

“What the Authorities of the Land Wish Done”

Relief and Rescue by the American Committee for Service in Czechoslovakia, 1938–1939

Laura E. Brade

Department of History, Albion College, Albion, Michigan, USA

On October 5, 1938 the American Unitarian Association's (AUA) Director of Social Relations, Robert Cloutman Dexter, addressed the Executive Committee of the AUA Board. The fate of Czechoslovak democracy was at stake. A week earlier, the leaders of France, Britain, Italy, and Nazi Germany had met in Munich and agreed to cede the borderland regions of Czechoslovakia to Nazi Germany to appease Hitler's desire for expansion. In early October, German troops began to occupy the Sudetenland. Czechs, Jews, and anti-Nazi Austrians and Germans fled. Robert Dexter described the refugee crisis to the Unitarian Executive Committee, arguing that the Czechoslovak government was “obviously inadequately equipped to deal with the sudden flood of refugees”. He then proposed a “wilder gamble” than any other American organization had undertaken: to “organize, establish, and raise sufficient funds inside and outside our own group to really do a creditable piece of work in dealing with these refugees”. The Board voted to appoint a three-member committee to “explore the possibilities of a joint Unitarian-Quaker enterprise for relief of refugees in Czechoslovakia”.¹

The representatives of this new service organization, the husband-and-wife team Rev. Waitstill and Martha Sharp remained in Prague for only six months, but the success of their work spurred the AUA to create a more permanent aid organization in May 1940, the Unitarian Service Committee (USC). Their work fell into two categories: rescue and relief. Relief and rescue activities supported each other in surprising ways, and humanitarians like the Sharps frequently pursued a dual strategy to achieve their goals. Humanitarians in the 1930s – including the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, the American Friends

¹ *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Archive*, Washington, D. C. (hereafter *USHMM*), Martha and Waitstill Sharp Collection (hereafter *Sharp Collection*), RG-67.017, series (hereafter s.) 1, box 3, file (hereafter f.) 18, Discussion Regarding Refugee Problem, Meeting Minutes of the Board of Directors, 5. 10. 1938.

Service Committee, and the Jewish Labor Committee – viewed “rescue” as any activity which facilitated migration (visa assistance, travel arrangements, identifying guarantors, employment abroad, etc.), while “relief” comprised constructive aid, including activities that allowed individuals to continue to live wherever they currently were – housing, food, medicine, retraining, employment – even if those activities (like retraining and medicine) later supported a migration attempt.² Put another way, relief work constituted aid that replaced social and welfare services that the state was expected – but failing – to provide for its citizens.³

This article builds on existing scholarship about the Sharps, relief and rescue during the Holocaust, and the development of humanitarianism more broadly. Although postwar commemoration of rescuers can be used by states as a politically motivated platform to avoid discussion of “the more morally ambiguous elements of their national wartime histories”, rescue remains an important topic of both public interest and academic research.⁴ In 2005, Yad Vashem recognized Waitstill and Martha Sharp as Righteous Among the Nations for “the risks taken” to rescue German-Jewish author Lion Feuchtwanger from France in 1940, while also “keeping in mind the Sharps’ meritorious assistance to other Jewish fugitives of Nazi terror”, including their rescue work in the Bohemian lands between February and August 1939.⁵ Although the Sharps’ work in the Protectorate of Bohemia

² PORTER, Stephen R.: *Benevolent Empire: U.S. Power, Humanitarianism, and the World’s Dispossessed*. Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press 2017, p. 14. For more on the JDC, see: FAURE, Laura Hobson: *A Jewish Marshall Plan: The American Jewish Presence in Post-Holocaust France*. Bloomington, Indiana University Press 2022, pp. 23–29; BAUER, Yehuda: *American Jewry and the Holocaust: The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, 1939–1945*. Detroit, Wayne State University Press 1981, pp. 31–40. For more on the Jewish Labor Committee, see: COLLOMP, Catherine: *Rescue, Relief, and Resistance: The Jewish Labor Committee’s Anti-Nazi Operations, 1934–1945*. Detroit, Wayne State University Press 2021.

³ FRANKL, Michal: Citizenship of No Man’s Land: Jewish Refugee Relief in Zbąszyń and East-Central Europe, 1938–1939. In: S. I. M. O. N. Shoah: *Intervention. Methods. Documentation*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (2020), pp. 37–49, here pp. 38–39.

⁴ BRADE, Laura E. – HOLMES, Rose: Troublesome Sainthood: Nicholas Winton and the Contested History of Child Rescue in Prague, 1938–1940. In: *History and Memory*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (2017), pp. 3–40, here pp. 28–29. See also: KOHEN, Ari – STEINACHER, Gerald: Introduction. In: IDEM (eds.): *Unlikely Heroes: The Place of Holocaust Rescuers in Research and Teaching*. Lincoln (NE), University of Nebraska Press 2019, pp. 1–12, here pp. 4–5.

⁵ [Anonymous:] Sharp Waitstill & Marta (Ingham). In: *The Righteous Among the Nations Database* [online]. Jerusalem, Yad Vashem, the World Holocaust Remembrance Center. [Accessed 2023-04-05.] Available at: https://righteous.yadvashem.org/?search=unitarian&searchType=righteous_only&language=en&itemId=5600148&ind=0. Rescue has also been a dominant theme in the popular narrative of the Holocaust, including both books and films, see: KERR, David: *Varian Fry: The Artists’ Schindler* [videorecording]. Chicago, Home Vision 1997. French-American documentary filmmaker Pierre Sauvage (best known for his feature documentary

and Moravia was not sufficient to earn them the Righteous recognition, historians of rescue generally include "efforts to help Jews emigrate [...] legally or clandestinely" in their definition of rescue.⁶ Susan Subak's meticulously researched *Rescue and Flight* and Debórah Dwork's innovative project *Saints and Liars*, are part of this trend, focusing mostly on the Sharps' rescue activities.⁷ Building on their insights into the personal tensions in the Unitarian operations and the role of luck and chance in the Sharps' mission, this article also engages with important questions raised by scholars of humanitarian relief during the Second World

Weapons of the Spirit, 1987) is working on another documentary on Varian Fry, *And Crown Thy Good: Varian Fry in Marseilles* (upcoming). On Gilbert and Eleanor Kraus, see: PRESSMAN, Steven: *50 Children: One Ordinary American Couple's Extraordinary Rescue Mission into the Heart of Nazi Germany*. New York, Harper 2014; and the film by Steven Pressman *50 Children: The Rescue Mission of Mr. and Mrs. Kraus* [videorecording]. HBO Documentary Films 2013.

⁶ FROMMER, Benjamin: The Saved and the Betrayed: Hidden Jews in the Nazi Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. In: KOHEN, A. – STEINACHER, G. (eds.): *Unlikely Heroes*, pp. 37–56, here p. 39; COLLOMP, C.: *Rescue, Relief, and Resistance*. For an insightful overview of forms of rescue during the Holocaust, see: BROWNING, Christopher R.: From Humanitarian Relief to Holocaust Rescue: Tracy Strong Jr., Vichy Internment Camps, and the Maison des Roches in Le Chambon. In: *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (2016), pp. 211–246. For more about refugees from and in East Central Europe, especially Czechoslovakia, see also: GATRELL, Peter: East Central Europe and the Making of the Modern Refugee. In: BORO-DZIEJ, Włodzimierz – PUTTKAMER, Joachim von (eds.): *Immigrants and Foreigners in Central and Eastern Europe during the Twentieth Century*. Abingdon, Routledge 2020, pp. 145–164; ZAHRA, Tara: *The Great Departure: Mass Migration from Eastern Europe and the Making of the Free World*. New York, W. W. Norton 2017. For more on refugee policy during the Nazi era, see: BENDA, Jan: *Útěky a vyhánění z pohraničí českých zemí 1938–1939*. Praha, Karolinum 2012; CASTECKER, Frank – MOORE, Bob (eds.): *Refugees from Nazi Germany and the Liberal European States*. New York, Berghahn 2010; CARON, Vicky: *Uneasy Asylum: France and the Jewish Refugee Crisis, 1933–1942*. Stanford, Stanford University Press 1999; FRANKL, Michal – ČAPKOVÁ, Kateřina: *Nejisté útočiště: Československo a uprchlíci před nacismem 1933–1938*. Praha, Paseka 2008 (the Austrian edition: IDEM: *Unsichere Zuflucht: Die Tschechoslowakei und ihre Flüchtlinge aus NS-Deutschland und Österreich 1933–1938*. Wien, Böhlau 2012); LONDON, Louise: *Whitehall and the Jews, 1933–1948: British Immigration Policy, Jewish Refugees and the Holocaust*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 2000; and VELECKÁ, Hana: Britská pomoc uprchlíkům z Československa od okupace do vypuknutí války v roce 1939. In: *Soudobé dějiny*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (2001), pp. 659–691.

