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Mayor Fiorello H. LaGuardia and His Rhetoric Vis-à-Vis the Jews, 1934-1945 or, Unpopular and Unafraid

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This paper focuses on LaGuardia the international spokesperson. More specifically, it examines his words and deeds as they refer to the concerns of America's Jews (generally New York's Jews) with their brethren in Europe, persecuted by Adolf Hitler and his Nazi henchmen. Finally, it determinedly attempts to answer the troubling question of whether he did enough for them, or if his words were just a clever and shallow political ploy—another method of garnering votes from his Jewish constituency. The study looks to primary sources for answers. Secondary sources round out the inquiry.

Between 1934 and 1945, Fiorello H. LaGuardia was the fiery, flamboyant, no-nonsense Mayor of New York City. Interestingly though, LaGuardia not only had a citywide agenda, many felt he had an *international* agenda.

This paper shows that between 1934 and 1945, Mayor LaGuardia did all he could to help the Jews in Europe, persecuted by Adolf Hitler and his Nazi henchmen. Whenever the opportunity arose, he continually and consistently spoke out against Hitler and Nazism. Whenever the opportunity arose, he tried to do something about the growing power of this evil.

Moreover, this paper would also like to submit that LaGuardia may very well have been testing the waters for what the President saw his future steps *might very well be* regarding Hitler and Nazism generally, steps as yet much too controversial and unpopular with the American public to take. For even as LaGuardia's views seemingly differed from Roosevelt's, Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes in his *Secret Diary* writes that after one of LaGuardia's more tempestuous outbursts concerning Hitler, on March 6, 1937 "at the opening of a Cabinet meeting the President turned with a grin to [Secretary of State Cordell] Hull and asked what was the latest on LaGuardia. Before Hull could reply, the President went on with: 'What would you say if I should say that I agreed completely with LaGuardia?'" Hull answered complaining vigorously about the New York City Mayor. "The President, still with a grin on his face, touched his left wrist lightly with the first two fingers of his right hand and remarked to Hull: 'We will chastise him like that'" At the conclusion of this *Diary* entry Ickes writes: "It was plain that he [Roosevelt] would like to see a gold medal pinned on LaGuardia's lapel for what he had said about Hitler" (1954, p. 89). LaGuardia historian Lawrence Elliott goes on to say that when the

President next met with the New York City Mayor they had a warm laugh over the whole thing! (1983, p.227). In sum, Roosevelt was *not* unhappy with LaGuardia.

Meanwhile, historians have noted how exceptionally concerned Roosevelt was with public opinion and what great care he took in all he said and did (Lipstadt, 1986, p. 4). Indeed, “his channels to the public mind were deliberately constructed and carefully maintained” (Steele, 1974, p. 195). Each day he consulted a score of newspapers, materials from clipping services, and read public opinion reports and polls (Sudman, 1982, p. 302). He read letters Americans wrote to him, he made it a point to meet with knowledgeable personal contacts and specialists charged with keeping tabs on the pulse of the people. Furthermore there was the important public opinion work done by Hadley Cantril and Gerard Lambert. All this helped him to “gauge and shape public attitudes” regarding the “public acceptance of the long range implications of the Roosevelt revolution, whether this was the welfare state or a new role for the United States in world affairs” (Steele, 1974, p.196). Thus, politically shrewd, Roosevelt may just have used the fearless LaGuardia as his point man at a time when Congress was “restrictionist” and most Americans were concerned with staying neutral when it came to all that was happening in Europe (Feingold, 1970, p. 242). Interestingly, in later years, this same LaGuardia fearlessness would lead to Roosevelt’s considering him a bit too difficult to handle in a cabinet position.

In contemplating the Jews in the 30s and 40s, one could easily jump to the conclusion that LaGuardia was concerned with them because his mother was a Jew. But that argument can be laid to rest immediately. His mother wasn’t a practicing Jew and “he would identify himself as an American Protestant of Italian descent, never as a Jew” (Mann, 1959, p. 28).

Actually, much concerning LaGuardia and the Jews can best be understood by a look back at the *whole* man, his formative years, and what he cared about even *before* he became Mayor of New York City—what made him the man to right wrongs.

First off, LaGuardia learned early what *struggle* was. He was born in New York City on December 11, 1882, to struggling immigrants Achille LaGuardia, a musician from Foggia, Italy, and his wife Irene Luzzato Coen, from Trieste, then a part of Austria. Because of Achille’s continuous joblessness, he soon enlisted in the United States Army and became the chief musician assigned to the Eleventh Infantry Regiment. Thus by 1892, the LaGuardia family, mother, father, Fiorello, his sister Gemma, and his brother Richard Dodge would be in Prescott, Arizona, the place Fiorello would forever consider his hometown.

