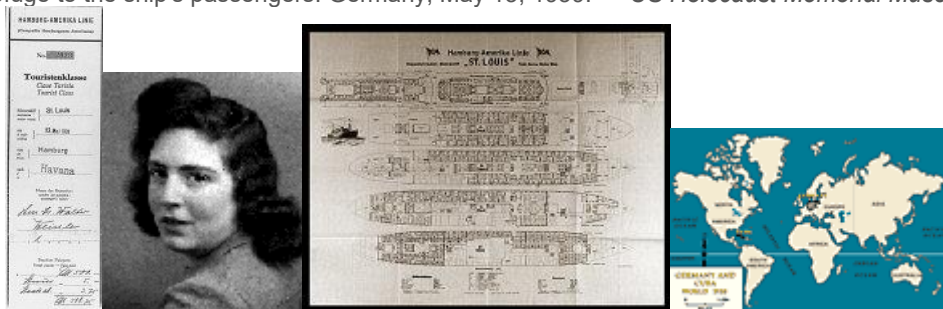


VOYAGE OF THE ST. LOUIS

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Gustav Schroeder, captain of the "St. Louis," on the day of the ship's departure from Hamburg. Neither Cuba nor the US granted refuge to the ship's passengers. Germany, May 13, 1939. — *US Holocaust Memorial Museum*



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On May 13, 1939, the German transatlantic liner *St. Louis* sailed from Hamburg, Germany, for Havana, Cuba. On the voyage were 937 passengers. Almost all were Jews fleeing from the Third Reich. Most were German citizens, some were from eastern Europe, and a few were officially "stateless." The majority of the Jewish passengers had applied for US visas, and had planned to stay in Cuba only until they could enter the United States. But by the time the *St. Louis* sailed, there were signs that political conditions in [Cuba](#) might keep the passengers from landing there. The US State Department in Washington, the US consulate in Havana, some Jewish organizations, and refugee agencies were all aware of the situation. The passengers themselves were not informed; most were compelled to return to Europe.

Since the [*Kristallnacht*](#) (literally the “Night of Crystal,” more commonly known as the “Night of Broken Glass”) pogrom of November 9–10, 1938, the German government had sought to accelerate the pace of forced Jewish emigration. The German Foreign Office and the [Propaganda Ministry](#) also hoped to exploit the unwillingness of other nations to admit large numbers of Jewish refugees to justify the Nazi regime's anti-Jewish goals and policies both domestically in Germany and in the world at large.

The owners of the *St. Louis*, the Hamburg-Amerika Line, knew even before the ship sailed that its passengers might have trouble disembarking in Cuba. The passengers, who held landing certificates and transit visas issued by the Cuban Director-General of Immigration, did not know that Cuban President Federico Laredo Bru had issued a decree just a week before the ship sailed that invalidated all recently issued landing certificates. Entry to Cuba required written authorization from the Cuban Secretaries of State and Labor and the posting of a \$500 bond (The bond was waived for US tourists).

The voyage of the *St. Louis* attracted a great deal of media attention. Even before the ship sailed from Hamburg, right-wing Cuban newspapers deplored its impending arrival and demanded that the Cuban government cease admitting Jewish refugees. Indeed, the passengers became victims of bitter infighting within the Cuban government. The Director-General of the Cuban immigration office, Manuel Benitez Gonzalez, had come under a great deal of public scrutiny for the illegal sale of landing certificates. He routinely sold such documents for \$150 or more and, according to US estimates, had amassed a personal fortune of \$500,000 to \$1,000,000. Though he was a protégé of Cuban army chief of staff (and future president) Fulgencio Batista, Benitez's self-enrichment through corruption had fueled sufficient resentment in the Cuban government to bring about his resignation.

More than money, corruption, and internal power struggles were at work in Cuba. Like the United States and the Americas in general, Cuba struggled with the Great Depression. Many Cubans resented the relatively large number of refugees (including 2,500 Jews), whom the government had already admitted into the country, because they appeared to be competitors for scarce jobs.

Hostility toward immigrants fueled both antisemitism and xenophobia. Both agents of Nazi Germany and indigenous right-wing movements hyped the immigrant issue in their publications and demonstrations, claiming that incoming Jews were Communists. Two of the papers—*Diario de la Marina*, owned by the influential Rivero family, and *Avance*, owned by the Zayas family, had supported the Spanish fascist leader General Francisco Franco, who, after a three-year [civil war](#), had just overthrown the Spanish Republic in the spring of 1939 with the help of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. Reports about the impending voyage fueled a large antisemitic demonstration in Havana on May 8, five days before the *St. Louis* sailed from Hamburg. The rally, the largest antisemitic demonstration in Cuban

history, had been sponsored by Grau San Martin, a former Cuban president. Grau spokesman Primitivo Rodriguez urged Cubans to "fight the Jews until the last one is driven out." The demonstration drew 40,000 spectators. Thousands more listened on the radio.

