

THE LAND OF ISRAEL AND CUBAN POLITICS: THE ROLE OF THE JNF IN PRESERVING JEWISH IDENTITY UNDER THE BATISTA DICTATORSHIP*

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On March 10, 1952, in a short and bloodless coup d'état, Fulgencio Batista seized the presidency of Cuba. Only eight months prior, the morale of the Cuban population was shattered by the suicide of Eduardo Chibás — the symbol of political integrity. As a member of the Students' Directorate, Chibás was one of the heroes of the 1933 revolution, who represented the aspirations of the Cuban people, and fought for independence, social justice and decent administration. Frustrated by Batista's seizure of power, they lived in political exile until their leader, Ramón Grau San Martín, head of the *Partido Revolucionario Cubano* — *Auténticos* returned to power.

Grau was elected to the presidency in 1944, but his democratic administration was tainted by corruption and continued submission to political gangsterism. Disappointed by the betrayal of his ideals, Chibás initiated a split among the *Auténticos*, and founded the rival party — *Ortodoxos*. He conducted a fierce attack against corruption, weakening the government's authority.¹

Disillusioned by the moral deterioration of the *Auténticos'* government and its submission to political gangsterism, the people reacted with indifference and cynicism to the return to power of the ex-President and Chief-of Staff, who violated the democratic constitution of 1940 that he himself had helped to formulate. The upper and middle classes saw in

* This article is part of a larger study on the history of the Jewish National Fund in Cuba, prepared under the auspices of the Research Institute of the JNF.

1 Louis A. Pérez, Jr., *Cuba Between Reform and Revolution*, Oxford University Press, 1995 (2nd edition), pp. 283-290; Hugh Thomas, *Cuba, the Pursuit of Freedom*, Harper 1 Row, New York 1971, pp. 737-786.

Batista a guarantee to order and stability; in the short range they were to benefit from his administration that protected their interests.

The only manifestation of protest against the *golpe de estado* came from the students at the University of Havana, who became the major force in the revolutionary opposition to Batista's military dictatorship, before primacy was taken by Castro's 26 of July movement. Participation in the revolutionary conspiracy, which was extremely dangerous, was basically a young people's movement; it reflected the rebellion of the students' generation against their parents who complied with the new regime.

The Jews, like the rest of the Cuban bourgeoisie, were not affected by the rise of the military dictatorship. On the contrary, they experienced an unprecedented improvement in their standard of life, and enjoyed the pleasures of prosperity. Economic progress and stability motivated a rash of communal building and the flourish of institutional life. Their confident mood is reflected in *The Golden Anniversary* — published in 1956 to celebrate the jubilee of the United Hebrew Congregation, the oldest Jewish organization in Cuba:

The Jewish population in Cuba is steadily increasing, and the constant influx of the new industries, many of which are operated by Jewish investors, betokens a bright future for the United Hebrew Congregation. We no longer need "to wait and see what the Future is likely to have in store for us"²...for our Future is at our very doorstep.

In retrospect, this attitude may be seen as a form of self-deception, but at that time the Jews were only modest participants in the last banquet of the old regime, in which they had their first taste of good life after long years of deprivation and hard work.

The Jewish population was more interested in its economic and social well-being than in Cuban politics. Since the foundation of the State of Israel, its institutional life revolved around the Zionist movement; the campaigns, headed by distinguished visitors from Israel, became the major social events. Keren Kayemet Leisrael — the Jewish National Fund — more than any other organization, emphasized the presence of Zionist activities in Jewish daily life. Small children who put their weekly *centavo* in the *pushke* (money box), members of youth movements who

2 United Hebrew Congregation Temple Beth Israel, *Golden Anniversary 1906-1956*, Published by United Hebrew Congregation in celebrating of its Fiftieth Anniversary, Havana-Cuba, 1956.

were responsible to empty the boxes, the ladies of WIZO who prepared the *Purim* Bazaar, or the activists who made the collection on weddings and anniversaries — all felt like participants in the construction of the Land of Israel. According to Mina Cherches, then secretary of the Keren Kayemet, the blue box was considered *kadosh* (sacred) in every Jewish Cuban home.³

This article deals mainly with the second generation of Cuban Jews — the children of the Jewish immigrants, many of whom were university students during the 1950s. Its purpose is to analyze the role played by the JNF in shaping their identity — as Cubans and as Jews — in light of the revolutionary banner on the one hand, and the Zionist cause, on the other.

