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Jewish Leaders and the Holocaust

Michael R. Marrus

Historical analysis of Jewish leadership during the Holocaust period, often with a sharply accusatory message, has now come to France.¹ Controversy began in 1980, when Maurice Rajsfus, a left-wing journalist whose immigrant parents were murdered in the Holocaust, published *Des Juifs dans la collaboration*, a harsh indictment of established Jewry, whom he accused of sacrificing foreign Jews while pursuing their own, class-based interests. Since then, we have learned considerably more. Jacques Adler, who survived the war and participated as a young man in a Jewish unit of the Communist resistance, has published a much more careful study, an abridgment of his doctoral thesis at the University of Melbourne. An historian at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Richard Cohen, has edited the remarkable wartime diary of Raymond-Raoul Lambert, arguably the most important French Jewish official in contact with the Vichy government and the Germans during the war. In addition, Cohen has just completed an extensive analysis of the Vichy-imposed Jewish council, a book that should appear soon. Several other investigations, including some studies of the Jewish resistance movements, have put the issue into wider perspective.²

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This article is a revised version of a paper which appeared in *Living with Antisemitism: Modern Jewish Responses*, ed. Jehuda Reinharz (Hanover, New Hampshire, 1987).

¹ For a European perspective, see Yisrael Gutman and Cynthia J. Haft, eds., *Patterns of Jewish Leadership in Nazi Europe 1933-45: Proceedings of the Third Yad Vashem International Conference, Jerusalem, April 4-7, 1977* (Jerusalem, 1979).

² Maurice Rajsfus, *Des Juifs dans la collaboration: l'UCIF (1941-1944)* (Paris, 1980); Cynthia J. Haft, *The Bargain and the Bridle: The General Union of the Israelites of France* (Chicago, 1983); Jacques Adler, *Face à la persécution: Les Organisations juives à Paris de 1940 à 1944*, trans. André Charpentier (Paris, 1985); Raymond-Raoul Lambert, *Carnet d'un témoin, 1940-1943*, ed. Richard Cohen (Paris, 1985); Richard Cohen, "The Jewish Leadership in France during World War II" (Ph.D. diss., Hebrew University of Jerusalem [Hebrew]); Renée Poznanski, "La Résistance juive en France," *Revue d'histoire de la deuxième guerre mondiale*, no. 137 (1985),

Concern with French Jewry during the Holocaust inevitably plunges investigators into problems of accommodation with the Nazis encountered by other historians of the Occupation period. For in no other country was the Jewish élite more thoroughly integrated into the life of the host society and more deeply identified with its fortunes. Assimilation had been underway for a century and a half when Hitler's armies struck in the West in 1940, and at the head of a Jewish community of about three hundred thousand, half of whom were newcomers, stood a Jewish patriciate little different in manners, beliefs, and political views from its non-Jewish counterparts. As in Eastern Europe, the Jews had forced upon themselves a Jewish Council, known as the Union Générale des Israélites de France (UGIF), which immediately became a tool of the Nazi and Vichy persecution. And as elsewhere in Europe, French Jews fed the Final Solution: some seventy-five thousand were deported from Drancy, a collecting camp in the northeast of Paris, the overwhelming majority to be murdered in Auschwitz.

France therefore offers an historical arena in which the theories about the Jewish leadership's response to the Holocaust can be examined and subjected to close scrutiny. My own view is that the evidence runs strongly against the accusers. It is entirely proper, of course, to air the weaknesses of Jewish leaders, to note where their judgment was flawed and where they went wrong. But more than twenty years after Hannah Arendt made her sweeping and ill-considered charges against Jewish officials who cooperated with the Nazis, we can afford to be more judicious and more painstaking in particular cases.³

That there were Jewish notables ready and eager to cooperate with the anti-Jewish government at Vichy, fully prepared to participate at the end of 1941 in the newly-established UGIF, there can be no doubt. But we should not imagine that they did so cheerfully

3-32. See also Centre de documentation juive contemporaine, *La France et la question juive, 1940/1944* (Paris, 1981); Simon Epstein, *L'Antisémitisme français: aujourd'hui et demain* (Paris, 1984). Richard I. Cohen, *The Burden of Conscience: French Jewry's Response to the Holocaust* (Bloomington, Indiana, 1987) appeared too late for consideration in this article.

³ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York, 1963). See the sharp critique of this work by Jacob Robinson, *And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight: The Eichmann Trial, the Jewish Catastrophe, and Hannah Arendt's Narrative* (Philadelphia, 1965). For some useful historical perspectives on the Arendt controversy, see Walter Laqueur, "Re-Reading Hannah Arendt," *Encounter* (March 1979), 73-9. I have discussed related historiographical issues in *The Holocaust in History* (Hanover, New Hampshire, 1987) and "The History of the Holocaust: A Survey of Recent Literature, *Journal of Modern History*, 59 (1987), 114-60.

or without serious *arrière-pensées*. It was clear from the beginning that the Vichy-defined UGIF, nominally set up to control all the non-religious communal affairs of French Jewry, was defined in an ominous and dangerously open-ended way: all Jews had to pay dues to the new body, and its activities could theoretically extend far beyond philanthropy. What might it be asked to do? French Jewish leaders were appalled at the government's arbitrary move and feared the uses to which the UGIF might be put. Yet the background to the formation of this body permits us to see how these leaders perceived their involvement in terms that are not so familiar to us today. Established Jews who became part of this organization knew little of the complex negotiations and strategies that lay behind it. They knew even less about ultimate Nazi plans for the Jews, schemes still being hatched in the inner recesses of the Third Reich.

In Paris since August 1940, SS Hauptsturmführer Theodor Dannecker was Adolf Eichmann's representative and head of the *Judenreferat*, the police branch for Jewish matters that reported directly to Berlin. Dannecker wanted a *Judenrat* for France, similar to the Jewish councils his SS colleagues had established in Germany and were imposing throughout Nazi-occupied Poland. Working with virtually no manpower and little support from other German agencies on the spot, Dannecker bullied and cajoled the French government into sponsoring the Jewish body. Responding to these pressures, the French convinced the Jewish notables with whom they met that Vichy was acting to forestall Nazi moves to set up the council under the latter's own auspices. Jewish leaders believed their choice was between a German and a French agency. They approached the new organization with great trepidation and considerable internal dispute. But they believed the UGIF to be under French authority, rather than that of the SS, and in this they were largely correct.⁴

To understand how Jewish notables related to this new body, we need to recognize the supreme demoralization of French Jewry, stunned by two crushing blows in the previous year. Like all Frenchmen, French Jews agonized over their country's defeat—a defeat that was so sudden, so overwhelming and so unexpected. But, in

⁴ On German and French strategy and the origins of the UGIF see Michael R. Marrus and Robert O. Paxton, *Vichy France and the Jews* (New York, 1981), 108–10. Cynthia Haft misses this important dimension of Jewish involvement in the organization. See *Bargain and the Bridle*, chaps. 1 and 2.

addition, the flurry of anti-Jewish legislation passed by the Vichy government beginning the summer of 1940 profoundly disturbed French Jews by striking at the core of their beliefs and expectations. That France, celebrated in her education as the very embodiment of progress and emancipation, could take these steps was inconceivable. Writing in his diary in October 1940, Lambert recorded his pain and incredulity: "What shame! I cannot even grasp this denial of justice and scientific truth. . . . This cannot last, this isn't possible. . . . I cried yesterday evening like a man who, suddenly, is abandoned by a woman who is the only love of his life, the only guide of his thoughts, the only director of his acts."⁵ As most Frenchmen, Jews were on the verge of despair in 1940. Nazism seemed securely triumphant. In the east, the Soviet alliance with Germany appeared unshakable. Only Britain remained in the war—the ally who (it seemed) had abandoned France so precipitately at Dunkirk. Britain's ability to continue, and even her survival, appeared very much in doubt. For almost a year, Lambert, a man who was temperamentally optimistic, dared not hope that the verdict of 1940 could be reversed. For the overwhelming majority of Frenchmen, Jews and non-Jews, the war was over.

How then to survive? The sharp debates that tore the Jewish leadership over the question of the UGIF reflect little of the "naïveté, resignation, or adherence to the New Order installed by Vichy" that Rajs fus sneeringly attributes to this establishment.⁶ It is true that most of these notables wrongly believed that Vichy anti-Semitism was Nazi-directed and that its principally intended victims were foreign Jews, not established Jews like themselves. (Indeed, this view was common enough even among professional historians in France until the 1980s.) It is also evident that by social preference, friendship, or professional association, some of those leaders had close links to the collaborationist structure now in place. Most notably, Jacques Helbronner, the elderly *conseiller d'état*, who was head

⁵ Lambert, *Carnet*, 19 October 1940, 85. A reserve officer in the French army (his notebooks are signed "Capitaine R.-R. Lambert de l'artillerie coloniale"), Lambert was an administrator of the Comité National de Secours and a specialist in immigration and refugee matters. Editor in chief of the weekly *L'Univers israélite*, a periodical associated with the establishment Consistoire central, Lambert championed the cause of Jewish unity during the Depression years.

