

Testimony Submitted to the
United States Congress
House of Representatives
Judiciary – Subcommittee on Immigration, Citizenship,
Refugees, Border Security, and International Law
March 19, 2009

by

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Madame Chairwoman, Distinguished Members of the Subcommittee,

My name is David Harris. I am the executive director of the American Jewish Committee.

Permit me to thank you for holding this hearing on a topic of immense historical importance that continues to resonate – and haunt us – to the present day.

Time does not permit more than a brief review of U.S. immigration policy from 1933 to 1945, the years that coincide with the rule of the Third Reich. Fortunately, there are many scholarly works on the subject, as well as personal testimonies, which fill out the picture.

Upon assuming office in 1933, President Franklin D. Roosevelt was immediately confronted with two daunting challenges – one domestic, the other foreign.

At home, President Roosevelt faced the devastating impact of the Great Depression and the pressing need to rebuild the economy and restore confidence in the nation.

Abroad, President Roosevelt took office just weeks after Adolf Hitler ascended to power in Berlin.

From the start, the President showed courage and sagacity in dealing with the domestic challenge, while, over time, recognizing, to his everlasting credit, that a country unenthusiastic about the prospect of once again rescuing Europe from its own demons, as it had in the First World War, needed to be prepared for that eventuality.

But the Roosevelt era included one great failing. As a nation, we did far less to rescue Jews, who were targeted for extinction by the Nazi juggernaut, than we could and should have.

Who was to blame? Frankly, it would be easier, and much shorter, to list who was not to blame.

The reasons, excuses, and defenses for those who failed to act could fill volumes.

However sensitive President Roosevelt might have been to the Jews' plight, and there is reason to believe that he was, domestic politics at the time made it difficult for him to act.

He was fearful of inciting the fertile ground of domestic anti-Semitism and facing the wrath of widespread nativist sentiment, both attested to by public opinion polls at the time. Moreover, he was convinced, once the U.S. entered the war, that the best way to help Europe's Jews was to vanquish the Nazis as quickly as possible, without any so-called distraction or diversion of resources.

The Congress, while including some Members who desperately wanted to help beleaguered Jews, could not overcome the resistance of restrictionist colleagues, who,

reflecting the popular mood, were unwilling to revisit strict immigration laws adopted in 1924, leaving those laws intact throughout the period under discussion here.

The State Department, plagued by the bureaucratic instinct for inertia and legalism at its worst, not to mention a tissue-thin facade that barely concealed the anti-Semitism of some of its key decision-makers, was the last place in Washington to look for help.

The general public was certainly not clamoring for the gates to be opened. Fearful of more newcomers, who were seen as threats to scarce jobs, and influenced by the hysteria wrought by demagogues like Father Charles Coughlin, who railed against the Jews in his popular radio broadcasts, the American people exerted little pressure on elected officials to do something dramatic to help Europe's embattled Jews.

In fact, a 1942 survey, cited by Leonard Dinnerstein in *Antisemitism in America*, found that Americans rated Jews as the third greatest "menace" to the country, behind only Germans and Japanese, the country's sworn wartime enemies. By 1944, Jews had moved to the top of the list, with 24 percent of Americans believing that Jews posed the greatest danger.

With notably few exceptions, the media did not experience its proudest moment, either. In such leading newspapers and opinion-molders as the *New York Times*, stories about the plight of Hitler's victims were often brief and buried, and editorials were few and far between. They hardly contributed to an understanding of, much less a popular outrage against, what was taking place in Europe, even as the grisly facts of the Nazi eliminationist plans emerged.

Jewish agencies, including my own, were alarmed by the trajectory of developments and sought in their various ways to raise consciousness and reach decision-makers, though, it must be said, their clout was severely limited. Indeed, as historian Henry Feingold despairingly notes in *The Politics of Rescue*:

Much of their formidable organizational resources were dissipated in internal bickering until it seemed as if Jews were more anxious to tear each other apart than to rescue their coreligionists.

I could go on. Suffice it to say that this was not our country's finest hour.

In the interests of time, let me cite just three examples that, I believe, encapsulate the larger story.

In May 1939, a passenger liner, the *St. Louis*, set sail from Hamburg with over 900 Jewish refugees. It was destined for Cuba, but, on arrival, Cuban officials cancelled the transit visas that had been issued to the passengers and refused to let all but a tiny handful disembark. The ship then headed for the coast of Florida, coming so close that the refugees could see the lights of Miami, but U.S. officials callously refused to let it enter a

port and discharge its passengers. Rather, the ship was sent back to Europe. More than a quarter of the passengers, it is known, were subsequently killed by the Nazis.

