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## Refuge Must Be Given: Eleanor Roosevelt, the Jewish Plight, and the Founding of Israel

John F. Sears

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REFUGE  
MUST BE GIVEN





# REFUGE MUST BE GIVEN



*Eleanor Roosevelt, the Jewish Plight,  
and the Founding of Israel*

John F. Sears

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Cover artwork: ER with Moroccan Jewish children at a Youth Aliyah transit camp in Cambous, France, March 1955. Courtesy of the FDR Library.

For Jane

*For lo, the winter is past,*

*The rain is over and gone.*

*The blossoms appear in the land,*

*The time of singing has come.*

The Song of Songs

Whatever one's philosophy may be, one has to face the stark realities affecting the Jewish people of Europe. Refuge must be given them wherever possible.

ROSE SCHNEIDERMAN TO ELEANOR ROOSEVELT, APRIL 14, 1938

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One of the most compelling reasons for the existence of Israel is the fact that it is the only sure haven for the Jewish people. In troubled times, when they are the first to suffer, it is essential for them to have their own country of refuge.

ELEANOR ROOSEVELT, MY DAY, DECEMBER 7, 1956

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Here in Israel the twenty-fifth Jubilee of Youth Aliyah is being celebrated, and the name of Eleanor Roosevelt appears again and again like a silver thread in the weaving of this particular piece of history.

JOSEPH BARATZ TO ELEANOR ROOSEVELT,  
KIBBUTZ DEGANIA A, FEBRUARY 23, 1959

# CONTENTS

Introduction	1
1. A Cautious Response to Nazi Germany	7
2. Partnering with Clarence Pickett	19
3. Responding to the Threat of War and the Nazi Assault on the Jews	32
4. Antisemitism and <i>The Moral Basis of Democracy</i>	40
5. The Wagner-Rogers Bill	49
6. The United States Committee for the Care of European Children	60
7. The Emergency Rescue Committee, Sumner Welles, and the Obstacles to Rescue	72
8. Continuing the Fight on Behalf of Visa Applicants	93
9. Combating Anti-Immigrant Sentiment and Antisemitism on the Home Front	107
10. A Failed Attempt at Rescue	116
11. Responding to News of the Extermination Camps, 1942–45	127
12. A March to a Better Life	140
13. The Postwar Refugee Crisis and the Future of Palestine	156
14. Committing to the Establishment of a Jewish State	176
15. Visiting Israel as World Patron of Youth Aliyah	194
16. Immigrant Children and the Task of Cultural Integration	214
17. American Policy toward Israel in the 1950s	223
18. A Special Bond with Israel	235
Conclusion	246
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	251
<i>Notes</i>	255
<i>Bibliography</i>	303
<i>Index</i>	309
<i>About the Author</i>	329





# INTRODUCTION

MUCH HAS BEEN written and debated about the failure of President Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR) and his State Department to do more to rescue Jews before and during the Holocaust. The lack of effective leadership on the part of many Jewish leaders in pressuring the Roosevelt administration to act and the opposition of Congress and the American people to admitting refugees, particularly Jews, have also been thoroughly analyzed.<sup>1</sup> Much less has been written about the role Eleanor Roosevelt (ER) played during the European refugee crisis and the Holocaust;<sup>2</sup> even less about her role in the postwar refugee crisis and the founding of Israel. In many ways she was unique among the central players in the drama. Not only was she a woman, while most of her colleagues were male, she was perhaps the most influential woman in American public life between 1933 and her death in 1962. From 1933 until 1945, she was the most effective First Lady in American history, constricted in some ways by the role she had to play but also politically powerful in her own right. She had to find indirect ways of exercising her influence, however, since she did not hold elected or appointed public office for much of the time period during which she was active.

ER's role was unique in another way as well. She was near the center of American power over a longer period than the other players involved in these affairs. She was active from the advent of Hitler's persecution of the Jews in 1933, through World War II and the Holocaust, during the debate over the future of Palestine, on through the establishment of Israel, and up to the point where Israel was a well-established state. We can see how these events in the history of the Jewish people changed her views and stimulated her to action.

She was also unusual in the way she approached human problems. The humanitarian impulses at the core of her being set her apart from most of her male contemporaries in the political and diplomatic worlds. Although she operated on the national stage, and later, on the world stage as a politician and stateswoman, the impetus for her actions was often the distress of individuals or groups of people she met in her travels, such as out-of-work coal miners in West Virginia, refugees from persecution in Germany and Eastern Europe who arrived in the United States, and survivors of the Holocaust and immigrant Jews from the Middle East who found a haven in Palestine and, later, Israel. The journalist Doris Fleeson remarked on this element of ER's character when she wrote: "I get so impatient with individuals and then I see you in operation and remind myself that that is the real achievement—to care for the individuals as well as for social justice. That is why you are so strong."<sup>3</sup>

It is also important to keep in mind that ER cared deeply not just about the rescue of people in distress but about their rehabilitation—about how to restore people to normal living who had, in many cases, lost everything. She and her colleagues sought ways to care for refugees once they arrived in the United States, to find them homes and jobs, fight prejudice against them, and make them feel welcome. She admired the way the American Friends Service Committee restored the spirits of displaced persons and provided them with the tools to make a new start and become self-sustaining. Later she supported the similar work that Youth Aliyah carried out in Israel with children rescued from Europe, Africa, and the Middle East.