⁶ Rajs fus, *Juifs dans la collaboration*, 121. See also Leni Yahil, "The Jewish Leadership of France," in Gutman and Haft, *Patterns of Jewish Leadership in Nazi Europe*; Yerachmiel (Richard) Cohen, "The Jewish Community of France in the Face of Vichy-German Persecution, 1940-1944," in Frances Malino and Bernard Wasserstein, eds., *The Jews in Modern France* (Hanover, New Hampshire, 1985), 180-203.

of the Central Consistory, had been a close associate of Marshal Pétain since the First World War and a classmate of the originally Pétainist Cardinal Gerlier of Lyon.⁷ But the real reason for agreeing finally, after much hesitation, second-thoughts, and agonizing discussion, to work under Vichy control was the feeling that there was no alternative. It is suggested now that these Jews should have had nothing to do with the proposal. Perhaps. At the time, however, working with the French government which had just violated the rights of Jews seemed preferable to giving the Nazis a free hand.

Much has been made of the opposition to plans for the UGIF that emanated from the Jewish Consistory, the pre-existing, officially recognized structure of the Jewish religious community. However, only by distorting Consistorial views through hindsight can the latter be seen as objecting to "collaborating in any way with the enemy."⁸ Consistorial leaders such as Helbronner certainly protested the imposition of a racial definition of Jews and strenuously objected to the discriminatory laws that followed. Yet when it came to the UGIF, they had great difficulty making up their minds. They were unhappy that negotiations were to a large degree out of their own hands, carried on with representatives of Jewish communal service agencies outside the Consistorial fold. Helbronner and his associates simply believed they could get a better deal. Also, the Consistoire jealously defended its own constitutional standing as a religious association and feared any interference that would further erode the Jewish legal standing in France. For Lambert, heavily involved in discussions with Vichy's anti-Jewish policy coordinator Xavier Vallat, and increasingly convinced of his own rectitude, the Consistorial protesters were "Jewish princes" attempting to protect their own plutocracy. In a revealing passage in his diary Lambert compared himself to Léon Blum in 1936, fending off the hatred of the far Right: "I am feared somewhat the way the Popular Front was feared. The very rich Jews, the majority in the Consistoire, are afraid that [the UGIF] will make them pay too much for the poor."⁹

⁷ On the *Consistoire central*, see Zosa Szajkowski, "The 'Central Jewish Consistory' in France during the Second World War," *Yad Vashem Studies*, 3 (1959): 173-86. See also idem, *Analytical Franco-Jewish Gazetteer, 1939-1945* (New York, 1966), *passim*.

⁸ Haft, *Bargain and the Bridle*, 9.

⁹ Lambert, *Carnet*, 30 November 1941, 133; 29 March 1942, 163; 20 August 1943, 238. See Richard Cohen's portrait of Lambert in his introduction to the latter, and also his "A Jewish Leader in Vichy France, 1940-1943: The Diary of Raymond-Raoul Lambert," *Jewish Social Studies*, 43 (1981): 291-310. See also the exchange between Renée Neher and Jacques Adler, "Le Consistoire central sous l'occupation," *Le Monde juif*, No. 121 (January-March 1986): 36-42, and the critique of Adler by Georges Wellers in *ibid*, 43-45.

Later, in the dark days of 1943, when Jews were being deported to the east and when there were no longer real doubts about Vichy's cooperation with murderous Nazi operations, the Consistoire became reconciled to the UGIF and its leadership, and this despite the personal quarrels and clash of personalities that had characterized relations between the two. The UGIF seems to have made no claim before Vichy to represent French Jews in any other but a purely "technical" sense—related to the management of Jewish social services. The UGIF never assumed the position of political preeminence among the Jews that Vichy and the Germans had originally intended. In this sense the identification of the UGIF as a *Judenrat* is inaccurate. The Consistoire, in turn, acknowledged the value of the UGIF's work to relieve the hardship of Jews who had lost practically everything. When the UGIF seemed on the verge of collapse in 1943, Helbronner himself urged its remnant: "You have to remain, to defend the unfortunate people who must be helped."¹⁰

