

Scott Miller: My name is Scott Miller, I'm the director of curatorial affairs at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

In a nutshell, what happened to the Saint Louis

Scott Miller: Right, well, in late May, early June of 1939, the unthinkable happened. A ship carrying over 900 Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi Germany in this great hour of national emergency for the Jewish people, they were denied entry into both Cuba and then the United States after sailing so close so tantalizingly close to the shores of Miami Beach that they could see the hotels, they could see the beaches and the palm trees. The ship was denied entry into American shores and had to sail back to Europe.

Do we know why they were denied access to Cuba?

Scott Miller: In terms of Cuba, we don't have the same access to archival information and the same freedoms that we do in archives in the United States, but as far as we know, and this is really sort of the pity of it all, the island of Cuba, which is a small island, had a relatively generous refugee policy toward Jews who were fleeing Nazi Germany, but sadly there was a corrupt Cuban immigration official named Benitez in Germany who was selling these Cuban landing permits for a lot of money and pocketing the money himself and they were not legal visas, they were just landing permits and there's a theory that the St. Louis passengers were denied entry into Cuba, it was really a way of the Cuban government telling Benitez we know what you're doing, it's not legal and we're not going to honor your landing certificates. So, in a certain way the St. Louis passengers fell prey to the infighting in the Cuban government. There was also growing xenophobic, anti-Semitic sentiment in Cuba. I understand that the week – the very week that the St. Louis sailed towards Cuban shores, there was a very large pro-fascist, anti-immigrant, anti-Semitic rally in Havana and the St. Louis was a rather large, conspicuous ship, it was almost 1,000 passengers. So, the timing was very bad for the St. Louis.

Did any of the passengers attempt to get back to Cuba after the incident?

Scott Miller: That is correct. In fact, there were a number of St. Louis passengers who ended up in Europe, were able to get out of Europe and went to Cuba in 1940, '41, '42.

Did the captain of the Saint Louis change course or he did go immediately back to Europe?

Scott Miller: Captain Schroeder did this with the following in mind: most of the passengers on the St. Louis had waiting numbers to get into the United States. They were going into Cuba as a place to wait until their waiting number, their immigration waiting number came up in the United

States, and again, people – passengers on the St. Louis were considered the lucky ones because they got to wait or they thought they'd be able to wait in Cuba, which is so close – as we all know, to Florida. At that point, Jews were – had waiting numbers were waiting in South America, in Asia, anywhere but Germany, so the ones in Cuba were considered to be the lucky ones. So, Captain Schroeder decided that he would try entering into the United States because it was really – when you think about it, it was just a matter of letting the passengers in a little early. They had waiting numbers to the United States. They weren't even today what we call boat people because in fact they had paperwork, it was a matter of letting them in a little early. That was Captain Schroeder's – it was a real strategy that he had.

Was this out of the captain's own initiative?

Scott Miller: It was mainly Captain Schroeder's initiative. There was a passenger committee of a few passengers and they were in daily conversation about this, but this was really Captain Schroeder's initiative. He decided to steer the ship towards the United States.

Were there any attempts to communicate with the WH?

Scott Miller: He – they – the ship approaches US shores and they send a telegram to President Roosevelt and to the State Department asking for entry into the United States for these passengers based on the fact that the passengers had waiting numbers to get into the United States. As far as we know the telegram that was sent to the White House never answered, but they did receive a reply from the State Department from the chief of the visa division, a Mr. Warren, and Mr. Warren said that the passengers would have to wait their turn 'till the waiting numbers came up and they could not stay on American shores.

Did the events of the Saint Louis become public as they unfolded?

Scott Miller: Absolutely, as was the St. Louis, it was headlines in the United States. People listened to it on radio, this drama on high seas.

What was the context in the United States while the passengers in the Saint Louis waited on board?

Scott Miller: There was, first of all, to be very forward, to be very blunt, anti-Semitism was at its height during those very years in the United States. It was known that the St. Louis was a ship of Jewish refugees, there was great public display of anti-Semitism and xenophobia, something that younger people today it's hard to even relate to, how publicly acceptable it was in that era. The United States also in the throes of a depression. Typically, during a depression, the government does not

allow in more refugees, they don't increase their refugee quota. There was fear of competition for jobs. In that era, it could be anything from public signs on country clubs that no Jews or dogs are allowed. People were blatantly denied employment because they were Jewish or because they were an immigrant, perhaps from southern or eastern Europe.

Is there any proof the denial of access was a conspiracy by Nazis?

