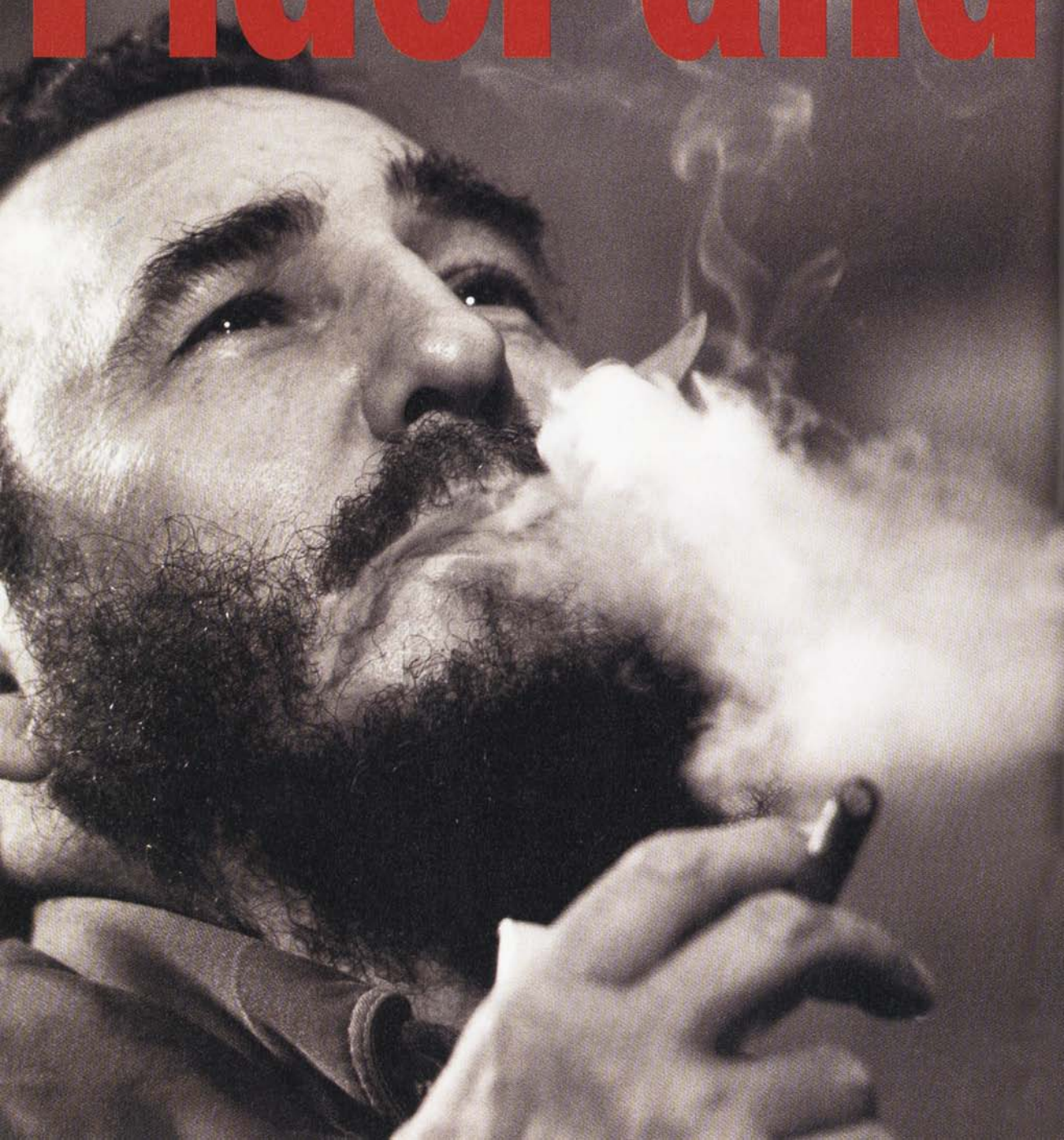


Fidel and



the Jews

Anti-Israel but not anti-Semitic, the controversial dictator gives the Cuban Jewish community room to grow

DANA EVAN KAPLAN

Daniel Esquinazi lives on a narrow street in Old Havana that shows the wear of 45 years of communism: Potholes gape like deep wounds and discarded fruit gives off an overpowering stench despite the harbor breeze. The buildings too, are rotting, their Caribbean pinks and blues faded, and some are leaning on wooden braces.

We stop in front of one and climb several stories of treacherous stairs to a room added on to the top of a roof—known as a *cuarteria*. Esquinazi—retired dockworker, tango lover, and Sephardic Jew—greets us at the door. My interpreter and I squeeze into the tiny space in which he has lived for 54 years, alone since his wife died. A bed sits in the middle of the room and he gestures for us to sit in some old chairs that are scattered around it.

Wrinkled and animated, Esquinazi's attired in a ratty shirt and formal pants that look like they were purchased 50 years ago, when he came to Cuba from Turkey. In those days Old Havana was an immigrant beacon, much like New York's Lower East Side, and home to large, vibrant Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jewish communities. Today it is home to the poor, among them several hundred aged Jews like Esquinazi who doggedly held onto their religion during decades of official disfavor.

I've seen Esquinazi on the bimah at Adath

Israel, a nearby Ashkenazi synagogue, unself-consciously chanting prayers to the Sephardic melodies he learned as a boy. But alone here with us, he doesn't want to talk about religion—or politics. Instead he is anxious to show us the posters of a famous 1930s Latin American tango singer that are plastered all over the crumbling walls of his room. "These are my photos of Carlos Gardel," he explains in Spanish. Then he pulls aside a blanket revealing his treasure—a stack of 78 rpm tango records.

