

Yearning to Breathe Free

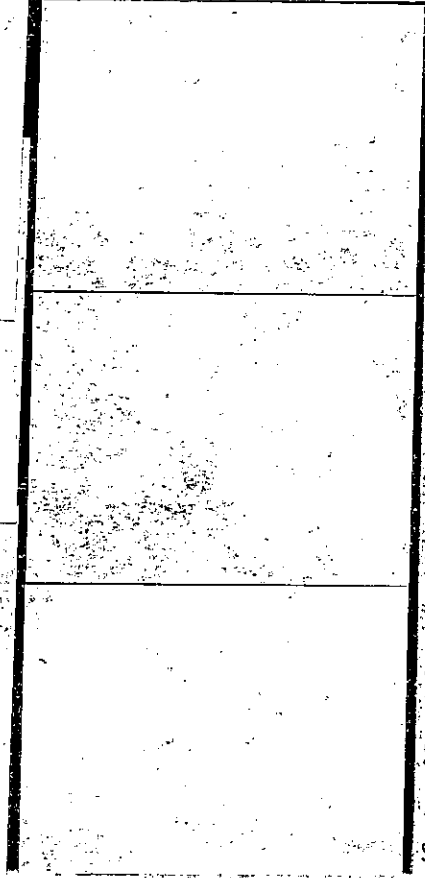
JEWISH REFUGEES

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Passengers on the St. Louis Leaving Germany

LEARNING TO BREATHE FREE (JEWISH REFUGEES)

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(Courtesy of Stern Archives)

Passengers on the St. Louis Returning to Europe

On May 27, 1939, the big German ocean liner *St. Louis* steamed into Cuba's Havana Harbor. The decks were crammed with happy German passengers eager and anxious to leave the ship after the voyage from Hamburg, Germany. The passengers all carried Cuban visas (legal documents allowing them to enter another country). After staying for a time in Cuba, the passengers expected to immigrate to the United States. Most of the passengers were elated. Why were they so happy? Why were they leaving their homeland? The story of the *St. Louis* and its cargo of over nine hundred people illustrates the social, economic, and political turmoil of the times.

Most of the passengers were German Jews fleeing the horrors of Nazi Germany. When Adolf Hitler and the Nazi party took control of

Germany in 1933, they were determined to rid Germany of all Jews. The Nazis blamed the Jews for Germany's problems and wanted to create a "pure" German race. Jews were not to be included.

Over the years, Nazi policies toward the Jews became increasingly severe. Jews were not permitted to hold certain types of jobs, jobs that they had worked at for years. Jewish businesses and property were taken by the government. Jews were prohibited from using public facilities such as parks and swimming pools. The Nuremberg Laws of 1935 declared that Jews were no longer German citizens. Many Jews were imprisoned in concentration camps, or simply dumped over the border into neighboring nations.

Early in November 1938, a night of terror known as *Kristallnacht* (Night of Broken Glass) occurred. Nazi mobs destroyed Jewish businesses and burned synagogues. Jews were beaten in the streets. The police did nothing to stop the violence. To add to the outrage, the government blamed the Jewish victims for the destruction. A heavy tax was placed on Jews to pay for the damage done to them! Even the most patriotic German Jews began to realize they would not be safe unless they left Germany.

President Franklin Roosevelt was shocked by the events of *Kristallnacht*. He said he "could scarcely believe that such things occur in a twentieth century civilization." In reaction, the president extended the time limit on visitors' visas for about fifteen thousand German Jews then visiting the United States. By his action, the German Jews could remain in the United States for an additional six months. He doubted that "we have a right to put them on a ship and send them back to Germany under the present conditions."

The president's action showed his disgust with Hitler's Nazis. Some Americans wished he would do more. Thousands of Jews were fleeing Germany seeking safety. Many wanted to come to the United States. Under U.S. law, however, the number of people who could immigrate to the United States was strictly limited. Some wanted the president to try to change the law. The vast majority of Americans favored the law, so it was unlikely that the Congress could be persuaded to change it.

Traditionally, the United States had been a haven for immigrants. Since the 1800s, however, the government had placed restrictions on immigration. The law in effect in the 1930s was the National Origins Immigration Act of 1924. The law set limits on the number of people

who were allowed to immigrate from various countries. Each nation received a quota stating the number of immigrants who could come to the United States each year. The highest quotas were given to nations in northern and western Europe. No immigrants from Asia were permitted. The quota for Germany was about twenty-six thousand a year.

