

The Jewish Community Leadership in Prague during the Second World War

The Nazi Central Office for Jewish Emigration in Prague (*Zentralstelle für jüdische Auswanderung Prag*, hereafter the *Zentralstelle*) was located in a large villa in Střešovice, an affluent district in the city.¹ The numerous rooms housed a small team of Nazi officials (mostly the SS), Czech employees, as well as representatives of the Prague Jewish Religious Community (*Pražská židovská náboženská obec*, hereafter the Prague JRC), the last of which functioned as liaisons to the Jewish town hall in the city center, the official seat of the JRC. In one room, a large board hung from the wall, displaying photos of the current Jewish leaders. Representatives of the JRC called it *die Sterbetafel* (a life or mortality board), and it symbolized the exposed position of the Jewish leaders in relation to their Nazi superiors.²

In October 1941, the *Zentralstelle* ordered the compulsory registration of all Jews in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia (the German-occupied Czech provinces), and in a few weeks, it tasked the JRC with preparations for the first transports of Prague Jews to Litzmannstadt (Łódź) in occupied Poland.³ All over occupied Europe, the beginning of the deportations put new pressure on Jewish leaders who had believed and tried to persuade the wider Jewish community that cooperation with the SS was in their interest and would prevent the worst from happening.⁴

1 On the *Zentralstelle*, see: Jaroslava Mílová, “Die Zentralstelle für jüdische Auswanderung in Prag. Genesis und Tätigkeit bis zum Anfang des Jahres 1940,” *Theresienstädter Studien und Dokumente 1997* (1997): 7–30.

2 Archiv bezpečnostních složek (hereafter ABS), V-1649 MV, Zápis o výpovědi sepsaný dnešního dne na zdejším velitelství s Krausem, Erichem, 5. prosince 1951.

3 Wolf Gruner, *The Holocaust in Bohemia and Moravia: Czech Initiatives, German Policies, Jewish Responses* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2019), 252–93.

4 See, for example: Beate Meyer, *A Fatal Balancing Act: The Dilemma of the Reich Association of Jews in Germany, 1939–1945* (New York: Berghahn, 2016), 110–15.

The registration in Prague did not progress as smoothly as the SS expected, and only five hundred of the one thousand Jews supposed to report came to the *Zentralstelle* on the first day. After the war, Erich Jucker, one of the few top JRC officials to survive the war, described the events that followed:

Abraham Fixler, at that time the head of the JRC branch at the *Zentralstelle*, was called to see [SS Sturmbannführer Karl] Rahm.⁵ Rahm asked him who the head of the registration department was. Fixler replied that the leaders were Dr. Hanuš Bonn and Emil Kafka, after which Rahm, in a furious state, tore off from the board containing photos of all leading JRC officials the photos of Dr. Bonn and Emil Kafka, called the Gestapo in Bredovská Street, to whom he gave these 2 names, with the order that these 2 Jews be arrested.⁶

Despite interventions of Jewish communal leaders, the Gestapo sent Kafka and Bonn to Mauthausen concentration camp, where they perished in less than a fortnight.⁷ In this way, the *Zentralstelle* ensured that the JRC cooperated during the deportations and sent a clear message that any potential act of resistance or non-conformity would be crushed with utmost severity. Some survivors even suggested that Rahm was only looking for a pretext to inflict a blow on the JRC.⁸ It is noteworthy that the SS used a very similar method in late September 1944, when they murdered the Jewish elder of the Theresienstadt (Terezín) Ghetto Paul Eppstein. Rahm was at that time the commandant of the ghetto. Eppstein was shot shortly before the beginning of the major transports that sent around 18,400 Jewish prisoners, a significant part of the ghetto, to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Also, in this case, Rahm and the SS wanted to ensure the co-operation of the other members of the Council of Elders (*Ältestenrat*).⁹

The existence of the *Sterbetafel* and the fate of Bonn, Kafka, and Eppstein demonstrate that the Nazi regime could dispose of Jewish

5 Between 1940 and 1944, Rahm was the deputy head of the *Zentralstelle*, and from February 1944 until May 1945, the commandant of the Theresienstadt Ghetto. He was sentenced to death and executed in 1947.

6 Státní oblastní archiv v Litoměřicích (hereafter SOA Litoměřice), Mimořádný lidový soud v Litoměřicích (hereafter MLS Litoměřice), Lsp 441/47, Erich Jucker, protocol, March 4, 1947.

7 See also: Livia Rothkirchen, *The Jews of Bohemia and Moravia: Facing the Holocaust* (Lincoln and Jerusalem: University of Nebraska Press and Yad Vashem, 2005), 126.

8 SOA Litoměřice, MLS Litoměřice, Lsp 441/47, Lev Kraus, protocol, March 6, 1947.

9 Miroslav Kárný, "Die Theresienstädter Herbsttransporte 1944," *Theresienstädter Studien und Dokumente 1995* (1995): 7-37.



Image 1: The "Mortality Board": Members of the Council of Jewish Elders in Prague (1943-1945). Source: Archiv bezpečnostních složek, V_1649MV.

leaders using any pretext, even if they fully cooperated. Although the SS realized that for various practical and psychological reasons it was beneficial to use parts of the Jewish community as intermediaries as they were in charge of the day-to-day administration and helped enforce the persecution, they also made it clear that Jewish leaders could be easily replaced.

The Jewish leaders were also under pressure from below. Already during the war, there was a lot of resentment in the Jewish community against those who, despite the persecution and humiliation, held leadership positions. They were often accused of collaboration. For many, these leaders became a symbol of the oppressive regime that made the life of the Jews miserable and later helped organize the deportations.¹⁰ Although ordinary members of the Jewish community were aware that the *Zentralstelle* was in charge of all these actions, they were officially announced and executed by the JRC. The feelings of resentment came to

10 Marie Bader, *Life and Love in Nazi Prague: Letters from an Occupied City*, ed. Kate Ottevanger and Jan Láníček (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), 194.

a head after the end of the war. The day Prague was liberated, a crowd led by survivors attacked the Jewish town hall and publicly abused the last deputy Jewish elder, Erich Kraus.¹¹

The nature of historians' discussions about the "Jewish Councils" has developed significantly. Works that would paint an overtly negative image of the JRCs in the Protectorate are scarce, though they come from prominent authors. Already shortly after the war, Hans G. Adler, a Prague-born survivor of Theresienstadt and Auschwitz, condemned the community leaders in Prague and Theresienstadt for their weakness.¹² Several decades later, Helena Krejčová et al. called them "involuntary intermediaries [or middlemen]," while at the same time taking at face value propagandist reports prepared by the communist secret police in the 1970s that accused some of the Jewish leaders of working for the Gestapo, the Nazi Secret Police.¹³ In contrast, Ruth Bondy, Livia Rothkirchen, Magda Veselská, and Benjamin Frommer have argued that the Jewish leaders in the Protectorate looked after the community. They also expected self-sacrifices from individuals if it was in the interest of the collective.¹⁴ The leaders in Prague and Theresienstadt developed strategies that in their opinion and in the "race against time" would protect at least parts of the community—the young and healthy—until the anticipated defeat of Nazi Germany. This did not rule out cases of corruption and nepotism that were inherent to the system.

