

Irving Cotler

February 2014

RG-50.977.0005

Summary

Irving Cotler is a member of the Canadian Parliament, an Emeritus Professor of Law, McGill University, Former Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada. He responds to questions regarding the SS St. Louis in 1939. Lessons to be learned from the events of the St. Louis in 1939 include that if you save a single life, it is as if you saved an entire universe, just like if you kill a single person (on the St. Louis), you kill a universe. Any of the survivors on the St. Louis could have been saved. A second lesson is the danger of State sanction of incitement to hate and genocide. Goebbels called it the indifference of what happened at the St. Louis. Two years before the St. Louis, the Evian Conference was held to decide what to do with the German and Austrian refugees which ended with no decisions. The two options in Europe: 1) places where Jews could not live and 2) places where Jews could not enter brought about the culture of hate and the voyage of the St. Louis. Not only were the Jews turned away from Europe, but they were turned away from the US, Cuba and Canada. Canada turned away the Jews because it was an immigration issue as the Jews did not have proper nationalities to enter. Third lesson: Holocaust and the St. Louis occurred not simply because of the culture of hate but because of the crimes of indifference and conspiracies of silence. The fourth lesson: “La Traision d’choix,” “The Betrayal of the Elites.” The Holocaust crimes compare with the crimes of the Nuremberg elites such as judges, lawyers, scientists, doctors, engineers, architects, educators, church leaders and others. Elie Wiesel said he learned that the same person can write poems and kill children. What happened was the betrayal by the elites, “La Traision d’choix.” Mr. Cotler’s colleagues’ Harold Troper’s and Irving Abella’s book, “None is Too Many” show how the bureaucrats of Canada used technicalities of administrative law to exclude the St. Louis entry. It is clear that the minister, and people of the government at that time could have acted. The betrayal of the elites is something to remember today as a contemporary example. At the time, the passengers of the St. Louis were kept out but most Canadians believed the people on the St. Louis were let in because Canadians are of a generous disposition, open to immigration. Later Canada became one of the more generous countries in the world in respect to immigration, allowing in immigrants after World War II as Nazi war criminals could enter although one was too many. Cotler visited the Auschwitz Museum which showed the ugly danger of anti-Semitism as more than a million Jews died in Auschwitz. While anti-Semitism begins with Jews, it doesn’t end with Jews and so the importance now is to learn history and combat anti-Semitism, hatred and racism. Therefore, there were two complementary conferences, one in Ottawa and one in London. London made a declaration and Ottawa drew up a protocol to commit its parliament to combat this oldest hatred. Holocaust is a metaphor for radical evil and anti-Semitism is a metaphor for radical hatred. At the time Canadians thought they did the right thing as let in the St. Louis passengers. Now any Canadians would feel horror as the St. Louis passengers were excluded so they established a task force and Holocaust remembrance in Canada which pays

reference to the experience of the St. Louis. At the International Conference in Ottawa, Nobel Peace Laureate Elie Wiesel sounded the alarm that it is time to mobilize all of humanity because he felt these things can happen again.