

## The SS St Louis - An **Untold Story** for assembly (Primary)

### Preparation

- **provide** large collecting boxes in the hall so that everyone will have somewhere to post a message to a passenger
- **practice** the drama/mime section several times. The assembly will work best when everyone works together as a team. Every part is important. The minimum number of participants is 10 but the assembly works best when the whole class takes part
- make sure you have seen the presentation <http://education.hmd.org.uk/resources/hmd-2011-primary-assembly> before the assembly and match your words or some music to the presentation

**Aim and Format:** The assembly helps younger students to engage with **Untold Stories** by raising awareness of the Holocaust and how people suffered when Nazi policies of hatred and discrimination were introduced. There are no details of horror or images of concern in the story so the presentation is suitable for all ages, though it may be better to ask older students to be the actors. By focussing on the passengers of the SS St Louis, we encourage students to think about people forced to leave their homes to seek a place of refuge because of persecution. It encourages them to consider why it is important to remember what happened to them and highlights the need to value everyone as a unique individual. Sharing this story helps students to think about how the world community can help refugees today and sends a confident message which challenges discrimination into the future.

Students will hear how during the Holocaust millions of people had their valuables and their homes stolen from them. They became refugees. The accompanying presentation <http://education.hmd.org.uk/resources/hmd-2011-primary-assembly> of pictures taken on the ship will encourage students to focus on creative responses to both rejection and the lifeline of hope. The italic script indicates suggested stage directions but your students may want to improvise their own movements as they prepare for the assembly. You will require a minimum of 20 students who will participate in the Assembly.

### The Assembly

**Welcome** everyone into the hall and **explain** how you hope everyone present, including teachers and guests, will want to talk to each other after the assembly and to share what they have heard with those outside of school.

**Play** a piece of music or a song which you think is connected to the story, this could be linked with thinking about the sea, a journey or feeling sad when saying goodbye to those we love. A good piece which works with this story is *Bridge Over Troubled Water* because it talks about helping others. Play the music as you **give** students paper and a pencil. When the piece ends **explain** that during the presentation and at the end of the assembly you will play the music again and hope that everyone will want to write special messages to some of the people whose **Untold Stories** they will hear. **Explain** that some students are going to help you tell these **Untold Stories** and that you would like everyone to watch and listen.

**Ask** the students participating to step forward and join you. **Announce** the title of the story - The SS St Louis – A Ship of Sorrows. All participants now join you. They create the sounds of the sea by repeating the line ‘a ship of sorrows’, starting as a whisper and then getting louder. **Experiment** with the words as they build up the sounds to a crescendo. ‘A ship of sorrows. A ship, a ship a ship of sorrows, sorrows, sorrows, sorrows, ship, ship, a ship of sorrows.’ The class should stand in a semi circle around you. Students step forward and create a mime of the scenes as you, or two of the students, tell the story.

### **This is the story of the SS St Louis – A Ship of Sorrows.**

Once upon a time, not all that long ago, there was a great big sailing ship. *(A group of about ten students step forward, they join hands and make the shape of the ship, some might stand, others might kneel, remember the ship has a pointed front and a rounded stern)*

This is the ship. It is moored in Hamburg harbour, swaying gently with the waves. Can you see what ship it is? *(The ship students hang a card which reads SS St Louis over the side of the ship.)* It is the SS St Louis and has a brave captain called Gustav Schroeder. *(One student becomes the captain, stepping into the ship and looking out through a telescope)*

Lots of people work on the ship. Their job is to look after the passengers, keep the ship clean and sail it across the sea. *(Other students enter the ship and mime different crew activities. At least three people in the group do not do any work but just stand looking at the captain)*

Captain Schroeder and his crew are waiting for the passengers to arrive. Here they come now. *(Some students become passengers, they mime approaching the ship, some are old and walk slowly, some are young children, some are worried parents, a few have heavy bags but some have nothing, the captain and the crew stand and watch them)*

Look at the passengers, do they all look happy? Some of the children seem excited but their parents look worried. There is an elderly man and his wife, they look very tired and their bags are heavy. *(The student passengers freeze and create a tableau)*

Look the captain is making a speech to the crew. *(Captain mimes his speech, pointing to the passengers, and the crew listen, apart from the three non-workers)*

The captain is telling his crew that they must do their best to look after all the passengers and to make sure that they are comfortable on the ship.