"The record player has been broken for years," he says enigmatically. Watching his face I am reminded of something writer Guillermo Cabrera Infante, himself a Cuban exile, once said: "In Cuba, dreams are the only private property. On the other hand, nightmares are all nationalized."

It's often hard to know what Esquinazi and the many other Cuban Jews I have met during my several trips to this tropical island of 11 million people are really thinking. As he proudly shows me his private bathroom—a rarity for an Old Havana *cuarteria*—I can't help but wonder what he and other Jewish Cubans feel about living for 45 years in the same apartment filled with the crumbling pre-revolution furniture, unsure whether they should risk saying what is on their minds, and dependent on American dollars to increase their standard of living.

What do they really think of Fidel Castro? Do they view him as a highly-charismatic despot who commandeered their country, one which according to the 2004 report of the U.N. Human Rights Commission ranks among the most egregious violators of human rights in the world? Or do they see him as a benevolent socialist who overthrew a corrupt regime in the hopes of building a utopian society? After all, when Fidel—who turns 77 on August 13—came to power, he was immensely popular. Even today—after many exhausting years of economic hard times, political spies, and no freedom of the press—many Cubans privately express frustration with the government but still believe that Fidel is a good man.

Whatever his opinions are, it is clear that Esquinazi is a poor man living on a meager pension. Elderly Jews make up about one third of Cuba's Jewish community, which numbers between 800 and 1,500, a fraction of the 12,000 to 15,500 Jews who once made their homes there. The majority of remaining Jews are professionals—doctors, accountants, dentists, scientists, computer workers—who live in suburbs like Vedado, pre-Revolutionary Havana's equivalent of New York's fashionable Upper West Side, or in tight-knit communities in the provinces such as Santiago de Cuba, Camagüey, Cienfuegos and Santa Clara.

Even these middle class Jews are poor by our standards. Salaries and pensions are modest. The average salary in Cuba is about 260 pesos a month, which equals \$10. Some people earn as little as 100 pesos per month, and many senior citizens receive pensions that are even lower.

Not that Cubans are starving. Their low incomes are offset by free education and free health care. Housing is free, although new housing is so nearly impossible to obtain that several generations of a family reside together in cramped quarters. But in order to live comfortably and be able to buy items

only available in dollars, the average Cuban Jew supplements his or her income with gifts from relatives abroad. Others receive help from international Jewish organizations. Some receive money from the thousands of Jewish tourists who visit Cuba each year from Canada, and Latin and Central America and—despite travel restrictions—the United States.

During my visits to the island, just 90 miles off the coast of Florida, I have observed that some Cuban Jews are embarrassed to take money from visitors while others aggressively demand it. Some, like Esquinazi, don't ask but are glad to accept. Before we head back down the steep wooden stairs, I hand him a twenty-dollar bill. He thanks me profusely.

According to popular lore, Jews arrived in Cuba with Columbus. Three, all of them converts to Catholicism, sailed to the island with the explorer: Luis de Torres on the Santa Maria, Juan de Cabrera on La Pinta, and Rodrigo de Triana on La Nina. In the centuries that followed, Jewish traders pursuing business in the New World set up outposts on the island, but it wasn't until 1898, after the Spanish-American War, that any Jews established a permanent presence: American Ashkenazi Jews born in Romania and Eastern Europe arrived to work at U.S.-owned plantations and businesses and founded the island's first synagogue, the United Hebrew Congregation—known as the American synagogue—in 1906. After World War I, they were joined by Sephardic Jews fleeing the Ottoman Empire.

Starting in 1924, thousands of Jews came to Cuba on their way to the United States. Many stayed just long enough to establish residency on the Caribbean island in order to circumvent the U.S.'s East European quota. Others fell in love with the bustling, tropical country—then a tourist and gambling Mecca—and

opened small shops in central Havana. Still others found work with the American corporations that dominated the Cuban economy. Even Meyer Lansky and fellow Jewish gangsters from Miami made an appearance, lured by the lucrative casino and hotel industries.

In Cuba, Jews weren't confronted by the deeply-ingrained, virulent anti-Semitism that they were accustomed to in Europe. Still, they were barred from joining Havana's exclusive clubs, leading them to create their own institutions—among them the Jewish beach club, Casino Deportivo, today occupied by the Cuban equivalent of the FBI. There is, however, an egregious historical blot on the Cuban record: In 1939, the government of President Federico Laredo Bru refused to allow the refugee passengers of the cruise liner *St. Louis* to disembark in Cuba, forcing them to return to Europe and certain death.

Nevertheless, life was good for Cuban Jews—or at least not worse than it was for other Cubans—as increasing political unrest spread among Havana's students and poor in the 1940s and early 1950s. In 1952, General Fulgencio Batista canceled elections and seized power in order to prevent the left-of-center democratic nationalist party, the *Ortodoxos*, and a young lawyer named Fidel Castro from winning a seat in the House of Representatives. The years that followed were wracked with violence, corruption and repression. When Fidel, imprisoned, was granted amnesty, he headed to Mexico to organize a guerilla war against Batista. There he met Ernesto "Che" Guevara, the legendary doctor who joined in the Cuban cause and returned with him to Cuba to fight a guerilla war from their base in the Sierra Maestra Mountains. Batista fled on New Year's Day 1959.

