

The Jews of Cuba since the Castro Revolution

BY DANA EVAN KAPLAN

Cuba has been attracting a great deal of attention recently. While the protracted custody battle over Elián González received the most publicity,¹ there have also been two cases of alleged spying, several high-level cultural exchanges, American trade missions, trials of Cuban dissidents, and even a series of baseball games between the Baltimore Orioles and a Cuban team.

From the Jewish standpoint as well, Cuba has become more important, as various American Jewish organizations send missions to visit the Cuban Jewish community, participate in religious and cultural activities, and provide essential food and medicine. Till soon after the revolution, the *American Jewish Year Book* published regular reports on the Jews of the country written by Abraham J. Dubelman. Dubelman's last report

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For a Jewish view on the case, see Dana Evan Kaplan, "The Aftermath of the Elián González Affair: A Jewish Perspective," *Congress Monthly* 67, Sept./Oct. 2000, pp. 12–15.

appeared in the 1962 volume, and, with the exception of a report on the Cuban Jews of Miami², this is the first AJYB article on the topic since.

The Jewish community in Cuba today is but a small percentage of what it was before the revolution of 1959.³ Then, among the more than six million Cubans, there were 10,000–16,500 Jews, with communities not only in Havana but also in Santa Clara, Camagüey, Santiago de Cuba, and many other locations. The Jews of Havana⁴ had five synagogues: Unión Hebreo Chevet Ahim⁵, the United Hebrew Congregation⁶, Adath Israel, Centro Sefaradi, and the Patronato, the largest, which had been built as a Jewish center in 1953 (its full name was Patronato de la Casa de la Comunidad Hebreo de Cuba). About 75 percent of the Jews in the country were Ashkenazi, the rest Sephardi.

² Seymour B. Liebman, “Cuban Jewish Community In South Florida,” AJYB 1969, vol. 70, pp 238–246.

Caroline Bettinger-López has recently discussed this subject in *Cuban-Jewish Journeys: Searching for Identity, Home, and History in Miami* (Knoxville, Tenn., 2000).

³ Robert M. Levine has written the standard work on the history of the Cuban Jewish community, *Tropical Diaspora: The Jewish Experience In Cuba* (Gainesville, Fla., 1993). Another important source is Margalit Bejarano, ed., *La Comunidad Hebreo De Cuba: La Memoria y la Historia* (Jerusalem, 1996), a collection of oral histories.

⁴ On the Jews of Havana see Reinaldo Sanchez Porro, “Tradición y Modernidad: Los Judíos en La Habana,” *Cuadernos de Historia Contemporánea* 18, 1996, pp. 175–189; and Maritza Corrales Capestany, “Comportamiento económico y espacial de los comercios e industrias judíos en La Habana: 1902–1959,” in Judit Bokser de Líverant and Alicia Gojman de Backal, eds., *Encuentro y Alteridad, Vida y cultura judía en América Latina* (Mexico City, 1999), pp. 500–527.

⁵ Chevet Ahim is also spelled Chevet Achim, Shevet Ajim, or Shevet Ahim. The congregation was at Calle Inquisidor [Inquisitor Street!] número 407 in Old Havana. On the High Holy Days it met at Calle Prado número 557, a location also used for social functions.

⁶ In Spanish, Congregación Hebrea Unida.

Unlike the Catholics, the mainline Protestants, and the smaller religious groups such as the Jehovah’s Witnesses, Gideon’s Band, and Pentecostals, substantial numbers of whom remained in the country after the revolution, most of the Jewish community emigrated.⁷ Those who remained, like the Christian religious groups, went into a “dormant state” enabling their community to survive in skeletal form under unfavorable political circumstances. Finally, with the fall of socialism in Eastern Europe, the catastrophic decline of the Cuban economy in the early 1990s, and the resulting government reforms, religious groups were able to come out of hibernation and rebuild their organizations. After years of using a combination of confrontation, defiance, silence, cooperation, and subterfuge, the various religious groups are now in a position to play a leading role in Cuban society and perhaps assist the country in moving away from socialism.⁸

Because of their small numbers, the Jews have been exceptionally careful to avoid antagonizing the government, and the government, for its own reasons, has been equally keen to avoid any action that might be perceived as anti-Jewish. Thus the Jewish community escaped the worst of the antireligious policies of the regime, particularly in the early decades of Communist rule. Nevertheless, in another respect the tiny Jewish community operated at a distinct disadvantage: Unlike the Christian groups, establishment or fringe, the Jews could not recruit freely from the general population.

⁷ Jehovah’s Witnesses actively resisted the authority of the regime. As a consequence, many were jailed and the 1976 constitution specifically forbade their religious practices.

⁸ Teresita Pedraza, “‘This Too Shall Pass’: The Resistance and Endurance of Religion in Cuba,” *Cuban Studies* (annual published by the University of Pittsburgh) 28, 1999, pp. 16–39.

Nevertheless, a remarkable Jewish renaissance is underway in Cuba.⁹ To understand this phenomenon requires some background on Jewish life in the country during the Castro years.

The Cuban Revolution and The Jews

It is difficult for Americans to conceive of a Cuba without its charismatic and idiosyncratic leader Fidel Castro. He has held power for more than 40 years, after leading a revolutionary movement that overthrew the corrupt government of Fulgencio Batista y Zaldívar. Despite their small numbers and the enormous amount of military aid that the United States gave Batista, the revolutionary forces of Ché Guevara and Camilo Cienfuegos took control of Havana on New Year's Day, 1959. Most Cubans—including many Cuban Jews—greeted Castro's victory with tremendous enthusiasm. Cubans of all economic classes had suffered under Batista's rule, and were disgusted by his excesses and corruption. Not only Batista, but the entire political system had been discredited; Castro and the other rebels had tremendous moral authority.

The majority of Jewish men were owners of small businesses, with about 15 percent owning large stores and wholesale enterprises. Others were professionals—engineers, physicians, managers, and so forth. Although many Jews, particularly among the Ashkenazim, had originally intended to pass through “Hotel Cuba” on their way to the United States, by the late 1950s nearly all who remained in Cuba had developed strong economic roots in the country. There was a small group of dedicated Jewish Communists, but since so much of the community owned businesses, Jews were

⁹ Dana Evan Kaplan, “A Jewish Renaissance in Castro’s Cuba,” *Judaism* 49, Spring 2000, pp. 218–36.

identified as “capitalists.” Their businesses were potential targets for confiscation, putting their middle-class lifestyle in jeopardy. But at that point nothing was for certain.

1959 was a time of both hope and uncertainty as Cubans waited to see how the new government would deal with many pressing issues. In July 1959, President Carlos Manuel Urrutia Lleo resigned, and over the next several months Castro, then the premier, appointed Communists to head most of the ministries. Communists also took control of the trade unions. While few Jews emigrated during 1959, they watched the unfolding political events with great trepidation, worried less about anti-Semitism than about the political and economic policies that the government might adopt.

In fact the revolutionaries displayed no signs of anti-Semitic sentiments; if anything, they seemed well-disposed toward Jews. Three of the ten original members of the Cuban Communist Party came from Jewish backgrounds. Fabio Grobart, who had arrived in Cuba with the name Abraham Simchowitz, remained an important Communist leader until his death many years later.¹⁰ Among the younger generation, Manuel (Stolik) Novigrod, whose parents had been long-time Jewish Communists, fought with the revolutionaries in the Sierra Maestra Mountains and became a career diplomat under the Castro regime. A number of other Jews also served in the revolutionary government, most prominently Enrique Oltuski, the son of Jewish immigrants from Poland who arrived in Cuba after World War I. While studying in Miami, he watched the unfolding of the revolutionary struggle with a growing sense of guilt. “My conscience pricked me... my comrades were dying and fighting in Cuba, while I was living well in the United States. Every day, I used to say I had to go back to Cuba, so one day I got up and

¹⁰ Fabio Grobart, *Un Forjador Eternamente Joven* (Havana, 1985); Luis Suardíaz, “Tributo a Fabio Grobart,” *Granma*, Oct. 23, 1991, p. 2.

went.”¹¹ Oltuski joined the struggle in 1955 and organized the 26th of July movement in the province of Las Villas. In 1959, at the age of 27, he was made minister of communications, staying in the cabinet even after the fall of President Lleo, in itself a remarkable political accomplishment. Originally at odds with Ché Guevera, the two soon became quite close.¹² Despite a number of political setbacks, he continued in government service, and today is deputy minister of fisheries. Other Jews became prominent as well, such as Dr. José Altschuler, president of the Comisión de Intercosmos de Cuba, responsible for overseeing the Cuban space program.¹³

Castro did not apply the same political pressure on the Jewish community that he did on the Catholic Church and most other Christian denominations. Unlike the Catholic Church, which had a vast organizational network that could conceivably have been used to develop an opposition movement, and unlike the other Christian groups, which had the potential to organize mass resistance among the populace, the tiny Jewish community was no threat whatsoever.

After the Revolution

During the course of 1959 it became increasingly clear that Castro’s economic policies would ruin the middle class, but still, very few Jews emigrated. As late as December 1960, the leadership of the Patronato—the most important Jewish communal

¹¹ Paco Ignacio Taibo II, *Guevara Also Known as Ché*, trans. Martin Michael Roberts (New York, 1997), p. 610. Taibo interviewed Oltuski in January 1995.

¹² Enrique Oltuski, “Que Puedo Decir?” *Recuerdos*, Jan./Feb. 1968, pp. 41–45.

¹³ *Vuelo Especial Conjunto Urss-Cuba Victoria del Socialismo* (Havana, 1981), p. 45.

institution—was essentially the same as before the revolution.¹⁴ Herman Heisler remained president, Morris Konski, Dr. Enrique Eiber, and Herman Lipstein remained the three vice presidents, Isaac Gurwitz was the general secretary, and Abraham Marcus Matterín and Jaime Bloch were the vice secretaries. Dr. Bernardo Benes, later to become well known as emissary to Fidel Castro for Presidents Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan,¹⁵ was the congregation’s attorney. Moisés Baldás, who would take over as president the following year, was not yet on the board.

According to the teachings of the revolution, those who had developed businesses were guilty of profiting at the expense of the masses, and were therefore “enemies of the revolution.” As businesses were confiscated during 1960 and 1961, more Jews left. In 1961, Israel and Cuba reached an agreement permitting Cuban Jews to go to Israel in return for shipments of goats and eggs; a good number of these Jews soon left Israel and went elsewhere. Many more Cuban Jews left directly for Miami, the center of Cuban exile life. Others stayed, hoping that the situation would stabilize or improve. By 1962 all such hopes were dashed, and many more Jews left as part of a massive exodus of hundreds of thousands of other middle- and upper-class Cubans. Those who remained were disproportionately elderly or ill.

The emigration process could be traumatic. Once a family applied for an exit visa, a Cuban governmental official would come and make an inventory of everything in

¹⁴ *Comunitarias: Organo Oficial de la Casa de la Comunidad Hebrea de Cuba*, 1, Dec. 1960, p. 4.

¹⁵ On Benes’s negotiations with Castro in the late 1970s and 1980s, see the new work by Robert M. Levine, *Secret Missions to Cuba* (New York and London, 2001); Benes, “Perder la Revolucion,” in Bejarano, ed., *La Comunidad Hebrea de Cuba*, pp. 242–44; and Meg Laughlin, “Bernardo’s List,” *Miami Herald*, Nov. 6, 1994, p. 2. For a Cuban governmental perspective, see Jesus Arboleya, *La Contrarrevolucion Cubana* (Havana, 1997), p. 175.

the house. If the family was suspected of removing things from the home prior to the inspection, emigration could be delayed. A representative of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) reported on the situation in July 1961:

It is disastrous—the rich have left, some having foreseen the situation, but these are few.... all assets [have been] taken over by the government, the militia, or other bandits who have simply taken over everything which our brothers have left behind after having worked for many years, sacrificing themselves to make their way.... Those who remain can do nothing; business is dying for lack of merchandise, and the large industries, as well as the small ones, are being nationalized. Owners are being watched strictly.¹⁶

By December 1961 at least 3,800 Jews had already left the country, with another thousand in the process of leaving. The previous month Castro had declared: “I am a Marxist-Leninist and I shall be one until the last day of my life.” This put an end to any remaining hopes for a return to the life that Jews had known before the revolution. By early 1963 a much larger number of Jews had left. At that time Congregation Adath Israel and the Unión Sionista de Cuba, (Zionist Union of Cuba) conducted a census of those registering to receive Passover supplies. They found that there were only 1,022 Jewish families in the country, composed of 2,586 individuals, most living in Havana.

Israeli ambassador Haim Yaari estimated that 45 percent of the Jews who remained in the country during the 1960s were unemployed.¹⁷ Most of these people survived by gradually selling off their more valuable possessions, such as washing machines, dryers, ovens, family heirlooms, and jewelry. Once again, there is little

¹⁶ Marek Schindelman to [James] Rice, United HIAS Service, July 1961, trans. Carmen Roman, RG AR3344, JDC Archive, as cited in Levine, *Tropical Diaspora*, p. 243.

¹⁷ Margalit Bejarano, “Antisemitism in Cuba Under Democratic, Military, and Revolutionary Regimes, 1944–1963,” *Patterns of Prejudice* 24 (Summer 1990), p. 40. The entire article is on pp. 32–46.

evidence to suggest that Jews were singled out for negative treatment. A number of American Jewish organizations that were monitoring the situation stressed that Jews were fleeing Cuba because of political and economic difficulties, not anti-Semitism.

Charles Shapiro, a major businessman in Havana and an American citizen, appears to have been a specific target of violence. A leader of the United Hebrew Congregation, Shapiro had been living in Cuba for about 35 years. In August 1960, Shapiro and his wife, Wilma, along with ten other relatives and several servants, were beaten, tied up, and robbed in their elegant home by five armed Cubans, who ransacked the house and took all the money and jewelry they found. Almost simultaneously, the family's department store, Los Precios Fijos, one of the largest in Havana, went up in flames, and government authorities detained the Shapiros' son, Jeffery, the store manager, for a short time. While there was no evidence that the Shapiros were targeted because they were Jewish, the incident increased Jewish trepidation about staying in the country.¹⁸

Another spur to emigration was fear that the government might at some point decide to restrict the freedom of Cubans to leave the country. Indeed, a law went into effect on July 26, 1963, stating that all males between the ages of 15 and 50 were obligated to perform military service, and from then on emigration became more difficult for men in that age bracket and their families.

¹⁸ See Wilma Shapiro's reminiscences, "Llegan los Milicianos," in Bejarano, ed., *La Comunidad Hebrea de Cuba*, pp. 244–46.

The Castro Government and the Jews

The revolutionary forces had portrayed themselves as reformers whose goal was to redress the injustices committed by former government, and specifically to reverse the arrangements that had been allowed to develop through sweetheart deals signed by corrupt senior officials. The groups that faced retribution were those that had been part of the Batista regime, and, virtually no Jews had been high-ranking government officials or military officers under Batista. It is true that some American Jewish gangsters, such as Meyer Lansky, were involved with Batista in the development of casino gambling, but none of them were arrested or tried. When Lansky's Havana Riviera Hotel was officially confiscated on October 24, 1960, no one suggested that the Communists had anti-Semitic motives; after all, 165 other American enterprises, including the Cuban subsidiaries and franchises of Canada Dry, Goodyear, Kodak, Westinghouse, and Woolworth's, were also seized.¹⁹

Although Castro's foreign policy towards the State of Israel has had its ups and downs, he has pursued a consistently benign policy towards the local Cuban Jewish community. There are a number of theories about why Castro did not adopt the kind of anti-Jewish policies instituted by the Communists in the Soviet Union and its East European satellites. Castro had a number of Jewish friends and supporters, and his relations with one or more of them may have predisposed him not to attack the Jewish community. It is also possible that Castro wanted to avoid anti-Semitism precisely in order to differentiate his regime from that of the Soviet Union, an explanation that would also cover his decision to maintain diplomatic relations with Israel after the 1967 Six-Day War, when the entire Communist bloc broke relations with the exception of Cuba.

¹⁹ Robert Lacey, *Little Man: Meyer Lansky and the Gangster Life* (Boston, 1991), p. 324.

Some have argued that the Castro regime did not want to generate additional hostility by persecuting a small and vulnerable religious minority, but it is hard to believe that the same government that was willing to antagonize the superpower to the north would fear the fallout from its treatment of local Jews. Havana historian Maritza Corrales Capestan suggests that, in the early years, many Cubans, and perhaps Castro as well, felt that Cuba and Israel were both small, struggling, socialist states beset by much larger and stronger enemies. Many Cubans also felt great sympathy for the tremendous suffering that the Jews had endured in the Holocaust.²⁰

Another theory is that Castro believes he is of Marrano ancestry. Certainly the name Castro was a common last name of Marranos (*anusim* in Hebrew, sometimes called *conversos* in Spanish), Jews who converted to Christianity—either willingly or unwillingly—before or at the time of the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492. Maurice Halperin writes that in 1960 Castro told Ricardo Wolf, Cuba's ambassador to Israel, that he had Marrano ancestors.²¹ Lavy Becker, who visited Cuba for the Canadian Jewish Congress, recalls hearing the same thing from Wolf.²² This account has also been confirmed by Dr. Bernardo Benes, who told reporter Ann Louise Bardach that “He [Castro] said to me in passing, ‘As you know, I have Jewish ancestors.’ He said he wanted Cuba to be a second Israel.”²³ In a recent conversation, Benes added a

²⁰ Interview with Maritza Corrales Capestan, Feb. 2000.

²¹ Halperin himself did not interview Wolf, but rather heard this from Shlomo Lavav, Israel's ambassador to Cuba between 1965 and 1968, who said he heard it from Wolf. Maurice Halperin, *The Taming of Fidel Castro* (Berkeley, Cal., 1981), pp. 241–242, n. 10.

²² Lavy Becker, “Report on Jewish Community of Cuba, May 29–June 4, 1975,” p. 1, Records of Alan Rose, Canadian Jewish Congress National Archives, Montreal.

²³ Ann Louise Bardach, “Fidel! Fidel!” *Talk*, Aug. 2001, p. 122.

few details: “I had heard that he [Castro] was from Jewish ancestry. … I told him, ‘The next time you go to a mirror, look at your nose, and look what you have done with this little island here in front of the powerful United States. Only a Jew could have done that.’ Castro asked me, ‘So there is no problem with being a Jew?’ and I said ‘Of course not, I’m one.’”²⁴ Benes recalled a time in 1984, when he, Benes, was negotiating with Castro on behalf of President Reagan: “I remember the exact date. It was May 18, 1984. … In the middle of an unrelated conversation, he said to me, ‘You know, my Jewish ancestors. …’ I remember the words exactly.” Benes told me, “I gave him to read the autobiography of Golda Meir, *My Life*. He was very impressed after he read it. He told me that she was one of the most distinguished women of the 20th century.” “This is just my personal opinion,” concluded Benes, “but I think he wanted to do in Cuba what the Israelis had done in the Middle East.”²⁴

Castro’s daughter, Alina, has written that Castro’s maternal grandfather was a Turkish Jew from Istanbul named Francisco Ruz. She described her great-grandfather as “a boy in Istanbul, who had ancestral memories of a greater empire, when his family of Jewish renegades probably dropped a letter from their last name, shortening it [from Ruiz] to Ruz.”²⁵ This would be a startling revelation if true, but it is not, since Alina Fernández told her mother Naty (Natalia) Revuelta that this was “the only lie in the book.”²⁶ What apparently is true is that many of Castro’s classmates called him “*judío*,”

²⁴ Interview with Bernardo Benes, July, 2001.

