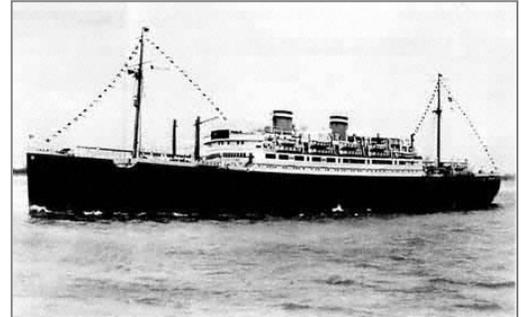




MS St. Louis Crisis

On May 13, 1939, the Hamburg-America Line ship *MS St. Louis* leaves Hamburg, Germany, carrying 937 passengers – almost all of whom were Jews fleeing Nazi Germany in the aftermath of the November 1938 pogrom cynically labeled “The Night of Broken Glass” (*Reichkristallnacht*). They are sailing for Cuba, which, influenced by the Evian (refugee) Conference of July 1938, has agreed to provide temporary refuge for German Jews. While there are touching departure scenes in Hamburg, many of the passengers – one had just been released (traumatized) from the Dachau concentration camp – were anxious to leave Germany as soon as possible. The vast majority of the passengers (743) hold American quota numbers, having applied for formal entry into the United States as immigrants. Their plan is to remain in Cuba only until their quota numbers come up. Cuba has been allowing German Jewish refugees to enter since the spring. Of the 937 passengers, 909 hold Cuba tourist landing permits, sold for roughly \$160 each by Cuba’s Director-General of Immigration, Manuel Benitez Gonzalez. What the passengers cannot know is that Benitez has been amassing a personal fortune by selling landing permits. Left out of this lucrative enrichment scheme, government officials convince Cuban President Federico Laredo Brú to invalidate the landing permits one week before the sailing of the *St. Louis*. Only those passengers – 28 in all – holding valid immigration visas will be allowed to disembark. All are German Jews.



14 Nazi agents (who entered Cuba disguised as refugees) are stirring up antisemitism in Cuba and are fabricating stories about the “criminal nature” of Jews. They are waging a campaign to “stop the Jewish invasion” of Cuba. Jewish refugees are portrayed as communist agents, intent on destroying Cuba. A large antisemitic demonstration has taken place in Havana five days before the *St. Louis* leaves Hamburg.

Despite Captain Gustav Schroeder’s stern warnings to the *St. Louis’* crew that Jewish passengers are to be treated like any other passengers, the voyage is a mixture of hope and unease. The Nazi flag flies above the ship, Hitler’s picture hangs in the social hall, and at least one active pro-Nazi crew member is harassing the passengers. When one elderly passenger dies of heart complications, the captain, purser, and ship’s doctor ensure that he receives a proper Jewish burial at sea. On May 23, Schroeder receives a telegram indicating that his passengers *might not* be able to disembark in Havana due to Presidential Brú’s Decree 937 which requires non-U.S. aliens wishing to travel to Cuba to get additional visas and pay a 500-peso bond. Accordingly, the captain forms a small passenger committee to explore possible options in case disembarkation is denied.



With the ship anchored in the midst of Havana harbor, tensions increase. Max Loewe, the survivor of Dachau, attempts suicide, but is rescued and taken to a hospital in Havana (he is later transported to England). Meanwhile, the story of the *St. Louis* becomes a cause célèbre in newspapers around the world as representatives of the American-Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), assisted by American diplomats posted to Havana, negotiate with the Cuban government for a positive outcome. The Cubans demand \$500 bond for each adult in addition to the \$150,000 already offered by the JDC. The JDC were being told to pay about 600,000 (or \$10 million in 2019 equivalency.)

On June 1 President Laredo Brú suspends negotiations with the JDC’s representatives and demands that the *St. Louis* depart Havana harbor by noon of the following day. He indicates his willingness to resume talks, but only after the ship has left Cuban waters. On June 2, Captain Schroeder proceeds to sail in circles in the waters between Cuba and Florida hoping the negotiations will lead to a resolution of the crisis. Forced to depart Havana harbor hastily, Schroeder knows the ship’s supply of food, water, and fuel are running low. If no resolution is achieved, he will be forced to head back to Germany on June 6.

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Can You Save the *St. Louis* Passengers?

