

## **I Will Protect You; I Will Not Protect You**

*Kristallnacht*, the “Night of Broken Glass” during which Jewish homes, synagogues, and businesses were attacked and destroyed across Germany and 30,00 Jewish males were rounded up and sent to concentration camps, had just taken place in November 1938. The violent intent of the German government was now clear, and more and more Jews and other targeted groups accelerated their plans to leave Germany for safety. In May 1939, 937 passengers boarded the *St. Louis* and sailed to Havana, Cuba to escape. Havana was not welcoming.

The voyage of the *St. Louis* was known abroad, and already in Cuba a campaign had begun to prevent the Jews from being admitted. Cubans were still struggling from the Great Depression, and it was easy to fan resentment against foreigners who might compete for scarce resources. Resistance to admitting any foreigners was also increased through fears of their endangering the Cuban way of life. The *St. Louis* arrived in Havana on May 13, 1939. The Cuban government used various bureaucratic measures to invalidate entry visas and, in the end, turned the *St. Louis* away from the Havana port on June 2<sup>nd</sup>.

The *St. Louis* then sailed toward Florida, getting close enough to see the United States, and passengers on the ship cabled President Roosevelt seeking refuge. He never responded. A decision was made by the U.S. State Department against admitting the passengers to the United States, even though there were legal avenues that could have been taken to allow them entry. Congress had an opportunity to raise immigration quotas just a few months before in view of the increasing number of people who wanted to escape the Nazi persecution, but the bill died in the Senate.

In the end, the U.S. government turned the *St. Louis* away and the ship sailed back to Europe where Great Britain, the Netherlands, Belgium, and France took in the passengers. During the next years of world war, 254 of the passengers of the *St. Louis* died in the Holocaust.

The denial of protection by the United States of people seeking refuge from persecution brings shame to this country to this day. Call it political cowardice or moral failure, the lessons from that incident stand as a guide as to how the country should or should not conduct itself when called upon to take in people whose lives are endangered. It seems, however, that these lessons have not been taken to heart.

The events unfolding in the United States currently are more perverse than what happened in June of 1939. Back then, the passengers were never admitted. Today, people from Haiti, Venezuela, and other countries who escaped conditions in which people were being robbed, tortured, raped, and killed, were indeed offered protection through what is known as Temporary Protected Status or Humanitarian Parole. On arrival and under subsequent decisions by the United States government these people were promised a certain amount of time in which they could live in safety, enjoy some level of normalcy by working and going to school, and determine if they could ever safely return to their countries or follow the laws of the United

States to become permanent residents and eventually citizens. With the recent actions taken by the United States government, their Temporary Protected Status is being taken away, Humanitarian Parole revoked, and bureaucratic measures advanced to close off any recourse. The United States government is reneging on its promises and snatching back the protection they were given. In terms of the *St. Louis* incident, our government is saying to these people, “Get back on the ship.”

Unfortunately, the same anti-immigrant resentments and prejudices that were present back in 1939 are behind these decisions today. The question now is the same as back then. Will the people of the United States and its public officials stand silent and let its government go back on its word and send these people back to certain persecution, suffering, and death? It is time for people to summon their sense of decency and take action to reverse these decisions. As of the writing of this article, some of these actions have been delayed because of various court rulings. Let us hope that these rulings prevail.

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