm Reichman to Cecilia Razovsky, December 23, 1942, file 541, National Refugee Service, YIVO; Cecilia Razovsky to Robert Pilpel, October 9, 1942, Robert Pilpel to Cecilia Razovsky, October 7, 1942, file 411, JDC Archives.

25. Gardiner, *Pawns in a Triangle of Hate*, p. 31.

26. *National Refugee Service News*, September 4, 1942, file 411, JDC Archives; Cecilia Razovsky to Reuben Resnick, January 21, 1943, Jack Gershtenson to Cecilia Razovsky, January 19, February 1, 2, 1943, file 538, National Refugee Service, YIVO.

27. Cecilia Razovsky to A. Abrahamson, February 8, 1943, file 541, National Refugee Service, YIVO.

28. Field Report of David Fichman, February 19–23, 1943, file 1130, Field Report of Jules Seits, February 23, 1943, file 1130, National Refugee Service, YIVO.

29. Cecilia Razovsky to S. B. Yampol, April 12, 1943, file 537, David Fichman to Cecilia Razovsky, March 25, 1943, file 537, National Refugee Service, YIVO. Fichman increased his visits to three times a week, and a second representative from the New Orleans Committee for Refugee Service went out once a week. Unfortunately, the refugee files of Judith Hyman Douglas at Louisiana State University cover the period of March–June 1936.

30. Jack Gershtenson to Cecilia Razovsky, February 4, 1943, file 538, National Refugee Service, YIVO.

31. Wilhelm Stein to Cecilia Razovsky, January 6, 1943, Margaret Keiles to Cecilia Razovsky, January 30, 1943, file 538, National Refugee Service, YIVO.

32. Cecilia Razovsky to Emery Komtos, April 2, 1943, file 451b, British Honduras, JDC Archives; Memorandum, Central and South American Internees, n.d., Other Refugees file, Box 1, Fort Ontario Refugee Shelter, Columbia University Library.

33. Jack Gershtenson to Cecilia Razovsky, April 2, 1943, D. Spielberg (Resettlement Consultant) to Cecilia Rasovsky, April 9, 1943, file 537, National Refugee Service, YIVO.

34. Feingold, *Politics of Rescue*, p. 261.

35. Summary of Meeting between NRS representative and Special War Problems Division, September 20, 1945, file 542, National Refugee Service, YIVO.

36. J. W. Russell to Cecilia Razovsky, February 5, 1943, Joseph Beck to Cecilia Rasovsky, May 6, June 17, 1943, file 537, Ann Petluck to Migration Staff, September 5, 1945, file 552, National Refugee Service, YIVO.

37. Bernard Dubin to Joseph Chamberlain, January 26, 1945, Ernst Mansbacher to Charles Riegelman, March 14, 1945, file 542, National Refugee Service, YIVO.

38. Gardiner, *Pawns in a Triangle of Hate*, p. 116: Ann Petluck to Ernst Mansbacher, March 28, 1945, file 542, National Refugee Service, YIVO.

39. Ann Petluck to Migration Staff, August 15, 1944, file 587, National Refugee Service, YIVO.

40. David Fichman to Gisela Sheven, July 20, 1944, Ann Petluck to Migration Staff, August 15, 1944, file 587, National Refugee Service, YIVO.

41. Joseph Drew to Henry Stimson, May 8, 1945, in U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), Diplomatic Papers*, 1945, vol. 4, pp. 266–268; Gardiner, *Pawns in a Triangle of Hate*, p. 115; J. Holbrook Chapman to Ann Petluck, October 31, 1945, file 542, National Refugee Service, YIVO.

42. Summary of Ann Petluck, September 20, 1945, file 542, Memo on Latin American Internees, September 11, 1945, file 545, National Refugee Service, YIVO.
43. Summary of Meeting, September 20, 1945, file 542, National Refugee Service, YIVO.
44. Sharon Lowenstein, *Token Refuge: The Story of the Jewish Refugee Shelter at Oswego, 1944-1946* (Bloomington, Indiana: 1986), p. 11.
45. Memorandum, Latin American Internees, October 8, 1945, file 544 Ann Petluck to Joseph Chamberlain, October 15, 1945, file 542, Ann Petluck to Jonathan Bingham, November 9, 1945, Dean Acheson to Homer Ferguson, October 10, 19, 1945, file 544, National Refugee Service, YIVO. The NRS contacted Jonathan Bingham, chief of the Alien Enemy Control Section of the State Department, but neither he nor his deputy Louis Henkin remembered the Jewish refugees. Jonathan Bingham to author, August 4, 1985; Louis Henkin to author, September 11, 1985. The NRS lobbied the AECS, the Special War Problems Division, and the Justice Department. The Justice Department and the Special War Problems Division handled the cases of the Jewish internees. According to Bingham and Henkin, the AECS was primarily concerned with returning non-Jewish internees to Latin America or their countries of origin. Unfortunately, Edward Ennis, director of the Alien Control Unit of the Justice Department, did not recall the Jewish internees, Ennis to author, July 15, 1985.
46. Gardiner, *Pawns in a Triangle of Hate*, p. 116, James Doyle, who served as an assistant to State Department Counselor Ben V. Cohan, was one of the people in the State Department who objected to Clattenburg's proposals to deport the Jews and other enemy aliens without hearings. James Doyle to author, September 10, 1985.
47. Fred Kappel to the National Refugee Service, October 4, 1945, file 542, National Refugee Service, YIVO.
48. Amy Gottlieb, "Refugee Immigration: The Truman Directive," *Prologue* 13, no. 1 (Spring 1981): 5, 7.
49. Statistical Census of Latin American Internees, April 17, 1946, Summary of Latin American Internee Cases, November 14, 1947, file 542, Ann Petluck to Joseph Beck, January 13, 1947, file 543, Lillian Cohen to Ann Rabinowitz, April 5, 1951, file 542, National Refugee Service, YIVO; Gardiner, *Pawns in a Triangle of Hate*, p. 171.
50. Stember, *Jews in the Mind of America*, p. 133.
51. Leonard Dinnerstein, *America and the Survivors of the Holocaust* (New York, 1982), p. 5. Also, Gil Loescher and John Scanlan, *Calculated Kindness: Refugees and America's Half Open-Door, 1945 to the Present* (New York, 1986), p. 9. Also, the Canadian government did not welcome the survivors of the Holocaust, Arbella and Troper, *None Is Too Many*, p. 285.
52. An example of NRS efforts to use the cases of the Latin American internees to prod the Roosevelt administration to establish temporary havens can be found in Joseph Beck to John Pehle, March 14, 1944. Notes on meeting with John Pehle, National Refugee Service, February 24, 1944, Box 17, War Refugee Board, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Sharon Lowenstein makes the same point in a brief mention of the Latin American internees, *Token Refuge*, p. 115.

Harvey Strum teaches in the division of Social Science at Russel Sage College, Albany, New York. He last appeared in *American Jewish Archives* in the April 1983 issue with his article on "Louis Marshall and Anti-Semitism at Syracuse University."