People who wanted strict limitations on immigration were known as *restrictionists*. Some restrictionists even favored the complete elimination of immigration. During the 1920s and 1930s, restrictionist sentiment ran high. Three general factors help explain the rise in restrictionist feeling: isolationism, unemployment, and nativism.

Isolationists wanted the United States to avoid involvement with foreign nations. Placing limits on immigration was one way isolationists sought to avoid getting entangled in the affairs of other countries. As one Senator put it: "Let Europe take care of its own people. We cannot take care of our own, to say nothing of importing more to care for."

As a result of the Depression, millions of Americans were unemployed. Many workers feared immigrants would compete with them for jobs. Some said that every job taken by an immigrant was one less job for an American citizen.

Nativists were people who endorsed slogans like "America for Americans," or spoke of the need for citizens to be "100 percent" American. Nativists looked down on immigrants. One man commented in disgust at "the babble of foreign tongues, . . . the filth of the streets, the greasy lives of the people, the utter disregard for American standards of morality" that he associated with immigrants. Nativists believed the United States would be threatened by an influx of immigrants. According to one book on immigration, "No living nation need permit its own conquest by unselected immigrants."

Some Americans believed that immigration contributed to the quality of American life. They pointed out that virtually all Americans were descended from immigrants. They argued that purchases by immigrants would stimulate the economy and reduce unemployment. They also stressed that the number of immigrants entering the United States was small compared to the nation's total population of about 130 million. From their point of view, immigrants were no threat to the United States. Besides, the poem on the Statue of Liberty was an invitation to all people "yearning to breathe free."

Although there were people who defended immigrants, public opinion polls showed that close to 70 percent of Americans consistently favored the restricting of immigration. Politicians were well aware of anti-immigrant feelings. One Senator said opposing foreigners "is perhaps the best vote-getting argument in present-day politics. The politician can beat his breast and proclaim his loyalty to America. He can tell the unemployed man that he is out of work because some alien has a job."

Disagreement about immigration was not confined to the United States. England, France, and many other nations struggled with the problem of how to handle the thousands of refugees fleeing Germany. Many nations believed they had already taken in more refugees than they could handle.

As Germany took control of other countries, including Czechoslovakia and Austria, the stream of refugees rapidly became a river and threatened to become a flood. Not all the refugees were Jews, although Jews were the special target of the Nazis. To many people, however, all refugees were Jews. This made the refugee problem even more complicated.

For centuries Jews throughout the world had often been subject to a form of prejudice known as *anti-Semitism*. Anti-Semites distrusted Jews and blamed them for causing problems. In the United States, for example, anti-Semites leveled many false charges against Jews. They claimed that Jews controlled the economy and the government. They accused Jews of being more loyal to their religion than to the United States. Some anti-Semites feared that American Jews, in their efforts to help German Jews, might try to drag the United States into European problems.

Anti-immigrant feelings placed President Roosevelt and many other world leaders in a difficult position. The president condemned the terror tactics of the Nazis publicly. Political pressures, however, made it difficult for him to solve the problem of the refugees. Many people believed that any efforts to increase the quota would lead Congress to make immigration policy even more restrictive.

The president would not take action to change the quota law. He did, however, call an international conference to consider what could be done about the refugee problem. Representatives of over thirty nations met at Evian, France, early in 1938. Many statements of sympathy for the refugees were made, but no significant way of dealing with them came from the meetings.

Germany was quick to point out that the nations would not take all the Jewish refugees. One German newspaper taunted America by saying: "The United States, which initiated the Evian Conference, should be reminded of its moral duty to set other immigration countries a good example with a generous gesture." Hitler said with a sneer that Germany was willing to let all Jews leave, "even on luxury ships."

The *St. Louis* was a luxury ship, but the passengers had faced great hardships to get on board. Some of them had once been prosperous professionals, but the Nazi government had taken virtually all their money and property. Others had been abused in other ways by the Nazis. About one-half of the passengers were women and children. All had managed to pull together enough money to buy Cuban visas and a ticket to Cuba. About seven hundred of them had been accepted as future immigrants into the United States. Because of the quota system, most would have to wait in Cuba for a few months to a few years before they could enter the United States.

Each passenger could tell his or her own story of suspense and fear before boarding the *St. Louis* on May 13, 1939. Would it be a lucky number? They knew the German government might, at any time, refuse to allow them to leave. No wonder there were sighs of relief when the ship pulled away from the dock.

The passengers were pleasantly surprised at how well they were treated by the German crew. They did not know that the captain, Gustav Schroeder, had ordered the crew, some of whom were Nazis, to treat the passengers with care and respect.

