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The Boycott of German Goods and Services in the United States, 1933-38: The Response of American Retailers and Wholesalers to the Boycott Organized by the Non-Sectarian Anti-Nazi League to Champion Human Rights

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Introduction

When Adolf Hitler was appointed Chancellor of Germany in January 1933 it was clear from the beginning that he posed a grave threat to the world Jewry. It was not long before Jews in various countries around the world proposed that one response might be a boycott of German goods and services. The American League for the Defense of Jewish Rights was one of a number of early bodies formed to organise such a boycott. However, it suffered from a serious handicap. Its leadership was mostly drawn from radical members of the East European Jewish-American community of New York City who were outside of the American political mainstream. They soon realized that their boycott campaign would be more effective if it was led by a member of the German and Central European Jewish-American elite. However, most of the German and Central European Jewish-American leaders were opposed to the boycott with one notable exception, Samuel Untermyer, an elderly corporate attorney. After Untermyer gave a speech in favour of radical action against the Nazi regime, including a boycott, he was invited to join the League. Untermyer accepted and quickly assumed the presidency of the organisation.

Samuel Untermyer was the son of Bavarian Jewish immigrants. Together with his half-brother, Randolph Guggenheimer, and brothers, Isaac and Maurice, he had built one of Wall Street's leading corporate law firms. The firm's initial client base was mostly made up of Jewish entrepreneurs and German brewers. However, Untermyer proved to be a formidable networker both in the corporate and political spheres. His reputation as a highly successful lawyer meant that it was unwise to ignore him. By the turn of the twentieth century his

firm's clients included many of America's leading corporations. By this time the firm had taken in a non-family member as a named partner, Louis Marshall, to become Guggenheimer, Untermyer & Marshall. As well as being a life-long friend Untermyer had made at Columbia Law School Marshall was also one of the most prominent Jewish members of the Republican Party. Since Guggenheimer and the Untermyer brothers were all Tammany Hall Democrats this gave Untermyer access to another useful network. In 1908 the London *Economist* observed that Untermyer was probably the best-known corporation lawyer in the United States. In the early twentieth century Untermyer became a high profile campaigner for the economic and social reform. He was particularly well qualified as a reformer because he himself had both participated in and benefitted from the corporate abuses of the Gilded Age. During this time Untermyer learnt the art of self-publicity. He was assisted by the fact that he had represented many of the leading newspaper publishers of the era including Adolph Ochs of the New York Times and William Randolph Hearst. When the United States House of Representatives embarked upon its Money Trust Inquiry Untermyer was appointed as counsel. He interrogated the leading financiers of the day including his social rival, J.P. Morgan Senior. The inquiry's report was to result in the establishment of the Federal Reserve System. Although Untermyer had announced his retirement in 1912 he continued as head of his law firm and to represent high profile clients in high profile cases. He also gained first hand experience of non-government organizations. During the 1920s he served as the first president of the Palestine Fund. In this role he raised hundreds of thousands of dollars for Jewish settlement and development in Palestine.¹

A) The League and the Anti-Nazi Boycott in the United States

¹ *Economist*, April 18, 1908, p.841; Richard A. Hawkins, 'American Boomers and the Flotation of Shares in the City of London in the late Nineteenth Century,' *Business History*, Vol. 49, No.6, November 2007, pp.802-22; Richard A. Hawkins, 'Samuel Untermyer and the Zionist Project: An Attempt to Reconcile the American "Melting Pot" with Zionism', *The Australian Journal of Jewish Studies*, Vol. XXI, 2007, pp.114-54; Richard A. Hawkins, 'Samuel Untermyer' in John A Garraty (ed), *American National Biography*, Cary, North Carolina, Oxford University Press, 1999, pp.106-8.

The founders of the League hoped that the multi-millionaire Untermyer would give their organization a higher profile, access to the various networks to which he belonged, and a secure source of funds for their work. Untermyer did draw upon the various networks to raise the profile of the executive committee of the League. He believed the boycott would not succeed unless it was supported by the non-Jewish majority in the United States. Notable non-Jewish politicians recruited to the executive committee by Untermyer included former President Theodore Roosevelt, New York City Mayoral candidate Fiorello H. LaGuardia and James W. Gerard, a former United States Ambassador to Germany.

Untermyer also believed that a successful boycott required the support of all of America's major faith communities, not just Judaism. Here Untermyer had less success since he had few prominent Christian clergymen or lay people in his networks. Nonetheless he did have liberal Roman Catholic and Protestant friends. Untermyer believed that the League should seek common cause with the Roman Catholic Church. Significant elements of the Nazi regime were virulently antagonistic to Roman Catholicism. In January 1935 Untermyer brought into the League the Pennsylvanian Roman Catholic lawyer and senior state official, Richard J. Beamish. Beamish became a member of the League's executive committee. He lived up to his promise to pull with the team to the best of his ability.² The official position of the Roman Catholic Church was hostile to the boycott as Untermyer discovered when he took up a suggestion by Beamish and travelled to Rome in the summer of 1935 with the intention of securing an audience with Pope Pius XI – which he regarded as “worth a long chance.” He was unsuccessful. Although he did get to meet with some Vatican officials, they were unsympathetic to his cause.³ Nonetheless, notwithstanding Untermyer's unsuccessful

² Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, Non-Sectarian Anti-Nazi League Collection [hereafter cited as NSANL Collection], Box 4, G.E. Harriman to Samuel Untermyer, Jan. 7, 1935; Bundesarchiv Berlin, R301/44489, Handel 37: USA, Folder 7, 35-6, Non-Sectarian Anti-Nazi League, August 12, 1935.

