

*Fleeing the Revolution:
The Exodus of Cuban Jewry
in the Early 1960s*

ABSTRACT

The Cuban Revolution's economic policies destroyed the island's Jewish community as it had been in the 1950s, leaving only a small contingent remaining on the island. Most Jews were middle-class businessmen and the revolution's socialist policies undermined the economic basis of the community. This article describes the events that led up to the mass emigration, the process of the emigration itself, and the financial consequences of the emigration for those who left and those who remained behind. As more restrictive laws governing emigration were passed, it became more difficult to leave the country and certainly to take out assets. The Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) organized a registration process in Havana and facilitated flights and resettlement. Of particular note were a small number of Jewish children who emigrated without their parents as part of Operación Pedro Pan. In recent years, some of the Cuban Jews who fled Castro have returned to visit the remaining Jewish community and in some cases contribute to its redevelopment.

RESUMEN

La comunidad judía de Cuba de los años cincuenta quedó destrozada por las políticas económicas de la revolución. Apenas un número muy reducido de judíos permaneció en la isla. La mayoría de los judíos eran hombres de negocios de clase media y las políticas socialistas de la revolución minaron la base económica de esta comunidad. Este artículo describe los acontecimientos que condujeron a la emigración masiva, el proceso de emigración en sí y las consecuencias financieras del éxodo, tanto para los emigrantes como para aquellos que se quedaron. A medida que se aprobaron leyes de emigración cada vez más restrictivas, salir del país y sacar bienes resultaba más difícil. La Sociedad Hebrea de Ayuda al Inmigrante (HIAS) organizó un proceso de registro en La Habana y facilitó vuelos y el reasentamiento de judíos cubanos fuera de la isla. En particular, se destaca un grupo pequeño de niños judíos que emigraron sin sus padres como parte de la Operación Pedro Pan. En años más recientes, algunos de los judíos cubanos que huyeron del régimen de Castro han regresado al país para visitar la comunidad judía y, en algunos casos, contribuir a su reconstrucción.

On the eve of the revolution, the Jewish community of Cuba numbered between 12,000 and 16,500 individuals. There were three distinct subgroups within the community: those who came from the United States for business reasons; Sephardim who immigrated from the Ottoman Empire during and after World War I; and Ashkenazim, who arrived from Eastern Europe from the 1920s onward. There were other smaller groups, as well, including German and other Central European Jews who arrived as refugees and a group of ultra-Orthodox Belgian Jews of Polish origin who arrived in the late 1930s. Most arrived penniless and many had planned to continue on to the United States. But by the 1950s, the Jewish community was becoming more affluent. The majority lived in Havana, but there were smaller Jewish communities in many other cities and towns throughout Cuba as well. Many of those in Havana had left Old Havana for the more prosperous suburbs of Vedado and Miramar. A significant number had achieved upper-middle-class status, and some had become wealthy. This new affluence allowed them to build new synagogues, including the Centro Hebreo Sefaradí and the Patronato, a large community center.

The revolution's economic policies destroyed the Jewish community of Cuba as it had been in the 1950s, with only a small contingent remaining. Most Jews were middle-class businessmen and the revolution's socialist policies undermined the economic basis of the community. The realization that immigration would be necessary dawned only slowly on most middle-class Cubans, Jewish and non-Jewish alike. It should be stressed that the Jews of Cuba left because of economic and political considerations. Neither the revolutionary government nor the Cuban people exhibited any anti-Semitic tendencies. This fact is quite remarkable in light of the considerable anti-Semitism experienced by Polish, Russian, Hungarian, and other Eastern European Jews under Communist rule.

Although most Cuban Jews eventually became alienated from the Castro regime, in the early days of January 1959 they welcomed the revolutionaries. Most Jews were pleased that the Batista dictatorship had come to an end and were hoping that the new government would promote greater freedom and usher in a period of greater prosperity. The original government appointed by Fidel Castro included mostly moderate democrats, but he was already secretly controlling the real decision-making process. Nevertheless, it gradually became clear that Fidel Castro was determined to turn Cuba into a communist country, albeit an idiosyncratic one. Those who felt that the revolutionary government was determined to ally itself with the communist bloc turned out to be right. This made it impossible for middle-class Jewish businessmen to continue to operate as they were accustomed, and most felt that they had to leave the country.

The Political Background

During the first two years of the revolution, Fidel Castro gradually instituted measures designed to tighten his hold on power and to transform the country into a socialist style dictatorship. Because of the immense distain that most Cubans felt toward Batista, as well as Castro's tremendous charisma, Fidel remained immensely popular throughout this period. Many middle-class Cubans, however, became increasingly alarmed at various government policies they believed to be incompatible with a free-market capitalist economic system. The Cuban government also engaged in a series of retaliatory measures with the United States. On 17 March 1960, President Dwight D. Eisenhower approved a covert action plan against Cuba that included the use of a "powerful propaganda campaign" designed to overthrow Castro. The plan included the termination of sugar purchases, the end of oil deliveries, the continuation of the arms embargo in effect since mid-1958, and the organization of a paramilitary force of Cuban exiles to invade the island. The deterioration in the diplomatic relations between the two countries upset many Cuban Jews, who were concerned that this would choke off their economic supplies and markets. They were also worried that it would encourage the Cuban government to retaliate and/or take more radical economic policy measures. Most of the Jews remaining in Cuba had achieved a measure of success after many years of hard work, and they were deeply concerned that their accomplishments were now endangered.

In April 1960, the Soviets signed an agreement for the purchase of 425,000 tons of Cuban sugar that year and one million tons each year from 1961 to 1965. As part of the payment, the Soviets agreed to sell crude oil to Cuba at heavily discounted prices. This led the revolutionary government to demand that Shell, Standard Oil, and Texaco refine the Soviet oil that was to be imported. In early June, the companies refused. Three weeks later, the Cuban government nationalized the foreign-owned refineries in the country. On 6 July, Eisenhower retaliated by cutting the Cuban sugar import quota by 700,000 tons, or 95 percent, effectively ending such imports. On 5 August, the Cubans expropriated additional American property, including other oil related assets, two utility companies, and thirty-six sugar mills.

By October 1960, it had become clear that the government was intent on nationalizing large foreign-owned companies and even middle-sized Cuban businesses. On 19 October, the United States government placed a partial economic embargo on Cuba, which included a ban on almost all American exports excluding food and medicine. President John F. Kennedy later extended and expanded this embargo. The Cuban government responded the same day by nationalizing a large number of businesses. While the government had seized property that had been owned by Batista government loyalists, this

was the first expropriation of nonagricultural property owned by Cubans who had not been leaders of the previous government. Three hundred eighty-two personal and core industry businesses were expropriated, including sugar and rice mills, railroads, and banks. Large-scale businesses important for the economy were also seized, including factories, distilleries, and department stores. Later that same month, Cuba nationalized an additional 166 American-owned businesses: hotels, casinos, import-export companies, chemical plants, food-processing concerns, insurance companies, textile manufacturers, tobacco companies, and others. American Jewish gangster Meyer Lansky's Hotel Riviera was one of these.

