

Turning Away from the Holocaust

Max Frankel

In 1973, Max Frankel won a Pulitzer Prize for his reporting on President Richard Nixon's trip to China. His books include *The Times of My Life and My Life with the Times* (2000) and *High Noon in the Cold War* (2004). Frankel has served as journalist and executive editor for *The New York Times*.

—Christian Morgan

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And then there was failure: none greater than the staggering, staining failure of *The New York Times* to depict Hitler's methodical extermination of the Jews of Europe as a horror beyond all other horrors in World War II—a Nazi war within the war crying out for illumination.

5 The annihilation of six million Jews would not for many years become distinctively known as the Holocaust. But its essence became knowable fast enough, from ominous Nazi threats and undisputed eyewitness reports collected by American correspondents, agents and informants. Indeed, a large number of those reports appeared in *The Times*. But they were mostly buried inside its gray and stolid pages, never featured, analyzed or rendered truly comprehensible.

10 Yet what they printed made clear that the editors did not long mistrust the ghastly reports. They presented them as true within months of Hitler's secret resolve in 1941 to proceed to the "final solution" of his fantasized "Jewish problem."

15 Why, then, were the terrifying tales almost hidden in the back pages? Like most—though not all—American media, and most of official Washington, *The Times* drowned its reports about the fate of Jews in the flood of wartime news. Its neglect was far from unique and its reach was not then fully national, but as the premier American source of wartime news, it surely influenced the judgment of other news purveyors.

20 While a few publications—newspapers like *The Post* (then liberal) and *PM* in New York and magazines like *The Nation* and *The New Republic*—showed more conspicuous concern, *The Times's* coverage generally took the view that the

atrocities inflicted upon Europe's Jews, while horrific, were not significantly different from those visited upon tens of millions of other war victims, nor more noteworthy.

Six Years, Six Page 1 Articles

Only six times in nearly six years did *The Times's* front page mention Jews as Hitler's unique target for total annihilation. Only once was their fate the subject of a lead editorial. Only twice did their rescue inspire passionate cries in the Sunday magazine.

Although *The Times's* news columns in those years did not offer as much analysis or synthesis as they do today, the paper took great pride in ranking the importance of events each morning and in carefully reviewing the major news of every week and every year. How could it happen that the war on the Jews never qualified for such highlighted attention?

There is no surviving record of how the paper's coverage of the subject was discussed by *Times* editors during the war years of 1939–45. But within that coverage is recurring evidence of a guiding principle: do not feature the plight of Jews, and take care, when reporting it, to link their suffering to that of many other Europeans.

This reticence has been a subject of extensive scholarly inquiry and also much speculation and condemnation. Critics have blamed "self-hating Jews" and "anti-Zionists" among the paper's owners and staff. Defenders have cited the sketchiness of much information about the death camps in Eastern Europe and also the inability of prewar generations to fully comprehend the industrial gassing of millions of innocents—a machinery of death not yet exposed by those chilling mounds of Jews' bones, hair, shoes, rings.

No single explanation seems to suffice for what was surely the century's bitterest journalistic failure. *The Times*, like most media of that era, fervently embraced the wartime policies of the American and British governments, both of which strongly resisted proposals to rescue Jews or to offer them haven. After a decade of economic depression, both governments had political reasons to discourage immigration and diplomatic reasons to refuse Jewish settlements in regions like Palestine.

Then, too, papers owned by Jewish families, like *The Times*, were plainly afraid to have a society that was still widely anti-Semitic misread their passionate opposition to Hitler as a merely parochial cause. Even some leading Jewish groups hedged their appeals for rescue lest they be accused of wanting to divert wartime energies.

At *The Times*, the reluctance to highlight the systematic slaughter of Jews was also undoubtedly influenced by the views of the publisher, Arthur Hays Sulzberger. He believed strongly and publicly that Judaism was a religion, not a race or nationality—that Jews should be separate only in the way they worshiped. He thought they needed no state or political and social institutions of their own. He went to great lengths to avoid having *The Times* branded a "Jewish newspaper." He resented other publications for emphasizing the Jewishness of people in the news.

65 And it was his policy, on most questions, to steer *The Times* toward the centrist values of America's governmental and intellectual elites. Because his editorial page, like the American government and other leading media, refused to dwell on the Jews' singular victimization, it was cool to all measures that might have singled them out for rescue or even special attention.

