

**The David S. Wyman Institute  
for Holocaust Studies**

**NOT NEW, NOT EVIDENCE:**

**An Analysis of the Claim that *Refugees and Rescue: The Diaries and Papers of James G. McDonald 1933-1945* Contains “New Evidence” of FDR’s Concern for Europe’s Jews**

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## I. SUMMARY

### ***What Breitman/Hochberg Claim:***

The May 1, 2009 press release announcing the publication of *Refugees and Rescue: The Diaries and Papers of James G. McDonald 1933-1945*, published by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and Indiana University Press, is headlined “New Evidence Challenges Widely Held Opinions About FDR’s Views on the Rescue of European Jews Prior to the Holocaust.”

The opening paragraph of the press release claims that the book “reveal[s] that President Franklin D. Roosevelt had conceived a series of initiatives as early as 1938 to resettle all Jews from Europe. The 1938 documents challenge widely held opinions that FDR simply ignored the plight of European Jews before the Holocaust.”

The editors of *Refugees and Rescue*, Richard Breitman, Severin Hochberg, and Barbara McDonald Stewart, state in their introduction that “we have found some fundamentally new information about the president’s views and policies before and during the Holocaust...” (p.4)

In Prof. Breitman’s Conclusion, he likewise claims that this book “changes traditional views of ... the attitudes of President Franklin D. Roosevelt” (p.329). He asserts that the book “uncovered some key episodes in changing American refugee policies previously overlooked,” although the only specific example of a supposedly “overlooked” episode in this regard is FDR’s tentative offer to possibly ask Congress for \$150-million to help in those “resettlement initiatives.” (p.335)

### ***What the Historical Record Shows:***

The “resettlement initiatives” cited by Breitman/Hochberg were actually revealed in other books many years ago. They are not “new evidence.” As the analysis below demonstrates, they were discussed in detail in Henry Feingold’s *The Politics of Rescue* (1970), David Wyman’s *Paper Walls* (1968), Haim Genizi’s *American Apathy* (1983), and in Prof. Breitman’s

own 1987 book, *American Refugee Policy and European Jewry* (coauthored by Alan Kraut), as well as other books.

Not only are the Breitman/Hochberg claims not new, they also do not demonstrate FDR's sincere interest in helping the Jews. Rather, they simply reiterate the well-known fact that Roosevelt harbored grandiose visions about the refugee problem that were not rooted in reality, and which he made no serious effort to implement.

FDR dabbled in amateur geography and was fascinated with the idea of moving large numbers of people from one locale to another to solve some social problem. He asked staff researchers to explore whether Jewish refugees could be settled in various countries in Latin America or Africa. But his actions did not match his words. He never asked Congress for that \$150-million or any refugee resettlement money. It is thus surprising that Breitman/Hochberg present the funding pledge as their central evidence of FDR's concern for the Jews.

*In a statement to the Wyman Institute this week, Prof. Henry Feingold, who has written extensively on the 1930s resettlement schemes, explained:*

*“President Roosevelt considered himself a nation-builder --even to the point of falsely taking credit for writing the constitution of Haiti, in order to show his impact on history. His own administration had an agency that resettled large numbers of farmers from the Dust Bowl to Alaska and other undeveloped regions.*

*“There was no financial or political cost in having experts research all sorts of tropical regions and dozens of other remote locations where Jews might theoretically be settled. But when it came to projects that actually had some practical potential, such as Alaska, he was unwilling to cross swords with restrictionists who did not want refugees coming to American territory.*

*“It was not expensive for him to sit in his office and say ‘if you can get me a large scheme that can attract money, I could pursue it’. It cost him nothing to say he was interested. But ultimately he was just being his normal expansive self. The Jewish issue was peripheral to him. He was unwilling to confront powerful restrictionists and isolationists, and take the political risks involved.”*

## II. WHERE THE “NEW” EVIDENCE PREVIOUSLY APPEARED:

1. FDR said he might ask Congress for substantial funds to help resettle Jewish refugees. (p. 152)

Not new.

Feingold 1970, p. 114, and Breitman/Kraut 1987, p. 62-63, discussed FDR’s statements that he might raise funds for refugee resettlement.

