

Elie Wiesel:

(applause) *St. Louis*. A place, a vessel, a name, a concept, a memory. *St. Louis*. A dark cloud in a sky fraught with peril. Call it a moral *Titanic*. *St. Louis* is the name of a ship, and that ship belongs to Jewish memory. She reminds us of Jewish loneliness in Germany, and also of the free world's complacency, indifference, and scandalous [00:01:00] ethical failure in refusing to save hundreds of innocent victims in danger. We say "*St. Louis*," and the next word that comes to mind is "sadness." And "shame." Sadness for the victims, and shame on the persecutors. And on their helpers. And sympathizers.

St. Louis also brings justified embarrassment to the names of those who were then leaders of freedom-loving nations. They failed the test of humanity towards those who felt forgotten and abandoned, counted for nothing, by so many happy people in so many lands. But there was a hero in this [00:02:00] sad and melancholy story. Who was he? We know who its victims were: more than 900 men, women, and children. All Jews who fled imprisonment and torment. We also know who the indifferent spectators were: democratically elected leaders of big and small

nations. Their lack of solidarity cannot be invoked as a reason to forsake hope. Not even in an era of pre-darkness.

The hero of the story is a German. A star of the Merchant Marine. The young 37-year-old captain of a large transatlantic passenger vessel, his name is Gustav Schröder. [00:03:00] He made moral history, and he will be remembered as the humanist of the *St. Louis*. Where does the tale begin? In 1933, when Hitler became the dictatorial chancellor of the Third Reich, and hurriedly ordered the establishment of the first infamous concentration camps, when prisoners were brought only to undergo public humiliation and cruel deprivation, when the outbreak of the first anti-Jewish activities were official German policy, and political philosophy. When the horrendous anti-Semitic Nuremberg Laws were announced and immediately implemented.

Where does the tale begin? [00:04:00] People knew then, as they remember now, that Jews in Hitler's Germany lived in constant fear. They could not be protected by law, since the law was the enemy. It was lawful to deprive them of their livelihood, of their safety, of their joy, of their hope, and in short, of all that today we could call their basic human rights. Old and new anti-Semites used their instantly-gained prestige and power to surpass one another in who would beat up more Jews in the

street. In the most ferocious and ugly manner. No wonder that so many targeted victims were eager to pick up their belongings, [00:05:00] leave their homes, and businesses, and emigrate. Where? Anywhere.

Thousands upon thousands of Jewish men and women, of all ethnic and national origins, of all ages, professions, and social spheres, besieged foreign consulates. Long, endless lines surrounded the American, French, British, South African, Australian, and Canadian consulates. A joke was going around in Berlin: two men more fortunate than others meet in the street. One says, "I am so happy. I am getting a visa for Shanghai. And you?" "Mine," says the other, "is for Tierra del Fuego in Argentina." [00:06:00] And the first said, "What? But that's far." And his friend answers, "Far from where?"

Strange as it may sound, now, surely, just as Jews wanted to leave, the German authorities wanted them to get out. Hitler's goal was not yet extermination, but racial cleansing. He and his followers called it *judenrein*, just that, *judenrein*. To patriotically and happily dwell in their land, without a trace of Jews. That was their sociopolitical objective, their fanatical goal. In fact, Adolf Eichmann's first position at the Gestapo was to help German and Austrian Jews [00:07:00] leave

Germany and first, Austria, which became Germany, legally. He even helped them choose illegal border crossings. High-level negotiations were also underway between the Jewish agency of Palestine -- at that time, Palestine meant the Jewish Palestine -- and German high officials, involving the so-called transfer, or *Haavara* Project, allowing Jewish immigrants to bring some of their expensive machinery to Palestine. Haifa and Nahariyya quickly became inhabited by German-speaking immigrants.

