

Humanity Overboard

Feb 24 this year marked the 70th anniversary of the sinking of the SS Struma, a ship carrying approximately 790 Jewish refugees from Rumania to the British Mandate in Palestine.

The ship was hardly seaworthy. Unknown to the desperate passengers it was a wreck that had recently been dredged up from the River Danube. Just three days after it set sail in Dec 1941 there was engine failure and the vessel was towed into Istanbul harbour. The British government and the Turkish authorities prevented the cramped passengers from coming ashore.

Finally, on Feb 23 1942 Turkish troops boarded the ship and towed it into the Black Sea leaving it to drift. The passengers hung "Save Us" banners over the sides.

The next day, Feb 24th, the Struma was torpedoed and sunk by a Russian submarine. There was only one survivor. It was the largest civilian naval disaster of WW2. Both sides of the conflict share responsibility for the tragic loss of innocent life.

My grandfather came to England from Berlin in the late 1930s. He escaped by boat the night after being assaulted by a black shirt at university. When the war started he found himself afloat again. Detained as an enemy alien by the British he was shipped to Canada with a boatload of Germans, most of them the selfsame Nazis he had come to England to flee. The crew and the human cargo were all fearful of U-boat attack. An accomplished pianist, my grandfather was plied with drink by the crew and encouraged to play on the piano throughout the voyage, a vain bid to keep up the spirits of all on board. Some months later he was returned to England and served with the British forces in Europe.



I grew up with stories of immigration denied. My grandfather's parents were left behind. Throughout his life he cherished their last letters to him pleading for assistance. His father, a composer of some distinction was seized in France and eventually put on a train to Auschwitz. His mother had run a furrier's shop on a prestigious German shopping street. In her correspondence she begged, "Dear Rolf, please find me any way of getting into England. I will do anything. I will even clean latrines. Dearest Rolf, please save me."

Young and unconnected, my grandfather received letters of rejection from the Jewish refugee and aid associations. These, together with the guilt of failure accompanied him throughout his life and were preserved with his parents' desperate letters. They reached out for salvation but it didn't come. They perished either in or on their way to Hitler's gas chambers.

We Australians are a nation of immigrants. With the exception of our indigenous peoples, few of us can trace more than four or five generations of Australian citizens on all sides of

our families. Most of us have a tale to tell of ancestors who came here in chains or looking for a brand new life of opportunity. Many came penniless. There is no shame in looking for an improved standard of living. Our literature applauds their hard work to forge a better life in a new land, far from home.

Certainly, we can take great pride in the nation that they have built and Australia's standing in the modern world. We like our way of life and our democratic values. For sure, we do not wish to see these undermined as others come in.

How can we be silent as lives are lost on immigration boats bound for Australia? How can we see families locked in detention centres, deprived of amenity in a policy calculated to deter others?

Those who share my history cannot sit idle and wish away or entrust to others our responsibility to refugees. While the Holocaust may have been unique in iniquity and scale, the crises today's asylum seekers are fleeing are real crises. The desperation that has them entrust themselves to people smugglers in unseaworthy vessels is real desperation. We must see them as individuals and as families and not sectarian statistics. We may condemn the regimes they flee, we may condemn the predatory opportunists who cram too many bodies into tiny boats. However, our condemnation does not resolve the plight of the victims. It does not give them security, nor shelter, nor hope.

We should, of course, use our best endeavours to resolve the troubles at point of origin; to encourage democracy and freedom of expression or worship, to resource the aid and welfare programs on the ground. However, it is surely incumbent upon us to acknowledge a humanitarian responsibility, to offer safe passage and a haven to those who cannot wait.

The problem is not our problem to solve alone. Nor can the burden of solution fall exclusively on the shoulders of Australians. Moreover, open hearts and open minds do not equate with gaping open borders. Our customs personnel routinely monitor all international travelers for contraband, narcotics and rogue citrus fruit. As of necessity, all processing of refugees must attend to our domestic security no less than our biosecurity.

We might well be the most attractive and preferred place of refuge. We are not the only one. We must, nonetheless play our part. It was a tragically short step from rejection of Jewish refugees by the western and European powers at the Evian Conference in 1938 to the Final Solution initiated at the Wannsee Conference in 1942.

Immigration must be resourced and supported. Immigrants must be integrated and not alienated. As of necessity, those who come must be educated in our language and our values; must be tutored in the benefits of democracy and the freedoms we enjoy. We wish them to subscribe to the belief that all are equal with no discrimination on the basis of gender, race, caste or faith. As we offer these in good faith we trust they will be reciprocated by goodwill. However, just as Australia has benefited from waves of

immigrants in the past, we must be open to the benefits that diverse cultures will bring us in the future.

I trust that my grandfather is proud of all that his grandchildren have achieved. In two generations we have come a long way. But I can't be true to his memory and I know he'd never forgive me if I turned my back on people who needed my help, as they clutched their own "dearest Rolf" letters and if I left them all at sea.

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