Facing History and Ourselves

A Guide to THE AMERICAN EXPERIENCE Documentary

America and the Holocaust:
Deceit and Indifference

WGBH Educational Foundation
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Preface

*America and the Holocaust: Deceit and Indifference* offers a disturbing look at the choices Americans made at a time when the Germans were labeling, isolating, humiliating, and eventually murdering European Jews and others they considered “undesirable.” The chilling story is told through the memories of a Jewish refugee, Kurt Klein who describes his efforts to save his parents. The documentary reveals the ways ordinary citizens, politicians, and government officials reacted as the plight of the Jews in Nazi-occupied Europe deepened.

*America and the Holocaust* provokes a number of important questions. Why didn’t more Americans speak out? What kept the nation’s leaders from offering the refugees a safe haven? What part did antisemitism play in the way Americans responded? What lessons can we learn from this history at a time when there are 23 million refugees in the world and another 26 million displaced within their own country? The documentary also reveals the complexities of decisions made in extraordinary times. And it teaches us much not only about the effects of policies based on indifference, deceit, and antisemitism but also about courage, caring, and compassion. We hope it will promote a discussion of avenues for outrage and advocacy that will shape policies that are more sensitive to human rights today and in the future. This study guide uses *America and the Holocaust* to stimulate and inform that discussion. We are deeply grateful to the Rita J. and Stanley H. Kaplan Foundation and WGBH for the opportunity to bring this important documentary to Facing History teachers and students.

Margot Stern Strom  
Executive Director  
Facing History and Ourselves

Facing History and Ourselves is a national educational and teacher training organization whose mission is to engage students of diverse backgrounds in an examination of racism, prejudice, and antisemitism in order to promote the development of a more humane and informed citizenry. By studying the historical development and lessons of the Holocaust and other examples of genocide, students make the essential connection between history and the moral choices they confront in their own lives.

With national headquarters in Brookline, Massachusetts, and regional offices in Chicago, Los Angeles, Memphis and New York City, Facing History provides teachers with staff development in the form of workshops, institutes, and seminars. It also offers participating teachers access to an assortment of books, periodicals, speakers and videotapes for classroom use. In addition, ongoing research in twentieth-century history and adolescent development has resulted in a number of Facing History publications, many of which are referenced in this guide.
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WGBH Educational Foundation, 114 Western Avenue, Boston, MA 02134 (617) 492-2777 Fax (617) 787-1639
Dear Educator,

We are very pleased that WGBH and Facing History and Ourselves have worked in partnership to prepare this study guide to America and the Holocaust for your classroom. We first viewed America and the Holocaust at WGBH where a special screening was held in April 1994. The focus of our Holocaust education, at home and at school, was Europe’s involvement and the heinous crimes committed by the Nazis. After viewing this powerful documentary, we realized how little we had been taught about America’s role in the Holocaust.

America’s youth need to see this documentary. The future leaders of our great nation will benefit by critically analyzing the choices our government made. Teachers and their students should engage in thoughtful discussion about our country’s role and what involvement could have been.

Our parents’ foundation, the Rita J. and Stanley H. Kaplan Foundation, agreed to underwrite this project because of its passionate commitment to education and the foundation’s support of Jewish continuity. This study guide is dedicated to our parents, Rita J. and Stanley H. Kaplan, our first and best teachers.

For history not to repeat itself, we are obligated to face the historical facts and the choices that were made. We are confident that the history taught in America and the Holocaust will enable future generations to act more responsibly.

Yours for success,

Susan B. Kaplan  Nancy Kaplan Belsky
Additional Resources

For a fuller treatment of ideas and concepts developed in this guide, see *Facing History and Ourselves Resource Book: Holocaust and Human Behavior*. Other resources of interest available from Facing History and Ourselves include:

- *Elements of Time*: A companion manual to the Facing History videotape collection of Holocaust testimonies—the result of a five-year collaborative project between Facing History and the Fortunoff Video Archive at Yale University made possible through the vision and support of Eli Evans and the Charles H. Revson Foundation. The book includes transcriptions of the videos along with essays by scholars who have addressed Facing History conferences.

- *I Promised I Would Tell*: Sonia Weitz’s poetry and remembrances of life in the Krakow Ghetto and various concentration camps.

- *Choosing to Participate*: A history of the voluntary sector that traces the way individuals and groups have used the First Amendment to the Constitution as avenues of outrage and advocacy. *Choosing to Participate* also addresses students’ questions about how they can make a difference by introducing them to traditions of care and models for participation.

Teachers can also obtain videos from Facing History and Ourselves to extend this study guide. Possibilities include: *The Hangman*, an animated video that raises questions about choice and responsibility; *Flight from Destiny*, a video montage that deals with the voyage of the *St. Louis*; *Imagining the Unimaginable*, a video montage that explores the reasons so many were unable to believe reports of mass murder; *The Radio Priest*, a part of the PBS series *THE AMERICAN EXPERIENCE*, and *The Making of a Hero*, a documentary on Raoul Wallenberg, an agent of the War Refugee Board.

The following books can be used to explore specific topics and/or concepts highlighted in this guide:


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* Times are approximate.
Introduction

*America and the Holocaust: Deceit and Indifference* explores a particular time in history—a time when Adolf Hitler and his fellow Nazis were carrying out their plans for a German Empire “free of Jews” and others the Nazis deemed “undesirable.” The video, however, focuses not on events in Europe but on decisions made in the United States. Through the story of a young refugee, Kurt Klein, and his desperate attempts to arrange his parents’ safe passage to the United States, the video examines the choices the American people and their government made in the 1930s and 1940s. In *The Abandonment of the Jews*, historian David S. Wyman said of those choices:

> The Holocaust was certainly a Jewish tragedy. But it was not *only* a Jewish tragedy. It was also a Christian tragedy, a tragedy for Western civilization, and a tragedy for all humankind. The killing was done by people, to other people, while still other people stood by.... Yet comparatively few American non-Jews recognized that the plight of the European Jews was their plight too. Most were either unaware, did not care, or saw the European Jewish catastrophe as a Jewish problem, one for Jews to deal with. That explains, in part, why the United States did so little to help.

Wyman wonders, “Would the reaction be different today? Would Americans be more sensitive, less self-centered, more willing to make sacrifices, less afraid of differences now than they were then?” This study guide is designed to help teachers and students explore American responses to the Holocaust. It also considers the legacies of those responses and the lessons we can learn from them.

The guide is divided into two parts. Each contains readings followed by questions and activities under the heading “Connections.” Part 1 previews events and ideas highlighted in the video. Part 2 seeks to deepen and extend students' understanding of those events and ideas. Each reading in Part 2 begins with a quotation from the video. Teachers who show the video at a single sitting may use this part of the guide to discuss the documentary as a whole. Teachers who show it over several days may find these materials helpful in analyzing the video section by section. The guide supports both approaches. The video, 87 minutes in length, can roughly be divided into four sections:

- **Section 1 (22 min.)** describes the campaign to drive the Jews from Germany and outlines the American response to the growing number of Jewish refugees. Antisemitism in the United States is featured.
- **Section 2 (17 min.)** describes the way antisemitic and anti-immigrant attitudes affected public policy toward the refugees.
- **Section 3 (20 min.)** explores when and how Americans learned of the Holocaust. It highlights the efforts of a small number of individuals and groups to save as many Jews as possible. This part highlights the ways individuals in a democracy can express outrage and advocacy.
- **Section 4 (26 min.)** reveals how individuals and groups can influence government policy. It highlights the way a few concerned groups and a number of politicians as well as some officials in the Treasury Department challenged the State Department’s response to the Holocaust.
Part 1: Preview

Part 1 provides a conceptual and historical context for the video *America and the Holocaust*. Ideas about difference have long shaped the way people everywhere decide who belongs and who does not. American poet James Berry raises important questions about the way we look at difference today. You may wish to answer the questions he raises in a journal so that you can refer to them again later.

Many students find it useful to keep a journal to respond to the questions and ideas they encounter in this study guide. Unlike a finished work, a journal documents the process of thinking. Much like history itself, it always awaits further entries. A journal also allows a writer to witness his or her own history and consider the way ideas grow and change. As American writer Joan Didion has noted, writing is a way of examining ideas. She explains, “I write entirely to find out what I’m thinking, what I’m looking at, what I see and what it means.”

