



**Advocate for the Doomed:
The Diaries and Papers
of James G. McDonald, 1932-1935**

Edited by Richard Breitman, Barbara McDonald Stewart and Severin Hochberg
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Reviewed by Shlomo Slonim

Though James G. McDonald strove to save German Jews from the Nazi menace and contributed significantly to laying the groundwork for the emergence of the Jewish State, his name is recognized by few Jews.

Already in the 1930s, McDonald stood out as a stalwart friend of the Jewish people. During this period, he worked assiduously to save Jews suffering from Nazi persecution in Germany after Hitler’s rise to power in 1933. In his capacity as League of Nations high commissioner for refugees, he met with Hitler, Mussolini, Roosevelt and numerous Jewish and non-Jewish personalities from Europe and Latin America in an effort to alleviate the plight of German Jews and secure mass immigration programs. His Herculean efforts were of little avail, however, since no country was prepared to accept Jewish refugees in large numbers. All doors, including those of the British Mandate of Palestine, which had been earmarked for Jewish settlement, were slammed shut. Thus, tens of thousands of people were left to

their fate, homeless and stateless. McDonald’s frustration at the utter apathy led him to resign his position as high commissioner of refugees in 1935 as a sign of protest. He hoped thereby to arouse the conscience of humanity to the impending catastrophe. Sadly enough, nobody stirred, even as the situation grew more desperate day by day, week by week.

This is the saga portrayed in this first volume of the McDonald diary and papers, covering the period from 1932 to 1935. (Two other volumes are to appear in due course—one covering the period through World War II, and the final volume commencing with McDonald’s participation in the 1946 Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry and concluding with his service as ambassador to Israel.) The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, which co-published the book, wisely recognized the incalculable value of this original source material for students of the Holocaust as well as for those wishing to gain added perspective on this period. The three editors—Richard Breitman, professor of history at American University; Dr. Barbara McDonald Stewart, McDonald’s daughter, and Severin Hochberg, a historian at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum—have done an outstanding job in annotating and commenting on the material, making it comprehensible to the average reader.

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In his diary, McDonald’s reports of the conversations he held with various personalities raises an important question: Was Hitler’s demonic scheme to implement a Final Solution discernible in the early thirties? McDonald’s diary does not record Hitler’s remarks extensively. The editors suggest that this is because McDonald had to be cautious, since he dictated his notes to a German secretary (p. 796). However, he did convey Hitler’s comments from an April 8, 1933 meeting to two acquaintances. According to Rabbi Stephen Wise, a Reform leader who was very influential at the time, McDonald stated that Hitler said, “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” (p. 48). Jimmie Warburg registered the conversation slightly differently. According to him, Hitler stated, “I’ve got my heel on the necks of the Jews and will soon have them so that they can’t move” (p. 68, n. 23). Thus Hitler’s rabid remarks confirm that he was determined to “cleanse” Europe of the “Jewish problem,” as foreshadowed in his book *Mein Kampf*.

Were Hitler’s hegemonic plans to conquer Europe, or even the world, already evident at that point? Again, McDonald’s diary does not provide a categorical answer to this question. However, former State Department official Herbert Feis, in his book *1933: Characters in Crisis* (Boston, 1966), cites the following, dated May 2, 1933: “McDonald predicted that German

Jews would regress to medieval ghetto status and that Hitler would trigger a European war” (p. 65, n. 23). This was also the impression of Eduard Benes, the then foreign minister of Czechoslovakia. In a conversation with McDonald in November 1934, Benes predicted that peace in Europe would not last more than a year or eighteen months. Germany, he said, would “be fully equipped for war in the spring of 1935” (p. 566). And in 1933, in a speech to the Rhode Island Bar Association, McDonald warned that the United States had only two choices. “One, do nothing now, and wait until the conflict comes, and disaster is upon us or, two, help strengthen the institutions of peace, because if conflict came there would be no way for the United States to stay out.” In a footnote, McDonald notes that these remarks, in which he foresaw that Hitler’s assumption of power that year made war inevitable, “shocked and frightened” his audience (p. 23).

During this period, McDonald met with President Roosevelt three times, and the question of European peace, in addition to the issue of refugees, was high on the agenda. McDonald was so close to the Roosevelts that he was invited to sleep over at the White House. At their first meeting, on January 16, 1934, the president indicated that he had received a letter from Felix Frankfurter, then in Oxford, England, conveying McDonald’s impression of the state of affairs in Germany. The president said that he

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was interested in the report, but remarked, “I did not see that there was anything I could do” (pp. 267-68). As the editors note, the president’s statement reflected the constraints under which he was operating. Isolationism was still a very powerful force in the United States. “As a politician and statesman,” Roosevelt’s hands were tied behind his back “by the climate in Congress, and to an extent, in the country at large” (p. 804). And with regard to Jewish refugees, of President Roosevelt’s entourage, only his wife, Eleanor, was active on behalf of their cause, so that McDonald’s initiatives with the White House “usually came to naught.”