The new leaders portrayed themselves as reformers who would redress the injustices and corruption of the Batista regime. Most Jews—like other Cubans—waited to see what would happen, although

about 3,000 of the wealthiest, fearing nationalization, left almost immediately. There were rumors early on that the revolutionaries would turn to communism. Some say Fidel was a “secret communist” when he took over, others that he was improvising and forced to turn to communism—and eventually to the Soviet Union—because his overtures were rejected by the Eisenhower administration.

The Jews who remained were hopeful that the new government would stop after expropriating and redistributing large tracts of land owned by U.S. in May 1959. When the regime turned its attention to nationalizing businesses, so many Jews started to leave that the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) set up offices in Miami and in the Caribbean. By 1965, as much as 90 percent of the Jewish community—including all the rabbis, cantors, and mohels—had left the island. A few hundred went to Israel and as many as 8,000 Cuban Jews settled in the United States, primarily in South Florida, New York and New Jersey.

Who stayed behind? Childless Turkish Jews like Esquinazi and his wife—relatively uneducated, politically uninvolved and without careers or families to draw them elsewhere—found it difficult to leave: Cubans who wanted to escape communism and move to the U.S. had to prove that they had been born in Cuba or had a child born in Cuba. Then there were those Jews who were loath to leave behind family and friends. Approximately half believed in Fidel’s promises or were socialists. Last but not least, there was an exclusive group of Jewish communists—among them some of Fidel’s closest cohorts—who had played major roles in the revolution or went on to hold important positions in the new government.

Although it was never technically illegal to attend churches or synagogues in the years following the revolution, few Jews were bold enough to risk being cat-

egorized as subversives. Without leaders, without numbers, religious Jews struggled to maintain their traditions and their synagogues. They adapted what is known as a “Cuban minyan,” that is, seven men with three Torah scrolls as stand-ins. Synagogues in the provinces closed for lack of members. All five in Havana remained opened, two eventually merging into others. Those Jews who didn’t have high positions or anything to lose—like Daniel Esquinazi—kept the traditions alive.

“By the end of the 1980s, community life was very poor for the Cuban Jews,” says Dr. José Miller Fredman, now the leader of Havana’s main Jewish community center and synagogue—the *Patronato de la Casa de la Comunidad Hebrea de Cuba* in Vedado—and the man who has become the spokesperson for the entire Cuban Jewish community. “There were three synagogues in Havana [but] with very few activities and religious services with barely a minyan. Nothing was going on in the other provinces. It was a very depressing situation with a very uncertain future.”

In the late 1980s, Soviet support petered out and Cuba’s standard of living took a nose dive. In response to the dramatic changes in Eastern Europe and new economic deprivations, the Cuban government began to relax its attitude about religion. At the Communists’ fourth Party conference in 1991, the ban on Party members having a religious affiliation was lifted. Though most Cubans aren’t members, this change heralded a full-fledged religious renaissance: people understood immediately that if a Party member wouldn’t be penalized for being religious or being associated with a religious group, then no one else would be either.

“For many years, the Jewish community was very quiet. There was nothing, no activity,” Benny Rutkevich, a middle-aged Jewish communist, told me as we relaxed in his comfortable Vedado apart-

ment near the city’s seafont boardwalk known as the Malecon. “We were very busy trying to build the revolution. I served in the army for many years. Because of this service, I was outside of my home a great deal. So I never visited the community.” Rutkevich, the son of Marcos Epstein, a prominent member of the Cuban Communist Party, had a change of heart in 1992 when a friend, another government employee, invited him to attend a B’nai Brith meeting. “I went, and I liked it. I had a lot of friends there. I do not see myself as religious, and I would not want to attend synagogue. B’nai Brith is a way of identifying without repudiating my secular humanist values.”

Unlike Benny Rutkevich, David Prinstein—the son of Victor Prinstein Topp, a high-ranking member of the Communist Party—decided to attend services at the Patronato despite the lack of a rabbi and concern that the roof of the main sanctuary might cave in after years of neglect.

Prinstein, a solidly built man then in his 30s, prayed with other returning Jews in a small meeting room in the basement. Completed in 1953, the Patronato had been the crown jewel of the country’s Ashkenazi Jews—a synagogue and prominent library rolled into a community center complete with theater, catering hall, and kosher restaurant. Even today the entrance designed by pre-revolutionary Jewish leaders is imposing, featuring a huge arch, and a grand staircase topped with metal doors engraved with menorahs and the lions of Judah.

The Patronato quickly became the heart of the Jewish renaissance. “At the beginning, it was a tremendous surprise,” recalls Prinstein, whose grandparents brought him to services regularly as a child. “Young people, who had been dispersed, started to come.”

Some had two Jewish parents; others

just one or the belief that their families had Jewish roots. Together, old and new Jews met to study Torah and took turns leading services. As Cuba's Jewish communities came back to life, Prinstein discovered how much Judaism meant to him. "The first time I held the Torah, my hands and feet were shaking. I don't know if that was because of the weight or because of the emotion. The first time I sang, tears came out of my eyes."

José Miller Fredman turned to the Jewish Joint Distribution Committee in New York for help. The JDC launched a recovery program for the community, dispatching a rabbi from Mexico, a doctor from the U.S., and a community development worker from Argentina. Miller also nurtured ties with numerous other international Jewish organizations, all of whom were more than happy to assist the island's long isolated Jewish communities, be they in Havana or in the provinces.

Miller is often credited with revitalizing the Jewish community and is viewed as a leader who—like many Jewish leaders in the past—has made the best of a difficult political situation. A few consider him a "court Jew" who keeps Cuban Jews in line so that the community gets no trouble from above. Certainly he and other Patronato leaders like long-time librarian and historian Adela Dworin have worked hard to create a positive relationship with *el Líder Maximo*, as Fidel is often called.

