

# LABOR AND THE HOLOCAUST

*The Jewish Labor Committee and the Anti-Nazi Struggle*

THE JEWISH LABOR COMMITTEE (JLC) WAS founded to provide a presence for Jewish labor in the councils of the American trade-union movement and in the Jewish "Establishment," and to mobilize Jewish unions, socialist organizations, and fraternal societies in the struggle against fascism. Its founding meeting, at Central Plaza on the Lower East Side of New York City, February 25, 1934, brought together more than a thousand delegates representing the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union (ILGWU), Amalgamated Clothing Workers, United Hebrew Trades, Workmen's Circle, *Jewish Daily Forward* Association, Jewish Socialist Verband, and a number of smaller groups.<sup>1</sup> Baruch Charney Vladeck, general manager of the *Forward*, was chosen president, David Dubinsky of the ILGWU, treasurer; Joseph Baskin of the Workmen's Circle, secretary; and Benjamin Gebiner, also of the Workmen's Circle, executive secretary. Believing that only a broad-based workers movement could overthrow Hitlerism, the JLC stressed its labor orientation and nonsectarian philosophy; its aims were to support Jewish rights everywhere, aid all victims of fascism, support all progressive and democratic antifascist elements, acquaint the American labor movement with the plight of the European Jews, and "impress upon the Jewish

masses that they must fight hand in hand with the general forces of democracy."<sup>2</sup>

The JLC was the brainchild of Vladeck, a brilliant writer and organizer who was known for the elegance of his Yiddish oratory and who was adept at navigating the perilous channels of New York immigrant politics. Vladeck, like most of the early generation of Jewish-American labor and socialist leaders, had served his political apprenticeship in the famous "Bund" or General Jewish Workers' Union of Lithuania, Poland, and Russia. The Bund functioned as a network of Jewish trade unions, a political party (legal in Poland, illegal in Russia), and a fraternal organization devoted to the strengthening of Yiddish culture and the support of Jewish community life. Generally hostile to both Zionism and Communism, in the 1930s it was associated with the left wing of the Social Democratic Second International. In many areas, the founders of the JLC were translating and adapting lessons learned in the ranks of the Bund for use in the very different social milieu of America.<sup>3</sup>

Vladeck had for years cultivated the friendship of William Green, president of American Federation of Labor (AFL), and hoped, with reason, that he would be prepared to welcome the JLC as a trusted advisory body on Jewish affairs. As chairman of the JLC, Vladeck addressed the 1934 convention of the AFL, presenting the Nazi persecution of Jews as an integral part of a general

*Unless otherwise indicated all photographs and illustrations are from the Jewish Labor Committee Collection, Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives*



*New York Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia speaking (in Yiddish) to the second Jewish Labor Committee convention, October 27, 1935. Also on the dais are (left to right) David Dubinsky, Baruch Charney Vladeck, Joseph Baskin, and Benjamin Gebiner.*

assault on labor rights and political liberty. In response the AFL created a Labor Chest to aid the victims of fascism; in coming years, the Chest funded a host of JLC-inspired educational and aid projects. The JLC handled much of the editorial work for the Labor Chest News Service and produced the Labor Chest pamphlet *Labor, Democracy and Fascism*, which contains excerpts from antifascist speeches by William Green, Vladeck, Walter Citrine of the British Trades Union Congress, Joseph Ryan of the International Longshoremen's Association, and others. The committee also organized a number of mass meetings in New York City under Labor Chest auspices, including a solemn commemoration of the anniversary of the 1934 Austrian workers uprising against fascism.

The JLC worked with other Jewish organizations engaged in anti-Nazi work, though sometimes chafing at the more cautious instincts of its partners. For instance, one of the JLC's chief concerns was to build support for a boycott of Nazi goods. At the urging of Vladeck and Jewish union leaders, the AFL came out in favor of a boycott at its convention of 1933. The American Jewish Congress, under the direction of Rabbi Stephen Wise, was also an early adherent of the boycott strategy, though



*Left to right: David Dubinsky, Adolph Held (JLC chairman), and actor Paul Muni at the April 19, 1945, opening of the JLC's exhibition "Heroes and Martyrs of the Ghettos."*

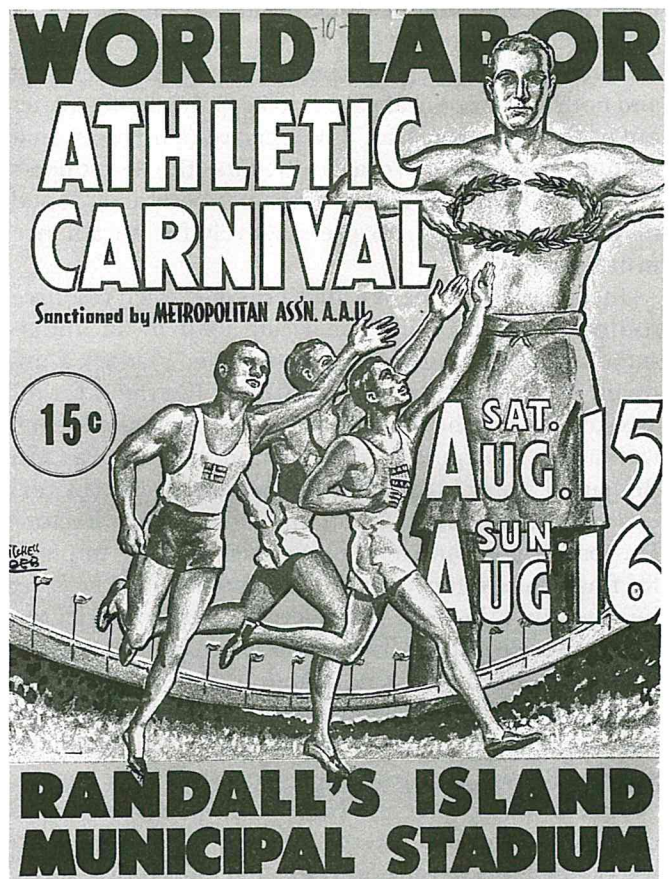
Rabbi Wise declined to join in boycott activity not conducted by Jews. The American Jewish Committee, B'nai B'rith, and other mainstream Jewish organizations hung back, fearing either a backlash against Jews in Germany or an upsurge of anti-Semitism in America if Jews

adopted such high-profile methods as picketing and public appeals. In February 1936 the JLC joined with the American Jewish Congress to form the Joint Boycott Council. The council's work was quite effective in the area of consumer goods, eventually enlisting Macy's, Gimbel's, and other major retailers in the boycott.<sup>4</sup>

