

Honoring Hispanic Heritage Month: Resources for Teaching about the Holocaust

Alex's Wake: The Tragic Voyage of the St. Louis to Flee Nazi Germany—and a Grandson's Journey of Love and Remembrance

Alex's Wake is a tale of two parallel journeys undertaken seven decades apart. In the spring of 1939, Alex and Helmut Goldschmidt were two of more than 900 Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi Germany aboard the *St. Louis*, "the saddest ship afloat" (*New York Times*). Turned away from Cuba, the United States, and Canada, the *St. Louis* returned to Europe, a stark symbol of the world's indifference to the gathering Holocaust. The Goldschmidts disembarked in France, where they spent the next three years in six different camps before being shipped to their deaths in Auschwitz.

In the spring of 2011, Alex's grandson, Martin Goldsmith, followed in his relatives' footsteps on a six-week journey of remembrance and hope, an irrational quest to reverse their fate and bring himself peace. *Alex's Wake* movingly recounts the detailed histories of the two journeys, the witnesses Martin encounters for whom the events of the past are a vivid part of a living present, and an intimate, honest attempt to overcome a tormented family legacy.

The shameful tale of the German liner *St. Louis*, which sailed the seas in 1939 with its Jewish refugee passengers in search of safe harbor, has been told many times — and why not? We need never to forget the cruel series of deliverances and disappointments, culminating in a rescue that turned out to be only a reprieve on the long march toward Nazi extermination camps.

However, "*Alex's Wake*" brings something different to the story; namely, that all-important personal touch, as *Martin Goldsmith* (well-known to listeners of "Symphony Hall" on Sirius XM Satellite Radio) focuses on two *St. Louis* passengers, his grandfather *Alex* and uncle Helmut. In one of the many profoundly personal statements that abound in the text, *Mr. Goldsmith* writes: "I've come to feel a deep need to connect with that vanished generation, with those members of my family who were murdered a decade before I was born." What he succeeds in doing is to connect the reader with them as well, enabling us to home in on their experiences on board the *St. Louis* and in the terrible years ahead before they met their ends in Birkenau. It has become increasingly clear in the decades since the midcentury European genocide that human faces need to be perceived if the reality of what befell so many millions can be fully comprehended. The term "Holocaust" — so widely used in recent decades, but not in those immediately following the catastrophe — no matter how caustically appropriate is still general.

It took the human face of Anne Frank and her vivid accounts of her own experiences and of her fellow residents of the hidden Amsterdam annex for what actually happened to individuals, real people — not numbers like the 6 million or fancy terms for mass murder — to sink in, to penetrate our consciousness.

"*Alex's Wake*" operates on two parallel lines: on the one hand, *Mr. Goldsmith's* quest to retrace his forebears' footsteps (and to come to terms with his feelings about today's Germany) and to tell the story of what actually happened to the *St. Louis* and its hapless human cargo. Not that they were treated that way on that German vessel back in 1939. The liner's captain, Gustav Schroeder, is one of the unexpected heroes of what is for the most part a disgraceful story.

Not only did he insist on the passengers receiving all the luxuries and comforts for which they had paid, but he even took down the photograph of Adolf Hitler adorning the large social hall that he converted into a synagogue for the duration of the voyage. When Cuba refused to honor the visas they had issued the refugees, he deliberately dawdled in sight of the U.S. coastline hoping that pressure would force the Roosevelt administration to admit them.

Had it done so, it would have saved their lives, of course, but when no such merciful decision came, Schroeder had to make his sad way back across the Atlantic as negotiations continued to find somewhere that would

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take them in. Aware of the dreadful fate if he delivered them back to their native land, he even considered beaching the liner on British shores. Would that he had done so, because the deliverance when it came involved most of them receiving refuge in Holland, Belgium and France, only to find themselves the very next year in the hands of the Nazi occupiers there.

Goldsmith's relatives went to France, where their experiences at the hands of the Vichyite collaborator government even before it handed them over for transport make painful reading. What happened to Alex and Helmut Goldschmidt at the hands of the Nazis is too well-known to us to be surprising but, in the telling of their tale here, which tries and succeeds to do such honor to them, is heartbreaking nonetheless.

At times, Mr. Goldsmith's narrative voice can become overwrought as he endeavors to come to terms with the terrible fate of his grandfather and uncle (and also of his grandmother and aunt, left behind in Nazi Germany to await their rescue that never came), always acutely and painfully aware of their being tiny parts of a horrific genocidal mosaic. Then there is that undercurrent of anger, rage even, that keeps surfacing, until at the very end he is able to take the high road to a kind of acceptance and personal resolution.

That raging leitmotiv is essential for the success of "Alex's Wake," a necessary part of Mr. Goldsmith's path toward catharsis. For that coruscating anger is so justified, so understandable, how could he not have felt it? It has the additional benefit of preventing so personal a quest from ever being self-indulgent. It keeps the focus just where it should be; namely, on the fate of Alex and all the others and on those who perpetrated this monstrous injustice.

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