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Box 70, Folder 4, Refugees study, 1980.

THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE

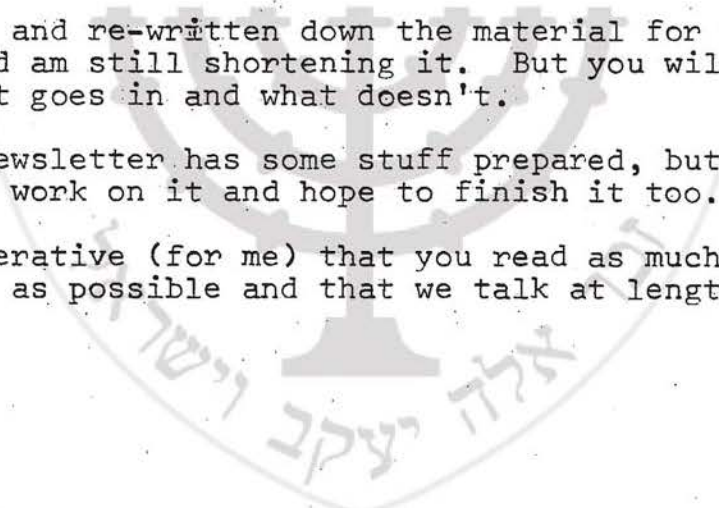
date Feb. 11, 1980
to Marc Tanenbaum
from Joel Gallob
subject Refugees Study, Newsletter

This is a copy of what I expect is the next-to-final draft of the Indochinese Refugee Study. One final draft will be required, in which I'll polish it up and hopefully, shorten it a bit. But 20 pages on such a large topic is not overly huge. I have not included stuff on what the other Jewish groups have done, beyond where it comes up naturally, for a couple reasons: First, my misunderstanding of your directions on this particular and the fact that I have little time to get that extra info; and Second, my feeling that it is better to get the record of your and the AJC's deeds down clearly rather than to state or imply that these acts led others to do likewise: such self-congratulation is usually self-defeatist in the long run.

I have written and re-written down the material for the external newsletter, and am still shortening it. But you will have to pick and choose what goes in and what doesn't.

The external newsletter has some stuff prepared, but more is needed. I am trying to work on it and hope to finish it too. Hope.

It remains imperative (for me) that you read as much of the above given material as possible and that we talk at length about the writings.



THE PLIGHT OF THE INDOCHINESE REFUGEES
THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE AND ITS INTERRELIGIOUS
AFFAIRS DEPARTMENT

By Joel Gallob

Those who do learn the lessons of history must act to prevent its repetition.

Introduction

"There were 15 people aboard, jammed together in sweltering closeness. The man who greeted me was Nguyen Than, the father of the 8 children on the boat and 'captain' of the decrepit vessel. He was a Vietnamese Catholic from Saigon, a teacher in a mission school and competent in English," wrote Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum, the American Jewish Committee's National Director for Interreligious Affairs, in December 1978, in a widely reproduced essay.

"I introduced myself as one of the 14 member U.S. Citizens Commission for Indochinese Refugees organized by the International Rescue Committee..."

Than recounted for the Rabbi how he and his family had escaped Vietnam to ply the turbulent waters of the South China Sea, and then he said: "Rabbi, you as a Jew will understand this better than most people. As terrible as was the starvation... the worst thing of all was the awareness that we were abandoned by the world... I now understand what it meant to be a Jew in Nazi Germany..."

Part I: Overview

THE EXODUS

Since the North Vietnamese victory in 1975, the refugee crisis in Indochina has come in waves.

The first wave, of some 135,000, left Vietnam with the last Ameri-

can troops. Within two years, the exodus at sea had begun. It hovered at about 1,000- 1,500 per month until late 1978, when it began to climb. When Rabbi Tanenbaum made his first trip to the region with the Citizens Commission, in February 1978, as the first official Jewish representative to visit all the major refugee camps, the outflow was about 1,000 a month; by the time of the second Citizens Commission visit, in December 1978, it had risen to 20,000.

In the summer of 1978, Vietnam forced some 180,000 to 200,000 of its ethnic Chinese into China, and they kept leaving for China until that nation reported it harbored 251,000 such refugees in September 1979, when the outflow abated.