Also in October, a second Urban Reform Law was passed, prohibiting Cubans from owning more than one residence, unless the second home was exclusively for personal use. A portion of that second Urban Reform Law stated that those who emigrated would have their property and assets confiscated.¹ The government soon began authorizing poor people as well as high-ranking communists to move into houses that belonged to those who had fled. The vast majority of the Jewish community in Cuba made plans to leave the country. Their businesses had either already been confiscated or were likely to be taken in the near future, and they saw no future for themselves or their children. A minority were communists or, if not actually members of the Communist party, leftist sympathizers. Many of these individuals stayed in the country, and some became quite prominent in the government. Others stayed because they were poor, elderly, sick, caring for sick relatives, or felt that they had nowhere to go.

The Threat of Expropriation

Many of the Jewish communal leaders were fearful that the government would confiscate Jewish institutional buildings. At the time of the revolution, a number of congregations and other communal groups were completing building projects, and the concern was that the revolutionaries would try to expropriate these buildings for their own use. Complicating the situation was the fact that many of these leaders were in the process of emigrating. Despite their plans to leave the country, they wanted to insure that the institutions that they had worked so hard to build would not be suddenly lost due to an arbitrary bureaucratic decision. The communal leaders had to respond to this threat at the same time that they were trying to protect their own personal assets.

Marek Schindelman, who visited Cuba on behalf of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) reported that the situation was dire. "It is disastrous — the rich have left, some having foreseen the situation have sent part of their disposable funds out of the country, but these are few. Most of them have left real assets, houses, apartments — with all their furniture, objects of all

kinds, including art—businesses, cars, etc.”² Schindelman’s comments reflect the shock, sadness, and betrayal that so many middle-class Cubans felt. He reported that many businesses and other property had already been confiscated. “All of this either was 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 in that island. 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.”³

Religious activities continued amid the crisis. All five synagogues in Havana conducted weekly Sabbath services and most had *minyanim* (prayer quorums) during the weekdays as well, despite the dramatic drop in attendance. But many believed that government agents were watching to see if communal buildings could be confiscated. By July 1961, Marek Schindelman felt that the Jewish community was just barely holding on to the property rights to their major institutions. He was particularly worried about the Patronato, which was not only a synagogue but also a community center. The government was confiscating schools and hospitals and reopening them as public institutions. They were also confiscating buildings no longer used by the original group for the original purpose.

In order to give the impression that the building was still needed, a small number of youngsters went to the Patronato to show “that some activity is done there.”⁴ Knowing that Cuban government agents would not see his report, Schindelman wrote honestly that the synagogue “is rarely used.” He predicted that “this building with all its installations will fall very soon like a ripe fruit in the hands of the Bulgarians.”⁵ He was being overly pessimistic. John Kirk, an expert on the history of religion in Cuba, wrote me (on 31 March 2004) that “no Catholic churches were expropriated, even though the Church as an institution was used and manipulated as a bulwark against the rapidly radicalizing process. [Consequently] I do not imagine that there was much danger of the synagogue being expropriated.”

Protecting the Patronato was of vital importance since it was the largest and most important Jewish institution in the entire country. The complex included a “Great Synagogue,” but it was much more than just a place to worship. Designed to replace the Centro Israelita, the Patronato was a community center that would be able to provide diverse programming for the entire Jewish community in Havana. At the beginning, the Great Synagogue had separate seating with a mechitza, a physical barrier between the men’s and women’s sections. In 1956, they took down the barrier but the separate seating remained.

The Situation Deteriorates

Despite the political developments that occurred in 1959 and 1960, there were still substantial numbers of Jews who remained in the country. One of the reasons was that they had become very attached to Cuba and were extremely reluctant to leave. Many had emigrated from the countries of their birth and had made the decision to adopt Cuba as their new home. Others had been born in Cuba and could not imagine living anywhere else. But there were economic reasons as well. Despite the fact that many Cuban Jews had become more affluent, the majority were still lower-middle-class storekeepers whose entire life savings were in the form of inventory. With the exception of those that owned rental properties, they had not been directly affected by the early revolutionary legislation. Although they saw the threat that was posed, they had little incentive to abandon their life's work and move penniless to the United States. Furthermore, they had very little hard cash with which to finance such an escape. But the redistribution of wealth promoted by the government's early measures stimulated retail purchases, and many of these small stores were able to significantly increase sales and reduce the existing stock. This in turn enabled these families to pay for their emigration and even buy dollars to take with them to the United States.⁶ But by the time some of them tried to do this, greater restrictions were in place, and some found their dollars confiscated and in some cases their immigration blocked entirely.

Already during the course of 1959, it had become increasingly clear that Castro's economic policies would ruin the middle class; yet very few Jews emigrated right away. The revolutionary government had expropriated large tracts of land in the context of the Agrarian Reform Law of 1959. But after that initial decree, there was no further nationalization or expropriation until over a year later, in June 1960. This in large part explains why so many Cuban Jews remained in the country during this time. While most were nervous about what direction the revolution might take, there did not seem to be any immediate economic threat that would justify the sudden liquidation or abandonment of their assets. They were, nevertheless, very worried.

Their fears began to be realized when the government took steps to fundamentally alter the economic structure of the country. An agrarian reform law was passed which limited private land ownership. This was intended to correct the situation where 8 percent of landowners owned 70 percent of the land. The government also confiscated foreign-owned industries. American concerns had owned 165 major companies and many smaller ones, including 90 percent of all public services and 40 percent of the sugar industry. Everything from farms to oil refineries and communication systems were nationalized and seized. Castro's government was determined to redistribute the wealth in the country. The result was that the peasant and working classes reaped an immediate

windfall. A low-income housing program was created and free healthcare and education were instituted for all Cubans. Racial discrimination was outlawed and when middle- and upper-class people started emigrating, their homes and other property were confiscated and given to those who had the greatest need (or the best connections).

Just as these radical policies helped the poor, they threatened the middle and upper classes. Businessmen lived in fear that the revolutionaries would come to their offices and demand the keys. Nationalizations technically provided compensation, but this compensation was worth very little. People faced the loss of their entire income and could become unemployed overnight. Those with money began to consider fleeing. Government policy worked against the interest of the middle class. On 24 April 1959, journalist R. Hart Phillips reported in the *New York Times* that “the present middle-class finds itself seriously hurt by drastic reductions, reductions of land values and forced sales of vacant lots in towns.” In the Jewish community, those with substantial assets left the country. Moses Baldas, who became the leader of the Jewish community after the revolution, told a visiting American leftist in 1973 that “it was the wealthy who left here. Yes that is the truth: that the rich left and the poor stayed. And of the poor-poor, one can say that all of them stayed.”⁷ Many people with modest amounts of savings had invested in property, “in the Spanish tradition,” and now found themselves penniless. Nothing, they told Phillips, would convince them that this was not due to communist influences.⁸

When businesses were nationalized in the summer and fall of 1960, many middle-class people who had waited with concern now began to leave the country. Most were white, urban, business people and professionals, including doctors, dentists, lawyers, engineers, teachers, and technicians of all types. Bernardo Benes was one such man. When Bernardo was six, his father, Boris, bought the Perro undershirt factory in Havana, which thrived. Boris was suspicious of Castro and the revolution, but his three children were initially enthusiastic. They believed the revolution would bring social and economic justice to the Cuban people while not infringing on the rights of the Cuban middle class. They later realized that they were wrong.

