

Accusation From Nazi Era: Journalists Failed the Jews

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Several prominent journalists have signed a petition asking the Newspaper Association of America to acknowledge publicly that its predecessor organization in the 1930's "was wrong to turn its back on Jewish refugee journalists fleeing [Hitler](#)."

The petition notes that just as other organizations have publicly apologized, paid reparations or taken other steps to "face up to their past," so the newspaper association should "squarely face up to the mistakes made by the journalistic community during those terrible years."

The petition was signed by more than 70 people. They include Nicholas Lemann, dean of the Graduate School of Journalism at Columbia; Marvin Kalb and Alex S. Jones, both of the Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy at Harvard; Leon Wieseltier, literary editor of *The New Republic*; and officials from many other journalism programs around the country.

The petition is based on research by Laurel Leff, a former reporter for *The Wall Street Journal* who teaches journalism at Northeastern University and is the author of "Buried by The Times" (Cambridge University Press), a book about [The New York Times's](#) coverage of the Holocaust.

She presented her research at a conference in December in a paper titled "Rebuffing Refugee Journalists: The Profession's Failure to Help Jews Persecuted by Nazi Germany."

Her paper says that journalists did not establish committees, as doctors and lawyers did, to help Jewish refugees secure positions that would have made them exempt from immigration limits and allowed them to come to the United States.

"The nation's journalism schools did not add a single displaced European scholar to their faculties, and they rebuffed pleas to re-educate foreign journalists, sometimes offering blatantly anti-Semitic rationales," she wrote.

"There is no question that anti-Semitism influenced those decisions," Ms. Leff said in an interview. "It was not the only factor, but it was an important factor."

She said that she had not sought to publish her paper yet because she was still researching the idea that "there was something more deeply embedded in journalism that made them more hesitant to help."

Nonetheless, the petition, which Ms. Leff said she had no part in, was timed to coincide with the newspaper association's annual convention in early April. Initiated by Rafael Medoff, director of the David S. Wyman Institute for Holocaust Studies, the petition asks the newspaper association to invite Ms. Leff to address its convention, in Chicago.

Her research says that in 1939, the association's predecessor organization, the American Newspaper Publishers Association, had rejected a request by Carl J. Friedrich, a non-Jewish German refugee and Harvard government professor, to address its convention.

John F. Sturm, president of the newspaper association, said in a statement that a detailed review of the predecessor organization's archives had found no record or discussion of Professor Friedrich's request to speak but that the association was giving the petition "careful consideration" and would address it in a "constructive manner."

"The allegation in Professor Leff's paper is one we take seriously, particularly since newspapers have played a crucial role in telling stories of the oppressed," he wrote.

Mr. Lemann said in an interview that he had not independently verified Ms. Leff's research and that his signature did not amount to an admission that the school had been anti-Semitic in failing to help persecuted journalists.

But, he said, "I felt comfortable signing the petition because it asks only for Laurel Leff to be allowed to speak and for a very general statement of regret that more wasn't done."

He added: "What they're asking for is fairly low-end, and it all made sense to me."

He also said that to this day, journalists around the world seek sanctuary of one sort or another at the school and that he often provided it.

"You could say that this is ancient history," he said of the persecution of journalists. "But I'm surprised by how often someone says, 'I'm in physical danger in my home country because of things I've written. Can you provide me with shelter?' I try to be extra careful to try to do something about these cases."