Vietnam, by the summer of 1978, had itself received huge numbers of Cambodians fleeing the Pol Pot regime; figures for this refugee flow range from 150,000 to 320,000.

By the end of 1978 Thailand had received some 120,000 refugees from Cambodia and Laos. By July 1979, that figure had reached 250,000 --and the number of those fleeing Vietnam by boat had reached 245,000. Perhaps another 200,000 had tried to do so, and drowned at sea. While the outflow at sea had abated by the end of 1979, a new arm of the crisis had reached huge proportions. Despite episodes of forced mass repatriation by Thai border authorities, that country had by this time developed huge refugee camps along its no-man's border with Cambodia. Reports on the size of that population have ranged widely--perhaps a half million is a reasonable estimate of the number in those camps.

The uncertainty of these and other figures could hardly obscure the fact that since 1975 one of the largest shiftings of human population ever has been and still is taking place in Southeast Asia. And, because of the region's war-scarred history and the political antagonisms of the region, this movement has been accompanied by mass star-

vation, hunger and disease--and all of this has been in addition to the slaughter of some 3 million Cambodians by the Pol Pot regime that took power in 1975.

THE ANTAGONISMS

Impelling this human explosion have been several forces whose threads have been intertwined by history--including antagonisms between the Thai, Khymer (Cambodian), Vietnamese and Chinese peoples; decades of anti-colonial and revolutionary war; sweeping Marxist revolution and subsequent repression and genocide; the Sino-Soviet dispute; and the East-West dispute.

In Vietnam, reunification was followed by the suppression of class and ethnic--mainly Chinese--minorities. The government instituted a policy of "re-education," followed by one of forced migration and the confiscation of the emigrants' wealth. In Cambodia, the Pol Pot government formed by the Khymer Rouge depopulated the cities in order to repopulate the nation's agricultural base and to "purify" the nation of Western influences," and enforced these policies with a brutality that quickly became genocide.

In Laos, too, the Pathet Lao victory led to another set of re-education camps, the suppression of ethnic minorities who had been on the losing side of the civil war, a refugee outflow, and most recently, the use of poison gas against recalcitrant hill tribes.

In December 1978 the Vietnamese, after months of border clashes, invaded Cambodia and ousted the Pol Pot government installing the Heng Samrin one. The Pol Pot forces turned to guerilla war against their conquerors, and thus war in the region continues.

GETTING FOOD AND SUPPLIES INTO CAMBODIA

In November 1979 six Congresswomen met with Cambodian officials and received assurances that supplies would be allowed through to the nation's people. It was the first break in months of Western aid efforts; yet it did not mean the end of problems in relief delivery.

Two self-styled liberation movements had at the time emerged in the Thai-Cambodian border camps. The Thai government reduced aid to the camps, fearing it would reach these movements--which have dominated and terrorized the camps--and thus provide the Vietnamese-backed Cambodians with an excuse for a new invasion. And Phnom Penh, fearing the supplies would reach these movements or the Pol Pot forces, blocked the delivery of food and medicines.

But while the International Committee of the Red Cross and UNICEF reported serious difficulties in distributing supplies, the British group Oxfam reported no such problems--largely because it was not demanding any oversight on where the supplies went. Some observers attributed the distribution problems to the devastation of the nation's roads and bridges; but recent refugee arrivals in Thailand report that supplies were not being distributed in Cambodia and that some of the supplies were being siphoned to Vietnam.

The Phnom Penh regime has had reason to be suspicious of Western motives. It has wanted world recognition, while the U.S., supporting China in the regional application of the Sino-Soviet dispute, has helped to maintain the ousted Pol Pot regime as the one recognized by the United Nations.

Soviet and East European supplies, Vietnamese officials contend, have provided enough aid to prevent mass starvation. But the evidence has clearly been otherwise, and the Russians have refused suggestions that they coordinate aid supplies with those from the West.

Food and medicine then, have become weapons in the area's struggles, with politics taking precedence over the salvaging of human life.

Part II: The Conscience of America is Moved

The International Rescue Committee recommended, after the first Citizens Commission trip, the adoption of a "long range strategy" to admit more refugees into the U.S. and to speed up their processing. At the time, about 16,000 refugees had been so admitted, but more than 100,000 were living in the refugee camps.