During the holiday weekend of 10 October 1960, Benes saw that the end was coming. Benes and his wife, his sister Ana and her husband Dr. David Anders, and some other friends traveled by train to Santiago de Cuba for a short vacation at the Versailles hotel. While they were there they ran into Raúl Castro, who had played soccer with Bernardo at the University of Havana for four years. Raúl was with his wife Vilma Espín. The group of friends stood around the swimming pool chatting for a long time. Raul Mausovicus, Benes’s closest friend, told jokes and everyone laughed. Eventually the conversation turned to politics and Bernardo told Raúl that it seemed that living conditions had become harder for most Cubans and that there were *alzados*, counter-

revolutionary guerrillas, fighting against the government in the Escambray Mountains. Raúl Castro told Benes, “Don’t worry, Bernardo, we will. . . .” Suddenly, he squeezed his right fist in an angry gesture. Benes sensed something very sinister in Raul’s response. As soon as they left the pool area, Benes told his wife that they should return to Havana immediately because the situation in the country was about to take a dramatic turn for the worse. His wife Ricky did not share his concern, telling him that he was unnecessarily worried.⁹

But as they returned to Havana, a series of decrees were issued that reinforced Bernardo’s concern. On 14 October, a decree was issued confiscating all large factories in the country. On 15 October, a housing reform act made it impossible to own rental properties, thereby allowing the government to confiscate apartments owned by rich families that were used to generate additional income. On 16 October, death sentences by firing squad were announced for those who had fought against the revolution. The 14 October decree meant that Boris’ textile factories were immediately confiscated. This included his *Tejidos y Confecciones Perro*, *Textilera Tricana*, and Gold Seal Hosiery. Boris was not able to enter any of his plants even to remove his personal items from his own office.

Benes’ brother Jaime had been facing problems with the labor union at his industrial dyeing plant *Perrodora Colortex* and left Cuba that same month for the United States. The trade union leaders accused Benes of helping Jaime to leave. The state security police came to the Ministry of Finance on Cuba Street where Benes worked and interrogated him in his office on three consecutive mornings. Soon they started questioning him in his apartment in Miramar, where Benes lived in the same building as his parents. The family was confused by the apparent hostility. Boris felt that he had always treated his 500 employees fairly and had never had a labor strike nor even been served with a complaint or an injunction of any type. Nevertheless, government officials now acted as if he had terribly exploited the factory workers in his plants for many years. The family understood that now they would have to leave the country.

Benes had a problem because he worked for the revolutionary government. The new regulations required government employees to file a request for exit papers through their respective departments. But this would tip them off that he was planning to leave and they could not only refuse his request but fire and even imprison him. So he deliberately ignored that requirement and, after working all morning, left at lunch time for the airport. A friend who worked at the airport helped him slip on board a Pan Am flight to Miami on Friday November 11, 1960. “It was the saddest day of my life.”¹⁰ The next day his wife Ricky and baby son Joel flew out. Soon after, Bernardo’s parents followed.

Bernardo arrived in Miami with a \$210 check sewn into his suit shoulder. He had no luggage, and no other assets. But his uncle introduced Benes to Jack Gordon, the president of the Washington Federal Savings and Loan Associa-

tion, and Gordon hired him for a salary of \$65 a week. The bank was connected with many of the important establishment figures in Miami, including U.S. Representative Claude Pepper. Benes soon became involved in dozens of civic causes and made many friends through out the region. He became one of the most prominent Cuban exiles in South Florida, and a leader of the local Democratic Party.

By the end of 1960, many Jews had despaired and were planning to emigrate. Nevertheless, others remained hopeful that the revolution would moderate its course or that the United States would forcibly overthrow the Castro government. On the contrary, the failed “Bay of Pigs” invasion in 1961 and the peaceful resolution of the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 put an end to these hopes. Almost no one now believed that Castro would soon fall from power. Those Cuban Jews who had waited in the country hoping that Castro would soon fall now made plans to emigrate.

Resettlement Possibilities

It became clear that there were substantial numbers of Jews among the Cubans fleeing the country. The U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW), led by Secretary Abraham Ribicoff — 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, along with other refugee agencies, HIAS could help provide assistance to the large number of Cubans streaming into the country. At the beginning of the exodus, many Cubans fled by small boats, either directly to the United States or to islands in the Caribbean. So HIAS set up a network of offices in the Caribbean as well to help the Jewish communities of Curaçao, Jamaica, Mexico, and Venezuela deal with the influx. James Rice, executive director of HIAS from 1956–1966, recalled that Castro was puzzled as to why the Jews were leaving. He even 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.¹¹

There were a substantial number of Jewish couples that could not leave the country because they were not eligible for a visa waiver. In particular, this group included a large number of elderly Turkish Jewish couples. The United States had instituted an immigration program to help Cubans escaping from communism. Such political refugees could enter the United States with a visa waiver, but in order to be eligible they had to have been born in Cuba. This requirement was meant to ensure that economic refugees from elsewhere could not simply claim to be Cuban. But since it was understood that not all Cubans had been born in the country, you could be eligible if your children were born in Cuba. Robert M. Levine mistakenly writes in his book *Tropical Diaspora* that

these Turkish Jews could not immigrate to the United States because they did not have any children. The real problem was that they couldn't meet any of the criteria for a visa waiver.

There were other countries considered possible destinations for the Jewish refugees. Some of these countries had already been receiving large numbers on inquiries. Canadian embassy officials told Samuel Lewin of the Canadian Jewish Congress (CJC) that from January through May 1961, the Canadian embassy had received about 1,500 applications for tourist visas. They had rejected them all since they did not believe that any of the Cubans were bona fide tourists but rather thought that they planned to come to Canada to wait for their American visas. Tourist visa requests were somewhat unusual since Cubans could visit Canada without one, but a Canadian visa was required in order to obtain a Cuban exit permit.¹² This was what made the Canadian officials suspicious.

Lewin asked some of the Jews he met in Havana how they would feel about immigrating to Canada. "Invariably, the reaction was very enthusiastic. I was told that should it become known that there are possibilities of immigrating to Canada, many would want to go."¹³ Yet Lewin felt that it would be hard to promote immigration to Canada because Cubans had no difficulty entering the United States, "but it is worthwhile trying." He suggested that the CJC ask for fifty immigration permits and offer the necessary guarantees to the Canadian government. If the request was granted, the CJC would have to send a representative to Havana "to work on the selection." Depending on how the first group of Cuban Jewish immigrants did, the CJC could then consider sponsoring additional groups.

Mass Emigration Begins

Between the beginning of the revolution on 1 January 1959 and President John F. Kennedy's announcement on 22 October 1962 that the Soviet Union was building nuclear missile bases in Cuba, 248,070 Cubans immigrated to the United States. Many affluent Cubans had business interests in Miami and simply moved their headquarters to the United States, at least on a temporary basis. But for middle-class Cubans, the decision to leave their country was terribly traumatic. They would have to resign from their jobs and leave behind most of their possessions. They would need to find new positions without the appropriate language skills and without the connections that they had built over many years in their native country. Physicians and other professionals would need licenses to practice in the United States, and this recertification process could be extremely difficult. Small businessmen would have to start from scratch. But many middle-class Cubans felt that these sacrifices were worth it. As the situation continued to deteriorate, most felt that they had no choice.

