

Cuban Jewish Community in South Florida

NO DEMOGRAPHIC study had ever been made of the Jews in Cuba. Estimates of their number before 1960 ranged from a low of 11,000 to a high of 16,000. Appraisals of the size of the two principal communities, Ashkenazi and Sephardi, and their respective percentages of the total population, differed widely. Those of the smaller group, the Sephardi, varied between ten per cent and one-third of the total. Jacob Schatzky in *Yiddische Yischuvim en Latin Amerika* (Buenos Aires, 1952, p. 185), put the number of Ashkenazim at 5,300 and Sephardim at 2,700 in 1925, and the total at 12,000 in 1951.

According to well informed sources, the Jewish population, both citizens and permanent residents, in Cuba before Castro was some 14,500. Of this number, 10,000 were Ashkenazim and 3,500 Sephardim. There was a third group of approximately 1,000 consisting of English-speaking Jews and many unaffiliated. The latter included descendants of Jews living in Cuba before the Spanish-American War in 1898 and who, though not converted to another faith, had little identification with their own. It also included the intermarried who did not adopt the faith of the non-Jewish spouses. Some of these unaffiliated secretly contributed to local Jewish and Israeli philanthropies.

Except for the small Jewish communities in the provinces of Camaguey and Oriente with a total membership of about 1,200, and a few other small settlements, most Jews lived in Santa Suarez, Habana Vieja, or Miramar, three districts of the capital. Miramar, the newer residential area of Havana, attracted the more affluent.

Jewish Settlement in Cuba

Jews have lived in Cuba ever since it was settled by Spain about 1502. Despite the edicts of their Catholic majesties, Ferdinand and Isabella, and their successors that no Jews, Moors, or other heretics, or their fourth-generation descendants, could reside in any part of the Spanish empire in the new world, the Jews were there.

The early Jewish inhabitants were known as Marranos. Their number increased rapidly, and, as the Bishop of Cuba wrote to Spain in 1508, practically every ship docking at Havana was filled with Hebrews and New Christians, as Jews recently converted to Christianity were called.

Inquisition proceedings against the Marranos in Cuba began as early as

1520. In the 17th century large-scale persecutions against the secret Jews were instituted. Among the arrested were some of the wealthiest and most influential people in the country: Antonio Méndez, Luis Rodríguez, Blas Pinto, Luis Gomez Barreto, Manuel Alvarez Prieto. Trials continued almost up to the abolition of the Spanish Inquisition in 1834. Two wealthy merchants, Antonio Santaella and Juan Rodríguez Mexia, were tried in 1783.

Many of the Jews who settled in Cuba during the colonial period, particularly in 1580–1640, were Portuguese or their descendants. In the 17th and 18th centuries Portuguese and Jewish were synonyms in the New World. Twenty-three Jews, who fled Brazil in 1654 when it was retaken from Holland by Portugal, stopped at Cuba en route to New Amsterdam in the Colonies, and established contacts with the Cuban Marranos. Among others, the secret Jews of Cuba arranged for trade between the Thirteen Colonies and the Jews of Jamaica, Barbados, and other Caribbean islands, enabling the Colonies to sell goods as well as to buy military and civilian supplies.

The new Spanish Constitution of 1869 removed all restrictions on the settlement of Jews in Latin America. One writer, in 1898, stated that there were over 500 Spanish Jews engaged in commerce in Cuba at that time and earlier, and that five or six Jewish families were among the wealthiest on the island. Jews were also among the founders of the commercial cane sugar fields and the first sugar refineries. Several important families such as Brandon, Marchena, Machado, and Dovalle had come from Panama, Curacao, and Surinam. The famous Cuban actress and poetess, Dolores de Dios Porta, who died in Paris in 1869, was an observant Jewess.

Many American Jews joined Cubans in their fight for independence as early as 1892 and in their revolution of 1895. Among them were August Bondi, Louis Schlesinger, General Roloff formerly known as Akiba Roland, Captain Kaminsky and Horacio Rubens. Joseph Steinberg, a captain in the army of liberation, and his brothers Max and Edward were personal friends of Cuba's Apostol, José Martí.