It was Dworin who invited Fidel to celebrate Hanukkah at the Patronato on

December 20, 1998, a still much-talked-about event. Dworin remembers that night vividly: "We waited for quite a while to see if he would actually come." People were complaining, because they were getting hungry. And then at 6:30, he came in. Had the Messiah himself walked in, they would not have been as surprised."

Fidel, wearing his usual army fatigues, received a warm welcome. Whatever their personal feelings about the Revolution, most of the congregants appreciated his support of the Jewish community. It was a sympathetic audience since cautious synagogue lead-

ers had left possible troublemakers off the invitation list.

Cuba's leader spoke extemporaneously for two hours, expounding on the similarities between the Communist Party and the Jewish people, two of the "strongest parties" in the world.

As a child, he told his audience, he rebelled against religious authority in the Catholic schools he attended and was bored by the religious instruction. But he had always liked the war stories in the Hebrew Bible, particularly the story of Joshua knocking down the walls of Jericho. He was attracted to the idea of a small military group—strong and intelligent—defeating a powerful enemy.

Like many Cubans, Fidel sympathized with the Jews after the Holocaust. "Many times, I have remembered the Holocaust and the factors leading up to the Holocaust. You are a people who have suffered

so much for so many centuries.

"I know a little bit about Jewish history," he continued. "What could move me more than a struggle of a people to preserve its traditions, its religion, and its culture? In 2000 some years, you have preserved your culture, identity, religion, tradition. I'm trying to remember if any other culture has accomplished this."

After his talk, Dworin recalls that Fidel sat down next to her. "He asked me how old Dr. Miller was. I was going to say he is an old man, but then I remembered that is the same age as Fidel," she explains laughing. "So I told him: 'He is a young man.'"

The pharmacy is in an old storage room on the second floor of the Patronato. It's a Tuesday, and five people are patiently waiting to present their prescription slips.

The person distributing medicine is Rosa Behar, M.D., a no-nonsense, hard-working practicing gastroenterologist. She and her daughter Rebecca founded the pharmacy in January of 1993, when two small boxes of medicines were sent to the Patronato from the U.S. Since then Behar, a round-faced woman with short auburn hair, has expanded the pharmacy, a crucial service for the community since government *farmacias* are poorly stocked.

"We don't advertise that we are open to everyone because obviously we cannot serve the entire 11 million population of Cuba, but if a non Jewish person hears about us and comes in, we are happy to provide them with medicines," explains Behar, whose parents moved to Israel in the early 1960s. She stayed because her husband wanted to stay.

The drugs—everything from Advil to Zolof—are delivered by visiting groups of doctors and tourists who load up their suitcases with samples and donated supplies. They are a powerful lure for Cubans who have some connection to Judaism, but they are not the only

"In 2000 some years, you have preserved your culture, identity, religion, tradition. I'm trying to remember if any other culture has accomplished this."

Fidel Castro

attraction. Cubans also come to the Patronato for adult education programs. Many enroll for the Introduction to Judaism class, and Introductory Hebrew is also very popular. They come to use computers in a Technology Center established by ORT, the New York-based organization that establishes Jewish education and training programs.

Meals after services are also a draw: All three of Havana's remaining synagogues feed their congregants. They also distribute the highly-subsidized or free food supplies. Onix Casas Szocherman, a slender young woman with two young children in tow, whispers glowingly: "I came here today for the milk. I am very grateful. My husband and children and I have all found tremendous comfort in Patronato, and my children in particular have thrived, being able to take computer classes, cultural activities and all types of special programs here."

Adath Israel, Daniel Esquinazi's synagogue, has the most generous food distribution program, supported by an annual Passover contribution of \$100,000 worth of goods from wealthy Panamanian Jew, Victor Arrak. Cooking oil, tuna, one-pound bags of dried grains, canned tomatoes and matzoh meal are distributed at highly subsidized prices throughout the year. The men who come most often to services get more food. Male members who come at least 15 times a month are entitled to buy 50 pesos worth of goods. Women can purchase 45 pesos worth of goods regardless of how many times they attend services since they don't count in the *minyán*.

Is the Jewish renaissance truly spiritual or just a way for Cuban Jews to get ahead? Jaime Suchlicki, a vocal critic of Fidel Castro and the director of the Institute of Cuban and Cuban-American Studies at the University of Miami is skeptical. Born in Cuba, he immigrated to Miami in the early 1960s. "There are really only 600 or 800 Jews in the whole country...the rest have converted to

Fidel's Jewish Comrades



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Among the Jewish "heroes" of the Cuban Revolution are Fabio Grobart, Israel Behar Duenas, José Altschuler, Haydee Tamara Burke, Enrique Oltuski, Archie Ratlow, Marcus Epstein and Julio Novomodi. Read more about them on our website at momentmag.com

Judaism so that they can get matzah and kosher meat," he says. Before his death, the late Robert M. Levine, author of the main reference work on the Jews of Cuba, *Tropical Diaspora*, also doubted that the renaissance had an authentic religious basis.

Others disagree with Suchlicki and Levine. People "may come first for the chicken dinners and the medicine, but they stay because they feel at home," Adela Dworin has remarked. Ruth Behar, an anthropology professor at the University of Michigan and an expert on Cuban Judaism, looks at it this way. "Most public spaces [in Cuba] are controlled by the state, and the synagogues and churches—you could say, temples—offer an alternative space where people can go and hear a different discourse of power, very different from the state discourse. It's about

the power of the individual to change his or her life through connection with the divine, God, and in this case, a historic Jewish community. Any Jews going to synagogue are connecting with a community outside of Cuba, an international Jewish community that is, at the moment, very interested in them."