What Do We Do with a Variation?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What do we do with a difference?</th>
<th>Do we look at it in awe or purely in wonderment?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do we stand and discuss its oddity or do we ignore it?</td>
<td>Do we work for it to disappear?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do we shut our eyes to it or poke it with a stick?</td>
<td>Do we pass it stealthily or change route away from it?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do we clobber it to death?</td>
<td>Do we will it to become like ourselves?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do we move around it in rage and enlist the rage of others?</td>
<td>What do we do with a difference?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do we will it to go away?</td>
<td>Do we communicate to it?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Let application acknowledge it for barriers to fall down?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

James Berry
Membership and the American Dream

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

With these words, 13 of Britain’s North American colonies declared their independence in 1776 and formed a nation. They then had to decide who belonged and who did not. Would everyone who lived in the new United States be included in the nation? If not, how would citizenship be determined?

The Declaration of Independence voiced the nation’s ideals. Americans acknowledged those ideals in their state constitutions. But no state lived up to all of them. Everywhere, indigenous peoples were viewed as outsiders, as members of separate but inferior nations. African Americans were also left out even though many had fought for the nation’s independence. In 1776, every state permitted slavery. And even free African Americans rarely enjoyed all of the rights of citizenship. Many white Americans did not enjoy all of those rights either. In a few states only Christians could vote or hold office. And every state required that voters and officeholders own property. Yet no woman, no matter how much property she owned, could take part in government.

Yet even with these exclusions, the newly independent states offered most Americans more freedom than people had almost anywhere else. Every state protected freedom of speech, press, and religion as well as the right to peacefully assemble and to petition the government to right a wrong. Indeed many Americans in 1787 refused to support a national constitution unless it included a formal listing or “bill” of rights. Therefore soon after the new government was formed, ten amendments were added to the Constitution. Over the years, Americans would use those rights to expand their definition of the citizen to include almost everyone who lives within the nation’s borders.

Connections

According to historian Garry Wills, Abraham Lincoln viewed the Declaration of Independence as a pledge to all people everywhere. What do you think Lincoln meant? To what extent has that pledge been fulfilled?

Who am I? is a question almost everyone asks at one time or another. In answering, we define ourselves. The word define means to separate one thing from all of the others. Nations, like individuals, have an identity. What values and beliefs were central to the nation’s identity in 1776? Which are central today?

Sociologist Kai Erikson has noted that one of the surest ways to “confirm an identity, for communities as well as for individuals, is to find some way of measuring what one is not.” What individuals and groups were not included in the word American in 1776? Who is not included in the word American today? What did it mean to be excluded in 1776? What does it mean today?
Guarded Gates or an Open Door?

In 1876, the United States celebrated the 100th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. In honor of the event, the French sent a gift: a huge copper statue that represents liberty. Emma Lazarus, a Jew whose family had lived in the nation for generations, described the statue as:

A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame  
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name  
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand  
Glows world-wide welcome....

“Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!” cries she  
With silent lips.  
“Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.  
Send these, the homeless, tempest tossed, to me.  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door.”

In 1903, the year Emma Lazarus’s poem was carved on the base of the Statue of Liberty, nearly one out of every ten Americans was foreign born. A few years earlier, Thomas Bailey Aldrich, a Protestant whose family had also lived in the country for generations, responded to those newcomers with his own poem:

Wide open stand our gates  
And through them passes a wild motley throng—...  
Flying the Old World’s poverty and scorn;  
These bringing with them unknown gods and rites,  
Those, tiger passions, here to stretch their claws.  
In street and alley what strange tongues are these,  
Accents of menace alien to our air,  
Voices that once the Tower of Babel knew!  
O Liberty, white Goddess! Is it well  
To leave the Gates unguarded?

Lazarus’s ideals and Aldrich’s fears have both been reflected in the nation’s laws. The United States, like other nations, determines by law who can live within its borders and who among those individuals can become a citizen. Immigration laws exclude, distinguish, and discriminate based on real or imagined differences.

From time to time, Congress has considered and reconsidered who could become a citizen. In 1790 Congress passed the nation’s first naturalization act. It welcomed “the worthy part of mankind” to settle in the nation and become citizens. To do so, immigrants had to live in the United States for two years and provide “proof” of good character in court. They also had to be “white.” Nonwhite immigrants could not acquire citizenship. Still their American-born children were citizens by birth. Over the years such laws would be revised many times. The chart on the next page outlines those changes. Notice in particular the restrictions that were in effect in the 1930s and early 1940s—the years explored in the documentary America and the Holocaust.
# US Immigration Policy 1789-1990

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Policies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1789-</td>
<td>Everyone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1875</td>
<td>No convicts No prostitutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1875</td>
<td>No idiots No lunatics No one requiring public care A head tax of 50 cents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1882</td>
<td>No Chinese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1882-1943</td>
<td>No cheap contract laborers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1885</td>
<td>No immigrants with contagious diseases No paupers No polygamists Start of medical inspection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1891</td>
<td>No epileptics No insane persons No beggars No anarchists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1903</td>
<td>No feeble-minded No children under 16 unaccompanied by parents No immigrants unable to support themselves because of physical or mental defects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1907</td>
<td>No illiterate adults Start of literacy tests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1917</td>
<td>No immigrants from most of Asia or the Pacific Islands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>No more than 3 percent of foreign-born of each nationality already in US in 1910, total about 350,000 annually</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1924-1927</td>
<td>National Origins Quota System established No more than 2 percent of foreign-born of each nationality in US in 1890, about 150,000 annually</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>All aliens must register and be fingerprinted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>Exclusion and deportation of aliens dangerous to security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1952</td>
<td>Minor alterations in previous immigration laws</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1965</td>
<td>National Origins Quota system abolished Limit of 20,000 from any one nation outside the Western Hemisphere; about 170,000 annually Limit of 120,000 from Western Hemisphere nations; preference to refugees, aliens with relatives in the US, workers with needed skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>Raised the number of immigrants to 700,000 annually until 1995 when it drops to 675,000; the number of refugees admitted annually varies. It is not included with the number of immigrants</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Connections

How does Emma Lazarus depict the United States? How does she view immigrants? In what respect are Thomas Aldrich’s views similar to those of Lazarus? What differences seem most striking?

Reread James Berry’s poem “What Do You Do with a Variation.” How would Emma Lazarus and Thomas Aldrich answer the questions he raises? What do the immigration laws suggest about the way Americans answered those questions in 1789? In the 1920s? The way it is answered today?

Choose one of the laws shown on the chart. Find out why it was passed. What events prompted Congress to change the nation’s immigration policy? What were the effects of that change?

What does it mean to be an American? Collect songs and poems about Americans and America. What qualities do they celebrate? What values do they see as fundamental to the nation?

Look carefully at the quotations that follow. How does each writer define the nation and the American people? Which set of ideas is closest to your own?

- In 1782, Jean de Crevecoeur, a French immigrant, wrote, “He is an American who, leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds.”

- In the 1850s, Theodore Parker, a Protestant minister of British descent, argued that an American is someone who believes “not ‘I am as good as you are’ but ‘You are as good as I am.’”

- In the 1920s, Boston mayor James Curley, an Irish American, stated, “All of us under the Constitution are guaranteed equality, without regard to race, creed, or color. If the Jew is barred today, the Italian will be tomorrow, then the Spaniard and Pole, and at some future date the Irish.”
• In 1939, newspaper columnist Dorothy Thompson, the daughter of an English immigrant wrote:
  George Washington was only born in this country because his grandfather was a political refugee. William Penn fled to this country from the prisons of England, where his fight for freedom of conscience... kept him continually locked in various jails. Thomas Paine may be called the original author of the Declaration of Independence, and he was twice a refugee of this country—once from the conservatism of England and once from the terror of the French Revolution. Woodrow Wilson’s forebears were religious refugees from Ireland; the LaFollette family were Huguenot refugees; the Middle West was settled to its great advantage by many Forty-Eighters [refugees from the Revolution of 1848 in Germany], and among those Forty-Eighters was the father of Justice [Louis] Brandeis and the father of Adolph Ochs [the publisher of The New York Times].

• In 1949, Langston Hughes, a noted African American poet, wrote:
  Oh, yes,
  I say it plain,
  America never was America to me.
  And yet I swear this other—
  America will be!

• In 1979, former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, a Jewish immigrant from Nazi Germany, wrote:
  When I was a boy [the United States] was a dream, an incredible place where tolerance was natural and personal freedom unchallenged. Even when I learned later that America, too, had massive problems, I could never forget what an inspiration it had been to the victims of persecution, to my family, and to me during cruel and degrading years.
Membership and “Race”

Until the mid-1800s, the word race had several meanings. Most implied kinship and suggested that shared characteristics are passed from one generation to the next. American scientists who studied “race” in the 1800s and early 1900s used the term in similar ways. They applied it to those who share a genetic heritage. After 1882 and the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act, that view of “race” would increasingly determine who could and who could not be an American.