The first Jewish cemetery in Cuba was established by the United States Army for the American Jewish soldiers who died during the Spanish American War in 1898, following demands by American Jewish organizations for separate interment according to Jewish law. The cemetery was sold in 1906 to the United Hebrew Congregation, the first official Cuban Jewish body created primarily by American Jews. Most members of the congregation, later named Temple Beth Israel, were Americans who fought in Cuba or who came from Key West and other parts of Southern Florida immediately after the end of the war.

Many Sephardi Jews were established in Cuba in 1908; they began to come in 1902. Among them were Young Turks who had participated in the earlier abortive revolt against the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire. Others came from Mexico, North Africa and other areas of the Mediterranean. The Sephardim spoke Spanish and were of swarthy complexion, which made them indistinguishable from the great majority of Cubans. This was an

important reason for the almost total absence of overt antisemitism in Cuba. There were other factors militating against antisemitism: the Cuban non-Jew was the most extrovert of all Latin Americans and had less guile; the fight for independence was too recent to be forgotten, and many Cubans remembered the part some Jews played in it; Catholicism in Cuba was female-oriented and little affected the life of Cubans outside the Church; the Cubans had not forgotten that they too had been a persecuted people. The Sephardim, then, integrated into their new milieu with little difficulty.

In 1914 the American Jews and the Sephardim, who until then had been together for religious purposes, parted ways; the latter established Congregation Shevet Achim. The parting was due partly to the differences in ethnic and social background. The American Jews maintained a higher standard of living, moved in upper Cuban social and economic circles, and were accepted in the most exclusive clubs. By contrast, the Sephardim were small merchants, artisans, and peddlers, who did not speak English. However, many American Jews were made honorary members of Shevet Achim in recognition of their assistance to the Sephardi community. Later the Ashkenazi Jews, too, expressed appreciation to the American Jews for assisting East European Jews.

Two significant events occurred before the large immigration of Ashkenazim. One was the activity of David Blis, who used the newspaper *El Día* to agitate for Cuban endorsement of the Balfour Declaration. Blis, a Jew, came from Mexico, and quickly established himself in Cuba as an active Zionist. The other was the first display of Jews as an ethnic-religious group in Cuba, when a contingent marched as Jews in the Havana parade on November 11, 1918, celebrating the armistice.

Ashkenazim began to come to Cuba in 1920. They were considered German nationals. Their first shops, whether dry cleaning, grocery, textile, or general merchandise, bore names such as Bazaar Aleman, Berlin, or Hamburg. Shortly after becoming established, they ceased attending the Sephardi Shevet Achim and built their own synagogue. Since this split, both groups maintained their own complex of institutions. There was little socializing between them, except at large social functions and in the B'nai B'rith lodge. There were friendly relations as well as some intermarriage between individuals of both groups.

The friendlier relations between the Ashkenazi and Sephardi groups in the decade before the Castro revolution may be attributed to the coming of age of a generation of native-born Jews who attended the same parochial elementary schools and secular secondary schools. Spanish became the leading language and began to replace Yiddish and Ladino as the immigrant generation passed away.

The Cuban Ashkenazim have had a twenty-year history of internecine disputes. Personal rivalries and religious and ideological differences were insurmountable obstacles to communal unity. The Jewish Communists were the most intransigent on all issues; some of them remained in Cuba to the

present day. They and the Bundists were viciously anti-Zionist. The Communists even attempted to sabotage fund-raising campaigns for Israel. However, there was also feuding among the Zionists; Labor Zionists with General Zionists and Mizrahi.

One of the factors contributing to the failure to achieve unity in the Ashkenazi ranks was difference of origin. The earlier wave of immigrants came mainly from Russia and Poland. The immigrants of the 1930s and the post-World War II period came from Austria and Germany. The most notable exception to the divisiveness of Cuban Jews was evinced during the period of virulent antisemitism between 1938 and 1940, which coincided with the worst outrages against the Jews in the Third Reich.

