The *St. Louis* Passengers and the Holocaust

REFUGE DENIED

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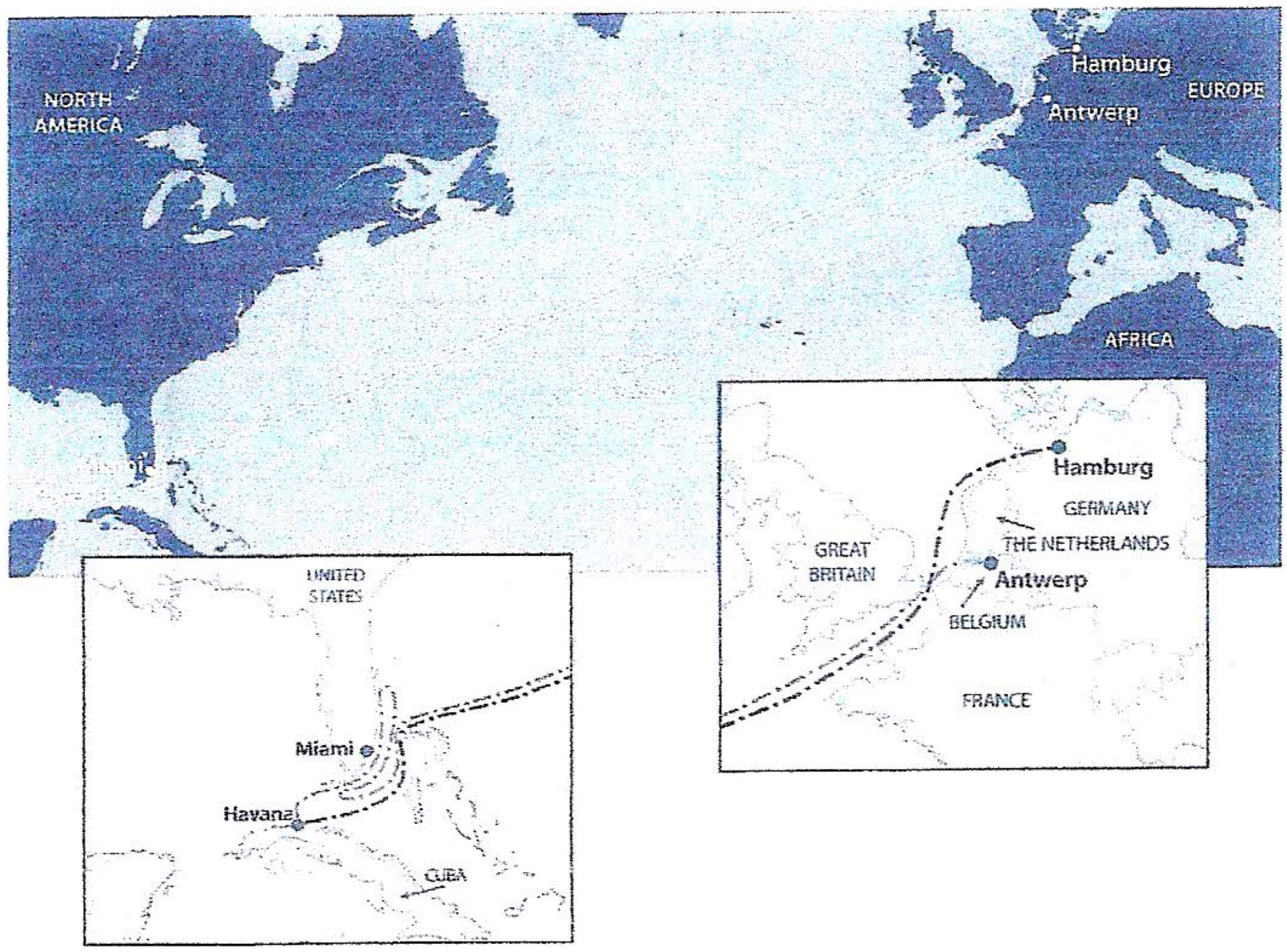
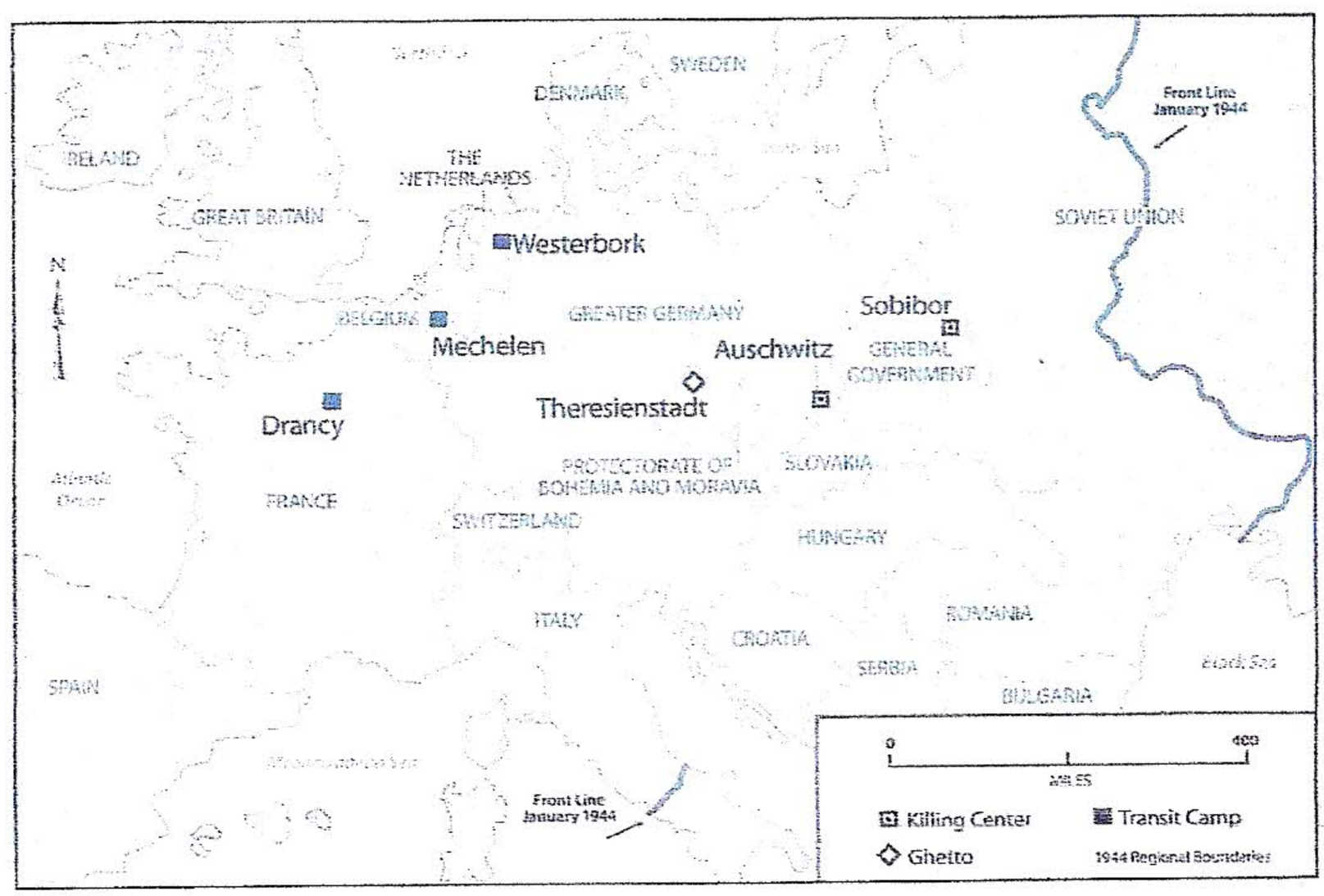
United States Holocaust Memorial Museum



The voyage of the *St. Louis*, May/June 1939. (USHMM)



Major sites where *St. Louis* passengers were interned or deported, including ghettos and killing centers. (USHMM)

Introduction

During the last week of May 1939, the government of Cuba officially refused to grant entry to more than nine hundred Jews fleeing Hitler's Germany. The people in question were passengers aboard the Hamburg-America Line's MS (Motor Ship) *St. Louis*. Previous boatloads of refugees had successfully found sanctuary in Havana. But now, quite suddenly, a convergence of factors—including greed, political infighting, public agitation against immigration, fascist influences, and anti-Semitism (a mix to be detailed elsewhere in this volume)—changed that equation, making the majority of those aboard the *St. Louis* unwelcome on Cuban soil.

Shortly thereafter, the German liner cruised within sight of Miami, where Captain Gustav Schröder was barred from making port. Several U.S. Coast Guard cutters surrounded the vessel to make sure that none of the would-be émigrés attempted to swim for shore.

Most of the *St. Louis's* passengers had already applied for United States visas. They had intended to stay in Cuba only until such time as their numbers came up on Bureau of Immigration and Naturalization quota lists. Despite this, appeals to President and Mrs. Franklin Delano Roosevelt that referenced the persecution the refugees would encounter should they be returned to Germany went unanswered. Facing repatriation, the *St Louis* passengers openly discussed the possibility of mass suicide.

Finally, on June 12, after many days of negotiations, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) brokered a solution. Several European countries other than Germany agreed to

take in the 908 passengers forced to return to Europe. Although 288 refugees wound up in Britain, the balance (except for Istvan Winkler, who was not a refugee at the time) went to the Netherlands, Belgium, and France and to uncertain fates in a Europe about to be overrun by Hitler.

The *St. Louis* affair has come to symbolize the world's indifference to the plight of European Jewry on the eve of World War II. The episode speaks directly to contradictions in American society when it was faced with the increasingly alarming effects of Hitler's totalitarian regime. On the one hand, there was widespread disapproval of Nazi brutality and persecution of Jews and other minorities. On the other hand, tough economic times, isolationism, and anti-Semitism hindered any moves to let more refugees in. In the end, the resulting gap—"between sympathy and action"—proved too great to overcome.

No study of United States policy and politics during the Holocaust can ever be complete without a full understanding of the *St. Louis* story: not just the events of late May and early June 1939 but also what happened afterward to the hundreds of desperate men, women, and children. Under the auspices of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Sarah and Scott have worked since 1996 to track the fates and resurrect the stories of the *St. Louis* passengers. *Refuge Denied* presents the fruits of this quest.

Refuge Denied is dedicated to the families, past and present, of the *St. Louis*. With reference to the greatest number of passengers, this book is intended to serve as a testament to the capacity of individuals to endure in the face of injustice. With reference to the balance, *Refuge Denied* will have to serve as something else altogether: an act of witness to terrible, senseless loss.

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A Mystery Beckons

Dr. Clark Blatteis—a distinguished, gray-haired physiologist associated with the University of Tennessee College of Medicine—paced the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum one warm spring day in April 1996. The serious, soft-spoken doctor had a certain look, a particular gait and demeanor of the type that veteran Museum staffers had come to recognize. There were many who visited every day simply as tourists. But there were others who arrived with a different purpose. These were pilgrims with a sense of mission. These were searchers intent on rediscovering and giving witness to their turbulent and troubled past. As for Dr. Blatteis, any Museum employee worth his or her salt would have instantly, and correctly, figured him for a pilgrim and searcher rather than a sightseer.

Walking the sometimes narrow and frequently dark halls of the Museum's exhibition space, Blatteis passed greatly enlarged photographs taken at Buchenwald and Dachau. Uniformed prisoners stared out with blank, lifeless eyes. Blatteis returned their gaze, glad his father was not among them. After all, Ernst (Elias) Blatteis—shoe salesman and once-proud Berliner—had endured and then risen from both these terrible places, hadn't he? In the end, Ernst (Elias) had not only emerged from the camps but had gone on with his wife, Gerda, and his young son to make a life in the United States—a land that at first had wanted nothing to do with them.