It is worth adding that involvement with Vichy and the UGIF took considerable personal courage on the part of the Jewish leaders who undertook to do so. Although this may not have been fully evident immediately, when the organization was first established, it soon became so. By early 1942 the SS was threatening to shoot Jewish hostages in reprisal for attacks on German troops. Jewish Communists had been executed in large numbers in the second half of 1941, and as the pool of these diminished, UGIF members were eminent candidates for such actions. André Baur, a prominent young banker who headed the UGIF in the Occupied Zone, came from a wealthy family with links both to the rabbinate and to Zionism; he would have had no trouble crossing the demarcation line to relative safety in the south, as Richard Cohen points out, but elected instead to take up his UGIF post in Paris.¹¹ In part, leaders drawn into UGIF service may have been flattered by high office and moved by a paternalistic sense of obligation to foreign Jews. But it would be wrong to deprecate their sense of responsibility. Lambert repeatedly stressed in his private diary the need to maintain the philanthropic services of the community, now only possible, he felt, under the UGIF. In his conception, UGIF work had to be strictly limited to such activity. On a personal level, Lambert seems

¹⁰ Yerachmiel (Richard) Cohen, "French Jewry's Dilemma on the Orientation of its Leadership: From Polemics to Conciliation: 1942-1944," *Yad Vashem Studies*, 14 (1981): 199.

¹¹ Cohen, "The Jewish Community," 187.

to have found relief from his own despair in his desperate efforts to provide services in camps and to shelter and feed the homeless. He reflected on how much better this was than to leave for New York—an escape he briefly contemplated. "Hold on and hold out" (*tenir et durer*), he wrote in December 1941, "remains my motto and my rule of action." "I act, and that's the important thing. Action fortifies me, fulfills me, consumes me, and I must take heavy responsibilities. . . . Long live life, and long live human activity!"¹² Albert Lévy, the titular head of the UGIF, finally broke ranks and fled to Switzerland at the end of 1942. During the next year both Lambert and Baur were arrested, taken to Drancy, and deported to Auschwitz. Jacques Helbronner, despite his links with Pétain, followed them to Poland within a short time. None of them survived.

The policy of "holding on and holding out" involved inevitable compromises and heartbreaking choices, unfortunately seen by some in retrospect as foolish or even criminal lapses of judgment. Despite ample ground for pessimism, the UGIF view was not entirely black. Behind this strategy lay a glimmer of light, kindled after the *Wehrmacht's* invasion of the Soviet Union began to stall. This was the hope that the Allies would soon turn the tide and that the liberation of France might find the bulk of the Jews still alive. Lambert hoped against hope that the end was not far off. "Victory is certain," he wrote when the UGIF was first established, "it is even possible in 1942." When the Americans went ashore in North Africa, he took heart once again. "This is truly the second front expected for the beginning of the winter. The Russian offensive at Stalingrad is going well. I truly believe it will all be over in the autumn of 1943." Six months later, following the Allied invasion of Sicily and the fall of Mussolini: "The Russian offensive is gigantic. . . . I believe that at Christmas we shall be in Paris."¹³ This was August, 1943. Bombs were by now raining on German cities—a new source of optimism. Of course, it was not to be. Two more entries, and Lambert's diary terminates abruptly with his arrest.

Were these assessments wishful thinking? Of course. But remember the conditions under which they were conceived. For a time, Swiss newspapers were available in unoccupied France, and

¹² Lambert, *Carnet*, 11 December 1941, 135; 11 December 1941, 137; 8 January 1942, 147.

¹³ Ibid., 28 December 1941, 138; 29 March 1942, 196; 17 August 1943, 236.

deductions from the reports they carried had at least an independent factual base. Thereafter, news had to be scraped together from the Nazi- or the Vichy-controlled media, from rumor, and from clandestine radio broadcasts from London. The latter certainly accented the positive; so also did the successes of Allied troops fighting in what was, after all, French territory in North Africa. Reinforcing their hopeful analysis was the incorrigible patriotism of these French Jews, whose objectives were far indeed, needless to say, from the *attentistes* or the men of Vichy. My own conclusion about their prognoses is cautious: they were wrong, but they had good reason for hoping they were right.

Fortified by whatever optimism they could muster, UGIF officials—like their *Judenrat* counterparts in Eastern Europe—conducted desperate negotiations with their persecutors. Adler argues that the basic strategy of “official Judaism” was to protect native French Jews. Certainly occasional statements coming from Consistorial circles or even representatives of the UGIF reflect a view that Jewish immigrants had compromised the future of French-born citizens of France. Writing to André Baur in early 1942, Grand Rabbi Paul Haguenauer, later to die in Auschwitz, objected to the Yiddish-language supplement to a UGIF *Bulletin*: “I cannot help but say that all our troubles come from books, newspapers, and periodicals [written] in this jargon that our foreign coreligionists introduced into France since the armistice [1918].”¹⁴ To us the appeals to patriotic service to France on the part of French-Jewish notables appear particularly apologetic in the light of the French police sweeps and the deportations to death camps in Poland. But let us recall that the Final Solution in France did not begin until two years after the French defeat. Apologetics and the occasional disparagement of foreign Jews were rooted in the preceding period and represented the first instincts of a Jewish élite flattened by the collapse of their familiar world.

