

Presentation at Jewish Rescuers panel, Boston conference, 2009

George Mandel-Mantello

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Thank you for allowing me to address you. I would like to talk today about a remarkable man and the rescue effort he led – the Romanian/Hungarian Jewish businessman Gyorgy Mandl, aka George Mandel-Mantello. The main parts of the story have been known for sometime, largely owing to David Kranzler's important work [The Man who Stopped the Trains to Auschwitz](#). However over the past year, since receiving a significant collection of documents from his son Enrico (himself a survivor born in Cluj in 1930), The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum is discovering previously unknown aspects to this history. Let me preface my remarks by stating explicitly that our work is still ongoing, and there is much that needs further research and explication.

George Mandel was a wealthy Romanian Jewish businessman who became friendly with a Salvadoran colonel, José Arturo Castellanos before the war. In 1939 Castellanos appointed Mandel to be honorary attaché of El Salvador in Bucharest, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia, and Mandel changed his name to Mantello to sound more Latino. After Castellanos became El Salvador's Consul General in Geneva, he appointed Mandel as his first secretary in August 1942. With the acquiescence of Castellanos, George Mandel-Mantello used his diplomatic position to launch a major rescue operation within months of his appointment.

Soon after arriving in Switzerland, Jewish friends affiliated with the ultra-Orthodox Agudat Yisrael asked Mantello for money to purchase South American passports for their relatives, primarily in France and Poland. Mantello was offended that people would charge for life-saving certificates and offered to provide similar papers himself free-of-charge. Castellanos approved the plan on condition that he only would fabricate citizenship papers rather than entry visas, and over the next two and a half year, Mantello produced 1000s of these certificates.

Mantello employed a small group of students to type up the certificates and assist him in his efforts. After printing each "official" certificate of citizenship, he made a notarized Photostat which he sent back to occupied Europe. The originals remained with him in Switzerland which accounts for their near pristine condition and how his son was able to donate over

1000 originals to the Holocaust Museum. Mantello sent the certified Photostats by diplomatic pouch with the assistance of diplomats from Portugal, Romania, El Salvador, IRC and the Vatican, as well as by the underground Jewish courier system. He also sent documents through regular Swiss mail through services provided by the notary in Geneva.

Though Mantello himself was not religious, he worked closely with the Aguda and its Swiss representative, the lawyer Mathieu Mueller. Mantello provided Mueller with office space, and Mueller assisted Mantello in manufacturing certificates. Because of the role of the Aguda, a large number of these early certificates were sent to rabbis and other ultra-Orthodox Jews. However, Mantello provided certificates to any Jew who requested them regardless of their political or religious affiliation, secular or religious, Zionist or Bundist. The certificates were sent to almost every country in occupied Europe and some were even sent to concentration camps including Westerbork, Theresienstadt and Auschwitz.

I have been particularly interested to discover that a number of other Jewish rescuers, well-known and beloved by people in this audience, themselves obtained Mantello Salvadoran certificates. It makes sense that if someone was engaged in a dangerous activity, they would have wanted an insurance policy in the form of false documents. For example, we have a certificate made out to Julien and Yvette Samuel, leaders of French OSE and the family of Judith Feist Hemmendinger who cared for the Buchenwald boys after the war and a huge number sent to the Chateau Manoir, an Orthodox OSE children's home ran by Rabbi Zalman Schneersohn. Furthermore, we have a certificate made out to Jonas Tieffenbrunner who ran a children's home in Belgium and to many members of his staff and the children under his care.

Mantello included as much information as possible, and the most complete certificates have date and place of birth, names of family members, current address and frequently a contemporary photograph. Therefore by looking at a certificate surviving relatives can discover photographs and information of loved ones. Therefore, these papers not only testify to one rescue operation, but also individually document the biography of several thousand survivors and victims.

