



WORLD REFUGEE DAY CANDLE REMEMBRANCE RITUAL Of Refugees Turned Away and Refugees Now Seeking Safety Recalling the Turn Away of the S.S. St. Louis on June 6, 1939

Background and Welcome to Event:

Throughout the month of June, and on the date of June 20, we celebrate World Refugee Day each year. We also recall in this month how on June 6th, 1939, the S.S. St Louis was turned away from the United States with 937 Jewish refugees on board. 254 of them – over a quarter – died in concentration camps. Tonight, we honor the memory of those individuals. As we remember the S.S. St Louis, we also bear witness as the United States risks repeating this dark moment in history where we saw the tragic consequences of shutting down pathways to safety for refugees. We must prevent this from happening again.

This year, there have been unprecedented attacks on the refugee program. Two executive orders seeking to halt refugee admissions were released, Congress launched various legislative attacks against refugees, and, across the country, governors and state and local legislators took measures to try to limit refugee resettlement in their states, towns, and cities. It is particularly tragic because these attacks come at a time when, globally, the number of refugees has reached its highest point in all of recorded human history. The policies targeting refugees will come at a real human cost and destroy a proud U.S. legacy of welcoming refugees.

Let us call on our elected officials to do everything they can to ensure that the U.S. continues to welcome refugees and to oppose actions to restrict, defund, or halt the refugee program. Let us ask that AT LEAST 75,000 refugees be resettled in this fiscal year, which will end on September 30.

To Prepare for Your Candle Remembrance Ritual:

Invite 11 people to participate in this ritual: 10 people to hold remembrance candles and read testimonies and 1 person to read the introduction and closing.

Each of the 10 main readers hold candles – 5 are lit and 5 are unlit. In Jewish tradition, these are called “yahrzeit candles.” The lit candles should alternate with the unlit candles. Those with lit candles will be reading stories of refugees who have since died. Those with unlit candles will be reading stories of refugees still seeking freedom today.

Leader (at beginning):

78 years ago, 937 Jews fleeing violence and persecution set sail with dreams of freedom and safety. When they arrived at the shores of the United States, they were turned away, suspected of being spies for the German government. Today, we honor the memories of those who died after being denied refuge. We also lament continued efforts to once again close the doors of our country to refugees seeking freedom and safety. Now, let us remember those on the ship, and still fleeing for safety:

Reader 1 (lit candle):

I am holding this candle in memory of Fritz Zweigenthal. At age 30, Fritz set sail for Cuba on the S.S. St. Louis. Fritz disembarked in Belgium, after the ship was forced to return to Europe. He joined the French Foreign Legion to fight in the war. The postcard his family received from him from Syria in 1940 was the last time they ever heard from him. May his memory call us to action for today’s refugees.

Reader 2 (unlit candle):

I am holding this candle in honor of Yacoub, a 32-year old Rohingya refugee who fled violence in his native Myanmar in 2012. Yacoub and the Rohingya community experienced extreme persecution as members of an oppressed Muslim religious minority in a majority Buddhist country. After leaving Myanmar for Bangladesh, Yacoub began working in a local mosque and teaches the Koran to children, but he cannot make enough money to feed his family of six. He has decided to make a second treacherous journey to Malaysia to find work. If he survives, he remains uncertain about what will come next for him and for his family. Let us take action for today's refugees so that this candle need not be lit.

Reader 3 (lit candle):

I am holding this candle in memory of Helge Skotzki, Inge Skotzki, Lore Doblön, and Eva Doblön. After being denied entry to the United States, Helge, age 15; Inge, age 13; Lore, age 16; and Eva, age 10, were all killed in Auschwitz, along with their parents. May these children's memories call us to action for today's refugees.

Reader 4 (unlit candle):

I am holding this candle in honor of Marwan, a 26-year old refugee from Syria. While performing his military service in Damascus, Marwan was sent to Hama, where he refused to participate in orders to shell areas where anti-government demonstrations were gathered. He went into hiding in a friend's house in a neighboring village and made plans to flee. As he was leaving, the army began bombing and he felt his arm being torn away from his body. His friends stopped the hemorrhaging by tying off his wound with wire, and he took his severed arm on an hour and half-long bus ride to a makeshift hospital. Though doctors told him there was nothing more they could do for him, he refused to give up hope and made it to a hospital in Antakya, Turkey. His wounds healed, but his life remained in danger. So, he swam to the Greek island of Kastellorizo. Ultimately, Marwan left Greece for another European country in hopes of receiving a prosthetic limb and the bare necessities for a normal life. He dreams of working, getting married, and simply living in safety. Let us take action for today's refugees so that this candle need not be lit.

Reader 5 (lit candle):

I am holding this candle in memory of Heinrich Gabel. He boarded the S.S. St. Louis with his wife, Beate, and their 20-month-old son, Gerhard. When they were denied entrance to the United States they were sent to the Westerbork transit camp. They were then deported to the Theresienstadt ghetto and ultimately to Auschwitz in October 1944. Heinrich was murdered on February 28th, 1945. There is no record that shows that Beate and Gerhard survived. May their memories call us to action for today's refugees.