Looking at the response of the Roosevelt administration to the persecution of the Jews through the lens of Eleanor Roosevelt shifts the discussion from those who failed to facilitate or obstructed the admission of refugees to the United States to those organizations and individuals who pushed hard, in the face of many barriers, to admit them. Today, Holocaust historians focus on why the Roosevelt administration and the American people did not do more to rescue the Jews. ER recognized that the Jews were the principal target of Nazi cruelty, but she also knew that many non-Jews were also in grave danger. From her perspective at the time, the question was: Why did the United States government and her fellow Americans resist admitting the victims of Nazi persecution, whoever they were, and what could be done to change American attitudes toward immigration? ER knew that most American Christians failed not only to demand the admittance of Jewish refugees to the United States but failed to demand the rescue of their fellow Christians. In the visa cases in which she intervened, she did not find it any easier for a non-Jew to get a visa than for a Jew to do so. Some of the cases she brought to the attention of the State Department involved Jews, some non-Jews. Although antisemitism was clearly a major factor in America's opposition to immigration, most of the obstacles ER tried to overcome applied to both groups.

In her efforts to assist refugees seeking to immigrate to America, ER served as a liaison between the President's Committee on Political Refugees, the Emergency Rescue Committee, and the United States Committee for the Care of European Children on the one hand and the president and the State Department on the other. She helped James McDonald, Marshall Field III, Clarence Pickett, and other leaders of rescue efforts to gain access to the president and the State Department. She advised them, encouraged them, and advocated on their behalf. The story of Pickett, executive director of the American Friends Service Committee, who was ER's closest partner in refugee work, has been almost completely neglected by historians. In addition, an examination of ER's persistent appeals to Undersecretary of State Sumner Welles on behalf of visa applicants and his response throws new light on Welles's enigmatic record during the refugee crisis and the Holocaust.

ELEANOR ROOSEVELT'S EXTRAORDINARY CAPACITY to grow as a person was rooted in her warm sympathy for other people, her interest in the special circumstances of their lives, and her desire to help when needed. Having felt unloved and excluded as a child, she identified with minorities and other outsiders.<sup>4</sup> Her openness to experience and her capacity to reach out beyond the privileged and circumscribed world in which she grew up to connect personally with people from other racial, ethnic, religious, and economic backgrounds helped make her one of the great humanitarians of the twentieth century.

Although she was still expressing antisemitic attitudes she had acquired as a child to a member of her family in 1918 when she was in her mid-thirties, ER became a crusader against antisemitism and other forms of prejudice during the New Deal and World War II. She argued that mere tolerance of other religions and races was not sufficient; people had to fight for the basic rights of all people. Paradoxically, she still occasionally repeated cultural stereotypes of Jews in her writing. In addition, as a way she and others believed would reduce prejudice, she favored policies that would distribute Jews more widely among the professions and throughout the nation. In her political work, however, Jews were among her most valued colleagues. She continued to advocate for the admission of more Jewish refugees to the United States after World War II, and she became a strong supporter of the United Nations plan to partition Palestine into a Jewish and an Arab state. After Israel's founding, she became Israel's most prominent Gentile champion in the United States and worked closely with Hadassah, the American women's Zionist organization, to assist Youth Aliyah in bringing Jewish children to the new nation and train them to become productive citizens—a largely untold part of her story.<sup>5</sup>

In 1903, when Eleanor Roosevelt was being courted by her cousin, Franklin Roosevelt, she was doing volunteer work at Rivington Street Settlement on the Lower East Side where many of the settlement's clients were Jews. ER taught calisthenics and dance, and on one occasion took FDR with her when she visited a family in the dark and crowded tenement where they lived. He had no idea that people lived under such appalling conditions. That visit inaugurated the role she would later play in bringing social problems, including the plight of refugees, to his attention. Her experience at Rivington Street stimulated an interest in addressing the needs of immigrants and the poor. It had no effect on the kind of antisemitism she had acquired from members of her family and friends, however. When FDR began law school at Columbia in 1904, ER wrote to him, "I am anxious to hear about your first day and whether you found any old acquaintances or had only Jew Gentlemen to work with." Much later, in 1918, when she attended a party in honor of Bernard Baruch for his contributions to the war effort during World War I, she wrote her mother-in-law, Sara: "The Jew party [was] appalling. I never wish to hear money, jewels and . . . sables mentioned again."<sup>6</sup>

This form of antisemitism was of a different character from the surge of paranoid antisemitism abetted by Henry Ford and others in the 1920s. Ford inaugurated a series of articles in his newspaper, the *Dearborn Independent*, called "The International Jew: The World's Problem," which repeated the substance of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, a document forged by the Russian secret police around 1900. The *Protocols* purported to reveal a secret Jewish conspiracy to bring about the destruction of Christian civilization by controlling the world economy. The newspaper carried the series for ninety-one weeks straight. The circulation of the *Independent* increased from 72,000 in 1920 to 700,000 in 1924, exposing hundreds of thousands of Americans to these accusations.<sup>7</sup> Another series of articles, written by Kenneth Roberts for the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1920–21, described Polish Jews as "human parasites" who were "unassimilatable [*sic*]" and "incapable of grasping American ideals."<sup>8</sup>