⁷ SUBAK, Susan Elizabeth: *Rescue and Flight: American Relief Workers Who Defied the Nazis*. Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press 2010; DWORK, Debórah: *Written in Green Ink: The Role of the Unpredictable and the Irrational*, presented at Nooit Meer Auschwitz Lezig, Amsterdam, 3 May 2022. This lecture comes from Dwork's manuscript in progress, *Saints and Liars*, forthcoming with W. W. Norton.

War.⁸ *More Than Parcels*, edited by Jan Lambert and Jan Láníček, sheds light on the ways in which relief, particularly food parcels, “provided critical emotional sustenance in the face of grief and peril”. They also suggested that important questions about the “continuities with the structures and protocols of the past relief work” remain open.⁹ This article addresses these continuities by focusing on the relationship between relief and rescue in the work of American Unitarians in Czechoslovakia, the precursor to the Unitarian Service Committee, a humanitarian organization formed in response to Nazi aggression.

Using primarily the Sharps’ personal collection, as well as the records of the Unitarian Service Committee, I argue that the Unitarians’ efforts as the American Committee for Service in Czechoslovakia blended “relief” and “rescue” activities, understanding the two to be inextricably linked functions of humanitarian service. While I am using these sources to explore Western understandings of their own humanitarian work, I recognize that the prevalence of sources in Western archives privileges the work of humanitarians from these places. It is important to note that Czechoslovak aid workers played essential, prominent roles in the rescue of Jews from the Bohemian lands.¹⁰ However, I use these sources to explore a particular moment of American humanitarian intervention in Europe, as it moved from religious charities to secular, professionalized aid.¹¹ The Sharps and their AUA colleagues used the terms “rescue” and “relief” to refer to separate categories of humanitarian service but combined them in practice once on the ground in Europe. In theory, voluntary organizations often described relief and rescue as separate and competing programs – that one must be emphasized over the other. But in practice, they found the two to be inextricably, and helpfully, linked. I demonstrate that American humanitarians, as private citizens, used relief and rescue to negotiate with foreign governments, allowing them to

⁸ See BURNS, Ken [director] – JOUKOWSKY, Artemis [writer and director] – JUSTUS, Matthew [writer] – BLITSTEIN, David [writer]: *Defying the Nazis: The Sharps’ War*. San Francisco, PBS 2016. An official companion book accompanied the film: JOUKOWSKY, Artemis: *Defying the Nazis: The Sharps’ War*. Boston, Beacon Press 2016.

⁹ LAMBERT, Jan: Introduction. In: LÁNIČEK, Jan – LAMBERT, Jan: *More Than Parcels: War-time Aid for Jews in Nazi-Era Camps and Ghettos*. Detroit, Wayne State University Press 2022, pp. 1–19, here p. 2. The articles in *More Than Parcels* analyse relief package schemes and their impact during the Holocaust, emphasizing hunger in the camps, the obstacles to providing relief shipments, the role of the Allied blockade, and Nazi policies.

¹⁰ See FRANKL, M. – ČAPKOVÁ, K.: *Nejisté útočiště*; FROMMER, B.: The Saved and the Betrayed; HÁJKOVÁ, Anna: Marie Schmolka and the Group Effort. In: *History Today*, Vol. 68, No. 12 (2018), pp. 36–49.

¹¹ CURTIS, Heather D.: *Holy Humanitarians: American Evangelicals and Global Aid*. Cambridge (Mass.), Harvard University Press 2018, p. 5; PORTER, S.: *Benevolent Empire*, p. 14.

act in a semi-official capacity. While they often described the two activities as separate, a connected relief and rescue program allowed for greater humanitarian opportunities.

The Origins of the American Committee for Service in Czechoslovakia

When Britain, France, Germany, and Italy signed the Munich Agreement ceding the western borderland region of Czechoslovakia known as the Sudetenland to Germany in September 1938, American foreign correspondents rushed to cover the ensuing refugee crisis. Journalists reported the dire situation, writing "[in] the north you got a feeling that the whole country was moving, lost, fleeing".¹² Humanitarians sensed that Czechoslovakia's "sacrifice" for the sake of global peace necessitated intervention, both to prop up Czechoslovak democracy and to support the hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing the borderlands.

The First World War represented a major shift in humanitarianism. Formerly a practice organized by nation-states, motivated by religious notions of charity, and dominated by religious activists, the experience of the First World War transitioned humanitarian aid – especially refugee relief – into a predominantly transnational, secular, and professionalized activity.¹³ In the context of the Great War, American humanitarians established "relief" missions which historians have described as "a nation's humanitarian awakening" and "a significant extension of American authority abroad".¹⁴

In the 1920s and 1930s, most American organizations withdrew from overseas activities in response to American isolationism and the economic hardship of the Great Depression.¹⁵ For Americans, the Great War represented a moment of internationalism, followed by increasing isolationism. Most American humanitarian organizations followed the political isolationism of the 1930s, reverting to older, national forms of intervention to relieve American suffering from the Depression. Only American Jewish humanitarian organizations continued to implement the newer, transnational humanitarian tactics, becoming "the face

¹² GELLHORN, Martha: Obituary of a Democracy. In: *Collier's Weekly* (10. 12. 1938), p. 12.

¹³ CABANES, Bruno: *The Great War and the Origins of Humanitarianism, 1918–1924*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 2014, pp. 3–4.

¹⁴ IRWIN, Julia: *Making the World Safe: The American Red Cross and a Nation's Humanitarian Awakening*. New York, Oxford University Press 2013; PORTER, S.: *Benevolent Empire*, p. 14.

¹⁵ PORTER, S.: *Benevolent Empire*, pp. 51–52.

of American foreign policy in Europe in the 1920s”.¹⁶ American Jewish and a few non-Jewish organizations interested in refugee issues worked closely with European colleagues and largely divided their efforts into two different categories: the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) emphasized relief (food and shelter, followed by retraining programs to integrate refugees into a host country), while other organizations like the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS), which were more willing to confront “political challenges”, focused their efforts on emigration assistance.¹⁷ The split between the JDC and HIAS – between relief and rescue activities – impacted the practice of other American voluntary organizations, particularly those that formed in the later 1930s to assist refugees fleeing Nazi persecution.

By 1938, even in the United States, new organizations emerged to support refugees fleeing Nazism, including a number of other Christian and non-sectarian organizations. The founding of a service organization by the American Unitarian Association – a small, liberal, Christian denomination which emphasized humanism, internationalism, and promoted social activism and connections with other non-Christian religions – was part of the proliferation and importance of private voluntary organizations dedicated to refugee aid.¹⁸ These new organizations were typically small and sought to ensure that their limited budgets had the greatest impact. In part out of practicality and in part following the model set by the JDC and HIAS, these organizations generally focused on either relief activities or rescue work (migration services). The American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), which had been active in relief work in Europe since 1917, created an official refugee service division after *Kristallnacht* in November 1938. AFSC leaders understood refugee services to be separate from relief work, writing that the AFSC is “not only assisting with relief [...] but is attempting to aid those who must leave Germany”.¹⁹ By the fall of 1938, these organizations, including the AFSC, had made firm commitments to support refugees from Germany and Austria, so none felt able to expand their operations to support Czechoslovak refugees after the Munich Agreement.

