

## **THE STRUGGLE OF CUBAN JEWS - 2004**

by **JEFFREY M. FREEDMAN**

My wife and I, along with my parents, recently traveled to Cuba with Cross-Cultural Solutions, a non-profit organization that also sends volunteers around the world for relief work and other aid. We wanted to learn more about the Cuban culture, meet with Jewish leaders in Havana, and deliver medical supplies.

The United States restricts travel to Cuba, and is the only country in the world to do so. We visited legally under Cross-Cultural Solutions' People-to-People Educational Exchange License, which was obtained from the U.S. Treasury Department. Cross-Cultural Solutions booked our charter flight and arranged visas, hotels, meals and transportation.

The flight from Miami to Havana took about forty minutes. When I got off the plane in Havana, I thought I was on a movie set from the 1950's. Classic American cars from the 1950's, 1940's, and even the 1930's are ubiquitous throughout Cuba. The streets of Havana were often crowded and smelled of gasoline fumes. Long lines of people waited at well-marked bus stops to board crowded double-length buses.

Havana was once a beautiful city, but today the city of over two million people shows signs of stress and decay. The once brightly painted stucco buildings are discolored from age and neglect; only a few of them have seen a coat of paint or any repairs in the last 50 years.

During the 1959 revolution, many homes and buildings were taken from their owners by the new communist Cuban government. In many cases, the properties were turned over to workers and those in favor with the Castro government. Housing in Cuba today is terribly overcrowded and often several families occupy the same dwelling.

I met many highly educated people who were unable to obtain jobs in their chosen fields or could not live on the wages those jobs paid. Teachers and engineers we met worked as tour guides or cab drivers, or in various positions in the tourist hotels. Premium employment for many means jobs where the tips are in U.S. dollars.

We felt very free to explore Havana and the surrounding area. I never felt like I was in a police state or subject to any surveillance. The Cubans we interacted with were warm and engaging. It was disconcerting, however, to realize that the government owned almost everything, including the restaurants and hotels. Only a few small businesses were privately owned. When I asked a Cuban friend “What would happen if the proprietor wanted to begin work very early, stay very late and build up his business?” He responded, “The government does not want private business to expand or grow.”

One of the purposes of our trip was to visit the Jewish community. During our meeting with the Jewish leaders in Havana, we discovered that Cuba once had one of the largest Jewish populations in Latin America. In the early 1940’s, over 20,000 Jews lived in Cuba. Today, only 1,500 remain and ninety percent of those are intermarried.

The Jewish population decline was a result of the 1959 Revolution. Ninety to ninety-five percent of the Cuban Jews fled. Jews, like many other Cubans, had their businesses taken away by the Castro Government and were denied the right to openly practice their religious customs.

I was told that there was no anti-Semitism in Cuba, but Jews had been under the same restrictions as other religious groups in this communist country. Practicing any religious custom was discouraged. Many Christians and Jews had to hide their religion in order to survive in the political system. In 1992, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Communist Party in Cuba declared that Cubans could once again be involved in religious activities without losing their membership in the Communist Party. Following this policy change, the synagogues in Cuba became active again.

One afternoon, we had the opportunity to visit the Havana Jewish Community Center, La Casa de la Comunidad Hebrea de Cuba, and the Conservative Synagogue, Beth Shalom, collectively called El Patronato. Beth Shalom was built in 1957; the architectural style is modern 1950s. This 300-seat temple was recently restored with the help of American and Canadian Jewish Groups. With 350 members, Beth Shalom is the largest Jewish congregation in Cuba.

We were able to tour the facilities, including the library and social hall. The building contains a well-stocked pharmacy that serves the entire community – Jews and non-Jews alike. We delivered two large suitcases filled with medical supplies and donated them to the congregation.

We had the opportunity to meet with Adela Dworin, the Vice President and librarian at El Patronato. Adela told us that “El Patronato is one of the centers of Jewish life in Havana – religious, educational, and social.” It was encouraging to see many people, young and old, coming and going at El Patronato. One of Adela’s goals is to reach out to those Jews who may have abandoned Jewish tradition. “After all, we are dealing with a generation that has lived without a Jewish way of life. Things are difficult,” said Dworin, “but Jewish life is improving for us. Shabbat services draw dozens of worshippers. Young people want to know more about their heritage and their roots.”

Rabbis are in very short supply. The temples share spiritual leaders or sometimes import them from other countries for the High Holy Days.

The Jews of Cuba have survived their isolation for 45 years. Despite the significant decreases in numbers, the absence of Rabbis, assimilation and other factors, Judaism has continued and there is hope. The future of Cuban Jews and Cubans in general depends on the political and economic situation. What will happen after Fidel’s reign is unknown, even to political scientists.

As of December 31, 2003, “people to people” educational visits will no longer be permitted due to changes in the U.S. Treasury Department’s regulations. Unfortunately, travel to Cuba by Americans will be extremely limited in 2004.

In the past few years, Cross-Cultural Solutions has sent about 3,500 Americans to Cuba through its licensed people-to-people educational trips. The organization is currently pursuing other license opportunities that will enable it to take travelers to Cuba who are interested in Jewish heritage.

I believe that by increasing interaction between Americans and Cubans, the ideals of democracy are promoted. We feel that our visit with the Cuban people was a helpful and healthy exchange, and we hope that the U.S. Treasury Department will reconsider restricting travel to Cuba so that Americans will be able to visit more freely in the future.

If you would like more information about travel to Cuba, visit [www.insightcuba.org](http://www.insightcuba.org) or [www.crossculturalsolutions.org](http://www.crossculturalsolutions.org), or call 1-800-935-2822.

If you would like to learn more about Jews in Cuba, visit [www.jewishcuba.org](http://www.jewishcuba.org), [www.thecajm.org](http://www.thecajm.org) or [www.jdc.org](http://www.jdc.org).

To take a look at my Cuba photos, please visit [www.freedmanphotos.com](http://www.freedmanphotos.com).

JEFFREY M. FREEDMAN can be reached at Jeffrey Freedman Attorneys At Law, 424 Main Street, Suite 622, Buffalo, NY 14202, or by e-mail at [jeffrey@jeffreymfreedman.com](mailto:jeffrey@jeffreymfreedman.com).