Film

Voyage of the Damned

Marcia R. Rudin

The last frame of the ponderous new film Voyage of the Damned announces that although some of the names of the characters have been changed in order to protect their privacy, the story's events are true. As the lights came up in the theatre where I viewed the film, several people in the audience exclaimed in shocked voices. "This was true?" Such reactions underscore the fact that most people are unaware of the fate of the desperate Jews aboard refugee ships in the days immediately prior to and at the beginning of World War II.

Those fortunate enough to escape the Nazis suffered in unbearable circumstances while seeking ports that would accept them. The S.S. Struma voyage in December, 1941, was the most famous of these "coffin ships." The Turkish Government refused permission for the 750 refugees to dock in Istanbul, and subsequently the damaged ship was towed out to the Black Sea, where it "mysteriously" exploded and sank. There was one survivor. Refugees who were more fortunate were sometimes imprisoned as "enemy aliens" in "detention camps" in places such as North Africa, the Isle of Man, and Mauritius for the duration of the war.

There is evidence that worldwide indifference to the fate of the refugees contributed to the implementation of the Nazis' "final solution." Plans for mass killings had been formulated earlier, but the Nazis claimed that at one point they were willing to attempt a solution of the "Jewish problem" through emigration. They organized and financed—at great profit to themselves, of course—large transports of Jewish refugees. The agencies whose mission it was to find new homes for the wanderers worked for a time hand in hand with the Nazis. Hitler made plans from 1938 to 1940 for mass relocation of the Jews: his Madagascar plan would have resettled millions.

But these plans never materialized, and there was to be no outlet for the large number of Jews involved. Palestine as a refuge became all but impossible under the British White Paper of 1939, and other countries held to, and in some cases even reduced, their usual restricted immigration quotas. The official order for implementation of the "final solution" was given to Heydrich on July 31, 1941: since the rest of the world didn't want the Jews either, the only recourse, the Nazis gloated, was their total physical destruction.

One of the most tragic examples of the failure of the world to rescue Hitler's victims (all the more tragic because they were so near salvation) is the odyssey of the S.S. St. Louis. The film Voyage of the Damned, based on the 1974 book of that name by Gordon Thomas and Max Morgan Witts, tells the heartbreaking story of 937 Jews who set sail on the luxury liner from Hamburg on May 13, 1939. They were fleeing Germany under threat of incarceration in concentration camps; some of them had already been in the camps and had been released on the condition they leave the country immediately and never return. This ship was their last hope.

The refugees had purchased expensive Cuban landing-certificates through the Hamburg-American Shipping Line (Hapag), which operated the St. Louis. However, they did not realize that these documents did not meet the visa requirements for entry into Cuba. The head of Cuban immigration, Manuel Benitez, had set up his own illegal operation and had rapidly enriched himself by the sale of inadequate certificates. The president of Cuba, Frederico Laredo Bru, chose this time to put a stop to Benitez's activities. Bru had been under pressure to curtail the large numbers of Jewish immigrants who, since the early years of Hitler's regime, had streamed into Cuba awaiting eventual admittance to the United States. Cuba's depressed economy could absorb no more destitute immigrants to compete with Cubans for the small number of jobs available. Bru also saw the St. Louis immigration question as an opportunity to test his power against that of Cuban Army Chief of Staff Fulgencio Batista. Thus on May 5, 1939, eight days before the St. Louis set sail from Hamburg and twenty-two days before it was to reach Havana, the Cuban Government pushed through Decree 937, which in effect refused these refugees entry into Cuba by prohibiting the use of the landing permits issued by Benitez.

When the ship reached port its passengers were not allowed to disembark: as they waited in the harbor their fears grew daily that they would be returned to Germany. Two suicide attempts by despairing refugees led the captain to fear mass suicide or mutiny. After six restless days the captain was ordered to leave the port; he headed the ship north, hoping the United States would offer haven. The U.S. refused. The ship headed once again for Cuba on a false promise that the refugees would be allowed to stay, interned, on the Cuban Isle of Pines. But all negotiations collapsed, and on June 6 the St. Louis headed back to Europe. England offered sanctuary to 228; France took in 224; Belgium 214; Holland 181. Those who went to France, Holland, and Belgium were soon caught up by the Nazis. Most perished.

The refugees were doomed from the outset by many complex factors. First and foremost were the political and personal alterations among Benitez, Batista, and Bru, exacerbated by the Cuban economic and political situation. This general climate had been influenced by the deliberate efforts of Nazi infiltrators placed in Cuba to stir up public sentiment against the Jewish passengers.

The Hapag Shipping Line was controlled by the Nazi Party, its major shareholder, and therefore was more hindrance than help to negotiations. German Military Intelligence used the voyage as a means of picking up important intelligence gleaned from the Nazi spy ring in Cuba (according to the film), the entire voyage was simply camouflage for an important intelligence mis-

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sion) and to that end manipulated the ship's captain and others who might have alleviated the passengers’ plight. When the voyage failed, the Nazi propaganda ministry turned the situation to its own advantage: No one else wanted the subhuman criminals either! Therefore the rest of the world was hardly in a position to criticize the Nazis for wanting to do away with them!

