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# North America and the Jewish Refugee Crisis

*None Is Too Many*, the book I wrote with Professor Harold Troper, began fortuitously. We received from a student at the Public Archives of Canada two documents. The first was a telegram, dated June 5, 1939, addressed to the Prime Minister of Canada, Mackenzie King. It read very simply, "Please take us in. Canada is our last chance. If you say no, you will be signing our death warrant." And it was signed, "The Passengers of the ship *St. Louis*". This was of course the famous Voyage of the Damned, the boat full of a thousand German-Jewish refugees who had been packed on board by the Nazis, their only possession being an entry visa to Cuba; everything else had been taken away from them.

When they got to Cuba, of course, the Cuban government forbade them entry. For the next few weeks they sailed up and down the coast of South and North America, looking for a place to land. Every country said "no", the Americans even sending out a Coast Guard vessel to make sure that the ship did not get close enough to shore so that a Jewish passenger might slip overboard and swim to safety.

It turned out that the last opportunity to save the passengers from the *St. Louis* was Canada. There had been no mention of Canada in the book about the Voyage of the Damned — nor in the movie, for that matter.

The second document from our source in the Archives also sparked our interest. It was a memorandum from the Deputy Minister of Immigration, F.C. Blair, which rejected the admission of these hopeless refugees in stark words. "No country", wrote Blair, 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." The line drawn, the passengers' last flickering hope extinguished, the Jews of the *St. Louis* headed back to Europe where many of them died in the ovens of the Third Reich.

These two documents shocked us. Had Canada really been so cold-hearted and so callous? It was the first time that we had heard that Canada was involved in any way with the Holocaust. Troubled by this, we began looking

around for information. There are hundreds of articles and books about Canada and the Second World War; there are biographies of Canadian politicians, and books and articles about Canada in the 1930s. Yet, not a word about the Jews. If you look through these various official biographies, and the official records of the Department of External Affairs and the Department of Immigration — at least the printed records — you will scarcely find a word about the Jews.

We decided that this was worth checking out, and headed to the Public Archives of Canada to see if there was a story behind these two documents. What we found shocked us, and undoubtedly has shocked many Canadians who have read our book. And not only shocked them, but perhaps shamed them. And, more importantly, forced them to ask some questions about their country.

We are all Canadians and are proud to be Canadians. We are proud of our heritage and of our traditions. And we are extraordinarily proud of our myths. And if there is a pervasive Canadian myth, it is that we are a country of immigrants, a country with a long history of welcoming refugees and dissidents, of always being in the forefront of accepting the world's oppressed and dispossessed. Racism, bigotry and antisemitism, most Canadians like to believe, are European or at least American in origin, and play little part in the Canadian psyche, Canadian tradition or Canadian history. We believe we are a country of vast open spaces, of immeasurable wealth, a country that has always been in the forefront of accepting those proverbial huddled masses yearning to be free.

Yet, the recent literature in Canadian history — not only *None Is Too Many*, but also books about our treatment of other groups, Chinese, Japanese, Eastern Europeans and Indians — has, I think, punctured a hole in this myth. No longer can Canadians sit smugly in judgement of others without taking into account their own record.

What our history books until recently did not mention and what few Canadians talked about, perhaps because they did not know or even worse did

not care, is that of all the democracies, of all the Western nations, of all the immigration countries in the world, our Canada had arguably the most appalling record in providing sanctuary to European Jewry at the time of its greatest need. Our Canada, which in 1956 took overnight some 40,000 Hungarian refugees, which in the 1960s and 1970s took thousands of Czechs and Ugandan Asians, which up to the present has resettled almost 100,000 Vietnamese refugees, could find no room in our bosom for more than a handful of the tormented Jews escaping the Nazis, looking for life, desperately looking for a haven.

