

The Dark Side of FDR

And The American Jewish "Leaders" Who Advised Him

While America and her allies deserve great credit for ending the hellish reign of the Nazis, and thus playing a crucial role in the survival of the remnant of European Jews, they failed to act and at times even prevented actions that could have saved countless Jewish lives! Shockingly, it was one of America's most beloved presidents, Franklin D. Roosevelt—architect of the New Deal and indefatigable leader through the worst of WWII—who was responsible for regulations, bureaucracy and decisions that resulted in probably preventable deaths, by doing things such as intentionally leaving almost 200,000 life-saving visas unused and rejecting calls to slow down the carnage by bombing Nazi gas chambers. Even more shockingly, he did so with the full backing and even the proactive involvement of some of America's most prominent Jewish "leaders"!

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In general, America is the quintessential *medina shel chesed* and the White House has long been friendly to the Jewish people, offering a listening ear to rabbis and community leaders. But there are exceptions to every rule. A handful of American presidents carved themselves a name for posterity as anti-Semites who openly or clandestinely harbored hatred for Jews.

Ironically, the one president who arguably caused the most damage to the Jewish people was not recognized as an anti-Semite. He even maintained close, friendly relations with American Jewish “leaders” who, tragically, were in great part responsible for his anti-Semitic policies.

The 32nd President of the United States, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, watched in silence as Jews were slaughtered by the millions during World War II. Not only did the Roosevelt administration refuse to take simple, doable steps to at least curb some of the slaughter, but it actively prevented rescue in many instances.

While in office, President Roosevelt managed to maintain such a façade of friendliness to the Jewish world that even during the war most Jews thought they had a close ally in office. It wasn’t until after the Allied forces brought about the complete defeat of Nazi Germany that the full picture emerged.

In truth, America’s so-called Jewish “leaders,” specifically Stephen Wise, one of the leaders of the Reform movement, bear a large share of the responsibility, as they repeatedly encouraged the president to take no action to save European Jewry, and took part in actions that prevented ending or even simply reducing the atrocities.

It is a dark chapter in American—and Jewish American—history. But that is what makes it such an important chapter to study.

“Nobody Wants Them”

When Hitler first came to power, the Nazi party did not dare handle the “Jewish Problem” through mass killings for the simple reason that it expected to face a

storm of protests from the free world if such inhuman means were discovered. For a while, the higher-ups even floated a plan to send all the Jews to a colony on the southeast African island of Madagascar.

Before the war had even begun, Hitler had declared that he was ready to ship the Jews even on “luxury ocean liners” to whichever land was prepared to accept them. His intent with this declaration was twofold: to cleanse Europe of its Jewish population while at the same time underscoring the fact that no other country was interested in admitting the Jews to live among them.

Indeed, from the moment Hitler took power in 1933, his anti-Semitic policies put pressure on the Jews to emigrate. In the years 1933-39, more than 300,000 Jews left Germany. More than 80% of German Jews under the age of 40, and 50 percent of Jews under 60, found refuge in other lands. By September 1939, when World War II broke out, the German Jewish population of 500,000 in 1933 had dwindled to 185,000.

As the Nazis occupied more and more territory – even before the war – their anti-Semitism grew progressively worse. In 1938, in what is known as the Anschluss, they took over Austria through political means (not dissimilar to the way Iran-backed Hezbollah is taking over Lebanon now). Austrian Jews did not have five years of graduated anti-Semitic decrees to brace themselves for a Nazi-run society. Immediately upon takeover, the Germans satisfied their thirst for Jew-hatred by beating them and forcing them to perform demeaning tasks in public. Men, women, children and the elderly were forced from their homes and set to tasks such as sweeping and scrubbing the sidewalks. The SS goaded the Jews on with whips while the local neighbors looked on in glee and applauded. German soldiers would stop Jews on the street to beat them and cut off their beards. Countless Jews were randomly arrested and their possessions confiscated.

But, even then, the Jews were not slaughtered en-masse. The Nazis intended to make life so difficult for the Jews that they would leave of their own accord.

After the Anschluss, SS head Reinhard Heydrich opened an agency in Vienna, called the Central Office for Jewish Emigration, which was occupied with granting exit visas to Jews who could afford to pay their way out, usually leaving their property and bank accounts behind. The office was overseen by an up-and-coming Austrian Nazi whose name would eventually become synonymous with the Final Solution, Adolf Eichmann.

Mass numbers of Jews in Austria after the Anschluss didn’t wait for more. They immediately began searching for ways to leave. The embassies and consulates in Austria were besieged by Jews looking for papers that would allow them to emigrate to... anywhere. Jews stood on long lines day and night waiting for their chance to speak to a sympathetic official who would grant them the precious passport to life.

The longest lines queued up in front of the American embassy. But the American officials turned down virtually every application with the same excuse: the quota of immigrants was already filled for that year. In truth, the quotas were far from



Special *siddur* printed in 1842 for Jews traveling to America.



Jews viewed President Franklin D. Roosevelt as a close friend. Only after his death did the truth emerge.

filled, but as we will see the man Roosevelt hand-picked to handle refugee matters, Breckinridge Long, was a terrible anti-Semite who saw it as his job to prevent Jews from coming to America.

Nevertheless, the creation overnight of tens of thousands of refugees could not be completely ignored. President Roosevelt therefore called an international conference in Evian, France, to discuss the burning “Jewish Problem.”

Thirty-two countries were represented at the conference, which took place July 6-13, 1938, but it proved to be a sham. Even before the conference began, the United States and Great Britain made an agreement that the British would not bring up the fact that the United States was not filling its immigration quotas, while the Americans would make sure that any mention of Palestine (then controlled by the British) as a possible destination for Jewish refugees was excluded from the agenda.

In a political bluff of scandalous proportions, Roosevelt opened the conference with a warm statement that it was time to take immediate steps to deal with the refugee crisis. The words were