



Nazi rally in NYC proves beginning of end for German American Bund

By R. Marc Kantrowitz, Lawyers Weekly, April 19, 2024

On Feb. 20, 1939, Nazi sympathizers and supporters gathered at a sold-out Madison Square Garden in New York City to hold a “Pro-American Rally,” which in reality trumpeted support for Germany and its Fuhrer. With more than 20,000 fascists inside the building, thousands demonstrated against them outside. Separating the two was an army of New York’s finest, with over 1,700 police officers outside and 600 inside, in uniform and plainclothes. “We have enough

police here to stop a revolution,” intoned a police official. Firefighters, armed with a heavy-duty fire hose to disperse an unruly mob if necessary, along with bomb squads, added to the security.

With membership declining, leaders of the German American Bund, a pro-Nazi organization established in 1936, hoped a well-publicized event would inspire the masses. In the end, it didn't, although the spectacle was one even Hitler and his cohorts in Germany would admire. As music blared in the background, uniformed Bund members marched in carrying both American and German flags. Audience members — who paid between 40 cents and \$1.10 for admission — jumped to their feet, greeting them with raucous cheers and Nazi salutes as the ensemble made its way to the stage. There, a 30-foot picture of George Washington with Nazi insignia flanking him awaited.

Despite assurances in renting the Garden that there would be no anti-Semitism displayed or verbalized, banners flowed proclaiming “Wake Up America — Smash Jewish Communism” and “Stop Jewish Domination of Christian America.” As the clock struck 8, Margarete Rittershaush regaled the crowd with her rendition of the “Star-Spangled Banner.” The Bund's national secretary, James Wheeler-Hill, then took the podium and proclaimed that “if George Washington were alive today, he would be friends with Adolph Hitler.” America, he bellowed, must be freed and restored to “true Americans.”

He and those who followed, taking their cues from Hitler, blamed the world's woes on the Jews and blasted those weak leaders who failed to recognize the threats posed. Jews, who controlled the movies and the press, they charged, moved in lockstep with the godless and evil Communists, “the menace of anti-national, gold-hating Jewish-Bolshevism.” Blame went to the nation's leaders, President Franklin Delano “Rosenfeld,” New York City Mayor Fiorello “Jew Lumpen,” and NYC District Attorney and future Gov. Thomas A. “Jewey.”

The final speaker, head of the Bund, Fritz Kuhn, further egged on the audience. In a decidedly foreign accent, he intoned: “We, with American ideals, demand that our government shall be returned to the American people who founded it. If you ask what we are actively fighting for under our charter: First, a socially just, white, Gentile ruled United States. Second, Gentile-controlled labor unions, free from Jewish Moscow directed domination.”

Suddenly, and without warning, a spectator, Isadore Greenbaum, incensed at what was being said, jumped on stage and charged Kuhn. Before he could reach him however, Kuhn's stormtroopers intervened and started to beat Greenbaum, much to the delight of the crowd. The quick intervention of the police, however, ensured that the sole protester was not severely injured.

Kuhn concluded his speech by imploring those gathered that "the Bund is open to you, provided you are sincere, of good character, of white Gentile stock, and an American citizen imbued with patriotic zeal. Therefore, join!" With the assembled thousands chanting "Free America! Free America! Free America!," the largest Nazi rally held on American soil came to an end.

Only 13 arrests were made that evening, all demonstrators opposed to Nazism and the message being told. Isadore Greenbaum, the charging 26-year-old plumbing assistant from Brooklyn, was also arrested for disorderly conduct. When the judge asked him whether he realized that someone could've been hurt by what he did on stage, Greenbaum replied, "Don't you realize that someone is going to be hurt by what was being said on that stage?" Greenbaum was fined \$25 (\$450 in today's dollars), similar to the penalties assessed against the other protesters. At the time, Hitler's sixth concentration camp was being completed.

Years later, Greenbaum explained that he "went down to the Garden without any intention of interrupting, but being that they talked so much against my religion and there was so much persecution, I lost my head and I felt it was my duty to [do something] [W]hat would you have done if you were in my place listening to that SOB hollering against the government and publicly kissing Hitler's behind, while thousands cheered? Well, I did it."

Much to the dismay of Kuhn and his followers, the Bund continued to lose support and interest. A few months after the rally, Warner Brother's "Confessions of a Nazi Spy" was released, further tarnishing Germany's image. Like those in the movie, Kuhn soon found himself under scrutiny. When it was discovered that \$14,000 (\$250,000 in today's money) was missing from the funds raised at the event, Kuhn was charged and convicted of embezzlement. It appears he spent the money on his mistress and other personal expenses. After he was sent off to prison, two people succeeded him. One fled to Germany in 1941, while the second, also under investigation, committed suicide.

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