Indeed, Fiorello loved Arizona, but, it was here that he learned what *discrimination* was. He was relentlessly taunted because he was an Italian, a “dago” (Elliott, 1983, p. 27). He was looked down on because he was the son of an enlisted man and not a commissioned

officer. He suffered no less because of his diminutive size—“in his prime he barely topped five feet” (Mann, 1959, p. 30).

It was here, too, that LaGuardia first witnessed *exploitation*. He saw how out-of-work miners and other laborers were at the mercy of the railroad then laying tracks from Prescott to Phoenix. He saw how helpless men were hired and gingerly fired. He saw how desperate others clung to dangerous railroad jobs daily risking life and limb.

According to his sister Gemma, the young LaGuardia reacted by becoming “pugnacious, loquacious, competitive, and blunt” (Mann, 1959, p. 30). In fact, one of LaGuardia’s public school teachers would later comment on how, with his “volcanic personality” (Elliott, 1983, p. 25), he early became “an insistent and determined speaker, ‘a real fighter’ when it came to expressing his views” (Qtd. in Elliott, 1983, p. 29). He discovered he liked being a leader, even if he was the smallest. Moreover, he found he just loved declaiming, and when he wanted to declaim you had to listen!

Most importantly, LaGuardia’s world view began to crystallize, a *very* sinister black and white world view, often expressed in the lingo of the Old West or the criminal underworld. In sum, for him the world would be populated by good guys and villains, or as he frequently called them “tin horns,” “chiselers,” “racketeers,” or “punks” (Heckscher with Robinson, 1978, p. 104; Brodsky, 2003, p. 10). The good guys would be all those struggling for a better life—not surprisingly, often immigrants. The good guys would be those battling discrimination wherever it was. The good guys would be lone individuals up against big corporations with their self-aggrandizing agendas. Concomitantly, the villains would include all those who made the good life difficult for honest, hardworking people to attain. The villains would be all religious and racial persecutors. The villains would be the selfish corporations LaGuardia would refer to as “the Interests” (Brodsky, 2003, p. xiii)

By the time he returned to New York City in the early 1900s, LaGuardia knew he wanted to study law. He knew he wanted to rid the world of as many villains as possible. The years had firmly confirmed his world view. His father’s untimely death due to, as LaGuardia maintained—tainted Army meat—dishonestly pawned off by the Armour corporation to equally dishonest Army purchasing agents, *thoroughly* convinced him of the incredible vulnerability of the individual vs. “the Interests.” Then the LaGuardia family’s subsequent move back to Trieste due to financial exigency, LaGuardia’s job with the American Consulate there and elsewhere in the area—all this again brought him face-to-face with immigrants, their very real and painful struggles, and the insidious discrimination they suffered at home and abroad.

By 1914, however, after receiving his law degree and practicing for a while, he realized “lawyering” was really not for him (Elliott, 1983, p. 60). Politics! Now there he would have a *golden* opportunity to rid the world of villains, not one by one, but en masse!

Running as a Republican for Congress from the 14th Congressional District—LaGuardia would never run as a Democrat, identified as they were with Tammany Hall and corruption—he determinedly pounded the pavement, learning about his constituency and presenting himself and his views to them with a boundless energy others would always marvel at. Since the people living in the District, encompassing the area generally from the Hudson to the East River and 3rd Street to 14th Street, included many Italian and Jewish immigrants, LaGuardia “expounded” on the acute knowledge he had of their problems (Mann, 1959, p. 62). Interestingly, he did this “expounding” in six languages, concomitantly showing an acute knowledge of the verbal language *and* the distinct body language of each culture (Kirch, 1979, p. 420). He did all this “sensitive” to his audience, but, on the other hand “as bruisingly rough and tumble as the best Tammany in-fighters” (Mann, 1959, p. 62). He did all this in his inimitable “slashing, hot gospel style of oratory” (Mann, 1959, p. 59). And all the while there was that high-crowned Stetson atop his head, in tribute to his Western roots. True, in the end he didn’t win—the 14th was a Democratic stronghold—but he found a definite place in the hearts of these people moved by a man who spoke their language.

In 1916, undeterred, LaGuardia ran again in the same District, this time as a Republican with Progressive support. Now the thrust of his campaign speeches dealt with the war and international issues. For example, he energetically and emotionally told Italians in his audience that “no peace would be an equitable peace unless Trieste were returned to Italy” (Brodsky, 2003, p. 71). He also revealed his first campaign stand concerning a specifically Jewish issue. In sum, he saw the war’s end also ending “the anti-Semitic tyranny of the Czars” and all the Russian people free (Elliott, 1983, p. 7). Indeed, there is every reason to believe he meant all he said for it fits in well with his views of righting the wrongs in the world . . . if he only could!

