

The General's Jews



DORSA's participation in one of Trujillo's civic parades. The placard reads, "We have found a new home. Always grateful, we share in the triumph of the Benefactor."

Photo: Joint Distribution Committee Archives

PART I

By Allen Wells

"People spat and hissed at us on the streets of Vienna. Other people can call Trujillo a murderer, but he saved our lives."

Heinrich Hauser

"Dr. Trone asked me if I was afraid of hard work. He chose me because I was young and strong," my father remembered. Solomon Trone, a recruitment agent for the Dominican Republic Settlement Association (DORSA), interviewed twenty-two year old Heinrich Wasservogel at the Hotel Neues Schloss, Zurich in the summer of 1940. DORSA's recruiter was looking for pioneers for a new agricultural settlement in Sosúa on the north coast. For the last six months Heini had worked at a number of labour camps run by Swiss provincial authorities. He had never heard of the Dominican Republic, knew no Spanish, and had no experience as a farmer, but like many refugees stranded in "countries of transit" along Germany's borders, he had few appealing options.

The Central European refugees who came to the Dominican Republic in the early 1940s could not have imagined that they would become, in a few short years, successful dairy farmers. Generalizing about their collective experience is difficult. Although they had much in common—language, customs, faith, exposure to discrimination, minimal experience on the land, and the anguish and uncertainty of leaving family behind—personal histories varied and so, too, did the situations they encountered and the choices they made while in flight.

Like others who arrived in the Dominican Republic during what scholars now call the panic emigration,

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opportunity to discuss his past—his flight from Austria, the two years in Switzerland, the subsequent, painful loss of much of his family in the Holocaust, and his resolve to reinvent himself from typesetter to farmer to cabinetmaker in the tropics. Pride in his accomplishments in the face of adversity was leavened with other emotions—the relief that he shared with other Sosuaners about their safe passage, the anguish over his inability to get loved ones out, and utter incomprehension of why he was spared when so many were not.

Reflecting fifty years later on his seven-year sojourn in the tropics, he sounded grateful for the opportunity. Without prompting, he lavished praise on the Dominican dictator, General Rafael Trujillo. "No one wanted us," he recalled. "He was **the only one** who took us in," his resonant voice punctuating those three small words for added emphasis.

Wasservogel was not alone in expressing gratitude. Martin Katz, one of only a handful of the original pioneers still remaining in Sosúa, recently told a journalist that he did not know why Trujillo did what he did, but "the important thing is that he did. He saved my life." While most refugees professed to be apolitical, they were well aware of Trujillo's brutality. Years later Judith Kibel recalled, "He was a bad man who killed many, many people But to the Jews he opened his country." It is one of history's small ironies that a man so feared and despised by many of his fellow countrymen—and by neighboring Haitians—was admired by these immigrants.

Indeed, Trujillo had stunned the world in the summer of 1938 when his representatives announced that his nation was prepared to accept up to one hundred thousand Central Europeans. Why did a ruthless dictator admit these castoffs when few nations would accept them? What did these exiles have to offer him and why did U.S. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and State Department officials give their public blessing to the enterprise? Why, moreover, did the Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) invest several million dollars in this modest colonization effort at a time when so many European Jews were in dire need of rescue and resettlement?

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The Sosúa story speaks to the settlers' experience, a despot's racist efforts to remake his own society, the high cost of Washington's complicity with a brutal dictatorship in its backyard, and the reasons why a gritty, unconventional experiment saved lives and, given its small size and the numerous obstacles arrayed against it, flourished to the extent that it did. Within a decade Jewish professionals from Berlin and Vienna, who had never set foot on a farm in the old country, had become successful pioneers. Their employee-owned dairy cooperative was producing one hundred thousand pounds of butter, a million pounds of cheese, and one-and-a-half million gallons of milk a year, and its prize-winning dairy products were marketed throughout the country.

Yet Sosúa also failed to live up to Trujillo's lofty expectations and, at one time or another, the colonization project confounded the Roosevelt administration, resettlement experts, Western diplomats, and philanthropists. Only 757 refugees made it to Sosúa, a fraction of Trujillo's initial offer. Why so few made it was a source of frustration for everyone concerned.