In 1938 the JLC joined with the American Jewish Committee, American Jewish Congress, and B'nai B'rith to establish the General Jewish Council to coordinate anti-Nazi work. The tensions among the organizations in this body are reflected in a story concerning one JLC representative who cried out at a 1942 council meeting, "If the Polish Jews will be annihilated, I don't care what is going to happen to the Jews here and to you and to your government!"<sup>5</sup>

While the JLC urged unified action, it also pursued an independent anti-Nazi campaign on many fronts. For example, when the American Olympics Committee declined to heed widespread protests against United States participation in the Berlin Olympics of 1936, the JLC held a World Labor Athletic Carnival, also known as the Counter-Olympics, at Randall's Island in New York City during August 1936. Dozens of teams representing New York union locals competed, and the main events featured outstanding amateur athletes from across the country. Governor Herbert Lehman presented the prizes. The Carnival received extensive nationwide press coverage, and the JLC repeated the event in the summer of 1937.<sup>6</sup>

Through the 1930s the JLC steadfastly expressed its conviction that the key to defeating Nazism was self-defense by a broad front of European labor and progressive forces, Jewish and non-Jewish, supported by material aid from abroad. As Vladeck put it, "The Jewish question must be solved in the countries where the Jews live." As anti-Jewish legislation and physical persecution intensified, Jews and other antifascists began to flee and seek asylum wherever they could find it. The prospect of mass Jewish emigration turned attention to existing United States immigration quotas. With many thousands of American workers on depression bread lines, it was unlikely that the AFL would relax its traditional opposition to mass immigration. The organized Jewish community, too, hesitated to call for the lifting of quotas. As they listened to the xenophobic and anti-New Deal ra-



Cover of program for JLC sponsored antifascist counter-Olympics, August 1936.

dio broadcasts of Father Charles Coughlin and his ilk, Jewish leaders could imagine anti-immigrant hostility touching off a paroxysm of racial hatred. What was happening in Europe might also happen here. Some, such as Rabbi Wise, feared that an international call for Jewish emigration might be seen as a symbolic gesture of acquiescence in Nazi crimes—a license for Jews to be driven from their homelands. Only when the Nazis' murderous intent became plain and wartime blockades made relief activity virtually impossible did the JLC begin to think in terms of a mass exodus.<sup>7</sup>

American engagement in a military campaign against Hitler was not yet envisaged by most labor and progressive groups. As late as 1939 the JLC loyally supported

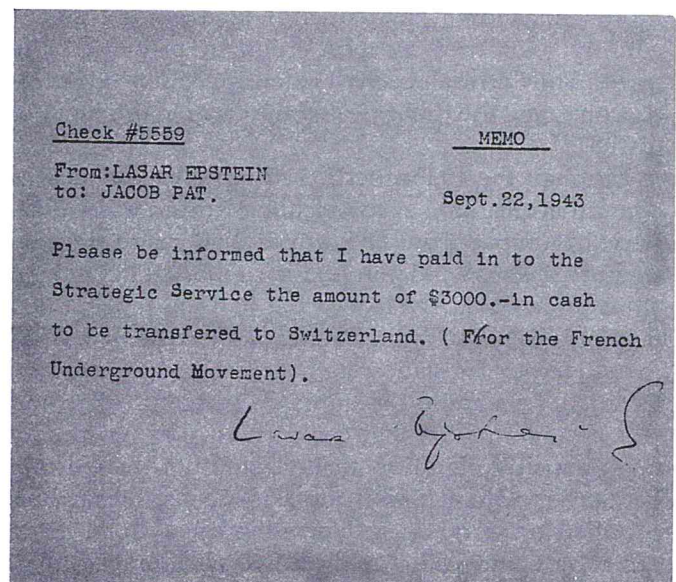
the AFL's commitment to neutrality. In September of that year it concurred in the General Jewish Council statement backing "the determination of the President and both major political parties to keep the United States out of the European War."<sup>8</sup> Within a year, however, that attitude had changed drastically. First the Workmen's Circle and then several JLC affiliate unions abandoned neutrality and began to press actively for an alliance with Britain.

In its leadership the JLC had a uniquely rich resource to draw on in bringing American labor to an understanding of the European catastrophe. Vladeck's untimely death in 1938 was a heavy blow, but the JLC staff was steadily enriched by the arrival of new emigres, each with a special expertise. Polish Bundists Jacob Pat and Benjamin Tabachinsky became, respectively, JLC executive secretary and JLC national fund-raising director.<sup>9</sup> Dr. Joseph Kissman came to America in 1937 to plead for financial assistance for the Romanian Labor League; he stayed on to become JLC research director and liaison with hundreds of left-wing Romanian refugees, scattered from Casablanca to Rio de Janeiro. Lasar Epstein, who had served for twenty years before the war as a Bundist representative in Tientsin, China, coordinated aid to the swelling Russian Jewish refugee population of Shanghai.