Cuban antisemitism was fostered by the Nazis (Camisas Doradas), Falangists (Spanish merchants and a few clerics), and the Catholic-owned newspapers *Diario de la Marina*, *Alesta*, and *El Día*, apparently with funds provided by the German embassy in Havana. Responsibility for the tragic incident of the S.S. *St. Louis*, which sailed from Hamburg on May 13, 1939 with 1,000 Jewish refugees, has been laid at the door of some Spanish merchants in Havana who feared business competition from these unfortunates. The passengers were in possession of valid Cuban visas, which had been issued at the direction of Minister of Migration General Manuel Benítez, against a payment of \$300 to \$500 per visa by Cuban Jews wishing to save their brethren from Hitlerism. The Cuban merchants revealed the details of the transaction, and President Laredo Bru, for reasons best known to himself, voided the visas while the ship was on the high seas, and refused the ship permission to land in Havana. Appeals to the United States to use its good offices to bring about a reversal of this decision brought no action.

Adolfo Kates and his brother Gustave have been acknowledged as principally responsible for the Cuban government's reversal of the antisemitic trend. The former, now residing in Miami, was outstanding among Cubans of all faiths with respect to the number of decorations he received from Cuba, Spain, France, and Belgium for his civic, philanthropic and diplomatic works.

The number of Jews in the various professions were: 20 lawyers, of whom one was a judge; close to 50 doctors and dentists, and about 40 architects, engineers and accountants. There were over 300 Cuban Jews who were pursuing higher studies at universities in Cuba, the United States, and Europe.

The Cuban Jews left five communal structures in Havana, in addition to their cemeteries: The buildings of the Centro Hebreo Sefaradi de Cuba, a religious and communal center resulting from a merger of the Union Hebreo Sefaradi and Congregation Shevet Achim; the Jewish Community House, known as Patronato para la Comunidad, of the Ashkenazi; Congregation Adath Israel; the Zionist building on the Prado, and the Autonomous Jewish Circle School. The total cost of these buildings exceeded \$2 million.

Fidel Castro assumed power in January 1959, following an armed revolu-

tion against the Batista dictatorship. In the summer of 1960 the Jews began a great emigration from Cuba. They looked upon Castro's Communism as a danger to their way of life and to their property interest. It was the fear of expropriation, not antisemitism, that was the primary motive for their departure. Some also feared that Castro might stifle a Jewish way of life in order to achieve his communal society.

CUBAN JEWS IN SOUTH FLORIDA

South Florida includes the Greater Miami area, also known as Dade County; Hollywood, and Fort Lauderdale in Broward County; Key West and Tampa on the West Coast of Florida. It was not possible to ascertain the exact number of Cuban Jews now residing in this area. While the Cuban Jews have formed two indigenous organizations, not all Cuban Jews were members of them. Many chose to integrate into the American Jewish community. Among these were some Orthodox, many who had socialized with American Jews who permanently lived in Cuba, and former members of the Reform Temple Beth Israel in Havana.

A large number of Cuban Jews had friends and relatives in Florida and had invested money in the Miami area for many years before 1960. Some had spoken mainly English in their homes in Cuba. The statistics of the National Council of Jewish Women and United HIAS Service (p. 289), the two organizations that have participated in the Cuban refugee program since 1961, were not representative of the total number of Cuban Jews who migrated to the United States. Many had come earlier, and many came via Venezuela, Colombia, Spain, Israel, Puerto Rico, and other places, making definite identification difficult.

Areas of Settlement

The HIAS figure of Cuban Jews registered under the Cuban refugee program, was approximately 4,500. Another 2,500 Cubans probably came to Miami from other countries, and even from other cities in the United States. HIAS resettled over 3,000 from the Southern Florida area in almost 300 cities in thirty-one states, in Puerto Rico and Costa Rica. A partial breakdown of the HIAS resettlement in 1961-67 revealed the following:

Alabama	8	Louisiana	18	New York State ..	31
Colorado	39	Maryland	42	Ohio	87
Connecticut	58	Massachusetts	76	Pennsylvania	111
Costa Rica	2	Michigan	46	Puerto Rico	53
Delaware & District of Columbia ...	30	Minnesota	7	Rhode Island	39
Georgia	27	Mississippi	3	Tennessee	4
Illinois	111	Missouri	44	Texas	137
Indiana	10	New Jersey	128	Washington	3
Iowa	1	North Carolina ...	11	West Virginia	2
Los Angeles	176	New York City ...	1,680	Wisconsin	3

Since HIAS did not follow up on the activities of those it resettled, there was no assurance that many of the Cuban refugees did not return to South Florida once they accumulated enough money, or to join friends or relatives. This was particularly likely since, of all states, the climate of Florida most closely resembles that of Cuba.

