The Fiftieth Anniversary of the St. Louis: What Really Happened
Barry J. Konovitch

The S.S. St. Louis departed Hamburg, Germany, on May 13, 1939, with 937 Jewish refugees bound for Havana and the free world. By the time she returned to Europe on June 17, the complicity of the western democracies in the destruction of European Jewry was foretold in the newspaper headlines, government communiques, and confidential conversations of diplomats: no one wanted the Jews.

Many writers have been preoccupied with the affair, and the ghastly details have been amply documented.1 But 1989 marks 50 years since the St. Louis sailed into infamy, and in the intervening decades we have grown to realize the enormity of the tragedy. Everyone must share the blame: the Nazis, who were planning for a Judenrein Europe; the American government, including the president, which refused to interfere in an internal Cuban affair; the Cuban government, which bowed to local anti-Semitic xenophobia; the Havana Jewish community, which fearfully and helplessly watched their brothers and sisters sail away; the American Jewish community, whose lack of organization, political clout and moral courage cowed it into accepting the callous decrees of the State Department; and the Hamburg-Amerika line officials who, in concert with the Nazi Minister of Propaganda, allowed the St. Louis passengers to sail for Havana knowing that permission to disembark had been denied.

During the late 1930s and most of the 1940s Cuba was one of the few destinations open to Jews fleeing the Nazis. What prompted the anti-Semitic aberration that closed Cuba to the St. Louis refugees? Cuban President Laredo Bru made an offer to Lawrence Berenson, the Harvard-educated lawyer who repre-

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("ranch") in Pinar del Rio. Berenson, accompanied by a few armed members of the Jewish community, delivered $125,000 in cash. Within days the Cuban Embassy in Berlin began issuing visas for the first 1,000 Jews on their waiting list.5

Benitez grew wealthy from his trade in visas, and the Jews living in Pinar del Rio referred to his local real estate investments and construction as reparto judío ("the Jewish suburb").6 It soon became apparent to the Cuban political hierarchy that fortunes could be made in the sale of these landing permits. Benitez' refusal to share the wealth was one of the factors that prompted President Bru to issue Decree 937 on May 5, 1939, which terminated the power of the Director of Immigration to issue landing certificates.7 Henceforth official visas had to be issued with the approval of the secretaries of State and Labor and a bond of $500 filed by every alien.8 Now Berenson was deprived of his main contact: he would have to approach the president.

Once again he came to Havana with cash in a briefcase. His old friend Batista could have opened the doors for him and eventually for the passengers on the St. Louis, but he declined to get involved. It was common knowledge that Batista was the real power in Cuba, but he was sensitive to the growing public opinion against refugees and he chose to do the politic thing by making himself unavailable to Berenson or to anyone pleading the case of the St. Louis. President Bru would have to be contacted directly, and Berenson was reminded of the consequences if an attempt to bribe the president of Cuba by an American citizen became public.9

American isolationist policies caused by grass-roots xenophobia stemming from fear of economic competition and loss of jobs were mirrored in Cuba in 1939. The anti-Semitic overtones became pronounced as the right-wing media began to beat the drums in Havana, as they had in the United States. The Nazis skillfully orchestrated this anti-Semitic sentiment by infiltrating

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7 Interview with Manuel Benitez Valdez, Miami Beach, 20 February 1989.
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9 Interviews with Zeidel D'Gabriel, Miami Beach, 23 February 1989, and Leizer Ran, 6 April 1989. Each new government required new contacts and new bribes. The St. Louis affair caught the attention of a large group of Cuban politicians, each of whom saw a considerable financial opportunity. Each would have to be paid even before the public offer could be negotiated. The stakes continued to rise, the situation became more confused, the amounts of money asked became unrealistic, and time ran out for the St. Louis passengers.
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how much more so did Bru, who would not last a moment in
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president was well aware that the eyes of the entire world were on
him. A refusal to grant asylum to the St. Louis refugees on hu-
manitarian grounds would condemn him forever in the pages of
twentieth century history.

A delegation from the Centro Israelita, the local Jewish
umbrella organization, went to visit the president. He responded
by indicating that money was not the issue; every republic should
accept some of the Jews in proportion to their population, and if
the United States had declined to accept the Jews, why should
Cuba accept them?11 America’s refusal to rescue the Jews of the
St. Louis underscored by a gunboat sent to keep them away
from the Florida coast, was a crucial decision that would shortly
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European Jews, condemning six million to death.

