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THE CUBAN JEWISH COMMUNITY TODAY

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[Editor's Note: The Cuban Jewish community once numbered 12,000 and was a way-station for thousands more fleeing Nazi persecution. While about 800 Jews remain in Cuba today, the community's proud and varied past is reflected in its few surviving Jewish institutions. The author recently returned from an extended visit to Havana and reports on the state of Jewish life in Cuba today.]

American Jews: The Founding Fathers of Cuban Jewry

The first nucleus of Jewish communal life in Havana -- the United Hebrew Congregation -- was formed in 1906 by Jews who settled there after the Spanish-American War (1898) had brought them to the island (Cuba became independent in 1902). Most of them were U.S. citizens who conducted their social life in English and identified with the local American colony. Their first preoccupation as Jews concerned the dead; they bought a large tract of land in the nearby town of Guanabacoa for a Jewish cemetery in 1910.

Initially, the United Hebrew Congregation held religious services only during the High Holy Days. When poor Sephardic Jewish immigrants arrived from the Ottoman Empire, the American Jews in Cuba were compelled to grant them burial grounds, but refused to accept them into their society. However, the growth of the Ashkenazi population affected the religious life of the American Jews; they organized regular services which were later transformed into a Reform Temple called Beth Israel. Services were conducted in English, but many of the participants were Eastern European Jews who

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wished to identify with the higher social stratum.

The original group of American Jews, composed of successful businessmen or representatives of U.S. companies, produced the most important philanthropists who assisted both the destitute immigrants from Eastern Europe who arrived in Cuba in the early 1920s, as well as refugees from Germany and Austria fleeing Hitler in the 1930s. These American Jews remained an upper class group who lived socially apart from the rest of the Jewish population.

The members of the United Hebrew Congregation, the veterans of the Jewish community and owners of the cemetery, never realized their plan to erect their own building. After the celebration of their congregation's 50th anniversary, the congregation was about to purchase a plot of land in the fancy section of Miramar when the triumph of Fidel Castro's forces in 1959 changed the current of events and led to the decline of their community.

American Jews were among the first to leave Cuba and return to the U.S., which they saw as their homeland. Their synagogue -- a rented building on the Avenida de los Presidentes (in the Vedado section), continued to function until around 1980 when it was handed over to the Cuban government. The United Hebrew Congregation has never been formally dissolved, and it still has a Board of Directors that fulfills official obligations. Since the nationalization of the cemeteries in 1967, the state has assumed responsibility for burial expenses, but the United Hebrew Congregation continues to be recognized as the manager and proprietor of the Jewish cemetery.

The Sephardic Community: From Early Immigration to Life Under the Revolution

The Sephardic Jews in Cuba came mostly from the European parts of Turkey. Prior to World War I, young men arrived seeking their fortune or fleeing military service in the Balkan Wars. Soon after the war they were joined by their families and numbered about 4,000 by the early 1920s. Nicknamed "Turcos" (Turks), Sephardi Jews dispersed throughout the island, making their living as peddlers or petty merchants. Ladino (Judeo-Spanish)-speaking in the Old World, they had no difficulty in mastering the language of the country.

The first Sephardi Jewish congregation, Union Hebrea Chevet Ahim, was founded in 1914. A few years later it acquired its own synagogue on Jesus Maria Street, in the Old Havana quarter not far from the harbor where newcomers used to settle. This synagogue housed the first Jewish school, founded in 1924 and named after Theodor Herzl, which served both the Sephardi community and the Zionist Organization; it hosted the Union Sionista de Cuba for several years and was the first center of Sephardi social and religious life.

Chevet Ahim was considered the mother community of the Sephardi organizations in the interior, most of which were founded throughout the 1920s. In Havana, Sephardi Jews used the cemetery of the United Hebrew Congregation until they inaugurated their own cemetery in 1942. The Sephardim founded Jewish cemeteries in other provinces, which also served Ashkenazi immigrants in those areas. Today five Jewish cemeteries still exist throughout the island (in Camaguey, Santa Clara, Camajuany, Banes, and the El Cobre cemetery of Santiago de Cuba), but no other form of Jewish organization has remained outside Havana.