Ironically, Breitman, in a 1993 lecture, criticized FDR for not seeking the funds as he promised. Breitman stated, “The president might have reversed the impression that the United States was willing to do little itself, if he had sought and won congressional approval for funding of refugee resettlement.” [Breitman, “The Failure to Provide a safe Haven for European Jewry, p. 134, in Verne W. Newton, *FDR and the Holocaust* (NY: 1996)]

2. FDR had “broad hopes” that the Evian conference would provide a large-scale solution to the refugee problem. (p. 335)

Not new.

This was already described in Wyman 1968, pp.43-45; Feingold 1970, pp.22-25; Genizi 1983, pp.75-76; and Breitman/Kraut 1987, p. 61.

3. In an April 4, 1938 conversation with League of Nations official Arthur Sweetser, Roosevelt used strong language in criticizing Hitler, saying “you could do very little with a man like that.” (p.127)

Not new.

The Roosevelt-Sweetser conversation is quoted on p.77 of William E. Kinsella, Jr., “The Prescience of a Statesman: FDR’s Assessment of Adolf Hitler before the World War, 1933-1941,” in Herbert D. Rosenbaum and

Elizabeth Bartelme, eds. *Franklin D. Roosevelt: The Man, the Myth, the Era, 1882-1945* (1987).

### III. McDONALD HIMSELF LOST FAITH IN FDR'S FUNDING PROMISE

While Breitman (p.335) hails FDR's expressed willingness to raise funds for a large-scale resettlement program, a careful examination of the McDonald diary entries shows McDonald repeatedly, and unsuccessfully, pressing Roosevelt and the State Department to make good on that promise, but FDR never did so. By the fall of 1939, McDonald clearly had lost faith in Roosevelt's promise:

--On August 25, 1939, McDonald drafted a memo to the State Department which argued, "For the United States to insist upon a comprehensive large-scale program as a sine qua non of government financial aid would be to postpone such assistance, perhaps indefinitely." (Breitman/Hochberg, p.181)

-- At a September 14, 1939 meeting of McDonald and other refugee advocates, "Everyone agreed that if settlement projects were to continue, there would have to be some degree of governmental financing ... It was felt that a recommendation to this effect should be made to the President and the Department of State and that the Government should begin immediately to study ways and means of making [a] contribution in this sense." (Breitman/Hochberg, pp. 184-185)

-- McDonald saw no purpose in going ahead with a planned October 1939 White House meeting on refugees if there was no U.S. funding commitment. He told Undersecretary Welles "that unless the United States were prepared to throw something substantial into the common pot, the chances for the success of the Conference were slight, and that the final result might be worse than if the Conference had not been held." (Breitman/Hochberg, pp.179-180)

--On September 19, 1939, McDonald told State Department official Robert Pell that there was no point in going ahead with the October meeting, in part because "It is fairly obvious that the American Government is not preparing to meet the British challenge on governmental financing..."

(Breitman/Hochberg, p.185) (The British had offered to provide a matching grant for resettlement if the U.S. would likewise contribute.)

--On June 17, 1940, McDonald wrote to FDR, urging that Jewish refugees be settled in the Caribbean, and asking for “maintenance of the refugees by our Government through an appropriation by the Congress...”  
(Breitman/Hochberg, pp.201-02)

#### IV. MISREPRESENTATION OF FDR’S POSITION ON THE WAGNER-ROGERS BILL

Breitman claims (p.335) that FDR’s supposed willingness to raise \$150-million constitutes the “reverse side” of “his unwillingness to endorse the [1939] Wagner-Rogers Bill,” which would have permitted 20,000 German Jewish refugee children to enter the United States in 1939.

In fact, it was not the “reverse side” of Wagner-Rogers but, rather, consistent with Wagner-Rogers; FDR failed to ask for that \$150-million, just as he failed to support Wagner-Rogers. Both actions by FDR indicate his lack of seriousness about helping Jewish refugees.

Breitman also argues that Roosevelt refrained from supporting Wagner-Rogers in part because “He saw that bill as a gesture--not a solution. He was a man of grand vision who wanted to resettle a much larger number of refugees from Germany.” (p.335) In other words, Roosevelt disliked Wagner-Rogers because it would have saved too few Jewish refugees. We are not aware of any documents in which FDR states, or is quoted as stating, that this was his motive; nor does Breitman cite any documents to support his unusual claim.