Although opposed to American isolationism and restrictionist immigration policies, the AUA had not been active in aiding refugees in the United States nor

¹⁶ GRANICK, Jaclyn: *International Jewish Humanitarianism in the Age of the Great War*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 2021, pp. 112–114.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 112–113.

¹⁸ CABANES, B.: *The Great War and the Origins of Humanitarianism*, p. 187.

¹⁹ JONES, Rufus M. – PICKETT, Clarence E.: Foreword. In: AMERICAN FRIENDS SERVICE COMMITTEE (ed.): *Refugee Facts: A Study of German Refugees in America*. Philadelphia, American Friends Service Committee 1939, pp. 3–4, here p. 3.

did they have an overseas relief operation. The AUA had close relationships in Prague: the leaders of the Czech Unitarian congregation (*Unitaria*), the children of the first Czechoslovak president Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, Jan and Alice Masaryk (whose mother Charlotte was an American Unitarian), and Robert Dexter visited Prague in 1937 and 1938.²⁰ Due to the inability of existing refugee organizations to assist refugees from Czechoslovakia and the AUA's close connections with Czechoslovak Unitarians, the AUA Board of Directors agreed that they were well positioned to provide aid for refugees in Czechoslovakia.

From the beginning, the Unitarians viewed relief and rescue to be related activities, but impossible for a small, new organization to tackle together. Their beliefs about humanitarianism reflected a moment of transition for humanitarianism more broadly: while clearly anticipating a future humanitarianism that tackled wide ranging, transnational problems from the perspective of secular notions of human rights and with professional staff, they clung to older methods of religious based philanthropy as more attainable given their inexperience and small budget. Taking the AFSC as their model, the AUA leadership viewed relief and rescue as separate operations. At first, AUA leaders believed that immediate relief – clothes and food for refugees – was a problem best tackled by local Czechoslovak organizations and that their new organization, the American Committee for Service in Czechoslovakia, should take on the much bigger problem of resettling refugees.²¹ The AUA sent Robert Dexter to Czecho-Slovakia on a fact-finding mission in November 1938. Dexter was accompanied by a representative of the American Friends Service Committee, Richard Wood. Because of the Unitarians' inexperience with overseas aid, they felt it important to learn from a more experienced overseas service organization. Dexter and Wood painted a bleak picture of the refugee situation. Due to the "peculiar political situation", the refugee issue was "confusing and more involved than in other countries presenting a refugee problem".²² All refugees were required to register with the Czechoslovak government, yet Dexter and Wood found that few Jews registered, fearing that registration with the police would result in their expul-

²⁰ *Brown University Library*, Providence (RI) (hereafter *BUL*), Robert Cloutman Dexter and Elizabeth Anthony Dexter Papers (hereafter *Dexter Papers*), Ms.2005.029, box 1, f. 2, Letter from Robert Dexter to Elizabeth Dexter, 9. 9. 1937, Prague. See also: *ibidem*, box 2, f. 8, "Chapter 1: It Began in Czechoslovakia" [typewritten unpublished manuscript, author Robert Dexter].

²¹ *Ibidem*, box 1, f. 3, Letter from John H. Lathrop to Frederick Eliot, 12. 10. 1938.

²² *USHMM*, Sharp Collection, RG 67.017, s. 1, box 2, f. 8, Robert Dexter, Preliminary and Confidential Report from Robert C. Dexter to the American Unitarian Association, 16. 11. 1938.

sion from the country. The delegation also cautioned that the danger of anti-semitism was “very real” and that Jews, communists, Sudeten German refugees, and refugees from Germany and Austria needed to leave urgently. The refugees desperately needed two things: funding for immediate material needs and assistance emigrating. Foreign social workers reported that although Czechoslovak social services functioned well on paper, they quickly crumbled under the strain of the crisis. Dexter and Wood thus recommended that the new committee should ambitiously adopt a dual strategy: providing relief, including feeding refugees, providing winter clothes and boots, occupational and recreational activities in refugee camps, as well as emigration.²³

As the AUA neared implementation of their plan, they fell back on older styles of humanitarian intervention – more limited in scope, based on religious notions of charity, and executed by religious personnel – even as they maintained a transnational program. By the time the AUA had drafted the charter for the American Committee for Service in Czechoslovakia, other international organizations had arrived in Prague to provide emigration assistance. Migration services, the AUA felt, should be left to the more experienced, and in their opinion, better-funded British organizations (who received some government funds).²⁴ Although the Unitarians had originally included resettlement as the primary work of their first overseas service campaign, the American Committee for Service in Czechoslovakia excluded emigration assistance entirely. The Unitarians believed the new committee should have more modest goals, focusing on aid for a group, rather than migration assistance for individuals: providing for “physical needs”, offering educational and vocational training programs, as well as other measures deemed “most essential to the constructive and permanent solution of the problem of re-settlement”.²⁵ The Unitarian representatives should only address the individual needs of “registered refugees” after all other funding options were exhausted. And even then, the AUA Board insisted that their overseas representatives avoid providing money for individual migration.²⁶ The AUA Board viewed relief as a more attainable goal that could do a greater amount of good for a greater number of people. Rescue – an inherently transnational interven-

²³ *Ibidem*, s. 1, box 3, f. 18, copy of Robert Dexter, Memorandum for American Committee for Relief in Czechoslovakia on Outline of Plan for Work of Committee, 5. 12. 1938.

²⁴ For more on the British organizations, see: BRADE, L. E. – HOLMES, R.: Troublesome Sainthood; VELECKÁ, H.: Britská pomoc uprchlíkům z Československa.

²⁵ *USHMM*, Sharp Collection, RG-67.017, s. 1, box 2, f. 13, Suggested Aims and Policy of the American Committee for Relief in Czechoslovakia.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, Instructions for Representative in Prague of the American Committee for Relief in Czecho-Slovakia.

tion – was complicated and expensive, requiring the bureaucracy of labor-intensive, expensive individual case work. Although they admired the AFSC's recent integration of refugee services alongside their relief work, the AUA Board felt unprepared to offer such a broad program.

Funding drove some of the AUA's decision about the scope of its mission. Much of the AUA's funding for the Czecho-Slovakia operation came from the American Committee for Relief in Czechoslovakia. Frequently called the "Butler Committee", this organization was established in late October 1938 by Nicholas Murray Butler, the President of Columbia University and President of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.²⁷ When the Butler Committee launched its fundraising campaign, it promised to not spend any money on administrative costs or overseas representatives and instead directed all funds to addressing the "immediate needs" of refugees in Czecho-Slovakia (food, shelter, and clothes as well as medical and sanitary aid) and "progressive relief in a period of re-education, re-employment and resettlement".²⁸ The Butler Committee sent money directly to Alice Masaryk, who helped modernize Czechoslovak social work as the head of the Czechoslovak Red Cross, until her resignation in December 1938. At the insistence of Alice Masaryk and the British relief workers, the Butler Committee turned to the Unitarians.²⁹ The Butler Committee agreed to provide most of the financial support for relief work, while the Unitarians raised money for the personnel, overhead, emigration expenses, and any aid to be provided to affiliated Czechoslovak churches. In addition, the Unitarians agreed to find a suitable couple (following the precedent set by the American Friends Service Committee) to serve as administrators.³⁰ By the time the commissioners left for Europe, the AUA had raised approximately \$12,000 in private donations; the Butler Committee raised an additional \$29,000 for resettlement and relief projects.³¹

The AUA selected Unitarian minister Rev. Waitstill Sharp (1902–1983) and his wife Martha (1905–1999) as the commissioners for the Czechoslovak mission. The Sharps themselves represented the blend of old and new methods of

²⁷ *Ibidem*, Selected Records of the Unitarian Service Committee and the Universalist Service Committee (hereafter Selected Records of USC), RG-67.028, s. 5, box 1, f. 13, Letter from Bracket Lewis to Robert Dexter, 14. 12. 1938, New York City [Original Materials: Andover-Harvard Theological Library, Harvard Divinity School, Cambridge (MA), USA, Records of the Unitarian Service Committee, bMS 16003].