“Race” scientists were convinced that “race” accounted for most of the differences they observed among human beings—differences not only in appearance but also in intelligence, behavior, and even morality. These scholars were so certain that their observations were true that they ignored research that showed that “race” was a meaningless concept. Instead they devoted themselves to dividing the world into “races” and then ranking them. Not surprisingly, their own “race” was always at the top of the list. Also not surprisingly, many were eager to preserve the “purity” of their “race.” Therefore they advocated eugenics—breeding the “best with the best.” As one scientist explained, “You cannot change the leopard’s spots, and you cannot change bad stock to good; you may dilute it, possibly spread it over a wide area, spoiling good stock.”

By the 1920s, racist thinking had become so widely accepted that the House of Representatives’ Committee on Immigration and Naturalization had its own “expert eugenics agent,” Harry Laughlin. As Superintendent of the Eugenics Record Office on Long Island, New York, he had been trying for years to convince Americans of the importance of protecting the nation from “inferior racial stocks.” Now he had an opportunity to be heard. He eagerly called dozens of “scientific experts” and collected reams of statistics that testified to the dangers of “alien blood.”

The few scientists who publicly disputed Laughlin’s findings were ignored. For example, when Herbert S. Jennings, a respected scientist, described flaws in Laughlin’s data at a congressional hearing, his testimony was cut short. Most members of Congress were not interested in learning that Laughlin’s data proved the opposite of what he claimed it proved. Most newspapers and magazines also ignored such testimony. Reporters found Laughlin’s lurid findings more compelling. After all, those findings confirmed what many Americans already believed: immigrants were “different” and those differences threatened the American way of life. Thus the eugenicists provided a pseudo-scientific rationale for the Immigration Restriction Acts of 1921, 1924, and 1927. It was a rationale that even the President supported. In signing the 1924 bill into law, Calvin Coolidge declared, “America must be kept American. Biological laws show... that Nordics deteriorate when mixed with other races.” Eugenic ideas had reached the highest levels of government.

Connections

Why do you think scientists who showed that “race” was a meaningless concept were ignored in the 1920s? Why did people prefer to believe that “race” determines morality and behavior? How do their actions support the view
that what people believe is true is often more important than the truth?

In the late 1800s, General Francis A. Walker, the Chief of the US Bureau of Statistics and Superintendent of the Census, regarded immigrants as “beaten men from beaten races, representing the worst failures in the struggle for existence.” A few years later Frank P. Sargent, the Commissioner General of Immigration, warned of “an enormous alien population in our larger cities which is breeding crime and disease.” Yet today historians and economists use data collected by the Census Bureau and immigration agents to show that the newcomers in the late 1800s and early 1900s were as skilled and well-educated as the average American of that day.

Were immigrants more likely to commit crimes? An historian who examined immigration statistics found that “when immigrants and natives were compared using controls for age and sex, immigrants are, at worst, equally prone to crime and, usually, less prone than natives.” Sargent reached a different conclusion by comparing the immigrants as a group to Americans as a nation. But nearly 80 percent of the immigrants were between the ages of 16 and 44 and about 70 percent were men. If Sargent had compared them to a group of Americans in the same age range and with a similar gender balance, he would have found they were more alike than different.

Frederick Douglass said of “race scientists” in the early 1800s, “It is the province of prejudice to blind; and scientific writers, not less than others, write to please, as well as to instruct, and even unconsciously to themselves (sometimes,) sacrifice what is true to what is popular.” How do Douglass’s comments explain why eugenics is considered “pseudo” or “false” science?

After the 1924 Immigration Act was passed, the Literary Digest interviewed the editors of 21 foreign-language newspapers in the United States. The comments of three of those editors appear below. How does each define an American? Compare their definitions to those in the previous reading.

- The editor of a Greek American newspaper stated, “The ideas of discriminating between foreigners was certainly an imported product, for neither the American Constitution nor the ideals of this country ever allowed such a political conduct.”
- The editor of an Italian-language newspaper declared, “If conditions compelled prohibition of immigration, the Government must demonstrate why that is so and apply emergency laws without showing any race discrimination. To stop immigration otherwise would be to violate the spirit of the American Constitution and offend sacred principles of humanity.”
- The editor of a Jewish American newspaper argued that “no country has a moral right to close its doors to newcomers who have peaceful intentions to better their lives or escape persecution.”
In an Age of Refugees

“The days before and the days after the first World War are separated not like the end of an old and the beginning of a new period, but like the day before and the day after an explosion,” Hannah Arendt, a noted philosopher, wrote in 1951. “Yet this figure of speech is as inaccurate as are all others, because the quiet of sorrow which settles down after a catastrophe has never come to pass. The first explosion seems to have touched off a chain reaction in which we have been caught ever since and which nobody seems to be able to stop.” American columnist Dorothy Thompson described one of those changes:

Since the end of [the First World War] some four million people have been compelled by political pressure to leave their homes. A whole nation of people, although they come from many nations, wanders the world, homeless except for refuges which may at any moment prove to be temporary. They are men and women who often have no passports; who, if they have money, cannot command it; who, though they have skills, are not allowed to use them. This migration—unprecedented in modern times, set loose by the World War and the revolutions in its wake—includes people of every race and every social class, every trade and every profession....

Thompson worried about so many refugees in a world in which “many countries have serious unemployment problems” and “strong barriers against immigration.” She also noted an increase in anti-immigrant feelings and antisemitism in “countries which never before were conscious of having a ‘Jewish problem,’ or an ‘alien problem,’ where, prior to the past five years, the Jews were satisfactorily assimilated to the whole society, and where there is actual under-population.”

Arendt expressed a similar view. “[The refugees] were welcomed nowhere and could be assimilated nowhere. Once they had left their home they remained homeless, once they had left their state they became stateless; once they had been deprived of their human rights, they were rightless, the scum of the earth.” She spoke from bitter experience. She was among those forced to flee Germany because “we were Jews.” But as soon as she and others crossed the border into France, they were labeled “Germans.” When World War II began in 1939, they were arrested as “enemy aliens.” After the Germans took control of France, they were not released “because we were Jews.”

Arendt and other refugees found themselves without papers in a world where “the right papers” could save one’s life. Before World War I, it was possible to travel anywhere in the world without even a passport. An English writer recalls visiting the United States in the 1890s, “I had no passport, no exit permit, no visa, no number on a quota, and none were asked for on my arrival to the United States.” Wartime fears of spies and anxieties over open borders changed the way nations regarded not only refugees but also travelers. Yet long after the war ended, the border guards and immigration agents remained. In their eyes anyone who did not have the right papers was, in Hannah Arendt’s words, an “outlaw” at the mercy of the local police.

Increasingly in the 1930s, police officers in a number of countries were prepared to expel refugees at a moment’s notice. Two years after Adolf Hitler came
to power, Germans of Jewish descent were stripped of political rights. Hitler’s policies were based on a belief that “race” not only furnishes “the key to world history but also to world culture.” As he took over one nation after another, he put those theories into practice. After taking over Austria in 1938, he encouraged Austrian Jews to emigrate as long as they left their money behind. Other nations, however, did not want penniless Jewish refugees.

In July, 1938, delegates from 32 nations met in Evian, France. Each representative expressed sorrow over the growing number of “refugees” and “deportees,” boasted of his nation’s traditional hospitality and lamented its inability to do more in the “present situation.” Each spoke in general terms not about people but about “numbers” and “quotas.” Golda Meir, who would later become prime minister of Israel, attended the conference as the Jewish observer from Palestine, then under British rule. To her sorrow, she was not allowed to speak. She later wrote, “I wanted to get up and scream at them, ‘Don’t you know that these so-called numbers are human beings, people who may spend the rest of their lives in concentration camps, or wandering around the world like lepers if you don’t let them in?’ Of course, I didn’t know then that not concentration camps but death camps awaited the refugees whom no one wanted.” Hitler agreed with her assessment. After the conference, he concluded, “Nobody wants these criminals.”

In the fall of 1938, Hitler turned his attention to Jews who were not born in Germany. He began by expelling those who held Russian passports. The Polish government feared that Polish Jews would be the next to go. To keep them from returning to Poland, officials announced that no Polish passport would be valid without a special stamp. Although few Jews wanted to return to Poland, they needed a passport to emigrate elsewhere. Yet when they tried to get the stamp, Polish officials turned them away. The crisis came to a head the day the Polish government announced that it would not issue stamps after October 31, 1938. On the night of October 27, Zindel Grynszpan, a tailor who lived in Hanover, Germany, heard a knock on the door.

