



BY DEBBIE BLUMBERG

It's almost Shabbat in Sosúa. After a day of tropical drinks and water sports on the beaches of the Dominican Republic's northern coast, well-baked beachgoers retire to their rooms to prepare for evenings of dinner and dancing to Latin rhythms. On any other night my travel partner and I would have joined them.

But on this night we decide to search for the elusive Sosúa synagogue.

The synagogue, we've been told, serves as a silent yet strong reminder of the fortitude and determination of a small group of European immigrants who had found refuge on this tropical island during the Holocaust. At a time when few nations would take in Jewish refugees, Dominican dictator General Rafael Trujillo initially offered to accept 100,000 immigrants from war-torn Europe. While historians question his intentions—some say he was eager to have Western nations overlook his massacre of some 20,000 Haitians in 1937, others say he wanted to “whiten” his race—Trujillo issued some 5,000 visas between 1939 and 1945. In the end, only 645 German and Austrian Jews managed to break through the Nazi stranglehold and reach the Caribbean island.

They settled on 26,000 acres of land which the United Fruit Company (now known as Chiquita) had developed as a

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TRAVEL

# IN SEARCH OF SOSÚA'S SYNAGOGUE

banana plantation in the late 1890s, but, because of poor growing conditions, sold to Trujillo in the 1920s. The Dominican Republic Settlement Association (DORSA), an organization created by the American Joint Distribution Committee to help Palestinian and European Jews in need, purchased this lush jungle land from Trujillo to resettle Jewish immigrants on condition that they would not be persecuted and that they would enjoy the right to practice Judaism. Each newcomer was given the opportunity to purchase eighty acres of land, ten cows, a mule, and a horse. Each homestead included a house, a patch of

land for gardening, and outhouses.

Most of the refugees, who in Europe had worked as business professionals or craftsmen, could not sustain themselves from farming, so they turned to industry, building a meat-processing plant as well as a butter and cheese factory. They ran the businesses as a cooperative, similar to an Israeli *moshav*, in which individual settlers owned and operated their own farms but pooled resources. (Both factories are still in existence today, operated by the Jewish-owned Productos Sosúa corporation.) They also established a library and a clinic, published a community



historic photos clockwise from left: Jewish immigrants riding along the coast near Sosúa; kindergartners, c.1946 (Sylvie Papernik is on the far right in the front row); dancing at the Hotel "Garden City" above Sosúa Beach, c.1948 (Sylvie's mother Irene and her uncle Julius are front right); musicians, c.1943 (Sylvie's father Otto is in the middle of the front row).



newspaper, and built a school—Colegio Cristobal Colón (The Christopher Columbus School), which today is known as Colegio Luis Hess (The Luis Hess School), in honor of its long-time principal and teacher, Luis Hess, a Jewish refugee from Germany.

Signs of the Jewish settlers' economic and educative success were easy to find, but what remained of their spiritual lives? On Friday afternoon we began to search for their synagogue, which, our guidebook explained, was tucked away in a small, unknown white building off Calle Dr. Alejo Martínez. If we only could find it before services began.



The best scout in Sosúa, we learn, is veteran taxi driver Honorio de Paula. He is unaware of the synagogue's existence, but quickly becomes as determined as we are to find it. Several times he stops the car to ask pedestrians if they know the way to what he calls "la iglesia de los judios," the church of the Jews.

Eight such conversations later, we finally locate Sosúa's synagogue in an unlikely place: it's set back from the street and sandwiched between a four-star beach resort and a strip of souvenir shops. Chickens wander about on a

front lawn bordered by unkempt palm trees. Above the synagogue's front door, a stained-glass window depicts a gold menorah against a sea-blue background. Atop the adjoining museum, a white dove spreads its wings in the center of a Star of David; underneath, a stained-glass *aleph* and *tet* announce the entrance to the building.

But our excitement soon turns to disappointment. The door of the synagogue is locked, and there's no sign listing upcoming services.

## “SIGNS OF THE JEWISH SETTLERS' ECONOMIC AND EDUCATIVE SUCCESS WERE EASY TO FIND, BUT WHAT REMAINED OF THEIR SPIRITUAL LIVES?”

Honorio refuses to give up. He leads us next door to the Casa Marina Reef resort and makes several inquiries. The hotel bellboy suggests we speak to Teresa, a descendant of one of the original Jewish settlers, and gives us directions to her home. When we arrive, the neighbors inform us that she's on vacation in Jamaica.

Our only chance now for a glimpse inside the synagogue is the vague promise in our guidebook of a Shabbat evening service "occasionally held at around 7:00 PM." We decide to try our

luck. To pass time, we browse in the nearby shops. Incredibly, even the shopkeeper of a small market located only steps from the building has no knowledge of the synagogue's existence.

At the nearby Rocky's Rock and Blues Bar our fortunes take a hopeful turn. We ask Canadian owner Mark Beland about the synagogue, and he immediately calls his friend Sylvie Papernik, who happens to be the daughter of one of the original Jewish settlers.

