

THE AMERICAN JEWISH JOINT DISTRIBUTION COMMITTEE, INC.
Minutes of the Meeting of the Executive Committee

A special meeting of the Executive Committee was held on Monday, June 5th, 1939 at 4 P.M. at the office of the Committee, 100 East 42nd Street, New York City.

There were present the following officers and members of the Executive Committee:

Messrs. Harry Fischel	Samuel D. Leidesdorf
Mrs. H.B.L. Goldstein	Albert H. Lieberman
I. Edwin Goldwasser	James Marshall
Harold K. Guinzburg	Miss Evelyn M. Morrissey
Marco F. Hellman	Dr. Joseph A. Rosen
Joseph C. Hyman	William Rosenwald
Henry Ittleson	Eustace Seligman
Alfred Jaretzki, Jr.	Lewis L. Strauss
Alexander Kahn	Edward M. M. Warburg
Dr. Bernhard Kahn	Rabbi Jonah B. Wise

Present by invitation:

Members of the Board of Directors
and Standing Committees --

Messrs. Abner Bregman	Miss Carolin A. Flexner
Isidor Coons	(repr. Gov. Lehman)
Mrs. Pauline Baerwald Falk	Mrs. David M. Levy
	Mrs. Marion R. Stern

Members of the Staff --

Miss F. R. Adlerstein	Mrs. H. K. Buchman
Mr. N. C. Belth	Mr. Herbert Katzki

Messages of regret were received from a number of the members, the list thereof being on file at this office.

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The SS "St.Louis" Emergency

The subject of the status of the passengers on the S.S. St.Louis was considered. Mr. Hyman brought the members of the Committee up to date on the developments in the emergency occasioned by the refusal of the Cuban government to admit on Cuban soil the 907 refugees aboard the Hamburg-American liner. He pointed out that there are today in Cuba, it is estimated, between 6,000 and 6,500 German Jewish refugees of whom between 700 and 1,000 had been receiving direct relief from the funds of the Joint Distribution Committee which has been disbursing \$3,000 a week for such assistance.

The problem arose in very large degree from the immigration procedure in Cuba. Ordinarily, the requirements for admission to Cuba had been the posting of \$500 in cash with the Cuban authorities as a guarantee against becoming a public charge and as against violating the labor laws. However, for a considerable period, special landing permits had been issued by the Immigration Commissioner, Col. Benites. These had been made available to applicants with visas in Germany and refugee lands abroad, through steamship agencies, lawyers, etc. It is believed that from 2,500 to 5,000 persons in Europe, more especially in Germany, had secured these so-called Benites landing certificates. The average fee charged had been \$160, although much larger sums had frequently been paid. There was a great deal of unpleasant discussion in the Cuban press and in Cuban political circles concerning this state of affairs.

The passengers on the S.S. St.Louis, with the exception of approximately two dozen persons, were all in possession of these special Benites immigration landing cards. Likewise, groups of passengers on the French steamship Flandre and on the British steamship Orduna had similar papers. All three boats had arrived in Cuba during the past week or ten days and had been denied admission.

The Cuban government, on May 5th, had issued an official statement that only persons with visas and certificates approved by three heads of the Cabinet, and on certification that \$500 had been deposited in cash, would be duly admitted and that all persons who failed to have such papers, would be denied entrance. This information had been officially given to the Hamburg-American Lines and to other lines. It had been made public; in fact, the League of Nations High Commissioner had likewise advised the authorities in Germany to that effect. The Joint

Distribution Committee, having received this word early in May, had immediately cabled to its office in Paris and word had been directly transmitted to all refugee committees in Europe, to the Hilfsverein in Berlin, to the Kultusgemeinde in Vienna and to all organizations dealing with emigration and immigration matters that passengers who hoped to enter Cuba on any but regularly approved certificates were taking the most dangerous chance and should be dissuaded and prevented from embarking on this trip. Nevertheless, hundreds of persons, under the pressure of the terror in Germany, had secured these certificates and were now being denied admission. These persons had done so without reference to any philanthropic or emigration agency.

