

A Tale of Three Ships Passover 2016 (5776)

“If err we must, let us err on the side of tolerance.”

Felix Frankfurter, Justice, United States Supreme Court
New York Times Magazine, November 23, 1952

“Eleanor’s failure to force her husband to admit more refugees remained, her son Jimmy later said,
‘her deepest regret at the end of her life.’ ” Doris Kearns Goodwin, No Ordinary Time

Services on the second day of Rosh Hashanah are my favorite of the Jewish High Holidays, specifically for their smaller crowd, lending intimacy, less formality, a casual ambiance—but not irreverence. In accordance with that air of less formality and in place of a sermon, the congregation is invited to participate in a back and forth discussion on a topic chosen each year—this year said topic being the Syrian refugee crisis. Gathered in Temple Sinai’s new chapel on a bright September morning on the second day of Rosh Hashanah 2015 (5776), Rabbis Rick and Susan Rheins and Cantor Sheila Nesis posted themselves with microphones within the congregation, allowing congregants ready access to voice their thoughts. Opinions of the congregation reflected the vagaries of opinions of the general populace of the United States. Some voiced vigorous disagreement with allowing Syrian refugees into the United States saying, “There could be terrorists admitted amongst them!” Others disagreed, voicing just as strongly, the opposite. As I listened to the exchange of thoughts and opinions, my daughter, Lisa, seated next to me, raised her hand, asking for a microphone. Speaking with clarity and passion but also with respect, she said, “It might be important we remember they didn’t want any of us let in either, you know. Nobody wanted us.” I knew without asking she was thinking of her grandfather, her grandmother, her aunt and her father. I was as well, but I was also thinking of a ship called the *MS St. Louis*. Although the parallels between the two events (the Syrian refugee crisis and the voyage of the *MS St. Louis*) cannot be called exact—some would argue cannot even be called parallels at all—there are enough similarities to provoke soul-searching thought.

On May 13, 1939, a ship sailed from Hamburg, Germany, heading for Havana, Cuba with 937 passengers aboard—most of them German Jews, fleeing the Third Reich. The ship was the *MS St. Louis*, part of the Hamburg-America Line (Hapag), a huge black and white ship usually sailing as a luxury cruise liner, having 8 decks. After Kristallnacht, a Nazi pogrom in November 1938, many German Jews faced the grim decision that it was time to leave. By 1939, visas were required to enter another country but money was also required to leave Germany. Many emigration laws had been toughened in Germany and in other countries, including the United States, where immigration visas were nearly impossible to obtain in a short time. Many of the passengers on the *MS St. Louis* intended to wait in Cuba until their quota number came up enabling them to enter the United States, Cuba being the only country near the United States willing to accept refugees in large numbers—for a price. In a book, Voyage of the Damned, published in 1974, Gordon Thomas and Max Morgan-Witts record this fateful voyage in a tension-filled, day-to-day account which was adapted to a movie by the same title produced in 1976.

The passengers all had their own stories of fear, persecution and desperation. Many left family behind in Europe. Most had been forced out of their jobs and professions, some had been living in hiding, others had spent short times in concentration camps after Kristallnacht. The journey on the ship was at first a joyous affair. The captain, Gustav Schroeder, a non-Jewish German, insisted his passengers be treated with courtesy. “Elegantly clad

stewards served foods that by 1939 were rationed in Germany; there were swimming lessons for the children in the ship's pool, dances and concerts were enjoyed and the captain allowed for religious services, also permitting passengers to throw a tablecloth over a plaster bust of Hitler..[they] felt they were on a vacation cruise to freedom" (paraphrased from Voyage of the Damned; Thomas and Morgan-Witts.)

However, by the time the *St. Louis* sailed, there were signs that political conditions in Cuba might keep the passengers from landing there. The U.S. State Department in Washington, the U.S. consulate in Havana, some Jewish organizations, and refugee agencies were all aware of the situation. The passengers themselves were not informed. They only knew they were fleeing for their lives in a last desperate hope to find asylum. The German Foreign Office and Germany's Propaganda Ministry hoped to exploit the unwillingness of other nations to admit large numbers of Jewish refugees to justify the Nazi regime's anti-Jewish goals and policies both in Germany and in the world at large. In more succinct and cold terms to say: "See? No one else wants them either."