²⁵ Alina Fernández, *Castro’s Daughter: An Exile’s Memoir of Cuba* (New York, 1998), p. 1. In addition, Francisco’s ancestry is clearly labeled on the genealogical tree that appears on an unnumbered page at the beginning of the book.

²⁶ Interview with Jaime Sarusky, June 2000. Sarusky, a noted Cuban journalist and author, spoke directly with Revuelta.

“Jew,” because he had not been baptized by the age of seven. In popular Cuban usage, the word *judío* was used to refer to a child who had not yet been baptized.²⁷ It is certainly possible that this and other experiences made him sympathize with the plight of the Jews. In his discussions with Frei Betto, Castro talks about his memories of Holy Week:

Holy Week in the countryside—I remember them from when I was very young—were days of solemnity; there was great solemnity. What was said? That Christ died on Good Friday. You couldn’t talk or joke or be happy, because Christ was dead and the Jews killed him every year. This is another case in which accusations or popular beliefs have caused tragedies and historic prejudices. I tell you, I didn’t know what that term meant, and I thought, at first, that those birds called *judíos* had killed Christ.²⁸

Whatever his motivations, Castro’s attitude toward the Jews of Cuba after the revolution was remarkably positive. Instead of tarring the emigrating Jews with the taint of disloyalty, he expressed regret that so many Jews, who might have contributed much to the new Cuba, were leaving. James Rice, executive director of HIAS from 1956 to 1966, recalled that Castro asked the Israeli ambassador in Havana why Cuban Jews felt it necessary to emigrate, since he had nothing whatsoever against them and would have been happy to use their talents to develop the new socialist regime.²⁹ Furthermore, David Kopilow has noted that the revolutionary government classified Cuban Jews going to

²⁷ Robert E. Quirk, *Fidel Castro* (New York and London, 1993), p. 3; Frei Betto, ed., *Fidel y la Religion: Conversaciones con Frei Betto*, (Havana, 1985), pp. 101, 107–108, available in English translation, *Fidel and Religion: Talks with Frei Betto*, (Havana, 1987).

²⁸ Betto, ed., *Fidel y la Religion*, p. 123.

²⁹ James Rice, “A Retrospective View: 1960s Cuba Exodus Brought Jews to U.S.,” *Intermountain Jewish News*, May 30, 1980, p. 23.

Israel as *repatriados*, repatriated ones, rather than *gusanos*, worms, which is what other emigrants were called.³⁰

Despite the small number of Jews left in the country, Judaism continued to be a subject of great interest in Castro's Cuba. During the mid- and late-1960s, the regime found numerous ways to use Jewish subjects in creative ways consistent with its ideological program. The government-controlled media lavished attention on Jewish holidays and cultural events: Passover was portrayed as a celebration of the "national liberation" of the Jews, and other holidays were likewise given a "Fidelistic" interpretation.

Of course the country had many problems, and Cuban Jews suffered along with the rest of the population. On the most basic level, living in Communist Cuba meant adapting to a lower standard of living than before. Nevertheless, those affiliated with the Jewish community enjoyed certain benefits. Kosher butchers were among the few private businesses not nationalized by the government. There was a widely held perception that Jews were allowed additional meat and poultry to compensate for the fact that they did not eat pork. Moisés Baldás, head of the community from 1961 through 1978, believed that the Cuban authorities thought that Jews had to have kosher meat in order to comply with the Jewish religion; that is, that Judaism required the eating of meat.³¹ The government allowed a kosher restaurant to stay open in Havana,

³⁰ David Kopilow, "Castro, Israel, and the PLO," Cuban American National Foundation, updated 1985, Web site www.canfnet.org/canf-lib/kopolow.htm.

³¹ Correspondence with Margalit Bejarano, Apr. 2001. Bejarano conducted 20 hours of interviews with Baldás shortly after he left Cuba. Tapes of the interviews, in Hebrew, are in the Oral History Division, Institute of Contemporary Jewry, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

and Radio Havana continued to broadcast Communist propaganda in Yiddish even after other foreign-language radio programs were banned.³²

Aiding the Emigrants

When Cubans started fleeing Cuba, the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW)—the government department with authority over resettlement assistance—asked the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) to establish an office in the Miami area. The government hoped that HIAS, along with other refugee agencies, could help provide assistance to the large number of Cubans streaming into the country. And since, at the beginning of the exodus, many Cubans fled by small boats not only to the United States but also to islands in the Caribbean, HIAS set up a network of offices there as well to help Jewish communities deal with the influx.

Not all families left Cuba together: in the early 1960s, 14,048 children were sent out of Cuba without their parents. In December 1960 the American government held discussions about how to handle the possible arrival of large numbers of minors with no chaperones, and, on January 9, 1961, the U.S. Department of State granted Father Bryan O. Walsh the authority to grant a visa waiver to any child aged 6–16 entering the country under the guardianship of the Catholic Diocese of Miami.³³ Reporter Gene Miller later dubbed the program Operation Pedro Pan, and the name stuck. Because the diocese coordinated the program, the perception developed that only Catholic children were taken care of in this manner. Actually the same provisions were also made with

³² Interview with Moisés Asís, Feb. 2001.

³³ Joan Didion, *Miami* (New York, 1987), p. 122.

Protestant and Jewish agencies.³⁴ In fact there were two separate operations. One, Operation Pedro Pan, was a semi-clandestine program to help children leave Cuba for the United States.³⁵ The other was the Cuban Children's Program, which was a social service designed primarily to care for Cuban children who were in the United States without parents or other close relatives. HIAS was involved in Operation Pedro Pan, helping 28 Jewish children get out of Cuba, and the Jewish Family and Children Services participated in the Cuban Children's Program, assisting 117 children whose parents were not with them (the Catholic Welfare Bureau assisted 7,041 such children).

Marcos Kerbel, a former president of Miami's Cuban Hebrew Congregation, was one of the children who got out of Cuba through HIAS. Kerbel's family had a clothing store in Guanabacoa, which they had developed into a thriving business over 30 years. Understandably reluctant to emigrate and leave behind all they had worked for, the Kerbels did not think the revolution would last, assuming, as did many others, that the United States would invade and overthrow Castro. Marcos Kerbel recalled:

³⁴ Bryan O. Walsh, "Cuban Refugee Children," *Journal of Inter-American Studies and World Affairs* 12, July/Oct. 1971, p. 391.

³⁵ Yvonne M. Conde, a Pedro Pan child who left Cuba at the age of ten and now lives in New York, has written a sympathetic account, *Operation Pedro Pan: The Untold Exodus of 14,048 Cuban Children* (New York and London, 1999). In contrast, two Cuban writers have published a book that portrays the operation as part of an American "psychological war" against Cuba. See Ramón Torreira Crespo and José Buajasán Marrawi, *Operación Peter Pan: Un Caso de Guerra Psicológica Contra Cuba* (Havana, 2000). Conde's book uses the name "Pedro" Pan to signify that this was an operation done to save Cubans, while Crespo and Marrawi use "Peter" Pan to show that this was an anti-Cuban American operation.

In the summer of 1960 things began to get a little bit tight in Cuba, and some of my friends started leaving. We used to meet on Sundays at the Patronato and we had what was known as a bar mitzvah club. There was concern at the time that the laws would be changed, what was known as the *patria potestas*, which means that the state would have total control over the kids. And there were rumors that anybody between the ages of 14 and 27 wouldn't be able to leave Cuba after that, even if they went into the service. They were in the process of drafting; meanwhile they wanted the kids, right after the first day of the school year, to go into the mountains to teach the peasants there how to read and write. That scared a lot of the parents, especially of the girls, because they felt that once the girls started going up into the mountains there that they were going to be coming back pregnant.

At first Kerbel found even his relatives unwilling to talk about their contacts with HIAS, but eventually they put him in touch with the local representative:

So the whole [emigration] movement started. I was not aware of the Catholic group [Operation Pedro Pan] until I arrived here, but there was a contact of HIAS in Havana, and I started checking how to get out. I did not have a passport at the time or a visa. I had found out at one of the Sundays that some cousins of mine were leaving, and I said, "how are you leaving? I know you don't have a passport and you don't have a visa." So at first there was such a hush-hush thing that even the kids' grandmother, who was my father's sister-in-law, said, "I don't know anything." Finally I went to my godfather, and I said, "What's going on here? Why are they leaving, how are they leaving?" So he put me in touch with somebody who was the contact from HIAS, telling him that I wanted to go.³⁶

Fourteen-year-old Marcos was sent to Los Angeles, where he was placed under the supervision of Vista del Mar Child Care, a Jewish orphanage. He was then sent to live with a strictly Orthodox family, but he found the adjustment difficult. In June 1962 his uncles arrived in Miami from Cuba, and Marcos went to live with them. His parents came on October 19, 1962, on the next-to-the last Pan Am flight before the Cuban missile crisis stopped all flights until 1965. In January 1963, the entire family moved to

³⁶ Interview with Marcos Kerbel, July 2000.

Atlanta, Georgia. Marcos lived in Atlanta through his college years, after which he settled in Miami.

Communal Impact

As Jewish emigration rose over the course of the early 1960s, the impact was felt even more strongly in the provinces than in Havana. Even though a lower percentage of those from outside Havana emigrated, many of those who remained in the country gravitated to the capital, destroying the smaller communities. By December 1965 more than 90 percent of the Cuban Jewish community had left, and of the roughly 2,300 who remained, 1,900 lived in Havana.

For almost 30 years, religious matters in Castro's Cuba were largely in the hands of Dr. José Felipe Carneado, director of the Department of Religious Affairs of the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party. Carneado, a strong supporter of the revolution and at the same time possessing a "deep respect" for popular Cuban tradition and beliefs, operated on the principle that religious groups that cooperated with the government should be protected by the regime, and Jews considered him a friend.³⁷

Religious activities continued. All five synagogues in Havana continued to hold weekly Sabbath services and most held services during the week as well. Because of the difficulty of achieving a minyan (the quorum of ten required for group prayer) in Havana, it became customary to count Torah scrolls as part of a minyan—if there were only eight people, two Torahs would be counted. The number of Torahs needed tended to increase, until a minyan might have as few as five breathing people. Jacob Kovadloff,

³⁷ Margalit Bejarano, "The Jewish Community of Cuba: Between Continuity and Extinction," *Jewish Political Studies Review* 3, Spring 1991, p. 129.

the American Jewish Committee's consultant on Latin America, reports that the expression "having a Cuban-style minyan" has become common in several other Latin American countries as well. In 1961 there were 19 bar mitzvahs and 50 Jewish weddings in Havana up until Rosh Hashanah.³⁸ But as emigration swelled thereafter, such occasions became few and far between. Until the revival of the early 1990s, the last bar mitzvah was celebrated in Havana in 1973, and the last Jewish wedding in 1976.³⁹

The congregation that suffered the smallest short-term decline in members was Adath Israel. This Orthodox Ashkenazi synagogue had approximately 800 members and, at least in the early 1960s, seemed to have survived the emigration rush. Adath Israel was the most traditional of all the congregations. Rabbi Everett Gendler, who visited in 1969, gave a description:

Maintaining a daily minyan morning and evening, it has curtained sections at either side of the main floor for the women worshipers. Yom Kippur morning there were some 250 people present, and before the Torah reading the devout *davening* [prayer service] was led by two older members of the congregation whose mastery of both the traditional *nusach* [melody] and the "oy vey" was quite moving.⁴⁰

The community *shohet* (ritual slaughterer), a man in his eighties, executed the Torah reading with great accuracy. Although many of the congregants were elderly, there were also eight to ten congregants in their late teens and early twenties, as well as a number of young children. Of course, Adath Israel too would eventually suffer the same diminution of numbers that the other congregations faced.

³⁸ Abraham J. Dubelman, "Cuba," AJYB 1962, vol. 63, pp. 483–84.

³⁹ Moisés Asís, "Judaism in Cuba 1959–99, A Personal Account," Web site www.jewishcuba.org.

⁴⁰ Everett Gendler, "Holy Days in Habana," *Conservative Judaism* 23, Winter 1969, p. 17.

The congregation that suffered the most precipitous loss of members was the United Hebrew Congregation, which was Reform. The revolution caught United Hebrew in the midst of plans to build a new, larger temple on Fifth Avenue in Miramar. But most of the members, American Jews living in Cuba, left the country within a year of the revolution, and plans for the building were scrapped. Rose Granison, the widow of Rabbi Abram Granison, who served the congregation during the early 1950s, said, “When Castro came into power, everybody ran. He was not inviting people to stay. It was a very scary scene.”⁴¹

With the loss of the American Jews, who were the founders and still constituted the bulk of the membership, there was every reason to believe that the congregation would fold. However a number of dedicated Cuban Jewish families, led by Isidoro Stettner, managed to keep the services going. Rabbi Everett Gendler also visited this congregation in 1969:

Temple Beth Israel, situated in a fine old converted mansion on a broad palm-lined boulevard of Vedado, is often referred to as the American congregation, even though the majority of its present members are not from the United States. They attend because it offers the only liberal service in Habana today. Established some sixty years ago through the merger of two groups, it uses the *Union Prayer Book*, gives page announcements in Spanish, carries on the services in Hebrew and English, and has a full Torah reading following the annual cycle. Men and women sit together, *kippot* [skullcaps] are used, and services are held Shabbat mornings and both days of the Festivals.

Gendler reported that the congregation had about 30 members, most of them in their fifties and sixties, and, he reported, “one senses both present dignity and sad recollections of a more vigorous and numerous community life in days past.”⁴²

⁴¹ Interview with Rose Granison, May 2000.

⁴² Gendler, “Holy Days in Habana,” p. 16.

In 1981, after Stettner's death, the congregation ceased operating, but it survived as a legal entity. This was because the United Hebrew Congregation was the official proprietor of the Jewish cemetery, and, as Margalit Bejarano of The Hebrew University of Jerusalem explains, "in Cuba, like in other Communist countries, you exist if you exist on paper—not necessarily in real life."⁴³ Adath Israel took over the cemetery book and the congregational records.

The Patronato remained the most important Jewish institution in Havana. Herman Heisler, an immigrant from Lithuania, is credited with the original idea of building a community center in the thriving seaside suburb of Vedado. He was president of the Patronato Association, saw the project through to completion in the 1950s, and then served as president of the community center and synagogue until his emigration in the early 1960s. Once Heisler left, though, the Patronato went through a period of uncertainty, with several presidents serving for very brief periods. Finally, the election of Moisés Baldás as president brought stability, and Baldás became the undisputed chief of the Havana Jewish community: "Everyone knew that if you needed to talk with the Jewish community, you went to Baldás."⁴⁴ By the mid-1960s, though, most of the members had emigrated. Everett Gendler described what he saw in 1969:

[The congregation] has a large building some fifteen years old, with synagogue, auditorium, dining hall, kosher kitchen, library, music room, game rooms. Ashkenazic-traditional in orientation, it had perhaps 250 worshipers occupying its one thousand seats on Rosh Hashanah, with the Consul of Israel also in attendance and seated on the *bimah* [platform]. The service is led by knowledgeable laymen, and certain of the old stratifications persist: one man, for example, introduces himself to me as the "gabbai sheni!"⁴⁵

⁴³ Correspondence with Margalit Bejarano, Apr. 2001.

⁴⁴ Interview with Adela Dworin, June 2000.

⁴⁵ Gendler, "Holy Days in Habana," p. 16. "Gabbai sheni" is Hebrew for assistant sexton.

Over the course of the next few decades, the Patronato's roof began leaking and the building became riddled with termites. Skeletal remains of dead birds that had fallen from nests in the rafters lay on the floor of the main sanctuary. According to one estimate made in the late 1980s, the building needed \$50,000 just for basic repairs.⁴⁶ The congregational leadership felt it would be prudent to remove the Torah scrolls from the ark to prevent damage to them. The Patronato, suffering severe budgetary problems, sold a part of the community-center section of the building to the government in 1981.

The Sephardi Jews of Havana also suffered a dramatic depletion of numbers. Chevet Achim, now defunct, was still an active congregation when Gandler visited:

A large converted house serves as the setting for an energetic, vigorous and highly vocal Sephardic service quite winning in its wild way. Women were seated separately, above and behind the men, with a total attendance of perhaps seventy-five people, including some youths. Various male members of the congregation ascended the *bimah* to shout out verses from the Yom Kippur *piyuttim* [liturgical poems], the rest of the congregation responding with resounding counter-shouts. One old member of the congregation was in general charge of the *davening* and led the *duchaning* [priestly benediction] as well, and here as elsewhere one saw an entirely lay-directed service of some power and conviction.⁴⁷

The congregation was located in old Havana, and Sephardim who had moved to the suburbs generally preferred to attend the Centro Sefaradi, where about 150 worshipers came to services on Rosh Hashanah. As the two Sephardi congregations lost more and more members, there was talk of merging Chevet Achim and the Centro

⁴⁶ Mimi Whitefield, "Jews in Cuba: The Fragile Flame, *Miami Herald*, Dec. 9, 1990, p. H4.

⁴⁷ Gandler, "Holy Days in Habana," pp. 17–18.

Sefaradi, and this was slowly accomplished over several years. Eventually one service was held, alternating between the two buildings.

Of the five Jewish elementary schools and one high school that had existed when the community was at its peak, by the time the government took control of the country's entire educational system in June 1961, only the Colegio Hebreo, an elementary school formerly run by the Centro Israelita, was still in operation. But it was on the verge of collapse since many Cuban Jewish parents had begun sending their children to the United States through HIAS. After discussions with the authorities, an arrangement was reached whereby the school would be taken over by the government and function as a quasi-Jewish public school. Its student body would be mostly Jewish, and while Judaic subjects would not be part of the curriculum, the Jewish community was allowed to operate a religious school in the building for 90 minutes every afternoon, after the completion of the regular school day. Thus students attending the school could remain in the building for religious studies without having to be transported elsewhere, and Jewish children attending other public schools in the city could join them after school. Ninety-five percent of the Jewish elementary students remaining in Havana enrolled in the school. This arrangement would last till 1975.

In 1965, Ben G. Kayfetz of Toronto, a Canadian Jewish Congress staff member, visited Cuba. Having paid an earlier visit in 1962, Kayfetz was in a position to make comparisons. The title of his report, "Cuban Jewry—A Community in Dissolution," told it all. The remnants of Cuban Jewry, Kayfetz observed, was a "community of ex-'s." They included ex-*comerciantes*, ex-*fabricantes*, "ex-this, and ex-that." Kayfetz reported that in the old city of Havana, where "hundreds upon hundreds of small shops were

huddled next to each other, strung together for miles along narrow sixteenth-century streets,” there were now “far more metal graded shutters covering closed up shops than there are open places of business.” Kayfetz observed, “The traveler, even when he does not speak to Cubans, can feel soon enough that he is in a Revolutionary state of the Marxist stripe.” Kayfetz wrote that “Propaganda messages are to be found on all placards and billboards—commercial messages of sales appeal are now obsolete.” Freedom of speech “in the North American and West European sense” was unknown, and the newspapers featured a constant supply of Fidel’s speeches. Signs on every city block announced the existence of the local unit of the Committee for the Defense of the Revolution (CDR).⁴⁸

And yet Cuba was the only country in the Communist orbit that continued to permit the existence of a Zionist organization, the Unión Sionista. Kayfetz immediately noticed that right next door to it was the Sociedad Club Arabe (Arab Social Club), which had a large poster of Egyptian president Nasser on the door. Local Jews assured the Canadian visitor that Jews and Arabs got along “quite cordially” in Cuba. Kayfetz noted the termination of large-scale Jewish fund-raising “because of currency regulations.” Previously, the Cuban Jewish community had raised generous sums of money for Histadrut, Youth Aliyah, the Hebrew University, and, in particular, Keren Hayesod. There was such a shortage of money that rumors circulated in Mexico that the Patronato had to sell some of its synagogue benches in order to pay its bills. Vehemently denying this, Patronato board members said that the benches were sold because the decline in members made them unnecessary. Kayfetz wrote that the Jewish community had “been

⁴⁸ B. G. Kayfetz, “Cuban Jewry—A Community in Dissolution,” *Congress Bulletin* (published by the Canadian Jewish Congress), Dec. 1965, pp. 3, 8.

destroyed” but it was “destroyed without any prior or deliberate intention, for no person I spoke to had any complaints as Jews against the Revolutionary government, all acknowledging its fairness and objectivity in dealing with Jewish communal and religious affairs.”⁴⁹

There was only one advantage to the community’s drastic reduction in numbers: it was more unified than before. A coordinating committee of all five Havana congregations met every other week, the sites of the meetings alternating between the different synagogues.

