

## Untold Stories from the SS St Louis

On Saturday 13 May 1939 the SS St Louis, a ship of the Hapag line, left the port of Hamburg in Germany and set sail for Havana in Cuba. On board were 937 Jewish passengers. They were German Jews fleeing Nazi persecution and hoping to start new lives. They planned to seek asylum in Cuba.

Obtaining a ticket for the transatlantic crossing had not been easy. Even the cost of a basic ticket was high and demand for a passage out of Germany

was even greater. The passengers were refugees and had suffered in different ways. At best they had faced prejudice from their own neighbours as Nazi laws had encouraged and demanded discrimination against the Jewish community. Some had been hiding from the Nazis, others had already been in concentration camps and several knew they risked imprisonment if they remained in Germany.

The Nazis had been in power for 6 years and during that time Jewish people had been forced to surrender their possessions, they had lost their homes and their savings, been forbidden to practice their professions and their businesses had been confiscated. Most had very little money left; some passengers had relied on relatives overseas to fund their crossing. Nevertheless there were no tickets left by 7 May. Nazi decrees restricted the amount of money a Jewish passenger could take out of Germany to 10 Reichmarks. Each passenger could also have a small allowance to spend at sea but this could not be converted back to Reichmarks or used anywhere else. Once the ship docked in Cuba the passengers would be virtually penniless.

The Captain of the St Louis was Gustav Schroeder. Although he was a German he had no time for Nazis policies of discrimination and hatred. He knew that the majority of his passengers were Jewish refugees. He also knew that Nazi laws required German citizens to hate Jewish people but he was determined that on his ship everyone would be treated equally. He could not prevent the Nazi flag being flown from the stern of the ship but he could make sure that his passengers arrived safely. Before embarkation he gave clear



The SS. St. Louis surrounded by smaller vessels in the port of Hamburg ©USHMM

instructions to his crew, all passengers were to be treated with courtesy. As far as the ship's team were concerned the Jewish passengers were no different from any other ticket holder on a transatlantic voyage.

As the frightened passengers came on board, members of the crew came to help them with their bags. This was the first act of kindness that many of them had experienced in a long time. The Captain also made sure that one of the staterooms on the St Louis was converted into a temporary synagogue so that his passengers no longer had to pray in secret.

Taking an anti-Nazi stance was not easy. Although most of the crew obeyed the Captain, a few members of the Gestapo had been planted amongst them and one of the stewards, Otto Schiendick, was working for the SS. The Nazi Ministry of Propaganda sent a photographer to take pictures of the passengers as they boarded the ship. The photographs could be used to pretend to the world that Jews were being treated well and were being allowed to travel wherever they wanted. As the passengers tried to hide from the camera Captain Schroeder ordered the photographer to leave. Instead the man took his camera to the dockside where he tried to take pictures of the poorest passengers. These pictures were to be used, selectively, in propaganda, where the Nazis could demonstrate that the refugees were 'savages' and 'fugitives' who did not deserve to live in Germany. At 8.30pm the St Louis left harbour and the passengers began their voyage to freedom. However, unknown to them the Ministry of Propaganda had been working to ensure that the welcome the refugees expected to receive in Cuba was evaporating even as they set sail. Joseph Goebbels, head of the Ministry, was determined to exploit the voyage for the purposes of the Nazi propaganda machine. He sent 14 Nazi agents to Cuba with orders to spread lies about the refugee passengers. By the time the St Louis sighted land again many Cubans would believe that the ship contained criminals, liars and fugitives. False rumours would be spread that these asylum seekers were going to steal Cuban jobs and damage the Cuban way of life. In Germany, Nazi controlled radio stations told German listeners that Jewish criminals were escaping from Germany with money they had stolen.

Although the refugee passengers hoped to rebuild their lives in Cuba, immigration was complicated. Decree 55 in Cuba stated that tourists were welcome in Cuba. They could have landing permits and no restrictions would be placed upon them. Immigrants needed visas. Decree 55 did not state the difference between tourist and immigrant.

