

The Philadelphia Inquirer  
**VIEW** SECTION G  
BOOKS • ART • ARCHITECTURE • DESIGN • ANTIQUES • COLLECTIBLES

*Examining the way that American Jews reacted to news of the slaughter of their brethren by the Nazis.*



Jewish prisoners — crammed into a rail car destined for a concentration camp — find ventilation. Many people died before they reached the camps.

## Disturbing histories



Nazis ridicule a Jewish prisoner by cutting off his hair.

Reviewed by  
David Lee Preston

In May 1943, Samuel Zsigalboim, a Jewish member of the British government-in-exile, committed suicide in London as he filed protest against the passivity with which the world is looking on and permitting the extermination of the Jewish people.

Although his death was widely reported, as these three significant new books all point out, hardly anyone paid attention to his native Congress Weekly, the journal of the American Jewish Congress, published a single paragraph reporting that Zsigalboim had "died suddenly" and had been "depressed and heartbroken, generally." Similarly, the American Jewish Congress's Contemporary Jewish Record reported the death in a single paragraph on an inside page.

Such was the frustration of the Jews under Nazi rule. At a point when their ongoing, systematic slaughter was known to the world, the American Jewish establishment was still paralyzed by its inability to face up to the monumental tragedy.

Numerous authors from Arthur D. Morse to David S. Wyman have documented the appalling ambivalence of the administration of President Franklin D. Roosevelt to the fate of Europe's Jews during the Nazi years of 1933 to 1945. Now it is time for American Jewish leadership of that period to take its lumps as well.

Worthwhile of Roosevelt, fearful of upsetting and terrified of the prospect of anti-Semitic backlash, American Jewish leaders were misled by deception and lethargy; the 28-year-old researcher Rafael Medoff says in *The Deafening Silence*, his well-written and well-researched account.

For Medoff, those leaders faced "a frightening conflict . . . between the collective desire to aid oppressed Jews abroad and the fear of jeopardizing the conduct of Jews at home" or America's war effort.

In "Who Speaks for the Vanquished?" the hard-hitting book by Holocaust survivor Leon

**THE DEAFENING SILENCE**  
American Jewish Leaders and the Holocaust  
Rafael Medoff  
Shapolsky, 232 pp. \$28.95

**WHO SPEAKS FOR THE VANQUISHED?**  
American Jewish Leaders and the Holocaust  
Leon Wollaker Wallis  
Peter Lang, 337 pp. \$36

**AMERICAN REFUGEE POLICY AND EUROPEAN JEWRY, 1933-1945**  
Richard Breitman and Alan M. Kraut  
Indiana University Press, 260 pp. \$27.50

David Lee Preston, an Inquirer staff writer, is a son of Holocaust survivors. His book about his mother's 14 months of survival in a Polish sewer will be published by Viking.

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