When the *St. Louis* arrived in Havana harbor on May 27, the Cuban government admitted 28 passengers: 22 of them were Jewish and had valid US visas; the remaining six—four Spanish citizens and two Cuban nationals—had valid entry documents. One further passenger, after attempting to commit suicide, was evacuated to a hospital in Havana.

The remaining 908 passengers (one passenger had died of natural causes en route)—including one non-refugee, a Hungarian Jewish businessman—had been awaiting entry visas and carried only Cuban transit visas issued by Gonzalez. 743 had been waiting to receive US visas. The Cuban government refused to admit them or to allow them to disembark from the ship.

After Cuba denied entry to the passengers on the *St. Louis*, the press throughout Europe and the Americas, including the United States, brought the story to millions of readers throughout the world. Though US newspapers generally portrayed the plight of the passengers with great sympathy, only a few journalists and editors suggested that the refugees be admitted into the United States.

On May 28, the day after the *St. Louis* docked in Havana, Lawrence Berenson, an attorney representing the US-based Jewish [Joint Distribution Committee](#) (JDC), arrived in Cuba to negotiate on behalf of the *St. Louis* passengers. A former president of the Cuban-American Chamber of Commerce, Berenson had had extensive business experience in Cuba. He met with President Bru, but failed to persuade him to admit the passengers into Cuba. On June 2, Bru ordered the ship out of Cuban waters. Nevertheless, the negotiations continued, as the *St. Louis* sailed slowly toward Miami. Bru offered to admit the passengers if the JDC posted a \$453,500 bond (\$500 per passenger). Berenson made a counteroffer, but Bru rejected the proposal and broke off negotiations.

Sailing so close to Florida that they could see the lights of Miami, some passengers on the *St. Louis* cabled President Franklin D. Roosevelt asking for refuge. Roosevelt never responded. The State Department and the White House had decided not to take extraordinary measures to permit the refugees to enter the United States. A State Department telegram sent to a passenger stated that the passengers must "await their turns on the waiting list and qualify for and obtain immigration visas before they may be admissible into the United States." US diplomats in Havana intervened once more with the Cuban government to admit the passengers on a "humanitarian" basis, but without success.

Quotas established in the US Immigration and Nationality Act of 1924 strictly limited the number of immigrants who could be admitted to the United States each year. In 1939, the annual combined German-Austrian immigration quota was 27,370 and was quickly filled. In fact, there was a waiting list of at least several years. US officials could only have granted visas to the *St. Louis* passengers by denying them to the thousands of German Jews placed further up on the waiting list. Public opinion in the United States, although ostensibly sympathetic to the plight of refugees and critical of Hitler's policies, continued to favor immigration restrictions. The Great Depression had left millions of people in the United States unemployed and fearful of competition for the scarce few jobs available. It also fueled antisemitism, xenophobia, nativism, and isolationism. A *Fortune Magazine* poll at the time indicated that 83 percent of Americans opposed relaxing restrictions on immigration. President Roosevelt could have issued an executive order to admit the *St. Louis* refugees, but this general hostility to immigrants, the gains of isolationist Republicans in the Congressional elections of 1938, and Roosevelt's consideration of running for an unprecedented third term as president were among the political considerations that militated against taking this extraordinary step in an unpopular cause.

Roosevelt was not alone in his reluctance to challenge the mood of the nation on the immigration issue. Three months before the *St. Louis* sailed, Congressional leaders in both US houses allowed to die in committee a bill sponsored by Senator Robert Wagner (D-N.Y.) and Representative Edith Rogers (R-Mass.). This bill would have admitted 20,000 Jewish children from Germany above the existing quota. Two smaller ships carrying Jewish refugees sailed to Cuba in May 1939. The French ship, the *Flandre*, carried 104 passengers; the *Orduña*, a British vessel, held 72 passengers. Like the *St. Louis*, these ships were not permitted to dock in Cuba. The *Flandre* turned back to its point of departure in France, while the *Orduña* proceeded to a series of Latin American ports. Its passengers finally disembarked in the US-controlled Canal Zone in Panama. The United States eventually admitted most of them.

Following the US government's refusal to permit the passengers to disembark, the *St. Louis* sailed [back to Europe](#) on June 6, 1939. The passengers did not return to Germany, however. Jewish organizations (particularly the Jewish Joint Distribution Committee) negotiated with four European governments to secure entry visas for the passengers: Great Britain took 288 passengers; the Netherlands admitted 181 passengers, Belgium took in 214 passengers; and 224 passengers found at least temporary refuge in France. Of the 288 passengers admitted by Great Britain, all survived World War II save one, who was killed during an air raid in 1940. Of the 620 passengers who returned to continent, 87 (14%) managed to emigrate before the German invasion of Western Europe in May 1940. 532 *St. Louis* passengers were trapped when Germany conquered Western Europe. Just over half, 278 survived the Holocaust. 254 died: 84 who had been in Belgium; 84 who had found refuge in Holland, and 86 who had been admitted to France.