The Role of the JNF in Jewish Life

The activities of Keren Kayemet Leisrael were based on the idea that every Jew, regardless of his age or wealth, has to participate in the redemption of the Land of Israel. A number of symbolic gestures were implemented to express this participation, such as inscriptions in the Golden Book, the printing of stamps commemorating personalities and events, and most important of all — purchase of trees to be planted in Eretz Israel.⁴

Though familiar with these practices from their communities of origin, Cuban Jews were very slow to adapt them. The Zionist roof organization — *Unión Sionista de Cuba* — was founded in 1924, but systematic work on behalf of the JNF only started in 1929.⁵ During the 1920s and early 1930s the Jewish street of Havana was dominated by progressive elements that encouraged Yiddish culture and socialist ideals. The *Kultur Farain*, controlled by Communist leaders, was considered as the center of Jewish social activity, before it was suppressed by the Machado regime.⁶ Though the workers gradually moved into the “bourgeois” class — as

3 Interview with Mina Cherches, Tel Aviv 1994, Institute of Historical Research of JNF.

4 Silvia Schenkolewski-Kroll, *The Zionist Movement and the Zionist Parties in Argentina, 1935-1948* (Hebrew), The Magnes Press, Jerusalem 1996, p. 53 n. 57.

5 Abrami to Central Office of JNF, 8 April 1929, Yosef Hachohen to JNF, 22 June 1929, Central Zionist Archives (CZA) KKL5/5436.

6 Margalit Bejarano, “Deproletarianization of Cuban Jews”, *Judaica Latinoamericana*, AMILAT (eds.), Magnes Press, Jerusalem 1988, pp. 57-67.

owners of workshops or as small merchants — they tended to remain loyal to their Yiddish secular ideals.

The small *Unión Sionista de Cuba* became a central force in Cuban Jewish life on the eve of World War II in light of the plight of European Jewry and the tragic situation of the refugees, some of whom reached the Cuban shores.⁷ The construction of Eretz Israel as a haven for persecuted Jews became a humanitarian cause that created a common front for both the Zionists and the politically uncommitted Jewish middle class.⁸ Zionist self-fulfilment became identified with the collection of funds on behalf of the two national campaigns: Keren Hayesod (the Foundation Fund) that constructed Eretz Israel, and the Keren Kayemet (JNF) that redeemed its soil.

During World War II circumstances were ideal for the development of philanthropic Zionism. News about the systematic extermination of European Jews instilled horror and panic and intensified the identification with the fate of the Jewish people. At the same time, the economic conditions of the Jews in Cuba improved considerably and their political status stabilized so that they were able to contribute to public causes. The presence of refugees from Belgium,⁹ among them experienced Zionists leaders, was instrumental in shaping the contribution patterns of the Cuban Jews.

The arrival of the JNF representative Natan Bistritzky in 1943 marks a turning point in the history of the organization in Cuba. A famous Hebrew poet and a gifted orator, he centered his efforts in the convincing of his audience of the just way of Zionism, and won the enthusiastic support of Jews and non-Jews alike. Bistritzky was responsible for the foundation of the *Comité Cubano Pro Palestina Hebreá* that encouraged the solidarity of the Cuban people and government with the idea of a Jewish state. He also played a decisive role in the ideological education

7 On the problem of the Jewish refugees in Cuba see: Robert M. Levine, *Tropical Diaspora, The Jewish Experience in Cuba*, The University of Florida Press, Gainesville 1993, pp. 79 ff.; Margalit Bejarano, *La historia del buque San Luis: La perspectiva cubana*, Instituto Abraham Harman de Judaísmo Contemporáneo, Universidad Hebrea de Jerusalem, 1999.

8 This process, as well as the victory of the Zionists over the Communists in the struggle for the control of the Jewish community, is dealt with in chapters 3 and 4 of my research on the history of the JNF in Cuba.

9 One of the main sources of economic progress was the diamond industry, established by Jewish refugees from Belgium. Levine, *Tropical Diaspora*, pp. 162-165.

of the local Jewish population and in the institutionalization of its Zionist activities.¹⁰

In the period between the end of the war and the foundation of the State of Israel several Cuban Jews went through an ideological transformation, moving from the “progressive left” towards Zionism.¹¹ More significant, however, was the shift in the orientation of the *Colegio Autónomo del Centro Israelita*, the largest Jewish day school that shaped the ideology of the younger generation.

