

"Just as the story of Anne Frank and the iconic photo of the child in the Warsaw Ghetto with his arms raised in surrender have come to symbolize the Nazis' war against the Jews," notes Rafael Medoff, "the voyage of the *St. Louis* has become the best-known symbol of America's tepid response to the Holocaust." Read this narrative in conjunction with Baumel-Schwartz's essay (pp. 38–43), on the 1,000 refugee children who did find haven, to prompt an essential discussion about America's indifference to the plight of European Jews.

Rafael Medoff

Revisiting the Voyage of the Damned

Are you going to be comfortable if Assad, as a result of the United States not doing anything, then gasses his people yet again and they—and the world says, why didn't the United States act? History is full of . . . moments where someone didn't stand up and act when it made a difference.

And whether you go back to World War II or you look at a ship that was turned away from the coast of Florida and everybody on it lost their lives subsequently to German gas, those are the things that make a difference.¹ And that's what's at stake here.

—Secretary of State John Kerry to members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee at a September 3, 2013, hearing on whether the US should intervene in Syria (Source: *Washington Post*)

Secretary Kerry's reference to the ill-fated voyage of the refugee ship *St. Louis* was significant for several reasons. First, it indicated that the Obama administration believes the record of America's response to the Holocaust should play some role in the formulation of foreign policy today. Second, the decision to raise the issue before the Senate, and the fact that none of the senators present challenged it, suggested that not just in the White House but on Capitol Hill, too, the experience of the *St. Louis* is considered relevant. Finally, that Kerry would mention the episode without naming the ship, evidently assuming his listeners and the public would recognize the story, points to the widespread familiarity with at least the main elements of that tragic episode. In addition to countless history books and high school textbooks, the *St. Louis* has been referenced in numerous novels and plays, was the subject of a US Senate resolution (in 2009) and a State Department apology (in 2012), and has even been

mentioned in the comic strip *Doonesbury*. Just as the story of Anne Frank and the iconic photo of the child in the Warsaw Ghetto with his arms raised in surrender have come to symbolize the Nazis' war against the Jews, the voyage of the *St. Louis* has become the best-known symbol of America's tepid response to the Holocaust.

"THE SADDEST SHIP AFLOAT"

For one agonizing week in the spring of 1939, the plight of the *St. Louis* was front-page news in America's major daily newspapers. Then, the "saddest ship afloat," as *The New York Times* called it, having been rebuffed by both Cuba and the United States, was forced to return to Europe, and the story of the tragic voyage vanished from the headlines—and from public consciousness—not to become a subject of substantial interest again until the late 1960s [Fig. 1].



FIG. 1: The SS *St. Louis*. Courtesy of The David S. Wyman Institute for Holocaust Studies.

The *St. Louis* did, however, garner a bit of attention during and shortly after World War II, thanks to Dutch novelist Jan de Hartog, who used the story as the basis for

his play *Schipper Naast God*, or *Skipper Next to God*. (In de Hartog's version, the skipper beaches the ship in the middle of a Long Island yachting competition and the yachtsmen rescue the passengers.) The Dutch underground performed the play in the hope of inspiring fishermen to hide Jewish children from the Nazis. After the war, *Skipper* made it briefly to Broadway (1948) and was made into a movie in 1953, although neither production occasioned much fanfare.

The story of the *St. Louis* gained wide postwar public attention only with the publication in 1968 of *While Six Million Died: A Chronicle of American Apathy*, by the investigative journalist Arthur Morse [Fig. 2]. It was the first book to examine the Roosevelt administration's policies concerning European Jewry. Prior to the book's publication, Morse's chapter on the *St. Louis* had appeared in the popular US news magazine *Look*, giving the story especially wide circulation.

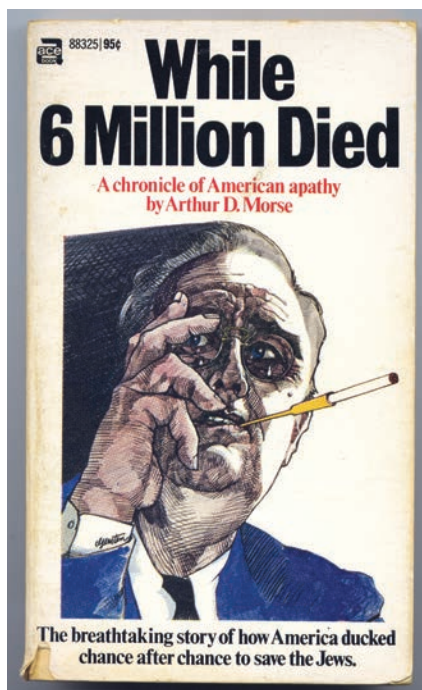


FIG 2:
Book cover.
Courtesy of
The David S.
Wyman Institute
for Holocaust
Studies.