In 1939-1940, after the Nazi invasion of Poland and the fall of France, the JLC realized that immediate action was needed to save European socialist and labor leaders, who would be prime targets of the Gestapo. The JLC approached President Franklin D. Roosevelt directly and secured his promise that the government would issue a large number of emergency visitors' visas, each valid for a family, on the understanding that the rescuees would return to Europe after the war. Under this arrangement the JLC compiled a list that included Jewish and non-Jewish labor leaders and socialists, as well as Yiddish writers and other intellectuals. William Green presented more than 1,200 names to the State Department, which approved them. In the end not all these individuals could be located and saved, but the State Department issued more than 800 visas, leading to the rescue of more than 1,500 people.<sup>10</sup> They included prominent socialist and labor leaders from Germany, Austria, France, Belgium, Russia, and Eastern Europe. As the JLC later noted proudly, by 1947 individuals from this



*JLC officers with shipment of clothing destined for Polish refugees in the Soviet Union, ca. 1944.*



*The JLC provided monetary support to the Resistance Movement in occupied France.*



group held cabinet posts in six European nations.<sup>11</sup>

The situation in Europe worsened week by week. Through its links with underground and resistance units in Eastern Europe, the JLC received compelling evidence of Nazi atrocities and publicized it relentlessly in the U. S. labor press, in government circles, and wherever there was a faint hope of stimulating American sympathy. By the fall of 1942 the full extent of the slaughter in Poland was widely known. In October Polish Underground courier Jan Karski brought out a lengthy report from the Jewish Underground and added his own eyewitness description of conditions in the ghettos and in the deathcamp of Belzec.<sup>12</sup> The report reached New York in early December, in time for a meeting of Jewish leaders—including JLC chairman Adolph Held—with Roosevelt. The President's response was predictably vague. At a December 18 JLC meeting David Dubinsky in tones of despair reported that 2,000,000 Polish Jews had already been killed and that extermination of the Jewish people was Hitler's ultimate goal.<sup>13</sup>

From Arthur (Shmuel) Zygelboym, Bund representative to the Polish government in exile in London, the JLC received anguished accounts of the strangling of the

Warsaw Ghetto and the final annihilation of Ghetto resistance in April 1943. These reports and the grim news of Zygelboym's suicide in protest against the world's indifference were translated and circulated by the JLC. The JLC's annual report for 1942-1943 began on a note of lamentation:

Regarding our accomplishments in the direction of halting the Jewish tragedy, we should like to express the feeling of dissatisfaction shared by all of us. No one feels that we have really fulfilled our duty . . . . We feel that overseas martyrs and "kidoshim" lie in millions of graves. We know that in fields and woods overseas thousands of our brothers and sisters wander about with the "kidush ha-shem" mark upon them. And we? We have cried out, focussed public attention, spoken at meetings, written memoranda, participated in delegations, and—stood before a high wall.<sup>14</sup>

Now, in sorrow, the committee took up the task of sustaining the remnants of Polish Jewry hiding in the "Aryan" sector.

The JLC was no stranger to criticism, from both allies and longtime opponents. Some in the Jewish community felt the committee devoted too much time to non-Jewish allies and non-Jewish causes. Others went so far as to suggest that the JLC muted its opposition to American anti-Semitism for fear of offending non-Jewish supporters.<sup>15</sup> In fact, the JLC followed the path dictated by its own principles, even at the risk of unpopularity. In 1943, for example, the JLC received conclusive evidence that Henryk Erlich and Victor Alter, the most highly respected leaders of the pre-war Polish Bund, had been imprisoned and then murdered in Russia on Joseph Stalin's orders. True to its Bundist roots, the JLC organized a mass memorial meeting in New York, thus incurring the wrath of Amalgamated Clothing Workers President Sidney Hillman, who feared annoying the Roosevelt administration with a public attack on its wartime Soviet ally. More predictable was the outrage of the American Communist Party, which mustered one hundred Jewish trade unionists to sign a protest accusing the JLC of aiding the Nazis by criticizing the Soviets.<sup>16</sup>

The Zionist question was another longstanding source

of difficulty for the JLC. Its leaders tended to adhere to the traditional Bundist attitude that Zionist appeals were a distraction from the essential goal of ensuring the right of Jews to live as free and equal citizens in every country.<sup>17</sup> The Polish Bund had, however, maintained close and cordial relations with the left-wing party of labor Zionists (Left *Poale Zion*), and the JLC continued this relationship in America.<sup>18</sup> In the shadow of the European debacle, more and more JLC affiliates began to look favorably upon the development of some sort of Jewish "home" in Palestine; many expressed the hope that Arab and Jewish workers could build the country together, join in common labor struggles, and live in peace and mutual respect.<sup>19</sup>

From its inception the JLC supported the demand for free immigration of Jews into Palestine and lent support to labor and Yiddish cultural institutions there. When the British White Paper of 1939 virtually cut off Jewish immigration, the JLC protested vigorously and enlisted the help of its AFL and Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) allies in demanding that the gates be reopened for the desperate victims of Nazism. In the face of growing disagreement in its own ranks, the JLC officially continued to dodge the central issue of the creation of a Jewish state and came under continuing fire from Zionists of all shades. As late as August 1943 the JLC reiterated its call for "solidarity with organized labor in Palestine" but refused to take a position on "the ultimate constitutional status of Palestine."<sup>20</sup> By 1945 the JLC had adopted a stance of benign neutrality toward Jewish nationalism, but still would not officially endorse the notion of a Jewish state.<sup>21</sup>

As the war drew to a close the immediate needs of survivors became the JLC's prime concern. By 1944 it was spending close to \$1,000,000 a year, mostly on European relief. The full contribution of the JLC cannot, however, be measured in dollars alone. Intangibles were just as important: knowledge of conditions in Europe; links to the underground; the ability to find jobs, homes, and care for emigres; the mobilizing of union locals to solicit vast quantities of free clothing, toys, and other goods from employers; and the thousands of hours of donated labor given to AFL and CIO antifascist projects by JLC supporters.