#### V. GIVING FDR CREDIT FOR ACTIONS THAT OTHERS TOOK

-- Breitman/Hochberg claim (p. 122) that FDR “suggested combining the German and Austrian quotas” (in order to help Austrian would-be immigrants). They clearly imply that it was FDR’s idea. But in Breitman’s 1987 book, he wrote (pp.56-57) that it was State Department official Herbert Feis who conceived this idea and proposed it to Roosevelt.

--Breitman/Hochberg claim (p.122) that Roosevelt “launched an initiative [to hold the Evian conference] without consulting the State Department...” However, Wyman 1968 (p. 44) already found an internal State Department document showing that it was Undersecretary of State Sumner Welles who conceived the idea and proposed it to Roosevelt.

## VI. “EVIDENCE” THAT HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH FDR

Breitman/Hochberg describe successful efforts by Bolivian businessman Mauricio Hochschild to bring an estimated 20,000 German Jewish refugees to Bolivia in the 1930s.

However, they acknowledge that “the events described here revolved around Hochschild, not McDonald.” (p.264) Neither McDonald nor President Roosevelt had anything to do with bringing refugees to Bolivia. In fact, they report that Hochschild met with State Department officials in 1939 to discuss his need for funds to refugee resettlement, but they present no evidence that the administration ever provided any funds for it. (pp.271-272)

Thus, far from supporting the Breitman/Hochberg thesis of a Roosevelt who was ready to provide funds for refugee resettlement, this episode appears to represent yet another instance in which the administration could have provided financial assistance for resettlement, but failed to.

Moreover, the Bolivian rescue operation is not a new discovery by Breitman/Hochberg, but was described in detail, more than a decade ago, by Prof. Leo Spitzer of Dartmouth, in his book *Hotel Bolivia: The Culture of Memory in a Refuge from Nazism* (published by Hill & Wang in 1998).

## VII. WHAT NEW RESEARCH ABOUT ROOSEVELT REVEALS

Other scholars who have recently completed genuinely new research in the field have found new information which reflects badly on the Roosevelt

administration with regard to the Jewish refugee issue.

**1.** *The Third Reich in the Ivory Tower: Complicity and Conflict on American Campuses*, by Prof. Stephen Norwood, will be published in May 2009 by Cambridge University Press. Norwood describes how, in early 1939, a number of American universities offered scholarships to European refugee students to enable them to study in the U.S. (and thereby possibly save their lives). Marion Edwards Park, president of Bryn Mawr, was deeply troubled when a student to whom Bryn Mawr gave a scholarship could not obtain a visa to the U.S. "because she could not meet the requirement of identifying a permanent residence to which she could return after completing her studies." American consular officials in London (where she had taken refuge) would not budge. Park's correspondence, cited by Norwood, mentions that she knew of about another fifty cases in which refugee students were unable to obtain visas because of U.S. consular officials' cold-heartedness. This was in the wake of Kristallnacht, when FDR supposedly was pursuing a policy more sympathetic to Jewish refugees--yet his State Department continued to look for every reason to prevent refugees --even students-- from coming to America.

**2.** Breitman/Hochberg mention that the Dominican Republic offered to accept Jewish refugees. They say the plan failed because "Dominican Republic dictator Rafael Trujillo was more interested in publicity and financial benefits than Jewish settlers..." Regarding the Roosevelt administration's role in the failure of the plan, Breitman/Hochberg state that "the behavior of some State Department officials and diplomats did not help bring larger numbers there."

But new research about the Dominican episode has found evidence that the Roosevelt administration played a more significant role in undermining the project than previously reported. Prof. Allen Wells, in *Tropical Zion: General Trujillo, FDR, and the Jews of Sosua* (Duke University Press, 2009) describes (on p.114 and elsewhere) how Roosevelt administration officials harbored paranoid fears that some German Jewish refugees would serve as spies for the Nazis and they actively pressured the Dominican haven organizers to refrain from bringing in refugees.



Prof. Marion A. Kaplan, in *Dominican Haven: The Jewish Refugee Settlement in Sosua, 1940-1945* (Museum of Jewish Heritage, 2008) finds that the “biggest problem” the haven organizers encountered, after bringing the initial batch of refugees, was the “unrelenting U.S. opposition” to bringing in more refugees (p.81) and “the State Department’s hostility and obstructionism” (p. 103).