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The Island within the Island

A Photo Journey to the Jewish Community of CUBA, Winter 2013

By Eliezer Yaari

The JDOCU photographers trip to Cuba

We land in Cuba on the 50th anniversary of the Cuban Missile Crisis. This had been Cuba's youth uprising, their revolution to free themselves from the corrupt and capricious regime that had been in cahoots with the Mafia and with anyone else who wanted to plunder their country. It was the last stage in Cuba's long war of independence, following centuries of colonialism, slavery, abuse, poverty and humiliation.

The revolution nationalized everything it could – the homes of the rich, fields, factories, and, especially, the American companies that had invested in the island. Under Fidel Castro's charismatic leadership, Cuba woke up several years later to find that it had no means to support itself. Cuba had only one last trump card – its location just south of the North American continent, right on the doorstep of the United States. In the midst of the Cold War, at the height of the space race and nuclear intimidation, Cuba sold land rights to Soviet missile bases for one billion dollars. And in November 1962, Cuba became the stage on which the crisis that threatened to bring the world to the brink of extinction played out. But then the missiles were removed and the crisis was over.

Half a century has passed since those days. The Soviet empire has been gone for over twenty years. Fidel Castro is 85 years old, and his brother, 81 year old Raul, controls the island. The embargo imposed by the world has been lifted; only the Americans haven't decided what they should do. Here and there are signs of a few free enterprise, but Cuba still chafes under the yoke of supervision, suspicion and revolutionary slogans.

The last communist regime in the Western world continues to make demands on 11 million Cubans, the descendants of the generations of African and Native American slaves and the sons of Spanish Negros. And even as they slosh through abysmal physical and social poverty, only 140 km. from Miami, Florida, the second largest Cuban city in the world, Cubans still continue to love the sea, music and Cuba.

Unlike the North Korean Communist regime, which poses a threat to world peace, Cuba can't pose a threat to anything and can't produce anything other than sugar, coffee, Cuban cigars and a reasonable level of medical services. And food rationing, month after month, year after year: a ration for a child, a different ration for a pregnant woman. The supply of meat has run out, the rations of black lentils are limited, the shelves are empty. The political penalty against Cuban citizens continues to take its toll, day in, day out.

Time has stopped in Cuba. Only the tourists hear the imaginary warm sounds of Ibrahim Ferrer and the Buena Vista Social Club, echoing from the Wim Wender movie that brought Cuba's sounds and lust for life to the West. The tourists do see the ever-present pictures of Che Guevara, they listen to Fidel's endless speeches, they see the statues of Jose Martinez that are everywhere.

In Santa Clara, they hear: "Perhaps the gentlemen is looking for a real cigar?" "Maybe you want a kiss," asks a girl standing on a boardwalk occasionally washed by the waves that break against the crumbling levy along Havana's northern boardwalk.

A bubble-gum pink Thunderbird drives slowly along the road, its rooftop rolled back. The fifties are still here – a bitter, sad marvel.

Havana city center. Time has eaten away at the houses and the people, who move about sadly against the decaying backdrop. They wait. One woman, in her eighth, or maybe ninth, month, is trying to sell brooms and plastic cups.

The ration stores are empty because the food has run out. In one place they're selling nice-looking pumpkin, a few cobs of corn and a chicken with a look and smell that could instantly convince you that vegetarianism isn't only a way of looking at the world but a means to survive in it. The grocery stores are bare, the scales are heavy, the shelves are empty, and pictures of Chavez and Fidel Castro hang on the walls. Even if you remember rationing in Israel – it was nothing like rationing in Cuba. In Cuba, every person is entitled to receive one cup of oil a month and half a chicken.

A woman comes in to take her flour – she brings the bag from home. There are no lines. A book of stamps. A notebook. No computers, of course. In thousands of places all over the island, everything – who gets what and when – is recorded in tattered notebooks. A heavy World War II vintage Dodge truck pulls up to the entrance and two porters unload next month's merchandise into the back room. Along the road, an old Lada is being repaired. A 56 Chevrolet, the last official car to drive along the empty roads.