Over the years a complex system of mutual aid and



*The JLC collects donated clothing on New York City's Lower East Side, ca. 1948. At right, Adolph Hold, Charles Zimmerman, and Jacob Pat.*

division of labor had grown up between all the groups concerned with Jewish survival. The older philanthropic organizations, notably the American Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) and the venerable Hebrew Sheltering and Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS), had a longstanding network of contacts around the world and budgets many times greater than the JLC's. The JLC sent money and supplies through JDC or HIAS channels, and it used these organizations' connections for arranging transit visas in China, Latin America, France, and Spain or for shipping goods through Teheran to refugees in Russia, for example. By the same token the JDC and HIAS transferred aid destined for Eastern Europe to the JLC, knowing that this was the best way to get it through. Beginning in 1940 the JLC received substantial sums from the Jewish Welfare Boards of various American cities; as



its reputation for efficiency and ingenuity grew, these contributions steadily increased.

The JLC also acted as a central clearinghouse, passing along innumerable requests that would spark the sympathy of smaller, more specialized groups. A plea is received from a company of Yiddish actors, starving in a DP camp. Send it to the Hebrew Actors' Union. Two emigre printers have arrived in New York. Call the Hebrew-American Typographical Union. Children's hats are needed. Notify the Millinery Workers. A family in Brooklyn are searching for their nephew, a rabbinical student. Contact Agudas Israel.

The role of the ILGWU and its indefatigable president, David Dubinsky, in JLC affairs can hardly be overestimated. With more than 200,000 in his union, Dubinsky had an impressive base from which to operate, whether in Jewish labor circles or in the leadership councils of organized labor. The ILGWU provided most of the money that passed through JLC hands, and at the same time contributed generously to other Jewish and

Voucher No. .... Check No. 5391

*Int. parcels for which refunds have been paid in.*

**VOUCHER**

JEWISH LABOR COMMITTEE

August 11, 1943  
Date

Pay to American Joint Distribution Committee

for 71 parcels to be reforwarded from Teheran, Iran to Refugees in USSR (out of the parcels of JLC stored with the Polish Red Cross, Teheran, Iran.)

\$ 1278.-

Approved by J.P. Signature [Signature]

*A 1943 voucher illustrating the multi-national and at times tortuous supply routes the JLC used to get help to refugees.*

non-Jewish relief organizations.<sup>22</sup> Dubinsky had many strings to his bow, and he was masterful in orchestrating them in the cause of Jewish survival.<sup>23</sup> A native of Lodz, Poland, with a Bundist background, he was deeply committed to the JLC effort. And he shared personally the anxieties of those whose frantic appeals for help poured across his desk. Several years after the war he was still involved in extricating members of his large extended family from the Displaced Persons (DP) camps.

In the spring of 1945 the JLC presented an exhibition entitled "Heroes and Martyrs of the Ghettos" at the Vanderbilt Gallery in New York. This was the first exhibit dealing with the atrocities of the Holocaust to be seen in New York—perhaps the first in America. At the opening ceremonies on April 19, the second anniversary of the Nazi destruction of armed resistance in the Warsaw Ghetto, actor Paul Muni read the final words of Arthur Zigelboym and Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia and Governor Thomas Dewey spoke forcefully. AFL President William Green, CIO President Philip Murray, Eleanor Roosevelt, Albert Einstein, and a host of American and European labor leaders sent greetings and support.

The end of the war brought tremendous new challenges. Within weeks of the cease-fire JLC representatives were touring Europe to judge for themselves what was most needed. JLC officers Nathan (Nahum) Chanin of the Workmen's Circle, Charles Zimmerman of the



*Through the JLC's child "adoption" program, hundreds of children were supported by individuals, organizations, and union locals such as these Philadelphia ILGWU workers who present a check to the JLC's Benjamin Tabachinsky (center, light-colored suit).*

ILGWU, and Jacob Pat sent back searing accounts of the condition of Jewish survivors and the destruction of Jewish life. Chanin's voluminous correspondence with the New York office reflects his fluctuating emotions. Interspersed with exasperated accounts of bureaucratic bungling and petty (and not so petty) squabbles among Zionist factions, between Zionists and Bundists, and between Communists and Social Democrats, there are sudden flashes of joy: "X is alive," "Z survives, is in Germany." Chanin visited the children's homes and hospitals, where help was most needed: "Today I was with the children from Buchenwald. Our aid is urgent. There are many Polish children . . ." <sup>24</sup>

In the former concentration camps the JLC helped prepare lists of those who perished and those who survived. <sup>25</sup> It also established elaborately cross-referenced card files on people seeking loved ones, which were used in answering the JLC's portion of the avalanche of heart-wrenching correspondence that was passed from the *Forward* to the Workmen's Circle, to the landsmanshaften, and to the many Jewish relief organizations.

In 1946 the JLC waged a massive propaganda cam-

paign, directed both at organized labor and at Congress, to urge passage of the Stratton Bill, which would have admitted 400,000 refugees to the United States under unused immigration quotas from the 1930s and early 1940s. Both the AFL and the CIO, and many of their constituent unions, relaxed their opposition to mass immigration and pushed hard for the bill. <sup>26</sup> The failure of this effort had a profound effect on the JLC's attitude toward a Jewish state in Palestine. The need for a safe haven was only too obvious. Reasonable alternatives were being closed off everywhere.

With deep shock, if not surprise, the JLC began to hear of renewed outbreaks of anti-Jewish violence in Poland. With supremely callous disregard of the lessons of the war, Sir Frederick E. Morgan, chief of United Nations refugee operations in Germany, declared that the migration of Jews from Poland into the United States zone in Germany was part of a "well organized, positive plan to get out of Europe" and added that he was not convinced by "all the talk about pogroms in Poland." JLC emissary Charles Zimmerman, who had just returned from Poland, replied scathingly that he had seen the survivors not plotting their escape to America but "crying for their murdered families." <sup>27</sup> Morgan's reaction to the indisputable massacre of forty Jews in a pogrom in Kielce six months later (July 1946) is not recorded. The JLC telegraphed Ambassador Jacques Maritain at Vatican City, "It is regrettable that the non-Jewish world has not





*A JLC worker addressing food packages for Jewish children in France, ca. 1949.*

reacted to this pogrom wave in the most speedy fashion. In fact the Catholic Church of Poland is silent."<sup>28</sup>

By 1947 there were still 850,000 people living in DP camps, and it had become obvious that hardly any of the Jewish survivors would return to their former homes in

Eastern Europe. Some who had already returned would flee again, as the Bundist dream of helping to build democratic republics in Eastern Europe was shattered by Communist takeovers.

