

In The Name Of Freedom

It somehow came as a shock to see that the organized Jewish community was expressing itself in favor of peace.

This expression for peace was recorded in the Spring, 1940, issue of the Contemporary Jewish Record—in which same issue was also the following news:

“Sale to Jews of milk, fish, poultry, peas, barley, rice and canned milk has been prohibited throughout Germany.”

“Nazis forced two rabbis of Plzn and Brno in Czechoslovakia to torture each other to death with electric torches.”

“Several thousand Austrian Jews were being held in an open air sports stadium, where an average of more than 50 a week were dying of exposure and ill-treatment. Families can obtain the bodies on payment of 300 marks apiece. In Poland, there was “on Jan. 2 . . . the execution of 100 Jews of Lask and 36 Jews of Sieradz . . . On Jan. 7, 200 synagogues in the districts of Kielce, Radom and Ostrowiec were either burned or transformed into barracks . . . On Jan. 10, in Warsaw, Nazi officers and soldiers carried out a raid in broad daylight on Jewish houses, seizing 40 Jewish girls between the ages of 18 and 20 . . . On Jan. 21, the massacre of an estimated 1,900 Jews in Chelm and Hrubieszow . . .”



Raab

In the same issue of the periodical reporting this news, it was reported that the annual meeting of B'nai B'rith “pledged support of efforts to keep America out of war” . . . and the annual meeting of the American Jewish Committee affirmed the “hope that America may remain at peace.” Peace? With Hitler? Was Nazism really reversible in 1940—or was Nazism “just a matter of taste,” as the Soviet government was then saying?

One must have a feel for conditions in America at the time. Organized anti-Semitism was at an all-time high, anti-Semitic newspapers were being hawked on the street corners of New York, the Nazi Bund was holding meetings in Madison Square Garden. And all this anti-Semitism was being tied to the popular isolationist mood in America, which was stimulated by the right wing, the Communist Party, and imported Nazi funds. Anti-Semitism was being used as a weapon to keep America out of the war. The Jews were being singled out—by Lindbergh, for example—as the war-mongers. To feed that image might well have served the cause of Nazism and of American isolationism.

And then, there was everyone's abhorrence of war, whose horrors were in fresh evidence in Europe. Still—in hindsight—all humanitarians should have been “war-mongers” in the Spring of 1940. Peace-at-any-price is not a humanitarian value, not a Jewish value. War is not the ultimate horror; certainly death is not the ultimate horror. In the same Spring, 1940, issue of Contemporary Jewish Record is a survivor's account of the transportation of Jews to a concentration camp in Lublin:

“People are dying all around us and not of natural causes. Many do away with themselves . . . They slash their wrists at night when no one can see, and never wake up. The guards lift the dead from the cars with complete nonchalance. One day, there are three; another five; third, seven, and once, as many as 16. On the night of Oct. 30, there were 22 suicides in those 50 freight cars.”

No, the ultimate social evil is not waging war, but imprisoning, oppressing, degrading the free spirit of the living. But no war can be waged without degrading the human spirit, even if it *must* be waged in order to save the human spirit. And no one knows better than today's Americans and Vietnamese how especially degrading and oppressive a war can be if waged wantonly and uselessly—even if it is waged in the name of human freedom.

These are excruciating contradictions, about which men must make excruciating decisions. Bumper-strip slogans about war and peace—or about freedom and honor—won't suffice. The tortured nature of these decisions is reflected in the yellowing pages of this 32 year old Jewish periodical.