³ NSANL Collection, Box 4, Samuel Untermyer to G.E. Harriman, July 18, 1935; NSANL Collection, Box 24, Richard J. Beamish to George E. Harriman, c.July 22, 1935; NSANL Collection, Box 24, George E. Harriman to Richard J. Beamish, Aug. 22, 1935; NSANL Collection, Box 24, George E. Harriman to Editor, The Forward, Aug. 6, 1935.

visit to the Vatican, in May 1936 the German Department for Foreign Trade reported that the scope of the boycott had widened as it gained the support of American Roman Catholics.⁴

It was the view of Theodore Roosevelt that the boycott's aim to relieve the persecution of Germany's Jews was best achieved by non-Jews like himself.⁵ While Roosevelt did not put that belief to the test himself, another of Untermyer's friends, Colonel Edward House, did. House had been President Woodrow Wilson's private adviser. Although House did not join the League, he did work behind the scenes, as he had done during his time as Wilson's adviser, on behalf of Untermyer. In 1934 House was invited to Germany to discuss the Jewish situation. He declined preferring to use the American Ambassador to Berlin, William E. Dodd, as an intermediary with the Nazi regime. Dodd met with senior members of the Nazi regime who agreed to take up the matter with Hitler. As a result promises were made that the Nazi regime would moderate its anti-Semitic policy. Unfortunately the promises were not kept.⁶

Untermyer also drew upon his membership of the Democratic Party of which he had been a prominent member both in New York and Washington, D.C., since the beginning of the twentieth century. As a major contributor to Franklin Roosevelt's successful presidential campaign in 1932 he had reason to expect a sympathetic response notwithstanding the new President's failure to include him in his Brain Trust. Some members of the Roosevelt Administration were sympathetic to the objectives of the boycott, notably Harold L. Ickes, Secretary of the Interior.⁷ Unfortunately Cordell Hull, Roosevelt's Secretary of State, was unsympathetic to the boycott. He was a staunch advocate of free trade. He was also a close friend of Untermyer's long-time enemy, Senator Carter Glass. Untermyer and Glass were involved in a long running dispute over the authorship of the Federal Reserve Act of 1913.

⁴ Bundesarchiv Berlin, R301/44489, Handel 37: USA, Bd. 7, S.343, Reichstelle für den Aussenhandel, May 2, 1936.

⁵ NSANL Collection, Box 2, Theodore Roosevelt to Henry H. Rosenfelt, Oct. 28, 1933.

⁶ Richard A. Hawkins, "Hitler's Bitterest Foe': Samuel Untermyer and the Boycott of Nazi Germany, 1933-1938," American Jewish History, Vol.93, No.1, March 2007, pp.42-3. [Hereafter cited as Bitterest Foe]

Hull incensed Untermyer by apologising to the German Ambassador, Hans Luther, for a speech the lawyer made in support of the boycott in November 1933.⁸ Luther had reported to Berlin in September that Hull also appeared to be unsympathetic to the plight of Germany's Jews.⁹ Hull apologized again in response to an official German complaint about a speech by Mayor LaGuardia in support of the boycott in 1937. LaGuardia had proposed that a "chamber of horrors" be erected at the New York 1939 World's Fair" with a figure of "that brown-shirted fanatic who is now menacing the peace of the world."¹⁰

Although the Roosevelt Administration was generally unsupportive of the boycott at least it did not actively oppose it like the British government. In April 1933 the Metropolitan Commissioner of Police issued instructions to London's Whitechapel police division to visit all Jewish shopkeepers and request them to take down all boycott notices as quickly as possible. Sharon Gewirtz also shows that the Foreign Office was opposed to Jewish meetings of protest and an official Jewish boycott.¹¹ In August 1934 Robert Vansittart, the Permanent Under-Secretary of State singled out Untermyer in his condemnation of the "aggressively Jewish, flamboyant and narrow character of the anti-German propaganda"¹² of the boycott campaign.

The founders of the League must also have had great hopes that Untermyer would provide the boycott with the oxygen of publicity associated with previous causes he had campaigned for. However, Untermyer experienced great difficulties in publicising the boycott. As he constantly reminded the volunteers at the League's New York headquarters coverage by the

⁷ NSANL Collection, Box 25, Harold L. Ickes to Samuel Untermyer, November 27, 1935.

⁸ 'Untermyer Scores Luther', New York Times, November 2, 1933, p.11; 'Hull Deprecates Attack On Luther', New York Times, November 3, 1933, p.10.

⁹ PRO, GFM33/4734, Telegramm, September 21, 1933.

¹⁰ "LaGuardia v. Hitler," *Time*, March 15, 1937; NSANL Collection, Box 5, Telegram to Interstate Conference of the NSANL, March 7, 1937.

¹¹ Sharon Gewirtz, 'Anglo-Jewish Responses to Nazi Germany 1933-39: The Anti-Nazi Boycott and the Board of Deputies of British Jews', Journal of Contemporary History, Vol.26, No.2, April 1991, pp.267-8.

¹² As quoted in ibid., p.267.

Jewish community press was not a triumph if this was not matched by the general press.¹³ Untermyer might have expected favourable coverage by the Hearst syndicate newspapers because William Randolph Hearst was both a former client and personal friend. Unfortunately Hearst was sympathetic to the cause of Nazi Germany.¹⁴ Adolph Ochs, publisher, of the influential *New York Times*, was also a personal friend and former client. Indeed Untermyer had helped finance Ochs' purchase of the *New York Times* back in the late nineteenth century. However, the Ochs-Sulzberger family were worried about alienating their non-Jewish readership. They chose not to give the boycott prominent coverage. Adolph Ochs did not share Untermyer's enthusiasm for the boycott. His son-in-law, Arthur Hays Sulzberger, who succeeded him as publisher of the *New York Times*, opposed the boycott.¹⁵ Untermyer complained to Ochs in 1935 shortly before the publisher's death about the *New York Times*' unsympathetic editorials on the boycott.¹⁶ The *New York Times* adopted the same policy toward the Holocaust as Laurel Leff has shown.¹⁷ Only one major newspaper publisher supported the boycott, J. David Stern, owner of the *Philadelphia Record*. Untermyer helped finance Stern's purchase of the *New York Evening Post* in December 1933.¹⁸ Some of the American press opposed the boycott. *TIME* magazine was a notable example. Its coverage also had an anti-Semitic undertone. For example, in one article from December 1933 Untermyer was ridiculed by *TIME* for objecting to various German festive items on the captain's table in the dining saloon of the S.S. *Monarch of Bermuda*.¹⁹

¹³ NSANL Collection, Box 4, Samuel Untermyer to Bernard G. Richards, Sept. 27, 1934.

¹⁴ David Nasaw, *The Chief: The Life of William Randolph Hearst*, New York, Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000, pp.488-99.