In general, anyone who had a visa to go anywhere could leave. And that applied even to concentration camp inmates. In fact, some Zionist activists and officials were liberated from Buchenwald, [00:08:00] since their names were on appropriate lists. Heydrich himself personally allowed the *St. Louis* passengers to leave the country. Individuals with great wealth or reputation had it easier. Thomas Mann and Franz Werfel, Sigmund Freud and Peter Lorre, Bertolt Brecht, Hannah Arendt, Fritz Lang, and a number of scholars and scientists, not all Jews, succeeded early on in finding ways to leave total fear and fortune behind, and uproot themselves for good. Two events sealed the fate of many others. The Évian Conference in October, and *Kristallnacht* in November. Of the latter, we spoke [00:09:00] at length last year, here, the state-organized pogrom in all German major and minor cities, was conceived and

implemented as an act of collective vengeance for the individual assassination of a German diplomat in Paris by a Polish youngster, Herschel Grynszpan. Hundreds of synagogues were set aflame, countless businesses ransacked, hundreds and hundreds of Jews were imprisoned and taken to Dachau and Buchenwald.

This time, the international community was outraged. The condemnation, quasi-planetary. President Roosevelt went as far as recalling his ambassador from Berlin for consultation. The Évian Conference preceded that pogrom. The world had already become painfully [00:10:00] aware of the refugee problem. At that time, it affected mainly, if not only, Jews in Germany and recently-annexed Austria. Where could they go? Which country would offer them rescue? Shelter? Roosevelt had an idea. Immediately and symbolically open the gates of our country? No, it's too much. Just call an international conference. That was his idea. A conference that would deal with the situation, and now everyone, everywhere, could breathe easier.

Chaired by a French diplomat, the gathering took place in the French spa, a spa resort, Évian. Hugely covered by the world press, and especially by the German media, it opened on July 6th, 1938. [00:11:00] Thirty-two nations participated in its discussions and deliberations. Hitler declared, and I quote

him, "I hope that the world's sympathy towards her criminals" -- meaning the Jews -- "will be translated in acts." And he continued, "Germany is ready to hand them over to them on luxury ships." Some 40 Jewish organizations and NGOs were treated with disdain. The World Jewish Congress was allotted 50 minutes. The representative of German Jewry, the same. The entire endeavor quickly turned into a farce. All official representatives, with the temporary exception of the Dominican Republic, expressed sympathy [00:12:00] for the refugees, but each and every one explained why his country was unable to accept them. Let someone else do it!

The French delegate said that his country was already demographically, quote, "saturated with foreigners." That's precisely what foreign minister Georges Bonnet privately told Ribbentrop. "France does not want more refugees on its soil." Great Britain was in the middle of the preparing a white book, limiting Jewish immigration to Palestine. America held on to its cherished, sacred quotas. Various alternatives began floating around. "Why not send the stateless and homeless refugees to Madagascar?" France opposed it. Its influential minister Georges Mandel, [00:13:00] though Jewish, declared, quote, "There will never be a Jewish community in Madagascar." How about Ethiopia? Mussolini said no. Uganda? Kenya?

Guyana? The German reaction? An article in the *Danziger Vorpost*, quote, "The Évian Conference vindicates the German policy towards the Jews. No country will accept a few thousand Jews. Why should we?"

Switzerland dispatched one of its influential ministers to Berlin, where he met with the head of the Gestapo and suggested to him that all Jews should, on their passports and IDs, have the letter "J," *juden*, printed, so that all the other nations would know not to accept them. Other governments of occupied countries [00:14:00] soon followed. Well, it's a very sad story. It was a very sad period. But, let us stop for a minute. Is it too sad? Its sadness would grow every day with every incident, deeper and deeper. Its memory of tragically closed doors will continue to hound our own for generations to come.

But then, as always, according to our tradition, a few parenthetical remarks seem in order. The story, as always, deals not only with the past, but also with its impact on the present. The Jewish people is the only one that remembers not only its victories and glorious moments, but also its defeats and dark hours. Such as the 10th day of *Tevet*, which marks the beginning of the Siege of Jerusalem [00:15:00] -- it's a fast

day. And the ninth day of Av, commemorating the destruction of the temple -- another fast day. But just as we recall Jeremiah's tears, and Isaiah's consolation, we remember the Crusades, the mass suicides, the pogroms. But also, the birth of the Zionist movement, of Hasidic glory, and the re-establishment of Israel's independence on its ancient soil.

Years and years ago, when the Iron Curtain came down, I published an op-ed piece in The New York Times, expressing my worry that the demolition of the Berlin Wall on November 9th will cast a shadow on the anniversary of *Kristallnacht*. My article aroused a rage of the chief editor and publisher of The Spiegel in Germany. [00:16:00] Regretfully, my concern was justified. Will this also happen to the anniversary of the *St. Louis*? Well, it's spring, and we remember it. And we shall continue as soon as those who are waiting outside, will come in.