A policeman came and told us to come to Region II [police headquarters]. He said, “You are going to come back immediately; you shouldn’t take anything with you. Take your passports.”

When I reached the Region, I saw a large number of people;... The police were shouting, “Sign, sign, sign.” I had to sign, as everyone did.... They took us to the concert hall on the bank of the Leine.... There we stayed until Friday night, about twenty-four hours; then they took us in police trucks, in prisoners’ vans, about twenty in each truck, to the railroad station. The streets were filled with people shouting, “The Jews to Palestine!”

After that, they took us by train to Neubenschen on the German-Polish border.... When we reached the border, we were searched to see if anybody had money, and if anybody had more than ten marks, the rest was taken from him.... The SS were giving us, as it were, protective custody, and we walked two kilometers on foot to the Polish border.... The SS men whipped us and hit those who fell behind, and blood was flowing on the road.... Then a Polish general and some officers arrived. They examined our papers and saw that we were Polish citizens, and they decided to let us enter the country. They took us to a village of
about six thousand people, even though we were twelve thousand. The rain was driving hard, people were fainting... There was no food.

In Paris, Grynyszpan’s 17-year-old son Herschel learned about the deportation in a letter. Furious at the news, he marched into the German Embassy on November 7 and shot a Nazi official. The man died two days later. The Nazis used the incident to unleash a night of violence on the Jews. The night of November 9-10 came to be known as Kristallnacht (the “Night of Broken Glass”). That evening, the Nazis destroyed hundreds of Jewish businesses, synagogues, and private homes. About 20,000 Jews were arrested, dozens of others were wounded or killed.

German Jews were unable to protest. They were now “displaced” people in their own country. Their right to life and human dignity was no longer “guaranteed by an organized community with the power to defend such rights.”

Connections

Dorothy Thompson believed that no democratic nation can “wash its hands of [the problems of the refugees] if it wishes to retain its own soul.” She insisted that “democracy cannot survive” if people deny minorities “the right to existence.” How does she define the word democracy? Why does she believe that a democracy must protect the rights of minorities? Do you agree?

Take a careful look at a passport. What information does it provide? How does it define its owner? How important is that definition?

As a result of the events of Kristallnacht, Roosevelt withdrew the nation’s ambassador to Germany. Diplomats regard the removal of an ambassador as a serious move. The next step is to break off all relations—a move that usually precedes a declaration of war. According to a poll, 57 percent of all Americans approved the recall. But 72 percent were unwilling to allow more Jewish refugees into the nation and over half opposed aid to refugees who wished to settle elsewhere. What does the poll suggest about the limits of people’s sense of outrage? About the way Americans viewed refugees in the 1930s?

After the United States declared war against Japan, 120,000 Japanese Americans on the West Coast were shipped to detention camps. Many lost homes and businesses. Yet no Japanese American was ever found guilty of sabotage or treason. When Japanese Americans challenged the legality of the camps, the Supreme Court ruled in 1944 that it was a valid use of the nation’s war powers. It would take 40 years before the United States government agreed to make reparations. Research the internment of Japanese Americans. What does it suggest about the way citizenship rights are viewed in wartime and other extraordinary times? In ordinary times?
**Part 2: Focus on America and the Holocaust**

Part 2 explores events and ideas featured in *America and the Holocaust: Deceit and Indifference*. The events below are highlighted in the documentary. Those shown in boldface trace the effects of the Holocaust.

**1933**  
Hitler becomes chancellor of Germany; Franklin D. Roosevelt becomes President of the United States.

**1935**  
Nazis pass the Nuremberg laws which strip German Jews of citizenship rights and isolate them from other Germans.

**1938**  
November 9-10: *Kristallnacht* takes place in Germany.

**1939**  
May: Jewish refugees aboard the *St. Louis* are denied entry into Cuba.  
A poll reveals that about 53 percent of all Americans view Jews as “different.”  
Congress defeats the Wagner-Rogers bill which would have bypassed immigration laws to admit 20,000 Jewish refugee children.  
June: The United States turns away refugees aboard the *St. Louis*. The ship returns to Europe where many of the passengers will perish in the Holocaust.  

**1940**  
June: France falls to Germany.  
The US government secretly cuts usage of quotas by 50 percent.

**1941**  
June: The Nazis invade Russia. **The beginning of the systematic murder of European Jews.**  
July: New State Department policies cut usage of quotas to 25 percent, virtually shutting down immigration.  
December: The United States enters the war. After Pearl Harbor to the end of the war, quota usage drops to 10 percent.

**1942**  
Spring: News of the Holocaust reaches the West. **About 20 to 25 percent of Jews who would die in the Holocaust have already perished.**  
November: The State Department confirms that the Nazis are systematically annihilating European Jews.  
American Jews hold rallies calling for an international effort to save Jews.

**1943**  
The State Department receives additional news of the Holocaust from a source in Switzerland.  
The State Department orders its Swiss legation not to accept further reports on the Holocaust.  
April: United States takes part in an international conference on the refugee crisis in Bermuda.  
December: Congress considers a bill to establish an agency to rescue Jews. **About 80 to 85 percent of the Jews who would die in the Holocaust have already perished.**

**1944**  
January: The Treasury Department informs the President of the State Department’s policies of obstruction. The President establishes the War Refugee Board by executive order.

**1945**  
May 8: World War II ends in Europe with millions of Jews, “Gypsies” and others murdered in a genocide that would later be known as the Holocaust.
In America, It’s Different

In America and the Holocaust: Father Charles Coughlin, a priest who attacked the Jews on a weekly radio show, made a deep impression on Kurt Klein. He recalls, “On Sunday nights we would always listen to Father Coughlin and it brought back shades of what I had recently experienced within Germany, but there was one difference. People could and did speak out against that, and also it wasn’t the official policy of our government to be antisemitic.”

Ten years before Hitler came to power, he and his followers were brought to trial for trying to overthrow the government. In court, they showed their contempt for German democracy by calling it a “Jew government.” The judge did not challenge the name-calling. Indeed he ruled that Hitler and his followers were “guided in their actions by a purely patriotic spirit and the noblest of selfless intentions.” Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the Nazis openly spread antisemitism—hatred of the Jews as members of a separate and dangerous “race.” Although Jews had lived in Germany for over 600 years, non-Jewish religious and political leaders were silent. No one spoke publicly in defense of the Jews.

Antisemitism was also prevalent in the United States. For much of the nation’s history, it was, in the words of writer Chaim Potok, “a white polluting noise, barely heard, barely sensed, but always present.” By 1939, the noise was becoming more audible. That year, over 5,000 people were randomly selected and asked in a poll with which of the following statements they agreed:

- In the United States the Jews have the same standing as any other people and they should be treated in all ways exactly like all other Americans.
- Jews are in some way distinct from other Americans but they make respected and useful citizens so long as they do not try to mingle socially where they are not wanted.
- Jews have somewhat different business methods and, therefore, measures should be taken to prevent Jews from getting too much power in the business world.
- We should make it a policy to deport Jews from this country to some new homeland as fast as it can be done without inhumanity.

Although 39 percent agreed with the first statement, 53 percent viewed Jews as “different.” About 32 percent wanted to restrict their “business methods” and about 10 percent favored their deportation. Eight percent had no opinion. Other polls resulted in similar findings. Few Americans were vehemently antisemitic, but many felt that Jews had to be kept in their “place.” The ads that
accompany this reading suggest how those feelings were expressed in everyday life.

Among those who fostered such attitudes during the 1920s and 1930s was one of the nation’s richest and most influential citizens. In 1919, Henry Ford bought a weekly magazine called the *Dearborn Independent*. In issue after issue, he attacked the Jews with articles that promised to reveal “The Scope of Jewish Dictatorship in the United States” “Jewish Degradation of American Baseball,” and “The International Jew—The World’s Foremost Problem.” These stories and others like them claimed the Jews were using communism, labor unions, gambling, even jazz music to weaken the American people and American.

Ford also printed a supposedly secret plan developed by the “Jewish Elders of Zion to enslave the Christian world.” Known as the *Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*, the plan was actually concocted in the late 1800s by the Russian secret police to stir up antisemitic feeling. Ford gave the document new life by publishing it in his magazine and then reprinting it in book form. The book sold over a half million copies in the United States alone. It was also translated into 16 languages and widely distributed abroad. Adolf Hitler was among those influenced by the German edition.

American Jews tried repeatedly to show Ford that he was mistaken. When he ignored their calls and letters, many voiced their disapproval in the marketplace. They stopped buying Ford cars. So did some non-Jews. And a handful of Ford dealers gave up their franchises. Few American Jewish leaders supported the boycott. Instead they tried to meet privately with Ford. When he refused to see them, they focused on a public relations campaign to educate other Americans about Jews and Judaism. Some non-Jews supported these efforts.