LaGuardia’s win in the 1916 Congressional election was historic. He was the first Italian-American to sit in the House of Representatives, and he was the first Republican to be sent to Congress from the 14th Congressional District. LaGuardia was going to make it mean something!

With that, the House met a “short, rather stout man with snapping black eyes, moving restlessly about the floor” (Limpus & Leyson, 1938, p. 206). He would always have “sheaves of notes and statistics before him.” He would speak extemporaneously “simply and forcefully, in language that tenement dwellers could understand, constantly repeating phrases that appealed to him, sacrificing grammar for vitality, coupling invective with humor and anger with irony” to make his point (Zinn, 1958, p. 271). He was ever ready to “pipe out” in a high-pitched voice—arms waving and lower lip jutting out—“tart comments which were a continual trial to the party leaders.” He was “tactless, obstinate, abusive, and overdramatic” (Zinn, 1958, p. 272). Finally, LaGuardia historian Howard Zinn characterizes the Congressman saying he “combined a profound sense of social responsibility with an irrepressible individualism” (1958, p. 273).

In those early years there were many national issues that claimed his attention: the war, the draft, the Espionage Bill, his own enlistment, there were the corporations LaGuardia saw bilking the public. Nonetheless, when an international issue came up, an issue he felt needed righting, LaGuardia was there.

For example, soon after World War I, anti-Semitic riots broke out in Poland. LaGuardia introduced a resolution which told the delegates at the Peace Conference to make it very clear to the representatives of the area where this occurred that such activity, if continued, would preclude any aid from the United States (Mann, 1959, p. 105). Shortly after, the State Department reported that it had received governmental assurances that there would be no repetition of the pogroms. LaGuardia would claim that “Poles in this country didn’t like me after that and they tried to influence Americans of Polish descent as well as other citizens to vote against me” (LaGuardia, 1961, p. 213). In fact, LaGuardia was unperturbed.

Not surprisingly, in 1924, the introduction of the Johnson-Reed Act incensed LaGuardia and he made his extreme displeasure known. The Johnson-Reed Act would “drastically curtail immigration and assign the highest quotas to Anglo-Saxon countries” (Mann, 1959, p. 167). In sum, LaGuardia stood in the House and passionately admonished his audience, reminding them of the contributions made by Jewish and Italian immigrants to America. Regarding the very idea that other cultures, races, or religions were somehow superior, LaGuardia once turned to a House colleague boasting of his own Mayflower roots and forthrightly replied, “I hope you can understand *my* pride when I say the distinguished navigator of the race of my ancestors came to this continent two hundred years before yours landed at Plymouth Rock. For every year by which your ancestors preceded mine to this country, mine can boast an additional century of civilization” (Qtd. in Jeffers, 2002, p. 110). LaGuardia’s opposition to the immigration laws brought him additional friends in the Jewish and Italian communities. Concomitantly, however, the *Fellowship Forum*, the Ku Klux Klan newspaper, convinced that America was being lost to true Americans because of men like him, harbored little love for this House member. Again, LaGuardia didn’t seem to care.

In that same year, LaGuardia faced down Henry Ford. Ford was bidding on “a half-finished dam at Muscle Shoals, Alabama” (Elliott, 1983, p. 148). He claimed he wanted the site “for the manufacture of low-priced fertilizer for the benefit of the American farmer” (Qtd. in Elliott, 1983, p. 148). Dubious, LaGuardia believed the property should remain the United States government’s to benefit all Americans—eventually this Tennessee Valley would. In the meanwhile, however, in order to stop Ford, LaGuardia publicly announced that there was no reason to believe in Ford’s altruistic spirit. He argued that Ford has “hatred in his heart,” and that he has an “ignorance of history, literature and religion” (Qtd. in Zinn, 1958, p. 124). Most of all he proclaimed that “the wealth and ignorance of Henry Ford combined has made it possible for vicious men to carry on a nefarious warfare against the Jews, not only of America but of the whole

world” (Qtd. in Limpus & Leyson, 1938, p. 161-162). It appears Henry Ford’s publication of the highly anti-Semitic *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* had not gone unnoticed by this member of the House.

In the immediately ensuing years, in speeches in the House, in press interviews, on radio station WRNY, and in his own column entitled, “I’m Telling You Confidentially” in the *New York Daily Graphic*, LaGuardia was busy fighting Prohibition, fighting for a more equitable tax structure, standing up against the beef and bread trusts that he saw relentlessly overcharging the public, demanding the improvement of working conditions for coal miners in Pennsylvania, Ohio, and West Virginia, and fighting for the rights of Native Americans. Then, in 1929, there was the Depression . . .

