

MS ST LOUIS REJECTION

Ottawa, Ontario - November 7, 2018

The Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau, today delivered a formal apology in the House of Commons regarding the fate of the MS *St. Louis* and its passengers. The Prime Minister apologized to the passengers, their families, and Jewish communities in Canada and around the world.

In May 1939, the MS *St. Louis* departed Germany with close to a thousand passengers, including over 900 German Jews, who were desperate for safety and refuge from persecution at the hands of the Nazis.

After Jewish refugees on board were denied entry to Cuba, the United States, and Canada, they were forced to return to Europe, where the United Kingdom, Belgium, France, and the Netherlands agreed to take them in. When the Nazis conquered Belgium, France, and the Netherlands in 1940, 254 MS *St. Louis* passengers were murdered in the Holocaust.

The Prime Minister apologized to Jewish refugees Canada turned away, and for the anti-Semitic, 'none is too many' immigration policy that led to the MS *St. Louis* incident. He also apologized to the Jews who were falsely imprisoned during the Second World War, to the members of Canada's Jewish community whose pleas were ignored, and to all others who paid the price of Canada's inaction.

Quotes

"Today, I rose in the House of Commons to issue a long overdue apology to the Jewish refugees Canada turned away. By issuing this apology, it is my sincere hope that we can shine a light on this painful chapter of our history and ensure that its lessons are never forgotten. Anti-Semitism, xenophobia, and hatred have no place in this country, or anywhere in this world. Recent attacks on the Jewish community attest to the work we still have to do. We must always stand up against xenophobic and anti-Semitic attitudes and hate in all its forms."

—*The Rt. Hon. Justin Trudeau, Prime Minister of Canada*

"Every year, thousands of people from around the world choose to settle in Canada and are warmly welcomed by our dynamic, inclusive and open country. The memory of the MS *St. Louis* reminds us of how far we have travelled since 1939 and rekindles our commitment to fight anti-Semitism everywhere. The atrocities that have been and continue to be committed against the Jewish people cannot be forgotten, and we must continue to stand together against hatred and discrimination."

—*The Hon. Pablo Rodriguez, Minister of Canadian Heritage and Multiculturalism*

Quick Facts

- Discrimination and violence against Jewish people in Canada and around the world continues at an alarming rate. According to the most recent figures, 17 per cent of all hate crimes in Canada target Jewish people, which is far higher per capita than any other group.
- The Holocaust was a genocide during the Second World War in which Nazi Germany, aided by its collaborators, systematically murdered over six million Jewish people. Millions of others were also killed and suffered atrocities at the hands of the Nazi regime. It is one of the darkest chapters in human history.
- While Canada did not directly experience the Holocaust, its restrictive immigration policies at the time largely closed the door to Jews seeking refuge from persecution in Europe.
- As a nation, Canada has been profoundly shaped by approximately 40,000 Holocaust survivors, who resettled across the country after the war. Today, Canadians remember the Holocaust, commemorate its victims, and renew our commitment to fight against racism, discrimination, and anti-Semitism.
- Canada has been a full member of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance since 2009. The Alliance aims to support Holocaust education, remembrance, and research in member countries and around the world.

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Statement of apology on behalf of the Government of Canada to the passengers of the MS St. Louis

Mr. Speaker –

On May 15, 1939, more than nine hundred German Jews boarded an ocean liner known as the *St. Louis*. The passengers had been stripped of their possessions, chased out of their homes, forced out of their schools, and banned from their professions by their own government.

Their synagogues had been burnt. Their stores raided. Their clothing scarred with yellow stars, they had been forced to add Israel or Sarah to the names they had known their whole lives. Women and men who had once contributed so much to their country had been labelled as aliens, traitors, and enemies – and treated as such. Persecuted, robbed, jailed, and killed because of who they were. Nazi Germany had denied them their citizenship and their fundamental rights.

And yet, when the *St. Louis* set sail from Hamburg that fateful Monday, the more than nine hundred stateless passengers on board considered themselves lucky. Lucky because they each carried on board an entrance visa to Cuba, a rare chance to escape the tyranny of the Nazi regime under Adolf Hitler. But by the time the ship docked in Havana Harbour, things would take a turn for the worse. The Cuban government refused to recognize their entrance visas and only a few passengers were allowed to disembark. Even after men, women, and children threatened mass suicide, entry was denied. And so continued their long and tragic quest for safety. They would request asylum from Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay, and Panama.