Of special significance is the record of the four meetings that McDonald held with Cardinal Eugenio Pacelli, the future Pope Pius XII. (McDonald was born a Catholic, although he married Ruth Stafford, whose parents were strict Methodists.) From 1917 to 1930, Cardinal Pacelli had served as papal nuncio to Bavaria and Germany, and at the time of McDonald’s meetings with him was serving as papal secretary of state. McDonald first met with Cardinal Pacelli in Rome in August 1933. Earlier that year, the Vatican had signed a concordat with the Nazi government, under which freedom of religion was assured and the ecclesiastical activities of the Catholic Church were



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to be protected. All German clergy were to be German citizens and the bishops were to swear loyalty to the Reich. This agreement was widely viewed as a surrender of Catholic independence in Germany and, possibly, as an implicit endorsement of the Nazi regime. McDonald notes that during the meeting, Cardinal Pacelli was “distinctly on the defensive” and strove to justify the terms of the concordat. The Vatican, he argued, had to acknowledge the reality of the situation. Given that Hitler was now in power, the Church was left with little alternative but to come to terms with that reality. McDonald writes that he tried to sound out Cardinal Pacelli on the Church’s attitude towards the Jews in Germany. “He expressed a feeling of Christian charity, but his reply, both the tone and the contents, convinced me that there could be no help expected from that source.” In a letter to Felix Warburg, dated September 14, 1933, McDonald described his reaction to the meeting as follows:

I was deeply disappointed by the attitude of the papal secretary of state. I talked with Cardinal Pacelli for nearly an hour. In the course of the conversation I brought up the question of the treatment of the Jews in Germany; the response was noncommittal but left me with the definite impression that no vigorous cooperation would be expected from that direction. Therefore I do not take seriously the press reports of the last few days to the effect that the Vatican has intervened vigorously on behalf of German Jews. The Church is so on the defensive in the Reich that it is hard pressed to define its own essential interests (p. 91, n. 45).

McDonald’s subsequent meetings with Cardinal Pacelli did not alter this impression. In 1939, Cardinal Pacelli became Pope Pius XII, and his reign extended throughout the years of World War II. Though he certainly knew of the German intention to annihilate millions of Jews, his reaction to the Final Solution is unknown. As the editors write: “The mystery of what Pacelli did or did not do in response to McDonald’s requests [and subsequently, in reaction to the Holocaust,] lies in Vatican archives” (p. 805).

During the three years that McDonald served as high commissioner for refugees, he had occasion to meet

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and work with prominent Jewish personalities and representatives of numerous Jewish organizations. His descriptions bear an air of unusual authenticity and objectivity.

Perhaps most revealing is McDonald’s report of his dealings with Chaim Weizmann, who subsequently became Israel’s first president. Weizmann, McDonald notes, was quite temperamental, and spoke with “almost terrible harshness” about the German Jews, “whom he criticized as leaders in the worst form of assimilation” (p. 172). From their several meetings, McDonald concluded “that Weizmann had a one-track mind and that his interest outside Palestine was of the slightest” (p. 221, n. 24). On another occasion, McDonald discussed with him the idea of forming a corporation, subscribed to by wealthy Jews, to handle all aspects of relief for German Jews. Weizmann opposed the idea. McDonald writes that he asked Weizmann if the British representative, selected to serve on his Bureau, was “typical of English Jewry.” Weizmann replied: “Yes, he is empty-headed, without intelligence or understanding of the problem. He is a perfectly appropriate representative” (pp. 270-71). McDonald attributes this cynical reply to “the strain of a combination of [extremely difficult] circumstances” under which Weizmann was then laboring.

McDonald also discussed refugee policy on various occasions with Albert Einstein, who had left Germany for the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey. His impression of Einstein was one of “a man of great charm of personality, of considerable natural acuteness in worldly matters, and of great breadth of human sympathy.” Einstein urged McDonald to get as many Jewish youths out of Germany as possible, and was acutely concerned with the fate of intellectual refugees. He was severely critical of rich Jews in Germany and elsewhere for failing to

rise to the crisis and facilitate the exit of German Jews (pp. 246-47; 774-75).

In 1945, President Truman appointed McDonald as a member of the Anglo-American Commission of Inquiry, which investigated the situation of Jewish refugees in Europe after the war and recommended the immediate admission of 100,000 Jewish refugees to Palestine. When British Foreign Minister Ernest Bevin pushed for adoption of the alternative Grady-Morrison Plan, which would have drastically modified—indeed, nullified—the Commission’s recommendations, McDonald organized a delegation of members of the Commission to meet with President Truman and warn him against accepting the revised proposals. The president accepted their advice and insisted on full implementation of the original recommendations. In his Yom Kippur statement in October 1946, President Truman endorsed partition for Palestine, paving the way for the United Nations General Assembly’s adoption of the Partition Resolution of November 29, 1947.

Without question, the most significant revelation of this huge tome is the picture it conveys of a non-Jew who evinced deep concern about the fate of the helpless Jews of Germany and of Europe generally, and who did his utmost to save them from a terrible fate. McDonald was a beacon of light, of dedication, sincerity and compassion in an ocean of evil, cruel and heartless politicians. He recognized the Nazi derangement for what it was, strove to arouse the consciences of the world’s leaders to the disaster that was unraveling before their eyes—and encountered only total and callous indifference. His subsequent efforts in 1946 to save the remnants of the Holocaust and gain their entry into Palestine were the natural outgrowths of his frustration at his inability to save European Jewry.

McDonald’s final public role, as the first United States ambassador to Israel (from 1948 to 1951), was a fitting tribute to a man who had dedicated his life to the cause of Jewish survival. The forthcoming two volumes of his diaries will undoubtedly confirm how valiantly McDonald battled for Jewish nationhood and for close American ties with the nascent Jewish State. We await their appearance eagerly. ■