

# 1,700 Ransomed From Gas Deaths

(This is the fifth article in the series on the international underground which snatched thousands from doom in Nazi death camps and occupied lands. Today's chapter discloses the rescue of 1,700 about to go to gas chambers and actual operations of this amazing group in German-invested territories.)

By ERWIN SAVELSON

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The Nazis ordered the underground to put up \$300,000 for the lives of 1,700 "important" personalities, or watch all perish in death camps and torture chambers.

This did not happen in the closing days of the European war. The frantic rush to neutral countries by Nazi big-wigs was yet to come.

This demand was made less than six weeks after Gen. Eisenhower landed his troops in Normandy—on the day the Yanks were driving Nazi hordes out of vital St. Lo. It revealed the cruelty and avarice of the "master race" months before ultimate unconditional surrender.

The underground raised 1,286,448 Swiss francs (\$300,000) to rescue these "important" men, women and children—ranging in age from two to 82. They included victims of infamous Bergen-Belsen; innocent souls tortured by Josef Kramer, the Beast of Belsen; hundreds of learned scholars and spiritual leaders from Budapest.

These were refugees who could not be smuggled to safety along



The underground railroad from Brest Litovsk to Vilna covered some 370 miles. Refugees trudged through forests and rough paths, guided by patriots, to escape the Nazis. They passed through Lithuania, Latvia and Russia (arrows) to ultimate points of freedom.

the 370-mile underground railway leading out of Brest Litovsk, Poland. The story of Brest is told later in this article.

First intimations of the desperate plight of the 1,700 came from inside Nazi-occupied Budapest on July 18, 1944. The message was from the late Rabbi Samuel David Ungar, who per-

## Orphans Of Nazi Storm

Three more orphaned by Nazis. (1) Cecil Rajngewic, 14, Polish, was sheltered by a Mrs. Richard in Vouvant, France, from 1941 to February, 1944, when the Nazis



seized her and sent her to Pottier. She remained there until May, 1944, after which she spent 15 days at the Drancy concentration camp. She was removed to Birkenau camp, then shipped to dreaded Auschwitz. The Russians liberated her in January, 1945. Her parents are dead. She is being cared for by such Jewish relief agencies as the Vaad Hatzala. (2) Motherless Bernard Chrzanoski, Polish, 9, was kept in a home in Bordeaux for three years. His father, Ansel, was a prisoner-of-war. (3) Blonde Esther Rosenzweig, 9, also Polish, was sheltered by a Mrs. Viquerat in la Roshette, Savoie, from 1943 to 1945. Her mother is dead. Her father, Maurice, was a prisoner-of-war. Many more children like these were hidden in non-Jewish homes by Christian friends until they could be redeemed after the war.

ished fighting the Gestapo. It was received by Isaac Sternbuch, in St. Gallen, Switzerland. Here is the cable sent that day by Sternbuch to the Vaad Hatzala Emergency Committee, at 132 Nassau St., N. Y. C.:

"Orthodox Community Budapest and Neutral Rabbi cabled from Budapest that a group of 1,200 rabbis and other great personalities are on the way to Bermania for possible deportation to Poland unless in 48 hours the Neutral Rabbi received a letter of credit in sum of 700,000 Swiss francs."

The message was received by the active leaders of the Vaad Hatzala, including Rabbi Israel Rosenberg, president of the Union of Orthodox Rabbis of the United States and Canada; Pincus Schoen, of 132 Nassau St.; Chief Rabbi E. L. Silver, of Cincinnati, and Rabbi Abraham Kalmanowitz, president of the Rabbinical College of Mir, in Shanghai.

Within ten days—on July 28—the first check of \$100,000 was cabled through the Foreign Dept. of the Public National Bank and Trust Co. of New York.

### Deposited Money

Roswell D. McClelland, director of the War Refugee Board in Switzerland, supervised handling the funds. On Government orders, the money was deposited in a Swiss bank in accordance with instructions from inside Budapest. The Nazis were told the money could be spent only in Switzerland; it could not be sent or taken out of the country.

Three weeks later—Aug. 21—320 weary Hungarian Jews transferred from Camp Bergen-Belsen arrived in Switzerland. They included infants of two and men and women up to 82.

There was concern for the rest of the 1,700. Apparently the Nazis grew greedier. For their demands were raised from 700,000 Swiss francs to 1,286,448. Another \$100,000 check went winging to Sternbuch on Sept. 27; then a third, on Dec. 2.

On the night of Dec. 6 to 7, a convoy of 1,355 Jews crossed the frontier—the horrors of Bergen-Belsen and Hitler's Nazidom miles away.

Wrote John W. Pehle, executive director of the WRB, on Dec. 19:

"News of this kind brings hope to all of us who are working unrelentingly to save the oppressed Jews remaining in enemy territory."

The rescue of such groups was effected after the Russians had driven back across Poland. How did the underground spirit thousands out of eastern Europe in the days of Nazi occupation?

There were many "stops." But one operation at the Nazi-infested Polish city of Brest—Brest Litovsk—is symbolic. The Vaad

Hatzala underground units worked in teams in this area, one Christian and one Jew to a squad.

Brest is less than 125 miles from Warsaw. Whole families, prepared for flight, would be passed on by underground agents until they reached Brest and were hidden.

The farmer's cart was a familiar sight on streets. Few knew that the farmer was a patriot of the underground. Hours before his arrival in a street, a refugee would receive word to be ready. As the farmer rode by the refugee hopped on the cart.

A central assembly point on the outskirts, the refugees were divided into groups of five and 10 each. Then began the long trek through forests and paths known only to patriots and agents—a journey in most cases of 370 odd miles to the Polish border city of Wilno, better known as Vilna.

Many almost froze to death. They carried children in sacks. They slept long nights in forests; sometimes in the farm houses of friendly persons. They skirted routes of Nazi military forces. Vilna was on the border of Lithuania. A rapid transfer took place in many directions. Refugees were shepherded northward into Lithuania, sometimes east into friendly Russian territory.

Ahead was liberty. Thousands reached Siberia. At this writing, 5,000 are being maintained in that sector of the world. Others kept on to Shanghai, even into Japan. Thousands were transferred in hiding to safer areas.

The plan was conceived by Chaim I. Eis of Zurich, who advised Sternbuch in the early days of the underground. Eis was the pioneer of the group. But the shock and worry over seeing millions of his fellow-Jews tortured to death—5,700,000 perished at the hands of the Nazis—was too much for Eis. He died of a broken heart.

On Monday night, 1,000 business and civic leaders and workers of the Vaad Hatzala will gather at the Hotel Astor to honor Mayor-elect O'Dwyer, executive director of the War Refugee Board, former Secretary of the Treasury Morgenthau, and Pehle, all of whom helped rescue thousands from the Nazi camps.

They will hear the story of how our Government and the Allies, churchmen of all faiths and laymen, joined this humanitarian cause. Baron Robert Rothschild is honorary chairman.