Traditionally a Yiddishist non-Zionist school, the *Colegio Autónomo del Centro Israelita* claimed political neutrality, although it was widely known that its director Eliahu Eliovich identified with the Bund. The change came about with the appointment of a new schoolteacher — Willy Tzoran (Tchornitzky) — a member of a kibbutz in the Galilee who came to Cuba as a leader of Hashomer Hatzair. His first impression, upon his arrival in 1953, was that Eliovich “sees the school as his private creation,” and that none of the board members dares to oppose him and to “abandon the school in the hands of the Zionists.”¹² Keren Kayemet activities were, however, gradually integrated into the school program. Children initiated campaigns for the planting of trees in Israel, while the study of the Hebrew language and the geography of Israel became part of the curriculum.¹³

The change of atmosphere in the Jewish community was also reflected in the main Yiddish newspaper *Havaner Lebn*, though its editor, Sender Kaplan, was one of the central Zionist leaders and had always maintained his strong pro-Zionist attitude. The news pages, that had previously covered both events in world and Cuban affairs, became exclusively dedicated to what transpired in Israel and in the Jewish world. This

10 Margalit Bejarano, “Bistritzky en Cuba: Su influencia sobre la estructuración del Keren Kayemet Leisrael y su actividad política entre los cubanos,” *Encuentro y alteridad, vida y cultura judía en América Latina*, Judit Bokser de Liwerant and Alicia Gojman de Backal (eds.), Fondo de Cultura Económica, México 1999, pp. 726-737.

11 See for example the interview with David Utiansky (Tel Aviv, 1981), Oral History Division, Institute of Contemporary Jewry, The Hebrew University (ICJ).

12 Willy to Arye, 2 December 1953, Hashomer Hatzair Archives, Guivat Haviva, (1)85.31. For the formal orientation of the school see: E. Eliovich, “25 Yor Yidishe Shul Beim Zenter” (25 Years of the School of the Jewish Center), *Hemshech Oif Kubaner Erd*, Havana 1950-51, pp. 31-32.

13 Eliovich to Central Office, 6 September 1954, Tchornitzky to Arzi, 29 October 1954, CZA, KKL5/21087; Graiver to Reznicoff, 20 March 1955, Shaposhnick and Raich to Latin American Dept., 5 April 1955, CZA, KKL5/21088.

change may be attributed to the acculturation in Cuba, that ended the role of the Jewish newspaper as an information channel to the Cuban media, but it also reflects the enormous interest and involvement in Israeli affairs.

The Role of the JNF in the Relations between Cuba and Israel

The Cuban society, though open and friendly, was slow to integrate the different immigration groups. The *negros*, *mulatos* and *chinos* could not conceal their ethnic origin, but even the *gallegos* and *moros* did not meld into the *ajíaco*¹⁴ — the symbol of the Cuban melting pot. In this mosaic, Jews were known as *polacos* — a word sometimes used in a derogatory manner, but was basically a popular nickname for the Jewish minority.

Though the majority of Cuban Jews were born in Poland, they did not regard it as their homeland, and they tended to interpret the word *polaco* as discriminatory — a sign of their inferior status in Cuban society.¹⁵ To win the respect of the Cuban people the Jews had to prove that they were not an uprooted group, but a part of a recognized national entity. When the *Comité Cubano Pro Palestina Hebrea* was founded, Zionist activists wrote to Jerusalem that they were viewed with more respect: “within one night we were converted from a colony of ‘polacos’... into a people of Hebrews with national aspirations.”¹⁶

The active support of the *Comité Pro Palestina* did not alter the decision of President Grau San Martín to vote against the partition of Palestine.¹⁷ Cuban Jews, however, received with great enthusiasm the United Nations’ decision of November 1947, which granted the legal basis for the foundation of the State of Israel. Twenty Cuban Jews, most

14 This metaphor was formulated by anthropologist Fernando Ortiz, who compared the Cuban society to the traditional spicy dish of Indian origin, to which every new immigration group added its own ingredients. Fernando Ortiz, “Los factores humanos de la Cubanidad,” *Revista Bimestre Cubana*, Vol. 46, 1940, pp. 161-186.