When other boats had reached Cuba subsequent to the government action, the Immigration Commissioner had personally arranged for the landing of the passengers despite their inability to produce the requisite certificates. At this time, however, the government refused to consider any such possibility.

When it appeared that the St. Louis situation had become critical and messages were being received from members of the Havana Joint Relief Committee and others in Cuba to that effect, the National Coordinating Committee and the Joint Distribution Committee determined to send down two representatives, Mr. Lawrence Berenson, an active lawyer who for a number of years had been the President of the Cuban-American Chamber of Commerce, and Miss Cecilia Razovsky, Executive Director of the National Coordinating Committee. An emergency meeting of the officers and active workers of the Joint Distribution Committee had been convened on Friday, June 1st, to consider the matter, had thoroughly discussed it and had appointed a subcommittee consisting of Mr. Alfred Jaretzki, Jr., as Chairman, and Messrs. David M. Bressler, I. Edwin Goldwasser and Joseph C. Hyman, to keep continuously in touch with Mr. Berenson and Miss Razovsky who had left for Cuba, and to take all necessary action. Since the meeting on June 1st, the subcommittee has been in constant telephonic communication, day and night, with Havana.

The situation was at present as follows: Mr. Berenson, after some difficulty, had succeeded in obtaining an appointment with the President of Cuba, Dr. Federico Laredo Bru. Prior to that, he had been in touch with a special committee appointed by the President to consider this matter. The President had stated through his Committee, that in the first instance, the steamship must leave Cuban waters so that it might be clear that the sovereignty of the Republic could not be flouted by the Hamburg-American Line. He would thereafter consent to consider the matter, after further discussion. Members of the President's committee, with whom Mr. Berenson had gone into this situation, were of the opinion that if the National Coordinating Committee or the Joint Distribution Committee were to offer a surety bond in a fair amount, \$25,000 to \$30,000, to guarantee that the St. Louis passengers, if admitted, would not become public charges or violate the labor law, it would undoubtedly prove acceptable to the administration.

Further discussions with Mr. Berenson impelled the subcommittee to authorize him to raise the amount of the indemnity bond to \$200,000, should that be required. Immediate arrangements were effected in New York, through the courtesy of Mr. Henry Littleton, with several bonding and indemnity organizations, and Mr. Berenson was authorized to state that any indemnity bond required would be given. The President had received Mr. Berenson cordially, but insisted that the full, legal, formal requirement of \$500 cash deposit per person must be met. Up to this time, the Cuban authorities had not insisted that infants or children accompanying their parents or older relatives, would be required to put up cash de-

posits. When Mr. Berenson asked whether this requirement now applied to children, he was advised that literal construction of the law would make it necessary for every person, whether adult, infant or child, to post this cash guarantee.

In the discussion with the President, Mr. Berenson indicated that he wished to report to his colleagues in New York and the President told him that within a few days, he would be ready to receive him after Mr. Berenson had had that opportunity. There was no agreement reached between the President and Mr. Berenson on any of these points save that Mr. Berenson had prepared, in detailed form, a letter setting forth the willingness of our Committee not only to guarantee the maintenance of persons who would require assistance from among the refugees on the St. Louis, but also from the refugees on the S.S. Flandre and the Orduna. Moreover, in this proposal, our Committee stood ready to arrange that the passengers would not be landed in Havana, where they would add to the over-congested refugee population, but would be placed in centers or camps, either in the interior of Cuba or on the Isle of Pines. In the course of the discussion with the President, Mr. Berenson had calculated that the total amount required for each adult aboard the three boats - St. Louis, Flandre and Orduna - would be approximately \$443,000. He asked whether, in view of the special circumstances in this situation, the putting up by the Joint Distribution Committee of \$200,000 immediately to be deposited with the National City Bank, an additional \$90,000 available to the National Coordinating Committee from relatives, and the balance of \$153,000 to be secured at the earliest moment from the boats' passengers and from additional relatives, would not meet the wishes of the government. The President stated that the legal requirement of \$500 cash per person should be met. It was not set forth as a final decision. He would consider it after Mr. Berenson talked to his New York colleagues.