Lately, Wolf Gruner and Benjamin Frommer also have put more emphasis on resistance activities of the Jewish leaders and significantly expanded the definition of this term.¹⁵ This has been in line with global

11 Jewish Museum Prague (hereafter JMP), Kurt Wehle Collection, folder 71, Erich Kraus to Kurt Wehle, February 28, 1979.

12 H. G. Adler, *Theresienstadt 1941-1945: The Face of a Coerced Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 215.

13 Helena Krejčová, Jana Svobodová, and Anna Hyndráková, eds., *Židé v protektorátu. Hlášeni Židovské náboženské obce v roce 1942* (Prague: Maxdorf, 1997), 21-23.

14 Rothkirchen, *The Jews of Bohemia and Moravia*; Magda Veselská, "Sie müssen sich als Jude dessen bewusst sein, welche Opfer zu tragen sind ... 'Handlungsspielräume der jüdischen Kultusgemeinden im Protektorat bis zum Ende der großen Deportationen,'" in *Alltag im Holocaust: Jüdisches Leben im Großdeutschen Reich 1941-1945*, ed. Doris Bergen, Andrea Löw, and Anna Hájková (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2013), 151-66; Benjamin Frommer, "Verfolgung durch die Presse: Wie Prager Bürokraten und die tschechische Polizei halfen, die Juden des Protektorats zu isolieren," in Bergen et al., *Alltag im Holocaust: Jüdisches Leben im Großdeutschen Reich 1941-1945*, 147.

15 Gruner, *The Holocaust in Bohemia and Moravia*; Benjamin Frommer, "Zurück ins Ghetto (und Dorf): Ausweisung und Umsiedlung der jüdischen Bevölkerung im nationalsozialistischen Protektorat Böhmen und Mähren," in *Delogiert und ghettoisiert: Jüdinnen und Juden vor der Deportation (Jahrbuch des DÖW, 2022)*, ed. Chris-

historiography. Yehuda Bauer has famously advocated the term *Amidah*, which encompasses a whole range of defiant activities, including acts that led to the “sanctification of life” and “meaningful Jewish survival,” for example, various cultural and educational activities or social welfare provision.¹⁶ Yet the fact remains that overt resistance on its own could rarely lead to the survival of a significant number of Jews.¹⁷ Christopher Browning in this context commented, based on his research of a Jewish slave labour camp which had a much higher survival rate than other camps, that: “The Jews of Starachowice pursued strategies of survival through compliance and alleviation, in the form of labour and bribery, over resistance and fight ... Those who benefited most were seldom individuals who stir our admiration.”¹⁸

This article contributes to the discussions about collaboration and resistance of the Jewish leadership, and about the relationship between the German authorities and the Jewish leaders on the one hand, and between the Jewish leaders and the Jewish community, on the other. It argues that in the Protectorate, Jewish leaders followed the path of compliance and cooperation, with acts of resistance largely confined to the sphere of minor concessions from the Nazis and social self-help.¹⁹ The result was the survival of some—though it is hard to tell if this was a consequence of the leaders’ actions—but also lengthy tensions in the postwar community, which often stemmed from misunderstandings and the overestimation of Jewish leaders’ powers. The core of the argument is based primarily on postwar recollections from those who worked for the Prague JRC during the war, as well as the interrogations of the last deputy Jewish elder Erich Kraus by the communist secret police. These are, by necessity, problematic sources because the survivors among Jewish leaders had

tine Schindler and Wolfgang Schellenbacher (Vienna: DÖW, 2022), 21–38; Benjamin Frommer, “The Holocaust in Bohemia and Moravia,” in *Prague and Beyond: Jews in the Bohemian Lands*, ed. Kateřina Čápková and Hillel J. Kieval (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021), 196–234.

16 Yehuda Bauer, *Rethinking the Holocaust* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 119–42.

17 See, for example, Isaiah Trunk, *Judenrat: The Jewish Councils in Eastern Europe Under Nazi Occupation* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 451–74.

18 Christopher Browning, “‘Alleviation’ and ‘Compliance’: The Survival Strategies of the Jewish Leadership in the Wierzbnik Ghetto and the Starachowice Factory Slave Labor Camps,” in *Gray Zones: Ambiguity and Compromise in the Holocaust and its Aftermath*, ed. Jonathan Petropoulos and John Roth (New York: Berghahn, 2005), 26–36.

19 For a discussion of the terminology, see: Evgeny Finkel, *Ordinary Jews: Choice and Survival during the Holocaust* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017).

good reasons to portray the work of the “Jewish Councils” in a positive light. But a careful approach to the testimonies, and a cross-examination of their content with other sources, allows us to gain insights into the work of the Prague Jewish leadership under the extreme conditions of German occupation.

The Jewish Religious Communities in the Protectorate

In March 1939, at the beginning of the German occupation, there were a total of 136 JRCs and approximately 118,000 Jews in Bohemia and Moravia (the number decreased to 88,105 by October 1941).²⁰ The JRCs traditionally looked after the religious needs of the community, provided social support, and in some cases also educated Jewish children. Alongside these voluntary bodies, there was a whole range of various community social and cultural associations and institutions. The situation changed under German occupation. All the Jewish associations were disbanded, and the JRCs remained the only authorized, in fact compulsory, bodies that represented all Jews, including those who were not members of the religious community (so-called non-mosaic Jews).²¹ On March 5, 1940, the *Reichsprotektor* Konstantin von Neurath issued a decree that gave the Prague JRC jurisdiction over the remaining JRCs in the Protectorate. This was part of the centralization efforts that were to help with the implementation of German and Czech Protectorate anti-Jewish measures, and it followed the Vienna model of one JRC in the capital tasked with communicating Nazi orders to the provinces.²²

The JRC in Prague, under various names, remained in existence for the entire duration of the Nazi occupation. Over time, its composition and assigned tasks changed. The wartime history of the JRC in Prague can be divided into four stages:

- 1) From the German invasion to the summer of 1939, when the creation of the *Zentralstelle* by Adolf Eichmann in July and then the outbreak of the war in September led to the first attempts to centralize Jewish persecution. The war also restricted options for emigration.