Imagine, our country could find neither the compassion nor the legal basis to admit 900 Jews fleeing Hitler who were within sight of our shores.

The next year, Assistant Secretary of State Breckenridge Long, no friend of Europe's Jews, to say the least, wrote his now legendary words: "We can delay and effectively stop for a temporary period of indefinite length the number of immigrants into the United States. We could do this by simply advising our consuls to put every obstacle in the way and to require additional evidence and to resort to various administrative devices which would postpone and postpone and postpone the granting of the visas."

Imagine, key officials in the State Department, when they were not trying to suppress information coming from Europe about the fate of the Jews, were actively seeking ways to block entry to the United States. In so doing, they failed even to meet the strict immigration quotas operative at the time. Shockingly, from 1933 onward, for example, the annual country quota for immigrants from Germany was only filled once.

In 1939, for example, there were over 300,000 applicants for the 27,000 German slots alone. The failure to do so was not for any shortage of applicants, cumbersome though the process was – including, hard as it may be to believe, a Certificate of Good Conduct from German police officials and, as of September 30, 1939, proof of permission to leave Germany. Rather, the problem was a total lack of compassion.

Nor were the refugees excluded in the knowledge that, if the United States did not resettle them, other nations would. Indeed, few other countries did.

Apropos, Britain, which itself took in 70,000 European Jews, succumbed to Arab pressure and tightened still further entry into Mandatory Palestine, another theoretical escape route, when, tragically, there was no sovereign Israel to offer safe haven to Jews in desperate need.

Two major intergovernmental conferences, Evian in 1938 and Bermuda in 1943, were touted as venues for discussion of the refugee crisis, but the U.S. and other participants seemed more far interested in the politics of symbolism than in substance.

In other words, the vast majority of Europe's Jews, feeling the Nazi noose tightening around their necks, were literally trapped, even when they still had the chance to leave countries like Germany and Austria. Too many had nowhere to go. They were the unwanted flotsam of the Second World War.

And on January 16, 1944, Henry Morgenthau, the Secretary of the Treasury, wrote his *cri de coeur* to his friend, President Roosevelt.

In it, he said:

The best summary of the whole situation is contained in one sentence of a report submitted on December 20, 1943, by the Committee on Foreign Relations of the Senate, recommending the passage of a Resolution (S.R. 203), favoring the appointment of a commission to formulate plans to save the Jews of Europe from extinction by Nazi Germany.... The committee stated: 'We have talked; we have sympathized; we have expressed our horror; the time to act is long past due.'

Concluding his admirable letter to the President, Morgenthau wrote, referring to the State Department:

The matter of rescuing the Jews from extermination is a trust too great to remain in the hands of men who are indifferent, callous, and perhaps even hostile.

Imagine, the Secretary of the Treasury felt compelled to resort to such language about governmental colleagues in a letter to the President, so angry and anguished was he about U.S. refugee policy.

Importantly, the result of Morgenthau's intervention was the creation of the U.S. War Refugee Board, which, through sheer ingenuity and audacity, was successful in rescuing an estimated 200,000 Jews from otherwise certain death.

It was a stark reminder of what this country was capable of when it resolved to act. If only we had done so sooner – but, alas, the government spent little time considering ways to rescue Jews, slow down the transport trains to the extermination camps, bomb the machinery of death, or warn the Nazi regime of severe retribution for its genocidal policy.

Madame Chairwoman, I cannot end this testimony without a personal word.

Even with the grievous failures of omission and commission in American policy, an estimated 200,000 Jews were able to enter the United States in the 12-year period from 1933 to 1945.

That number may have been a mere pittance compared to those who sought entry and, indeed, were eligible for admission under the existing quota system, but nonetheless those 200,000 Jews were saved.

I would not be here today, Madame Chairwoman, were it not for that group of 200,000. My mother and maternal grandparents were among them, arriving in New York in November 1941.

Their entry into the United States was not made easy, I assure you, but in the end, having crossed the Iberian Peninsula to Lisbon, they were able to board the *SS Exeter* and find a safe haven, and new start, in this country.

But if only more leaders had had the capacity not only to grasp the genocide at hand, but also to identify with the anguish of the victims – the victims who till the very end wanted to believe that their plight as human beings would not, could not, go neglected – then there would have been no need for this hearing. And, yes, there would be many more people like myself today proud to call America home.

Thank you, Madame Chairwoman.