What is striking about the Sosúa episode is how securely these stateless exiles were tethered, without their knowledge or consent, to larger geopolitical concerns at a moment of world crisis—to Washington's anemic immigration policy, to Machiavellian diplomatic currents swirling around the refugee question, to the Dominican Republic's determination to assert itself as a power broker in the Caribbean, to the wartime United States' "Fortress America" strategy to cordon off the hemisphere from Axis aggression, to real and imagined fears of Nazi espionage and fifth column threats, and to fissures within the American Jewish community. As the colony repeatedly became a flashpoint for a number of heated debates, Sosuaners became pawns on *realpolitik* chessboards in Washington, Berlin, Ciudad Trujillo (as the dictator renamed the capital, Santo Domingo), New York and London.

Sosúa's numbers pale in comparison to the nearly one hundred thousand Jews who escaped Hitler and reached other Latin American countries. But if the Sosuaners were a drop in the bucket, the initiative's timing, and its unique ability to capture the imagination of statesmen, relief organizations, and the general public on three continents suggests that the hopes and aspirations of many were riding on this diminutive experiment in social engineering.

Since the colony's fate was intimately bound by contingencies not of the colonists' own making, it is to this broader canvas that we now turn. We begin with General Trujillo himself, who from the outset cast an imposing shadow over the colony.

The General, The President, and the Philanthropy

Trujillo had wasted little time in acquiring a well-deserved reputation for brutality during the first decade of his thirty-one year dictatorship (1930-1961). His ruthless mistreatment of both the political opposition and Haitians living in the Dominican Republic compares with the most heinous Latin American dictatorships. The most egregious example was his army's unprovoked massacre of 15,000 unarmed Haitians during a ten-day rampage in October 1937.



Heinrich Hurwicz, a colonist in Sosua, c. 1941

Photo: Joint Distribution Committee Archives

The aftershocks of this tragedy continue to scar relations between these neighbors.

International public opinion condemned the massacre, and the dictator, reliant on U.S. military and economic assistance, quickly sought to defuse the crisis and restore his image abroad. Welcoming German and Austrian Jews must be understood in this same light, as part and parcel of the dictator's efforts to reestablish good relations with Washington.

Roosevelt and his advisors knew full well who was responsible for the killing spree, a gruesome operation despicably labeled "*El Corte*" (The Cutting Down) because Dominican troops used machetes and clubs to murder their defenseless victims. Though it publicly condemned the massacre, the Roosevelt Administration was reluctant to meddle in Dominican affairs. Building on the policies of his predecessor Herbert Hoover, FDR had proclaimed that the United States would be a "Good Neighbor" in the Americas, and military intervention, a recurrent feature of U.S.-Latin American relations since 1898, was inconsistent with the principles of hemispheric cooperation. Hoover had not stood in the way of the 1930 coup that brought Trujillo to power, nor did his successor encourage Trujillo to step down after horrific news reports first surfaced about the massacre.

Instead, the State Department worked to lessen tensions between the Dominican Republic and Haiti. Undersecretary of State Sumner Welles and Secretary of State Cordell Hull were preoccupied with events in Europe and a looming Nazi threat in the backyard. As a result, they eschewed punitive action against Trujillo and focused their attention on a diplomatic solution.

The new Pan-American spirit fostered by the Roosevelt Administration came with only a thin veneer of what one student of U.S.-Latin American relations has termed "surface respect." Diplomatic jawboning, dangling carrots of military and economic assistance, and delaying recognition to recalcitrant regimes, were tactics the State Department employed to guarantee support for its initiatives.

Nonintervention, such as it was, often had unintended consequences. As U.S. forces withdrew from former protectorates, they left behind military leaders and armies they had trained and equipped, which ruled with impunity, no longer fearing intervention. In

practice, Pan-Americanism meant that Washington was less likely to criticize authoritarian regimes. By 1939, all but five countries were ruled by military strongmen and all enjoyed American backing.

With atrocities such as the massacre, Washington's muted response did not go unnoticed. Critics like journalist Carleton Beals reminded readers that something was amiss when an American president criticized totalitarian regimes in Europe yet showed unflinching support for the "Dictator Trujillo, in the Dominican Republic, [who] was butchering 12,000 peaceable Haitians—men, women, children and babes." By feigning impartiality and upholding the



U.S. Secretary of State Cordell Hull and Rafael Trujillo, dictator of the Dominican Republic, signing the Hull-Trujillo Treaty, September 24, 1940.