15 See for example interview with: Israel Bichachi, Miami 1987, ICJ.

16 Zilber and Levis to Central Office, 25 February 1944, CZA, KKL5/13232.

17 For the conflicts behind the Cuban decision see: Ignacio Klich, “Fact, Fiction and Faction on Cuba’s Opposition to Jewish Statehood in Palestine, 1944-1949,” *Judaica Latinoamericana*, AMILAT (eds.), Magnes Press, Jerusalem 1997, vol. III, pp. 275-302.

of them Sephardim, enlisted in the Israeli army as volunteers, to fight for the country's independence.¹⁸

In 1949 the Administration of Prío Socarrás officially recognized Israel; and its consulate was opened in 1951 with Sender Kaplan as Honorary Consul. Leaders of the Unión Sionista, who actually ran the consulate and represented the interests of Israel, financed the rent and the furniture of the consulate.¹⁹ Their dedication was proof of their ideological identification with the historical homeland of the Jews, but also of their own interests to protect their status within the Cuban society.

Diplomatic relations between the two countries were established under Batista, with a non-resident representative. Yosef Kessary, Israel's Ambassador in Mexico, presented his credentials to the Cuban President in 1954. In his report to Jerusalem Kessary wrote that his hosts in the Foreign Ministry referred to the local Jews as "*votre colonie*." President Batista told him: "You have a very good colony in Cuba. They are good Cubans and [good] Jews."²⁰

Batista did not see a contradiction between the two identities of Cuban Jews, and he was ready to recognize their special ties with Israel. He personally participated, in the donation of 200 trees, in the Keren Kayemet campaign to plant a forest named after José Martí. The forest, in the Judean Mountains, marked the participation of the Jewish community in the celebrations of the hundredth anniversary of the birth of Martí — the venerated Cuban national hero.²¹

In their correspondence with Israel, JNF activists in Cuba emphasized the importance of the forest in strengthening the political relations between the two countries. Due to their insistence, the forest was planted on Martí's birthday in January 1955 with representatives of the Cuban government and the Israel Foreign Ministry presiding. A parallel ceremony took place in Havana, where distinguished Cuban personalities and local Zionist leaders adorned the monument of Martí in the Parque

18 For the memories of one of these volunteers see: Alberto Forma, "*Altalena*," *Memorias de Israel*; Published by the author, Miami 1998. See also interviews with: Nahman Solowiejczyk, Tel Aviv 1981, Israel Bichachi, Miami 1991, Carlos D'Gabriel, Miami 1991, Jacobo and Alberto Forma, Miami 1991.

19 Blumencranz and Skornik to Schwartz, 15 June 1951, CZA, F14/119; Interviews with David Utiansky, Tel Aviv 1981, Israel Luski, Miami 1984, ICJ.

20 Kessary to Malat, 20 July 1954, Israel State Archives [ISA] HZ3/2/455.

21 Tuchman and Raich to Latin American Dept., 19 May 1954, Shames and Tuchman to Main Office, 14 October 1954, CZA, KKL5/21087; Circular signed by Berezdivin and Schwartz, 15 October 1953, CZA, F14/58.

Central with flowers. The Jewish community thus expressed its Cuban identity through the forestation of the Land of Israel.²²

The JNF and the Process of Acculturation

The Jewish community in the post-war era sought its collective integration within the Cuban society as a socially respectable group, but tried to avoid individual assimilation. Interviews reveal the strong Jewish identity of the second generation, both among Ashkenazim and Sephardim. Parents did not encourage social contacts of their children with non-Jewish friends for fear that they would lead to mixed marriages. Jewish children saw themselves — and were seen by their Cuban friends — as belonging to a different national group; most of them joined Zionist youth movements or community social clubs.²³

The acculturation of most Jewish youths, and in many ways also of their parents, manifested itself in the adaptation of social patterns of their Cuban counterparts to a Jewish environment, in which they felt more comfortable. Women whose economic situation improved engaged in charities in Jewish frameworks, and young men who liked football or volleyball played on Jewish teams. The Purim ball of the Keren Kayemet, with the Queen Esther contest, became the most fashionable social event of the year.

The Purim Ball was organized by the JNF Committee, together with WIZO and Hashomer Hatzair, and received the support of the whole Jewish community. Three girls were chosen as candidates for the contest, and each had to sell tickets, in favor of her election. The girl who succeeded in selling the most votes — not necessarily the prettiest — was crowned as Queen Esther; the other two were named the *damas de honor*. The crowning ball became very popular in Jewish circles, but it was also a political social event of the Jewish colony. Cuban politicians were invited to the ceremony, which was broadcasted on both radio and TV, and publicized in the *sociales* section of the Cuban press.²⁴

22 Graiver to JNF Cuba, 18 November 1954, Shames and Tuchman, 14 October 1954, CZA, KKL5/21087; See press clippings of the ceremony in CZA, KKL5/22484.

