

Trujillo and Jewish Refugees:¹ Philo-Semitism or anti-Haitianism?

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During the hundred years preceding the Nazi Holocaust in the early 1940's, some 3.9 million Jews had left their various homelands for other lands.¹ 72% of these came to the U.S., 10% went to Palestine, and 10% went to Latin America. Argentina, which began aggressive attempts to attract European immigrants in the late 1800s, would absorb six out of ten of the Jewish migrants to Latin America. But the tiny Dominican Republic, despite its long history of friendliness to Jewish immigrants, was able to attract very few. The following paragraphs will briefly document three chapters in this unusual saga.

The first chapter occurs in 1846, just two years after Dominican independence from Haiti. President Pedro Santana, received an angry letter from certain Dominican tobacco intermediaries in the Cibao. Furious that Sephardic Jewish tobacco merchants from Curacao were paying impoverished Dominican farmers twice as much for their tobacco as they themselves were accustomed to paying, they wanted the government to squelch these Jewish merchants, whose high prices were (according to the Dominican merchants) somehow jeopardizing the well being of the new nation. Santana responded sarcastically and furiously that he would like to flood the countryside with such merchants to protect Dominican farmers from the

entrenched monopolists (like the letter writers) that had been oppressing them. The Sephardic Jews settled in, became Dominican citizens, and several of their sons achieved high positions in the Dominican government as overseas ambassadors or consuls.

Chapter Two concerns a Jewish migration that never occurred. Tsar Alexander's assassination in 1881 triggered off pogroms against Russian Jews. The Dominican government (whose president at that time was a Catholic priest) immediately contacted Jewish agencies in France and offered to take in "all of our brothers, your correligionists"² who are being persecuted. They would be given land if they wanted to farm, they were guaranteed total freedom to practice their religion, and citizen groups were formed in the major Dominican cities to welcome and accommodate them. The migration

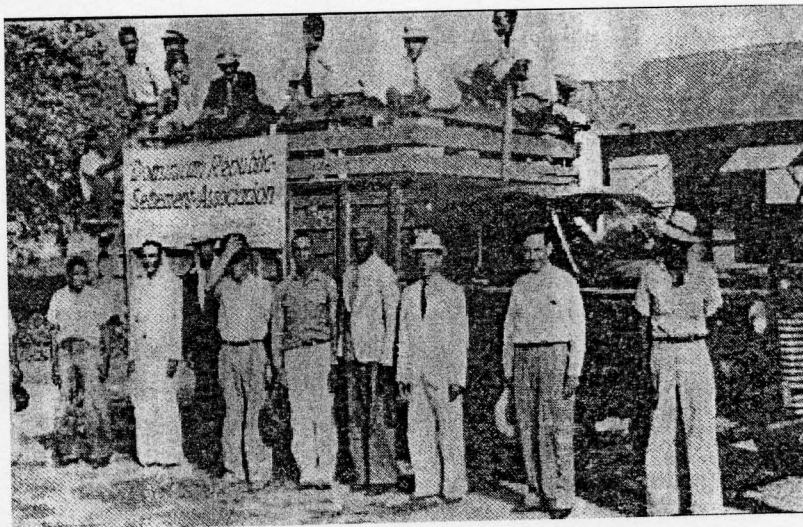
never occurred. Dominican scholar Bernardo Vega has documented that representatives of German-American Jewish groups wrote scathing letters to the European Jewish leaders in France labelling the Russian Jews as "unscrupulous beggars". American Jewish groups of German origin had achieved a position of economic prominence in the U.S. and were practicing a variant of Judaism that fit in with the liturgical practices of their Christian neighbors — organs, choirs, stained glass windows, family pews with men and women praying together, liturgies in the local vernacular (rather than Hebrew). They were horrified at the perspective of an inundation of East European Jews into the Americas, with their long-bearded men in yarmulkes, Yiddish accents, raucous Hebrew prayer modes that separated men from women, strict public Sabbath observance, and other traditional ethnico-religious practices that the German-American Jews had long since

jettisoned in favor of Westernized and socially more respectable religious forms. At this stage, they were opposed to massive migration of Russian Jews to any part of the Americas. According to Vega, the negative letters that these American Jewish groups wrote to European Jewish agencies cast enough cold water on the emigration plans to prevent their take-off.

Chapter three occurs in July of 1938, when U.S. President Roosevelt convenes an international Conference on Refugees on the

border of France and Switzerland. Prominent on the agenda was the dilemma of Jewish refugees from Nazism. The general response was one of thundering silence. Not even the convener of the conference, F.D. Roosevelt, dared risk domestic political flak by offering any assistance that would bypass the immigration restrictions that had been erected in the U.S. in the early 1920s. The one startling exception was the Dominican Government, whose dictator Rafael Trujillo stunned the other 31 nations at the assembly by offering immediate asylum to 100,000 Jewish refugees. For a third time in its history, the Dominican State makes aggressive public overtures to the international Jewish community.

