



**CATHERINE COLLOMP:
THE UNTOLD STORY OF JEWISH LABOR IN THE FIGHT AGAINST NAZISM**

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Joshua Holo: Welcome to the College Commons Podcast, passionate perspectives from Judaism's leading thinkers, brought to you by the Hebrew Union College, Jewish Institute of Religion, America's first Jewish institution of higher learning. My name is Joshua Holo, Dean of HUC's Jack H. Skirball Campus in Los Angeles, and your host.

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JH: Welcome to this episode of the College Commons Podcast. I'm very much looking forward to joining with you in a conversation with Catherine Collomp. Catherine Collomp is Emerita Professor of American History at the Université de Paris, and she's a French researcher in the fields of labor and immigration history. The author of numerous publications, she edited "An American in Hitler's Berlin." "Abraham Plotkin's diary 1932 to 1933." And her most recent book "Rescue, Relief, and Resistance: The Jewish Labor Committee's Anti-Nazi Operations, from 1934 to 1945," was translated into English in 2021 and received the Organization of American Historians 2017 prize for the best book on American history written in a foreign language. Catherine Collomp, thank you so much for joining us on the Commons Podcast.

Catherine Collomp: It's a pleasure to speak with you and to speak about this book.

JH: Before we launch into the subject of your book, which is the Jewish Labor Committee and the Rescue of European Jews, I wanna situate your research in the context of our haunted American Jewish psyche. We have received a widespread idea among historians and the greater public that the American population, including American Jews, remained indifferent to, or in fact willingly ignored the genocide of European Jews during World War II. Where does that idea come from, and how does it set the background for your book?

CC: Yes, it's an idea that has been circulated since Arthur Morse's book on the apathy of the American public, including Jews concerning the destruction of European Jewry, and the first book was published in 1968, so it has been in the air for a long time. And especially David Wyman reinforced this idea with his book "The Abandonment of The Jews." There's a new point of view proposed by Lichtman and also Breitman, that Roosevelt in fact was sensitive to the issue although he would not diverge his war strategy during World War II, he would not change it for the sake of Jews, and that is true. But on the other hand, it is through his administration with the War Refugee Board that the first steps were taken to help refugees, although this was already very late in the context of Nazi destruction of European Jewry. So that is the background, and I agree with that background, but instead of continuing to criticize the American administration on this subject, I looked at the positive action taken by American labor to save Jews, or more generally victims of the Nazi destructive programs.

JH: One of the dimensions of this idea is that the Jews themselves were relatively ineffective or even indifferent to their fellow Jews in World War II, and that's where your book comes in very strong because you introduce us to the Jewish Labor Committee or the JLC, which most American Jews have probably never heard of, and which directly challenges this notion of Jewish apathy. So I'd like to ask you to introduce us to the JLC, what was the primary mission of the Jewish Labor Committee, and what did it achieve in the pre-war and war years?

CC: The JLC was founded in 1934 by a section of the American labor movement known as "Jewish labor," that is it included of course big needle trades unions, but also the workmen's circle and the Jewish Bund Labor party, it was created in response to the destruction by the Nazi authorities of the whole German labor movement in 1933. So primarily, the Jewish Labor Committee reacted very clearly to the destruction of the German labor movement, but in fact the Jewish Labor Committee as its name includes was Jewish and had always been concerned by the fate of Jewish people in Europe, they themselves were Jewish, they were Jewish immigrants from the Russian Empire, had arrived in the United States in the pre-World War I period, and they were all Bundists. Bundism was a Jewish labor party, uniting Jewish workers in the Russian Empire.

CC: The founders of the Jewish Labor Committee in New York in 1934, who had reached the top of the Jewish labor movement, David Dubinsky, Sidney Hillman, were themselves former Bundists, they had been part of this movement in Russia in defense of Jews and in defense of workers, they had been young militants and forced to migrate because of the repression against their movement in the early revolutionary movement in Russia in 1905. Baruch Charney Vladeck who was the initiator of the Jewish Labor Committee and became its first president, was also a very well-known young leader of the Bund in Russia. So these people Vladeck, Dubinsky, Hillman, and others who are less well-known today had been militants in defense of Jewish interest, Yiddish-speaking people.