Rescue in Hungary

Though we have certificates from almost every country in occupied Europe, Mantello accelerated his production of certificates following the German invasion of Hungary in March 1944 for two reasons. First, because of the unique diplomatic situation there was greater opportunity to conduct rescue in Hungary than in other countries. Furthermore, Mantello was driven by personal considerations. His wife and in-laws were still in Budapest, and his parents and huge extended family lived in Hungarian occupied Transylvania. Enrico testifies that after the occupation, his father began devoting all his energies to the rescue of Hungarian Jewry. Carl Lutz, the Swiss diplomat and rescuer, represented Salvadoran interests in Budapest and played a pivotal role in the encouragement, distribution and fabrication of certificates. For example, in a letter dated November 8, 1944, Lutz writes to Mantello as follows:

I also take the liberty of advising that, in the near future, a request is to be made to your consulate for the delivery of Salvadorian citizenship certificates concerning a family by the name of Kalman Radecza and Szemere Istvan. The photographs are included with the request. I would be most grateful if you were good enough to exceptionally prepare such certificates as it pertains to a very worthy family which finds itself in utmost danger. It would be desirable if you were to send subject certificates here by the next courier as the situation has worsened dramatically. Subject documents may be addressed either to me or to the Mission.

And he adds a PS

It no doubt would be of interest to you to know that we were able to arrange for the doubtful certificates to be deemed acceptable even when lower level employees had objections, as also occurs in the case of people in possession of other documents.

Did everyone who received a certificate survive?

Though we can document the scope of Mantello's efforts, we still do not know how many of the certificates' recipients actually survived. The efficacy of the papers varied greatly country by country. The certificates probably had the greatest impact in Hungary where Mantello not only sent papers but also hundreds of blank certificates that were filled out on the spot in the Swiss embassy. Furthermore, Zionist youth after learning of their effectiveness manufactured their own counterfeit Salvadoran documents.

Several Dutch Jews who received Mantello certificates were sent a special camp in Bergen-Belsen for foreign nationals and thus spared deportation to Auschwitz or Sobibor. Two of

these families were later transferred to Switzerland in January 1945 and then to North Africa as part of a prisoner exchange with German nationals.

Jonas Tiefenbrunner (the head of the Jewish orphanage in Belgium) wrote to Mathieu Muller on June 27, 1945 vouching for the importance of these papers.

Vous me demandez un rapport pour les papiers de San Salvador. Eh bien, ces papiers étaient très utiles, car les porteurs de ces papiers étaient couverts dans ce sens qu'officiellement ils ne pouvaient pas être déportés. Si on prenait dans une raffle des personnes avec des papiers salvadoriens, on pouvait seulement les interner comme citoyens ennemis. Ce n'était pas encore le plus grand malheur. Chez le consul protecteur, c'est-à-dire le consul suisse, il y avait 37 personnes qui étaient inscrits chez lui comme citoyens salvadoriens. Il ne prenait pas la chose au sérieux, car il savait que ces papiers étaient envoyés pour sauver les gens. Au fond, c'est regrettable que ces papiers ne restaient pas valables, car dans chaque point de vue et surtout pour l'émigration, cela donnera des avantages. Tous ceux qui se trouvaient encore en Belgique au moment de l'arrivée de ces papiers ont été sauvés.

However, in other countries the Germans paid no attention to the certificates and treated the bearers as they would any other Jew.

In many cases, the certificates arrived too late to be of use, including those sent to Mantello's own parents. Mantello had asked Florian Manoliu, an anti-Fascist Romanian diplomat in Switzerland, to personally hand-deliver papers to his family in Bistrita. Tragically Manoliu arrived only a few days after the entire Jewish community in the town had been liquidated and sent to Auschwitz. None of Mantello's extended family survived.

This also illustrates another important significance of the collection. It helps document who knew what when. The number of certificates sent to concentration camps shows us that people in the West knew of deportations (such as to Theresienstadt or Westerbork). However in the case of Lithuania, information was lacking; we have several certificates made out to Lithuanian rabbis in 1943, two years after they were killed.

Some information was only partially known. I received an email from a child survivor who I contacted after finding a certificate for her and her parents. She told me that the names, dates and places of birth were correct, but the address was wrong. Was the certificate ever delivered? She had never seen the certificate before, but as her parents are no longer alive so we will never know whether they had received it.