The owners of the *St. Louis*, The Hamburg-Amerika line, knew even before the ship sailed that there may be difficulty disembarking in Cuba. The passengers did not know that just a week before the ship sailed, the president of Cuba, Frederico Laredo Bru, had issued a decree invalidating all recently issued landing certificates. The voyage itself obtained a great deal of media attention with right-wing newspapers in Cuba deploring its impending arrival and demanding that the Cuban government cease admitting Jewish refugees. More than money, corruption and power struggles, the additional contributing factor was the Great Depression in both the United States and Cuba. Public opinion in the United States, superficially sympathetic to the plight of the refugees with abundance of media attention, continued to favor immigration restrictions. The Great Depression had left millions in the United States out of work and fear of competition for scarce jobs fueled antisemitism, xenophobia and isolationism. President Roosevelt could have issued an executive order to admit the *St. Louis* refugees but the general hostility to immigrants, the gains of isolationist Republicans in Congress in the elections of 1938 and Roosevelt's wish to run for a third term were the considerations mitigating against such a gesture. "Officials from the U.S. State Department to the FBI to Roosevelt himself argued that the refugees posed a threat to national security—there could be Nazi spies among them!" (Daniel Gross, Smithsonian Magazine.)

As the journey progressed, passengers gradually became aware of the possibility they would not be allowed to disembark in Havana. Levels of anxiety increased with one passenger attempting suicide and, once at Havana, was evacuated to a hospital there. One passenger died of natural causes en route. Captain Schroeder made efforts to ensure no other suicides, attempted or completed, occurred by ordering some of the crew to patrol the ship as "security patrols," also to ensure against mutiny.

The *St. Louis* docked on May 28, 1939, at the "roadstead," just outside of the harbor-proper in Havana. Negotiations proceeded at feverish pace but without success. On June 2nd, President Bru ordered the *St. Louis* out of Cuban waters. Allegedly, negotiations were supposed to continue but failed. The *St. Louis* attempted to gain access to the port of Miami in Florida but the U.S. refused to allow passengers to disembark, one source saying, "America not only refused their entry, but [the U.S. Coast Guard]..even fired a warning shot to keep them away from Florida's shore." (Ted Falcon and David Blatner, Judaism for Dummies.) The ship then attempted to dock in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada but was refused there as well and on June 6th, the *St. Louis* sailed back to Europe with 907 passengers. Twenty-eight passengers had been allowed to disembark in Havana—some who had United States visas and others who were Spanish or Cuban. However, not all the passengers returned to Germany. Jewish organizations, most prominently the Jewish Joint Distribution Committee along with Captain Schroeder (who had threatened to run the ship aground before returning the passengers to certain death in Germany) negotiated with four European governments to accept the refugees: Great Britain took 288; the Netherlands admitted 181; Belgium took 214; and 224 passengers were admitted to France. But the following year, May 1940, after the Nazi

invasions of Belgium, France and the Netherlands, all the Jews in those countries were at renewed risk, including the recent refugees—532 were trapped in Western Europe. 87 had managed to leave Western Europe before the invasion. Just over half (278) survived the Holocaust. 254 died: 84 in Belgium; 84 in Holland and 86 in France. Of the 288 admitted by Great Britain, all survived but one (Statistics via U.S. Holocaust Museum). June 6, 1939—the day the Statue of Liberty cried.

The sailing of the second ship in our tale coincided with the Blitz, specifically the German blitzkrieg—the bombing of London by unrelenting air raids by Hitler’s Wehrmacht and extending from May through September 1940. Great Britain courageously held itself together as Hitler over-ran France and heroically evacuated troops from Dunkirk in June. In September of that year, ships sailed from Liverpool, England carrying British children (under the auspices of The Children’s Overseas Reception Board, a.k.a. CORB) sponsored by Great Britain for British children or, in a related American activity, the “U.S. Committee for the Care of European Children,” which sought to evacuate children from Continental Europe. By that time, images of the German bombing raids and European refugees had had a major impact on American opinion. Seemingly, finally there came a smidgen of political will and the ability to begin to intervene for the children. However, quotas for the United States were maintained as low as possible via Assistant Secretary of State, Breckenridge Long, a “virulent anti-Semite.. who blocked fulfillment of even the small extant quotas for Jewish refugees.” ([Wall Street Journal](#), January 27, 2016.) Specifically, Long’s department blocked 90% of quota spaces available for immigrants. If those spaces had been filled, 190,000 people could have escaped Nazi atrocities. (“The American Experience, The Holocaust.”)

And so, in September 1940, with air raids raining down bombs and Great Britain bracing for a feared invasion, three-year-old Charles Peter Simson (later known as Peter Guthery and also later known as my beshert), his mother and sister, boarded a ship (likely the *SS Nerissa*) for America. As Peter would come to tell it, 12 ships set sail through the U-boat infested Atlantic Ocean with 10 of them bombed and the remaining two surviving to dock in New York. If he and his mother and sister traveled via the British CORB organization, it is likely that 3-year-old Charles Peter was the “ticket” for embarkation for the whole family since he had been born in London after the family escaped Germany, thus making him a British citizen and giving him the right as a British child (note: but not as a Jew due to strict United States quotas against admission of Jewish refugees) to seek evacuation to the United States from the raging Battle of Britain.