Actually, the name pre-dates the tragic event we are dealing with here tonight. In Jewish collective memory, it evokes a period of animosity, enmity, and implacable ill will. King Louis of France, the ninth of 18 French sovereign rulers, attained sainthood, of course, posthumously. As is the custom, the title and the honor awarded to him covered his lifetime work for the glory of his church, [00:17:00] in the 13th century.

So, the Jew in me cannot but wonder, what made him so special that the highest Vatican leadership decided to turn him into an example to be admired and followed for generations to come? There must have been other reasons for their decision. But the one that interests me as a Jew was his extreme and infinite hatred for Jews, and the Jewish faith.

In those times, the Middle Ages, other kings in France and elsewhere disliked Jews, in their own ways. Some even protected them, as did some popes. But in matters of discrimination, with the exception of King Ferdinand of Spain, none [00:18:00] surpassed that of Louis IX, who became Saint Louis. During the bloody Crusades, he refused to protect Jewish victims in his own provinces. And in 1240, the year 1240, the famous disputation between the great Rabbi Yechiel ben Joseph and the apostate Nicholas Donin took place in Paris. On orders of the royal palace, realizing that the representative of the church was not faring too well, the king, Louis IX, commented, quote, "Rather than discuss matters with a Jew, the Christian layman should plunge his sword into him."

In Rome, when Pope Innocent IV felt obliged [00:19:00] to declare that no one can study Scripture without the Talmud, King Louis of France threatened to expulse from the country any Jew

caught with the possession of a Talmudic tractate. And following his orders, in 1242, 24 cartloads of Jewish books, especially the Talmud, were publicly set on fire. Furthermore, it was he who, influenced by the same Nicholas Donin, ordered all his Jew subjects to listen to Christian missionary sermons. If not, they would go to jail. They were ordered also to wear a distinctive badge of shame in the cities, villages, and streets of his kingdom. Why, then, was he included [00:20:00] among the saints of the Catholic Church? Who knows? I don't.

But seven centuries later, there was a ship named *St. Louis*. May 13, 1939. Nine hundred thirty German Jews are embarking on the beautiful eight-decked ocean liner *St. Louis* of the Hamburg-America Line, in festive Hamburg, which is celebrating its 750th anniversary. Four hundred passengers paid \$320 for first-class cabins. Five hundred were in tourist class. All tickets were, in a way, round-trip. It was Saturday. Thirty pious Jews had come aboard a day earlier, so as not to [00:21:00] violate the Sabbath. But all were personally greeted by the ship's captain, Gustav Schröder. At the pier, customary music was played in honor of the departing passengers. The 231-member crew followed the captain's specific solemn orders to treat them with special attention and courtesy. He went dangerously far in trying to

please them by removing Hitler's official picture from the ballroom, which was transformed into a temporary synagogue.

The moment the vessel left the shore, the passengers' mood became good, uplifted, cheerful. The uncertainty of their future didn't bother them. What was certain was that they would not have to endure any more vicious German anti-Semitism.

[00:22:00] They knew that far away in Cuba, their immediate destination, life would be bearable, at least. They all had in their possession official American quota numbers, and special Cuban certificates, allowing them to stay in transit while waiting for American visas. How long? Probably a few months, or even years. In the meantime, they might find ways to adjust to their new surroundings.

The first real signal of a possible problem reached the captain on the 23rd of May. He was informed that Cuba's president, Federico Laredo Brú, issued a law number 937, effectively prohibiting the passengers from disembarking in Cuba. Why?

Neither the passengers nor the captain knew this. [00:23:00] Pro-Nazi and anti-Semitic articles in major newspapers produced unprecedented hostility to Jews in Cuba. The largest anti-Jewish demonstration in its history had taken place just around that time. And it had an impact on the president.