Rabbi Tanenbaum noted then the lack of public concern for the refugees' plight despite the "special responsibility" the U.S. had to them. IRC Chairman Leo Cherne emphasized "the absolute necessity of sanctuary" for all who fled Cambodia, and the IRC urged a more generous admissions criteria for Laotian refugees, and urged the US. to appeal to all maritime nations to save boat people and all nations of the region not to close their ports to the refugees.

INTERRELIGIOUS AFFAIRS DEPARTMENT ACTIVITIES

At the beginning of 1978, on January 29, shortly before the first Commission trip to Southeast Asia, Rabbi Tanenbaum spoke about the tragedy on his commentary on N.Y.C.'s radio station WINS and on 25 other stations in the nation which carry his commentaries. He was the first Jewish leader to become involved in efforts to bring the U.S. to the aid of the refugees of Indochina.

The Judeo-Christian consciousness, strongly shaped by the experience of exodus, he said, had already "become a significant force in leading the IRC to create a fact-finding committee..." to look into a crisis that had become "an abomination." The journey, he hoped, would "drama-

tize the facts of this human tragedy..."

On February 12, he told his listeners that "This broadcast is being taped at the airport in Seattle" where the IRC Commission was soon to leave for Southeast Asia "to develop a deeper understanding of the magnitude of this urgent humanitarian problem, and to propose a comprehensive program for meeting these critical human needs."

Two weeks later, he recalled on the air the terrible sights of the region, and urged, "The international community must put a stop to that indifference to human life, and now."

INCREASING THE IMMIGRATION QUOTAS

As the crisis grew, the Carter administration periodically increased the U.S. immigration ceilings for the refugees, out of humane considerations and because of pressure from groups like the IRC and the AJC. But each time, the size of the problem grew and overwhelmed the American response, and a new, larger one had to be decided upon.

On January 24, 1978, the State Department announced it would allow 7,000 more refugees into the U.S. than had been allowed (some 15,000) the year before.

On March 18, the President sent to Congress a bill to triple the number of immigrants entering under the non-parole immigration laws from 17,400 to 50,000 per year, and on March 26, the Attorney General stated that he planned to parole in another 25,000 more.

On March 29, President Carter announced a new policy, and on June 4, Attorney General Griffin Bell stated that it would go into effect 10 days later. It called for the granting of parole entrance 25,000 Indochinese up to May 1, 1979; half were to be boat people, the other half land refugees from Thailand. As part of this policy, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance requested that all U.S. maritime vessels plying

the region's waters pick up boat people they meet, and assured the governments of the region that the U.S. would give "prompt and sympathetic consideration for admission to the United States on a case-by-case basis for those rescued at sea.

THE AJC CONVENTION

The American Jewish Committee, at its 72nd Annual Convention in May 1978, warned that "if published reports...are even partially true, then the scale of murder (in Cambodia)... approaches the enormity of the Nazi exterminations." It called upon the developing nations to protest the slaughter, and upon the U.S. Attorney General to use his parole power to bring into the U.S. "the thousands of Cambodian refugees... in Thailand."

Chang Song, the last Minister of Information in pre-Communist Cambodia, told the Convention that one-third of the Khymer people had been killed and pleaded that "The time has come to put an end to these terrible crimes against humanity."

Morton Yarmon, the AJC's Director for Publicity, joined Congressman Stephen Solazr in delivering a resolution urged President Carter to "invite the leaders of the democratic nations to meet with him to consider (how) to bring the maximum moral and political pressure against the reign of terror" in the region.

THE HAI HONG IS SAVED

On November 22, 1978, on the eve of the Commission's second trip to Southeast Asia, the AJC called upon President Crter and Attorney General Bell to admit the 2,500 refugees aboard the Hai Hong freighter. Recalling the fate of the St. Louis--which, in 1939, denied entry to the U.S. and other nations, returned to Europe to face the infernos--

the AJC urged immediate action to save the Hai Hong and to meet the larger crisis.

On November 27, President Carter stated that he would ask Congress to allow yet another 15,000 more Vietnamese into the U.S. during the following six months. Then the Attorney General announced that the U.S. would take in 2,500 refugees from Malaysia, which in turn would take in the Hai Hong refugees. And on Nov. 29, the Attorney General stated he would let in 21,875 more Indochinese refugees.