Communal Leaders Who Remained

Although most of the Cuban Jewish community’s leaders emigrated in the years immediately following the revolution, there were those who stayed to guarantee that the community would at least survive, if not flourish. The key figure was Moisés Baldás, mentioned earlier in connection with his leadership of the Patronato. Baldás, who had a Polish yeshivah background as well as a good secular education and spoke a fluent Hebrew, had come to Cuba in the 1920s as a young man. By 1959 he was a successful businessman and the owner of a seven-story building in the center of Havana that housed a supermarket as well as apartments and his own private penthouse. A 60-year-old widower when the revolution took place, he was known as “Mr. Zionism” of Cuba. The Castro regime nationalized his building but compensated him with a pension and permitted him to retain his penthouse.

Baldás turned his energies to the community, taking a personal interest in every aspect of its affairs, particularly education. Lavy Becker of the Canadian Jewish

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 3.

Congress, reporting on the situation in 1975, identified Baldás as the force behind the Hebrew school, all Zionist activities in the community, the youth choir, the training of new ritual slaughterers and the *mohel*, and the encouragement of young people to assume leadership roles. Many others have confirmed this perception. Since the government gave him clearance to attend a World Jewish Congress (WJC) conference in Brussels and a World Zionist Organization (WZO) conference in Jerusalem, Baldás could simply have declined to return, and settled abroad. It was his strong commitment to, and sense of responsibility for, the Cuban Jewish community that kept him from doing this for many years. Becker wrote of Baldás, “because of his good judgments and able leadership, he has achieved the respect of his community and has been a major factor in maintaining a unified, well-balanced and hopeful Jewish community.”⁵⁰

After the government’s decision to break diplomatic relations with Israel in 1973 (see below, p.), Baldás’s strong identification with Zionism placed him in an uncomfortable position, and by the late 1970s he felt ready to leave Cuba and retire to Israel. Having made this decision, Baldás began grooming Dr. José Miller Fredman to succeed him as leader.

Miller was a successful maxillofacial surgeon who was born and raised in Yaguajay, then part of Santa Clara province and now part of Sancti Spíritus province. There were three Jewish families there when Miller was growing up, two Ashkenazi and one Sephardi. He told me that “there were some Presbyterians [and] some Baptists in my town, but the majority were Catholic. My family kept the tradition. We were Jews not only because we knew we were Jews but also because the goyim knew we were

⁵⁰ Becker, “Report on the Jewish Community of Cuba,” p. 8

Jews. We had celebrations of the Jewish festivals among the three families that were there. There were seders every year.” Miller came to Havana in order to attend dental school, and stayed. His second wife, Dalia Gomez, converted to Judaism and became active in the community, serving on the Patronato board and working in the Patronato office. Miller told me that he was surprised when Baldás asked him to consider becoming the next president: “I became the leader of the Jewish community because they had no one else. I had no experience in community leadership—I was a doctor. But I learned.”⁵¹ As part of his preparation to assume the presidency, Miller attended German classes so that he would be able to understand the Yiddish spoken by many of the old-timers on the board of the Patronato.

Miller was unusual in that he was a highly trained professional who nevertheless stayed after the revolution. “I stayed in the country because I enjoyed living here. Don’t remind me how much money I could have earned in America. I enjoyed living in Cuba very much, and for that reason I’m glad I stayed here. But we all make choices and we have to live with the good and the bad consequences of those choices.” Miller took over the presidency in 1978, and Baldás stayed for about a year and a half to help with the transition. He then flew to Canada and the United States before settling in Givatayim, Israel. The transition was carried out smoothly and Miller’s leadership was accepted virtually unanimously. Miller has provided the Jewish community with strong and visionary leadership during a very difficult period. Margalit Bejarano explains that “the most important point in Miller’s leadership is his good relationship with the authorities. He is a good diplomat, who knows how to move among the Cuban leaders,

⁵¹ Interview with José Miller Fredman, June 2000.

and thanks to his good contacts the community can survive.”⁵² He was among the first to suggest programs and funding possibilities that have resulted in the remarkable regeneration of the Havana Jewish community.

Abraham Marcus Matterín, director of the Patronato library from its founding in 1953 until his death in 1983, was another important Jewish community leader. He was born in Lithuania in 1916 and arrived in Havana as a teenager. A self-educated journalist, Matterín wrote for *Periodico: El Mundo*, an influential Cuban newspaper, and was writer and editor for the Jewish periodicals *Hebraica* and *Reflejos*, both of which were published in the 1950s. He befriended Cuban writers, painters, intellectuals, and poets, founded the Cuban-American Cultural Association of Havana—an intellectual group that sponsored cultural activities and issued publications—and was regarded as a key bridge between the Jewish community and the broader Cuban society. Among his many friends were Juan Marinello, writer, intellectual, and prominent leader of the Communist Party; Luis Gómez Wangüemert, the editor of *El Mundo*; Fernando Ortiz, the most respected Cuban historian and anthropologist of his generation; and Nicolas Guillén, the Cuban national poet. Matterín stayed in Cuba because of the intellectually satisfying role he was able to play, even though he was not a member of the Communist Party.⁵³

José Dworin left his native Pinsk for Cuba in 1924 with the intention of going from there to the United States and then raising money to bring over his mother and siblings. But he never got to the United States, and in 1930 his mother and two brothers

⁵² Correspondence with Margalit Bejarano, Apr. 2001.

⁵³ The Matterín papers, including most of the Patronato records, are in the archives of the Office of History of the City of Havana.

came to Cuba. After the revolution Dworin's clothing factory was nationalized and he made plans to leave the country, but his daughter Adela talked him out of it. He stayed and took a job working for the government. Dworin was one of the founders of the Anti-Tuberculosis Committee, which later expanded into the field of mental health, providing economic aid for Jews who were hospitalized in mental institutions; every Sunday, Dworin and his committee went to visit the patients. He was a member of the board of the Patronato until his death in 1971.

His daughter, Adela, was raised as a traditional Jew, and would come to be known as one of the most observant members of the Jewish community. She attended two Jewish day schools that existed in prerevolutionary Havana, the Tarbut School and the Yavneh Institute. At the same time she was active in Hashomer Hatzair, a left-socialist Zionist youth movement, and participated in the youth organization of the Patronato. At the time of the revolution Adela Dworin was a law student, but the University of Havana closed down for three years, and when it reopened the new revolutionary government wanted to decrease the number of law students. As a result, she did not return to the university and never completed her degree. In 1970, she began a long career in the Patronato library. Her responsibilities gradually expanded, especially after Abraham Matterín died.

“Petering Out” in the 1970s

Adela Dworin recalls that even after 1965 there was still a substantial amount of activity in the Jewish community. But from about 1970 onward, “there were really only elderly people coming in, and not very many of those.”⁵⁴ Lavy Becker, the Canadian

⁵⁴ Dworin interview.

Jewish Congress representative who visited Cuba a number of times during the decade, referred to “this once-flourishing community... now petering out.” In 1975, Becker noted that “all five synagogues in Havana and one in Santiago still function, with regular services and social interaction before and after services.” He did point out, however, that on any given Shabbat a total of only some 70–80 people attended all of the Havana synagogues, and that these Jews were mostly elderly, almost all over the age of 70. The synagogues supported themselves through a combination of monthly membership dues, rental money they received from the government for the use of their auditoriums, and the sale of Passover products brought in with the help of the Canadian Jewish Congress.⁵⁵

The Havana community had an afternoon Hebrew school with an enrollment of 37 children between the ages of five and eleven, which, as noted above, operated in the “Jewish” public school five days a week for an hour-and-a-half a day. Those 37 students represented slightly more than 40 percent of the 90 children estimated to be in that age bracket in the Jewish community at the time. Not only did the government allow those children who had to come from other public schools to leave early so that they could get to Hebrew school on time, but it also granted the Jewish community the use of two small buses, as well as the necessary gas ration, to transport the children. This was a complete deviation from the norm in Cuba, where children typically went to the grade school nearest their homes, and therefore would not require bus transportation. Furthermore, Cuban schoolchildren would normally go home for lunch, but the Jewish children attending the “Jewish” school—who were in many cases much farther from home than other students—were provided a lunch by the government in the school building. Becker explained that “since the government nationalized this building [the

⁵⁵ Becker, “Report on Jewish Community of Cuba,” pp. 1, 3.

former Jewish day school]...it may well be that the government considers these concessions a quid pro quo.”⁵⁶ Becker visited the school shortly before it closed. Just prior to the opening of the 1975–76 school year, the government sent Moisés Baldás a letter instructing him that Jewish children should now attend their neighborhood public schools.

Before the revolution, the Havana community had had very active Maccabi and Betar youth organizations. During the first years of the revolution both disappeared, due mainly to the emigration of their leaders and members. But in 1969, the Unión Sionista sponsored a new youth organization.

An important source of inspiration for the Havana Jewish community in the 1970s was its young-adult choral group, where, as Moisés Asís explained, “young people learned a lot of Israeli popular songs in Hebrew, patriotic marches in Hebrew and Yiddish, and traditional Jewish songs in Hebrew.” These activities inspired many young Cuban Jews, said Asís, “despite the strong anti-Israel, anti-Zionism, and anti-religion stand by the Cuban government in those critical years in which any religious believers were banned from universities and from many jobs.”⁵⁷ Becker commented that “the level of their music may be low, the repertoire limited, but their joy is unbounded.” The group served an important social function. “This is a program without which these more than 20 young people would have hardly any contact with anything Jewish,” Becker noted.⁵⁸ Led by a violinist who was employed in a restaurant orchestra, the choral group performed on holidays such as Hanukkah, Purim, and Israeli Independence Day, as well

⁵⁶ Ibid, p. 9.

⁵⁷ Correspondence with Moisés Asís, Mar. 2001.

⁵⁸Becker, “Report on Jewish Community of Cuba,” p. 9.

as at more solemn occasions, such as a program to commemorate the fall of the Warsaw Ghetto.

It was through this choir that the community found a schoolteacher for its afternoon school—Miss Mercedes Villapol, a Catholic from Spain who would eventually convert to Judaism in Havana. Moisés Baldás encouraged her to join the choral group, where she learned Hebrew and Yiddish melodies by rote. She later began to study in the adult Hebrew classes, and was then persuaded to take over the teaching of the children. Becker commented, “her whole life these last four to five years is related to Jews and Judaism. It will surprise no one to learn that she now has a strong desire to become a Jewess.”⁵⁹ Villapol and Baldás also ran the adult-education program, which met two evenings each week, with Villapol teaching seven or eight adults and Baldás two or three. They taught Hebrew, history, and current Jewish events, with particular focus on political events in Israel.

The government was very generous to the Jewish community in the allocation of meat. In 1975 each Cuban was entitled to three-fourths of a pound of meat every nine days. The government regulated the slaughter of animals and the packaging of meat for sale in government butcher shops so as to maintain equal rationing for all. But the government made special arrangements to enable the Jewish community to prepare kosher meat: the two *shohetim* were permitted the use of one of the abattoirs, and the two kosher butchers were authorized to package the kosher meat.

Before the 1959 revolution, the Cuban Jewish community, like most others in South America, was strongly Zionist, but the interest in Israel and commitment to it gradually lessened over the following decades. The three most important reasons were

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 3.

that the vast majority of the most committed Zionists had left the country; the relationship between Cuba and the State of Israel had deteriorated; and the acceleration of intermarriage meant that even in cases where the intermarried couple affiliated with the Jewish community, the non-Jewish partner had only a weak sense of Jewish peoplehood, and no historical or familial ties with Israel. Interestingly, even though Castro suddenly broke diplomatic relations with Israel in September 1973, his government allowed the Unión Sionista to continue to function, and granted formal permission to hold large public celebrations of Israeli Independence Day in 1974 and 1975. Unión Sionista even remained in operation for three years after the 1975 United Nations “Zionism is Racism” resolution, which Cuba supported. Baldás believed that the authorities were simply unaware that such an organization was still functioning, and when the continued existence of the Unión Sionista came to their attention, they ordered it closed.⁶⁰

B'nai Brith Maimonides Lodge also continued to function even though the American Jews who had created the organization had long since left the country. Becker was encouraged by the fact that a relatively young man had succeeded Miller as president of B'nai Brith. He was a 37-year-old accountant named Luis Szklarz, the head of the department of ferrous and non-ferrous metals and oil in the government foreign-trade office. Another sign that younger people sought identification with the Jewish community was that, in addition to the choral group, about 30 young married people and singles met regularly under the auspices of the Juventud Hebrea de Cuba.

⁶⁰ Correspondence with Margalit Bejarano, July 2001.

The handful of ordained rabbis in Cuba had all left the community years earlier. One of them, Nissim Gambach, lives in Miami Beach to this day.⁶¹ There were a number of non-ordained ritual functionaries in the Sephardi community who continued to serve into the early 1980s. These included José Pinto, who was born in Jerusalem and died in Havana in 1984. According to his son, who still lives in Havana, he ministered to the Sephardi community at both Chevet Achim and Centro Sefaradi until 1982.⁶² Solomon Sussi, born in Turkey, also served the Cuban community until his death in 1986. In the mid-1970s, Baldás hired Isaac Chammah, a learned Jew born in Syria, to teach Torah reading and synagogue skills to Moisés Asís and Jacobo Epelbaum. Epelbaum served as community *mohel* for a number of years until his emigration in 1979. Asis led services at the Patronato on Friday nights from the mid-1980s until his emigration in 1993. A number of elderly congregants also played key roles in keeping the services running. Of particular note was Jacobo Peretz, who played a central role in Chevet Ahim during the 1970s and 1980s: he ran a bar on the first floor of the synagogue building, the revenues helping maintain the congregation.

Shrinkage of the community meant a shortage of Jewish marriage partners, and the intermarriage rate rose. Since Jewish families had to register for the purchase of Passover products, there are data on intermarriage for March and April 1975. In Havana, there were 430 families containing at least one Jewish member. Of this total, 308 had both spouses Jewish and 122 were composed of intermarried couples. In 26 other locations in Cuba there were a total of 113 Jewish families, of which 53 had two

⁶¹ See his comments, “Un Refugiado de la Guerra Civil Española,” in Bejarano, ed., *La Comunidad Hebrea De Cuba*, pp. 123–124.

⁶² Interview with Alberto Pinto, June 2000.

Jewish partners and 60 were intermarried. Thus, of the total of 543 families recorded in this census, 361 consisted of two Jewish partners and 192 were intermarried. The intermarriage rate was much higher—over 50 percent—outside of Havana than in the city, where it was below 30 percent.⁶³

Many of those who identified as Jews were only partly Jewish by parentage. Of the 1,041 individuals affiliated with the Havana Jewish community, 671 had two Jewish parents, 226 were born of mixed marriages, and 144 were of non-Jewish parentage. The total of Jews for the rest of the country was 352, 173 of whom had two Jewish parents, 113 were of mixed parentage, and 66 were of non-Jewish parentage. Thus of the total number of 1,393 individuals counted in the census, 844 had two Jewish parents, 339 were of mixed parentage, and 210 had no Jewish parents.

Virtually all of those categorized as without Jewish parentage were married to Jews; since they were part of a family that was receiving Passover supplies, they were seen as being affiliated with the community. Likewise, those of mixed parentage reported in this census were either married to Jews or felt a sufficient degree of Jewish identity to register for the Passover supplies. By 1975, community leaders were well aware of the substantial presence in the Jewish community of people of non-Jewish and

⁶³ The numbers of intermarried individuals varied not only between Havana and the rest of the country, but also between males and females. In Havana, 362 males were of two Jewish parents, whereas 309 females were; 132 men were of mixed parentage whereas 94 were; 46 men were non-Jewish whereas 98 females were. This last number indicates that twice as many Jewish men were married to non-Jewish women as Jewish women were married to non-Jewish men. In the 26 other locations the percentages were even more skewed, with more than three times as many Jewish men married to non-Jewish women as the reverse.

mixed origins, many of whom had “shifting identities.” They might at one point identify as Jews—such as during the Passover distribution of food—and at other times, such as visits to the non-Jewish side of their families on Christian holidays, identify as Cubans of Catholic background. A number of Jewish leaders suggested that a rabbi or a panel of rabbis visit Cuba to regularize their status, a step that would not be taken till the early 1990s. Meanwhile, these individuals were accepted on their own terms into the community, if they chose to participate. The Jewish population was so small that tolerance and acceptance had become central values. This marked a dramatic change from the more exclusionary attitudes of the 1950s and earlier, when the community had been much larger.

By the late 1970s, the community had hit its low point. Bernardo Benes, the prominent Cuban Jew residing in the U.S. who functioned as President Carter’s unofficial emissary to Castro, had begun visiting regularly, and he did what he could to assist the local Jewish community. He recalls: “I was the first Cuban Jew to go back from Miami and meet with the leadership of the Cuban Jewish community, in 1978.” The next year, when Benes had to fly in for a one-day meeting with Cuban authorities, he brought with him Rabbi Mayer Abramowitz, the rabbi of the Miami Cuban Jewish community. The first rabbi to set foot in the country in almost two decades, Abramowitz visited three of the Havana synagogues and performed a memorial service at the Jewish cemetery.⁶⁴

That same year, 1979, Rabbi Isidoro Aizenberg visited the country on behalf of the CJC. Born in Argentina and having served a congregation in Caracas, Venezuela, Aizenberg went to each of the Havana synagogues and later described their low level of

⁶⁴ Benes interview.

activity. Though all five congregations held Sabbath services, and two—Adath Israel and Chevet Ahim—tried to keep up a daily minyan, “a minyan is [a] precious commodity.” The Patronato, which had the largest Sabbath service, could muster “over a dozen men and some women.” In the Centro Hebreo Sefardi, Aizenberg and his wife encountered “several non-Jewish men and women, who, we were told, regularly and faithfully participate in the weekly Shabbat services.” The United Hebrew Congregation survived “thanks to the unshakable devotion of its elder statesman, Isidoro Stettner,” who “brings together a few people who pray for half an hour from the *Union Prayer Book*.”