Hence this very young refugee began his life in freedom in New York, starting school in Queens with his teachers assiduously “helping” him rid himself of his British accent—to replace it with a New York accent. As he grew up living in Kew Gardens, Queens, his best childhood playmate was Walter Strauss, also a son of a family who escaped Nazi Germany, Walter escaping when he was two years old, having sailed to America with his family in January 1940, a few months earlier than Peter. Living in the same apartment building in Kew Gardens, the boys would roam the halls between apartments 4F and 6A, seeking adventure as best friends, Walter joining Peter and his parents at the shore together, going to elementary school and high school together—Walter helping Peter in math—and also together, devouring the delicious German pancakes which were Walter’s mother Joan’s specialty. On the surface, looking as common place as any American story. Boys, fast friends, growing up in Queens, New York. Ordinary American story but “ordinary” separated by a hair’s breadth and a string of “what-ifs” from being marked for the end of their young lives—the “what if” Walter’s mother had not applied for a visa early-on in 1933 when Hitler came to power that allowed them to leave 6 years later; the “what-if” Peter’s mother, pregnant with him and threatened by the gestapo, had not packed up and fled by night to Switzerland; the “what-if” the Catholic priest as part of the underground had not warned Peter’s father not to return to Dresden from business in Berlin but to flee to Switzerland; the “what-if” Peter had not been born in London; the “what-if” the British had not evacuated children via CORB; the “what-if” the *SS Nerissa* had been one of the ships bombed by U-boats? The string of “what-ifs” that suspended by the slenderest of slender threads—made up of time, luck and

circumstance—the lives of two boys over a treacherous abyss dark with genocide—but ended with them bopping down tree-lined Park Lane South of Kew Gardens, Queens, New York—maybe in 10-year-old banter on who would be the pitcher for that day’s New York Yankees baseball game. “Baruch atah Adonai Eloheinu Melech haolam shehecheyanu....Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, Ruler of the Universe who has given us life.”

The last ship in our tale cannot really be called a ship—not even a boat. Rather, it was a small, basket-like vessel, made of papyrus reeds, lined with tar and pitch and crafted by a desperate woman seeking to protect her baby son from being murdered by the oppressive regime in which she and her family lived as slaves. Placing the infant in the vessel, she set it afloat down a river on which it meandered along the river banks, hidden within the bulrushes and weeds, bearing its tiny refugee, and coming to rest quietly near the royal palace, the infant then being rescued by a member of the royal court, adopted and raised as a prince.

The infant grew up within the court but was aware of his origins, and when he saw one of his people being beaten by a slave-master, his anger, the management of which would become a problem for the rest of his life, overcame him and he killed the slave master. Having committed a capital crime, his position in court became untenable and, refugee again, he fled to the desert wilderness and another country, finding comfort amongst a family, not of his own background, but who took him in, allowing him to work as a shepherd and eventually, marry one of their daughters—out of the faith.

Working as a shepherd, he was confronted one day by a peculiar sight: a bush burning without being destroyed. His God spoke to him from the bush to return to the oppressive regime and rescue his people. He resisted this calling, claiming his people would not know this god’s name, claiming a lack of speaking ability—he stuttered—claiming a lack of ability to lead, that his people did not know him—so why would they follow him?—finally, telling his God to send someone else. His God persisted, however, for his God understood he was flawed but knew also his strengths. Finally, he relented and reluctantly returned to the oppressive regime, eventually leading his people to freedom, becoming their guide through their wanderings until their mind-set of slavery could be molded into the mind-set of a free people. After a retreat on a mountain-top, he also became their law-giver, giving them a code of conduct and ethics that remains the bedrock of civilization today. 3,000 years later. It is called the Ten Commandments.

His name was Moses. This reluctant refugee-leader gave his people, who would become known as the Jewish people, God’s instructions, that once in their promised land, “You shall proclaim liberty throughout the land for all its inhabitants” (Leviticus 25:10). That proclamation came down through the millennia to be inscribed on the Liberty Bell of the United States of America. “You shall proclaim liberty.....”

“Breckinridge Long, [in the late 1930’s] then a senior State Department official in charge of visas..established rules so strict that few Jews could pass. ‘We can delay and effectively stop for a temporary period of indefinite length the number of immigrants,’ Long boasted in a 1940 memo. His callous security requirements led to the deaths of many tens of thousands of Jews..Yes, security was a legitimate concern then, as it is now, but security must be leavened with common sense and a bit of heart. To seek to help desperate refugees in a secure way is not naïveté. It’s not sentimentality. It’s humanity.” Nicholas Kristof, New York Times, November 22, 2015

In celebration of Passover, our holiday of freedom. Chag Sameach!

Jean Guthery

With appreciation to Dr. Walter Strauss for his editorial assistance and to Debbie Guthery Owen for her research on the *SS Nerissa*.—J.G.