On Cuba, that strategic island only 145 kilometers from Miami, Florida, the Russians built hundreds of kilometers of wide superhighways – and every day, more cars cross the Ayalon Freeway in five minutes than will ever travel those highways. The tourist buses are made-in-China new and they transport the tourists into the embrace of the most beautiful scenery in the West. China has insinuated itself into all the places that the others have abandoned, searching for oil on the beaches and maintaining the tourist industry.

Tourism is Cuba's central industry these days, with well-intentioned services and two sets of currency – a currency for tourists and a currency with the visage of Che Guevara for the locals. God alone knows how that system works. In a tourist store, a bottle of Coke costs a reasonable 75 cents. At the local kiosk, the same bottle also costs 75 cents, but those cents are worth 4% of the tourist currency – and there's no Coke there anyway, only locally produced mango juice. When mangoes are available, that is. And if a tourist happens to pay for a Coke in a local store with a tourist dollar, then the merchandise was sold for 25 times its usual value. How can they possibly deal with this?

There's no violence against tourists, because tourists are the provenance of the government. And there are no beggars (at the synagogue, during morning prayers, a well-dressed man, enveloped in his tallit, has the job description of "community beggar." After all, proper order must be maintained.)

School children everywhere look wonderful: they wear clean, pressed uniforms and their school bags are well-organized. The classrooms are clean and the teachers are dedicated. At the Pina del Rio where I visited, the principal stood at the gates, under a picture of Che Guevara, and kissed each and every child as he or she filed out. The Cubans are very proud of the tens of thousands of Cuban doctors trained by their school system but they are also very troubled by the lack of medical equipment, the deteriorating hospitals and the horrendous lack of medications. They suffer and they are frustrated because the boycott against Cuba has been lifted but the system persists. There is no private property; all property – homes, stores and land – has been nationalized. The sea of government clerks and bureaucrats is endless, the rationing continues, the work ethic is non-existent. There are no investments other than what comes from Venezuela, which, as a gift, supplies Cuba with all of its fuel needs, recent Spanish investment in tourism and European investment to renovate Havana city center. There's no internet; there are no PC's or iPhones or iPads. There are no construction cranes on the horizon, no industrial chimneys, no traffic. No economy. No billboards, the view along the sides of the roads is open and it strums a soft chord of nostalgia for a non-commercialized society – clean, naïve, just. But Havana's large harbor is completely empty because there's no export and sugar factories – Cuba's great source of pride, income and identity – are falling apart. Cuba imports sugar now. They import flour, corn, meat and chicken, too. The only real market is the black market, visible only to local eyes, and the huge barter economy – get your hair done in someone's living room in exchange for a half-cup of sugar; get your illicit computer repaired in exchange for gifts left by tourists.

Some groups have tried to organize construction projects: at the entrance to the Jewish cemetery, a group of residents is building a small housing project, several dozen apartments. The government provides the materials. Sounds touching, doesn't it? And when we were there, they were actually working. But they've been working for seven years and have built only three floors. They're nowhere near finished.

Which brings me to the reason I went to Cuba in the first place: It would appear that even though the Jewish community in Cuba was completely disbanded several years after the revolution, when all of Cuba's Jews immigrated to the U.S. or Israel, it's suddenly growing again. On that beautiful Caribbean island that was basically only a way-station on the way to Los Angeles' streets of gold, the Jewish phoenix has risen again and is rebuilding its home.

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Only slaves and Catholics had been permitted to settle in the great Spanish Empire, but after the Spaniards were thrown out in 1902, Jews and others were allowed in. The Cubans hadn't known any Jews and so there was never any European-style anti-Semitism on the island. There was xenophobia, which is part of the basic character of the Cubans, who are descendants of African slaves who were captured and abused for centuries.

In 1906, the Jews who landed on the shores of the Caribbean were part of those great waves of Jews who had been fleeing from Europe and the declining Ottoman Empire since the end of the 19th century. To this day, Jews are still referred to according to their ancestry: Spaniards are still called "Turkos" and Ashkenazim are still called "Polacos."