70 Only once did *The Times* devote its lead editorial to the subject. That was on Dec. 2, 1942, after the State Department had unofficially confirmed to leading rabbis that two million Jews had already been slain and that five million more were indeed "in danger of extermination." Even that editorial, however, retreated quickly from any show of special concern. Insisting in its title that Jews were merely "The First to Suffer," it said the same fate awaited "people of other faiths and of
75 many races," including "our own 'mongrel' nation" and even Hitler's allies in Japan if he were to win the war.

In only one 48-hour period, in early March 1943, was the paper moved to concede in multiple ways that Europe's Jews merited extraordinary attention. The impetus apparently came from Anne O'Hare McCormick, the foreign affairs columnist, a favorite of Sulzberger and a member of his editorial board, who thought that a Madison Square Garden rally pleading for the rescue of Jews had exposed "the
80 shame of the world."

"There is not the slightest question," she wrote, "that the persecution of the Jews has reached its awful climax in a campaign to wipe them out of Europe. If the
85 Christian community does not support to the utmost the belated proposal worked out to rescue the Jews remaining in Europe from the fate prepared for them, we have accepted the Hitlerian thesis and forever compromised the principles for which we are pouring out blood and wealth."

Beside her column on March 3, the last of seven editorials allowed that Hitler had condemned the Jews to death "where others are sometimes let off with slavery." Vaguely urging the United States to revise "the chilly formalism of its immigration regulations," it urged other free nations to let no "secondary considerations" bar
90 entry of those refugees who might yet escape from the Nazis' control.

On the previous day, that same Garden rally was described in an exceptional half-page article, beginning with three paragraphs on Page 1 under the smallest of 11
95 front-page headlines:

SAVE DOOMED JEWS, HUGE RALLY PLEADS

100 As never before or after, that day's coverage included long quotations from speeches and even the text of the rally's "resolution" calling for urgent measures to move Jews out of Hitler's grasp.

When more than a year later the editorial page returned to the subject and supported the idea of temporarily housing refugees in isolated American camps, it urged saving "innocent people" without ever using the word "Jew."

105 On its dense inside pages, however, *The Times* was much less hesitant about offering persuasive and gruesome details of the systematic murders of Jews. Hundreds of short items and scores of longer articles from different corners of Europe bore out the prophetic dispatch from the Berlin bureau that had appeared on Page 5 on Sept. 13, 1939, two weeks after Hitler invaded Poland:

110 NAZIS HINT PURGE
OF JEWS IN POLAND

“First intimations,” it began, “that a solution of the ‘Jewish problem’ in Poland is on the German-Polish agenda are revealed in a ‘special report’ of the official German News Bureau.” Given the report’s claim that Polish Jewry “continually fortified and enlarged” Western Jewry, the *Times* correspondent added, it was hard to see how their “removal” would change things “without their extermination.”

On March 1, 1942, just seven weeks after the notorious Wannsee Conference distributed orders about the mass-murder weapons to be used against Jews, an article on Page 28 bore this headline:

120 EXTINCTION FEARED
BY JEWS IN POLAND

Polish intellectuals and officials cited underground sources for the warning that 3.5 million Jews stood condemned “to cruel death—to complete annihilation.”

By June 13, the threat became official: “Nazis Blame Jews/For Big Bombings” read a headline on Page 7. The accompanying article quoted Joseph Goebbels as vowing that the Jews would pay for German suffering “with the extermination of their race in all Europe and perhaps even beyond Europe.”

Two weeks later, two paragraphs appended to the end of a related article brought the news that “probably the greatest mass slaughter in history” had already claimed the lives of 700,000 Jews in Poland—a slaughter employing “machine-gun bullets, hand grenades, gas chambers, concentration camps, whipping, torture instruments and starvation.” By June 30, a brief item said the World Jewish Congress put the death toll at one million.

Still greater detail followed, on Page 6 of the July 2 issue, in a London report quoting the Polish government in exile. It cited the use of gas chambers to kill 1,000 Jews a day in different cities and the staging of a blood bath in the Warsaw ghetto. It said that “the criminal German government is fulfilling Hitler’s threat that, whoever wins, all Jews will be murdered.” Typically, the headline, “Allies Are Urged/To Execute Nazis,” was no larger than that on a neighboring article about a Polish diplomat who died in a plunge on Riverside Drive.

