



# Seeking Refuge:

*Immigration to Canada Before, During  
and After the Holocaust*



# A BRIEF HISTORY OF CANADIAN IMMIGRATION POLICIES

Canadian immigration policy has restricted who could immigrate to Canada in a variety of ways throughout Canadian history. Following Confederation in 1867, Canada had few explicit restrictions on immigration, but in practice government policy encouraged the immigration of white, able-bodied people. Canada's immigration policies became increasingly discriminatory. Beginning with the first *Immigration Act* in 1869, the federal government explicitly imposed restrictions on the basis of class, ability and race; subsequent policies included the Chinese head tax (1885) and the exclusionary Chinese Immigration Act (1923). In 1919, legislators made amendments to the Canadian *Immigration Act* to restrict the admission of groups considered undesirable, believing that they posed a risk to Canada's health and economy. Anyone presumed to have difficulty assimilating to Canadian society could be turned away from entering the country, which meant, for example, prohibiting immigration from Central and Eastern Europe. In 1923 and 1931, Orders-in-Council were released, further limiting the groups permitted to enter Canada: only people who were skilled farmers, had a father or husband already in Canada, or citizens of the US or a Commonwealth country were accepted. These categories meant that European Jews were largely excluded. Canadian immigration legislation continued to allow arbitrary exclusions that reflected prevalent racist and antisemitic views. Antisemitism, among other forms of racism and xenophobia, was pervasive in Canada during the early-to-mid-twentieth century. Some examples of discrimination in Canada during this period include exclusionary accommodation and employment practices, as well as prohibiting individuals from being members of public and leisure facilities.

Global events in the twentieth century highlighted the effects of Canadian immigration restrictions. In Germany, starting in 1933, the Nazi Party enacted a series of antisemitic measures that aimed to isolate, persecute and ultimately murder the entire Jewish population of Europe, with similar laws targeting Jews eventually appearing in other European countries that aligned themselves with Nazi Germany. In accordance with other Western countries, Canada condemned Germany's politics; however, this condemnation did not shift Canada's immigration policies. Although Canada was never formally closed to the Jews of Europe by law, widespread antisemitism in Canada and restrictive immigration policies continued to limit Jewish immigration to Canada in the years leading up to and during World War II. In 1933, a letter from a Canadian government official stated that "a strict administration of the existing immigration regulations will not offer any solution so far as Canada is concerned, of the problems of Jews or other refugees." Between 1933 and 1947, Canada admitted only 5,000 Jews. Canada's record on accepting Jewish refugees at this crucial time is even worse than that of other Western countries.

To view the referenced primary source documents from 1919, 1923, 1931 and 1933, see Appendices 1 through 4.

To learn more about the history of restrictive policies, visit the [Canadian Encyclopedia's website](#).

# 2024 MARKS THE 85<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY OF THE MS *ST. LOUIS* BEING TURNED AWAY

In May 1939, 937 mostly German Jewish refugees boarded a ship in Hamburg, Germany, hoping to find a haven from the persecution and violence plaguing their lives since Hitler rose to power in 1933. Cuba, the United States and Canada all denied entry to these refugees, indicative of the restrictive and antisemitic immigration policies of the time. The ship was forced to return to Europe, with the refugees landing in Great Britain, the Netherlands, Belgium and France, most of which was soon to be under Nazi occupation. More than 250 of the MS *St. Louis* passengers would end up being killed in the Holocaust.



View of the MS. *St. Louis* surrounded by smaller vessels in the port of Hamburg. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Herbert & Vera Karliner.

## POSTWAR IMMIGRATION

In the immediate aftermath of the Holocaust, Canada reconsidered its own discriminatory policies, including immigration policies. With reluctance and after nationwide debates, Canada gradually eased its admission criteria and adopted a refugee policy that was open to the displaced Jews of Europe. Accepting Jewish refugees also served as a solution to the postwar demand for skilled, cheap labour in Canada. Sponsored between Canada's Department of Labour, the Canadian Jewish Congress (CJC)<sup>1</sup> and other organizations, more than 2,000 Jews were admitted into Canada through an initiative referred to as the Garment Workers Scheme, also known as the Tailor Project, or as furriers or milliners. Canadian Jews were also able to sponsor European Jews as "close relatives." Between 1947 and 1949, the CJC worked to bring 1,123 Jewish orphans to Canada through the War Orphans Project, to be cared for by Jewish families across the country. In the decades following the Holocaust, Canada became home to approximately 40,000 Holocaust survivors.