23 See, for example, interviews with: Eugenia Credi, Miami 1984, Benzion Cherches, Miami 1984, Rafael Kravec, Miami 1991, ICJ.

24 Matz, Falikson, Kreps to Arzi, 14 April 1954, Tzoran to Ezrahi, 5 September 1954, CZA, KKL5/21087; Shuster-Hazor-Rashbam to Central Office, 7 January 1957, CZA, KKL5/22770.

The Queen Esther contest became the largest source of income for the JNF in Cuba. Candidates were chosen amongst girls whose father could contribute for their election, not only through his own donations, but also through those of his business associates — Jews and non-Jews alike.²⁵ In one case, the Queen sold tickets in the amount of \$8,000 — a record achievement in the history of Keren Kayemet in Latin America. Her father had good contacts among police officials, and many votes were obtained from Cuban policemen who probably knew very little about the Jewish National Fund.²⁶

The collective entrance of Jews into Cuban society was to be achieved by the building of the *Patronato* — the Great Synagogue and the House of the Jewish Community. While most of the Jewish institutions were still centered in Old Havana, the Patronato was located in the rich suburb of Vedado, thus representing the social mobility of the community. The Cuban architect Aquiles Capablanca designed the building, and saw it as a combination of the contemporary spirit and the Jewish tradition: “This synagogue...will be like a spiritual message, made of stone, that the Hebrews of Cuba bequeath to the future generations.”²⁷

The corner stone, placed in 1951, was brought from Mount Zion in Jerusalem “to prove symbolically the eternal bond between the Jewish Diaspora and the Land of Israel.”²⁸ In a book published to honor the event, the Patronato’s President — Leon Hiller — presented the objectives of the new institution:

To build the House of the Jewish Community means to secure its future... (it) will be the home of all the Hebrew community for the satisfaction of all our necessities — national, religious, cultural, beneficiary and educational as well as recreation and sport... We aspire that our community will improve and rise in all the areas,

25 Tuchman and Raich to L.A. Dept., 7 April 1954, CZA, KKL5/21087; Hazor, Grinberg, Tuchman to L.A. Dept., 27 December 1955, Shuster, Rashbam to Arzi, Peskin, 24 September 1957, CZA, KKL5/22769.

26 Graiver to Drosnin, 29 March 1956, CZA, KKL5/21088; Grinberg-Hazor-Tuchman to L.A. Dept., 12 March 1956, CZA, KKL5/22769. The father was murdered in 1958, probably due to his relations with the Batista regime. *Havaner Lebn*, 5 March 1958, p. 1.

27 Dionisio Castiel, “Una charla con el Arquitecto y los Miembros del Comité de Construcción del Edificio,” *Der Gruntstein - La Piedra Fundamental*, Patronato de la Casa Hebrea, La Habana 1951, pp. 34-42.

28 Invitation to Aba Eban, signed by Hiller and Heizler, 29 May 1951, ISA, HZ97/38. Hiller to Kaplan, 30 March 1951, Lebanon to Malat, 18 May 1951, ISA HZ2574/16.

and that we will be able to show to the Cuban society an encouraging example of a colony that realizes a high social and cultural life. I hope it will be so. Our dignity as Hebrews and our love for Cuba will assure this path.²⁹

The magnificent building of the Patronato was inaugurated in 1955 in the presence of important government officials; the most distinguished guest being “President Batista (who) entered the *schul* with a *yarmulke*.”³⁰ The new institution, however, provoked criticism because it created inequality amongst its members: The sponsors who bought shares to finance the construction became the *patronos* — the owners of the institution. While the first priority of the founders was to secure the Jewish future of their children in Cuba, Zionist leaders argued that it was more important to support the State of Israel.³¹ The daughter of Isaac Gurwitz, who headed the construction committee, concludes that in spite of these conflicts the Patronato became the “Ambassador” of the Jewish community under Batista, and it remained the representative institution also during the Castro regime.³²

A different method of integration was proposed by a group of young professionals, who aspired to create a cultural bridge between the two sides of their identity. In 1953 they founded the *Agrupación Cultural Hebreo Cubana* in order:

To achieve a greater cultural identification between the Hebrew residents of Cuba and the gentile Cubans lovers of culture ...(and) to improve the divulgation on our purposes and those of the State of Israel.³³

The activities of the *Agrupación Cultural* included the invitation of well-known Cuban intellectuals to lecture in Jewish circles, a series of publications on Jewish and Cuban themes, and the support of scientific

29 “El señor León Hiller Afirma: ‘levantar la casa de la comunidad significa asegurar el futuro de la vida hebrea en Cuba,’ *Der Gruntstein* (The Corner Stone), Patronat fun der Yidisher Heim, Havana 1951, p. 15.