²⁸ [Anonymous:] Victims of Munich. In: *The New York Times* (29. 10. 1938), p. 18; *USHMM*, Sharp Collection, RG-67.017, s. 4, box 30, f. 2, Martha Cogan Sharp Memoir, p. 25.

²⁹ *USHMM*, Sharp Collection, RG-67.017, s. 1, box 2, f. 13, Suggested Aims and Policy of the American Committee for Relief in Czechoslovakia, p. 24.

³⁰ *BUL*, Dexter Papers, Ms.2005.029, box 2, f. 8.

³¹ JOUKOWSKY, A.: *Defying the Nazis*, p. 12.

humanitarian intervention. Selected because of Waitstill's credentials and position as a minister and training as a lawyer (he graduated from Boston University with degrees in history and economics, went on to attend Harvard Law School, graduating in 1926, and subsequently took a position as the secretary of the AUA Department of Religious Education; he also pursued special studies at Harvard Divinity School and Union Theological Seminary before his ordination in 1933),³² Martha (born Ingham Dickie, she graduated from Pembroke College, the women's college of Brown University, studied social work at Northwestern University Recreation Training School, and received a master's degree from Radcliffe College in comparative literature, married Waitstill in 1928 and converted to Unitarianism) brought a level of professionalized care work to their operations, given her training and experience as a social worker.³³

In late February 1939, the Sharps arrived in Prague with the mission of providing relief to refugees. By that time, British rescue work was well underway. American newspapers ran stories about the ten million pounds provided by Britain and France in January 1939, half loan and half gift, as well as several hundred thousand pounds raised by the Lord Mayor of London through a public appeal drive. These stories included references to British representatives in Prague, who had been coordinating emigration since October 1938.³⁴ On their way, Waitstill and Martha stopped in London to meet with individuals who had been working in Prague, gaining important contextual information about the crisis.³⁵

When the Sharps arrived in Prague in late February 1939, they were aware of their inexperience in overseas relief work. One concern for the AUA, like other relief agencies, was how they would convert the American dollars raised for refugee

³² USHMM, Sharp Collection, RG-67.017, s. 1, box 1, f. 1, biographical note about Waitstill H. Sharp, p. 21.

³³ A trained social worker was one of the AUA's ideal qualities for the selected couple. See: *Ibidem*, Selected Records of USC, RG-67.028, s. 5, box 1, f. 6, Qualifications for Couple (No. 1 Plan); DWORK, D.: Written in Green Ink, pp. 12–13.

³⁴ [Anonymous:] London and Paris Give Aid to Prague: 16,000,000, Half of Which is Gift, Granted to Czechs in Refugee Problem. In: *The New York Times* [online], 28. 01. 1939. [Accessed 2023-10-03.] Available at: <https://www.proquest.com/docview/102845081>; GEDYE, G. E. R.: Prague Arranges Exodus of 10,000 – Palestine, Canada and South American Countries to Take Refugees from Czechs – Reich Still Wants Deal – Insists on Linking Trade with Jewish Solution-Norman Sees Schacht Today. In: *Ibidem* [online], 05. 01. 1939. [Accessed 2023-03-10.] Available at: <https://www.proquest.com/docview/102726886/7BEABBCD163F445APQ/1>. For more on the British Loan, see: BRADE, L. – HOLMES, R.: Troublesome Sainthood, pp. 9–10. For a detailed description of the agreement, see: KUKLÍK, Jan: *Do poslední penze: Československo-britská jednání o majetkoprávních a finančních otázkách, 1938–1982*. Praha, Karolinum 2007.

³⁵ USHMM, Sharp Collection, RG-67.017, s. 1, box 3, f. 18, Letter from Waitstill Sharp to Robert Dexter, 14. 2. 1939, p. 43; *ibidem*, s. 4, box 30, f. 2, Martha Cogan Sharp Memoir, p. 29.



Portrait of Martha Sharp (1905–1999) standing next to a fireplace, date unknown [1930s]. Author unknown
 © United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Photograph No. 98285, courtesy of Renee Rizzoni

relief to Czechoslovak crowns to be spent in Prague and prevent that money from falling into Nazi hands. The AUA first proposed that the Sharps exchange dollars for Czechoslovak crowns "at a higher than official rate in order to increase relief sums". The Sharps explained this proposal to experienced voluntary workers, who insisted that such an exchange would be illegal. Instead, they suggested that the Sharps contact the Czechoslovak National Bank and ask "whether there is any way by which these funds could be transmitted in order to release for relief work larger sums than would be provided by remittance at the ordinary rate".³⁶ The Sharps pursued this arrangement, hoping it would allow them to maximize their dollars for relief projects, meet the needs of the Czecho-Slovak government, and create working relationships with government officials. In considering relief projects, they used the Butler Committee's "seventeen principles of expenditure", which "precluded all individual case work, either for relief or for emigration" and required that they "make financial contributions only to large-scale

³⁶ *Ibidem*, s. 1, box 3, f. 21, Letter from Malcolm Davis to Brackett Lewis, 7. 2. 1939.

government-planned or government-approved resettlement projects”.³⁷ In those initial weeks, they had many meetings with other relief organizations and government officials to determine how best to be good stewards of the Butler Committee funds, yet also meet the needs of the local population.³⁸ They had even received “estimates from all of the Organizations doing Refugee Relief work” and were nearing a decision, when the Nazi occupation of the Bohemian lands on March 15, 1939 brought an abrupt end to the Sharps’ negotiations with the Czechoslovak National Bank and changed everything, including how they perceived their humanitarian operation.³⁹

The Nazi Occupation: Combining Relief and Rescue

The *Einmarsch* on March 15, 1939 was a “thunderbolt” which the Sharps felt “suspended” any rules and conditions under which they had previously operated and which made them feel “duty bound” to pursue a dual strategy of relief and rescue.⁴⁰ In an atmosphere of uncertainty and urgency, the Sharps learned that relief and rescue could be linked to support goals that had once seemed mutually exclusive. The Nazis immediately suspended emigration and relief work for several weeks after the occupation. On the night of the occupation, Martha reported that “frantic refugees and citizens of Prague” crowded their offices, hoping that they “were American territory and they would be safe if only they could reach them” or that the Sharps could help them flee.⁴¹ Martha insisted, and Waitstill agreed, that the Nazi occupation warranted shifting the focus of their work to include individual emigration assistance. Martha established an emigration office

³⁷ *Ibidem*, Unitarian Universalist Service Committee Records (hereafter UUSC Records), RG-67.012, s. 2, box 4, f. 64, “Commissioners’ Report: Co-Operation and Relief in Czechoslovakia” [authors Martha and Waitstill Sharp], in: *How Americans Helped a Nation in Crisis: Report of the Commission for Service in Czechoslovakia*, pp. 4–5.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, s. 2, box 4, f. 65, Letter from Waitstill Sharp to Robert Dexter, 13. 3. 1939, Prague.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, Selected Records of USC, RG-67.028, s. 5, box 1, f. 13, Letter from Martha Sharp to Brackett Lewis, 31. 3. 1939, Paris, Qualifications for Couple (No. 1 Plan), Copy of Unitarian Service Committee, Records on Relief Work in Czechoslovakia.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, UUSC Records, RG-67.012, s. 2, box 4, f. 64, “Commissioners’ Report: Co-Operation and Relief in Czechoslovakia” [authors Martha and Waitstill Sharp], in: *How Americans Helped a Nation in Crisis*, pp. 11–12.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, “Emigration Case Work” [author Martha Sharp], in: *How Americans Helped a Nation in Crisis*, p. 21.



