

students about the Nakba, the word meaning *disaster* that Palestinians give to the seizure of their land in 1948 and the exile and dispossession that followed. The official Israeli Newspeak line is that Jews from Palestine, Europe, and the Middle East came to live in a “land without people, for a people without land.” Israeli schoolchildren are not given accurate maps of their country, nor are they told the facts of their so-

cial system, which resembles South African apartheid. (It is also an offense to combine the words “Israel” and “apartheid.”) Israel has never declared its borders. The facts of domestic agriculture, water distribution, city planning, and politics are likewise camouflaged with hopeful fictions.

How far are we in Canada from these hopeful fictions? As Professor Keefer wrote in his review of

To Love a Palestinian Woman, by Palestinian poet Ehab Lotayef, “The politicians of Canada’s ruling parties may express a pious commitment to international human rights law, but their actions show how feebly selective, in fact, this commitment is.... Our leaders’ message to [the Palestinians] is that of Franz Kafka’s jurists in his novel *The Trial*: ‘There is justice, plenty of justice—only not for you.’” ♦

Drop in the Bucket: Jewish Refugees, Latin American Dictatorship, and the Sweep of Time

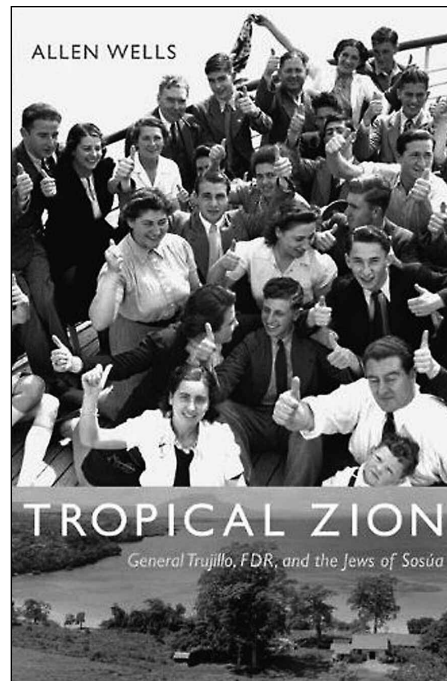
TROPICAL ZION: GENERAL TRUJILLO, FDR AND THE JEWS OF SOSUA

Allen Wells. Durham: Duke University Press, 2009.

Reviewed by David Sheinin

Around the edges, this begins as a familiar story—European storm clouds gathering in the 1930s, Jews trying to escape a surging Nazi threat, and the unlikely emergence of a haven for a relative handful in the New World. While the majority of European Jews couldn’t escape, a small number did. In the Americas, doors opened and closed like a nightmarish fun house, with Jews alternately admitted and rejected here and there as governments (including Canada’s) juggled anti-Semitism, humanitarianism, political interest, and a range of other factors in giving a thumbs up—or more commonly a thumbs down—to Jewish refugees from Hitler’s horror. Sometimes Jews slipped into this or that country. On other occasions—most famously, in the case of the passenger ship *St. Louis* which was turned away from multiple ports before its Jewish passengers were returned to impend-

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ing doom in Europe—Jews were buffeted from port to port in the hope of asylum.

Commenting on the still hotly debated case of Brazil and the Jews from wartime Europe, historian Jeffrey Lesser has noted that the documentary record shows a variety of Brazilian government responses, ranging from the outright refusal of refugees to their enthusiastic acceptance. There are three

ways historians have made sense of the contradictions. Some, according to Lesser, have simply shoved aside evidence of the many Jews welcomed to Brazil, brandished the documents showing their having been turned away, and insisted on a fascist-inspired anti-Semitism at work. Others have chalked up the contradictions to supposedly “happy-go-lucky” Brazilians, sometimes cheerily accepting Jews, sometimes rejecting them with equal flippancy. A third way of looking at the contradictions is to begin with a hypothesis that there are likely explanations here that go well beyond sympathy or disdain for European Jews. And that is precisely how Allen Wells has thoughtfully approached Jewish refugees and the Dominican Republic in *Tropical Zion*—if, in the end, his conclusions about a tacit alliance between Jewish refugees and the dictatorship of brutal strongman Rafael Trujillo are a disturbing discovery.

In part, this is a marvellous history of 750 Jews who escaped Nazi Germany and established a thriving agricultural colony in Sosúa (Dominican Republic). But beyond the contours of a happy escape—a drop in the bucket, Wells writes, when bearing in mind the nearly 100,000 Jews who found a way out of Hitler’s Europe to Latin America (p. xx)—what makes *Tropical Zion* exceptional reading are three intertwined, larger stories that Wells tells better than anyone—the creation of community, the friendly relations between the Sosúa leadership and the Trujillo

regime, and the nature of community decline and the emergence of a globalized tourist economy.

