

Downplaying the Holocaust: Arthur Hays Sulzberger & the New York Times

TEDx Talk by Anna Blech

Viewable online at

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q2PQCNQH2IY&feature=youtu.be>

Anna is the granddaughter of Felix Wimpfheimer, a physician in his 90s who still practices and teaches internal medicine and endocrinology. Dr. Wimpfheimer escaped from Nazi Germany to New York City in 1938. Anna's paper "Downplaying the Holocaust: Arthur Hays Sulzberger and the New York Times" won First Place at the 2013 New York City History Day Contest, a National Gold Award at the 2014 Scholastic Writing Awards, and the Eleanor Light Prize from the Hunter College High School Social Studies Department. The Eleanor Light Prize was established by Eleanor Ullman Light '49 for research on the Holocaust, human rights, and genocide.

Transcript of Anna's talk:

My grandfather and his family left Germany in 1938 and settled in New York City. When I asked him whether he was aware of what happened to the Jewish community he left behind, he said that he did not know about the fate of European Jewry until after the camps were liberated.

Similarly, when Eisenhower marched through Buchenwald with all the most eminent congressmen and journalists in order to document what had been done, the general consensus seemed to be: "How did we not know about this while it was happening?"

The only problem is, we did.

A *New York Times* article from July 2, 1942 reports the slaying of 700,000 Jews, "one-fifth of the entire Jewish population of Poland." It even mentions concentration camps and gas chambers. The article says: "Children in orphanages, old persons in

almshouses, the sick in hospitals and women were slain in the streets. In many places Jews were rounded up and deported to unrevealed destinations or massacred in nearby woods." The article goes on to list how many Jews have been killed in each province, and then says that "the massacre still continues in Lvov."

This account was typical. The information is factual, detailed and even contemporaneous. And there were a lot of articles like this. Between 1939 and 1945, Historian Laurel Leff counts 1,186 articles about the Holocaust in *The New York Times*.

Yet the American public was largely unaware. So that raises two questions. The first question is how did this happen? And then the second question is why did this happen?

So first: How? The answer is that these articles were buried in the middle of the paper. The article from July 2, 1942 appeared on page six under a small subheading reserved for unimportant material.

Another article from June 27, 1942 which describes the same massacre as "probably the greatest mass slaughter in history," was on page five and had no title at all.

So then we ask: Why? Well, it wasn't because the front page was full of momentous news. On the day that this story appeared in *The New York Times*, the front page featured articles about tennis shoes and canned fruit.

So then, we ask again, why?

The answer is: Arthur Hays Sulzberger. Arthur Hays Sulzberger was the controlling owner and publisher of the *New York Times*. And what made it so surprising is that he was Jewish.

But the fact that his family dated back to eighteenth century America and that he had a long and aristocratic heritage made him feel that he had no connection to the threatened mass of European Jews.

He wrote:

“There is no common denominator between the poor unfortunate Jew being driven around what was recently Poland and...Mr. [Leslie] Hore-Belisha [British Secretary of War who was a Sephardic Jew] or myself. Certainly, in Poland, this Jew is part of a recognized minority. Mr. Hore-Belisha and I, fortunately, are in no such category.”

Sulzberger’s dissociation from European Jews was reinforced by his religious ideology. His grandfather-in-law, Isaac Wise, founded Classical Reform Judaism in America, which is not to be confused with modern Reform Judaism. Classical Reform Judaism promotes the idea that Jews are not a people, a nation, or a race but simply followers of a religion.

Sulzberger viewed the situation of European Jews through the prism of his Reform Judaism. Because he did not see the Jews as a race, he refused to comprehend that Hitler was targeting them as a race, specifically an inferior race akin to rats.

Time after time, Sulzberger’s views are reflected in *New York Times* editorials, in which the plight of the Jews is not highlighted specifically.

About German refugee children, almost all of whom were Jewish, the *New York Times* says: “They would be of every race and creed.”

About Hitler’s regime, the *New York Times* says: “It is decency and justice that are being persecuted—not a race, a nationality, or a faith.”

About the refugee problem, the *New York Times* says: “It has nothing to do with race or creed. It is not a Jewish problem or a Gentile problem.”

And remarkably an editorial about the Warsaw Ghetto uprising in 1943 does not mention Jews at all.