All the congregations were dominated by the elderly, for three reasons. First, no one could be excused from work on religious grounds, and since Saturday morning was part of the workweek, only retired people could attend services without penalty. Second, as was the case elsewhere in Latin America, most Cuban Jews had never been inclined to attend services regularly, and “today’s conditions certainly do not encourage greater attendance.” Finally, there were few Jews who knew how to lead services or read the Torah, and those who did tended to be the very elderly. Sabbath services in all the synagogues were followed by a kiddush, which played a role “far beyond that of any such kiddush in Canada or the U.S.A.” For many of the 50–70 people attending services at the five synagogues, the food served—a roll with a slice of kosher canned meat, a hard-boiled egg, and a piece of pound cake—“represents a daily meal.” Services in Chevet Ahim and the United Hebrew Congregation were held in the main sanctuaries, which were relatively small and provided the only available spaces for prayer. The other

three congregations conducted their services in their chapels, since “in reality, there is never—even during the High Holidays—a need to use the sanctuaries.”⁶⁵

Indeed, the congregations were all in the process of deciding how best to utilize their facilities. The Patronato arranged for a government-sponsored theater group to rent its central hall, and, in 1981, the government purchased this part of the building. At the time of the Aizenberg’s visit, the Patronato’s officers were in the middle of a debate over whether to rent out the fully equipped kitchen and large “mirror hall,” which had served kosher meals. By 1979, this meal service was no longer operating and the government’s restaurant administration was interested in renting out the space. The officers faced a dilemma. On one hand, they did not use the space and did not need it. On the other hand, they had already rented out a large portion of the building, and turning over an additional segment appeared to signify a further step toward the community’s demise.

Aizenberg’s visit came shortly before the Sixth Conference of Nonaligned Nations, which Cuba was hosting in Havana, and the city was already plastered with slogans, one of which was “*contra el sionismo*,” against Zionism. When the government ordered the closing of the Jewish community’s Unión Sionista in June 1978—the only Jewish institution ever confiscated by the authorities, in marked contrast to the government’s willingness to allow dwindling congregations to retain large synagogue buildings—the structure was turned over to the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), in an obvious attempt to demonstrate Cuban hostility to Zionism and the State of Israel.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Isidoro Aizenberg, “Confidential Report to Alan Rose, Canadian Jewish Congress, July 23, 1979,” pp. 3–4, Rose Records.

⁶⁶ Ibid, p. 12.

Aizenberg concluded, “During our two-week stay in Havana we witnessed the slow death of a Jewish community. Given the Jewish experience under older Communist regimes, there is little or no hope of reversing this process. Jewish destiny has always been *havrutah o mitutah*, fellowship or death, and there cannot be such fellowship in today’s Havana.”⁶⁷

Many Cuban Jews apparently agreed, for when an opportunity came to leave the country—the Mariel boatlift—a substantial number seized it. In 1980 a group of 12 Cubans charged into the Peruvian embassy in Havana seeking asylum and safe exit from the country. A Cuban guard was killed in the course of the incident. In response to the Peruvian government’s refusal to eject the occupants, Castro withdrew the Cuban military guards from outside the embassy. Word spread quickly that the Peruvian embassy was now unguarded, and within 24 hours more than 10,000 Cubans rushed into the embassy. Concerned about the widespread media coverage of the event and anxious to defuse what could be a catastrophic situation, Castro announced that any Cuban who would like to leave the country was free to do so. This caused great excitement in Florida’s Cuban community, where plans were immediately made to bring relatives and loved ones from Cuba. American boats sped to pick up the thousands of Cubans who chose to emigrate. About 125,000 eventually left, most from the port of Mariel west of Havana, among them some 400 Jews. Those Cubans who reached the United States between April 1980 and September 1981 as a part of this boatlift were called *marielitos*. Castro also used the Mariel boatlift as an opportunity to free himself of some of the most disaffected citizens of the country, releasing criminals from prison, as well as letting out

⁶⁷ Ibid, p. 14.

psychiatric cases and other “antisocial” elements, and allowing them to emigrate to the U.S.

Some stigma attached to all the *marielitos*, and not only because of the association with Cuban misfits. Rosa Levy, a Jew who left Cuba at this time, forbade her children to tell people how and when they got out of Cuba. Levy believed—not without reason—that *marielito* was a label to be avoided at all costs, explaining: “I have been mentioned [in the community as a possible Communist]. While I was arriving here, the moment that I arrived, they, the first ones [1960 emigrants], mentioned that. . . It’s like you came late because you were a Communist.⁶⁸

But the boatlift was an overwhelmingly positive experience for most participants. Whatever the underlying tensions, Jewish arrivals were greeted by Jewish Cuban Americans and assisted by the Greater Miami Jewish Federation’s Resettlement Task Force and HIAS. With the emigration of the Jewish *marielitos* it was believed that the Jewish population of Cuba (not counting part-Jews or those who had disaffiliated) was now below 800, consisting mostly of the elderly and the hard-core supporters of the regime.

Attempts at Revitalization in the 1980s

Jacob Kovadloff, the American Jewish Committee’s specialist on Latin American affairs, visited Cuba in 1981, 1983, and 1985.⁶⁹ On his first visit he found that about 300 Havana Jews were affiliated with one or another of the four synagogues left in the city. However, 831 people registered for kosher-for-Passover meals, which were

⁶⁸ Bettinger-López, *Cuban-Jewish Journeys*, pp. 88–90.

⁶⁹ Interview with Jacob Kovadloff, June 2000.

sent into the country free of charge by the CJC and sold for a small fee by the local Jewish communities. Kovadloff agreed with earlier visitors that "Cuban Jews actually enjoy certain special privileges, such as being able to obtain the special Passover meals, year-round kosher meat and chicken, and fish for Rosh Hashanah and Passover, as well as additional potatoes. (Neither Catholics nor Protestants got such additions to the normal food quotas.) Religious services are permitted; but for cultural meetings the community must receive authorization, and this is frequently denied."⁷⁰

Cuban Jews, fearful of spies, would only talk to Kovadloff in private. Nevertheless, one Cuban Jewish leader who preferred to remain anonymous told him, "twenty years after the revolution, we cannot say we are disappearing because of anti-Semitism. Rather, we are disappearing because of attrition." This attrition was particularly severe in the interior of the country. Three months before Kovadloff's arrival in 1981, the synagogue in Santiago de Cuba closed due to lack of attendance. Its four Torah scrolls had been brought to Havana, and community leaders asked Kovadloff to take them to the United States. Government approval was arranged and two of the scrolls were sent to congregations in Miami, one went to Puerto Rico, and one to Israel. The government "is anxious to prove that Cuba is not anti-Semitic, which is true," Kovadloff reported. However, he noted, Jews felt enormous pressure because of the government's anti-Zionism.

José Miller made a number of attempts to interest individual Jews and Jewish organizations outside the country in the Cuban Jewish community. As early as 1985 he proposed that a religious leader be sent from abroad to encourage young Jews to involve

⁷⁰ Memo from Jacob Kovadloff to Abraham Karlikow, Apr. 17, 1981, p. 1, American Jewish Committee Archives.

themselves in the Jewish community. He told Edgar Strauss, a visiting Canadian, that the community in Cuba was dying for lack of young leaders to replace the older people. The time was right for outside help, since the Cuban government was in the process of changing its religious policies. The Central Committee of the Communist Party had recently opened a Department for Religious Affairs, and Catholic and Protestant groups were rebuilding their communities. Strauss, the Canadian visitor, suggested, “in view of the make up of the Jewish community in Cuba, the rabbi or religious leader going there should not be Orthodox. Too many of the young people are from mixed marriages and uncertain background.”⁷¹ Alan Rose of the CJC was skeptical, responding, “it will be difficult indeed to find a religious leader to spend time in Cuba, although such a person would be performing a mitzvah.”⁷² (Two years earlier, when Jacob Luski, a Conservative rabbi in St. Petersburg, Florida, who had been born in Havana and lived there with his family until leaving for the United States in 1960, sought to volunteer his services to the Cuban Jewish community, Rose had advised that “it would be a great mitzvah to visit Cuba as a tourist” and do some religious visitations on an unofficial basis. Luski never made it to Cuba, but still hopes to do so.⁷³)

Another impediment to assisting the Cuban Jews was political sentiment in the United States, especially in the Miami area, that entailed “labeling Cubans who have remained in revolutionary Cuba as Communists, Castro-lovers, and traitors to the ‘real’

⁷¹ Edgar Strauss to Allan [sic] Rose, Mar. 14, 1985, Rose Records.

⁷² Alan Rose to Edgar Strauss, Mar. 26, 1985, *ibid.*

⁷³ Jacob Luski to Alan Rose, Dec. 2, 1983; Rose to Luski, Dec. 20, 1983, *ibid.*; interview with Luski, May 2001.

Cuba, the Cuba of the past.”⁷⁴ Eddie Levy, the director of Jewish Solidarity, a Miami-based assistance program that helps Cuban Jews, explained, “the people who normally would have been in charge of helping the community there would have been the Cuban Jews that lived in the United States, and for political reasons they have kept apart from doing that, because they were afraid of the reaction that they would have had from the more reactionary elements in South Florida.” One woman, a prominent Cuban Jew in the Miami area, told Levy, “Those Jews had a chance to go when I went, and they chose to stay behind. As far as I care they could all die of hunger.”⁷⁵

Marcus Kerbel served in a number of capacities for both of the “Cuban” congregations in Miami. During his time as president of the Cuban Hebrew Congregation in Miami Beach, Kerbel, too, found great reluctance on the part of the Jewish Cubans in Miami to help those still in Cuba live more comfortably there or to come to the United States. While one reason was the fear of bomb threats from the militants, another concern was that new waves of immigrants would place financial pressures on the existing congregations. “None of the congregations received the Cubans too warmly,” recalled Kerbel. “Part of it was they couldn’t figure out why there were Jews in Cuba, and, number two, they put a budget strain on those congregations. I was treasurer of Temple Beth Moshe [in North Miami], an American congregation, and they look to the budget.”⁷⁶

Despite the many obstacles, there were some promising developments in the 1980s. After years of discouraging tourism, the government shifted policy and began

⁷⁴ Bettinger-López, *Cuban-Jewish Journeys*, p. xl.

⁷⁵ Interview with Eddie Levy, June 2000.

⁷⁶ Kerbel interview.

welcoming tourists. Many Jews came to visit, mostly from elsewhere in Latin America, and they frequently made contact with the local Jewish community. A number of foreign Jewish communities made specific donations that helped to set the stage for the revitalization of the community, such as the gift of *la gauguita*, a minibus, by the Jewish community of Venezuela. Chabad-Lubavitch started to work in Cuba in the late 1980s, even before the return of the JDC to the country, bringing over educators and helping create new educational and social programs.

Cuban-Israeli Relations and the Cuban Jewish Community

Cuba adopted an aggressive anti-Israel policy after the Six-Day War of 1967 and especially after the 1973 Yom Kippur War. This position gradually softened over the years till the outbreak of sustained conflict between the Palestinians and Israelis in 2000 undermined much of the quiet progress that had been made.

The State of Israel began assisting the Cuban Communist government in the early 1960s, with Israeli scientists and engineers providing technical assistance in a number of areas. For example, farming specialists from kibbutzim affiliated with the left-wing socialist Hashomer Hatzair movement helped Cuba develop its agricultural sector. In addition, several private Israeli companies conducted business in Cuba. Even after the break in diplomatic relations an unofficial relationship between some Israeli business concerns and the Cuban government has continued and even intensified, in marked contrast to the official hostility between the two governments.

In 1966, Cuba invited members of the PLO and other Palestinian military organizations to come to Cuba for advanced training. This set the stage for Yasir Arafat,

George Habash, and other Palestinian leaders to pay official visits to Havana. Castro was eager to extend Cuba's influence in the Arab world beyond the Palestinians to Libya, Algeria, Syria, South Yemen, and elsewhere. There have been numerous reliable reports that Cuban military advisors helped train Spanish Basque fighters on Libyan soil, Polisario guerillas fighting against the Moroccan government in Algerian territory, and Communist government troops in South Yemen.

The outbreak of the Six-Day War in June 1967 came as the culmination of several weeks of growing political tension; Israel's Arab neighbors threatened to destroy the Jewish state, and Israel's preemptive strike in response to those threats was as remarkable as it was decisive. For Fidel Castro, the war offered an opportunity to fulfill his aspiration of playing a leading role among the nonaligned nations by supporting the Arab countries, which were part of the so-called third world. Furthermore, Israel was closely allied with the United States, and supporting the Arab cause would be another way of opposing American interests. Nevertheless, Castro hesitated. He had always maintained good relations with the Cuban Jewish community, and up until this point Cuban foreign policy had been generally sympathetic toward the State of Israel. The Soviet Union had broken diplomatic relations with the Jewish state in the aftermath of the war, which further complicated matters. Had Cuba had done the same, it would have appeared as if Castro was mimicking the Soviet line. Therefore, he avoided taking these steps immediately, but instead, while condemning what the Arab side referred to as "Israeli aggression," he placed the bulk of the blame on "American imperialism." Castro did not break diplomatic relations with Israel, and he criticized the Arab countries for their political and military failures.

To be sure, on June 23, 1967, Ricardo Alarcón Quesada, the Cuban ambassador to the UN, gave an incendiary speech criticizing the State of Israel in very strong terms. Alarcón argued that Israel had committed “armed aggression against the Arab peoples.”⁷⁷ Even more upsetting from a Jewish point of view, Alarcón described the Israeli preemptive strike as a “surprise attack, in the Nazi manner.” Further, he opposed Israel’s seeming ambition to annex the West Bank, Golan Heights, and Sinai Desert, “occupied by force of arms.” This was the first time that any Cuban ambassador to the UN had condemned Israel in such unequivocal terms.

Alarcón, however, began his speech by declaring Cuba’s opposition to any form of prejudice and stating that the Jews as well as the Palestinians deserved peace and justice. The diplomat argued that Cuba “as a matter of principle, [is] opposed to every manifestation of religious, national, or racial prejudice, from whatever source, and also objects to any political proclamation which advocates the destruction of any people or State. This principle is applicable to the Palestinian people... unjustly deprived of its territory, as well as the Jewish people, which for two thousand years has suffered racial prejudice and persecution, and during the recent Nazi period, one of the most cruel attempts at mass extermination.”⁷⁸

Consistent with Castro’s own determination, Alarcón put the lion’s share of the responsibility on “North American imperialism.” “Our position with respect to the State of Israel is determined by [its] aggressive conduct... as an instrument of imperialism against the Arab world... it is in the context of the global strategy of imperialism that the true meaning... of the aggression... is revealed. ... The criminal war unleashed by the

⁷⁷ *Granma*, June 24, 1967.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

imperialist government of the United States against the people of Vietnam, with absolute impunity, demonstrates this affirmation, if the experience of Korea, the Congo, and Santo Domingo... are not sufficient proof.”⁷⁹

Alarcón suggested that “Yankee imperialism” was at the core of the problem in the Middle East and elsewhere. The Soviet Union had broken diplomatic relations with Israel; all of the Eastern European Communist countries, except for Romania, had done likewise. But Castro’s foreign policy priorities were different from those of the Soviet Union: while the Soviet Union felt it was essential to maintain a dialogue with the United States, Castro wanted to stress what he believed to be the American role in the development of conflict throughout the world.⁸⁰ Castro had a complex relationship with the Soviet Union. On one hand, he was a close ally, while on the other, he attempted to maintain as much independence as possible. As Susan Eckstein puts it, “Shaped by the Cold War, Castro never became a complete pawn of Moscow...he on occasion implemented policies at odds with Moscow’s and he manipulated Cold War politics to his country’s advantage.”⁸¹

In the years following the Six-Day War, Castro consistently refused to break diplomatic relations with Israel. But a few days before the Yom Kippur War in 1973, he succumbed to pressure. At this point, Castro was the leader of the pro-Soviet element among the Third-World countries. In Algeria to participate in a conference of

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Cuban diplomats sarcastically called the Soviets “big tailors” because they were “taking measures,” trying to look like they were doing things when they actually were doing nothing. In contrast, the revolutionary Cubans prided themselves on being doers.

⁸¹ Susan Eva Eckstein, *Back from the Future: Cuba Under Castro* (Princeton, N.J., 1994), p. 5.

nonaligned nations, Castro was looking forward to refuting the idea, supported by the Chinese, that there were two imperialisms threatening the world, one from the United States and the other from the Soviet Union. Castro spoke for only half an hour, and his speech drew tremendous criticism. The exiled Prince Norodom Sihanouk of Cambodia, for one, cited the recent history of his own country as a classic example of how the two imperialistic powers had colluded to destroy countries and nations.

More seriously, Colonel Muammar Qaddafi, the Libyan leader, went so far as to state that Cuba had no business belonging to an organization of nonaligned states because Cuba was, like Uzbekistan or Czechoslovakia, allied with the Soviet Union. Qaddafi's verbal attack nearly caused the conference to break up in chaos. Castro needed to make a dramatic gesture to save his reputation as a third-world leader, and so he announced that he had been persuaded to sever diplomatic relations with the State of Israel. Qaddafi rushed over to Castro and gave him a big hug. *Granma*, an official Cuban government newspaper, reported that Castro's announcement was greeted with a standing ovation that "seemed to last forever."⁸²

There is no doubt that breaking diplomatic relations with Israel was Castro's spur-of-the-moment personal decision, and it caught the Cuban government bureaucracy completely by surprise. But the country's officials and its media quickly fell into line. During the Yom Kippur War that broke out soon thereafter, a contingent of Cuban soldiers actually participated in tank battles on the Syrian side. Cuba portrayed Israel not only as the aggressor but also as having committed atrocities against civilians, particularly Syrians. Cuba became one of the most extreme anti-Israel voices on the international scene, even lobbying against the Egyptian-Israeli peace process and lining

⁸² *Granma*, Sept. 16, 1973.

up as one of the sponsors of the “Zionism is Racism” resolution adopted by the UN General Assembly on November 10, 1975. The government newspaper called this resolution a “forward step by the peoples of the world” which “left no doubt about the identical imperialist origins and racist structure of the Israeli Zionist regime that is occupying Palestine and the one that is exploiting the black masses of Zimbabwe and South Africa.”⁸³

In November 1974, PLO leader Yasir Arafat visited Cuba, where the government gave him a high-level reception and Cuba’s highest decoration, the Order of Playa Girón. In 1975, in his opening report to the Congress of the Cuban Communist Party, Castro strongly attacked Israel as a tool of “U.S. imperialism,” which the American government was using to threaten the territorial integrity of the Soviet Union along its southern flank.⁸⁴ The congress adopted a strong statement in support of Palestinian national rights. In December 1975, Castro confirmed reports that Cuban troops had been sent to Syria before the 1973 war, a public demonstration that his anti-Zionism had moved from the realm of polemics into actual military involvement on the Arab side.

On October 12, 1979, in a speech at the UN, Castro claimed that the State of Israel was committing genocide against the Palestinian people, similar to the “genocide that the Nazis once visited on the Jews.”⁸⁵ Castro stated that the Palestinians were “living symbols of the most terrible crime of our era,” thus inferring that Israeli crimes

⁸³ Ibid., Jan. 18, 1976.

⁸⁴ *Granma Weekly Review*, Jan. 4, 1976.