Schröder had, almost from the beginning, established a special passenger committee to discuss all eventualities. He informed them right at the outset that no matter what, he would not return to Hamburg. So, life will go on, and did go on, undisturbed. Good meals offered, and taken regularly. Entertainment. Religious services. The *St. Louis* continued [00:24:00] to Havana, where they arrived on the 26th of May. It was Saturday. And there, a shocking surprise. Armed Cuban police immediately boarded the vessel, and the passengers were told that only those among them with official visas would be allowed to disembark. Twenty-two left the ship. The others remained her prisoners, whose mood instantly changed.

Weeping relatives of some tried to meet them, without success. Scenes of panic and despair have been recorded by protagonists and journalists. From a variety of circles, political pressure and economic rewards were employed. Pathetic news stories began appearing in the western press. An important official [00:25:00] of the influential American Joint Distribution Committee, or the Joint, Lawrence Berenson, met with President Brú. A long conversation with emotional moments ensued. Huge sums were discussed and offered. Others also interceded. A variety of interventions took place with officials and private

personalities who were close to those in power. But Havana remained unmoved, resulting in increased fear among the passengers.

One of them, a distinguished lawyer from Berlin, Max Loewe, fearing an unavoidable return to Germany, attempted suicide by cutting his wrists and jumping into the sea. He was saved, and brought to a local hospital. The captain [00:26:00] felt then compelled to appoint a special joint team of his own crew and Jews to patrol the vessel and watch for possible imitators. There were none. But now, the passengers' only hope was America. They began sending heartrending cables all over the world. One went to Cuban President Brú's wife, appealing to her as a woman and a mother. Time was running out.

Seven Latin American countries, Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Panama, Paraguay, and Uruguay, were approached also, with huge monetary offers. All said no. President Brú personally asked the captain to move his ship out of Cuban waters. [00:27:00] But Schröder remained loyal to the passengers. He felt responsible for their safety, for their welfare, and for their future. Though ordered by his company to return the vessel and its passengers to Germany, he decided to bring the ship to American shores, while continuing his

negotiations with local authorities. In the meantime, the *St. Louis* was still in the harbor. Schröder, in civilian clothes, went ashore, asking to meet with a representative of the president. The captain mentioned the suicide attempt of Max Loewe, warned against more. Extreme behavior of passengers was not to be excluded. He described their mental anguish, their disarray, their disorientation. The despair of mothers, [00:28:00] the suffering of children.

The Cuban high official answered that if the *St. Louis* did not move into international waters forthwith, the Cuban navy would have to intervene. In his diary, Gustav Schröder wrote, I quote, "Frightening," he said. "Even slaves in antiquity had monetary value. Jews have none." Again and again, he reassured his passengers that whatever happened, he would not bring them back to Hamburg. In that moment, he, the German, became their sole anchor, their momentary savior. And soon, Schröder concluded [00:29:00] that he had no choice. The ship had to leave Cuba. She did, still heading not to Europe, but to Florida.

Again, she had to stay outside territorial waters, this time America's. And here, the international press was waiting. The story occupied headlines all over the country and abroad. Max

Loewe's pathetic suicide attempt was reported in national dailies and weeklies. Consequently, pleas were addressed everywhere. The tragedy of so many homeless Jews, unwanted by all countries, and risking the worst in Hitler's Germany, touched the heart of simple people. The Washington Post wondered, quote, "There are sanctuaries for birds and nature everywhere in the United States, [00:30:00] except for over 900 persecuted human beings." End of quote.

Heartbreaking telegrams from desperate passengers were sent to the State Department. No answer. To President Roosevelt. No answer. And another one to his wife Eleanor. She later confessed her sorrow, for not having done enough for *St. Louis* refugees. That it was, quote, "the deepest regret at the end of her life." We understand why. Doris Kearns Goodwin, the renowned historian of the American presidency, in her book *No Ordinary Time*, quotes a letter an 11-year-old girl wrote to Mrs. Roosevelt. Quote, "I am so sad that the Jewish people have to suffer so. [00:31:00] Please let them land in America. It hurts me so. I would give them my little bed, because it is the last thing I had. Let us Americans not send them back to that slaughterhouse." The letter was written, according to Goodwin, with many misspellings, and the little girl said, "We have three

rooms we do not use. Mother would be glad to let someone have them." No answer.

