

Excerpt from
The Jews Should Keep Quiet:
Franklin D. Roosevelt, Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, and the Holocaust

by Rafael Medoff

For media inquiries: Suzanne Selengut, sselengut@jps.org

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Introduction: “If Only He Would Do Something for My People!”

“Justine and Shad had dinner with the Roosevelts on Saturday, including the President,” Rabbi Stephen S. Wise reported to his son, with evident pride, about the honor extended to Wise’s daughter and son-in-law by the First Family. And that was not all: “Justine said [President Roosevelt] sent his affectionate regards to me.” But then Wise added a discordant note: “If only he would do something for my people!”¹

The date was February 16, 1943. Two months had passed since the United States and its allies had publicly confirmed that the Germans had slaughtered “many hundreds of thousands” of Jews as part of a systematic, ongoing effort “to exterminate the Jewish people in Europe.” Yet President Roosevelt and his administration insisted there was nothing they could do to aid the Jews, or interrupt the murder process, except to defeat Hitler on the battlefield. Rabbi Wise, the foremost leader of the American Jewish community in the 1930s and 40s, agonized over the slaughter of Europe’s Jews and longed for some kind of US intervention. Yet the very fact that he confined his critical remark about FDR to a private letter and would never express such

sentiments in public illustrates both the dilemma that Wise faced, and the success of Roosevelt's strategy for stifling potential Jewish criticism of his refugee policy.²

Franklin Roosevelt has been described by many of his biographers and other scholars as “a master manipulator”—not only “of Congress, the press and the public,” but also of individuals, friends and foes alike. He was “supreme in the manipulation of people,” exhibiting “an almost instinctual ability” to exploit “men's ambitions, fears, and loyalties” to his advantage. Roosevelt engineered fawning press coverage by inviting select reporters to private Oval Office sessions where he would engage in “cheerful banter” and “make them feel as though they were inside participants” in the evolution of presidential decisions. He outmaneuvered subordinates by “consciously stirring rivalries among those he put in positions of power, ultimately leaving himself in control.”³

Nowhere was Roosevelt's “passion for manipulation” on greater display than in the way he managed his relationship with Rabbi Wise. Calling Wise by his first name, extending a dinner invitation to Wise's daughter, and sending along “affectionate regards” were the kind of gestures that touched Wise and made him feel important. A meeting in the Oval Office, however rare, made Wise feel as if he had the ear of the president. Such gestures helped ensure that Wise would keep his negative feelings about Roosevelt's refugee policy to himself—which in turn would help sustain the traditionally high levels of support for FDR among American Jews, who constituted a significant voting bloc in New York, the state with the largest number of electoral votes in a presidential election. Furthermore, FDR's practice of glad-handing—of making policy-related promises that he had no intention of keeping—was especially effective when dealing with Jewish leaders such as Wise, who were profoundly reluctant to press Roosevelt to follow through on his unfulfilled pledges.⁴

This reluctance was intertwined with how American Jews understood their own place as a small minority group—numbering five million, under four percent of the national population—in a society where they were not yet fully accepted. Polls in the late 1930s and early 1940s found that more than half of the US public perceived Jews as greedy and dishonest; between one-third and one-half believed Jews had “too much power”; and about one-third regarded Jews as overly aggressive. About 15% of respondents said they would support “a widespread campaign against the Jews in this country” and an additional 20-25% indicated they would feel sympathy for such a movement; only about 30% said they would actively oppose it. Even on Capitol Hill, a small but vocal number of congressmen exhibited fierce xenophobia, occasionally crossing over into outright antisemitism. A 1941 diatribe by Rep. John Rankin (D- Mississippi) accusing “international Jews” of trying to drag America into Europe’s war, delivered on the floor of the US House of Representatives, actually caused a Jewish congressman to suffer a fatal heart attack.⁵

