

# CANADA FAILED JEWISH REFUGEES FLEEING THE NAZIS

## THE SITUATION IN NAZI GERMANY

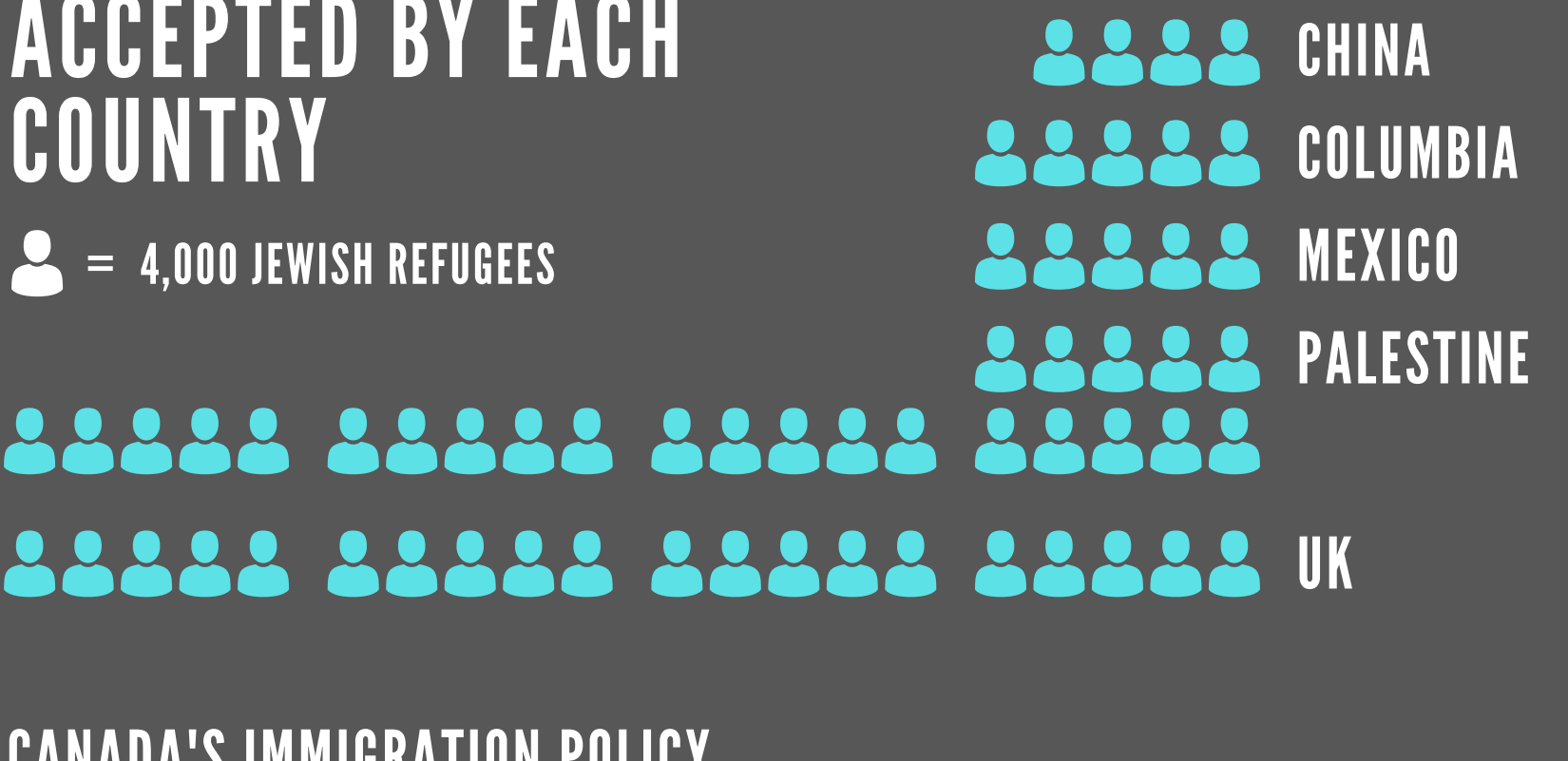
Between 1933 and 1939, more than 800,000 Jews fled from the Third Reich.