Regardless, in the midst of all this, in December 1931, LaGuardia brought Germany to the attention of the House. Put simply, “he strongly urged that a moratorium” on debts “be extended to all European countries” and especially Germany (Zinn, 1958, p. 239). For, he said, “there is a political party in Germany right now that is hoping this Congress turns down this moratorium. Why? Because the Hitlerites will move in and take control of the government” (Qtd. in Zinn, 1958, p. 239).

Indeed, LaGuardia would be “one of the first to warn Americans about Hitler” (Kessner, 1989, p. 400). He would continue doing this even when what he was saying was unpopular. Americans felt they had been fooled into participating in World War I and were not about to make the same mistake. When it came to reports of atrocities, Americans remembered, too, the fallacious reports of the past war and refused to believe! For a very long time America would insist on its neutrality. What LaGuardia said about Jewish suffering didn’t strike a general chord. Too, much of what LaGuardia would say regarding Hitler and Germany, no matter how dramatically he “framed” it did not end up on the front page of newspapers (Folger, Poole, and Stutman, 2009, p. 55). And if something did, it wasn’t for long! For that matter, even when reporters began sending back information on the horrors visited upon the Jews in Europe, people didn’t believe, and that, too, wasn’t usually on the front page of any newspaper (Lipstadt, 1986, p. 139). As to those who did believe what was happening to the Jews, they only sympathized—and Roosevelt knew it (Morse, 1967, p. 261). Moreover, when Roosevelt even hinted that isolation and neutrality on America’s part was not the answer when dealing with aggressive nations in the world and that America should take a stronger stand—“there was an outpouring of protest that saddened and sobered him.” The President would say: “It’s a terrible thing to look over your shoulder when you are trying to lead—and to find no one there” (Qtd. in Kessner, 1989, p. 469).

Nonetheless, in May, 1933, at a mass protest meeting at the Battery in New York City, LaGuardia vehemently spoke out against the anti-Semitic activities of the Nazis come to power, and underlined “that the peace of the world was being threatened by” them. He “declared that ‘America must not permit this to happen.’ He passionately urged that America “refuse to associate” with “the disturbers of world peace” (Qtd. in “100,000

March Here,” 1933, p. 10) In keeping with this idea, LaGuardia would become an early supporter of a nationwide boycott of German exports to America, first promulgated by the Jewish War Veterans in America in March 1933.

A month later at the American National Conference Against Racial Persecution in Germany, in his keynote address “he denounced Hitler as a ‘perverted maniac.’” He “asserted that ‘part of [Hitler’s] program is the complete annihilation of the Jews in Germany’” He said “‘Civil strife is usually a domestic affair, but when the internal affairs of one country affect the peace of the world, then it is time to protest’” (Qtd. in “Ask Roosevelt Aid,” 1933, p. 15). He fervently encouraged the Conference to present the resolutions it had made to President Roosevelt. These resolutions included American action “in behalf of judges and lawyers of Jewish blood who have been dismissed from their positions and forbidden to practice” and the temporary relaxation of immigration barriers so that the many (“Ask Roosevelt Aid,” 1933, p. 15), now persecuted in Germany and “‘of superior attainments and qualities of fine citizenship [who] would make valuable additions to our commonwealth’” could be welcomed here (Qtd. in “Ask Roosevelt Aid,” 1933, p. 15).

When he became Mayor of New York in 1934, LaGuardia’s righteous outrage regarding Hitler and his followers did not diminish. Now he simply had a better platform from which to express his feelings . . . feelings that had only intensified as the absolute danger of Hitler and Hitlerism itself intensified.

On March 7, 1934, at Madison Square Garden in New York City, when “the American Jewish Congress along with fifty other liberal, Jewish and anti-Nazi organizations” joined forces to present an event that would uniquely focus attention on what was happening in Germany and its ramifications (Cypkin, 1996, p. 24)—LaGuardia was there. The event was a mock trial, “The Case of Civilization Against Hitlerism,” with a Judge, Bainbridge Colby, past Secretary of State presiding. Mayor LaGuardia appeared as one of twenty witnesses for the prosecution. Once on the stand, in front of the twenty-thousand that had gathered in the arena, LaGuardia, speaking in the name of American public opinion, again passionately charged that “Hitler’s Germany was a threat to world peace” (“LaGuardia Sees,” 1934, p. 16). He said “Hitler’s philosophy [was] ‘abhorrent’ to Americans” (Qtd. in “LaGuardia Sees,” 1934, p. 16). He talked about what Jews had contributed to the world and what they were now suffering under Nazism. Then, he angrily declared—hearing that an individual (a Jew) carrying an American passport could not now expect to travel in safety in Germany—that America, in consequence, should “abrogate its treaty of friendship” with Germany (“LaGuardia Sees,” 1934, p. 16). Hadn’t the American government done this in reaction to the dastardly acts of the Romanoff dynasty? The audience greeted this with “tremendous applause” (“Nazis ‘Convicted,’” 1934, p. 14).

