George Mandel, also known as Mantello (1901–1992), was a successful Jewish businessman in Romania who became honorary consul of El Salvador in Bucharest on the eve of the Second World War. In mid-1942 he moved to Switzerland and until 1945 was the first secretary of the consulate of El Salvador in Geneva. Switzerland was then a hub of espionage activity. It was also a base for Jewish organisations attempting to get aid to Jews during the height of the ‘Final Solution’. Mantello covertly assisted British intelligence and also made contact with various Jewish organisations, notably the Swiss committee of rabbis, with the intention of helping imperilled Jews in areas under German control.

Mantello came up with many plans, but his most concrete success was to supply Salvadorean diplomatic papers to Jews in Holland, Belgium, France, Poland and Slovakia who were threatened with deportation. Since the Germans were reluctant to offend neutral countries, Jews with the right citizenship were held back from transports to ‘the east’. Following the German occupation of Hungary in March 1944, Mantello organised an aid committee that centralised rescue work and disseminated information about the unfolding catastrophe. He arranged for a friendly Romanian diplomat to visit Hungary to garner authoritative first-hand information and meet with local Jewish leaders. As a result, Mantello obtained the Auschwitz-Birkenau report compiled by two recently escaped prisoners. During June and July 1944, while transports were carrying thousands of Jews each day to the gas chambers, he worked tirelessly with a band of volunteers to publicise the report in Switzerland and internationally. The Swiss press carried dozens of articles that were in part inspired by Mantello’s campaign. These reports rattled the Germans. Articles in Switzerland fed into the press of other free countries, too, where they helped to swing opinion in favour of measures to assist the Jews.

Even after the suspension of the deportations in early July, the surviving Jews of Budapest remained in great danger. A far-right coup in October 1944 led to renewed persecution. But this time the Nazis and their Hungarian collaborators faced resistance from Jews acting in concert with the representatives of the neutral powers and the Red Cross. Mantello channelled Salvadorean papers through sympathetic neutrals to vulnerable Jews and continued to expose the nefarious acts of the Germans and their auxiliaries. In the last months of the war, he used diplomatic papers to get certain Jews out of Belsen and other camps.

This is an impressive record of rescue work, and David Kranzler is to be congratulated for rescuing Mantello from obscurity. However, he does his subject less than justice by exaggerating the scale of his achievements, a failing that begins with the hyperbole in the title and runs through the entire narrative. As Kranzler concedes, in mid or late 1943 (he gives two dates) the Germans withdrew recognition of Salvadorean diplomatic papers because they suspected their provenance was corrupt. Mantello was accused of selling citizenship of El Salvador, probably falsely, and may have been denounced by genuine crooks who objected that his altruism was ruining their business. Nevertheless, Salvadorean diplomatic protection was seriously devalued.

Mantello’s un-diplomatic enterprises brought him into conflict with the Swiss authorities, who detained him for several weeks at the onset of the deportations from Hungary. A criminal investigation launched by Heinrich Rothmund, the unlikable head of the Swiss Alien Police, crippled his rescue work at a crucial moment and haunted him for years afterwards. Mantello was ‘out of the loop’ when the first desperate alarms came from Hungary, but remained convinced that only he knew what was
happening. Kranzler admits that various calls for help had reached allied and neutral governments independently of Mantello and before his own campaign got going.

In Kranzler’s narrative, Mantello’s undoubted activism becomes the hammer that falls on the anvil of international indifference. He repeats the well-worn criticism that American Jewish leaders failed to use their ‘political power’ to get President Roosevelt to order the bombing of Auschwitz. According to Kranzler this would have been a ‘relatively minor military intervention [that] could easily have been carried out had the president so desired’. Yet Henry Feingold and several other scholars have demolished the notion that American Jews formed a coherent body and that they could have bossed Roosevelt around even if they had acted collectively. Anyway, Mantello’s press campaign came too late in the day to cause the Nazis to abort their anti-Jewish measures in Hungary. Kranzler over-states his case by claiming that Papal protests stemmed from information supplied by Mantello’s people or that the Hungarian decision to end the deportations had a similar cause.

Most curiously, Kranzler argues that at this juncture the Swiss came up trumps. He certainly shows that Martello inspired Swiss church leaders and theologians to issue poignant condemnations of the atrocities, and provides evidence of an impressive outpouring of protest and concern in the Swiss press. He claims that this obliged the Swiss federal authorities to rescind Rothmund’s restriction on the entry of Jewish refugees (in place since mid-1942) and even maintains that it helped face down Swiss antisemitism. But it is hard to square this with the stony-faced attitude of Swiss bankers after the war when confronted by the heirs of murdered Jews seeking to claim their relatives’ assets. How can we reconcile the apparent realisation that genocide against the Jews happened all around them with the resistance against restitution for the heirs of murdered Jews? And how can we explain the fact that in 1950 Martello set up the Swiss-Israel Bank to conduct business between the two countries?

Martello was a complex character who does not emerge clearly from Kranzler’s narrative. He was a right-wing Zionist who may have displayed a willingness to work across sectarian lines, but who annoyed so many different groups that after 1945 there were as many willing to demean as to praise his achievements. While Kranzler provides a lot of useful detail about the background to the fate of Hungarian Jewry and rescue work, his account is rendered less than helpful by the implicit attribution of all positive rescue efforts to this one man.

Royal Holloway, University of London


Holocaust Theology is an ambitious project. Whilst conceding that it is not ‘exhaustive’, the editor claims it provides ‘a panoramic survey of Holocaust theology’ (p. 1). After an introduction and a historical survey (pp. 26–37), the readings themselves are arranged in four parts: the Challenge; Faith in the Death Camps; Wrestling with the Holocaust; and Jews, Christians and the Holocaust.