Blatteis paused for an especially long time at the Museum's exhibit showcasing the story of the German liner *St. Louis*. Designed quite purposely to be tight and claustrophobic, thus mimicking

the narrowing of options experienced by German Jews during the late 1930s, the display dedicated to the *St. Louis* sat wedged in a narrow corner on one of the Museum's upper floors. The exhibit used contemporary newspaper articles, passenger belongings, and original documents together with cutting-edge multimedia to deliver a condensed rendition of the *St. Louis* saga.

The photos at the start of the corridor presented placid, unremarkable scenes of a typical luxury voyage. Antique black-and-white images depicted young couples playing shuffleboard, grandparents lounging in deck chairs, happy children cavorting, and stylish women sipping champagne at formal dinners. Blatteis also viewed relatively ordinary artifacts, including the hat once worn by Captain Gustav Schröder.

Farther down the dark hall, however, the display turned ominous. Several old newspaper photos, greatly enlarged, showed the desperate scene in Havana harbor. Small boats crowded with relatives and friends circled the sequestered *St. Louis*. Still more vessels—police boats standing as "suicide guards"—hovered even closer. Near the newspaper photos, a glass case housed the original telegram from *St. Louis* passengers addressed to the wife of Federico Bru, president of Cuba, pleading the case of women and children aboard the vessel.

Clark Blatteis had himself been one of those children.

Thus, later that same day in the Museum's well-lighted, library-like room housing the Benjamin and Vladka Meed Registry of Jewish Holocaust Survivors, he took his quest for the past one step further. Launched in 1981 by the American Gathering of Holocaust Survivors (an organization founded by the Meeds, two survivors of the Warsaw ghetto), the Registry had been donated to the Museum in 1993. Survivors and family members come from all over the world to search the database for information about lost relatives. But, oddly, the Registry included hardly any of the names for which Blatteis sought information.[1]

After spending some unproductive time at the computers, Blatteis decided to try another tack. "My name is Clark Blatteis," he said, extending his hand to a young woman working at a nearby desk. "I was a passenger on the *St. Louis*. I'm looking for more information about my parents and some other passengers. Can you help me?"

Sarah Ogilvie had never planned for a career as a Holocaust researcher, curator, and educator. Nevertheless she had long nourished a deep interest in the great catastrophe imposed on European Jewry under the Nazis. She had grown up on tales told by her father, a World War II U.S. Army sergeant who once helped administer a displaced persons (DP) camp in Austria. "It was definitely a defining experience in his life," Sarah recalls.

> I was captivated by his stories. I guess it's also important to note that my father was a Presbyterian minister. A lot of our family dinners were spent discussing and dissecting big questions like "How could the Holocaust have happened?" Also, I was a high school student in 1978 when the television docudrama *The Holocaust* aired, stimulating discussion across the country and generating great interest on the part of students like me who had studied European history but had heard no mention of this cataclysmic event (in class at least). Apparently I was part of a wave of students who went to school the next day after the piece aired demanding to know more. There was a real element of "How can we consider these teachers to be credible if they're teaching us Western Civilization but omitting the one event that seems to make that an oxymoron?"

Much later, during two years in an interdisciplinary PhD program at Emory University, Sarah pursued in-depth studies of the Holocaust's various ramifications—economic and theological as well as historical.

By the summer of 1989, Sarah had long since settled for her master's and was living in Washington, D.C. Ironically, she was not even seriously looking for a job when, casually glancing through the *Washington Post*, she spotted an announcement for a research post at the fledgling United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, a position that sounded as though it had been custom designed for her. Sarah spent the next three and a half years helping develop what would become the Museum's permanent exhibition. Upon the opening of the Museum in April 1993, she received a promotion to deputy director of the Meed Registry, the position she still held when she found herself greeted by Clark Blatteis in 1996.[2]

Blatteis told Sarah he was especially hoping to find information concerning the fates of children with whom, as a

seven-year-old, he had enjoyed high, happy times during the *St. Louis*'s journey. Most important, he was interested in finding the whereabouts of Rudi Jacobson, a boy with whom he had become very fast friends. He recalled how one day early in the trip, the two wound up in disgrace after hiding in a lifeboat when they should have been at dinner. By the time they reappeared, their parents and the *St. Louis*'s captain—fearing they had been lost overboard—had organized a search party and were busy scouring the ship. The boys were punished by their parents for inconveniencing the crew and their fellow passengers.