Among those who publicly spoke out against antisemitism were a number of prominent Catholic and Protestant leaders. Although they did not mention Ford by name, they did express their confidence in the “patriotism and good citizenship” of “our Jewish brethren.” In addition, over 120 prominent Americans, including Presidents Woodrow Wilson and William Howard Taft, signed a public letter condemning antisemitism. It ended with these words, “We believe that it should not be left to men and women of the Jewish faith to fight this evil, but that it is in a very special sense the duty of citizens who are not Jews by ancestry or faith.”

None of these efforts seemed to affect Ford’s popularity. Every week, he received thousands of letters of appreciation and financial contributions. Then in 1924, the *Dearborn Independent* ran a series of articles attacking Aaron Sapiro, a Chicago attorney for the National Council of the Farmers’ Cooperative Marketing Association. He was accused of being part of a “conspiracy of Jewish bankers who seek to control the food market of the world.” This was not the first time Ford falsely accused a Jew of wrongdoing. But it was the first time that one chose to fight back. Against the advice of family and friends, Sapiro hired a lawyer who filed a one-million-dollar law suit against Ford. Ford responded by hiring a team of lawyers and an army of detectives.
The first trial ended abruptly in a mistrial when a reporter interviewed a juror. As the second trial unfolded, it became increasingly clear that Ford had no proof of the charges he had made against Sapiro. When Ford realized that he was about to lose the case, he contacted two prominent Jews: Louis Marshall of the American Jewish Committee and Congressman Nathan Perlman. He told them that he had been wrong to attack Sapiro and other Jews and now wanted to make amends. The two men suggested a public apology and an end to Ford’s antisemitic campaign. Ford agreed. He sent a copy of his apology to every newspaper in the country. He also wrote each of his publishers asking that his name not be used in connection with antisemitic materials.

Although some people have praised his change of heart, others are unconvinced. Biographer Albert Lee notes, “Ford had started the Jew-hatred snowball rolling and he was now content to stand on the sidelines and watch it grow, with only occasional, and generally covert, encouragement from him along the way. And the snowball grew.”

There were five antisemitic organizations in the United States before 1932, including the *Dearborn Independent*. Between 1932 and 1940, there were over 120 groups. And many of them relied on the articles and books Ford published in the 1920s in their attacks on the Jews.

Among the antisemites who acknowledged their debt to Ford was Father Charles Coughlin. At the height of his popularity in the 1930s, his radio show reached over three million people. He also published *Social Justice*, a magazine with a circulation of about one million. When it reprinted the *Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*, Coughlin wrote in the introduction, “Yes, the Jews have always claimed that the *Protocols* were forgeries, but I prefer the words of Henry Ford, who said, ‘The best test of the truth of the *Protocols* is in the fact that up to the present minute they have been carried out.’” In a letter defending that statement, Coughlin said, “Mr. Ford did retract his accusations against the Jews. But neither Mr. Ford nor I retract the statement that many of the events predicted in the *Protocols* have come to pass.”
Connections

How did the German judge view the Nazis’ antisemitic remarks? How did American courts view Ford’s remarks? How did American political and religious leaders view them? How do your answers explain why Kurt Klein felt safe in the United States in spite of Father Coughlin?

During the Middle Ages, banking was one of the few occupations open to Jews. At the time, the Church considered it a sin for Christians to charge interest for a loan. Money lending was also contrary to Jewish laws. But Jews had few other ways of earning a living, so many were forced to become bankers. That occupation led to a new stereotype: the Jew as a greedy moneylender engaged in a conspiracy to dominate the world. It was a stereotype that would linger long after the French and the Italians forced the Jews from the banking industry in Europe. That stereotype was at the heart of the “conspiracy” Ford feared. It is a stereotype that lingered on long after Ford’s public apology. How difficult is it to “undo” a lie? Why is it sometimes easier to believe an outrageous lie than a simple truth? How do leaders use stereotypes based on myth and misinformation to attract followers?

The New York Telegram said of Sapiro’s lawsuit: “If one of the richest men in the world cannot get away with anti-Semitism in this country, nobody else will have the nerve to try it, and of that we can all be thankful, gentiles as well as Jews.” Do you agree? What did the case prove? What did it fail to prove? What does the case suggest about the strength of democracy? About the fragility of democracy?

Look carefully at Father Coughlin’s statement in the last paragraph of the reading. What does he expect a reader to assume about the Protocols? Does he actually say they are true? Does he actually deny they are forgeries?

What does the 1939 poll suggest about the effects of antisemitic publications like the Dearborn Independent and radio shows like Father Coughlin’s? Why do leaders choose to stir up hatred?

The American Jewish Committee commissioned a series of public opinion polls between 1940 and 1951. To the question “Have you heard any criticism or talk against the Jews in the last six months?” pollsters reported the following responses:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Yes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>1946</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1942</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>1950</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1944</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>1951</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>84%</td>
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How do you account for the change in climate that took place between 1946 and 1950? What does the shift suggest about the times when appeals to hatred are most likely to succeed?
Like Kurt Klein, Hannah Arendt saw America as “different.” She tried to explain that difference to a former teacher after the war.

[People] here feel themselves responsible for public life to an extent I have never seen in any European country. For example, when all Americans of Japanese descent were locked up willy-nilly in concentration camps at the beginning of the war, a genuine storm of protest that can still be felt today went through the country. I was visiting with an American family in New England at the time. They were thoroughly average people... and they had, I’m sure, never laid eyes on a Japanese in their lives. As I later learned, they and many of their friends wrote immediately and spontaneously to their congressmen, insisted on the constitutional rights of all Americans regardless of national background and declared that if something like that could happen, they no longer felt safe themselves (these people were of Anglo-Saxon background, and their families had been in this country for generations, etc.)

What does Arendt see as unique about America and Americans? How does the qualities she describes explain why democracy has survived in the United States?
In America and the Holocaust: Herbert Katzki, a refugee relief worker, describes the maze of restrictions that kept Kurt Klein’s parents and other refugees trapped in Europe. “It was a technical nightmare to get out of France. You had to have... an exit visa from France. You had to get a Spanish transit visa, you had to get a Portuguese transit visa. You had to have your American visa either promised or stamped into your passport, and you have to have a boat ticket or onward transportation. All of these things had to happen within a four month period. If any of it fell by the wayside, you had to start over again in order to get everything lined up.”

In April of 1939, a Fortune magazine survey revealed that 83 percent of the American people were opposed to the admission of refugees. The editors noted, “Here is an American tradition put to the popular test, and here it is repudiated by a majority of nearly 10 to 1. There is about this answer a finality that seems to mean that the doors of this country should be virtually closed to refugees, and should stay closed to them, no matter what their need and condition.”

Thousands of miles away, a young Jewish woman desperate to leave Czechoslovakia responded to the “closed doors” by writing:

This was the one country you could get a visa for,
this country of the cold,
The one unguarded frontier of them all;
The only one that had an open door,
The only one with quota still unfilled,
Where race and credo matter not at all.

During those years a number of Americans worked frantically to save the refugees. Many of them had friends and relatives abroad. They inundated members of Congress and government officials with letters and telegrams. Some officials recognized the danger and looked for ways to bring more refugees into the country. Among these officials were members of the President’s Advisory Committee on Political Refugees. In 1940 they and others argued with the State Department to simplify immigration procedures for refugees.

Those in power in the State Department, however, insisted on enforcing the nation’s immigration laws as strictly as possible. Some did not want more Jews in the United States. Others feared that among the refugees were Nazi spies. Among those officials was Breckinridge Long—the person in the State Department responsible for issuing visas. He saw himself as “the first line of defense” against those who would “make America vulnerable to enemies for the sake of humanitarianism.” On June 26, 1940, he wrote in a memo, “We can delay and effectively stop for a temporary period of indefinite length the number of immigrants into the United States. We could do this by simply advising our consuls to put every obstacle in the way and to require additional evidence and to resort to various administrative devices which would postpone and postpone and postpone the granting of visas.”

The two approaches to the refugee crisis collided later that summer. In August, the Quanza, a Portuguese ship, docked in New York. The 200 passengers who held US passports or visas quickly left the ship. The remaining
passengers, Jewish refugees from France, pleaded with authorities to let them come ashore. They were told it would be “impossible” without the “proper papers.” The ship continued on to Veracruz, where Mexican authorities also refused to let the passengers come ashore. Next the ship headed for Nicaragua. There, too, the refugees were refused. The ship then sailed to Norfolk, Virginia, to take on more fuel before returning to Europe. In a biography of the Roosevelts, historian Doris Kearns Goodwin describes what happened next.

