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OP-ED PAGE

VIETNAMESE "BOAT PEOPLE" - THE JEWS OF ASIA

by Marc H. Tanenbaum

(Rabbi Tanenbaum, national interreligious affairs director of the American Jewish Committee, is a member of the Citizens Commission on Indochinese Refugees organized by the International Rescue Committee. In February of this year he spent two weeks in Southeast Asia on a fact-finding mission on the plight of Vietnamese "boat people" and Cambodian refugees. Rabbi Tanenbaum leaves this Friday, December 1, for a ten-day mission to Malaysia and Thailand to help bring relief to the growing numbers of Indochinese refugees.)

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In the harbor of Djakarta, the frail battered Vietnamese boat lay anchored listlessly, looking exhausted under the blistering February sun that scorched the Indonesian archipelago. I walked out on the rotting wharf and then jumped onto the boat, no larger than an oversized rowboat.

There were fifteen people aboard, jammed together in sweltering closeness. The man who greeted me was Nguyen Than, the father of several of the eight children on the boat, and "the captain" of this decrepit vessel. He was a Vietnamese Catholic from Saigon, a teacher educated in a mission school and competent in the English language.

I introduced myself as one of the 14-member U. S. Citizens Commission for Indochinese Refugees organized by the International Rescue Committee that was engaged in a fact-finding mission on the plight of Vietnamese boat people, Cambodian and other Indochinese refugees in Hong Kong, Thailand, Malaysia, the Phillipines, and Singapore. I asked Nguyen Than to tell me his "story."

While his diminutive wife and sisters-in-law were busy putting together a meal of rice and fish, and the children jostled each other in quiet play, Nguyen Than unfolded the tale of his exodus from oppression.

The Communist government in Hanoi had ordered him and his family to the rural countryside for "reeducation" as members of the new collective

society. Hanoi confiscated what little earthly goods they had, and worse still, they began to confiscate their freedom and dignity as human beings. Through bribes and stealth, Nguyen Than crossed through the forests, reached the shoreline, and in the middle of the night escaped on a decayed fishing boat that he and his two brothers had purchased at what for them were astronomical costs.

They sailed for four weeks across the turbulent South China Sea. They were turned away by border patrols from the shores of Singapore and the Phillipines. "By the third week," Nguyen Than told me, "we had no more food and water. We began to drink the sea-water and eat sea-weed. Our children became deathly sick and feverish and we were certain that we would die."

And then this small man's face became fierce with anguish and he spoke these words which penetrated my heart. "Rabbi, you as a Jew will understand this better than most other people. As terrible as was the starvation, the physical pain in our bodies, the worst thing of all was the awareness that we were abandoned by the world, that our lives meant absolutely nothing to anybody, that human life has become worthless."

He looked intensely into my eyes and added, "I now understand what it meant to be a Jew in Nazi Germany in the 1930s, when all the world knew that your Jewish people were being destroyed and you were abandoned."

Abandoned. Not only were these fifteen human beings turned away from haven by fellow Asians, but during their harrowing odyssey on the sea they were abandoned as well by people from the Western world. "Twenty-three freighters passed us by - we counted them - 23 large ships carrying cargo, probably to Singapore. Most of them were great ships carrying Western or Japanese flags. We waved at them begging them to pick us up, at least to give us water and food. Nothing. A couple times some freighters slowed down and their crews came up on deck to watch us as if we were some entertainment.

Some of the people even smiled or laughed at us. Our children began to scream in terror when they tried to sleep."

As Nguyen Than spoke, I suddenly found his face and voice dissolving before me, and I was overwhelmed by other images. It was 1939, the boat churning in the turbulent ocean was the St. Louis. The human cargo aboard was 936 Jewish men, women, and children, fleeing certain death in Nazi Germany. Like the Indochinese refugees, they too had to buy their way out of oppression, paying large sums for passage on the St. Louis, and buying "official landing certificates" that was to guarantee them entry into Cuba. Some 730 of the Jewish refugees were also able to purchase American immigration quota numbers, just in case the Cuban haven should fall through.

On May 27, 1939, they docked at Havana's port. They were told their "official landing certificates" were invalid. Cuba's President Frederico Laredo Bru told them they could land if they could produce one million dollars within 24 hours. An impossibility. Despair. Abandonment. Several men committed suicide. Cuban gunboats forced the ship back into the Atlantic Ocean. Frantically, desperately, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee pleaded with South American countries to provide asylum. Cables to Colombia, Chile, Paraguay, Argentina. "Regard these passengers as doomed if they are returned to German soil," said the cables. The reply came back - no room at the inn.

Then incredibly, the United States Government, under the "heroic" leadership of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Secretary of State Cordell Hull, rejected the refugees who possessed immigration numbers. Apparently, they did not want to meddle in the "internal affairs" of Nazi Germany.

The St. Louis returned to Europe. Belgium, Holland, France, and England each received several hundred of the Jewish refugees. Epilogue: the Nazis overran Belgium, Holland, and France, and all these refugees in those

countries were massacred in the Nazi genocide.

The St. Louis episode changed my life. I attended a rally for the St. Louis "boat people" in Madison Square Garden, I made a vow to myself then - which I believe is a silent vow that every Jew who lives under the shadow of the Nazi trauma has made to himself or herself. The vow is a paraphrase from the Book of Leviticus: "You shall not stand idly by while the blood of your brothers and sisters cries out to you from the earth."

That's why I joined James Michener, Bayard Rustin, Leo Cherne, Ambassadors William Casey and Cecil Lyons and others, last February on that mission of saving human lives in Southeast Asia. Our Citizens Commission played a role in moving the U.S. Congress to adopt legislation to admit 25,000 Vietnamese boat people and 15,000 Cambodians to this land of freedom.

Since last January, some 1,500 Vietnamese refugees fled their country each month seeking haven. Now, there are 10,000 escaping each month, and despite monsoons, there will be thousands more during the coming months seeking desperately a chance to live. Unless something changes, 60% of them will drown in the sea.

The St. Louis tragedy taught me one permanent, universal lesson: a world that was callous and indifferent to the suffering and the massacre of millions of Armenians in 1915 became a world that was callous and indifferent to the suffering and agony of six million Jewish men, women, and children slaughtered by the Nazis. And a world that stood by silently while Jewish lives became worthless is now a world that stands by silently while thousands of Vietnamese boat people perish in the sea, while 2 to 3 millions Cambodians were massacred before the eyes of humanity during the past two years, while 300,000 black Christians were destroyed by Idi Amin's terror, while 40,000 Lebanese Christian and Moslem civilians were killed, while Catholics and Protestants die every day in Ireland.

There is an epidemic of dehumanization in the world today. Civilization, H. G. Wells has written, ultimately is a race between education and catastrophe. We are going to Malaysia and Thailand this Friday to try to help lift up before the consciousness of the American people and of the whole human family the central moral issue of our age - and that is, the dignity of every human life created in the sacred image of God. The very survival of a sane, civilized mankind depends on our learning that moral lesson, and our doing something about it...now.

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