These high levels of antisemitism resulted from traditional (religion-based) prejudice against Jews, compounded by insecurities and fears magnified by the hardships of economic depression. By 1940, more than one hundred antisemitic organizations were operating nationwide. More than 200,000 Americans subscribed to *Social Justice*, a weekly tabloid published by the antisemitic Catholic priest Father Charles Coughlin, and 3.5 million Americans regularly listened to his Sunday radio broadcasts; plus an additional ten million tuned in at least once each month.⁶

Antisemitism often went hand in hand with isolationism and nativism. The America First movement, which mobilized grassroots sentiment against American involvement in overseas conflicts, grew rapidly during this period. Many isolationists charged that US opposition to

Hitler's anti-Jewish policies could drag America into armed conflict with Germany, as aviation hero Charles Lindbergh asserted in an infamous 1941 speech. At the same time, nativists whipped up fears that immigrants would bring radical foreign ideologies with them. With the onset of the Great Depression and unemployment reaching 25% in the early 1930s, many Americans feared that new immigrants would take away jobs that rightfully belonged to established US citizens.⁷

In this difficult environment, American Jews struggled to gain acceptance as Americans. On the one hand, Jewish organizations sought to counter anti-Jewish bigotry by enlisting prominent gentiles to denounce antisemitism and publicizing statistics to prove that many Jews had served in America's wars. At the same time, many Jewish immigrants or children of immigrants discarded their parents' religious or cultural practices, motivated not only (and sometimes not at all) by theological considerations, but rather by a simple desire to fit in as Americans. Many Reform rabbis began delivering their major weekly sermon on Sunday mornings rather than the Sabbath, and a small number of Reform synagogues went so far as to officially change their Sabbath from Saturday to Sunday. The transformation of the minor holiday of Hanukkah into a major gift-giving event, paralleling Christmas, was yet another way Jews altered their religious and social behavior in order to advance the goal of Americanization.⁸

For the American Jewish community, the question of responding to the Nazi persecution of Jews—and how the Roosevelt administration should respond to it—became part of the broader question of how to navigate conflicts between ethnic group interests and what was deemed acceptable behavior in the American public realm. Genuine anguish over the persecution in Europe and the instinctive desire to respond as forcefully as possible sometimes clashed with fears that large or intemperate protests might somehow jeopardize the status of Jews in America.

Should Jews publicly take issue with the president's refugee policy, if that meant alienating some non-Jewish Americans?

This dilemma was heightened by American Jewry's widespread and fervent support of President Roosevelt's New Deal policies. "Jewish people are not supposed to worship graven images, but my mother used to kiss this little bust of Franklin Roosevelt that was on top of the big old radio," the Broadway producer Arthur Cantor once recalled. "That was very characteristic of Eastern European Jews [in America]." Wise too was a devout supporter of the New Deal. Should Jews criticize a president whose domestic agenda they enthusiastically embraced?⁹

America's entry into World War II added a new layer to this conflict of conscience: Was it appropriate, in the midst of a world war, for Jews to request special action to aid their coreligionists alone? Wise himself had just recently had opposed a colleague's proposal for a one-hour work stoppage by American Jewish laborers as a gesture of solidarity with Europe's Jews, fearing it would provoke accusations that American Jews were interfering with the war effort. Wise also had urged other Jewish leaders to refrain from calling on the Allies to threaten reprisals against the Germans, on the grounds that "Americans have not yet completely thrown themselves into this war, [so] how then could we ask the American people to take a special warlike action on behalf of the Jews?" How to respond to the plight of Europe's Jews without endangering American Jewry's own status would prove to be the most difficult challenge of Wise's life.¹⁰

Historians have long grappled with, yet never fully answered, many of the key questions surrounding President Roosevelt's response to the Holocaust. For example, relatively few Jewish refugees were allowed to enter the United States during the 1930s and 1940s—but why did the