While the ship remained in the harbor, Jewish organizations appealed to Mrs. Roosevelt for help.

Eleanor was at Hyde Park when she received word of the situation. Convinced that something should be done, she appealed to her husband directly. He agreed to send Patrick Malin, representing [the President’s Advisory Committee on Political Refugees], to Norfolk to see what he could do to secure visas for children, for aliens holding visas from other countries, and for bona-fide political refugees.

Working quickly, Malin certified all the documents that were presented to him and construed everybody else to be a political refugee so that the entire ship could disembark.

Long was outraged. He wrote in his diary, “I remonstrated violently; said that I thought it was a violation of the law; that it was not in accord with my understanding with them; that it was not a proper interpretation of my agreement; that I would not be a party to it; and that if they did that I would have to take the matter up some other way.” Malin stood firm. He wrote that when Long “told me that he felt he could not take responsibility for them, I informed him that they were already landing.”

Malin and his associates won the battle, but this war within a war was not yet over. In the months that followed, Long tightened immigration procedures even further. By July, 1943, refugees hoping to reach the United States needed to find two American citizens as sponsors. Each sponsor in turn had to furnish two character references. The complexity of the process was reflected in the application form. It was eight feet long and printed in small type. Applicants also had to submit a police record from their hometown. For Jews, this would mean securing records from the Nazis. Under the best circumstances, the process took nine months. For German Jews, who were categorized as “enemy-aliens,” the wait was even longer and approval less likely.

Connections

In the documentary America and the Holocaust, historian David Wyman describes the barriers that Long and the State Department erected as “paper walls that meant the difference between life and death.” What were those barriers? Why does Wyman call them “paper walls”?

To what extent is the poem quoted in this reading a response to the attitudes expressed in the 1939 poll? According to the poet, what is the only country that has no visa? Where does “race and credo matter not at all”?

A 1993 Newsweek poll revealed that 60 percent of Americans regarded
immigration as a “bad thing for this country.” About 62 percent believed that immigrants take the jobs of US workers. Compare this poll with the one in 1939.

Some Americans in 1940 feared that if the US helped the refugees, the nation might be dragged into the war. These Americans favored isolation—staying out of world affairs. Write a working definition of the word isolation. What are the connotations of the word? Is isolation a good thing for individuals? Is it possible? Is it good for nations? Is it possible?

How do extraordinary times affect the way people perceive government policies? Both Long and Malin supported the nation’s immigration laws. Both recognized that there was a refugee crisis in the world. Yet their responses to the crisis were very different. Long believed in a strict enforcement of the nation’s immigration laws. Malin was interested in cutting through the “red tape” even if it meant bending the law a little. Who was in the right, Long or Malin? What criteria did you use to decide? How would the criteria you used apply to immigration laws today? To other laws?

After the war, American officials eased the nation’s immigration laws to help a new group of refugees—former Nazi scientists. They were even willing to alter their files to help them gain admission to the United States. They did it because the nation needed more scientists to help win the growing “cold war” between the United States and Russia. Were American officials in the right? Would Long agree? Would Malin? What criteria did you use to decide?

The people who worked in American consulates were bombarded with applicants. But the quotas made it impossible to take everyone who wanted to emigrate. So every consul had to make tough choices. For example, the consul in Algiers in North Africa asked: “Is an ‘intellectual’ more worthy of consideration than a working man, or a small time merchant, who has left behind all his meager belongings and has once started in again, in a strange country, under new conditions?” Freda Kirchwey of The Nation described the problem this way, “It is as if we were to examine laboriously the [resumes] of flood victims clinging to a piece of floating wreckage and finally to decide that, no matter what their virtues, all but a few had better be allowed to drown.” The resulting record was, in her view, “one which would sicken any person of ordinary humane instincts.” What do her comments suggest about the way she would answer the question the consul raises? How would you answer the question he raises?

America and the Holocaust describes the voyage of the St. Louis. The voyage is also described in the Facing History and Ourselves Resource Book. Study both accounts and then compare the fate of the passengers on that ship with those on board the Quanza. What similarities do you notice? What differences seem most striking? How significant are those differences?

What might have happened if other Americans had followed Eleanor Roosevelt’s lead? If other officials had taken the stand Patrick Malin took?
Choices in a Time of Crisis

In America and the Holocaust: Kurt Klein recalls, “In September of ’42 some of the letters we had sent to our parents were returned to us stamped ‘Return to sender, moved, left no forwarding address.’ We feared the worst, but of course didn’t know the details.”

In January of 1942, Nazi leaders gathered at Wannsee, a suburb of Berlin to discuss the “Final Solution to the Jewish Question.” That meeting did not mark the start of the Holocaust. Jews were being killed long before the meeting. It was significant, mainly because it turned the “final solution” over to the bureaucrats. The murder of Jews would now be carried out in a systematic way. It would be done according to rules and regulations. By spring the Nazis were ready to carry out their plans. At that time, after two and one-half years of war, one-fourth of all the Jews who would be killed by the Nazis had already died. Just eleven months later—by February of 1943—three-fourths were dead.

Knowledge can be divided into three parts: receipt of information, acknowledgment of the information, and action based on that information. In the summer and fall of 1942, a number of people received bits of information about the deportations and mass murders. For some, like Kurt Klein, that information was a stamped notice on letters returned from Europe. For others it was more detailed.

That summer, Eduard Schulte, a German industrialist who owned mines not far from Auschwitz, learned about the Wannsee meeting. On July 30, he traveled to Zurich, Switzerland, to tell a trusted business associate that the Nazis were planning to deport the Jews to concentration camps in the East where they would be “at one blow exterminated in order to resolve, once and for all the Jewish Question in Europe.” With Schulte’s approval, the businessman gave that information to a leader in Zurich’s Jewish community. He in turn told Gerhart Riegner, the Swiss representative to the World Jewish Congress, an international group committed to protesting Nazi persecution and aiding refugees.

Riegner now had to decide what to do with the information. He began by investigating Schulte. He discovered the German had passed on information before and that information had proved to be accurate. Riegner also compared Schulte’s report with other data he had gathered. It seemed to explain things he found puzzling. If the Jews were being sent to the east to work, why were old people and children included in the transports? Why were the deportations so brutal? The more he probed, the more convinced he became that Schulte was telling the truth. Riegner decided to send the information to Stephen Wise, the head of the American Jewish Congress, and to the US State Department. He also sent copies to Sidney Silverman, a member of Parliament and the British
representative to the World Jewish Congress, and the British Foreign Office.

In a world at war, such messages are not sent through the mail or delivered over the telephone. Riegner had to send them through diplomatic channels. That meant persuading the American and the British legations in Zurich to pass them on. At the American consulate, Riegner spoke to a young official who was convinced that Riegner was sincere but was skeptical of the information he was sending. Despite his doubts, he recommended sending it on to Washington. His superior, Leland Harrison, agreed but attached a note questioning its accuracy.

A few days later, the message arrived at the Division of European Affairs at the State Department. Now officials there would have to make some important decisions. Should they send it to Rabbi Wise? Tell the President? Investigate further? The group decided not to send the message to Wise. Instead officials simply filed it. Some of them wanted to instruct the Bern legation to refuse any more such messages. But this suggestion was not implemented. At about the same time, the British Foreign Office received the same message and made a different decision. Although officials there were also unwilling to act on the message, they did decide to send a copy to Silverman. At Riegner’s request, he then sent the information it contained directly to Wise.

Riegner’s message finally reached Rabbi Wise on August 28. He too had to make some difficult choices. To verify the information, he arranged a private meeting with the Undersecretary of State. At that meeting Sumner Welles asked Wise to say nothing about the message until its accuracy could be checked. Wise agreed. He kept that promise throughout the fall of 1942, even as he received more and more accounts of mass murder. He did, however, pass on each new message to Undersecretary of State Welles. In October Welles asked Leland Harrison to corroborate Riegner’s message. The next day Harrison alerted Welles to numerous reports from both Jewish and non-Jewish sources.

On October 22, Harrison met with Riegner and Richard Lichtheim, the Geneva representative of the Jewish Agency for Palestine. The two gave him a 30-page report with specific evidence, including a country-by-country breakdown of the number already dead. They also provided independent confirmation of the murders from a high official in the International Red Cross. Harrison carefully checked out the sources of the information the men provided. He then sent a report to Welles. After receiving that information on November 24, Welles released Wise from his promise to remain silent.