These and other antisemitic writings helped create the atmosphere that led to the passage of restrictive immigration laws in 1921 and 1924. The laws, which established quotas for the number of immigrants admitted from each country, created the "paper walls" that would keep out so many refugees in the 1930s and 1940s. Although the campaign against the Jews initiated by Ford subsided after 1927, antisemitism persisted, and the nation became still more antisemitic over the course of the following decade as Americans faced the devastating effects of the Great Depression and the fear of another world war. Antisemitism would reach its peak in the late 1930s and early 1940s, just at the time when European Jews desperately needed America's help.<sup>9</sup>

While many Americans remained deeply antisemitic during the 1920s and 1930s, ER moved in the opposite direction. The main motivator of this change was her active

participation in progressive politics and her growing embrace of America's diversity that went with it. Her decision to stay with her husband in 1918 after his affair with Lucy Mercer, her social secretary, and commit herself to an independent life of public service brought her into contact with an ever-growing number of people from different backgrounds. She developed a network of allies among progressive activists, including Jews who were active in the Democratic Party, the labor movement, social welfare organizations, and other areas of public life. Among these colleagues were Lillian Wald, pioneering public health nurse and founder of Henry Street Settlement, with whom ER worked on child welfare, health, and labor issues; Rose Schneiderman, union organizer and president of the Women's Trade Union League, which ER joined in 1922; and Belle Moskowitz, Governor Al Smith's key political adviser, with whom she worked on passing progressive legislation in New York State and organizing Smith's gubernatorial and presidential campaigns. ER and FDR also became friends with Herbert Lehman and his wife Edith. Lehman was a leading philanthropist and supporter of progressive causes, including Henry Street Settlement. He served as FDR's lieutenant governor, his successor as governor of New York, and, later, as a senator. ER came to depend greatly on her Jewish colleagues, whom she found unusually responsive to appeals for assistance in meeting human needs.

ER's closest Jewish friend was Elinor Morgenthau, wife of Henry Morgenthau Jr. Unlike Rose Schneiderman and Belle Moskowitz, who were from recently immigrated Eastern European families, the Morgenthaus were from German-Jewish families who had been in the United States for several generations and become highly assimilated. The Morgenthaus were the married couple with whom Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt maintained the closest friendship. The fact that the Morgenthaus were Jewish made this unusual. "[The Roosevelts] would not have been part of a normal friendship and social circle that my family moved in," recalled Henry Morgenthau III many years later. But the Morgenthaus, like the Roosevelts, owned a farm in Dutchess County, New York, and Henry and Franklin were drawn together by their common passion for agriculture and public service. When FDR became governor of New York in 1928, he appointed Morgenthau chair of the New York State Agricultural Advisory Committee and later to the state Conservation Commission. In 1933, when he was president, FDR appointed Morgenthau secretary of the Treasury, a position Morgenthau held throughout the rest of FDR's presidency. Eleanor Roosevelt and Elinor Morgenthau began working closely together as leaders in the Women's Division of the Democratic Party in the 1920s and remained close friends and political allies until Elinor's death in 1949.

Despite the friendship and close working relationships established between the Roosevelts and Morgenthau, however, there remained some distance between them as a result of their different religious backgrounds. "[T]here was a separation between

Jewish families and Christian families,” Henry Morgenthau III remembered. He could not have gone to the same schools the Roosevelt children attended, for example. “And you didn’t talk about it.”<sup>10</sup>

Like the Morgenthaus, who did not observe Jewish holy days, most of ER’s Jewish friends were secular and, as a result, ER had scant familiarity with Jewish religious practices. When asked what ER learned from his parents about being a Jew in America, Henry Morgenthau III said, “Nothing.”<sup>11</sup> This was not entirely true, however. ER was aware of how antisemitism sometimes affected the lives of the highly assimilated Jews whom she knew. In 1937, when ER proposed Elinor Morgenthau for membership in the Colony Club, the most prestigious women’s club in New York, which ER had helped found, the club refused to admit her because it did not accept Jews as members. The rejection offended both women deeply, and ER quietly resigned from the club. Although deeply hurt by the rejection, Elinor Morgenthau did not want ER to protest publicly.<sup>12</sup>

Henry and Elinor Morgenthau, like many of the prominent Jewish families in the United States, saw themselves as Americans first and foremost. But this did not mean they wished to lose their Jewish identity or advocate that American Jews abandon their traditions. In a 1936 speech to the Federation of Brotherhoods of the Temples and Synagogues of Baltimore on the need to defend American democracy against the fierce challenges it faced from within and without, Henry Morgenthau told the audience that “each minority group through its unique contributions serves to enrich the whole of American life.” Jews brought to America “the song and the art, the belief and the morality, the poetry and the literature of our four thousand year old tradition.” This heritage was “no little thing” that the Jews had to offer for it embraced “the attitude of an Amos, the dream of an Isaiah, the gentle humanity of a Hillel, the philosophy of a Maimonides.” Jews could therefore best serve America “not by abandoning our Jewish tradition but by maintaining it.” The only way to preserve their tradition was to strengthen democracy, whose essence was its “assumption of the equality of all human beings” and whose goal was to provide every individual with “an opportunity to attain to the fullness of life.”<sup>13</sup>

As ER’s activities brought her into contact with people from varied backgrounds, she too became committed to promoting a society that nurtured the welfare of all Americans. Her changing view of Jews went along with this larger conception of what America could become. The close relationships that Eleanor Roosevelt developed with Jews while working for progressive causes laid the groundwork for the key role she played in efforts to admit more European refugees to the United States, her leadership in combating antisemitism, and, ultimately, her strong support for the new state of Israel. Initially, however, she responded very cautiously to the persecution of the Jews by Nazi Germany.