20 Rothkirchen, *The Jews of Bohemia and Moravia*, 116.

21 *Reichsprotektor* Konstantin von Neurath introduced the Nuremberg Laws in the Protectorate on June 21, 1939.

22 Gruner, *The Holocaust in Bohemia and Moravia*, 387.

- 2) From the outbreak of the war until the second registration of the Jews and the beginning of the main deportations from the Protectorate in October 1941.
- 3) From the time of the main deportations until July 1943, when the last Jews without protection were deported to the Theresienstadt ghetto (those who were protected lived in so-called mixed marriages [*arisch versippt*] or were of mixed origin [*Mischlinge*]).
- 4) The period from July 1943 until the end of the war and the liberation of Prague in May 1945.

The first three periods were characterized by the gradual centralization and radicalization of Nazi anti-Jewish policies. During the last period, only several thousand Jews remained outside of Theresienstadt, and even most of those who lived in mixed marriages were deported to the ghetto during the final transports between January and March 1945.

In 1939, the JRCs assumed new tasks such as the vocational retraining of those Jews who planned to emigrate. In fact, support for forced emigration—for example, by helping with the bureaucratic process—was initially one of their main tasks. But they also had to communicate all Nazi orders, organize forced labor battalions, collect taxes from the Jews, and maintain the register of all Jews living in the Protectorate. With increasing persecution in 1940, the *Zentralstelle* tasked the JRCs with the organization of the relocation of the Jews to selected parts of Bohemian and Moravian towns, where they had to find space for the newcomers in houses occupied by other Jewish tenants. Over time, the need to secure social welfare services, including soup kitchens, nursing homes for the elderly, hospitals, schools, and orphanages also burdened the JRCs.²³

Starting in the autumn of 1941, the JRCs had to organize the deportations and help with the establishment of the Theresienstadt ghetto. They were also forced to clear all apartments of deportees and secure their assets, which were stored in large warehouses in Prague. For this purpose, the JRC on October 13, 1941 created a new department, the *Treuhandstelle*, led by Salomon Krämer, a Zionist from Moravská Ostrava.²⁴ As the deportation process unfolded, all JRCs in the Protectorate were disbanded in January 1943. Instead, the *Zentralstelle* (now under the new name *Zentralamt für die Regelung der Judenfrage in Böhmen und Mähren*

23 For the history, see: Rothkirchen, *The Jews of Bohemia and Moravia*, 116–37; Erich Kraus, “Židovské organizace za okupace” (unpublished manuscript, 1955); JMP, Kurt Wehle Collection, folder 76, Erich Kraus to Kurt Wehle, January 7, 1980; Krejčová, Svobodová, and Hyndráková, *Židé v protektorátu*.

24 Krejčová, Svobodová, and Hyndráková, *Židé v protektorátu*, 17.

[Central Office for the Solution of the Jewish Question in Bohemia and Moravia]; hereafter the *Zentralamt*) created the Council of Jewish Elders in Prague (*Ältestenrat der Juden in Prag*), which existed until the end of the war. The former JRCs across the Protectorate became its local branches, though most of them now consisted of only a few individuals. Their agenda was rather limited and focused on the registration of Jewish assets and other liquidation work.²⁵ At the peak of the Prague JRC's activities, some 2,102 employees worked in various departments, with around half of them employed in the *Treuhandstelle*. The number quickly dropped during the final round of deportations in the first half of 1943.²⁶

JRC Leaders in the Protectorate

The relationship between the Jewish community and the leadership was, first of all, conditioned by trust and by the confidence and respect the leaders held in the community (legitimacy).²⁷ The existence of representative bodies was not new to Jewish community life, but the German invasion created a dilemma for established community leaders who had to decide whether to continue serving in their positions. Although they could not predict the severity of the persecution, they soon realized that they would be expected to unconditionally enforce the will of the Nazi security apparatus.²⁸ At the same time, the community leaders believed it was essential for recognized authorities to maintain a semblance of continuity and stability, and, at least in the beginning, use established contacts and networks to help with emigration. Both of the main Jewish groups in the Protectorate, the Czech-Jewish assimilationists and Zionists, agreed to share the burden of working for the community, though the traditional tensions did not disappear. Also a small group of Orthodox

25 Friedrich Thieberger and Karl Stein, "Die Juden zur Zeit des Protektorates in Böhmen und Mähren-Schlesien" (unpublished manuscript, undated [Stein died in 1961]), copy in author's possession; JMP, Kurt Wehle Collection, folder 82, Židovské organizace za okupace (unpublished manuscript, 1955).

26 Krejčová, Svobodová, and Hyndráková, *Židé v protektorátu*, 14; JMP, Kurt Wehle Collection, folder 76, Židovské organizace za okupace (prepared by Erich Kraus in 1955); Erich Kraus to Kurt Wehle, January 7-16, 1980. Kraus estimated that the number eventually increased closer to 2,600.

27 See also: Wolfgang Schneider's chapter in this volume.

28 H. G. Adler, "The 'Autonomous' Jewish Administration of Terezín," in *Imposed Jewish Governing Bodies under Nazi Rule. YIVO Colloquium, December 2-5, 1967* (New York: YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, 1972), 71.

Jews, a marginal group in the Czech provinces, worked for the JRC.²⁹ In Prague, many of the recognized leaders who could emigrate decided not to abandon the community and helped negotiate the emigration of others.³⁰ Most of them eventually perished.

The composition of the “Jewish Councils” changed constantly during the war. Historian Aharon Weiss has suggested that in occupied Poland, as time progressed, the SS replaced recognized community leaders, and eventually, a significant number of elders were either new to community life or refugees from other parts of occupied Poland.³¹ In the latter case, it was an intentional decision by the SS to put into key positions people without any local ties, who were often willing to enforce the strictest orders if there was the possibility of saving their own lives or receiving other benefits.³² The situation in Prague differed. The JRC, and later the Council of Jewish Elders in Prague, were, until the liberation in 1945, led by people who had been previously active in local Jewish affairs.³³ This was not typical in the eastern parts of Europe.³⁴ However, most of the ordinary employees, especially those employed following the hasty creation of the large *Treuhandstelle*, were newcomers to the Jewish town hall.³⁵

Leading Jewish politicians and activists assumed key positions in the Prague JRC. From the assimilationist camp, it was initially Emil Kafka (not the same man murdered together with Bonn in 1941), the last prewar head of the Prague JRC. In the summer of 1939, however, he did not return from his trip to London, where he negotiated emigration options.