To focus attention on the murders, Wise immediately arranged press conferences in Washington and New York. Jewish leaders also set aside a national Day of Mourning and Prayer. Special services were held in synagogues. Jewish workers in factories and stores stopped production for ten minutes of silent prayer. Several radio stations also went silent. As a result of such efforts, the story received widespread coverage but rarely on the front page. To many journalists, it seemed too incredible to be true.

In her biography of the Roosevelts, Doris Kearns Goodwin reports that immediately after the Day of Mourning, Eleanor Roosevelt noticed a small item buried in the paper that filled her, she said, “with horror.” Goodwin explains, “In Poland, it was reported more than two-thirds of the Jewish population had been massacred. News of massive killings in Poland had been leaking out for months, but this was the first time that Eleanor had fully absorbed the enormity
of the slaughter.”

On December 17, 1942, the governments of the United States, Britain, and the Soviet Union issued a joint declaration stating that “the German authorities not content with denying to persons of the Jewish race in all the territories over which their barbarous rule has been extended the most elementary human rights, are now carrying into effect Hitler’s oft-repeated intention to exterminate the Jewish people in Europe.”

Although the Allies now acknowledged the mass murders, they did nothing to stop them. They insisted that the best way to end the killings was by winning the war. A number of people disagreed. They wanted the Allies to rescue as many Jews as possible. To do so, they would have to shape public opinion. One group decided to place a series of advertisements in newspapers across the nation in hopes of making Americans more aware of what was going on. These activists were led by Peter Bergson, a young Jew from Palestine with a flair for public relations. For example, when The New York Times revealed in February of 1943 that the Rumanian government was willing to release 70,000 Jews to the Allies for 20,000 lei per refugee, the Bergson group put the story in terms anyone could understand. They ran an ad in newspapers across the country. In bold letters, the headline read:

**FOR SALE TO HUMANITY**

**70,000 JEWS**

**GUARANTEED HUMAN BEINGS AT $50 A PIECE**

The advertisements combined with rallies and petitions began to show results by early spring. The United States and Britain announced plans for a conference on refugees. It was set for April 19, 1943, in Bermuda. But when the Bermuda Conference ended with no plan of action, the campaign resumed. The Bergson group highlighted not only failures but also successes. In October, when the Nazis decided to deport all 6,000 of Denmark’s Jews, the Danish people managed to smuggle them into Sweden. The Bergson group celebrated the event with an ad that proclaimed, “It Can Be Done!”

One of the most powerful ads appeared after a conference in Moscow. There the Allies issued a statement outlining the atrocities for which the Nazis would be held accountable after the war but failed to mention the mass murder of European Jews. The statement was made public on November 2, 1943. Three days later, this ad appeared in newspapers across the country:

I have an Uncle who is a Ghost....

He was elected last April by the Two Million Jews who have been murdered by the Germans to be their World Delegate. Wherever there are Conferences on how to make the World a Better Place, maybe, my Uncle Abraham appears and sits on the window sill and takes notes.

...Last night my Uncle Abraham was back in a Certain Place where the Two Million murdered Jews met....

“Dishonored dead,” said my Uncle Abraham, “...of the Moscow Conference I have this to report. The Conference made a promise that the world was going to punish the Germans for murdering all the different
peoples of Europe—Czechs, Greeks, Serbs, Russians, French hostages, Polish officers, Cretan peasants. Only we were not mentioned....

“In the Kremlin in Moscow, in the White House in Washington, in the Downing Street Building in London where I have sat on the window sills, I have never heard our name. The people who live in those buildings—Stalin, Roosevelt, and Churchill—do not speak of us. Why, I don’t know....”

A Woman Ghost from the Dynamite Dumps of Odessa spoke.

“If they didn’t mention the two million murdered Jews in the Conference, isn’t that bad for four million who are still alive? The Germans will think that when they kill Jews, Stalin, Roosevelt and Churchill pretend nothing is happening.”

And from the Two Million Ghosts came a great cry....

My Uncle Abraham raised his hand.

“Little children,” my Uncle Abraham spoke: “Be patient. We will be dead a long time. Yesterday when we were killed we were changed from Nobodies to Nobodies. Today, on our Jewish tomb, there is not the Star of David, there is an Asterisk. But, who knows, maybe Tomorrow—!”

This ended the Meeting of the Jewish Underground.

My Uncle Abraham has gone to the White House in Washington. He is sitting on the window sill two feet away from Mr. Roosevelt. But he has left his notebook behind.

**Connections**

Write a working definition of the word bureaucrat. How do “rules and regulations” shape the decisions bureaucrats make? How do their own values and attitudes shape the decisions they make?

In *America and the Holocaust*, Jan Karski, a courier for the Polish Resistance, is interviewed. He recalls his meeting with the President in July of 1943. Karski also met with Justice Felix Frankfurter. He later reported that when he told Frankfurter what was happening to the Jews in Poland, Frankfurter replied, “I cannot believe you.” The Polish ambassador was indignant that the justice would think Karski was lying. But according to Karski, Frankfurter replied, “I am not saying he is lying. I only said that I cannot believe him, and there is a difference.” What is the difference? How important is the difference? For more on Jan Karski’s efforts to inform Americans about the death camps and ghettos, see Facing History’s *Elements of Time*. A video interview with Karski is available from the Facing History Resource Center.

How does the division of knowledge into three parts apply to the way people responded to Riegner’s message? Did people know? Did they acknowledge the information? Did they act on that knowledge? How does it apply to the way people today respond to murders in Bosnia, or Rwanda? To violence in the United States? To catastrophes in other parts of the world?

At whom were the ads aimed? How did they appeal to that audience? What action did they want the audience to take?
The ads did not change the opinions of most Americans. Antisemitic feelings ran high throughout the war. The ads did, however, made a strong impression on government officials. Roosevelt was particularly disturbed by “Uncle Abraham.” He complained that it “hit below the belt.” Were the ads “fair”? Were they “right”? What do they suggest about the way people can make themselves heard in a democracy?

Some Americans believed that it was wrong to criticize the government in time of war. In a time of danger, they argue, people ought to support the government no matter what. Others believe that they had a responsibility to speak out—even in wartime. Which view is closest to your own?

Despite the charges of antisemites like Father Coughlin, American Jews were not united. They were divided politically, economically, and religiously. Although they agreed on the need to help European Jews, they did not agree on the best way to accomplish that goal. How did that lack of unity hurt their efforts?

It has been said that knowledge is power. Who held power in the summer of 1942? How did they use that power? What lessons can be learned from that experience? In 1993, a number of State Department officials resigned over the way the government was handling the crisis in Bosnia. Find out what happened as a result of their resignations. Why did they take a stand? What effect did it have?
Choosing to Rescue

Will Rogers Jr. and others in Congress who shared his views wanted the President to create a special government rescue agency designed to save the surviving Jews of Europe. In November of 1943, the Foreign Affairs Committee of the House of Representatives launched hearings into proposed legislation that would establish such an agency.

Behind closed doors, Breckinridge Long insisted to committee members that there was no need for a rescue agency as the United States was already doing all it could for the refugees. Long claimed that “we have taken into this country since the beginning of the Hitler regime and the persecution of the Jews, until today, approximately 580,000 refugees.” He implied that most of them were Jews.

Representative Emanuel Celler of Brooklyn was quick to point out that Long’s 580,000 refugees were “in the main ordinary quota immigrants coming in from all countries and the majority were not Jews.” No more than 250,000 refugees who had been granted visas had entered the nation. Only about 138,000 of them were Jews. Celler blamed Long for the “tragic bottleneck in the granting of visas.”

As pressure to help the refugees mounted in Congress, Long found himself under attack from yet another source: the Treasury Department. In late 1943, three young lawyers in the department—Randolph Paul, John Pehle, and Josiah DuBois—were troubled by their recent contacts with the State Department. One of the three, John Pehle, had discovered that the State Department was actively blocking the transfer of private funds intended for the rescue of Jews. The three decided to investigate further. In doing so, they stumbled across a reference to a cable which they hoped would shed additional light on the State Department’s actions. (What they didn’t know at first was that State Department cable number 354, dated February 10, 1943, instructed its representative not to send more messages like an earlier telegram from Gerhart Riegner to Stephen Wise which described massive killings of Jews in Poland. In effect cable number 354 was designed to cut off the flow of information about the Holocaust.) When the three asked for copies of the cable, the State Department refused to comply.