In Cuba they built a strong community with its own separate cultural life and educational system. This is the way the Jewish Cuban story developed: first a cemetery – after all, what symbolizes permanency more than anything else other than the purchase of land for a Jewish cemetery, several kilometers from the center of Havana?

The cemetery was followed by a Sephardic synagogue, "Shevet Achim," an Ashkenazi synagogue, "Beit Shalom," a Jewish school, communal aid institutions, charity institutions, a hospital, vocational training and organizations to handle the Jewish community's relationships with the rest of Cuban society.

When the skies darkened over Europe in the early 1930s, the U.S. fearful of overwhelming local markets that were still reeling from the Depression, closed its borders to Jews. Yet despite the difficult circumstances, the Joint was able to pull its resources together and take some 400,000 Jews out of Germany and Austria. They were scattered throughout the world; some even made it to Cuba, along with Jews from France, Spain, Italy, Belgium and other European countries.

WWII was the Joint's finest hour, in Cuba and in the rest of the world. The Joint was established for just such times: It was founded in North America in 1914 by refugees who had just landed on America's safe shores, while in Europe, their families and communities were facing war, displacement and hardship that would escalate into the greatest catastrophe in history.

The organization began with a call to the American Jewish community by Henry Montague, then the American ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, asking them to immediately send 50,000 dollars to save the Jews of Palestine from starvation. When the US entered WWI, the humanitarian disaster throughout the Ottoman Empire worsened and representatives of the Joint saved countless Jews, refugees from the Russian wars and revolutions and the crumbling Ottoman Empire, by moving them from their homes to safer areas, such as South America and free Cuba, where they would be allowed safe entry.

The Joint continues to use the same methods to this very day.

The collective memory of Cuban Jews and their neighbors is still troubled by Cuba's refusal to allow the St. Louis to dock with its cargo of 1000 Jewish refugees from Germany; after they were refused port in the U.S., too, they returned to Hamburg and many of them burned in the crematoria. Cuba's vote against the establishment of the State of Israel is part of that memory, too.

Yet, Cuba, unlike the U.S. and dozens of other countries, did, in the end, open its gates to thousands of Jewish refugees during WWII.

It would take fifteen years from the conclusion of WWII before that entire community disappeared as if swallowed by the earth. The sense of temporariness, embedded in the community from its inception, prodded the Jews onto the ships in Havana harbor for the short sail to the United States, their final destination. Among other things, this marked the establishment of the Jewish involvement in the diamond industry in New York, since many Belgian Jews had escaped to Cuba, but none stayed for long on the island after the war.

Yet, with love and commitment, the Jews who did stay on the island continued to build their Sephardi and Ashkenazi synagogues and schools and communal institutions. Over the years, Cuban Jews became proudly Zionist; united in their support for the State of Israel, they were influential in the tightening of the relationships between Cuba and Israel, even during Castro's time - until the Americans destroyed that relationship, because, during those years, you could have only one ally, and Israel chose America.

Gradually, members of the local Jewish community accumulated their own wealth but they continued to accept the generous aid provided by American Jewry. In fact, American Jews continue to generously support the Cuban Jewish community.

At times over the years, there have been more than 15,000 Jews in Cuba. But, in the end, this beautiful and fertile island was little more than a way-station on the journey to the U.S.

Castro's revolution created the opportunity to obtain a U.S. visa, and in 1963, the number of Jews dropped to 1200; by the 1970s, only several hundred Jewish communists and Cuban patriots remained. In 1978, only three years after Cuba voted in favor of the resolution equating Zionism with racism, Castro gave what had been Zionist House over to the PLO. The Palestinians turned it into their embassy, and that seemed to symbolize the end of Cuban Jewry.

Except that the story doesn't end there at all.

