Talk by Dr. Becky Kook
Some Personal Reflections on the Politics of the History of Rescue

Firstly, I would like to thank Mr. Pfeffer for organizing this special evening, and for graciously providing me with an opportunity to contribute to this memorial. I met Mr. Pfeffer for the first time a number of months ago, when he organized a similar evening about my father, Hillel Kook. Mr. Pfeffer is a savior of memory. His actions are courageous and are moral. I would like to thank him deeply for this.

I am not going to speak tonight about the possibility of rescue during the dark years of the extermination of the Jews, nor will I talk at length about the heroic efforts of Rabbi Weissmandl sitting in the midst of the hell of Europe, or the brilliance of my father's activities in the United States – both activities that managed to transform rescue from a dream, from a chimera, into a reality. What I would like to speak about tonight, briefly, is the possibility of introspection; the possibility of reckoning; the possibility of memory. I want to ask one question: how is our collective memory established, molded, sculpted? Why do we "remember" certain things, and are seemingly doomed to forget others? Why does this memory forget about people like my father, like Rabbi Weissmandl – and how can we make their memory possible.

My father and Rabbi Weissmandl originated in similar worlds, but experienced the war in separate ones – as separate as two planets are from each other. Rabbi Weissmandl experienced the hell of Europe, experienced the degradation, the humiliation and finally the extermination of the Nazis first hand. From Bratislava, through the train to Auschwitz, from the cave outside of Lublin, Weissmandl defied all odds and all rationality by acting incessantly: helping Jews – no matter who they were, and trying to get the news out – no matter who listened. My father experienced the knowledge of the extermination from the relatively safe streets of New York and Washington. But he – a young, anonymous Jew from Palestine, broke the walls of silence, the walls of indifference, defying all odds – helping Jews – no matter who they were, and getting the news, the awful, dreadful news of killing and murder out and around. Each, in their own way, confined by the constraints of their different circumstances, realized at a very early stage the importance of information, and that knowledge is power. And they both, each in their own way, shook heaven and earth to get that knowledge out and did not rest until the killing machines broke down.

Why don't our children learn about Rabbi Weissmandl's mythological invention of Felix Roth (the rich Swiss Jew he invents to bribe Nazi officials); about the Europa Plan – an ambitious plan to stop the transports of Jews, initiated in a small apartment in Bratislava; why don't our daughters learn about the 400 orthodox rabbis whom my father marched to Washington to plead the cause of their people? Of the thousands of people who packed Madison Square Garden night after night to learn about the extermination. Perhaps we can try and explain why school children in Phoenix, Arizona do not learn about them – but why don't school children in Israel, the Jewish state learn about them? Why don't the Jews talk and teach about their own Jewish saviors?

Sadly, I think the answer is simple: because acknowledging those who did, those who acted, requires acknowledging those who did not. Acknowledging the action, demands acknowledging the silence. Acknowledging the bravery requires

acknowledging the failing. And the reality of those years is a sad one: by and large, the leadership of the Jewish world outside of Europe did not act. They were partners to the deafening silence about the Jews. And this silence continues until today.

Fundamentally, the Zionist and Jewish leadership adopted the western argument, lock stock and barrel: the best way to help the Jews is to win the war. So – don't bother us about the Jews, because we're busy trying to win the war. As if winning the war and saving the Jews involved actions that were mutually exclusive, and as if separate actions aimed at rescue were either counter productive or futile.

Stephen Wise, Chaim Weizman and countless other Jewish leaders and functionaries seemed to accept these assumptions. And being more Catholic than the pope, they spent tireless efforts trying to silence those Jews who did not. Weissmandl and Bergson did not. And each, through their own action, through the temporary cessation of the transports from Bratislava, through the demand to bomb Auschwitz and through the bringing about of the establishment of the War Refugee Board, proved the assumptions misguided, mistaken, and morally wrong.

So, I repeat: acknowledging the activities of those who acted involves an acknowledgment of those who didn't.

The history of rescue during WWII has recently been undergoing a necessary process of rewriting. The first generation of Jewish and non-Jewish scholars to deal with this issue – Morse, Davidovitch, Feingold, Wasserstein – could not bear to look the beast in the face, and call a spade a spade: that the Jewish leadership outside of Europe during its darkest years did not do enough, did not do what they could do to raise consciousness about the extermination, to put pressure on the allies to do something, to raise hell. Jewish leadership during these years should have raised hell and they did not. Upon reading about the news of the extermination in 1942, my father said to then Secretary of State Ickes: *I don't know about you mister secretary, but I know that I am going to wake up in the morning and go to bed in the evening with one question on my mind: what can I do to save the Jews.* He did, they didn't. End of story. Bottom line.

How do we acknowledge these memories? How does a people come to grips with a failing of such magnitude towards its own people, and, perhaps more importantly, what does the possibility of this memory imply.

This is not a simple task. It requires courage, sensitivity and intelligence. Over the past two decades, a number of such courageous historians have appeared. David Wyman's landmark study – the *Abandonment of the Jews* – was pathbreaking in this sense. Lately even the establishment historians have begun to retract their amnesia – historians like Lucy Davidovitch who have begun to acknowledge the magnitude of the importance of my father's activities. This is of course a good thing, a healthy process. No, it will not bring back those who perished. Nor will it ever provide an unequivocal answer to the question – how many Jews could have been saved. But it is one step towards recovery. Nonetheless, the work has just begun, and Rabbi Weissmandl's story is still waiting for his David Wyman.

The importance of recovery, however, goes beyond our own reckoning with god. Our experience of the past feeds our views of the present. My father argued that there was an inextricable link between the failings of the Jewish leadership during the war, and

the failings of the Israeli political leadership since 1948. And the truth is, that without honest introspection, without an open and public debate about the failings of the Jewish leadership during World War II, about the implications of these failings for Jewish identity, Jewish life in general, and Israeli society in particular are doomed to reproduce the mistakes of the past.

Creating an arena of memory for our Jewish saviors or Jewish heroes as Larry Pfeffer calls them, is an essential first step. Creating the possibility of memory allows the possibility of reckoning and introspection. Rabbi Weissmandl in his appeal for Hungarian Jews in May 1944 wrote to the Jews of the free world: "**There is only one thing that can be said in your exoneration – that you do not know the truth."** Creating the possibility of memory is the basis for acknowledging this truth.

Thank you.