

What Did Canadians Know During the Holocaust?

.....
At the beginning of 1933, the Nazi Party came to power in Germany. 12 years later 6 million Jews had been systematically murdered. What did so called "bystander nations" know? What did they do? There is a popular belief that the Holocaust was "discovered" at the end of WWII when Allied forces reclaimed Nazi occupied territory. This is untrue. As Ulrich Frisse writes, "Canada's largest paper exposed Canadians to a surprisingly high level of detailed information on the persecution and genocide of the Jews of Europe in real time." (215-216)

Reporting

The *Toronto Daily Star*, then the most widely distributed newspaper in the country, had a correspondent, Pierre van Paassen, stationed in Berlin. He reported on the state sponsored dispossession and violence against German Jews. These reports came from his personal observations, eyewitness accounts, and statements made by the German government. (Frisse 217)

From January to July of 1933 the *Toronto Daily Star* ran 19 different front page stories focusing on the abuses facing Jewish people in Germany. Some typical headlines from van Paassen's articles in early 1933 are "Nazis' Reign of Blood Eclipses Massacres of Medieval Times," and "Jews Beaten up by Hitlerites in Berlin" (Frisse 218).

Later in 1933 van Paassen was deported from Germany for his activity as a reporter. Even without a correspondent reporting first hand experiences, the *Toronto Daily Star* continued to publish news on the conditions of life in the Third Reich for European Jews throughout prewar years and during WWII.

Reception

Due to existing antisemitic prejudices and the severity of Nazi violence against Jews, van Paassen's reporting was often accepted skeptically or even outright disbelieved.

Letters written to the editors of the *Toronto Daily Star* accused Pierre van Paassen of Jewish heritage and anti-German bias. This campaign caused the *Toronto Daily Star* to publish an article reaffirming the paper's faith in van Paassen's reporting and his background as a Dutch Protestant. (Frisse 218)

Deutscher Bund Canada, a pro-Nazi and German nationalist group was known for encouraging its members to discredit what it deemed "anti-German propaganda" by "exposing the authors' alleged Jewish background" (Frisse 220)



Pierre van Paassen, *Toronto Daily Star* correspondent stationed in Berlin

Canadians were aware of the plight of European Jews. How did this influence public opinion and government actions?

Popular Opinion

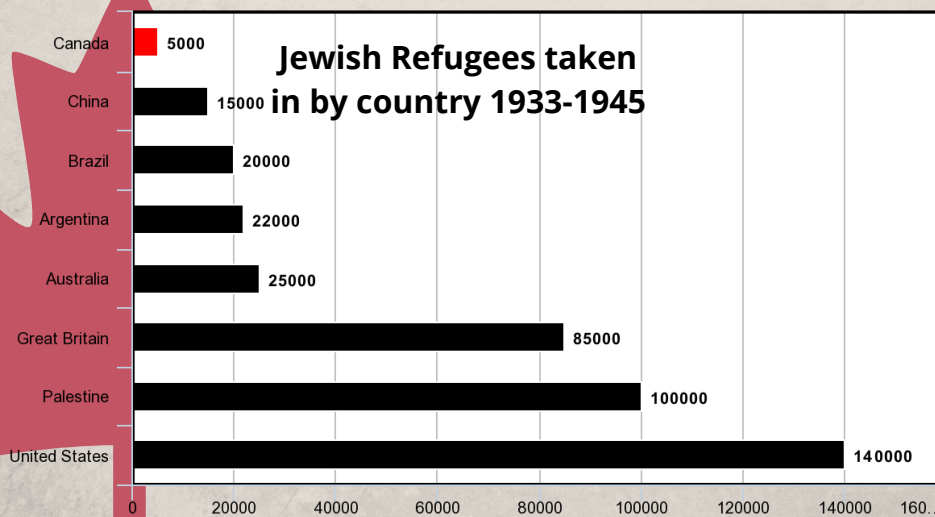
In Canada during and after the war, public feeling towards the plight of European Jews ranged from general apathy to outright hostility (Abella and Troper 209).

In early 20th Century Canada, Germany and Germans were held in high standing whereas Jewish people were considered 'undesirable citizens' (Valverde 110). While Germans were vilified during WWII the Canadian public continued mainstream prejudice against Jewish people.

Government Actions

Of the 800,000 Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi rule, Canada only accepted 5,000. This is among the lowest number of refugees accepted by any country at the time. Prior to 1940 Argentina admitted 22,000, Australia was willing to take in 25,000, Brazil 20,000, China 15,000, Great Britain 85,000 Palestine, 100,000 and the United States took in 140,000 refugees. (Abella and Troper 181)

During and after WWII, Canadians continued to support antisemitic policy and beliefs in government. Politicians such as Maurice Le Noblet Duplessis were elected because of the use of antisemitic rhetoric in their campaigns (Sheftel 22).



Jewish Refugees aboard the *St. Louis* in 1939. They were denied entry to Cuba, USA, and Canada. They returned to Europe after months at sea (Abella 178-180).

Canadian attitudes and policy towards Jews existed as they did, "not made *because* of lack of information, but *in spite of* information that, as early as 1942, pointed towards a comprehensive plan to destroy the Jews of Europe - the Final Solution." (Frisse 243)

Bibliography

Abella, Irving and Troper, Harold. "The line must be drawn somewhere": Canada and Jewish refugees, 1933-9." *Canadian Historical Review* 60. no. 2 (1979): 179-209.

Frisse, Ulrich. "The 'Bystanders' Perspective" The *Toronto Daily Star* and Its Coverage of the Persecution of the Jews and the Holocaust in Canada, 1933-1945." *Yad Vashem Studies* 39, no. 1 (2011): 213-244.

Sheftel, Anna and Zembrzycki, Stacey. "'We started Over Again, We Were Young': Postwar Social Worlds of Childhood Holocaust Survivors in Montreal." *Urban History Review* 39. no. 1 (2010) 20-30.

Valverde, Mariana. "Racial Purity, Sexual Purity, and Immigration Policy." In *The Age of Light, Soap, and Water: Moral reform in English Canada 1885-1925*, 104-128. Toronto: University of Toronto Press (2008)