In fact, a year later, in July 1935, an incident occurred which revealed that, while the American government had not abrogated its Treaty of Friendship (the Treaty of Commerce and Friendship, signed in 1925) with Germany, Mayor LaGuardia had.

Paul Kress, “a German citizen living in New York City, applied for a masseur’s license.” Under the Treaty, Mr. Kress’ licensing should have been a simple matter—Germany and America “recognize[d] each others’ professional licenses.” Nonetheless, LaGuardia refused to issue the license. Why? “Treaties are based on reciprocity” and La Guardia added (Kessner, 1989, p. 401), “it is well known that American citizens of the Jewish faith have been discriminated against in Germany. That being the case, I cannot see how the German Government can insist upon alleged rights contained in the treaty on which they now rely” (Qtd. in “Mayor Puts Curb,” 1935, p. 3). Denouncements by German-American groups didn’t change LaGuardia’s mind—even when they said they would see to it that German-Americans didn’t vote for him. Denouncements in German newspapers full of vitriol and attacking LaGuardia had absolutely no effect on the man (“Paper Scores,” 1935, p. 6). For that matter, Secretary of State Hull couldn’t budge him (Bayor, 1988, p. 137). And the Jewish community? They were warmed by a Mayor who they saw standing up for their European co-religionists—not because they were Jews, but because it was the right thing to do.

In November 1935, in order to underscore his continued support of the boycott of German exports, LaGuardia made sure that 500 tons of German steel ordered for a Triborough underpass in Queens, was cancelled. LaGuardia’s *excuse*, “he was responsible for the safety of the city’s inhabitants, and German steel was in his learned opinion, unsafe.” “A domestic replacement for the imported steel was found” (Kessner, 1989, p. 402).

Then, in 1936, LaGuardia’s attention was drawn to local anti-Semitic hate-monger, Robert Edward Edmondson. Edmondson was sending out an exceptionally prodigious amount of anti-Jewish literature from his printing shop on Washington Street, materials he was “receiv[ing] from Germany” (Herstein, 1989, p. 172). In 1936 he sent out “5 million pieces of hate mail.” Among Edmondson’s claims was “the existence of an international conspiracy of ‘sinister Jewish leadership forces’ bent upon undermining the American economy.” Edmondson further “promoted the formation of ‘Gentile vigilante groups’ to deal with them.” LaGuardia reacted by “invoking a rarely used mayoral power” (Kessner, 1989, p. 402). He issued a summons charging Edmondson with criminal libel “that unless checked . . . may incite to a breach of the peace and public disorder” (Qtd. in “Racial Libel,” 1936, p. 1).

Of course, LaGuardia never forgot that the arch-enemy was Hitler. Hence in March 1937 at the women’s division meeting of the American Jewish Congress, the Mayor, in speaking about the forthcoming New York World’s Fair declared that if the Fair had a religious center it should include a “‘chamber of horrors’ in which he would have as a climax ‘a figure of the brown shirted fanatic who is now menacing the peace of the

world” (Qtd. in “Religious Center,” 1937, p. 25). The “audience responded enthusiastically” (Esposito & Esposito, 1988, p. 45). The German Embassy in Washington immediately protested. “The protest brought a quick retort from Secretary Hull that he regretted the use of language by any American citizen calculated to offend a friendly power” (“Germany Protests,” 1937, p. 1). Indeed, Secretary Hull couldn’t stop apologizing. Meanwhile, newspapers in Germany called LaGuardia a “gangster-in-chief,” and “a criminal disguised as a public office holder” (German Press Attacks,” 1937, p. 9). They called him a “‘Dirty Talmud Jew’” (Qtd. in “German Press Attacks,” 1937, p. 9). German-American organizations protested. Then Mrs. Stephen S. Wise, president of the Women’s Division of the American Jewish Congress, insisted that Secretary of State Hull demand an apology from the German Government. Why? The official German press had characterized the women at the meeting at which His Honor spoke as “‘women of the streets,’” and moreover, that they had “‘gathered together in order to be entertained by ‘a pimp and procurer,’ the Mayor of New York” (Qtd. in “U S Takes Reich,” 1937, p. 1). The Reich refused to apologize.