"Generally, I have memories of having had a lot of fun on the ship. I have no great recollection of the consternation that must have been felt by the older ones when we were not allowed to land. So either we, the younger ones, were shielded very well, or it didn't affect us. We were not understanding. I just remember running around and swimming in the pool and having a real nice time."[3] But Blatteis also recalled standing with his father at the ship's rail, looking at the lights of Miami, and hearing his father say that Florida's golden shore, so near, might as well be four thousand miles away for all the good it did them.

Although Blatteis had many other clear recollections, he had never discussed the *St. Louis* with his parents, a fact that he regretted after their deaths in the 1980s. Nor had he talked with them much about the troubles that afflicted the Blatteis family before and after that fateful journey. It was the outline of this story that Blatteis now shared with Sarah, thus supplying the first piece for a puzzle that she had not yet realized needed solving.

The Blatteis family of Berlin were Ashkenazi Jews, and not particularly religious. They celebrated the High Holy Days but did not regularly attend synagogue. (In later years, when young Clark reached the age of manhood, his parents did not even bother to have a bar mitzvah ceremony for him.) Religious or not, the Blatteis clan became targets of Nazi power in June 1938. During a sales trip to the eastern German town of Cottbus, Clark's father found himself placed under arrest—his only crime being his Jewish descent.

He was due to come back on Clark's birthday, June 25, 1938. "I remember particularly because one of my uncles gave me a gift of a record, and the record was 'The Toreador Song' from

S.S. ST. LOUIS
(THISCORNIA)

Surname	M.	W.	Maiden Name	Family Status	Case No.
BLATTEIS	ELIAS	GERDA			

ADDRESS Belgium

Relatives on S. S. St. Louis

1st Name	Date of Birth	Nativity	Passport	Occupation	Registration with Consul		
					Date	Place	Waiting No.
M Elias	8/15/00	Arnsdorf		Vertreter		Berlin	14856
W Gerda	9/14/00	Lupow/P				"	14857
CH Klaus	6/25/32	Berlin				"	14858
2							
3							

	Name	Address	Contact Through	Result of Contact
Affiants	Benjamin S. Blatteis	324 Lincoln Place Bklyn, N.Y.		
	Benjamin Blatteis	1096 Park Place Brooklyn, N.Y.		
Relatives in U. S.				
Relatives in Belgium				
England	S. Blatteis	London, 150 Walm.Lane Cricklewood		
~~Holland~~				
France	G. Bergmann	London W. 1, 8, Conduit Str.Regentstr.		

Passenger registration card for the Blatteis family. (USHMM)

Carmen. I don't know if that has anything to do with my lifelong love of opera, but there it is, imprinted in my memory. There was a knock and my mother went to the door expecting to open it to my father, but instead two policemen were there. . . . A little while later, my mother went to visit him."

Clark's father was first put in a regular prison in Cottbus. Then, eventually, the SS moved him to Buchenwald and, after some months, to Dachau. "It was while he was in the concentration camp that my mother began the work to get us out of the country. And it was during that time that she, I guess, purchased the passes, these permits, for Cuba, where we could wait for our American visas to come up."

The shoe salesman Ernst (Elias) Blatteis was released only after his wife, Gerda, presented the Gestapo with the Blatteis family's visas for entry to Cuba together with their tickets for departure aboard the *St. Louis*. Meanwhile, Clark's education in German public schools had ended abruptly following Kristallnacht—November 9–10, 1938—with the Reich's November 15 announcement that Jewish children were no longer welcome at institutions of learning.