Scott Miller: As we know, there's no documentation that there was a conspiracy between the Nazi party and immigration officials in Cuba or even the United States. That's not to say that this did not play into the hands of Nazi propaganda, the idea that nobody wants the Jews. So, it still could've been a propaganda victory for the Nazis even though it wasn't a conspiracy. This was a year after the Evian Conference, which was just such a stunning statement on the part of 32 Western countries that really, nobody wanted the Jews and nobody wanted refugees, or at least no country was willing to increase its refugee quota, with the exception of the Dominican Republic for farmers.

Was there any pressure or support from the Jewish community to get the passengers to safety?

Scott Miller: At that point, the idea was that the ship would go back to Germany, and as you can imagine, there was mass panic on the ship. There were threats, even, of mass suicide, and but Captain Schroeder sailed back, steered the ship very slowly past Germany – excuse me, Captain Schroeder steered the ship very slowly back toward Germany, but in the meantime, he was in negotiations with the American-Jewish Joint Distribution Committee and a deal was brokered that four Western European countries, other than Germany – France, Holland, Belgium and England – would take in the passengers. And at the time, this was considered a happy ending for the story. We know from history, hindsight is 20/20, we know what happened. Three out of those four Western European countries were invaded by the Nazis, but in June of 1939, specifically June 17, 1939, when the passengers disembarked, not in Hamburg but in Antwerp and were dispersed between the four countries, this was considered the happy ending of the story because the passengers did not have to go back to Germany.

You co-authored a project in search of the fate of each of the Passengers. What motivated you to go after this story?

Scott Miller: First of all, our interest was not in retelling the story of the St. Louis and the drama on high seas. This was a very well-known American saga. We wanted to find out what became of the passengers on the St. Louis. This was an unsolved mystery that really hovered over America for nearly 60 years. Whatever became of the passengers, one by one by

one, who sailed on the St. Louis? And we embarked on this project really for a number of reasons. One, you could say we had some unfinished business with this story. We had some unfinished business with the American government. We wanted to show that there were individual consequences to a less-than-generous refugee policy in a time of need, and in the case of the St. Louis, where there were 937 passengers, we wanted to show that there were 937 individual consequences to this ship being sent back. We say here at the Holocaust Museum, "What you do matters," and what the American government did really mattered 937 times over. We also wanted to be able to tell these individual stories. History is really about people. The Holocaust is not one story, it's millions of stories of victims. It's millions of stories of survivors, of collaborators, of perpetrators, of rescuers. We wanted to tell the individual stories. We also chose to research what became of the passengers, because when you think about it, the story of the St. Louis is really the place where Holocaust history and American history intersect, and what better place than the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, where the nation's memorial to the victims of the Holocaust, what better place to research the fate of the passengers than right here? And the other reason that we wanted to do it was simply the thrill of the chase, the challenge, could we find out what happened to all 937 passengers?

Did most of the passengers on the Saint Louis die in the war?

Scott Miller: Yeah, we found out – first of all, every story that we found out was, in a sense, new, but the big picture – was we found out that most of the St. Louis passengers survived the war. This was a little known fact. Even the St. Louis survivors themselves thought they were they lucky few. They didn't realize that the majority had survived the war, but the fact that the majority survived does not diminish from the tragedy. In a certain way, it accentuates the tragedy. The reason that this – the scales were tipped in favor of survival for this particular group of Jews caught up in the Holocaust was because, as I said earlier, they had waiting numbers to get into the United States. So in late 1939 into 1940, '41, even early 1942, with great difficulty, but still, they were – dozens of them, hundreds of them were able to get out of Europe, because their waiting numbers came up, but there were 254 who were – who died during the Holocaust, most of them murdered at Auschwitz and Sobibór. They also had waiting numbers. Their waiting numbers could've been coming up as they were being deported or a day after or the day before. So the same logic which enabled the majority to survive could've enabled all of them to survive. I go back to what I said earlier, it was just a matter of letting them in a little early. So this was a major research revelation for us, that the majority survived. It was always believed that the majority of St. Louis passengers were killed.

How many of these passengers made it back to the US?

Scott Miller: So there were over 600 who survived the war, out of which the majority, over 500, came to the United States. and there were probably – I don't know the exact number, but about 100 who went to other countries, either stayed in the country they were in Europe, there was a handful that went to Israel, there was a handful that went to Australia, Canada, South America. So it really, in a certain way, reflected the Jewish diaspora and dispersion.

What is the lesson that we have learned from these events?