Photo: www.latinamericanstudies.org/good-neighbor.htm

twin principles of national sovereignty and nonintervention, the administration left itself wide open to charges of hypocrisy.

Despite Washington's kid glove treatment, Trujillo, coveting American aid, was anxious to mend fences. To placate the Roosevelt Administration, the General sent representatives to Évian, France in July 1938, to an international conference on refugees from Nazism, proposed by FDR to deflect criticism of America's restrictive immigration policies. Thirty-two nations sent representatives, but only the Dominican Republic agreed to open its doors to those fleeing Nazism.

The dictator was not just making amends for murdering Haitians. He wanted to "whiten the Dominican race." Obsessed with stemming the tide of Haitian migration across his nation's western border, he welcomed Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi Aryanism—ironically themselves the object of scorn and derision in Europe because of their "racial" characteristics. After "El Corte," Trujillo sought to seal off the ill-defined frontier with Haiti, encourage white immigration, foster intermarriage with Europeans, and establish agricultural colonies in underutilized parts of the country. At roughly the same time it welcomed Central Europeans, and for similar reasons, the Dominican Republic admitted several thousand Spanish Republican expatriates living in France who had been driven into exile by General Francisco Franco after the Spanish Civil War.

Although "improving the race" through European

immigration had been a desideratum for decades, and political leaders throughout Latin America actively promoted miscegenation to erase "blackness and Indianness," the Dominican case was exceptional because the dictatorship went to extremes to recast racial categories to suit its ideological ends. At a time when the country's population was predominantly mulatto, the 1935 census patently denied their existence. Astoundingly, the two out of three Dominicans of black and white ancestry were labeled *mestizos* (of white and Indian blood), even though it was common knowledge that the indigenous people had been eliminated from the island centuries before.

Race had been a persistent preoccupation of elites well before Trujillo, but it was under his rule that it became a pliable and effective tool to foment nationalism, cultural homogeneity and a new Dominican identity. Although popular perceptions of ethnic and racial identity differed from official discourse, regime propaganda shaped how Dominicans of all social classes perceived themselves and their neighbors.

During Trujillo's reign, the nation's Hispanic heritage (white, Catholic and colonial) was celebrated while its "Africanness" was denied. While Mexico celebrated *mestizaje*, and racial harmony was proclaimed by Brazilians, Trujillo sought, in historian Robin Derby's words, "to police the purity of the race" by stemming the tide of Haitian-Dominican miscegenation and contriving preposterous racial categories.

Recognizing the dictator's racial motives, a pragmatic JDC nevertheless embraced Trujillo's offer, hopeful that successful colonization in the Caribbean would persuade other Latin American states to open their doors. They knew they had exactly the right men to oversee this venture. Both James Rosenberg, a prominent New York corporate bankruptcy attorney, and Joseph Rosen, an eminent Russian agronomist, were fervent believers in colonization who boldly predicted that Jews would prosper in the tropics.

These administrators were not just incurable romantics. They had hands-on experience moving more than 150,000 Russian Jews from towns and cities in the Pale of Settlement in western Russia to the Crimean steppes. From 1924 to 1938, Rosenberg and Rosen, with the assistance of the Soviet state, which made available nearly two million acres of land, were the architects of a novel social experiment that transformed citified Jews into farmers. The JDC spun off a subsidiary, the Agro-Joint Corporation, to manage the multimillion dollar collaboration between a capitalist philanthropy and a communist state. As the attorney raised funds in New York, the agronomist directed 250 cooperatives, preaching the gospel of crop rotation and high-yield seed varieties, and, bringing American-made tractors and water-drilling equipment to the Crimea.

It is interesting that these disciples of Jewish agrarianism were, like Trujillo, enamored of scientific racism, reasoning that thousands of years of living in cities had contaminated the Jewish gene pool. Toiling on the land, they contended, whether in the Crimea, Palestine or the Caribbean, would cleanse the soul and regenerate the "Jewish race."

To be concluded next issue