"I had been, during the time while my mother was busy making all these arrangements, moved to one of my

grandmother's—my maternal grandmother's—and stayed with her." But soon the grandmother immigrated to Johannesburg, South Africa, where several other family members had already moved a few years before. "After she left I returned to my mother. Then my father was released—with a shaved head. I hardly recognized him. He joined us in Berlin, but then later my mother and I traveled to Hamburg, and the *St. Louis,* just the two of us by ourselves. My father came separately. There was a reason for this arrangement, but I forget now what it was. I do recall, however, that we boarded the ship together."

Likewise they disembarked together, at Antwerp, after the grave disappointment at Havana and the rejection off the coast of the United States. "We had hoped to be selected for England, because my grandparents, my father's parents, were there. But that didn't happen." The family eventually settled in an apartment in Brussels, where Clark resumed his schooling and used his knack for languages to pick up French very quickly. "I served as translator for my parents for quite some time, because it took them a whole lot longer. In fact, I don't think my father ever learned to speak French very well. But I did." Clark's mother, meanwhile, wasted no time in applying—actually reapplying, as they had already filed paperwork before the voyage of the *St. Louis*—for American visas.

World War II began in September 1939, but Belgium was not invaded until May 1940. "In Europe at those latitudes in the fair weather the nights are short. I think the Germans attacked at about four in the morning. And we heard *boom boom boom,* the anti-aircraft guns. I remember going to the window and seeing these little white puffs exploding in the air and planes way, way up. Then people came running from upper floors. They knocked on our door, and they were telling us that the Germans were bombing and that we had to go to the cellar, which we did. Soon the bombs began to fall. It was a very frightening noise. I remember I was very, very frightened."

There was a lot of destruction—not right where the Blatteis family lived but around them. Many of the windows in the Blatteis family's building were shattered by the explosions. "My father and I went out sometime later, maybe a day or two later, to see what had happened. And when we returned, my mother had been arrested as an enemy alien, a German, by the Belgian

authorities. We had to go try and get her. The Belgians had assembled all the German refugees in a school. It was not the school to which I had been going but another one also nearby. So we went in and we found my mother, and we were all three interviewed and then released."

With the Germans in rapid advance, the only thing for Clark and his parents to do was what everyone else was doing: head south. They could not carry much, so most of what they owned had to be left behind. As the German Wehrmacht (army) closed in on the city, the Blatteis family joined the throng at the Brussels train station, vainly attempting to board what was rumored to be the last train leaving. "That train departed and it looked like there wouldn't be another. Then we and many of the other refugees were thrown out of the station, and the station doors were locked." With no other option, the family began walking south. They had not gone far when, serendipitously, they encountered a friendly Belgian soldier who informed them that another train would depart shortly and that they should hike back to the station along the railroad tracks so as to circumvent the locked doors. "We made that second train, the true last train. And later, when our train caught up with the previous one, we saw that it had been bombed, and they, all the people on it, were dead and wounded: a terrible scene."

Many of the passengers on the Blatteis's train disembarked at Paris. "Nobody thought the Germans would ever get to Paris. That city, for some reason, seemed safe. But my parents knew no one in Paris, so we stayed on the train and continued south to Toulouse near the town of Roques, where we spent about a month, maybe two." Toulouse was pleasant enough at first, but every day, as the Germans moved deeper and deeper into France, it got more crowded. Nevertheless the camp remained a safe place to be—at least for the moment. When France signed its surrender (euphemistically called an "armistice") on June 22, 1940, the document set the demarcation line *north* of Roques. Thus Clark and his parents were spared from falling into German hands.

Clark recalled that he personally enjoyed life in Toulouse. "There were lots of children to play with, and there were lots of games. It was summer, and we were camping. But my parents were wondering, of course, what to do next. We couldn't stay

there forever. Somebody suggested Morocco, which sounded very exotic, far away, and removed from difficulties. Of course, we needed to get visas to travel through Spain, because it was well known that the Spanish—unlike the authorities in some other countries—were arresting refugees traveling illegally. My mother was very ingenious in these things, and somehow she got the appropriate paperwork." Soon thereafter, Clark and his parents went by car with another couple up into to the Pyrenees, crossed into Spain, and then journeyed to Algerciras.

