

# Let Us Weep for Zion

In June 1939, the United States turned away a ship carrying 937 Jewish refugees from Europe. Most of the passengers later perished in the Holocaust. Yet today, Christians are calling the church to repent for its silence 62 years ago.

Darkness overtook the SS St. Louis as it approached the Florida coastline on June 3, 1939. The lights of Miami winked in the distance, sending a faint signal of hope to more than 900 Jewish refugees aboard the German luxury liner.

The Jews had fled the terror of Nazi Germany and sailed across the Atlantic in search of asylum. As the ship lingered off Florida, a Coast Guard gunboat prevented passengers from jumping overboard and swimming ashore.

"We were so close we could see hotels on the beach," says Liesl Loeb of Elkins Park, Pennsylvania, who was a 10-year-old passenger. "The mood was very grim. The captain thought maybe we could land illegally at night. But America sent military planes and the shore patrol to make sure we kept moving."

Seeking refuge in America was a desperate move by the St. Louis. Days earlier, the ship had been denied entry into Cuba—her original destination—after the government revoked the passengers' landing permits. Most of the Jews had sold their possessions to book passage, pay off corrupt German officials and buy visas.

For five days, the St. Louis wandered between Cuba and the United States, appealing to governments in North, Central and South America for mercy. The U.S. State Department refused to intervene in Cuban affairs, and telegrams sent by passengers

to President Franklin Roosevelt were not answered. The American church also was silent.

The final rejection came from Canada, where immigration director Frederick Blair—a Baptist elder—announced that “the line must be drawn somewhere.” He believed that admitting Jewish refugees could destroy the country.

On board, despair and panic seized passengers as the St. Louis turned back to Hamburg, Germany. One crew member committed suicide by hanging. Aaron Pozner, a Jewish passenger, rallied some youths in a failed mutiny attempt on the bridge. Before the St. Louis had sailed for Cuba, Pozner was interned at Dachau concentration camp, where he witnessed the murder of Jews by hanging, drowning and crucifixion, and the torture and mutilation of others.

Jules Wallerstein, a surviving passenger, says his father told him on board that the Jews would commit suicide before the ship returned to Germany. “That to me was a shocker,” says Wallerstein, who lives in Norwalk, Connecticut. “I was 12 years old and realized it was the end of my life. My parents knew if we went back the trains would be waiting for us.”

As the ship steamed toward Europe, Captain Gustav Schroeder, who had compassion for the refugees and in 1993 received the title “Righteous Among the Nations” at the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial in Israel, plotted to ship-wreck the St. Louis off the English coast, set the vessel on fire and evacuate passengers ashore. But Great Britain, France, Holland and Belgium agreed to admit the Jews.

Months later, three of those countries were overrun by the

Nazis as World War II erupted in Europe. Nearly two-thirds of the St. Louis Jews—including Pozner—perished in concentration camps.

### **A Call for Repentance**

Sixty-two years have passed, and the doomed voyage is but a footnote in history. But a growing number of Christian intercessors believe God still holds the nations accountable for the St. Louis rejection. They say He is calling the body of Christ into repentance for its apathy and hostility toward Jews during the Holocaust.

“The St. Louis was a test to the nations, and the nations failed,” says David Demian, director of Watchmen for the Nations ministry in Vancouver, British Columbia. “When the ship returned to Europe the chancellor of Germany came on the radio and said: ‘We sent the Jews away, and nobody wants them. We will start our Final Solution.’”

Demian says the ship was uniquely positioned in history because it floated on the waters 40 days and 40 nights: “Noah was on the waters during the 40 days and 40 nights of rain when God judged the world. In His mercy, God is bringing the whole Jewish issue before the nations. How they react will determine whether they fulfill their destiny or come under judgment.”

During an intercessors conference in Jerusalem last September, Christians say God gave them a startling revelation as they brought sins of the nations before Him.

“We listed abortion, racism, rebellion. But God said the No. 1

sin is anti-Semitism," says Rosemary Schindler, a prayer leader from California. "The Lord told us we won't get a breakthrough in other sin areas until we address the first issue. God is weighing the nations to see if we'll repent and receive a full redemption."

They say repentance is a key in the healing process between Christians and Jews, and a step toward God's ultimate plan of "one new man" described in Ephesians 2:14-16, when Jesus breaks the wall of separation and unites Jews and Gentiles to Himself.

But the wounds are deep and the divisions wide. Six million Jews perished under Hitler, but historians say millions more have died in the name of Christianity. Edward H. Flannery's book *The Anguish of the Jews* is perhaps the most definitive work on anti-Semitism. The suffering documented by Flannery and other historians is chilling:

\* During the Crusades in 1099, Christian soldiers under Godfrey de Bouillon locked Jews in a Jerusalem synagogue and set it ablaze, marching around the flames and singing the hymn "Christ We Adore Thee."