29 ABS, V-1649 MV, Zápis o výpovědi sepsaný dnešního dne na zdejším velitelství s Krausem, Erichem, 5. prosince 1951; Adler, “The ‘Autonomous’ Jewish Administration of Terezín”; Thieberger and Stein, “Die Juden zur Zeit des Protektorates in Böhmen und Mähren,” 2.

30 Ruth Bondy, “Elder of the Jews” *Jakob Edelstein of Theresienstadt* (New York: Grove Press, 1989), 129–207; Margalit Shlain, “Jakob Edelsteins Bemühungen um die Rettung der Juden aus dem Protektorat Böhmen und Mähren von Mai 1939 bis Dezember 1939,” *Theresienstädter Studien und Dokumente 2003* (2003): 71–94.

31 Aharon Weiss, “Jewish Leadership in Occupied Poland—Postures and Attitudes,” in *The Nazi Holocaust, Part 6, Vol. 1: The Victims of the Holocaust*, ed. Michael Marrus (Westport, CT: Meckler, 1989), 440–70. The situation in Germany and Austria was similar.

32 Weiss, “Jewish Leadership in Occupied Poland,” 449–50, and 458–62.

33 Also, for example, the head of the Vienna JRC Josef Löwenherz remained in Vienna until the end of the war.

34 Also in Germany, after the deportation of the *Reichsvereinigung* leadership, the last head of the *Rest-Reichsvereinigung* after 1943, Walter Lustig, was a newcomer to the upper echelons of Jewish communal life. See: Meyer, *A Fatal Balancing Act*, 330–35.

35 Krejčová, Svobodová, and Hyndráková, *Židé v protektorátu*, 17.

The chairmanship was then assumed by František Weidmann, a young leader of the Czech-Jewish movement. The Zionist camp could rely on veterans from the interwar Jewish Party, the Zionist Organization, WIZO, and the Palestine Office: Jakob Edelstein, František Kahn, Hannah Steiner, and František Friedmann. Weidmann headed the JRC until his deportation to Theresienstadt in January 1943, with Edelstein serving as his deputy until he was sent to Theresienstadt as the first Jewish Elder in December 1941. In January 1943, Weidmann's position in the newly created Council of Jewish Elders was assumed by the aforementioned Zionist Krämer, who had previously been forced to organize the first deportation of European Jews from Moravská Ostrava to the so-called Lublin Reservation in October 1939. Herbert Langer, a Czech-Jewish assimilationist, became his deputy. Both were deported to Theresienstadt in the last transport of "Full Jews" (*Volljuden*) in July 1943.³⁶

The last elder, the oft-praised interwar Zionist politician František Friedmann, remained in the position until the liberation of Prague in May 1945. His prewar handicap from the Zionist perspective, namely, being married to a non-Jewish Czech woman, turned out to be an advantage in the long run. His marriage protected him against the deportation, though he died a few weeks after the liberation at the age of forty-seven.³⁷ Contemporary witnesses suggested that in the last years of war, Friedmann took almost sole responsibility for negotiating with the Germans, with the goal of saving remnants of the Jewish community.³⁸ After July 1943, the rest of the Council of Jewish Elders was composed of people who had not been involved in Jewish community life before the war. For example, Friedmann's deputy, Erich Kraus, joined the JRC only in the autumn of 1939, when the need to manage community affairs, including the registration of the Jews and their emigration, required the expansion of the staff. He did not belong to any of the Jewish ideological groups.³⁹ After the war, as the highest ranking official of the Prague JRC

36 JMP, Kurt Wehle Collection, folder 82, Židovské organizace za okupace (prepared by Erich Kraus in 1955).

37 Tatjana Lichtenstein, "A Life at Odds? The Political and Private Worlds of a Prague Zionist," in *Borders of Jewishness: Microhistories of Encounter* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), 13-15. Apparently, this was the reason he did not become a candidate for the Czechoslovak national assembly before the war.

38 ABS, V-1649 MV, Zápis o výpovědi sepsaný dnešního dne na zdejší velitelství s Krausem, Erichem, 5. prosince 1951. Dr. H. Kafka, 'Dr František Friedmann', *Věstník Židovské obce náboženské v Praze* (hereafter *Věstník*), 3 June 1946, 6/VIII, p. 52.

39 ABS, V-1649 MV, Zápis o výpovědi sepsaný dnešního dne na zdejší velitelství s Krausem, Erichem, 5. prosince 1951.

still alive, he was the subject of a long investigation as a suspected collaborator.

The Prague JRC and Council of Elders avoided the extensive interference of the *Zentralstelle* in terms of personnel, and almost none of the leaders fully collaborated with the SS.⁴⁰ Erich Kraus believed that one of the main reasons for the lack of outsiders or people at the top seeking personal benefits was that the JRC structures were formed at moments when working for the community was not seen as desirable. The JRC expanded their administration for the first time in 1939, when such appointments prevented individuals from emigrating.⁴¹ The Council of Jewish Elders was reconstructed in mid-1943, and its leaders came from the ranks of those living in mixed marriages. At this point in time, most of the remaining Jews tried to avoid exposed positions, hoping that their marriage offered the best possible protection. Leading positions and being in constant contact with the SS and Gestapo did not fit this plan.⁴²

There were only two main exceptions when prominent positions in the JRC in Prague were staffed according to direct orders from the *Zentralstelle*.⁴³ First, in 1939, the *Zentralstelle* appointed Richard Israel Friedmann to a leadership position in the JRC; Friedmann was ordered to move to Prague from Vienna to help organize the emigration agenda.⁴⁴ The second direct appointee was one of the most controversial characters in Prague, Robert Mandler. He too came from Vienna already before the war, and after the German invasion, he arranged illegal transports to Palestine. Historians and survivors accused him of extracting large sums of money from people desperate to flee but he, in the end, did not help them escape.⁴⁵ The *Zentralstelle* appointed Mandler to a key position, and between 1941 and 1943, he and his team—called the “Circus” by survivors—served as the on-the-ground organizers of the deportations to Theresienstadt. At a crucial moment, the SS selected an outsider and a questionable character to instigate conflict and mistrust within the

40 JMP, Kurt Wehle Collection, folder 76, Židovské organizace za okupace (prepared by Erich Kraus in 1955); folder 76, Erich Kraus to Kurt Wehle, January 7-16, 1980.

41 JMP, Kurt Wehle Collection, folder 76, Kraus to Wehle, January 7-16, 1980.

42 Ibid. Kraus's opinion was not shared by all survivors. H. G. Adler held the opposite view. See Adler, “The ‘Autonomous’ Jewish Administration of Terezín,” 72-76.

