

THE VOYAGE OF THE "ST. LOUIS"

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Jewman
Ref in Cuba
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Few events within recent months have aroused such wide sympathy as the plight of the 907 refugees aboard the Hamburg-American Liner St. Louis, who, refused admission to Cuba, finally found asylum in Holland, Belgium, England and France, after three weeks of almost superhuman effort on the part of the Joint Distribution Committee. Their story has been told in every newspaper throughout the country. It is recounted here as a simple, factual summing up of all the events leading up to the final, dramatic rescue.

Readers will be familiar with many of the details. Others may be new to them. But in view of the many conflicting day-to-day reports, it is important that the St. Louis story be recorded as it actually happened. Because it captured such wide public interest, it is perhaps difficult to see the St. Louis case in its true perspective in relation to the manifold problems faced by the J.D.C. throughout the world. Certainly, more public attention has been directed to these 907 refugees than to many others whose story is as pathetic, who require aid just as urgently, and for whom it is equally important to make provision in any J.D.C. budget.

The St. Louis set sail from Hamburg on May 15th. Ten days earlier, the Cuban government had publicly issued a decree which, in effect, voided all landing permits previously issued by Commissioner of Immigration Benites and distributed by the various Cuban consuls in Europe. Every future immigrant, said the decree, would be required to deposit a \$500 bond as guarantee against becoming a public charge and against violating Cuban labor laws, and in addition would need a visa authenticated by the Cuban Secretaries of State, Labor and Treasury.

The J.D.C. notified its Paris headquarters, as well as all Jewish agencies dealing with emigration, urging them to discourage refugees from going to Cuba unless they possessed the new type of certificate.

The St. Louis docked in Havana harbor on May 27th. Passengers were not allowed to land, except for those few whose relatives had previously deposited the \$500 bonds and whose papers met the new requirements. There were three attempted suicides when it was learned that the boat might have to return to Hamburg.

Since 743 of the refugees had visa registration numbers for admission to the United States, bringing the matter within the province of the National Coordinating Committee, Miss Cecilia Razovsky, Executive Director of the National Coordinating Committee and Lawrence Berenson, Chairman of the Cuban-American Chamber of Commerce, flew to Havana on Monday, May 29th.

They found the Cuban government firm in its stand that none of the 907 refugees left aboard the St. Louis would be admitted. Panic reigned on the ship and in sections of the Cuban Jewish community.

An emergency meeting of J.D.C. officers and Executive Committee members was called on June 1 and a special sub-committee consisting of Alfred Jaretski, Jr., David M. Bressler, I. Edwin Goldwasser and Joseph C. Hyman was appointed to deal with the case of the St. Louis. From the moment of their appointment, members of the sub-committee were in constant touch with Mr. Berenson and Miss Razovsky, with the Joint Relief Committee in Havana, with J.D.C. European officers, with the U.S. State Department, the Hamburg-American Line -- with leaders, organizations and officials all over the world.

Meanwhile, Mr. Berenson had started discussions with President Federico Laredo Bru of Cuba. The Cuban government took the position that the Hamburg-American line had flouted its authority by bringing the St. Louis passengers to Cuba in what it considered violation of the immigration decree. The Hamburg-American line, however, stated that the boat had sailed under assurances from Commissioner of Immigration Benites that its passengers would be permitted to land. The Cuban government refused to entertain representations

of any kind in behalf of the refugees while the St. Louis was still in territorial waters. Accordingly, the St. Louis steamed slowly out of Havana, and idled off the Florida coast while negotiations proceeded.

On Saturday, June 3, the sub-committee in New York advised Mr. Berenson that the J.D.C. stood ready to post the bond required by Cuban law in behalf of the passengers. In order to make sure that the refugees would not become public charges, and would not add to the congestion of the refugees in Havana, it was proposed that they be placed on the Isle of Pines, or some other section of Cuba outside the capital city. The J.D.C. was to assume costs for all maintenance and to place these people as quickly as possible under the guidance of experts in agricultural or other occupations approved by the government. On Sunday, following a long conference with Mr. Berenson, the President announced that Tuesday noon would be the deadline for concluding the negotiations conducted by American Jewish organizations. Mr. Berenson obtained an appointment for 10 o'clock Tuesday morning, at which time he hoped to complete arrangements.

Promptly at 10 o'clock on Tuesday, June 5, Mr. Berenson arrived at the Presidential Palace. He was kept waiting in an anteroom until one o'clock. Meanwhile, at the stroke of twelve, Joaquin Ochoterena, Cuban Secretary of the Treasury, announced to the press that the deadline for accepting the government's offer had passed, and since Jewish organizations had failed to take up the offer in the time allotted, it had lapsed. Unaware of Mr. Ochoterena's statement, Mr. Berenson was informed, at one o'clock, that he would not be allowed to see the President.

It seemed incredible that anything had gone wrong when negotiations were proceeding so smoothly. Cuban officials indicated that it was still possible to hope for a settlement, but that bonds would no longer be acceptable. The full amount would be required in cash. Promptly the J.D.C. sub-committee in New York got in touch with officers of the Chase National Bank. By 11 o'clock

the following morning, the full amount \$550,000 — was available in cash at the Chase National Bank in Havana. An appointment was made by the officers of the bank with President Bru for Thursday.

In the meantime, on Wednesday afternoon, James N. Rosenberg, Chairman of the National Council of the J.D.C. had cabled the President informing him of these latest steps and entering a final plea for the admission of the St. Louis passengers. The President's reply, while reiterating his regret and pointing to Cuba's past record of hospitality toward refugees, stated that the St. Louis case was "completely closed by the government."

Nothing more could be done in Cuba. The ~~St.~~ St. Louis turned its prow toward Hamburg, and J.D.C. officials set to work to see if some European have of refuge could not be found for the hapless 907.

Fortunately, Paul Baerwald, Chairman of the J.D.C. happened to be in London, together with Harold Linder, an associate of the Committee. Immediately upon word from the New York office, Mr. Baerwald approached officials of the British government, the Intergovernmental Refugee Committee and the Council for German Jewry.. Meanwhile, Morris C. Troper, European Director of the J.D.C. set to work on the problem in Paris. No possible opportunity for a solution was overlooked. Mr. Troper communicated with Max Gottschalk, head of the Refugee Committee in Brussels, and Mrs. Gertrude Van Tijn, head of the Amsterdam Committee. Both undertook to make representations to their respective governments, upon assurance that the J.D.C. would pay all maintenance costs, and post bonds guaranteeing that none of the St. Louis passengers would become public charges.

The Hamburg-American Line in Berlin was approached, ^{On} hearing that there were possibilities of disembarking the passengers in some ^{European} port, they sent a wireless to the captain of the St. Louis to proceed at reduced speed until Sunday noon, pending more definite word.

On Saturday, June 10, a meeting of all French refugee committees, including the Hicem, was held in Paris. Jules Braunschwig, a member of the French refugee committee, with business interests in Tangiers, thought that it might be possible to land some 500 passengers there. An appeal to the French consul at Tangiers was made by telephone. Other possibilities acted upon were Holland, Belgium, Luxembourg and Portugal.

Belgium was the first country to respond favorably ---with an offer to take 250 refugees. With this as a start, other refugee committees were urged to redouble their efforts, and constant contact was maintained with them.

Mme. Van Tijn, and Professor D.D.Cohen of Holland obtained audience with Queen Wilhelmina, who was extremely interested in the problem. Graciously, she promised full cooperation. Soon it was learned that Holland would accept 194 of the refugees. This accounted for a total of 444 out of 907.

Mme. Louise Weiss, secretary of a semi-official French committee, headed by M. Georges Bonnet, Minister of Foreign Affairs, obtained an audience with M. Bonnet. He informed her that he would gladly accede to a request from M. Sarraut, Minister of the Interior, to accept a number of the St. Louis passengers into France. Meanwhile Mr. Baerwald and Mr. Linder, in London, had obtained tentative assurance that England would accept some 250, and Mr. Troper was so informed.

Next day, Mr. Troper met with M. Sarraut, together with Mme. Weiss, Albert Levy, Chairman of the French Refugee Committee, and two representatives of Cardinal Verdier of Paris and of Baron Robert de Rothschild. The Minister of Interior agreed to accept a number equal to that which England had agreed upon. In addition, he gave permission for the St. Louis to land in France all passengers destined for Holland and England. The problem was rapidly nearing solution.

Following a phone consultation, it was decided that it would be

best to land the refugees in Antwerp, and conduct them to the various countries from that point. The story of the landing of the St. Louis at Antwerp, so near to the land the refugees had fled, is too well known to need repetition.

Special tenders provided by the Belgian Red Cross met the boat, to take passengers to England, Holland and France. Only through the close and whole-hearted cooperation of interested governments and non-sectarian welfare agencies had landing been made possible. Protestant and Catholic as well as Jewish organizations, gave generously of their time and efforts in order to speed the case to a happy conclusion. Their humane efforts deserve the deepest gratitude of Jews everywhere —but perhaps the thanks they appreciate most were the expressions on the faces of the 907 refugees — smiling and happy once again after three grueling weeks of despair, hope and heartache.

The J.D.C. has likewise received the praise of newspapers throughout the world. Many friends have written to express their appreciation for the work done in this emergency — an emergency which might so easily have ended tragically for the 907 refugees.