From late 1960 to late 1962, middle-class Cubans were lining up to leave the country. Members of the Jewish community would plan their flight and wait for all of the papers to come through. They would say their goodbyes, knowing that they were likely to meet most of their friends in Miami within a short amount of time. Isaac Rouso told me that “there were three groups in the [Sephardic] congregation at that point. One group had already received their visas to go to the United States. A second group was in the midst of the process of applying for their visas. And the third group was now beginning to apply for visas.” This was heartbreaking for many because they had created a warm and successful community in what was certainly “a tropical diaspora.”

Salomon Garazi was one of the many children of Sephardic immigrants who had made good in Cuba. His father had moved to Cuba from Aleppo, Syria, in about 1910 and his mother emigrated from Turkey about ten years later. His father began working as a peddler in the Cienfuegos area and then eventually moved to Havana. “He moved because he was looking for a bride.” His father indeed married and established a business on Muralla and Aguacate streets. Garazi became an accountant and went into business with his father-in-law, Moisés Egozi. They decided to open a shoe store because “most of the shoe stores in the country were owned by Spaniards or Jews.” Their business thrived and the family became very affluent. Then, in August 1960, the revolutionaries paid a visit to their store. “We had one of the largest shoe stores in Cuba; they came in, told us to give them the key to the place and not come back till they told us to. They searched our homes, they confiscated our bank accounts. That’s when we decided to move to Miami.”¹⁴ When Garazi arrived in Florida in September, he started selling flip-flops door-to-door at the hotels on Miami Beach.

By Rosh Hashanah—which in 1960 fell on 22 September—as many as 3,000 Jews had already emigrated, and Jewish communal institutions felt their loss. The United Hebrew Congregation, which was predominantly American, had lost the vast majority of its members. The other synagogues had also lost substantial numbers of congregants. Jewish schools likewise saw their enrollments drop. For example, the Centro Israelita enrolled 340 students in 1960–61, down from 470 students the previous year. Communal organizations that provided services for the Jews of Havana began to shut down. The *Havaner Leben* (*Vida Habanera*) weekly newspaper ceased publication on 31 December 1960, after twenty-seven years of operation. Even its very last edition has many advertisements, but these had been ordered earlier and by the time the bills were sent, the companies had already been nationalized. Editors Sender M. Kaplan and Abraham J. Dubelman both immigrated to Miami shortly thereafter. Most Cuban Jews planned to move to South Florida or the New York/New Jersey area, but there were some who were hoping to make *Aliyah*.

The HIAS Registration Process in Havana

The Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) provided vital assistance to many of those hoping to emigrate. HIAS paid the transportation costs to the United States or Jamaica for those who had no relatives in the United States. This was crucial since this charge had to be paid for by a money order issued in the United States, something few of the immigrants could afford. In addition, they processed waiver claims for those who qualified. Maurice Hallivis, a leader of the Sephardic community in Havana, volunteered to represent HIAS. Hallivis helped to provide documentation for those needing assistance and arranged for Jamaican visas and payment waivers. He also helped contact airlines and helped with other technical details of the emigration process. In June 1961, Samuel Lewin of the Canadian Jewish Congress (CJC) in Montreal visited Havana. Lewin wrote to Moses A. Leavitt, executive vice-president of the JDC, that he was “immensely impressed with the devotion and self-denial” of Hallivis.¹⁵ But Lewin was worried that the entire process might break down. Although Hallivis had a prosperous business, lived in a three-story house, and owned two cars, his three children were already living outside of the country. “He expects his business to be nationalized very soon and decided to leave right away.”¹⁶ Lewin argues that it is important “to make immediate arrangements for the continuation of the HIAS work lest everything would have to be stopped and every contact discontinued.”¹⁷

Lewin considered a number of possibilities. Assigning a resident professional community worker from outside of Cuba was not feasible. “It would be risky not only for the worker who out of necessity would attract the attention of the police but also for the community.”¹⁸ Rather, Lewin and Hallivis looked for a local contact that would be willing to “disregard the risk involved.” They interviewed numerous people who were either unwilling or unable to fulfill the role. Finally, on the day of Lewin’s departure, they chose Theresa Perchuk. Perchuk remained in the country to help her husband and oversee the business of her brother-in-law who had already left the country. Emanuel Goldberg volunteered to work with the British Consul and the airlines.

Every evening beginning at 6:00 p.m., Hallivis, Regina Alzaze, and her twenty-four-year-old son, Salinas, registered people in the Shevet Achim synagogue, which Lewin refers to as a “club.” They asked participants to fill out a registration form, but no mention was made that they were planning to emigrate. This was deliberate; if the wrong people had heard, the prospective emigrants could have lost their jobs and even been imprisoned. Hallivis and Alzaze also collected passports from those who had them and took them to the British Consulate. HIAS guaranteed the \$200 deposit required, and the British Consulate issued visas. This proved to be problematic because the British consul insisted that applicants prove that they had transportation arranged

before a visa could be issued, since they did not want to have a backlog of unused visas. But transportation was impossible to arrange since all flights out of Cuba were booked through the end of 1961. Hallivis and Lewin met for two hours with the British consul who was “very sympathetic” but would only promise that “in exceptional cases on special recommendation of the HIAS representative he will issue a visa without transportation proof.”¹⁹ Lewin was apparently satisfied to some degree since airline tickets were available on the black market, and “some may be able to arrange transportation on their own.”²⁰

Many of the Cuban Jews were desperate to fly to Jamaica where they could acquire visas to the United States. The only airline operating between Havana and Kingston was KLM, which offered three flights per week. Hallivis and Lewin met with a Mr. Findley, a Cuban who was working as the manager of KLM in the country. Findley had apparently been detained in the “post invasion period” (after the Bay of Pigs) but had subsequently been released. They asked Findley to make room on each KLM flight for at least five or ten HIAS cases, but Findley responded that this was impossible. They then requested that Findley “indicate in general terms to the British consul that HIAS cases are considered for space” and “to mark their tickets accordingly.”²¹ This would provide the recipients with a document that might make it possible for the British consul to issue them a visa. Findley agreed to do this but warned them that this would only be a short-term solution, because KLM was about to close its office in Havana. All KLM tickets would then be sold through the thirty-seven travel agencies in the city.