30 Interview with Aron Yuken, Miami 1987, ICJ.

31 Kessari to Malat, 20 July 1954, ISA HZ455/2/3: Interview with Moshe Levin, Miami 1993, Research Institute of KKL.

32 Interview with Helena Wek, Miami 1993, ICJ. See also: Levine, *op. cit.*, pp. 211-212, Margalit Bejarano, *La comunidad hebrea de Cuba — la memoria y la historia*, Instituto Abraham Harman de Judaísmo Contemporáneo, Universidad Hebrea de Jerusalem, 1996, pp. 206-8, 210-11, 229-231, 234-38.

33 Reyler and Miller to Director of Malat, 20 April 1954, ISA, HZ2574/16.

institutions in Israel. One of their important achievements was the naming of a public school in Havana “Estado de Israel”.

Félix Reyler, the President of the *Agrupación*, was a brilliant lawyer. After the revolution he immigrated to Miami, where he played a central role in the organization of the Cuban Jewish community and the establishment of relations with the Cuban exile colony there. The Vice-President, Marcos Matterín, and the Secretary, José Miller, chose to support the revolution and maintained good relations with its regime; they continued to, however, remain loyal also to their Jewish ancestry: Matterín was the director of the Patronato’s library and studied the history of Cuban Jews. Miller, who practiced as a dental surgeon, has served as the Jewish Community’s President since 1981.³⁴ In different ways the three main activists of the *Agrupación Cultural Hebreo Cubana* continued to bridge the cultural gap between Cubans and Jews.

The JNF and the Revolutionary Movement

With the undermining of Batista’s dictatorship, identification with the Cuban *patria* could not remain separated from politics. Though high school and university students were highly exposed to politics, only a small number of Jewish youth actually became involved. Max Lesnick, President of the Youth Organization of the Ortodoxo Party, inherited his political inclinations from his mother’s Catholic family, and was successful in deflecting prejudices inflicted as a result of his father’s Jewish name. He explains the failure of his attempts to attract Jewish friends to political activities due to “self imposed prejudices” — a fear of discrimination where there was no ground for one.³⁵

According to Lesnick, the few Jews who participated in politics joined the revolutionary movement because they could conceal their activities from their parents. The presence of Jews among the revolutionaries was very small, and they were generally engaged in the collection of funds or in giving shelter to friends who went into hiding. Very few engaged in revolutionary fighting; the best known among them was Enrique Oltuski, who organized the 26 of July movement in Las Villas.³⁶

34 William Gralnick, *Death of a Different Salesman*, based on an interview with Marcos Matterín shortly before his death in 1983. Interview with Dr. José Miller, Havana 1990, ICJ.

35 Interview with Max Lesnick, Miami 1984, ICJ.

36 Hugh Thomas, *Cuba, The Pursuit of Freedom*, New York, Harper and Row, pp. 867, 918, 974, 1065.

The apolitical image of the Jews was the best protection against Batista's police who considered every young person as a potential revolutionary. Interviews reveal cases in which Jewish suspects were set free due to their *polaco* names. In one case, David Rot, then secretary of *Hashomer Hatzair*, was able to convince a group of armed policemen, who rounded up the *Unión Sionista* while they were organizing their summer camp, that the equipment they gathered, which included ropes and kitchen knives, were to be used for the innocent activities of the *polaco* boy scouts.³⁷

Hashomer Hatzair was a youth movement that combined Zionist and Socialist ideology. In Cuba it had always been the most active collaborator with Keren Kayemet, since its foundation in 1933. Members of *Hashomer Hatzair* distributed the blue boxes and were responsible for the *harakot* — monthly visits in Jewish houses in which they emptied the JNF boxes. For several years, however, the socialist orientation of the movement was very mild, and Jewish parents regarded it as a social framework and a barrier against assimilation.³⁸