Whatever their motivation for returning to synagogue, most Cuban Jews want to keep a low profile about the assistance they receive, although Protestants and Evangelical groups are experiencing similar revivals spurred on by help from abroad. José Levy Tur made this point emphatically the very first time I met him. As the president of the Centro Sefardi, located just four blocks from the Patronato, Levy is responsible for keeping the Sephardic community alive.

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Fidel and the Jews continued from page 45

"How are the Jews doing in Cuba?" I asked him. "No worse and no better than anyone else," he answered. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that the smaller the religious group, the greater the help each member receives. This means that Jews and Protestants receive more help than the Catholics, and all religious Cubans receive help unavailable to the average Cuban who is secular.

Even during the darkest years of the revolution, Fidel and those surrounding him displayed no signs of anti-Semitic sentiments. Still, Jews feared that the anti-Jewish policies that had been adopted by other communist governments would be imposed. But nothing of the sort happened. The government focused on trying—and later executing—Batista's cronies, which didn't have a major impact on the Jewish community, since no Jews had held high-ranking government or military positions under the dictatorship.

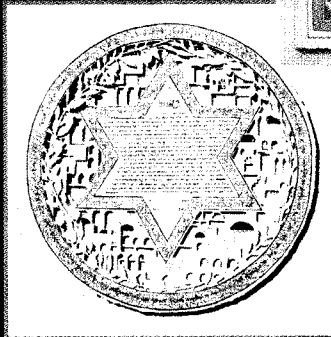
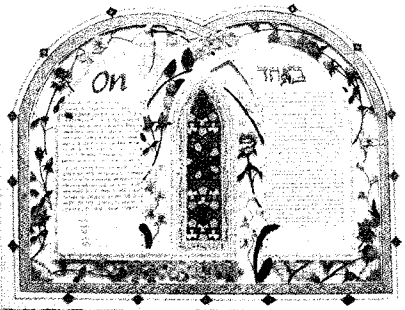
"Castro bent over backwards not to persecute the Jews," wrote Robert M. Levine. Fidel even asked the Israeli ambassador in Havana why Cuban Jews felt it necessary to emigrate since he had nothing whatsoever against them and wanted them to help develop the new socialist regime, recalls James Rice, executive director of HIAS from 1956-66. Fidel seemed genuinely puzzled, according to Rice.

If anything, the government seemed to favor the Jews. For example, despite strict rationing of food—especially meat—due to shortages, Jews in Cuba were granted an additional allotment of kosher meat. In fact, the kosher butcher stand in Old Havana was the only private business in Cuba not nationalized.

And though there were few Jews left, the government-controlled media lavished attention on Jewish holidays and cultural events. True, the holidays were given a new twist by the regime in order to reinforce revolutionary values, which

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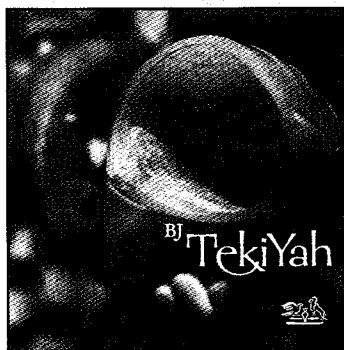
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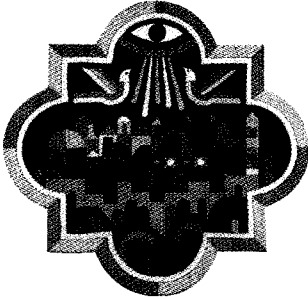
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Castro saw as a parallel to the Jews' historic struggle for justice. For example, in the early years Passover was portrayed as a celebration of the "national liberation" of the Jews.

Most important, Fidel never applied the same kind of political pressure on the Jewish community that he did on the Roman Catholic Church, which was large and could potentially organize to overthrow him. Many of the island's priests have been expelled over the years. One Cuban Catholic told me: "There are 250 priests for 11 million people and very few churches. He has decimated the church, jailing outspoken leaders and infiltrating the church." Other smaller Christian groups, like the Jehovah's Witnesses, who refused to participate in government programs, were also persecuted.

The tiny Jewish population was never viewed as troublesome. "There are very few [Jewish] dissidents; they're no threat

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to the regime," Jaime Suchlicki told me. I had read a quote by Tony Fune, a rare outspoken Cuban Jew, saying that the freedom to practice the religion he never abandoned couldn't compensate for the lack of milk and meat for his daughters and the dearth of basic liberties. "I understand we have no freedom of speech, no freedom of the press, no freedom to travel, no freedom to choose how we will educate our children," he had told a reporter for *The Orlando Sentinel Tribune*. "And I understand that is not right."

So I wasn't completely taken by surprise when I met Fune outside of the Patronato one Shabbat morning. He was walking back after praying at the Centro Sefaradi, and had stopped to say hello to friends. He was also handing out leaflets calling for democracy in Cuba. Fune, considered a "second tier" Cuban dissident, has been tolerated so far and

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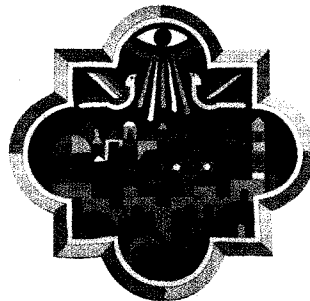
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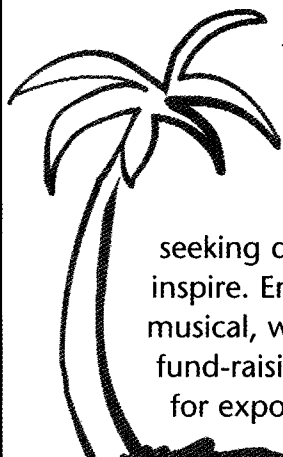
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wasn't among those apprehended in the March 2003 crackdown in which 75 dissidents were arrested—none of them Jewish. But later Fune told me that he plans to immigrate to Israel soon. He's afraid that if there is another round-up he might not be so lucky.