<sup>1</sup> An advocacy organization and lobbying group for the Canadian Jewish community founded in 1919.

# CLASSROOM INSTRUCTIONS



## LENGTH

2 lessons (75–90 minutes each)



## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

To learn *about* the Holocaust through a wartime primary source (diary) and *about* Canadian immigration policies before, during and after the war using additional primary sources including immigration legislation and official government documents. Through studying the MS St. Louis, immigration quotas and the War Orphans Project, students will gain an understanding of the impact of immigration policies on the Jews of Europe. Using first-hand accounts (memoir excerpts), students will focus on the War Orphans Project, one of a few ways that survivors made their way to Canada in the postwar years.

Students will learn *from* the Holocaust by reflecting on Canada's response to the Jewish refugees in Europe. They will analyze primary sources to better understand the significant push and pull factors of immigration during and after the war. In addition, students will better understand the way some of Canada's Jewish communities, which include approximately 40,000 Holocaust survivors, were established.



## MATERIALS NEEDED

- Internet-enabled tablet or computer
- Student Reading Booklet
- Student Response Booklet

Before you begin teaching about the Holocaust, it is important to reflect on your knowledge, goals and methods. To prepare educators and build their confidence in teaching this topic, we have created a guide titled [The First Step: A Guide for Educators Preparing to Teach about the Holocaust](#). As you move through the material and short activities in The First Step, you will gain familiarity with the core content of the Holocaust, reflect on your teaching rationales and consider best practices in how to bring this topic into your classroom. We encourage you to explore this guide before beginning any Holocaust education activity with your students.

## ACCOMMODATIONS



- All of the accompanying materials, including PDFs and videos, are compliant with current accessibility standards.
- Consider offering the Student Reading Booklet prior to the in-class lesson to students who require additional time for reading or processing.
- Assign students who require additional time reading or processing one of the following authors for Lesson 2: Leslie Mezei, Michael Kutz or John Freund.

## EXTENSIONS



- Use the [Ontario Jewish Archives](#), [Canadian Jewish Archives](#) or the [Canadian Jewish Heritage Network](#) to further explore the history of Jewish landmarks, organizations and people in Canada.
- Learn more about the War Orphans Project using these resources:
  - <https://vhec.org/open-hearts/english/>
  - <https://refairesavie.museeholocauste.ca/eng/war-orphans-project-0>
  - <https://memoirs.azrielifoundation.org/exhibits/education-disrupted/starting-over-in-canada/>
- Read the transcript or watch the video of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau apologizing on behalf of Canada for turning away the MS *St. Louis* in 1939:  
<https://www.pm.gc.ca/en/videos/2018/11/07/pm-trudeau-delivers-apology-regarding-fate-passengers-ms-st-louis>

# LESSON 1

## Primary Source Analysis



### LENGTH

1 lesson (75–90 minutes)



### MATERIALS NEEDED

- Student Reading Booklet: Susan Garfield Background Reading (p.36)
- Student Reading Booklet: Susan Garfield Wartime Diary Excerpts
- Student Response Booklet: Activity #1: Primary Source Analysis
- Optional: Appendices 1–4

## INSTRUCTIONS

### STEP 1

Begin by introducing the vocabulary term **primary source** and the value of learning about history using primary sources.

Definition of primary source: “A source is primary if it is original or first-hand in terms of time and access to the event,” such as artifacts and documents that were created during the time under study. Primary sources are different from secondary sources, which are “deliberately prepared accounts.... produced from information drawn from other sources,” like a history textbook.<sup>1</sup>

### STEP 2

Before reading the diary excerpts, students should familiarize themselves with the author, Susan Garfield, as well as with what was happening in Hungary during the Holocaust. As a class, in small groups or independently, students will read the background reading on Susan Garfield and the historical context information about Hungary. This can be found in the Student Reading Booklet (p. 36).

### STEP 3

In partners or independently, students will read excerpts from Susan’s wartime diary. Note: Some diary excerpts were shortened or omitted for the purposes of this activity. The complete diary entries can be found in Susan’s memoir, [\*Too Many Goodbyes: The Diaries of Susan Garfield\*](#).

### STEP 4

After reading the diary excerpts, students will complete Activity #1: Primary Source Analysis in their Student Response Booklet.

### STEP 5

Students can share their responses in small groups or as a whole class.