The Hai Hong had been saved, and the U.S. and the world was becoming more aware of the horror in the region. "Jews must feel a very special empathy for the boat people," noted Rabbi Tanenbaum on Dec. 1, because their desperate plight recalls the tragedy of Jewish refugees..."

On November 26, 1978, the Rabbi joined HIAS Ex. Director Gaynor Jacobsen and the AJC's David Harris in taping a program, which aired the following month, on "The Jewish Community and the Plight of the Indochinese." But while the Jewish community, and much of the world, had begun to direct its labors to saving the refugees, the Vietnamese were pushing even more refugees out to sea.

THE CRISIS AND THE CONCERN GROW

While the Citizens Commission was in Southeast Asia for its second tour of the area, in Dec. 1978, the crisis was growing worse. The exodus had reached 20,000 in the month of November, and the numbers were to continue to climb.

Rabbi Tanenbaum's essay on his first trip was released by the Interreligious Affairs Department and it appeared in newspapers around the nation in December. The story of his meeting with Nguyen Than and other boat people--at the time still the most desperate of the refugees--appeared in such newspapers as the Long Island Newsday,

The Jewish News, the Intermountain Jewish News, and the Cleveland Jewish News. Copies of the essay were sent by the IAB to such Christian leaders as Timothy Cardinal Manning, Archbishop of Los Angeles, and Humberto Cardinal Muderios, Archbishop of Boston.

* * *

World concern led to the convening of a conference in Geneva on Dec. 11. Attended by 38 nations, largely from the West and from the affected region, it heard U.S. Under Secretary of State David Newsom urge that "the international community--and not just a few nations--must respond" to the crisis. But precious little emerged from the conference beyond a slight increase in the world's pledged yearly emigration quotas from less than 80,000 to 82,250. The best concerned spokesmen could say was that it had focused world attention on the problem.

* * *

Back from Southeast Asia, the Rabbi continued to speak of what he had seen and of what needed to be done, both on his radio broadcasts and in his numerous personal appearances.

On December 17, he asked his listeners, "What better Christmas or Chanukah gift can you give yourselves than to help redeem these human lives" by sponsoring a refugee into the U.S.

In January of the new year, he was reminding people over the air of the "major response" by Catholic, Protestant and Jewish organizations the crisis had elicited. The National Council of Catholic Bishops, the National Council of Churches, and the AJC, he said, had all sent messages to the President and Congress urging the doubling of the nation's immigration quotas to 14,000 per month.

That same month, he spoke before the Jewish Community Center in Milwaukee under the auspices of the AJC and a number of Christian and

interfaith groups; on June 17, on the air, he spoke of what he had seen in Thailand; in October, he addressed the Interreligious Task Force on Soviet Jewry's Leadership Conference in New York, linking the oppression in Eastern Europe with the horror in Southeast Asia; on Nov. 4, on the air again, he urged that politics and ideology not be given precedence over human life in the politics of aid; and later that month he spoke in Columbia, South Carolina, where his words sparked several religious and interreligious efforts at fund-raising, community action and political pressure on behalf of the refugees. As 1979 drew to a close, he was back in New York for a teach-in on Cambodia, at which he was one of the leading speakers.

THE AJC II

The AJC called, once again, for an increased U.S. response to the crisis on April 4, 1979. AJC President Richard Maas urged "the Malaysian and other governments in Southeast Asia to come to the aid of the Vietnamese refugees now." Malaysia had only a few days before turned back a boat which then capsized at sea, losing all 100 passengers. "While other nations, including the United States, are in the process of making the necessary arrangements to offer haven to these homeless people," Maas stated, the nations of the region must help keep them alive.

On June 20, Maass wrote a cable to President Carter which stated "They must not be abandoned by the civilized world." He urged the President to "lead our government, the American people, and the international community... in mobilizing on an emergency basis an effective response." This, he wrote, should include a sea lift using U.S. Navy and maritime vessels; doubled immigration quotas; and the opening of Guam or another island as a place of temporary refuge. "We believe that the moral sanity and civility of the human family depends on our

wholehearted response," Maass wrote.

