



Wyner Family Jewish Heritage Center Spotlight

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Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society of Boston Case Files and the “Voyage of the Damned”

A wave of anti-Jewish violence swept Nazi Germany on November 9 and 10, 1938. Rioters burned and destroyed synagogues, looted and shattered the windows of Jewish-owned shops and businesses, and killed nearly 100 Jews in the pogrom that came to be known as *Kristallnacht*, or “Night of the Broken Glass.” In *Kristallnacht*’s immediate aftermath, nearly 30,000 German Jewish men were arrested and sent to concentration camps. Among those arrested were Moritz Epstein, Fritz Heidt, and Arthur Weinstock. The stories of their attempts to escape Europe are told, in part, through the resources of the Boston office of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS).

Picture postcard of the *St. Louis*.
Circa 1939. United States Holocaust
Memorial Museum, courtesy of
Julie Klein, photo by Max Reid.



On May 13, 1939, the Hamburg-America Line ocean liner *St. Louis* departed Hamburg for Havana, Cuba. On board were Moritz and his wife Bettina; Fritz and his wife Else; and Arthur with his wife Charlotte and son Ernst. Almost all the passengers were Jewish refugees who had applied for U.S. visas and held documents which allowed them to stay in Cuba until they could legally enter the U.S.

Just a week before the ship’s departure, however, the Cuban government had changed its immigration laws, voiding the passengers’ immigration papers. When the *St. Louis* arrived at Havana on May 27, the Cuban government admitted just 28 passengers—22 of whom were Jewish refugees who already held U.S. visas—and refused entry to the rest. After five days in the Havana harbor, the ship sailed toward Miami. The ship’s captain hoped the U.S. would agree to take the remaining 908 refugees, but the State Department and the White House did not allow their entry. Canada, too, decided not to admit the passengers. On June 6, the ship sailed back to Europe. With the help of negotiations by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee and other organizations, passengers were assigned to the four countries who had agreed to offer temporary asylum: Great Britain, France, Belgium, and the Netherlands.¹

Here the paths of the Epsteins, Weinstocks, and Heidts diverged. The

Passengers aboard the *St. Louis* in Havana harbor. From a photo album belonging to passenger Moritz Schoenberger. May 27–June 2, 1939. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Julie Klein.



Epsteins disembarked in France, the Heidts in Belgium, and the Weinstocks in the Netherlands. Two families eventually started new lives in the United States, and one family perished in the Holocaust.

Moritz and Bettina Epstein

Moritz Epstein was born on May 15, 1895, to Hermann and Ida (Weil) Epstein in Eichstetten, Germany. His wife Bettina was born on January 28, 1905, to Emil and Clara (Schwabacher) Kitzinger in Memmingen, Germany. The couple married on July 12, 1936, and settled in Pirmasens, where Moritz worked as a businessman in the shoe industry.²

On November 12, 1938, Moritz was arrested and, along with more than 10,000 Jewish men, sent to the Dachau concentration camp. He was released on December 5. A few months later, he and Bettina were aboard the *St. Louis*. When the ship was forced to return to Europe, the couple disembarked in France.

On January 22, 1940, HIAS contacted Simon Waters, presumably a potential donor, who lived at 222 Summer Street in Boston, and asked him to either send two steamship tickets on a neutral line or funds to buy tickets for the Epsteins. Waters responded by saying that he did not know the couple, and thus was not willing to provide assistance.³ HIAS's involvement ended there.

Despite this setback, the Epsteins sailed on the *DeGrasse* from Le Havre, France, and arrived in New York on February 26, 1940. According to the ship's manifest, their destination was the home of their friend Paul Wolff in Boston. Wolff, who himself had

immigrated to the United States in 1938 with his wife Ilse, was from Pirmasens, where the Epsteins had lived for several years.⁴

Moritz and Bettina held a variety of jobs. Moritz worked as a cleaner in a shoe factory, a salesman, and a manufacturer. Bettina worked as a tiller at a chemical company. The Epsteins later moved to South Florida, where Bettina died in August 1962. Moritz, now "Morris," remarried the following year. He died in Miami on July 15, 1977.⁵

Moritz's brother David was sent to Auschwitz on August 14, 1942, and died shortly thereafter. Little is known of the other family members' fates.

Fritz and Else Heidt

Fritz Heidt was born on November 4, 1908, in Schalke, Germany, to Max and Selma Heidt. His wife Else was born on September 15, 1908.⁶

Fritz was arrested in 1938 and interned at Sachsenhausen concentration camp. He was released on January 9, 1939. He and Else disembarked from the *St. Louis* in Belgium. After Germany invaded and occupied Belgium in May 1940, Fritz was one of more than 4,000 German Jewish refugees arrested by Belgian authorities. He was interned at St. Cyprien Camp in southern France and, when it was closed in late 1940 due to flooding,

he was marched about 280 miles west to Camp de Gurs. At some point Else moved from Belgium to France, presumably to be near her husband.