Scenario: It is June 1, 1939, and time is running out for the passengers of the *MS St. Louis*. You have been chosen to be special advisors to President Roosevelt to recommend a proper course of action.

Task: Help the refugees on board the *St. Louis* before the ship is forced to return to Germany.

1. Form groups of three or four.
2. Come up with possible solutions to save the passengers. Their fate rests in your hands.



To Consider:

1. The Wagner-Rogers Bill is being discussed in Congress. It advocates for admitting 10,000 children per year for a two-year period. These refugees would not be counted against existing quotas.
2. 2/3rds of Americans opposed Wagner-Rogers Bill. 83% are against relaxing restrictions on immigrants.
3. The annual combined German-Austria immigration quota is 27,370. In 1939, the quota has been filled.
4. If President Roosevelt issues emergency visas he will need to do so by an executive order that bypasses the restrictions of the U.S. Immigration and Nationality Act of 1924.
5. If emergency visas are granted, the refugees on board will displace other refugees who are also awaiting visas.
6. 1940 is an election year and President Roosevelt has announced he will be the first president to run for an unprecedented third term. This has already created a backlash from some members of his own Democratic Party, some of whom are isolationists and white supremacists.
7. Since the July 1938 Evian Conference many countries have closed their borders.
8. There is fear that accepting refugees will spark an antisemitic backlash like the one the Nazis agents had sparked in Havana.

Possibilities:



1. 734 passengers hold U.S. entry visa numbers.
2. There are groups like the JDC who are working hard to save them.
3. The U.S. has diplomatic connections.
4. Many Europeans fear that war with Germany is coming.

Rescuing the *St. Louis* Passengers: What Happened?

President Roosevelt was unable to publicly help the refugees of the *St. Louis*. FDR's response was shaped by political realities at home. Four out of five Americans rejected increasing the quota for refugees even though many expressed sympathy about their plight. As the *St. Louis* headed back to Europe the U.S. Congress was considering legislation to deport all undesirable aliens. Senator Reynolds (NC) broadcast to a nationwide radio audience his rejection of the Wagner-Rogers Bill arguing "Our citizens first!" Many Congressmen were members of the KKK whose slogan, "America First!" fanned the flames of isolationism and antisemitism. Public opinion and Congress were against any support of refugees beyond them trying to navigate the immigration quota system. Additionally, FDR was planning to argue to Congress the need to change American Neutrality Acts in order to allow the U.S. to help arm European democracies in the face of the growing Nazi threat. This was going to be a tough fight with isolationists and he did not want to squander his political capital on a lost cause. His political capital had diminished with a failed Supreme Court packing plan, a revolt within his own party of Southern Democrats, and losses in the mid-term elections. He was keenly aware that the only election he had lost was to Herbert Hoover who had signed the 1924 Immigration Quota system into law.

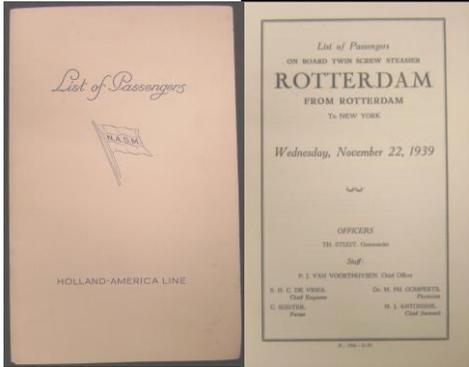
As Nazi Germany was seeking to find friends and Allies in the Western hemisphere, FDR's "Good Neighbor Policy" which had shifted American policy away from imperialism and intervention, had paid dividends. Latin America was becoming a bulwark for American foreign policy. FDR did not wish to intervene in their internal affairs. FDR was cautious, thinking in long-term, strategic objectives that would require much subtle political maneuvering. If he tried to intervene he may have lost the 1940 election to Wendell Willkie and the Republican isolationist platform. FDR gave explicit orders for the American ambassador in Havana not to interfere with negotiations between Jewish groups and the Cuban government. One idea, floated by Secretary of State Cordell Hull was to issue tourist visas to the U.S. Virgin Islands. After *Kristallnacht*, the islands had adopted a resolution offered up safe haven for refugees. The idea soon became a non-starter as the law required that tourist visas be granted only to applicants who had a home to return to. Of course, this was impossible for a refugee.