Community

As did Jews who reached Panama, Colombia, and elsewhere, many who came to Sosúa before World War II left shortly after, mostly for the United States—what Wells calls America-Leavers (p. 340). This notion of impermanence, of Latin America as transitional space and time, is a constant in many Latin American Jewish writings, ranging from *Prisoner Without a Name, Cell Without a Number* (journalist Jacobo Timerman's essay on his detention and torture at the hands of the Argentine military in the late 1970s) to Leo Spitzer's aptly titled account *Hotel Bolivia*.¹

Most Jewish refugees who reached the Dominican Republic were not fervent Zionists. "But at that hateful moment, when a Jewish state was little more than a pipe dream," Wells writes, "this tiny agricultural settlement did represent a Zion in the tropics for Jews who yearned for places they could call and make their own" (xxxix). How are we to reconcile this seeming paradox? On the one hand, the ideal of a New World Zion implies permanence and settlement. On the other, as Sosuaner Joe Benjamin told Wells matter-of-factly in 2006, after most Jewish residents had long departed, "Sosúa served its purpose. It saved lives" (339).

Like other Jewish colonies in the Americas that "vanished" as communities defined by an original cultural and historical identity, Sosúa today is no longer a place populated by more than a small remnant of the Jewish refugees or their descendants. Many of their stories are told richly here, from the mechanics of the dairy economy they created to what Wells calls the "little Vienna" (225) they built, replete with the staging of theatre productions of *The Dybbuk* and *Die Romainische Khassena*, as well as Sunday afternoon *Kafee und Kuchen*. But here the author departs from the norm. Almost al-

ways, such studies are presented in part as a lament for a Jewish community extinguished, one more nail in the coffin of pre-World War II Jewish European culture. The community comes and goes. For example, in her recently published *The Invention of the Jewish Gaucho: Villa Clara and the Construction of Argentine Identity* (Austin, 2009), anthropologist Judith Noemí Freidenberg freezes the Argentine Jewish agricultural colony of Villa Clara in time after 1945 in two ways. First, she treats the latter half of the twentieth century as a postscript to the period of greatest cultural resonance for the colony—the first decades of the twentieth century. Second, and in conjunction with the above, she presents Villa Clara as strangely, almost impossibly, apart from the political and social turbulence of late twentieth-century Argentina, as though locked in time and space.

Wells' temporal and spatial understandings of community are novel, and distinct from those of Freidenberg. So, Sosúa doesn't "end" with the postwar outmigration to New York, Chicago, Miami, and elsewhere. Wells shows how community continues to infuse the cultures, social relationships, and identities of those who left (including his father), and how, as both a memory and a set of ideas, Sosúa marked in turn the new communities into which the Sosuaners settled. At the same time, he refuses to be seduced by the notion that when the Jews left Sosúa, it was time to put out the lights and ignore what was happening in that community—as though all that was left was a memory of the past.

Dictatorship

That the Jewish refugee community thrived, particularly in economic terms, in the 1940s and early 1950s created what became in the end an untenable irony. Having fled brutal dictatorship in

Europe, Sosúa's Jews were immediately a favoured community of Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo. For the most part, that support was returned in kind. Sosúa's leadership maintained good personal and political ties with the dictator, with little questioning of government violence and a poor sense of allegiance with others on the island. A strong ally of the U.S. during the early Cold War period, Trujillo became a growing problem for U.S. policy-makers during the 1950s. Despite Trujillo's solid anti-Communist credentials, it became harder and harder for American officials to ignore the raw brutality and megalomania of the Dominican leader, as well as his increasing recklessness that led, for example, to the kidnapping in New York of Columbia University instructor Jesús de Galíndez Suárez, and his subsequent assassination in the Dominican Republic.

In the mid-1950s, as more voices in the U.S. Congress decried Trujillo's repressive rule, the dictator did what he had done in the case of Sosúa's Jews. "To repair his tattered image," Wells writes, "Trujillo again played the all-too-familiar religious tolerance and humanitarian cards" (306). In 1956, after the Soviet invasion of Hungary, he invited twenty thousand Hungarians to come to the Dominican Republic, a ploy he knew would gain him points in Washington. Only two hundred came and, in a deployment similar to that of Sosúa's Jews, they were sent to agricultural colonies. More cynical still, at an elaborate ceremony in April 1957, to which four Jewish members of the U.S. Congress were invited, Trujillo announced that he was ready to admit five thousand Egyptian Jews. (None ever arrived.) At the same time, the dictator trumpeted the recent election of a Sosúa Jew to the Dominican Congress (as

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¹ See Brent Knazen's review, "Timerman's stark memoir reflects Argentina's contradictions" (*Outlook*, October 1981) and Paul Weinberg's article, "Argentina and Canadian Jews (May-June 1981), and Dan Propp's review of Spitzer's *Hotel Bolivia: The Culture of Memory in A Refuge From Nazism* (*Outlook*, Sept./Oct. 2000). — Eds.

though such elections were held freely)—evidence, according to one of the invited Americans, New York Congressman Herbert Zeilenko, of “the freedom of opportunity, freedom of worship and absence of any kind of racial or religious discrimination” (307) in Trujillo’s Dominican Republic.

