

NOV. 10, 2019 – WESTCHESTER JEWISH CENTER

KRISTALLNACHT AND THE ST. LOUIS

Sonja Maier Geismar

Today we commemorate Kristallnacht—the night and day that ended one era and started another. Until that night most German Jews tolerated legal persecution and exclusion enacted by about 400 federal, state, and local laws as well as vicious propaganda, indignities, and menacing growling dogs that instilled fear and intimidation. 1/2 million Jews comprised less than 1% of the German population. They believed that the regime was a “temporary aberration” and would soon collapse. As Peter Gay, who was a Professor of History at Yale, stated: “We were the Germans; the gangsters who had taken control of the country were not Germany; we were”. Incidentally, Peter Gay’s family, originally named Froehlich—happy in German- was supposed to travel on the St. Louis, but fortunately took an earlier voyage to Cuba.

My family along with about 100 other Jewish families lived in Malsch, a small town in Baden in southwest Germany where Jews and their Christian neighbors got along well. For that reason, the Gestapo who came were from elsewhere. I was only 4 years old, but I will never forget Kristallnacht. I remember Nazis barging into our house, throwing the contents of the bureau drawers to the floor, breaking crystal and dishes, and ripping open the light green quilts in my parents’ bedroom scattering down feathers around the room. It’s been documented that ruining the quilts was routine throughout the country. My most terrifying moment was seeing a photo of my father torn into many pieces. As my mother held me in her arms, I cried bitterly as I thought that meant he had died. Earlier in the day, my father along with other men, was incarcerated in Dachau where he was beaten, starved, and mistreated for five weeks. A similar scenario was repeated throughout the country. My father was released on condition that he leave the country.

Kristallnacht made it crystal clear that Jews had to leave Germany. What was the world's reaction to Kristallnacht? The news was carried on radio, clergymen decried it from pulpits, newspaper editorials were critical, rallies were held, sympathy was expressed, but—there was no action. Kristallnacht got extensive coverage in the US press. The Los Angeles Examiner's headline on its front page read "Nazis warn world —Jews will be wiped out unless evacuated by democracies". President Roosevelt stated "I myself could scarcely believe that such things could occur in a 20th century civilization". He did not mention Nazis or Jews in this statement. But he did extend the visitors' visas of over 5,000 Germans already in the country.

The purpose of Kristallnacht was to accelerate the expulsion of Jews. About 210,000 left for many destinations during the winter of 1938-9. Innumerable documents had to be submitted. Strict regulations were imposed on wealth that could be taken out of Germany rendering refugees virtually penniless and were not favored by the receiving country.

The preferred destination was the USA whose immigration policy was based on a 1924 law which specified the number of visas available each year for each country. Unused quota slots did not carry over to the following year. Between 1933—38 quotas were far from filled, but immigration increased annually. Twice as many entered the U.S. in 1937 than in 1936. By 1939 300,000 people were on a waiting list for a visa; the wait could take up to 10 years. To obtain a visa, applicants had to submit police certificates, exit and transit permission, identification, valid ship tickets, financial affidavits, and sponsorship to guarantee financial support. Visas also had expiration dates. To further complicate matters, the undersecretary of state in charge of visas—Breckinridge Long—went beyond the law. He instructed consuls to create paper walls by putting "every obstacle in the way and require additional evidence and use administrative devices to postpone and postpone granting visas". My maternal grandparents were caught in a web of delays and bureaucracy which eventually led them to Auschwitz. Their

story and other stories are interwoven with a description of German and U.S. policies in a thoroughly researched book published this year *The Unwanted: America, Auschwitz, and a Village Caught In Between*.

The maximum number of Germans and Austrians (after the Anschluss) who could emigrate to the US was 27,370 per year. That quota was filled only in 1939 and 1940. There was no asylum policy at that time. Emigrants had limited access to the USA because of isolation, the depression and unemployment, fear of economic competition, xenophobia, reluctance to provide public assistance, anti-semitism, and the refusal to modify immigration laws. A bill to save 20,000 children under the age of 14 was killed. Two members of FDR's cabinet advocated that the US territories of Alaska and the Virgin Islands could be temporary havens, but these suggestions were rejected. A public opinion poll revealed the overwhelming majority of Americans opposed amending the immigration laws. Where could my family find a safe haven until our quota numbers would be called?

My parents purchased landing permits to enter Cuba. On May 13, 1939, six months after Kristallnacht we boarded the St. Louis with my paternal grandparents and 2 two great aunts; we were a group of seven. The ship was a luxurious cruise liner. Its brochure read:

It's a ship on which one travels securely and lives in comfort. There is everything one can wish for that makes life on board a pleasure.

I remember its gleaming floors, wide staircases, crystal chandeliers, and large dining room. For the first time I tasted ananas—pineapple. I saw dark-skinned people—some of the ship's personnel—for the first time. My mother told me they were good people—they were not Hitlers. And it was the first time I attended kindergarten. There was nightly entertainment for adults and passengers relaxed and had a good time. There was a costume ball the night before we reached Havana. Despite the relief of leaving Eu-

rope, there was anxiety about starting life in a new country and sadness and concern for leaving loved ones behind.