¹⁵ New York Times Archives, Adolph S. Ochs to Samuel Untermyer, July 5, 1933; NSANL Collection, Box 7, Arthur Hays Sulzberger to Ezekiel Rabinowitz, August 22, 1933.

¹⁶ American Jewish Archives, Collection 251, Samuel Untermyer Papers, Box 2, Folder 8, Samuel Untermyer to Adolph S. Ochs, March 5, 1935.

¹⁷ Laurel Leff, *Buried by the Times: The Holocaust and America's Most Important Newspaper*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005, pp.19-48.

¹⁸ J. David Stern, *Memoirs of a Maverick Publisher*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1962, p.220, 'Evening Post Sold To J. David Stern', *New York Times*, December 8, 1933, p.30; 'J. David Stern, Publisher, Dies: Signed First Pact With Guild', *New York Times*, October 11, 1971, p.38; Eric Fettmann, *200 Years New York Post: The Post's History Is The Nation's Own*, <http://www.nypost.com>.

¹⁹ 'Untermyer & Gewgaws', *Time*, December 18, 1933.

Untermeyer also made use of his networks to organise two international boycott conferences, the first in Amsterdam in July 1933 and the second in London in November 1934. Both conferences were largely funded by Untermeyer himself. However, while Untermeyer was willing to fund projects with tangible outcomes such as the conferences, conference proceedings, and an in-house publication, the *Economic Bulletin*, he was less willing to fund the every-day expenses of the League. He expected the League to become self-financing. However, despite continued efforts to raise funds the League remained dependent on Untermeyer's funds until his resignation as president in early 1938. As a result the League was inadequately funded and was heavily dependent on the goodwill of its East European Jewish-American founders. That goodwill was often stretched to breaking point both by Untermeyer and his representative, the executive secretary of the League, who was effectively an employee of Untermeyer. Untermeyer imposed a succession of executive secretaries on the League. The first executive secretary was the journalist, Bernard G. Richards, who had recently parted company on bad terms with the American Jewish Congress. However, Richards found Untermeyer to be a very difficult employer and after a few months he resigned.²⁰ He was replaced by Captain George Egerton Harriman, a non-Jew, whose appointment outraged the Jewish volunteers at the League's headquarters. Ironically Harriman was the longest serving executive secretary under Untermeyer and succeeded in winning over most of his opponents. After Harriman parted company with the League in August 1935²¹ there was a succession of transient executive secretaries who were either fired by Untermeyer or left of their own accord in despair. Two of Untermeyer's appointees were not who they claimed to be. Dr. Boris E. Nelson, a German Jewish refugee, did not have a Ph.D. in literature from Heidelberg University and was probably not a former

²⁰ "America To Lead Jewish World Congress Plan," The Jewish Criterion, Oct. 23, 1931, pp.2, 33; The Jewish Criterion, Feb. 12, 1932, p.29; The Jewish Criterion, June 24, 1932, p.12; The Reminiscences of Bernard G. Richards (1960), pp.170-73, in the Oral History Collection of Columbia University; Brandeis University Library, Judaica Department, Papers of Rabbi Hillel Silver, Microfilm Roll 49, Folder 1219, Bernard G. Richards to Abba Hillel Silver, December 14, 1934.

²¹ The Jewish Criterion, September 4, 1936, p.19.

inmate of Dachau.²² Johannes Steele, the last executive secretary of the League, another German refugee, almost certainly forgot to inform Untermeyer that he was a Communist sympathiser.²³

Nonetheless there seems little doubt that Untermeyer provided the League with a focus and drive that it initially lacked. Max Ornstein, another early member of the League, argued that apart from inviting Untermeyer to join, the league "had been floating around without intelligent direction." It reminded him of Don Quixote. He urged Untermeyer in September to transform the league into a more effective organization.⁸ Untermeyer believed that German economy could be brought to its knees by a successful boycott. Unlike many of his fellow American Jewish leaders he had a first hand and in-depth knowledge of the German economy. He believed that the German economy was far weaker than was believed at the time – a view that has recently been supported by the research of Adam Tooze.⁹

It can be argued the boycott would have been more effective if there had been a unified movement in the United States. Initially the two most important American Jewish organizations, the American Jewish Committee and the American Jewish Congress, opposed the boycott. As an organisation the American Jewish Committee held this position throughout the remainder of the 1930s. As Sharon Gewirtz has shown, the Committee's British counterpart, the Board of Deputies also opposed the boycott during the same period.²⁴ However, the Committee was forced to concede the right of individuals to boycott

²² NSANL Collection, Box 5, Boris E. Nelson to Samuel Untermeyer, March 8, 1937; The Jewish Criterion, February 26, 1937, p.29; "Dr. Boris Nelson dies, was retired arts editor at Blade, UT professor," Toledo Blade, February 20, 1995, pp.1:1, 1:5, 2:10.

The University of Toledo archivist, Barbara Floyd, says that there is some doubt as to whether Nelson was actually awarded a Ph.D. from Heidelberg in 1931. The University of Heidelberg archivist, Dr. Werner Moritz, says that there was nobody born in 1911 among 125 Jewish students who had their Ph.D.s revoked between 1937 and 1945.

E-mail from Dr. Werner Moritz, University of Heidelberg, August 28, 2007; E-mail from Barbara Floyd, University of Toledo, August. 28, 2007.

²³ NSANL Collection, Box 5, Samuel Untermeyer to Johannes Steel, December 6, 1937; "Lonely voice," Time, February 18, 1946.

²⁴ Gewirtz, op. cit., pp.255-76.