In those years, the Nazi regime stripped German Jews of their citizenship; barred them from schools, courts, and government positions; imposed enormous collective fines on them; confiscated their property and businesses; and sanctioned violence against them.

## Canada's record ranked among the worst of the Allied countries

### JEWISH REFUGEE SETTLEMENT AROUND THE WORLD

Though most countries were inhospitable to refugees at the time, Canada was uniquely restrictive of Jewish refugees. From the year Hitler became chancellor to the outbreak of World War II, Canada had admitted only 4,000 refugees: far fewer than other Allied countries.



### CANADA'S IMMIGRATION POLICY

Canada's immigration policy had always been ethnically selective, preferring immigrants from northern European over those from central European, and preferring both over Jewish, Black, and Asian immigrants.

Those least preferred immigrants would only be considered acceptable if they could be kept out of public view working dangerous jobs in mines, lumber camps, and rural farms.

Since the 1920's, Canada had begun increasingly restricting immigration. The mass-unemployment of the Great Depression gave the federal government the opportunity to complete that restriction.

## PROMINENT FIGURES WHO INFLUENCED REFUGEE SETTLEMENT



### FREDERICK CHARLES BLAIR

Federal director of immigration (1936-1943)

Blair was Canada's director of immigration leading up to World War II, and he held direct control over the fate of refugees who sought asylum in Canada.

Blair was deeply antisemitic, regularly expressing his contempt and distaste for Jewish people. While the Third Reich became ever more openly hostile to its Jewish citizens, Blair became ever more insistent on keeping Jewish refugees out of Canada.

Under his leadership, Canada refused thousands of Jewish refugees who would end up dying in the gas chambers and crematoriums of the Nazi regime. Blair alone is not solely responsible for this travesty, however. He kept his position precisely because his actions were exactly what the Prime Minister and federal cabinet wanted.



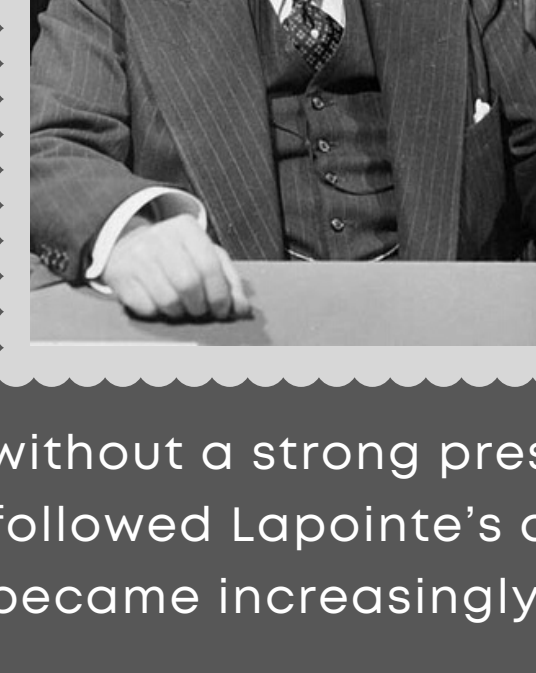
### ERNEST LAPOINTE

Federal Quebec Lieutenant (1935-1941)

Lapointe served as the Prime Minister's Quebec lieutenant and played a key role in Canada's restriction of Jewish refugees.

While antisemitism was prevalent throughout Canada at this time, politics and popular opinion within Quebec were particularly grievous.

After the profoundly antisemitic Union Nationale party in Quebec defeated the Liberal party in 1936, Lapointe focused his energy on ensuring the Quebec Liberal party would survive. Lapointe emphatically believed that allowing any Jewish refugees to settle in Canada (even outside of Quebec) would harm Quebec Liberals, so he continuously fought to keep Jewish refugees out of Canada.