CC: So these persons who had had an active revolutionary past became immediately sensitive to the threat that Germany posed to Jews and to workers. In 1934 by founding the Jewish Labor

Committee, they reacted to the destruction of the German Labor Movement and also simultaneously to the destruction of the Austrian Labor Movement in 1934 too. So their aim was to give support and rescue to victims of Nazi destruction. At point, they did not aim at creating a refuge for all Jewish persons, that was impossible. What they organized was the rescue or the financial support or providing relief for some leaders that they knew of the German labor movement, Austrian and also the Italian Labor Movement because in the garment trades which they organized, the labor force was multi-ethnic. Jewish yes but also Italian Polish, Czech, Slav.

CC: So it was a multi-lingual constituency, and they supported leaders from these countries, Italy, which had become fascist Italy, Germany which had become Nazi, Austria, which was also under the threat of Nazi assimilation integration. They created contacts with European labor leaders and helped them come to the United States.

JH: The Bundists who were at the foundation of the JLC were Jewish socialists who had a very complicated relationship with communism, among other things, because they were identifying Jews, the Bundists didn't properly fit the radical cosmopolitanism and anti-nationalism of what we think of as traditional communism, insofar as these Bundists were the founders of the Jewish Labor Committee, and they also relied on support from left-wing organizations back in Europe, how did they navigate their options in trying to cooperate with Europeans given their ideological limitations?

CC: The Bund was a massive labor party in the Russian Empire, it was part of the revolution in 1905 and part of the revolution in 1917, but they opposed the Bolshevik communism and methods of action. So in the 1930s in the United States, the Jewish Labor Committee did not include communist organizations and vis a vis Europe, they did not create relations with communist leaderships of labor parties in Europe. They worked within the Labor and Socialist International or within the International Federation of Trade Unions, but not within the Communist International. Vladeck for instance, traveled to Europe several times in the 1930s meeting leaders of the Socialist International, and he made sure not to have any conflict and entanglement with communist organizations. Of course, in Germany there was a strong communist party, but the JLC created ties with non communist organizations. Similarly in Austria, they created ties with the Social Democratic liberal parties but not with Communist organizations. And eventually the persons for whom they offered a haven in the United States were not communists. So certainly the history of the Jewish Labor Committee is apart from the history of International Communism.

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JH: Before we return to the podcast, we wanna let you know about digital learning on the College Commons platform. Beyond this podcast, which is available to the public at large, check out the online courses at collegecommons.huc.edu, for in-depth learning, digital syllabi, assignments, inspiration for teaching, and one of our most influential courses called Making Prayer Real. Subscribe with your synagogue for all this and more. Just click, sign up at

collegetcommons.huc.edu, oh, and one more thing, help us out rate us on iTunes, but whatever you do, do not give us five stars unless we deserve it. Now, back to our podcast. How did the JLC manage anti-Semitism among the European anti-Nazis with whom they needed to work?

CC: They were sensitive to anti-Semitism in the United States by creating programs within the labor unions to make workers sensitive to that issue. In Europe, they worked in collaborations with Anti-fascist organizations. They organized support for Jewish refugees who were coming to France, for instance, or Italian refugees from Mussolini Italy also being rescued in France. They worked along the line of Anti-Semitism, but they worked within their labor organizations, the Labor and Socialist International or the Federation of Trades Unions.

JH: You made reference to Anti-Semitism at home in the United States. And so I wonder what strategies the JLC adopted in relation to the challenges here?

CC: Anti-Semitism was strong in the United States in the 1930s, and one thing that the Jewish Labor Committee did was to counter the influence of the Olympic Games in Germany, they created counter Olympic Games in New York City in August 1936. With the American Jewish Congress another Jewish-American organization, they took part in boycotting German goods. The machines, for instance, in the garment trade, they opposed the use of sewing machines coming from Germany, they participated in a vast network of boycott of German goods. I don't think this was very effective with Germany but it did take place. Anti-Semitism was also strong in the American administration, especially in the State Department, and this prevented any change in the quota system which completely restricted even the acceptance of refugees in the United States. Everything was regulated by the quota system since the beginning of the depression, quotas had been reduced to 10% of their value.