Morse (1967) began:

On May 13, 1939, the Hamburg-American Line's luxurious *St. Louis* sailed from Germany with 936 passengers—930 of them Jewish refugees, among the last to escape from the Nazis' narrowing vise. Inscribed on each passport was a red "J," and in each mind, the memory of six years of ever-increasing terror. (p. 59)

All but 22 passengers held tourist visas issued by the Cuban Director-General of Immigration, which they had purchased for \$161 each. In addition, 734 of the passengers had already applied for visas to America and received quota numbers and had then been placed on the long waiting list

to enter the United States.

The ship set sail with the encouragement of the Nazi regime, which at that point was energetically promoting the emigration of Jews from Germany. In fact, some of the passengers had been released from the Dachau concentration camp (in which they had been imprisoned during the mass arrests of *Kristallnacht*) only upon pledging to leave Germany by a specified date.

The reason they could not be admitted to the US immediately was that in 1939, for the first time during President Roosevelt's years in office, the annual quota for immigrants from Germany was filled. In fact, it would be the only year during the Roosevelt presidency that the German quota was filled; during most years in the FDR era, less than 25% of the German quota places were used. This was because the administration piled on extra requirements to discourage and disqualify would-be immigrants. In the immediate aftermath of *Kristallnacht*, however, the president permitted the quota to be filled for the coming year. The passengers on the *St. Louis* thus considered it their good fortune to have qualified for entry to Cuba in the meantime.

Even before the *St. Louis* reached Havana, the government of Laredo Bru, wracked by internal disputes and sensitive to rising domestic antisemitism and nativism, invalidated the refugees' tourist visas. When the ship reached Cuba, the only passengers permitted to disembark were those 22 who had paid an extra \$500 fee for an immigration visa, in case the tourist document proved insufficient. The others were turned away.

Two American Jewish envoys, Lawrence Berenson of the American Jewish Distribution Committee (JDC) and Cecilia Razovsky of the National Coordinating Committee for Aid to Refugees, flew to Cuba on May 30 to negotiate with President Bru. Berenson was confronted with conflicting and steadily escalating monetary demands by Bru

and other Cuban officials. The JDC representative also feared that the terms would establish a precedent the Joint would be unable to underwrite in the future. Because of these factors, Berenson waited too long to give his final assent to Bru's terms. The Cuban leader called off the talks. The captain of the *St. Louis*, Gustav Schroeder (who subsequently was recognized by Yad Vashem as one of



FIG 3: Gustav Schroeder, captain of the *St. Louis*. Courtesy of The David S. Wyman Institute for Holocaust Studies.

the Righteous Among the Nations) [Fig. 3], still hoped for a last-minute agreement to spare the passengers a return to Germany, so instead of immediately sailing for Europe, on June 1 he steered a course north towards the coast of Florida.

THE UNANSWERED TELEGRAM

So close to the shore that they could see the lights of Miami, a committee representing the passengers sent a telegram to the White House, begging President Franklin Roosevelt, "Help them, Mr. President, the 900 passengers, of which more than 400 are women and children" [Fig. 4]. They received no reply.



FIG 4: Seven-year-old twin sisters, Ines and Renate Spanier, aboard the SS *St. Louis*. Courtesy of The David S. Wyman Institute for Holocaust Studies.

An unpublished memoir by Razovsky (1967), recently discovered by the Israeli scholar Bat-Ami Zucker, sheds some light on the administration's position. Describing the negotiations, Razovsky wrote: "We again at that time tried to get permission from Secretary of State Hull to take them but our State Department was unsympathetic and Franklin Delano was apathetic, although Eleanor did everything in her power to change their attitude" (p. 112).