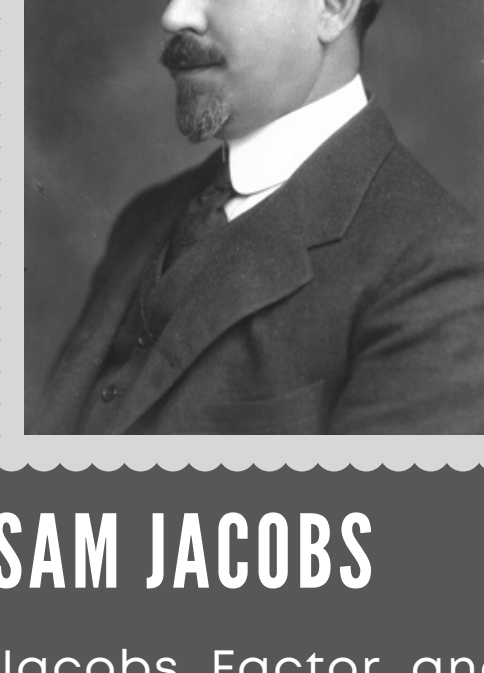
### MACKENZIE KING

Prime Minister of Canada (1935-1948)

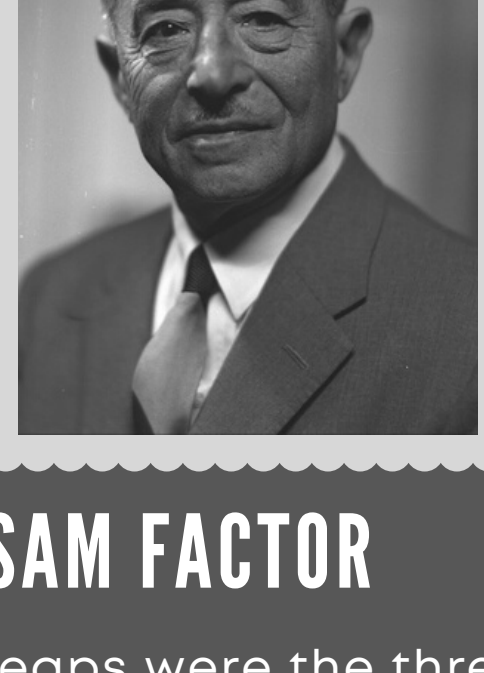
Mackenzie King was the Liberal Prime Minister of Canada during World War II and for much of the pre-war era.

King consistently prioritized his own party's political opportunities over Jewish lives. King feared that his Liberal party could not succeed without a strong presence in Quebec, so he consistently followed Lapointe's direction even as news out of Germany became increasingly dire.

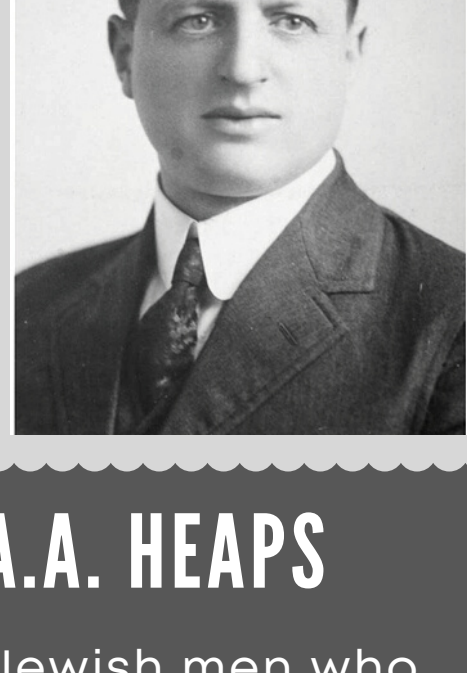
King believed that allowing Jewish refugees into Canada might cause riots and undermine the unity of the nation, ultimately destroying the country. Thus, every effort was made to restrict Jewish refugees. Instead of acting on the pleas of Jewish community advocates, King told them to "arouse public opinion" – a strategy which would never end up shifting the government's policy.



