



LESSON PLAN: The Role of the US and Responsibility of Nations

INTRODUCTION

This lesson will help students understand the role the US and other nations played in immigration of Jewish and other refugees during the Holocaust. Using primary source materials, students will look at attitudes of everyday Americans at the time and examples of failed rescue efforts. Students will foster empathy with Jewish refugees in their desperation to leave Nazi Germany while pondering the responsibility of the US to help those in imminent danger throughout the world.

1 Students skim the **Echoes & Reflections Timeline of the Holocaust** (timelineoftheholocaust.org) through the years 1933-1945, noting the Evian Conference of July 6, 1938, and the Bermuda Conference of April 19, 1943. Students consider how much they think the average American knew at various stages about what was happening in Nazi-occupied Europe. Students learn that American newspapers actually ran many stories about events happening in Nazi Germany, including actions of mass murder.

2 Utilizing the United States Memorial and Museum's Americans and the Holocaust online exhibition, students view the **Public Opinion Polls** (exhibitions.ushmm.org/americans-and-the-holocaust/topics/public-opinion) that were conducted at various points throughout the Holocaust. Students learn that the first poll taken after Kristallnacht showed 94% of Americans disapproved of Nazi violence against Jews but 71% did not believe in allowing more Jews to enter the US.

3 Students read the letter in **The Otto Frank Letter** handout. As they read, students highlight sections/lines that show attempts made by Otto Frank to leave his country and come to the US. Then, students discuss the following questions¹:

¹ Felix Nussbaum was born in 1904 in Osnabrueck, Germany. Recognized as a true talent by his parents (his father, Phillip Nussbaum himself was a talented amateur artist), Felix was allowed to pursue his art and enroll in art school in Hamburg in 1922. The young artist then went on to study in Berlin, where he received recognition and acclaim by critics and artists alike. This led to a scholarship in 1932 to paint and study in Rome, under the auspices of the Berlin Academy of Arts. He traveled to Rome together with his girlfriend, the Polish-Jewish artist, Felka Platek. When the Nazis came to power in January, 1933, the reach of Nazi culture and policy extended all the way to Rome, and a new type of art—an art that extolled the virtues of the Aryan race—became the only art tolerated in the new Germany. Nussbaum was no longer seen as a young artist on the rise. He was, according to Nazi doctrine, first and foremost a Jew. Nussbaum and Platek fled Rome in 1933, beginning a life as exiles, first in Italy, and eventually in Belgium, where they married in 1937.

With the German occupation of Belgium in 1940, Felix's fears of discovery became a reality. He was arrested and sent to the internment camp of Saint Cyprian in southern France, along with other aliens. After applying as a German to be sent back to Germany, Nussbaum managed to escape while en route, and eventually was reunited with Felka in Brussels. There the two were forced into hiding, relying on the goodness of friends to shelter them from discovery, and to supply Nussbaum with art supplies. From this point, Nussbaum's artwork began to express his overwhelming feelings of dread, melancholy, persecution, and the approach of death, although occasionally portraying symbols of a fragile optimism.

This optimism was not to be realized. In July, 1944, Felka Platek and Felix Nussbaum were arrested, sent to Mechelen transit camp and then to Auschwitz, where they were both murdered.

- What barriers to leave Germany existed for the Frank family? What is he asking the recipient of the letter to do?
- Now look at The Refugee painting. What do you believe the artist was attempting to say to the world through this work?
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- What emotions are conveyed by the painting and the letter? How do these two pieces represent the Jewish refugee experience of the 1930s? Cite specific evidence from the letter and the painting.
- Do you think this painting could have meaning for present-day refugees? Explain your thinking.

4 Students watch the testimony of **Liesl Loeb (bio)**. In small groups or as an entire class, students discuss the following questions:

- a) The quota number Liesl's parents had was in the 14,000s. She says that by the time her mother's sister was able to get to the consulate and get a number, they were in the 70,000s. What do these figures tell you about the desire of the Jewish population to leave Germany at the time?
- b) How does Liesl describe the emigration process for Jews living in Germany? What were some of the unofficial barriers that US officials had put in place to restrict the amount of Jewish refugees able to leave Germany for the US?

5 Students read the **Evian Conference and Bermuda Conference** handouts and discuss the following questions:

- Compare the two conferences; what were their official goals?
- What was the outcome of these conferences?
- Do you believe that antisemitism was a factor in the outcome of these conferences? On what have you based your response?
- What role, if any, should the United States play in helping to provide a safe haven to refugees from countries where gross human rights violations, genocide, or potential genocide is taking place?

6 Students are introduced with background information about the MS St. Louis using the information provided in the corresponding².

² *The MS St. Louis, a German ship, left Hamburg, Germany for Cuba on May 13, 1939, with 937 passengers, most of them Jewish refugees. These passengers possessed landing certificates for Cuba, arranged for them by Manuel Benitez Gonzalez, the Cuban Director General of Immigration. Officially, the certificates were free, but Gonzalez took money for them.*

Jealousy of Gonzalez's gain, local dislike of Jewish immigration, and the government's fascist tendencies led them to cancel the validity of the certificates on May 5, 1939, before the departure of the ship. When the ship reached Havana on May 27, its passengers were denied entry. The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) tried to negotiate on their behalf, but the Cuban president insisted that the ship leave its harbor.

The ship left Havana on June 2, steering in circles while negotiations continued with Cuba, the United States, and other nations in the Western Hemisphere. The ship returned to Europe where the refugees were taken in by Belgium, France, Great Britain, and the Netherlands. Many of these refugees later came under the net of German occupation and were murdered by the Nazis.

- 7** Students watch the testimony of **Sol Messinger (bio)** and discuss the following questions:
- What did you learn about the ill-fated journey of the MS St. Louis by watching Sol Messinger's testimony?
 - How far is Cuba from the United States? How do you think passengers felt being so close to the United States and freedom, but not being allowed to come ashore?

- 8** Next, students watch the testimony of **Jan Karski (bio)** as he discusses meeting with President Roosevelt about the situation of the Jews in Poland. Students reflect on the following questions, either in a journal entry or in small groups:
- How did President Roosevelt respond? Does Jan Karski feel the President's response was adequate? How do you know?
 - After analyzing the Evian Conference of 1938, Sol's experience being turned away by Cuba and the United States while aboard the MS St Louis in 1939, the implementation of the Final Solution in 1941, the Bermuda Conference of 1943, and the meeting of Karski with President Roosevelt in July 1943, do you feel the US response to the pleas of Jewish refugees was adequate at different points in time based on the knowledge it had about what was happening to the Jews of Europe?
 - Thousands of Jews were saved by the actions of individuals, and generally not from the many governments and institutions who had pledged to save them but largely failed. Consider the decision by the Allies to prioritize winning the war over disrupting or stopping the genocide. Evaluate the actions of governments, including the United States, in their roles as deeply flawed rescuers and victors over Nazism.

- 9** As a summative task, students refocus on the plight of the victims and the human story that their experiences teach us. The poem, ***Refugee Blues*** by W. H. Auden is distributed. Students read together or individually and discuss the following questions:
- Who is the intended audience? What was the author's purpose for writing this poem?
 - What images and emotions are evoked by the poem? Cite textual evidence.
 - What does the author want the reader to think, do, and understand after having read this poem?
 - Does this poem have significance today? Explain.

ESTIMATED COMPLETION TIME: 150 – 180 MINUTES