⁸⁵ Allan Metz, “Cuban-Israeli Relations: From the Cuban Revolution to the New World Order,” *Cuban Studies* 23, 1993, p. 123, quotes from the official UN proceedings.

against the Palestinians were worse than anything that had been done in Uganda, Vietnam, or Cambodia.⁸⁶

This was certainly a dramatic change in Cuban policy, but Allan Metz has argued that it did not cause Castro any sleepless nights: “Principle may have had nothing to do with the abrupt change in Cuban policy toward Israel. In this respect, he was no different from others who wielded arbitrary power. At any rate, the main reason for Castro’s shift in his policy toward Israel was pure and simple opportunism. And once he embarked on this new policy, he sought to gain as much benefit as possible. Castro proved to be very successful because he bolstered his ambition of portraying himself as a third-world leader while simultaneously gaining the appreciation of the Soviet Union.”⁸⁷

Castro’s new Israel policy made things difficult for Cuban Jews, especially as the turn against the Jewish state coincided with a period of deterioration within the Cuban Jewish community that had nothing to do with the Middle East. In 1975, the Patronato’s kosher restaurant closed down, and the “Jewish” public school with its afternoon Hebrew school came to an end. Hebrew classes, instead of being conducted daily, were reduced to once a week, and came close to being stopped entirely. It appeared that the community no longer had the critical mass necessary to sustain a viable Jewish life. Moisés Baldás, the leader of the Jewish community, had worked hard to cultivate good relations between Cuba and Israel, and the turn toward virulent anti-Zionism, coinciding with other danger signals for the Jewish community, made it impossible for him to function effectively as the representative of Cuban Jewry. In 1981, as noted above,

⁸⁶ *Granma Weekly Review*, Oct. 21, 1979, quoted in Halperin, *Taming of Fidel Castro*, p. 254, n. 16.

⁸⁷ Metz, “Cuban-Israeli Relations,” p. 123.

Baldás settled in Israel. José Miller Fredman, his protégé and successor, long a supporter of the revolution, had to be particularly careful in presenting his views on Israel and Zionism, since, while the Jewish community looked to the Jewish state as a treasured homeland, the government portrayed it as a tool of Yankee imperialism.

By the late 1980s, there were signs that Cuban-Israeli relations were warming up again. In 1988, Castro was reported to have told Venezuelan Jewish leaders traveling in Cuba that “Cuba has a lot to learn from Israel.”⁸⁸ That same year, an official economic delegation from Cuba visited Israel to study irrigation methods; Israel had pioneered a number of innovative techniques, and this was of great importance to Cuban agricultural specialists who were trying to improve citrus production. Since 1988, Israeli experts have continued to provide technical assistance in this area, in methods of growing other agricultural products, and even in fishing.

These contacts preceded, if only by a short period, the crisis that engulfed Cuba after the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe. By June 1990, Cuba had opened unofficial lines of communication with Israel, using the left-wing socialist party Mapam, whose ideology seemed congenial to Cuban socialist principles, as the conduit. Castro’s primary concern after the fall of Soviet Communism was the survival of his regime, all other factors taking a back seat. Despite Cuba’s acute need for oil in the aftermath of the Soviets’ withdrawal of subsidies, Cuba had little to gain politically from a virulent anti-Israel position at a time when Arab countries were beginning to sign peace treaties with Israel.

But Israeli support for the American embargo against Cuba remained a source of tension. In November 1999, the State of Israel was the only country to join with the

⁸⁸ “Around the Hemisphere: Cuba,” *Latin American Report*, Dec. 1988, p. 5.

United States against a UN vote to end the embargo. *Granma*, a Cuban government newspaper, featured the vote on its front page, noting that 157 nations had voted to end the economic embargo. The headline read “The World Against the Blockade,” with a subheading: “Two countries NO: United States, Israel.”⁸⁹ Conversely, because of its alignment with the Arab countries, the Cuban government voted against Israel on various issues at the UN.

The question of Cuba’s policy toward Israel was addressed by a delegation from the American Jewish Congress, led by its president, Jack Rosen, in July 1998. The delegation, which said it was ready to “look seriously” into calling for an end to the U.S. economic boycott of Cuba, met with President Castro for a six-hour dinner at the presidential palace. Delegates expressed their disappointment that Cuba was the only country in the Western Hemisphere to vote against rescinding the UN’s “Zionism is Racism” resolution, and Castro responded that he was actually unaware of the position taken by the Cuban delegation at the UN. As it happened, Ricardo Alarcón, the Cuban U.N. representative who actually cast the vote, was present at the dinner, and, not surprisingly, he did not offer to field the question. Other Cuban officials informally told Rosen that the vote was to be expected, given the fact that Israel voted against Cuba on virtually every matter.

In June 2001, the Cuban government expressed strong support for the Palestinians at a two-day UN-organized regional forum on the Middle East conflict held in Havana and attended by representatives from 45 countries. Cuban foreign minister Felipe Perez Roque told the forum: “There will be no fair and lasting peace in the region until an independent Palestinian state is proclaimed, with eastern Jerusalem recognized

⁸⁹ *Granma*, Nov. 10, 1999, p. 1.

as its capital.” Farouk Kaddoumi, the head of the PLO’s political department, exclaimed, “Cuba has been the Palestinian people’s best friend in our fight for the peace and stability of the Middle East.” Perez Roque went on to connect Israel’s alleged “crimes” with the political support it received from the United States. “Israel’s killing machinery has been developed and perfected for years thanks to the financial, military and technological aid of the United States, its unconditional ally which shares responsibility for the grave violations of the Palestinian people’s basic human rights.”⁹⁰

Following the forum, President Castro personally led a demonstration of solidarity with the Palestinian people held in the “anti-imperialist” plaza built during the Elián González controversy, directly across from the United States Interests Section on the Malecón (seaside promenade) in Havana. A student addressed the approximately 10,000 people with the words: “We want to demand the end of the genocide against our brother Arab nation. Long live the heroic Palestinian people! Long live the Arab people who fight against Imperialism! Socialism or death!”⁹¹ Speakers alternated with poets, singers, and even pantomime artists acting out scenes of violence from the Middle East. Yasir Arafat wrote to thank Castro for his enthusiastic support. Arafat stated, “It was with great emotion that we have seen your excellency with the Palestinian flag on your shoulders leading a massive show of solidarity with our heroic people. I consider this show of unbreakable friendship and firmness in Havana as a strong and effective message on the part of a loved international leader who enjoys great world prestige.”⁹²

⁹⁰ “Cuba backs Palestinians at U.N. forum in Havana,” Reuters report, June 12, 2001.

⁹¹ “Castro leads pro-Palestinian rally in Cuba,” *Ha’aretz*, June 15, 2001, p.1.

⁹² “Arafat agradece el apoyo de Castro,” *El Nuevo Herald*, June 22, 2001. Thanks to Prof. Jaime Suchlicki for faxing me a copy of this article.

It deserves emphasis that anti-Zionist or anti-Israel policies pursued by the Cuban government in the 1970s, 1980s, and later did not result in any increased local anti-Jewish activity. There remains a great deal of sympathy for Jews among the Cuban people and among government officials, and this carries the seeds for improved relations with the State of Israel in the future.

The Fall of Communism and the New Religious Environment

Soon after Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in the Soviet Union in 1985 he embarked on a course of reform, and the fallout was immediate. Within a year, virtually all of the Eastern European states had started the long and difficult process of transformation into democracies with free-market capitalism. The final, dramatic conclusion occurred on November 9, 1989, with the fall of the Berlin Wall, followed soon thereafter by the unification of Germany.

With European Communism dying, Castro had to face the loss of his few remaining allies in 1989 and 1990. On December 20, 1989, U.S. forces invaded Panama, and Manuel Noriega's cocaine-financed government toppled almost immediately. On February 25, 1990, the Nicaraguan Sandinistas called an election and were defeated by Violeta Barrios de Chamorro. Castro took the loss hard, since he had considered Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega not only a political ally but also his "revolutionary son." Ortega's defeat left the Cuban government with no close ideological allies in the entire region.

There were those who expected the Communist Cuban government to fall just as quickly as those in Eastern Europe. *Miami Herald* journalist Andres Oppenheimer

named his 1992 book *Castro's Final Hour: An Eyewitness Account of the Disintegration of Castro's Cuba*. The book described the withdrawal of Soviet support, the apparent dissatisfaction even among the highest-ranking politicians and military leaders, the loss of Cuba's regional allies, and the terrible shortages of almost all consumer goods—a situation of economic stringency that Cubans came to call, euphemistically, the “special period.” Oppenheimer can be forgiven for feeling confident that Cuba had indeed reached “Castro’s final hour,” and he was not alone. *Time* magazine crowed, “Castro’s Cuba—The End of the Dream”; *U.S. News and World Report* wrote about “Fidel Castro’s Last Battle”; while the *New York Times* titled one article, “The Last Days of Castro’s Cuba.” *Newsweek* more accurately described what was going on in the country as “Cuba’s Living Death,” and *Life* magazine titled one report, “Waiting for the end in Cuba.”⁹³ *Life* magazine has since ceased publication for the second time, but Fidel Castro, in 2001, goes on.

With Communism in retreat throughout the world, Cuba has successfully redefined itself and avoided radical political change. One tactic has been the co-optation of previously excluded groups, such as religious believers, a policy that has yielded the added benefit of helping develop relationships with foreign-based programs of a religious nature that provide economic aid.

For more than two decades, the government has gradually increased religious freedom, though the rapprochement between religion and state is both complex and ambivalent.⁹⁴ At the same time that the government has been easing the old restrictions

⁹³ The headlines are cited in Tom Miller, *Trading with the Enemy: A Yankee Travels Through Castro's Cuba* (New York, 1992), p. xxii.

⁹⁴ John M. Kirk, *Between God and the Party: Religion and Politics in Revolutionary Cuba* (Tampa, 1989).

on religious activities, Cubans have demonstrated an increased level of interest in religious participation, but there may not be a simple cause-and-effect relationship between the two trends. Jorge Ramirez Calzadilla of the Center of Psychological and Sociological Research in Havana argues that the resurgence of religion in Cuba has little to do with government policy but is in large measure a response to the spiritual and economic crisis brought on by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the economic rigors of the “special period.”⁹⁵

This is a widely held view. Today few Cubans take Communism seriously, and they are looking for something to believe in. When Rabbi Jeffrey Salkin of the Community Synagogue of Port Washington, New York, visited Cuba during Passover in 1997, he asked some of the university students he met why there was so much interest in religion. “They had one answer,” reported Salkin: “‘Communism is a spiritual failure.’”⁹⁶ Aside from the spiritual vacuum, there are other needs that religion fills. In Cuba, money is scarce; there are no multiplex cinemas, no Disney theme parks, and no shopping malls. Churches and synagogues provide a place to meet, mingle, and be entertained. They offer classes, services, and even festive dinners.⁹⁷

The Communist government had never banned religious affiliation or activity for the general public, although it was forbidden for members of the Communist Party. Still, since the authorities viewed it with disfavor, many Cubans believed that involvement with a church or synagogue could stigmatize them and stunt their career

⁹⁵ Eloy O. Aguilar, “Religion Grows in Cuba,” Associated Press report, Aug. 18, 1997.

⁹⁶ Rabbi Jeffery K. Salkin, “Cuba: A Preparation for Liberation,” sermon delivered on Shabbat Chol Ha-Mo’ed Pesach, Apr. 19, 1997, at the Community Synagogue, Port Washington, New York.

⁹⁷ Tom Masland, “Learning To Keep The Faith,” *Newsweek*, Mar. 13, 1995, p. 30.

opportunities. Thus the Cuban Communist Party's repeal of the prohibition on religious involvement for members in October 1991 came as a great surprise. The Cuban constitution was then revised to state that education would henceforth be "secular," rather than "atheistic," as set forth in the previous version. The old Marxist-Leninist philosophical definition of the Cuban state was also excised from the constitution.

In the decades following the 1959 revolution, most congregations of all religions had become accustomed to seeing a steady decline in membership. Many of the most devoted church members, fearful of religious intolerance, left the country in the early years, and those who remained often distanced themselves from religious activity. That is no longer the case. Today, Christian churches are growing exponentially, the number of baptisms jumping from 25,258 in 1979, to 50,979 in 1990, and 62,664 in 1992.⁹⁸ Although some of the "new faithful" are returning to the churches they were raised in, many are former atheists with no previous history of religious involvement.

The rising fortunes of Judaism have been directly tied to the successes of other Cuban religious groups.

Pope John Paul II's visit to the country on January 25, 1998, had a profound impact on the whole country. Enrique Lopez Oliva, a professor of the history of religion at the University of Havana for many years and now a freelance journalist, emphasized its significance: "Do you remember that John Reed book about the Bolshevik Revolution, *Ten Days That Shook the World*? Well, we can call this 'Five Days that Shook Cuba.'"⁹⁹ Speaking to hundreds of thousands of Cubans gathered in Plaza de la Revolución for the final Mass of his historic visit, the pope argued that atheism could

⁹⁸ These statistics were culled from the *Amario Pontífica Vaticano*.

⁹⁹ Interview with Enrique Lopez Oliva, June 2000.

not be the official ideology of a modern state. Rather, he said, personal freedom was the only way to achieve true justice: “This is the time to start out on the new paths called for by the times of renewal that we are experiencing.”¹⁰⁰

On Sunday, January 25, the pope met with two Cuban Jewish representatives, Dr. José Miller, the community’s head, and Abraham Berezniak, president of Adath Israel. After Berezniak and the pope chatted about their Polish backgrounds, the three men discussed Christian-Jewish relations.¹⁰¹

In the aftermath of the pope’s visit the government set up a committee to decide whether to make December 25 an official holiday, and Castro named Miller and Adela Dworin as members. The fact that two prominent Jews were placed on a panel to decide on the recognition of a Christian holiday, a matter unrelated to the Jewish community, showed how seriously Castro took the opinion of the tiny Jewish minority. Furthermore, it was through participation in these meetings that Miller began to develop a personal relationship with Castro that he would use for the benefit of the Cuban Jewish community.¹⁰²

Then, as part of the new openness to religion resulting from the papal visit, Miller and Dworin invited Fidel Castro to celebrate Hanukkah, in December 1998, at the Patronato. Castro came with Carlos Lage Dávila, one of Cuba’s five vice presidents, and Felipe Pérez Roque, considered by many to be Castro’s closest confidant outside of

¹⁰⁰ “Pontiff calls for ‘New Paths’ in Cuba,” *Miami Herald*, Jan. 26, 1998, p.1.

¹⁰¹ A photograph of the pope and Berezniak, taken at that meeting, is displayed today at Adath Israel. Berezniak died in April 1998, three months after the papal visit, at the age of 50.

¹⁰² Miller interview. In November 1998, at one of the committee meetings, Castro turned to Miller and asked, “What do you think?” Miller responded, “How could I possibly object to a holiday celebrating the birth of a nice Jewish boy?”

his family, who then served as his personal assistant and who today is minister of foreign affairs. Also in attendance were two members of the Central Committee, Eusebio Leal Spengler, the official historian of the city of Havana, and Caridad Diego Bello, head of the Department of Religious Affairs. Castro spoke extemporaneously and at great length on a variety of subjects related to Jews and Judaism in a warm and informal style. He also asked the audience questions, and paid rapt attention to the answers.¹⁰³

There had been very little formal contact between Jewish and Christian organizations in Cuba until 1980, when Dr. Kenneth Schulman, a professor of social work at Boston University, introduced Moisés Asís to Adolfo Ham, a Presbyterian minister serving as president of the Ecumenical Council of Cuba. Ham had a special interest in the philosophy of Martin Buber and was very keen on developing a relationship with Asís and with the Jewish community. When the Patronato held a commemoration of the 850th birthday of Maimonides, Ham was invited as one of the speakers. Subsequently, Asís was appointed to be the first Jewish representative on CEHILA, a center for religious ecumenism, and began contributing articles to the Ecumenical Council's *Mensaje* magazine. Today, the Jewish community is a special member of the Ecumenical Council, and its representative on CEHILLA is José Levy Tur. There have also been contacts with the National Council of Churches in Cuba.

¹⁰³ José Miller, "La Visita del Presidente Fidel Castro a la Comunidad Judía de Cuba," *Menorah*, Nov./Dec. 1998, p. 3. The description of Castro's behavior is based on a privately taken video of the event. The visit was recorded in a government newspaper, which also published a positive editorial, "Asiste el Comandante en Jefe a actividad de la Comunidad Judía," *Granma*, Dec. 22, 1998, p. 8.

When the Jewish community has a special event, Christian visitors often come as invited guests.

Such interfaith involvement has helped the Jewish community achieve greater recognition in the broader society, especially since the government sometimes calls on representatives of religious groups, including Jews, to help it achieve political objectives. For example, Dr. José Miller traveled to the United States as part of a delegation that included prominent Cuban church leaders to explain why he believed the embargo against Cuba should be lifted.

The relationship between the Cuban Jewish community and the Catholic Church has been growing. The Vatican embassy in Cuba invited the leaders of the Jewish community to attend an event there on the occasion of Pope John Paul's visit, and around the same time the Catholic magazine *Espacios* published an article by Arturo López Levy about Catholic-Jewish relationships, "Tenemos Tanto que Hacer Juntos" (We have so many things to do together). This was the first time that any Cuban Catholic publication had included an article by a Jew. Shortly thereafter, the Dominican Order included the Jewish community—represented by Arturo López Levy—in a roundtable discussion for leaders of different religious bodies to discuss the meaning of the papal visit for religion in Cuba. During Catholic Social Week the next year, in June 1999, Levy was invited to make a presentation on globalization and how the religious communities in Cuba might help the country integrate into the world economy. In September 1999, Cardinal Jaime Ortega of Havana visited Adath Israel to hear the blowing of the shofar for Rosh Hashanah 5760. In a pastoral letter, Ortega recounted his visit to the synagogue, referring to the Jews as "his older brothers." Ortega wrote:

“When I say ‘our future’ I am not invoking the Catholic God, rather the only God—Father, creator of all. If we are sons of the same father, then it opens in us these wonderful and complementary truths: all men are my brothers.”¹⁰⁴

Outside Aid

THE CANADIAN JEWISH CONGRESS ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

After the revolution, the Jews remaining in Cuba came to feel increasingly isolated. Since, for many Cuban Jews, the distribution of Passover foods was the sole Jewish activity they remembered from their childhood, providing those foods became the primary way of reasserting the Jewish world’s link with Cuban Jewry.

Before the revolution the Jewish community of Cuba had obtained Passover supplies from the United States, but once the two countries severed diplomatic relations this was no longer feasible. In 1961 representatives of the community issued an urgent appeal for help. Since the JDC in New York was unable to provide direct assistance, Moses Leavitt, the JDC executive vice chairman, routed the request to the Canadian Jewish Congress (CJC). Canada had never broken diplomatic relations with Cuba, and Canadians were not restricted from visiting or conducting business with Cuba. Jack Silverstone of the CJC stated, “Canada has a rather good relationship... compared to the Americans. We give quite a bit of foreign aid down there, so we have very good access without difficulty.”¹⁰⁵

The Canadians needed to obtain a permit from Cuba for permission to import food products for Passover use, and another permit in Ottawa to export the food from

¹⁰⁴ Cardinal Jaime Ortega, “Un Solo Díos Padre de Todos,” *Palabra Nueva*, Dec. 1999, section 28.

¹⁰⁵ Interview with Jack Silverstone, Dec. 1999.

Canada. They had difficulty finding shipping space, and at one point it seemed certain that the only way they would be able to send in any goods would be by air. Finally, space was obtained on a boat leaving from St. John, New Brunswick, on March 13, 1961, with a scheduled arrival date in Havana of March 23. Since this arrangement was made at the last minute, the CJC feared it would not be able to get the matzo and kosher Passover wine to port in time for loading.¹⁰⁶ But it did, and on April 5 Congregation Adath Israel sent a cable to Sigmund Unterberg of the CJC in Montreal to acknowledge that the shipment had arrived.¹⁰⁷

The CJC has continued to send the Passover products annually. Over the years, Edmond Lipsitz, the executive director of the Ontario CJC, was concerned that there might have been difficulties in receiving or distributing the Passover supplies in Cuba.¹⁰⁸ When he visited in 1987, Lipsitz found that while the Cuban Jewish community had often been uncertain about the arrival dates of the ships, the community had indeed received the food, and, he remarked, “The fact is [that] we are sending more matzo than they need.”¹⁰⁹

To give an example of the quantity of food shipped and the cost involved, the CJC’s Josh Rotblatt calculated the exact expense for 1992. Three thousand pounds of

¹⁰⁶ “CJC Rushes Passover Supplies to Cuba,” *Congress Bulletin*, Apr. 1961, p. 1.