Scott Miller: These events really – events like the St. Louis and the denial of entry for the St. Louis passengers, I think, makes the American government and the American people ask – difficult s about refugees, the place of America for immigrants, how many immigrants can one let in a year. I grew up in New York, my grandparents came to America from Russia at the turn of the last century around 1905, and for me, the Statue of Liberty is everything. To me, that's the quintessential American symbol is the Statue of Liberty. We're a country of the descendants of immigrants and refugees. So I think the implications of a story like the St. Louis is that the United States has not always lived up to the Statue of Liberty and what that stands for, and it's one of the hard s, as I said, that we have to ask ourselves. How come it happened, could it happen again, are there similar situations now, and I would hope when people are thinking about – refugee policy, which I know is very complicated, that they would think, though, about the St. Louis and what took place in 1939.

Was the US refugee policy discriminatory?

Scott Miller: Refugee policy, immigration policy and also prejudice, in general. Not all but some of immigration policy, refugee policy, is informed by prejudices. Less today than it was in the 1930s, when clearly, anti-Semitism and xenophobia reflected American immigration policy, and the St. Louis passengers were really the unfortunate outcome of that.

Could the events of the Saint Louis be repeated today?

Scott Miller: I would hope it wouldn't, but we've learned from history, history can repeat itself, never to say never, but what I think could happen again is that people just become apathetic and maybe not worry that there's a ship lingering off the coast of Miami with refugees. I think the apathy is the thing that could really happen again.

Have you met any of the survivors at the USHMM?

Scott Miller: One of the survivors, they were two St. Louis passengers in the exhibit, and one said to the other that they had no room for us, but today they allow in thousands and thousands of refugees, and the other St. Louis passenger turned to him and said, "I'd like to think it's because of us that they do let them in."

Was Captain Schroeder a hero of this story?

Scott Miller: Captain Schroeder, really from day one of the journey, and I've heard this from every single St. Louis passenger that I have met, when I asked about Captain Schroeder, they gave the same answer that Captain Schroeder – did what he could and beyond to help the passengers and to make them feel comfortable. That St. Louis – excuse me, that Captain Schroeder instructed his crew, many of whom were members of the Nazi party, that these individuals are Germans and that they purchased their tickets like anybody else and they are to be treated like any other Germans, and that's a sentence that most St. Louis passengers in 1939 had not heard since 1933, that they are Germans like anybody else and are to be treated like other Germans. Captain Schroeder set up makeshift synagogues in the rooms in the – on board the ship to have Shabbat services and even ordered the removal of the swastika Nazi flag from those rooms. Captain Schroeder, of course, then on the return journey to Europe did what he could to negotiate with the Joint Distribution Committee and the four Western European – countries to take in the passengers. He was an active participant in their rescue, and in a certain way, the fact that the St. Louis passengers were sent to Western Europe, of course it meant the death of 254 of them. Many of them can sort of trace back their rescue and their survival to the efforts of Captain Schroeder, and Captain Schroeder was recognized posthumously at the Yad Vashem as a rescuer, and a group of St. Louis passengers went to Jerusalem and planted trees in his memory, and there were a number of St. Louis passengers who stayed in contact with Captain Schroeder after the war. There's a real feeling of gratitude and recognition of goodness on the part of Captain Schroeder.

What was the fate of captain Schroeder upon his return to Nazi Germany?

Scott Miller: As far as I know, Captain Schroeder, this – was older and this was his last voyage. He was not persecuted when he went back to Germany, but he certainly wasn't rewarded, either, for what he did. Either – obviously not even during the war or after the war. I believe he lived most of his life in relative poverty. He did receive some money from St. Louis passengers and he died relatively unknown in Germany. His

reputation in later years was revived posthumously due to the efforts and gratitude of the St. Louis passengers.

What is there to be learned from the events of the Saint Louis in 1939?

Scott Miller:

