

The Centre for Holocaust Education and Scholarship
Teachers' Workshop 2017
Think – Pair – Share Strategy
“Closed Doors”

Background

Jewish immigration to Canada was severely restricted in the years before the war, as desperate Jews sought to flee Nazi Germany. In 1938 Canada reluctantly attended the Evian Conference convened by the American President Roosevelt, to discuss the problem of Jewish refugees. Canada, along with the thirty-one other countries at Evian, refused to accept any further refugees. In May 1939, following the example of Cuba and the United States, Canada refused entry to the 907 Jewish refugees aboard the S.S. St. Louis, forcing the ship to return to Nazi Europe.

Canada admitted only 5,000 - 8,000 Jews from 1933 - 1945, the worst record of any large non-European country. By comparison, the city of Shanghai accepted 25,000 Jewish refugees, more than entered Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and India combined. The Canadian government was preoccupied with the depression, the war and feared an anti-Semitic backlash in Quebec. The man responsible for enforcing Canada's closed door immigration policy was F. C. Blair, Director of Immigration. Blair believed that Canada was in danger of being “flooded with Jewish people” and felt it his duty to guard against this possibility. As a powerful civil servant it was Blair who interpreted government immigration policies but it was Mackenzie King – Liberal Prime Minister throughout most of the 1920s and again after 1935 – and his cabinet ministers, who responsible for the policies

Examine the Paper Trail

Students examine the study documents to follow the paper trail left behind by government officials in their efforts to restrict immigration:

- Diary entry from Prime Minister Mackenzie King
- Letter from Immigration Director F. C. Blair
- St. Jean Baptiste Society's House of Commons' petition

An excerpt from the diary of Prime Minister W. L. Mackenzie King, Ottawa, 29 March 1938...

...Attended Council from 12 till 1:30. A very difficult question has presented itself in Roosevelt's appeal to different countries to unite with the United States in admitting refugees from Austria, Germany, etc. That means, in a word, admitting numbers of Jews. My own feeling is that nothing is to be gained by creating an internal problem in an effort to meet an international one. That we must be careful not to seek to play a role of the dog in the manger so far as Canada is concerned, with our great open spaces and small population. We must nevertheless seek to keep this part of the Continent free from unrest and from too great an intermixture of foreign strains of blood, as much the

The Centre for Holocaust Education and Scholarship
Teachers' Workshop 2017
Think – Pair – Share Strategy
“Closed Doors”

same thing as lies at the basis of the Oriental problem. I fear we would have riots if we agreed to a policy that admitted numbers of Jews. Also we would add to the difficulties between the Provinces and the Dominion...

A letter to F. Maclure Sclanders from Immigration Director, F. C. Blair, 13 September 1938...

OTTAWA, 13th September, 1938.

CONFIDENTIAL.

Dear Mr. Sclanders,

...And so it goes, the poor Jew all over the world seems very unpopular and yet as you remark there are some very fine people amongst them. I often think that instead of persecution it would be far better if we more often told them frankly why many of them are unpopular. If they would divest themselves of certain of their habits I am sure they would be just as popular in Canada as our Scandinavians. It seems odd that it should be so but nevertheless it is true that there is a smaller percentage of Jews engaged in the basic industry of agriculture in this country than any other race or class of people we have, not excluding Chinese, Japanese, Greeks, Syrians and Armenians and at the other end of the scale is the German with highest percentage. I am not finding fault with the Jew because he does not farm, but on the other hand it need not surprise these people that a country which since Confederation has encouraged the immigration of the agricultural class, should favour other races than those who never or seldom farm. Just because Jewish people would not understand the frank kind of statements I have made in this letter to you, I have marked it confidential.

Yours faithfully,

Director

A petition to the House of Commons by La Société St. Jean Baptiste, 30 January 1939...

Petition of La Société St. Jean Baptiste Protesting Against All Immigration

Mr. Wilfrid Lacroix (Quebec-Montmonrency): I have the honour to present to this house a petition from La Société St. Jean Baptiste of the Quebec diocese, bearing the signatures of 127,364 persons, vigorously protesting against all immigration what so ever and especially Jewish immigration; demanding with all the energy inspired by the instinct of self-preservation [of Christian religion and French culture] that we maintain a rigorous policy of forbidding immigration.

Discussion Questions

What arguments do Prime Minister Mackenzie King, Immigration Minister F. C. Blair and

The Centre for Holocaust Education and Scholarship
Teachers' Workshop 2017
Think – Pair – Share Strategy
“Closed Doors”

the St. Jean Baptist Society make against the admission of Jewish refugees?
What role did racism and anti-Semitism play in setting government policies?

For More Information...

The above information is based on the exhibit *Open Hearts – Closed Doors*, produced by the Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre (VHEC). All of the information provided is found in the VHEC Teacher's Guide. The PDF document can be found here www.vhec.org/images/pdfs/openhearts_guide.pdf. For more information on this exhibit and other exhibits on the Holocaust at the VHEC please visit www.vhec.org.