The ship's bells woke us up early on May 27 after 2 weeks at sea and we could see the colorful buildings of Havana. But we were not permitted to disembark to our temporary safe haven as our tourist landing permits had been declared invalid. Why? There was increasing anti-semitism fueled by Nazi propaganda and Cuba had already admitted about 5,000 refugees. The immigration secretary had enriched himself by c. \$500,000 and would not share his windfall. So Decree 937—equal to the number of passengers on board—eliminated tourist landing permits. The new law required authorization from Cuban Secretaries of Labor and State plus a \$500 bond for each person. The Joint Distribution Committee—JDC sent Lawrence Berenson to negotiate with President Bru but an agreement could not be reached and the ship was ordered out of Cuban waters. After six days of sitting in the harbor in intense heat, despair, panic, and anguish unnerved the passengers. Fearing a collective suicide pact, the captain created a suicide-watch committee. My father was asked to join the committee and the captain was thoughtful enough to write letters of gratitude to its members. My parents treasured the letter and it is now displayed in my home. It should be noted that two smaller ships—the Orduna and Orinoco were also in the harbor and a third ship was supposed to arrive. Only some passengers were permitted to disembark. What country would accept us?

If the St. Louis had a different captain, who knows what would have happened? Hoping that entry into the USA would be permitted, Captain Gustav Schroeder sailed to the coast of Florida. The captain and the passenger committee sent letters to Mrs. Roosevelt, influential Americans, the Canadian prime minister (who said “One Jew is too many”) as well as government officials of Latin American countries. Throughout the voyage, Schroeder's staunch anti-Nazi position was made clear—he instructed his crew on proper behavior toward the passengers, he removed Hitler's photo from the social hall for religious services, he buried the passenger who

died in the St. Louis flag rather than the Nazi flag. And—he reassured and promised that he would not return us to Germany. He even considered running the ship aground and setting the ship on fire so that England would be forced to rescue us. He was courageous and determined not to abandon his passengers. Captain Schroeder was honored posthumously by Yad Vashem as a Righteous Gentile.

Through the JDC's negotiations headed by Morris Troper—the chief of operations in Europe—France, Great Britain, Belgium, and the Netherlands agreed to accept the passengers until their quota numbers would be called. Letters of thanks were sent to the JDC and Mr. Troper by the passenger committee and Captain Schroeder.

After 40 days at sea the wandering refugees docked in Antwerp and the passengers were dispersed to their assigned countries. How was my family fortunate enough to go to England rather than to the continent? Passengers were given a preference and my parents correctly surmised that the channel would be protective. Assignments were also based on having relatives or friends in the respective country. We lived in Broadhurst Gardens in London in a boarding house run by Quakers—the Lees. Mrs. Lee taught me my first nursery rhyme in English—Baa Baa Black Sheep. In order to cover some of the expenses my mother became the cook for the residents. World War II started only 3 months after the passengers were dispersed to their respective countries. The threat of the Nazis followed us.

After 7seven months our quota numbers were called and we arrived in NYC on February 11, 1940. We awoke early to glimpse the Statue of Liberty as we entered the harbor. It is a sight I will never forget.

Why happened to the other passengers?

288 went to Great Britain	224 went to France
214 went to Belgium	182 went to the Netherlands

By May 1940, 87 managed to emigrate from Europe. Others on the continent went into hiding; children were protected by the Quakers and the OSE (Children's Aid Society) in France who placed them in children's homes, convents, or safe houses. The amazing stories of some of the survivors are featured in a book entitled *Refuge Denied; The St. Louis Passengers and the Holocaust*. It took the authors, who were on the staff of USHMM, 10 years to trace all the passengers or their descendants.

Unfortunately, 254 of the passengers were murdered by the Nazis.

The children and young adults on the St. Louis were resilient and became productive and successful. They made significant contributions in medicine, science, law, and education. Among them are a founder of pharmacogenetics who earned worldwide recognition, a thermal physiologist, a pathologist and professor of medicine, a lawyer who successfully argued a case before the Supreme Court, and a professor who was on the governing board of the USHMM.

In 2009, I attended a reunion on the 70th anniversary of the voyage. At the reunion, a Senate Resolution was presented which acknowledged our country's role in forcing the ship back to Europe. The resolution also states the need for public officials and educators to raise awareness of the relevance of the St. Louis for current and future generations. Copies of the resolution were signed by each passenger and then presented to dignitaries and representatives of many organizations such as the JDC, HIAS, National Archives, and USHMM. The Florida businessmen who sponsored the reunion established the National Foundation for Jewish Continuity. The foundation created the St. Louis Legacy Project whose mission is to promote awareness of human rights, immigration, and refugee policy—all current issues we're dealing with today or in many situations not dealing with.

Surviving passengers were invited to the 2012 State Department's tribute at which a Proclamation of Gratitude was presented to the ambassadors of the four countries to acknowledge allowing entry of the passengers. We heard a weak apology by the American government. In 2018, the Legacy Project was invited by the Canadian government and an evangelical group that hosted us. In Parliament we heard PM Trudeau's strong and stirring apology.

The St. Louis symbolizes the world's indifference to refugees in crisis. The plight of refugees is an ongoing world problem.