Mr. Jaretzki supplemented Mr. Hyman's report and read part of a statement that had been issued to the press by the Cuban government at four o'clock that very afternoon, in which it appeared that the government says that it is willing to consider the adoption of some measures that would enable these refugees to organize provisional concentration camps exclusively for the passengers of the St. Louis, that this would be done after guarantees had been assured that the refugees would not become public charges, and that food and housing would be guaranteed for the time of their stay. Moreover, the statement said that the time within which this offer would have to be accepted would end the following day at 12 o'clock noon. In the meantime, the St. Louis had been ordered out of Cuban territorial waters and was reported to be cruising about 300 miles off Havana. The offer of Mr. Berenson to find \$443,000 in cash, the funds to be furnished by the J.D.C. and by deposits of relatives with the National Coordinating Committee, would provide at the rate of \$500 per adult for the refugees on the three boats. The question of infants and children had, for the time being, been held over; this accounted for the difference between the sum which he proposed to offer and the total amount of \$500 per capita for each person - man, woman and child. It was expected that during the course of the afternoon or evening, a definite understanding would be reached with the Cuban government, inasmuch as the J.D.C. and the Coordinating Committee were meeting substantially every requirement imposed by the government.

There following a very full discussion of all the aspects of the situation. Members of the Committee raised questions as to the position of the St. Louis, the morale of the passengers, communication with the Hamburg-American Line and asked for other detailed information. It was reported that if the latest proposal presented by Mr. Berenson were accepted, as hoped, the Joint Distribution

Committee was prepared to send to Cuba within twenty-four hours, a staff of experts and social workers headed by Dr. Joseph A. Rosen, to organize in all details for suitable housing arrangements, educational and training facilities, etc. Mr. Hyman had personally been in touch with a number of organizations, - the American Red Cross, the American Friends Service Committee, the German Jewish Children's Aid, the National Council of Jewish Women, etc. From each of these he had had cordial offers immediately to lend workers and assistance. Moreover, he had been in touch with Mr. Kepecs of Chicago, an outstanding child-care worker, who was ready to proceed within twenty-four hours to Havana. Dr. Rosen had already packed his clothes preparatory to flying down to Havana.

In response to the question as to whether there was any accuracy concerning reports that the Dominican Republic had agreed to admit the St. Louis passengers, Mr. Jaretzki reported that these statements were not wholly accurate and that the proposals which had come were by no means feasible.

The question of sentiment among the Jews in this country concerning the entire emergency, was considered. Rabbi Jonah B. Wise pointed out that public opinion had been aroused. Although these passengers had not been advised to come to Cuba by the J.D.C., the Coordinating Committee or any organization with which the J.D.C. deals; although they had, in fact, been advised and urged not to come to Cuba without regular certificates; the feelings of sympathy for the passengers, and indignation against the German authorities, were such that there was virtually a mandate to the J.D.C. to exert every possible effort to help land these passengers, at whatever cost. At the same time, he realized fully the gravity of the precedent that might seem to be created. There could be no such precedent. The J.D.C. could not continue on such a course of action and the St. Louis passengers were being assisted because, in view of the present state of public emotion, they were in a special category and because - and this point he emphasized - these people had proceeded to Cuba believing that the visas issued by the Commissioner of Immigration were in fact legal visas.

Dr. Wise raised the question as to whether it might be desirable to ask the various communities throughout the country to share in the necessary underwriting of the cash deposit guarantees out of their own funds or out of special funds. In this way, there would not be an unduly large burden on any single individual or on the J.D.C., which was already burdened in all directions.

Mr. Jaretzki explained that although he and his colleagues on the subcommittee had been given complete authority to go to the full limit of putting up \$500 in cash per person, if necessary, this subject was so important that it was desirable to have this authority approved by the Executive Committee. Thereupon, Mr. Harry Fischel made a motion, which was seconded by Mr. Lieberman, that the subcommittee be given full and ample authority to deal with this situation and to furnish all sums that might be requisite in the circumstances.