The overt support of Sosúa’s Jewish leadership for Trujillo was manifest that same year when the dictator requested the community’s help in effectively answering media criticisms in the United States. The Sosúa leadership asked Louis Loeb, president of the New York City Bar, to establish a commission of inquiry into the Galíndez disappearance, stating that it was “utterly inconceivable that Generalissimo Trujillo can have anything to do, directly or indirectly, with the unfortunate disappearance of Dr. Galíndez” (307).

Decline, Growth, and the Globalized Sosúa

When Trujillo was assassinated in 1961, Sosúa’s leaders, as supporters of the dictatorship, knew they were in trouble. As in other parts of the country over the following two years, landless peasants occupied portions of the Sosúa settlement. Without Trujil-

lo’s protection and with a new government sympathetic to land redistribution on the island, removing the squatters proved difficult and in many cases impossible. At the same time, if Trujillo’s fall precipitated an accelerated decline in the settlement economically and as a “Jewish” community, the principal causes had less to do with politics than with demographics. The last infusion of Jewish refugees into Sosúa had come more than a decade earlier. Moreover, young adults uninterested in agriculture and with the opportunity to emigrate to the United States, had begun to leave the community in large numbers. Wells describes a range of motivations for departure, ranging from professional opportunities to a fear of “mixing” with non-Jewish Dominicans.

By the 1970s, many aging Sosuaners had become fatalistic about the future, and visiting outsiders reported on the imminent death of Sosúa. No leader emerged in the post-Trujillo period to capture the imagination of the community, and Wells argues that the remaining Sosuaners had become “consummate free agents, tending to their businesses and coming together only as shareholders to set policy for the [community] cooperatives and to address matters affecting the municipality” (329).

But there was something wrong with this picture of an idyllic communal enterprise in decline, founded by noble Jewish refugees from Nazi Europe. For a long time Sosúa had not actually functioned as a cooperative agricultural colony. As early as 1945, residents had begun to favour privatized corporations over communal enterprise. Settlers were not close friends. As some became wealthier than others, envy and bad feeling often flourished. And as the Jewish presence declined during the 1960s and 1970s, non-Jewish Dominicans moved in, working formerly Jewish farms and buying up beachfront properties on which, in some cases, luxurious homes overlooking the ocean were built. By 1970, Sosúa was alive

and well; but of a population of 4,204, fewer than 200 were Jews.

A second, “globalized” change came after 1980 with the construction of a nearby international airport and improved highways linking Sosúa to Dominican cities. No longer an agricultural colony, Sosúa’s remaining Jews (some now based in the U.S.) began to invest in tourism in the hope of drawing blue-collar workers from the U.S. and Canada in large numbers. Remaining cooperative lands along the beach were sold off to build hotels. Otto Papernik, who had left for New York in 1951, came back to Sosúa, bought a house, and turned it into a hotel. Edith Meyerstein, still living in Sosúa, opened an amber jewelry shop directed at a growing tourist market. In fairly short order, though, the tourist industry was Dominicanized, further erasing Sosúa’s Jewish cultural identity. Today, the town looks and feels much like hundreds of other Caribbean resort towns. There are European newspapers available for purchase; the number of residents rises and falls with the tourist season; souvenir shops abound; and the town is divided ominously by class and race, with working-class Dominicans who clean hotel rooms living in a sector of town never visited by tourists.

The single largest group of expatriates in Sosúa is German, an unhappy irony for some of the remaining Jewish residents. Germans now own bakeries, internet cafés, and hotels, among many other businesses. Moreover, Sosúa has become a notable destination for sex tourism with the accompanying exploitation of African-Dominican and African-Haitian prostitutes by white tourists with dollars in their pockets. For many in the Dominican Republic, Sosúa has come to represent violence tied to the sex trade and the accompanying proliferation of HIV-AIDS. A very small number of visitors come to Sosúa to look for its Jewish heritage, but by and large, that has all but disappeared. ♦

Argentinean-Canadian mezzo-soprano

FABIANA KATZ

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