

Noah Golinkin

©2004 by Rafael Medoff & The David S. Wyman Institute for Holocaust Studies

Noah Golinkin was studying to become a rabbi, at the Conservative movement's Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City, when news about the Holocaust began reaching America in 1942. Late at night, sitting in his dormitory room, Noah would tremble with fear as he read the latest newspaper reports about the Nazi massacres of Jews in Poland. He himself had immigrated from Poland to the United States just a few years earlier, shortly before the German army conquered his native land.

Students at the Seminary were saddened to hear of the suffering of Jews in Poland and other European countries. But, deeply immersed in their studies, the students hesitated to disrupt their regular lives and schedules in order to focus their attention on problems in far-away Europe. Sometimes it takes one special person to stand up for what is right, and to lead others to do what is needed. Noah Golinkin was such a leader.

***THINK ABOUT IT:* Can you recall other examples, either in Jewish history or American history, of a special person who took the lead and inspired others to do the right thing?**

Noah and two of his closest friends at the Seminary, Jerome Lipnick and Moshe "Buddy" Sachs, decided to establish their own "Students Committee for European Jewry." They did not ask the Seminary for permission to set up their organization; they felt it was necessary to take quick action, regardless of what others at the school might think. As it turned out, their teachers and other school officials did not object. In fact, some of them participated in the Committee's activities.

Noah organized a group of his fellow students, together with some rabbinical students from Yeshiva College (Orthodox) and the Jewish Institute of Religion (Reform), to meet with the most prominent Jewish leader of that time, Rabbi Stephen Wise. They urged Rabbi Wise to organize demonstrations and other activities to publicize the idea of saving Jewish refugees by bringing them to the United States. Wise rejected the students' proposals. He feared that demonstrations might arouse anti-Semitism among Americans. He also thought it was inappropriate for American Jews to publicly disagree with the President's policy of keeping out immigrants.

***THINK ABOUT IT:* What do you think of Rabbi Wise's reasons? Should the students have accepted his view and refrained from further protest activity?**

Noah Golinkin did not give up. He, Jerome Lipnick, and Buddy Sachs wrote a hard-hitting article, which was published in a leading Jewish magazine, in which they expressed strong disappointment with Jewish leaders: "What have the rabbis and leaders ... done to arouse themselves and their communities to the demands of the hour?" the article asked. "What have they undertaken to awaken the conscience of the American people?"

These three students had done something unusual—and risky. By publicly challenging the policies of the most revered and experienced leaders in their community, they could have been risking their own careers. Remember—they were rabbinical students, being groomed to become the rabbis of synagogues around the country in the next few years. Their article could have caused bad feelings and even prevented them from finding jobs as rabbis. But that did not deter them.



*Noah Golinkin
1914-1989*

***THINK ABOUT IT:* Were they right to risk their future careers in this way? If you were the parent of one of these young men, what would you have advised him to do?**

In early 1943, Noah Golinkin's committee organized an extraordinary Jewish-Christian inter-seminary conference to raise public awareness of the Holocaust. Hundreds of students and faculty attended, with sessions alternating between the Jewish Theological Seminary and its Protestant counterpart,

the nearby Union Theological Seminary. The speakers and panel participants included prominent Jewish and Christian leaders and experts on refugee and relief issues. For many of these Christians, it was the first time they had heard in detail about the Holocaust—and about the possibility of rescuing Jews from Europe.

THINK ABOUT IT: Why was it important to enlist Christian help in publicizing the news of the Holocaust?

In the aftermath of the conference, Golinkin and his fellow students sent a memorandum to various Jewish leaders, outlining their ideas for a more activist response to the persecution of European Jewry. Carl Alpert, editor of the Zionist Organization of America's journal, *New Palestine*, was so impressed that he wrote back: "When I note the progressiveness, the imagination, and the energetic spirit displayed in your memorandum I feel that perhaps it would not be such a bad idea if all leaders of American Jewry were to abdicate and a committee of students from the respective Rabbinical seminaries were to take over for a period of six months."

The students had their most significant impact on the Synagogue Council of America, the national umbrella group for Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform synagogues. Shortly after meeting with Golinkin and his friends, the Synagogue Council announced the establishment of an emergency committee to raise Jewish and Christian awareness of the Nazi genocide.

Following a suggestion made by the rabbinical students, the Synagogue Council announced a seven-week spring publicity campaign to coincide with the traditional seven weeks of semi-mourning between Passover and Shavuot. Synagogues throughout the country adopted the suggestions to recite special prayers for European Jewry; to limit their "occasions of amusement"; to observe partial fast days and moments of silence; to write letters to political officials and Christian religious leaders; and to hold memorial protest rallies. At the rallies, some congregants wore black armbands that were designed by Noah Golinkin. (Three decades later, Vietnam War protesters would adopt a similar badge of mourning.)

THINK ABOUT IT: How did these kinds of actions increase public awareness of the Holocaust? What additional steps do you think might have been effective?

The memorial rallies were held all across the country on May 2, 1943. In many instances, they were jointly sponsored by Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox rabbis—an uncommon display of unity. It was also significant that the Federal Council of Churches agreed to organize memorial assemblies at churches in numerous cities on the same day. Many of the assemblies featured speeches by both rabbis and Christian clergymen, as well as prominent political figures. The gatherings received significant coverage in the newspapers and on radio. This important Jewish-Christian alliance helped raise American public awareness about the Nazi slaughter of European Jewry.

Changing the American government's policy toward rescuing Jews required a lengthy and complicated process. Raising public awareness was the first crucial step in that process. Alerting the public increased the interest of Congress and the media in the possibility of rescuing Jews from Hitler. That, in turn, increased the pressure on the White House to intervene. In early 1944, after a year of mounting pressure and protests—culminating in Congressional hearings on the rescue issue—President Roosevelt established a federal government agency called the War Refugee Board. During the final fifteen months of World War II, the Board helped rescue more than 200,000 Jews from Hitler. (Among other things, the War Refugee Board sponsored the work of rescue hero Raoul Wallenberg.)

At a time when it seemed that nobody cared about the Jews of Europe and nothing could be done to rescue them, three young rabbinical students helped mobilize Christian sympathy for Hitler's victims and convinced a major Jewish organization to undertake a national campaign to help shatter the silence surrounding the Holocaust. Few in number but persistent and imaginative, the students demonstrated that it was possible, even without funds, offices, or a professional staff, to make a difference.

The David S. Wyman Institute for Holocaust Studies

On the campus of Gratz College
7605 Old York Road - Melrose Park, PA 19027
Tel: (215) 635-5622 - Fax: (215) 635-5644
www.WymanInstitute.org