While Jews are not perceived as a threat, there are deeper reasons why Fidel may have adopted fairly benign policies towards them. Had Cuba followed the Soviet lead in being hostile to Jews, it would have appeared as if Castro were mimicking Russian policy, says Boston University sociology professor Susan Eckstein, author of *Back From the Future: Under Castro*. "Shaped by the Cold War, Castro never became a complete pawn of Moscow ... He on occasion implemented policies at odds with Moscow's and he manipulated Cold War politics to his country's advantage."

But perhaps the most intriguing reason is that Fidel himself may be descended from Jews who were forced to convert to Catholicism in Spain. "Fidel Castro thinks he's Jewish," writer Tom Miller has said. "Or at least part Jewish, buried in his past." He reports that Fidel asked one of his aides, Antonio Nuñez Jimenéz to research his family genealogy and that Nuñez found out that it was indeed possible that the Castro family might have been New Christians at the end of the 15th century. In Anne Louise Bardach's *Cuban Confidential: Love and Vengeance in Miami and Havana*, Armando Castro, who claims to be a distant cousin of Fidel, says that the name Castro was a common family name of Conversos—Jews who were forced to convert. He also says that other families with the Castro surname in the Oriente—the eastern-most province of Cuba where Fidel's father settled when he emigrated from Spain—are largely Jewish.

There is also speculation that Fidel has Jewish roots on his mother's side. According to a 1998 memoir written by his daughter Alina Fernandez, Fidel's

maternal grandfather, Francisco Ruz, was a Turkish Jew from Istanbul. Whether or not it's true, Fidel has told a number of people over the years that he may be descended from Conversos. Maurice Halperin, a Jewish professor who was accused by the American government of espionage and sought refuge in Cuba in the 1960s, writes that in 1960 Fidel told Ricardo Wolf (also known as Ricardo Lobo), Cuba's ambassador to Israel, that he had Jewish ancestors. Several other people have confirmed this account, including Dr. Bernardo Benes, a Cuban-American lawyer who was the honorary legal advisor to the Patronato at the very beginning of the revolution, before he emigrated. Benes also says that Fidel told him: "I want Cuba to be a second Israel." Benes says he felt that Fidel wanted to do in Cuba what the Jews had done in Israel.

Despite Fidel's respect for Jews, Cuba has a generally hostile relationship with Israel.

It didn't start out that way: During his university years in the late 1940s, Fidel was a youth leader in the Cuban People's Party, an organization with strong sympathies for the socialist ideals of Zionism. The Party's leader, Eduardo Chivas, was Cuba's strongest advocate for the 1948 U.N. partition that granted Israel statehood. Fidel himself participated in numerous activities organized by a Zionist group called the Committee for a Hebrew Palestine.

In a discussion in Havana 2003, Padre Carlos Manuel de Cespedes, who studied at the University of Havana in the 1940s, told me that Fidel's involvement in Zionist activities made sense in the context of the times. "Leftists were the ones who supported the State of Israel at this time and rightists opposed it." The right wing Cuban government led by President Ramon Grau San Martin had voted in 1947 against the partition of Palestine. "Leftists sympathized with the

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Jews as victims of fascism and identified with the State of Israel as a socialist country. Fidel was very supportive of the State of Israel.”

As a result, up until the June 1967 Six-Day War, Cuban foreign policy was generally sympathetic towards Israel. According to writer Robert M. Levine, Fidel declared a three day

mourning period when Israeli president Yitzhak Ben-Zvi died in 1963, an act which may have led Algeria to withdraw an invitation for him to visit.

In a dramatic gesture, Fidel broke relations with the State of Israel just before the 1973 Yom Kippur War, even sending a contingent of Cuban soldiers to participate in battles on the Syrian side. He closed down the Zionist Union on Pardo Street in Havana. Government propaganda became anti-Zionist and Cuban foreign policy belligerently anti-Israel. In the years following, Cuba lobbied against the Egyptian-Israeli peace process and lined up as one of the sponsors of the “Zionism is Racism” resolution adopted by the U.N. General Assembly in 1975. The Cuban government invited PLO leader Yasser Arafat to visit Cuba in 1974, and provided advanced training for the PLO and other Palestinian military organizations. Fidel personally escalated his rhetorical attacks on Zionism. In an October 12, 1979, speech at the U.N., Castro claimed that Israel was committing genocide against the Palestinian people, similar to the “genocide that the Nazis once visited on the Jews.”

Why the dramatic change of heart? “Whatever his personal feelings [towards Jews and Judaism] may have been, Castro put them aside in his pursuit of the Third World, particularly the Arabs,” writes conservative journalist Georgie Ann Geyer in *Guerilla Prince: The Untold Story of Fidel Castro*. She says that Fidel himself became “ferociously, if theatrical-ly, anti-Israel,” although she adds that “in truth, both his earlier lack of anti-Jewish feeling and his subsequent anti-Israel postures probably reflect only how little ideological, religious, or even politically committed feeling he had about anything, unless or until it suited his own power purposes.”