In other words, as far as world leaders were concerned, whatever was happening, was happening only to Jews. So why bother? But questions remain. What was the [00:32:00] Jewish response? Jewish communities at large must have been distressed. Some passengers had relatives in America. They must have been sensitive to their pain. Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau suggested granting the refugees temporary visas, and the idea was rejected higher up in the administration. Some religious voices were heard, both Jewish and Gentile, but they were not powerful enough to influence policy in the White House.

And while this was going on, the captain received an unambiguous order from his superiors: return to Hamburg immediately. Under duress, Schröder left the American shore on June 6th. From discussions with Joint representatives, [00:33:00] he knew that their activity had already moved to Europe, and he kept his word. His Jews would not be handed over to their persecutors. And to a friend, he confided his secret decision: that, if all else failed, and no help given from European nations, he would sabotage the vessel.

As for the passengers, certain European governments were finally willing to accept a number of them. Thanks to the efforts of Morris Troper, the Joint's European director, Antwerp was the first stop. King Leopold III of Belgium accepted 200 passengers. The queen of Holland, 194. Great Britain, 350. France, 250. [00:34:00] Except for those who went to England, many, if not most, of the others, ended up in Auschwitz.

So, of course you must remember, their tragic end. But we must also remember that only European nations felt guilty enough then to open their doors to the passengers of *St. Louis*. The United States did not. And this is both sad and shocking, but regretfully, not surprising. Now it is clear that America's behavior towards European Jews during Hitler's reign remains far from being praiseworthy. [00:35:00] Examples. We mentioned earlier that as the noble response to *Kristallnacht* pogrom, President Roosevelt recalled his ambassador from Berlin for consultation. But soon afterwards, a State Department high official wrote in a memorandum, quote, "This move cannot and must not interfere in any way with our relations, political or commercial, with Germany. Our interests in Germany must not suffer." End of quote.

As for the consequence of the Évian Conference, America's attitude was not much better, nor any worse, than that of all other nations. During a subsequent press conference when the International Committee on Refugees, created by the Évian Conference, was totally inactive, President Roosevelt was asked about it. [00:36:00] What would happen to the refugees? The Évian Committee would look after them, he answered. Had the president any idea where they would go? He had considered the matter at length, he said, but was not yet prepared to make a statement. Would he recommend to ask Congress to change the law, so as to allow some refugees in America? And the answer was, no.

The fact is that due to the destructive work of an anti-Semitic undersecretary of state, Breckinridge Long, and his close associates, America's attitude toward Jewish refugees and victims in Europe was deplorable, to say the least. And they all believed that they were following FDR's guidelines. But other nations do not deserve compliments, either. [00:37:00] To Switzerland, Jewish refugees were almost by definition categorized as undesirable aliens. France? After *Kristall* Night, Hitler's foreign minister von Ribbentrop was invited to Paris to assign a friendship covenant, and he was given a festive state dinner. After the *Kristallnacht*. And in order

not to embarrass him or his sensitivity, Jewish members of the Cabinet and the Parliament were actually not invited. The president of the Parliament, Édouard Herriot, in meaningful solidarity with them, declined the invitation, but others accepted it.

Some great intellectual figures did speak up. Eugene O'Neill, the great dramatist. [00:38:00] John Steinbeck, the great writer, Pearl Buck, Eddie Cantor, Thornton Wilder, and Clifford Odets. And others that denounced America's diplomatic complacency in a statement, and I quote it, "Thirty-five years ago," they wrote, "a horrified America rose to protest against the pogrom in Kishinev in southeast Russia. God have pity on us if we have become so insensitive to human suffering that we are incapable of protesting today against the pogroms in Nazi Germany. We believe it is profoundly immoral for Americans to continue to maintain commercial relations with a country which openly adopts mass murder to solve its economic problems."

How are we to understand America's [00:39:00] policy in the late '30s? Évian was before. But *St. Louis* came after *Kristall* Night. The whole world knew what Hitler had done to German Jews. The fury of hatred, our horrors, the manhunts, the public humiliations, the arrests, the torture, the flames, the terror.

And more than 900 Jews, men, women, and children, were sent back to Germany.