Manuel Benitez, the Cuban Director of Immigration, decided to exploit the vagueness of decree 55. He opened an unofficial tourist office and through it sold landing papers for 150 American Dollars. Others bought these permits and sold them on to potential migrants in Europe for 500 Dollars, thus individuals were making a great profit whilst further

impoverishing the refugees. The landing papers were made to look as official as possible. They looked like authentic immigration documents rather than tourist papers. The passengers on the St Louis had paid in advance for their papers. They did not know that a new decree, 937, had just been passed which replaced 55, closing any loopholes and making their papers worthless.

On 23 May, four days before the St Louis was due to dock in Havana, Captain Schroeder received a telegram which warned him that his passengers might not receive permission to land in Cuba. He set up a small committee to represent the passengers in case he needed to pass on bad news.

On 26 May, the St Louis sailed down the coast of Florida. The passengers were very excited as they tried to identify famous landmarks. Some sent telegrams to waiting friends and relatives telling them that they had almost reached their destination. Others decided to spend the last of their voyage allowance money because it would become worthless once the ship docked. Then another telegram arrived. It ordered the St Louis to anchor some distance from the harbour rather than come alongside. Something was not right.

Captain Schroeder had no choice but to obey orders. He could not enter the harbour without a pilot from the shore who would come aboard to guide the ship into port. When the pilot came on board he would not answer any questions about the new instructions and pretended he could not understand what the Captain was saying. When the passengers saw that the ship was not in port they began to worry. Then immigration officers and the police boarded the ship. On shore relatives and friends of the passengers also wondered what was happening. Some hired small boats and crossed over the water which separated the St Louis from the dock. They waved and shouted to the passengers but were not allowed to get too close. The Captain began delicate negotiations to enable the passengers to land.

Four days later the ship was still at anchor. Captain Schroeder called a meeting of the passenger committee and suggested they send telegrams to anyone they knew who might influence the decision makers. This was to no avail, the following day the Cuban government stated that the ship definitely had no permission to dock. Still the Captain tried to negotiate. On Thursday 1 June he changed out of his uniform into civilian dress and demanded to be taken ashore by launch. On arrival he was met by the shipping company's lawyer. He travelled to the presidential palace and requested an audience with the Cuban President. A diplomatic agent refused the request even when Captain Schroeder appealed to him on humanitarian grounds. On hearing that the Cubans might forcibly remove the St Louis from port, the Captain begged for more time. He would need to load more supplies of food; the ship did not have enough left for another sea voyage. The diplomat gave him just

one extra day. As a last resort Schroeder went to the German Consulate to ask for diplomatic pressure to be put on the Cuban authorities. He was ordered to take 'the Jews' back to Germany. Captain Schroeder had no alternative but prepare the ship to leave. He returned to the St Louis.

On Friday 2 June the harbour police began to chase the small boats away. The sad passengers waved to their friends and relatives as the distance between them grew wider. Now morale was very low and there was at least one suicide attempt. Some passengers made plans to jump into the water in the hope that sympathetic people would pick them up but, due to a large police presence in the harbour, escaping detection was impossible.

By now the plight of the St Louis, or the 'ship of sorrows' as reporters named her, was appearing in newspapers around the world. The Captain received a telegram from the Associated Press asking where he intended to go. The New York Times reported that the Cuban government had demanded an extra 500 Dollars from each refugee if they wanted permission to land. It was impossible to comply; passengers did not have any money left. The ship sailed round in circles, keeping close to Cuba, in the vain hope of a change of heart. Messages and telegrams travelled to and fro from ship to shore. Sometimes there was hope, the Dominican Republic might offer sanctuary, and Cuba might relent if a larger sum of money was raised.

The Captain ordered the crew to take the ship past the coast of Florida again. America often welcomed refugees; surely the American government would offer sanctuary to the weary passengers.

However no American offer was forthcoming. Although America welcomed Jewish refugees from Germany there was a quota system and a waiting list. If the St Louis passengers were allowed to land they would be jumping the queue. However if the passengers returned to Germany they were welcome to apply to join the waiting list.

