

Eric Fusfield

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Summary

Eric Fusfield, the Director of Legislative Affairs for B'nai B'rith International, responds to questions concerning the SS St. Louis event. One hurdle to achieve unanimous passing of Senate Resolution 111 concerned the word, "apology" as survivors want an apology from the US government. Some Congressmen would not sign any document that apologizes for a US issue or policy. They had to find wording to address the failure of the US role to act to rescue the ship. They settled on language that the US acknowledges their failure to act without using the word, "apology." A second problem with the word, "apology" was whether African/Americans be compensated for centuries of slavery that their ancestors endured. The use of "apology" raises the question of restitution and compensation. The Japanese who were in internment camps in World War II received compensation after decades of struggle. There are no decades to wait as the survivors of the Holocaust are all elderly so they do not want to delay acknowledgement of the US role in this resolution. Instead of the issue of the US acknowledgement of its role on the SS St. Louis over monetary compensation, they prefer to use the word, "acknowledgement of failure" instead of "apology" to assure swifter passing of the legislation. As to whether the US was naïve when they failed to take in the passengers, rather the US officials used an excuse that they did not want to interfere in Cuban affairs as Cuba had also refused to accept passengers from the ship. The US Coast Guard trailed the ship to Florida to assure that no passenger jumped ship and swam to shore and fired warning shots at the ship. The captain felt he had no alternative but to turn the ship around to head back to Europe when the passengers were not accepted. Four countries agreed to take the passengers in but not in time to save 254 passengers who perished. As the Senate resolution indicated, the refusal to take in passengers was a joint response between Cuba, the US and Canada as all three refused to take in the passengers. It was a disappointment for many US citizen's ancestors who came here and were welcomed with open arms when they suffered persecution elsewhere. In '39 the political environment had nativist and anti-immigrant influence on US society. The US government gave in to negative impulses instead of acting on its own high ideals. It is questionable whether a situation similar to the St. Louis being turned away can happen in the US today as the Nazi threat was unique. The world saw warning signs and knew what was happening in Europe as there were great amounts of people fleeing the continent and countries would not open their doors to them. Today we have refugees in need of sanctuary. The great lesson of the St. Louis tragedy shows the importance of the existence of the State of Israel today which is prepared to take in Jewish refugees from around the world in unlimited number which is essential for the survival of the Jewish people. The historical importance of Senate Resolution 111 is that it underscores the importance of sanctuary for Jewish refugees in the State of Israel... Secondly, the St. Louis saga illustrates what happens when people of conscience fail to act and have to be confronted or tragic consequences can follow. Thirdly, the St. Louis example serves as a challenge in our own time

as there are tragedies and genocides around the world including the Sudan and Syria. Challenges of Jewish communities including Iran's effort to acquire nuclear materials, and their sponsorship of terrorism and the anti-Semitism that is deeply embedded in the international system need to be confronted. Future generations will ask what we did in our time to address these challenges and act accordingly. Senate Resolution 111 demonstrates we are mindful of what St. Louis' passengers experienced and is a measure of our commitment that future generations will learn and remember what happened to the St. Louis' passengers and that is the best message we can send.