

Capitol Hill Honors Diplomat Who Aided Jews And Challenged FDR

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An American scholar and diplomat who aided Jews during the Holocaust and challenged the Roosevelt administration's refugee policy was the focus of this year's Holocaust Memorial Day commemoration on Capitol Hill last week.



McDonald (standing, right) with President Roosevelt, circa 1940.

The late James G. McDonald, who served as the League of Nations' commissioner for refugees and as an adviser to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, was featured in the Capitol Hill program, which was sponsored by U.S.

Congresswoman Donna Christensen.

Christensen, a Democrat who represents the Virgin Islands, said she felt "a deep personal connection" to McDonald's efforts on behalf of refugees because the governor and legislative assembly of the Virgin Islands offered, in 1938, to open their doors to Jews fleeing Hitler. President Roosevelt rejected the offer on the grounds that it could enable Nazi spies to sneak into America.

The Capitol Hill program included the debut of a one-hour

documentary, "A Voice Among the Silent: The Legacy of James G. McDonald," by Chicago filmmaker Shuli Eshel. The film describes how McDonald, as a young foreign policy scholar, was one of the first Americans to meet personally with Adolf Hitler in early 1933. The Nazi leader openly vowed to McDonald that he would "get rid of the Jews." McDonald brought that information to Roosevelt and other world leaders, but his warnings were ignored.

In a panel discussion accompanying the film, Dr. Rafael Medoff, director of the David S. Wyman Institute for Holocaust Studies, spoke about McDonald's attempts to solicit U.S. support to aid the Jewish refugees.

"McDonald asked FDR for a token \$10,000 contribution to support his work as League of Nations commissioner for refugees," Medoff noted. "Roosevelt said yes, but months went by and the promise was never fulfilled. A few years later, FDR told McDonald he would ask Congress to allocate \$150-million to help settle Jewish refugees outside of Europe – but those funds likewise never materialized."

Also on the panel was McDonald's daughter, Prof. Barbara McDonald Stewart, who discussed her father's motives in helping the Jews. "As a Christian, he was keenly aware of his moral obligation to help people who were being persecuted. He used to say, 'If Christians acted like Christians, there wouldn't be any anti-Semitism.' "

Prof. McDonald also recalled her experiences as assistant to her father during his post-World War II role as the first American ambassador to Israel. "Israel's first years were a difficult time, as they were trying to build a state and defend themselves [against the invading Arab armies] while also developing a relationship with the United States." She said she was "very proud" that her father helped rebuff State Department officials who wanted to impose sanctions on Israel at one point during the 1948 war.

Ms. Eshel, the filmmaker, told the Capitol Hill audience that "the fact that the world did so little in response to the genocides in Rwanda and Darfur shows that many people have still not learned the lessons of the Holocaust." She said she hopes her film about McDonald "will inspire young people to day to realize that they too can – and should – stand up against evil, as McDonald did."

During a Q & A session after the screening, audience members strongly praised the film and urged that it be shown in schools. A young woman from Mississippi, who said she serves on the staff of one of Washington's museums, said "It's especially important that Christians see this film—and remember James McDonald as a role model for this generation."

