June 7, 1939: Prime Minister Mackenzie King turns away Jewish refugees on board the SS St. Louis

At 8:00 ON THE MORNING OF MAY 13, 1939, THE SS St. Louis departed Hamburg with 937 Jewish refugees on board, destined for Havana, Cuba, where they were to live until their names reached the quota list for entry into the U.S. For many, it was their last chance to escape internment in the Nazi concentration camps.

But a week earlier, on May 5, Cuban President Frederico Bru had bent to anti-Jewish sentiment, whipped up by Nazi propagandists, and published Decree 937, invalidating the refugee's landing permits by closing a loophole that had allowed them access to Cuba by blurring the distinction between tourist and refugee. President Bru refused to let the passengers disembark, so the St. Louis remained anchored in Havana's harbour from May 27 until June 2 as the various political, economic, personal, and military sides made efforts to influence the president's decision.

Different interests collided as the drama unfolded. Propagandists from Germany used the plight of the St. Louis to prove to the world that nobody wanted the Jews, making it hypocritical for anyone to condemn their actions.

Luis Clasing, a corrupt agent for the Hapag shipping line, and the equally corrupt Cuban director of immigration, Manuel Benitez, were interested in the money they made selling fake landing permits to refugees through the loophole now closed by President Bru's decree.

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The German Secret Service wanted Otto Schiendick, the ship's Nazi party Ortsgruppenleiter (local group leader), to transport American military secrets from Havana back to Germany. And in every country to which Jewish organizations appealed for support, governments struggled between protecting their economies, appeasing the public, and maintaining an international image of reason and compassion.

On June 7, 1939, Prime Minister Mackenzie King was in Washington. His response mirrored America's when he stated he was "emphatically opposed to the admission of the St. Louis passengers." Earlier, at the Evian Conference, an international meeting to address the refugee problem, King had claimed, "The admission of refugees perhaps posed a greater menace to Canada in 1938 than did Hitler." Canada's director of the Immigration Branch of the Department of Mines and Resources, Charles Frederick Blair, said that "if these Jews were to find a home [in Canada] they would likely be followed by other shiploads. No country could open its doors wide enough to take in the hundreds of thousands of Jewish people who want to leave Europe: the line must be drawn somewhere."

Rejected from all ports, and after pacing the ocean between Havana and Miami, the St. Louis reluctantly turned back to Hamburg on June 6. The situation on board became so desperate, passengers threatened or attempted suicide – a few succeeded. Some plotted mutiny. Although Captain Gustav Shroeder managed to peacefully quell the only uprising, even he succumbed to the desperation and planned to either run the ship aground or set it on fire off the coast of England, forcing the passengers to evacuate and flee ashore.

But as the St. Louis neared the end of its return trip to Hamburg on Monday, June 12, France, the United Kingdom, Belgium, and the Netherlands stepped forward to each take a share of the refugees. The ship was redirected to Antwerp, Belgium, where representatives from the four countries fought to receive those closest to the top of the waiting list for the U.S., thus reducing the time the refugees would be in their care. The choice of country was mostly beyond the control of the passengers. For many, where they were sent determined their fate.

Only an estimated 240 of the 907 passengers who returned to Europe survived the Holocaust, most in Britain. In 1944, the Royal Air Force bombed the St. Louis. Though badly damaged, it was later converted into a floating hotel in the Hamburg Harbour until 1950, when it was dismantled and sold as scrap metal. Gordon Thomas and Max Morgan Witts made the story of the St. Louis into a book titled Voyage of the Damned. The authors gathered personal letters, diaries, and official documents and combined them with personal interviews of passengers and crew. In 1976, the movie version, with a huge cast that included Faye Dunaway, Max von Sydow, Orson Welles, and Ben Gazzara, was nominated for three Academy Awards.

Twenty-five survivors from the St. Louis received a public apology from Canadian Christian leaders in Ottawa in 2000. Among those apologizing was Baptist minister Doug Blair, the great-nephew of Charles Frederick Blair.

R.W.

Beaver Bites
Profiles of Canadian artifacts both beautiful and beaverful
Beaver sealer jar

Glass became the material of choice for storing perishables in the early nineteenth century, outpacing tin and stoneware by the middle of the century. This amber beaver sealer dates from the late nineteenth century and was most likely manufactured by the Ontario Glass Company in Kingsville, Ontario. Note how the beaver faces right, not left. What's the difference? Left-facing beavers, probably manufactured by the Diamond Glass Company, are rare, highly prized collectables. For antique collectors, those left-facing beavers can fetch up to five times the value of their right-facing mates.

July 19
To recall the first annual convention of the CCT in Regina in 1933, led by J.S. Woodsworth and attended by more than 150 delegates. Paint the town red.

July 29
To commemorate the completion of a suspension bridge over the Niagara River between Niagara in Canada and the U.S. in 1848. Sing some Simon and Garfunkle.