



BACKGROUND INFORMATION

500,000 Jews lived in Germany before the Nazi party came to power. They enjoyed social and political equality, and the majority of them saw themselves as an integral part of the German society. The anti-Jewish policies of the Nazi regime that began during the 1930s led to a major change in the condition of the Jews, and many of them wished to leave Germany. The increasing number of Jewish refugees from Germany, together with the reluctance of the different nations to change their immigration quotas and to absorb those refugees, led to a humanitarian crisis. It led to a sense that “there [was] no entry permit to the entire world” (as described by Beno Cohen during his testimony at the Eichmann trial).

The voyage of the St. Louis

The St. Louis affair was a tragic event that reflected the situation of the Jewish refugees during the 1930s. On May 13th 1939, the St. Louis ship sailed from Hamburg port with 936 Jewish refugees on board. When it arrived to its destination, Cuba, on May 27, it was revealed that the visas held by 930 of its passengers were not valid. The Cuban president Federico Laredo Brú announced that the refugees will not receive political asylum, and will not be allowed to leave the ship. One of the passengers tried to commit suicide and a few other threatened to do the same.

The American-Jewish relief organization – “The Joint” – sent a representative to Havana to negotiate allowing the passengers to enter Cuba. At that point, the U.S. announced that it would also refuse to accept these refugees (following a direct instruction by President Roosevelt). On June 2, Brú ordered the ship out of Cuban waters and it sailed to the direction of Florida, where it stood and waited in hope of a solution. On June 5th an agreement was reached, that allowed the refugees to enter Cuba in exchange for bonds of 453 thousand dollars (about 500 dollars for each refugee) that were to be deposited the following day. However, “the Joint” was not able to gather the money, and on June 6th the ship had to sail back to Europe.

A month later, the ship arrived in the port of Antwerp in Belgium. The Belgian government was willing to accept 214 passengers. 288 passengers reached Britain, 181 passengers reached the Netherlands, and 244 others continued to France. “The Joint” asked the Jewish Agency (the leadership of the Jewish community in Mandatory Palestine) to allocate to these refugees immigration certificates (that the Jewish Agency received from the Mandate authorities), but the Jewish Agency declined.

The refugees who found shelter in Britain survived. 87 of the 620 passengers who returned to continental Europe were able to emigrate before Nazi Germany invaded the Netherlands, France and Belgium. The rest was bound to endure the atrocities of the Holocaust, 254 of them perished.



In 1993, Yad Vashem awarded the honorary title “Righteous among the Nations” to Gustav Schröder, the captain of the St. Louis ship, that refused to return the passengers to Germany until he had found a safe haven for them.