What we discovered in the Archives were files full of letters from Jews desperate to escape the Nazis. One of the first we found was addressed in 1939 to the Immigration Department, and it read:

Gentlemen,

In great distress and need, a refugee family addresses itself to you for help and rescue. Our distress, particularly that of our children, a nine-year-old boy and a seven-year-old girl increases daily and there is nothing left for us but suicide. In our desperation we appeal to you for a permit to enter your country. Surely there are people left in this world, people who will have pity on us, people who will save us. My wife will refuse no work. We will farm, we will keep house, we will do anything in order to enter your country. Please do not let our cry for help go unheeded. Please save us before it is too late.

It was signed, Jacob and Cecilia Stein.

This letter is an example of the thousands that poured into the Department of Immigration and into various Jewish organizations throughout this country. There were requests for admission from doctors, bankers, lawyers, mathematicians, scientists, merchants, capitalists, people with money, precisely the people we needed in Canada in the 1930s to help us get out of the economic morass we were in. This was unlike any immigration group that had ever applied to this country before. We were being asked to accept the best that

Europe had to offer. This was the cream of European society. Those countries which did accept them benefitted enormously. Unfortunately, these people were Jews and Jews were not accepted in Canada in the 1930s.

And to each of these letters the response from the Department of Immigration was the same to the one appended to the letter from the Steins. It read:

Dear Sir,

Unfortunately, though we greatly sympathize with your circumstances, at present the Canadian government is not admitting Jews. Please try some other country.

And, of course, for the millions of Steins there was no other country.

Why was Canada so obsessive about keeping Jews out of our country? Obviously it was a time of depression and no country wanted to accept large numbers of job-hungry immigrants. But other countries suffered far worse from the Depression than did Canada and accepted far more. The answer to why Canada was closed to Jews was because the Canadian government made a definitive decision. Canada, it said, had enough Jews. It did not need any more.

If you think back to the Canada of 50 years ago, it was a Canada unrecognizable to those of us born since the Second World War. It was a Canada permeated with racism, bigotry and antisemitism.

These were particularly overt in the province of Quebec, where the Catholic Church led the onslaught against the Jews. Weekly, Jews were denounced from pulpits as "trouble makers, Christ-killers, evil, malevolent people who cheat and exploit". Catholic newspapers, the official newspapers of the Church in Quebec, denounced the Jews as exploiters, as the devil incarnate. Almost every French newspaper portrayed the Jews as cheaters, as parasites spreading insidious diseases. French-Canadian leaders, especially those in Parliament, carried petitions to the House warning the government that any action which would allow any number of Jews into this country would meet with deep and unremitting hostility in the province of Quebec. There were movements in Quebec to boycott

Jewish businesses and Jewish public officials and to prevent Jews from coming into Canada.

But anti-Jewish prejudice was not limited to Quebec. In English Canada, according to a report by the Canadian Jewish Congress commissioned in 1938, which was never released because it was so frightening, there were massive quotas and restrictions. This report stated that few of this country's principals and teachers were Jewish; that banks, insurance companies, large industrial and commercial interests did not hire Jews; and that department stores did not hire Jews as sales people — they could work in the back but they were not allowed to serve customers. Jewish doctors could not get hospital appointments.

Dear Sir,

*Unfortunately, though we greatly sympathize with your circumstances, at present the Canadian government is not admitting Jews. Please try some other country.*

Indeed, there was a great scandal which has been largely forgotten. In 1934, when a certain Jewish intern graduated first from the University of Montreal, he was hired as the first Jewish intern at a Quebec Catholic hospital, Notre Dame. The moment Dr. Samuel Rabinovitch began his tour of duty, the interns at his hospital went on strike and began picketing the hospital, refusing to work with a Jew. Eventually he was fired, the University of Montreal agreed to further restrict the enrolment of Jewish students and the hospital agreed never again to hire a Jewish doctor.

And typically and symbolic of what it was like in Canada for a young Jew, the young doctor left the country as did so many thousands of other young Jews who could not get jobs here, and became a distinguished research professor in the United States, winning countless awards. We lost thousands of Rabinovitchs because we had no room in our society in the 1930s and 1940s for Jews.