German goods and services as the Board of Deputies did some months later.²⁵ Unlike the Committee the Congress subsequently changed its position as an organisation. Untermyer was keen to join forces with the Congress and it took a great effort on the part of Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver, a fellow League member, to persuade him against this course of action.²⁶ Members of the League such as Mary Harris were opposed to giving up their organization's identity. She observed to Harriman in August 1935 that Joseph Tenenbaum and the American Jewish Congress's "idea of coordination is to make every possible attempt to have us lose our identity and truly give them a clear field to work in."²⁷ Nonetheless, Benjamin Dubovsky, one of the founders of the League, recalled in 1937 that there had been many unsuccessful attempts to unite the boycott actives of both organizations. At the early conferences, it was clear that the League could not become a part of the American Jewish Congress, but the boycott activities and the boycott committee of the American Jewish Congress could become part of the League, thus forming one united organization to conduct all boycott activities. However, at one of these meetings the representatives, according to Dubovsky, asked as a "compensation" for giving up their separate boycott activities, 25 per cent of all the funds collected by the united boycott appeal, to be used by the Congress for its other activities. Untermyer, and all the senior members of the League, objected to this condition.²⁸ Rabbi Stephen Wise, president of the American Jewish Congress, also believed that Untermyer needed the Congress more than it needed the League, because in Wise's opinion Untermyer had no organization, was unwilling to spend large sums of money and unwilling to give of his time.²⁹ In reality in late 1933 the Congress had been losing activists to the League because of the Congress's cautious approach to the boycott even after it had

²⁵ Naomi W. Cohen, 'The Transatlantic Connection: The American Jewish Committee and the Joint Foreign Committee in Defense of German Jews, 1933-1937', American Jewish History, Vol.90, No.4, December 2000, p.363.

²⁶ Bitterest Foe, pp.32-3, 39-40.

²⁷ NSANL Collection, Box 5, Samuel Untermyer to Boris E. Nelson, July 23, 1937.

²⁸ NSANL Collection, Box 6, Mary Harris to G.E. Harriman, August 8, 1935.

²⁹ Morris Frommer, "The American Jewish Congress: A History, 1914-1950" (Ph.D. thesis, Ohio State University, 1978), 357-59.

endorsed it earlier in the year. A boycott bureau was not organized by the Congress until February 1934.³⁰

Even after the American Jewish Congress became more active in the boycott movement Morris Frommer argues that most of the leadership regarded the boycott as "nothing more than a quixotic gesture."³¹ Sterba has observed that established German-American Jews, such as much of the leadership of the Congress, sought to avoid the kind of noisy protests and high visibility associated for example with the League because they feared an anti-Semitic backlash.³² In February 1936 a Joint Boycott Council was formed in which the American Jewish Congress was an equal partner with the Jewish Labor Committee. Although the Congress still officially supported the boycott Frommer argues that most of its leaders were pleased that the new organization meant that they no longer had to waste precious resources on what they considered to be a hopeless cause. Only Joseph Tenenbaum's faction regarded the boycott as a high priority.³³

After the foundation of the Joint Boycott Council, Joseph Baskin, the secretary of the Jewish Labor Committee, found it difficult to establish contact with the League which he felt might either reflect an adopted policy of non-cooperation on the part of the League toward the Jewish Labor Committee or a lack of cohesion within the League itself.³⁴ It seems it was the latter because Untermeyer had no personal objections to contact with Joint Boycott Council.³⁵ Later in 1936 contact was established and a conference was held in December 1936 with the Joint Boycott Council. Dubovsky observed that the issue of fund raising also wrecked the conference as it had the ones held previously with the American Jewish Congress. The League suggested the fusion of all groups into one, a complete united front under one

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.361-62.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp.366-68.

³² Christopher M. Sterba, "The Melting Pot Goes to War: Italian and Jewish Immigrants in America's Great Crusade, 1917-1919" (Ph.D. thesis, Brandeis University, 1999), p.65.

³³ Frommer, *op. cit.*, 368-69; Joseph Tenenbaum, Three Years Anti-Nazi Boycott, New York, Joint Boycott Council of the American Jewish Congress and Jewish Labor Committee, 1936.

³⁴ NSANL Collection, Box 5, Joseph Baskin to B.C. Vladeck, July 22, 1937.

³⁵ NSANL Collection, Box 5, Samuel Untermeyer to Boris E. Nelson, July 23, 1937.

leadership for the boycott. However, both partners to the Joint Boycott Council insisted on reserving the right for their organizations to solicit funds separately on the claim that they are doing boycott work, and then allocate part of such funds to the coordinated boycott committee.³⁶ Another attempt was made to coordinate the boycott with the Joint Boycott Council in 1938 after Untermeyer's resignation from the League.³⁷ While Silver had originally opposed cooperation with the American Jewish Congress he supported the proposal that the League should be amalgamated with the Joint Boycott Council.³⁸ However, this proposal was also unsuccessful.

While the League was undoubtedly dysfunctional and over-dependent upon Untermeyer for funding it is unlikely that it would have been functionally more successful if it had been better organised and funded. It is also unlikely that a unified boycott organisation would have made a difference given that Rabbi Wise believed the boycott was not an effective use of resources. On the other hand, the opposition to the boycott of much of the American Jewish elite did undermine its prospects for success.

B) The Response of Retailers and Wholesalers to the Boycott Campaign

In the early 1930s the United States imported several significant categories of merchandise from Germany including luxury goods, such as fine porcelain china, and cheap variety goods, such as toys and Christmas decorations. The League launched a boycott of German goods and services at a conference in June 1933. It supplemented a boycott by professional trades and industries previously begun by the League.³⁹ Although the boycott's scope was nationwide in reality it was confined to the New York metropolitan area and a few other communities such as Chicago, Cleveland and Philadelphia where the boycott was organised

³⁶ NSANL Collection, Box 25, George E. Harriman to Samuel Untermeyer, August 21, 1935; NSANL Collection, Box 16, Benjamin Dubovsky to Samuel Margoshes, February 11, 1937.

³⁷ NSANL Collection, Box 412, Quarterly report by the chairman of the National Executive Committee, Dr. B. Dubovsky, November 15, 1938.

³⁸ NSANL Collection, Box 3, Abba Hillel Silver to Dr. S. William Kalb, November 29, 1938.