Roosevelt administration officials instructed US diplomats in Cuba to keep their distance from the controversy. The president feared being seen as taking the lead in helping foreign refugees because of widespread isolationism and anti-immigration sentiment among the American public. The American Consul General in Havana, Coert du Bois, reported to Secretary of State Cordell Hull that Avra Warren, chief of the State Department's Visa Division, had told him "that under no circumstances" would Warren "or

the Secretary of State or the President give me or the American Ambassador in Habana any instructions to intervene in the matter of the landing of the *Saint Louis* nor, presumably, any other European refugees" (p. 3). Du Bois (1939) wrote that Warren

said he wanted to make the position of the Department perfectly clear in this matter and repeated these instructions twice, and corroborated me when I repeated them back to him. . . . He said he had had several interviews with Secretary Hull and that word had come from the White House, all to this effect.

Additional evidence of the Roosevelt administration's attitude may be found in a 1971 essay by Irwin Gellman in the *American Jewish Historical Quarterly*, which was the first scholarly treatment of the *St. Louis* episode. He quoted Assistant Secretary of State George Messersmith rebuffing an appeal from US Senator James Mead (Democrat of New York); Messersmith said the US should not intervene "in a matter of this kind which was one purely outside of our sphere and entirely an internal matter in Cuba" (p. 149).

Gellman noted that when the JDC's Berenson asked US Ambassador J. Butler Wright and Consul-General du Bois to accompany him to a meeting with the influential Cuban military chief Fulgencio Batista, "they refused to become involved in a situation which affected Cuban sovereignty and Laredo Bru's personal prestige" (p. 152).

State Department officials did briefly canvas some South American governments to see whether they would be of assistance. The Roosevelt administration did not shy away from asking other governments to do for refugees what it declined to do itself. Henry Feingold (1995) has noted that "Roosevelt's enthusiasm [for refugee resettlement schemes] appeared to grow the further away such projects were from the Western hemisphere" (p. 107). But State found no takers among its South American contacts, and refrained from exercising pressure on those regimes to admit the refugees. With the crisis escalating and attracting widespread news media attention, Assistant Secretary of State Sumner Welles eventually authorized Ambassador Wright to say something to Bru in support of the *St. Louis*. By then, though, the ship was well on its way back to Europe; it was too little and too late. US officials subsequently blamed the Jewish negotiators for the fiasco. Du Bois wrote to his colleagues that Berenson "and his co-religionists in New York" (the JDC leadership) were guilty of "horse-trading" (pp. 149–154) instead of seeking to save lives. Although the wisdom of Berenson's negotiating tactics may be debated, du Bois's remark, especially with the gratuitous reference to Berenson's "co-religionists," contains perhaps a passing nod to certain classic stereotypes about Jews.

THE VIRGIN ISLANDS SOLUTION

In the midst of the crisis, Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau, Jr., discussed with Secretary Hull a possible solution involving the Virgin Islands: Because the islands were a US territory and therefore not governed by the immigration quota system, the passengers might be admitted there, temporarily, as tourists. The Virgin Islands were just a few hours away from Florida; moreover, in the wake of *Kristallnacht*, the governor and legislative assembly of the islands had publicly offered to open their doors to German Jewish refugees.

Hull shot down the idea on the grounds that the *St. Louis* passengers did not have valid return addresses, a prerequisite for a tourist visa. However, the Roosevelt administration actually had more leeway on the tourist visa issue than it acknowledged. For example, since the passengers had been required to pay a return fare of \$81 in advance (in case they were turned away from Cuba), the administration could have chosen to consider that fact to be evidence they had somewhere to which they could return. Alternatively, the president could have taken action along the same lines as his post-*Kristallnacht* decision to extend the visas of 15,000 German Jews then in the United States as tourists, on the grounds that it was unsafe for them to return to Nazi Germany. Aiding the *St. Louis*, however, meant risking criticism from anti-immigration forces, and President Roosevelt was not willing to take that risk.

As the *St. Louis* slowly sailed back to Europe, JDC officials there successfully lobbied the governments of England, France, Belgium, and the Netherlands to each admit a portion of the passengers. A few US diplomats, such as Robert Pell of the Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees, played a minor supporting role in this effort, but the JDC deserves the lion's share of the credit for finding havens.

The passengers of the *St. Louis* understandably rejoiced when they learned they were not returning to Germany. Even the detention facilities in which some of the passengers were placed in Belgium and Holland were far preferable to life under Hitler. Citing the passengers' initial expressions of relief, some contemporary Roosevelt supporters have argued that the refugees were, in effect, rescued from the Nazis. Yet the findings of Sarah A. Ogilvie and Scott Miller (2006) of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum suggest otherwise. They interviewed every living survivor of the ship for their book *Refuge Denied* and discovered that upon disembarking in continental Europe, many of the passengers quickly looked for ways to flee again.