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As Myra Levy-Rodriguez from the Sephardic community in Havana tells it, "I was born in Cuba. My parents came here in the early 1930s, like everyone else, one might say. My father is of Turkish descent and my mother of Spanish descent. My mother," she continues proudly, "is 94 years old, and I take care of her, here in Cuba. I grew up in Cuba in a vibrant Jewish community, with mutual aid and responsibility. That's my background."

Myra Levy-Rodriguez studied medicine in Cuba and is still active in community affairs. She has two sons - one lives in Cuba and the other in Israel.

"No, there haven't been any problems of anti-Semitism," she says. "There are 75 different religions in Cuba and even during the long years of official atheism, they all stayed alive – in homes, in hearts. Today they thriving again. We still have our synagogues and we have received all the permits necessary to rebuild them."

"My son made aliyah to Israel. He's in Israeli hi-tech and recently received a job in Canada, so he and the grandchildren are close by. They all come to visit."

She looks at me knowingly and says, "You'll probably ask me why I didn't leave when everyone else was leaving. In 1959, when the great emigration started, I was eight years old. The question wasn't relevant for me, my parents made the decision. Today I can say that I am a proud Cuban and a proud Jew. This is my home. Yes, ninety percent of the Cuban Jewish community did leave and there is no disagreement about that fact. But we have built an exemplary community here."

And she takes us to the social hall in the back of the synagogue. Once it was used for prayers but now they need only a small room off to the side for prayers and this large hall is used for social activities, performances, exhibits; nearby, the community is even building a small, modest Holocaust museum to tell the story of the Holocaust to non-Jewish Cuban visitors.

In the face of the general sense of shortage that is felt in Cuba, it seems that the organized Jewish community has developed additional resources, managed imperiously by a group of women leaders.

"Our synagogue's income comes from several sources," explains Levy-Rodriguez. "Rental of the building for various events, partnerships with various Jewish organizations, like Bnei Brith, who send us support, and, of course, groups of visitors. A group can visit our synagogue only if they agree to pay – and the price can be as high as \$5,000."

Have I already mentioned the women leaders? Meet Adella Dvorin, the undisputed president of the Cuban Jewish community. Her parents, too, were on the boat from Pinsk to America and found themselves in Cuba. She grew up in an ultra-Orthodox home. Proudly, she carries the gilded pin of the "Lions of Judah," awarded to American Jewish women who contribute the highest amounts. Dvorin was awarded the prize in recognition of her energetic contribution to Jewish federations' philanthropic campaigns.

She's an in-demand speaker, traveling throughout the United States and the Spanish speaking world. But she is also, she says, "A proud Cuban. When everyone else ran away, we stayed here, and my father, who still remembered Russian, was the translator for the Russian army. Maybe that's the reason that we always had food at home. I have no complaints: I'm a patriotic Cuban, I'm a loyal Communist. Fidel Castro is a friend and the community is my family. This is where my love flows; this is my life, my desire. The community is everything."

Adeptly, Adella Dvorin glides past questions that could be politically dicey. She carries a heavy responsibility for the community and its welfare on her shoulders and has done wonders in enlisting the entire organized Jewish world. She continues the legacy of her predecessor, Dr. Jose Miller, who led the community during its most difficult times. Dvorin hosts two groups a week - equipment, religious articles, rental of the offices and even medications and food are all contributed by friends and guests. She has established a pharmacy in the community center, administered by Dr. Rosa Becher, a gastroenterologist who was born in France and grew up in Cuba. Becher is alone now - her children have left and the community is her family, too. She understands that Federation groups in the U.S. need to bring their members to Cuba in order to show them, up close, what their philanthropic contributions are accomplishing. Here, American Jews can hear the message more clearly: Cuba a communist country, led by Castro. The Jewish people lives! So you must contribute generously. And they do.