Chevet Ahim seems to be the only Jewish organization still functioning in its original premises. While new Sephardi organizations were founded over the years in order to fulfill the social needs of a mobile society that was gradually improving its economic position, Chevet Ahim remained as the center of those who continued to reside in Old Havana, many of whom continued to live as peddlers until the Castro revolution.

The majority of Cuban Jews left the country following the nationalization of private businesses. Some of those who remained in the country received compen-

sation for their nationalized property or found employment in government-owned establishments; others remained with no source of income and have since been living on Jewish charity. Among these were poor Sephardi peddlers who did not profit from the economic opportunities under Fulgencio Batista, Cuba's ruler prior to Castro, lacked the initiative to leave Cuba, and were unable to adjust to the revolutionary regime.

Chevet Ahim continued to serve as the social and religious center of the Sephardi Jews in Old Havana, but since the revolution its situation has constantly deteriorated. The younger members of the community have left the country or keep aloof from religion; the older generation is gradually dying out. Since the death of the last haham (rabbi) in 1986, there is no one to conduct services; in 1990 prayers are recited by an old man who can barely read Hebrew, and none of those present seem to be able to follow.

However, Chevet Ahim refuses to die. Fortunately for its members, Old Havana was recognized by UNESCO in 1982 as part of its World Heritage program and the quarter is undergoing reconstruction under the supervision of the City Historian. The old Sephardi synagogue, decorated in the early 1920s, is now being repaired by the Cuban government. Members of the Board of Directors of Chevet Ahim claim that their building, rich with memories and of historical value, deserves to be turned into a Jewish museum, but without help from outside sources they are bound to leave the bare walls as the sole witnesses to their past.

The second center of Sephardi social life in Cuba -- the club of the Union Hebrea Chevet Ahim on the Avenida del Prado -- has totally disappeared. The club, which had also served as a second synagogue, was a center for social and cultural activities and from the 1930s until the revolution was considered by Sephardi parents as the best place for their children to find a Jewish spouse.

During the 1950s several Sephardi families moved into the better residential areas of Vedado and Miramar and sought to establish a new organization more reflective of their social position. In the Cuban Jewish community in Miami they still speak of the beautiful Sephardic Center in Vedado.

The main part of the Centro Hebreo Sefaradi, situated on 17th and E Streets in Havana, has been rented by a Cuban musical organization. Jews now have access only to the side entrance leading to a small synagogue and an office; a table in the middle of the corridor where breakfast is served is the meeting place after services. The rent paid by the Cuban government is the only source of income for the Sephardi community, whose Board of Directors, now headed by Roberto Levi, serves both Chevet Ahim and the Centro Sefaradi.

Ashkenazi Jews: Present Organization

Not far away, on 13th and I Streets (near Linea), stands the building of the Patronato -- the official home of the Jewish community of Cuba. A beautiful building, designed by the famous Cuban architect Aquiles Capablanca, it is the most salient example of Jewish exhibitionist construction from the Batista years. A large section of the building was sold to the government and houses a theater company, but a much larger portion than that of the Centro Sefaradi has remained in Jewish hands.

The entrance to the second floor -- a huge metal door covered with Jewish emblems -- opens to a hall leading to two synagogues. The largest one presents a sad sight: its ceiling is broken, the once beautiful parochet -- covering an empty ark -- is torn, and the Seat of Eliahu is covered with dove-droppings. The small synagogue, however, is well-preserved. Its regular Sabbath services are conducted in accordance with the Ashkenazi rite by people who still remember the tradition.

On the ground floor, the part still in possession of the Jewish community consists of a small office, a large hall with

an adjoining kitchen, and a library. In the 1960s and 1970s, the community had its own restaurant which served kosher food; now the place is used to prepare lunch for participants in the Sabbath services and as the central gathering place during Jewish festivals.