The passengers were becoming desperate. They knew if they returned to Germany many of them would be murdered. Some began to cry, others prayed. The SS Agent and the Gestapo crew members began to taunt them, telling them what would happen when the ship returned them to Germany. In Canada meanwhile a group of leading Christians and business people were trying to persuade their government to intervene and offer a berth to the ship but the Canadian Government refused to act.

Then the Nazi agent, Otto Schindick, gave himself away. He tried to send a telegram to his superiors in Germany encouraging them to exert pressure to force the ship back to

Hamburg but the Captain found out about this before the message was sent. The owners of the shipping line intervened. The international publicity surrounding the ship was affecting their cruise bookings and they were losing money. They ordered the Captain to return to Germany.

In Germany the Ministry of Propaganda was making much of the American decision to turn the St Louis away. Now the Nazis argued that the world had no right to pass judgement on the treatment of Jews in Germany because other countries were also rejecting them.

The Captain had very little choice. He told the passengers that they would be returning to Europe but that they would do everything possible to avoid a stop in Germany. Now the passenger committee and the Captain sent desperate pleas to various European Governments. The Prime Minister of the UK received the message:

907 passengers on S.S. St Louis half women and children refused landing in Cuba in spite of permits and now on return voyage to Hamburg beg to be saved by being granted asylum in England or at least disembarkation at Southampton as return to Hamburg impossible and acts of desperation would be unavoidable.<sup>1</sup>

Acts of desperation were already on the agenda. Some of the younger passengers, fearing what would happen to everyone back in Germany, tried unsuccessfully to take over the ship. There was also concern that food supplies would run out if a safe haven was not found soon. The Captain understood that the young passengers were acting out of fear. Instead of charging them with criminal damage and mutiny he told them that he was doing everything he could to save them from the Nazis then he gathered the passengers together and made a short speech. He promised that the St Louis would not return to Hamburg. Then he met with three trusted crew members and one of the passengers, a Doctor. He told them that if no offers of help were forthcoming he planned to scuttle the St Louis close to the English coast, setting her on fire. In such an emergency the passengers would have to be evacuated and rescued as survivors of a shipwreck.

On Tuesday 13 June the Captain received a telegram. He told the passenger committee that the Belgium, Dutch, French and UK governments, encouraged and assisted by American Jewish relief agencies, had agreed to give asylum to the passengers.

There are many **Untold Stories** connected with the story of the St Louis. Every single passenger had a reason for leaving Germany. Many people were involved in the long drawn

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas G and Morgan-Witts M, The Voyage of the Damned, 2009, p271

out negotiating process and we do not know why they reacted in the way they did. Lots of newspaper reports were published and we do not know what the reporters really thought and how their readers responded. There are also **Untold Stories** about the eventual fate of the passengers. Those who received shelter on mainland Europe faced the Nazis again and many were sent to concentration camps. When war was declared in September 1939 the 288 refugees who came to the UK were declared 'enemy aliens' and the men were sent to internment camps. Captain Gustav Schroeder fell on hard times after the war but was supported by some of the surviving passengers, who sent him food and clothing. He died in 1957 and was declared a 'Righteous Amongst the Nations' by Yad Vashem in 1993.

There is much to reflect upon in these **Untold Stories**. On 4 June 1939, when the fate of the St Louis was still undecided, an American newspaper the *Galveston News* passed comment on the 'ship of sorrow.'

Driven out of their homeland by senseless persecution, all they ask of any other land is a chance to live in peace and opportunity to earn a livelihood. That is something no country is willing to give them... The reason for excluding them seems to be economic rather than racial or anti religious... There is almost universal sympathy for the victims of Nazi terror, but worldwide unemployment makes it difficult to find places anywhere for impoverished immigrants.

On Holocaust Memorial Day the story of the SS St Louis and her refugee passengers reminds us of the cruelty of the Nazis and how easily lies can be spread through propaganda. This **Untold Story** encourages us to consider the plight of modern day refugees and asylum seekers and ask whether the world community is really more welcoming today.

*You can read more about the crew and passengers in Voyage of the Damned by Gordon Thomas and Max Morgan-Witts (ISBN 978-1-906779-04-7)*