The deep sense of family, like the keen sense of isolation from the rest of the world that pervades all of Cuba, is most intense on Shabbat. From the moment that Shabbat begins, the entire community lives and acts together: In the communal kitchen, they cook dinner for hundreds of people. The baking group prepares the Challot and the cooks prepare the chicken soup. This Shabbat meal will provide the only portion of meat that many of these guests will taste all week. Here, the Jews will get the medications they need, together with updates about events taking place over the coming week. These activities are organized enthusiastically and lovingly by the representatives of the Joint, a young couple that has come from Argentina, Luciano Yichiamovitz and Alexandra Kotler. Yichiamovitz and Kotler take care of everything – they lead the baking group, organize the folk dancing, manage the Jewish school and prepare the local leadership to take over the reins when the Joint completes its work here. They are the liaisons to the Joint's headquarters in New York – they are the ones who know when the next group is supposed to arrive, how many books the visitors should bring, how much medication, what educational materials are needed, and even which movie to bring for a Saturday night social, so that everyone can watch, in between dancing.

On Shabbat, the members of the Jewish community share their will communal meal. A few hours before it's time for Havdalah, the ceremony that marks the end of the Sabbath, dozens of families show up to have their picture taken. For hours, they stand in line, just to have their pictures taken. Yaakobo Meirs Behar and his wife Tanya are here. They have come with a picture dating back to 1948 of their uncle, Rahamin, Ba'ahar. "He lives at 62 Nordau Street," they say to the visitors from Israel. "Maybe you know him? Maybe you've had some sort of contact with him?"

Larissa Levy-Harel and her sister Amanda are here, Jewish stars hanging prominently from chains around their necks. They carefully dictate the telephone numbers and email addresses of their friends to us. Bu they won't be able to Skype or email - there's no internet in Cuba. They are terribly isolated, they say.

And lonely Shlomo Lederman, the community beggar, is here, too. Right after Havdalah, he passes through the crowd and demands his due.

Haimi Jose Ashkenazi and his family have come. They are very excited. "We have relatives in Beer Sheva. Would you call them?" They bring old notebooks, scraps of paper, pictures of old documents. Henri and Enriette Leon, Diansi Uziel Valenta Levi-Diaz. She is looking for a girl, Melore, who was born in Cuba, came to Israel in 1961 and since then has disappeared. Maybe we could find her.

And here is Gadi Ben Ami, an Israeli who made aliyah to Israel from Uruguay in the 1970s but left his farm in the Jordan Valley to be an agricultural adviser in Cuba. His three sons from his first marriage are holding down three farms in the village of M'sua in the Jordan Valley, while he is cultivating a new family in Cuba. On Thursday, two days ago, they celebrated the Bar Mitzvah of his son, Dan. Dan says he doesn't know where he will live in the future. We take their pictures, family by family. They are filled with a sense of urgency and pride. When everyone else disappeared, we stayed here. We are the Jewish community of Cuba. We are proud Cubans. We've held on for all these long and difficult years. And we are proud of who we are. We are part of the Jewish people.

Tears, excitement. Something very primal. The sudden recognition that they are the center of attention, that they will be remembered even after they are gone. When we've finished taking family pictures, they group themselves by activities - the adult choir, the 30s and 40s dance group, the arts and crafts workshop and the Bible study group. Then we all go down into the crowded basement, hundreds of people. The vice presidents offer greetings and then each group makes a presentation about its achievements. They dance to popular Israeli tunes, to songs about how "The people of Israel lives" and "One Day There Will Be Peace." Then the lights are dimmed, everyone embraces and young girls hold the Havdalah candle and the spice box. The flame is doused in the wine, and they hug and kiss. This is their family, here in Havana in 2012. Then they eat and dance together, as if these were the bygone days of a forgotten kibbutz. They have become a youth movement despite themselves; a community had once disappeared and now it is recreating itself.

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Cuba, 2012. Fifty years after the Missile Crisis, fifty years of the unending revolution that is slowly reaching its denouement. The broken, beautiful backdrop of this island is waiting for the next scene to play out. People in the streets asking for a chance to smile for the camera. The grocer in his empty store. The lady selling hair clips on a street corner, the cooperative builders near the cemetery who in seven years still haven't managed to finish building their home. The empty, decrepit roads. A truck passes, crowded with dozens of people sticking to each other, like the trucks that used to bring the workers back to the kibbutz from the fields. The wind blows through their hair and the truck leaves a trail of smoke. A farmer stands in his fields on the side of the road; he looks up at the passing truck then goes back to plowing with his two oxen.