43 JMP, Kurt Wehle Collection, folder 82, Židovské organizace za okupace (prepared by Erich Kraus in 1955).

44 Yad Vashem Archives (hereafter YVA), O.64.2/93, Protocol with Cäcilie Friedmann, Prague, December, 5, 1945.

45 Bondy, “Elder of the Jews” Jakob Edelstein of Theresienstadt.

community. Mandler did not have any local ties, and it is also possible that his previous problematic behavior made him a perfect candidate for this position. Mandler thus fits neatly into the theory proposed by Weiss.⁴⁶ After the war, one survivor, Max Berger, suggested that Mandler “behaved like an SS man toward us. Only the Jewish origin of this man was an obstacle to his becoming a member of the SS. Both he and his gang could not be deterred from beating the Jews.”⁴⁷ Later, the SS Office in Theresienstadt placed Mandler on the last train to Auschwitz, where he was gassed in late October 1944.⁴⁸

Although only a small number of people who were willing to overtly collaborate with the SS reached the higher ranks of the JRC, unsubstantiated allegations of Jewish leaders’ collaboration with the SS or Gestapo often circulated in communities. Such accusations could stem from the fact that especially in smaller towns, Jewish leaders had to personally report to local Gestapo offices on a regular basis, which fueled rumours.⁴⁹

The JRC: Strategies and Role in the Deportations

The Jewish community’s opinions of Jewish Elders were often conditioned by the perception of leaders’ willingness to either oppose or fulfill German orders and not necessarily by the real actions of the leaders. Historians suggest that there were four major patterns of behavior among council leaders in Nazi-occupied Poland, ranging from the complete refusal to cooperate with the German authorities to full cooperation, including in deportations, with the intention to “safeguard personal interests.”⁵⁰ Based on these patterns, the Prague Jewish leadership—though working under different conditions due to the milder occupation in Bohemia and Moravia—came closer to the third pattern: “Sacrificing portions of the Jewish population, thereby hoping to save others.”⁵¹ Despite some

46 Weiss, “Jewish Leadership in Occupied Poland.” This happened also in the provinces. For example, in Mladá Boleslav, Hugo Kaiser, a refugee from the Sudetenland, entered the service of the local Gestapo and, as a reward, could stay in the town longer than the rest of the community. SOA Praha, Krajský soud Mladá Boleslav, sign. Tk VIIa 46/47.

47 YVA, O.7.cz/222, Testimony of Max Berger, undated (1945).

48 “Robert Mandler” in the database of Holocaust victims. Institute of Terezín Initiative. See: <https://www.holocaust.cz/databaze-obeti/obeti/108575-robert-mandler/>.

49 Veselská, “Sie müssen sich als Jude dessen bewusst sein, welche Opfer zu tragen sind ...,” 155.

50 Weiss, “Jewish Leadership in Occupied Poland,” 467; Trunk, *Judenrat*, 420.

51 Weiss, “Jewish Leadership in Occupied Poland,” 467.

criticism leveled against the leaders, there were rarely allegations that they acted out of self-interest.⁵²

Jewish leaders in the Protectorate helped enforce all anti-Jewish measures, coordinated the registration of the Jews, helped secure their assets, and also helped organize deportations. At the same time, the general assessment of the Jewish leaders was never overtly negative. Many of them, including Edelstein, Weidmann, Otto Zucker, and František Friedmann, were officially praised immediately after the war for their work for the community in such extreme conditions.⁵³ The leaders initially believed that the main way to protect Jews was to emigrate, and later to try to help them survive until the liberation. But they soon realized that the SS could quickly radicalize their policies toward the Jews. In October 1939, Jews from parts of the Protectorate experienced the first deportations to the so-called Lublin Reservation in eastern Poland. Shocked by this action, Edelstein and Richard Israel Friedmann, who traveled with the deportees, returned to Prague convinced that any further deportations to occupied Poland had to be avoided at all costs because Czech Jews would not be able to survive in the conditions of eastern Poland.⁵⁴

Historian Peter Longerich has cogently argued that most Jewish leaders in Europe “were guided by the idea that the Germans were pursuing a rationally comprehensible goal and that their behaviour was ultimately calculable or predictable.”⁵⁵ Edelstein’s strategy, which he pursued in Prague as well as in Theresienstadt, was to present the Jews as an essential workforce that the Germans could use for their war economy (“rescue-through-work”).⁵⁶ The Jewish leadership even accepted the creation of Theresienstadt with relief, believing it was preferable to further deportations to the east, which nevertheless soon followed. Although Edelstein and the rest of the Jewish leaders ultimately failed, it was not due to a lack of effort on their side. Even Adler, one of the harshest critics, eventually recognized that Edelstein and his colleagues were guided by

52 ABS, V-1649 MV, Zápis o výpovědi sepsaný dnešního dne na zdejším velitelství s Krausem, Erichem, 5. prosince 1951. Some survivors accused Kraus of collaborating with the SS to protect his mother, who was not deported. Additionally, Friedmann’s Jewish relatives were not deported.

53 Dr. E. Ornsteinová, “Vzpomínka na Jakuba Edelsteina,” *Věstník*, October 28, 1945, 3/VII, 19; František Fuchs, “Dr František Weidmann,” *Věstník*, October 28, 1946, 12/VIII, 107; Dr. H. Kafka, “Dr František Friedmann,” *Věstník*, June 3, 1946, 6/VIII, 52.

54 Bondy, “Elder of the Jews” *Jakob Edelstein of Theresienstadt*, 219.

55 Peter Longerich, *Holocaust: The Nazi Persecution and Murder of the Jews* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 170.

56 Thieberger and Stein, “Die Juden zur Zeit des Protektorates in Böhmen und Mähren-Schlesien,” 3 and 10.

good intentions, though he also questioned the methods they used and what he critically perceived as an abandonment of the weaker parts of the community, including the elderly, in Theresienstadt.⁵⁷ The Jewish leaders themselves recognized their precarious relationship with the community and already during the war sought informal scrutiny from their colleagues.⁵⁸

The main point of contention was the Jewish leaders' participation in the selection of deportees. Local Jewish representatives in smaller places in the Protectorate did not face this dilemma as the entire community was deported to Theresienstadt within several days. In Prague, with its large community, the selection for individual transports between October 1941 and July 1943 seemed to be entirely random.⁵⁹ Contemporary sources metaphorically compared the gradual process of deportation to the children's game *Plumpsack* (in English: Duck, Duck, Goose). Nobody knew who the next victim would be.⁶⁰ But there were also rumors about cases of bribery by rich individuals whose names were subsequently removed from deportation lists or that good contacts in the Jewish town hall could provide at least some protection.⁶¹ Overall, while survivor testimonies differ in small details, the consensus has been that the *Zentralstelle* played the main role in the selection, and the JRC only had limited ability to change the deportation lists. This contrasted with the situation in other places, including Theresienstadt.⁶²

After the war, Karel Gross, who had worked for and for some time led the transport department of the Prague JRC described the selection as follows:

The transport lists were compiled at the *Zentralstelle* ... The list of persons included in the transport was handed over by the Germans to the JRC, and the latter had the obligation to notify these persons.

