Panel explores lessons from St. Louis incident

‘Voyage to nowhere’ remains touchstone in refugee debate

Discussing the fate of the Jewish passengers aboard the St. Louis and current U.S. refugee policy at an April 26 Rutgers University program are, from left, Fernando Chang-Muy, a specialist in refugee law; Scott Miller, director of curatorial services at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum; and Hans Fisher, a retired Rutgers professor and St. Louis survivor.

Photo by Debra Rubin

Seventy years after its Jewish passengers were turned away from American shores, the S.S. Louis remains a fixture in the current debate over immigration and resettling refugees.

“The more things change, the more they stay the same,” said Fernando Chang-Muy, a specialist in refugee law who was among those speaking April 26 at the annual Raoul Wallenberg program of Rutgers University’s Allen and Joan Bildner Center for the Study of Jewish Life.

The program, at Trayes Hall on the Douglass campus, explored the fate of the 937 Jews aboard the ship who were sent back to an uncertain future in Europe after being denied entry to Cuba and the United States — despite being anchored just four miles off the coast of Florida.

Panelists also discussed current U.S. refugee policies and what has changed since the World War II era.

Not much, according to Chang-May. The Thomas O’Boyle Lecturer at the University of Pennsylvania School of Law and former legal adviser to the UN high commissioner for refugees, Chang-May said those hoping to enter the United States today to escape “horrible human rights violations,” including torture, persecution, or death, bear little difference from Jews fleeing the Holocaust.

“The issues are still the same; people A hating people B,” said Chang-Muy. “What has changed are their faces; they are more likely to be Asian or African.”

The panel also featured Scott Miller, director of curatorial services at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, and retired Rutgers professor Hans Fisher of Highland Park, who sailed with his mother and sister aboard the St. Louis (see sidebar).

The program was presented as part of the Rutgers community’s year-long commemoration of the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, spawned in the wake of the Holocaust.

Chang-Muy said current policy requires refugees to go through the Department of Homeland Security, where they are “seen as terrorists.” The United States now allows up to 80,000 refugees to enter the country annually. They are split up among resettlement agencies, including the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society.

Chang-Muy urged the audience of several hundred, which included a number of Holocaust survivors, to “practice *tzedaka*” by sponsoring a refugee or by donating to an agency like HIAS that supports refugees or to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, which promotes tolerance; and to support legislation backing refugees and asylum seekers.

Miller said the St. Louis incident — the infamous “voyage to nowhere” — “is a place where Holocaust history and American history intersect.

Ironically, he said, the St. Louis passengers had been approved for immigration to the States; however, under a strict quota policy enacted in 1924 that based the number of immigrants from each nation on the percentage of that nationality recorded in the 1890 census, their numbers hadn’t yet come up. The Roosevelt administration and State Department refused to budge on early entry, he said.

Miller outlined the painstaking 10-year process begun in 1995 of discovering and documenting the fate of every ship passenger by placing newspaper ads, poring over concentration camp records and displaced persons lists, and pounding the pavement in the once heavily German-Jewish Washington Heights section of Manhattan.

“Much to our surprise, most survived the war,” said Miller. “We assumed, and even most survivors had assumed, that most had died.”

Although 22 passengers were allowed to enter Cuba on Cuban visas — the rest had what turned out to be worthless landing permits — the others were finally accepted by Belgium, France, the Netherlands, and England. Many eventually came to the United States as their quota numbers came up, explained Miller.

However, as he showed photos of the passengers, Miller noted that some, including entire families, lost their lives in the death camps.

Among the stories he shared was that of five-year-old Michael Fink, who was on the St. Louis with his parents. The museum had hit a dead end on tracing the family until it placed a small ad in a Tel Aviv German-language newspaper, *Israel Nachtrichten*.

Miller received an e-mail from a Michael Barak, born Michael Fink. Barak said his family had been sent to Westerbork in the Netherlands and deported to Theresienstadt in 1944, from where his father was sent to Auschwitz and his death. Fink and his mother immigrated to Palestine and changed their names after the war.

Miller called Barak and can still recall the first thing the former refugee said to him: “America bears responsibility for the death of my father.”

Five-year-old Michael Fink in the Westerbork transit camp in the Netherlands, where he and his parents were sent after they and other passengers aboard the St. Louis were refused entry by Cuba and the United States. His father later died in Auschwitz; he and his mother immigrated to Palestine, where the family name was changed to Barak.

Photo courtesy U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum

‘Our victory over Hitler’

DR. HANS FISHER of Highland Park had his American dream delayed by an immigration policy that in 1939 showed little sympathy for Jews fleeing Nazi Germany.

That year, Fisher, his mother, and sister, Ruth Bickhardt, also of Highland Park, set sail from Germany aboard the St. Louis. They planned to join his father, who had fled to Cuba months earlier after being released from Buchenwald, where he had been interned on Kristallnacht.

When the ship's passengers were refused entry by Cuba and the United States 70 years ago — in perhaps the most notorious example of the West's ambivalent response to the Holocaust — his family ended up in the small French town of Laval.

Within months, Germany's blitzkrieg of France had begun and "we spent more time in air raid shelters than above ground," recalled Fisher.

Fisher was sent back to his mother, but several months later his father was able to get Cuban visas for his family and they set sail again aboard a vessel carrying mostly Spaniards fleeing the civil war in that country. The ship stopped in England and Ellis Island along the way; ultimately they joined his father in Cuba.

About a year later, the family obtained visas to come to the United States. They were settled on a poultry farm in Vineland through a grant from the Baron Hirsch Agricultural Foundation.

Fisher recalled learning to speak and read English under the guidance of a librarian in Vineland and through high school Latin classes.

"One of the great things about this country that few people ever mention, but that is incredibly important, is the free public library system," he said

Highland Park resident Hans Fisher, top right, is shown with fellow passengers aboard the St. Louis. His family ended up in France and eventually were allowed into the United States.

Photo courtesy U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum