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Summary

Hella Roubicek (née Levinson), born Frankfurt-on-Oder, Germany; passenger S.S. St. Louis carrying more than 900 Jewish refugees denied permission to land in Cuba & America, half forced to return to Nazi persecution & death; Hella left Germany age 13, mother/father, one sister (father served Germany in WWI, “a patriot” according to Hella); father, also a medical doctor – Hella’s recalls “people delivered to his practice bleeding” from Anti-Semitism; Hella herself enduring taunts, shoving, father’s practice begins to decline leading up to Kristallnacht, synagogue is set on fire, people beaten, family flees to Berlin after Hella’s school becomes untenable, father stays behind, then arrested, jailed in city prison (Hella later learns others arrested were sent to concentration camps), father released upon condition he leave country, leaves on German ship, arrives to Cuba safely, works toward acquiring US visas for his family; Mother’s confusion dissolving their household to board S.S. St. Louis; Hella hearing “people were disappearing, concentration camps,” Germans had already raised “equivalent of American billion off of Jewish citizens”, leaving Mother with little money; once on S.S. St. Louis, Hella recalls nostalgic song being sung, encapsulating “Farewell to my country”; enjoying luxurious amenities onboard (exception an unfriendly steward), games for children, good food; hearing harsh alarm when someone died, seeing coffin lowered into sea; Havana Harbor landing, everyone gathers in dining room; after couple days, apprehension, confusion palpable, 100’s of people leaning over railing trying to communicate with people in little boats surrounding ship (father in one of boats); Mother obtains permission to visit husband on bridge; Hella on deck, witnesses suicide attempt-“man opened his arteries, jumped from ship”; another woman threatens to throw her child down to someone, people restraining her; Passenger Committee formed; refugees refused disembarkation by Cuba, ship coasts to International waters, accompanied by “boats on both sides & swarms of people walking along shore”; hearing rumor of another passenger “wanting to kill himself,” Hella protected by mother from much of onboard panic; US rejects refugees’ immigration despite some having visas; feeling great relief from announcement that four European countries would permit entrance, Hella/Mother taken in by family in Brussels (receiving schooling for 6 months); leaving Netherlands on Dutch ship to join father America 6 weeks before Nazi invasion; closing thoughts on lessons learned from the S.S. St. Louis.