Massive deportations began in the summer of 1942, from the Unoccupied as well as the Occupied Zone. At the start, the victims were almost all foreigners, those whom some established French Jews had considered the real, intended victims and the fundamental cause of Vichy anti-Semitism. Throughout the deportations the German and French authorities did not oblige the UGIF, as the Nazis did the *Judenräte* of Eastern Europe, to furnish Jews to fill

¹⁴ Quoted in Adler, *Face à la persecution*, chap. 4, 124.

deportation quotas. That task fell to the French, who complied more or less willingly until the summer of 1944—dragging their feet occasionally, near the end, when it came to some native French Jews. UGIF leaders felt trapped and maintained their policy of bargaining for whatever crumbs they could get from Vichy and its bureaucracy. Examples abound. Having been apprised of the great roundup of foreign Jews in Paris intended for mid-July 1942, the northern council of the UGIF hesitated for two weeks without warning the Jewish population. Crucially, it wanted to maintain the confidence of the authorities in charge. Writing to Pétain a month after the Paris roundups, André Baur thanked the Maréchal for having obtained the exemption of French citizens and asked that French Jews who were in camps ("most of whom are war veterans and wounded, who were interned without having committed any infraction of the law") be liberated. He made no mention of the cruel fate of foreign Jews.¹⁵ Similarly in the southern zone, Raymond-Raoul Lambert appealed repeatedly to secure exemptions—for the staff of the UGIF, for war veterans, or for those who held foreign entry visas.¹⁶

One can see this policy as evading a central reality of the Final Solution—that sooner or later all Jews were targeted for murder and that the Nazis made no fundamental distinction between assimilated western Jews and their coreligionists from Eastern Europe. This approach also reflects a continuing belief that Vichy might treat native Jews more lightly if only the case on their behalf could be eloquently and insistently made. On this last point UGIF leaders were not entirely wrong, as their occasional—if few—successes showed. More important, perhaps, the effort to secure exemptions bespeaks a legalistic frame of mind that was utterly inappropriate during the Nazi Holocaust. After all, a Jew exempted was only temporarily exempted, and in any case another Jew had to be found to take his place. This failure to comprehend the real nature of the Nazi's intentions provides an additional explanation for the priority given to rescuing native French Jews.

But it should not be assumed that the fate of foreign Jews left the established Jewish leadership cold, just because these men did not always press their case in their correspondence with Pétain or

¹⁵ Quoted in *ibid*, 117; Haft, *Bargain and the Bridle*, 34.

¹⁶ See Lambert, *Carnet*, 4 October 1942, 183; 11 October 1942, 186-87; Cohen, "Jewish Community of France," 196-97.

Laval. Lambert had been, after all, the head of the Committee for the Relief of Refugees from Germany since its establishment in 1936 and a widely recognized champion of Jewish refugees at the time of the Popular Front. Like many in France, Lambert wanted some kind of “statut des étrangers” to relieve tensions caused by refugee waves in France. But this did not necessarily mean he rejected French liberalism toward persecuted outsiders. His private diary indicates his outrage at the deportation of foreign Jews, but also suggests that he felt genuinely powerless to prevent their dispatch to the east. Pleading constantly with police, prefectoral and ministerial officials, sometimes literally as the trains took their victims away, Lambert grasped what could and could not be achieved in a practical, immediate sense. “Great joy this morning,” he wrote in his diary in June 1943. “I obtain eight liberations, on the guarantee of the UGIF, among them Henri Abraham, the physician, professor at the Sorbonne.” And then he added: “To my credit.”¹⁷

Such notions of success helped inspire what Robert Paxton, in another context, has called “the most corrupting of self-deceptions”—the idea that the leader was indispensable. Across Europe heads of *Judenräte* fell victim to this failing when they refused to crack under the great pressures they all faced. Prying loose favors from an implacable foe, these men riveted upon the bargaining process. Lives indeed hung on their every move. Their “achievements” were few, but all the more valued because they appeared to have been secured against tremendous odds. Meanwhile, of course, the machinery of destruction ground on all around them. To their colleagues, and to the Jews in whose name they claimed to speak, *Judenrat* chiefs increasingly seemed arrogant, single-minded, and ruthless. From the leaders’ vantage point, however, things looked different. Assailed from many quarters at once, increasingly isolated at the top, facing impossible demands, they felt they were the only hope for a squabbling, bitterly divided Jewish community. For Lambert, who certainly fits this pattern, the chief characteristic of his Jewish critics was their *ingratitude*. He referred often to these Jewish enemies, the “princes” of Judaism, beside whom Vichy and the Germans were at least predictable and frank. To the last he remained convinced that his few exemptions constituted a significant accomplishment, for which he deserved appreciative recognition.¹⁸

¹⁷ Lambert, *Carnet*, 29 June 1943, 232.

¹⁸ Ibid, 18 August 1943, 237.

The most cruel test of exemptions policy arose with respect to several hundred Jewish children, cared for under the auspices of the UGIF and thus temporarily sheltered from arrest and deportation. Sometimes parents confided children to the UGIF when they could no longer care for them or on the eve of their own deportations; sometimes the UGIF obtained custody of children liberated from the camps; and sometimes the children were simply taken in hand by the UGIF when their parents were arrested. Between July and November 1942, according to Adler, the UGIF placed more than a thousand Jewish children in private homes or shelters of various sorts.¹⁹ All of this was done with the authorization of the Vichy or German officials, who eventually attempted to capture these helpless victims and deport them to Auschwitz. Adler cites evidence to show how concerned the official leadership was to preserve the Jewish identity of the children, many of whom were boarded with non-Jewish families or institutions, and he suggests that this may well have limited independent rescue work outside the circuits known to the SS or Vichy police. In any event, the UGIF's scrupulous legalism and insistence on an official structure of placement put the children in grave jeopardy when the French or the Germans were ready to strike. Armed with addresses and lists carefully submitted by Jewish social workers, the Gestapo could swoop down on homes or orphanages at will. By 1944 some UGIF activists were deeply involved in clandestine activity and helped save many of the youngsters by spiriting them away from previous UGIF custody. Georges Edinger, a codirector of the UGIF in Paris, apparently refused to countenance a massive escape of five hundred children in UGIF homes in July, with the result that they were all caught by the SS.²⁰ By that summer the official policy of the UGIF, now rejected by many of its own operatives, seems particularly obtuse.

For some, like Maurice Rajsfsus, this episode provides a fitting and shameful epitaph for the "Juifs dans la collaboration." Although not seeking to absolve the UGIF of responsibility in every situation, we should not ignore the simultaneous existence of other trends within the organization, which finally became more active in

¹⁹ Adler, *Face à la persecution*, 113. On the fate of the children, see also Hillel J. Kieval, "Legality and Resistance in Vichy France: The Rescue of Jewish Children," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 124 (1980): 339-66; Michael R. Marrus, "Vichy et les enfants juifs," *L'Histoire*, 22 (April 1980): 6-15.

²⁰ Adler, *Face à la persecution*, 154; Rajsfsus, *Juifs dans la collaboration*, 256ff.

the last year of Nazi occupation. While some doggedly pursued the path of Vichy legalism, which had performed undoubted services for the Jews in the preceding period, others burned their bridges with the past and recognized the need for clandestine operations. Tragically, this realization often came too late.

Richard Cohen alludes to the “dual existence” of this sphere of Jewish leadership in 1943 and 1944, with some of its work legal, known to Vichy, and some of it illegal, devoted to resistance or rescue. Here too appears a phenomenon common to some of the *Judenräte* in Eastern Europe. I am not speaking of simply two different trends and groups of individuals; some leaders simultaneously maintained earlier strategies of legality while secretly trying to save hunted Jews and working with the underground. Lambert himself left some evidence of having done so. During 1943 he had frequent contact with Angelo Donati, an Italian Jew planning a mass evacuation of Jews from the Italian-occupied zone of France. Lambert named two important personalities in the Jewish resistance to UGIF posts, greatly enhancing their ability to move throughout France and coordinate underground activities.²¹ One of them, Maurice Brener, was Lambert’s cousin and confidant, to whom he wrote several coded letters on the eve of his deportation from Drancy. Richard Cohen found Lambert’s wartime diary in Brener’s possession, almost thirty years after the end of the war.

Jacques Adler contends that the posture of “official Judaism” prevented the emergence of an alternative Jewish leadership that might have achieved a more united Jewish response to Nazi and Vichy persecution.²² His judgment derives from an acute sense of how established French Jews failed to provide wholehearted support for the foreign Jews in their hour of need. It is also based on an admiration for the work of the immigrant Jewish community, notably the array of welfare societies coordinated by the Comité Amelot in the Occupied Zone, which met during the occupation on the Paris street of that name. Clearly, in the world of immigrant Jews one breathes a different air from that of “les Juifs français de vieille souche.” As outsiders, immigrant Jews were less entranced by the liberal heritage of France and less subject to illusions about French beneficence. Psychologically better prepared for their ordeal, they strove to unify Jewish responses. Many became involved

²¹ Richard Cohen, “Introduction” to Lambert, *Carnet*, 51-2.