Perhaps we ought to view this episode within the context of the general political and economical situation in our country. Was FDR anti-Jewish? Though I still find it regrettable and humanly inadmissible, his refusal to bomb in 1944, the railways [00:40:00] leading to Birkenau, I cannot believe that he felt animosity towards Jews. He surely was not an anti-Semite. He knew how popular he was in the Jewish community. He was admired, even worshipped as a savior. As the saying goes, some of his closest allies and advisors were Jews. I can tell you in my little town, I didn't know the name of David Ben-Gurion. But I did know the name of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, for we used to say prayers for him.

So, who was he? He was a president who had to take care of burning domestic issues. Both labor unions and the right-wing militants were against immigration, and they said, we have our own problems here. Why do we need new ones? Most statistical surveys [00:41:00] indicated similar attitudes of a vast majority of Americans. They were against immigration. And then there was Father Coughlin, and his mongering, hate-mongering radio broadcasts, with millions of listeners. And the German

Bund, and its pro-Hitler parades, with swastikas and Nazi uniforms in Madison Square Garden for the whole world to see their proud loyalty to Hitler.

So, how can one ignore this element in the equation? We must not. But what the Jew in me fails to understand is, well, in consulting the sources of that period, while the *St. Louis* drama was unfolding, I do not find a strong adequate Jewish response, either by the leadership or by the population, on the level of communal [00:42:00] and organizational cooperation. Were there mass demonstrations? Popular petitions, signed and sent? Where? Have we mobilized congressional support? I repeat, the national and international press had done its work, and had fulfilled its professional obligations. Reports on the tears shed and the nightmares endured on the *St. Louis* while in Florida, and then on her way to Europe, were printed. Were they heard, absorbed, and acted upon in the appropriate Jewish circles?

Were there delegations sent to the White House, to the State Department? To the Capitol? Were there emergency reunions held to plan immediate assistance and rescue? What was done toward the administration [00:43:00] to temporarily and exceptionally change the quota system? Was there a sense of urgency

justifying the traditional commitment to *Ahavat Yisrael*, or solidarity with Jews in peril? But then, could it be, let's be honest and frank, perhaps Roosevelt had something to do with the European nations' decision not to allow the *St. Louis* to bring a passenger back to Hitler's death servants. It's possible. He intervened, he called up people in Paris, London. I hope so.

Perhaps French, British, Belgian, and Dutch archives do contain documents to that effect. But I have found no trace of them in American sources. In the French novel, of all places, I read one rumor about a conversation. Of all topics, on moral philosophy, [00:44:00] Roosevelt had in Warm Springs a few days before his death, a conversation he had with his friend Harry Hopkins. And the main question dealt with Hitler's crimes against the Jewish people.

One strange revelation in archival documents shows that the German shipping company was fully aware of the difficulties waiting for the vessel in Havana. Certain humanitarian agencies, including the Joint, had been forewarned. Scores of cables, foreign messages, and memoranda, are there to prove it. If they knew, so did Berlin. Only the passengers were kept in the dark. But the question remains: if so many people involved in the project knew, why did they permit the ship [00:45:00] to

sail towards the unknown? Why did the German officials not stop her?

On May 8th, 1939, the Society of Nations' high commissioner for refugees sent an official letter to the president of HIAS, an old Jewish organization for immigrants, strongly asking him to cancel the journey. He also cabled the same message to the shipping company in Hamburg. In other words, Havana had, on the highest level, informed Berlin that the *St. Louis* passengers' papers would be considered illegal and worth nothing. The passengers would, therefore, not be allowed to land on Cuban territory. But then, why did the vessel undertake the voyage? Granted, as was mentioned earlier, each passenger [00:46:00] had to purchase a round-trip ticket. But with such knowledge about certain difficulties, wouldn't it have been more advisable to cancel, or at least delay, the departure altogether?

Which elicits another, more poignant question to be put before the student of history. Mind you, whatever the answer may be, it would not alleviate the world's responsibility in the case. But the question itself does shed a new somber light on the whole situation. Is it possible that Germany did not want the passengers to disembark in Cuba from the outset, just to illustrate what it had been repeating before and during the

Évian Conference, namely, that Jews are unwanted everywhere on the globe? Either in America or even in [00:47:00] faraway Cuba. So why should Germany be kinder to them?

Interestingly, while the *St. Louis* episode occupied front pages all over the world, it had drawn less attention in Palestine. Its daily newspapers devoted amazingly few lines to the plight of its Jewish passengers. The headlines dealt with something else: a political event that had what, at that moment, journalists would have considered having only an indirect connection with their pain and anguish: the publication of the outrageous British white book against Jewish immigration to Palestine.

