



The call of the cha cha cha

Ruth Behar's parents left Havana for the United States when she was a child but she had always yearned to reconnect with the island that had been a haven for her grandparents and other Jewish immigrants

There are ways you learn in childhood you are an immigrant and will always be an immigrant. I remember being 11 and begging my mother to let me take piano lessons. She immediately said no. Not only could we not afford a piano, not only did we lack room for it in our small New York apartment; it was an instrument that would have to be left behind if we had to pack a suitcase and flee.

"Learn to play the guitar or the accordion, a portable instrument," she said. I didn't understand my mother's logic. But I took up the guitar and sang Joni Mitchell songs, and I played second violin in the school orchestra.

Now I know it was the double identity of being Cuban and Jewish that informed my mother's sense of impermanence, her belief that everything that seemed ordinary about our lives could change overnight. In two generations my family had lived through a double diaspora, leaving Europe for Cuba, then Cuba for the United States. That loss of home had marked us, made us feel we were nomads, afraid the need to flee would come when we least expected it.

It is widely agreed that the first Jew to set foot in Cuba was Luis de Torres, a

converso – a Jewish convert to Catholicism – who accompanied Christopher Columbus on the voyage to the Americas in 1492, landing on the eastern end of the island, near what is today the town of Baracoa. 1492 was also the year of the expulsion of the Jews from Spain, when the monarchs of Castile and Aragon ordered practising Jews to convert or leave their kingdom. In that era, the conversos sought to show their fidelity to the kingdom while seeking greater freedom, which may be why Luis de Torres went on the voyage. His knowledge of Hebrew, Arabic and Aramaic gave him translation skills that were thought to be of use in communicating with the natives in a new land. While his fate in Cuba is unknown, many other conversos followed in his path, finding their way to several regions of the Americas, including Mexico and Brazil.

Only after Spain's imperial presence ended in Cuba, following the Spanish-American War of 1898, could religions other than Catholicism be practised on the island. The United States' intervention brought about an era of backyard

neocolonialism, which was deeply resented by many Cubans and which sparked the Cuban Revolution and Fidel Castro's rise to power in 1959. The American presence also opened the door to religious freedom. Jews could openly practise their faith at last. American Jewish expatriates arrived first, seeking business opportunities. They established, in 1906, the island's first Jewish cemetery – the United Hebrew Congregation, Centro Macabeo of Cuba – in Guanabacoa, a town on the outskirts of Havana. American Jews opened the Moishe Pipik kosher restaurant in Old Havana, offering such delicacies as soup with kreplach and blintzes.

The largest group of Jews came to Cuba from Europe, in the period between the two world wars as penniless immigrants. They went to Cuba because they couldn't enter the United States following the implementation of the 1924 Immigration Act, which limited the number of southern and eastern Europeans entering the country through a quota system that directly affected Jews. Hearing rumours that Cuba was so close to the



United States that you could practically swim there, many immigrants decided to go to Cuba and then make their way north. Thousands succeeded in reaching the United States, via Cuba, but many fell in love with the tropical island and made it their America.

Among the Jews who chose to stay in Cuba were the members of my family. They were part of the two large migrations, Sephardi and Ashkenazi, that created a Jewish community on the island in an astonishingly short period of time. My paternal grandparents were Sephardi Jews from Turkey, seeking refuge on the island after the fall of the Ottoman empire and increasing Turkish nationalism. They settled in Old Havana, near the Chevet Ahim, the first synagogue on the island. It was a Sephardi synagogue founded in 1914, and was located, ironically, on the Calle del Inquisidor (the Street of the Inquisitor). The Sephardi Jews spoke Ladino, or Judaeo-Spanish, and though their Spanish was old and quaint, they made themselves understood and integrated easily into everyday life. They formed communities in several provincial cities, most notably on the eastern end of the island, in Santiago de Cuba and Guantanamo, close to where Luis de Torres had set foot in 1492.

My maternal grandparents were Ashkenazi Jews from Russia and Poland, escaping poverty and antisemitism. They arrived in the mid-1920s and met in Cuba. My grandmother was the first of seven siblings to settle on the island. Like immigrants today, she took it upon herself to work hard and bring her family to safety. If it hadn't been for her efforts, her family would have perished. Indeed, the migration of Polish Jews to Cuba was so massive that the term to this day for a Jew in Cuba is 'polaco'. Both my grandparents, like other Ashkenazi Jews who settled in Cuba, were enmeshed in Yiddish culture. After living in the countryside of Matanzas, they moved to Havana so they could send their children – my mother, aunt, and uncle – to the Jewish day school, where instruction was in Yiddish and Spanish.