Each said no. On June 2nd, the MS *St. Louis* was forced to leave Havana with no guarantee that they would be welcomed elsewhere.

And after the Americans had denied their appeals, they sought refuge in Canada. But the Liberal government of Mackenzie King was unmoved by the plight of these refugees. Despite the desperate plea of the Canadian Jewish community, despite the repeated calls by the government's two Jewish caucus members, despite the many letters from concerned Canadians of different faiths, the government chose to turn its back on these innocent victims of Hitler's regime. At the time, Canada was home to just eleven million people, of whom only 160,000 were Jews. Yet even that proved to be too many for many Canadians, including Frederick Charles Blair, who then headed the government's immigration branch.

In a letter to the Prime Minister, dated September 1938, the Minister wrote, "Pressure by Jewish people to get into Canada has never been greater than it is now, and I am glad to be able to add that, after 35 years of experience here, that it has never been so carefully controlled."

Not a single Jewish refugee was to set foot – let alone settle – on Canadian soil. The MS *St. Louis* and its passengers had no choice but to return to Europe, where the United Kingdom, Belgium, France, and Holland agreed to take in the refugees.

And then when the Nazis conquered Belgium, France, and Holland, many of them would be murdered in the gruesome camps and gas chambers of the Third Reich.

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Mr. Speaker – The story of the *St. Louis* and its passengers is no isolated incident. The Government of Canada was indifferent to the suffering of Jews long before the *St. Louis* ever set sail for Halifax, and sadly, long after it had returned to Europe.

In the wake of the Great Depression, Canadian lawmakers had begun to tighten restrictions on immigration, adopting policies that were both economically and ethnically selective. To the government of the day, Jews were among the least desirable immigrants; their presence on our soil had to be limited. The government imposed strict quotas and an ever-growing list of requirements designed to deter Jewish immigration. As the Nazis escalated their attacks on the Jews of Europe, the number of visa applications surged. Canadian relatives, embassy officials, immigration officers, political leaders – all were flooded with calls for help. Wealthy businessmen promising job creation. Aging parents vowing to take up farming. Pregnant women begging for clemency. Doctors, lawyers, academics, engineers, scientists imploring officials and the government to let them serve our country. They offered everything they owned, promising to comply with Canada's every request.

But the government went to great lengths to ensure that their appeals went nowhere. That their cries for help were left unanswered, for Canada deemed them unworthy of a home, and undeserving of our help. By 1938, the world was wrestling with a growing refugee crisis. When leaders of all nations convened in Evian to discuss the future of Jews in Europe, no country stepped forward to drastically increase its quotas. Jews were viewed as a threat to be avoided, rather than the victims of a humanitarian crisis. When Canadian lawmakers returned from Evian, they used their power to further tighten rules around Jewish immigration, legitimizing the anti-Semitic sentiment taking hold at home and abroad.

Bitter resentment towards Jews was enshrined in our policies – the same policies immigration officials would later use to justify their callous response to the *St. Louis* and its passengers. Of all the allied countries, Canada would admit the fewest Jews between 1933 and 1945. Far fewer than the United Kingdom and significantly less per capita than the United States. And of those it let in, as many as 7,000 of them were labeled as prisoners of war and unjustly imprisoned alongside Nazis. As far as Jews were concerned, none was too many.

Mr. Speaker – Adolf Hitler's test was one the Canadian government failed miserably. This week marks the 80th sombre anniversary of Kristallnacht, a turning point in Hitler's racial policy and the beginning of the Holocaust.

Kristallnacht happened on the heels of that Evian conference, where the world cemented its indifference and antipathy towards Jews. There is little doubt that our silence permitted the Nazis to come up with their own, "final solution" to the so-called Jewish problem. When Canada joined the war against Germany – when we were fighting for democracy abroad – we were failing Hitler's victims at home. What we were willing to do abroad, we were unwilling to do at home.

The plight of the *St. Louis* did not lead to a significant change in policy, nor did alarming reports from across Europe or the gruesome details of a coordinated effort to eliminate Jews. When the Allies caught wind of the concentration camps, they did not bomb the rail lines that led to Auschwitz, nor did they take concrete action to rescue the remnants of Europe's Jewish community. When the war ended, Canada and the Allied

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power discovered the full horrors of the Holocaust. We joined the world in condemning in the strongest terms the death camps of Hitler and the despicable cruelty of his actions. And yet, even the industrial mass murder of more than six million Jews did not force a swift change in our immigration policy. It would take another three years for Canada to open its doors. Three years before we would take in Jewish refugees at the same rate as we did non-Jewish German nationals at the end of the War.

