

Canada turned away Jewish refugees

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Tale of St. Louis and its 907 German Jews on display in Stellarton



The St. Louis at Hamburg, Germany, prior to its departure for Cuba in May, 1939. (U. S. Holocaust Memorial Museum)

They needed Canada's help and Canada said no.

It was 1939 and 907 Jewish refugees aboard the German transatlantic liner St. Louis were seeking sanctuary from Nazi Germany. Canada refused to take them in and the ship sailed back to Europe, where 254 would later die in concentration camps.

A display now on at the Museum of Industry in Stellarton tells the sad tale of the St. Louis and its ill-fated passengers.

Although the story does not put Canada in a good light, it's one that should be told, Debra McNabb, the museum's director, said Thursday.

"It's the job of a museum not to censor history," said McNabb.

"We must not just tell the stories we're comfortable with hearing. We must tell both the light and the dark."

And the story of the St. Louis is so dark.

The St. Louis: Ship of Fate panels in the museum show photos of German Jewish families holding one another and smiling as the luxury liner turns its stern to a nation descending into hate and sails off across the Atlantic.

The panels tell of how at mid-crossing, first Cuba, then neighbouring Caribbean countries and finally the United States closes their ports to the refugees. And they tell of how Canada also rejected taking in the refugees, forcing the St. Louis to head back to Europe, despite having come within a two-day steam of Halifax.

And the panels should raise a question for us all about what it is to be human.

"Would I have behaved any different, have said to let them in, had I been alive at the time," Gerry Lunn, curator of exhibits at the Maritime Museum of the Atlantic, said earlier this week.

“It would be self-deceiving to claim to know. My sense of values and how they have been guided are a product of a different time and different experiences.

“For anyone working at a museum when presenting a historic story, they have to answer the question: So what? How is this relevant to me?” said Lunn.

“Within the exhibit we’re hoping that people see there are all kinds of shading to individuals ... good, bad and many areas of grey.”

Then-prime minister William Lyon Mackenzie King would fit into the grey area.

In researching for the exhibit, Maritime museum staff unearthed the correspondence of King with his then-immigration minister Frederick Blair.

With the St. Louis heading back toward Europe, but still within reach of Halifax, University of Toronto history professor George Wrong led a group of prominent clergy and academics in petitioning King to grant sanctuary to the refugees on humanitarian grounds.

King, who was travelling in the United States at the time, wrote to Blair, advising that he “strongly consider this request.”

But Blair, remembered by history for his race-based immigration policies that saw Canada only accept 5,000 Jewish immigrants (compared to 200,000 by the United States) during the 1930s and '40s, fought the move.

“Much to our shame, King, who had many Jewish friends, didn’t force the matter,” said Lunn.

And Blair didn’t act alone. He was aided by public servants in Ottawa and the widespread anti-Semitism in Canada during the 1930s

“Part of the concern in Nova Scotia was that coming out of the Depression or the waves of recessions this province had experienced ... a wave of immigration coming in would have been frightening to some people, concerned for the few jobs that were available,” sa McNabb.

But one place anti-Semitism wasn’t found was in the mind and deeds of the non-Jewish German captain of the St. Louis.

Capt. Gustav Shroeder argued first with the Cuban authorities, then those of neighbouring Caribbean countries and finally with American authorities to let the refugees land. Notably, he seemed to have given up on Canada and there isn’t a record of his lobbying our country.

Steaming back toward Europe, he promised his passengers he wouldn’t return them to Nazi Germany and hatched a desperate plan to run his ship aground on the English coast if no safe port could be found.

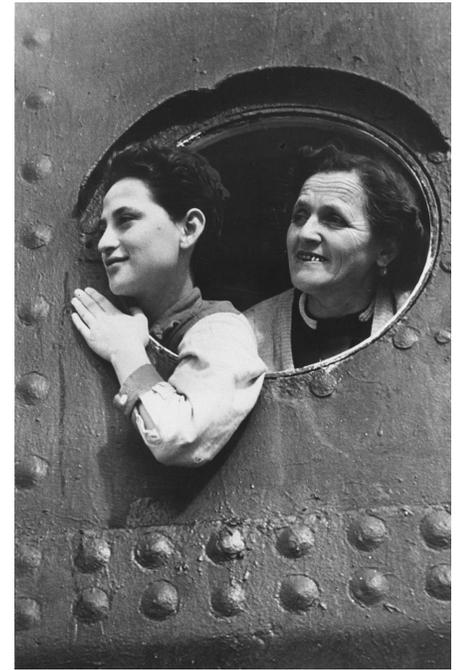
At the last moment, Belgium, France, the Netherlands and Great Britain accepted the refugees and the boat landed its human cargo in Antwerp, Belgium.

That country, France and the Netherlands were soon over-run by Nazi Germany and 254 of the passengers were sent off to die in concentration camps.

The value in history, said Lunn, is not just to know what happened in the past but to inform the decisions of the present and future.

“Goodness knows, boatloads of people still show up on our shores,” said Lunn.

As for Capt. Shroeder, he managed to sail around a British blockade when war was declared and eventually made it home to Germany.



The sympathy he showed his Jewish passengers was noted by Nazi authorities and he lost command of his ship and was put on a desk job.

But with the end of the Second World War, it was the surviving Jewish passengers who sent him money and food so he could survive in a Germany that was destroyed. In 1957, two years before his death, the German government awarded him a medal for his service to those same passengers.

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