

The Swamp in Washington Was Not Drained in World War II

by Michael Curtis



Henry Morgenthau and President Franklin D. Roosevelt, 1934

Saviors of the Jewish people appear from time to time. Purim is a holiday celebrating the saving of Jews from annihilation in the Persian Empire. The villain Haman, the royal vizier, wanted to destroy all the Jews in the Empire, but was foiled by Queen Esther, aided by her cousin Mordechai who refused to bow or show reverence to Haman, who persuaded King Ahasuerus to save their Jewish people from genocide. The powerful King of the great kingdom was a savior: he granted her petition, the Jews were saved and the evil Haman was hanged.

Some 2,500 years later, another powerful leader of a great nation was reluctant to become a savior of the same people in spite of the urging of his wife, Eleanor. In Jerusalem the memorial Yad Vashem honors individuals, Righteous Among the Nations. So far it includes more than 26,000, who risked their lives to save Jews from the Holocaust and can be regarded as saviors. Regrettably, U.S. President F.D. Roosevelt, in spite of his notable contributions to American life and public affairs, is not one of them.

Since the appearance in 1984 of David Wyman's book, *The Abandonment of the Jews: Americans and the Holocaust, 1941-4*,

with its criticism of religious organizations, the media, and movies, and argument that the U.S. State Department and the British Foreign Office had no intention of rescuing large numbers of Jews, controversy has raged over the unflattering portrait of Roosevelt as doing little or nothing to save Jews for 14 months after learning of the murder of European Jews.

The release of more documents on the fate of Jews during World War II, and the exhibition on the subject at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington sheds further light on the views and actions of Roosevelt. Most surprising was that he was concerned less with direct action to preserve the life of Jews than with the future. He was engaged with the issue of where displaced people, including Jews, should be settled after the War. In 1943 he wrote to Winston Churchill that the best way to settle the Jewish question was to disperse the Jews thin all over the world, rather than keep them all in one place.

To this end Roosevelt set up on July 30, 1942 a secret project, the M (Migration) project, outlining options for post war migration of displaced Europeans. He had discussed this with J. F. Carter, journalist and novelist, whom he had appointed in 1941 to conduct an investigation into the loyalty of Japanese-Americans, a person who realized the danger to FDR of Lindbergh, and who had headed a secret intelligence service for FDR. His partner in this was Henry Field, an anthropologist.

The project was to study anticipated ethnological problems, because of racial mixtures, in postwar Europe. FDR's choice of personnel for this is questionable. His first choice to head the project was Ales Hrdlicka, an anthropologist at the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History, a believer in the superiority of the white race, and proponent of the view that Japanese had less developed skulls and were innately warlike. Hrdlicka refused the position because he would not be given full control of the project .

Roosevelt then appointed Isaiah Bowman, president of Johns Hopkins University, 1935-48, a professional geographer who helped found the American Geographical Society, and served as an adviser to Woodrow Wilson as well as FDR, to head the project. However, Bowman was also a manifest antisemite, who stated there were too many Jews at Hopkins, who limited and imposed a quota on the number of Jewish students at the university, and who fired from the faculty the young Jewish Eric Goldman, later professor at Princeton and author of *Rendezvous with Destiny*. Interestingly and what is relevant to the present discussion, Goldman wrote of FDR as "restless and mercurial in his thinking...he trusted no system except the system of endless experimentation."

This is a moment when the honoring of past celebrated figures is being reevaluated. Now that Robert E. Lee, John Calhoun, Woodrow Wilson, Roger J. Taney, Cecil Rhodes and others have been dethroned, physically and literally, is FDR to suffer the same fate? Certainly his reputation is not enhanced by the new documents. Controversy for some time has ranged over his actions and non-actions. When did FDR first know of the Holocaust? Why did he not order specific action to save Jews?

The newly revealed documents show that FDR knew of the Nazi atrocities more than two years before the usually assumed date. Various indications were at hand. The CBS journalist Edward R. Murrow on December 13, 1942 broadcast that one should no longer speak simply of concentration camps, one must speak only of extermination camps. Testimonies by camp prisoners of the horrors were smuggled to the war-time Allies. British foreign minister Anthony Eden on December 17, 1942 told the House of Commons that Polish authorities were aware of mass executions of Jews, and that this had been widely reported in the press. Eden remarked that the German authorities were carrying into effect Hitler's oft-repeated intention to exterminate the Jewish people.

FDR himself in a statement of October 7, 1942 said the

government was receiving information concerning the barbaric crimes against civilian populations in occupied countries, particularly on the continent of Europe. However, FDR's main thrust was "win the war." That he held was the best way to stop the killings. The perpetrators of these crimes would answer before the courts of law after the War. What is absent is any mention or specific reference to Jews or to particular actions to stop the murders.

Understandably, FDR had other priorities and was troubled by and hindered by various factors; interagency battles within the administration; the hostile swamp of the State Department in which Breckinridge Long, former ambassador and Assistant Secretary of State, played a major role in blocking visas for German Jewish refugees, and deliberately preventing information about mass murder of Jews from becoming known to Congress and the media.

FDR acted in an atmosphere of considerable isolationism, exemplified by powerful figures, Charles Lindbergh, Henry Ford, Charles Coughlin, the America First Committee. Public opinion polls by the American Institute of Public Opinion in November 1938 recorded that 71% agreed that the U.S. should not allow a larger number of Jewish exiles from Germany to enter the U.S. to live. In hindsight, it is evident that the U.S. media and Hollywood, when they did mention Nazi behavior, did not feature Jews as main victims of persecution. Humphrey Bogart in *Casablanca* appears to be unaware of the persecution of Jews.

Polls also showed that about 90% of the U.S. in May 1940 opposed U.S. intervention in World War II.

Some individuals of course were conscious of the lack of action by FDR. Interestingly in the light of present day politics, one was Thomas D'Alesandro, Catholic son of Italian immigrants, Mayor of Baltimore and member of Congress, January 1939 -May 1947, and father of Nancy Pelosi. Though he agreed

with FDR on most issues, he opposed FDR's limit on Jewish refugees, and supported the Bergson Group headed by Hillel Kook (a.k.a. Peter Bergson), the group that challenged FDR on the refugee issue and lobbied for action. Through its activities and the urging of Henry Morgenthau, Secretary of the Treasury and the only Jew in the Cabinet, FDR on January 22, 1944 issued an executive order for the creation of the War Refugee Board to rescue those who could be rescued, perhaps 200,000.

A remaining controversy is why FDR, once he was aware of the ongoing Holocaust, did not order the bombing of Auschwitz. It is revealed that US planes did bomb the nearby I.G. Farben complex at Monowitz, and that between July and November 1944, 2,800 planes bombed oil factories, sometimes flying over Birkenau. Twice bombers struck less than five miles from the gas chambers. George McGovern, a young bomber pilot in some of the raids, said that FDR, his political hero, had made two great mistakes: interning the Japanese-Americans; and not bombing Auschwitz. The bombing would have saved Jews and the actions would have been symbolically important.

The verdict on FDR is still open. Now that all the evidence is public, perhaps we can anticipate a fervent debate on whether FDR Drive in New York City should be renamed.