The library, directed by Adela Dworin, houses a large collection of books in different languages, and is the only place where one can find a Jewish printed word. Unfortunately, during the last 30 years only sporadic periodicals and books have found their way into that collection and Cuban intellectuals interested in information about Israel or the Jewish people, or young Cuban Jews curious to learn about their ancestral tradition, find a meager selection. The rich collection of Yiddish classics -- once the best-sellers on the Jewish street -- accumulate dust on the shelves.

When it was built in the early 1950s, the Patronato was designed to serve the Centro Israelita de Cuba, the central organization of Eastern European Jews, founded in 1925, which served as the representative body of Cuban Jewry. The building of the Patronato symbolized the transformation of Cuban Jews from their position as a group of immigrants, struggling for survival in a foreign land, to that of an established colony, well-rooted in the general middle class. Ironically, ten years after its completion, the Patronato was deserted by almost all its members, most of whom emigrated to the U.S.

The Heyday of the Ashkenazi Community

Immigrants from Eastern Europe, known as "Polacos" (Poles), were the largest of the Jewish groups that entered Cuba. Their immigration began in 1921, largely as a consequence of U.S. immigration restrictions. The number who settled in Cuba has been estimated at around 8,000, but several thousand others passed through Cuba on their way to the U.S. Until about 1930, the Ashkenazi population was relatively unstable, but with the ultimate closing of both Cuba and the U.S. to immigration, Jews began to sink roots into their new land.

Eastern European Jews created a large network of Jewish organizations covering every aspect of their social life. This report touches only those institutions that are still functioning in Havana, which represent only a shadow of what Jewish life there had been. Since the disappearance of social, cultural, educational and political activities in the community, religious functions remain the core of organized Jewish life.

The most important religious organization of Ashkenazi Jews had always been Adath Israel, founded in 1925 by a group of Orthodox Jews who assumed responsibility for the religious needs of the entire community. For many years Adath Israel maintained a rabbi who arranged religious weddings, supervised kosher slaughtering, and supported a Chevra Kadisha which supervised the religious aspects of burial (in the cemetery owned by the American Jews).

Due to an old dispute between rabbis, for many years the Ashkenazi Jews had two synagogues, Adath Israel and Knesset Israel, both in the same building on Jesus Maria Street. They were reunited in the early 1950s with the building of a modern synagogue on Picota and Acosta Streets, in the heart of the former Jewish Quarter of Old Havana.

The ground floor of Adath Israel is composed of a large hall divided into compartments by low partitions, thus creating a sense of unity between the synagogue, the offices, the dining hall, and the recreation area. A daily minyan, mostly of old people, is held regularly twice a day. The modest breakfast served after the morning prayer is an important part of the participants' daily nourishment. A chat around the dining table, followed by a game of dominos, converts the daily prayer into a center of social activity, a poor version of a golden age club.

The second floor of Adath Israel is occupied by the large synagogue, now hardly ever in use; the upper floor, with its huge

hall, is rented by an orchestra. The rental agreement respects the sanctity of the synagogue, and contains an obligation to refrain from rehearsing during Jewish festivities. Adath Israel's building also contains a mikve.

Adath Israel is responsible for kosher slaughtering, authorized by the Cuban government and carried out in the municipal slaughterhouse. Since meat and fowl are strictly rationed, Jews are entitled to buy their meat quota in the community's butcher shop, which is opened three consecutive Mondays each month.

The Chevra Kadisha of Adath Israel is still responsible for Ashkenazi Jewish burial. Since many of the Jews left in Cuba are intermarried, the families are not always cooperative in fulfilling the deceased's wish to be buried according to ancestral tradition. Abraham Berezniak, managing director of Adath Israel, who also serves as ritual slaughterer, supervises this sacred obligation with the help of the few remaining activists.

The Jewish community of Cuba has no religious leadership or spiritual guidance. Ashkenazi and Sephardi rabbis left the country during the post-revolutionary exodus; Jewish weddings and bar mitzvahs have totally disappeared, and there has not been a mohel to circumcise newborns for over ten years. Paradoxically, the community is returning to the period of its founding when Jewish burial was the only expression of religious identity.