Thus, for example, after Clark Blatteis and his parents reached Belgium, "Clark's mother wasted no time in applying for American visas" (p. 10). Michael Fink and his parents were sent to Holland, where his father immediately tried to scrape together enough money to buy per-

mits for them to become construction workers in Chile. A passenger named Bela (no last name provided) who was sent to France quickly departed for Hungary because, as he later explained, "After all, people knew the Nazis could invade France at any time" (p. 67). Warren and Charlotte Meyerhoff, taken to Holland, smuggled themselves out of the Westerbork detention facility and made their way back to Cuba. The *St. Louis* exhibit at the Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York City includes additional anecdotes of this nature.

How many of the passengers of the *St. Louis* perished during the subsequent German occupation of their lands of refuge? Arthur Morse (1968) did not know—nobody at that early stage knew—and he did not pretend otherwise. He wrote, correctly, that

The only *St. Louis* passengers protected from the Nazi terror were those who had found sanctuary in Britain. Many—it is impossible to know how many—died in the German gas chambers following the Nazi invasion of Belgium, Holland, and France. (p. 299)

In 1974, journalist Gordon Thomas and television producer Max Morgan Witts published what has become the best-known book about the *St. Louis*, *Voyage of the Damned*. A 1976 film based on the book, costarring Faye Dunaway, played an important role in acquainting the public with the fate of the *St. Louis* and establishing it as the central symbol of America's response to the Holocaust. Highlighting the human dimension, Thomas and Witts reconstructed the story through personal vignettes gleaned from interviews with surviving passengers and crew members. Although their narrative was more fast-paced and dramatic than Morse's, they got the basic story right.² They noted that if the survival rate of the *St. Louis* passengers was similar to that of other Jews in Europe during the Holocaust, then nearly all of those who went to England would have survived, as would have most of those who went to France and Belgium, and about one-third of those who disembarked in Holland.³

By and large, mainstream historians have been appropriately cautious about the number of fatalities. Classic works in the field, such as David Wyman's *Paper Walls* (1968), Henry Feingold's *The Politics of Rescue* (1970), and Ronald Sanders's *Shores of Refuge* (1988), made no claims as to the death toll. The matter was finally resolved in the aforementioned study by Ogilvie and Miller. They found that of the 620 passengers who went to France, Belgium, or Holland, 87 emigrated shortly afterwards. Of the 533 who were still in those countries when the Germans invaded in 1940, 254, or about 48%, were murdered (pp. 174–175). The other passengers, who went to England, survived.

A NEW CONTROVERSY

In recent years, several authors have promoted a version of the *St. Louis* story much more favorable to President Roosevelt and his administration as part of a broader effort to reshape the public's view of FDR's response to the Holocaust. The most notable of these accounts appears in the 2013 book *FDR and the Jews*, by Richard Breitman and Allan Lichtman. They make the surprising claim that "there is no truth to the notion, found in some literature, that American officials ordered the coast guard to prevent any passengers from reaching American shores" (pp. 137–138).

The question of the Coast Guard is of some significance. Because neither President Roosevelt nor Secretary of State Hull made any public statement about the *St. Louis* during the crisis, the action of the Coast Guard constituted the only visible response by the United States government to the presence of the *St. Louis* in US waters. As Deborah Lipstadt (1986) has written: "The *only* action taken by the American government was the dispatch of a Coast Guard cutter when the ship was close to the shore of Miami" (p. 118). Likewise, Ogilvie and Miller note: "Several US Coast Guard cutters surrounded the vessel to make sure that none of the would-be émigrés attempted to swim for shore" (p. 3).