However even when the rescue attempts were unsuccessful, the mere existence of the certificates proves that people cared for others and tried to extend help to friends under occupation to a greater extent than is commonly acknowledged. One young woman who works at the Holocaust Museum discovered a certificate made out to her great aunt and uncle who perished in the Holocaust. Though the knowledge of this discovery does not change the tragic fate of her aunt and uncle, finding a certificate proved that someone cared enough to try to save them, and they did not perish forgotten by friends and relatives.

Further complicating the process of determining the benefits of the certificates is the fact that at times they were transferred to third parties. I received a phone call from an Auschwitz survivor from a small town in the Hungarian countryside. He told me that he was the sole survivor of his immediate family, but he knows that an uncle in Switzerland had sent them Salvadoran papers in care of another uncle in Budapest, who did survive. Sure enough, I found several certificates made out to his extended family. He went on to tell me that after the war, another survivor approached and told him that he had survived using his certificate -- once he and his immediate family had been deported, the Budapest uncle had given their papers to another family.

What is the connection between Mantello and the Auschwitz Protocol?

The manufacture and distribution of the Salvadoran citizenship papers, was only part of Mantello's rescue work. He also played a key role in breaking the secret of Auschwitz. In April 1944 two Slovakian Jews, Rudolf Vrba and Alfred Wetzler, escaped from Auschwitz and wrote a detailed report on the mass murders. Florian Manoliu obtained a copy of the protocol from Miklos Krausz (head of the Palestine office in Budapest) during his unsuccessful trip to save Mantello's parents and immediately gave it to Mantello upon his return on June 20. Though the Protocol had reached the west a month earlier, established Jewish organizations were sitting on it and reluctant to make it public for various political reasons. Mantello had no such hesitations. Recognizing the protocol's importance, Mantello recopied it, translated it, and immediately distributed it to Swiss Protestant clergy headed by Paul Vogt. Within a few days sermons and editorials appeared throughout Switzerland condemning the deportations to Auschwitz and Hungary's collaborative role. The story was picked up abroad as well. The NY Times published its first story on Auschwitz two weeks later on July 3 under the headline --"Inquiry Confirms Nazi Death Camps: 1, 715 Jews said to

have been put to death by the Germans up to April 15" and cited the Swiss clergy that Mantello had briefed as the source of the information.

On July 7 Horthy, the Hungarian regent, temporarily halted the deportations to Auschwitz from Budapest thereby saving the lives of much of this large community. Historians disagree about what caused Horthy to change his mind. Other important developments were happening at the same time -- most important among them being the American bombing of Budapest and the Russian advances from the East. However, many attribute Horthy's change of mind to the world wide condemnation that ensued from Mantello's leak. For example, G. Reitlinger, writes in his book "The Final Solution,

The publication of portions of the Vrba-Wetzler report in the Swiss press in the last days of June, and by the Western Allies shortly afterwards, produced a spontaneous international denunciation, which led to protests from the Pope, the US Secretary of State Cordell Hull, the British Foreign Minister Anthony Eden, the International Red Cross and the King of Sweden, amounting to a "bombardment of Horthy's conscience". They indubitably influenced the Regent to order the cessation of the deportations from Hungary on July 7."

And Thomas Stark (reviewing wrote in a review published in "Holocaust and Genocide Studies "Mandel-Mantello unleashed in neutral and western countries an unprecedented press campaign that contributed greatly to the halt of deportations".

The press campaign combined with Mantello's wholesale manufacturing and distribution of false certificate may have led to the rescue of thousands of European Jews. However, only through further research we will know precisely how many people he saved.

How can you help?

Let me end on a personal note. I requested permission to be included on this panel because I am hoping that you might assist me in further understanding the significance of this collection. Much is known, but much is left to be learned. We have a good sense of how the names were given to Mantello but we are looking for more information about their distribution. Exactly how many people did Mantello's efforts save? We hope that we can find answers to these questions by meeting with people who received certificates. Therefore if you know anyone who received such a certificate, please contact me.