Reflections on the Past: A Visit to Guanabacoa Cemetery

At the peaceful Guanabacoa Cemetery, behind the gate carrying the name Beit Hachaim (House of the Living), one can find the most vivid testimony of the past. The aristocratic status of the American group can be traced on the central lane facing the entrance where many of the early members of the United Hebrew Congregation are buried under rich marble monuments.

More modest tombstones, some of which can hardly be deciphered, reflect the hardships of the early immigrants: tiny graves of children, many of whom died in the 1920s and 1930s, or the early age of death engraved on the adults' tombstones. The American Jews did not discriminate among the dead: Sephardi and Ashkenazi Jews lie side-by-side. Most of the early deaths were memorialized in Hebrew characters and the words were written in Yiddish, Ladino, or Hebrew. An important chapter in the history of the Jews in Cuba involves the nearly 11,000 refugees who escaped Nazi persecution and found temporary shelter in Cuba. A few traces can be seen in the few German inscriptions on tombstones in the cemetery.

Sephardi Jews secured their own cemetery in 1942, next to that of the United Hebrew Congregation. Many of the tombstones, dating from the late 1940s and 1950s, are decorated with large stars of David carved in the marble stone; like their Ashkenazi counterparts, they reflect both the Zionist enthusiasm and the economic affluence of that period. During the same period both communities erected, in each of their cemeteries, a monument to the memory of the six million Jews exterminated in the Holocaust.

A unique characteristic of the Sephardi cemetery is the large monument of the Geniza, facing the gate, where holy books no longer in use had been buried. The Sephardi cemetery also bears witness to past discord among the Ashkenazi Jews: it includes a parcel of graves that had belonged to Achim Israel -- a dissident Ashkenazi group.

An interesting monument carrying the names of five Jewish martyrs -- young Communists who had been killed by the Cuban police in the early 1930s -- was erected in the United Hebrew Congregation's cemetery after the Castro revolution. Communism had a strong appeal among the poor immigrants from Eastern Europe and some of the Jewish Communists had participated in the early stages of the Cuban Communist Party. After World War II and with the foundation of the State of Israel, Zionism became the

core of Jewish life in Cuba, and the old Jewish Communists disappeared from the Jewish arena. After the Castro revolution, the merits of the veteran Communists were recognized by the Cuban government, but their leadership was not accepted by their fellow Jews.

Religious Rights under the Revolution and the Present Situation

Many of the pre-revolution Jewish leaders moved to Miami, including Sender Kaplan, ex-Honorary Consul of Israel, President of the Union Sionista, and editor of Havana's Yiddish periodical. Those who stayed behind had to struggle with two major problems -- the continuous decline in their numbers, and the restrictions on their autonomy imposed by the Communist regime.

It should be stressed that the new Cuban government granted the Jewish minority full rights to preserve their religion and institutions; the only Jewish institutions closed by the authorities were the Albert Einstein school and the Union Sionista. The former had been a government day school that maintained supplementary classes in Hebrew and Yiddish; when it was closed in 1975, Jews were free to open a Sunday School in the Patronato. The Zionist organization was closed in 1978, three years after Cuba supported the UN vote that equated Zionism with racism; in view of Cuba's hostile policy towards Israel and Zionism, it is remarkable that this institution had remained in existence for so long.

The government respects the Jews' proprietorship of religious institutions and indirectly supports their maintenance by the partial rental of their buildings. To the outside visitor it may seem that the division among four synagogues weakens the small existing community. This observer's impression was that the local Jews consider the preservation of their institutions as an existential problem, and the struggle to maintain all four organizations is a barrier against indifference. Moises Baldas, who for over twenty years was the major leader of the Jewish community, has formed an informal Coordinating Committee, composed of the presidents of the five communal organizations; coordination is essential both to have a single voice vis-a-vis the government and for internal organization of activities.

