



Ohef Sholom Temple Archives
Finding Aid for the
SS Quanza Collection
1991-2001

Finding Aid created by Alice K. Titus, 2017

Creator: Ohef Sholom Temple [OST] Archives

Extent: 1 linear foot (1 box)

Abstract: The *SS Quanza* Collection was compiled by various OST staff members from donations of several OST members over a period of approximately ten years. The Collection documents the story of the *SS Quanza*, a Portuguese steamship transporting refugees, many of them Jewish, from Nazi-occupied Europe to safe haven in the United States and Mexico in August of 1940. After stopping in New York City, where 196 passengers, 66 of whom were American citizens, disembarked, the ship, with its 121 remaining passengers, then headed for Veracruz, Mexico, its intended final destination. Although Mexico had previously welcomed European refugees, many of them Jewish, anti-immigrant feeling had been growing, and in the summer of 1940, it focused on the plight of the *Quanza* passengers. Of the 121 on board, only about 35 were permitted to disembark. The ship then headed back to Portugal, much to the dismay of the remaining Jewish passengers. On September 11th, the ship docked in Norfolk, Virginia, to take on coal. It was supposed to remain overnight and then proceed to Lisbon.

Efforts to rescue the *Quanza* passengers had begun a month earlier while the ship was still on its way to Veracruz. Rabbi Stephen Wise, then President of the American Jewish Congress in New York, met with Secretary of State Cordell Hull and Assistant Secretary of State Breckinridge Long to try to convince them to allow the refugees to enter the U.S. Although he received promises of help, none was forthcoming.

However, after it became known that the ship had been turned away in Mexico and would have to stop in the Port of Hampton Roads, American friends and relatives of some of the passengers contacted two Newport News attorneys who were experienced in litigating cases involving maritime law. The husband and wife team of J.L. and Sallie Rome Morewitz filed a \$100,000 lawsuit against the steamship company on behalf of four passengers, on the grounds that the company was in breach of its contract to deliver the passengers to Mexico. The Morewitz team knew the lawsuit would not stand up in court; however, the suit would delay the ship's departure in order to give time for advocates to take actions which would provide a permanent solution.

The delay afforded by the court case enabled relatives and friends in the U.S. to begin a letter and telegram-writing campaign aimed at getting President Franklin Roosevelt to intercede on behalf of the refugees. At the time, anti-Semitism in the U.S. was being fueled by fears that American Jews were using their influence to involve the country in what was seen as a

“European war.” Fear of Communism and the belief that many Jews were Communists also played a role. Roosevelt, privately sympathetic to the Allied cause, tried to publicly remain neutral.

Public opinion, however, began to swing in support of the refugees. Newspaper coverage by *The Washington Post* and *Virginian-Pilot* helped, as did the personal intervention by First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt. A compromise was reached, under which the passengers were questioned and their documents were examined. Finally, on September 14, three days after the ship had arrived in Norfolk, landing permits were awarded to all the remaining passengers. Many stayed with local families before leaving for New York and cities from Washington, D.C. to Chicago, to St. Louis, and Lexington, Kentucky.

Although the rescue of the *Quanza* passengers is considered a success, both for Mrs. Roosevelt and others who had been advocating for refugees for years, it led to a backlash in the State Department which resulted in America closing its doors to future refugees. In the ensuing years, few Jewish immigrants were allowed into the U.S. In contrast to the 39,945 Jewish refugees allowed to immigrate in fiscal year 1940, only 41,450 were allowed to immigrate in the next four years. Nonetheless, as a counterpoint to the more tragic story of the *S.S. St. Louis*, whose more than 700 refugee passengers had been turned away just a year before, the story of the *S.S. Quanza* remains a triumph of compassion over prejudice.

Language: The material is in English.

Access: The collection is open to research.

Copyright remains with Ohel Sholom Temple.

Cite as: [item], folder, box, *SS Quanza* Collection, Ohel Sholom Temple Archives.

Scope and Content: The *SS Quanza* Collection consists of manuscripts, excerpts from periodicals, transcripts, correspondence, and audio and VHS tapes. Manuscripts may or may not have been published. Newspaper clippings include some that date from 1940 and others that relate to events held many years later to commemorate the rescue of the *Quanza* passengers. Correspondence consists of messages sent to or from OST Archives staff related to exhibits, lectures, and panel discussions held on various anniversaries of the 1940 events. Recordings consist of tapes of a panel discussion, lecture, and various interviews. Of particular interest is a manuscript entitled *The Saving of the S.S. Quanza in Hampton Roads, Virginia on September 14, 1940: A Prelude to the Nazi Holocaust* by Stephen L. Morowitz [grandson of the two Newport News attorneys whose lawsuit led to the rescue] and Susan B. Lieberman. Of particular prominence is an audio tape of a 1995 interview of a son of the Newport News attorneys and two of the former *Quanza* passengers.