In June 1939, as the St. Louis remained at anchor in Havana
harbor, 937 Jews looked wistfully at the Malecon Promenade.
They could see and smell Cuban freedom, but they could not
touch it. Among the factors working against them was a direct
communication from Washington to Havana requesting that the
Jews not be given passes to disembark because they would event-
ually request permission to continue on to the United States.12
And the United States didn’t want them for the same reasons that
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try free of anti-Semitism. If anything, the original Jewish immi-
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Ariel Remos, 28 March 1989 in Miami Beach. Sender Kaplan recalls that many
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sented the New York Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), for
disembarking the Jews. Why weren’t the negotiations suc-
cessfully concluded?

Most of the literature published since World War II on the
Holocaust refers to the St. Louis affair as a precursor of things to
come. Only the Voyage of the Damned and ‘‘The St. Louis
Tragedy’’ discuss the incident exclusively and in detail, over the
period of May and June 1939, from Hamburg to Havana and back
to Europe. But Lawrence Berenson’s failure to secure the release
of the passengers is not adequately explained. If business as usual
in Cuba, 1939, meant providing the right politicians with the right
amount of money, why wasn’t Berenson successful in his mis-
sion?

Gellman indicates that after a Cuban offer was made to accept
the refugees, Berenson ‘‘felt that he could reduce the admission
price.’’ He had already spoken to ‘‘his principals’’ in New York
suggesting that he could ‘‘save them a considerable amount of
money.’’ On the following day, the President [Bru] spoke with
the director of Chase National Bank and explained that Ber-
enson’s attempt to bargain and save some money ended the dis-
cussions.2

Thomas and Witts report an announcement by the Cuban gov-
ernment issued on Tuesday, June 6, 1939, at 6:00 p.m.:

Agreement was reached two days ago with Senor Berenson to land
the exiles on the Isle of Pines after he had deposited $500 in cash per
person with a subsidiary guarantee with regard to their food and lodg-
ing. He was given 48 hours to meet these requirements. Yesterday
Senor Berenson made an alternative proposal offering $443,000 for
the St. Louis passengers, plus $150 additional for the refugees on the
Orduna and Flandre, the sum to include expenses for food and lodg-
ing. The Cuban government could not accept the proposal, and having
passed excessively the time allowed, the government terminates the
matter.3

But a refusal to negotiate on the part of the Cuban president, or
any Cuban politician for that matter, would have meant a major
financial loss, something they were not likely to choose. The only
question should have been is how high they could force Berenson
to go. Instead, Bru cut off all discussion just when final negotia-
tions should have started and thereby forfeited all chances for any
monetary benefit. Furthermore, Lawrence Berenson’s role in the
St. Louis affair has never been adequately documented. Nor has

2 Gellman, p. 15.
his thinking and action been accounted for. How could a man
with such vast experience in dealing with Cuba, so well con-
nected politically and so familiar with Havana politics, have
failed?

In order to fill in the gaps in the story, and in order to flesh out
the picture of Lawrence Berenson in Havana and account for his
failure to secure the release of the St. Louis passengers, we need
to turn to the eyewitnesses, who until now have not given their
testimony. They are the members of the Havana community of
1939, mostly Jews, who have intimate knowledge of Lawrence
Berenson and the St. Louis affair. This article draws extensively
on their observations and conclusions gathered from personal in-
terviews.

From the moment he landed in Havana, Lawrence Berenson
had no doubt he could successfully negotiate the freedom of the
St. Louis passengers. His overconfidence would be his downfall.
Experience had taught him how to do business in Cuba: the right
amount of money in the right pocket would always achieve the
desired results.

His brother, Richard, owner of the Miami Jai-Alai Fronton,
had been travelling to Cuba since the mid-1930s recruiting play-
ers. An enterprising businessman, he took advantage of the anti-
Machado revolution and chartered Chalk’s Airlines to rescue
well-heeled political refugees. He met Fulgencio Batista and rec-
ommended that his brother Lawrence handle the military leader’s
legal affairs. Lawrence Berenson and Fulgencio Batista became
close associates, and when this last president of Cuba went into
exile following the Castro revolution, Lawrence Berenson ac-
companied him to Trujillo’s Dominican Republic.4

Berenson was the JDC’s logical choice to negotiate the landing
of the St. Louis refugees. The Jewish lawyer from New York was
the former president of the Cuban Chamber of Commerce in the
U.S. He had already used his considerable political connections
in Cuba to purchase 1,000 visas to facilitate the exodus of Jews
from Germany. Although the Cuban authorities were still lenient
regarding refugees from Europe, Berenson wished to comply
with the German bureaucratic mentality. An “official” document
would satisfy the German authorities and facilitate the exit of
Jews from the Third Reich. Berenson’s discreet political inquiries
led him to contact Manuel Benitez, Director General of Immigra-
tion. A clandestine meeting was arranged at Benitez’ finca

4 Interview with Louis Stanley Berenson, nephew of Lawrence Berenson,
Miami Beach, 2 February 1989.

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outburst of 1939 that resulted in the rejection of the St. Louis Jews was an aberration, for in the 1940s, under the presidency of Batista, Cuba welcomed many thousands of Jewish refugees. But in June 1939, the fears of the Spanish merchants and manufacturers, who controlled most of the economy, were transmitted through the falange-dominated right-wing press and aggravated by local Nazi cells. The result was tragedy.