* * *

In Washington D.C., the AJC representative to the nation's capital, Hyman Bookbinder had in August 1978 worked with members of the Congress in passing the Dole ammendment, which authorized the Attorney General to parole 15,000 additional Cambodians into the US and the funds needed for their proce-sing. He worked with Congressman Stephen Solarz and together they urged the Senate-House conferees to incorporate the Cambodian measure into the final bill--which was signed by the President.

In June, 1979, Bookbinder wrote an essay on "Jews and the Boat People' for the Washington Post: the escuse used by Germans and non-Germans alike during the Holocaust--"we didn't know"--"simply won't be available for any of us in years to come," he warned.

"The UNITED States had done, in a statistical sense, more than its fair share, accepting 70% of the 300,000 refugees resettled in the last four years. But it can do more, and must do more..."

"No we will never be able to tell our grandchildrem... that we didn't know. We know. We've known. Will wehave done enough?"

Later, in ~~October-1979~~, ~~Bookbinder-attended-a-fun~~ July, 1979, he attended a press conference held by singer-activist Joan Baez to publicize her then-upcoming concert for the boat people; and he attended the conert, on July 19. In October, he joined other notables in a fund-raising party hosted by Baez for the refugees. And in each case, he provided those in attendance with a Jewish humanitarian perspective on the crisis and the response that it required.

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCES

Twenty-four nations, most from the affected region, met in Djarkarta

on May 15, 1979, to discuss the situation. Little more came out of the gathering that a promise by Vietnam to let the 600,000 of its people who wanted to leave do so if the West could guarantee them haven--a promise which most attendees took to be more in the way of a threat.

The seven industrialized western nations soon met in a Tokyo summit, and President Carter there announced, on June 27, that the monthly intake by the U.S. would be doubled to 14,000 per month, and that the U.S. would provide additional funds to the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees for its program in the region.

INTERFAITH PRESS CONFERENCE

The president's announcements were hailed by three religious leaders who met in New York City to give an interfaith press conference. On June 28, Rabbi Tanenbaum joined Cardinal Terence Cooke of New York, Rev. Paul McCleary of the Church World Service, and Rev. T. Grady Mangham of the National Ass'n of Evangelicals in a warning that the situation "threatens to become the greatest humanitarian crisis of this decade." They urged the President to promote increased admissions by other nations, to establish transit centers for the refugees, and to use military transport if needed to get those already cleared for entry to the U.S. into the country.

THE SECOND GENEVA CONFERENCE

With the announcement of plans to hold another international conference in Geneva, AJC President Richard Maass issued a statement noting that it was "a welcome beginning, but only a beginning," in light of the failure of previous such efforts. This time, the conference suc-

ceeded in raising \$180 million for the refugees--but \$125 million of that came in pledges from the U.S.

More importantly, the Vietnamese promised they would make every effort to stop illegal departures for a reasonable period of time. There were qualms about the world's having, in effect, endorsed a totalitarian state's closing its exit doors, but the promise seemed to bode a stemming of the tide of human suffering that was landing on the beaches of Southeast Asia.

PROTESTS IN THE U.S.

In New York, on July 16, IAD Asst. Director Rabbi A. James Rudin spoke at a rally across the street from the United Nations which had been sponsored by the Committee Against Genocide in Vietnam and which the AJC's New York Chapter, headed by Haskell Lazare, had helped organize. The Rally to Save the Boat People drew about 10,000, along with speakers not only from the city's Chinese population, but Congresswoman Elizabeth Holtzman, Congressmen Willian Green and Ted Weiss, Bishop Wetmore of the Episcopal Diocese of New York, Martin Begun of the American Jewish Congress, Donald McAvoy of the National Conference of Christians and Jews, and civil rights leader Bayard Rustin.

Rabbi Rudin drew the parallels between the Jewish refugees of an earlier world crisis and the boat people, and concluded by noting that America, as John Kennedy once wrote, "is a nation of immigrations," and one which history would judge harshly if it fails to meet "this moral and human crisis."

Two days later in Washington, Joan Baez held her press conference and the following day, her rally for the boat people drew a crowd estimated by Bayard Rustin at 65,000.