In addition to the Box and Folder List below, the Collection also includes:

- A VHS tape recording of a talk on the subject, which was presented at a 2001 Southern Jewish Historical Society conference;

- A VHS tape recording of a panel discussion entitled *Saving the S.S. Quanza Refugees*, that was held at the University of Richmond's T.C. Williams Law School on April 12, 1999; and
- Two copies of an audio tape recording of an interview that was aired on WFAS AM radio on June 18, 1995: the program was entitled *From a Jewish Point of View*, the host was Rabbi William Herskowitz, and guests interviewed were David Morewitz (son of the attorneys who filed the 1940 lawsuit), and two former passengers, Elsa Weinman and Dr. Maurice Goldenhar.

Box and Folder List: The *SS Quanza* Collection is housed in one box.

Folder 1: Morewitz and Lieberman Manuscript

+ Copy of a typed manuscript by Stephen J. Morewitz and Susan B. Lieberman entitled *The Saving of the S.S. Quanza in Hampton Roads, Virginia on September 14, 1940: A Prelude to the Nazi Holocaust*.

Folder 2: New York *Quanza* Exhibition

+ Photocopies of photographs, documents, letters, and newspaper articles pertaining to the 1997 New York City Exhibition.

Folder 3: Dramatic Productions

+ Playbill for stage play produced by the Virginia Stage Company in 2001. The play focuses on her memories of her life with FDR from 1918 to 1922. [The *Quanza* episode may or may not be mentioned in the play.] Newspaper clippings about productions in Chicago and Upstate New York of a play entitled *Steamship Quanza*.

Folder 4: Miscellaneous News Coverage

+ Newspaper clipping from *The [Baltimore] Sun*, April 19, 1999, concerning the *S.S. St. Louis*, and note about a former passenger.

+ News clipping from *Dateline: World Jewry [World Jewish Congress]*, December 2001 concerning a paper on the *SS Quanza* presented at the annual meeting of the Southern Jewish Historical Society annual meeting.

+ Partial newspaper clipping about the *SS St. Louis* [possibly from the *Virginian Pilot* and letter from Marilyn G. Salasky to Minette Cooper referencing an article in the *Virginian Pilot* and the Associated Press.

Folder 5: Correspondence Concerning Exhibits and Radio Interview

+ Correspondence between David Morewitz and Jennifer Priest regarding his presentation at the Southern Jewish Historical Society annual meeting, his

presentation at the Ft. Monroe Historical Society, and related issues including “The Jewish Experience in Virginia” presentation at the Chrysler Museum.

+ Correspondence between David Morewitz and the United Jewish Federation of Tidewater concerning publication of his story in book form.

+ Correspondence between Jennifer Priest, the Norfolk City Historian, and Georg Reinfelder regarding the research being done by the latter.

+ Correspondence between Jennifer Priest various researchers, including Steve Karmel regarding his research.

+ Copy of Morewitz’ article in the *William and Mary Magazine*, Summer, 1991.

+ Correspondence with Mark Friedman [on behalf of the Mariners’ Museum], Jennifer Priest, and Sue Robinson Sain [University of Richmond].

+ Single page excerpt from *While Six Million Died* by Arthur D. Morse.

Folder 6: Richmond Lecture and Panel Discussion and Lecture, University of Richmond, April 12, 1999 -- Transcripts

+ Manuscript of Panel Discussion: *Saving of the S.S. Quanza Refugees; A Prelude to the Holocaust.*

+ Manuscript of Lecture: *Litigating the Holocaust.*

Folder 7: Richmond Lecture and Panel Discussion Photos and Written Material

+ Brochure advertising lecture and panel discussion.

+ Articles and correspondence *related* to lecture and panel discussion.

+ “Sanctuary,” *Richmond Law*, Summer 1997, Vol. 10, No. 2

+ Original photographs of participants and members of the audience.

+ Notes related to panel discussion.

Folder 8: Elise Margolius

+ Photocopy of note from Elise to Sue Ellen Bangold.

+ Transcription of note.

+ Photocopy of a photo of Elise and others.