¹⁰⁷ Comunidad Religiosa Hebrea Adath Israel to Sigmund Unterberg, Apr. 5, 1961, Anglo-American collection 493, Western Union International Communications. The telegram read: “Received matzoth wine good order twenty-eighth paid five thousand five hundred custom tax stop fully satisfied and much obliged your excellent attention stop after Passover will send letters.”

¹⁰⁸ Interview with Edmond Lipsitz, Nov. 2000.

¹⁰⁹ Ben Kayfetz, “Cuban Jews in Need of Rabbis, Visitor Finds,” *Ottawa Jewish Bulletin and Review*, Sept. 11, 1987, p. 22.

matzo sent at \$1.53 Canadian per pound worked out to \$4,590. Two thousand pounds of matzo meal were sent at \$1.50 per pound, and 3,600 liters of oil at \$2.375 per liter. With a thousand cans of tuna at \$1.00 a can, 1,500 cans of sardines at \$1.82 a can, 240 boxes of tea at \$2.95 a box, and 504 jars of horseradish at \$2.10 a jar, the total came to \$21,636 Canadian. (Not included in the estimate were 840 bottles of kosher wine, 2,500 packages of kosher soup, 600 pounds of powdered milk, and \$22,000 for airfreight expenses via Mexico—the food was assembled too late that year to send by boat).¹¹⁰ The Jewish communities of Mexico, Venezuela, and Panama have also provided some assistance, as have individual American Jews. Jack Rosen of New Jersey, for example, who owned a private plane, made a number of trips to Havana to deliver Passover supplies.

In 2000, the Cuban government agreed for the first time to cooperate actively in the CJC's annual shipment of Passover goods. Pedro Garcia Roque, Cuba's consul general in Montreal, helped arrange for Cubana, the country's national airline, to ship 4,000 kilograms of kosher supplies free of charge, and another 6,000 kilograms at a greatly reduced rate. In previous years the CJC had shipped about 40 percent of the supplies via Cubana at regular airfreight rates, with the rest being sent by ship; in 2000 the Cubana offer made it possible to send the entire shipment by air. The goods left Montreal on March 31, and arrived in Havana the same day, the first time a shipment was received so far ahead of the Passover holiday, which began that year on the evening of April 19. Furthermore, businessman Walter Arbib of Toronto-based Skylink Aviation

¹¹⁰ Josh Rotblatt to Yehuda Lipsitz, Feb. 27, 1992; and “Passover Products for Cuban Jewry,” both in Canadian Jewish Congress National Archives.

underwrote the cost of sending the supplies from Havana to the Jewish communities in the provinces by air rather than overland.¹¹¹

Over the years, the food has not only served the ritual requirements and nutritional needs of Cuban Jews, but has also been of great symbolic significance. Jack Silverstone of the CJC said, “I can’t overestimate the importance of the Passover food order to these folks. For a long time, it was their only connection to Judaism; they just couldn’t get what they needed. They are extremely appreciative of it, and rely on it.” He added, “I almost didn’t realize how important it was until I got down there and they spoke so emotionally about the Canadian connection. It was very touching. When the community got together for seders, that was basically *the* major Jewish event across the island, and it was important.”¹¹²

UJA (UJC) MISSIONS

From spiritual retreats to Internet study groups, American Jewish organizations are harnessing progressively more sophisticated and creative techniques for grabbing and holding the interest of their actual or potential clientele. Missions abroad have become a popular part of an increasingly complex network of informal American Jewish educational projects. Such mission, generally restricted to those who give substantial contributions to the UJA, reinforce the most viscerally felt values of civil Judaism, especially the classical rabbinic injunction that “all Jews are responsible for one another.”¹¹³

¹¹¹ Ron Csillag, “Cuba to help CJC bring in food for Pesach,” *Canadian Jewish News*, Apr. 13, 2000, p. 7.

¹¹² Silverstone interview.

During the 1990s, Cuba became a popular destination for these missions, as the American government quietly eased certain restrictions on contact with that country. On January 5, 1999, the U.S. announced its first public change of policy, allowing the institution of direct charter flights to Cuba to help facilitate family reunions, the reestablishment of direct mail contact, and legalizing educational, cultural, journalistic, athletic, and religious exchanges. Direct charter flights between New York and Havana began in the fall of 1999, offering travelers an option in addition to the Miami-Havana route. A Los Angeles-Havana flight was inaugurated shortly thereafter.

The new regulations gave added impetus to the work of nonprofit organizations, religious and secular, interested in bringing groups to Cuba, and the flow of United Jewish Appeal (UJA) missions to Cuba intensified. UJA, since reorganized and merged with the Council of Jewish Federations and the United Israel Appeal, is today known as the United Jewish Communities (UJC). Its missions now arrive at the rate of about one every month from many American Jewish communities, including Detroit, San Francisco, Houston, Boston, New York, and, of course, South Florida.¹¹⁴

When UJA began sponsoring missions abroad, almost all were to Israel, the Jewish spiritual homeland, or to Eastern Europe, where the majority of American Jews trace their roots. Cuba is neither of these things. Amir Shaviv, assistant executive vice president of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), explained, “The

¹¹³ On Jewish civil religion in the U.S., see Jonathan S. Woocher, *Sacred Survival: The Civil Religion of American Jews* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1986).

¹¹⁴ In truth, the South Florida embarkation point is less obvious than it might appear, since Cuban Americans residing there are subjected to considerable pressure not to visit Cuba so long as Fidel Castro is president.

reason they go to Cuba is because it's a nearby destination that gives you, in a nutshell, the entire scope of Jewish revival of a community that was barred from Jewish life. If you have three days and you want to go somewhere and see what your money is doing, Cuba is the place to go.”¹¹⁵ Furthermore, Cuban Jewry seems tailor-made to fulfill the psychological needs of the mission participants: Cuban Jews are well educated and many speak English. They are in the midst of an extraordinary process of Jewish return, which cannot help but inspire American Jews who are deeply concerned about perpetuating their own religious identity. And finally, the economic deprivation that is so evident in Cuba inspires mission participants and convinces them that there is a real need they can help fill. So popular have missions to Cuba become, in fact, that in 1998 the JDC, which has professionals in the country working to revive Cuban Jewish life, felt compelled to ask groups “to cut back on the number of visits, which have been somewhat overwhelming for the community.”¹¹⁶

Stephanie Simon participated on one of these missions.¹¹⁷ The mother of three young children, Simon had to pass up a number of missions that were offered by the UJA’s Young Leadership Cabinet, of which she is a member, because the trips to Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Israel ran from ten days to two weeks, far too long to be away from her children. But when a four-day mission to Cuba was announced, she jumped at the chance. A reporter interviewed her in her Marblehead, Massachusetts,

¹¹⁵ Melissa Radler, “Cuba Emerges as Destination Much Favored by Federations,” *Forward*, Apr. 28, 2000, p. 5.

¹¹⁶ Kenneth Bandler, “Jewish organization considers call for end to embargo of Cuba,” *Jewish Telegraphic Agency Daily News Bulletin*, June 25, 1998, p. 3.

¹¹⁷ Bette Wineblatt Keva, “Young Mother’s UJA Mission to Cuba,” *Jewish Journal* (Boston), Mar. 16–20, 1998.

home shortly after her return from Havana. Simon spoke enthusiastically of the “amazing trip, which changed my life,” relating that when she was halfway home from the airport, she suddenly burst into tears from all that she had seen and experienced in Cuba: “I thought we would see a lot of old Sephardic Jews who were sick, too poor to leave the country. I thought most would have loved to come to the United States. Since my background is Ashkenazi, I thought I would feel they were my people only in a distant sense. All three notions were blown out of the water!” Simon told of meeting people who walked an hour and a half to get their children to the Sunday morning Hebrew school, and remarked on the joy she felt when watching a performance that the Hebrew school gave for the U.J.A. group. They sang the same Hebrew songs her own children sing, bringing home the conviction that these could be her children.

She described the poverty of the community, and was immensely excited about the important work that the UJA was doing to alleviate it, saying, “I saw where our Federation dollars go. People here [in the United States] complain about the Jewish Community Center (JCC), or this or that. In Cuba, those dollars are buying milk for children. The funds are purchasing a breakfast and a lunch. This is 60 [sic] miles from the U.S.! These are kids who don’t have enough food to eat.” Participating in Friday night services at the Patronato, Stephanie Simon’s mission saw the congregation make the blessing over bread using matzo that was left over from Passover, and then eat a small chicken dinner. The UJA group decided to pool their contributions to provide the congregation with real hallah (Sabbath loaves), as well as chicken, wine, candles, and other products so that the congregation could celebrate Shabbat comfortably. Almost on

the spot, the group raised \$18,000, enough to sponsor Shabbat dinner for the entire congregation for a year.

Not everyone in the Jewish community supports these Cuban missions. The weekly *Forward* newspaper, for one, criticized the missions in a front-page editorial in 2000. Directly under the by-now-infamous photo of Elián González being taken at gunpoint from the home of his Miami relatives, the *Forward* questioned why there were 30 Jewish missions planned for the near future, asking whether the aim was “to help the 600 [sic] Jews trapped in the communist country,” or whether “the backers of the biggest American Jewish charitable structure emerge with those pressing for a soft line on the communist regime during the twilight years of its dictator, Fidel Castro” instead of “the hard line for which so many have sacrificed so much.”¹¹⁸

The “biggest American Jewish charitable structure” meant the United Jewish Communities (UJC), the umbrella organization for local Jewish federations, which, among them, raise approximately \$790 million annually for Jewish charitable needs, and the *Forward* was virtually accusing it of being soft on Castro-style Communism. While the missions were ostensibly apolitical, the *Forward* believed that they served a political agenda by creating goodwill for the Castro regime and pumping tourist dollars into the Cuban economy. In contrast to many in the Jewish community, the *Forward* continued to support the economic embargo of Cuba. “This embargo,” it stated, “may not have toppled Mr. Castro’s dictatorship, but it has helped stymie his efforts to export his revolution to Latin America. And it has curbed the ability of communist sympathizers, or rank opportunists, to exploit properties the communists seized in Cuba.”¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ “Elian and Us,” *Forward*, Apr. 28, 2000, pp. 1, 8.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., p. 8.

In an accompanying front-page news story, the *Forward* quoted both defenders of the missions as well as other critics, who contended that the amount of Jewish money spent in Cuba was way out of proportion to the needs of other sectors of world Jewry, such as, for example, the large numbers of poverty-stricken Jews living in the former Soviet Union and elsewhere in Eastern Europe. While the *Forward*, in its editorial, questioned the missions from a politically conservative perspective, the divisions on this issue did not break down along simple liberal/conservative lines.

One important leader of a liberal Jewish organization expressing uneasiness about the amount of Jewish attention and money lavished on Cuba was Rabbi Eric Yoffie, president of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC), the national body of Reform synagogues. He said, “Realistically, I think we need to acknowledge that this is a small and mostly elderly community, so a sense of proportion might dictate that it might not merit an extensive mission program from the United States. If there is more than a mission or two, I would suggest that they might want to consider the issues of priorities and consider those areas around the world where larger numbers of Jews are to be found.” Conversely, a political conservative, Joshua Muravchik, resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, favored the missions, claiming that letting citizens of the free world interact with Cubans has the effect of exposing the latter to democratic ideals, thereby increasing popular pressure on Castro to liberalize his regime. Jewish professionals who sponsored and led the missions Cuba defended them on the practical ground that people increased the size of their donations when they saw where their money was going. For example, John Ruskay, executive vice president of the UJA-Federation of New York, said that his organization raised over

\$75,000 specifically for the Cuban Jewish community as a direct result of a mission to Cuba in 1999.¹²⁰

THE PROFESSIONAL MEDICAL EDUCATIONAL PROJECT

The JDC originated during World War I to provide material relief to Jews living in the war zones, and it has a long history of assisting Jewish communities around the world. The JDC played a major role in the revitalization of Jewish life in Cuba in the 1990s; it is universally praised for sending representatives to run services, teach classes, and organize activities. These representatives are JDC community workers from Argentina, who have been granted government permission to enter Cuba and work as resident directors for the program. Based in Havana, they work with Jews throughout the country.

The JDC is funded by the UJC (previously the UJA), as well as by grants from individuals and foundations. There is also a nonsectarian JDC program operating in more than 30 countries that provides humanitarian aid, particularly for disaster relief. One initiative in Cuba funded in this manner is the Professional Medical Educational Project, which came into being in a roundabout way. In 1992, Dr. José Miller told the JDC that the Havana Jewish community needed a rabbi—they hadn't had one since the early 1960s. The JDC sent Alberto Senderey, a community-development worker, from its Paris office. Seeing the condition of the community, Senderey reported that not only were Cuban Jews desperately in need of spiritual help, but that they were short of food and medicine.

¹²⁰ Radler, “Cuba Emerges as Destination Much Favored by Federations,” pp. 1, 5.

To deal with the medical problem, the JDC sent Dr. Ted Myers, one of its senior medical consultants, to assess the medical needs of the community in 1994.¹²¹ Although the Cuban government provides free medical care to all citizens, there was a severe shortage of drugs during the “special period” of economic stringency, and many Cubans could not get the prescriptions they needed. Working together with the JDC, Dr. Rosa Behar and the local Hadassah organization decided to open a private pharmacy in the Patronato that would provide medicines, vitamins, and other medical supplies.

Jewish Solidarity, run by Eddie Levy in Miami, has been instrumental in supplying the pharmacy. Levy, who left Cuba in the mid-1950s, before the revolution, founded Jewish Solidarity in 1993, during the worst part of the “special period.” Since then, his Miami-based organization has imported into Cuba a large amount of food and medicines. He explained the importance of these donations not only as vitally needed material assistance, but also as a way of expressing Jewish values and engendering political good will:

They [the Patronato pharmacy] get the credit for it, you know, they’re recognized for doing that, plus anybody that needs any medicine in that pharmacy, regardless if they’re Jewish or not, and they’ve got a prescription, it’s given to them. It is not only what Judaism is all about, which is to help each other and help in general, but it’s also good strategy, because nobody can say in Cuba that the Jews have privilege over all the Cubans, because after all, the Jews of Cuba are *Cuban*—with a capital letter—Jews. They’re not a separate entity, like happened in the Eastern Bloc, in which people were looked at as somewhat different from the rest of the people. In Cuba Jewish people are Cuban, with a religious preference of Judaism.”¹²²

¹²¹Correspondence with Ted Myers, Apr. 2000.

¹²² Levy interview.

According to Laina Richter, coordinator of the nonsectarian medical program in Cuba, the JDC also found that Cuban doctors were “really out of touch with what was going on in the Western industrialized world in terms of the most recent techniques and methods; they didn’t know anything about the newest medications and drugs.”¹²³ Myers therefore established the Professional Medical Educational Project, which sent Jewish doctors from the United States at a rate of about one every two months. The JDC covered the cost of the doctors’ travel to Cuba as well as their accommodations, and the individual doctor picked up all other expenses. The approximate total cost per doctor was \$2,000. Many of the doctors established ties with the local medical community that they have maintained on their own since the initial visits.

Doctors sent to Havana on the Professional Medical Educational Project work intensively with Cuban counterparts for one week, going on rounds with their Cuban colleagues, helping train local medical students, and giving lectures. As Richter explained the preparation for each doctor’s visit, “There would be a dialogue before the doctor went down, to get an idea of what was needed as well as to bring in medical literature that they didn’t really have access to. In addition to kind of bringing down their expertise and knowledge, they also brought down literature, and medical equipment and supplies.” Although the program was nonsectarian, it did have a specifically Jewish communal component as well: “While they were there, they would spend Shabbat with the Jewish community and make connections within the Cuban medical community... and the Jewish community.”¹²⁴

¹²³ Interview with Laina Richter, Mar. 2000.

¹²⁴ Richter interview.

B'NAI B'RITH

In February 1997, B'nai B'rith announced the formation of a Committee on Cuban Affairs, chaired by Elizabeth (Betty) Baer, wife of Tommy P. Baer, B'nai B'rith International's president. This committee grew out of a B'nai B'rith humanitarian mission in which 32 members of the organization brought medicine, food, and clothes into Cuba. Six of the 32 were Cuban-born, including Michael Mandel, a cantorial student who performed concerts of Jewish songs for the Cuban Jewish community. Richard D. Heideman, then chairing the B'nai B'rith Center for Public Policy, stated,

In keeping with B'nai B'rith's 153-year tradition of providing aid to Jews throughout the world, we have created this special committee to assist in improving the lives of this isolated community who are in desperate need of even the basic necessities of life. ... We plan to obtain and send educational and religious materials written in Spanish and sponsor more humanitarian missions. The needs are immense.¹²⁵

In the winter of 1999, B'nai B'rith sent 23 members from its Tri-state, Allegheny/Ohio Valley, and Golden Pacific regions to Havana and Santiago de Cuba. In addition to 2,000 pounds of supplies shipped to Cuba in advance of their arrival, the mission personally delivered 700 pounds of food, Hanukkah toys, Judaica, clothing, and medicine. The group celebrated Hanukkah with the local Jewish community in the city of Santiago de Cuba. One participant reported: "A touching moment occurred when small necklaces containing Mogenai David [Stars of David] were distributed to the adults and children of the congregation. Many of us, adults and children alike, wept as we helped them adorn their necks with this precious reminder of their faith. It was an

¹²⁵ B'nai B'rith press release, Feb. 12, 1997.

extremely emotional experience and one that we will cherish when we remember our visit.”¹²⁶

Thus began B’nai B’rith’s Cuban Jewish Relief Project, coordinated by Stanley Cohen and carried out in conjunction with the Brother’s Brother Foundation of Pittsburgh and with Eddie Levy’s Jewish Solidarity. It collects clothing, pharmaceuticals, and food products in the U.S., which are then shipped to Cuba via Jewish Solidarity in Miami. The goods are consigned to the Department of Religious Affairs in Havana to be given to the Jewish community. In mid-February 2000, for example, the project shipped over 1,600 pounds of antibiotics, vitamins, antacids, children’s medicine, hygienic supplies, high-protein canned goods such as tuna and salmon, and powdered milk.¹²⁷

The Renaissance of the 1990s

In the early 1990s there was a visible revitalization of Jewish life in Cuba. As the regime’s loosening of restrictions on religion encouraged Cubans of all types to discover or rediscover religion, a steady stream of people began to acknowledge Jewish antecedents and seek affiliation with the community.

Primary credit for the revival of Jewish life in Cuba goes to the JDC, whose representatives, sent from Buenos Aires, have educated a new generation of Cuban Jews. Jorge Diener was the first resident JDC director. He was followed by Roberto

¹²⁶ Stuart Cooper, “B’nai B’rith goes back to Cuba: Humanitarian mission delivers two thousand-seven hundred pounds of supplies,” *B’nai B’rith Today*, Jan./Feb. 2000, pp. 1, 3.

¹²⁷ Interview with Stanley Cohen, Apr. 2000.

Senderovitch, who was in turn succeeded by Diego and Laura Mendelbaum. The current directors, Ivan and Cynthia, took over in May 2000.

RABBI SZTEINHENDLER

During the early years of the revival, the JDC brought in numerous other educators as well—rabbis, community workers, volunteers—for short periods of time. Many were from the United States and Canada and spoke English; others were Spanish-speaking Jews from Central and South America.

