# JEWISH REFUGEES STRANDED ON S.S. ST. LOUIS

MAY 1939

After World War I, Germany experienced a long period of political unrest as different groups struggled for power. Germany's economy suffered and unemployment reached record levels. Ordinary citizens, struggling to survive and humiliated by their country's defeat in the war, became attracted to radical political parties such as Adolf Hitler's National Socialist (Nazi) party. The Nazis came to power in 1933 and enacted a series of antisemitic laws that persecuted German Jews, taking away their human rights, employment and educational opportunities.

To escape this discrimination, 907 German Jews with visas for Cuba left Hamburg aboard the ship, S.S. St. Louis, on May 15, 1939. When the ship reached Havana on May 27, the Cuban government refused to let the refugees enter the country. On June 5, Cuba agreed to let them land if they paid $443,000 within 24 hours, a deadline the Jewish relief agencies could not meet. Panama, Argentina, Columbia, Chile and Paraguay all denied the ship permission to land. The Americans sent their coast guard ships to escort the St. Louis northward and away from the American coast.
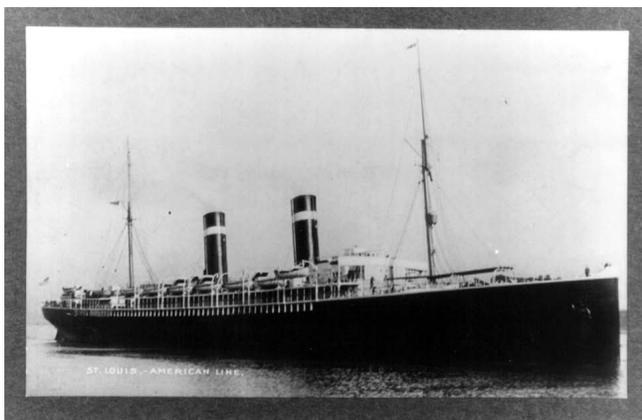
The predicament of the St. Louis touched some influential Canadians, who sent Prime Minister MacKenzie King a telegram asking that Canada offer the exiles sanctuary. King, preoccupied with the British Royal Family visit, did not think it was a Canadian problem. Justice Minister Ernest Lapointe was "emphatically opposed" to admitting the refugees, while Immigration Minister F.C. Blair said the refugees were not qualified under Canadian immigration law and that "No country could open its doors wide enough to take in the hundreds of thousands of Jewish people who want to leave Europe; the line must be drawn somewhere." When a delegation of Jews went to Ottawa in 1939 to ask the government how many Jews Canada would take in after the war, the answer was, "None is too many."

The St. Louis was forced to return to Europe. Those who disembarked in England were safe. Many of the others who left the ship in Belgium, France and the Netherlands were later caught by the Nazis and murdered in the Holocaust – the Nazi plan for the destruction of the Jews of Europe.

The fate of the Jews on the S.S. St. Louis did nothing to move the conscience of the government of Canada, or any other country. Once World War II began, the immigration policies of many nations condemned the Jews of Europe to death at the hands of the Nazis.

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