The Treasury Department officials could have shrugged off the matter at this point, but they felt they had a responsibility to find out exactly what was going on and why. So DuBois contacted an acquaintance who worked as an aide to the Assistant Secretary of State. At the risk of his own job, the aide, Donald Hiss, decided to secretly show DuBois copies of the cable. It revealed that in early 1943 the State Department had suppressed vital information about the massive murders of the Jews. The three men showed the evidence to their boss, Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau.
Morgenthau was one of the first Jews to hold a cabinet position. He was also a close friend of the President. Until 1942, Morgenthau seemed to distance himself from the Jewish catastrophe in Europe. He later said that his attitude changed on the day in 1942 when “Dr. Wise and his son James came to call on me and read that unbelievable cable telling about the crematoriums in Europe. I think that day changed my life.”

Now Morgenthau had to figure out what to do with the evidence his aides had uncovered. He decided to meet with the Secretary of State. Long, who was also at the meeting denied any wrongdoing and tried to shift blame to an aide. During the course of the meeting, Morgenthau said to Long, “The United States of America was created as a refuge for people who were persecuted the world over, starting with Plymouth. And as Secretary of the Treasury for 135 million people, I am carrying this out as Secretary of the Treasury not as a Jew.” Before the meeting ended, Morgenthau off-handedly repeated his department’s request for a copy of cable number 354.

When the cable arrived, Morgenthau and his staff discovered that the cable did not match the one Hiss had shown to DuBois. It had been altered in hopes of covering up the fact that State Department officials had tried to stop the flow of critical information about the massive killing of the Jews. There was now direct evidence of the State Department’s attempt to block information about the Holocaust as well as an attempt to cover up that action.

When Morgenthau was confronted with this new evidence, he asked Paul to prepare a memo. The thrust of the 18-page memo entitled “Report to the Secretary on the Acquiescence of This Government in the Murder of the Jews” is evident in its opening passages:

One of the greatest crimes in history, the slaughter of the Jewish people in Europe, is continuing unabated.

This Government has for a long time maintained that its policy is to work out programs to save those Jews of Europe who could be saved. I am convinced on the basis of the information which is available to me that certain officials in our State Department, which is charged with carrying out this policy, have been guilty not only of gross procrastination and willful failure to act, but even of willful attempts to prevent action from being taken to rescue Jews from Hitler.

I fully recognize the graveness of this statement and I make it only after having most carefully weighed the shocking facts which have come to my attention during the last several months. Unless remedial steps of a drastic nature are taken, and taken immediately, I am certain that no effective action will be taken by this Government to prevent the complete extermination of the Jews in German controlled Europe, and that this Government will have to share for all time responsibility for this extermination.

The tragic history of this Government’s handling of this matter reveals that certain State Department officials are guilty of the following:

(1) They have not only failed to use the Governmental machinery at their disposal to rescue Jews from Hitler, but have even gone so far as to use this Government machinery to prevent the rescue of these Jews.

(2) They have not only failed to cooperate with private organizations in the
efforts of these organizations to work out individual programs of their own, but have
taken steps designed to prevent these programs from being put into effect.
(3) They not only have failed to facilitate the obtaining of information concerning
Hitler’s plans to exterminate the Jews of Europe but in their official capacity have
gone so far as to surreptitiously attempt to stop the obtaining of information
concerning the murder of the Jewish population of Europe.
(4) They have tried to cover up their guilt by:
(a) concealment and misrepresentation;
(b) the giving of false and misleading explanations for their failures to act and their
attempts to prevent action; and
(c) the issuance of false and misleading statements concerning the ‘action’ which they
have taken to date.
Upon reviewing the document, Morgenthau changed the title to “A Personal Report to
the President” and toned down the inflammatory language. But he did not tone down the
implications of a nasty political scandal.
After Morgenthau and his aides presented the memo to the President, Roosevelt set up
the War Refugee Board. Placed under Morgenthau’s supervision, it saved about 200,000
Jews through a combination of diplomacy, bribery, and extraordinary commitment from
such dedicated agents as Raoul Wallenberg. John Pehle, who headed the board, later
remarked that “what we did was little enough. It was late.... Late and little, I would say”

Connections

Why did Will Rogers, Jr. think that it was important for the United States to take a stand
regardless of the outcome? Do you agree?

What choices did Pehle, Paul, DuBois, and Hiss make? What motivated their decisions?
DuBois later told Morgenthau’s son that if the President had not acted on the report, he
would have resigned and released the report to the press. How was DuBois’s position
similar to that of Will Rogers, Jr.? What difference seems most striking?

Many years after World War II, John Pehle told Morgenthau’s son that his father “didn’t
want to stand out as a Jew. He wanted to stand out as secretary of the treasury. It was
doubly hard, I would think for him but he did it.” How were the choices Morgenthau faced
similar to those of his young aides? What differences seem most striking? Why did Henry
Morgenthau feel he had to tell Long he was acting as the Secretary of the Treasury not as
a Jew?

In America and the Holocaust, John Pehle, who headed the War Refugee Board, states,
“what we did was little enough. It was late.... Late and little, I would say.” What did he
mean by that remark? How would you assess the work of the Refugee Board?
Legacies and Lessons

In 1939, W. H. Auden wrote:
Came to a public meeting; the speaker got up and said:
“If we let them in, they will steal our daily bread”;
He was talking of you and me, my dear, he was talking of you and me.

Though I heard the thunder rumbling in the sky;
It was Hitler over Europe, saying, “They must die”;
O we were in his mind, my dear, O we were in his mind.

Saw a poodle in a jacket fastened with a pin,
Saw a door opened and a cat let in:
But they weren’t German Jews, my dear, but
they weren’t German Jews.

Went down the harbor and stood up the quay,
Saw the fish swimming as if they were free:
Only ten feet away, my dear, only ten feet away.

Walking through a wood, saw the birds in the trees;
They had no politicians and sang at their ease:
They weren’t the human race, my dear, they weren’t the human race.

Dreamed I saw a building with a thousand floors,
A thousand windows and a thousand doors:
Not one of them was ours, my dear, not one of them was ours.

Stood on a great plain in the falling snow;
Ten thousand soldiers marched to and fro:
Looking for you and me, my dear, looking for you and me.

A year earlier, Dorothy Thompson estimated that there were about four million refugees in the world. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, in 1995 there were about 23 million refugees in the world and another 26 million displaced in their own countries. Africa had nearly 7.5 million refugees and many of the displaced; Asia had 5.7 million refugees and Europe 6 million, not including all of those who were displaced within their own countries. Another 2.3 million—and an uncounted number of
displaced—were refugees in the former Soviet republics. That year the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees printed the ad that accompanies this reading. It states:

Look at this nice happy people.

Notice that each one has something: a tool or implement here, a bicycle or a briefcase there. All completely normal and unremarkable.

But wait. Something’s amiss. That nice fellow near the bottom—third row down, second from the right. He doesn’t seem to have anything.

Indeed. You see, he’s a refugee.

And as you can see, refugees are just like you and me except for one thing: everything they once had has been destroyed or taken away, probably at gunpoint. Home, family, possessions, all gone.

They have nothing.

And nothing is all they’ll ever have unless we help.

Of course, you can’t give them back what’s been destroyed, and we’re not asking for money (although every penny helps). But we are asking you to keep an open mind. And a smile of welcome. It may not seem much. But to a refugee it can mean everything.

Connections

How did Auden view the refugees in 1939? How did he view the nations of the world and their people? In what respect is his view similar to the one expressed in the advertisement that accompanies this reading? How does it differ?

In 1938, Thompson argued that refugees add to “world unrest.” How did they add to unrest then? Research the Haitian refugees in the early 1990s or another group of refugees and find out to what extent her observation is true today. Share your findings with the class.

In the late 1800s, poet Steven Crane wrote: A man said to the universe:

“Sir, I exist!”

“However,” replied the universe,

“The fact has not created in me

A sense of obligation.”

To whom does the universe feel “a sense of obligation”? To whom should it feel an obligation? How important is it that the world feel a sense of obligation to individuals? Dorothy Thompson believed that no democratic nation can “wash its hands of [the problems of the refugees] if it wishes to retain its own soul.” Was she right?

In 1980, Elie Wiesel, a Holocaust survivor and the recipient of the Nobel Prize for Peace, joined a “March for Survival” organized to bring food and medicine to Cambodia where millions had already lost their lives under a terrible dictatorship. When he was asked later why he went to Cambodia, he replied, “I
came here because nobody came when I was there. One thing that is worse for the victim than hunger, fear, torture, even humiliation, is the feeling of abandonment, the feeling that nobody cares, the feeling that you don’t count.” He later remarked, “Perhaps we cannot change the world, but I do not want the world to change me.” In the 1990s, he traveled to Bosnia for the same reasons. How does Wiesel define his obligations to himself? The universe? How are those definitions like those of Will Rogers, Jr.,? Henry Morgenthau and the young lawyers in the Treasury Department? How are they different?