Clark and his parents crossed the Strait of Gibraltar on a ferry to Spanish Morocco and then traveled to French Morocco and beautiful, white Casablanca.[4] There the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) and a group of Moroccan Jews helped the Blatteis family find a small studio apartment, which was all they could afford. "My parents started me back at school immediately, and I attended the public school until the Vichy government expelled Jewish children from the schools. After that I went to a local Jewish school." Meanwhile, Clark's father, who had been a salesman all his life, now worked as a common laborer. He learned to cut leather for shoes. His wages were very low, but the family was able to pay its way.

"Every once in a while there would be a panic," Clark remembered. "Rumors would fly round that everyone, all we stateless refugees, all we people without nationalities, were going to be arrested." But it never happened. There were no German occupiers in Morocco, just a token force. "German submariners would often take their leaves in Morocco. They would be wearing civilian clothes, but you knew who they were. They recognized us, too, of course, and realized we were German Jews. But it is interesting, and maybe a bit odd, that they were never unpleasant or impolite. So it wasn't easy for us there, but it also wasn't that bad considering what was going on in other places."

Still, Clark and his parents were relieved to see the Americans arrive in 1942. "I left the Jewish school and went back to the French school after the Americans came and the Vichy were gone. Finally, in 1948, we got visas for the United States. You know, it is funny and it is sad. We were contacted after the war by the Germans, the new German government, inviting us back to Germany. Some people did go, but my parents had no interest.

Germany was over for them, and for me. I was sixteen when we came to the United States in 1948."

It was impossible to listen to Clark Blatteis's story without considering the vagaries of fate. Seemingly small questions—such as what train one happened to get on, which station one happened to get off at, and the random latitude of a dotted line drawn on an armistice map—could ultimately have quite large (in fact, life-or-death) consequences.

For the passengers of the *St. Louis,* selection for Britain had meant virtually guaranteed survival, whereas selection for the Netherlands, Belgium, or France meant continued risk once the Nazis overran those countries. Writing in his 1967 book *While Six Million Died,* Arthur Morse said that "the only *St. Louis* refugees protected from the Nazi terror were those who had found sanctuary in Britain. Many—it is impossible to know how many—died in the German gas chambers following the Nazi invasions of Belgium, Holland and France."[5] Seven years later, Gordon Thomas and Max Morgan-Witts echoed this sentiment in their 1974 bestseller *Voyage of the Damned:* "For many of the refugees on the *St. Louis,* their rescue proved to be the beginning of the end. [Those] who went to England were the luckiest. . . . No one can say with certainty how many of the *St. Louis* passengers eventually perished."[6] A 1976 movie based on the book (starring Faye Dunaway, Max Von Sydow, and Oskar Werner) ended with the same grim generalization. Yet here was a man sitting across from Sarah and bearing witness to the escape of his entire family. How many more *St. Louis* passengers got out alive? And how many did not? Compounding Sarah's question was the quirky fact—a coincidence?—that Clark Blatteis was the fourth *St. Louis* passenger to come into the Registry that week.

Listening to Dr. Blatteis narrate his family's utterly unique tale of survival, Sarah sensed that the largest part of the history of the *St. Louis* had yet to be researched and written. The ship's manifest—a part of the Museum collection that Sarah now allowed Blatteis to look at in its entirety—listed 937 passengers. Of that total, one passenger died en route to North America, 28 had been allowed to enter Cuba, 620 were returned to continental Europe, with 288 going to Britain. A passenger who attempted

suicide in Havana harbor was initially hospitalized there but later joined his family in Britain. This meant that out there, somewhere, were hundreds of individual stories waiting to be uncovered, hundreds of human dramas that deserved—no, demanded—recognition. In short order, Sarah decided to do her best to track down the fate of each and every *St. Louis* refugee and to write the final chapter of the infamous voyage.