The Socialist element in the *Hashomer Hatzair* ideology in Cuba became more apparent only following World War II. This was due to the educational work of the movement's *shlichim* (messengers), who called for personal self-fulfilment, namely immigration to Israel and settlement in a kibbutz.³⁹

The establishment of the State of Israel sharpened the political differences between the Zionist youth movements, in particular the rivalry between *Hashomer Hatzair* and Betar — founded in 1940 by followers of Jabotinsky. The two movements were almost exclusively Ashkenazi, and though most of their activities were held in Spanish, they were able to communicate in Yiddish with the *shlichim* arriving from Israel. The Sephardic youths were organized separately in the framework of Maccabi (founded in 1934). Many of them sympathized with Betar especially since two of the Sephardic volunteers for Israel's War of Liberation were killed on board of the *Altalena*.⁴⁰ In spite of their

37 Interview with David Rot, Dvir 1990.

38 Nivenu, Iton Bogrim *Hashomer Hatzair* Cuba, May 1955, Hashomer Hatzair Archives, 1.7-1 (2b); Interview of *Hashomer Hatzair* group, interviewed by Yechiel Harari, n.d., received from *Hashomer Hatzair* Archives, ICJ.

39 Ibid.

40 The *Altalena* was a ship with armaments for the *Irgun*, that was bombed by the newly created IDF forces in the port of Tel Aviv in June 1948. See note 15 and interview with George Feldenkreis, Miami 1991, ICJ.

political affinity with Betar, from which they received their military training, the ex-soldiers who returned to Cuba founded their own organization.

A new Zionist youth movement — *Hanoar Hazioni* — was founded in 1952, under the auspices of the Unión Sionista. The movement identified with the General Zionists and appealed to the circles of the Patronato.⁴¹ By that time the socialist banner had lost its popularity in the Jewish street; *Hashomer Hatzair*, however, remained the largest youth movement and the most active on behalf of the JNF.

The relationship between *Hashomer Hatzair* and Socialist elements in the Cuban society receive special meaning in view of the Castro revolution that ensued. The interview with Itzjak Zilber, member of the first Aliya group in 1949, traces the connection of *Hashomer Hatzair* leaders with future officials of the revolutionary regime with personal contacts established during the 1940s, that included his schoolmates — brothers Alfredo and José Guevara, and his university professor — Raúl Roa.⁴² As *Hashomer Hatzair* leader he obtained Socialist literature in Spanish from the publishing house of the PSP (Partido Socialista Popular), directed by Carlos Rafael Rodríguez. The Communist leader showed interest in the Zionist Socialist movement, and was invited to lecture on socialism in a summer *moshava* (camp).

Since Communism was forbidden under Batista, the reading of Marx and Engels became dangerous. Though uninvolved in local revolutionary activities, *Hashomer Hatzair* members had the taste of underground adventure when they had to conceal the forbidden red literature they were reading. Their rebelliousness, however, found expression in their direct conflict with their own parents, who generally opposed their *aliya*. Haim Hayet, *Hashomer Hatzair* secretary, reported to Israel that due to the guerrilla fighting there is a curfew at night: “Nevertheless, our members continue with their work illegally, because any political or social activity is forbidden.”⁴³

The first group of *Hashomer Hatzair* immigrated to Israel in 1949 and joined Kibbutz Ga’ash; it was followed by a second group in 1954 that settled in Dvir. These pioneers, however, were only a small minority

41 Berezdivin to President of Unión Sionista, 8 April 1952, CZA, F14-26, *Hanoar Hazioni* to Unión Sionista, 6 August 1952, 11 August 1952, CZA, F14/90.

42 Alfredo Guevara (no connection with Che Guevara) was director of the ICAIC (the Cuban Institute of Cinema) and Raúl Roa was Foreign Minister.

43 Jayet to the Jewish Agency, 2 August 1957, *Hashomer Hatzair* Archives, (3)1-7.1; see also Interview with Hashomer Hatzair group.

among the members of their movement who actually interpreted their Zionist ideology in terms of *hagshama* — self-realization by settling on a kibbutz in Israel. Zionism, including the educational work of Keren Kayemet, was perceived by most Cuban Jews as a philanthropic enterprise. In the words of Guedalia Feldenkreiz, who was a Keren Hayesod employee: “sionismo era recoger dinero” (Zionism was fundraising).⁴⁴