One of the most influential was Rabbi Shmuel (Samuel) Szteinhandler, a native of Argentina and a Conservative rabbi. During the 1990s, he made four trips a year to Cuba from his congregational base in Guadalajara, Mexico. (About 20 percent of that congregation had emigrated from Cuba after the revolution.) Before his first trip, Szteinhandler had been led to believe that the only Jews left in Cuba were a few old people. But when arrived in January 1992, sent by the JDC, he witnessed first-hand the incipient revival of interest in Judaism and the potential for communal growth. Szteinhandler conducted services in the Havana synagogues and around the country, and officiated at ritual circumcisions and weddings. He instituted programs of “education, training for religious services, youth activities, cultural activities, holiday services and celebrations,” as well as Judaica lending libraries, Israeli dancing and theatrical groups, and distributed prayer books with Spanish translation and transliteration. Szteinhandler also worked with the communities to clean up the Jewish cemeteries and the abandoned sanctuaries and make them usable.¹²⁸ He influenced and inspired many. “Rabbi Szteinhandler is our spiritual father. We only see him two or three times a year, but he

¹²⁸ Interview with Shmuel (Samuel) Szteinhandler, July 2000.

is always in our minds,” José Levy Tur told a visiting journalist in 1996.¹²⁹ Szteinhendler has recently taken a pulpit in Santiago, Chile, and is no longer able to visit as often as he would like.

THE RENOVATED PATRONATO

While the various JDC representatives have worked with Jewish communities throughout Cuba, their primary focus has been the Patronato, and it has emerged as the center of Jewish life in Havana. Not only do Jews come there for services on Friday night and Saturday morning, but they also come to use the computers in the library, to get vitamins and drugs from the pharmacy, and to participate in organizations, clubs, and activities sponsored directly or indirectly by the Patronato. Renovation of the Patronato was initiated by a challenge grant from the Harry & Jeanette Weinberg Foundation of Baltimore, Maryland, after members of the Weinberg family visited Cuba. The Scheck family donated money to renovate the community center, and the Zelcer family paid to fix up the prestigious and heavily used Patronato library. A number of Cuban Jews living in Miami made donations through the Greater Miami Jewish Federation, but such aid remains controversial. When the building was dedicated in May 2000—with the Elián González controversy still unresolved—some of the donors declined to attend out of fear that their presence would hurt their communal standing in Miami.

Although the Patronato is constitutionally required to have a 24-member board, the responsibility for decisions falls primarily on a very small group led by the president, José Miller. Adela Dworin, vice president of the Patronato and its librarian, is very

¹²⁹ Kenneth Bandler, “Argentine rabbi ignites fervor in dormant Cuban communities,” *Jewish Telegraphic Agency Daily News Bulletin*, Jan. 11, 1996, p. 4.

active in running the institution, taking many of the American tour groups around to show them the newly renovated sanctuary and relate the history of the congregation. In 1995 the Patronato launched *Menorah*, a newsletter for the Havana Jewish community. The congregation also sponsors social and cultural groups geared to different age levels. M  cabi Cuba, the youth group for ages 13-30, has helped stimulate and promote the renaissance of Jewish life throughout the country. Guesher (bridge), led by Tatiana As  s, a physician, is for 30-55-year-olds. Simcha, for the over-55 group, is led by University of Havana English professor Lourdes Albo. Each group meets once a month, alternating locations between the Centro and the Patronato, after the kiddush that follows services on Shabbat morning. The groups also go on trips, sometimes outside Havana. The Simcha group runs an exercise program that meets on Mondays and Tuesdays at Adath Israel.

“Collective birthday celebrations” are held every three months, giving special recognition to those whose birthdays fall out during that time span. Lourdes Albo explains: “In its beginnings the meetings were held with only a few participants. Today more than 60 members come to each meeting. It is very meaningful for them to have the opportunity to socialize, share their vivid memories, interests, celebrate their birthdays, go on excursions—in other words, to have a good time with their brothers and sisters of the Cuban Jewish community.”¹³⁰ In July 1999, the first national camping experience for the Simcha seniors group was held in Aguas Claras, where some 80 Jewish seniors from all over the country gathered for two days. After experiencing Shabbat together, the program continued on Saturday night with a havdalah ceremony, and was followed by

¹³⁰ Interview with Lourdes Albo, Mar. 2000.

an exercise program and an outing to La Cueva del Indio the next day. There were also group discussions on psychological, social, and religious issues.

A number of other Jewish cultural events take place regularly at the Patronato. About eight times a year the Asociación Femenina Hebrea de Cuba (Jewish Women's Association of Cuba) brings together more than 100 women from the three Havana synagogues for dialogues on Jewish issues. The program is led by Rosa Behar Hazdai, who also heads Hadassah in Cuba. The Patronato recently held an exhibition of paintings by Israeli and Palestinian children that had been created under the auspices of Givat Haviva, an Israeli organization dedicated to furthering Arab-Israeli understanding; the president of the Cuban Arab Federation, Alfredo Deriche, attended the opening ceremonies. There have also been several dance presentations by the Mexican Jewish group Anajnu Ve Atem (We and You), one of which was held at the National Theater as part of Cuba's International Ballet Festival.

A milestone in the resurrection of Jewish life in Cuba took place at the Patronato on Rosh Hashanah 1999, when Alberto Behar chanted from the Torah, becoming Cuba's first native-born Torah reader since the revolution. Diego Mendelbaum, then JDC's representative in Cuba, trained Behar. Mendelbaum recalled, "When we started, he could scarcely read Hebrew. But he had the desire. We decided on a two-month course of study. In the process, he learned much more than the musical symbols he would need. He studied commentaries and reflections on the Torah. He moved beyond the technique of reading the Torah and investigated the spiritual and emotional meaning contained in each portion. When you hear him read, you can sense his fulfillment." Behar commented, "While following the text with my eyes, I can see in the scrolls the

reflection of my father's and grandfather's faces. They are happy that I am maintaining the Jewish tradition.”¹³¹

ADATH ISRAEL

Adath Israel is located in the middle of Old Havana, the area of original settlement in colonial times. This neighborhood is the country's primary tourist attraction, and with the economy in bad shape, it made sense for Cuba to invest in it. In 1978, a year after UNESCO declared it a world heritage site, the government adopted a plan to renovate the entire area. As part of this project, the Havana Restoration Commission sent architecture student Jorge Herrera to Germany, on scholarship, to study the architecture of German synagogues so that he might develop a plan for Adath Israel. Upon Herrera's return, he worked with leaders of the congregation on a proposed full restoration of the sanctuary, and also suggested a number of innovative features, such as a frame attached to the roof of the building that could be used for the erection of a sukkah. The government contributed part of the cost for the renovation, with the rest donated by a number of wealthy Orthodox businessmen from Panama, Venezuela, and elsewhere.¹³²

The president of the Adath Israel Congregation today is Alberto Zilberstein Toruncha, an engineer, whose father was Ashkenazi and whose mother was of Turkish Sephardic descent. He attended a Jewish day school as a child and his mother was

¹³¹ “The Torah Finds its Cuban Voice: JDC-trained Cuban *Baal Kore* is Welcomed by his Community,” on JDC’s Web site, www.jdc.org.

¹³² Laura Gooch, “Cuba’s Jews Struggle to Renovate their Crumbling Synagogues,” *Cleveland Jewish News*, Feb. 16, 1999.

active in the Chevet Achim Sephardic synagogue, but by 1970 she decided to end the family's public involvement in Jewish activities in order to shield her children from the possible stigma of being identified as "religious." She nevertheless tried to maintain some degree of Jewish tradition in their home. When Alberto's own children reached school age, his mother encouraged him to send them to the Patronato's Sunday school, and the parents became involved through the children. In 1994, leaders of Adath Israel sought him out to become active in their congregation. He explained: "People now want to become involved in synagogue life... it gives them a very warm communal feeling which can be very comforting in the tough economic times that we're facing."¹³³

Adath Israel consists of about 120 people who travel there from all over the greater Havana metropolitan area, including Santos Suarez, Alamar, San Paulo de Francisco, Santiago de las Vegas, and many other suburbs and towns. Even though it is nominally Orthodox, it differs little from the non-Orthodox congregations in its high rate of intermarriage.¹³⁴ The congregation has a system for awarding extra rations to those who commit to coming to the minyan at Adath Israel, and no other synagogue, a certain number of times per week. Thus Adath Israel is the only synagogue that even attempts to have a daily minyan both morning and evening, and it succeeds about 85 percent of the time—a feat made more difficult by the Orthodox rule that only males can be counted. Friday night attendance is between 65 and 70, with about 35–40 on Saturday morning and 30–35 on Saturday night.

One of the most emotional moments in the revival of Cuban Jewry occurred at Adath Israel in December 1994—its first bar mitzvah in over 30 years. The bar mitzvah

¹³³ Interview with Alberto Zilberstein Toruncha, June 2000.

¹³⁴ Interview with Salim Tache Jalak, Adath Israel's executive director, Nov. 1999.

boy was Jacobo Berezniak, the son of Abraham Berezniak, Havana's kosher butcher and one of the leaders of the congregation. Besides the regulars, relatives, and friends, the congregation that morning included a 20-person group visiting from the United States and a camera crew that was filming a documentary on Jewish life in Cuba. (The crew was permitted to film because the service was held on a Thursday rather than a Saturday.) Eleazar Benador, at 85 the oldest member of the congregation present, was given the honor of opening the ark and removing the Torah scroll. The bar mitzvah boy was escorted up to the Torah by his father and the president of the congregation, and he read his portion in what one of the American visitors described as a "steady and competent manner."¹³⁵

SOCIAL, EDUCATIONAL, AND YOUTH PROGRAMS

It was mostly affluent American Jewish businessmen who founded the local branch of B'nai B'rith in Cuba in 1943, which, till the revolution, combated anti-Semitism and did philanthropic work. The organization never disbanded after the revolution, but it did little till the early 1990s, when the organization was revitalized as part of the broader Jewish renaissance. A key player in that revitalization was Isaac Gelen, now president of the B'nai B'rith Maimonides Lodge in Havana. As Gelen explained to me, the revived organization had to change its original mission, since there was now very little anti-Semitism to fight and the members were not in a position to donate the large sums of money necessary for meaningful philanthropy. Instead, B'nai

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Paul Margolis, "A Young Man's Coming of Age Mirrors the Rebirth of Judaism in Cuba," *Jewish Standard*, Feb. 18, 1996.

B'rith has expanded its educational activities, meeting monthly with approximately 20 people (out of the 41 official members) in attendance.¹³⁶

Moisés Asís, now living in Miami, founded the community's current one-day-a-week educational program in 1985. Two years later, Rabbi Marshall Meyer, dean of the Seminario Rabínico Latinoamericano, the rabbinical school in Buenos Aires, personally recruited Asís for an intensive six-month program to train him for communal religious leadership, and the JDC gave Asís a scholarship for this purpose. He studied not only academic subjects, but also practical techniques such as circumcision. Today, Alberto Meshulam Cohen, a pediatric neurologist, directs the Hebrew school, which is cooperatively sponsored by all three Havana congregations and taught by dedicated volunteers. Approximately 40 children up to the age of 15 attend classes at the Patronato every Sunday morning for three hours. Simultaneously, some 30 people over the age of 15 attend sessions at the Centro Hebreo Sefaradi. The JDC provides two buses that shuttle the participants from their neighborhoods to the programs and back. Over the past two years at least 112 Cuban Jews involved with the Sunday school, teachers and students, have settled in Israel, but new people get involved each year and the school continues to thrive.¹³⁷

Mácbi Cuba has the responsibility for running the Friday night service at the Patronato, and this is one reason that the service is so popular with young people. On Saturdays the Mácbi has meetings devoted to the study of Judaism that stress practical, hands-on activities and the use of creative and innovative techniques to communicate the spiritual dimension of Jewish life. Mácbi also sponsors a volleyball team that conducts

¹³⁶ Interview with Isaac Gelen, June 2000.

¹³⁷ Interview with Alberto Cohen, Mar. 2000.

training on weekday evenings, and each Tuesday night there is a meeting of the Israeli dance group.

Mácbi sponsors two camping experiences during the year, one in March and the other in July, bringing together about 150 young Jews from all over the country. The camp, which lasts for four days, is the only opportunity young Cuban Jews have to experience intensive Jewish living 24 hours a day, including a full Shabbat. Most of these children—up until a few years ago, almost all of them—were from homes where there was no Jewish expression whatsoever; all they knew was that their parents had told them they were Jewish. In August 1999 Cuba hosted a “Pan-American Camp” in Aguas Claras, Pinar del Rio, with assistance from the Jewish communities of the United States, Venezuela, Panama, Mexico, Brazil, and Nicaragua. Not only was there a strong Jewish educational component to the camp, but the young Cuban Jews had the opportunity to meet and interact with Jews from other countries and to feel that they are part of world Jewry.

Mácbi Cuba, however, is beginning to pay a price for its success: during 1999 it lost two of the most active members of its executive committee. Liver Humaran Maya, a dynamic young leader, received a gala public send-off when he left to study Jewish education for a year at the seminary in Buenos Aires, with the intention of returning to teach in Cuba. As part of his studies, though, he went to Israel to study Hebrew, and decided to settle there; not only would he not complete his training in Buenos Aires, but he would not be returning to Cuba to bolster Jewish education in the community. Dania Martínez Nissenbaum, another member of the executive committee, also left the country, settling in the United States. Both losses came as heavy blows to Mácbi Cuba.

CONVERSION AND OTHER DENOMINATIONAL ISSUES

Shortly after the revival of Jewish life began in the 1990s, communal leaders in Havana reached an understanding to promote conversion as the way to formalize Jewish status for those who were of Jewish origin or married to Jews, but who were not Jews according to Jewish law. However individuals who approached the community without either Jewish ancestry or a Jewish partner were not generally encouraged to convert, a reflection of the dominant national/ethnic conception of Jewishness. About 150 conversions have taken place over the last several years, with Conservative rabbis from other Latin American communities performing them. Among the earliest converts were José Miller's wife and children.

Rabbi Szteinhandler explained how he approached the issue of conversion. “First, we regularized the Jewish status of people who belonged to mixed-marriage families and are active in some way, or at least related, to the community. Secondly, we will go to the mixed marriages and their families who are there but are not related to the community. Third, we regularized the Jewish status of those people who are third generation of some Jewish grandparent. Last, we attended [to] people who had not had any Jewish former relatives.” The process involved intensive consultation with Miller and other communal representatives.

All the cases were accepted first by the local leadership, and then we established a study program that took almost a whole year. People had to participate weekly in study sessions, in the communal activities, in the Shabbat and holiday services, and meet with me each time I was in the island to have intensive study sessions. The ritual of accepting them as fully Jewish followed the rules of the CJLS [Committee on Law and

Standards] of the Conservative/Masorti Movement, which means: men needed to go thru Brith Milah [circumcision] and all the people went through *mikvah* [ritual immersion]. We had, each year, a bet din [religious court] of three Conservative rabbis. The *mohel* was brought from Mexico to perform the Brith Milah of each one according to Jewish law.¹³⁸

According to Rabbi Szteinhandler, when Rabbi Yisrael Meir Lau, the Ashkenazi chief rabbi of Israel, visited Cuba in 1994, he made known his acceptance of these conversions.¹³⁹

In light of the fact that conversions in Cuba were performed under the auspices of Conservative Judaism, it is hardly surprising to find that much of the community has developed formal or informal ties with the Conservative movement. Rabbi Jerome Epstein, executive director of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, has been the point man for the development of the Conservative movement in Cuba. While this would normally be the responsibility of the World Council of Synagogues, which is the umbrella organization for the Conservative movement around the world, it was decided that the U.S.-based United Synagogue would take responsibility for Cuba and Barbados, because of their proximity to the United States. Also, the United Synagogue's budget could accommodate the extra expenditures involved.

Even though the Patronato and other Cuban congregations are affiliated with the Conservative movement, the form of Judaism that the congregations practice is not completely consistent with Conservative Judaism elsewhere. Epstein explained: "They are Conservative in large part because they are not Orthodox and they want to maintain some tradition. They are not what you could say committed to an ideology that is similar

¹³⁸ Szteinhandler interview.

¹³⁹ Kenneth Bandler, "Jewish youth lead the way in a long-isolated community," *Jewish Telegraphic Agency Daily News Bulletin*, Jan. 8, 1996, p. 2.

to Conservative Judaism here in North America, and because of what they went through in the Castro regime, they really don't have a lot of knowledge of Judaism at all. There is a whole generation that really lost everything that they really wanted to develop in their own lives. It was really lost, all their traditions. They really don't have any recollection of Shabbat and many of the holidays. And it's almost like building from scratch.”¹⁴⁰

Epstein first visited Cuba in 1997, when he and a number of other Conservative leaders met with representatives of the different Cuban congregations and began a dialogue on how the United Synagogue could help strengthen Judaism in Cuba. The United Synagogue provided Spanish-Hebrew prayer books, and translated and distributed selections from its popular tract series, short essays on aspects of Jewish law, holidays, and prayer. Epstein explains, “We tried to develop a strategy that would make it possible for us to do something constructive without being perceived as ‘the Ugly Yankee.’” Epstein recalls, “Most of the people felt badly that they had let their memories fade, in terms of Judaism, and a lot of them were very hungry to get something back again. It was almost as if they felt deprived. Not necessarily of all the ritual elements—they just wanted a connection with God.” In particular, Epstein was struck by the interest the young people showed.¹⁴¹

Originally, the Patronato synagogue had been officially Orthodox, although the congregants were not very observant. It was only in the beginning of the 1990s—when the JDC became involved in the Havana Jewish community—that the nominal Orthodox label was dropped. Jorge Diener, the first JDC representative in Cuba, encouraged all

¹⁴⁰ Interview with Jerome Epstein, Apr. 2000.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

three Havana congregations to affiliate with the Conservative movement. The Patronato was the first to do so, and the Centro Sefaradi followed suit several years later.

Nevertheless, the two congregations retain certain religious differences: the Patronato has men and women sitting together and allows women to lead services and read the Torah, while the Centro Sefaradi retains separate seating (without a physical barrier) and does not allow women any leading role in the service.

Adath Israel, still nominally Orthodox, has consistently resisted JDC suggestions to join the Conservative movement. Yet it is not a member of any international Orthodox Jewish organization, perhaps because its membership includes many people who are not Jewish according to Halakhah. Zeiling Mooris, a retired Romanian-born Jew living in England, has made several trips to Havana to help lead services, but his involvement has created tensions. When he first came he expressed a willingness to accept the congregational situation and deal leniently with the questionable Jewish identity of members, but as time went on—and possibly as a result of a felt need to conform to Lubavitch standards—Mooris began to balk at calling up to the Torah congregants who had non-Jewish mothers or who had converted through the Conservative movement. Alberto Zilberstein, the president, had to insist that Mooris either allow these people to participate or “get off the *bimah* [platform] and let us continue with our service.”¹⁴²

When Chevet Achim closed down, some of the members joined the Centro Sefaradi in Vedado, but many of those living in Old Havana preferred to remain with a synagogue that was close by and so they joined the ostensibly Eastern European Adath Israel. As a consequence of the influx of Sephardim from Chevet Achim, as well as the presence of many spouses from non-Jewish backgrounds, the Eastern European flavor of

¹⁴² Zilberstein interview.

Adath Israel is far less pronounced today than it was at the time of the revolution.