Throughout all this back and forth, LaGuardia remained adamant, only wondering how Hitler knew he “‘meant him.’” Was it “‘his guilty conscience or my power of description’” (Qtd. in Esposito & Esposito, 1988, p. 47). Not long after, LaGuardia was told that newspapers in Germany were reporting that there was “‘immorality’” to be found in New York high schools, “‘evidence of what unheard-of-things are possible in this city under the eyes of the Jew LaGuardia.’” LaGuardia directed that this information be sent to the New York official in charge of sewage disposal. Asked to comment, Walter Binger, Deputy Sanitation Commissioner would only say, “‘I am under Mayor LaGuardia’s orders, and I will put anything through the sewage disposal system that he tells me to put through’” (Qtd. in “LaGuardia Retorts, 1937, p. 2).

All this LaGuardia did in his first term as Mayor. Concomitantly, New York never left his thoughts. Weighed down by Tammy graft and corruption, he did a “thorough house-cleaning” of the city government (“The Job of Mayor,” 1933, p. SM3). LaGuardia brought millions of dollars of federal money to the city. This resulted in construction projects mushrooming all over New York. Many jobless found employment. At the same time, the city did its utmost to see that the unemployed had housing and food. LaGuardia went after organized crime. An outdated City Charter was revised. A Municipal Arts Committee was organized. An airport was in the works for New York. And, of course, none of this stopped the Mayor from appearing at fires or major emergencies to do his bit.

In his second term as Mayor, LaGuardia continued many projects begun in his first term. For one, he opened the North Beach Airport, quickly renamed LaGuardia Airport. Then, he had the Board of Estimate buy “a polluted bathing beach in Queens” (Brodsky, 2003, p. 385). This site would eventually become Kennedy Airport. He opened the 1939 World’s Fair in Queens. He unified the New York City Subway system, putting it under municipal ownership.

At the same time, LaGuardia increasingly stood for American entry into the war. In 1939, speaking to the press he said: “We must talk a language that the bums and punks of the dictator countries can understand. We have learned by sad experience that a strict neutrality attitude is beneficial only to the aggressor nation” (Qtd. in “Taft Warns,” 1939, p. 28) In reaction to Hitler’s demand for Danzig and a corridor through Poland to East Prussia he declared: “When I was raised in Arizona, some people used to put guns on the table when they played cards. Of course they were tinhorns—they weren’t gentlemen” (“Mayor Sees Poles,” 1939, p. 7). Then referring to Germany, “he said that the United States was obliged to respond when another state turns into a menacing international outlaw” (Kessner, 1989, p. 469). In 1941 he appeared at a Freedom Rally held at Madison Square Garden in New York, and announced to the many in America who were still isolationists that he, too, “believe[d] in isolation . . . [but that he] want[ed] to isolate Mr. Hitler—and the quicker we do it the better for the peace and happiness of the whole world” (Qtd. in “Wilkie Assails,” 1941, p. 1) Later in 1941 LaGuardia commented to the press that “There can be no compromise with Adolf Hitler and the Axis powers, just as there can be no compromise between a policeman and a criminal” (Qtd. in “Honor Paderewski,” 1941, p. 14). LaGuardia early backed President Roosevelt’s Lend Lease activities—an act Americans would *ever-so-slowly* come to accept due to increasingly frightening world events beginning to impinge on *specifically* American concerns. He became Honorary Chairman of the New York Chapter of the Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies. “Roosevelt named him chairman of the U.S.-Canadian Joint Permanent Defense Board” (Brodsky, 2003, p. 416). Additionally, LaGuardia created the national Office of Civilian Defense and President Roosevelt quickly named him its Director.

In Mayor LaGuardia’s second term of office, he also appeared at many specifically Jewish rallies. Many of them were run by Zionists, pressuring Britain to open up the gates of Palestine for the emigration of Hitler’s victims. Here LaGuardia stated “Britain was honor bound not to go back on the promise to Jews implicit in the Balfour Declaration”—“the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people” (Qtd. in “Attack on Hitler,” 1938, p. 16). LaGuardia appeared at Zionist rallies encouraging people to contribute money to help with the entire process of Jewish rescue and emigration to Palestine.

Unfortunately in the city, as the United States drew closer and eventually entered the war, LaGuardia was faced with a growing amount of anti-Semitism. The German-American Bund; the Christian Front, spurred on by the words of Father Charles Coughlin; the Christian Mobilizers—all of them blamed the Jews for everything, including the war. In the South Bronx, in Washington Heights, in northern Manhattan, in Flatbush in Brooklyn, and in other neighborhoods, street meetings held by these groups, quickly erupted into violence. Synagogues and Jewish owned stores were vandalized. Services at synagogues were interrupted by “groups of boys who would yell ‘Kill the Jews’” (Qtd. in Bayor, 1988, p. 155). Jews were attacked.