\* John Chrysostom (344-407), considered one of the most eloquent preachers in church history, said the Jews were "inveterate murderers, destroyers, men possessed by the devil."

\* A decree issued in Portugal in 1497 required that Jewish children under age 14 be baptized before Easter Sunday. Children and parents were torn from one another by force and dragged to baptismal fonts. Some Jewish parents killed their

children by throwing them into rivers and wells to avoid conversion.

\* Martin Luther (1483-1546) took the gospel to the Jews, but when they didn't convert he became enraged, calling them "parasites on Christian society." Nazi war criminals used his vicious attacks in their defense at Nuremberg.

Today, many Christian leaders say "replacement theology"—the belief that God is finished with the Jewish people and has transferred the covenant promises and blessings to Christians—has added another layer of anti-Semitism in the church. They point out that the teaching ignores hundreds of Old Testament prophecies about God returning the Jews to their biblical homeland for restoration and healing. Among the verses cited is Zechariah 12:10, which says God will pour out the Spirit of grace and supplication, and the Jews will look on the One whom they pierced and "'mourn for Him as one mourns for his only son'" (NKJV).

"It's clear in Scripture that when the ordinances of day and night cease,

He casts off Israel," says Ramon Bennett, a Christian author and Bible teacher from Jerusalem. "The natural branches [Israel] were broken so the wild branches [Gentiles] could be grafted in. But the wild branch has become proud and doesn't want the Jew back in."

### **Seeking Forgiveness**

Christian intercessors say, however, that reconciliation won't happen until the church acknowledges and repents of its sin toward Jews. Nita Johnson, an international speaker and

founder of World for Jesus Ministries in Clovis, California, says the church, not the cross, is the stumbling block to the Jews.

"We missed a divine opportunity to show the love of God to His ancient people when we didn't as a refuge for Jews during the Holocaust," she says. "Two-thirds of the church knows nothing about the Holocaust.

"To hear a figure of 6 million people dying is too mind-boggling. If you don't get down into the pit of the pain and touch the Holocaust victim, it's too easy to brush off. The human suffering was tremendous. The majority of the church closed its eyes, ears and heart."

Johnson interviewed three elderly Jewish men in Florida for a book she is writing on Holocaust survivors. The men wept before her, stunned that a Christian would extend love and compassion to a Jew.

"They said: 'The church has never cared about us Jewish people in 2,000 years. Why would they care now?' I told them the church has an inaccurate understanding of God's heart toward the Jewish people," Johnson says.

But that division appears to be weakening as many Christians are seeking God with renewed intensity and, in the process, responding to His call for repentance. Last November, 250 Canadian Christians gathered at the Château Laurier Hotel in Ottawa, Ontario, to welcome 25 Jewish survivors of the St. Louis and seek their forgiveness.

In one night, decades of unforgiveness and bitterness began to

melt away as the Jews were honored at a private dinner organized by Demian and Watchmen for the Nations. Baptist pastor Doug Blair, great nephew of the immigration director who rejected the St. Louis, offered an apology so tender that the survivors rose spontaneously to embrace him.

"I have come to beg your forgiveness for the deep, deep wrong that was done to you," he said to them. "I understand very well that my name is not one dear to your you forgive me and let me call you my friends?"

St. Louis survivor and Miami resident Herbert Karliner, 75, was so touched by the demonstration of love that he continues to stay in contact with Demian.

"It was so amazing. We Jews are very skeptical because we always were persecuted by this one or that one," says Karliner, who lost his parents and two sisters in the Holocaust. "But we saw so much love.

"A Canadian child wrote a letter that said: 'Dear Jew, I'm so sorry we didn't let you in because you are the apple of God's eye.' We have to love each other and forgive each other."

Demian invited Karliner to speak at churches in Vancouver; Winnipeg, Manitoba; and Ottawa before the St. Louis dinner, and the Christian response was overwhelming. As Karliner shared his story in Vancouver, 400 Christians rushed forward, knelt at his feet and in tears asked for forgiveness.

"I was so moved I didn't know what to do," he says. "I was trying to lift them up, but I couldn't lift up 400 people. I knew other Jews who were coming to the Ottawa dinner. I

couldn't tell them what I saw and felt. Nobody would believe me."

His testimony sparked a similar response at an Ottawa church as hundreds of Christians formed a human shield around Karliner and several Jewish friends. The believers repeated the vow that Ruth spoke to Naomi in the Bible, "'Your people shall be my people and your God, my God'" (see Ruth 1:16).

In June, St. Louis survivors attended the All Americas Convocation in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, during which Christian and government officials from the United States joined leaders who represented the 50 nations of the Americas to seek forgiveness for their silence in 1939 (see page 61).