Lawrence Berenson failed to grasp the complicated and shifting pressures on the Cuban government. In assuming that it was business as usual, he made a fatal error of judgement. The Joint Distribution Committee was officially on record against the payment of bribes. But they were ready to post a bond of $500 for each passenger to guarantee that they would not become a burden to the Cuban government. Berenson was sure the Cubans “would settle for less,” but he was wrong.

On June 2 the St. Louis was forced to weigh anchor and leave Havana. If no agreement with the government was forthcoming, she would have to sail for Europe. Two days later, at Sunday noon, Lawrence Berenson was admitted to Bru’s country estate. The president requested that $500 per passenger be deposited in the Cuban treasury, that a further bond of $150 per passenger be posted to cover their sustenance at the Isle of Pines barracks or elsewhere, and that all arrangements be concluded in 48 hours. On Monday the president repeated his terms to the press in Havana. Berenson now had a clear and definite offer; had he immediately fulfilled Bru’s conditions the Jews of the St. Louis would all have been saved.

Instead he chose to play by the old rules of Cuban politics, not realizing that the game had suddenly and dramatically changed just as surely as the players had changed. Benitez was out and so were his conditions for doing business. In addition, the heretofore benign Cuban attitude towards Jewish refugees was gone. Bru was completely in charge, by design, and the fate of the St. Louis passengers rested entirely in his hands. He found himself on the horns of a dilemma: if he allowed the Jews to land he would jeopardize his chances of remaining president; if he sent the Jews

15 Voyage, p. 249.
16 Interview with Martin Mayer, Miami Beach, 8 March 1989. Bru’s legal argument with Charles Silver over collecting insurance for a burned building purportedly caused bad feelings and has been connected with the anti-Semitic outbursts of 1939.
away his name would be disgraced in the eyes of the world. He desperately sought a way out, and his final offer to Berenson offered a solution. Bru and his advisors shrewdly anticipated an attempt to negotiate any terms they presented. By drawing Berenson into this trap they hoped to put the onus for the failed negotiations on his shoulders. The world would understand that the "magnanimous" Cuban government had offered the Jews a haven, but Lawrence Berenson, representing the JDC and the Jewish people, refused to accept this generous offer.

As soon as Berenson presented a counter offer to Bru, the trap was sprung: the president refused to discuss the matter further, the 48 hours passed, and the ship was forced to sail for Europe. The New York JDC office had suggested that Berenson pay the amount demanded, but he elected to "save them money" and see how inexpensively he could secure a safe harbor for the St. Louis passengers.17 Surely the limited resources of the American Jewish community had to be considered, and surely Berenson approached the negotiations in a strictly businesslike fashion. But in the end, 907 Jews sailed back to Europe, most to their deaths, because Berenson did not agree to the price Cuba placed on their heads. Had he immediately agreed to Bru's conditions, the St. Louis would have discharged her passengers at the Havana docks. But Berenson may not have been briefed properly as to the unique and dangerous political conditions that prevailed in Cuba in May, 1939. He was familiar with the facts. He was aware that the affair presented a no-win situation for Cuban politicians, most of whom refused to get involved, but he failed to translate these facts into a successful negotiating strategy. Instead, he relied on his experience, and he failed.

Had the Jewish community in America been as politically powerful, organized and wealthy as it is today, and had the Jewish community in Cuba been as influential as it became in the decade before the Castro revolution, Lawrence Berenson's chances for success would have increased dramatically. An effective Jewish response might have overcome American indifference, Cuban confusion, and German mendacity.18

17 Voyage, p. 222.
18 Discussions at the Fiftieth Anniversary Reunion of 27 survivors held at the Cuban Hebrew Congregation, Miami Beach, June 3-4, 1989. Liel Loeb, daughter of Joseph Joseph, the on-board chairman of the St. Louis passengers' committee in 1939, asked "What did you Cubans do for us?" Rabbi Barry Konovitch, responding for the Cuban Jewish community, told of the behind-the-scenes efforts that were made. Loeb answered that had any significant actions been undertaken, her father would have been informed since he was in contact with the JDC representatives in port.