<sup>1</sup> Mike Denos and Roland Case, *Teaching about Historical Thinking* (Vancouver, BC: The Critical Thinking Consortium, 2006), 16–17.

## OPTIONAL: EXTEND THE LEARNING

Print multiple copies of the primary source documents from 1919, 1923, 1931 and 1933 (Appendices 1-4). These documents demonstrate the increasingly restrictive changes to immigration policies over these years in official government legislation and communications.

Allow students to explore the documents from the Canadian government and offer their reflections using sticky notes or a digital tool, such as [Padlet](#).

Consolidate the learning with these discussion questions:

1. These primary sources are formal, legal Canadian documents that outline the policies restricting entry into Canada to a select few groups. How does this seem different from the Canada we live in today?
2. How does immigration policy in Canada look different today? Use these resources to learn more:
  - <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/campaigns/immigration-matters/system.html>
  - <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/what-canadas-immigration-policy>

# LESSON 2

## The War Orphans Project



### LENGTH

1 lesson (75–90 minutes)



### MATERIALS NEEDED

- [Short film](#) accessed with an internet-enabled tablet or computer
- Student Response Booklet: Activity #2: Short Film Reflections
- Student Reading Booklet: War Orphans Project excerpts
- Student Response Booklet: Activity #3: War Orphans Graphic Organizer
- Chart paper or 11x17 blank paper
- Markers

## INSTRUCTIONS

### STEP 1

As a class, review the Background Readings of Marie Doduck, Kitty Salsberg and Johnny Jablon in the Student Reading Booklet.

### STEP 2

Watch [the short film](#). This can be done as a whole class or independently.

### STEP 3

Students should complete Activity #2: Short Film Reflections after the film. This can be found in the Student Response Booklet.

**Alternatively, Steps 1–3 can be assigned as homework after completing Lesson 1.**

### STEP 4

Read the following statement to your students:

*Today we will be reading excerpts from memoirs that were written by Holocaust survivors who moved to Canada after the war. Each of these survivors came to Canada through the War Orphans Project; however, they came from different places and arrived at different times in 1947 or 1948. Some had positive experiences arriving in Canada and others faced difficult challenges. Some settled into their new homes easily and others really struggled to find their place. Each group will learn about one survivor's experience coming to Canada through the War Orphans Project, and then we will all share the story we learned with our peers.*





## TEACHING TIP

Due to the varied lengths of the texts and the diverse reading skills of students, consider completing Steps 5 and 6 as assigned homework. Before beginning Step 7, have students review the excerpts and their completed graphic organizers in groups.

### STEP 5

Assign each student one author.

Note: War Orphans Project excerpts vary in length. Some excerpts were shortened for the purposes of this activity. A short biography and historical context are provided for each author. The content of the selected excerpts is appropriate for an 11+ audience. The memoirs the excerpts were taken from are **not recommended** for an 11+ audience.

#### SHORT

- Michael Kutz, *If, By Miracle*
- Leslie Mezei, *A Tapestry of Survival*
- John Freund, *Spring's End*

#### MEDIUM

- Molly Applebaum, *Buried Words: The Diary of Molly Applebaum*
- Susan Garfield, *Too Many Goodbyes: The Diaries of Susan Garfield*
- Michael Mason, *A Name Unbroken*

#### LONG

- Johnny Jablon, *A Lasting Legacy*
- Kitty Salsberg, *Never Far Apart*
- Marie Doduck, *A Childhood Unspoken*

### STEP 6

During and after reading, students will fill in Activity #3: War Orphans Graphic Organizer in their Student Response Booklet.

### STEP 7

Give each group a piece of chart paper or blank 11x17 paper with markers. Students will summarize their survivor's story by visually representing it on paper. They may choose to include words/phrases, pictures or symbols, and have the option to organize it chronologically or in a more abstract way.

### STEP 8

Groups can present their author's story to their peers. Alternatively, display the posters around the room and do a gallery walk.

### STEP 9

Come together to debrief the learning with a class discussion. Below are some suggested discussion questions to guide the conversation.

- Which parts of the survivor stories were similar? What elements did each or most of the survivors mention?

(For example, deciding to leave Europe, travelling on a ship, arriving in Canada, the role of the Canadian Jewish Congress, meeting with a social worker, being assigned to a host family, settling into life in Canada.)

- How did the survivor stories differ?