On April 10, 1941, HIAS contacted Walter Wulfsohn (perhaps a distant relative) at 14 Center Street in Cambridge, requesting that he sign three affidavits for the Heidts: a financial affidavit; a "so-called moral and political affidavit"; and a "Remote Relation Details," for persons in the United States who sponsored immigrants to whom they were not closely related.

Wulfsohn, who himself had emigrated from Germany three years earlier, wrote on April 26 that he was happy to sign the affidavits, but thought it wouldn't be helpful. He noted that he earned only \$30 a week and supported his wife and daughter. He also mentioned that he had already submitted an affidavit for his mother, who still lived in Germany. This response marked the end of HIAS's work with the Heidts.⁷

Nevertheless, the Heidts escaped France and somehow made their way to Trinidad, then part of the British West Indies. On June 19, 1941, they sailed on the *Acadia* to New York City, where they joined a cousin, Manfred Oppenheimer. The Heidts settled in the Washington Heights neighborhood of Manhattan. Else died on May 11,

1989, and Fritz, known as Fred, died on December 19, 1992.⁸

Arthur, Charlotte, and Ernst Weinstock

Arthur, or Avigdor, Weinstock was born on June 22, 1889, in Posen, Germany (now Poznań, Poland). His wife Charlotte was born on November 24, 1898, to Emma and David Marcus in Berlin. The couple's son, Ernst, was born on September 27, 1931, in Breslau, Germany (today Wrocław, Poland).⁹

Arthur was arrested on November 11, 1938, and sent to Buchenwald concentration camp. He was later released.

On May 2, 1939, HIAS wrote to Mark Linenthal at 16 Lincoln Street in Boston to acknowledge his signing of an affidavit on behalf of the Weinstock family and request additional documentation, including a copy of his 1938 tax return and a statement of his assets and liabilities, in order to move

the case forward. A May 5 HIAS case note states that affidavits on behalf of Charlotte and Ernst were given to a Mr. Windheim for signature, and that Mr. Windheim recommended that Samuel Ginsberg, of 6 Euclid Avenue in Winchester, Massachusetts, be an affidavit signee. Ginsberg signed these affidavits, but more documentation was needed. Nothing further is reported in the case file.¹⁰

The Weinstocks sailed on the *St. Louis* with extended family: Irma and Ison (Aron) Schild; Anna Daniel; and Alice Feilchenfeld, with her four young children, Wolf, Bertha, Heinz, and Raphael. Alice's husband, Bernhard, had sailed to Cuba previously and was there when the *St. Louis* arrived at Havana.

When the *St. Louis* left Havana for Europe, the group dispersed.

Bernard traveled to Miami and on to New York in 1940.

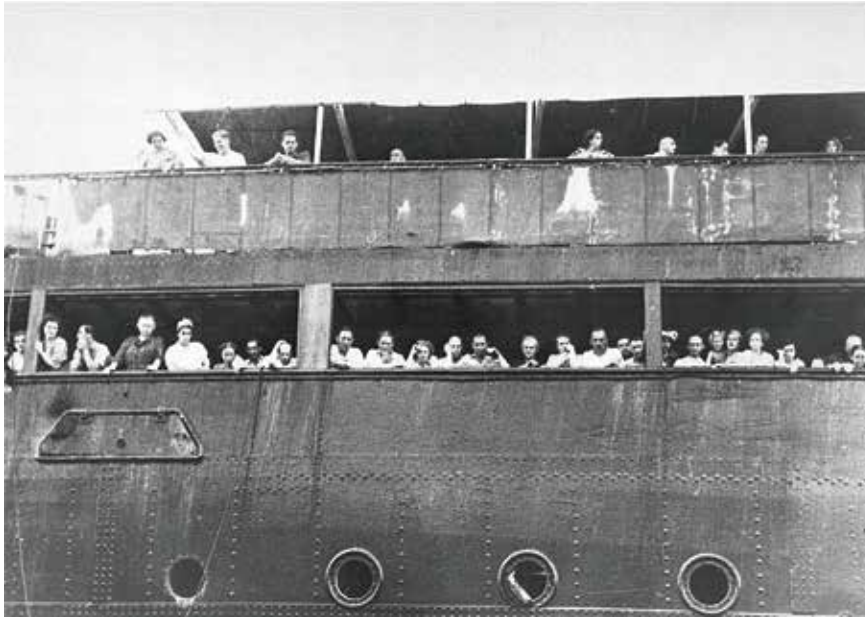
The Schilds disembarked in France. In September of 1942, they were both deported to Auschwitz, where they perished.