Eleanor Roosevelt, who publicly supported the Wagner-Rogers Bill continued to press her husband to do something specifically about the *St. Louis* refugees. FDR was concerned with the plight of German Jews, but saw things in broader, geopolitical terms and not the individual crises that Eleanor was focused on. He was trying to find solutions for the entire refugee crisis having combined the German and Austrian quota in the spring of 1938, calling the Evian Conference in July 1938, creating the International Committee to coordinate international policy on refugee resettlement, and supporting the privately funded International Refugee Foundation. On June 6, 1939, FDR changed his policy of noninterference in the *St. Louis* situation when President Brú refused to admit the refugees. As the *St. Louis* began to sail back to Germany the JDC authorized the payments the Cubans had demanded and FDR ordered the U.S. State Department to do whatever it could to help facilitate JDC funds. It was too late.

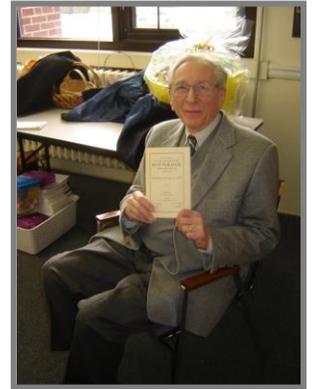
The Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) along with other Jewish organizations continued to actively negotiate with European governments. The JDC was aided greatly by the secret support of President Roosevelt and members of the U.S. State Department who had the diplomatic connections the JDC lacked. Soon, four European countries stepped forward to offer safe haven, despite their own restrictions on immigration. They had been persuaded by the JDC, which promised financial support so that the refugees would not become "public burdens." The fact that many passengers possessed U.S. visas and therefore would only require temporary haven (and the U.S. expressed concern over the fate of the passengers at a time when there was growing fear of a coming war with Germany) also influenced their decision. The British stepped up first, having been the first country to offer help to German Jews following *Kristallnacht* with their Kindertransport program. Their hope of inspiring others actually paid dividends as other countries stepped up and saved every passenger on board the *St. Louis* in 1939. Great Britain took in 288 passengers; the Netherlands admitted 181; Belgium took in 214; and France gave temporary refuge to 224 passengers. All but one (killed in an air raid in 1940) who were admitted to Great Britain survived the war. Of the 620 who returned to the continent, 87 (14%) managed to emigrate before the German invasion of Western Europe in May 1940. Just over half of the remaining passengers who were trapped in Europe survived the Holocaust. Eventually 450 emigrated to the

U.S. 254 of those passengers who had sailed on the *St. Louis* would be murdered in the Holocaust. It is important to note that the outcome was hailed as a success, especially by the passengers at that time. Although American ideals symbolized by the Statue of Liberty did not overcome the realities of fear, xenophobia, and antisemitism of the day, FDR found a way to maneuver. He was not indifferent.

Many other refugees sailed to the United States and found refuge. One story to share came from the Cohen Center's accidental discovery of a forgotten ship's manifest in the early 2000s. The Holland America ship *Rotterdam*



sailed in November 1939 (the war had begun in September 1939) filled with German Jewish refugees. The *Rotterdam* arrived in New York City in December 1939 and it was one of the last ships able to escape Europe. All of the passengers, including one whom we discovered had sailed on the *St. Louis* a few months before, were admitted to the U.S. Unlike the *St. Louis* passengers, these refugees' quota numbers had come up and were valid. It is



important to remember that although antisemitism did operate as a powerful force within U.S. political circles, the quotas were based upon national, not religious origin. Unexpectedly, on separate occasions, I have had the pleasure of meeting two of the children who were on board the *Rotterdam*: Helga Lustig (in 2013) and Leonard Ehrlich (right, in Keene, March 2008). They were some of the last children to escape Europe. When I think of refugees and the promise of the United States, I think of them.

Although hindered by the quota system and by antisemitism by some (but not all) within the State Department, the United States was one of the few countries that accepted refugees. Although isolationist and anti-immigrant advocates claimed that the U.S. would be "flooded" by refugees if immigration quotas were relaxed, in truth, 47,172 more people left the U.S. (emigrated) than came in (immigrated) from 1933-1937. From 1933 to 1940 only 48.2% of the quotas for Germany and Austria were used. From 1938 to 1940, Jews accounted for about half of all immigrants admitted to the U.S. In 1940, the majority of visas were issued to German Jews who were already outside of Germany.