Reader 6 (unlit candle):

I am holding this candle in honor of Aziz, who, at the age of 10, witnessed his father being killed in Afghanistan and had to flee for his life with his mother, older brother, and sister. Aziz lived in Iran for three years – without papers or money – and experienced intense racism. His brother sent him to Europe for a better life. He is now 26 and has been living in Greece for nearly a decade. He applied for asylum in 2008 but has never received notification. He says that his life is getting worse by the day and wonders aloud how many years a person can live without a future. Let us take action for today's refugees so that this candle need not be lit.

Reader 7 (lit candle):

I am holding this candle in memory of Meta Schlesinger. Meta was born on July 22nd, 1887 in Stargard Germany. On May 13th, 1939, Meta and her husband, Richard, set sail on the S.S. St. Louis hoping to begin life anew in a safe land. Those dreams were shattered after their ship was turned away from the shores of the United States. Meta and Richard disembarked in the Netherlands and were then deported to the Sobibor death camp in Poland where they were both killed. May their memories call us to action for today's refugees.

Reader 8 (unlit candle):

I am holding this candle in honor of Carlos, a refugee from Túquerres, Ecuador. Carlos worked as a farmer in Túquerres, where it was common to see guerrilla fighters. One day, there was a massacre on the farm where Carlos worked. The paramilitary self-defense group of the farmers killed the workers after accusing them of being part of the guerilla fighting group. Carlos was saved only because he was hidden by the cattle he was tending, but, because he witnessed the attack, he knew he must to flee in order to stay alive. Carlos says that, in Ecuador, Colombians are all assumed to be drug dealers, so, even though he owns his own Chinese food business, it took him 7 years to gain the trust of the community. Still, the landlord who rents space to him overcharges him for the space because he is Colombian. He hopes that one day he will find a place to live free from discrimination and oppression. Let us take action for today's refugees so that this candle need not be lit.

Reader 9 (lit candle):

I am holding this candle in memory of Walter Viktor. After being detained in Dachau, Walter was released in November 1938, received a visa to Cuba, and boarded the S.S. St. Louis with his wife, Else, to sail to safety. When the ship was turned away, Walter was sent to Belgium, where he was detained on false charges of spying. Walter fled to France but was detained there and deported to an unknown location. Else received her last letter from Walter in May of 1943. In 1947, she received word from the Red Cross that Walter had been transferred from Drancy camp to Lublin camp but that he was not amongst the survivors when the camp was liberated. May his memory call us to action for today's refugees.

Reader 10 (unlit candle):

I am holding this candle in honor of Isaias(2), a 65-year old born again Christian refugee from Eritrea. In his homeland, Isaias worked as an excavator and lived a comfortable middle-class life with a nice home and car. In 2002, the government began closing Isaias's community's churches, accusing practitioners of being spies for the American government. With nowhere to worship, Isaias and his 10 friends started coming together to pray in secret. Most of the other people in their church had been arrested, whipped, beaten, and tortured – including the pastors. The government said that, if church members signed a document denouncing their religion, they would be left alone, but, if they did not sign, they would be imprisoned. Isaias refused to sign and continued praying secretly with the small group. Eventually, their names were passed to the government. When the government began arresting his friends, Isaias and his wife quickly gathered their passports and used what money they had in hand to buy plane tickets to Kenya. They left Eritrea with very little money, as he was not allowed to access his bank account. In Kenya, Isaias is not allowed to work, and he and his wife share a small room with several other tenants. They all take turns paying rent whenever anyone has money, and they share food whenever anyone has some. He wishes he could return to Eritrea, but it would not be safe. He says that, though he did not choose to be a refugee, he believes that God will help him and prays to be resettled in a place where he can work and support his wife. Let us take action for today's refugees so that this candle need not be lit. (2 Name has been changed to protect safety.)

Leader (at end)

The memories of Fritz, Helge, Inge, Lore, Eva, Heinrich, Beate, Gerhard, Meta, Richard, Walter, and the 243 others who perished when the S.S. St. Louis was denied entry to the United States call us to action for today's refugees. The stories of Yacoub, Marwan, Aziz, Carlos and Isaias remind us how urgently we must take action. We pray that our country will not repeat one of the darkest moments in our history by denying refuge to those whose lives are in danger.

May it be God's will that they soon know safety and freedom on our shores and borders. But, may it first be our own. AMEN.

(Much appreciation to HIAS, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, who provided the stories and above ritual.)

For further background and teaching, share the photos and story link from the article below:

SS St. Louis: The Ship of Jewish Refugees Nobody Wanted:

<http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-27373131>.



Boys aboard the ship.



The S.S. St. Louis.



Passengers on board.



A 15 year old on board



...And the same woman several years ago

For more information about how your congregation and community can support refugees and immigrants, contact:

*Rev. Dr. Sharon Stanley-Rea, Refugee & Immigration Ministries Director,
Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the U.S. & Canada
202-957-7826, sstanley@dhm.disciples.org*

Visit our website at: <https://www.discipleshomemissions.org/missions-advocacy/refugee-immigration-ministries/>

Find us on Facebook at:

https://www.facebook.com/RefugeeAndImmigrationMinistriesChristianChurchDoc/?ref=aymt_homepage_panel

Or Tweet Us at: @StanleyRea

