

May 8th, 1945

May 8th, VE Day, is the anniversary of the end of the Second World War in 1945. It marks the final defeat of the Nazis and an end to the worst crime against humanity in the history of the world. The fate of the Jewish people hung by a thread between extinction and survival. Had they won, the Nazis would have extended the extermination of Jews to the UK and Israel. Philip Roth's novel and the current HBO series "The Plot Against America" illustrates, in fiction too close to fact for comfort, the chances that a pro-Nazi government in the USA could also have led to the destruction of American Jewry.

Initially, America had no intention of getting involved. Anti-Semitism was so endemic at every level of American society that humanity, nobility, and compassion were simply squashed by government obstruction. Roosevelt was known for his anti-Semitic biases and racist epithets – he even joked about getting rid of the Jews to Stalin. He refused to bomb the rail lines that ferried Jews to Auschwitz. He stubbornly blocked Jewish immigration to the USA – he turned back the St Louis refugee ship with its Jewish passengers to Germany and death. Only a Gallup poll expressing approval eventually persuaded him to accept 982 Jews in 1944. His supporters defended him as wanting to go to war to defend Britain, but was constrained by internal politics. On the other hand, it must be said that his wife, Eleanor, was very sympathetic and supportive.

All of this is documented in "The Secret War against the Jews" by John Loftus and Mark Aarons. And expanded recently in Rafael Medoff's "The Jews Should Keep Quiet." Sadly too many Jewish lay leaders, such as the self-proclaimed spokesman of American Jewry, Rabbi Stephen Wise, were happy to flatter Roosevelt. But chose not to try to persuade or pressure him to act. Their priorities were their egos. It was left to outsiders such as Peter Bergson (Hillel Kook), Ben Hecht and the Orthodox rabbinate to make a public nuisance of themselves by daring to protest and demonstrate. Wise even compared Bergson to Hitler!

Japan bombed Pearl Harbor in 1941 and declared war on America. It was Germany which then declared war on America in support of its Japanese ally. Roosevelt was forced by circumstances, not choice, to confront Hitler. If ever there was a coincidental chain of events or, as some would say, a miracle, this was it.

People liked to talk about a new World Order after the war. And it is true that the USA, particularly the Marshall Plan, played a crucial part in rebuilding the Old Worlds and in standing up to Stalin and Communism. But did the rest of the world appreciate it? Certainly not politically. Besides, the USA used its muscle for self-interest, to support often corrupt brutal dictatorships, and wasted wars and invasions across the globe. It propped up the utterly useless United Nations and, in return, was rewarded with hatred, derision and obstruction.

I recall the post-war years, the popular mood of Europeans was neither gratitude nor support of the USA. They envied the wealth and brashness that saved them. They undermined American fiscal and political policies regardless of who the President was. So much for American leadership of the Free World. To everyone else, it meant that money bags would bail them out or beat them up. The amazing thing was that despite all this the USA sometimes actually got it right. And for all its mistakes, the USA is still the country most citizens of the world would prefer to live and work in.

Who now will lead the post COVID world? Anyone? China – with its mind and police controls? Russia- led by criminals and the KGB? Iran – oppressing its own people and fueling hatred against other Muslims as well as Israel? A command economy can bulldoze its way to impressive, modern infrastructure. China can flex its muscles in the China Sea and pour money into its Belt and Road network. It can undermine other economies. But it is not loved. It will never attract the minds and talents of those who do not wish to live in countries where there is no freedom of thought and expression.

The saving grace of the Free World lies in a culture of being able to think for oneself. It lies in its pools of talented, committed, and moral human beings with the financial means to find ways of peacefully and ethically dealing with crises. This is the victory the Second World War reminds us of. It gave us imperfect men like Churchill who, purely by force of personality, had the confidence to do the right thing regardless of mistakes.

We have much to do. To defeat COVID-19 as we did with polio and malaria. To rein in our assaults on nature, climate and inequality as well as the brutality of failed, terrorist states. It is a small minority that will see us through and on to a better world. Like Noah in his ark, history did not end. It does not end. It goes on weaving and twisting over thousands and millions of years.

We Jews know that all it takes is a few really dedicated, committed people who are animated by morality and a sense of purpose and identity to stand up to those who tried to destroy us despite the odds. So it will be with humanity. According to the Bible, God promised Noah the world would not be destroyed by God. But it is up to us to ensure that we do not do it instead!