# 1

## A CAUTIOUS RESPONSE TO NAZI GERMANY

“The German news is horrible and  
I don’t wonder you feel as you do  
for I feel much the same”

LEANOR ROOSEVELT BECAME acutely aware of the effect of Nazi ideology on German citizens and its special impact on Jews soon after FDR’s inauguration as president on March 4, 1933.<sup>1</sup> After Hitler had been named chancellor of Germany in late January of that year, the Nazi Party immediately began a brutal campaign against German Jews, as well as socialists, Communists, and other opponents of the regime. The Nazis expelled Jews from the faculties of universities, forbade them from continuing to practice law and medicine, and excluded their children from schools and universities. Nazi storm troopers insulted, robbed, and terrorized Jews on the streets. These violations of the rights of Jewish citizens in Germany were well publicized, yet ER’s public statements before 1938 are remarkable for the near absence of reference to these events. Her silence did not reflect a lack of knowledge or concern, however. She was eager to hear accounts of events in Germany and acted behind the scenes to make sure that her husband was as aware of the situation as she was. Her informants were friends and colleagues whose opinions she highly valued and who actively opposed Hitler’s policies or tried to mitigate their effects. Their activities, statements, and relationship to ER provide insight into how ER felt about the Nazi assault on Germany’s Jewish citizens in these early years.

In April 1933, ER heard a disturbing report on the persecution of Jews in Germany from James G. McDonald, who had recently met face to face with Adolf Hitler. McDonald was head of the Foreign Policy Association (FPA), which sought to keep Americans informed of events abroad, especially in Europe. McDonald was a spokesman for the internationalist viewpoint shared by Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt and



he knew them both. FDR had addressed the FPA in 1919 and ER served on the organization's nominating committee from 1927 to 1929.

No one could have provided ER with a more intimate portrait of the attitudes and policies of the new regime in Germany than McDonald. Fluent in German and on good terms with many people in the German government, particularly in the Foreign Office, McDonald had access at the highest levels of power. Partly because he was tall, fair-haired, and fair-skinned—close to the Nazis' Aryan ideal—and had written sympathetically about Germany after World War I, the Nazis accorded him an unusual degree of trust. They hoped he would take their side: "My Nazi friends believe that I am not completely lost," he wrote in April 1933.<sup>2</sup>

The man who arranged McDonald's interview with Hitler was Ernst "Putzi" Hanfstaengl, Hitler's foreign press chief. When McDonald challenged him about the April 1 boycott of Jewish businesses organized by the Nazis, Hanfstaengl told him: "The boycott is only a beginning. It can be made to strangle all Jewish business." When McDonald suggested that such a course could endanger Germany economically by provoking reaction abroad, Hanfstaengl laughed. "The Jews are the vampire sucking German blood. We shall not be strong until we have freed ourselves of them."<sup>3</sup> When McDonald raised the issue of the treatment of the Jews with Hitler himself in their meeting on April 7, Hitler retorted: "I will do the thing that the rest of the world would like to do. It doesn't know how to get rid of the Jews. I will show them."<sup>4</sup>

After McDonald returned to the United States, he wrote to ER, telling her of his disturbing conversations in Germany. The next day he received a telegram from ER's secretary asking him to spend the night of May 1 at the White House: "President most anxious to hear your impressions."<sup>5</sup> As a result, just three weeks after his interview with Hitler, McDonald went to the White House to report about his trip to ER and to spend two hours alone with the president, informing him about the nature of Hitler's regime and discussing its implications for international affairs. Thus began a partnership between McDonald and ER that would last until Hitler's defeat at the end of World War II. McDonald kept ER informed of the situation in Europe and of his efforts to aid refugees (both Jewish and non-Jewish); ER provided moral support and assisted him when she could, most often by helping him gain access to the president and the State Department.

On May 4, after his discussion with FDR about his experiences in Germany, McDonald wrote to ER expressing his thanks for the chance to talk at such length with the president: "His grasp of the underlying elements in the present complicated international situation was very reassuring. I was deeply touched, too, by his willingness to talk to me so frankly."<sup>6</sup>

Accounts of the persecution of Jews in Germany also appeared in the American press in the spring and summer of 1933, where ER would have read them. The *New*

*York Times*, normally cautious in calling attention to Jewish issues, condemned “the Nazi scheme of wholesale oppression” by which Jews would be deprived of a livelihood and their children of access to education. In response to the threat by the Nazi regime to hold German Jews hostage until foreign governments silenced the criticism of Germany, the *Times* declared that the German government “cannot compel citizens of other nations to be dumb in the presence of what they consider an outrage upon the finer professions and ideals of modern states. If they keep silent, the very stones would cry out.”<sup>7</sup>

Many groups that included both Jews and non-Jews expressed their disapproval of Nazi policies. Two of the most significant protests, however, involved Christians only because the signers believed it was important that the Nazis understand that American Christians as a group objected to the persecution of Jews. Twelve hundred Christian clergymen signed a letter declaring that “the endeavor of the German Nazis to humiliate a whole section of the human family threatens the civilized world with the return of medieval barbarity.”<sup>8</sup>

Carrie Chapman Catt, one of ER’s political mentors, organized the other significant protest involving Christians only. Catt, who had played a leading role in the suffragist movement and founded the League of Women Voters after the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment, inspired ER’s early work with the League and her participation in the women’s international peace movement in the late 1920s and 1930s. Catt was so sickened by McDonald’s description of Hitler’s war against the Jews that she founded the Protest Committee of Non-Jewish Women Against the Persecution of Jews in Germany.<sup>9</sup> The group began circulating a letter of protest throughout the country seeking the signatures of five thousand Christian women who played important roles in their communities, including club presidents, businesswomen, and churchwomen.

