Preface

The journey that led to the publication of this volume began in Toronto in June 2009 with a conference entitled “The St Louis Era: Looking Back, Moving Forward,” which was co-hosted by the Government of Canada and the League for Human Rights of B’nai Brith Canada. This conference, held in partnership with the US Department of State, the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, and the Mémorial de la Shoah was the “liaison” project that led to Canada’s entry as a full member of the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research.

The conference proceedings were designed to do more than just examine the fate of the passengers of the ill-fated voyage of the MS St Louis in 1939, many of whom, tragically, later perished in the Holocaust. The St Louis was, after all, just one boat of many bearing refugees who had taken to the seas in desperation, searching for safe haven from Hitler’s Nazi regime. The goal of the conference was to look more widely at this era of prejudice and restrictive immigration policies; hence the title of the conference and the terminology used by some of the authors in this book.

Academics, educators, government officials, and human rights activists from Canada and abroad came together to take a fresh look at the perceptions and policies of the past, in some cases revisiting familiar terrain in search of new perspectives. Conference presenters set forth difficult questions and offered answers that were, of necessity, tentative. But two unmistakable conclusions emerged: first, that further research was necessary on this painful subject to encompass both the intellectual and emotional spheres of inquiry; second, that a national body should take the lead in fostering new scholarship and
creating fresh educational material, with the assistance of a multi-
disciplinary advisory body of experts.

The St Louis era conference thus marked the launch of the National Task Force on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research (NTF), created by the League for Human Rights with the generous funding support of the Community Historical Recognition Program (CHRP) of Citizenship and Immigration Canada and the B’nai Brith Foundation. Its mandate included the sponsorship of original historical research, such as the scholarship presented in this volume. The government funding was in itself remarkable, since it was given specifically to increase understanding of the failings of this country throughout its history in its treatment of refugees seeking sanctuary on these shores. It is, to say the least, unusual for governments to fund studies of their shortcomings.

The CHRP funding was specifically designed “to commemorate and educate Canadians about incidents which, while legal at the time, are no longer consistent with Canadian values.” As such, in addition to funding for research and education on the ms St Louis incident, CHRP has funded projects on injustices that affected other minority communities, such as the internment of “enemy aliens” under the War Measures Act during the First and Second World Wars; the decades-long imposition of the head tax and other restrictions on immigrants from China; and the refusal to allow entry to passengers on board the Komagata Maru in 1914, based on the Continuous Passage Act, which was designed to curb immigration from India.

Since prejudice towards the “Other” is a common theme linking all these exclusionary moves, the NTF reflected on these harsh chapters in Canadian history in its opening project, the creation of a new educational resource for students, entitled Welcome to Canada? This text explores how Canadian immigration policy affected different minority groups throughout Canada’s history, looking at who was welcomed and who was turned away. It is now being used by teachers across the country in a pilot project designed to enhance the study of civics and related courses.

The work of the NTF has culminated in this current volume, Nazi Germany, Canadian Responses, which brings together the original research of eight outstanding Canadian scholars in an in-depth study of the St Louis era. With this volume, these scholars collectively advance our understanding of the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in the 1930s and 1940s, and the ways in which Canadian
society became engaged in ethical debates that had at their epicentre the plight of European Jewry and the need to respond to Hitler’s regime. Examining the moral and political dilemmas that Canada faced at that time, and the ways it responded or failed to respond, helps to contextualize the decisions of the day and equips us to interpret more contemporary dilemmas, as well.

Beyond this analysis, something greater emerges from the undercurrents of the authors’ broader narratives: a chorus of unnamed voices, of ordinary Canadians who rose up to protest during the St Louis era when Jews were being vilified and victimized. Our hope is that the reader will be inspired by their example, applying the lessons of the past to the realities of today, so that future generations of Canadians will speak up and take action wherever and whenever antisemitism – or any form of bigotry, discrimination, or injustice – threatens to take root.

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