

Skeletons rattling for US Jews

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My thesis adviser in graduate school in 1973 rejected my initial list of proposed subjects with a dismissive wave of his hand. "Go with something you're passionate about," he admonished and we'll make it fit what we need."

It didn't take much to convince me and I was soon poring over archives to complete what turned out to be the first ever academic study of the Bergson Group, led by Peter Bergson (whose real name was Hillel Kook.) His tight-knit band of cohorts became my heroes, and I was thrilled to interview such fascinating iconoclasts as Yitshaq Ben-Ami, Shmuel Merlin, Will Rogers Jr. and so many others in my quest to chronicle the PR miracles created by these activists in the US during the 1940s.

In his own time, Bergson was treated as a pariah. He was almost completely omitted from history books of the era -even though his group organized the one and only mass rally in Washington during the Holocaust demanding efforts to rescue European Jewry. It was as though American Jewish consciousness was suffering historical amnesia of a movement which had touched the lives of tens of thousands in the US.

Expecting that not much had changed in this regard, I was startled on my recent visit to the United States to discover that a great deal has changed, and for the better. Last week's conference in New York City about the Bergson Group made me realize that in recent years, there has been a near-revolution in the American Jewish public's view of the Bergson Group and US Jewry's response to the Shoah.

THE CONFERENCE, called "Jewish Activists Who Shook the World: The Bergson Group, American Jewry, and the Holocaust," was organized by The David S. Wyman Institute for Holocaust Studies, and held at the Fordham University Law School.

I knew something unusual was afoot even before the first speaker began. The conference booklet listed its "Honorary Sponsors" - people who lent their names as a gesture of support. I expected to see the names of Bergson Group partisans and wannabees. Instead, I found some of America's most prominent Jewish establishment figures -Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice-president of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations; Rabbi Yitz Greenberg, former chairman of the US Holocaust Memorial Museum; even Rabbi David Ellenson, president of the Reform movement's Hebrew Union College.

I say "even" because the founder and head of Hebrew Union College, Rabbi Dr. Stephen Wise, was Bergson's most strident opponent. I wonder what he would have thought of his predecessor joining those who maintain that Bergson, not Wise, was right about America and the Holocaust.

Elie Wiesel, the keynote speaker of the conference, made it clear that he, too, believes Bergson was right and Wise wrong. While the Bergson Group worked "day and night" to promote rescue of Jews from the Holocaust, "the Jewish community's leaders didn't do what they should have," Wiesel said. "Even now, it makes me despair."

PROFESSOR DAVID Wyman, after whom the Institute is named, spoke next. His 1984 best-seller, *The Abandonment of the Jews*, was the first book to look at the Bergson Group in depth. To the audible surprise and consternation of the audience, Wyman noted that the US Holocaust Museum does not mention the Bergson Group in its exhibits. He said the Museum is treating Bergson as "persona-non-mentionable."

Wiesel, too, was surprised by this revelation. He suddenly returned to the podium and vowed to do "whatever he could," as the Museum's first chairman and still its most important member, to rectify this omission. (The fact that Bergson is briefly mentioned on its Web site and in a film strip and in secluded small side area - is certainly no substitute for being included in the main, regular exhibits that all visitors see.)

The afternoon sessions were equally enlightening. One of the Bergson Group's most remarkable successes was its building of what the Wyman Institute calls "the rainbow coalition for rescue." Two new chapters were added to this story at the conference. Former New York City mayor Ed Koch spoke about his predecessor, Bill O'Dwyer, and other prominent Irish-American supporters of the Bergson Group. Dr. Rafael Medoff, the Wyman Institute's founder and director, and Wilhelmina Hayes, a leader of the NAACP, unveiled new research on prominent African-Americans who supported Bergson.

BUT BEFORE the mood at this standing-room-only conference (in and of itself a minor miracle, considering it was Father's Day!) could become too upbeat, we were brought back to grim reality by Seymour Reich, the veteran Jewish leader who now heads the Israel Policy Forum.

Reich delivered a jarring talk about the lengths to which Rabbi Wise and his colleagues went to try to undermine and destroy Bergson's coalition. They pressured VIPs to break with Bergson, mobilized rabbis to sign petitions against him, and even lobbied the State Department to "draft or deport" him.

What was most impressive about Reich's remarks was his frank declaration that "the Jewish leaders in the 1940s were wrong. They should not have spent their time and energy attacking Bergson, when they should have been focusing completely on how to bring about the rescue of Europe's Jews."

It was quite a breath of fresh air, to hear a Jewish leader with the courage to criticize his predecessors and tell the truth about history.

Wiesel and Reich were not the only Jewish leaders at the conference to face up to the past. Rabbi Haskel Lookstein, leader of Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun and the Ramaz Day School, and Michael Miller, director of the Jewish Community Relations Council of New York City, strongly criticized the Jewish leadership for urging president Roosevelt to snub the 400 rabbis whom the Bergson Group brought to a Washington march for rescue in 1943.

Miller's father, the late Israel Miller, was one of the marchers, as was the father of renowned attorney Nathan Lewin, another speaker. So was Naftali Carlebach, whose granddaughter, singer Neshama Carlebach, spoke at the conference via videotape.

AS I SAT in the audience, I marveled at the contrast between the attitudes of Jewish leaders towards Bergson, then and now. It seemed to me that this conference was an important turning point in helping American Jewry face its past. Statements like those made by Wiesel, Reich, and the others were unthinkable not long ago. Now I expect we will hear them more and more.

And not just from the leaders. In my private conversations with friends and acquaintances in the days to follow, I found a similar willingness to acknowledge that American Jewish responses to the Holocaust were inadequate, and the attacks on Bergson were a terrible mistake.

I suppose part of the explanation is just the passage of time. The generation of the 1940s is passing from the scene, and younger Jews are not so consumed by the political biases and intra-Jewish rivalries of yesteryear.

But part of the explanation is that the Wyman Institute has mobilized the voices of the Second Generation and is making them heard. Like the children of Holocaust survivors, who have taken on the mantle of speaking out now that their parents can no longer do so, there is a Second Generation of children and grandchildren of the Bergson activists, telling their unique story.

We heard Ben-Gurion University professor Rebecca Kook, Bergson's daughter, speak about her father's work. We learned about Bergson's rabbinical march from two of the remaining marchers and from the sons and granddaughter of marchers.

We learned about Congressional supporters of the Bergson Group from the Speaker of the US House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi, who sent a message to the conference expressing her great pride that her father, then-Maryland congressman Thomas D'Alesandro, Jr., had been one of Bergson's backers.

Pelosi's role really brings the story full circle. Earlier this year, Speaker Pelosi addressed a major Washington gathering of the Union for Reform Judaism, the movement Stephen Wise led for so many years. She told the delegates how pleased she was to learn from the Wyman Institute that her father was a Bergson supporter. She proceeded to read a long excerpt a *Jerusalem Post* op-ed about her father's involvement with the group.

Watching the podcast of those Reform delegates heartily applauding, and thinking about the powerful words spoken by the Jewish leaders at the Wyman conference, I chuckled as I recalled the prevailing mood in the Jewish community when I was writing my thesis.

American Jews, you've come a long way, baby.

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