The largest donors to the United Jewish Appeal or the Israel Bonds were also the leaders of the Patronato, who strove to become the representatives of the Jewish community at large. Since Zionism was measured by financial contributions, their prestige was on the rise, while that of the veteran leaders of the Unión Sionista, and in particular the activists of Keren Kayemet, began to decline. While the annual income of the United Jewish Appeal in Cuba was around \$100,000, Keren Kayemet activists, who asked for donations at family celebrations, became a nuisance. In addition, competition with other Zionist and local campaigns became unbearable, particularly since the economic situation started to deteriorate. Avraham Peskin, the last JNF *shaliach* to visit Cuba, bitterly wrote: “The activists of Keren Kayemet are of the lowest rank. They don’t have any public power, and during the last period their prestige had greatly declined...[because] it is a matter of small coins.”⁴⁵

A few months prior to the revolution representatives of numerous Jewish organizations continued their competition for the money of those same Jews, though the financial situation deteriorated considerably as Castro was conducting guerrilla warfare from the Sierra Maestra and terrorist activities were causing panic in the cities. Unaware of the situation in Cuba, the JNF central office in Jerusalem continued to scold local activists for the decline in contributions. In October 1958 Peskin reported:

The political situation is horrible. Bombs explode every night, and dead bodies are rolling in the streets... The income from the shops is nil and everybody complains. People are even afraid to come to meetings.⁴⁶

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44 Interview with George Feldenkreiz. Other *Hashomer Hatzair* groups that immigrated to Israel joined Dvir or settled in Ga’aton and Yechiam.

45 Peskin to Graiver and Arzi, 4 October 1958, CZA, KKL5/24113.

46 Ibid.

The Castro revolution created a totally new situation in Cuba, which compelled the Jews to redefine their identity. The destruction of the bourgeoisie uncovered the volatility of their integration in the Cuban society, and the majority opted for emigration to the United States. Like their counterparts in the Cuban exile community, their identity remained tied to the pre-Revolutionary era.

The revolutionary regime denounced every form of discrimination, and it protected the religious rights of the Jewish community. It demanded, however, total identification with the revolutionary principles: Religious practice was undesirable but tolerable, but further financial support of Israel became totally inconceivable.

Jews who preferred to return to their historical homeland were treated with respect by the new authorities that saw them as fellow idealists. The leadership of *Hashomer Hatzair* analyzed the new situation by applying the theories of the Socialist Zionist leader Dov Ber Borochoy. They argued that the revolution exposed the narrow economic structure of the Jewish minority, which prevented their transformation into regular people. They were thus faced with the dilemma between assimilation that would lead to a national suicide, and emigration to another country — a temporary medicine that would not cure their illness. The leadership of *Hashomer Hatzair* decided that the only possible solution for the Jewish problem in Cuba was Aliya:

First, the Jewish people have to be re-established as a normal nation in the land of our forefathers, in the old/new homeland Eretz Israel. Second, we advocate for the Pioneer Colonizing Movement that was, is and will continue to be the avant-garde of the Jewish people in the Diaspora as well as in Israel. We have to clarify that the kibbutz is ... a form of life in itself, and a prototype of a just and progressive society...⁴⁷

Conclusion

In the Jewish cemetery of Havana one can still see the engravings of Keren Kayemet certificates for trees, planted in memory of the persons buried under the tombstones, evidence of the role of the JNF in the life cycle of Cuban Jews. Since the founding of the State of Israel, the Keren

47 *Histadrut Hashomer Hatzair Becuba, Hanhaga Harashit*, 14 November 1960, *Hashomer Hatzair Archives*, (3a)1-7.1.

Kayemet became the expression of Zionist consensus within the community, translating the support in the integration of Eretz Israel into daily life.

This consensus was based on the dual identity of Cuban Jews, whose attachment to the Land of Israel received political legitimacy under Batista's Administration. Recognized by government officials, as well as by the Cuban society at large as a different national group, the Jews strove to increase their collective prestige as a respected colony, but not to assimilate as individuals in Cuban society. Keren Kayemet, whose main interest was to obtain financial support, collaborated with the local Jewish leadership in developing a co-existence between the two identities — Cuban and Jewish — that facilitated their support of the State of Israel without antagonizing their loyalty to Cuba.

Only two small groups could not accept this compromise: The few who joined the revolutionary movement and the pioneer immigrants to Israel. Both aspired to establish a just society based on socialist principles, who lived up to their ideological beliefs. They differed, however, in the choice of their national identity and in their political loyalties.