

Chapter 10

Teaching at Claremont, 1938-42

By the beginning of 1939, Europe was on the verge of war. Repudiating the Treaty of Versailles which ended World War I, Germany had remilitarized, occupied the Rhineland, annexed Austria, partitioned Czechoslovakia, and begun its campaign against the Jews. In August 1938, Britain had warned that it would go to war if Germany invaded Poland. This firmness bought only a year of respite. On 1 September 1939, Germany tempted fate and invaded Poland. Britain declared war; but within a year, Germany had invaded Holland, Luxembourg, Belgium, and France, and was bombing London.

The United States remained neutral. After World War I, most Americans felt that the nation should not get involved in overseas strife. Besides, America had its own problems, most significantly, the lingering effects of the Great Depression which had begun with the spectacular stock market crash of October 1929. Despite the highly acclaimed New Deal of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, which created massive public works projects, deficit spending, and government regulation designed to stimulate the economy, the nation struggled for normalcy. By 1939, the unemployment rate was still 15 percent.

The Depression brought in its wake a resurgence of anti-Semitism across the world, including America. The America First Committee, created in July 1940, lobbied hard to keep the United States out of any European “entanglements,” but it also subscribed to a philosophy of militant anti-Semitism. Many of its supporters, including Father Charles Coughlin, Henry Ford, and the nation’s hero Charles A. (“Lucky Lindy”) Lindbergh, delivered hate-filled speeches against the supposed “Jewish conspiracy” controlling banking, government, and the motion picture industry.² From the Depression years through World War II, “anti-semitism had never been worse in the United States, nor would it be again.”³

²Leonard Dinnerstein, *Anti-semitism in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 128-49. See also Spencer Blakeslee, *The Death of American Anti-semitism* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2000) and Charles Herbert Sember et al., *Jews in the Mind of America* (New York: Basic Books, 1966).

³Blakeslee, *The Death of American Anti-semitism*, 36.