

Dr. Irwin Cotler: My name is Irwin Cotler. I'm a member of the Canadian Parliament, an emeritus professor of law at McGill University and a former minister of justice and attorney general of Canada

Are there lessons to be learned from the events of the Saint Louis in 1939?

Dr. Irwin Cotler: So, the teaching of our sage that we must always bear in mind that if you save a single life it is as if you have saved an entire universe just as if you kill a single person any of those that died on the St. Louis is as if you killed an entire universe.

So, the first abiding lesson and it comes out of the horror of the St. Louis because it could have been prevented is that we are each wherever we are the guarantors of each other's destiny. It leads to the second lesson which bears direct reference to the St. Louis and that is the danger of state sanctioned incitement to hate and genocide. The enduring lesson of the holocaust and the genocides that follow is that they occurred not simply because of the industry of death but because of state sanctioned cultures of hate.

you see Goebbels speaking in those interviews recalling also that it was the indifference and the inaction of the international community to what happened to the St. Louis which – and what happened the year before the St. Louis at the Evian Conference when you had an international conference to decide then what are we going to do about the German and Austrian refugees. The end of that was nothing. So, as a result of the time the world was divided into two options. Europe presented two options, places where Jews could not live and places where Jews could not enter.

That was what brought about that culture of hate, the St. Louis to begin with. Jews were fleeing that culture of hate. Jews had in mind the Evian Conference. The Jews on the St. Louis knew what fate would befall them if they would remain there. In the end the Evian Conference proved tragically true. Europe divided into two places, places where Jews could not live and places where Jews could not enter and that was not only Europe. It became the Americas as well as Jews were turned away in Cuba, turned away in the U.S. and turned away in Canada. When one looks at why they were turned away in Canada the reference was at the time that it was an immigration issue, that they did not have the proper nationalities for purposes of entrance.

Of course, because they simply had already been denationalized and they had already been delegitimized. This leads me actually to a third and very compelling lesson. That is that the holocaust occurred, the St. Louis occurred not simply because of cultures of hate but because of crimes of indifference, because of conspiracies of silence.

Just as when the voyage of the St. Louis took place we knew what would happen if they would be turned away and they were turned away because of crimes of indifference, because of conspiracies of silence. Which leads to the fourth lesson I'm drawing to a close and that is [speaks French], the betrayal of the elites. The holocaust crimes were

the crimes of the Nuremberg elites, judges, lawyers, scientists, doctors, engineers, architects, educators, church leader and the like. Elie Wiesel put it, "One learned that one could both save people and kill children."

The relationship to the St. Louis here is direct because what happened with the St. Louis was the in effect once again [speaks French], the betrayal by the elites, government elites, bureaucratic elites

When bureaucrats use technicalities to block the entry of refugees does that make them accomplices?

Dr. Irwin Cotler: You know one of the related lessons is that the holocaust occurred and I would say the particularity of the St. Louis because of the bureaucratization of genocide of which Adolf Eichmann, the "Desk Murderer" was the personification of the bureaucratization. But as I said it was not only the bureaucracy who [speaks French]. It was the elites, the government leaders, the ministers. Yes, as it was shown in the book by my colleagues, Harold Troper and Irving Abella, *None is Too Many*, you saw the manner in which the bureaucrats at the time in Canada used the technicalities of administrative law to exclude the St. Louis from entry. But it is clear that the ministers at the time, the people in the government at the time could have acted. At the end of the day the bureaucrats make the recommendations. I can tell you as a former minister you get all kinds of recommendations from the bureaucrats but the responsibility begins and ends with the minister himself or herself. It begins and ends with the government leaders and therefore while there was a complicity by the bureaucrats at the time regrettably the government leaders must be seen to bear the responsibility. That's why I use the notion of [speaks French], the betrayal of the elites as something that we need to remember today. I want to take it to a contemporary example.

Canada also turned away the Saint Louis, was this due to a popular rejection of immigrants or a government decision?

Dr. Irwin Cotler: One of the worst things at the time is while the St. Louis was being kept out what we found later on were two things. One, that most Canadians believed that people on the St. Louis were let in. Why? Because Canadians, their disposition is generally that of a generous disposition, open to immigration. In fact, if there's something that has been a positive fallout from the St. Louis in terms of the longer term public policy in Canada it is that we have become one of the more generous countries in the world with respect to immigration and with respect to the conferral of refugee status. But it was not like that at the time. In fact, in the immediate aftermath even of the Second World War and where as I say refugees were not allowed in – it wasn't only the St. Louis – Canada was not a country that opened itself to Jewish refugees fleeing but Nazi war criminals were able to enter Canada.

So, you have the situation where on the one hand None is Too Many is the phrase and the title of the book of the statement attributed to a senior bureaucrat at the time who justified his exclusion of the St. Louis. That's where the anti-Jewish dimension comes in with None is Too Many. Yet Nazi war criminals were admitted into Canada of which one was too many. So, we see that kind of thing that I was reminded of now when I visited the Auschwitz museum and that is the ugly danger of anti-Semitism. I say that because Jews died in Auschwitz. When I say of 1.3 murdered 1.1 million were Jews. Jews died at Auschwitz because of anti-Semitism. Let there be no mistake about it. But anti-Semitism did not die.

Is Anti Semitism only a Jewish problem?

Dr. Irwin Cotler: As we've learned only too well while it begins with Jews it doesn't end with Jews. So, the important now in terms of learning the historical lessons, the importance of combating anti-Semitism and racism and hatred in all their forms and manifestations and that's why we have two parliamentary conferences, one in London and one in Ottawa and drew up a London Declaration and an Ottawa protocol to commit parliamentarians and with them and through them governments and civil society to the combating of this oldest and most enduring of hatreds. Because if the holocaust is a metaphor for radical evil and then anti-Semitism is a metaphor for radical hatred.

How do Canadians today feel about the Saint Louis events?

Dr. Irwin Cotler: when they would hear about the St. Louis they thought that in fact Canada did the right thing and let the St. Louis in. I think in looking back now amongst Canadians would be a sense of horror that in fact the St. Louis was excluded and that is why we establish a kind of national task force and holocaust remembrance in Canada that pays particular reference to the experience of the St. Louis, the lessons to be learned from it.

Dr. Cotler, it seems that Anti-Semitism is on the rise. Can the Holocaust be repeated?

Dr. Irwin Cotler: You know one of the most important statements made at our International Parliamentary Conference took about Anti-Semitism in Ottawa is made by Nobel Peace Laureate Elie Wiesel who once again was sounding the alarm on behalf of humanity. Elie Wiesel had said something which he had said years earlier but we still had not appreciated that sounding of the alarm or acting upon it. He said, "I have to tell you I feel a sense of urgency, a sense of emergency. I have not felt this way since 1945. I feel that now is the time to mobilize all of humanity, to mobilize the parliamentarians because I feel yet again these things can happen another time."

So, Elie Wiesel was trying to sound the alarm in part because as he said elsewhere he felt that the pandemic of Anti-Semitism was once again rearing its ugly head.