The letter condemned “the German pogrom against the Jews,” which “carries a Christian banner” but “is a subversion of all things Christian.” Instead of adhering to “the highest ethics of modern international understanding” that make protecting “the lives, rights, and liberties” of national minorities “the sacred trust” of the national majority, the letter stated, the German majority has “threatened the destruction” of its 600,000 Jewish citizens.

The letter enacted an idea that was only beginning to gain currency in international affairs: that when a nation abuses its own citizens, the international community of nations and the citizens of other nations have a responsibility to do what they can to protect the human rights of the victims. “If the German majority is unwilling to protect the Jewish minority,” the letter read, “it becomes the duty of the world’s nations to assume this obligation.”<sup>10</sup> The failure of the nations of the world to protect the European Jews would become one of the impetuses for the adoption of the Universal Declaration

of Human Rights by the United Nations, which Eleanor Roosevelt would help draft after World War II as chair of the United Nations Human Rights Commission.

Beginning in June 1933, Catt's protest letter circulated among women throughout the country. By August 13, when Catt's committee released the letter to the press, it had far exceeded its goal, gathering 9,000 signatures from 753 towns in the 48 states, plus the District of Columbia.

FDR had also considered protesting the Nazi persecution of the Jews but received conflicting advice from his Jewish advisers and from Jewish leaders. Some of them, like Rabbi Stephen Wise, founder of the American Jewish Congress, and Harvard law professor Felix Frankfurter, who had become an influential adviser to FDR, wished him to speak out; others, including members of the American Jewish Committee, who feared that Germany would react by increasing restrictions on German Jews, wanted him to remain silent. FDR chose silence, but he appears to have urged the Senate majority leader, Joseph Robinson, to speak out. On June 4 Robinson gave a speech in the Senate condemning the "cruelty and inhumanity" of Germany's treatment of the Jews.<sup>11</sup>

In conformity with FDR's cautious approach to the issue, ER did not sign Catt's petition, but she did publicly recognize the contribution Catt had made. In November, when Catt received the American Hebrew Medal for her work in organizing the protest against the persecution of German Jews and for promoting better understanding between Christians and Jews in the United States, ER presented the award. She praised Catt's contributions to the struggle for women's suffrage and her leadership in the women's peace movement. She did not refer directly to Catt's petition campaign against Nazi persecution, leaving that part of the tribute to Rabbi Isaac Landman, editor of the *American Hebrew*, the weekly Jewish magazine that made the annual award. In accepting the award, Catt described the state of mind in Germany as a "psychosis" in whose "paroxysms" the Jews had tragically been caught up. Was "this disease curable or incurable, infectious or contagious?" she asked. "No one knows."<sup>12</sup> For diplomatic reasons, ER could not say such things, but she honored a woman who did.

MCDONALD WAS NOT THE ONLY person to furnish ER with firsthand reports of the persecution of Jews in Germany during the early months of Hitler's rule. In August 1933, ER and Elinor Morgenthau stayed overnight at Lillian Wald's Connecticut home. They spent an afternoon, an evening, and most of the following day talking with Jane Addams and Dr. Alice Hamilton, a professor at the Harvard School of Public Health. Addams, Hamilton, and Wald had all played prominent roles in the Progressive campaign for social reform in America and helped build the international women's peace movement. They had close relationships with their counterparts throughout Europe. Hamilton had just returned from a trip to Germany with Clara Landsberg, a

rabbi's daughter. During six painful weeks in Germany, they had witnessed the devastating implementation of Nazi policies. As the Nazis moved to shut down women's organizations in Germany, many of the women with whom Hamilton and Landsberg had worked, including leaders of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom that Addams and Wald helped found, sought refuge abroad or were at risk of being sent to a concentration camp. In a few short months, the Nazis wiped out all the advances in status that German women had struggled for years to achieve.

What ER learned about the swift, frightening reversal of progressive values in Germany—values that she herself had been working for in the United States for over a decade—shocked her. It prompted her to invite Hamilton to Hyde Park to give FDR a firsthand report on what she had observed and to express her outrage. Hamilton met privately with FDR, joined the Roosevelt family for dinner at ER's Val-Kill cottage, and breakfasted the following morning alone with ER.<sup>13</sup>

Despite the brutality Hamilton had witnessed and heard about—the ruined lives and fortunes, the suicides, the despair of the Jews she knew and admired—Hamilton believed that the economic crisis of the Great Depression made it impossible for the United States to rescue the Jews of Germany: "If only we could open our doors to these people, they are so fine, but of course we cannot," she wrote to Jane Addams as she traveled back to the United States.<sup>14</sup>

Catt, however, thought otherwise. ER had also invited her to visit Hyde Park in the spring of 1933 to speak to the president about the Nazi assault on the Jews, but she had declined, apparently feeling that she could have a greater effect by arousing public support for allowing more refugees to enter the United States.<sup>15</sup> In speeches to civic groups and at universities she called for the liberalization of America's immigration laws. Some other groups also urged a change in American policy. On September 10, 1933, thirty-six members of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) urged the president to support a more open immigration policy in order to permit the admission of religious and political refugees, particularly from Germany. Such a policy, they told him, would be in keeping with the American "tradition of asylum for refugees from foreign tyrannies." Among those making the appeal were ER's friends Lillian Wald, Jane Addams, and Felix Frankfurter, one of the founders of the ACLU.<sup>16</sup>