³⁹ "Boycott Is Begun By Jewish Women," New York Times, June 28, 1933, p.4; NSANL Collection, Box 29, The Economic Boycott of Germany: Address By Samuel Untermeyer Before the Women's Conference on the Boycott, Hotel Astor, New York City, June 27, 1933.

by satellite organisations. The boycott had four stages. The first involved discovering which businesses stocked German goods, either overtly or covertly. Intelligence was acquired from one of three sources: information from concerned citizens; questionnaires sent out to businesses by the League; and interviews or fieldwork by members of the League. The second stage involved writing to businesses and asking them to comply with the boycott. When appropriate, the League provided information about American or other non-German substitutes. If the business refused to comply, the League instituted a boycott of that concern. Sometimes circulars were distributed informing customers of the firm's links with Germany. After the League was reorganized in December 1933 as the Non-Sectarian Anti-Nazi League to Champion Human Rights, the names of offending firms would be published in the organization's journal, the *Economic Bulletin*.⁴⁰ However, the organization did not support directly or indirectly picketing, but as Untermeyer told his son Irwin,

Whilst our organization does not and cannot from motives of policy support picketing, and has taken every opportunity of so explaining, between you and me we are glad that it is being done, and hope that it will continue. It has had very effective results.⁴¹

One might have expected the League would have had a more sympathetic response to its call for a boycott of German goods. Indeed Untermeyer was well acquainted with the department store sector where many of these imports were retailed. His extended family included the owners of the Guggenheimer department store in his birthplace, Lynchburg, Virginia, and also the owners of the Lowenstein department store in Memphis, Tennessee. Furthermore his social network included the owners of many of the department stores in the New York metropolitan area such as the Straus family who owned Macy's. Indeed Untermeyer was particularly furious at Macy's for continuing to sell German goods, because

⁴⁰ Karen J. Greenberg, ed., Archives of the Holocaust; Volume 6, Columbia University Library, New York: The Non-Sectarian Anti-Nazi League to Champion Human Rights Papers: The Non-Sectarian Anti-Nazi League Pamphlet Collection, New York, Garland Publishing, Inc., 1990, pp.ix-x.

⁴¹ Private Papers of the late Frank Untermeyer, Evanston, IL, Samuel Untermeyer to Irwin Untermeyer, February 9, 1935.

Irwin was referring to the actions of the Newark Minutemen in support of the boycott. The Minutemen were backed by the city's crime boss, Abner 'Longy' Zwillman. Warren Grover, Nazis in Newark, Edison, Transaction, 2003.

the owners were descended from German Jews like himself. However, in the summer of 1933 the mass circulation New York newspapers refused to publish his attacks on their biggest advertiser, unlike the Jewish national daily, *Der Tog*.⁴² Therefore he persuaded Stern, who was publisher of the *Philadelphia Record*, to publish his attacks on Macy's. Untermyer then circulated thousands of reprints in New York City.⁴³ On October 2, Macy's published a full page advertisement on the boycott in the New York daily newspapers. The advertisement was entitled "Three Personal Letters concerning the sale of German Goods by Department Stores in the United States." The letters were purportedly correspondence about the boycott between an unnamed customer and Percy S. Straus, the store's president. Furthermore a statement was issued by the Retail Dry Goods Association on behalf of twenty leading New York department stores, many of which were owned by Jews, stating they had minimized their purchases of German merchandise, but that the boycott of their stores by the League would "create a dangerous precedent."⁴⁴

A half-page advertisement in response to that of Macy's, signed by Untermyer as president of the League, was refused by three New York morning newspapers, the *Times*, the *Herald-Tribune*, and the *American*, for publication on October 3. Untermyer challenged the accuracy and sincerity of some of the statements in Macy's advertisement. The well-known radical liberal magazine, *The Nation*, considered that the newspapers' "refusal to publish even as paid advertising a statement from a man of the standing of Mr. Untermyer, who could be held liable for any libelous material therein contained, constitutes a unique and flagrant suppression." *The Nation* offered to publish the advertisement without payment in its next issue.⁴⁵ On October 25, it published an article on "The Suppressed Advertisement

⁴² Brandeis University Library, Judaica Department, Papers of Rabbi Hillel Silver, Microfilm Roll 15, Folder 344, Dr. S. Margoshes to Abba Hillel Silver, August 9, 1933.

⁴³ Stern, *op. cit.*, p.214.

⁴⁴ "Three Personal Letters concerning the sale of German Goods by Department Stores in the United States," *New York Times*, October 2, 1933, p.7.

⁴⁵ *The Nation*, October 18, 1933, p.423.

Concerning R.H. Macy" that embarrassed the department store,⁴⁶ within which was the text of Untermeyer's advertisement. It took the form of an open letter to Straus, in which Untermeyer observed,

That the decision of the New York department stores to which you refer [in your advertisement of October 2], against refusing to further handle goods made in Germany, is said to have been influenced largely by your leadership as the most important store in the group, supported by another Jewish-managed store in New York City; that so long as you persisted in continuing to buy German goods you would have maintained an unfair advantage over them if they had failed to follow your lead; that they preferred not to subject themselves to such unequal competition.

He also wrote,

That the "dangerous precedent" of the boycott, to which you so feelingly refer, is in no respect dangerous nor is it in no respect dangerous nor is it a "precedent" in that is a purely defensive counter-boycott against a vastly more impressive and all-embracing boycott that is being enforced against all Jews in Germany. It follows the precedent that was set by Germany when it was brutally inaugurated and actively continued to prosecute the boycott of Jewish manufacturers and shopkeepers and professional men by the entire German nation for the avowed purpose of destroying their means of livelihood and of ruining and exterminating the German Jews.

Untermeyer's open letter was followed by a summary of Macy's response. Straus denied asking any New York newspaper to suppress the advertisement. He went on further to observe that,

Action on the part of a large business house which tends to accelerate racial cleavage in the United States is un-American. The policy of a mercantile establishment ought not to be directed to inculcating or to opposing the views of anyone on the ground of race, creed, or politics.⁴⁷

Untermeyer's difficulty in persuading the New York City department store owners to support the boycott can be explained by several factors. The United States was in the depths of the Great Depression, thus they could ill afford to lose business, particularly if, as is probable, many of their Gentile and Jewish customers were unsympathetic to the boycott. The League promoted substitutes from countries such as Czechoslovakia and some trade diversion took place. But not all their customers were prepared to accept substitutes. Although by the end

⁴⁶ The German Consulate-General in New York City considered this to be an important turn of events. Bundesarchiv Berlin, R301/44484, Handel 37: Bd.2, S.42, Deutsches Generalkonsulat New York, October 25, 1933.