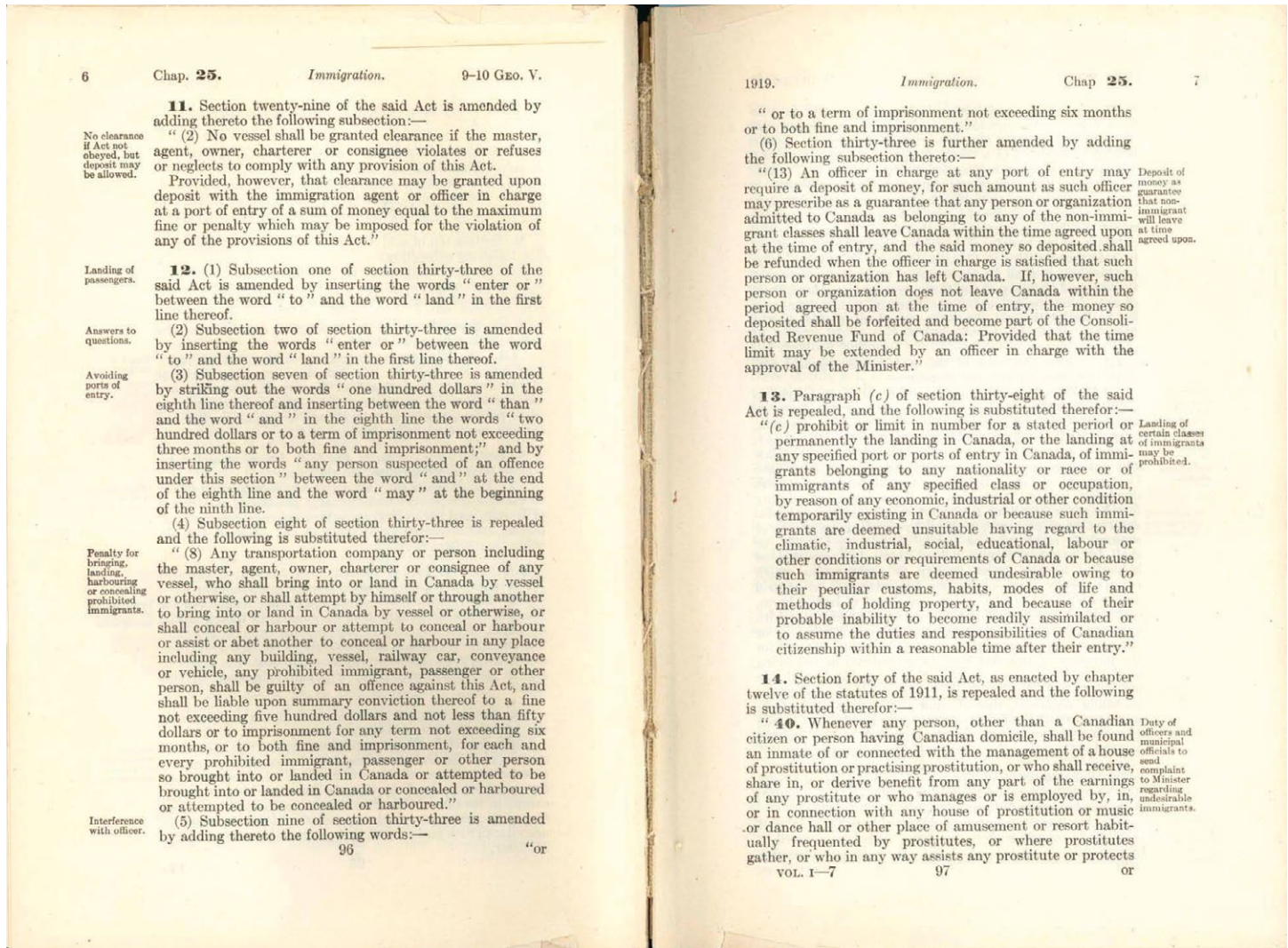
(For example, where they left from, what time of year they arrived, their age when they arrived, what they did when they first came to Canada, how they settled in with their host family, how they adapted, challenges they faced.)

- Why is it important to learn about historical events through first-hand accounts like survivor stories and primary sources like diary entries?
- How do you feel about Canada's response during the Holocaust? Is there anything you feel the Canadian government could have done differently?
- Why is it important to continue to learn about the Holocaust?
- Given that the Holocaust did not take place in Canada, why is it important that in Canada we still commemorate the Holocaust through memorials and public ceremonies?