In October, the AJC endorsed and was one of the sponsors of a concert at Avery Fisher Hall in New York to raise funds for the refugees.

THE AJC III--OPERATION BOAT PEOPLE AND ITS PREDECESSORS

On June 27, 1979, the AJC urged its Area Chapters to try to have printed in their local newspapers a brief op-ed story on the refugees which urged the U.S. to take the lead in "meeting the catastrophe." Recalling the Holocaust refugees, it warned, "We must not permit history to repeat itself with the 'boat people'."

Exactly one month later the Committee sent to all its Area Directors an Action Plan which suggested numerous possible courses of action around the crisis, which included Chapter efforts to sponsor refugees, working with other Jewish and Christian groups to plan press conferences, educational forums, interfaith services, meetings with elected officials, and religious and interreligious media and fund-raising efforts.

Then, on August 30, AJC Executive Vice President Bertram Gold announced that the Committee was launching Operation Boat People--a campaign involving the Committee's 86 branches still further in the effort to save the refugees.

Hundreds of American Jews had soon called the AJC to ask what they could do to help, and were referred to fund-raising groups, to AJC branches in their locale, and later, after it was initiated on Dec. 27m 1979, to the AJC's own Cambodia Aid Fund.

Meanwhile, across America, the AJC's local chapters--many of which had already begun such efforts--started to move in a centrally co-ordinated fashion. In city after city, AJC Chapters met with Christian groups, held press conferences, began forums and fundraisers, and worked to sponsor refugees or open holding places for the refugees who had arrived in the U.S.

In Dallas, even before Operation Boat People, the Chapter Chairman,

Leon Rabin, sent the text of AJC President Maass's telegram to the
 the Chapter
 President to the local newspaper, and/began to work on the crisis.

In Houston, the AJC Chapter joined the Jewish Family Service to start a local resettlement operation.

In Pittsburgh the local Chapter, headed by Jonathan Levine, sent a representative to a coalition building meeting on August 13. Out of this developed an interfaith steering committee which began to receive local publicity for its efforts, and which evolved into a large Boat People Committee which worked to get sponsors and to open a local federal property for the refugees.

In San Francisco, the AJC Bay Area Director, Ernest Weiner, appeared on TV station KCBS's popular Afternoon Magazine show to speak on the unique Jewish sensibility to the crisis. This August show produced a large number of phone calls from viewers, many of whom wanted to work with refugee aid organizations.

Also in August, the Los Angeles Chapter President, Paul Ziffren, wrote to the prestigious L.A. Times to reiterate the AJC's three-pronged approach to the crisis--that the U.S. Navy and other vessels should pick up all refugees at sea; that Guam or another island should be opened as a transit center; and that other nations must also be moved to ~~xxxxxx~~ increase their admissions levels.

The following month, the L.A. Chapter joined an interreligious press conference for the boat people. It involved Catholic, Episcopal, Presbyterian and Methodist as well as Jewish leaders, and ~~xxx~~ was one of the first such efforts in that city. The interreligious coalition that thus developed began to work on a private airlift of medical supplies to Malaysia.

In October, in St. Louis, the local Chapter voted to sponsor a refugee family. Mrs. Bernard Colton and Mrs. Mont Levy, co-chair-

persons of the boat people project there, coordinated the chapter's participation in the response to the crisis. One of the first local groups to do so, it worked with others also active in the effort, including the Jewish Family Service and HIAS. The entire Chapter chipped in to offer everything from clothes and furniture to birth control counseling, money and driving services to the refugees.

In Atlanta, in November, the local Chapter joined existing Jewish, Catholic and Baptist-sponsored resettlement efforts. It began work on forming an interfaith steering committee designed to develop a "community-wide strategy" to meet the crisis.

WISCONSIN INDOCHINA REFUGEE RELIEF, INC.

Perhaps the most extraordinary response came out of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where Elmer Winter, a former AJC President, was instrumental in forming the Wisconsin IndoChina Refugee Relief, Inc., project. Inspired and managed by members of the Medical College of Wisconsin, the community-based coalition began to raise \$100,000 to send a medical team to the camps of Thailand, with the hope of ultimately sending four such teams on a revolving basis. By early December, its fund-raising and materials and volunteer raising effort had gone so well that it was hoping to be able to add a fifth team to the project. Each team consists of five doctors and a nurse--all volunteers. In addition, WICRR undertook to send an initial shipment of 1,000 tons of food, medicines and medical equipment to be used in Thailand.