Portrait of Waitstill Sharp (1902–1983), New York, after 1939. Author unknown

© United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Photograph No. 98283, courtesy of Renee Rizzoni

to handle individual case work, something she later called the “distaff side” of their mission.⁴²

Several Czech refugees and American college students volunteered to help Martha with the enormous task of meeting with individual refugees, compiling emigration dossiers, and finding emigration opportunities. They acted as intermediaries between the Bohemian lands and the U.S. government, eased the costs of emigration by paying fees for paperwork, and found countries of temporary refuge while migrants waited for their U.S. visa quota number.⁴³ Both Sharps traveled several times outside of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, either escorting transports of refugees or smuggling out refugee resumes to deliver to organizations coordinating flight.⁴⁴ Emigration casework was time-consuming. Martha’s datebooks from this period are filled with meetings with individual ref-

⁴² *Ibidem*. For more on a gendered analysis of the Sharps’ work, see: DWORK, D.: Written in Green Ink, pp. 12–13.

⁴³ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, Sharp Collection, RG-67.017, s. 4, box 30, f. 3, Martha Cogan Sharp Memoir, p. 9.

ugees, government officials, and other relief workers, and her postwar testimony attests to the long hours she spent on individual migration casework.⁴⁵ By May, Martha had over 2,600 case files of refugee families, which grew to over 3,500 by August 1939.⁴⁶ Most of the case files were not preserved, but of the approximately three hundred files that remain, almost all of the Sharps' cases were Jews or had Jewish heritage.⁴⁷ However, the Sharps did not prioritize Jewishness when selecting cases. Instead, they understood their work to be about rescuing "distinguished intellectuals", particularly "students and professors", and those with a good chance of obtaining an American visa.⁴⁸ Martha felt that an additional group should receive special attention: "non-Aryan Christians", because they had "no religious groups to turn to, that I feel we as Unitarians should give them our help in procuring affidavits".⁴⁹

While Martha handled migration case work, Waitstill managed their finances and relief projects. The Sharps brought only a few thousand dollars of hard currency to Prague and, under the Czecho-Slovak administration prior to the Nazi occupation, had sought to maximize their dollars through legal exchange channels. Most of the money raised by the Unitarians and the Butler Committee remained in the United States. In order fulfill their mission, the Sharps needed hard currency inside the Protectorate, but they resisted legal currency exchanges because they feared enriching the Nazis, who now controlled the banking system. In addition, the Czech *koruna* fluctuated wildly as international markets responded to the uncertainty of the occupation.⁵⁰ Thus, the Sharps adopted a system that Waitstill later referred to as "corrupting the currency".⁵¹ Although

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, s. 2, box 15, f. 2, Datebooks; *ibidem*, s. 4, box 30, f. 3, Martha Cogan Sharp Memoir.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, s. 1, box 2, f. 15, Letter from Waitstill Sharp to Malcolm Davis, Robert Dexter, and Brackett Lewis, 20. 5. 1939.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, s. 3, boxes 26–29.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, UUSC Records, RG 67.012, s. 2, box 4, f. 64, "Commissioners' Report: Co-Operation and Relief in Czechoslovakia" [authors Martha and Waitstill Sharp], in: *How Americans Helped a Nation in Crisis*, p. 17; *ibidem*, f. 65, Letter from Martha Sharp to Brackett Lewis, 31. 3. 1939, Paris; *ibidem*, Sharp Collection, RG 67.017, s. 1, box 2, f. 15, Summary of Future Prospects and Policy, Letter from Waitstill Sharp to Robert Dexter, 21. 7. 1939, Paris.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, Sharp Collection, RG-67.017, s. 3, box 28, f. 19, Letter from Martha Sharp to Norman Fletcher, Prague, 27. 7. 1939.

⁵⁰ BRYANT, Chad: *Prague in Black: Nazi Rule and Czech Nationalism*. Cambridge (MA), Harvard University Press 2009, p. 80.

⁵¹ *USHMM*, UUSC Records, RG-67.012, s. 2, box 4, f. 65, Letter from Waitstill Sharp to Robert Dexter, 13. 3. 1939, Prague; *ibidem*, Sharp Collection, RG-67.017, s. 1, box 7, f. 60, Letter from Waitstill Sharp to Robert Dexter, 13. 6. 1939, London; *ibidem*, s. 4, box 43, f. 103, Interview with Waitstill H. Sharp, Conducted by Ghanda di Figlia.

illegal, the Sharps insisted to the AUA Board that this arrangement maximized the possibilities for relief and rescue because "the starving refugees must be fed, clothed and sheltered as far as possible".⁵² The Sharps asked trusted representatives in London, Paris, and Geneva to open bank accounts in their name. The AUA sent money to these representatives, who deposited the funds for the Sharps to withdraw when they took trips outside the Protectorate. In the end, the Sharps personally withdrew little. Instead, Waitstill used the accounts to help refugees transfer money outside of the Protectorate without encumbering the extortionist Reich Emigration Tax (*Reichsfluchtsteuer*). Prior to departure, a refugee gave Waitstill *koruna*, and in return he handed the refugee his own calling card with an amount written on the back. The refugee then presented the card in Paris, Geneva, or London and received the arranged amount in pounds or dollars from the Sharps' bank account. Waitstill altered exchange rates based on what he believed a refugee could pay, charging wealthy refugees more than poorer ones.⁵³

With the funds from refugees, Waitstill financed relief projects in the Protectorate. Waitstill kept sparse records of his transactions to protect himself, the American Committee for Service in Czechoslovakia, and those from whom he received money.⁵⁴ But after returning to the United States, Waitstill created a ledger of expenses, rates, and notes about sixteen people with whom he exchanged currency. Of these sixteen, five had migration case files in the Sharps records, and all five were Jews. The Sharps had been offered an exchange rate of thirty-eight crowns to the dollar by the Czecho-Slovak government on March 14, 1939 and a rate of twenty-nine crowns to the dollar once the currency had stabilized in the Protectorate.⁵⁵ According to the ledger, Waitstill's rates ranged from thirty-seven crowns (the "social worker rate") to one hundred and fifty crowns to the dollar for wealthier migrants, including landowners and "industrialists". Of the six highest exchange rates on Waitstill's ledger, at least four were Jews.⁵⁶

The case of Franz Kraus is illustrative of both the Sharps' case work and the currency exchange schemes. Kraus, a twenty-six-year-old Czech Jew and technical clerk, registered for a U.S. visa on December 21, 1938 and opened a case file with

⁵² *Ibidem*, Sharp Collection, RG-67.017, s. 1, box 2, f. 8, Letter from E. Rosalind Lee to Robert Dexter, 7. 4. 1939.

⁵³ *Ibidem*, s. 4, box 43, f. 103, Interview with Waitstill H. Sharp, Conducted by Ghanda di Figlia.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*, s. 1, box 7, f. 60, Letter from Waitstill Sharp to Robert Dexter, 13. 6. 1939, London.

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*, s. 1, box 2, f. 15, Summary of Future Prospects and Policy, Letter from Waitstill Sharp to Robert Dexter, 21. 7. 1939, Paris.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, f. 23, Consolidated Account Receipts in Crowns Settlements in Dollars or Sterling; *ibidem*, s. 4, box 43, f. 103, Interview with Waitstill H. Sharp, Conducted by Ghanda di Figlia.