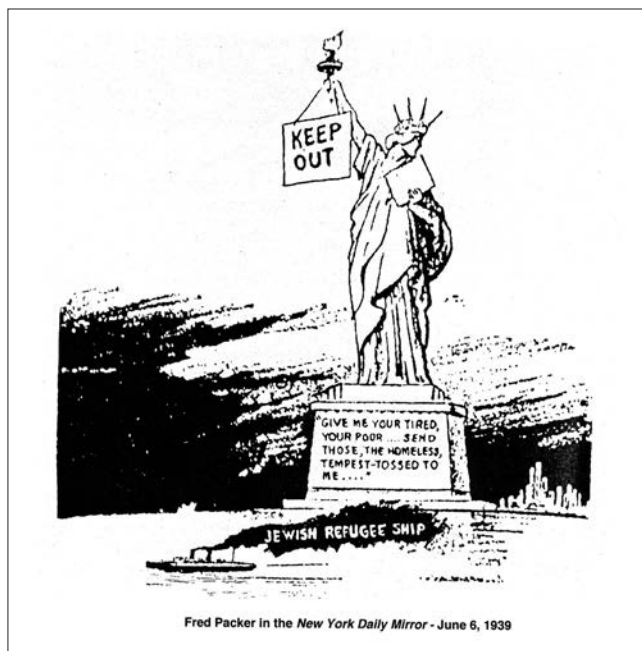


FIG 5: Political Cartoon. 1939. Courtesy of The David S. Wyman Institute for Holocaust Studies.

In March 2013, four *St. Louis* survivors issued a public statement challenging the Breitman–Lichtman claim:

We saw the Coast Guard planes that flew around the ship to follow its movements. We saw the Coast Guard cutter that trailed us and made sure the *St. Louis* did

not come close to the Florida coast. We heard the cutter blaring its warning to the *St. Louis* to stay away. Since the Coast Guard was carrying out its job of guarding the coast against anyone who tried to come close without permission, the Coast Guard planes and cutter had clearly been ordered to intercept the *St. Louis* and prevent any unauthorized landings of passengers. (SS *St. Louis* Legacy Project press release, March 17, 2013)

Further confirmation of the Coast Guard's role comes from the transcripts of Secretary Morgenthau's conversations with Secretary Hull about the *St. Louis*. In those discussions, Morgenthau made reference to his awareness that the Coast Guard was already trailing the *St. Louis*.

THE FORGOTTEN MAN

Unlike other aspects of America's response to the Holocaust, very little new information of significance about the *St. Louis* has emerged over the years.

At first glance, Breitman and Lichtman did appear to have uncovered a bombshell when they published their suggestion that the initial voyage of the *St. Louis* was part of a secret deal in which President Roosevelt had convinced Cuba to admit Jewish refugees; in exchange, he was to reduce tariffs on Havana's sugar exports to America. Breitman and Lichtman's source for this claim, however, turned out to be a celebrity gossip columnist, and more than a dozen leading scholars of US–Cuban relations and Cuban Jewry contacted by this author replied that they had never seen any evidence of a sugar-for-Jews deal.

As for the aforementioned Ogilvie–Miller study, it did flesh out some missing details, but the basic facts of the tragic voyage, the muddled negotiations, and the chilly US response, as first chronicled by Morse 45 years ago, have stood the test of time. The story of the *St. Louis* remains a powerful and instructive symbol of missed opportunities for rescue and reveals much about the president who presented himself as the champion of "the forgotten man" and yet seldom answered when desperate refugees knocked on America's door [Fig. 5].

The circumstances surrounding the *St. Louis* episode constitute almost a textbook case of the Roosevelt administration's prewar response to the plight of Europe's Jews. There was no doubt as to the danger the passengers faced if they were turned away; *Kristallnacht* had already demonstrated that. The refugees posed no danger to America's well-being; indeed, the vast majority had already qualified for eventual admission to the United States, meaning that even if they could not find jobs, friends or relatives had guaranteed they would not become dependent upon government assistance. Although the regular quota for German nationals was full in the spring of 1939, there was an

obvious solution at hand in the Virgin Islands, whose leaders had set an impressive moral example by unilaterally offering to open their doors to Jewish refugees. There also was considerable public sympathy for the passengers, as the many positive newspaper editorials at the time and the heartfelt letters of appeal in the files of the State Department attest [Fig. 6]. That is not to suggest there was sufficient sympathy to make possible liberalization of the immigration quotas, but there might have been enough—with some presidential leadership—to enable their temporary admission to a US territory out in the Caribbean.

