

## **ST. LOUIS** SHIP OF FATE



Photo: AP Images

## **ABOUT THE EXHIBITION**

In May 1939, a few months before the outbreak of the Second World War, more than 900 Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi persecution boarded the German ocean liner *St. Louis*. Turned away by Cuba, the United States and Canada, their ship was forced to make its way back to Europe, where more than a quarter of the passengers would later be killed in the Holocaust. ***St. Louis – Ship of Fate*** explores their tragic story within the context of Nazism and international racism, through photographs, text, interactives and artifacts.

***St. Louis – Ship of Fate*** will be on display at the Canadian War Museum from March 21 to April 29, 2018. This travelling exhibition is produced by the Maritime Museum of the Atlantic, a part of the Nova Scotia Museum, in collaboration with the Atlantic Jewish Council and Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada.

### **The Ship**

The *St. Louis* was a sleek, modern vessel of the Hamburg-America Line. A photograph from its maiden voyage in 1929 shows the ship's arrival in Halifax, a regular port of call. Once directed by Albert Ballin, a proud and patriotic Jewish German, Hamburg-America was purged of Jewish employees after Adolf Hitler and the Nazis came to power in 1933. The luxurious *St. Louis* was subsequently used for Nazi propaganda cruises, in addition to its regular voyages. The exhibition includes posters advertising these trips, along with a metre-long model of the vessel.

### **Nazi Persecution of Jews**

Adolf Hitler and the Nazis began persecuting Jews immediately after taking power in 1933. Images in the exhibition from 1938's Kristallnacht, or the "Night of Broken Glass," illustrate the escalating violence and persecution. Synagogues and Jewish businesses were ransacked and destroyed, and hundreds of Jewish people were killed. Tens of thousands more were rounded up and imprisoned. By the time the Second World War broke out in September 1939, half of Germany's Jewish population had already fled the country.

### **Canadian Immigration in the 1930s**

During the Great Depression, Canada's restrictive, racist and anti-Semitic immigration policies tended to exclude Jewish people and others seen as "undesirable," partly under the guise of preserving jobs for Canadians. The exhibition introduces a few families — such as the Echts, who settled in Hants County, Nova Scotia — who were admitted to Canada only because they agreed to take up farming, or because they had significant financial assets or family connections.

## The Fateful Voyage

With German Captain Gustav Schroeder in command, the *St. Louis* sailed for Cuba on May 13, 1939. Pictures in the exhibition show passengers enjoying the transatlantic voyage, undoubtedly relieved at the prospect of freedom from life under the Nazis. Another photograph shows the ship being welcomed in Havana, Cuba, by waiting family and friends. Unfortunately, Cuba had changed its visa requirements and refused to allow the passengers ashore, with the exception of a fortunate few. The *St. Louis* next headed for Florida, but the United States also turned the ship away, citing strict quotas and a long waiting list for Jewish refugees and other immigrants.

As other countries in the Caribbean, South America and Central America also refused to help, the plight of the *St. Louis* refugees drew public attention in Canada and elsewhere. The exhibition examines how a group of Canadian clergy and academics petitioned the government to accept the refugees on humanitarian grounds. Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King was sympathetic, but other politicians and immigration officials were not. Anti-Semitism and indifference prevailed, forcing the ship to sail back to Europe. A newspaper clipping and editorial cartoons in the exhibition reflect media criticism of Canada and the United States for their failure to protect the refugees.

Captain Schroeder refused to return his passengers to Germany, instead arranging for other European countries to accept them. In one of the exhibition photographs, the captain is seen negotiating landing permits as passengers disembark in Belgium on June 17. From Belgium, many made their way to Britain, France and the Netherlands.

## Fate and Consequences

Within a year, three of the four countries that had taken in the *St. Louis* refugees were overrun by German forces. Belgium, France and the Netherlands were now under the control of the Nazi regime, which was determined to round up and kill Europe's Jews. In all, 254 of the *St. Louis* passengers died in the Holocaust, most of them killed in the Sobibor and Auschwitz death camps. Their names are listed in the exhibition, along with several individual photographs.

Following the Second World War, many of the surviving passengers made their way to North America, as doors finally opened to Jewish immigration. Some of their descendants live in Canada today. Their stories, and the story of the *St. Louis*, remain a cautionary tale for current and future generations.

MARCH 21  
TO APRIL 29, 2018

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