Americans and the Holocaust photo captions

“Sponsorship affidavit of Louis Lyons” Notarized June 22, 1939 United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, gift of Hans Weinmann

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"Americans and the Holocaust" special exhibition (2018-2021)
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“Payment for ship passage for the Winters.” January 26, 1939 United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Collection, gift of Stephen Winter

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After Germany invaded and annexed Austria and Czechoslovakia in 1938 and 1939, hundreds of thousands of people, mostly Jews, applied to immigrate to the United States. U.S. immigration visas were difficult to obtain due to America’s national security concerns, the difficulty refugees had in securing American financial sponsors, and the finite number of visas and travel options.
“Portrait of Jan Karski during his mission to the United States to inform government leaders about Nazi policy in Poland.” July 1943 United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Jan Karski

Jan Karski, a lieutenant in the Polish underground fighting the German occupation, was smuggled into both the Warsaw ghetto and prisoner transit camp to witness the horrors suffered by Jews. Nine months later, Karski arrived in Washington, D.C., to tell American government officials what he had seen. Karski met President Roosevelt at the White House on July 28, 1943.
“Unemployed men queued outside a depression soup kitchen opened in Chicago by mobster Al Capone.” February 1931 National Archives at College Park - Still Pictures

As Americans read press reports about the Nazi persecution of Jews in Germany, the United States had been suffering the effects of the Great Depression for nearly four years. Some 25 percent of workers were unemployed in 1933. To stimulate recovery, the new U.S. President, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, promised the country a “New Deal,” immediately embarking upon an ambitious agenda to repair the U.S. economy. Although there were public anti-Nazi protests and rallies in spring 1933, most Americans focused on serious domestic problems in the United States rather than on the persecution of a minority group thousands of miles away.
“Unemployed man with sign asking for work in Detroit, Michigan.” 1932 Deliverable: Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library & Museum; Copyright: Walter P. Reuther Library, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University

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Credit: U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum
President Franklin D. Roosevelt took significant yet limited action in response to the persecution of German Jews, the refugee crisis in the 1930s, and the “Final Solution,” the Nazi campaign of mass murder. Roosevelt prioritized economic recovery from the Great Depression and victory in World War II above humanitarian crises overseas.
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“Gilbert and Eleanor Kraus (center) pose with the fifty Austrian children they are bringing to the United States.” June 1939 United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Collection, gift of Steven Pressman

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On May 13, 1939, the German transatlantic liner St. Louis sailed from Hamburg, Germany, for Havana, Cuba, carrying 937 passengers, the majority of whom were Jewish. When the St. Louis arrived in Havana, the passengers learned that the landing certificates they had purchased were invalid. After Cuba refused to allow the passengers to land and the United States (and other Western Hemisphere nations) did not offer to take the passengers, the ship returned to Europe. The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee worked with the State Department, ultimately persuading four countries—Great Britain, France, the Netherlands, and Belgium—to admit the passengers.
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During the 1930s and 1940s, the U.S. State Department tolerated nativist, xenophobic, and often antisemitic attitudes and actions. Although some State Department diplomats and officials aided Jewish refugees, Assistant Secretary of State Breckinridge Long was often accused of being personally antisemitic and unsympathetic to European refugees, especially Jews. Under his supervision, the Visa Division cited national security concerns when placing new restrictions on immigration, even though it was clear that Jewish refugees in Europe were in serious danger.
On January 22, 1944, President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9417, establishing the War Refugee Board, and tasking it with the “immediate rescue and relief of the Jews of Europe and other victims of enemy persecution.” The Board, which operated between January 1944 and September 1945, was staffed mainly by Treasury Department employees and headed by the secretaries of State, War, and Treasury. It streamlined the work of private relief agencies, helping them send money and resources into neutral and enemy territory. They also placed American representatives in neutral nations to supervise projects and pressure these countries to welcome refugees. The War Refugee Board was the first and only official American response to the crimes we now call the Holocaust.
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