Extensive investigation produced an estimate of about 3,500 Cuban Jews living in South Florida, many of them, if not most, in Miami Beach. Here they were to be found in the northern part (North Shore area running from 62nd Street to 95th Street) and in the South Beach area, below Lincoln Road.

For many years since World War II, Cubans of all faiths came to Miami Beach during the summer, when hotel and restaurant rates, as well as prices in general, were much lower than in the winter season. This was particularly so before 1959. Local residents of Miami Beach called the summers the "Cuban invasion." Cubans were familiar with the streets, shops, and general area of Miami Beach. This familiarity and the proximity to the ocean contributed to their choice of this city for settlement.

Composition of Community

Cuban Jews in the United States continued to maintain some of their former divisions. There were three distinct groups in South Florida: Sephardim, Ashkenazim, and the youth—under sixteen years of age—of both groups. The youngsters, who associated with other children at school, integrated rapidly and were mixing with all types of Jews. They fail to see any significant distinctions between Sephardim and Ashkenazim.

Ashkenazi adults and children differed little in appearance and religious practice from the general Jewish community. By contrast, the Sephardim, who remained in the minority, stood out because of their olive complexion, their volatility, emotionally and otherwise, and their strong adherence to tradition. They lived within voluntarily prescribed areas, and their pattern of life facilitated the preservation of their customs. However, the movement away from one area, loosening of family ties, and greater exposure to outside influences, soon may break down Sephardi distinctiveness. Also the lack of American-trained Sephardi rabbis may alienate Sephardi youth reared in America.

Commitment to Judaism

Synagogue affiliation of Cuban Jews was comparable to that of American Jews in the various neighborhoods. Still, one of the first things the Cuban Jews wanted to know when they arrived was the location of synagogues and schools where their children could receive a Jewish education. As with most American Jews, their identification with Judaism was much greater than observance of ritual. But their commitment to Jewish education for their children was stronger than that of American Jews. A strong inducement for many Cubans to settle on the North Shore was that Temple Menorah (Con-

servative) in the area was the most hospitable of all Greater Miami congregations. It invited the newcomers to share, without charge, its services, including seats for the High Holy Days, and its Talmud Torah for the education of their children. It continued this practice for five years. Most other congregations, including the Sephardi Jewish Center in Miami Beach, requested nominal payment, thus antagonizing the Cuban Sephardim. They now organized the Cuban Sephardi Hebrew congregation, which they named after Shevet Achim in Havana.

The new Shevet Achim had a membership of 150 families, a Cuban rabbi, Nissim Mayer, and Sunday School classes. Not all Cuban Sephardi Jews belonged to this congregation. Some attended the original Sephardi Center, also in Miami Beach. It was rather surprising that the Floridian Sephardim did not show more cordiality toward the new arrivals, since many of them, like the Cubans, were of Turkish ancestry. The Sephardi Center, with about 200 member families, also conducted Sunday School classes, but the Cuban congregation had a larger enrollment. The two institutions were only two blocks apart. They had a combined student body of 60. Both considered themselves Orthodox, but many of their members, who were scattered throughout Dade county, had to travel on the Sabbath and Holy Days in order to attend. *Kashrut* was observed by a small percentage. To many, it meant only abstinence from pork and shellfish.

A distinguishing feature between Ashkenazi and Sephardi religious observance was attendance by Sephardim at all synagogue services, morning and evening, and total participation in the recital of all prayers. There was no problem of having a *minyan* (quorum) on weekdays or Saturdays and Sundays.

The Ashkenazim held religious services in the Circulo Cubano Hebreo, with Rabbi Dov Rosenzweig officiating. Also located in South Beach, the Circulo was more than a religious institution; it was the largest social center for all shades of Cuban Jews, with over 700 member families. Its New Year's party was attended by more than 800 people. It also conducted week-day classes for some 20 children with a staff of three teachers.

