



FEDERAL INTER-AGENCY
HOLOCAUST REMEMBRANCE PROGRAM



PERILOUS PASSAGES
TWO JOURNEYS TO SURVIVAL

APRIL 30, 2019
11:30 AM – 1:00 PM LINCOLN THEATRE
1215 U STREET NW WASHINGTON, DC

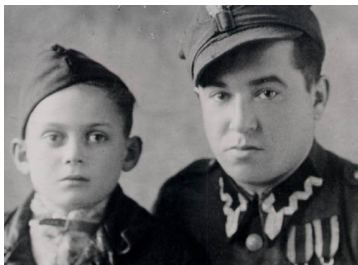
PERILOUS PASSAGES: TWO JOURNEYS TO SURVIVAL

Today's featured speakers, Dr. Hans Fisher and Judge Thomas Buerghenthal, were born into a world of peril. Adolf Hitler's Nazi Party would soon bring about the Holocaust, murdering six million European Jews just like themselves during World War II. Although the boys' parents came tantalizingly close to ushering them to safety, the war overtook them.

In 1939, the Buerghenthal family was trying to outrun Hitler's army as it invaded Eastern Europe. Stripped of citizenship, they were stranded for a time in a no-man's land at the border of Poland until Thomas's father outwitted the guards. Once in Poland, they obtained prized visas to England, but on the day of their scheduled departure, Germany invaded Poland. They were trapped. After four years of confinement in a Jewish ghetto, they arrived at the Auschwitz concentration camp, where Thomas and his parents were separated. Thomas endured a death march from Auschwitz and incarceration in the Sachsenhausen concentration camp on his own. He was only 10 years old.

In May 1939, 11-year old Hans Fisher's family was among 937 passengers—nearly all Jewish—fleeing Nazi Germany aboard the ocean liner *St. Louis*. The ship's destination was Cuba, which had previously admitted Jewish refugees while they waited for their turns to enter the U.S. under its immigrant quota system. Cuba, however, had reversed its policy by the time the *St. Louis* tried to land. Barred from Cuba, the *St. Louis* sailed to Miami, Florida, but the U.S. also denied refuge. While four European countries accepted the refugees to spare them from returning to Germany (the Fishers went to France), three later fell to the Nazis, costing 254 *St. Louis* passengers their lives.

In 2004, Hans Fisher recalled his fear of returning to Europe, aware of the Nazi threat Jews faced. He knew, for example, of Jewish refugees trapped in a no-man's land at the border of Poland, some perishing, unable to escape. Eleven-year old Hans could not have known that four-year old Thomas had been among the stateless families stranded in this no-man's land. With a sense of reverence, we are honored to bring these two men together for the first time in their lives to help us confront the past and demand more of the future.



Thomas Buerghenthal with a Polish soldier who aided him after liberation.



Hans Fisher (2nd row, far right) and friends aboard the *St. Louis*, June 1939. Used by permission from the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum.

PROGRAM

Welcome

Jeff Knishkowsky
Chair, Federal Inter-Agency Holocaust Remembrance Committee

National Anthem

Kathryn Hill
U.S. Department of Agriculture

Conversation with Holocaust Survivors

Introduction by Scott Miller, Moderator
Judge Thomas Buergenthal, Holocaust Survivor
Dr. Hans Fisher, Holocaust Survivor

Candle Lighting Ceremony

Dr. Eugene Bergman, Holocaust Survivor
Michael Taylor, Holocaust Survivor
Dr. Hans Fisher, Holocaust Survivor
Judge Thomas Buergenthal, Holocaust Survivor
Daniel Kuhn, Grandson of Holocaust Survivor
Julia Diamond, Granddaughter of Holocaust Survivor
Eliav Binstock, Grandson and Great-grandson of Holocaust Survivors

Video – “Chai” (Hebrew for “Alive”): Created/Produced by Koolulam

Members of the audience who are Holocaust Survivors, or children, grandchildren, or great-grandchildren of Holocaust Survivors, are invited to join the candle lighters on stage.

