

Prime Minister MacKenzie King and Immigration Director F.C. Blair kept the number of Jewish refugees small.

As the influence of Nazi-inspired hatred threatened the Jewish communities of Europe, Jews tried to head to safety in the United States, Canada, Australia, and even Cuba.

Between 1933 and 1945, less than 5000 Jews were accepted into Canada.

Individual citizens, aid agencies and groups tried to encourage the government to open its borders to desperate Jewish refugees. Trying to appeal to Canada's economic interests, companies like Canadian Pacific hand-selected Jewish engineers for immigration. Skilled professionals, particularly needed during the war, applied to come to Canada. They were almost universally rejected.

Jewish refugees were placed in a special class.

Entry into Canada relied directly on the Canadian cabinet. In spite of guarantees that Canadian families would bear the financial burdens, even schemes to allow orphans to enter Canada were rejected.

The SS St. Louis, with nearly 1000 refugees, was turned away from Canada.

On May 15, 1939, 907 German Jews left Hamburg aboard the SS St. Louis with visas allowing them to enter Cuba. But when they arrived in Havana harbour, Cuba denied the refugees entrance. The St. Louis was then turned away from Panama, Argentina, Colombia, Chile and Paraguay. Canada, the last hope for the refugees aboard that ship, refused them entry. The St. Louis sailed back to Europe. Very few of the refugees survived the Holocaust.

REFUGEES

WE MUST NEVERTHELESS SEEK TO KEEP THIS PART OF THE CONTINENT FREE FROM UNREST AND FROM TOO GREAT AN INTERMIXTURE OF FOREIGN STRAINS OF BLOOD, AS MUCH THE SAME THING AS LIES AT THE BASIS OF THE ORIENTAL PROBLEM. I FEAR WE WOULD HAVE RIOTS IF WE AGREED TO A POLICY THAT ADMITTED NUMBERS OF JEWS.

PRIME MINISTER MACKENZIE KING,
DIARY ENTRY – Ottawa, 29 March, 1938.



HORST ROTHFELS (Germany)

I went to a Jewish agency in Berlin for help. They put me on the list for illegal transport to Palestine. I had a knapsack concealed in a suitcase. I was waiting from day to day to be smuggled across the border. Conditions had to be right. Nothing happened and my time was running short. They got a permit for me to go to England as an agricultural worker. So that's how I got out of Germany.

I went to a Salvation Army Boy's Farm south of London. I think they were delinquent boys. We did some farm work, gardening mostly. One day they asked for volunteers to work on a private farm in England. I volunteered. They were happy; the people seemed happy. I worked on the farm until I got interned again. We all had to go in front of those tribunals.

I was classified as 'friendly alien refugee from Nazi oppression.' I was free to come and go, do whatever I wanted. One day the invasion panic was on. They were worried about what would happen to us if England were invaded, so they were deporting us to Australia or Canada. We arrived in Canada and the authorities were taken completely by surprise. They were expecting German prisoners of war and here came the rabbis and little boys off the boat.



The St. Louis departing Hamburg, May 13, 1939. Photo: Stern.