Bella Meiksin and Nathan Gierowitz, two youthful and intrepid emigres, were assigned as full-time JLC representatives working in the camps. They soon became expert at cajoling assistance—from medical treatment to

## THE CHILDREN



*Chana, a Polish orphan living in the Vladeck Home in Paris, writing to the JLC.*

Clearly the future of Jewish life and culture was closely bound to the fate of surviving children—some orphaned, others living with ailing, destitute parents or guardians. Many had emerged from long years in hiding; some had been in the concentration camps. To help the children the JLC organized a Child Adoption Program. Its aim was not adoption in the usual sense, but rather to provide a mechanism by which Americans could contribute to the care of children living in Europe or Israel. At a cost of \$300 per year, a union shop or local, fraternal society, Workmen's Circle branch, women's club, or any other group or individual could "adopt" a child. The money

was used to supply clothes, school supplies, toys and gifts, and special food parcels. Adoptive "parents" received a photo of "their" child, a biography, progress reports, and letters from the child. The JLC Women's Division, founded in 1947 with May Vladeck Bromberg as president, played a crucial role in soliciting adoptions and also in directly supporting the JLC's children's homes and day nurseries.

Thousands of children were supported in this way well into the 1950s, and their letters and drawings are a testament to human goodness and resilience. Chana, a Polish orphan living in the Vladeck Home in Paris, exclaimed, "You ask me what it is I would like you to send.



Mother and daughter at the entrance to a JLC-supported day-nursery in Bielavo, Silesia, ca. 1947. The nursery is named for B. Michalewicz, a leader of the Bund.

No one has ever asked me such a question before.” Antonio, an amputee whose father was shot by the Gestapo, wrote from a Milan hospital, “I think of you many times—I pray to the Lord to give you and your families happiness . . . .”<sup>1</sup> Halina, an older girl from Lodz, Poland, stated in January 1948:

I received your package for which I am very grateful to you. I am a little upset that it is necessary for me to receive assistance from you. I understand that I should



Children in Rome receiving JLC parcels, 1945.

be self-dependent by now, but conditions force me to accept aid . . . . At present I am studying and I almost caught up with the students whose schooling was not disturbed by the war . . . From time to time I help others with their studies and in this way I try to support myself . . . .

In the beginning the ghetto looked terrible to us, but later we became accustomed to it. Then the liquidation of the ghetto and of the Jews began. The ghetto which seemed so terrible to us later seemed to be like the Garden of Eden. Each of us would have been glad to remain in the ghetto until the end of our lives, to hunger, to struggle, just as long as we could be with our families, just as long as our families should not be sent to the crematoriums. Despite the terrible loneliness, hunger, sickness, and even though we were only shadows of human beings, we wanted to live so much, so much—but unfortunately—<sup>2</sup>

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Both quoted in *Our Children* (New York: JLC, [1949]).

<sup>2</sup>English translation in Child Adoption Files, Jewish Labor Committee Collection, Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University.



*Bella Meiksin, described by a JLC colleague as a "human dynamo," was one of the committee's two full-time representatives in postwar Europe.*

transit visas—out of reluctant or overburdened officials. JLC offices in Brussels and Stockholm served thousands of refugees waiting to be permanently resettled. Across Europe soup kitchens, cooperative workshops, Yiddish schools and libraries, day nurseries, and clinics were supported by JLC funds. The atmosphere was captured by Jacob Pat in a 1948 report:

Thanks to the French Socialist Party we were able to secure 1,200 more visas for our D.P.'s in the camps who will now be permitted to settle in France. People have to be selected and examined medically. Then we must find transportation to France and provide new arrivals with apartments and work . . . . We are in the midst of bringing 2,000 needle trades workers and their families to Canada . . . . The Australian government has made 500 visas available . . . . Quite recently we moved 90 workers from the camps to Sweden . . . . We are now organizing a great central library in Munich . . . we have sent 50,000 books abroad so far.<sup>29</sup>

The first post-war national conference of the JLC, held in Atlantic City in 1947, was both a solemn and a heartening event. Haakon Lie of the Norwegian Social Democrats, Daniel Mayer of the French Socialists, and

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*The Borochov Library of the Left Poale Zion (Labor Zionists) in the former ghetto of Lodz, Poland, 1947. The JLC donated books to this and many other libraries and schools throughout Europe.*



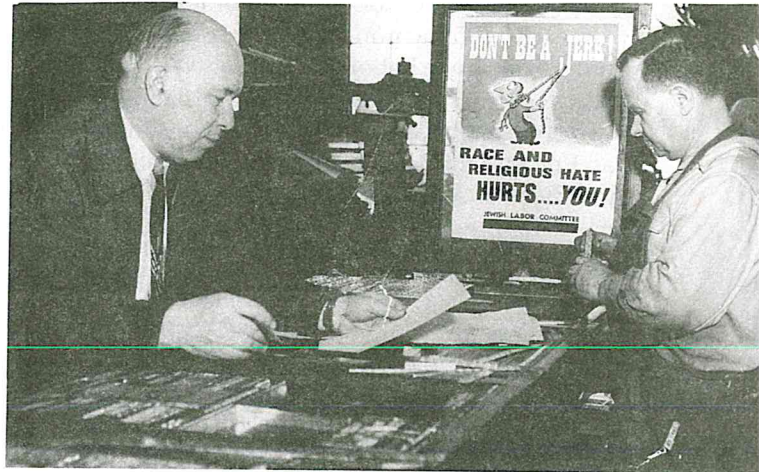
many others expressed the deep gratitude of European comrades for the JLC's wartime assistance. Delegates listened to survivors of the camps and to others who had been rescued through JLC efforts. Joseph Zygelboym, son of Arthur, recounted his experiences as a resistance fighter in the ghetto of Baranovitch. Young Vladka Meed told of her missions as an underground courier, bringing JLC aid to hidden survivors after the Warsaw uprising:

The money that you sent was the basis for all our later illegal activities. Your help reached the various cities in Poland, the hideouts, the dugouts, forests and camps . . . Our only justification for continuing to live is to fulfill our obligations to those who have passed on—to be petitioners for vengeance and justice, and to help those who have remained behind to rebuild a way of life which will be as valuable as the life that was cut off.<sup>30</sup>

The JLC understood that much remained to be done, not only overseas but at home. A new world had to be fashioned from the ashes and bitterness of war. Jacob Pat had written,

Our work over here and over there, our Jewish work and our international work—it is all one closely linked chain. We believe that there can be no good world that would be bad for the Jewish people, nor can there be a bad world that would be good for the Jewish people . . . Our fight for a better America is equivalent to a fight for the American people, for the American labor movement; it is [a] fight for humanity and brotherhood. This is our fight also for the protection of the most injured masses—the Jewish masses.<sup>31</sup>

The JLC's Committee to Combat Anti-Semitism, in cooperation with the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith and the Negro Labor Committee, became the driving force behind AFL and CIO educational efforts in the field of human rights.<sup>32</sup> The National Trade Union Council for Human Rights was chaired by the JLC's Charles Zimmerman, and JLC staff members helped to form committees to combat intolerance in more than twenty American cities. The JLC supplied posters, pam-



*A JLC and B'nai B'rith produced poster created by Bernard Seaman, 1945.*

phlets, and film strips, organized classes, conferences, and summer institutes, and generally stimulated awareness of the evil of race hatred throughout the labor movement. The JLC monthly labor news service, *Labor Reports*, distributed human rights news clips and cartoons in one U. S. and two Canadian editions (English and French).

The post-war years brought profound changes for Jewish labor, as for all other sectors of American society. At home, the JLC faced the demise of the New Deal and the rise of Cold War anticommunism (and general anti-leftism), the constraints imposed on labor by the Taft-Hartley Act, the changing ethnic composition of the once-Jewish unions, and the "suburbanization" of American Jewry. Internationally, it saw a new balance of power in Europe, rapprochement between European social democracy and American capitalism, the emergence of the State of Israel, and the inevitable decline of Yiddish culture, savagely uprooted from its East European seedbeds. Although the conditions of work had changed, the basic goals remained: to assist the surviving victims of fascist brutality, to oppose anti-Semitism and support labor and human rights everywhere, and to preserve and foster the liberal and humane traditions of Jewish life. The JLC continues to stand as a voice of conscience in the councils of labor and as labor's advocate in the broader Jewish community. ■

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This article had its genesis in a photo exhibit the author helped prepare for the October 1990 biennial convention of the Jewish Labor Committee in New York City. A debt of gratitude is owed to Erika Gottfried of the Wagner Archives, co-curator of that exhibit. Additional thanks are due to all colleagues at the Tamiment Library/Wagner Archives, especially to Karl Dunkel, Ethel Lobman, Moshe Kagan, and Shavit Birenzvice; to Martin Lapan, Philoine Fried, Florence Cohen, and Arieh Lebowitz of the Jewish Labor Committee; and to Esther Brumberg of the Museum of Jewish Heritage, New York City.

In early 1985 the non-current records of the Jewish Labor Committee were donated by the committee to the Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives at New York University Library. This vast collection, totaling more than 800 linear feet of documents and nearly 10,000 photographs, covers the work of the committee from its founding in 1934 through the early 1980s. It is a valuable resource for scholars studying the Jewish communities of pre-war Europe, the Holocaust, Jewish immigration, the history of Palestine and Israel, and the Jewish labor movement in America. The earliest portion of the collection, covering the Holocaust period (1934-1947), is now being prepared for microfilming under a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

<sup>1</sup>*Jewish Daily Forward*, 26 Feb. 1934; *New York Times*, 15 Apr. 1934.

<sup>2</sup>Statement of Purpose, 1938, quoted in George Berlin, "The Anti-Nazi Activities of the Jewish Labor Committee in the 1930's," M.A. thesis, Columbia University, 1966, p. 4.

<sup>3</sup>On Vlodeck, see Melech Epstein, *Jewish Labor in U.S.A.* (New York: Ktav, 1969), vol. 2, 1914-1952, pp. 384-88; and John Herling, "Baruch Charney Vlodeck," *American Jewish Yearbook, 1939-1940* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1940), pp. 79-93. Vlodeck's correspondence relating to the AFL and the JLC is in Vlodeck Papers, Tamiment Library, New York University. On the history of the Bund, see Bernard K. Johnpoll, *The Politics of Futility: The General Jewish Workers Bund of Poland, 1917-1943* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967); and Nora Levin, *While Messiah Tarried: Jewish Socialist Movements, 1871-1917* (New York: Schocken Books, 1977).

<sup>4</sup>On disagreements within the Joint Boycott Council, see Berlin, "Anti-Nazi Activities," pp. 17-21; and David Kranzler, "The Role in Relief and Rescue during the Holocaust by the Jewish Labor Committee," in Seymour Maxwell Finger, *American Jewry During the Holocaust* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1984), Appendix 4-2, pp. 3-7. On the uneasy alliance between the

JLC and the Congress, as well as the boycott in general, see Moshe R. Gottlieb, *American Anti-Nazi Resistance, 1933-1941: An Historical Analysis* (New York: Ktav, 1982), pp. 181-296; and Joint Boycott Council Files, Jewish Labor Committee Collection, Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University [hereafter cited as JLC Coll.]. Having served its purpose, the Joint Boycott Council disbanded in Oct. 1941.

