

Commentary: Write future's history books by resisting travel ban

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As president of Chabot College, I am hearing from students and colleagues about their fears for America's future following the president's executive order banning immigration from seven predominantly Muslim nations. I share their alarm. My own immigrant family is no stranger to these fears.

I pulled a letter yesterday from a box of family relics as I thought about the travel ban and its potential impact.

It was dated March 10, 1941 and was neatly typed on U.S. Department of State letterhead. It is addressed to my paternal grandmother Amalie Sperling who was pleading with the U.S. State Department to give a visa to her sister Miriam.

"My dear Miss Sperling, writes the immigration official in response, I have your letter of February 15, 1941 regarding your interest in the immigration of your sister and her daughter who are understood to be residing in German-occupied Poland."

In polite bureaucratic parlance, the State Department official goes on to inform her that the quota for Jewish refugees has been filled.

"Understood to be residing in German-occupied Poland" — Really?

My grandmother's sister Miriam was a German Jew forcibly relocated by the Nazi regime to occupied Poland. By the time of this final urgent attempt by my grandmother, Miriam was already a stateless person and had been since the Nuremberg Laws of September 15 1935, which deprived Jewish communities in Germany of all rights of citizenship.

Many have asked in retrospect: how could Americans have denied political asylum to desperate people under these dire circumstances?

The answer to this question is a pressing one today. Many politicians promulgated fear and xenophobia as did the press (In 1941 the venerable New York Times cautioned that Jews seeking U.S. visas might well be Nazi spies!).

Up and down the West Coast, law-abiding Japanese Americans were confined to internment camps in a wave of xenophobic hysteria promoted by the government and press. Irish, Southern Europeans, Chinese, and others considered “undesirable” had faced similar challenges earlier in the 20th century.

That a nation of immigrants could pursue such exclusionary policies seems counter-intuitive, and yet the stains of racism and xenophobia run deep through our history.

Now anti-immigrant polemics from those in power again focus toxic anger on particular immigrant groups and we read about the burning of mosques and hate-filled slogans scrawled across walls.

Words are followed by actions — as the purpose of these words is always to prepare us for actions. The president’s executive order of Jan. 27 suspending entry into the U.S. of Muslims from targeted countries and other restrictions saw permanent residents with green cards, visiting scientists, scholars, and U.S. college students refused passage to the U.S. or taken off planes on Saturday. Some of them were held in custody at U.S. airports. An eleventh hour legal action by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) brought some temporary relief, although it remains unclear what will follow in the months ahead.

The U.N. estimates the total number of refugees worldwide to exceed 50 million for the first time since World War II. A great many of these stateless persons are Syrian, among the banned. They have fled deadly violence, poison gas, hunger, lack of medicine, and death at sea.

Like my great aunt, they are victims of history who seek to make decent lives for their families and deserve our compassion and support. As in 1941, our country’s door has been slammed shut.

At Chabot College we pledge to continue to support and educate all of our immigrant students, to organize with other educators to resist xenophobia and defend immigrant rights — as Americans we must collectively write our future history books.

Susan Sperling is president of Chabot College.