



(Derek Gee/Buffalo News) Dr. Sol Messinger, who was seven years old when he and his family sailed from Germany to Cuba aboard the S.S. St. Louis in an attempt to escape the Nazis. Denied entry to Cuba, the ship went back to Europe and many of its 931 passengers--mostly Jews--died in the Holocaust. Thursday, Jan. 17, 2013.

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Local doctor shares chilling story of surviving Holocaust

Visit to Cuba stirs memories of fleeing Germany as child

BY: **GENE WARNER** / NEWS STAFF REPORTER

Dr. Sol Messinger finally got admitted to Cuba – 73½ years later.

On Jan. 3, Messinger walked through Cuban customs at the Havana airport without incident, a far cry from his first attempt to enter the island nation.

That happened May 27, 1939, when Messinger – not quite 7 years old – was one of 937 passengers aboard the SS St. Louis.

The ship attempted to dock in Havana and unload its passengers, almost all of them Jews who had fled Germany and the coming horrors of the Holocaust.

The St. Louis was turned back, then denied entry to the United States, before it headed back to Europe. Messinger and his parents got off in Belgium, then cheated death two or three times before settling in Buffalo about three years later.

Messinger survived the bombing of a train platform on the France-Belgium border, was sent to a detention camp, fled there with his mother and left southern France a few weeks before Jews there were rounded up and sent to the Auschwitz death camp.

All that happened before he was 10 years old.

The Buffalo resident is part of an ever-dwindling number of Jews who survived the Holocaust. Now at age 80, he tells his story of survival, if only from a child's perspective.

He's become a symbol of Holocaust survival. The life he has led in Buffalo suggests how much the world lost when more than 1 million Jewish children perished in that mass killing.

Messinger has carved out a full life in America, working as a pathologist at Millard Fillmore Hospital for 46 years before retiring at age 76. He has also been a major donor and activist with local Jewish groups, including the Holocaust Resource Center.

Messinger recently signed up for a five-day mission with the Jewish Federation of Greater Buffalo, one of two dozen local residents who visited the Jewish community in Havana, armed with much-needed supplies.

Two moments on that recent visit were emotional for Messinger, the first being his uneventful entrance to the island nation.

"I was thinking that I'm finally on Cuban soil," he said. "Constantly, I was thinking how lucky I was to be alive and to have lived to the point where I could actually go to Cuba."

The second came on the group's first bus ride on the Malecon, a four-mile road and seawall along the Havana harbor.

"We were driving along the harbor, and I could look out and see where the [St. Louis] had been," he said. "I remembered where it had been because there was a fortress on one side of the harbor, and I could remember that."

In a recent interview, Messinger, in unemotional tones, told the chilling story of how he survived the Holocaust.

Born six months before Hitler came to power, Messinger remembers, at age 3 or 4, being called a dirty Jew and being beaten up in the courtyard of his family's apartment house in Berlin, where they had moved from Poland.

His parents applied for a visa to enter the United States and were given a number, based on a Polish quota.

On Oct. 28, 1938, at age 6, he heard pounding on the door and saw two Nazis enter the apartment.

"They said to my father, 'You're coming with us.' He got dressed. My mother had no idea where they were taking him."

The Germans, she later learned, had arrested all Jewish men of Polish origin and shipped them back to Poland.

Meanwhile, his mother obtained a visa for Cuba, a waiting spot until the family's number came up to be admitted to the United States. As the departure day neared, Messinger's mother wrote to her husband, vowing not to leave without him.

"You'll have your son's blood on your hands if you don't get on the ship," he wrote back.

The day before they left, there was another knock on the door.

“My mother screamed, because she recognized my father’s knock,” Messinger recalled. “He had come back.”

Messinger distinctly recalls the ship pulling away from the Hamburg pier on May 13, 1939, and his father starting to cry.

“Why are you crying?” his mother asked. “We’re leaving Germany. You should be so happy.”

“I’m crying because I’m leaving all of my relatives, and who knows when we’ll see them again?” he replied.

As Messinger said, “Nobody could imagine exactly what was going to happen, but you knew things were bad.”

The captain, Gustav Schroeder, treated the Jews very well. The Messingers finally were a family again, they had left Germany, and they were aboard an ocean liner, where the German sailors treated them like normal human beings, a far cry from the Jews’ experiences in Germany.

Messinger has one vivid memory of the two-week trip.

“It was the first time I swam in a swimming pool,” he recalled. “I can still picture the pool. It was such a wonderful thing.”

On May 27, the ship pulled into the Havana harbor, its passengers unaware that the Cuban government recently had rescinded their landing permits.

During the six days there, a time of frustration and anger, there was one bright moment. Messinger and his parents went downstairs, opened their lower-deck porthole and talked with relatives who had been admitted to Cuba earlier and were circling the St. Louis in small boats. Among them was Messinger’s first cousin, Edith, whose daughter, Rhonda Wise, also was on the recent Cuban mission.

Denied admission to Cuba, the St. Louis headed to Florida, with people on board sending cables to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, hoping that, at worst, the passengers could go to a U.S. camp until their visa numbers came up.

“They sent out a PT boat to make sure we didn’t swim ashore,” Messinger said, still bitter. “That was the response from the United States.”

The passengers were absolutely terrified about returning to Germany. More than 900 of them, though, were granted refuge in Great Britain, the Netherlands, France and Belgium, although about 250 would not survive the Holocaust, historians say.

Messinger turned 7 in June 1939, the day before he and his parents got off the ship in Belgium.

The following May, the Germans invaded the Netherlands, Belgium and France. Desperate to flee Brussels, Messinger’s father put all the family’s papers and valuables in a sheet, slung it over his shoulder and announced that they’d all start walking toward France.

They later boarded a train, and at the French-Belgian border were ordered to get out and stand on the train platform. An air-raid signal then sent them to a shelter stuffed with people and lacking oxygen.

“We’re not going down there again,” Messinger’s father said later. “We’re not going to suffocate. If we die, we’ll die on the platform.”

The family survived the night, took a train to Paris and a cattle train to southern France, where they settled in a village before being sent to a detention camp, Agde, near Marseille, in October 1940. With no heat or furniture, they slept on hay. The women and children were in one part of the camp, the men in the other. Once a week, they could talk, across a barbed-wire fence.

Messinger's father instructed his wife and son how to escape, which they did on Christmas Eve, when the French soldiers were drunk. The father followed on New Year's Eve.

They returned to the little village in the Pyrenees, and a year later their U.S. visa number came up. They made their way to Lisbon and onto a Portuguese ship, the Serpa Pinto, riding in the hold before later sleeping on deck.

Messinger and his parents landed in Staten Island on June 24, 1942.

"I celebrate that as my second birthday, because I started my second life when we landed in the U.S."

Six weeks after the Messingers left France, the Nazis rounded up many Jews in southern France and sent them to Auschwitz.

With some relatives in Buffalo, the Messingers migrated here, settling on East Ferry Street. Their son attended School 53, Fosdick-Masten High School, the University of Buffalo and UB Medical School.

"I'm grateful," Messinger said. "I'm grateful that I survived with my parents, and I'm grateful that I'm living in the United States. It's a terrific country. Only people who lived in other countries where things weren't so great can really appreciate the United States. I think Americans take it for granted."

Messinger has no trouble finding the perspective to explain his tough childhood:

"While it was bad what I went through, it was nothing compared to the people in the concentration camps."