In June 1941, the U.S. State Department forbade visas to anyone who had relatives in an Axis country. The 1902 inscription on the Statue of Liberty, "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free" was written by Emma Lazarus, an American Jewish poet.

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Local Connection: A Remarkable Story

David Kochman, the president of Congregation Ahavas Achim in Keene, had two grandparents and an aunt on board the *St. Louis*. All of David's family came from Germany. His father Karl Kochmann was from Hindenburg in Upper Silesia (now part of Poland). His mother Gerda Jaffe was from Berlin. His two grandfathers (both named Fritz) were both German Army officers in World War 1 and became friends. During the war, David's paternal grandfather was shot four times (once with a mortar) and left for dead on a Russian battlefield. He was awarded the German Iron Cross, First Order and Iron Cross, Second Order posthumously. His wife Alice received a two-page letter about how he was killed in combat and what a hero he was. But, he was found barely alive by a Russian nurse, nursed back to health, and eventually became a prisoner of war in Siberia. In Siberia, short of labor and with nowhere to go, he was utilized to protect the Russian fur traders. He would actually go out with a rifle every day and then turn it in and return to his cell every night. One day, on one of his outings, he met a Russian lady and promised her 3,000 German Marks if she would help him escape. She did. Dressed as a Russian army officer, he posed as her deaf-mute husband and they took the Trans-Siberian railroad back to Germany. His wife Alice never had really believed that Fritz was dead and was waiting for him. He fought once again in the German army in the closing year of World War 1. As a highly decorated German war hero, Fritz was naive about the rising Nazi threat and was slow to leave. In 1937, their son Karl, decided to leave Germany by himself at age seventeen, and made his way to the United States.

After things worsened in Germany with *Kristallnacht* (November 9-10, 1938), the Kochmanns (Fritz, Alice, and their daughter Hilda) finally tried to leave and ended up on the *St. Louis*. Gerda's father, Fritz Jaffe, was able to get them off the ship upon its return in Belgium by paying the required bond. The families were then separated. Rose Jaffe, Gerda's mother, tried to get the family to England and waited in a tiny apartment in Dunkirk. The apartment took a direct hit during the Battle of Dunkirk and the family was unable to get transportation with the fleeing Brits. In April 1940, Rose arranged for a smuggler to get the family to the south of France. They were dumped off in Paris where they stayed in a hotel. They were betrayed by a friend who was collaborating with the Nazis and questioned by the Gestapo. They fled to the demarcation line with Vichy France where Gerda Jaffe was arrested by the French military the day before her fourteenth birthday. Later, the family was sent to a French camp near Marseilles called St. Cyprien. Gerda's father, uncle Walter and cousin Warner were already in Gurs, another French camp. In August 1941 the Kochmanns made their way through Spain to Portugal and took the *Excalibur* to the United States. Finally, in November 1941, Gerda and her family took the last ship out of Portugal (the same ship *Excalibur*, that unknown to them, that the Kochmanns had sailed on in August) just before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor (December 7, 1941).



Fritz and Alice Kochmann. on board the *St. Louis*. Picture by Hilda, their daughter.



Karl and his sister Hilda Kochman.

Karl's direct family (father, mother, sister) came to America and settled in Hartford, CT. Some members of the family remained in Germany and perished during the war in the Nazi camp of Theresienstadt. Karl later became a combat soldier and ended up spending four years fighting the Japanese with the U.S. Army in Burma. Eventually, he met Gerda, who was eight years younger, and had settled in New York. They married and had five children. Every other member of his family ended up going to Israel. They now live on a farm outside of Netanya and in Jerusalem. They farm oranges, grapefruit, and sheep. David's cousin Yuval was killed parachuting into Jerusalem during the 6 Day War. After World War II, Karl served as a fire jumper in Oregon before returning back East.

The Jaffes owned a flour mill in Germany after the war and received compensation from the German government for crimes committed against their family. Rose Jaffe, Gerda's mother, had to present herself at the German Consulate every year to prove that she was still alive. She smuggled some very valuable art work out of Germany include works by Picasso, Korint, Greco, Degas, and Toulouse La Trec. Most of these are currently on loan to various museums. In 1991, the Berlin government invited the Jaffes back to Berlin for an all-expense paid trip. Gerda's brother Herby went, but Gerda has never been willing to set foot in Germany again. She does occasionally speak to youth groups about her experiences as a Holocaust survivor.