In this country in the 1920s and 1930s

there was not one single Jewish full-time professor at any university. If you think about the great names in law, science, medicine and music throughout the world, you could see what we were missing. Our universities in this country were *Judenrein*. When we were offered German Jews — many of them famous researchers — and we were offered them free, because the Carnegie Foundation would pay the salary of any Jewish immigrant who was hired in a Canadian university — scarcely any were hired, with the notable exception of Gerhardt Herzberg, our one Nobel laureate in science, who was not Jewish but had married a Jew. Canadian universities argued that since they were not hiring Canadian Jews, why should they hire foreign ones. The Congress report also said that it was impossible for Jewish nurses and architects and engineers to find jobs in their fields and they often succeeded in getting jobs only when they changed their names and adopted Christian ones.

If Jews found it difficult to find jobs, it was perhaps even more difficult for them to find a place to live or to vacation, because there were restrictive covenants put on properties throughout Canada which forbade them from being sold to Jews. There were signs in various resorts and beaches which forbade the Jews from vacationing. Here in Toronto there were two beaches at either end of the city, in the west end and the east end, beside the one highway at that time coming into Toronto, the Lakeshore. Prominently displayed right off the highway were signs which read, "No Jews or Dogs Allowed". "Restricted". Those were signs of the times in Canada in the 1930s. There was also some violence as Jew and anti-semitite confronted one another on the streets of Toronto, Winnipeg, Montreal and Vancouver, including the famous Christie Pits riots here in Toronto which have gone down in the folklore of the Jewish community.

Why was Canada so antisemitic? What explains this racism? Well, there are all sorts of reasons. It was the time of the Depression, people were looking for scapegoats, and invariably the search for a scapegoat ended up on a Jewish doorstep. Jews were seen as trouble-makers because they were prominently represented in left wing movements, thus prompting many malevolent Ca-

nadians to believe that all Jews were communists.

In addition, Canada had been open to immigrants for three decades. Between 1900 and 1930 we took millions of unlettered aliens. The Jew was a symbol for these because he tended to live in cities and tended in the eye of the Canadian nationalist to represent the mongrelization of Canada. For many, the Jew was a symbol for what was happening to their country — and they did not like it. So antisemitism, in the word of one distinguished academic, was simply a form of Canada nationalism. Obviously, some hated Jews for religious reasons: Jews had killed Christ, had refused to repent, and therefore they were damned.

To me there was one reason that stands out, and still stands out to some extent today. And that is a feeling amongst our elite, the people who form opinion for society — journalists, government officials, teachers — that the Jew did not fit into their concept of Canada. Canada to them was to be a country of homesteaders and farmers, and despite what the Jews were doing in Palestine at the time, turning a desert green, these people did not believe that Jews could become farmers. And those immigrants who did not farm were expected to go into the woods, mines, forests, smelters and canneries or join construction gangs to build and fuel the great Canadian boom. And, again, most Canadians felt that Jews did not fit this pattern. Most Canadians thought of the Jews as a city people in a country attempting to build up its rural base. They were peddlars and shopkeepers in a country that wanted loggers and miners. They were seen as people with brains in a country that wanted people with brawn. They were seen as people with strong minds in a country that wanted people with strong backs. The extent of antisemitism, of course, explains why this country turned its back on the Jews of Germany and Europe throughout this period.

Our policy towards Jewish refugees did not change once the war began. Of the hundreds of thousands of Jews who escaped the onrushing Nazi army, of those thousands who made their way to Spain and Portugal and to the Low Countries and even to Japan, Canada

accepted between 1939 and 1945 a grand total of 500. What is astonishing to note is that in a period of a few months one man, Raoul Wallenberg, saved five times as many Jews as Canada did between 1933 and 1945.