⁴⁷ "The Suppressed Advertisement Concerning R.H. Macy," The Nation, October 25, 1933, pp.478-80.

of March 1934 Macy's, Saks, Gimbel's, Bloomingdale's, Hearn, Best, Constable, Lord & Taylor Wanamaker all declared that they would discontinue importing goods from Germany, they not completely adhere to the boycott.⁴⁸ In December 1934 Untermyer received reports that Macy's were selling German knives. A junior manager at Macy's also reported that the Rosenthal China Co. claimed to have orders for German china from Wanamaker and a half dozen other New York stores. (Wanamaker claimed that these orders were only for replacements.) The F.A.O. Schwarz toy store was openly selling German-made toys which it had not done in 1933.⁴⁹ Nonetheless in February 1935 the German General Consulate in New York reported that the boycott had begun to have a severe effect on sales of German goods in the city's department stores.⁵⁰

However, in many other metropolitan centres the boycott was less successful. Tom May of Los Angeles's May department store observed to Untermyer in January 1935 that his support for the boycott put him at a big competitive disadvantage because all the other stores in Los Angeles were handling German china and gloves.⁵¹ One might have expected the Jewish owned mail order and department store retailer Sears, Roebuck & Co. based in Chicago to support the boycott. Indeed Untermyer claimed in a letter to Bryon D. Miller of Woolworths that Sears absolutely adhered to the boycott.⁵² In fact, although Sears had suggested it would support the boycott, it continued to purchase German merchandise until the outbreak of World War II, although it claimed in its defence that these were kept to the minimum.⁵³

⁴⁸ Bundesarchiv Berlin, R301/44485, Handel 37: USA, Bd. 3, S.104, Telegramm, March 20, 1934; Moshe Gottlieb, "The Anti-Nazi Boycott Movement in the American Jewish Community, 1933-1941" (Ph.D. thesis, Brandeis University, 1967), p.173.

⁴⁹ NSANL Collection, Box 29, Samuel Untermyer to R.G. Richards, December 10, 1934; NSANL Collection, Box 24, Merchandise Manager, John Wanamaker, to Bernard G. Richards, December 13, 1934.

⁵⁰ Bundesarchiv Berlin, R301/44488, Handel 37: USA, Bd. 6, S.130-5, Vorhandensein und Verkauf deutscher Erzeugnisse in New Yorks Warenhausern, February 8, 1935.

⁵¹ NSANL Collection, Box 9, Tom May to Samuel Untermyer, January 26, 1935.

⁵² American Jewish Archives, Collection 251, Samuel Untermyer Papers, Box 1, Folder 2, Samuel Untermyer to Byron O. Miller, October 24, 1934.

⁵³ Greenberg, *op. cit.*, pp.31-40.

While the established middle-class and upper-class Jewish community of German and central European descent was generally not supportive of the boycott the opposite was true of Jews of East European descent. So there may have been a greater impact on the stores patronised by lower income citizens of the New York metropolitan area such as the 5¢ to \$1 chain stores which included Woolworths, McCrory, Kresge, Kress, F.W. Grand and W.T. Grant. By 1935 the League had persuaded these chains to minimise their inventories of German merchandise. However, the League suspected that some of the chains which had German contracts and were somewhat sympathetic to the Nazi German regime, rather than attempting to sell it in the New York market were dumping their German merchandise throughout the rest of the United States.⁵⁴

One of the chains targeted by the League was Woolworths. In March 1934 the League succeeded in persuading Woolworth's to discontinue importing goods from Germany.⁵⁵ Byron D. Miller, president of Woolworth's, sent a telegram to the League saying that, "Replying your.... query as to policy of this company regarding importation of goods from Germany. Beg to advise that we have discontinued importation owing to extreme sales resistance."⁵⁶ For example, in March 1934 Woolworth's stopped purchasing "Soft Luna" pencils from J.S. Staedtler, a Nuremburg pencil manufacturer, because of consumer resistance. Staedtler's New York Office observed

...It was not believed at first that all the propaganda spread through the newspapers, and by word of mouth of the Jewish Dealers and Consumers would have any effect, as we had hoped that this propaganda would be short lived.

However, we very much begin to wonder about the results, as every day we feel it more and more, and must prepare ourselves for the very worst.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Greenberg, *op. cit.*, p.50.

⁵⁵ "Woolworth Bans All German Goods," *New York Times*, March 21, 1934, p.11.

⁵⁶ Greenberg, *op. cit.*, p.7.

⁵⁷ Bundesarchiv Berlin, R301/44485, Handel 37: USA, Bd. 3, S.245, J.S. Staedtler, Inc., New York to J.S. Steadtler, Nuremburg, March 20, 1934.

Woolworth's was unable to honour its agreement. This may have partly been the result of retaliation against its German subsidiary in May 1934.⁵⁸ The subsidiary had only been established in 1927⁵⁹ although Woolworths had been purchasing merchandise in Germany since the 1890s.⁶⁰ The German Foreign Ministry reported the following month that Woolworth's had continued to purchase goods from Germany through its subsidiaries in Canada and Great Britain. The German General Consulate in New York also reported that Woolworth's was still purchasing goods from Germany for resale in the majority of its stores in the United States.⁶¹ This is substantiated by reports received by the League regarding German goods on sale at American and British branches of Woolworths in August 1934.⁶² The League resumed its boycott of Woolworths. Woolworths, together with Sears, was regarded as the largest and most conspicuous violator of the boycott.⁶³ The League highlighted this in its *Economic Bulletin*. However, Gabriel Lowenstein, a manufacturer who supported the League, argued in December 1938 that the League was being unfair to Woolworths. The chain could only repatriate their German subsidiary's profits in offset purchases. Nonetheless Woolworths had tried to minimise its German purchases by helping American manufacturers develop substitutes for many German products.⁶⁴

⁵⁸ Bundesarchiv Berlin, R301/44486, Handel 37: USA, Bd. 4, S.249-51, Boykott-Massnahmen gegen die Einfuhr deutscher Erzeugnisse durch die Firma F.W. Woolworth Co., New York, July 4, 1934.