At tall tree frames my picture, the plain of sugar fields behind it. But when all that sugar is harvested, there won't be enough machinery to process it and produce the white gold that sweetened the lives of Spanish rulers, the appetites of American merchants and the sweet smiles of children who munch a silver-wrapped Hershey's kiss or two before they go to sleep at night.

Cuba, December 2012.

The revolution that began in 1959 has known ups and downs. It has stoked the imaginations of millions of people throughout the world who dreamt about simple happiness like Fidel Castro. But, fifty years later, his ideology and political machinations have brought his country to painful, debilitating bankruptcy. The revolution persists because there's no one in Cuba who can take the ship backwards. The state has been victorious. What is left for the State to do other than capitulate, abdicate, give up its power and allow other forces to move in and build homes, stores, centers of higher learning. To plow the fields and allow the seeds to sprout, the hay to ripen and the cows to calve, because that's what the world needs to do. It's only in Cuba that the dashing, gallant image of Che Guevara, dead now for sixty years, is still displayed in every village and city. School children swear allegiance to his name and go home and do their homework in the dark because there's no electricity. The roads are very, very long and terribly empty – but unlike the roads in the well-known psalm, they are not narrow – they are six lanes wide. And they stretch on for thousands of kilometers.

And yet, there is no sense of desperation. Meals are poor and simple, the bread is tasteless, and there is no butter, no fruit, no cheese or sour cream to spread on it. The coffee is bitter, the water is murky. Yet the school principal stands at the gate and kisses each and every one of her proud, beautiful, well-cared-for students. They are the next generation of Cubans.

Cuba, December 2012.

People want to have their picture taken. They cover up the bleakness of the homes, they stand in front of the camera and they declare, "I know that I am a daughter of the revolution. But my house is falling apart and I can't live with my parents anymore." So she moves out with her infant son and her husband goes somewhere else. A room in an attic? How can he pay for that?

For 8 days, from before sunrise until after sunset, we document Cuba. From the airport to the alleyways of Trinidad in the south. We don't watch TV, we watch and listen to the people in the streets, in the synagogue. "My name is Gita Bachar, I am a doctor and now I am part of the community. My children have gone, only the community is left for me. We encourage one another and tell ourselves that we are Jews, we sing songs from the land of Israel and we eat challah. Yes, we are Jews. There are 73 religions in Cuba, but fear, barter and survival are still the center of our lives."

Judaism is a form of survival, too. The small children dance with their flags, singing a oncepopular Israeli song, "We are alive. Alive! This is the song that my grandfather sang for my father."

"Grandfather is buried in the cemetery on the outskirts of the city, father left here and I stayed here with my grandmother. That is our fate. Now the photographers from the Land of Israel have come here, and maybe they will find a solution for us, and, in the meanwhile, at least they will leave a gift for the synagogue so that we can continue to maintain our community."

Cuba, December 2012.

Soon it will be Christmas and the Cubans have begun to decorate the streets. Hurricane season is over; the sea is quiet and clear. And with no industry or dust from construction, the air is clear, too; the skies are bright blue, the fields stretch on forever up to the horizon. The buildings in the city are crumbling. In one revolutionary swoop, the kings were stripped of their glory and the Casino and commercial magnates were deprived of their greed. But now everything is peeling away, like long scabs of forgotten memories. There are no medications and people look sad.

The neglect reveals their despair. They have given up. They sing the "Chin Chin" song and the Beuna Vista Social Club and the song about that girl from Guantanamo – Guantanamera. Then they sing the Chin Chin song again. A band of elderly mariachi musicians tries to keep the dream of happiness somewhere in the world alive – but there really is no happiness here. Happiness is for tourists only.

Listen to the sounds – these are the sound of people who have no freedom – and they are the saddest sounds of all.

