

Hella Roubicek

Photographed with her husband Frank

Wartime Experience: Passenger on the steamship SS St. Louis

An old Prussian garrison town, Frankfurt-on-the Oder, fifty miles east of Berlin, is my birthplace and that of my older sister. My father, a native Berliner, had served during World War 1 as a young medical officer on the Russian front. Upon completion of his service at a military hospital near Frankfurt, he settled there to practice medicine.

Twenty years later, upon orders of the Gestapo to round up all Jewish males, he was arrested by the local police. Some of the policemen, who "simply carried out their duty," had been his patients over the years. For several days, the handful of Jews, still in town, mostly professionals and businessmen, shared with my father the accommodations of the local jail. Thereafter, virtually all of them were transported to concentration camps. One of the police officers, a neighbor, surreptitiously pulled him out of the line-up and thus, probably, saved his life. The Gestapo, however, gave my father an ultimatum: to leave Germany within two months or be taken, like the others, to a concentration camp.

My nineteen-year-old sister, the first émigré in our family, had just arrived in Chicago, when she learned this news from a telegram we sent to her. Her immigration had been sponsored by a distant relative whom none of us had ever met. Now it was up to her to find quick sponsorship for our father. Contrary to popular opinion, it was already extremely difficult to find a country of asylum at a moment's notice.

The only options at that time were Shanghai and Cuba. The latter required a large cash deposit. As all our funds had been confiscated by then and she had to raise the required amount in the U.S. She managed to do it. Six weeks later our father was on his way to Havana.

His first concern upon arrival was to help the remaining family leave Germany. That included grandmother, aunt, cousin, and of course, my mother and myself. Permits, later declared invalid, were being sold for two hundred dollars apiece by a corrupt Cuban government agency. They had to be paid with borrowed money. This expenditure left him practically penniless and unemployed. Working by immigrants was not permitted.

As we were waiting for exit permission from Germany, a special one-way trip to Havana was announced by HAPAG, a German cruise line. The SS St. Louis was scheduled to sail on May 13, 1939 with nine hundred thirty-five refugees on board; my mother and I were among them.

We were approaching our destination when rumors began to circulate that there might be landing difficulties. Indeed, soon after our ship was anchored outside the harbor of Havana, we learned that our entry permits were not going to be honored by the Cuban immigration authorities and that almost no one would be allowed to disembark. As a thirteen-year-old at

that time, I was only marginally aware of the actuality and gravity of the situation and mostly enjoyed the fun with youngsters my age.

Some scenes, while anchored outside the harbor and those on our voyage back, have left a lasting impression. Several times a day, my father, just as so many others, awaiting their families came to the ship in a tender. Everyone attempted to assure us that landing permissions would surely be given tomorrow or at the very latest-the following day! These tenders, packed with people, out shouting one another in order to be heard by those on board, presented quite a sight. The optimism voiced by so many was unfortunately not borne out by the events that followed.

After agonizing and futile negotiations between refugee advocates and the Cuban government for more than a week, the St. Louis was ordered out of Cuban waters with no prospect of finding refuge on the American continent. While we were in a holding pattern off the Florida coast, Washington made it amply clear that the U. S. would not accept us either. This, despite the fact that a large percentage of the passengers held affidavits, making them eligible for eventual immigration within a matter of months. The only “welcome” we got here, were from a U.S. coast guard cutter warning the ship not to trespass into American waters. This was underscored by the appearance of several military planes.

Thus the SS St. Louis turned its course back towards Europe. As options dwindled, confusion and outright panic dominated the decks. We were, after all, on a German ship and carried Gestapo on board. Our captain, Gustav Schroeder, a truly righteous German, did everything possible to restore calm on board and to allay fears among his crew that had been deprived of its scheduled shore leave. He vowed to do everything in his power not to take us back to Germany.

There were casualties on the ship, most of them occurred after we had been denied asylum in Cuba and the U.S. As we got the order to leave Havana, a man, after opening his arteries, pushed everyone on deck aside, and jumped overboard. It was the final straw for Mr. L. who had been a newly released concentration camp inmate. He was rescued by the Cubans, sent to a detention facility, and ultimately deported. On the way back, I was awakened one morning by the eerie sound of the siren signaling, “Man overboard!” It was one of the crewmembers, who, having had a brief involvement with one of the female passengers, had jumped in fear of being taken to task for “racial defilement” upon return to the fatherland. This suicide coincided with the burial at sea of one of the passengers who had succumbed to a heart attack. Around the clock suicide watch was now in effect.

Telegrams pleading for asylum had gone out to countries all over Europe and the American continent. Everyone on board was eagerly awaiting hopeful news. It finally happened. About seventy-two hours before the St. Louis was due back in Hamburg, England, France, Holland and Belgium, each, declared their readiness to accept a portion of the passengers. At last, we were saved! If only temporarily. As we found out later, our valiant captain had devised a desperate

emergency plan, which called for running the ship aground at night in the British Isles, had all else failed.

On June 18, 1939 nearly five weeks after we had set sail from nearby Hamburg, my mother and I, together with some two hundred other fellow passengers, went ashore in Antwerp. With the help of an international Refugee Committee we were provided for with food and housing in Brussels for the duration of our stay.

When World War II began and the Germans overran Western Europe more than two thirds of the passenger population of the St. Louis perished. My mother and I were among the fortunate ones to receive the American visas early in 1940 and were, therefore, able to leave Belgium before the German invasion.