Martha's office in mid-May 1939.⁵⁷ At some point, Kraus paid Waitstill 46,000 *koruna* at an exchange rate of 98.29 crowns to the dollar (more than double the "social worker rate"), receiving \$468 in October 1939 after arriving in Paris. Kraus then traveled to Genoa, Italy, in the hopes of sailing for the Dominican Republic. To travel to the Dominican Republic, Kraus needed \$500 in landing money, and he appealed to his two American uncles, British Unitarian Minister E. Rosalind Lee, and Waitstill Sharp for further financial assistance.⁵⁸ Lee wrote to Sharp that Kraus had submitted to her an "urgent appeal" for funds and that she "was under the impression you [Waitstill] had received rather a lot of money from him in Prague", so she paid Kraus an additional £75 (approximately \$350) from the Sharps' London account, which she managed.⁵⁹ Waitstill asked Lee to withhold future payments to individual refugees, including Kraus, because Kraus was a "nuisance" who "threatened suicide" and would "continue to yell for money". Furthermore, Waitstill stated that "[Kraus] is pretty 'dumb' and second-rate, and simply not worth large scale assistance, as a talented artist or intellectual would be".⁶⁰ Waitstill asked Lee in January 1940 to not make any more withdrawals from the Sharps' account, because the Unitarians were planning future relief operations in Europe and "£75 in a refugee concentration camp in the Low Countries or in Rumania, would do an enormous amount of good".⁶¹ The Sharps' actions certainly helped Kraus to escape the Bohemian lands and obtain necessary foreign currency. But Waitstill deemed him unworthy of large-scale aid because he was not intellectually or culturally significant.

From the currency exchanges with individuals like Franz Kraus, the Sharps financed relief through Christian charitable organizations, including the Salvation Army, the Czechoslovak Church (*Církev československá*), and the Unitarian congregation in Prague. Waitstill's first major pledge was \$21,000 for secret food stores, an anti-tuberculosis camp, and dental work, which he hoped would "fortify the little children of the Protectorate against the severe needs of next winter's privation".⁶² The Sharps' large projects also included an "American wing" for refugees at a Salvation Army country rest home for poor children in the small Central Bohemian town of Úvaly; repairs to a YMCA summer camp hosting refugees; meals for German and Austrian refugees through the Salvation Army;

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*, s. 3, box 28, f. 17, Case file for Frank Kraus.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*, Letter from Toot Bleuland van Oordt to Waitstill Sharp, 13. 9. 1939, Paris; *ibidem*, Letter from Waitstill Sharp to Frank Kraus, 3. 10. 1939.

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*, Letter from E. Rosalind Lee to Waitstill Sharp, 19. 12. 1939, Swansea.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*, Letter from Waitstill Sharp to E. Rosalind Lee, 10. 1. 1940.

⁶¹ *Ibidem*, Letter from E. Rosalind Lee to Waitstill Sharp, 19. 12. 1939, Swansea.

⁶² *Ibidem*, s. 1, box 7, f. 60, Letter from Waitstill Sharp to Robert Dexter, 13. 6. 1939, London.

food, medicine, and wool stores for the Social Service Committee of the Religious Society of the Czechoslovak Unitarians (*Náboženská společnost unitářů československých*) to distribute; a YWCA children's summer camp; the Karel Farský Refugee Children's Home (*Dětský domov Dr. Karla Farského*) of the Czechoslovak Church in Jílové, a small town near Prague; children's relief in Brno; construction of a summer camp work and a maternity pavilion for refugees through the Provincial Commission for Child Welfare in Bohemia (*Zemské ústředí péče o mládež v Čechách*) and the Czech Red Cross (*Český červený kříž*); additional funds for social work to the Czech Red Cross; and a fund for the care of Czech refugee children in England.⁶³

Although the Sharps obtained Czechoslovak currency for relief work from Jewish refugees with an exchange rate of more than double the official exchange rate, the Sharps did not provide relief money directly to Jewish organizations. The Sharps were aware of the increasing persecution of Jews in the Bohemian lands and the growing financial challenges facing Jewish organizations. They noted that Nazi persecution and antisemitism had an enormous impact on Bohemian and Moravian Jews, who were "deprived of their businesses, their positions, and their possessions".⁶⁴ The Sharps also described how the heads of Jewish refugee organizations had been arrested and detained by the Gestapo for several weeks, virtually stopping legal Jewish emigration from the Bohemian lands in March and April 1939.⁶⁵ The Sharps met regularly with JDC officials in Paris, even agreeing to share the costs of sending a representative to survey potential work in Poland supporting Polish refugees from Germany and Czech Jews in Katowice.⁶⁶ But they stopped short of spending relief money specifically on Jewish organizations. As Bohemian and Moravian Jews lost their jobs and attempted to flee themselves, the Prague Jewish Community's Social Institute (*Sociální ústav náboženských obcí židovských Velké Prahy*), which relied on local donations, lost its primary source of income. In June 1939, the Sharps visited the headquarters of the Prague Jewish Community's Social Institute, reporting that the situation of Jewish refugees was "the most critical problem we have faced". The thousands of

⁶³ *Ibidem*, UUSC Records, RG-67.012, s. 2, box 4, f. 64, "Commission for Service in Czechoslovakia", in: *How Americans Helped a Nation in Crisis*, p. 10; See also: *ibidem*, Sharp Collection, RG-67.017, s. 1, box 2, f. 16, Letter from Martha Sharp to Brackett Lewis, 2. 5. 1939; *ibidem*, f. 14, Consolidated Disbursement Sheet Other Than Office and Maintenance Costs.

⁶⁴ *Ibidem*, UUSC Records, RG-67.012, s. 2, box 4, f. 64, "Emigration Case Work" [author Martha Sharp], in: *How Americans Helped a Nation in Crisis*, p. 23.

⁶⁵ *Ibidem*, Sharp Collection, RG-67.017, s. 1, box 2, f. 14, Letter from Martha Sharp to Brackett Lewis, 31. 3. 1939, Paris.

⁶⁶ *Ibidem*, s. 1, box 4, f. 25, Letter from Waitstill Sharp to Martha Sharp, 17. 7. 1939, Paris.

Jewish refugees supported by the Social Institute lived on only twenty crowns per week. Waitstill commented that living on that sum would lead to rampant “suicide and deficiency diseases”.⁶⁷ The Sharps sympathized with the Jewish Community’s position, and while they helped the head of the Jewish Religions Community obtain JDC relief money, the Sharps did not provide financial assistance to Jewish humanitarian organizations in the Bohemian lands.⁶⁸

Waitstill later expressed some remorse at his involvement in the calling card scheme, saying that he negotiated “mercilessly” and that he “drove the hardest bargains, sometimes [it was] unconscionable”. He said that, “I felt I could soak them if I found the source of their available Czech wealth”.⁶⁹ But he also expressed pride in his “Christian intention” to determine which organizations benefitted from the currency exchanges.⁷⁰ He made these decisions based on donor intention (the Butler Committee had promised certain sums to the Provincial Commission for Child Welfare in Bohemia and the Czech Red Cross) and also based on his attachment to particular people or programs: lifting the Unitarian mortgage because of his “adoration for Dr. Norbert Čapek”;⁷¹ the feeding program for refugees (mostly political refugees) run by the Salvation Army because of “the courage and resourcefulness” of the two Danish men running the program; and an emergency grant to the Provincial Commission for Child Welfare in Bohemia, “due to my increasing affection for the saint” Antonín Sum.⁷² Waitstill admitted to having “twinges of conscience” for the disbursement to the Unitarian Church when he considered the “desperate need” of refugees and others relying on social service organizations. He reconciled his conscience by reminding himself that the origin of their operation was, “by cracky, a Unitarian and Unitarian-inspired, Unitarian-administered, and Unitarian-embodied project [which] justified lifting that very onerous mortgage”.⁷³

⁶⁷ *Ibidem*, s. 1, box 2, f. 17, Letter from Waitstill Sharp to Malcolm Davis, 29. 6. 1939.