Because of the “practical impossibility to obtain space” on regular flights to Jamaica and Miami, Lewin considered the possibility of chartering a special plane to take HIAS cases to Jamaica. Lewin discussed this possibility with both KLM and Delta, which had a flight from Havana to Montego Bay once a week. “The airlines maintain that they have no equipment and are obviously not interested.”²² Much of the problem was that although tickets have to be purchased with money orders drawn on U.S. banks, the airlines receive their payment in Cuban currency at the official exchange rate of one peso for one dollar. At the time, the unofficial exchange rate was seven pesos for one dollar. Lewin suggested that the HIAS representatives in New York could “explore the possibility further with the BOA (British Overseas Airways) or another company.”²³

James P. Rice, the executive director of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS), was involved in the logistics of trying to arrange for the flights. Unfortunately, Rice reported that “we are running into a streak of bad luck.”²⁴ He flew to Jamaica, where he received notification that the first chartered flight could leave on 10 July 1961, if funds could be arranged quickly. “We took immediate action but, unfortunately, the formalities couldn’t be cleared in time.”²⁵ The flight was postponed until 14 July, but BOAC (British Overseas Airways Corporation) had a maintenance strike at their London headquarters,

which affected their Britannia and DC7 airplanes. As a result, the 14 July flight had to be postponed as well.

Eventually, the flights were arranged. In the middle of the night, the Cuban Jews boarded chartered DC3s at the Havana International Airport. Norma Henriques was a high school student who helped her father Sammy host the refugees. "I was among those who met the planes in Kingston and chauffeured the Cubans to waiting homes. I had a small car, an Anglia, but we packed it tight like in one of those circus clown cars. Once I packed in 12 Cubans."²⁶ Sammy owned the Ford franchise in Jamaica and was one of the principal organizers of the airlift along with Rabbi Henry Silverman, Donald Sampson, Granville DeLeon, and HIAS representatives Jaime Reisman and Estella Bitter. Norma remembers that "some nights, there were three flights. If it were real late, Daddy had me bring them to the house. I remember one night, Mommy had gone to bed and when she woke up the following morning, there were 21 people sleeping in the living room." It's not clear exactly how many emigrated from Cuba via Jamaica. Jamaican Jewish historian Ed Kritzler writes that although local Jewish sources put the number at around 600, he found the names of only 96 Cuban Jews who arrived in the United States via Jamaica.

Norma recalls that the refugees arrived with very little. "The Cubans left without anyone knowing. Many left behind parents or a wife or husband. Jewelry and other valuables were taken from them at the airport in Havana, and they had to buy their way out. Some came with only the shirt on their back, and, come to think of it, one fellow had no shirt on his back. His name was José. One lady cut open the hem of her dress and she had two U.S. dollars. I mean, that was a million dollars to that woman, you know. Another woman had her wedding band sewn in the hem of her dress. They were so thankful that more than a few, when they landed, lay down and kissed the tarmac."

Jewish Pedro Pan Children

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. On 9 January 1961, the U.S. Department of State vested Father Bryan O. Walsh with the authority to grant a visa waiver to any child aged six to sixteen entering the country under the guardianship of the Catholic Diocese of Miami.²⁷ Reporter Gene Miller later dubbed the program Operation Pedro Pan, and the name stuck.²⁸ 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 made with Protestant and Jewish agencies.²⁹ In fact, there were two separate opera-

tions. One was Operation Pedro Pan, which was a semiclandestine program to help children leave Cuba for the United States.³⁰ 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 was involved in the Cuban Children's Program, assisting 117 children whose parents were not with them. This was a very small percentage of the children. In contrast, the Catholic Welfare Bureau assisted 7,041 such children.

Despite the small numbers, Operation Pedro Pan had a tremendous impact on the Jewish children who were involved. Marcos Kerbel, the former president of Miami's Cuban Hebrew Congregation, was one of the children who was able to get an exit visa through the HIAS offices. Kerbel's family had a clothing store in Guanabacoa, which they had developed into a thriving business over a thirty-year period. They were understandably reluctant to emigrate and leave behind all they had worked for. They did not think that the revolution would last, assuming like many others that the United States would invade Cuba and overthrow Castro. But as the situation continued to deteriorate, they decided to send their fourteen-year-old son Marcos to the United States, just in case.

Kerbel and his friends used to meet on Sundays at the Patronato at what they called the Bar Mitzvah Club. "In the summer of 1960, things began to get a little bit tight in Cuba, and some of my friends started leaving." There was concern that the *patria potestad* laws would be enforced and minors would become wards of the state. Many feared that the government would regard itself as the true guardian of the children, and the parents would lose all control over their own families. There was also a sense of urgency because many believed that the government would stop the flow of emigration completely. It was expected that anyone between the ages of fourteen and twenty-seven wouldn't be able to leave Cuba, even if they were willing to first serve a limited period in the military. So it was an urgent matter to get children out of the country, because they might not ever be able to leave if they waited.

Kerbel noticed that his parents had become very concerned. "The government wanted the kids, right after the last 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."³¹ The fear that their daughters would become pregnant was a very real one. The revolutionary practice of sending Cuban youngsters into the cane fields or the mountains had a dramatic social impact. The strict middle- and upper-class norms of sexual behavior were abandoned. The JDC's Marek Schindelman explained that "parents fear for their daughters." The literacy

campaign encouraged girls thirteen years of age and older to enlist. Schindelman commented that “they are being sent to the interior of Cuba to teach the farmers to read and to write and it is easy to imagine the rest.”

Social taboos were ignored, Schindelman explained, and the parents would be left with the task of dealing with the consequences. He added that the revolutionaries were bringing many girls from the interior to Havana. “They use a uniform which consists of a kind of pink pajamas and they are used for frivolity of the militia of all types and to produce future soldiers for the country.” Schindelman reported that “the motto is that it is not necessary to get married to have children, and that the children do not have to be baptized, for the procedure is only a lucrative activity for the priests and nuns who are almost totally considered as anti-revolutionaries.”³² But it wasn’t only the Catholic clergy who were concerned. Jewish parents were horrified at the thought of their teenage daughters being impregnated by revolutionary militiamen. But Schindelman’s comment that the revolutionaries did not think it was necessary to get married in order to have children was inaccurate. In truth, the revolutionary government had organized a campaign to legalize common-law marriage in the early months of the revolution, and Schindelman may have confused this policy change with an active government encouragement for having children out of wedlock.

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, Miguel Brazlovsky, who helped HIAS in Havana until he emigrated. Kerbel told me that, “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.”³³

Albert Barouh met Marcos at the arrivals terminal at Miami International Airport. Barouh was a Cuban Jew who had left on 30 May 1960, and a week later had gotten a job working at the International Airport Hotel. When he would finish his shift at 5:00, he volunteered to meet Cubans coming off the planes in the evening. “Many of them were baffled when they came here. They had left their homes and their businesses and their friends, and they were just in shock.”³⁴ His job as a volunteer was to greet them, answer any questions they might have, and give them a ticket to another part of the country. “Every morning, upon arrival at the office, I had already on my desk a passenger list of

the flights from Cuba and Jamaica for that day. I would highlight the names of the Jewish passengers and proceed to meet them at the airport. I had a big tag with HIAS written on it so that I could be identified.”³⁵ HIAS followed American government policy to spread the Cubans throughout the country rather than allow them to congregate in South Florida. “Many people would come to plead with Pearl Tulin, the director of the Miami HIAS office. They begged her to let them stay in Miami. She told me that while she sympathized with them, there was nothing she could do.” If they stayed in Miami without permission, they would become ineligible for any of the government assistance programs.