president go out of his way to suppress immigration far below the limits allowed by law? Why did he leave nearly 200,000 quota places unused, when—as refugee advocates pointed out at the time—the quotas could have been filled without new legislation or controversy? Why did he refuse pleas to let Jewish exiles stay temporarily in a US territory, which would have kept them safe from the Nazis without admitting them to the American mainland? Why did he turn away the passengers of the refugee ship *St. Louis*, when the governor and legislative assembly of the US Virgin Islands had just offered to open their doors to Jews fleeing Hitler? He abhorred Hitler and worked hard to prepare America for war with Germany in the face of widespread isolationism—so why did he, at the same time, insist on maintaining friendly and diplomatic and economic relations with Nazi Germany? Why did FDR remove anti-Hitler references from a cabinet member’s speech, and send US representatives to Nazi rallies in New York City and Germany? Why did he refuse to even verbally criticize the Nazi persecution of Jews throughout most of the 1930s? Why did his administration help the Nazis evade the American Jewish boycott of German goods, by allowing them to use deceptive labeling on their exports to the US?

The Roosevelt administration claimed that rescuing Jews conflicted with the goal of winning the war—but why was it unwilling even to take steps to rescue Jews that would not have interfered with the war effort, such as using empty Liberty ships returning from Europe to carry refugees, as some Jewish advocates urged? Why did the administration refuse requests to drop bombs on the railways and bridges leading to Auschwitz, from American planes that were already flying over that area—while air-dropping supplies to Polish fighters whose revolt the administration believed would fail?

Did President Roosevelt’s private attitudes toward Jews—largely overlooked by historians—play a role in shaping these and other policy decisions? Was it just a coincidence that

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FDR's personal opinions about Jews were strikingly similar to his view of Asians? Could there be a connection between his policy of excluding Jewish refugees and his mass internment of Japanese-Americans?

Finally, how did President Roosevelt manage to prevent the American Jewish leadership, with its longstanding tradition of seeking US government intervention on behalf of persecuted Jews abroad, from acting similarly during the Nazi era? How did FDR keep Rabbi Wise and other leading Jews quiet, so that his policy regarding Europe's Jews could proceed unhindered?

These are among the questions *The Jews Should Keep Quiet* will explore, not from the convenient perspective afforded by hindsight, but in the context of what was actually happening then: the harsh political and social environment of the era, the level of knowledge and belief concerning the plight of Europe's Jews, and the realistic opportunities for rescue which, if acted upon, could have saved many lives.

¹ Stephen Wise to James Waterman Wise, February 16, 1943, SSW, Box 4.

² "Text of Declaration of the Allied Nations on Nazi Slaughter of Jews," Jewish Telegraphic Agency, December 18, 1942.

³ Freidel, *A Rendezvous with Destiny*, 99; Burns, *Roosevelt: The Lion and the Fox*, ix; Breitman and Kraut, *American Refugee Policy and European Jewry*, 222, 227; Morgenthau III, *Mostly Morgenthau*, 255; Ted Morgan, *FDR*, 772.

⁴ Breitman and Kraut, *American Refugee Policy and European Jewry*, 227; Adler, "The Roosevelt Administration and Zionism," 133.

⁵ The victim was Rep. E. Michael Edelstein (D-New York). See “Edelstein Dies After Clash with Rankin in House over Anti-Jewish Speech,” Jewish Telegraphic Agency, June 5, 1941. For the polls, see Stember et al, *Jews in the Mind of America*, 8, 210, 215.

⁶ Wyman and Medoff, *A Race Against Death*, 5-6.

⁷ “Washington Sees Similarity Between Lindbergh’s and Berlin’s Anti-Jewish Propaganda,” JTA, September 14, 1941; Shapiro, “The Approach of War,” 59-62; Gartner, “The Two Continuities of Antisemitism,” 317-318.

⁸ Olitzky, “The Sunday-Sabbath Movement in American Reform Judaism”; Dianne Ashton, *Hanukkah in America*, 4.

⁹ Frommer and Frommer, *Growing up Jewish in America*, 112-113.

¹⁰ Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews*, 71; Max Beer, “A Few Remarks About the Jewish Attitude in This War, Especially in the Field of Propaganda,” September 2, 1942, File 268/90, WJC Papers, AJA, Cincinnati. Pressure from labor activists ultimately compelled Wise and his colleagues to accept a ten-minute stoppage, with the time to be made up by each participating worker on the following day.