St. Louis

German ship carrying Jewish refugees to Cuba in 1939. Before the refugees could land, the Cuban government voided their landing permits and denied them entry.

The St. Louis left Hamburg for Cuba on May 13, 1939 with 936 passengers, most of them Jewish. All possessed landing certificates for Cuba, arranged for by Manuel Benitez Gonzalez, the Cuban Director General of Immigration. Legally, the certificates were free, but Gonzalez took money for them. Jealousy of Gonzalez's gain, local dislike of Jewish immigration, and the government's fascist tendencies led them to cancel the certificates on May 5, 1939, after they had been purchased, but before the departure of the ship. Thus, many passengers hoped the Cubans would continue to honor the certificates.

When the ship reached Havana on May 27 its passengers were denied entry. The American Jewish Joint Distribution CommittrE (JDC) tried to negotiate on their behalf, but the Cuban president insisted that the ship leave. The ship left Havana on June 2, and steered in circles while negotiations continued. An agreement was reached whereby the JDC would pay $453,000 in exchange for entry into Cuba. The JDC could not meet its deadline, however, and the ship returned to Europe, where the refugees were taken in by other European countries. Most were later murdered by the Nazis.