

In May 1939, nearly one thousand German-Jewish passengers boarded the *M.S. St. Louis*, a luxury liner bound for Cuba. They hoped to escape the dangers of Nazi Germany and find safety in Cuba. In this novel in verse, twelve-year-old Ruthie Arons is one of the refugees, traveling with her parents. Ruthie misses her grandmother, who had to stay behind in Breslau, and worries when her father keeps asking for his stomach pills. But when the ship is not allowed to dock in Havana as planned—and when she and her friend Wolfie discover a Nazi on board—Ruthie must take action. In the face of hopelessness, she and her fellow passengers refuse to give up on the chance for a new life.



37 Days
at Sea

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*Before Day 1: Wednesday, May 10, 1939
Breslau, Germany*

Locked In, Locked Out

Father has shipped most of our belongings to New York. He takes out his key to lock our front door, looks at Mother, and leaves the key in the lock. They sold our twenty-room house to the first buyer for pennies.

I run my hand along the woodwork, risking a splinter, as I've done so many times before. We have no time left. We must get our train to Hamburg and then a cab, Father says, to the ship.

America! Where I can walk on the sidewalk, sit on a park bench, go to a movie, go to regular school.

America! Where Father won't need a special license plate with a *J* on it for *Jew*.

America! Where there
are no laws against Jews.
America! Where I won't be
followed on my way home
from anywhere and spit on
and shoved.
America!
Just the roll
of it on my tongue feels like the waves
of the Atlantic.

Father and Mother will not notice
I've carved *Ruthie lived here* on one
of the linden trees in the front yard.
I take one last look at the house and walk
backward to the street, never taking my eyes
off the only place I've known as home. I
refuse to remove the splinter from my palm.

*Day 1: Saturday, May 13, 1939
Hamburg, Germany*

Yellow Roses

I wave to Auntie from the gangplank
until all I can see is a dot on the pier.
Mother says, "Do they have to play
that song?" It's about leaving one's little town.
She keeps waving to her sister. Father
takes me by the hand. He says, "We
are so lucky to be leaving, my girl.
Germany is no place for Jews anymore."
"But Auntie and Grandma and Peter
are still here," I say. A steward
announces, "Flowers for Ruthie Arons!"
"Here I am," I say. Father calls him over.

The steward's name tag says *Kurt Steinfeld*.
He hands me a bouquet of yellow roses.
Father hands him a couple of coins.

"Who are they from?" Mother asks.
She searches for a card. "*For Ruthie,
with love always, Grandma,*"

she reads. Suddenly, my thoughts
go back to last November, that night
of broken glass. I'm back

at our house, the one we had to sell,
and I see the knife sticking up in Grandma's bed,
the overturned piano, eggs

smashed against the walls,
gas seeping out of our stove.
What those vandals did

to our beautiful home in Breslau.
I could never feel safe again,
no matter how often I looked under the bed.

When the night is quiet, I still hear the crunch
of boots, the rip of fabric. And
the banging, the banging, the banging.

"We'll send for her as soon as we can,"
Father says. The idea of an ocean separating us
makes me long for Grandma's velvety skin. I want

to roll up in her apron pocket like a crescent
of dough. I wish I had brought a photo.
My tears spill onto soft petals.

One single bud begins to open. It must be a sign.
The smokestacks belch goodbye. Adventure
across the Atlantic Ocean beckons.

Steady Companions

We settle into our first-class stateroom,
and I find a place for my flowers
and Schnitzel, the stuffed dachshund

Grandma gave me for the trip.
At eleven, I'm too old
for a stuffed animal, but his fur is so soft,

and he smells like Grandma's gingerbread.
We are aboard the *M.S. St. Louis*, steaming
our way to Cuba. Father says it's a good place

to wait until our visas allow us to enter
the United States. When we reach
Cherbourg, my cousin will come on board.

It's been 178 days since Hans
left Germany and me. Uncle thought it best

to send him away to a safer place.
Hans boarded a train for Holland
with lots of other children.

That was the Kindertransport.
Mother and Father sent me away
too, but I stayed in Germany

with their friends. Then Father
got us tickets for this ship,
and he came to get me.

We'll have a real cousin reunion
and maybe celebrate with ice cream.
Someone can take our picture.

The First Night

I don't know how this big ship
can glide along the Elbe River,
but it does. I can barely feel

the movement of the water.
We're not even out into the ocean,
yet Mother looks as green

as our velvet parlor sofa and just as puffy.
Father takes her hand as we approach
the first-class dining room.

A steward bangs a gong to announce
the first seating. He lets me bang
the gong a few more times.

Father talks to the maître d' who guides
us through the checkerboard-floored room
to the captain's table. We seem to be

Very Important People.

A piano player performs a bunch of songs listed
on a card placed on our table. But I don't want

to hear Beethoven or Bach. I want to hear
Benny Goodman and Artie Shaw.

I want trumpets to blare. I want my feet to tap,

my fingers to snap. I try with Beethoven. It doesn't work.
I wrap candied peaches into my napkin. After
Mother and Father think

I've gone to bed, I'm going to sneak out
to see my first grown-up movie
and eat my peaches.