

TIMES PAST  
**1939**



**Passengers** aboard the *St. Louis*, 1939.  
A postcard (inset) from the *St. Louis*



# The Doomed Voyage of the *St. Louis*

Eighty years ago, a ship approached U.S. shores with more than 900 Jewish refugees on board, begging for safety from the Nazis. What happened next might surprise you. **BY JOE BUBAR**

**A**ll Ruth Zellner wanted was to get to shore. Looking out from the deck of the giant steamliner the *St. Louis*, the 18-year-old could see the bright lights and palm trees of Miami.

"I [wished] they would let us in," Zellner recalled in a 1999 interview. "I wasn't particularly interested in going to America. I was interested in staying alive."

Zellner and her parents were among the 937 people—almost all German Jews—who'd boarded the *St. Louis* hoping to escape the forces of Nazi

Germany and find safety elsewhere. The passengers had departed Hamburg, Germany, on May 13, 1939, en route to Cuba. Most had documents from the Cuban government that would allow them to stay there while they awaited visas to come to the U.S.

But when the ship arrived, the Cuban government had had a change of heart and prevented almost all of the passengers from disembarking.

The *St. Louis* then turned toward Miami, as passengers pleaded with the United States, Canada, and any other nation on this side of the Atlantic

that would listen to save them.

None of them did.

"That's when [we] really screamed," Zellner said in an oral history conducted by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. "It was a riot."

The *St. Louis* was forced to return to Europe. Though Zellner survived World War II, many others on the ship weren't so lucky: More than a quarter of them were killed in the Holocaust.

Many say the turning away of the *St. Louis* by the U.S. 80 years ago is one of the most infamous moments in

BOTH IMAGES: UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM, COURTESY OF DR. LIANE REIF-LEHRER (PASSENGERS); COURTESY OF JULIE KLEIN, PHOTO BY MAX REID (POSTCARD)



**Nazi leader** Adolf Hitler parades through Kessel, Germany, 1939



American history, when the nation failed to live up to its ideals as a land of refuge.

“We tell ourselves in the United States, in our national mythology, that we’re a nation of immigrants,” says Daniel Greene, a historian at the Holocaust Memorial Museum. “And then we often don’t live out those realities on the ground.”

### The Rise of Hitler

By the time the *St. Louis* set sail in 1939, it was clear to Zellner and many other German Jews that they were in danger.

Adolf Hitler had risen to power as chancellor of Germany six years earlier (see *timeline*, p. 18), using Jews as a scapegoat for many of the nation’s problems, including its defeat in World War I (1914-18) and the economic crisis that followed. In his speeches and writings, he compared Jews to “vermin” and called them “subhuman.”

As Germany’s leader, he took advantage of widespread anti-Semitism to systematically target Jewish people, stripping them of their rights, forbidding them to work in certain jobs, and

shutting down Jewish businesses.

This anti-Semitic rhetoric and legislation turned into physical violence on the night of November 9, 1938, known as Kristallnacht, or the “Night of Broken Glass.” Vicious mobs, spurred by Nazi officials, decimated Zellner’s hometown of Breslau, Germany, and other Jewish communities. They destroyed thousands of Jewish-owned businesses, homes, and schools, killed nearly 100 Jews, and imprisoned another 30,000 in concentration camps.

Zellner and others sensed that this was only the beginning.

“You knew that things were coming. Nobody knew how horrible, but still,” she recalled. “Everybody was trying to get out.”

The worst was yet to come: By 1945, 6 million European Jews would be murdered by the Nazis—either shot on sight or imprisoned in concentration camps, where they were worked and starved to death or killed in gas chambers. Two-thirds of the

continent’s Jewish population would be wiped out, along with another 5 million people, including Roma, Poles, homosexuals, and the disabled.

Zellner and her parents left their friends, family, and home behind, and boarded the *St. Louis* in May 1939 with only suitcases of clothes, about \$120, and landing permits for Cuba. Still, they considered themselves among the lucky few who were escaping.

“We were happy,” Zellner said. “We thought we were out of it—which we were not.”

### Stuck at Sea

Little did they know that a few days before they had set sail, 40,000 Cubans had protested the ship’s arrival. The pro-fascist Cuban government caved to this pressure, and when the *St. Louis* pulled into Cuba’s port after its two-week voyage, only 28 passengers were allowed to disembark.

The rest were stuck at sea.

“People were planning to go overboard,” Zellner said. “They were not taking any chances to go to Germany. They’d rather drown.”

One passenger, who’d already been in a concentration camp, tried to commit suicide. He slit his wrist and jumped overboard, but a crew member saved him and took him to a hospital in Havana, Cuba. However, his wife and kids weren’t allowed to go with him.