LaGuardia tried desperately “to uphold constitutional rights [and] . . . maintain a balance between freedom of speech and the right of minorities to be free from abuse.” At the same time, he put “pressure on the police and the courts to rid the streets of the agitators if they stepped outside the law” (Bayor, 1988, p. 139). He put even more pressure on the police to do their job *conscientiously* when an investigation revealed that *some* police were siding with the troublemakers. Policemen were assigned to guard synagogues and “investigate carefully any anti-Jewish occurrences.” Furthermore, “LaGuardia ordered the formation of a special detective squad to deal with these and similar incidents in other neighborhoods and offered a \$500 reward for information leading to conviction of the anti-Semitic vandals” (Bayor, 1988, p. 156).

Meanwhile, doubtless, one of the funniest things Mayor LaGuardia did during this period of his political life, or perhaps, in *all* his political life, was the manner in which he dealt with the New York City German Consulate’s request for protection from those unhappy with the German government’s activities. After conferring with his Police Commissioner Lewis J. Valentine, LaGuardia dispatched forty Jewish policemen, headed by Captain Max Finkelstein, president of the Shomrin society (the Jewish fraternal organization for policemen) to do the job. “The Mayor said it was simply ‘a matter of routine,’ but he smiled as he contemplated the situation he had created” (“Police Detail,” 1938, p. 9). “The move cheered beleaguered Jews and infuriated the Nazis, who compared LaGuardia to a gorilla” (Kessner, 1989, p. 520).

All this was very serious business, though. For it was also during this period that LaGuardia received a .22 caliber cartridge in the mail, with a note saying, ““You will get this if you continue to attack the German Nazi party”” (Qtd. in “Letter and Cartridge,” 1938, p. 16). “The signature was a crayoned Nazi swastika” (“Letter and Cartridge, 1938, p. 16).

Nonetheless, in his third term as Mayor—a history making attainment—LaGuardia, fearless, continued doing what he felt was right. He continued speaking at rallies. In fact, in 1942, at a mass rally at Madison Square Garden, poking fun at the State Department’s reaction to earlier remarks he had made, he noted, ““I protested when it wasn’t so popular to do it, and the State Department today is not apologizing for anything that I said.”” Then he told his 1942 audience, as far as the war, ““The swine Hitler and the little dog Mussolini and the yellow rat the Mikado know that we are in it. It may last a month; it may last a year; it may last two years; it may last for four years, but it will last until we destroy the whole crew of them”” (Qtd. in “Nazi Punishment,” 1942, p. 4).

As to Europe’s Jews, in 1943, LaGuardia became involved with Peter Bergson and the “Emergency Committee to Save the Jewish People of Europe.” Determined to rescue Europe’s remaining Jews *immediately* and *without* tying this rescue effort to the opening of Palestine to them, Bergson and his group went on a highly dramatic public relations campaign drawing attention to the Holocaust. They took out full page newspaper ads, they did major theatrical productions like the March 1943 Ben Hecht presentation, *We*

Will Never Die. In November, 1943, three of their members “introduced a resolution with bipartisan support to Congress calling upon the president to create an agency that would act immediately to save the remaining European Jews” (Baumel, 2005, p. 164). In short, many believe that the Emergency Committee’s stunning public attention-grabbing activities, along with Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau, Jr.’s report to the president revealing the “apathy and incompetence” of the State Department vis-à-vis European Jewish rescue—gingerly resulted in President Roosevelt’s 1944 creation of the War Refugee Board. The War Refugee Board “would formulate rescue plans, co-ordinate relief to the victims, find means of transportation to evacuate victims and set up temporary refugee havens” (Peck, 1980, p. 386). According to Dinnerstein in his book on the Holocaust and America this Board did make a difference in saving some Jews from being killed (1982, p. 4).