Opposing Israel allowed Fidel to aspire to the leadership of non-aligned nations. It also became a way for him to

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woo Arab countries into supporting Cuba when the U.N. had to vote whether to condemn Cuba's human rights record.

And it became a way for Cuba's leader to take a stand against *yanqui* imperialism. Fidel has a hatred of the power concentrated in the United States and therefore "he hates Israel, a political rather than social or cultural form of anti-Semitism," writes José Luis Llovio-Meléndez, who served in the Cuban government until his 1981 defection, in *Insider: My Hidden Life as a Revolutionary in Cuba*.

Nevertheless, by the late 1980s, Cuban-Israeli relations were warming up again. In 1988, an official delegation from Cuba visited Israel to study irrigation methods. Throughout the 1990s, connections between the two countries continued to grow. In 1994, Israel's chief Ashkenazic Rabbi Yisrael Meir Lau paid a visit to Cuba and was cordially received by Fidel himself. Cuba's new openness also has economic underpinnings: After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Cuba opened its doors to foreign investment. An Israeli firm called the BM Group invested in the Cuban citrus industry, inciting the anger of the U.S. government.

Some say that ties were never completely severed between Cuba and the Jewish State. Israel's leftist Zionist party, Mapam, later renamed Meretz, kept up relations with Cuba and has sent representatives to Cuba to discuss forming stronger political ties. "There was a rupture in the diplomatic relationship between the states," says Arturo Lopez Levy, a research associate at the Institute for the Study of Israel in the Middle East and an expert on Cuban-Israeli relations. "But this leftist party kept the connection going."

The Intifada has slowed but not stopped this rapprochement. Nevertheless, Lopez argues that the time is ripe to reopen official relations. "There is a relatively large Cuban presence in Israel

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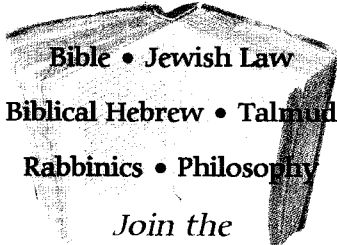


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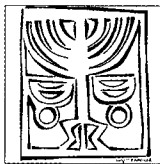
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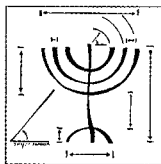
now," he says. "And there is a vibrant Jewish community in Cuba. These two constituencies make diplomatic relations a necessity."

Meanwhile, some Cuban Jews worry that the Intifada has ignited a new round of aggressive anti-Israel rhetoric in the media. Cuban Jew Luis Szklarz, a retired accountant who worked for the Castro government for many years, revealed to me his concerns by handing me a recent issue of *Orbe*, a new weekly newspaper. The paper had published a large, incendiary headline at the top of its front page article about the assassination of Ahmed Yassin, the leader of Hamas. It read "*Israel: terrorismo de estado*", which means "Israel: State Terrorism."

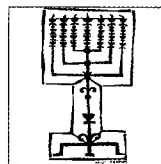
At the same time that the Cuban government is mouthing pro-Arab sentiments, it's busily—and intelligently—working to market itself to



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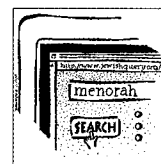
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American Jews, much to the chagrin of Castro-haters who see any tourism as a way to funnel much-coveted dollars to the Cuban government.

Located in Old Havana, the Hotel Raquel is a Cuban fantasy version of Jewish life. The top floor rooms have names like "Sinai" and "Gallilee." The gift shop in the Art Nouveau lobby is named Betzalel, written in letters that are shaped to look like Hebrew. The stained glass windows have Jewish themes and contemporary paintings by Cuban Jewish artist José Luis Fariñas are displayed throughout. The phone system plays the theme song from the film *Schindler's List* when callers are placed on hold.

The restaurant is kosher style and serves chicken soup with matzo balls, gefilte fish, Israeli salad, cheese blintzes and Hungarian goulash. Although the menu avoids blatantly non-kosher dishes, the restaurant is not kosher, says general manager José Manuel Quesada.

Meals are prepared by a non-Jewish chef who has learned what he can from books and interviewing people. The hotel tries to hire as many Cuban Jews as possible but most know little or nothing about Jewish cooking. Still the food—especially the gefilte fish and Hungarian Goulash—is delicious. "I was very pleasantly surprised to find such a nice Jewish hotel in Havana," says Mexican Jew Doron Kotlowski. "This was a very elegant restaurant comparable with any five star hotel in the world."

"We have built a place of harmony in a Havana neighborhood that respects the best traditions of the Jewish people, members of a community that live in Cuba together with citizens of other beliefs" says Eusebio Leal Spengler, the urbane historian of Havana and member of Cuba's Communist Party Central Committee. Leal has taken the lead in renovating the boutique hotels that can now be found throughout old Havana.

Leal plans to create a Jewish square on Acosta Street where Adath Israel is

located. "This is a Jewish historical street," he explains. "Many Jews lived here when they first came in the 1920s." The plan is to place plaques in front of the houses of prominent Jews who once lived there—including the late Communist Party leader Fabio Grobart. A plaque will also be placed at the former print shop of German Raigorodski, the father

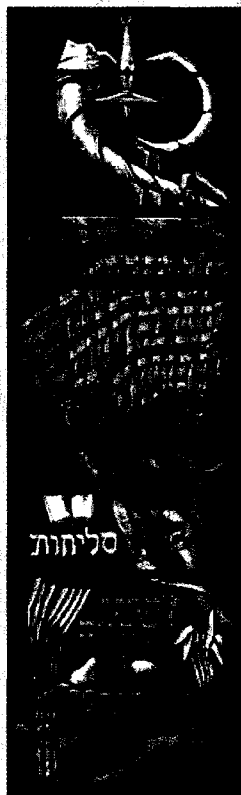
of Moisés, who became famous as the first Cuban martyr to die in the Spanish Civil war in 1936.