A committee of passengers, including Zellner’s father, Max, worked with U.S.-based Jewish organizations to try to convince the Cuban government to let more passengers in, but to no avail.

Over the next 10 days, the *St. Louis* remained in the Atlantic Ocean, the fate of the passengers in limbo. Some of them cabled President Franklin D. Roosevelt asking for refuge. He never responded. They received only a telegram from the State Department saying they wouldn’t be allowed in at the time.

After more than three weeks at sea, the *St. Louis* re-routed to

**Six million Jews were murdered during the Holocaust.**

Watch a video about the Holocaust at [UPFRONTMAGAZINE.COM](http://UPFRONTMAGAZINE.COM)

# Timeline THE HOLOCAUST



**1933**

## Hitler's Rule Begins

After the Nazi Party wins elections, its leader, Adolf Hitler, becomes chancellor (similar to president) of Germany. The Nazis burn books by Jews, fire Jews from government jobs, and organize a boycott of Jewish businesses.

**1935**

## The Nuremberg Laws

The Nazis strip Jews and other "non-Aryans" of their citizenship and later ban them from schools and other public places. (Hitler called certain Germans and other northern Europeans "Aryans," and deemed them a superior race.)

**1938**

## Kristallnacht

On November 9, the Nazis unleash a wave of anti-Jewish attacks, burning and looting synagogues and Jewish-owned shops. They arrest 30,000 Jewish men and send them to concentration camps.

**1939**

## WWII Begins

On September 1, Germany invades Poland, beginning World War II. At the height of its power, Germany dominates most of Europe.



**Smashed windows** at a Jewish shop in Berlin, Germany, following Kristallnacht, which means the "Night of Broken Glass"

Antwerp, Belgium. Jewish organizations had negotiated with four European governments to take in the passengers. The luckiest ones—nearly 300, including the Zellners—went to Great Britain, where all but one survived the war. The rest were divided up among the Netherlands, Belgium, and France. Each of these nations was later invaded by Germany, and more than 250 of the *St. Louis* passengers were killed in the Holocaust.

### The U.S. & the Holocaust

Looking back, it might seem rather unfathomable that the U.S. wouldn't let in the passengers of the *St. Louis*.

Americans weren't oblivious to the horrors Jews faced across the Atlantic. The plight of the *St. Louis* was on the front page of *The New York Times*. And though nobody predicted just how bad things would get, American newspapers frequently reported on Germany's persecution of Jews. In 1938, a front-page article in the *Los Angeles Examiner* even read: "Nazis Warn World Jews Will Be Wiped Out Unless Evacuated by Democracies."

So then why didn't the U.S. open

## In Search of a Home

A look at the current migrant crisis sweeping the globe

### Where Refugees Are Leaving

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN	REFUGEES
<b>SYRIA</b>	<b>6.3 million</b>
<b>AFGHANISTAN</b>	<b>2.6 million</b>
<b>SOUTH SUDAN</b>	<b>2.4 million</b>
<b>MYANMAR</b>	<b>1.2 million</b>
<b>SOMALIA</b>	<b>986,400</b>

SOURCE: UNITED NATIONS, 2017

### Where They're Settling

COUNTRY OF DESTINATION	PERMANENTLY RESETTLED REFUGEES
<b>UNITED STATES</b>	<b>33,400</b>
<b>CANADA</b>	<b>26,600</b>
<b>AUSTRALIA</b>	<b>15,100</b>
<b>UNITED KINGDOM</b>	<b>6,200</b>
<b>SWEDEN</b>	<b>3,400</b>

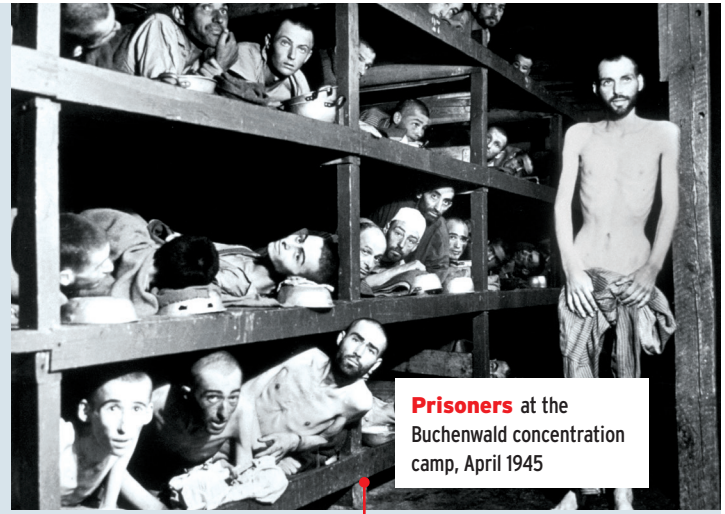
**There are more displaced people** in the world today than during World War II, when an estimated 60 million Europeans fled their homes. The most recent United Nations statistics show that in 2017, there were more than 25 million refugees worldwide and an additional 40 million internally displaced people (those who've left their homes but remain in their countries). Another 3.1 million people are categorized as asylum seekers (those who plan to claim refugee status once they reach a new nation, rather than applying for it in advance).