But, all such questions may very well remain unanswered and disquieted. There are others. Whenever we approach anything, directly or even indirectly related [00:48:00] to the tragedy, of the *churban*, the destruction, which we so poorly call the Holocaust, we stumble upon endless interrogations. And that applies to events that occurred afterwards as well. The latest one had to do with what we called institutional issues. How to recover monies and properties stolen by the enemy. There was recent meeting, took place last June in Prague, five to six

hundred participants from all over the world were there, and I was asked to give the opening address.

I read from my notes, "I remember on April 18, 1944, when a house-to-house operation destined to rob all Jewish families of their fortunes, a policeman and an elegantly dressed Hungarian lieutenant entered our home in Sighet, and asked for all our valuables, to be confiscated. [00:49:00] He wrote in his report, 'Four hundred thirty-one *pengös*,' our entire cache. 'A camera, my fountain pen, a pair of seemingly gold earrings, a golden ring, one silver ring, three ancient silver coins, one military gas mask, one sewing machine, and three batteries for flashlights.' They dutifully signed the document, which I have in my possession. And they left for my grandmother Nisel's home, two houses away. She was a war widow. Her husband, my grandfather, whose name, Eliezer, I try to wear with pride, fell in battle as a medic. In mourning, a profoundly pious woman, my grandmother wore black clothes, shrouds. She knew, [00:50:00] and while alive, she rarely spoke, and read psalms uninterruptedly.

A similar document listed her valuables. 'One *pengö*. Two coins. Three smaller coins. Two pieces of 21 centimeters tall solid brass Shabbat candlesticks.' That's all she possessed.

Bureaucracy was supreme, and eternal even then. Whether official murder or robbery, not fearing embarrassment or retribution, everything had to be recorded. And my God. Why the Hungarian and German armies needed what was her pitiful life savings, and the Shabbat candlesticks, to win their war, is beyond me. At times, I am overcome with anger, thinking of the red coat my little eight-year-old sister Tzipora had received for our last holiday. [00:51:00] She wore it in Birkenau, walking, walking hand-in-hand with my mother and grandmother towards -- "

A daughter of an S.S. must have received it as a birthday present. Just measure the added ugliness of their hideous crimes. They stole not only the wealth of the wealthy, but also the poverty of the poor. The first transport left our ghetto one month later. Only later did I realize that what we so poorly call the Holocaust dealt deals not only with political dictatorship, racist ideology, and military conquest. It also deals with financial gain, state-organized robbery. It deals with money.

Yes, the Final Solution was also meant to remove from Jewish hands all their buildings, belongings, acquisitions, possessions, [00:52:00] valuable objects, works of art, bank

accounts, and simple, everyday objects. Remember, before being shot by *Einsatz* commanders, or before pushed into the gas chambers, victims were made to undress. Six million shirts, six million undershirts, six million suits, scarfs, pairs of shoes, coats, belts, hats. Countless watches, pens, rings, knives, glasses. Children's toys. Walking sticks. Take any object and multiply by six million. All were appropriated by the Third Reich.

It was all usefully calculated, almost scientifically thought through, programmed, industrialized. Jews were made to be deprived of their identity, and also of their reality. In their nakedness, with names and titles [00:53:00] and relations worthless, deprived of their self-esteem, of being the sum total of their lives -- comprised all that had accumulated in knowledge and in visible categories, there were numbers.

But the war ended. What the first response to its unspeakable tragedy? For us individual Jews, the obsession was not vengeance, but the need to find lost family members.

Collectively, in all D.P. camps, a powerful movement was created to help build a Jewish state in Palestine. In occupied Germany itself, the response moved to the judiciary. The Nuremberg Trials, the S.S. trial, the doctor trial. With the Guttmacher,

restitution, compensation, indemnization, were not on the agenda yet. The immensity of the suffering and the accompanying melancholy defied any expression in material terms.

In liberated countries in eastern Europe, [00:54:00] surviving Jews who were lucky to return to their homes and or stores were shamelessly and brutally thrown out by their new occupants. Some were killed in instantaneous pogroms, like in Kielce, in 1946. Who had the strength to turn attention, their attention, to restitution?