Extermination Order on Page 10

On Nov. 25, a lengthy London dispatch on Page 10 cited roundups, gassings, cattle cars and the disappearance of 90 percent of Warsaw’s ghetto population. It said Heinrich Himmler, the Gestapo head, had ordered the extermination of half of Poland’s Jews before the end of 1942.

That same month, the State Department finally conceded that it had confirmed the extermination campaign but insisted that the Allies were helpless to prevent it. By Dec. 9, 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt was reported on Page 20 to have promised Jewish petitioners eventual punishment of the Nazi murderers. He was told that “the scientific and low-cost extermination” had claimed almost two million

lives. There followed a rare front-page notice, on Dec. 18, under the smallest of a dozen headlines: "11 Allies Condemn/Nazi War on Jews." A brief editorial that day observed that this protest responded not just to the outcry of victims but to "officially established facts."

155 For once, *The Times Magazine* now felt free to offer a passionate plea for Europe's Jews. A brief essay by the novelist Sholem Asch on Feb. 7, 1943, recounted "the inhuman process of transportation in sealed, unventilated, limed freight cars, which are death traps."

"Those that survive," he wrote, "become as human waste to be thrown into mass-slaughter houses."

160 The magazine's next and last article on the subject, by Arthur Koestler on June 9, 1944, dealt mainly with the difficulty of comprehending "the greatest mass killing in recorded history."

165 Yet comparable emotion appeared in *The Times* only in a half dozen large advertisements pleading for "ACTION—NOT PITY!" They were from groups urging the rescue of Jews or the formation of an avenging Jewish army in Palestine. Only passing notice recorded the mounting Jewish death toll: 3 million in August 1943, 4 million in July 1944, 5.5 million in November 1944.

Never the Lead Article of the Day

170 No article about the Jews' plight ever qualified as *The Times's* leading story of the day, or as a major event of a week or year. The ordinary reader of its pages could hardly be blamed for failing to comprehend the enormity of the Nazis' crime.

175 As Laurel Leff, an assistant professor at the Northeastern School of Journalism, has concluded, it was a tragic demonstration of how "the facts didn't speak for themselves." She has been the most diligent independent student of *The Times's* Holocaust coverage and deftly summarized her findings last year in the Harvard *International Journal of Press/Politics*.

180 "You could have read the front page of *The New York Times* in 1939 and 1940," she wrote, "without knowing that millions of Jews were being sent to Poland, imprisoned in ghettos, and dying of disease and starvation by the tens of thousands. You could have read the front page in 1941 without knowing that the Nazis were machine-gunning hundreds of thousands of Jews in the Soviet Union.

185 "You could have read the front page in 1942 and not have known, until the last month, that the Germans were carrying out a plan to annihilate European Jewry. In 1943, you would have been told once that Jews from France, Belgium and the Netherlands were being sent to slaughterhouses in Poland and that more than half of the Jews of Europe were dead, but only in the context of a single story on a rally by Jewish groups that devoted more space to who had spoken than to who had died.

190 "In 1944, you would have learned from the front page of the existence of horrible places such as Maidanek and Auschwitz, but only inside the paper could you find that the victims were Jews. In 1945, [liberated] Dachau and Buchenwald were on the front page, but the Jews were buried inside."

A story buried but not, over time, forgotten.

195 After the Nazis' slaughter of Jews was fully exposed at war's end, Iphigene Ochs Sulzberger, the influential daughter, wife and mother of *Times* publishers, changed her mind about the need for a Jewish state and helped her husband, Arthur Hays Sulzberger, accept the idea of Israel and befriend its leaders. Later, led by their son, Arthur Ochs Sulzberger, and their grandson Arthur Sulzberger Jr., *The Times* shed its sensitivity about its Jewish roots, allowed Jews to ascend to the editor's chair and
200 warmly supported Israel in many editorials.

And to this day the failure of America's media to fasten upon Hitler's mad atrocities stirs the conscience of succeeding generations of reporters and editors. It has made them acutely alert to ethnic barbarities in far-off places like Uganda, Rwanda, Bosnia and Kosovo. It leaves them obviously resolved that in the face of genocide,
205 journalism shall not have failed in vain.