Nor did the story change once the war ended. Between 1945 and 1948 Canada was booming; it needed workers. Industry after industry came to the government pleading to be allowed to go into the Displaced Persons (D.P.) camps and recruit workers. We were supplying much of the wherewithal for Europe's survival; food, goods, machinery. The government agreed. Any company, any industry that came to the government, was allowed to go into the D.C. camps and to bring out as many workers as it wanted with one exception: it would not be allowed to bring in any Jews. Jews were not yet acceptable in Canada, even after the war.

There was a public opinion poll taken at that time, in which Canadians were asked right after the war, knowing full well that the country would have to be opened up to immigrants, "What type of immigrant do you not want in this country?" At the top of the list, not surprisingly, I guess, were the Japanese, since Canada had just finished the war in Japan. But right behind the Japanese as the immigrants least wanted by the

Canadian people were the Jews. Way down the list were the Germans. So that even though the newsreels and the newspapers were still full of the bestial activity of the Nazis, Canadians preferred almost anyone to the Jew.

Our story, and perhaps Canada's "Jewish problem", ends in 1947 with the creation at the United Nations of a Jewish state. Until 1947 the Canadian government was afraid that it would be inundated with Jews if it opened up its doors; but once there was a Jewish state, the Canadian government knew the Jews would have an alternative, they would have somewhere else to go. One of the reasons Canada in 1947 breaks for the first time with Great Britain at the United Nations and votes for the creation of a Jewish state, I would argue, is precisely to be rid of the obligation of opening its doors to large numbers of Jewish refugees.

Yet that is precisely what we do. Once Israel is created, once the Jews have a homeland and we know we will be rid of the obligation of accepting large numbers of Jews, because they will be going to Israel, we then send our immigration agents into the D.P. camps to recruit the people who would make the best citizens in this country.

What is also true is that at that time



*"They were seen as people with brains in a country that wanted people with brawn." Jewish internees chopping wood at Camp B, near Fredericton, New Brunswick. (Courtesy of Gunther Bardeleben).*

Canada, which was closed to the Jews, was open to all sorts of other people whose credentials were acceptable to immigration officials. When the Canadian officials went into the D.P. camps looking for immigrants, they had a hit parade, they knew what ethnic groups they wanted. And number one on the hit parade were those who could prove they were anti-communist. We did not want communists in Canada; this was the height of the cold war. And how did you prove you were anti-communist? You proved you were anti-communist by having fought with the Nazis against the Russians. And so while large numbers of Jews were being turned away, we were accepting large numbers of those — I am not talking only about war criminals — who could prove their anti-communism by having supported the Nazis.

I want to speak for a moment about the American response. The American record towards the victims of the Holocaust has, of course, received far more attention than the Canadian one. It has been the subject of books by Arthur Morse, Saul Friedman, Yehuda Bauer, Henry Feingold, Leonard Dinnerstein and, most recently, Monty Penkower's *The Jews Were Expendable* and David Wyman's *The Abandonment of the Jews*.

All make the case that the world's greatest democracy was unwilling to assist the Jews in their hour of greatest need, and indeed was incapable of understanding the nature of the Jewish catastrophe — although, of course, the United States did far more than Canada between 1933 and 1945, accepting over 200,000 Jewish refugees while Canada took less than 5,000.

Historians all agree that what prompted America's lack of response was the antisemitism and nativism that permeated Congress and the country at the time, the cold indifference of President Franklin Roosevelt to the plight of the Jews, the obstruction and callousness of various key officials in the Departments of State, Immigration and War, the apathy of the media, which carried few stories about the massacres of Jews, the refusal of many to believe the details of the Holocaust despite the enormity of the evidence, the silence of the Christian churches, the academic community and other non-Jewish or-

ganizations, and, finally, the divisions within the Jewish community itself.