57 Adler, "The 'Autonomous' Jewish Administration of Terezín," 72-76.

58 Fuchs, "Dr František Weidmann," 107.

59 Jiří Weil, *Život s hvězdou* (Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1990), 103-106. Although Weil wrote a novel, it was based on his personal experiences and completed shortly after the war.

60 Bader, *Life and Love in Nazi Prague*, 158.

61 Chava Pressburger, *The Diary of Petr Ginz 1941-1942* (Sydney: Picador, 2007), 123.

62 SOA Litoměřice, MLS Litoměřice, Lsp 441/47, Vilém Cantor, protocol, March 5, 1947; Ludvík Robert Weinberger, protocol, January 24, 1947. In Theresienstadt, the SS Office gave instructions about the groups of prisoners who would be included in (or excluded from) the following transports, but the Council of Jewish Elders compiled the lists. The situation in Prague resembled that in Vienna. See Doron Rabinovici, *Eichmann's Jews: The Jewish Administration of Holocaust Vienna, 1938-1945* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), 99-108.

Deported persons were called regularly 2-3 days before boarding the transport, but it very often happened that this period was shortened so that the deportees had a few hours left, sometimes only 1 hour, before they had to arrive at the assembly point. It also happened that the person in question was summoned to the *Zentralstelle* and from there was sent without luggage to Terezín.⁶³

The *Zentralstelle* had a copy of the registration catalog of all Jews in Prague and randomly selected those to be deported, though sometimes they picked specific people—as a form of punishment or for other reasons. Although Gross had good reasons to minimize the role of the JRC (and himself) in the selection process, other survivors, including Erich Kraus and Karel Stein, confirmed his description of the process.⁶⁴

Others ascribed more responsibility to the JRC. Rabbi Richard Feder and the famous composer Karel Reiner both suggested that the JRC was deeply involved in selections, and Reiner went as far as accusing the leaders of intentionally getting rid of unwanted people or those who did not belong to particular ideological or economic groups.⁶⁵ Other sources then suggest that the JRC created a list of people who were protected against deportation, at least for the time being, until the summer of 1943. Indeed, most of the survivors involved in the process agreed that the *Zentralstelle* always selected between 1,200 and 1,300 names, and the JRC had to return the final list of 1,000 names, which allowed them to remove JRC employees, their family members, and other protected individuals from the transports. Although the JRC's room to maneuver was restricted, it did not completely foreclose options for protectionism and bribery.⁶⁶ Adler, for example, in this context wrote about “shady machinations” at the top of the JRC.⁶⁷ Even Cäcilie Friedmann, who otherwise defended the memory of her late husband Richard Israel, admitted that the “limited right of reclamation ... became the focus of protection possibilities”

63 SOA Praha, MLS Praha, Lsp 2876/46, Záznam pro vedení, November 3, 1946, Dr. Karel Gross.

64 ABS, V-1649 MV, Zápis o výpovědi sepsaný dnešního dne na zdejším velitelství s Krausem, Erichem, 5. prosince 1951. See also the Protocol with Cäcilie Friedmann, Prague, December, 5, 1945: YVA, O.64.2/93; Archiv Hlavního města Prahy, 36-13908, affidavit by Karel Stein, January 25, 1947.

65 Richard Feder, *Židovská tragédie: dějství poslední* (Kolín: Lusk, 1947), 34; JMP, Karel Reiner, *Naše činnost 1939-1944*. I would like to thank Benjamin Frommer for sharing this information and document with me.

66 ABS, V-1649 MV, Záznam, September 20, 1951.

67 Adler, *Theresienstadt 1941-1945*, 55.

and that “ideal conditions did not prevail ...The Community of Jews was no worse, but also no better, than [those] in the outside world.”⁶⁸

The JRC leadership certainly had more leverage when the *Zentralstelle* ordered the deportation of JRC employees. The JRC created a special commission that decided the order in which the employees would gradually be deported. According to Kraus, first they sent those who were not necessary for advancing the JRC’s agenda as well as younger and healthier people who, in their opinion, could better cope with the conditions in Theresienstadt.⁶⁹ The situation changed in the final months of the war, when the *Zentralstelle* ordered the deportation of those living in “mixed marriages,” including a large segment of the staff of the Council of Jewish Elders. In this case, the council was tasked with creating a list of employees unnecessary for the work associated with the final liquidation of the agenda in Prague. They complied, and those who were sent to the ghetto in these final transports were some of the most vocal critics of the Jewish leaders after the war.⁷⁰ They were selected for the deportation in the final months of the war and evidently considered this a betrayal on the part of their colleagues, who, at least in their opinion, should not have followed Nazi instructions until the very end.

Assessment of the Prague JRC and the Limits of Resistance

“It was the saddest chapter in the history of the venerable Prague JRC,” when it became the “tool of the enemy” who wanted to destroy all the Jews. These comments concerning the recent past were made in 1945 by Kurt Wehle, the postwar secretary of the Council of Jewish Religious Communities in Bohemia, Moravia, and Silesia. Wehle worked for the Prague JRC until 1943, when he was deported to Theresienstadt and later Auschwitz. But his comments were not intended to blame Jewish leaders. Although the Nazis planned to utilize parts of the victim community to help with persecution, Wehle continued, “they did not count on ... the courage and intelligence of their victims, their manliness, determination, and fighting spirit, their moral strength and their sense of responsibility.”⁷¹

68 Adler, *Theresienstadt 1941-1945*, 663, quoting from Cäcilie Friedmann’s testimony submitted in 1945: YVA, O.64/93.

69 ABS, V-1649 MV, Zápis o výpovědi sepsaný dnešního dne na zdejším velitelství s Krausem, Erichem, 17. prosince 1951.

70 SOA Praha, Krajský soud trestní v Praze, spis. zn. Tk XVIII—16146/47.

71 Kurt Wehle, “Židovská náboženská obec za okupace a po osvobození ČSR,” *Věstník*, September 1, 1945, 1/VII, 1945, 3.

The JRC could not prevent the Nazis from executing their eliminationist program, but through their cleverness, they could “delay, mitigate, sabotage; they could achieve some concessions and small successes; they could push through proposals and even save certain assets.”⁷² Overall, Wehle asserted, the JRC behaved “honorably.” Erich Kraus also believed that, on balance, the Jews benefited from the JRC’s existence. He emphasized the support it provided in connection with emigration and vocational retraining, its attempts to delay the implementation of Nazi orders, its educational and cultural activities, provision of social welfare in Prague and for those deported, as well as the mere existence of a “Jewish space” in the Jewish town hall where they could meet and converse undisturbed.⁷³ Similar sentiments have recently been echoed in Gruner’s comprehensive analysis: “Despite the strict surveillance ... the Prague Jewish Community did not allow Eichmann’s Central Office [*Zentral-stelle*] to turn it into a mere organ of policy implementation.”⁷⁴