Then came the Goldmann-Adenauer Agreement, on with the Guttmacher. The first Israeli-German conference took place early in 1953, in Wassenaar, Poland. I was there. Israeli officials and wealthy Jews from America and England allegedly spoke on behalf of survivors, none of whom was present. I covered the proceedings for Israel's *Yedioth Ahronoth*. I disliked what I witnessed. I worried it might lead to a precarious reconciliation. It did. The icy mood of the first meetings quickly developed in [00:55:00] friendly conversations at the bar. Then also, deep down, I personally opposed the very idea of compensation. I felt that money and memory are irreconcilable.

The Holocaust has ontological implications. In its shadow, monetary matters seem quasi-frivolous. In the name of Israel's national interest, David Ben-Gurion's attitude was, on the other hand, quoting the prophet's accusation of David, "*Ha-ratzachta v'gam-yarashta?*", Should a killer be his victims' heir?" Logic was on his side, emotion was on mine.

In the beginning, we spoke about millions. At the end, the number reached billions. International accords with governments, insurance companies, private and official institutions in Germany, Switzerland, and various countries. In Israel, local industry benefited from the endeavor, [00:56:00] as did needy individual survivors elsewhere too, including Europe and America. Throughout those years, chroniclers, memorialists, psychologists, educators, and historians discovered the Holocaust as their new field of inquiry. Some felt inadequate and even unworthy, to lure into what mystics would call forbidden ground. Having written enough pages on the subject, I confess that I am not satisfied with my own words. The reason: there are no words. We forever remain on the threshold of language itself.

However, I believe that I must declare my conviction that living survivors of poor health or financial means deserve first

priority. They suffered enough, and enough [00:57:00] people benefited from their suffering. Why not do everything possible and draw from all available funds to help them live their last years with a sense of security and dignity and serenity? All other parties can and must wait. Whenever we deal with this tragedy, always we know, we better recall, the saying of a great Hasidic master. He says, "If you wish to find a spark, look for it in the ashes."

Well, here we are again, therefore, in this fragmentary analysis of the *St. Louis*. When evil dominated Europe, and indifference, the world all at the same time. Again, we must know, we must remember. A war was going on. A world war. A good war, a just war. The war against Hitler was [00:58:00] a just war, even in biblical terms. And America led that war to victory. And we must be grateful for it. We must admire it, for it. Now, in those times, there were those who covered humanity with shame. But there were also those who brought it honor. And Gustav Schröder was one of the noble ones. I wish I had met him, but he died in '57, I think he received the Medal of the Righteous from *Yad Vashem*, posthumously.

Another man I wish I had met, he was a Czech *blockälteste*, the children's Block 66 in Buchenwald. He saved us all. On April

5th, 1945, all Jews were summoned to the Appellplatz to be evacuated. He made us stay inside. And throughout the night, he, with some of his accomplices, rewrote the register, and made us Christian. [00:59:00] And then, Maria, our maid, she came into the ghetto, pleading with my father not to go to the train. She had a hut in the mountain, and she was taking care of us. Had we known where we were going, I think we would have followed her. But we didn't know. So many people knew. In Washington, the Vatican, Stockholm, but we didn't know.

The lessons from all that was said. One: waiting in certain crises, both individual and collective, is a sin. Even those European countries who at the end did accept some of the passengers could have done so earlier, or why not immediately. In doing so, they would have spared the refugees nights and weeks of pain and anguish. When help is required, better offer it right away. [01:00:00] If there is a blessing for charity or *tzedakah*, if there is no blessing, it's because the blessing might take too long. For everything else we do must be preceded by benediction, not charity.

Two: when victims need assistance or intervention, do not rely on others to do it. They may rely on you, and so the needed help will never come. Three: never give in to despair. Never

give up on man's capacity of hope. Remember, only another human being can push me to resignation. But also, one other human being can move me to moral elevation. Four: remember always, what we say. "If you want to find a spark of hope, [01:01:00] a spark of truth, a spark of goodness, a spark divine grace in our own humanity, look for it in the ashes."

But then, look at each other. The face of the other next to you is worth your love, and your hope, and your own generosity.

Thank you. (applause)

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