### SAM JACOBS



### SAM FACTOR



### A.A. HEAPS

Jacobs, Factor, and Heaps were the three Jewish men who won seats in Canada's 1935 federal election. Through meetings, committees, lobbying, pleading, and letters to the Prime Minister, these Members of Parliament fought for Canada to allow more Jewish refugees.

Unfortunately, their efforts were continuously spurred by Blair, Lapointe, and King who refused to concede to even minimal proposals.

## PUBLIC PROTEST TO CANADA'S RESTRICTIVE REFUGEE POLICY

Through the efforts of Jewish community organizations and activists over several years, public support for Jewish refugees grew.

In 1938, community organizing in Canada exploded after *Kristallnacht* when German Jews were beaten and murdered in the streets; lost homes, businesses, and synagogues to vandalism and arson; and were taken to concentration camps en-masse.



A Synagogue in Berlin which was destroyed during Kristallnacht

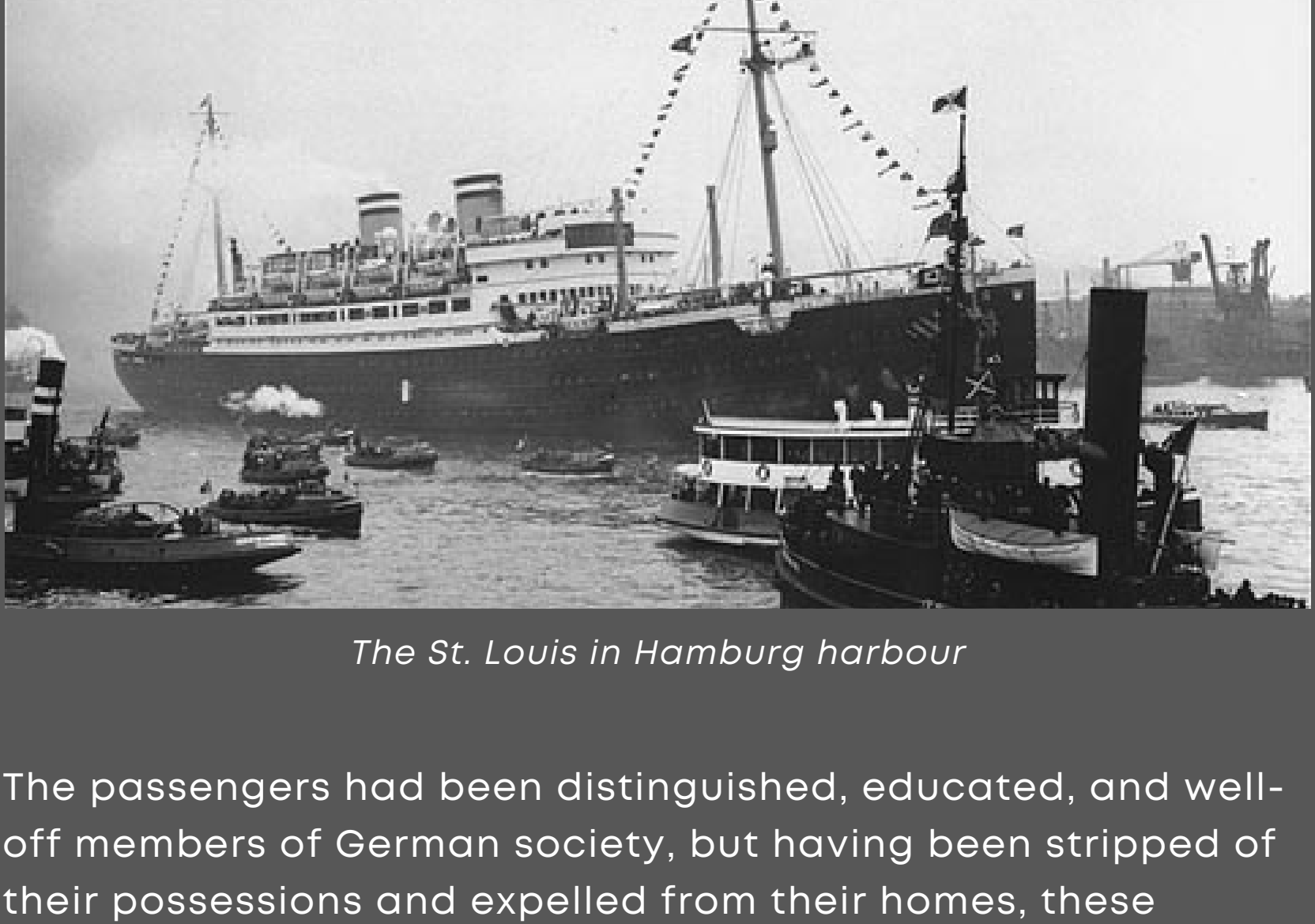
In the weeks following *Kristallnacht*, mass meetings with hundreds and thousands of attendees were held in cities across Canada; thousands of people signed petitions; and articles which condemned the federal government's inaction were printed in nearly every English-language newspaper in the country.