⁵⁹ John K. Winkler, Five and ten, the fabulous life of F.W. Woolworth, New York, R.M. McBride & Company, p.238.

⁶⁰ Ibid., pp.84-5; James Brough, The Woolworths, New York, McGraw-Hill, 1982, pp.89-95; 'A skyscraper built by the nickels of millions; The Woolworth building tells the romance of a business', New York Times, January 1, 1911, p.SM6.

⁶¹ German Foreign Ministry Political Archive, Bonn, R 99530, Auswärtiges Amt, June 6, 1934.

⁶² American Jewish Archives, Collection 251, Samuel Untermyer Papers, Box 1, Folder 2, C.Q. Henriques (Jewish Representative Council for the Boycott of German Goods and Services) to Samuel Untermyer, August 14, 1934; Nanette Silbert to Samuel Untermyer, August 30, 1934

⁶³ Gottlieb, op. cit., p.289; NSANL Collection, Box 9, Abba Hillel Silver to G.E. Harriman, November 20, 1935.

⁶⁴ NSANL Collection, Box 399, Gabriel Lowenstein to Johan J. Smertenko, December 22, 1938; Gabriel Lowenstein to Johan J. Smertenko, December 29, 1938.

Although the League induced hundreds of wholesalers to cease handling German merchandise,⁶⁵ as in the case of the retail trade there were importers willing to break the boycott.⁶⁶ In October 1934 Bernard Lubow of the Manhattan Import Co. Inc. reported to Untermyer that a number of Jewish importers were breaking the boycott by importing German goods and that it had become the most profitable business. Lubow observed that "We fight such a gang – Jewish importers – who stoop low enough in their greed to profiteer from the misery of their brethren."⁶⁷ Lubow claimed that importers could go to Germany, purchase one of a half-a-dozen phoney currencies, and acquire merchandise as low as 40¢ on the dollar. While German merchandise was not generally available in New York City when Lubow travelled further west he encountered almost everywhere large quantities of German goods. He claimed that these were generally purchased from Jewish importers in New York City.⁶⁸

The resistance to the boycott on the part of retailers and wholesalers is not surprising given the market conditions of the Great Depression. It would appear that German goods were often cheaper than American or other non-German substitutes. Both the department store proprietor Tom May and the wholesaler Bernard Lubow reported to Untermyer that their observance of the boycott meant they were placed at a competitive disadvantage. Nonetheless many American Jews did try to observe the boycott and the evidence suggests that many retailers did try to accommodate them. Untermyer recognised that for the boycott to be effective non-Jews had to be persuaded to observe it as well. However, the evidence suggests that the League failed to persuade most of them.

C) The German Reaction to the Boycott

⁶⁵ NSANL Collection, Box 3, S. Feller to Samuel Untermyer, August 30, 1934.

⁶⁶ NSANL Collection, Box 29, Samuel Untermyer to George E. Harriman, June 27, 1935.

⁶⁷ NSANL Collection, Box 29, Bernard Lubow to Samuel Untermyer, October 22, 1934

⁶⁸ Ibid.

The mainstream contemporary American news media such as the *New York Times* create the impression that the boycott was not very effective.⁶⁹ In December 1934 Untermyer refuted the conclusions of a *New York Times* editorial and suggested that comparing the first ten months of 1933 and 1934 German exports to the United States had in fact fallen by 50 per cent. He also asserted that the boycott was stimulating and helping American industry. At least 510 articles previously imported from Germany were now being manufactured in the United States.⁷⁰

The German reaction to the boycott also suggests that it did have an impact. In addition to the approach made to Colonel House to negotiate with Untermyer an end of the boycott a secret agent posing as a journalist also approached Untermyer during 1934 to determine his conditions for ending the boycott.⁷¹ The following year the Nazis unsuccessfully tried to persuade the Hamburg banker, Max Warburg, to try to muzzle Samuel Untermyer.⁷²

Furthermore *Time* reported two speeches by Nazi Economics Minister, Dr. Kurt Schmitt, and Reich Commissioner for Justice, Hans Frank, respectively referring to the boycott's adverse impact.⁷³ This was confirmed by a report Untermyer received in confidence from a senior executive at Macy's in October 1934 there was an effort by Germany to undermine the "sales-resistance" by offering goods at sacrifice prices.⁷⁴ A few months later in March 1935 the Nazi Governor of Berlin, Julius Lippert, gave a speech to Berlin's American Chamber of Commerce calling for an end to the boycott.⁷⁵ George Harriman observed to Richard J. Waldo of the McClure Newspaper Syndicate that Lippert's speech on the boycott "proved better

⁶⁹ *New York Times*, December 6, 1934, p.20.

⁷⁰ 'The Boycott', *New York Times*, December 8, 1934, p.14.

⁷¹ Bundesarchiv Berlin, R301/44486, Handel 37: USA, Bd. 4, S.380-1, Interview S.U., July 24, 1934. [Translated by Dr. Peter Brown]

⁷² Ron Chernow, *The Warburgs: A Family Saga*, London, Pimlico, 1993, pp.430, 435-6.

⁷³ "'Air & Sun'," *Time*, June 11, 1934.

⁷⁴ NSANL Collection, Box 4, Samuel Untermyer to Bernard G. Richards, October 19, 1934.

⁷⁵ "Jews v. Jews," *Time*, March 11, 1935.

than our words, its effectiveness, and the fear that its maintenance raises in the Nazi mind."⁷⁶

The League had some success in achieving trade diversion as evidenced by German government records. The League wrote to European competitors of German manufacturers suggesting that the boycott provided them with an opportunity to replace German imports in the United States, for example Czechoslovakia.⁷⁷ One such letter came to the attention of the German Textile Workers Association. It had been sent in early November to the Asch (now known as Aš) Textile Industries Federation in Czechoslovakia suggesting that Czech manufacturers could replace imported German cotton and leather gloves.⁷⁸ The following year L. Max Beyer, of the Beyer & Bock porcelain factory in Rudolfstadt, reported to Fritz Saukel, the Governor of Thuringia, that the League was trying to redirect trade to their competitors in Czechoslovakia.⁷⁹ The boycott also caused trade to be diverted to Japan. In May 1934, the Japanese Information Bureau in Tientsin reported that Woolworths had replaced some of its imports of cheap articles from Germany with ones from Japan.⁸⁰

It would appear that offering goods at sacrifice prices was not a total success. Germany began to illegally disguise the origin of their exports to the United States. Untermeyer's high profile among New York Jewry meant that he got tips, many unsigned, from people working near the docks or in factories or stores, on where to find German goods. Mitchell Salem Fisher,⁸¹ who had been a well-known rabbi before he went to law school and was the only lawyer at Guggenheimer & Untermeyer active in the boycott, later recalled with his wife a typical example in an interview with Nanette Dembitz, a distant relative of Untermeyer, in the

⁷⁶ NSANL Collection, Box 25, G.E. Harriman to Richard J. Waldo, March 6, 1935.

