

# Senator Elbert D. Thomas

## *A Courageous Voice Against the Holocaust*

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

During the Holocaust, United States Senator Elbert D. Thomas of Utah was one of the most outspoken voices in Congress for rescue of Jews from Hitler.

Growing up in Salt Lake City in the late 1800s, Thomas experienced prejudice against his family because of their Mormon beliefs, which evidently helped shape his later interest in the plight of Jews persecuted by Hitler. During 1907-1912, he headed the Mormon Church's Mission in Japan. On his way back from the Far East, Thomas visited Palestine (then under Turkish rule), and became deeply convinced of the need to re-establish the ancient Jewish State there.

Upon returning to the United States, he completed a Ph.D. in political science at UCLA and taught at the University of Utah, before successfully running for United States Senator in 1932. He would be re-elected in 1938 and 1944.

A visit to Germany in 1934 enabled Thomas to view Nazi persecution of German Jews first-hand. Back home, he criticized Hitler's human rights violations, warned that the Nazis intended to pursue global conquest, and supported Congressional appropriations to build up the American military.

Throughout the 1930s, the Roosevelt administration opposed permitting more Jewish refugees to enter the United States. Through a policy of imposing layers of bureaucracy to discourage would-be immigrants, the administration managed to keep the already-tight immigration quotas unfilled in most years. (During the Hitler era, 1933-1945, the quotas were often 90% unfilled, and nearly 190,000 immigration slots from Axis-controlled countries went unused.)

Even after Hitler's Jewish policy changed, in 1941, from discrimination to mass murder, the administration refused to take in more refugees. Thomas, although a loyal Democrat and strong supporter of the New Deal, spoke out against FDR's failure to aid Jewish refugees. "It is the first time in history that the physical extermination of a whole people—the Jewish people—has become declared policy, in fact, one of the major policies and war aims, of a powerful, aggressive nation," he declared in a November 1942 speech in New York City. He said that rescuing the Jews and establishing a Jewish homeland in Palestine should be "the last question on which we can afford to be silent or evasive." He emphasized that the plight of the

Jews "is not just a Jewish problem" but rather a problem that the entire international community was morally obligated to address.

Thomas soon became an active member of the Emergency Committee to Save the Jewish People of Europe, a political action committee led by the maverick Jewish activist Peter Bergson, which lobbied for U.S. intervention on behalf of Hitler's victims.

Hoping to deflect mounting criticism over their apathy in the face of the Holocaust, the American and British governments sponsored a conference in Bermuda on the refugee problem in April 1943. When the conference ended without the Allies taking any concrete steps to aid European Jewry, Bergson's group placed a large advertisement in the *New York Times* headlined "To 5,000,000 Jews in the Nazi Death-Trap, Bermuda was a Cruel Mockery." Senator Thomas and other prominent Congressmembers were among the signatories on the ad. Such public criticism of the Allies' refugee policy was unprecedented, and several of the Senators who signed the ad quickly dissociated themselves from the Bergson group. But not Thomas; he stood fast, which is especially notable in view of the fact that he was a Democrat, and it was a Democratic administration that was being criticized.



*Sen. Elbert D. Thomas  
1883-1953*

Thomas served as co-chair of one of the most important events in the Bergson group's rescue campaign, a week-long Emergency Conference to Save the Jewish People of Europe, which attracted more than 1500 delegates to the Hotel Commodore in New York City in July 1943. The Roosevelt administration contended that the only practical means of aiding Hitler's victims was to attain military victory over the Nazis. The well-publicized conference challenged that claim, by featuring panels of experts outlining specific ways to save Jews from Hitler.

Thomas's most important contribution to the rescue campaign was his leadership role in drafting and promoting a Bergson-initiated Congressional resolution calling for the creation of a U.S. government agency to rescue refugees.

After unsuccessfully pressing the State Department to establish such an agency, Thomas and his colleague, Sen. Guy Gillette (D-Iowa), proceeded, in October 1943, to introduce the resolution in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Although there was overwhelming support in the committee for the resolution, the committee chair, Senator Tom Connally of Texas, opposed it out of deference to the administration. When Connally took ill and was absent from the committee's sessions in late December, Thomas fortuitously became the presiding chair, and quickly introduced the resolution. It passed unanimously.

The preamble to the resolution poignantly expressed the sentiments of Thomas and his colleagues toward the plight of the Europe's Jews: "The problem is essentially a humanitarian one. It is not a Jewish problem alone. It is a Christian problem and a problem for enlightened civilization. ... We have talked; we have sympathized; we have expressed our horror; the time to act is long past due."

Although the rescue resolution was delayed by hearings in the House of Representatives, the fact that it passed the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and would soon come up for a vote before the full Senate made a powerful impression on the administration.

Fortuitously, the Senate committee's approval of the resolution coincided with developments at the Treasury Department concerning the rescue issue. Senior aides to Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau, Jr. had recently discovered that State Department officials had been blocking transmission of Holocaust-related information to the United States, and had been intentionally obstructing opportunities to rescue Jews from Hitler. Armed with this information, and with the rescue issue reaching the boiling point on Capitol Hill and in the press, Morgenthau went to FDR in January 1944, determined to convince him that "you have either got to move very fast, or the Congress of the United States will do it for you." The specter of an imminent Senate vote made this prospect very real. Ten months before election day, the last thing FDR wanted was a public scandal over the refugee issue. He quickly did what the Congressional resolution sought, by issuing an executive order to create the War Refugee Board.

During the final fifteen months of the war, the Board energetically employed unorthodox means to move Jews out of dangerous zones, pressured the Hungarian authorities to end deportations to Auschwitz, and sheltered Jews in places such as Budapest. The Board helped finance the life-saving work of the famous Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg, who used his association with a U.S. government agency as leverage in his rescue activity. The WRB's efforts played a major role in saving about 200,000 Jews and 20,000 non-Jews.

Throughout 1944, Thomas continued to promote rescue. He proposed a Congressional resolution urging U.S. pressure on England to open Palestine to Jewish refugees. (In response to Arab demands, the British had shut the doors to all but a trickle of Jewish immigrants.) He also chaired the Bergson group's Second Emergency Conference to Save the Jewish People of Europe, in August 1944.

Thomas's keynote address to the conference turned into a nationally-publicized controversy. Delivering his speech over the CBS Radio network as part of his weekly national radio address, Thomas declared, "as an American and as a Christian," that the British had an "inescapable moral duty" to announce "that every Hebrew will be admitted into Palestine." CBS officials, apparently uncomfortable that a Senator was criticizing an American ally, censored those portions of the address in which Thomas took the British to task. Protests by the Bergson group compelled CBS to publicly apologize to Thomas and to broadcast the original speech in its entirety.

Participating in a Congressional delegation to postwar Europe in the spring of 1945, Thomas visited the Allied-liberated Nazi death camps, met with Holocaust survivors, and came face to face with the horrors from which he had tried to rescue the desperate refugees. As someone from "a religion and a nation whose fundamental principles are based upon the concept of the worth of the individual," Thomas said he was profoundly "shocked ... to observe situations where individual rights, personal dignity, and governmental protection of the individual were shattered ... Those experiences hurt me spiritually."

Most of the international community had stood by silently while the Nazis had committed those atrocities. But not Elbert Thomas. His was a powerful and principled voice for rescue, and played a key role in the campaign which ultimately helped bring about the saving of more than 200,000 lives.

## **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](http://www.WymanInstitute.org)