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Holocaust historian discusses FDR

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(Photo: Bryan Mitchell)

Farmington Hills — A Holocaust historian said Sunday that President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, but for the nation's economy and his own personal ambition, might have saved the lives of thousands of Jews who were executed during World War II.

Michael Berenbaum, director of the Sigi Ziering Institute at the American Jewish University, addressed more than 300 people at the Holocaust Memorial Center in Farmington Hills in a reconsideration of Roosevelt titled "FDR was the Best: The Best of His Generation in Dealing With the Holocaust, the Best of His Successors in Dealing with Genocide; but That is No Compliment!"

"FDR may have been a fine president and if not for his actions, World War II might have been lost to Germany. But there were other factors at work that impacted Roosevelt decisions to act or not to act on behalf of Germany's Jews between 1933 and 1944."

Roosevelt began the first of four presidential terms in 1933, just 33 days after Hitler took power in Germany, said Berenbaum, a former director at the U.S. Holocaust Research Institute at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, one of several museums he has helped develop.

Berenbaum, a scholar, author and co-producer of several films, said Roosevelt took office with one single issue on his agenda: restoring the U.S. economy from the Great Depression. In 1938 and 1939, Roosevelt's focus was directed at getting re-elected and by 1942, to winning the war against Germany and Japan, he said.

By that time, a Nazi group had concocted and provided Hitler with the genocidal "Final Solution," the plan to exterminate incarcerated Jews in death camps. Within 15 months, 80 percent of Jews, four out of every five, held in camps were killed. More than 6 million Jews are estimated to have been executed in the camps.

"My hypothesis is that FDR has to be seen in the political climate that he lived," said Berenbaum, noting intelligence gathering made it clear that lives of Jews were increasingly at risk.

Another factor restricting immigration to the United States were American policy and the political climate of the time, including requirements that Jews seeking to enter the United States provide documentation of good conduct and employability.

"Those documents would have to be obtained from the Gestapo," said Berenbaum.

Among those attending Berenbaum's lecture was Rabbi Herbert Yoskowitz of Adat Shalom Temple in Farmington Hills.

"I found it very informative," Yoskowitz said. "... More could have been done to protect innocents from being slaughtered in the death camps."

The event was sponsored by Wayne State University's College of Liberal Arts and Sciences and the Guy Stern Endowment in Exile and Holocaust Studies and several other organizations.