Sulzberger thought that Jews should not be persecuted as Jews nor rescued as Jews. What he failed to take into account is that it was not he and his fellow Reform

Jews who were driving history at that moment, but rather, Hitler and the Third Reich.

The second reason that Sulzberger influenced his editors and writers to downplay the Holocaust was his fear that the *New York Times* might be seen as a “Jewish paper” and lose credibility.

Here is an example: In the pre-war years, the *New York Times* received a large number of anti-Semitic letters. Sulzberger decided that he could not publish any letters that denounced the persecution of German Jews, because then he would have to be neutral and print alongside those letters some of the anti-Semitic letters he was receiving. The modern day equivalent would be if a newspaper editor decided he could not publish letters from the Executive Director of the NAACP because if he did that, he would have to be neutral and publish a racist diatribe by the Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan. Sulzberger wanted so badly to be neutral about Jewish issues that he adopted an absurd and amoral stance.

Blindly loyal to the government, the *New York Times* never called for the lifting of Jewish immigration quotas. The paper toed the government line that there was nothing the U.S. could do to save Jews except to win the war as quickly as possible and prosecute Nazis once it was over.

This editorial is typical. The *New York Times* says: “The most tragic aspect of the situation is the world’s helplessness to stop the horror while the war is going on.”

In truth, we may not have been so helpless. Historian Deborah Lipstadt points out that the Roosevelt administration had a policy of “obfuscation and camouflage” of atrocities against the Jews because it did not want to be barraged with requests for rescue attempts.

And even late in the war, such rescue attempts could have done a great deal. It was towards the end of the war that the extermination of the Jews became most efficient. After the Nazi takeover of Hungary in May 1944, the death trains began running straight from the Jewish ghettos in Hungary right up to the gas chambers.

By bombing the camps or bombing the tracks leading up to the camps, the Allies could have seriously impacted the German ability to keep the extermination going. However, the War Department declared that rescue missions were not feasible, because they would detract important resources from the war effort. But would they?

On September 13, 1944 an aerial photo was taken from a U.S. fighter plane on a mission to drop bombs onto a German synthetic oil factory. But it had missed its target, and instead it dropped eight high explosive bombs onto the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp by mistake. In the upper right and left corners you can even see the gas chambers. Clearly, U.S. fighter planes were flying over the camps on military missions. Dropping bombs on Auschwitz or on the tracks leading up to it would not have compromised the war effort in the slightest.

Since the *New York Times* was the paper of record, hundreds of newspapers around the country followed its lead. By treating the Holocaust as an important story, the *New York Times* could have galvanized public opinion, and it could have altered the Roosevelt policy of not attempting to rescue Jews or disrupt the Nazi death machine.

But the writers and editors at the *Times* were acutely aware of Sulzberger's sensitivity to Jewish issues. They based their placement of stories in the newspaper on their perceptions of his views. Abraham Rosenthal, former managing editor of the *Times* said it best: "I assure you, nobody put a sign on the wall that said downplay the Holocaust. It's the way of life. You have an organization. Sometimes things are not said, they're done."

But even if Auschwitz could not have been bombed, even if immigration quotas could not have been eased, even if putting atrocities against the Jews on the front page could not have saved a single life, Sulzberger still should have done it. He had a journalistic and a moral responsibility to give those articles the attention they deserved.

On March 2nd, 1944, an article appeared in the *New York Times* on page four amid thirteen other stories. The first two paragraphs describe a decision by the British House of Commons to allocate funds to help refugees. In the third paragraph, the article says: "During the discussion S.S. Silverman, Labor member, read a report from the Jewish National Committee operating somewhere in Poland, saying: Last month, we still reckoned the number of Jews in the whole territory of Poland as from 250,000 to 300,000. In a few weeks no more than 50,000 of us will remain. In our last moment before death, the remnants of Polish Jewry appeal for help to the whole world. May this, perhaps our last voice from the abyss, reach the ears of the whole world."

As if the *New York Times* writer was totally unaware of what he had just written, the article continues: "The Commons also approved an installment of 3,863 pounds to help the International Red Cross Open an office in Shanghai."

The voice from the abyss did not reach the ears of the whole world. The *New York Times* included that voice in their paper, but they drowned it in a cacophony of other voices, and, ignoring the patterns of genocide, they refused to add their own clarion call for action. Some stories are too important to be whispered. To quote historian Laurel Leff: "If the world is to have even a chance to hear, the press must shout."

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