Others challenged this heroic narrative. Rothkirchen suggested that the JRC’s policies of “retardation,” of slowing down persecution, were successful only in the initial period, until the main wave of deportations commenced in October 1941.⁷⁵ Similarly, survivors expressed sentiments of distrust and resentment toward the Jewish town hall. Postwar Jewish leaders repeatedly turned to the Jewish public with appeals not to condemn the wartime JRC, and *Věstník*, the official community journal, published celebratory obituaries of the leaders who perished. They even asserted that thanks to the efforts of Edelstein and Weidmann, parts of the Jewish community survived until the liberation.⁷⁶ The existence of such articles and their tone indirectly imply an effort to reestablish trust between the community and its new leadership.

The truth remains that the real and imagined privileges the JRC employees enjoyed during the war estranged them from the community. Many believed that corruption, nepotism, and favoritism guided the decisions in the JRC, for example, about the allocation of work assignments, social support, and housing.⁷⁷ Jiří Weil, in the semi-autobiographical novel *Life with the Star* published shortly after the war, aptly

72 Ibid.

73 JMP, Kurt Wehle Collection, folder 82, Erich Kraus, “Cíle ŽNO a ŽRS” (1955).

74 Gruner, *The Holocaust in Bohemia and Moravia*, 397.

75 Rothkirchen, *The Jews of Bohemia and Moravia*, 134.

76 Ornsteinová, “Vzpomínka na Jakuba Edelsteina,” 19; Fuchs, “Dr František Weidmann,” 107.

77 Heda Kaufmannová, *Léta 1938-1945. Válečné vzpomínky* (Prague: ÚSD AV ČR 1999), 75.

characterized the Jewish town hall as a bureaucratic maze, with cold bureaucrats sworn to secrecy, unwilling or unable to reveal the real direction of persecution. The mentality of “them”—the JRC—against “us”—the wider community—was clearly present.⁷⁸ Troublemakers among Jewish claimants could easily be punished with worse accommodations or harsher labor assignments.⁷⁹ Adler also believed that the speed with which the JRC had to hire new employees in the initial period led to a situation in which “people with different talents, attitudes, political persuasion, and ethical values remained members.”⁸⁰ But psychology, stress, and anxiety also played an important role. Victims overestimated the influence of the Jewish town hall. Any refusal to help could immediately be interpreted as a sign of corruption or an abuse of power. Doron Rabinovici, concerning this context, observed the following in relation to the Jewish Community Office in Vienna: “The powerlessness of the Jewish institutions was seen by the Jews as an unwillingness to help and their lack of authority as indifference.”⁸¹

This resentment was often more forcefully voiced by members of the younger assimilated generation with secular leanings, especially if they were involved in anti-German resistance. One such person, Heda Kaufmannová, who went into hiding when she was summoned for deportation, described her perception of the Jewish town hall in her memoirs:

This was the grim, worn out, sweaty, desperate reality of pre-hell; an atmosphere of fear, anxiety, uncertainty, anger, hatred ... The JRC officials, who every now and then caught slaps and kicks from the masters at the *Zentralamt*, often could not stand the tension and in another form spread the thunder down to the subordinates, and they, in turn, to the frightened arrivals. It was absurd and undignified ... When the Jewish clerk at the JRC, a man with an academic degree, yelled at me because he had to react to the feeling of fear and humiliation from the brass-hat manners of the men from the *Zentralamt*, then it was understandable, but it was outrageous and disgusting. After all, he rode on the same board as all those with the star, who at that moment depended on his delegated power—and he played for them, presumptuously, the role of an overlord; at that moment, he did not realize that he would follow the same path the *Zentralamt* was prepar-

78 Weil, *Život s hvězdou*, 17, 64, 114–15.

79 Bader, *Life and Love in Nazi Prague*, 117.

80 Adler, “The ‘Autonomous’ Jewish Administration of Terezín,” 71.

81 Rabinovici, *Eichmann’s Jews*, 71.

ing, for the time being secretly, with his perhaps unconscious help: at the end of it, the chimneys of the crematoria were smoking.⁸²

The perception of the JRC differed from person to person. Marie Bader was in her mid-fifties early in the war. In the letters she sent her old friend in Thessaloniki, Greece, she often alluded to the situation at the JRC. Although critical of the immense bureaucracy, she believed that individual claimants often contributed to the tense atmosphere. Early in the war, the JRC had to find accommodations for all the Jews in Prague who lived outside the allotted districts. The shortage of accommodations meant that in most cases, several families had to share an apartment or even a room divided by furniture. These housing conditions triggered conflicts:

And then along came someone else to share the room who brought with her enough furniture for two rooms, who argues every day with the landlady, and there is a constant danger that the two women will fly at each other. Horrible scenes like that are now unfortunately the order of the day among our co-religionists, and the [JRC] is fully engaged with settling quarrels. Unfortunately most of the Prague families who have to let out part of their flats are very unreasonable and unkind and see others as intruders.⁸³

The JRC, thus, functioned as middlemen not only between the *Zentralstelle* and the Jews but also between different Jewish factions, trying to settle quarrels. Anxious claimants, who were gradually losing their entire life savings, belongings, and social status, had to queue for hours with groups of similarly desperate people. This led to heightened sensitivity and perceptions that JRC employees demonstrated a lack of empathy for the plight of the claimants:

One gets very angry when one goes to the Jewish office, where I was just now about the business with the flat. One has to wait for hours with a number and then watch as a lot of people who haven't registered go in first. Then, when it's finally one's turn, one is told by the official on some pretext to come back another day when it suits him better.⁸⁴

But there is also the other side of the coin. Recently, in connection with the relationship between the JRCs and ordinary Jews, historians have