Now this is a strange thing for him to say. The crew's job is to look after passengers so why is the captain telling them something they should already know?

Let me explain. It is 1939 and the Nazis are in charge of Germany. The Nazis hate certain groups of people and treat them unfairly. They have been cruel to Jewish people, disabled people, Gypsies, Gay people, Black people and to anyone who does not agree with what the Nazis want. They are making plans to murder people they don't like and Germany is not a safe place to be if you belong to one of these groups.

These passengers are Jewish. They are trying to escape from Germany before it is too late. Some of them have seen terrible things. They are very scared. Listen to their **Untold Stories**.

*One by one the passengers unfreeze and speak*

The Nazis came and burned down our synagogue.

The Nazis stole all our valuables and now we have nothing left.

I saw the Nazis burning books because they did not agree with the words written inside them.

My Granddad was taken away by the Nazis and we don't know where he is.

My husband is sick but the hospitals are not allowed to care for him.

My best friend isn't allowed to play with me anymore. Her mum said I was dirty.

A soldier spat at my mum and called her horrible names which made her cry.

I want to go home but they broke the windows in our house.

*(The passengers freeze again)*

The Nazis have passed new laws which say that people must treat Jews as second class citizens. They encourage everyone to be unkind to them. They want to make life as difficult as possible for Jewish people.

But Captain Schroder thinks this is wrong. He disobeys the Nazis. He orders his crew to welcome the passengers and treat them well. Most of the crew obey - look how they are helping the passengers aboard. *(The crew assist the passengers onto the ship, carrying bags, pointing the way etc but three crew members stand and watch with folded arms)*

Can you see a few people who disobey the Captain? They support the Nazis and as the passengers come on board they sing Nazi songs and do not offer any sign of welcome. *(The three crew members point and laugh at the passengers)* One of these cruel people is a Nazi spy. He is going to make life difficult for the passengers and the Captain if he can.

Now everyone is on board and the ship can set sail. It is going to leave Germany behind and sail over the Atlantic Ocean to Cuba. Many of the passengers have friends and relations in Cuba. They hope to meet them and start a new life. Others hope to visit Cuba for a while before travelling to America.

It is 13 May and the ship is ready to leave. It takes a long time to cross the Atlantic. The passengers will be tired when they arrive. They try to make the best of life on board ship and most of the crew support them. *(The ship students mime a rocking boat and others mime activities on board either as crew or passenger. The non working group can either stand and sulk or try to upset passengers.)*

Now it is 26 May and the tired passengers can see land ahead. They are excited and a little scared. Soon they will be able to start living in a new land and they have a chance to be happy again. *(Passengers point to land, smile at each other, parents show the children where to look)*

But all is not well. The Nazis have sent cruel messages to Cuba. The messages have arrived before the St Louis. In the messages they tell lies about the passengers. They say that they are all criminals and not the sort of people Cuba should welcome.

The captain receives a telegram. *(The Captain mimes reading a message. He looks sad and shakes his head)*

The message tells the Captain he cannot take the ship close to the land. He is ordered to anchor off the coast. The Cubans will not let the St Louis into the port of Havana. They want it to go away. *(Some students stand on the land and signal to the ship that it should go away. They shake their fists and point at the ship)*

But look some little boats are coming toward the ship. They contain friends and family of the passengers. They are waving to them and trying to reach them. *(Individual students mime rowing towards the ship. They hold up baskets of food and wave. The passengers look over the side of the ship and wave back but they cannot get off the ship. The non working crew laugh and taunt the passengers)*

More messages reach the ship by telegram. People in Cuba believe the lies the Nazis have sent. The messages say that if there are any tourists on board they may leave the ship and visit Cuba but everyone else has to pay lots of money for a visa. The captain tells everyone. *(Captain passes on the news. All passengers look sad, the non working crew laugh and jeer)*

But most of the passengers are refugees, they have no spare money. Many of them spent everything they had to get a ticket on the ship and many of them had already paid for visas before they left. This is terrible news. *(Passengers mime empty pockets)* They will not be allowed to start a new life in Cuba.

The Captain holds meetings with a group of passengers. They try to negotiate with the Cubans. *(Captain gets into a huddle with a small number of passengers. The Captain moves away from the group and reads another telegram. This happens two or three times)* More messages pass to and fro but the answer is always the same. *(Captain returns to the group and shakes his head)*

The Cubans tell the Captain to take the ship back to Germany but he knows that the passengers can't go back. It is too dangerous. He has another plan. The Americans will help. He tells the crew to sail the ship to America. America is not far from Cuba after all.