Religious affiliation of the more affluent Ashkenazim was centered in the North Shore area. The few Orthodox Jews belonged to congregations close to their homes. The American Jews and those who belonged to the Reform Temple in Havana were affiliated with Reform temples in South Florida. However, with the exception of the Conservative Temple Menorah, more Cuban Jewish children attended the Orthodox all-day Hebrew Academy than any other single school. Their parents saw no conflict between the Orthodox education their children were receiving and their much less rigid religious observance at home.

Social Life

As most other Latin Americans, Cuban Jews were family-centered. In the United States, this kind of relationship was breaking up because of resettlement and a high degree of mobility. Cuban Jews still had Christian Cuban friends, but there was a loosening of ties. They also tended to maintain friendships with other Cuban Jews, but new relationships with American Jews were encroaching on them. Working hours in the United States differed from those in Cuba, and the pace was much faster. While in Cuba there was little socialization between Jews and Christians during the evening hours, there was much during the day. They found little time for such day-time activity in South Florida.

Economic Situation

The adjustment of Cuban Jews to American economic life has been phenomenal. Two lawyers were in high posts in the banking field. The main occupations of Cuban Jews were engraving, manufacture of leather goods, and selling insurance. Several Cubans have built multimillion dollar exporting and importing businesses, dealing in sugar and other articles, especially shoes. Many of the retail stores in the Miami downtown business area were now Cuban-owned and-operated. Cuban Jews also were predominant in the sale of textiles and remnants, but they also were engaged in all retail businesses, except food services. Many successful Cuban Jews took their Cuban Jewish friends and members of their families into their businesses, as junior partners. Within the younger generation, the division between Ashkenazim and Sephardim was quickly disappearing in all fields of activity.

Cultural Life

The newcomers have become citizens of the United States and, despite the use of Spanish in some homes, succeeded in their desire to assimilate into American life. Their adherence to Spanish as the language of the home was remarkable. In several homes, where Yiddish had been the main language before emigration, it now was Spanish. Parents wanted their children to speak Spanish. Of course, Spanish was spoken with pride by all who came to South Florida from Latin America. This was quite unlike the reaction to Yiddish by first-generation Americans, who wanted their parents to discard Yiddish.

The Cuban Jew did not seem to have been a great participant in Cuban or Spanish cultural life. His knowledge of Spanish was, and continued to be, confined to its use as a means of communication. The most plausible explanation of their devotion to Spanish in their new home may be found in what immigrants generally considered the most agreeable aspect of life in Cuba, namely their acceptance as equals by Cubans. Having themselves been exposed to persecution or having heard stories of what pogroms in Russia,

Poland, and other East European countries and Nazi persecution did to their families, the Jew found Cuban acceptance of him as a citizen a most heart-warming experience. His gratitude to that country was expressed by adherence to its tongue.

Future of the Community

The Cuban Jews in South Florida had no intention of returning to the island in the event of Castro's downfall. Of the more than 100 interviewed, only three thought they would do so. Many said that they would go back to try to regain some of the possessions they were forced to leave behind, and then return to the United States. The children, like their parents, have become completely integrated into American life.

Few of the immigrants expressed a desire to settle in Israel. Some explained that for them America was the third home, and the mere thought of having to establish a new life for a fourth time in Israel was too much. However, they were active in pro-Israel causes. In December 1968 they sponsored an Israel Bond dinner with Adolfo Kates as guest of honor. The attendance was over 350 and the drive was a success, not so much in the total amount sold as in the number of sales. However, in the view of this writer, the disintegration of traditional ties among former Cuban Jews precluded many more such annual affairs. As individuals, they were likely to continue attending similar functions, sponsored by their temples, synagogues, Zionist organizations, or fraternal groups.

The 1969 Greater Miami Jewish Federation campaign marked the third year of participation by Cuban Jews as a group. Each year the number of contributors and the amount of their gifts showed marked increases. Sender Kaplan was coordinator of the Federation's annual dinners and drives among the Cuban Jews. He was former editor of *Habaner Leben*, a Yiddish semi-weekly and the sole publication of the Cuban Jewish community, which he published for over 20 years.

The Cuban Hebrew Circle was making a valiant effort to maintain the insularity of Cuban Jewish life. Its leaders sponsored a professionally directed cultural program of lectures and discussions for youths and adults. Since one of the program's aims was to have the new citizens acquire a greater understanding of the American way of life, its long-range effect might be the dissolution of the community of former Cuban Jews.

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