The Return of the St. Louis

532 *St. Louis* passengers were trapped when Germany conquered Western Europe. Just over half, 278 survived the Holocaust. 254 died: 84 who had been in Belgium; 84 who had found refuge in Holland, and 86 who had been admitted to France.

FRANCE

During the 1930s, many German Jews and other refugees fled from Nazi Germany to France. By 1939, France imposed restrictions on Jewish immigration and set up internment camps for refugees. There were more than 300,000 Jews in France when German troops invaded the country in June 1940.

Under the terms of the armistice between France and Germany, northern France remained under German occupation. Southern France, which was not occupied by the Germans, was governed by an exclusively French administration based in the town of Vichy. The Vichy regime publicly declared neutrality in the war, but actually was active in passing anti-Semitic legislation and cooperated with Germany in the deportation of Jews from France.

Jews were excluded from public life, and were removed from the civil service, the army, professions, commerce, and industry. In July 1941, the Vichy government began an extensive program of "Aryanization," and confiscated Jewish-owned property for the French state. Many Jews became destitute and foreign Jews were particularly vulnerable as thousands were deported to internment camps.

Refugees fleeing southern France had to maneuver through a bewildering and often insensitive bureaucracy. The Vichy regime required that a potential emigrant have a valid entry visa for their destination country, reserved passage on a ship out of France, or a transit visa for a country bordering France (usually Spain, through which refugees traveled to Portugal). In order to secure transit visas, a refugee must have first secured passage on a ship from his or her point of embarkation. Reservations for passage on a ship were commonly valid for no more than three weeks. Within that time, an individual had to secure a transit visa from one or more foreign consulates. Only when a refugee had completed these steps would the French consider his or her application for an exit visa. Often, by the time one set of papers was approved, validation of another had expired.

French authorities shared applications for exit visas with the Gestapo, and Vichy police had authorization to arrest foreign Jews without cause and place them in internment camps. Under Article 19 of the Franco-German armistice, French authorities pledged to "surrender on demand" any refugees that the Nazis sought for political or racial reasons.

For refugees imprisoned in French internment camps, it was nearly impossible to navigate the visa application process, especially within the required time span. Many sought means of illegal emigration rather than approach the authorities in hope of receiving visa approval. By the end of 1941, most legal avenues of escape were closed, and by the summer of 1942, the Nazis began large-scale deportations of Jews from France to killing centers in occupied-Poland, primarily to Auschwitz.

Throughout the summer and fall of 1942, French police rounded up Jews, mainly those without French citizenship, in both the German-occupied and Vichy-governed zones. Throughout France, Jews were assembled in camps and then loaded onto cattle cars. They were deported first to the Drancy transit camp (northeast of Paris), which became the main center for deportations from France. During that year over 60 transports (carrying more than 40,000 Jews) left Drancy, mainly for the Auschwitz-Birkenau killing center.

The last deportation from France to the killing centers in the East occurred in the summer of 1944. By then, about 75,000 Jews (25 percent of the Jews in France), primarily refugees from other countries, had been deported. Although several transports were sent to Majdanek and Sobibor, the majority were deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Most of the deportees were killed.

BELGIUM

Germany invaded and occupied Belgium in May 1940. At that time, more than 65,000 Jews lived in Belgium, primarily in Antwerp and Brussels; 90 percent of them were refugees and immigrants. In the summer of 1940, some German Jews and political refugees in Belgium were deported to camps in southern France, such as Gurs and St. Cyprien.

German military authorities instituted anti-Jewish laws and ordinances in Belgium that restricted the civil rights of Jews, confiscated their property and businesses, and banned them from certain professions. Jews were isolated from their fellow countrymen and were forced to wear a yellow star on their clothing.

Initially, Belgian Jews were rounded up for forced labor. In late July 1942, the German Security Police and SD officials ordered Jews to report to the Mechelen camp, ostensibly to be sent to work camps in Germany. German military and police agencies began arresting Jews throughout Belgium and interning them in Mechelen. From there they were deported to killing centers, mostly Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Between August and December 1942, two transports with about 1,000 Jews each left the Mechelen camp every week for the Auschwitz-Birkenau killing center. Between August 1942 and July 1944, 28 trains carrying more than 25,000 Jews left Belgium, primarily for Auschwitz via Mechelen.

The arrests of Jews and the beginning of deportations met with increasing resistance in Belgium. About 25,000 Jews avoided deportation by hiding from the German authorities or fleeing to neutral Switzerland, Spain, or Portugal via the unoccupied zone in southern France. The Belgian civilian administration refused to cooperate in the deportations, leaving the German military police to carry out the deportations largely without assistance from the Belgians.

In 1942, the Jewish underground destroyed the registry of Belgian Jews, hindering deportations. There were many escapes from deportation trains and in mid-April 1943, the Jewish underground, together with the Belgian resistance, derailed a train carrying Jews from the Mechelen camp to Auschwitz. Most of the Jews on that transport were captured and later deported.

THE NETHERLANDS

In May 1940, Germany invaded and occupied the Netherlands. The Dutch civilian administration continued to function, under German control, but Queen Wilhelmina and her government fled to Great Britain. German policy in the Netherlands was determined by the Reich Commissar for the Occupied Netherlands, Arthur Seyss-Inquart, who actively promoted anti-Jewish measures and insisted on strict compliance with them. Between 1940 and 1942, Seyss-Inquart instituted anti-Jewish laws and ordinances that restricted the civil rights of Jews, confiscated their property and businesses, and banned them from certain professions. Jews were isolated from their fellow countrymen and were forced to wear a yellow star on their clothing.

In January 1941, Seyss-Inquart ordered all Jews to report for registration; more than 140,000 responded. German authorities then required all Dutch Jews to move to Amsterdam, the country's largest city. Stateless and foreign Jews who had emigrated to the Netherlands during the 1930s were sent to the Westerbork transit camp.

In early 1942, the German police sent more than 3,000 Jews to forced labor camps in the Netherlands, and in late June 1942, German authorities announced that Jews would be deported to labor camps in Germany. In reality, they were concentrated in Westerbork and then deported to the Auschwitz-Birkenau and Sobibor killing centers in occupied Poland.

The majority of Jews sent to Westerbork remained there only a short time before they were deported. Dutch police guarded Westerbork, where conditions were relatively good in comparison to transit camps elsewhere in Western Europe. The Dutch provided the camp with supplies, and the prisoners had adequate food, clothing, housing, and sanitary facilities. Nonetheless, the barracks were extremely crowded, and prisoners lived in constant fear of weekly deportations to killing centers.

Dutch churches protested to the German occupation authorities about the deportations, but the protests had little effect, since the Dutch civilian administration cooperated with the German SS and police. The Dutch police, with few exceptions and with assistance from Dutch Nazis, participated in roundups of Jews. In little more than two years, more than 100,000 Jews were deported from the Netherlands; only 5,200 survived. Less than 25 percent of the 140,000 Jews living in the Netherlands in 1940 survived the war. Almost all the survivors were hidden by Dutch neighbors or strangers.