Alice Feilchenfeld and her children disembarked in Belgium, along with Anna Daniel. They settled for a time in Brussels; young Raphael died there. In 1946, the Feilchenfelds sailed on the *Uruguay* from Le Havre, arriving on May 8, 1946 in New York, where they reunited with Bernard.¹¹ Anna eventually joined them, reaching New York on September 7, 1946.

After disembarking in the Netherlands, the Weinstock family lived in Amsterdam for almost four years. On May 25, 1943, they were sent to Westerbork, a transit camp for

Passengers crowd the deck of the *St. Louis*. June 1939. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Herbert & Vera Karliner.





Jewish refugees aboard the *St. Louis* attempt to communicate with friends and relatives in Cuba, who were permitted to approach the docked vessel in small boats. June 3, 1939. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of National Archives and Records Administration, College Park.

Jews prior to deportation eastward to concentration camps. On July 23, 1943, the Weinstocks were sent to the Sobibor concentration camp, where they perished.



Of the 907 *St. Louis* passengers who returned to Europe, approximately 255 perished during the ensuing war and Holocaust. Where the passengers disembarked made a crucial difference in survivorship. Of the 288 passengers admitted to Great Britain, all survived the war except one, who was killed in an air raid in 1940. Those who disembarked in the three other nations had a significantly smaller chance of survival. Once Germany invaded Western Europe in May 1940, the *St. Louis* passengers in France, the Netherlands, and Belgium were trapped and unable to flee.

In 1940, the *St. Louis* returned to Germany, having evaded Allied patrols and a Royal Navy blockade. Captain Gustav Schröder took a desk job with the *St. Louis's* shipping company; he never returned to sea. In 1957 he was

awarded the Order of the Merit by the Federal German Republic. He was posthumously honored as a Righteous Among the Nations by Yad Vashem in 1993.

The *St. Louis* was bombed by the Royal Air Force in Hamburg harbor in 1944. Nearly destroyed, the vessel was sold for scrap. This year marks the eightieth anniversary of the *St. Louis's* fateful "Voyage of the Damned." ♦

The Boston HIAS records (I-96) include case files, thousands of arrival cards, ship manifests, displaced persons tracers, scrapbooks, photographs, and other administrative paperwork. The collection is one of our most widely used, accessed by both family historians and scholarly researchers. Thousands of documents have been digitized and made available online, and more are being added every day. If you are interested in accessing this collection, please contact jhreference@nehgs.org. We are grateful to the staff of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum for their help in researching these passengers.

NOTES

- ¹ "Voyage of the *St. Louis*," Holocaust Encyclopedia, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/voyage-of-the-st-louis.
- ² "Full Passenger List: Voyage of the *St. Louis*," United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, ushmm.org/online/st-louis/list.php.
- ³ Case file of Moritz and Bettina Epstein, Boston Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society Records; I-96; Box 15, Folder 2; Wyner Family Jewish Heritage Center at NEHGS.
- ⁴ "New York, New York Passenger and Crew Lists, 1909, 1925–1957." (From original records, "Immigration, New York, New York, United States, NARA microfilm publication T715," held by the National Archives and Records Administration.) Online database: FamilySearch; Bettina Epstein, 1940, familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:242B-F15.
- ⁵ "Florida Death Index, 1877–1998," (From original records, "Florida Death Index, 1877–1998," index, held by Florida Department of Health, Office of Vital Records, Jacksonville.) Online database: FamilySearch; Bettina Epstein, August 1962 (familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:VV34-RK6); and Morris Epstein, 15 July 1977 (familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:VVQV-23X).
- ⁶ Full Passenger List: Voyage of the *St. Louis* [note 2].
- ⁷ Case file of Fritz Heidt, Boston Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society Records; I-96; Box 49; Folder 21; Wyner Family Jewish Heritage Center at NEHGS.
- ⁸ "United States Social Security Death Index." (From original records, U.S. Social Security Administration, Death Master File, database, Alexandria, Virginia.) Online database: FamilySearch; Else Heidt, 11 May 1989 (familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:JTB3-GQ9); and Fred Heidt, 19 Dec 1992 (familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:JTB3-GM3).
- ⁹ Full Passenger List: Voyage of the *St. Louis* [note 2].
- ¹⁰ Case files of Arthur and Ernst Weinstock and Charlotte Ernst Weinstock, Boston Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society Records, I-96; Box 167; Folders 52 and 54; Wyner Family Jewish Heritage Center at NEHGS.
- ¹¹ No cause of death is known for Raphael Feilchenfeld, who was a year old aboard the *St. Louis*.