During the first year or so after Hitler took control of the German government, the protests in the United States against his policies were vocal and widespread. They included petitions; statements by Jewish, Protestant, and Catholic religious and political leaders; and resolutions passed by professional organizations. On March 7, 1934, the American Jewish Congress, the American Federation of Labor, and nearly fifty other anti-Nazi groups organized a protest rally at Madison Square Garden in New York City. Twenty thousand people attended the rally. A series of speakers, including Rabbi Stephen Wise, Senator Millard Tydings of Maryland, former governor of New

York Al Smith, and Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia of New York City, acted as “witnesses” in a mock trial of Hitler’s government. Catt told Rosa Manus that “Mrs. Roosevelt came to speak” at the rally, but it was only wishful thinking on her part because ER did not participate. Catt’s mistake, however, suggests that she had heard very clearly in private where ER stood on the issue.<sup>17</sup>

The vehement protests against Hitler’s policies that began in the spring of 1933 and lasted for about a year died down as it became clear that the Nazis were bent on imposing ever more restrictive measures against the Jews and threatening to impose more if foreign criticism continued. Efforts to liberalize American immigration policy continued, but not at the same level of energy. Catt, however, was not easily discouraged. The National Committee on the Cause and Cure of War, the women’s peace organization that Catt had founded in 1924, was the only women’s peace group that pressed throughout the 1930s for changes in the immigration laws so that more Jewish refugees could enter the United States.<sup>18</sup> ER did not publicly support Catt’s campaign to change American immigration laws, probably because she did not wish to challenge the policies of her husband’s administration on such a controversial issue.

LIKE CATT, ER’S FRIEND JAMES MCDONALD persisted in his efforts to find a way to assist the refugees fleeing Germany. He worked successfully with colleagues from the Foreign Policy Association and others interested in the problem to persuade the League of Nations to establish the High Commission for Refugees (Jewish and Other) Coming from Germany.<sup>19</sup> On October 13, 1933, after having achieved this goal during a trip to Europe, McDonald met with Undersecretary of State William Phillips, Jay Pierrepont Moffat, chief of the Division of European Affairs in the State Department, and Secretary of State Cordell Hull to discuss America’s relationship to the new agency and his possible appointment by the League as its high commissioner. At the State Department, McDonald encountered the two attitudes that would impede the efforts of Americans to assist European Jews from the beginning of the refuge crisis in the early 1930s until after World War II: antisemitism and resistance to immigration. Phillips expressed this bias in saying that if an American were placed in the position of high commissioner, he might become a tool for “‘prying open’ the floodgates of Jewish immigration into this country.”<sup>20</sup>

The next day, over lunch with ER at the White House, McDonald reported to her on the dispiriting situation in Germany, the proposed plan for the high commission, and, no doubt, the response to the proposal by the State Department. He told her that FDR would need to act on the matter soon. ER asked him if he had seen the president, and when he said that no appointment had been scheduled, she turned to FDR’s secretary, Marguerite “Missy” LeHand, who was also at the table, and asked her, why not?

LeHand said the reason was they were just too busy. McDonald concluded that ER's interest in what he had to say would help him get an appointment with the president, but he did not get that opportunity until several months later.

On October 26, 1933, the Council of the League of Nations selected McDonald to be the high commissioner for refugees. When McDonald heard the news, he "felt no exaltation—rather, a deep sense of the many things which had to be done at once."<sup>21</sup>

FOR THE NEXT TWO YEARS McDonald traveled from one European capital to another, to New York and Washington, and to South America, laboring to find countries in which the refugees from Germany could settle and urging nongovernmental organizations to raise the funds needed to assist the refugees. He experienced little success. He found from the outset that the governments who already had refugees on their soil "were anxious to be rid of them, and those who have none, anxious not to receive any."<sup>22</sup>

In December 1934 McDonald wrote to ER, asking her if he could see her to ask her counsel "about some of those aspects of my work abroad which are troubling me most just now."<sup>23</sup> When he arrived in Washington on December 17, he found a telephone message from ER's personal secretary, Malvina Thompson ("Tommy"), waiting for him, inviting him to a dinner with the family that evening. "I had not asked the President for an appointment," he wrote in his diary, "indeed, I had not communicated with him at all" but had simply told ER that he would like to see her if she were free. ER's initiative resulted in McDonald and FDR having a substantive discussion about the refugee problem. McDonald reported in his diary that the president "expressed vigorously his opposition to the anti-Semitic policy of the Reich." He impressed McDonald with his memory of the issues they had addressed in their conversation in April 1933 when McDonald had stayed overnight at the White House. "His fundamental opposition to the principles of the Third Reich, which he had shown at the very beginning and had indicated subsequently each time I had talked with him, were obviously as strong as ever."