Marcos was one of those who was to be sent away from Miami as soon as possible. He was transferred to a plane flying to Los Angeles the same day, 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, and 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 19 October 1962 on the next-to-the-last Pan Am flight before the Cuban Missile Crisis stopped all flights until 1965.

Albert still remembers the first child that he met, Elio Penso, the son of Harry and Susana Penso of Havana. “He appeared to be very traumatized by the new situation and always called to beg me to help him get a new home until his parents’ arrival. I am sure that the experience he suffered has made quite an impact on his life to this day.” He also remembers Marcos and Rafael Maya, “two scared children, one of them with a cast on his arm. I received them and they stayed temporarily at my home until they were relocated a few days later. They were not allowed to stay in Miami, in spite of the fact that one of them needed medical attention.” Soon Albert was offered a full-time job with HIAS. “I worked twice the hours that I did at the hotel, no overtime, but the moral reward — the feeling that I was able to help my own people — was beyond any compensation.”³⁶ He worked for HIAS greeting new arrivals at the Miami Airport between January 1961 and the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962, when all flights between Cuba and Miami were stopped. “I felt lucky that I was not one of these poor refugees — that I had had the premonition to leave everything and come to the United States earlier. But it was a wonderful job because I could feel that I was helping my *landesman* [fellow Jews].” The work was very satisfying. “I loved helping them, especially the children. I felt sorry for the children who had to come by themselves. It was heartbreaking to get the phone calls of their parents, pleading that I should take care of their children since they didn’t know when they would be able to join them. ‘My son is flying to Miami tomorrow alone. Please, please, please take good care of him.’ I used to get those sort of calls all the time. That was when my wife Susana and I decided to volunteer ourselves as a temporary foster home.” But children never stayed longer than four or five days at a time. That was the maximum that HIAS

would allow them to stay in Miami before they were shipped out to other cities. They were afraid that the children would become too comfortable and refuse to leave.

Many parents feared that they would be separated from their children for a lengthy period. This fear frequently became reality. The hope that they would be able to bring their children back to Cuba of course never materialized, and many were unable to leave the country for two or three years. Albert told me that “The reunion was always hard, the children being used to their new parents and the biological parents trying to regain the love of their children. Those were hard times.”

Making Aliyah

Jews around the world looked to Israel as their spiritual homeland and some Cuban Jews had moved to Israel in the late 1940s and 1950s. This was called “making aliyah,” which means going up or ascending. The state of Israel welcomed Jews from all over the world and took pride in its role as a refuge for Jews escaping persecution. The Cuba situation was slightly different since the Jews were not escaping persecution because of their Jewishness. But Israel was committed to absorbing Jewish immigrants from all over the world who, for whatever reason, left their native countries. The communist revolution in Cuba meant that the Cuban Jewish community was in need of assistance and the Israelis thus began negotiating with the Cuban government for the quick release of Cuban Jews.

The vast majority of the Cuban Jewish community supported Zionism and the state of Israel, but, like Jews in most other western countries, they preferred to give money rather than to immigrate to Israel themselves. Many felt secure knowing that there was a State of Israel that would take them in, should another Hitler come to power and threaten them, but most Cuban Jews leaving the country did not see Israel as their first-choice destination. Jonathan Prato, the Israeli Consul in Havana, told Samuel Lewin of the CJC that there was a “lack of interest in emigration to Israel.” Prato attributed this to the fact that “those who left or are about to leave would want to come back at the first opportunity, and they actually do not ‘immigrate’ but ‘transfer to a waiting station.’”³⁷ Most of the Cuban Jews who were leaving were hoping to return immediately after Castro’s fall—which they expected would be imminent. Lewin thought, “There is no doubt that people do not abandon so easily such wealth as many have accumulated in Cuba. Obviously they want to recover it and hope (possibly against hope) that the time will come soon when the situation will change and they will be able to come back.”³⁸

They also realized that if they needed to start over, it would be easier to set up new businesses in Miami rather than Tel Aviv. The country of Israel was

only about thirteen years old and had a generally low standard of living. There was a high risk of terrorism and a persistent possibility of war. Men under the age of fifty-five would have to serve four months reserve duty in the army and all high-school graduates—females as well as males—would be drafted for two to three years. This alone was enough to discourage many. There was, however, a small number of intensely idealistic Cuban Jews determined to move to Israel. There were others who were willing to go, either because they wanted to try it out or because they were so anxious to get out of Cuba that they wanted to go to the country that would take them most readily. Some were also attracted to Israel because they were allowed to bring their personal property with them, including furniture, other large possessions, and even valuables such as jewelry. If they went to the United States, they could only take three sets of clothes.³⁹ In 1961, an agreement was reached between Israel and Cuba that permitted Cuban Jews to go to Israel. The Cuban government gave preferential treatment to these immigrants. The government stamped their passports with the word “*repatriado*,” meaning that they were being repatriated to their home country. This was a more positive image than those who left for the United States, who were regarded as “*gusanos*,” worms. Some of the Cuban Jews who went directly to Israel were committed Zionists. Others felt that this was their only way of escaping the deteriorating situation. Eli J. Benarieh, then known as Elias Leon Bejar, was a teenager from Manzanillo, which had a Jewish community of thirty to forty Sephardic and about a half dozen Ashkenazi families. “I finished my second-to-last year of high school in May of 1959 and my brother graduated that same year. My mother and father started making preparations for my brother to go to university in Havana. Life went on as usual. There were rumblings but nothing that seemed too serious.”

Benarieh later found out that his uncle in Havana was in trouble. “Isaac Bejar, my mother’s brother, was an industrialist who had a large textile plant in Havana. It became clear by the end of 1959 that they were going to nationalize his factory and he worried that they would accuse him of irregularities.” Apparently, they were justifying their confiscations by making such accusations. “He didn’t want to wait for the government to come get him so he left for Florida with his wife Sara. Their children and my grandmother came later.” Benarieh wasn’t aware of any of this at the time. “It was my parents who knew about this, but my father was very ill. My parents had run a small clothing shop in Manzanillo and they either sold it or gave it away toward the end of 1960. At the beginning of 1961, we left Manzanillo for Havana. Other people were leaving the country, but because my father was in and out of the hospital, we were not even in a position to think about that.” Eli’s father passed away early in 1961, and once he died, his mother began to think about emigrating. “The only way to get out of the country legally at this time was to go with the *Shochnut* [the Jewish Agency]. So we signed up for that with the *Shaliach* [the

emissary] in Havana who was coordinating the *aliyah*. It took several months for all the paperwork to be finalized and then we left on one of the special flights in August 1961.”⁴⁰

The three Cubana planes flew from Havana with Cuban Jews immigrating to Israel. There was a rumor that Israeli diplomat Mordechai Arbell had made an agreement with Cuba to trade Cuban Jews for goats and eggs. Clara Cohen, the longtime third secretary in charge of consular relations at the Cuban Embassy in Tel Aviv, told me that “this is hogwash.” But goats were loaded onto the plane for the return flight to Havana. Fidel Castro had been very interested in promoting the development of Cuban dairy farming. He had tried a number of different approaches to increase the milk production of Cuban cows and had imported various types of cows for this purpose. He apparently tried the same thing with Israeli goats. “Castro knew that Israel had very good goats that gave a lot of milk—more than a cow—so he wanted the Cuban ambassador to Israel, Ricardo Subriana y Lobo, to get him some *cabras* (goats). But Israel only had a limited number of these goats and was only willing to sell eleven of them to Subriana. So he grabbed them.”