⁶⁸ *Archives of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee*, New York, Records of the AJDC New York Office 1933–1944, Subcollection 4, RG 4.15, s. 1, f. 535, Copy of Letter from Morris C. Troper to the Jewish Religious Community in Prague, 31. 7. 1939, Paris.

⁶⁹ *USHMM*, Sharp Collection, RG-67.017, s. 4, box 43, f. 103, Interview with Waitstill H. Sharp, Conducted by Ghanda di Figlia.

⁷⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁷¹ Norbert Fabián Čapek (1870–1942) was a Czech religious thinker, founder and first President of the Religious Society of the Czechoslovak Unitarians, executed in Dachau.

⁷² Antonín Sum (1919–2006) was a lawyer, member of the Czechoslovak anti-Nazi resistance and the last personal secretary of the Foreign Minister Jan Masaryk after the War.

⁷³ *Ibidem*.

As time wore on, the Sharps and other foreign workers speculated that their ability to continue their work was "precarious" due to Gestapo pressure.⁷⁴ Several times, the Sharps wrote to the AUA Board that they needed to start "winding up". Although emigration assistance could only continue while the Sharps remained in Prague, relief funds could be spent in their absence and they passed on resources and structures to local colleagues to continue relief work if they were unable to remain in the Protectorate.⁷⁵ As early as April 1939 – just six weeks after the Nazi occupation – they allocated their remaining funds for "interior projects designed to forestall inevitable food shortage and probable cuts in social service budgets"⁷⁶ and for external relief and emigration assistance. In mid-June, Waitstill began spending in earnest, pledging \$21,000 in Czech crowns (at a very advantageous rate) to purchase food "to be kept in secret stores against next winter's need" and fund medical projects, such as "anti-tuberculosis camps and widespread dental surveys and dental work". The Sharps wanted to do "something to fortify the little children of the Protectorate against the severe needs of next winter's privation".⁷⁷

In total, the Butler Committee, together with the American Unitarians, raised \$94,595 for the American Committee for Relief in Czechoslovakia. Of that total, \$37,397 was sent directly to the Czechoslovak (or Czech) Red Cross and the Provincial Commission for Child Welfare in Bohemia in Prague; \$42,960.88 was spent by the Sharps on relief projects and small sums for individual case work; \$3,499.50 was distributed to Czechoslovak exiles in Poland and the United States; and \$10,000 was disbursed by the Czecho-Slovak ambassador in Washington to help recent immigrants to the United States establish themselves. Administrative expenses were indeed low (\$7,378.84 or 7.8%) and the Sharps were entirely supported by the Unitarian-Quaker Commission (an additional expense of \$4,000).⁷⁸

⁷⁴ *Ibidem*, s. 1, box 3, f. 22, Telegram from Waitstill Sharp, Martha Sharp, Malcom Davis, and Donald Lowrie to Brackett Lewis, 12. 4. 1939.

⁷⁵ *Ibidem*, box 2, f. 15, Letter from Waitstill Sharp to Robert Dexter, 21. 7. 1939.

⁷⁶ *Ibidem*, box 3, f. 22, Telegram from Waitstill Sharp, Martha Sharp, Malcom Davis, and Donald Lowrie to Brackett Lewis, 12. 4. 1939.

⁷⁷ *Ibidem*, box 2, f. 8, Letter from Waitstill Sharp to Robert Dexter, 13. 6. 1939.

⁷⁸ *Ibidem*, f. 12, Letter from Brackett Lewis to the Members of the American Committee for Relief in Czecho-Slovakia, 23. 6. 1939.

Future Work

Both the Butler Committee and the Unitarians considered the Prague operation to be a “temporary one to meet an emergency”.⁷⁹ The Butler Committee raised very little money after the March 15 invasion and ceased operations in June 1939.⁸⁰ The AUA chose the name “American Committee for Service in Czechoslovakia” to reflect the “limited field of effort” for the operation, which was in many ways a self-imposed test.⁸¹ The Czech mission was an “experiment in helpfulness” that would “indicate the path” for any future operations.⁸² In May 1940, the AUA formally created the Unitarian Service Committee (USC), “to aid destitute Czech refugees in France”.⁸³ Unitarian leaders considered a “Service Committee” to be a name “appropriate for a committee organized for service in several fields”.⁸⁴ Although the USC began their operations in France, they intended to operate in multiple fields and simultaneously opened field offices in Portugal and North Africa during the war, and across Europe after 1945. As the first USC commissioners, the Sharps returned to Europe weeks after the fall of France to provide emigration assistance, and had latitude to determine “wherever the need seemed greatest”.⁸⁵ They soon determined “the greatest need” was not actually emigration casework, but relief: specifically, “milk for the little ones” in unoccupied France, where the “American Red Cross supplies had stopped”.⁸⁶

The milk distribution relief program became the Sharps’ focus, and they temporarily abandoned any efforts to provide emigration assistance. In all, the milk

⁷⁹ *Ibidem*, Selected Records of USC, RG-67.028, s. 5, box 1, f. 6, Qualifications for Couple (No. 1 Plan), Unitarian Service Committee, Records on Relief Work in Czechoslovakia.

⁸⁰ *Ibidem*, Sharp Collection, RG-67.017, s. 1, box 2, f. 14, Letter from Brackett Lewis to Robert Dexter, 15. 6. 1939, p. 18.

⁸¹ *Ibidem*, Selected Records of USC, RG-67.028, s. 5, box 2, f. 1, Letter from Henry H. Perry to Robert Dexter, 28. 12. 1938; *ibidem*, box 1, f. 6, Qualifications for Couple (No. 1 Plan), Unitarian Service Committee, Records on Relief Work in Czechoslovakia.

⁸² *Ibidem*, UUSC Records, RG-67.012, s. 2, box 4, f. 64, Robert C. Dexter, Secretary’s Report – Commission for Service in Czechoslovakia.

⁸³ *Ibidem*, UUSC Records, 1935–2006, RG-67.012M, s. 1, box 1, f. 9, [Anonymous:] Unitarians Set Up War Relief Committee to Aid Destitute Czech Refugees in France. In: *The Boston Herald* (24. 5. 1940).

⁸⁴ *Ibidem*, Selected Records of USC, RG-67.028M, s. 5, box 2, f. 1, Letter from Henry H. Perry to Robert Dexter, 28. 12. 1938, Unitarian Service Committee, Records on Relief Work in Czechoslovakia.

⁸⁵ *Ibidem*, Sharp Collection, RG-67.017, s. 1, box 2, f. 11, Martha and Waitstill Sharp Report to USC, 1940.

⁸⁶ *Ibidem*.

distribution fed 801 babies for at least one month in the Basses Pyrénées region.⁸⁷ French officials in Portugal responded positively to the Sharps' milk distribution and gave the Sharps "credentials commending the [Unitarian] Service Committee to all the French authorities, civil and military".⁸⁸ This one document ensured that the Sharps received "the extraordinary exception" to enter France⁸⁹ and was, according to Waitstill, "beyond value in making possible our free travel over France and our interviews for the sake of the *service aspect* of our operations".⁹⁰

The Sharps credited the milk distribution project for facilitating their subsequent work in Europe. Through the milk distribution operation, the Sharps received "the utmost cooperation from all French officials".⁹¹ Waitstill insisted that the milk distribution project was "the largest single service" they provided because it entitled them to a special license to legally bring funds into France without incurring high exchange rates, which the Sharps and future USC commissioners used for both relief work and smuggling refugees over the Pyrenees into Spain.⁹² Thanks to the milk distribution project, Martha had access to internment camps in France in order to distribute aid packages, including supplies, books, musical instruments, and tools.⁹³ While distributing aid in the camps, Martha identified individuals eligible for USC emigration casework, including refugee children whom she later brought to the United States as part of a children's migration project.⁹⁴

Although relief work facilitated rescue work, neither the Sharps nor subsequent USC representatives understood relief work to be simply a cover for rescue work. Relief facilitated rescue, and vice versa. Martha urged the USC to continue direct aid to the camps "to give new hope, and preserve the bodies and sanity of these people". Her final recommendation to the USC was that "our experience would prove that we can safely carry on the distribution of goods in Non-Occupied

⁸⁷ *Ibidem*, f. 9, Letter from Helen and Donald Lowrie, undated.