During the war, the welfare of *all* New Yorkers was no less a priority for LaGuardia. Every Sunday at 1 P.M., over municipal radio station WNYC, the Mayor spoke to the city on a program aptly titled, *Talk to the People*. Waiting for the theme song, a favorite of the Mayor’s—the “Marine’s Hymn”—to begin, marking the top of the show, “as many as 1.8 million [people] would tune in” (Heckscher with Robinson, 1978, p. 361). LaGuardia might begin with news from the front, offering up strategy tips to Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill, as if they were bosom-buddies listening in. Coming to city issues, LaGuardia “would grow more intense” as he lit into gangsters, tinhorns and the “Interests.” Then, more “conversational and informal” (Heckscher with Robinson, 1978, p. 363), he might move on to share a personal family issue somehow relevant to his listeners, like, “how to help children with their homework.” On this half-hour program LaGuardia also offered up tips on how to manage rationing, including, most especially, the use of fish instead of meat. In fact, he talked about fish so much that New Yorkers began to call him the Little Flounder, a play on the fact that Fiorello meant Little Flower. In sum, researchers agree, LaGuardia’s program helped New Yorkers “believe that someone was looking after things”—their Mayor—and that “what was right would prevail” (Elliott, 1983, p. 232). All that was needed was ““Patience and Fortitude!”” LaGuardia’s words as he signed off (Heckscher with Robinson, 1978, p. 363). The program ran from January 18, 1942, two weeks after Pearl Harbor, to a day before His Honor left “office four years later” (Elliott, 1983, p. 231).

In his third term as Mayor, LaGuardia also had to quell race riots in Harlem. On a lighter note, he opened the City Center for Music and Drama. There was the 1945 newspaper deliverers strike, resulting in what many New Yorkers would most remember about this Mayor: LaGuardia, on radio, reading the Sunday comics to the children of the city, full of “gusto” (Elliott, 1938, p. 232).

After leaving office, LaGuardia planned to work on his memoirs, work as a newspaper columnist, and do radio programs. However, in March 1946 he was appointed director general of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) by

President Truman. This organization was “to plan, coordinate, administer or arrange for the administration of measures for the relief of victims of war in any area under the control of the United Nations through the provision of food, fuel, clothing, shelter and other basic necessities; medical and other essential services . . .” (“Agreement for United Nations,” 1946). The displaced persons of Europe became LaGuardia’s charge. In his acceptance speech, he already showed his eagerness to do and act, as well as his impatience with all those who simply talked *about* doing. Thus he said of the displaced: “The people need relief, not sympathy. I want fast-moving ships, not slow reading resolutions” (“Text of LaGuardia UNRRA,” 1946, p. 5). In July, “he disclosed his plan for an ‘immediate and final’ solution of the displaced-persons problem, through a six-month pooling of all unused immigrant quotas—he estimated that 120,000 visas were now available. He argued that if the United States would take the lead by opening these quotas, other countries would follow and thus speedily resettle the ‘hardcore’ of non-repatriatables” (Qtd. in Furman, 1946, p. 2). In October “he pleaded” for the United States to set this “example” (“Big 5 Veto,” 1946, p. 14). But it didn’t happen—in fact it looked like things were moving backward. Finally, disheartened, LaGuardia resigned. Much more talk was needed before things began to move. LaGuardia, however, could do no more. In September 1949 he died . . . and many, many mourned him . . .

Not surprisingly, some believe LaGuardia said and acted as he did vis-à-vis Europe’s Jews in order to get the New York Jewish vote. Ironically, though, the record shows that cannot be so. For indeed, sometimes he did *not* please his Jewish constituents in the least! For example, on May 17, 1934, when the “Friends of the New Germany” met at Madison Square Garden, swastikas and all—LaGuardia did not stop them. Jews and others complained. According to the Mayor however, “there was no threat to public order,” hence “there were no legal grounds for abridging the freedom of speech” (Esposito & Esposito, 1988, p. 43). In 1937, Jewish New Yorkers were again unhappy with the Mayor. Nazis were permitted to parade in New York. Why? LaGuardia didn’t like it, but he felt upholding the constitutional “right of assembly and speech” was *most* important. (“Nazi Parade Plot,” 1937, p. 7). He would not, he said, “use the repressive measures of the dictators” (Qtd. in Esposito & Esposito, 1988, p. 50). Furthermore, throughout this same period, before America actually entered the war, some New York Jews *did not* like LaGuardia’s bringing attention to what was happening to the Jews in Europe. They felt Hitler would get angrier and make things even worse for their European co-religionists. Moreover, many of them were against the boycott.

In reality, what LaGuardia did for the city would have been *more than enough* to get him votes to be re-elected time and time again.

Perhaps, as this researcher believes, LaGuardia was simply a man who felt what he was doing was just the right thing to do. Indeed, he put it that way himself in a speech he gave in 1937: “There is no reason why any human being should not expect and receive justice

in any country in the world today. My friends, there is no ersatz for justice” (Qtd. in “Mayor Gets Medal” p. 21)

Meanwhile, with the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941, public opinion decidedly swung Roosevelt’s way, making things that had been unpopular with Americans decidedly popular. And, with that, many were now behind the President . . . and he could lead . . .

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