²² Adler, *Face à la persecution*, 156.

in the Jewish resistance movement. Yet it also seems to me that such activity was made possible partly by the cover and indirect help provided by the established organs of French Jewry. I want to suggest that the much-maligned official Judaism performed important services for the Jewish opposition that emerged during the war.

In financial terms, the UGIF provided a funnel through which several hundred million francs reached Jewish groups from the Joint Distribution Committee, based in New York. UGIF officials managed to transfer funds to the northern zone, despite the Gestapo's and Vichy's knowledge of this illicit action. Although none of this aid reached Jewish Communist groups—held at arm's length by established Jewry because of their revolutionary politics—it certainly fueled other clandestine operations and rescue activity by immigrant organizations.²³ More generally, it may be argued that various kinds of Jewish assistance agencies could exist openly only because the UGIF structures satisfied the Nazis and Vichy that they had the Jews in hand. An interesting case was the Jewish boy scout movement, the Eclaireurs israélites de France, which Vichy permitted to operate within the framework of the UGIF until the beginning of 1943. Robert Gamzon, founder of the movement and its leading figure throughout the war, was a member of the UGIF council from the beginning.²⁴ In another example, the southern zone UGIF provided cover for OSE, the Oeuvre de Secours aux Enfants, a child-rescue organization increasingly involved in underground operations during the latter part of 1942.²⁵

The Jewish Communists followed their own path, providing an important qualification to what has just been said. As in the general sphere of resistance, the Communists were the earliest in the field, mounted the most extensive attacks on the Nazi-Vichy system, and suffered the most for their efforts. In the Jewish and in the non-Jewish sphere, they were the "parti des fusillés." Drawing upon an immigrant, working-class community, Jewish Communists were the only ones in the immediate post-defeat period, according to Adler, to grasp the predicament of the Jews under Vichy, albeit one couched in their own, Moscow-produced terminology—"that fascism was the enemy of the Jewish people; that Nazism was the worst form of fascism; that Vichy, an antidemocratic regime, would in-

²³ Ibid., 134-36, 151.

²⁴ Lambert, *Carnet*, 28 December 1941, 139-40. Cf. Robert Gamzon's posthumous, *Les Eaux claires: Journal 1940-1944* (Paris, 1980), for another account of his involvement.

²⁵ See Szajkowski, *Analytical Franco-Jewish Gazetteer*, chap. 18.

evitably persist in its hostility toward the Jews.”²⁶ Their Paris-based organization, known as Solidarité, linked the internments of Jews and other anti-Jewish moves in the Occupied Zone with Vichy policy in the south. After the attack on the Soviet Union in June 1941, the Communists moved into active resistance while at the same time championing a collective Jewish response to persecution. Specifically Jewish units were formed; Jewish internments became a focal point for agitation and self-help; and wider Jewish political activity was encouraged in the shape of the Communist-sponsored Union des Juifs pour la résistance et l’entraide (UJRE). From August 1942, according to Adler, the time of massive roundups in unoccupied France, there was an ever greater accent on specifically Jewish issues and an affirmation of a Jewish national consciousness.²⁷ Engaged in sabotage, attacks on German personnel, material aid to immigrant Jews, as well as strong denunciations of the UGIF, the Jewish Communist resistance was decimated by the SS and French police during 1943.

Yet despite this heroic struggle, we can question how much the Jewish Communists offered persecuted Jews as a whole in France. The starting point of the movement was Jewish identification with the cause of the Soviet Union, engaged in its titanic struggle against the Hitlerian Reich. For the Communists, Russia was the principal champion of oppressed peoples, and its interests ultimately determined resistance strategy. Therefore, Jewish Communists made few direct assaults on the Nazis’ anti-Jewish machinery: they blew up no deportation trains; assassinated no SS Jewish affairs specialists; and left it to others to liberate the camp of Drancy, the Parisian antechamber to Auschwitz. Moreover, the Party’s immigrant organization, the Main-d’oeuvre immigré (MOI), refused to consider Solidarité or the UJRE as specifically Jewish bodies, disowning the line taken by immigrant activists and leaving them even more vulnerable to the Gestapo than they might otherwise have been.²⁸

Other Jewish resistance groups drew upon prewar secular Jewish ideologies—mainly Bundism and Zionism—to form networks less powerful than those of the Communists, but more closely attuned to Jewish needs in the latter part of the occupation period. Their desperate and dangerous efforts span the full range of un-

²⁶ Adler, *Face à la persecution*, 166.