This time the migration did materialize in the form of a Jewish refugee community in Sosúa. The total number of Jews who came was closer to 1,000 than to 100,000. But once again forces



Josef David Eichen. Sosúa: Una Colonia Hebrea en la República Dominicana. Universidad Católica Madre y Maestra, República Dominicana, 1980.

from the American Jewish community would make their presence felt with problematic interventions. Trujillo contracted with a Manhattan based Jewish organization to manage the details of the Sosúa settlement. This organization imposed three conditions — two of them astounding and unwarranted — on the Holocaust refugees: (1) they had to become farmers, whatever their earlier professions were (many were professionals); (2) pig raising was the first activity which they had to undertake — a measure which if imposed by Nazis would have been viewed as a manifestation of humiliating anti-Semitism; and (3) the refugees had to operate under a socialist or collectivized property mode. No settlers could own their own land or livestock. They had to work in a collectivized mode and split the profits. It must be emphasized: these astounding conditions were imposed on the refugees, not by Trujillo or the Dominican Government, but by DORSA, the American Jewish organization to whom the management of the colony was entrusted. (Pig-raising would continue, but the settlers eventually forced the emergence of a privatized production mode.)

Why would an American Jewish organization impose these conditions? The answer to that question would take us far afield into analysis of the ideology of secular Zionism, which included hostility to traditional Jewish religious observances on the one hand, and ideological attachment to collectivized agricultural modes more in line with Soviet than with Jewish cultural tradition.

In the Latin American context, the interesting analytic question concerns rather the origins of this persistent and atypical philo-Semitism on the part of the Dominican State. I have heard Dominican friends propose answers based on Dominican friendliness: “los dominicanos somos gente abierta y amistosa....” Haitian canecutters in the D.R., however, subject to various types of public scorn and abuse, might have a less rosy view of Dominican xenophilia. I would suggest instead a causal model that examines the unusual demographic and military history of the D.R. as the most powerful factor governing the atypical behavior of Dominican society toward Jewish immigrants.

In this model, it will be necessary to look toward Haiti, by examining each of the Judeo-Dominican chapters in the light of Haitian-Dominican relations. As for chapter one, the Haitian military had occupied the D.R. for 22 years, creating an antagonism that persists to this day. (Independence Day in the D.R. celebrates freedom, not from Spain, but from Haiti.) The Sephardic Jewish merchants praised and protected by President Santana in 1846 had made substantial contributions to the military activities that had resulted two years previously in Dominican independence. The main problem of the fledgling Republic was the danger of a Haitian reinvasion, and money was required to support the army that would resist them. The Sephardic Jews placed their resources squarely on the side of the Dominicans in this and in later conflicts.³ Chapter two: the response to the 1881 pogroms. The Dominican diplomat (Gregorio Luperón) who spearheaded the offer in France to flood the D.R. with

Russian Jewish refugees was a former general (and President) who had spent much of his career promoting immigration to his underpopulated country.. Immigration of Cuban and Puerto Rican refugees had already been used as a demographic strategy to increase the non-Haitian presence in eastern Hispaniola. The offer to Russian Jews was quite sincere — and demographically quite sensible in the light of Dominico-Haitian history.

Chapter 3: Trujillo. The dictator’s benevolent gesture to Jewish refugees came about a year after this lover of suffering humanity had ordered, in October of 1937, the slaughter of 18,000 Haitians residing on Dominican soil.⁴ For the first time in his career, he had fallen under humiliating international criticism. His public humanitarian gesture in front of the international community has to be understood in the light of his recent murder of Haitians. Furthermore, as for immigrant agricultural colonies, Trujillo also engineered the settlement of Spanish and Japanese farmers as a vehicle for introducing non-African elements in the population. The Jewish settlement was a consistent element in a demographic strategy that involved other nationals as well. This state supported hispanophilia and negrophobia was given institutional expression in the public school system and cultural support in the popular approval of intermarriage with light skinned outsiders as a vehicle for (only half-jokingly) “mejorando la raza,” improving the race.

In short, all three major chapters in the friendly saga between el pueblo dominicano and am Israel can be at least partially understood in the light of the historical tensions between Dominicans and Haitians. It is not only the widespread human tendency to scapegoat “the other” which rises and declines under the impact of demographic, economic, and military forces. These historical forces also govern the choice of “enemies”. Dominican history, in identifying “el haitiano” as the national enemy, has helped to generate as a secondary by-product an unusual degree of receptivity to “el judío” throughout the nation’s history.

¹ J.L. Elkin, *The Jews of Latin America*. New York: Holmes and Meyer.

² Bernardo Vega, “El fallido esfuerzo de Gregorio Luperón por promover una migración judía a Santo Domingo.” In *Presencia Judía en Santo Domingo*, Alfonso Lockward, ed. Santo Domingo: Taller, 1994.

³ H. Hoetink, *El Pueblo Dominicano: 1850-1900* (Santiago, D.R.: UCMM, 1970)pp. 47-55.

⁴ Frank Moya Pons, *The Dominican Republic: A National History* (New Rochelle, N.Y.: Hispaniola Books).

From Gerald Murray’s lecture presented at the Latin American Studies-Jewis Studies “Celebration of the Jewish Presence in Latin America” on October 3rd. The event inaugurated a photographic exhibit on the Jewish community in Sosua, provided by retired UF professor of urban planning, William Weismantel, “In Transition from Judaism to Tourism: Sosua-1985, Dominican R.Epublic,” displayed in the Reitz Union during Hispanic Heritage Month (mid-September-mid-October).