"The ship was rejected exactly 62 years ago," says Tom Hess, coordinator of the Florida reunion and director of Jerusalem House of Prayer for All Nations. "Isaiah 62 talks about placing watchmen on the walls who will take no rest until God makes Jerusalem a praise in the earth.

"Watchmen were not on the walls 62 years ago when the U.S. government rejected [the St. Louis passengers] and sent them to the Holocaust. God is calling for a fullness of repentance and for watchmen to get back on the walls."

Hess believes God was speaking last November as Americans waited expectantly for an outcome in the presidential election, delayed for weeks by ballot counts and legal challenges in Florida. "The three counties that were holding up the elections—Palm Beach, Broward and Dade—were the counties that the St. Louis passed while trying to land," Hess says. "God got our attention during the elections. The

rejection of the St. Louis was perhaps the most blatant act of anti-Semitism in U.S. history.”

Demian believes God desires to pour out His mercy on nations, but they must meet His conditions of repentance. In July 1999 he and 2,300 Canadian Christians met in Winnipeg to repent for anti-Semitism.

“The Lord is not looking for statements or signatures,” he says. “He is looking for tears, weeping, sorrow and travail. We spent 10 hours weeping and travailing before the Lord.”

During the Winnipeg gathering, Christians built a memorial altar with small stones so that “the next generation will remember what the Lord has done for Canada as their fathers and mothers humbled themselves and wept,” Demian says.

He believes twin rainbows that appeared in the skies over Winnipeg symbolized God’s affirmation. Demian says God then led him to organize the gathering for St. Louis survivors in Ottawa, the next step in Canada’s journey of reconciliation.

As the Jews entered the grand hall for the banquet, church leaders and guests broke into thunderous applause. The blast of a ram’s horn filled the room as tears streamed down the faces of Jews and Gentiles.

One survivor remarked: “I never had much of a wedding. I felt like a bride walking up the aisle on her wedding day.” \*

### Three Days of Reconciliation

*Christians and Jews met recently in Florida to heal the wounds caused by a painful event in U.S. history.*

Tears flowed as Christians and Jews laid a wreath on the waters of Florida's eastern coast recently to help close a shameful chapter of American history. The floral tribute floated to sea from the same jetty where 62 years earlier U.S. Coast Guard ships had sailed into the Atlantic to turn away a shipload of Jewish refugees from Europe. Many of them were returned to their deaths at the hands of the Nazis.

Forty surviving passengers of the SS St. Louis, whose doomed attempt to flee Hitler's persecution was immortalized in the 1976 movie *Voyage of the Damned*, came to Fort Lauderdale in June as guests of the All Americas Convocation, an international Christian prayer gathering. As the wreath floated away, many of the survivors threw the roses that had greeted them in their rooms into the sea in memory of lost loved ones.

The three days of remembrance and repentance occurred on the anniversary of the days in 1939 when the passengers of the St. Louis had waited off the Florida coast, hoping for asylum. Finally, after being refused admission by the United States, Cuba and Canada, the ship returned to Europe. Many of the 937 aboard subsequently died in the Holocaust.

Among them were Judith Steel's parents, who perished in the Auschwitz concentration camp. As a 14-month-old passenger, Judith was more fortunate. Her parents gave her to a French Roman Catholic family who raised her for four years before she came to the United States at the end of the war.

Now a grandmother and cantor at her New York synagogue, Steel said the Fort Lauderdale ceremonies were an “unbelievable” experience.

“It was overwhelming. I had so much love shown to me,” she said. “I felt their hearts. I felt God’s presence so strongly.” Steel wept as 500 Christians who attended the convocation from across the Americas greeted her and the other survivors with a standing round of applause during a special reception.

The three-day event included a visit to the Holocaust Memorial in Miami and an evening ceremony during which several leaders publicly expressed their regret for what had happened. Organizers also presented formal statements of repentance from Gov. Jeb Bush and Mayor Jim Naugle of Fort Lauderdale.

Although the Florida gathering focused on events from more than half a century ago, recent headlines first spurred the idea for the initiative. Convocation leader Tom Hess convened the event when he realized the three Florida counties at the center of last year’s election-ballot controversy—Palm Beach, Broward and Dade—made up the very coastline along which the St. Louis had waited, hoping for entry.

“God was trying to show us that there [was] unfinished business that [had] to be dealt with in regard to the United States and repentance for the sin of rejecting these people and sending them back to the Holocaust,” he said.

Two days before the November election took the United States to the verge of a constitutional crisis, a group of St. Louis survivors were guests at a reception in Ottawa, Ontario, where

a group of Canadian Christians had repented for their country's refusal to accept the refugees.

Steel, who also attended that event, said she hopes the message of the two gatherings will spread. "I have two children and two grandchildren, and I love them very much and don't want anyone to ever go through something like [the Holocaust] again."

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