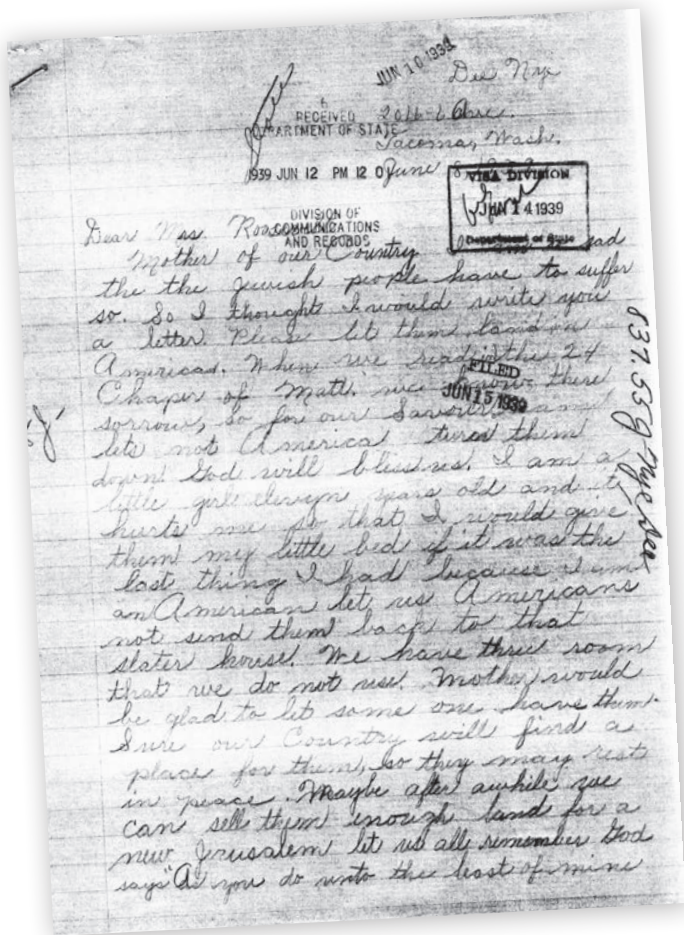


FIG 6: Letter to Eleanor Roosevelt asking her to let the *St. Louis* passengers land in America. Courtesy of The David S. Wyman Institute for Holocaust Studies.

The facts that lay before the Roosevelt administration during the *St. Louis* crisis offered the president a stark choice between, on the one hand, a policy of unnecessary stinginess and, on the other hand, a policy of minimal generosity, within the limits of the existing laws, that would have saved lives at no substantial political risk. In the case of the *St. Louis* passengers, the question of whether they had a safe return address was not black and white. The president, and his policy advisers, could have opted

to go either way. The return address problem had not stood in the way when Roosevelt was considering the fate of 15,000 German Jews who were in the United States in late 1938 on tourist visas. The president unilaterally extended their tourist status not because they needed more time to visit the Grand Canyon but because he recognized that in the wake of *Kristallnacht*, their return addresses were at least temporarily unsafe. He could have acted in the same spirit to enable the passengers of the *St. Louis* to land in the Virgin Islands even though they were not genuine tourists. All that was required in Washington was a little human desire to help and some creative thinking along the lines of the post-*Kristallnacht* “tourists.” Instead, the return address issue became the administration’s convenient device for blocking the admission of refugees even to those tiny, distant island specks.

The significant number of innocent lives lost when they could have been saved reminds us of the real-life consequences when government officials search for reasons to avoid extending a helping hand rather than aspire to the noble principles for which America has always stood that are inscribed on the Statue of Liberty. The voyage of the *St. Louis* remains, as former president Bill Clinton (2005) has put it, “one of the darkest chapters in United States history” (Eshman, p. 10).

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[1] Although many of the *St. Louis* passengers did ultimately die in Nazi gas chambers, many survived the Holocaust; the numbers are clarified in the text.

[2] The film likewise remained largely faithful to the historical record, despite its invention of a doomed romance between a Jewish passenger and a German crewman and its erroneous suggestion, in a note at its conclusion, that most of the passengers died in the Holocaust.

[3] Ironically, the statistics provided by popularizers Thomas and Witts were more accurate than those of some well-known historians who referred to the *St. Louis* in the years to follow. Howard M. Sachar (1992), for example, wrote that of the 621 passengers who went to France, Belgium, or Holland, "all but four perished." Michael Berenbaum (1993) wrote that aside from those who were admitted to England, "only a few survived the Holocaust." See *A History of the Jews in America*, by Sachar, 1992, New York: Knopf, p. 493; and *The World Must Know: The History of the Holocaust as Told in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*, by Berenbaum, 1993, Boston: Little, Brown, p. 58.