The Financial Consequences of Emigration

The revolution wreaked havoc on the finances of the Cuban Jewish community and the Cuban Jews as individuals. Formerly affluent families were left with little or nothing, and virtually everyone was in a panic. They feared they would lose everything they had worked so hard for over many years and that they might end up living in a communist society with no assets, no way to emigrate, and no hope for the future. This sense of despair was a marked contrast to the continuing euphoria felt by a large portion of the Cuban population. The Cuban lower class continued to overwhelmingly support the revolution and had already felt the tangible benefits of Castro’s economic policies.

The new circumstances had a negative impact on Jewish communal affairs. Ben G. Kayfetz, Director of Community Relations for the Canadian Jewish Congress (CJC), visited Havana in October 1962. He noted the termination of large-scale Jewish fundraising “because of currency regulations.”⁴¹ The revolutionary government had very strict rules concerning the possession and transfer of funds. Business assets were being seized and any attempt to subvert the nationalization of such property was a criminal offense. Likewise, any attempt to smuggle money or other valuables out of the country was a serious crime. Previously, the Cuban Jewish community raised generous sums of money for Histadrut (a large voluntary organization in Israel), Youth Aliyah, the Hebrew University, and, in particular, Keren Hayesod. But all charitable work had stopped. Already in 1961, Marek J. Schindelman explained that charitable donations had all but ceased. “Needless to say that everyone man-

ages the little they have left without daring to make donations to benefit institutions of a philanthropic nature. Since they [these institutions] do not belong to the state, they are considered antirevolutionary.”⁴² Contributing to an anti-revolutionary cause was certainly grounds for suspicion and could even result in being sent to prison.

All of the Jewish organizations in Cuba began to experience financial difficulties. There was such a shortage of money that a rumor 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 membership made them unnecessary. By February 1961, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) representative Boris Sapir reported that “these organizations are in a difficult situation and cannot continue their activities without assistance from the outside.”⁴³ The Patronato already showed a deficit of more than \$6,000 — about 10 percent of their operating expenses — in 1960. But their projected budget for 1961 anticipated a huge deficit — in excess of \$90,000. Sapir reported that about 60 percent of the Patronato’s membership had already left the country and the others were not able to support the institution. The leadership asked the JDC for a loan of \$90,989.29, which would include \$38,989.29 for the repayment of the most pressing debts. Otherwise, they feared that the now nationalized Cuban banks, which held the mortgages on the buildings, would foreclose and seize the property.

Other Jewish organizations in Havana also experienced budgetary shortfalls. Between 1 September and 31 December 1960, the income of The Albert Einstein School was \$16,388.45, resulting in a deficit of \$3,256.44 — about 16 percent. By September 1960, The Colegio Hebreo del Centro Israelita de Cuba was running a monthly deficit of \$1,742 — about 24 percent of their budget. Between September 1960 and 19 January 1961, the school lost 165 students. This meant a tuition loss of \$2,596 every month, thereby increasing the monthly deficit to \$4,338, or \$35,704, for the period January to August 1961. This was the situation, presuming that the situation stabilized. Sapir writes that this would be the actual shortfall, “provided that there will be no further changes in the enrollment and in the ability of the parents of the remaining pupils to meet their financial obligations to the school.”⁴⁴ This was unlikely to be the case.

Social service organizations likewise began running large deficits. The Asociación Femenina Hebrea de Cuba had 882 members in the immediate aftermath of the revolution. This decreased to 851 by October 1960, 719 in November, and only 545 in December. Their budget reflected this membership loss. In October, they had a surplus of \$1,047.18. In November, they still had a surplus of \$434.47. But in December, they had a loss of \$539.08. The Bikur Holim society, The Sociedad de Damas Hebreas “La Buena Voluntad,” and

The Protectora de los Tuberculosos y Enfermos Mentales all lost large numbers of members and began running deficits.

Trouble with the Authorities

As the situation deteriorated, even many of those who had planned to stay in the country now realized that emigration was the only option. Some had planned ahead and had smuggled money or valuables out of the country. Others had invested abroad, particularly in Florida real estate. But most had their assets tied up in Cuba. Leaving would mean abandoning everything that they had worked to build up during their entire lives. The hope was that they would be able to take some money with them, but this was against the law. Furthermore, their money was in Cuban pesos and these bills were worthless outside of the country. The revolutionary government was planning to issue new currency after which the old peso bills would be worthless inside Cuba as well. So there was a frantic rush to try to do something.

The best option was to exchange Cuban pesos for American dollars and then smuggle these dollars out of the country. But this was very risky. In November 1962, Ben G. Kayfetz reported that the illegal exchange of currency “is one of the most serious offenses, next to political crimes, and once you are caught, there seems to be no way out of it.” Kayfetz remarked that those accused were convicted on evidence that would not stand up in an “ordinary court.” Because of the “dreadful conditions of the jails, it’s one of those tragedies that they think about but about which nothing can be done.” It was even dangerous for anyone other than the wives or husbands of prisoners to visit them. “To visit is considered to place yourself under suspicion,” Kayfetz stated.⁴⁵

There were seventy-two Jews in prison for currency offenses. Ricky Benes’s parents were two of them. She and her husband Bernardo had left for Miami in November 1960, but her parents had stayed behind. Ricky heard nothing from her parents and sister for months. Bernardo found out that her parents had been caught and imprisoned, but did not tell his wife. Her father and mother had needed to convert pesos into dollars on the black market in order to have enough money to live off until they could emigrate. This was a common practice, but unfortunately, they were caught, convicted, and imprisoned. Her father served nine months in the La Cabana fortress prison in Havana, while her mother served six months in a primarily women’s prison in Guanajay. When she was released, other prisoners had had their houses confiscated by the government while they were in prison, but Ricky’s mother was able to return to her home. This was a stroke of luck not only because they had a place to live temporarily but also because they had hidden their passports in the

freezer. If the house had been confiscated and their passports lost, it would have been much more difficult to leave the country.⁴⁶

Nissim Cohen was in the tobacco business. He advanced money to the *guajiros* [country people] and they bought the seeds and fertilizer then sold him the tobacco once the crop was ready. But once Cohen realized the gravity of the situation, he distributed payments to all of the *guajiros* and made plans to flee the country. His wife looked at him in utter astonishment. "Aren't you at least going to collect what they owe you from last year?" He responded, "No. We're leaving the country as soon as we can."⁴⁷ One of his daughters, Lucia Poyastro, did stay behind. She spent the next several months trying various means of exchanging Cuban pesos for American dollars and then she arranged for the dollars to be smuggled out of the country inside dolls, cakes, and even a bag with a false bottom. She lived in Varadero, and the family knew everyone at the airport. So that's probably why they were never caught. Once she was stopped and made to switch a cake she was transporting for a fresh one, but she was able to outsmart them and put even more money in the substitute cake. Finally, Lucia fled the country as well. Right after she left, her maid called the *militianos* [militia men] and they took all of her fine lingerie onto the balcony of her apartment to show all the neighbors: "Look at how well the capitalists live!"