The latter — the lack of action by Jews — has been the subject of much historical dispute, as some historians have argued that, had only the Jewish community been more aggressive, then far more could have been done. It seems to me that some of those who argue that the North American Jewish community should have done more are simply trying to save their own consciences and to get their countries off the hook. After all if the Jews themselves did little, could anyone expect the American and Canadian governments to do more? Yet it is a serious charge made by respectable historians and worth examining.

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From the onset of the crisis Jewish leadership in Canada saw quiet diplomacy as the only tactic which might convince the government to open the doors to a handful of refugees. Regularly and unobtrusively Jewish emissaries tramped off to Ottawa, cap in hand, to lobby with immigration officials and Members of Parliament. They were made promises which were never kept. In fact, in order to keep the Jews quiet, some prominent members of the community were rewarded with special immigration permits to be distributed to a fortunate few. It was a cynical activity but it worked. For the most part, though restive, Canadian Jews remained loyal to the Liberal Party. After all, on immigration matters the Conservative opposition was even worse.

Jewish leaders pleaded with such Jewish organizations as the trade unions, the Zionists and the fraternal societies, to avoid mass meetings, protest marches and demonstrations, because

they feared such methods would alienate the government and create an anti-semitic backlash throughout the country. It was no time, the leaders argued, for what we today would call the "politics of the street". Helpless, the Jews of Canada followed orders, they remained silent. To the very end the Jewish community put its faith in its own leadership and in the Liberal Government; neither delivered.

But even if Canadian Jewry had been more forceful, it would have made little difference. The Canadian Government was committed to keeping Jews out of Canada, and it was not to be deterred in its objective by the tiny Jewish community whether it was noisy or silent. So long as the Churches remained passive — and they did — and the provinces did not say anything — and they did not — there was little domestic pressure on the Government to force a change in policy.

The American Jewish community was of course much more powerful or integrated but scarcely powerful or integrated enough. There were, of course, divisions in the community over Zionism, over strategy, over support of Roosevelt, and a host of other things, which their enemies in government were fully aware of.

Yet, it seems to me, a united Jewish community would have made no difference. The Allies were not going to change their war time priorities simply because Jews asked them to. Nor would the Nazis stop their slaughtering. The rescue of Jews was never formally discussed at any of the war time conferences held in Newfoundland, Casablanca, Teheran, Cairo or even Yalta. For the Allies it was not — and never could be — an issue. And the Nazis, of course, were adamantly determined to destroy Jews no matter the pressures brought on them by the Allies. They were obsessed with the need to solve the Jewish question. A united American Jewish community would have made no difference.

In any case what could the Jews have done? There was no political party they could support which made the saving of Jews a priority; there was no action they could take in the middle of a war without being subjected to charges of sedition, of harming the war effort,

and without poisoning the already pervasive antisemitic atmosphere.

At the very heart of the problem is the question of Jewish power and influence in the 1930s. The possibility of success depended not only on getting the story believed but then convincing decision-makers that action was required.

There is little doubt that Jews did not remotely possess the kind of power required to convince an almost totally unreceptive officialdom that something more was involved in the Jewish pleas for action than what was dismissed by official Washington as "the usual Jewish wailing".

We must not make the historical mistake of reading back into the history of the 1930s and 1940s a condition which only developed later. Because Jews have some influence and power today does not necessarily mean that they had any forty or fifty years ago. In any case there is always a limit to the amount of influence an ethnic group can exercise on policy, especially in time of war.

From what historians know today, the official American resistance to any rescue attempt and the outright sabotage and lying at all levels of the bureaucracy and, most important perhaps, the hostile indifference of Roosevelt himself to the plight of the Jews, were so overwhelming, that the possibility of rescue advocacy breaking through the wall of silence was extremely limited. One should recall that it was not until 1943, after Stalingrad, that Allied leaders could be fairly certain that they, too, would not become Hitler's victims. And, in any case, most Americans saw Japan as a worse threat than Nazi Germany and did not want to be bothered by what was to them a side show.