# APPENDIX 1

## Immigration Act Amendment (1919)

<https://pier21.ca/research/immigration-history/immigration-act-amendment-1919> (p. 7)



### CREDITS:

**Publication:** Statutes of Canada. An Act to Amend the Immigration Act, 1919.

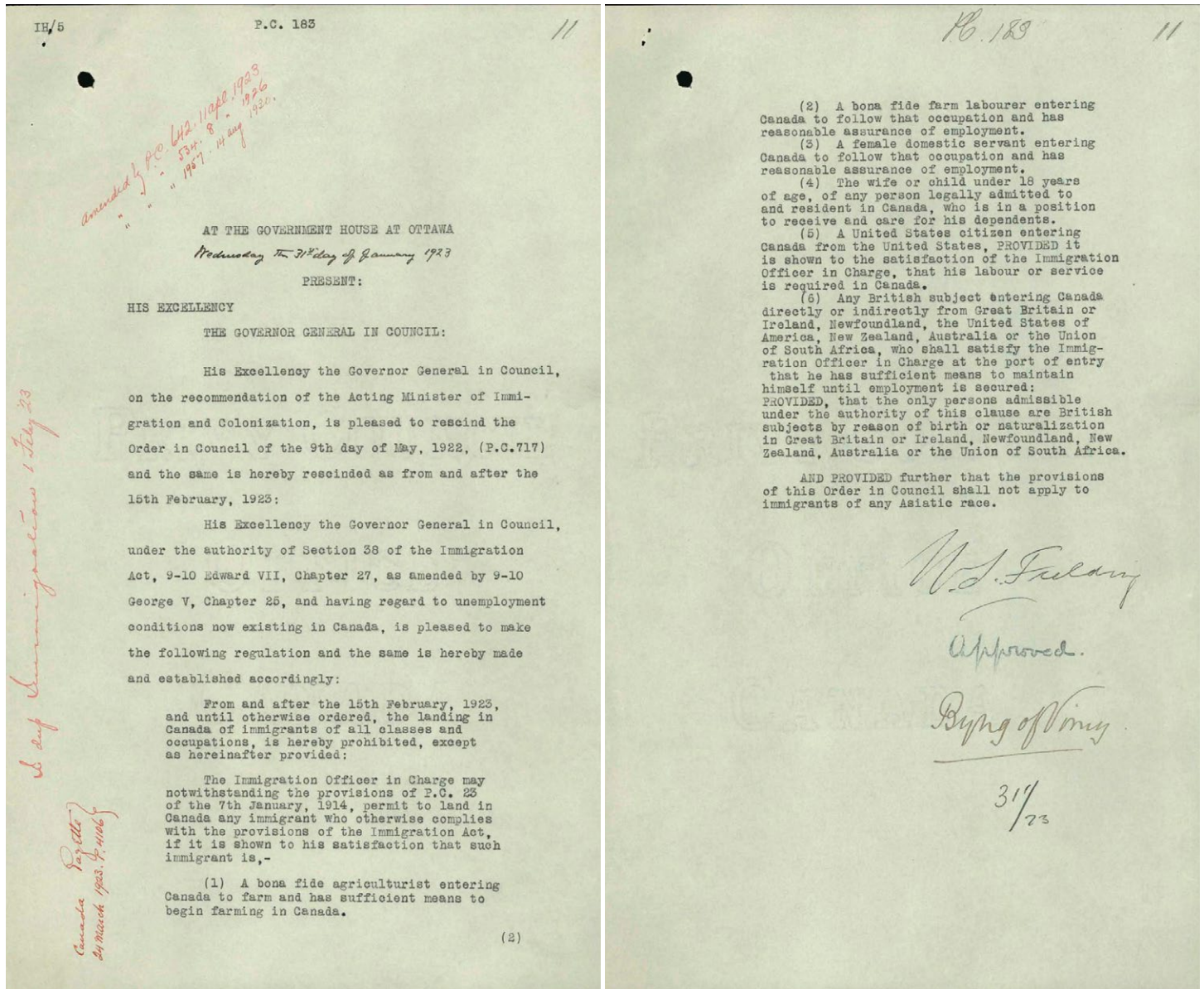
Ottawa: SC 9-10 George V, Chapter 25

**Source:** Library and Archives Canada/OCLC 4353651

# APPENDIX 2

Order-in-Council PC 1923-183

<https://pier21.ca/order-council-pc-1923-183>



CREDITS:

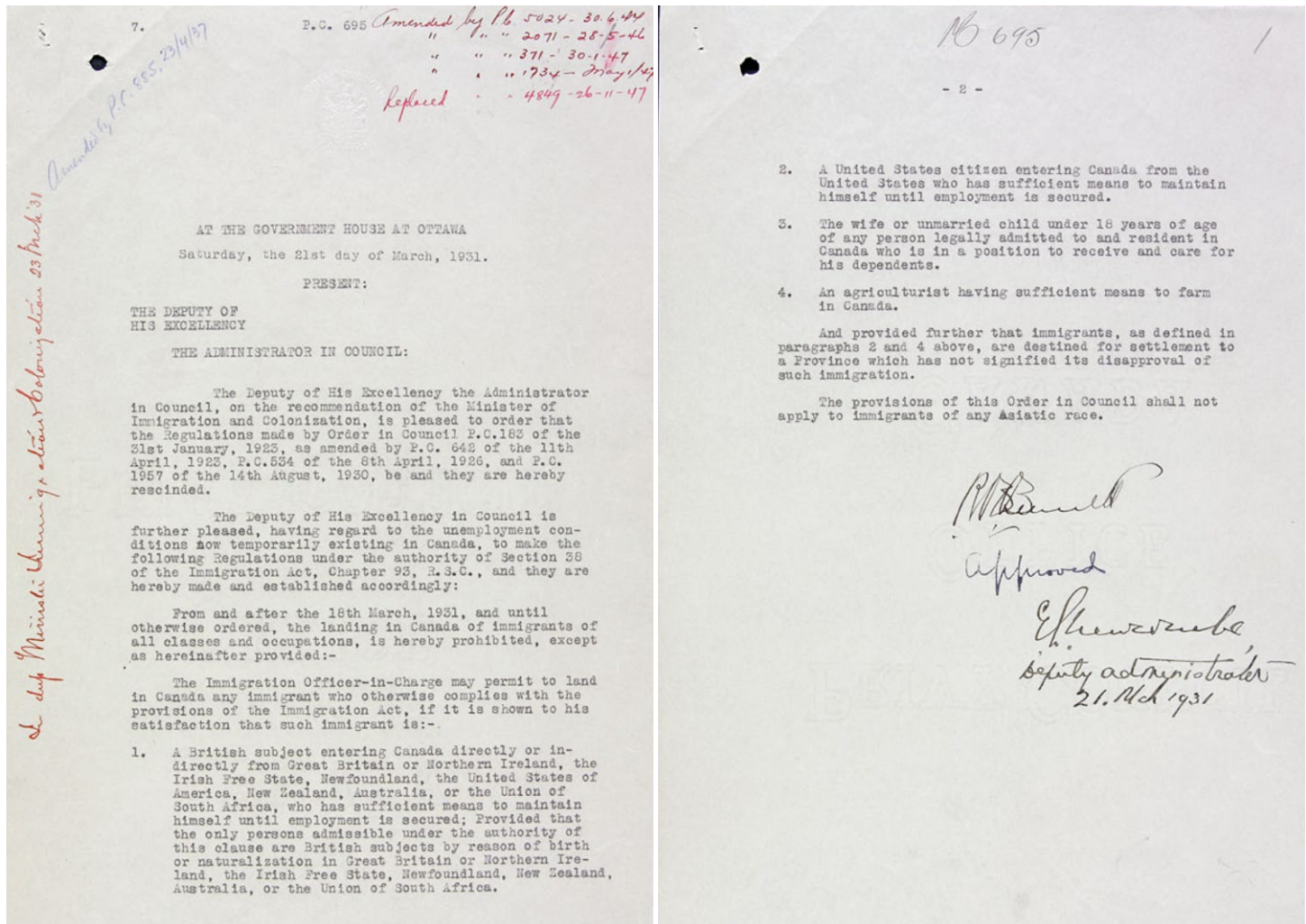
**File:** Order-in-council, P.C. 183, 31 January, 1923

**Source:** Library and Archives Canada/RG2-A-1-a, vol. 1322, pages 1, 2

# APPENDIX 3

Order-in-Council PC 1931-695

<https://pier21.ca/research/immigration-history/order-in-council-pc-1931-695-1931>



CREDITS:

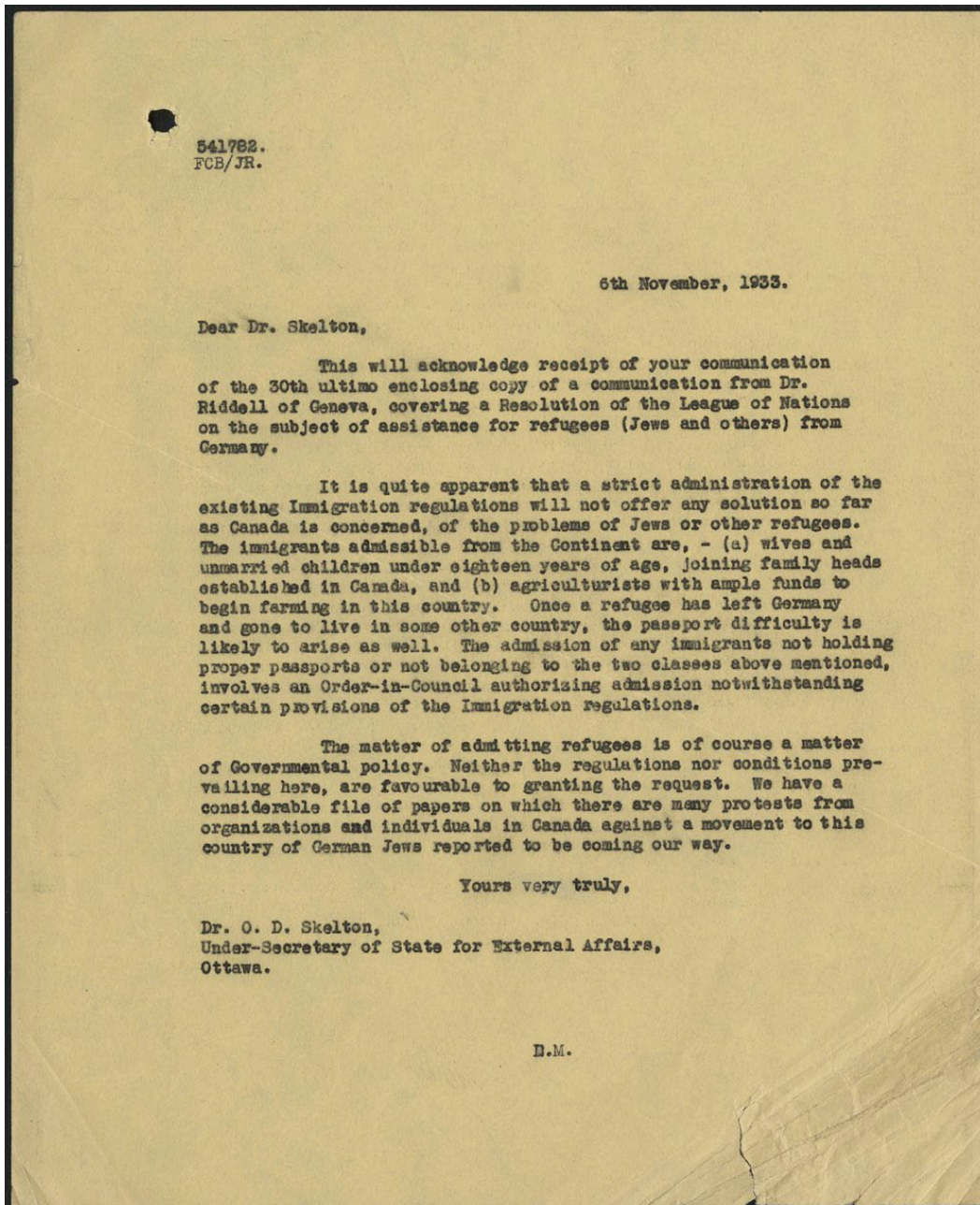
**File:** Order-in-council, P.C. 695, March 21, 1931

**Source:** Library and Archives Canada/RG2-A-1-a, vol. 1479, pages 1, 2

# APPENDIX 4

Letter

<https://recherche-collection-search.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/home/record?app=fonandcol&ldNumber=5010694>



CREDITS:

**Correspondence:** Letter to Dr O.D. Skelton  
© Government of Canada.

Reproduced with the permission of Library and Archives Canada (2023).

**Source:** Library and Archives Canada/RG76-I-A-1, Volume no. 391, File no. 541782/e011201900