In a meeting days after the mass rallies, Jewish leaders pleaded with the Prime Minister and the director of immigration to allow 10,000 refugees over a five-year period. The leaders further guaranteed that these refugees would not cost the government anything. Nonetheless, King refused the request, telling the leaders that the country's unity must take priority over accepting any refugees.

# TURNING AWAY THE ST. LOUIS

## THE FATE OF A SHIP CARRYING 907 REFUGEES

On May 15, 1939, the St. Louis left Hamburg, Germany with 907 German Jews who were desperate to escape Nazi persecution.



*The St. Louis in Hamburg harbour*

The passengers had been distinguished, educated, and well-off members of German society, but having been stripped of their possessions and expelled from their homes, these refugees were now penniless.



*Members of the Heldenmuth family boarding the St. Louis*

The passengers had managed to secure entrance visas to Cuba, but when their ship docked in Havana, none were permitted to disembark. Though various Jewish organizations attempted to find a country for them to land, all the countries of Latin American had refused to accept the refugees. With the United States also refusing, Canada was the last hope for these refugees.

### CANADA'S RESPONSE TO THE REFUGEES

Though Jewish communities and leaders had been advocating for the acceptance of more refugees, and though some influential Canadians had written to the prime minister begging him to show these refugees “true Christian charity,” the passengers of the St. Louis would not be allowed to land.

At the time, Lapointe was serving as acting prime minister while King visited the United States. Unsurprisingly, Lapointe was “emphatically opposed” to allowing the refugees to enter Canada.

Blair shared a similar stance: he felt that the country had already done too much for the Jews, and he feared that allowing these refugees would encourage others to follow. In his mind, “the line must be drawn somewhere.”

### THE FATE OF THE PASSENGERS

With their last hope of finding asylum in the Americas crushed, the passengers returned to Europe. There, many would end up dying in the Nazi’s gas chambers and crematorium.

# CANADA'S COMPLICITY

## IN THE JEWISH REFUGEE CRISIS

In the years leading up to World War II, Canada was not alone in its dismal support for Jewish refugees; certainly, most other countries could have taken in far more Jewish refugees than they did.

However, Canada was unique in its restrictiveness, fighting harder than any other Allied country to ensure that it blocked as many refugees as possible. In a horrific environment where Jews who could not find safe harbour faced genocide, Canada was complicit in countless deaths that it could have directly prevented.

### SOURCES

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