*(Ship students mime sailing as before)*

So the ship reaches America, look - it is gliding down the coast of Florida. A message is sent to the American Government and the passengers wait anxiously. Will there be a happy ending to our story?

*(Pause)* The Captain receives a message. *(Captain mimes message reading as before)*

No, there is no happy ending this time. The American government says it is sorry for the passengers but it has already taken lots of refugees from Germany this year. It cannot possibly take any more. It has a waiting list which the passengers may join but they cannot come into America today because that would be jumping the queue. *(The Captain mimes telling the passengers, he shakes his head and the passengers mime sadness and disbelief)* The passengers are in despair. This is truly a ship of sorrows. What can they do?

But there is good news at last. The story of the ship is travelling around the world. In the UK people will be reading about it in the newspapers. *(A student becomes a news vendor and walks through the audience handing out newspaper)*

Some people in Canada have heard about the plight of the ship. They are asking their government to help. The Captain and crew turn the St Louis toward Canada. *(Mime of sailing as before)*

But no, the Canadian government will not allow the ship to land. *(Mime sad message to Captain as before)*

Then the Captain receives an order. He cannot believe it. He must take all the passengers back to Germany. No he can't do this. The passenger's lives will be in danger. The Nazis want to murder them. *(Captain paces back and to on the deck)* But what can he do? Food supplies will run out and the ship can't sail around the world for ever. He makes a decision *(Captain reacts throughout speech)* He will disobey orders, even if it means losing his job or even his life. He can't let his passengers down. He will save them from the Nazis.

Look, he is speaking to a small number of trusted crew. *(Captain and three others plot together)*

He has a plan. The ship will cross the Atlantic again and return to Europe but it will not go to Germany. They will ask other countries in Europe to give the refugees a home. He will take the St Louis through the English Channel and if no homes are offered they will set her on fire off the UK coast. Then someone will have to rescue the passengers because they will be survivors of a shipwreck. That way they will have to be given shelter.

What a long and sad return journey! *(Play music again and repeat crossing the Atlantic mime)*

All through the journey messages pass to and fro and the newspapers are full of the story of the ship which had been turned away from so many places. *(Newspaper mime as before)*

At last good news! There is no need to wreck the ship. The plight of the refugees has been noticed. Holland, Belgium, France and the UK will offer a safe haven to the refugees.

*(Everyone cheers)*

At last the passengers can leave the ship. The firm ground feels very strange after so much time at sea! *(Some passengers get off the ship; they stagger about but are happy)*

288 have travelled here to the UK. It is 21 June 1939 and they have reached Southampton. Now most of them will travel to Waterloo station by train. *(Remaining passengers get into a line and mime a train journey)*

Imagine how tired they must be. They have crossed the Atlantic twice to find a new home.

**Play** the music again (you may wish to use *Bridge Over Troubled Water* as previously suggested) whilst *everyone mimes being welcomed home*.

At the end of the piece **ask** students and teachers to write a message to either the Captain or the passengers of the SS St Louis on their paper. **Show** the presentation of passenger photographs whilst people write. <http://education.hmd.org.uk/resources/hmd-2011-primary-assembly> Then **speak** over the presentation, timing your words to fit.

Today is Holocaust Memorial Day, when people all over the world remember the Holocaust and the cruel actions of the Nazis which shocked and changed the world. The passengers in our story were ordinary people just like us. We can see this by looking at their photographs – but the Nazis wanted to hurt them. Today many people are making a promise to work hard to make sure that nothing like the Holocaust will ever happen again.

All of the passengers in these pictures were special people. Like us they belonged to a community, like us they would have had families and friends who cared for them and whom they loved. On Holocaust Memorial Day we are asked to remember them. By looking at these photographs and listening to their stories we remember them and we also remember the plight of refugees in our world today.

**Play** the music a final time and replay the presentation then **bring** the assembly to a close. **Tell** everyone that on leaving the assembly space they will see some large containers. Everyone should put their passenger messages into them. Later in the day display the messages on a notice board for everyone to see.

After the assembly some groups might want to research what happened to the passengers. You can suggest their teachers visit the HMD website <http://education.hmd.org.uk> to find out more. Please remember that not all **Untold Stories** have happy endings.