Fifty years ago the world was divided into two parts — those places where Jews could not live, and those, like Canada, where they could not enter. Fifty years ago the nations of the world were put to the test of civilization and failed. The failure was not one of tactics, but of the human spirit. The Nazis planned and executed the Holocaust but it was made possible by an indifference in the Western world to the suffering of the victims which bordered on contempt. Not one nation showed generosity of heart to those doomed,

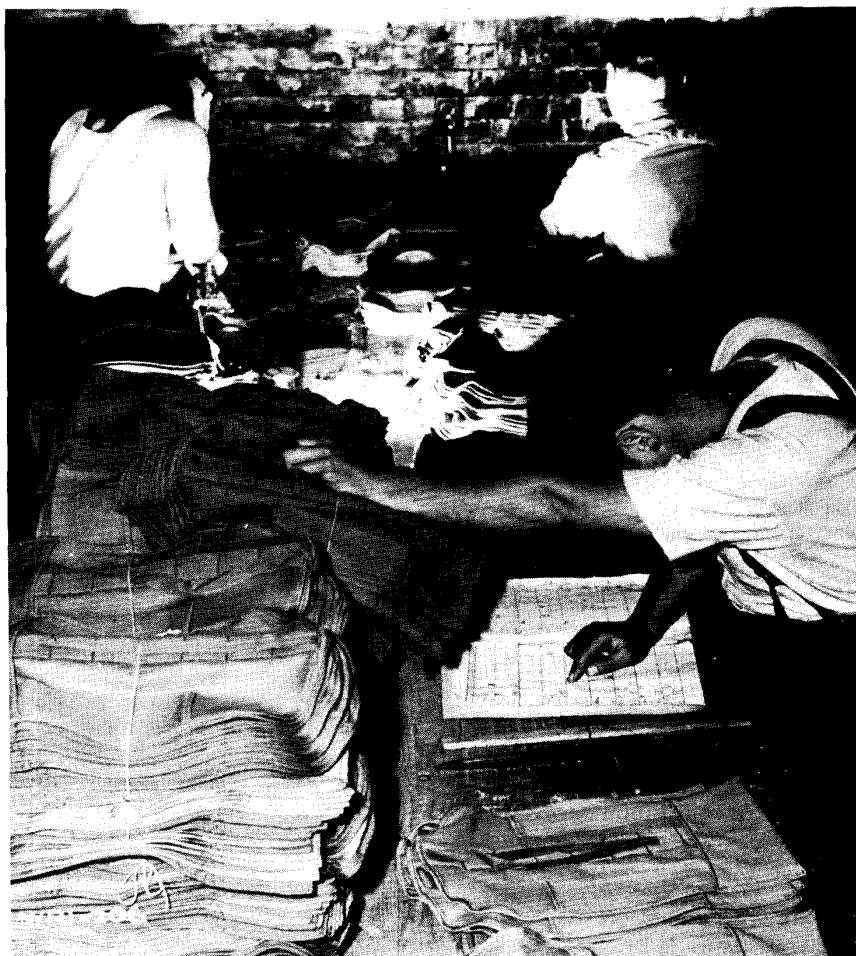
not one made the Jewish plight a national priority, and not one willingly opened its doors after the war to the surviving remnant of a once thriving Jewish community. Rescue required sanctuary and there was none. Rescue required concern but there was only apathy. Rescue required commitment, but there was only silence. Rescue required understanding, but there was only hostility.

One of the lessons to be learned by all of this, of course, is of the weakness of democracy. Mackenzie King, the best

politician Canada ever had, knew very well that if there were votes to be won in allowing in Jews, he would have allowed them in. But he knew there were not, so he did not.

If there is anything to be learned from all of this, it is to resolve here and now, as Canadians, in the 1980s, that never again, at any time, for anyone, should none be too many.

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*War work in Camp N, Sherbrooke, Quebec, circa September 1941. Internees had to wear clothes with large circles on their backs for easy identification. (Courtesy of Public Archives Canada).*