Before he left the White House on December 17, ER asked McDonald to let her know if he were coming to Washington again before returning to Europe, and after the meeting McDonald sent ER a copy of the latest report of the High Commission's governing body.<sup>24</sup>

AS MCDONALD STRUGGLED TO ADDRESS the needs of the refugees who had already left Germany, the Nazis continued to tighten the restrictions placed on Germany's Jews and on those Christians it classified as "non-Aryan" because they had a Jewish grandparent or a Jewish spouse, even if the Jewish member of the family had converted to

Christianity. By the summer of 1935 McDonald believed the situation had reached another crisis. "I wish I might have now an opportunity to sit down and talk with you," McDonald wrote ER on July 24, 1935. "Not since my visit to Germany in March and April 1933—about which I told you and the President on my return home—have I had as deep a sense of impending tragedy as now." McDonald believed that the Nazis had adopted "a program of forcing gradually the Jews from Germany" by creating intolerable conditions for them. Hitler's announcement of the Nuremberg Laws, a new set of antisemitic restrictions, at the annual Nazi Party rally in September 1935 would confirm McDonald's fears. In his letter to ER, McDonald asked "how long" could "the Governments of the world . . . continue to act on the assumption that everything which is taking place in Germany, and the threat implicit in present developments, are matters purely of German domestic concern?" He wondered if "the time has not come when, in harmony with other precedents in American history,"<sup>25</sup> the American Government should take the initiative in protesting against the prevailing violations of elementary civil and religious rights in Germany." From Campobello, where she had gone for vacation, ER immediately sent McDonald's letter on to the White House with a handwritten note: "Please give Miss LeHand for the President and tell her Mrs. R says it is important."<sup>26</sup>

But the American government made no official protest, even after Hitler's announcement of the Nuremberg Laws. FDR and the State Department continued to pursue a policy of noninterference in Germany's internal affairs for fear that official condemnation would make matters worse and disrupt the efforts of the democracies to keep the peace. Great Britain and France pursued the same course.

BY THE FALL OF 1935, the situation in Europe that he had described in his July 24 letter to ER left McDonald stymied. He concluded that the High Commission could not solve the underlying problem and that he had done as much as he could. On December 27 McDonald submitted his letter of resignation to the secretary-general of the League.

In the letter, McDonald noted that the German policies that generated refugees had evolved "catastrophically" since his appointment in 1933. He feared that Jews and non-Aryan Christians, having been stripped of their right to vote or hold public office, practice their professions, attend university, or participate in the cultural life of German society, and finding it increasingly difficult to support themselves, would, in their "utter anguish and despair, . . . burst the frontiers in fresh waves of refugees." Trying to meet the needs of these refugees would overwhelm private philanthropic organizations, whose financial resources were already overstretched, and the refugees would not be welcome in other nations because current economic conditions gave these nations "only a limited power" to absorb new immigrants. Therefore, an effort had to be made

“to remove or mitigate the causes which create German refugees.” This, he said, could not be the responsibility of the High Commission. “It is a political function, which properly belongs to the League itself.” Drawing on its “moral authority,” the League of Nations and its member states had to make “a determined appeal” to the German government to modify policies that were driving refugees into neighboring countries.<sup>27</sup>

Having issued a report on the refugee situation, as FDR had suggested he do if his mission were unsuccessful, McDonald hoped the impact of his resignation and statement would move the United States, Great Britain, and other nations to take action to bring about a change in German policies. The *New York Times* and the *London Times* ran the story on their front pages and published the full text of McDonald’s letter of resignation.

On January 8, 1936, McDonald sent a copy of his statement to ER. Although he knew she had probably seen news reports of it, he thought she might discover in the complete text “something of interest” which she “might care to call to the attention of the President.” McDonald expressed a desire to see ER the next time he visited Washington. When he visited the city in early February 1936, ER again invited him to dinner at the White House.<sup>28</sup> After dinner, ER arranged for McDonald to meet briefly with the president. The president “could not have been more cordial,” McDonald reported, but he found the twenty minutes he spent discussing the situation in Germany “discouraging.” The hope that he had once had that the president would listen to his appeal for a public protest faded as FDR remained characteristically indefinite about his intentions: “He doesn’t seem to have become any more friendly to the regime. On the other hand, I had kind of an impression that he was not any more inclined to take an initiative in the matter than he had been previously.” Apparently, FDR indicated an unwillingness to denounce publicly the Nazi persecution of its own people or even make a friendly appeal to the German government through private diplomatic channels, as McDonald proposed in a meeting with Undersecretary William Phillips at the State Department the following day.<sup>29</sup>

While ER encouraged McDonald behind the scenes in his valiant, though failed mission and helped honor Catt for organizing a group to protest the Nazi persecution of the Jews, she, like her husband, did not publicly protest Hitler’s treatment of the Jews. She had no power herself to affect Hitler’s policies beyond making sure that FDR had access to the most informed observers of events in Germany in the hope that he would find an effective way to respond. But ER’s readiness to arrange for McDonald to meet with FDR, even when he did not request it, and his appreciation of her counsel indicate that she shared McDonald’s alarm at the situation in Germany and wished that something could be done. The State Department remained opposed to confronting the Nazi government, however, even though German policies generated an increasing exodus of refugees from the country. While FDR himself expressed to McDonald



his strong opposition to Hitler's policies, he did not deviate from the position taken by the State Department on how the United States should respond to the situation.

WHILE ER FOLLOWED THE POLICY OF FDR, the State Department, and some Jewish leaders of not condemning Hitler publicly, the events in Germany intensified her efforts to address prejudice in the United States, where she was in a position to make a difference. From 1933 onward, while Hitler destroyed the Jewish community in Germany with increasing brutality, both ER and FDR forged close bonds with the Jewish community in America. No president before FDR brought so many Jews into important positions in the American government.

