

## **RG-50.031.0140**

### **Summary**

Lothar Molton born in a small town east Russia; recalls antisemitic picket signs (1933) at family store; 3 years later father/grandfather sell store, move to Hamburg, "cosmopolitan town" reputation where they might be safer; 1938 father sent to concentration camp, released after family demonstrates ability to send their Jewish father to Cuba; Kristallnacht; Jews denied schooling, mother forced to turn over two suitcases of silver & gold (after war, most recovered from a Jewish exhibition); discussion on how 900 Jewish refugees obtain passage on S.S. St. Louis en route to Cuba; after placing grandfather in Jewish old age home (Berlin), Lothar/brother/sister/mother board ship (tourist class) to join father in Havana; afternoon May 13, 1939 "flags waving, band playing German good-bye song"; ship enters North Sea, first stop Cherbourg, France, "Food excellent...dancing at night, movies, games, weather beautiful...vacation cruise into freedom...no Nazi films played, only love stories"; arrival May 1927, Havana Harbor; after long wait, Cuba refuses entry because of earlier law passed; later learning of Cuba's President Brú's political advantage rejecting their entry; father (among others) rented "little steamers" (fishing boats) to pull up to ship, 12 yr. old Lothar unable to hear father's shouting up to family; Jewish passenger cuts wrists, jumps overboard, crew member dives in, has to knock refugee out to control him, attempted suicide victim taken to Cuban hospital, survives, his family not allowed to leave ship to join him; "mood (of refugees) becomes worse & worse & worse"; after couple days, Jewish organizations step in, NY attorney Berenson flies in, negotiates possible refugees' entry on Isles of Pines; Cuba's Colonel Benitez role in rejecting Jews' entry; offer of money to Cuba so refugees would not be financial burden; Berenson's dealing with Cuba's Batista causes Pres Bru to turn ship away May 2nd; some passengers form Jewish Committee to negotiate with ship's Captain Schroeder who assures them he will stay close to Cuba in case anything changes; Lothar's recollection of Cuba's east avenues filled with thousands of people waving goodbye (ship had become worldwide press story); Captain was "extremely decent"; memories of seeing Miami's hotels 4-5 miles offshore, Captain wants to drop passengers in Miami, US coast guard cutters pressure Captain to exit US waters; 700 onboard had upcoming US immigration numbers but Roosevelt despite refugees' willingness to be placed in a camp, rejects accelerating their immigration, also sabotaging their entry into other countries; refugees required to buy return ticket to Europe, food quality goes down, chatter that everyone could jump overboard if ship moves close to English shore, captain considers creating sham fire in engine room, forcing passenger evacuation in life boats; interview returns to Lothar's family prior to fleeing Germany, the incremental stripping of their rights, enduring gradual dehumanizing anti-Semitism until they became public norms; return voyage, "No more movies, dancing, only rumors"; talk of suicide pact among 200 men if forced back into Germany; Belgium first to allow ship's entry, Holland, France, England join; mother's enormous relief they would be allowed into Antwerp May 17th; extraordinary kindness extended by Belgian people, "We were free."; Lothar's bar-mitzvah/Brussels synagogue; closing thoughts "We in the free world need to make sure it doesn't happen again."