⁸⁸ *Ibidem*, Martha and Waitstill Sharp, A Memorandum on Material Aid Policy of the Unitarian Service Commission [authors Martha and Waitstill Sharp], 13. 8. 1940.

⁸⁹ *Ibidem*, f. 11, Report of Sharps' USC Work in France, 1940.

⁹⁰ *Ibidem*, f. 9, A Memorandum on Material Aid Policy of the Unitarian Service Commission [authors Martha and Waitstill Sharp], 13. 8. 1940. Italicized in the document.

⁹¹ *Ibidem*.

⁹² *Ibidem; ibidem*, Letter from Waitstill Sharp to Robert Dexter, 18. 8. 1940; SUBAK, S.: *Relief and Rescue*, p. 38.

⁹³ See CORAZZA, Stephanie: *The Routine of Rescue: Child Welfare Workers and the Holocaust in France*. Toronto, University of Toronto 2017. Doctoral thesis, p. 115; SUBAK, S.: *Relief and Rescue*, pp. 39–40.

⁹⁴ USHMM, Sharp Collection, RG-67.017, s. 1, box 2, f. 11, Report of Sharps' USC Work in France, 1940.

France. [...] I heartily recommend our continuation of work in the camps by sending in clothing and needed supplies along with an emigration program.”⁹⁵ After the Sharps left Europe, subsequent USC representatives created a medical relief program, delivering medical supplies, laboratory equipment, reference books, dental equipment, and improving the sanitary conditions in the internment camps of Southern France.⁹⁶ In July 1941, the USC opened its own clinic in Marseille, stocked with medicines, vitamins, and nutritional supplements which were virtually unobtainable in other pharmacies in France. The USC representatives proudly reported to donors that “our reputation in this field [of medical services] has spread beyond the French borders”.⁹⁷ By the spring of 1942, the clinic had around 2,000 consultations per month.⁹⁸ Some of these consultations were with refugees who had visas for the U.S. but needed a medical clearance form to be given final approval for travel. The clinic also housed the Children’s Aid Society (*Œuvre de secours aux enfants*, OSE) – well known for its efforts to rescue Jews – and the USC helped place children who came in for medical treatment with the rescue organization.⁹⁹

Conclusion

The American Unitarian Association’s first overseas operation was formative and instructive. Martha advocated for relief in her letters to the AUA Board, describing “a great need for direct relief in the form of food and lodging for people emigrating”.¹⁰⁰ Direct assistance benefited refugees and eased the burden of refugee care for the Czecho-Slovak government. The relief work that the Sharps conducted endeared them to government officials, establishing relationships that allowed them to carry out the complicated emigration work. Waitstill believed – both publicly and privately – that while rescue services provided a lasting impact on individual families, the Unitarians’ relief work demonstrated that “we have done

⁹⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁹⁶ *Ibidem*, UUSC Records, RG-67.012M, s. 4, box 9, f. 163, Saving the Future in Europe: The First-Hand Story of the Unitarian Service Committee’s Medical Work in Unoccupied France; *ibidem*, box 1, f. 8, *USC Bulletin*, No. 2; *ibidem*, f. 9, Chronological Outline of the Unitarian Service Committee Medical Work.

⁹⁷ *Ibidem*, box 9, f. 163, Saving the Future in Europe: The First-Hand Story of the Unitarian Service Committee’s Medical Work in Unoccupied France.

⁹⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁹⁹ *Ibidem*, box 4, f. 70, Noel Field, Memorandum for Dr. Charles Joy; SUBAK S.: *Relief and Rescue*, pp. 109–111.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibidem*, Sharp Collection, RG-67.017, s. 1, box 2, f. 14, Letter from Martha Sharp to Brackett Lewis, 31. 3. 1939.

something to express our sympathy for the Czechs. [...] The leadership of this nation knows now that THE UNITARIANS HAVE CARED; they will never forget that fact."¹⁰¹ In a published summary report in 1939, the Sharps wrote that "the chief lesson from this enterprise is in its record of co-operation. It was a common cause, neither a solo nor a duet, but an orchestration of interests and abilities."¹⁰² This sentiment set the stage for the Unitarians' later operations during the Second World War: to show the local government that the service organization cared about the situation on the ground through relief work, while also providing rescue services.

For the American Committee for Service in Czechoslovakia and its successor organization, the Unitarian Service Committee, relief and rescue were inextricably linked. In his final report to the USC in December 1940, Waitstill wrote that their policy in Czechoslovakia had been "the basic strategy of arriving in a foreign land prepared to do at least in part what the authorities of that land wish done for the welfare of their population".¹⁰³ Waitstill explained that strategy had directly informed their later operation in France. By working with local authorities to provide direct relief, the Sharps could also pursue rescue work. The Sharps and the subsequent USC directors understood relief work to not only facilitate rescue, but to be an important function of the organization. As representatives on the ground grappled with how best to distribute aid, they came to understand the two as intricately linked and necessary to pursue in tandem. As humanitarians confronted with the reality of twentieth-century warfare, they transformed into a modern humanitarian operation, linking relief and rescue programs to provide individual services and broad relief to a larger population.

Abstract

Humanitarian efforts during the Second World War have traditionally been divided into two categories: relief and rescue. Rather than discussing relief and rescue separately, this article examines the relationship between these two activities and shows that in practice they were inextricably linked. To reveal the complex balancing act that humanitarians faced between relief and rescue operations, the author focuses on the American Unitarian Association's (AUA) early efforts at humanitarian relief

¹⁰¹ *Ibidem*, f. 15, Letter from Waitstill Sharp to Robert Dexter, 21. 7. 1939.

¹⁰² *Ibidem*, UUSC Records, RG-67.012, s. 2, box 4, f. 64, "Commissioners' Report: Co-Operation and Relief in Czechoslovakia" [authors Martha and Waitstill Sharp], in: *How Americans Helped a Nation in Crisis*, p. 21.

¹⁰³ *Ibidem*, s. 1, box 3, f. 43, "Laying the Groundwork" [author Waitstill Sharp], in: *Journey to Freedom: The First Chapter of Unitarian Service – Reports of Commissioners Waitstill and Martha Sharp*.

in Prague. In February 1939, the AUA sent Waitstill and Martha Sharp to Prague as the representatives of the American Committee for Service in Czechoslovakia. Their records reveal that, once on the ground, the Sharps found that relief and rescue activities supported each other in surprising and complicated ways, especially after the Nazi occupation of Bohemia and Moravia. Relief assistance provided especially to Jews and endangered members of the democratically minded intelligentsia endeared voluntary workers to local Czech authorities, granting them greater opportunity to conduct humanitarian efforts, a strategy that the Sharps later used in their work in France in 1940. Humanitarian workers constantly grappled with which activity to prioritize. Although relief frequently greased the wheels of rescue, humanitarians struggled with when and how to offer relief. By focusing on the relationship between relief and rescue, the author sheds light on one of humanitarianism's enduring challenges: how to navigate internal conflicts about the distribution of aid, while still helping on the ground.

Keywords:

Czechoslovakia; Second Czechoslovak Republic; Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia; United States; France; Second World War; Nazi occupation; Holocaust; antisemitism; Unitarians; American Unitarian Association (AUA); American Committee for Service in Czechoslovakia; Waitstill Sharp; Martha Sharp; refugees; Jews; humanitarianism

DOI 10.51134/sod.2023.054