In less than half a century, these

immigrants, who numbered about 20,000 by 1959, had made a new home, founding five synagogues in Havana as well as synagogues in provincial cities. The majority were storeowners, merchants, and street peddlers. But there were a few writers, who spoke for all through their passionate declarations of Cuban patriotism and devotion to Yiddish. Ascher Penn's epic Yiddish poem, Hatuey (1931), honoured the Native American hero of Cuba who refused to convert to Catholicism and was burned at the stake. In turn, Eliezer Aronowsky wrote another Yiddish poem, Marti (1954), dedicated to José Martí, the poet who fought for Cuba's independence, and a homage in Yiddish and Spanish was organised in 1954 on the centennial of Martí's birth.

This Jewish community set down roots in Cuba that seemed permanent. But after the Cuban Revolution in 1959, the dissolution of the community was swift, like a candle snuffed by the wind. With Castro's turn to communism after the Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961, Jews lost their businesses and even their modest peddling jobs. They weren't persecuted, but they rightly feared that their Jewish institutions, particularly their schools, would collapse under the new system, which sought to create national educational and health programmes for all.

Suddenly, it was all over. More than 90 per cent of the community fled to Miami and New York, leaving a remnant that believed in the revolutionary project, or had married out of the tribe, or didn't have the means to emigrate. But those who fled never forgot Cuba. They mourned the loss of the island, spoke Spanish, drank cafecitos, danced the cha cha cha. Cuba was etched into their hearts. I left Cuba as a young child and grew up within that community of nostalgic Jewish Cuban emigrants. Though they remembered Cuba fondly, they were adamant about not returning. But I felt a burning need to form a bond with the country where I was born. I began to travel to Cuba in the 1990s, forging a connection with the Jewish community that remains.

The contemporary Jewish community in Cuba numbers no more than a thousand at most. Religious freedom returned to the island in the 1990s after the fall of the Soviet Union, and many who had grown distant from their heritage reclaimed their Jewish identity. But only a handful are Jewish on both their mother's and father's side. There are Jews of



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Ashkenazi and Sephardi background, though those distinctions are no longer significant since the vast majority are converts to Judaism who have entered the community through their marriage to

people of Jewish heritage. If not for these converts, who are deeply committed to their new faith, there would not be a Jewish community in Cuba today. The majority live in Havana, where there are three synagogues, but there are Jews also living in Santa Clara, Sancti Spiritus, Camaguey, Santiago de Cuba and Guantanamo.

Despite its small size, the community has a vibrant sense of identity. The Jewish holidays are celebrated in lively events that assert Cuban patriotism as well as respect for Israel. Many in the community are professionals, working in health, education, law and business, but salaries are meagre and elderly people living on modest pensions abound. Support comes from Jewish agencies in the United States and Canada and donations from travellers. With the growth of private enterprise, handicrafts are now made by members of the community to sell to visitors and help with the upkeep of the synagogues. The government doesn't interfere in Jewish life and has supported the existence of the kosher butcher shop in Havana. Recently, the Jewish cemetery in Guanabacoa was repaired under the auspices of the commemoration of Havana's 500th anniversary.

It is impressive how hard the tiny Cuban Jewish community works to be recognised by the global Jewish community, whether by participating in the Maccabean games or by marking Holocaust Remembrance Day. Cuba is still a safe place to be a Jew. Adela Dworin, the president of the Jewish community, likes to say, "Our door is open. We don't need security here."

When I'm at Shabbat services in Havana, I feel a flurry of emotions, happy there are still Jews in Cuba holding on to our traditions, and also sad that so many left and will never return. Most of all, I feel grateful to be able to keep returning and know what it is to be a Jew in Cuba. I have experienced something of the wonder my ancestors felt when they arrived on the island and breathed the tropical air and felt the swoosh of palm trees, whispering a message of hope. ■

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CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: A girl at Havana's Beth Shalom synagogue after taking part in a weekly youth group; Cover of *Marti, Poema* by Eliezer Aronowsky (1928); Cover of the 1935 edition of *Hatuey* by Ascher Penn; Ruth and her parents in Havana; Moishe Pipik advert