Leal's company, Puerto Carenas, recently completed the renovation of the vast first floor sanctuary of the Patronato, paid for with a \$250,000 grant from an American Foundation and donations from seven wealthy American-Cuban

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Jewish families. Currently Puerto Carenas is renovating Adath Israel.

Suchlicki is infuriated by the way money is flowing into Cuba despite economic sanctions, currently being tightened by the Bush administration at the behest of the influential Cuban-American community. "The Patronato is just for American Jews," he scoffs. "It's been renovated seven times."

Although there are no hard numbers, tourism in Cuba is substantial. Jews come from all over the world—be it on mercy missions to deliver prescription drugs or bike trips through the peaceful Cuban countryside. At times, the Havana Jewish community hosts one mission after another.

"Cuban Jews have been getting a lot of assistance precisely because there is an

embargo and because Cuba remains a mystery," says anthropologist Ruth Behar. "It has an aura that attracts Americans because it is a forbidden country. That has actually led a lot of Jewish Americans to travel to Cuba."

This disturbs Suchlicki. "The American Jewish community uses a visit to Cuba as an excuse to do a junket," he complains. "They visit the Patronato and then they can say: 'I have helped Cuban Jews.'"

Not everyone takes such a dim view of the visitors. "It feels incredibly rewarding—as a child of Holocaust survivors and as an American Jew—to be able to go to a place where Jews were really cut off from us for so many years," says Will Recant who coordinates the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee's efforts in Cuba. "It's wonderful to be able to be with them, to be able to bring solidarity, to show that we really are one."

When David Prinstein started attending synagogue at the Patronato in the late 1980s, his fiancée, lawyer Marlen Fernandez Borroto, went with him. In 2002, eleven years and four children after their civil marriage, Marlen formally converted, joining the hundreds of Cubans over the last decade who have become Jewish. To seal their faith, Marlen and about 50 other converts immersed themselves in the sea off Tarara, a beach east of Havana, in an official mikvah.

"For years I felt Jewish, but I felt sad," she recently told a reporter from *The Orlando Sentinel Tribune*. "I couldn't touch the Torah. I couldn't dance with it. Now I can."

David and Marlen then celebrated a Jewish wedding at the Patronato. Now Marlen leads services on Friday nights. David leads them on Saturday mornings.

Their offspring have grown up in the Patronato. "What I am most proud of in



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my children is that they are just not coming to the synagogue to please me but that they feel their own personal devotion to their religion," explains David. who is overjoyed that his children have learned Hebrew songs. "The youngest one, who is four years old, has been able to sing in Hebrew since he was three. He knows 'Adon Olam,' 'Dayenu' and 'Al Kol Eile' and also blesses the bread and wine. He knows how to name the colors and to say mother, father and brother in Hebrew. He wants to be a rabbi.


"I am trying to impart to my children what my grandfather would have liked to impart to me," David continues. "I try to follow the footprints of my ancestors. Wherever my grandfather is, I think he should be happy for what I am doing."

What will happen to the Prinstein family and the rest of the island's Jews when Fidel dies?

This is the kind of question that leads to more questions. Who will take Fidel's place when he is gone? Fidel has tapped his brother, Raul, five years his junior at 72, to succeed him and continue on with current policies. But will Fidel's death—or that of Raul's—spark a civil war? Will the Cuban military cede power over this gold mine of an island so close to the U.S.?

There are no certain answers; only the words of David Prinstein, the son of a communist leader, grandson of religious Jews, husband of a Jew, and father of four children being brought up in his family's religious tradition.

David believes that Judaism in Cuba can now survive the passing of the old Jews—like Daniel Esquinazi, who kept the traditions alive for nearly five decades—as well as Fidel and his revolutionary generation.

"We are a strong and well organized community," David says. "That makes us great. I think that there will always be Jews in Cuba." 

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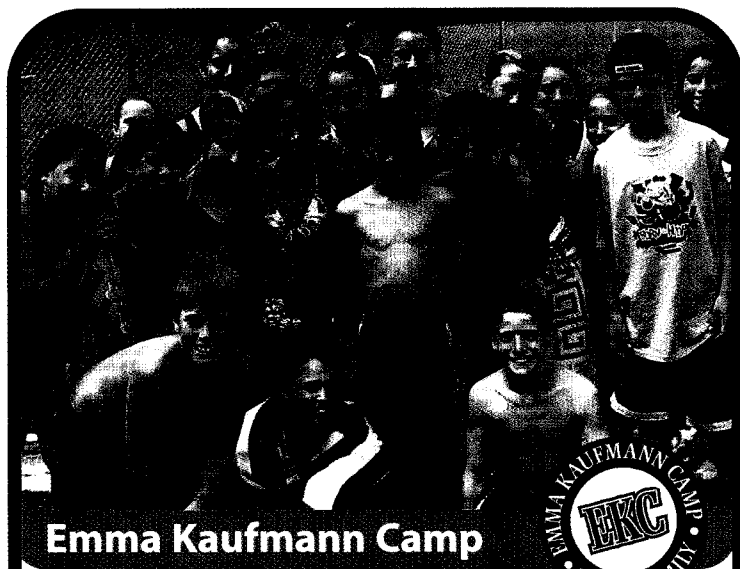
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