Closing

Jeff Knishkowsky

JUDGE THOMAS BUERGENTHAL



Born in Czechoslovakia shortly after the Nazi Party came to power, Thomas Buergenthal is one of the youngest survivors of the Auschwitz and Sachsenhausen concentration camps. The human rights violations he suffered as a child, which he recounted in his memoir, “A Lucky Child,” determined the course of his life. Emigrating to the U.S. after World War II, he went on to establish himself as one of the world’s foremost experts in international human rights law. Judge Buergenthal obtained his J.D. from New York University School of Law and two advanced law degrees from Harvard Law School. From 1979 to 1991, he was a judge with the

Inter-American Court of Human Rights, serving as vice president and president for four of these years. During his tenure, the Court addressed such human rights abuses as the Honduran “disappearance cases,” effectively bringing an end to the practice of state-sponsored “disappearances” in this country. Later, between 2000 and 2010, he served as the U.S. judge on the International Court of Justice, the principal judicial organ of the United Nations, at The Hague, Netherlands. Judge Buergenthal also served as Dean of American University’s Washington College of Law and the Lobingier Professor Emeritus of Comparative Law and Jurisprudence at the George Washington University Law School. In 2015, the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum awarded him the Elie Wiesel Award. Judge Buergenthal and his wife Peggy reside in the Washington, D.C. area.



Three-year-old Thomas Buergenthal with his parents, June 1937.



Thomas Buergenthal at Auschwitz (1995), 50 years to the day from his death march from the camp as Nazis fled the Allied Forces.

DR. HANS FISHER



Hans Fisher was born in Breslau, Germany (now Wroclaw, Poland) on the cusp of the Nazi Party's rise to power. When he was 11, his family sought to escape the Nazis by booking passage on the ocean liner *St. Louis*, which set sail from Hamburg, Germany in May 1939. After crossing the Atlantic with over 900 Jewish refugees, the *St. Louis* was forced to return to Europe after Cuba and the U.S. denied all but a few passengers refuge. Many of these passengers later lost their lives during the Holocaust; Dr. Fisher's family managed to escape Nazi-occupied Europe during a second trans-Atlantic crossing. Once in the U.S., Dr.

Fisher mastered English, graduated as valedictorian of his high school, and received a full scholarship to Rutgers University. He went on to earn his Ph.D. in Nutritional Biochemistry from the University of Illinois, after which he returned to Rutgers as a faculty member. There, he rose to prominence as a professor and researcher, serving as a department chair for 22 years and an associate provost for 54. His pioneering research led to many scientific breakthroughs about the role of diet in preventing and treating disease. Among other things, his work led to improved treatments for alcoholism and schizophrenia. Dr. Fisher has been married to Ruth Hirschberg Fisher for 68 years. Together, they have three accomplished children, nine grandchildren and one great-grandchild.



The *St. Louis*, in its homeport of Hamburg, Germany, surrounded by smaller vessels. Used by permission from the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum.



The Fishers; Hans's father (not pictured) had to flee to Cuba alone, and expected his family to arrive on the *St. Louis*.

SCOTT MILLER



Scott Miller, whose career as a research historian at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum spanned nearly 30 years, became transfixed during his tenure with the fate of 937 passengers who fled Nazi Germany aboard the trans-Atlantic liner *St. Louis*, which was forced to return to Europe after Cuba and the U.S. denied refuge. With colleague Sarah Ogilvie, he co-authored “Refuge Denied—The *St. Louis* Passengers and the Holocaust,” which was published in 2006. That was also the year Mr. Miller became the Director of Curatorial Affairs at the Museum, the position from which he retired in 2019. Mr. Miller’s

career began in 1989, four years before the Museum’s public opening. He worked first as a research historian for the Museum’s multimedia Wexner Learning Center. Then, in 2001, he was appointed Director of the Museum’s Benjamin and Vladka Meed Registry of Holocaust Survivors, which now includes more than 200,000 records related to survivors and their families from around the world. Mr. Miller remains active speaking around the country and in Israel about the *St. Louis*.



Refugees on the deck of the *St. Louis*, May or June, 1939. Used by permission from the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum

KOOLULAM/Chai

Koolulam is a mass singing social initiative in Israel that undertakes to bring diverse members of Israeli society together in song, so that they can bridge their differences and help create a more unified experience. Last year, in collaboration with an organization that coordinates Holocaust commemoration ceremonies, Koolulam brought together 600 Holocaust survivors, children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren to sing “Chai,” the Hebrew word for “Alive,” to commemorate Holocaust Remembrance Day (Yom HaShoah). The song celebrates the survival of the Jewish people. One part of the song translates: “Alive, alive, alive, yes I’m still alive, this is the song that our grandfather sang yesterday to our father, and today, I am able to sing it.” <https://www.koolulam.com>.

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