The state of Wisconsin did its part, providing the project with a full hospital unit with its own power generator; and Winters received \$200,000 worth of medical supplies in donations.

The first medical team was scheduled for flight to Thailand in January 1980. And while the project was being organized, Winter went

to Los Angeles, to speak about his project and try to help two local Rabbis replicate it in that city.

The Milwaukee Chapter, with which Winter remains affiliated, joined with the Catholic Social Services, the Jewish Federation, the United Way and other groups to coordinate a city-wide effort to identify sponsors and provide immigrants with housing, education, jobs, english training and other forms of support.

A RAY OF HOPE

On August 6, 1979, some weeks after the Geneva conference at which the Vietnamese stated they would try to stop the outflow, the U.S. Admiral in command of all U.S. Navy ships in the South China Sea, Rear Admiral Ernest E. Tissot, reported that the outflow from Vietnam had "reduced considerably."

By October 14, the New York Times could report that, for the first time, the outflow of boat people refugees residing in the camps to new homes had exceeded the inflow of new refugees. The boat people crisis had begun to abate. But there was soon to come reports from Thailand of the development of huge encampments of Cambodian refugees along the Thai-Cambodian border. And there was no way of guaranteeing that the coastal outflow from Vietnam would not grow in size once again.

TESTIMONY IN WASHINGTON, WITNESS IN S.E.ASIA

On Dec. 18, 1979, Rabbi Tanenbaum attended a conference sponsored by the Citizens Commission on Indochinese Refugees at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington D.C. That same day, the Commission submitted a detailed report on the politics and the needs of Southeast Asia to the House Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, chaired by Rep. Lester Wolff.

Rabbi Tanenbaum testified before the Subcommittee on the most recent developments in Southeast Asia and the continuing urgency of relief action for the people of the region.

"My experience on two fact-finding missions to all of the refugee camps in Southeast Asia literally changed my life... That was an experience whose only antecedent for me was Bergen-Belsen and Dachau. There were the same starved bodies, wracked with fever and disease... the only difference now was the pigmentation of their skin..."

"I simply cannot understand how the international community can go on with its conventional affairs and not feel the urgent sense that the sanity of mankind is at stake here."

"The cruel irony is that there is the capacity to provide that (needed) food now. It is on the borders of the country, and the whole issue of whether human beings will be kept alive or will die depends on politics and ideology, that is, the callous presumption that business is usual."

"How many Nazi holocausts, how many Cambodian genocides can the world endure and regard itself as worthwhile to continue," he asked.
full page

On January 10, the AJC ran an advertisement in the New York Times urging readers to "Do a Mitzvah. Save a Life," by contributing money to Cambodian relief. Four days later, the Rabbi attended a White House consultation on Cambodia, at which was announced the formation of a National Cambodia Crisis Committee, designed to link the capabilities of the government with those of leading citizens to further mobilize Americans to help save those lives. The Rabbi is one of the members of that Committee.

Then, in early February, in a dramatic effort to bring supplies and world attention to the Cambodian refugees, he went to Bangkok with a host of other notables including Liv Ullman, Joan Baez, Elie Wiesel

and others to try to bring an IRC sponsored relief convoy through the jungle to the swelling camps. While the Thai government, fearing a Cambodian government response to the convov if it entered disputed territory, blocked its going to the camps, it brought additional supplies to the region as well as a kind of international witness to the suffering of the refugees.

* * *

While the tragedy is far from over, especially in Cambodia, the AJC could state during the summer of 1979 that "Catholic, Protestant, Jewish and Evangelical refugee and immigration agencies have made a magnificent contribution... by resettling.. nearly 75% of the 210,000 refugees who have come to our shores." And when the full history of the Indochinese refugee crisis is written, the response of America's religious, and particularly, its Jewish, community, will be seen as one of the few bright rays of light in a grim tragedy. This response has already proven that thoise who do learn the lessons of history are moved to prevent its repetition. This time, mankind--lead in part by its spiritual leaders--Has not sat idly by, feigning ignorance and evidencing unconcern.