It would take new leadership, a new world order, and the creation of the State of Israel, a homeland for the Jewish people, for Canada to amend its laws and begin to dismantle the policies that had legitimized and propagated anti-Semitism.

Mr. Speaker – Adolf Hitler alone did not seal the fate of the *St. Louis* passengers or the Jews of Europe. To harbour such hatred and indifference towards the refugees was to share in the moral responsibility for their deaths. And while decades have passed since we turned our backs on Jewish refugees, time has by no means absolved Canada of its guilt or lessened the weight of its shame.

Mr. Speaker – Today, I rise in this House to issue a long overdue apology to the Jewish refugees Canada turned away.

We apologize to the 907 German Jews aboard the MS *St. Louis*, as well as their families. We also apologize to others who paid the price of our inaction, whom we doomed to the ultimate horror of the death camps. We used our laws to mask our anti-Semitism, our antipathy, and our resentment. We are sorry for the callousness of Canada's response. And we are sorry for not apologizing sooner. We apologize to the mothers and fathers whose children we did not save, to the daughters and sons whose parents we did not help –

To the imprisoned Jewish refugees who were forced to relive their trauma next to their tormentors – To the scientists, artists, engineers, lawyers, businessmen, nurses, doctors, mathematicians, pharmacists, poets, and students – To every Jew who sought safe haven in Canada, who stood in lines for hours and wrote countless letters. We refused to help them when we could have. We contributed to sealing the cruel fates of far too many at places like Auschwitz, Treblinka, and Belzec. We failed them. And for that, we are sorry. And finally, we apologize to the members of Canada's Jewish community whose voices were ignored, whose calls went unanswered.

We were quick to forget the many ways in which they had helped build this country since its inception. Quick to forget that they were our friends and neighbours. That they had educated our youth, cared for our sick, and clothed our poor. Instead, we let anti-Semitism take hold in our communities and become our official policy. We did not hesitate to circumvent their participation, limit their opportunities, and discredit their talent. They were meant to feel like strangers in their own homes, aliens in their own land. We denied them the respect every Canadian, every human being – regardless of origin, regardless of faith – is owed by their government and their fellow citizens.

When Canada turned its back on the Jews of Europe, we turned our backs on Jewish Canadians as well. It was unacceptable then, and it is unacceptable now.

Your country failed you, and for that, we are sorry.

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Mr. Speaker – The story of the *St. Louis* and the ill-treatment of Jews before, during and after the Second World War should fill us with shame. Shame because these actions run counter to the promise of our country. That's not the Canada we know today – a Canada far more generous, accepting and compassionate than it once was.

Mr. Speaker – When Canada chose to turn its back on refugees more than 70 years ago, not only did the government fail to help the most vulnerable, it harmed all of us. Jewish Canadians have made immense contributions to our country. As do all the immigrants who have chosen and continue to choose Canada. As we stand here today, we are reminded of not only how far we've come, but how far we still have to go. During this Holocaust Education Week, it is all the more impossible to ignore the challenges and injustices still facing Jews in this country.

According to the most recent figures, 17 per cent of all hate crimes in Canada target Jewish people. Far higher per capita than any other group. Holocaust deniers still exist. Anti-Semitism is still far too present. Jewish institutions and neighbourhoods are still being vandalized with swastikas. Jewish students still feel unwelcomed and uncomfortable on some of our college and university campuses because of BDS-related intimidation.

And out of our entire community of nations, it is Israel whose right to exist is most widely – and wrongly – questioned. Discrimination and violence against Jewish people in Canada and around the world continues at an alarming rate.

Canada and all Canadians must stand up against xenophobic and anti-Semitic attitudes that still exist in our communities, in our schools, and in our places of work. We must guard our communities and institutions against the kinds of evils that took hold in the hearts of so many, more than 70 years ago, for they did not end with the War.

And I pledge to you now: we will do more.

As we stand here today, we must commit ourselves not just to remember, but to act on this tragic history, so that our children and grandchildren flourish in a world in which they are never questioned or attacked because of their identity.

More than 70 years ago, Canada turned its back on you.
But today, Canadians pledge, now and forever, never again.

REMARKS BY PRIME MINISTER JUSTIN TRUDEAU, NOVEMBER 7, 2018