

A Jewish Voice Exclusive Interview: Filmmaker Documents "A Christian's Response to the Holocaust"

By: Ariella Haviv

Shuli Eshel, an Israeli-born filmmaker based in Chicago, has created documentaries on topics from the Jewish immigrant experience to Jewish women in American sports. But she has taken on one of her most challenging projects in her new film, "A Voice Among the Silent: The Legacy of James G. McDonald." The film, which debuted on Capitol Hill on Holocaust Remembrance Day (Yom HaShoah), tells the story of an American diplomat and scholar who tried to help Jewish refugees flee from Hitler. The Capitol Hill program, called "A Christian's Response to the Holocaust," featured Ms. Eshel; McDonald's daughter, Prof. Barbara McDonald Stewart; Congresswoman

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Donna Christensen (D-VI); and Dr. Rafael Medoff of the David S. Wyman Institute for Holocaust Studies

? JV: Why is so little known about James McDonald?

Eshel: A significant portion of McDonald's diaries disappeared before historians had a chance to see them. It was only many years later that they turned up, in the papers of his literary agent, who had been hoping to turn them into a book but never did. Finally, a few years ago, the complete diaries were donated to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum and the first volumes have been published. But it really was a close call--McDonald's story was almost lost to history. My film brings that story to the screen.

? JV: The film does not reflect well on President Roosevelt's response to the Holocaust.

Eshel: The historians who appear in the film are pretty frank in their assessment. But that's their job. They have to tell the truth about the historical record, no matter where their chips may fall. They examined McDonald's diaries and his correspondence and the other records. Regardless of their personal beliefs or political



New evidence shows that U.S. diplomat James G. McDonald (R) repeatedly challenged President Roosevelt on his response to the Holocaust. He is pictured here with the late Israeli President Yitzhak Ben Zvi on the left.

views, the historians have to tell us what happened. And in this film, that's what they do.

? JV: In the film, you describe how McDonald asked President Roosevelt for a \$10,000 contribution from the U.S. government to assist in the work he was doing as the League of Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. FDR promised to give the money, but then didn't do it. But \$10,000 is such a small sum for a government, did it

really make much of a difference that FDR didn't come through with the funds?

Eshel: The \$10,000 would have been symbolic, but symbols can be important. Surprisingly, the League of Nations did not provide funding to McDonald for his work as commissioner of refugees. He had to do the fundraising himself. The governments that he approached were all very reluctant to help. He needed American leadership. A contribution by the Roosevelt administration would set an example--in fact, that's exactly what McDonald told President Roosevelt. If the United States

contributed--even a modest amount--others would follow. But when there is no leadership, there are no followers.

? JV: After the war, McDonald was appointed as the first American ambassador to Israel. Is there a connection between his work for refugees and his position in Israel?

Eshel: Absolutely. He spent years trying to save Jewish refugees, but was able to help only a few thousand. Naturally he felt a special obligation to help the survivors, and he lobbied President Truman to press the British to allow 100,000 Holocaust survivors to enter Eretz Yisrael. He actively supported creating a Jewish state, and then as ambassador to Israel, he used his influence to help prevent the State Department from imposing sanctions on Israel. For McDonald it was all part of the same cause--justice and compassion for the Jewish people.

? JV: Ultimately, what was it that motivated McDonald, a Catholic from the Midwest, to devote much of his life to helping the Jewish people?

Eshel: He said he felt a "calling." He seemed to mean it in a spiritual sense--as a Chris-



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tian, he felt a moral obligation to speak out. In every generation, there are a small number of people like that--people who feel driven to do the right thing, even though there is no personal gain from doing it. I wish there had been more people like him in our own time--to take action against the genocide in Cambodia, or Rwanda, or Darfur. Sadly, it often happens that those who have the power to help, choose not to. In the case of the "boat people" fleeing from Vietnam, it was little Israel that was the first to give them refuge at a time when the rest of the world turned away.