<sup>5</sup>Quoted in Monty Noam Pankower, *The Jews Were Expendable: Free World Diplomacy and the Holocaust* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983), pp. 68-69. The JLC representative was Jacob Pat.

<sup>6</sup>Edward S. Shapiro, "The World Labor Athletic Carnival of 1936: An American Anti-Nazi Protest," *American Jewish History* 74 (Mar. 1985): 255-73; Gottlieb, *American Anti-Nazi Resistance*, pp. 231-35; clippings scrapbooks, "Labor Athletic Carnival, 1936," and "Labor Athletic Carnival, 1937," JLC Coll.

<sup>7</sup>The Vlodeck quote is from the *New York Times*, 15 Apr. 1934. For the history of the JLC and the AFL's pre-war positions on immigration reform, see George L. Berlin, "The Jewish Labor Committee and American Immigration Policy in the 1930's," in *Studies in Jewish Bibliography, History and Literature in Honor of I. Edward Kiev* (New York: Ktav, 1971); and Sidney Kelman, "Limits of Consensus: Unions

and the Holocaust," *American Jewish History* 79 (Spring 1990): 336-57. Berlin is critical of JLC for subservience to AFL policy; Kelman notes the outspoken support of the ILGWU and the CIO for immigration reform but concludes, "Even the ILGWU [and by implication the JLC] could not exceed the limits of current public opinion," p. 344.

<sup>8</sup>Quoted in Berlin, "Anti-Nazi Activities," p. 25.

<sup>9</sup>Pat's wife and children were stranded in Vilna; with poignant restraint, he wrote to the Bund in London, "I am applying to you in the hope that you will be able to do something for my family at no other Comrade's expense." His wife, Rifke, died in Vilna; his son, daughter, and daughter-in-law escaped to America. J. Pat to B. Rosner, 21 Dec. 1939, translation in JLC Coll. Tabachinsky, who lost his wife and son to the Nazis, was a beloved figure; he was greeted joyously by surviving Bundists when he visited DP camps in 1946. See Tabachinsky Correspondence File, June 1946, JLC Coll.

<sup>10</sup>A further 700 names were presented by the Orthodox authorities, and about 110 by the World Jewish Congress. Tragically, only 40 families on the Orthodox list could be found and rescued. Finger, *American Jewry*, p. 35.

<sup>11</sup>For a colorful account of the rescue project, see Jacob Pat, "The JLC and the International Anti-Nazi

Resistance Movement," leaflet, reproduced from *Labor and Nation* (Jan.-Feb. 1947), JLC Coll.; report of Adolph Held in Executive Board Minutes, 6 Mar. 1941; and report of Isaiah Minkoff in Executive Board Minutes, 16 Apr. 1941, JLC Coll.

<sup>12</sup>Published, in part, by the JLC as "Eye-Witness Report of a Secret Courier Fresh from Poland," *Voice of the Unconquered* 1 (Mar. 1943): 5, 8; and by the Bund in New York in its paper, *Unser Zeit*.

<sup>13</sup>Kenneth Waltzer, "American Jewish Labor and Aid to Polish Jews during the Holocaust," paper presented at the conference of the United States Holocaust Memorial Council, Mar. 1987, Washington, D.C., pp. 8-9.

<sup>14</sup>"Report 42/43," incomplete English translation, in JLC Coll., p. 8. For details of the anatomy of the Polish Underground, the JLC's cooperation with the Polish government in exile, and the tortuous, illegal means by which JLC money made its way into Poland, see Waltzer, "American Jewish Labor," pp. 7ff. Roughly translated, 'kidoshim' means "holy ones" and 'kidush ha-shem' 'mark' means "mark of holy martyrdom."

<sup>15</sup>For a strong refutation of this charge, see JLC Field Director Charles Sherman's open letter in reply to R. Salzman's pamphlet, *Manipulations of the Jewish Labor Committee* (New York: International Workers Order, 1944), JLC Coll.

<sup>16</sup>*Daily Worker*, 25 Mar. 1943. The Polish Bundists' anticommunism, like their anti-Zionism, went back to the blood-feuds of the turn of the century.



*Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union secretary-treasurer Frank Rosenblum and wife, Ida, visit a Yiddish class at the Vladeck Home near Paris, 1953. After the war, funds from the JLC helped to build and support homes, schools, and rehabilitation centers in several Western European countries for both Jewish and non-Jewish orphans and destitute children.*

In the 1940s as accommodation with Zionism grew ever more alluring, their—and the JLC's—opposition to Communism deepened and hardened. See Kranzler, “Role in Relief and Rescue,” p. 16.

<sup>17</sup>Zosa Szajkowski, “Western Jewish Aid and Intercession for Polish Jewry, 1919-1939,” in Joshua A. Fishman, ed., *Studies on Polish Jewry, 1919-1939* (New York: YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, 1974), p. 217.

<sup>18</sup>On the JLC and Zionism, Samuel Halperin, *The Political World of American Zionism* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1961), pp. 162-69; Finger, *American Jewry*, p. 34; and Berlin, “Anti-Nazi Activities,” pp. 51ff. See also the confidential, highly

critical memo to the JLC from *Forward* editor Abraham Cahan, 25 May 1937, JLC Coll.; and “Jewish Labor Comes Closer,” *Congress Weekly* (31 Jan. 1941), p. 4.

<sup>19</sup>Berlin, “Anti-Nazi Activities,” p. 52.

<sup>20</sup>*Post-war Peace Demands for the Jews* (New York: JLC, 1943), JLC Coll.; “Re: Our Palestine Program,” memo to Adolph Held, 20 May 1941, JLC Coll.

