

Title: Leo Herrmann: The Untold Story of a Man Who Rescued Max Brod and 2,500 Other Czechoslovak Jews From the Nazi Occupation.

The proposed talk aims to introduce the rescue plan for 2,500 Czech Jews by means of a ha'avara scheme in 1939-1940, which was negotiated by the Bar Kochba alumnus, Leo Herrmann (a cousin of Hugo Herrmann). Born in Lanškroun/Landskron in 1888, Herrmann was truly a renaissance personality – lawyer, diplomat, Zionist but also peace activist, journalist, editor in-chief in several newspapers, film producer and longtime secretary general of the Keren Ha-Yesod. Herrmann studied law at the today's Charles University in Prague and in 1908, he chaired the famous student club Bar Kochba. There, he met leading figures of the Prague and German Jewish community and representatives of the moderate branch of so-called "cultural Zionism", such as Max Brod, Franz Kafka, Shmuel Hugo Bergmann, and Martin Buber. The latter was invited to Prague by Herrmann himself, and the lectures that Buber delivered at the association in 1909 (the so-called Three Lectures on Judaism) had a significant impact on the popularization of Zionism in the Prague-Jewish milieu.

Herrmann ascended expeditiously through the hierarchy of the Zionist movement, attaining the position of Secretary General of the Zionist fundraising and development agency Keren ha-yesod in 1921. During his involvement in the Paris Conference (1919-1920), he established a close friendship with Jan Masaryk. In the mid-1920s, he joined the group of German-Jewish peace activists, known as Brit Shalom/Tahalluf as-Salam, which lobbied for inclusion of Palestinian Arabs into the Zionist enterprise. In 1934-1935, he produced the first-ever Zionist movie with sound, directed by Juda Leman, which received high critical acclaim. The year 2025 marks the 90th anniversary of the movie's famous 1935 screening in the New York hall, Astor, attended by many leading personalities, including Albert Einstein.

Seeing the rapidly deteriorating situation of the Czechoslovak Jewry after the Munich agreement, Herrmann mobilized all efforts of his institution to design a rescue plan akin to the German ha'avara that would use a portion of the British post-Munich gift and loan for legal emigration to Mandatory Palestine. Using his unique skills in fundraising and crisis management as well as his excellent contacts within the Czechoslovak government-in-exile, Herrmann designed a scheme that allowed the rescue of thousands of Czechoslovak Jews, including notable Zionists such as Max Brod, Felix Weltsch or David Paul Meretz, often in the last possible moments. When Brod and others recount their fateful escape from Czechoslovakia on the night of Nazi invasion (March 15, 1939), it was Leo Herrmann, who made this last-minute escape possible. Without Herrmann, the Franz Kafka's archive smuggled by Brod from Czechoslovakia would have likely been lost forever.

Leo Herrmann died in 1951 and his role in what may have been the largest rescue operation for the Czechoslovak Jews in the entire Holocaust period, was largely forgotten both in the Czech lands and in Israel. This proposed lecture aims to bring his name back to the forefront using previously unpublished archival material and to raise awareness about his life and work at the 90th anniversary of „Land of Promise“ screening in New York.