

Against the Tide

MOVIE DOCUMENTING THE INACTION OF THE ROOSEVELT REGIME AND THE AMERICAN JEWISH ESTABLISHMENT DURING THE HOLOCAUST, RESONATES TODAY.

Doris Strub Epstein

After seeing the sold out premiere of the latest Simon Wiesenthal Center, Against the Tide, at the Ford Center Monday night, no one will ever feel the same about President Roosevelt and his regime, or about the leading spokesman of the American Jews at that time, Rabbi Stephen Wise.

Roosevelt not only did nothing to save the Jews of Europe during the Holocaust, but allowed members of his government to obstruct their rescue. Wise, who had a long relationship with Roosevelt, out of fear that Americans would call it a "Jewish war" and possibly escalate anti-Semitism, did not use his enormous influence to pressure the government. American Jews were afraid to make waves.

The hero that emerges, during this dark time, is the little known Peter Bergson, a Lithuanian born Jew that did everything in his power to call the attention of the world, particularly the US, to the slaughter taking place in Europe and the urgency to rescue Jews from the Nazi persecution. He challenged the Roosevelt

administration and the American Jewish community, demanding that the rescue of Europe's Jews become an immediate top priority. He was acting against the tide of Jewish and non Jewish America.

"Who will call it a Jewish war?" rebutted Bergson. "The French who are occupied? The English who are fighting? No. It's the Jews in America who will say people will call it a Jewish war and they're petrified." The film painfully documents the inaction of the Roosevelt administration and Jewish American leaders like Wise, whose lack of intervention led to the horrific murder of six million men, women and children.

Wise, long time leader of the American Jewish Congress and Zionist Organization of America, went so far as to tell US government officials that Bergson "was as equally great an enemy of the American Jews as Hitler, for the reason that his activities could only lead to increased anti-Semitism."

Again and again we see Roosevelt and his aides, suppressing information about what was happening to the Jewish people, avoiding, deliberately procrastinat-



Avi Benlolo

ing, and even obstructing the rescue of European Jews. Juxtaposed throughout the film are shots of the Nazi persecution, showing Jews rounded up for transport, concentration camp scenes, piles of bodies...the impact is at times overwhelming.

The film was narrated by Dustin Hoffman, who twice during the eight hours of his narration, had to leave the room in tears to collect himself

The message of the movie resonates in our world today as Iran threatens the very existence of Israel and with the escalation anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism. "We cannot rely on the U.N., the universities or the mass media. We have to rely on ourselves to educate and to use the existing legal channels, both local and international," said Avi Benlolo, President and CEO of the Canadian Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Center for Holocaust Studies.

"The movie also teaches us that the Jewish community must not come into conflict with itself. Many more Jews

could have been saved if they would have acted together. We need to work together, not be at crossroads or act out of self interest for the benefit of the Jewish people and Israel and the democracies in the world, to preserve what we have."

Benlolo, 37, was born in Israel to Moroccan parents and came to Canada when he was five years old. Not enough people know about the plight of the Sfaradic Jews during the war, he says. "The war threatened the existence of Jews around the world. In Libya, Morocco, Egypt, Algeria, Tunisia, and Greece - we have to give greater emphasis to what happened to the Jewish communities in those countries. Had the war continued, they would have been obliterated. The infrastructure to do this was already in place."

"Our goal at the Simon Wiesenthal Center is to ensure that never again really means never again."

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