Since Baldas' emigration to Israel in 1981, the President of the Patronato, Dr. Jose Miller, has acted as chairman of the Coordinating Committee. As such he represents the Jewish community before the Office of Religious Affairs of the Central Committee of the Communist Party. The friendly attitude of Dr. Jose Felipe Carneado, head of that office, is considered an essential factor in the defense of Jewish interests in Cuba.

One of the major functions of the Coordinating Committee is the division and sale of products for Passover received annually from the Canadian Jewish Congress. [Canada maintains ties with Cuba while the United States and Israel do not; ergo, Canadian Jewry has inherited the responsibility. -- ed.] The role that these products fulfill in the lives of Cuban Jews is incredibly important since they often represent the only link with Judaism, especially for people living in the interior towns where no form of Jewish organization exists. There is no denying that some buy the Passover products in order to supplement their poor diet, especially in periods of economic recession like the present. The ability of the Jewish organizations to sweeten the Jewish holidays with a richer meal becomes a source of attraction; for children of assimilated families the eating of a traditional dish has become a sort of ritual, an expression of identification with Jewishness.

The sale of Passover products is also a source of revenue for the Coordinating Committee, which distributes a monthly subsistence grant to those in need. Many of the worshipers at Adath Israel are totally dependent on these grants, their only source of income. The Canadian Jewish Congress has been the only pipeline which has provided continuous assistance to a

community which has long felt cut off and forgotten by the Jewish world.

Cuba's recent policy of encouraging tourism has begun to bring Jewish tourists to Havana, particularly from Latin America. Many of them visit the Patronato, the most important link of Cuban Jewry with the outside world. An important outcome of new connections with the Jewish community of Venezuela has been the purchase of a minibus for the Havana community, largely for the transport of children to the Jewish Sunday School.

It takes the driver nearly two hours to collect the 12 children who are dispersed throughout Havana. The two volunteer teachers, Moises Asis and Dr. Mechulam, had many difficulties in locating these children, convincing their parents to send them to the little school, and drawing their attention to a language and tradition that is completely foreign to their daily experience.

Almost all the students in the Sunday School, like the rest of the younger generation of the Jewish community, are children of mixed marriages; in fact, it is hard to define "who is a Jew" in Cuba. An unknown number of those who had been born to Jewish families have chosen the path of militant Communism and keep aloof from everything connected with Judaism. On the other hand, Cuban women married to Jewish men often defend the traditional inheritance of their husbands more zealously than Jewish-born mothers. Many of those identifying themselves as Jews might not understand the denial of their Jewishness by halakhic standards; they possess a strong sense of belonging to Judaism but very vague knowledge.

Unlike Communist countries in Eastern Europe, Cuba has no anti-Semitic tradition. Fidel Castro's ideological condemnation of racial and religious discrimination found true response in the people's culture and Jews have never suffered under the revolution for their heritage.

As noted earlier, the revolutionary government granted the Jewish community freedom to maintain its religious functions. However, the constitutional freedom of religious and the practical tolerance towards religious institutions does not change the basic antagonism between Communism and religion. Practicing a religion -- any religion -- is a severe obstacle to one's career, which should not be underestimated. In the case of the Jews, fierce attacks against Israel and Zionism -- which should not be mistaken for anti-Semitism -- have caused serious dilemmas and deepened the individuals' fear to identify openly with the Jewish camp. During the last decade, however, there has been a growing tolerance towards the practice of religion. It is too early to tell whether the few old Communists who are approaching the community, or their children who seek their Jewish heritage, are merely a coincidence or are the beginning of a new phenomenon.

While the bulk of the Cuban Jewish community, which reached its peak in the 1950s, has long since left for the U.S., the Cuban government, sensitive to its image, has not altered the structure of former Jewish institutions and has recognized the remaining Jews as the successors to the community's possessions. The gap between the organizational framework and the actual strength of the local community has been constantly growing. Trying to live by the image of the former structure, the Cuban community is in danger of gradually disappearing as its older generation dies out and the number of activists continues to diminish. Its continuity, however, like that of any other Jewish community in the world, will lie in its ability to recruit new members from among the younger generation.

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