CC: So, the number of immigrants admitted in the United States was extremely low, even for Germany, Austria and those countries, the JLC tried to influence representatives in Congress on that issue, but both The Republican Party and The Democratic Party would not move on that issue, so the JLC quickly understood that they would not obtain any significant change in the immigration laws in the quota system. So they circumvented that by finding a way of obtaining visitor's visas for those persons for whom they wanted to offer rescue.

JH: Can you tell us one of the most compelling anecdotes or stories that you learned to help give us a vignette of this incredible work in the JLC which is so unknown to most Americans and American Jews?

CC: I think most Americans, and especially American Jews have heard of Varian Fry, an American citizen who was in Marseille, in France and saved a number of artists, writers, intellectuals who were admitted in the United States as refugees. Yet leaders of the Jewish Labor Committee created a parallel and similar network of rescue parallel to that of Varian Fry. In 1940, when France was occupied, Anti-Nazis, Anti-fascist persons especially labor leaders or the leaders of Jewish organizations, had found a refuge in France during the 1930s. They

suddenly found themselves in a deathtrap, they were on the list, the Gestapo list. And The Jewish Labor Committee knew of them and knew how they were displaced during their exodus in France, from the Paris region to the Southern region, they knew of their whereabouts. And The Jewish Labor Committee quickly, very quickly, in July 1940, name by name, they obtained visas for these men and women and their families. Eventually, it was at least 1,500 persons whom they rescued by providing them with visas to be admitted to the United States. In spite of the quota system, they obtained that.

CC: And how did Varian Fry and the Jewish Labor Committee collaborate? The Jewish Labor Committee named the persons it wanted to protect, and these persons were to find their visas by the American Consulate in Marseille. Well, in itself, it was very difficult to get from one place to the other in France during the occupation and to obtain a visa, and then to obtain an exit Visa to leave France and to cross Spain and Portugal. In Marseille, those people often went to Varian Fry, that is the other organization, the agent of the Emergency Rescue Committee, which certainly helped them to go to obtain the visa from the Consulate or probably provided money to help them leave during those days.

CC: So there is, in fact, a collaboration between the two organizations: The Emergency Rescue Committee of Varian Fry and the Jewish Labour Committee which operated from New York City by giving names to the State Department in Washington, having the visas sent to Marseille and signed, and sending money to those refugees and helping them, directing them on their very difficult crossing of the Pyrenees through persons whom they also supported, etcetera. So this is one extraordinary action which they were able to lead. Another is that at the same time, the JLC created another rescue network for the leaders of the Jewish Labour Movement in Poland which was Bundists. Those Jewish leaders had found refuge in Lithuania. And Lithuania by then had been annexed by the Soviet Union. So again, similarly, these people who had found a temporary haven there, were in a trap and were to be probably deported to USSR and certainly would not have survived.

CC: The Jewish Labour Committee was similarly able to obtain visas for 300 persons there and follow their steps of their evacuation from Kaunas or Vilnius in Lithuania through USSR to Japan which was not yet at war. Some stayed in Japan in Kobe for a while and obtain trans-Pacific transportation to San Francisco. So the JLC was able to coordinate these two rescue networks and efforts for hundreds of people from two parts of Europe which were submitted to authoritarian dictatorial government; USSR in Lithuania, Nazi Germany which had invaded France with the collaboration of the Vichy government in France, which also contributed to hunting enemies of the Third Reich. I mean it is true that those German refugees who were in France had to be able to get out of France to escape the Gestapo. The French Police were also collaborating with the Gestapo to arrest people.

JH: Catherine Collomp, I wanna thank you so much for this illuminating and really unknown chapter of history. Thank you for joining the podcast. It was a pleasure to talk to you.

CC: Thank you very much.

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JH: We hope you've enjoyed this episode of The College Commons Podcast available wherever you listen to your podcasts or at the College Commons website, collegecommons.huc.edu, where you can also stay tuned for future episodes.

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