Soon many passengers began relaxing and enjoying the good life aboard the liner. Captain Schroeder had made certain that they would receive the same fine food and entertainment for which his ship was known. There were many things, however, that the captain could not control.

Captain Schroeder had been assured by his superiors that Cuba would admit his passengers. He was not told that the Cuban visas had been cancelled! The visas had been illegally written and sold by a Cuban immigration official. Cuba's president, Federico Bru, had discovered the visa scheme and issued a decree making the visas worthless.

President Bru's action was popular in Cuba. Cuba had already accepted a few thousand Jewish refugees, and many Cubans believed they should take no more. There were also rumblings of anti-Semitism.

Referring to the *St. Louis*' passengers, one newspaper editorial said: "Against this invasion we must react with the same energy as have other people of the globe."

When the *St. Louis* entered Havana Harbor, passengers crowded on the decks thrilled to be so close to safety at last. On shore were crowds of onlookers, including relatives of some of the passengers. On board, ten-year-old Marianne Bardeleben strained her eyes for a glimpse of her father. Her mother stood with her.

The passengers had packed their luggage and were prepared to leave the ship. Hours passed. No announcement to disembark had been made. Why the delay? The travelers became anxious.

A day passed. Gradually it was becoming clear that the passengers were not going to be allowed to leave the ship. Police boats circled the ship to make certain no one attempted to jump overboard. Other small boats carried relatives of the passengers, looking up longingly at their dear ones. Still nothing happened.

The passengers were close to panic. One man slashed his wrists in a suicide attempt. Captain Schroeder feared that mass suicides might occur if his ship were ordered back to Germany. He established suicide patrols. Groups of men moved throughout the ship to stop desperate passengers who might try to kill themselves.

The captain argued with officials on shore. He urged a German diplomat to try to get the Cuban government to accept the passengers. The diplomat replied, "These are Jews, Captain, feeling here is against them." Schroeder was furious. "They are also people," he snapped, "and I care about people."

The captain's efforts were unsuccessful. Cuban President Bru said, "The post that I occupy has painful duties, which oblige me to disregard the impulses of my heart and follow the stern dictates of duty." Apparently he saw his duty as upholding the decree and not accepting the illegal visas.

A U.S. diplomat sent a telegram to U.S. Secretary of State Cordell Hull asking what might be done. The reply was: "There appears to be no action that . . . could properly [be taken] at present."

Captain Schroeder received orders for the *St. Louis* to leave the harbor. The ship quivered as the big engines rumbled to a start. A group of screaming passengers rushed the gangway but were pushed back by Cuban police. The *St. Louis* steamed away.

The story of the *St. Louis* had made headlines in newspapers around the world. Eager readers had followed the complicated story. It had become a great opportunity for German propaganda. Accord-

ing to the Nazis, the treatment of passengers aboard the *St. Louis* was proof that no nation wanted Jewish refugees.

Captain Schroeder had not yet been ordered to return to Germany. He was permitted to cruise slowly while further efforts were made to find a haven for the passengers. The ship passed close to Miami, and hopeful eyes looked toward the United States for help.

One of President Roosevelt's advisors called Secretary Hull to see if something might be done. Hull said, "This is a matter primarily between the Cuban government and these people."

A committee of passengers had sent a cable to President Roosevelt asking for help. Involved in many other complicated political and economic matters, the president had not followed the *St. Louis* episode very closely. He chose not to overrule the opinion of the State Department. To this day no one knows for certain why the president, a man sympathetic to the plight of refugees, decided as he did.

Captain Schroeder finally received orders to return his ship to Germany. The captain was determined that his passengers should never have to face Nazi horrors again. He considered crashing the huge liner into the rocky shoreline of southern England with the hope that the passengers could be evacuated safely. Such a dangerous and drastic action was not needed.

The governments of England, France, Belgium, and Holland, after lengthy negotiations with refugee organizations, reluctantly agreed to accept the *St. Louis*' passengers. The anguish of the voyage had ended. The passengers were safe at last.

The refugees were finally safe, but their refuge did not necessarily last for long. When the German army swept through Europe during the early years of World War II, they brought with them Hitler's new policy of "the final solution." He was no longer forcing Jews to emigrate. They were now to be taken to death camps. Before the war was over, millions of Jews had been killed. No one is certain how many of the passengers of the *St. Louis* were victims of the war. According to one estimate, only 240 of the over 900 passengers survived.

The major sources for this story were:

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