FDR's inclusion of Jews in his administration sometimes provoked vitriolic attacks from American antisemites, who claimed that the Roosevelt administration was "Loaded with Jews," as well as from the Nazi press.<sup>30</sup> For American Jews, on the other hand, who rejoiced to find so many of their brethren in positions of power for the first time in American history, FDR's inclusive attitude toward Jews reinforced the other reasons most of them supported him. An editorial endorsing FDR in the *Washington Jewish Review* in 1936 praised him for restoring "confidence to a panic-stricken people" and addressing the needs of the forgotten man, as well as placing Jews in high positions. Most of the Jewish press supported FDR, the editorial concluded, "because his social outlook most closely approximates the transcendental ideals of Jewry."<sup>31</sup>

FDR's unprecedented inclusion of Jews in his administration reinforced ER's own growing acceptance of Jews and her appreciation for the contributions they were making to American society. With the encouragement of Elinor Morgenthau, she began to speak frequently to Jewish groups, particularly women's groups, and refuse to speak to groups that excluded Jews.<sup>32</sup> But when she spoke to Jewish groups, she did not allude to the persecution of Jews in Europe or address the problem of German refugees, or even focus on the problems of Jews in the United States. She spoke instead about the economic, educational, health, and other problems faced by every American. Her implicit and sometimes explicit message in speaking to Jewish groups was that Jews possessed the same rights and responsibilities as all Americans. In her first appearance before a Jewish group after FDR's election as president, ER spoke at the Hotel Commodore in New York to thousands of Jewish women from seven organizations. Florence Rothschild reported in the *Wisconsin Jewish Chronicle* in March 1934 that some members of the audience felt disappointed that "as she stood under the Zionist flag," ER did not refer to problems particular to Jews, but Rothschild took it as "an additional instance of her tact that at the very beginning of her address she emphasized that she was speaking not as a non-Jewess to Jewish women but as an American to fellow Americans." Her speech focused on the ways in which American women

could contribute to solving the social problems caused by the economic depression facing the nation.<sup>33</sup>

ER's avoidance of references to the persecution of Jews in Germany extended to her private correspondence even with her Jewish friends. Nevertheless, it is clear from ER's sympathetic support of McDonald's efforts and her frequent emphasis on the need for religious freedom in the United States that ER shared the pain that events in Germany caused her friends. When ER spoke to 4,000 women at the twentieth annual convention of Hadassah in October 1934, she focused on the poor health conditions she had observed in the United States, which she called "a disgrace to any country that calls itself civilized." She hoped that "every woman, regardless of religion or race, would make it her job to know the conditions of the community in which she lives" and then join with other women to "change unsuitable living conditions." If "we can forget ourselves as individuals and think of the objects we have to accomplish, we shall override pettynesses and meanesses, no matter what race we belong to."<sup>34</sup>

While ER did not directly refer to the treatment of Germany's Jewish citizens, the subtext of her talk was that the United States must show that it was not like Nazi Germany, that in America people of all backgrounds worked together to solve the nation's problems. ER was also well aware from the speech Elinor Morgenthau gave at the same conference, and no doubt from private conversations with her, of the effect that the persecution of Jews abroad was having on American Jews: "Suffering and oppression always tie people together," Morgenthau said, "and the cruel misfortunes of Jews in certain parts of the world has made even those of us who were not primarily concerned with Jewish affairs eager to reaffirm our Jewishness." She urged Jews not to isolate themselves or let others segregate them, thus reinforcing ER's message.<sup>35</sup> In August 1935, in the most direct reference in her correspondence at this time to the Nazi persecution of the Jews, ER wrote to Morgenthau: "The German news is horrible and I don't wonder you feel as you do for I feel much the same."<sup>36</sup>

ER's connection to the American Jewish community was also strengthened by her characteristic responsiveness to individuals in need. Usually her intervention involved putting the person in touch with a government or private agency or individual who could be of assistance, for example, in finding the person a job, but occasionally it led her to become deeply involved in the lives of particular people by supporting their efforts to improve their own lives. One of the people in whom she took a special interest was Bertha Brodsky, a fourteen-year-old Jewish girl who suffered from scoliosis, a spinal disease. Her family could not afford surgery to correct the problem and her brother appealed to ER for help. In response ER arranged for the operation at the New York Orthopedic Hospital. Her generosity to Brodsky was well enough known in the Jewish community for Florence Rothschild to mention it in her article on ER in the *Wisconsin Jewish Chronicle*.<sup>37</sup> For the rest of her life, ER continued to correspond

with Brodsky, invite her for visits, help her and her brother get jobs, and counsel her about her marital problems.

The relationships ER developed with Jews were the most important influence on her changing attitude toward them. Her deepening commitment to a society in which people of all backgrounds respected each other's traditions shaped that change as well. Her growing ties to the American Jewish community and more inclusive vision of democracy advanced together and reinforced each other. The disturbing news about the growing repression of Jews, other minorities, and political opponents by the Nazi regime in Germany created an urgent need to address issues of inequality and intolerance in the United States. At the same time, Americans needed to find a way to assist the refugees fleeing Germany because of Nazi policies.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John F. Sears served as executive director of the Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt Institute from 1986 until 1999 and as associate editor at the Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project from 2000 until 2007. *The Eleanor Roosevelt Papers, Vol. 1*, appeared in 2007. He is also the author of *Sacred Places: American Tourist Attractions in the Nineteenth Century*. He has taught at Tufts University, Boston University, and Vassar College.