Despite its Orthodoxy, Adath Israel is fully involved with the rest of the community. It participates together with the other two Havana congregations in the joint Sunday programs, the one for children held at the Patronato, and the one for adults held at the Centro Sefaradi. Whenever an issue of concern to the broader Jewish community arises, representatives of the three congregations meet together.

However Adath Israel, like the other congregations, has had to face certain boundary issues. Early in 2000, one congregant who had been raised with virtually no Judaism in his home and had begun to attend services was asked not to come any longer because he was also a regular attendee at a Protestant church. Such syncretistic religious activity is widespread among segments of the Cuban population—many Catholics are also involved in Afro-Cuban religious activities, specifically Santeria—but syncretism has made no inroads in the Jewish community.

As of July 2000, Chabad-Lubavitch had sent a total of 56 missions to Cuba under the auspices of Chabad Friends of Cuban Jewry, headquartered originally in Brooklyn and now in Toronto, and directed by Rabbi Shimon Aisenbach.¹⁴³ Each mission is staffed by two emissaries, usually young, unmarried rabbis. For the holiday of Shavuot 2000, Aisenbach sent a young, married couple. Aisenbach commented, “Periodically I have this idea to send a couple as well [as two single rabbis], the reason being simply that the Jewish community should see religious family life. I feel that the community should see a Jewish *frum* [strictly observant] couple, a Lubavitch couple from time to

¹⁴³ All the information about the role of Lubavitch in Cuba is based on an interview with Rabbi Aisenbach, June 2000.

time, not only as rabbis but as they visit homes so that people can see the complete picture.”

Chabad-Lubavitch is dedicated to seeing that the Cuban Jews be led down the proper Halakhic path, and it is especially alarmed by the high incidence of intermarriage and what it considers Halakhically incorrect [Conservative] conversions. Rabbi Aisenbach explained: “‘Who is a Jew’ is definitely a problem that we must take into consideration. Many people identify themselves as Jews who really are not. . . Who are these people and what are they going to claim that they are? They immigrate to Israel and then they are dating your daughter, for example. It brings a lot of confusion. It brings such confusion. People think that it’s just a game, but it’s not a game. It eventually brings confusion and eventually even disaster.”

Aisenbach is especially puzzled about Adath Israel, since it is officially Orthodox and at the same time contains a majority of intermarried couples. “Everything is wishy washy there,” he says:

For example, that shul itself was built as an Orthodox shul. Even when I came six-and-a-half years ago it wasn’t running like an Orthodox shul. Seventy-five to eighty percent were non-Jews, men and women sitting together. I spoke to a couple of people there and I said, “Listen, at least respect the way the shul was built. It was built as an Orthodox shul.” Is it 100 percent Orthodox, are the meals kosher yet? Not yet. For example, there is no kosher meat coming out of the kosher butcher. To make a piece of meat kosher is not a simple thing. Even though I am an official rabbi, I took the exams on becoming a rabbi, I’m not a *shohet*. . . In

Cuba there are even [Halakhically] non-Jews doing *shehitah* [ritual slaughtering]. Even though they're doing a perfect job, the animal is not kosher. And also the knives are from before the revolution, and obviously almost inevitably there is a problem with them.

Aisenbach wanted to arrange for a *shohet* to visit Cuba every few weeks, have the meat stored in special freezers, and distribute it to community members. As for the meat people were eating, he said, “its not 20 percent kosher, its not 50 percent kosher, its not kosher meat at all.”

Chabad in Cuba also operates a summer day camp where, in addition to sports, the children pray and are taught about Jewish practice. Says Aisenbach, “We feed them and their parents a meal and we go on night trips with them. We printed a 96-page booklet in Spanish with illustrations all about the basic mitzvahs and an entire Yiddishkeit guide.” Chabad insists that “every single child in our camp is born to a Jewish mother, and therefore “we don’t have many children. There were years it was 20, and there were years it was 17. But as the focus of the camp was Jewish education, a Jewish education belongs to a Jewish child.” Seven of the children who have attended Chabad camps over the years have gone on to study at yeshivot in other countries.

Communal Renaissance Outside of Havana

CAMAGÜEY

JDC representatives and other Jewish visitors have had a profound impact on this community. Sarah Albojaire, a former president of the Jewish community now living in Miami, states, “They taught us how to sing the prayers; they brought books, gefilte fish

—and, most importantly, they taught what we couldn’t to our children.” Albojaire explains what happened to the Jews of Camagüey. “Years without formally practicing and without any organized services really removed us from Judaism. Most of us, like me, had to marry out of the religion. There were no Jews.”¹⁴⁴

Since most of the Camagüey Jews were intermarried, many of those expressing interest in Judaism were themselves only partly Jewish. In 1995 Rabbi Szteinhendler came to Camagüey to officiate at the conversion ceremonies of 21 people, mostly spouses of Jews and children of Jewish fathers and non-Jewish mothers, just as was being done elsewhere in the country under similar circumstances. But since then visits from rabbis have been infrequent. In 1999, two boys, ages 10 and 12, were medically circumcised at a hospital in the city. As there was no *mohel* or rabbi available, Sara Albojare, a member of the community, read the prayers.¹⁴⁵

The original Sephardi synagogue in Camagüey, Congregation Tiferet Israel, built in the 1920s, closed down after the revolution. On Rosh Hashanah 1998 the 37-family community dedicated a new synagogue building in a whitewashed turn-of-the-century house, connected to a row of homes in the center of the city. It was named Tiferet Israel, the same name as the prerevolutionary synagogue, and was bought for the congregation by Ruben Beraja, who was then serving as leader of the Jewish community of Argentina.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁴ David Abel, “Cuba’s Jews Take Heart from First New Synagogue since Revolution,” *Newark Star Ledger*, July 24, 1998.

¹⁴⁵ Correspondence with Merle Salkin, February 2001.

¹⁴⁶ Correspondence with Merle Salkin, March 2001.

Merle Salkin, director of education at the Society Hill Synagogue in Philadelphia, made several trips to Camagüey to teach Hebrew to the Jewish community. Salkin's congregation donated \$3,000 for the Camagüey synagogue, as well as for prayer books and other ritual items. She explains that after the religious revival began, "people started coming out of the woodwork, asking questions and signing up for conversion classes." As is the case in many small communities, there is one member who has taken the lead and inspired others. In Camagüey, according to Salkin, that individual is Reina Roffe, "the spiritual heart and driving force of Jewish education in the city." Roffe started the first conversion class and developed the curriculum for the synagogue school. She was brought to Kol Ami in Philadelphia in 1999 to learn Hebrew and received intensified training for her work in Cuba. She celebrated her own bat mitzvah at Kol Ami and then celebrated her son Daniel's bar mitzvah in Camagüey shortly after her return to Cuba. Working with Salkin, she has taught adult education classes, including Hebrew, holiday observance, and Jewish symbols.¹⁴⁷

CIENFUEGOS

The 29-member Jewish community of Cienfuegos, even smaller than the one in Camagüey, is held together by a strong-minded, energetic woman, Rebeca Langos, a Spanish teacher in a local middle school, who is the community president. Raising her two small sons as Jews although her husband is not Jewish, Rodriguez told a reporter that she would like them to marry Jews but realizes that in Cienfuegos this is unlikely to happen. Since there was only one girl in the community, she asked, "What are we going

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

to do?"¹⁴⁸ She has considered moving with her family to Israel, but her husband doesn't want to leave his ailing mother. The continued presence of Rodriguez is of crucial importance for the local Jewish community; were she to leave, Jewish communal life would probably fall apart. About once a month Shabbat services are held in Rodriguez's home, although never with a minyan. Every Saturday the community's seven children come to her second-floor apartment for Hebrew school. Sometimes the parents stay with the children till the end of the Sabbath for havdalah.

SANTA CLARA

David Tacher, the president of the Jewish community in Santa Clara, explains that until 1995 the community was virtually inactive. That year, a visitor donated *The Jewish Book of Why*. A number of local Jews started reading it, and thus began the process of revival. "Families got together to reencounter their roots. There was a revival of interest about being Jewish. At the end, we realized we were lacking; we weren't practicing our religion. Then, all the community began to celebrate *Kabbalat Shabbat* services, the blessing of the wine, the bread, then step by step, havdalah, then the first Passover, then learning Hebrew."¹⁴⁹ In 1996 the Jews of Santa Clara celebrated Purim together for the first time, and, later in the year, commemorated Holocaust Memorial Day.

Tacher explains that the Jews in Santa Clara always knew each other. They had visited the Jewish cemetery and were familiar with the names on the tombstones; they

¹⁴⁸ Lisa J. Huriash, "Judaism: Alive in Castro's Cuba," *Young Israel Viewpoint*, Spring 2000, p. 74. The article appears on pp. 71–78.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 75.

knew which people in town were related to those deceased ancestors, and so there had never been a complete loss of Jewish memory. But there had been no religious activities for years. Now, though, there are seven active families consisting of about 30 individuals. Tacher is not planning to move to Israel. “I have my mother here and she’s sick. She can’t start over; she’s an old woman,” he says. Tacher believes that he can be a faithful Jew in Santa Clara. “If you are Jewish, you are Jewish. My mind and heart are in Israel. As long as there is a Jew in Cuba, Judaism will never die in Cuba.”¹⁵⁰

SANTIAGO DE CUBA

Santiago de Cuba, the second largest city in the country, is regarded as the most Caribbean of all Cuban cities. Local residents are proud of the role that the city played in the revolution. Most of the early Jewish settlers came from the Ottoman Empire, though a number of Ashkenazi families from Poland also came before World War II. The Sociedad Unión Israelita del Oriente de Cuba, the Jewish Society of Eastern Cuba, was founded here in October 1924. The community held services in rented quarters until 1939, when a synagogue building was erected. From that time on it was referred to as the Sínogoga de Santiago de Cuba. Two spiritual leaders served the community, one from 1924 until 1943, and the other from 1946 through 1967. The revolution brought a dramatic decline in community activity. Most of the local Jews emigrated, and by 1978 the community had ceased functioning. As the synagogue building was not being used, the remaining Jews gave it to the government.¹⁵¹

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹

Yet, a small number of Jews in the Santiago area, most of them intermarried, retained some interest in their ancestral faith. At Passover each year the Santiago Jews would gather to receive their Passover package from the CJC, which was routed through the Havana Jewish community. The regular annual receipt of this aid made a deep impression on the local Jews, showing them that there was a Jewish presence outside of their area and giving them a sense of global Jewish solidarity.

After 15 years of inactivity, the Santiago community began to reorganize in October 1993 when Jewish communal activities began to be held on a regular basis in the home of Rebeca Botton Behar, the president of the newly emerging Jewish community. Talks with the government resulted in the return of the original synagogue building to the Jewish community, and a joyous rededication ceremony took place, Rabbi Shmuel Szteinhandler officiating, on July 25, 1995—a date coinciding with the 480th anniversary of the founding of the city.¹⁵²

The congregation now has regular Sabbath services and, after the Saturday morning prayers, a kiddush lunch is served for the entire congregation, followed by a class on the Torah portion of the week in Spanish. The community has two Jewish dance groups, one for children and the other for adults. In 1996, a double bar mitzvah was held for two cousins, Robertito Novoa Bonne and Andresito Novoa Castiel, attended by the entire Jewish community. These were the first bar mitzvahs held in the city in almost 20 years.¹⁵³

¹⁵² Interview with Evely Laser Schelnsky, Apr. 2000.

¹⁵³ Lesley Pearl, “Bay Area Jews Visit Cuban Shul for First Bar Mitzvah in Twenty Years,” *Jewish Bulletin of Northern California*, June 13, 1997.

Rabbi Stuart Kelman of Congregation Netivot Shalom of Berkeley, California, has brought several missions from Northern California to work with the Jewish community of Santiago. “There’s a certain laxness about kashrut rules,” he notes, “about Shabbat, and that is all very understandable, given the fact that they are situated on the edge of the island, and have had no leadership in God knows how many years in that sense. They are a struggling community, and in a way, the Judaism that they practice is the best that they can do.”¹⁵⁴

Operation Cigar, Aliyah. And the Future of the Community

“Operation Cigar,” the clandestine emigration of 400 Cuban Jews, made headlines in October 1999 after the Israeli government confirmed a report that appeared in the *Jewish Chronicle* of London. President Castro apparently gave his approval for it in 1994, allegedly soon after meeting with Israeli chief rabbi Lau. Through this operation, the Jewish Agency for Israel, with the help of the Canadian government, arranged for the departure of mostly younger Cuban Jews from Havana through Paris to Tel Aviv beginning in 1995.

Once “Operation Cigar” became public knowledge, a number of theories developed as to why Castro had agreed to it and why it had been kept secret. Some believed that Castro saw the operation as a way to win favor with the U.S. government and bring an end to the economic boycott, or, if that were not possible, at least to induce Israel to drop its support of the boycott. There were also allegations that Israel had paid Cuba between \$3,000 and \$5,000 per Jew as “compensation” for Cuba’s investment in

¹⁵⁴ Interview with Stuart Kelman, Apr. 2000.

their education. As for the secrecy, Israeli sources claimed that Castro insisted on a news blackout, for fear that publicity would cause civil unrest in his country among the many other Cubans who were denied the ability to emigrate. Arturo López Levy, however, has argued that Cuba's reason for maintaining a low profile had less to do with domestic considerations than with a reluctance to offend Arab nations.¹⁵⁵

Whatever strategies lay behind "Operation Cigar," many Cuban Jewish leaders were quite upset by press descriptions of the emigration as "top secret." José Miller, for example, was appalled at the implication that this was a Jewish Agency rescue mission similar to Operation Solomon in Ethiopia, in which thousands of Ethiopian Jews were quite literally saved from famine and civil war. Miller stated that, in contrast to that type of dramatic evacuation, the emigration of Jews from Cuba was a voluntary process that occurred over a prolonged period. The individuals involved chose to relocate for economic or social reasons. They were not escaping from cataclysmic events or the imminent threat of violent death.¹⁵⁶

All the publicity served to shed light on the actual process of Cuban Jewish emigration to Israel, which had been going on, albeit on a smaller scale, even before 1995, and has continued since. Since Israel and Cuba do not have diplomatic relations, the Canadian embassy in Havana represents the interests of the State of Israel. Cuban Jews wishing to emigration must request permission from the Cuban government and also fill out a request for immigration to Israel with the consular section of the Canadian embassy. These applications are then sent from the embassy in Havana to Ottawa, and

¹⁵⁵ "'Operation Cigar': A not-so-secret Cuban aliyah gets world attention," *Jewish Telegraphic Agency Daily News Bulletin*, Oct. 13, 1999, pp. 1–2. For a Cuban perspective see Aldo Madruga, "No hay tal pacto secreto," *Granma*, Oct. 31, 1999, p. 4.

¹⁵⁶ Interviews with Dr. José Miller Fredman, Nov. 1999 and Feb. 2000.

from there the Canadian government turns them over the Israeli embassy, which forwards them to the appropriate government department in Tel Aviv.

Prospective emigrants then have to wait for their exit permits from the Cuban government. While this can take months, there have been no reported cases of any Cuban Jew being turned down (for Cubans seeking to emigrate to other countries, the process can take years). The emigrants leave Cuba in groups, using Cuban exit visas and passports. They travel from Havana to Paris, where they disembark from the plane and go to the Israeli embassy to receive documentation to enter Israel as *olim*, immigrants. They complete the final leg of their journey on Canadian travel documents.

Recent public attention to the organized aliyah of Cuban Jews has also stimulated interest in their reception in Israel and their feelings about living in the Jewish state. Aside from the usual problems that immigrants face—learning a new language, finding a job—the major complaint is that the aid package available to them, they believe, is the same as that provided to new immigrants from other Western countries, and considerably less than what is given to Jews coming from countries defined as “distressed,” such as Ethiopia, Yemen, Syria, and Iran. The Cuban Jews believe that this is unfair since the government of Cuba, unlike those of other Western states, takes away the job of anyone applying for an exit visa, Jewish or not, and confiscates all of the property of those who leave except for 20 kilograms of clothing.¹⁵⁷

Another source of dissatisfaction stems from unrealistic expectations. Some Cuban Jews immigrate to Israel because, as Jews, it is the simplest way of escaping from the poverty and lack of job opportunities in Cuba. Their ultimate aim, however, is to

¹⁵⁷ Erik Schechter, “Out of Castro’s Frying Pan,” *Jerusalem Report*, Oct. 25, 1999, pp. 20–22. In fact the notion that the Cubans are treated as Westerners is a misperception. Since July 1992 Cuban immigrants have received benefits at the level of Soviet immigrants, which is higher than that for Westerners. Correspondence with Margalit Bejarano, Apr. 2001.

reach the U.S. They have found, however, that it is extremely difficult to get to the U.S., and many feel trapped in Israel. There is a unique psychological aspect to this frustration as well: Cuban *olim* know that many of their friends and neighbors who settled in Miami have been very successful, and they compare their own situation with those Cubans, not with other Israeli immigrant groups, and they tend to feel shortchanged.

A few among the *olim* have returned to Cuba, and the dissatisfaction of Cubans in Israel may cause other Cuban Jews to think twice about aliyah. However, younger *olim*, especially those with technical skills and proficiency in Hebrew, have integrated successfully into the Israeli economy and are very happy in their adopted country.¹⁵⁸

Whatever the short-term problems, the slow but steady emigration of many of the younger Cuban Jews seems destined to siphon off much of the Jewish energy that was generated over the course of the 1990s. Barring dramatic improvement in the Cuban economy, emigration will continue, and since the Jewish community in Cuba will only convert those who have some Jewish ancestry or are married to Jews—virtually all of whom, if they were interested, have already converted—the Cuban Jewish community will shrink in size.

The fate of this tiny community largely depends on what happens to the country. Life in Cuba remains a struggle: the few stores that exist are poorly stocked; almost everything is rationed; very few people have cars, most of the vehicles on the road are old and in constant need of repair. As for the political situation, Fidel Castro recently fainted in the middle of a speech, underscoring the potential for a sudden change in leadership.¹⁵⁹ Castro has repeatedly insisted that his brother Raúl, currently the defense

¹⁵⁸ Avi Machlis, “Despite grievances, Cuban *olim* feel lucky to be in Jewish state,” *Jewish Telegraphic Agency Daily News Bulletin*, Oct. 21, 1999, pp. 1–2.

¹⁵⁹ Anita Snow, “Castro Fainting Underscores Mortality,” Associated Press report, July 2, 2001.

minister, is his heir, adding that, “There is not only Raúl, but a plethora of young people with talent.” Raúl has the loyalty of the military, but is seen as lacking charisma and popular appeal. Other potential leaders include Carlos Lage Davila, the secretary of the Council of Ministers; Ricardo Alarcón Quesada, president of Cuba’s parliament; and Felipe Perez Roque, the foreign minister. Jaime Suchlicki, director of the University of Miami’s Institute for Cuban and Cuban-American Studies, argues that without Fidel, Raúl will have to establish a joint leadership, but that a swift shift to democracy was unlikely: “They want a smooth passing of power, not another revolution.” The Cuban leadership, Suchlicki notes, has carefully studied the Chinese model that would allow for gradual economic change while maintaining tight political control, and this might be the basis for an evolving governmental structure in a post-Fidel Cuba.¹⁶⁰

Despite the demographic challenge symbolized by aliyah and the uncertainty surrounding the political and economic future, the Jewish renaissance in Cuba is real. Jewish leaders no longer speak with sadness about the “death of a community”; instead, locals and visitors alike talk with excitement about a miraculous rebirth, a testament to the endurance of Jewish identity and faith.

¹⁶⁰ Interview with Jaime Suchlicki, July 2001.