I reach Papernik by phone from Rocky's. Born in Sosúa, she remembers the close-knit Jewish community of the 1940s. "I have memories of going to bar mitzvahs," she says. "We have a few family photos of the events." Perhaps even more meaningful to her is the synagogue's large wooden menorah, lovingly carved by her father, an expert cabinetmaker.

After many years of living both in the United States and Europe, Papernik now owns Sosúa's Tropix Hotel, the result of an unexpected surprise following Sosúa's fortieth anniversary celebration in 1980. "I had vowed never to come back after my last visit in 1964 because I didn't want to see it so changed," she explains. "But I did come for the forti-

PHOTOS COURTESY OF SYLVIE PAPERNIK; BEACH: TOM BROWN



We finally locate Sosúa's synagogue (l.), in an unlikely place: it's set back from the street and sandwiched between a four-star beach resort and a strip of



souvenir shops. The entryway to both the synagogue (inset: close-up) and the adjoining museum (r.) are decorated with stained glass.

eth anniversary with my dad, and

at the end of it he told me he had bought a property for me. It was his way of keeping me sort of grounded, literally and figuratively, and of keeping me on this side of the hemisphere."

Later I would learn from Papernik's fellow community member Ivonne Milz, a Sosúa resident and Productos Sosúa employee, that many of the Jewish refugees had moved back to Europe or to the United States to pursue educational and professional opportunities. The remaining Sosúa community members—about ten to fifteen Jewish families—share the work required to maintain the synagogue and museum and to coordinate communal holidays and celebrations, such as the annual Passover seder, usually held at a local restaurant and attended by the entire community. The temple museum, which opened in 1990, is now being renovated to include additional photographs of settlers, documents, letters, and a few personal objects collected from the Jewish families still in the country and from descendants of refugees who are now living abroad. Whereas in the past some of the older community members had shied away from publicizing the temple and museum, given their experiences in Nazi-controlled Europe (none can recall antisemitic acts within Sosúa), once renovations are complete, the museum may be open on a more regular, publicized

schedule. There is no full-time rabbi; most residents are happy sharing their Colombian-born rabbi (or, as they call him, religious director), Oisiki Ghitis—affectionately known as Chicole—with the Dominican's only other synagogue in Santo Domingo, the WUPJ-affiliated Centro Israelita de la Republica Dominicana. "He comes to Sosúa once a month," Milz explained. "So we have services at least once a month. And we can call him if we need him."

As for this evening, Papernik says, if Chicole is conducting services, or whether there's even a service, she hasn't a clue.



Good conversation and delicious food keep us at Rocky's for quite a while. By the time we pay our bill it's ten after seven. We run to the temple, urged on by an excited Honorio. "Hay luces!"—the lights are on—he calls.

We open the front door quietly, trying not to interrupt the service already underway. As I behold the beautiful wooden interior—the walls, the floor, the ceiling—a young girl with curly black hair escapes her mother and rushes over to me. "Aquí," here, she says,

motioning me to follow her to the other side of the room, to the women's gallery. As I take my seat with the women, a tall young man with dark, tightly curled hair and light skin—perhaps the descendant of a European grandfather and Dominican grandmother—hands me a small white prayer book. Printed by the Parroquia Israelita de la República Dominicana (the Israeli Parish of the Dominican Republic), the book's cover reads, in Hebrew: *Sefer Kabbalat Shabbat*. I follow along in both Hebrew and Spanish-transliterated Hebrew, frequently losing my place as I gaze around the sanctuary. A map of Israel hangs on the right-hand wall; to my left, a deep-blue velvet ark cover sheathes the synagogue's Torah. I count about eighty absorbed faces—local community members joined by tourists (who wear the neon plastic identification bracelets which local resorts distribute to their guests).

The worship service is led by a short, brown-bearded man, who, I later find out, is a French rabbi vacationing at a neighboring resort, accompanied by a large French contingent—marking the first time the community has welcomed a large Jewish tourist group and their rabbi into their sanctuary. We recite the *Sh'ma* and the *V'ahavta*, sing several other prayers *a cappella*—no instruments are used during the service—and we end with the *Mourner's Kaddish*. After an hour, we sing the closing hymn and join in a common wish for well-being: *Shabbat shalom*.

As I sit in the synagogue with my prayer book in hand, I imagine the Sosúa Jews who've now relocated abroad, praying with their loved ones at Shabbat services in Europe or the United States, silently thankful for that wild tract of land rejected by United Fruit Company executives. □

#### WHEN TRAVELING TO SANTO DOMINGO

When you're in Santo Domingo, consider visiting the Progressive congregation Centro Israelita de la Republica Dominicana, Avenida Sarasota #21, Lincoln y Winston Churchill, Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic. For more information please contact the synagogue at (809) 535-6042, fax (809) 237-0942, or Religious Director Oisiki Ghitis at (809) 440-9981.