82 Kaufmannová, *Léta 1938-1945*, 76.

83 Bader, *Life and Love in Nazi Prague*, 92.

84 Bader, *Life and Love in Nazi Prague*, 113; See also: Rabinovici, *Eichmann's Jews*, 96.

begun to pay more attention to the resistance of Jewish community bodies, pointing to various administrative interventions and petitions that helped slow down the impact of the Nazi anti-Jewish measures.⁸⁵ Support for emigration, including help with the completion of all the necessary paperwork, and the administration of retraining and vocational courses belong in this category as well. The JRC's efforts to provide Jews for forced labor and Edelstein's idea to present the Jews as an essential workforce have also been considered acts of resistance in the sense that their aim was to save many Jews and delay deportations. Others have discussed cases of relief activities and social services for the Jewish community, and later for those imprisoned in the Theresienstadt ghetto and other concentration camps. The JRC, its employees, and their family members (such as Heinz Prossnitz) sent thousands of food parcels to the ghetto and to those deported further east.⁸⁶

These attempts to help had limits. Jewish representatives could look for small holes in Nazi orders, but their exposed position made them the easy targets of Nazi revenge and, consequently, necessarily limited their capacity to resist. In the autumn of 1943, a woman with a daughter came to the JRC office in Prague seeking help. They had been living in hiding but had to leave their hiding place and had nowhere to go. The Jewish leaders, represented at that time by Friedmann, persuaded the mother that the best option was to contact the *Zentralstelle*. They reported that two persons who had not appeared for a deportation transport were now willing to go to Theresienstadt voluntarily. Awaiting the response, somebody leaked the information to the Gestapo, who immediately arrived and detained not only the mother and daughter but also Friedmann and three other employees of the Council of Jewish Elders. The Gestapo held Friedmann for a week and the rest for almost a month before they released them with a strong warning.⁸⁷ The mother and daughter were sent to the concentration camp but survived.

This proved to be sufficient warning. In January 1945, the evacuation transports with prisoners from Auschwitz were passing through the Protectorate on their way to the remaining concentration camps in the west. Some of the prisoners, freezing to death and dying of starvation in open

85 Gruner, *The Holocaust in Bohemia and Moravia*, 396-98.

86 JMP, Kurt Wehle Collection, folder 82, Židovské organizace za okupace (prepared by Erich Kraus in 1955); folder 76, Erich Kraus to Kurt Wehle, January 7, 1980; Ruth Bondy, "Ein Brotwunder. Das Hilfswerk von Heinz Prossnitz," in *Theresienstädter Studien und Dokumente 1999* (1999), 76-104.

87 ABS, V-1649 MV, Zápis o výpovědi sepsaný dnešního dne na zdejším velitelství s Krausem, Erichem, 5. prosince 1951.

train carriages, attempted to escape. A group of escapees came to the Jewish town hall in Prague. The employees immediately reported the cases to the Gestapo, who took the escapees either to Pankrác prison or the Small Fortress of Terezín, where they soon perished due to the inhumane conditions. After the war, Erich Kraus suggested that council members were concerned that it could be a provocation because one of the escapees immediately began to share details about life in Auschwitz. Furthermore, too many people were present, which made it very likely that the Gestapo would soon be informed. At the same time, the Jewish leaders requested that a police patrol be placed in front of the Jewish town hall: “this was to warn any other escapees not to enter” and to protect the council as well.⁸⁸

Epilogue

In the 1970s, the New York-based Society for the History of Czechoslovak Jews was preparing the publication of their third volume on the Jews of Czechoslovakia, which focused on the Holocaust. Rothkirchen, the eminent Yad Vashem historian and survivor, contributed a key chapter, which also dealt with the history of the JRCs during the German occupation. The editors sent a draft to Erich Kraus, and his emotional response clearly expressed his disappointment and anger:

Why is it assumed by ... R[othkirchen]... that the existence and activity of JRC and Jewish Council of Elders was evil, caused by insufficient bravery, insufficient foresight, insufficient selflessness of their officials? With such an a priori attitude, is objectivity even possible?⁸⁹

Kraus continued:

With bare hands and without any rights, to be given over to the will of sadists, competing with each other in cruelty—that was the fate of the individual. In addition, the leaders were responsible for the consequences of each of their actions for the collective, without any possibility of public relations, justification, defense. This was no time for heroic poses and exalted actions.⁹⁰

88 Ibid.

89 JMP, Kurt Wehle Collection, folder 76, Kraus to Kurt Wehle, January 7-16, 1980.

90 Ibid.

Kraus defended the Jewish leaders, believing that a lot of the criticism of the JRC originated from a lack of understanding of the immense pressure—from both the German occupation authorities and the Jewish population in the Protectorate—the Jewish leaders experienced.

In the Protectorate, the Jewish leadership mainly chose the path of compliance and cooperation. This helped approximately 26,000 Jews emigrate before the borders were slammed shut in October 1941. But their help had limits. Once the second registration was initiated and, not long after, the deportations started in October 1941, the community leadership found itself in a race against time. Survivors who served in the community leadership as well as some historians asserted that it was thanks to Edelstein's negotiations that the *Zentralstelle* agreed to create a ghetto in the Protectorate—in Theresienstadt—which at least temporarily postponed the dreaded deportation to Nazi-occupied Poland: "This would buy us time," they believed.⁹¹ Yet the first transport to the East—to Riga—left the ghetto after only six weeks. The Jewish leadership pursued the strategy of "rescue-through-work," which required their cooperation with the Nazi authorities in the deportations. This mirrored what Beate Meyer called the "fatal balancing act" of the German-Jewish leadership.⁹² In contrast, Rothkirchen, still one of the most prominent historians on this topic, characterized this period as one defined by "a total compliance" of the JRC, which did not generate any tangible benefit for the Jews.⁹³

In May 1945, only small groups of Jews—around 2,803 individuals—remained in Prague and the rest of the Protectorate. They either managed to avoid the last deportation to Theresienstadt in 1945 through individual acts of resistance or they were temporarily allowed to stay and finish the liquidation of the structures of the Council of Jewish Elders. The reckoning came soon enough. Kraus, the last deputy elder, had to undergo lengthy retributory investigations carried out within the Jewish community as well as by the state judicial system. Although all the courts eventually acquitted him, doubt and suspicion in the community remained. This experience was shared by other Jewish leaders, including Benjamin Marmelstein, the last elder of Theresienstadt, who although never sentenced, suffered social ostracism until the end of his life.⁹⁴

91 Thieberger and Stein, "Die Juden zur Zeit des Protektorates in Böhmen und Mähren-Schlesien," 8.

92 Meyer, *A Fatal Balancing Act*.

93 Rothkirchen, *The Jews of Bohemia and Moravia*, 135.

94 Ronny Loewy and Katharina Rauschenberger, eds., "Der Letzte der Ungerechten": *Der "Judenälteste" Benjamin Marmelstein in Filmen 1942-1975* (Frankfurt a.M.: Campus Verlag, 2011).