But it is in the collapse on the diplomatic front that the true tragedy lies. The British director of the Intergovernmental Committee on Political Refugees, Sir Herbert Emerson, tried to prevent the voyage entirely because he feared it would jeopardize his efforts to negotiate with the Nazis for a massive full-scale resettlement of the Jews. Although the British Government eventually consented to admit 228 of the St. Louis refugees (the males were interned, incidentally, as “enemy aliens”); it refused even to consider taking them all in until they returned first to Germany. The United States not only refused to accept them, but government officials responded to the whole matter with incredible apathy, a point glossed over in the film. President Roosevelt, whose administration's abysmal failure in European refugee rescue efforts has now come to light, didn't even bother to answer or acknowledge desperate pleading telegrams from the St. Louis passengers.

A major factor in the failure of negotiations was the inability of Lawrence Berenson, the representative of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (known as the “Joint”), to agree on a monetary settlement with the Cuban Government for the acceptance of the refugees. Confusion marked the negotiations from the beginning, and perhaps the “Joint’s” representatives cannot be fully blamed. However, according to Irwin F. Gellman, Berenson received several telephone calls while the negotiations were still open, calls from his New York superiors telling him to go ahead and meet Bru’s full monetary demands. Berenson related in a conversation with Coert DuBois, the American Consul General in Havana, that he was annoyed by these telephone calls. He wanted the New York office to “keep out of it.” If they would “let him run it he would save them a considerable amount of money” (“The St. Louis Tragedy,” American Jewish Historical Quarterly, Vol. LXI, 1971). Also, the “Joint” failed to follow up on the few alternative havens that were offered. The Dominican Republic, the Balboa quarantine station in the Panama Canal Zone, and Honduras volunteered to take in the refugees—for monetary concessions—and a rich New Yorker named Bernard Sandler offered to provide an alternative ship, with Eddie Cantor reportedly ready to finance the operation.

This sorry record of official rescue efforts was to be echoed in similar heartbreaking stories throughout prewar and early war history. Such rescue of the European Jews that did succeed was due primarily to underground organizations such as the Aliya Bet. In September, 1944, the United States Government finally committed itself to all-out rescue attempts through the establishment of the Joint Emergency Committee for European Jewish Affairs. But this commitment came too late to save millions who had already perished at the hands of the Nazis.

This film about one aborted effort performs a service in that it makes available to a wide public the facts of this appalling episode. However, the presentation of the story is unclear, especially in detailing the Cuban political climate and its influence on the fate of the ship. I never quite understood who was who in the parade of Hollywood superstars portraying the Cubans who attempted to summarize the complex local political situation by such phrases as “this is Cuba,” and “you don’t understand Cubans.”

The film also fails to explain the details of the complex negotiations by the “Joint” with the Cuban Government and the reasons for the failure. This account in the Thomas and Witts book is also vague. It is possible that the true circumstances are indeed subject to debate, so perhaps it is not entirely the film’s fault that the viewer is left confused. Also, the figures of Lawrence Berenson and Morris Troper, who came on the scene only after the ship had been turned back to Europe, are combined in the film into one person—Troper. This was probably done in an attempt to simplify the confusing political machinations, but it impairs the accuracy of the narrative.

Rather than take time to clarify the factual circumstances of the fiasco, the film’s makers opt to spend their time—and they do spend in interminable scenes, each of which easily could have been halved—detailing the personal stories of those caught up in the drama. Of course one must particularize the story by making the viewer care about the people in order both to hold his interest and to drive home the tragedy of the event. Although the characters are for the most part based on real people, the slow pace and heavy-handedness of the direction transforms them into maudlin soap-opera characters. And the personal story that gets the most attention in the film was not based on an actual occurrence, as far as I know. The film builds up the suicide of a young German helmsman. Heinz Krich, mentioned only briefly in the book, into a double suicide involving a beautiful Jewish woman and an innocent German crew member who were in love. Why, with all the drama inherent in the true story, was so much emphasis placed on this fiction?

And why were such wonderful actors as Orson Welles, James Mason, and José Ferrer wasted in small “there goes...” walk-on roles, with time and attention devoted to the dreary Malcolm McDowell as the German crewman? McDowell, who has a mug only a mother could love, slouches and plods through his part. Lee Grant gives a genuinely moving performance, but Oskar Werner does a burned-out retreat of his alienated Ship of Fools doctor. Marvelous in the earlier film, here he is tedious. Faye Dunaway is always fascinating to watch, but the sexuality of her character seemed to have been added primarily to help keep the viewer’s attention throughout the long film.

The point is that it should not have been necessary to rely on Faye Dunaway’s sex appeal or to serve up a mini and far inferior Ship of Fools soap opera of damned souls journeying through purgatory on their way to the final hell in order to keep audience interest. The real facts of the event are compelling, the human tragedy almost overwhelming; these flaws blur rather than focus the harsh truths.