

Jewish Flight from Nazi Germany "Voyage of the Damned"

On May 13, 1939, the Hamburg-America luxury liner *MS St. Louis* departed Germany with 937 passengers, almost all Jewish, seeking refuge from Nazism. Virtually all held Cuban landing permits and 734 had quota numbers for possible future entry into the USA. En route to Cuba, the landing permits were revoked due to bitter infighting and greed within the Cuban Government that was well known prior to departure by the organizers but kept from the passengers. In Havana, only 22 Jews with valid US visas, four Spanish and two Cuban nationals were admitted. A 29th tried to commit suicide and was evacuated to a hospital in Havana. US Diplomats and a Jewish Agency tried to negotiate down the "new" \$500 per passenger bond but had no success and on June 2, the *St. Louis* was ordered to leave Cuban waters. Pleas to the US State Department for refuge were ignored. On June 12 and 13, Great Britain, France, Belgium, and the Netherlands agreed to accept them. Of those who found refuge on the continent, nearly all fell under German rule within a year, and 254 perished in the Holocaust.



Roman Kempler was among the 2,500 German Jewish refugees that found refuge in Havana prior to the *St. Louis* voyage. The refugees were being assisted by the Joint Distribution Committee (JDC or the "Joint") of New York. Laura Margolis Jarblum, was a Joint representative in Cuba at the time (In 1941 she accepted an assignment in Shanghai where she was instrumental in assisting their Jewish refugees).

A July 20, 1939, envelope from Roman Kempler to England contained two letters. Kempler complained, "I have not received any support from the Joint, hence I have to struggle with financial difficulties." His mother wrote, "I had to cry continuously, realizing that my dear ones had to endure so much unpleasantness...Sorry to state that everything is closed here and nobody gets in."

The envelope from Kempler was to Samuel Neumann, inmate at Kitchener Internment Camp in England. Jews who fled Germany were held by Great Britain in the derelict army camp beginning in February 1939 until they found a way to emigrate overseas.