<sup>21</sup>Harry Rogoff, “The Poale Zionists on a Dangerous Road,” leaflet, translated from *Forward*, 24 May 1945, JLC Coll.

<sup>22</sup>Both the JLC and the ILGWU were sensitive to the varied ethnic composition of the garment unions, and were

careful, for example, to publicize their support of non-Jewish Italian antifascists. See Walzer, “American Jewish Labor,” p. 6.

<sup>23</sup>On ILGWU rescue and relief activity, see Sidney Kelman, “Limits of Consensus,” pp. 342-45.

<sup>24</sup>N. Chanin to J. Pat, 19 June 1945, JLC Coll.

<sup>25</sup>See Joel Zak, Josef Lindemberger, and Jacob Silberstein, *Memorial Dates (Yorzait) of the Martyred Jews of Dachau*, 2 vols. (New York: JLC, 1947). Unpublished portions of this list are in JLC Coll.

<sup>26</sup>Kelman, “Limits of Consensus,” pp. 354-55.

<sup>27</sup>JLC press release, 3 Jan. 1946, JLC Coll.

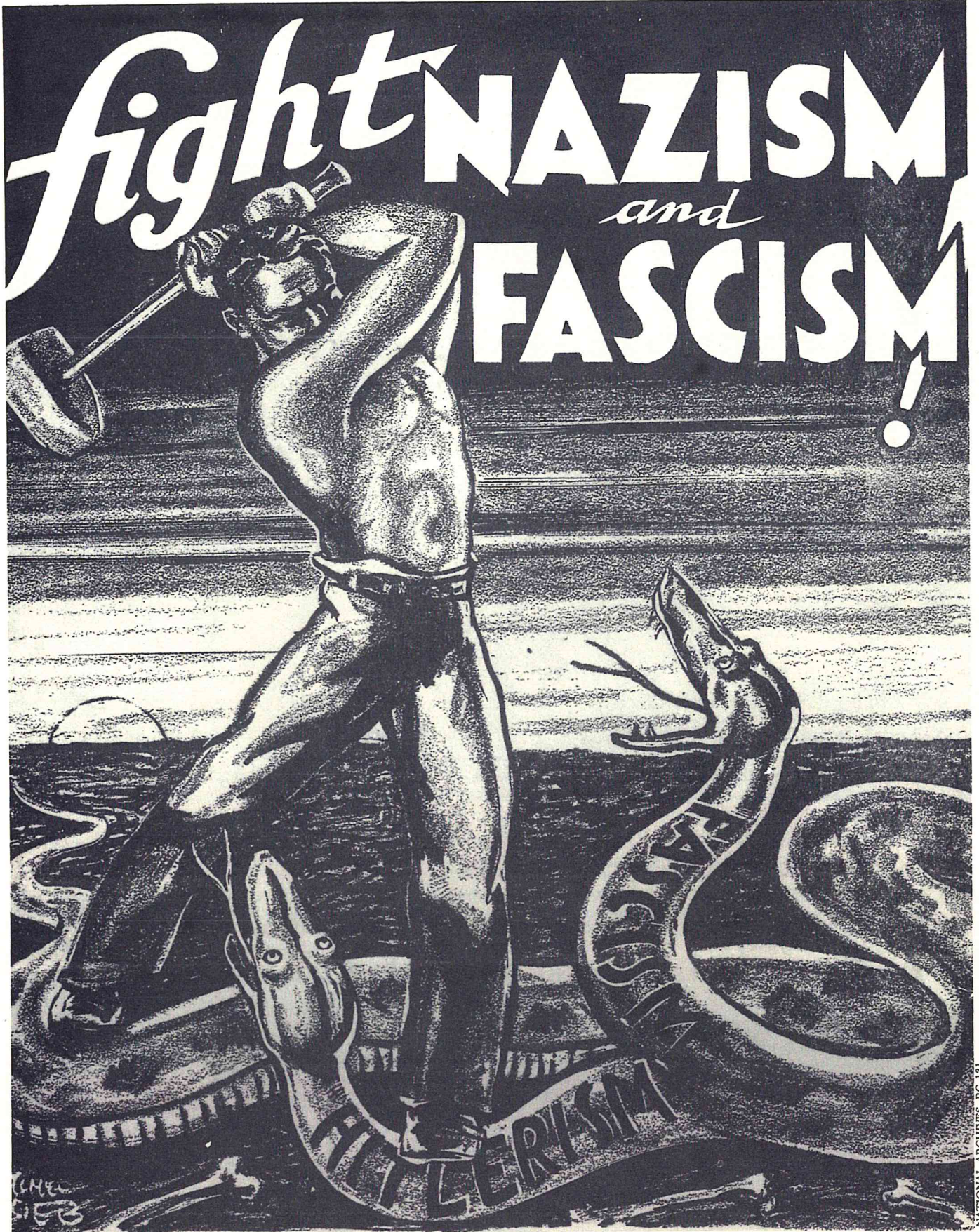
<sup>28</sup>JLC to Jacques Maritain, 12 July 1946, JLC Coll.

<sup>29</sup>Jacob Pat, *The Story of the Jewish Labor Committee* (New York: JLC, 1948), [pp. 6-7].

<sup>30</sup>English translation in National Convention File, 1947, JLC Coll. See also, Vladka Meed, *On Both Sides of the Wall: Memoirs from the Warsaw Ghetto* (New York: Holocaust Library, 1979).

<sup>31</sup>J. Pat, “Story of the JLC,” [p. 8].

<sup>32</sup>Thomas R. Brooks, “Jewish Labor Committee . . . Fighters for Freedom,” *American Federationist* 71 (July 1964): 20-21; and Thomas R. Brooks, “40 Years of Fighting Bias,” *American Federationist* 80 (Dec. 1973): 19-21.



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*Antifascist poster widely circulated by the JLC and other labor organizations, ca. 1935.*