Kayfetz was asked in Toronto by a former Cuban resident whether it would be possible to ransom the Jews imprisoned for currency offenses and he discussed this possibility with Israeli consul Prato. Prato recommended against even trying because it would alert the government that there was a significant number of Jews in prison for these crimes and that it might encourage the authorities to make further arrests. So nothing was done on an organized basis for the Jews as a group. This was unfortunate because many of those arrested suffered greatly, including a large number of women. Kayfetz was terribly upset by their plight. "There are many cases of women of good families who now find themselves in prison quarters, under indescribable conditions. One of them is a daughter of the former *shochet* [ritual slaughterer]." Some are given a trial and receive formal sentences while "others just sit and never see the inside of a courtroom." The daughter of the former *shochet* was sentenced to six years. But others were being punished even more severely. Kayfetz was also informed that many people were being shot daily for political crimes in the Morro castle and in other fortresses.

Kayfetz wrote that "I haven't opened a conversation of more than a few words privately, either in a home or in the privacy of the synagogue office, when anyone I met told me quite openly about the terror of the regime, the ruination which has fallen upon the country as a whole and the brutal nature of the communist regime." Kayfetz writes that "I must admit that I came to Cuba

with some idea that perhaps Castro was a reformer bringing some benefit to the country but I left converted, a thorough ‘reactionary.’” Kayfetz found it “an eye opener” to see how the Cuban regime was of “a doctrinaire, dogmatic nature, totally made in Moscow.” He joked that they had discovered a “Cuban” philosopher named Carlos Marx whose slogans are on billboards everywhere. “It was like something out of 1984 with the full 100 percent brainwashing that exists in the totalitarian communist countries.” He found poverty and destitution. The freedom and prosperity promised by the new government was lost and forgotten.

Subsequent Events

Like other middle-class Cubans forced into exile by the socialist revolution, most Cuban Jews settled in South Florida or the New York/New Jersey area. Others dispersed throughout the country. Many initially hoped that Castro would soon fall from power and that they would be able to return, but over the years, they settled into their new lives and began to relinquish this dream. Those in Miami built two specifically Cuban congregations, one Ashkenazi and one Sephardic.

Many of those immigrants remember the early years as being a time of deprivation and difficulty. But gradually most succeeded in earning good livings, and many became affluent. While many — particularly those living in Miami — share the hard-line attitudes of many of their non-Jewish Cuban compatriots, increasing numbers are beginning to express more reasoned and politically moderate views on how the United States should deal with the Castro regime.

Meanwhile, the Cuban Jewish community is undergoing a renaissance, one of the by-products of the increasing alienation of the Cuban population from communism. The JDC has begun operating throughout the country and large numbers of American Jews — including some Cuban American Jews — have visited on “missions.” Synagogues are being renovated and Cuban American Jewish families living in South Florida provided half of the funding to renovate the sanctuary of the Patronato. Unfortunately, the rededication ceremony took place during the Elián González controversy and none of the donors felt that they could risk being photographed at the event. But some of them later visited and others have made plans to reestablish ties with the community that nourished them in their youth.

NOTES

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1. Louis A. Pérez Jr., *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 326.

2. Marek Schindelman to James P. Rice, July 1961, translated by Carmen Roman, American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee Archives, New York City (hereafter cited as JDC Archives), JDC Collection 55/67, file 137.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

6. Anonymous reader's report, *Cuban Studies*, December 2003.

7. Donna Katzin, "The Jews of Cuba," *The Nation*, 25 May 1974, 659.

8. R. Hart Phillips, *New York Times*, 24 April 1959.

9. Robert Levine, *Secret Missions to Cuba* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 34–35.

10. Jacob Bernstein, "Twice Exiled," *Miami New Times*, 11 November 1998. Cited from <http://www.miaminewtimes.com/issues/1998-11-12/feature2.html/1/index.html>.

11. James Rice, "A Retrospective View: 1960s Cuba Exodus Brought Jews to U.S.," *The Intermountain Jewish News*, 30 May 1980, 23.

12. Letter from Samuel Lewin to Moses A. Leavitt, 13 June 1961, JDC Archives, JDC Collection 55/67, file 137.

13. Ibid.

14. Interview with Salomon Garazi, Miami, May 2003.

15. Letter from Samuel Lewin to Moses A. Leavitt, 13 June 1961, JDC Archives, JDC Collection 55/67, file 137.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid.

23. Ibid.

24. James P. Rice to Moses A. Leavitt, 14 July 1961, JDC Archives, JDC Collection 55/67, file 137.

25. Ibid.

26. Ed Kritzler, "The Untold Story of the Cuban Jamaican Airlift," unpublished manuscript; correspondence with Ainsley Henriques, 9 May 2003.

27. Joan Didion, *Miami* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 122.

28. *The Miami Herald*, 9 March 1962.

29. Bryan O. Walsh, "Cuban Refugee Children," *Journal of Inter-American Studies and World Affairs* (July–October 1971): 391.

30. This operation is a classic example of an historic event understood in diametrically opposing ways by different parties, depending upon their personal perspective. 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: Routledge, 1999). In contrast, two Cuban writers have recently published a book that portrays the operation as part of a "psychological war" being fought against Cuba by the United States. See Ramón Torreira Crespo and José Buajásán Marrawi, *Operación Peter Pan: Un caso de guerra psicológica contra Cuba* (Havana: Editora Política, 2000). Note that Conde's book

uses the name “Pedro Pan” to signify that the airlift was done to save Cubans while Crespo and Marrawi use the name “Peter Pan” to indicate that, in their view, this was an American government operation against the Cuban people.

31. Author’s interview with Marcos Kerbel, Miami, July 2000.
32. Marek Schindelman to James P. Rice, July 1961, translated by Carmen Roman, JDC Archives, JDC Collection 55/67, file 137.
33. Author’s interview with Marcos Kerbel: Miami, July 2000.
34. Interview with Albert Barouh, Miami, 8 November 2003.
35. Correspondence from Albert Barouh, 7 November 2003.
36. Ibid.
37. Letter from Samuel Lewin to Moses A. Leavitt, 13 June 1961, JDC Archives, JDC Collection 55/67, file 137.
38. Ibid.
39. Margalit Bejarano, correspondence with the author, 31 March 2004.
40. Interview with Eli J. Benarieh, San Diego, March 2003.
41. Ben G. Kayfetz, report to the United HIAS services on visit to Havana on 19–26 October 1962, written on 16 November 1962, JDC Archives, JDC Collection 55/67, file 137, p. 9.
42. Marek Schindelman to James P. Rice, July 1961, translated by Carmen Roman, JDC Archives, JDC Collection 55/67, file 137.
43. Boris Sapir to Moses A. Leavitt, memorandum 816, 1 February 1961, JDC Archives, JDC Collection 55/67, file 137.
44. Ibid.
45. JDC Archives, JDC Collection 55/67, file 137, p. 9.
46. Robert M. Levine, *Secret Missions*, 60.
47. Interview with Albert Barouh, Miami, 8 November 2003.