

NEWSLA

Syrian refugees' story mimics struggles by Anne Frank's family 75 years ago

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A picture of Anne Frank is pasted in a book at the exhibition "Anne Frank, a History for Today" at the Westerbork Remembrance Centre in Hooghalen, Netherlands, June 12, 2009. Photo: AP Photo/Bas Czerwinski

President Barack Obama has pledged to take in 10,000 Syrian refugees who are fleeing war in their homeland. There was another group of refugees — Jews trying to escape Europe on the eve of World War II -- who also sought to come to the United States. Many have noted the similar obstacles that the two groups, more than 75 years apart, have faced.

Among the many who tried — and failed — to escape German persecution were Otto Frank and his family. His wife was Edith, and his daughters were named Margot and Anne, who was the author of "The Diary of Anne Frank." In 2007, American University history professor Richard Breitman wrote about the discovery of old documents. They told the story of the Franks' struggle to get permission to come to the U.S.

Otto Frank survived the Holocaust, the mass killing and imprisonment of European Jews during World War II by German Nazis. Breitman said that if immigration rules had been different "Anne Frank could be a 77-year-old woman living in Boston today -- a writer."

Instead, she died at the age of 15 in a German concentration camp.

Policies Carried A High Cost For Refugees

The United States' immigration policies did not allow the Franks to enter. These rules were designed to protect the country and guard against a flood of foreigners during the war, Breitman wrote. Some say that the Syrians are being kept out for the same reason. Some Americans are worried that members of Islamic State, a violent group that has taken over parts of Syria and Iraq, could hide among the refugees.

In 1940, Nazi Germany invaded the Netherlands. In 1941, Otto Frank, who had moved with his family from Germany to the Netherlands, applied for U.S. visas. The complicated and ultimately doomed process was described in nearly 80 pages of documents found by the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.

"The story seems to unfold in slow motion," The New York Times wrote after looking at the YIVO documents. The papers describe the painstaking exchange of letters back and forth from Europe to the U.S. and from state to state. "Each page adds a layer of sorrow as the tortuous process for gaining entry to the United States ... is laid out," the paper wrote. The moment the Franks and their American supporters overcame one obstacle, another arose.

Pleading To Save His Daughters

On April 30, 1941, Frank wrote to his old college friend from the United States, Nathan Straus Jr. "I am forced to look out for emigration and as far as I can see U.S.A. is the only country we could go to," he wrote. "Perhaps you remember that we have two girls. It is for the sake of the children mainly that we have to care for. Our own fate is of less importance."

Straus was the son of a co-owner of the Macy's department store. He was also the head of the government's Housing Authority and, according to The Times, a friend of American first lady Eleanor Roosevelt. He, like Edith Frank's brothers, did everything they could to get the Frank family visas. They all failed.

In Nazi-occupied Germany, Jews could not be teachers or government officials. They could not own businesses, and their children had to go to special schools for Jews. But the Franks were safe for the time being in the Netherlands. Frank preferred staying there under Nazi occupation to life as a refugee in a new country, wrote David Engel, a New York University history professor.

Changing Immigration Rules Kept Foreigners Waiting

Meanwhile, American immigration rules were changing. The U.S. government was making it harder for foreigners to get into the country — and the Nazis were making it difficult for them to leave.

By early 1939, more than 300,000 people were on the waiting list to receive a visa to the United States, Breitman wrote.

At the time, people believed that German authorities would pressure the Jewish refugees to spy in the United States.

Otto Frank had already concluded that there was little chance of getting into the U.S. He managed to get a Cuban visa for himself on Dec. 1, 1941. Just 10 days later, war was declared, and Frank's visa was canceled.

The Frank family went into hiding in 1942, a day after Margot Frank received a Nazi order deporting her to a labor camp in Eastern Europe. A month later, Anne Frank received that famous diary for her 13th birthday.

Family Perished Despite Efforts To Escape

The family was eventually discovered and sent to concentration camps. Anne Frank and her sister, Margot, died of typhus, and their mother died of starvation. Otto Frank was the only family member to survive.

"It's difficult in times like these: ideals, dreams and cherished hopes rise within us, only to be crushed by grim reality," Anne Frank wrote in 1944 in her diary before she knew the fate that awaited her. Her diary helped make the tragedies of the Holocaust more real for the world. "It's a wonder I haven't abandoned all my ideals, they seem so absurd and impractical. Yet I cling to them because I still believe, in spite of everything, that people are truly good at heart."

Quiz

- 1 Which section highlights the similarities between the Jewish refugees during World War II and the Syrian refugees today?
 - (A) "Policies Carried A High Cost For Refugees"
 - (B) "Pleading To Save His Daughters"
 - (C) "Changing Immigration Rules Kept Foreigners Waiting"
 - (D) "Family Perished Despite Efforts To Escape"

- 2 Which paragraph in the introduction [paragraphs 1-4] suggests that coming to America would have saved Anne Frank's life?

- 3 Which statement BEST represents the central idea of the section "Pleading To Save His Daughters"?
 - (A) Even Eleanor Roosevelt was unable to help Otto Frank protect his daughters by moving to America.
 - (B) Otto Frank decided that staying in the Netherlands was the best option since they couldn't move to the United States.
 - (C) Although there were many restriction on Jews at the time, Otto Frank felt his family was safe in the Netherlands.
 - (D) Despite the efforts of Otto Frank and several others in America, the Frank family was not able to flee to the United States.

- 4 What could be another title for the section "Changing Immigration Rules Kept Foreigners Waiting"?
 - (A) "A Famous Gift"
 - (B) "Frank Obtains Visa"
 - (C) "Difficult Entries, Difficult Exits"
 - (D) "Jewish Refugees Or German Spies?"