Well, as an American, I learned, one, that you could really never be apathetic. I asked, where was the American public when this was happening, when this group of refugees, many of whom had paperwork to come into the United States, where was the outrage? I mean, there were some protests in Miami, but where was the national outrage? I, again think, as every person in a great democracy like this one has to do, to think critically about your history, that you learn, as I mentioned earlier about the Statue of Liberty and what that stands for and I look at my own family story, which was extremely fortunate coming here in 1905 and escaping the pogroms of Russia and making an incredible life here that's now through around the fourth generation, but I realize that it wasn't that way for everybody, certainly not the St. Louis passengers. I realize also the importance and the significance of the state of Israel, of a sovereign Jewish state, and whenever I land in Ben Gurion airport, I think to myself, "If only this was here in 1939," and how important it is that there's one country in the world, just one, where the port of entry is controlled by Jews, and no immigration official can say there are too many Jews in this country, which unfortunately happened in the United States in the era of the St. Louis. But I also – thinking about the St. Louis passengers also makes me embrace America even more, because when I speak to the St. Louis passengers about their feelings of the United States, though they have such obvious resentment about what happened and how American refugee policy, in certain ways, destroyed their lives. I mean, they may have survived, but they had siblings on the statement or parents who did not survive. On the other hand, they are really the quintessential American refugee success story, and they love America like all other immigrants do. Because the country, when we did when America did take them in, though a little bit too late, when it did take them in, this country embraced them like it does most immigrants. So, looking at America through their eyes, 60, 70 years later, it makes me embrace the country even more. And also, how the St. Louis passengers, how people listen to their stories and learn from them. They speak in schools, in synagogues, in churches, in museums around the country, and what an open society this has been and so receptive to their story. People just want to know more and more and more, so that speaks very well for the United States.

Is there a message in the Saint Louis events for future generations?

Scott Miller:

Wow. I have to think about it, but the message would be to – don't take the blessings of democracy for granted. Democracy is very – can be very fragile, so be aware there can be sort of cracks in the wall, in the great wall of democracy, and if there's prejudice, don't assume it will go

away and that democracy will just take care of it, that you really – people have to act. People can't be bystanders. During the Holocaust in Europe or in the United States, as the St. Louis was approaching our shores, most people were not perpetrators most people were not victims, most people were not rescuers, most people were bystanders. I don't want to say innocent bystanders, because if you're a bystander, I guess you're – you can't be really that innocent, but don't be a bystander would be – is the – I think the ultimate message of the story of the St. Louis. Because had there been just more public outcry, the – all the St. Louis passengers might've ended up on American shores, and as years go on, there's less excuse to be a bystander. You can't say, with all the technology and CNN, none of this existed in 1939 and who knows what's going to exist in 50 years from now. It will only be more communication, not less. No one can say they don't know, they didn't know it happened. Even today, we can watch. In the comfort of our homes, we watch genocide being perpetrated in Rwanda or in Darfur. Nobody can say they don't know, unless they're a hermit. They just can't say that. So my message ultimately would be don't be complacent in this wonderful, great country and democracy of ours. You can't be a bystander.

Is there a universal moral to the Saint Louis saga?

Scott Miller: No, it's not only a Jewish story. It's a story that happened to Jews, but there – within the story itself, they're half the picture. The other half are – it's really the American government and refugee policy. So even from a historical point of view it's not just a Jewish story, but on a broader level, no, there are universal implications here about refugee policy, about not being apathetic. There are people, I'm sure, who are turned away from shores all over the world on a daily basis. So, it is really a – in a certain way, the quintessential universal story. It's about people in great distress and despair looking for help and being denied help. That could happen on the street two blocks from here, who knows. So, it's – in a certain way, it's the most universal of stories.

Were the Saint Louis events a pivotal event in reaching the Final Solution?

Scott Miller: I don't know if it was directly related to the decision execute the final solution, but this was a pivotal event in the sense of Western failure to rescue. The St. Louis has come to symbolize American inaction. In other words, I don't think it's really so much about the final solution. I don't know – I don't think it influenced the Germans, but it's about us. It's about America. This was a major rejection of – it wasn't just a theoretical political rejection that happened at the Evian Conference. These were actual people, 937 of them, mostly Jews off the coast of Miami Beach were denied entry. So, this was really pivotal because this was the litmus test that America really was not going to let in more refugees into this country. They were so close to the shores. So, as I

said, the St. Louis has really come to symbolize American inactivity in the fact of evil during World War II.

Can anyone deny the events around the Saint Louis actually took place?

Scott Miller:

The – well, there are people already denying that the Holocaust happened and I'm sure, in another 50 years, there will still be people who denying that the Holocaust happened or that the St. Louis happened and on a certain level, what I will tell the deniers is the same thing that I would say to anyone who doubts any historical event that look at the documentation. That's why it is so important that the Holocaust Museum collects as much documentation and testimonial information from survivors as possible. The deniers, really in a certain way, picked the wrong historical event to deny because there is so much documentation, German documentation, post-war German documentation from the Nuremburg trials where the Nazis never denied that the crime took place. We have miles and miles and miles here in this museum, at the Holocaust Museum, of documentation. So, we're just increasing our documentation, we're increasing our survivor testimony and it's simply presenting the facts. I don't believe people should engage in argument or debate with Holocaust deniers. It's simply just the historical data, the historical facts.