²⁷ Ibid, 201; Poznanski, “Résistance juive,” 19.

²⁸ Adler, *Face à la persecution*, 203-4.

derground activity, from independent fighting units, such as the Armée juive, which later became the Organisation juive de combat, to rescue operations like those of the Oeuvre de secours aux enfants. Renée Poznanski points out that for Jews the anti-Semitic measures of 1940-41, and then the deportations of the following year, had the same impact as the imposition of forced labor for work in the Reich had in February 1943 for the French community as a whole: they placed Jews before immediate problems prompting many to go underground and begin resistance. In general, Jews were drawn into resistance earlier and in significantly greater proportions than the general population.²⁹

Tragically, however, even the most clear-sighted resistance leaders had no answers for most Jews caught in the maelstrom of 1940-44. For the young, for those without family responsibilities, armed combat provided a means for Jewish affirmation in the last months of Nazi presence in France; for others, the rescue of Jewish children, the manufacture of false identity papers, and the secret passage of the frontiers into Spain or Switzerland were realistic possibilities. For most Jews, however, little could be done without assistance from the French population, the willingness of Vichy authorities or police to look aside, and extraordinary good luck. The principal political achievement of the Jewish resistance, indeed, looked more toward the postwar period than the last phase of deportations.

From the autumn of 1943 the various Jewish organizations began to move toward a clandestine national Jewish body known as the Conseil représentatif des Juifs de France (CRIF). The latter brought together representatives from the UGIF, as well as immigrant Jews, establishment figures, and Communists. Its first head was Léon Meiss, interim president of the Consistoire central after the arrest of Jacques Helbronner in October 1943. Feeling against the UGIF ran high within this body, but no decision about it was taken before the end of the war. Until then the UGIF was accepted

²⁹ Poznanski, "Resistance juive," 7, 9. For additional material on the Jewish resistance see "La Résistance juive en France: Où en est son histoire?", special number of *Le Monde juif*, no. 118 (April-June 1985). See also Annie Latour, *La Résistance juive en France, 1940-1944* (Paris, 1970); David Diamant, *Les Juifs dans la résistance française, 1940-1944* (Paris, 1971); David Knout, *Contribution à l'histoire de la résistance juive en France, 1940-1944* (Paris, 1947); Joseph Ariel (Fisher), "Jewish Self-Defense and Resistance in France during World War II," *Yad Vashem Studies*, 6 (1967): 221-50; Annie Kriegel, "Résistants communistes et Juifs persécutés, *H-Histoire*, 3 (November 1970): 99-123; Lucien Steinberg, *La Révolte des justes. Les Juifs contre Hitler* (Paris, 1970).

by this underground agency as a constituent part of French Jewry. The CRIF was an extraordinary breakthrough, bringing together many divergent communities. It won a Jewish presence in Charles de Gaulle's Conseil national de la Résistance and the provisional government that followed and provided a forum for postwar Jewish claims on the French national scene.³⁰

There may be a masochistic strain in recent Jewish historiography that judges the established Jewish leadership during the Holocaust as particularly manipulative or short-sighted. To the general historian of Europe, however, who surveys this period across a wasteland of appeasement and an inability to understand the Nazis, the Jewish actors in this drama of an entire civilization seem no more blind or weak-willed than any of the other participants. Indeed, their record is not unworthy, taken as a whole. The Jews' relative powerlessness before the murderous anti-Semitism of the Nazi era was a bitter reality to be faced and remains a bitter pill for some to swallow even now. But blaming Jews for this condition, then as now, does not assist understanding, and sometimes serves nefarious political purposes.

Jewish leaders such as I have discussed in this article faced agonizing choices—to intervene with oppressors or not to intervene, to use resources at hand or not to use them, to attempt temporary relief or risk all for open, direct resistance. With the help of careful historical work, we are increasingly able to understand why groups and individuals adopted the positions they did. We may choose to admire some and not others. But let us grant them all some benefit of historical doubt: Who knows, in their place, what we might have done.

³⁰ Adler, *Face à la persécution*, 220-25; H. Herz, "Historique du C.R.I.F.," in *Les Juifs en Europe (1939-1945)* (Rapports présentés à la première conférence du Centre de documentation juive contemporaine) (Paris, 1949), 58-62; Abraham Rayski, "La Fondation du Comité représentatif des Juifs de France," *Le Monde juif*, n.s. 51 (July-September 1968): 32-37; David Weinberg, "The French Jewish Community After World War II: The Struggle for Survival and Self-Definition," *Forum*, No. 45 (Summer 1982): 45-54.