More than two-thirds of all refugees in 2017 came from just five countries that have been devastated by civil wars, violence, and persecution. The vast majority of refugees find temporary protection in neighboring countries. Only a small portion receive permanent residence elsewhere.

The U.S. permanently resettled 33,400 refugees in 2017—more than any other country. But that's a 65 percent drop from the year before, and the lowest number of refugees admitted since 2002.

The chart above shows the nations where the most refugees came from and the nations that permanently resettled the most refugees in 2017.

BETTMANN/GETTY IMAGES (HITLER); UNIVERSAL HISTORY ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES (KRISTALLNACHT)



**Prisoners** at the Buchenwald concentration camp, April 1945

## 1941

### **U.S. Enters the War**

Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor in Hawaii on December 7 brings the U.S. into the war. By late 1942, Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union stalls, turning the tide against the Nazis.

## 1942

### **'Final Solution'**

The Nazis formalize the "Final Solution," their plan to systematically murder all of Europe's 9.5 million Jews.

## 1943

### **Warsaw Uprising**

In one of many acts of resistance, Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto in Poland start an uprising against the Germans in April. It lasts almost a month before it's crushed.

## 1945

### **Liberation of Camps**

With the German army in retreat, Allied forces liberate concentration camps across Europe. By the war's end, 6 million Jews have been killed, as have millions of other "undesirables."

## 1945

### **Surrender**

In a Berlin bunker on April 30, Hitler swallows a cyanide pill before shooting himself. Germany surrenders on May 7. Japan follows on August 15, leading to the end of the war.

its ports to the *St. Louis*?

After World War I, America took an isolationist stance on world affairs; it wouldn't enter World War II until after Japan attacked Pearl Harbor in 1941.

The U.S. also didn't have a refugee policy at the time, and it placed strict quotas on the number of immigrants it allowed from each country. For Germany, the limit was about 25,000 a year. Because the U.S. didn't differentiate between refugees—people escaping war or persecution at home—and immigrants simply seeking a better life, everyone was grouped on the same waiting lists. As a result, it could take years to gain entry.

From 1933 to 1940, the U.S. accepted about 90,000 German Jews—more than any other country. However, thousands more applied to immigrate but weren't allowed in.

A few months before the *St. Louis* set sail, two senators introduced a bill in Congress that would have let 20,000 German Jewish children above the quota come to the U.S. But it failed to pass.

Popular sentiment put pressure on

**In 1939, most Americans opposed letting in more Jewish refugees.**

President Roosevelt and Congress not to take in more refugees. In a 1939 poll, only 30 percent of Americans supported letting more Jewish refugee children come to the U.S. Historians say the Great Depression, which lasted from 1929 until the late 1930s, inflamed deep-seated anti-Semitism and xenophobia in the U.S.

"You have this rhetoric that we can't take new immigrants because there aren't enough jobs for Americans who are living here," says Greene of the Holocaust Memorial Museum. "And some even stronger anti-immigrant voices in America at the time blamed the immigrants for the bad economy."

Many Americans also feared that Nazi spies were hiding among Jewish refugees, a concern experts now say was overblown.

### **The Refugee Act**

After the war, the U.S. and many other nations responded to their failures in helping more Jews escape the Nazis by creating new policies to protect refugees. Today, under the Refugee Act of 1980, the U.S. president has the authority to

set the maximum number of refugees to let into the country each year, separate from the number of other immigrants.

Since World War II, no country has accepted more refugees than the U.S. And 68 percent of Americans think that our openness to people from all over the world is essential to who we are as a nation, according to a 2018 survey by Pew Research Center.

However, Americans once again are at odds over how best to deal with immigration issues. The world faces its largest migrant crisis since the Second World War (see *"In Search of a Home"*), and thousands of Central Americans have streamed across the U.S. border from Mexico seeking asylum.

Greene cautions against drawing too close a comparison between the U.S. today and during the 1930s when it comes to immigration. But he does see similarities.

"There's a lot of disagreement among Americans today about their responsibilities to refugees and immigrants, and that debate was going on in the 1930s," he says. "And I think understanding some of the failures of the past might help inform the present." ●