⁷⁷ Bundesarchiv Berlin, R301/44486, Handel 37: USA, Bd. 4, S.267, League to Verein der Cechoslovakischen Industriellen, November 7, 1934.

⁷⁸ Bundesarchiv Berlin, R301/44484, Handel 37: USA, Bd. 2, S.139-42, Deutscher Textilarbeiter-Verband to Reichsaussen-ministerium, December 20, 1933.

⁷⁹ Bundesarchiv Berlin, R301/44486, Handel 37: USA, Bd. 4, S.265-6, L. Max Beyer to Fritz Saukel, June 30, 1934.

⁸⁰ Bundesarchiv Berlin, R301/44486, Handel 37: USA, Bd. 4, S.82, Anlage zum Tientsin, May 24, 1934.

1960s. An anonymous note had been received from a clerk in Macy's that clocks with backs stamped on the outside 'Imported from Switzerland' and 'Imported from Czechoslovakia' had 'Made in Germany' inside on the works. Fisher and his wife went to Macy's pretending to be shoppers. They asked the salesman in the clock department to call the buyer, and they demanded to know whether a 'Swiss' clock was actually German. When the buyer removed the back, he expressed much surprise at the German inscription underneath. The Fishers had no way of establishing whether the Swiss cover was added in the United States or in Germany or Switzerland. So they went up to the 8th Floor and delivered with youthful militancy a sermon to the Macy executives on trade with Nazi Germany.⁸²

The German reaction to the anti-Nazi boycott campaign in the United States suggests that Untermyer's campaign strategy had an impact. Vansittart's advice to the British Board of Deputies that they should rely on quiet diplomacy rather than the strategy adopted by Untermyer was clearly unhelpful. Even if the British Foreign Office had been sincere and had actually intended to intercede on behalf of Germany's Jews Untermyer's own attempt at quiet diplomacy, using Ambassador Dodd as an intermediary, shows this strategy had no impact at all.

Conclusion

The slogan of the Non-Sectarian Anti-Nazi League to Champion Human Rights was "the boycott is the moral equivalent of war." Monroe Friedman in his assessment of the anti-Nazi boycott in the United States concludes that it may have succeeded more in its value-expressive goals than in its instrumental goals. Instrumentally it failed to stop the Holocaust.⁸³ Gewirtz is undoubtedly correct in arguing that Untermyer's optimism was exaggerated to boost the boycott campaign when he predicted in November 1933 that

⁸¹ 'Mitchell Fisher, 86; Rabbi Left the Pulpit to Become a Lawyer', New York Times, March 22, 1990, p.B16.

⁸² Nanette Dembitz, The Anti-Nazi Boycott Campaign (unpublished manuscript in the possession of the late Frank Untermyer, Evanston, Il, c.1964), pp.20f, 33f.

⁸³ Monroe Friedman, Consumer Boycotts: Effecting Change Through the Marketplace and the Media, New York, Routledge, 1999, p.138.

Germany would economically crack within one year if the boycott was properly prosecuted.⁸⁴ However, Untermyer was prescient when he predicted in February 1934 that if Hitler was unable to rid Germany of its Jews by any other means he would exterminate them.⁸⁵ Unlike most of his contemporaries among the American Jewish leadership he tried to do something constructive in defence of Germany's Jews. As shown above, he persuaded a significant number of retailers and wholesalers to minimise or cease their purchases of German merchandise. Unfortunately the boycott did not prove to be the equivalent of war notwithstanding the activities of Abner 'Longy' Zwillman's Minutemen in support of the boycott in Newark, New Jersey.

It can be argued that the League was more successful than the sister organisation in Great Britain, the Jewish Representative Council for the Boycott of German Goods (from November 1934 the British Non-Sectarian Anti-Nazi Council).⁸⁶ This is especially surprising given the fact that the British Non-Sectarian Anti-Nazi Council was supported by prominent British politicians and trade unionists such as Herbert Morrison, leader of the London County Council, Clement Attlee, leader of the opposition Labour Party from 1935, and Sir Walter Citrine, General Secretary of the Trades Union Congress.⁸⁷ However, Citrine later recalled that the boycott was not very successful.⁸⁸ Neil Forbes has argued that in all parts of British society there was a desire to protect the well-being of businesses trading with Germany. A successful economic boycott might have worsened Germany's domestic situation and, as a result, the international climate. Forbes argues that this was the very thing Britain most wanted to prevent.⁸⁹ This explains the position taken by Robert Vansittart in August 1934 when he singled out Untermyer in his condemnation of the anti-Nazi boycott in both Britain and the United States. Notwithstanding the unwillingness of the Roosevelt Administration to

⁸⁴ Gewirtz, *op. cit.*, p.261.

⁸⁵ 'Untermyer Brands Nazi Rule by Extermination', San Francisco Chronicle, February 14, 1934, p.3.

⁸⁶ Jewish Chronicle, November 10, 1933, pp.26-7;

⁸⁷ NSANL Collection, Box 29, Report of Mr. Samuel Untermyer Upon the London Conference of November 25-7, 1934; Bitterest Foe, p.45.

⁸⁸ Walter Citrine, Men and Work: An Autobiography, London, Hutchinson, 1964, p.356.

support the boycott at least it did not actively oppose it like Britain's National Government did during the 1930s.

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⁸⁹ Neil Forbes, Doing Business with the Nazis: Britain's Economic and Financial Relations with Germany, 1931-1939, London, Frank Cass, 2000, pp.228-9.