

COSTA RICA AND THE JEWS DURING THE HOLOCAUST

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Resumen

Costa Rica y la República Dominicana, dos naciones de tamaño comparable, la primera de régimen democrático impecable y la otra sometida a una de las dictaduras más crueles de América Latina, actuaron de formas completamente diferentes respecto a la salvación de judíos durante el Holocausto. Este trabajo analiza la actitud de Costa Rica.

Como las demás naciones latinoamericanas, Costa Rica sostenía que la única categoría de refugiados judíos que serían aceptables eran los agricultores. Sin embargo, por presión de la opinión pública, se paralizó un proyecto de colonización agrícola que instituciones judías de Estados Unidos trataban de desarrollar. Asimismo, las autoridades negaron la entrada de los poquísimos refugiados que llegaron a sus puertos. Por consiguiente, la aportación de Costa Rica a la salvación de judíos fue nula durante toda la época del Holocausto. Los antisemitas entre los ticos se imponían.

Introduction

Looking at the history of the Jews in the Nazi era, there is no question that 1938 was a pivotal year during the pre-World War II period. The Austrian *Anschluss* in March 1938; the Evian Conference in July 1938 ostensibly convened to find a solution for the refugee problem; the *Kristallnacht* pogroms across Germany on the night of November 9, 1938 – these were some of occurrences that stood out that year, although there were others. After the Evian Conference, one small Latin American country grabbed

the headlines for its magnanimous offer to take in Jewish refugees: The Dominican Republic. General Rafael Molina Trujillo's pledge to absorb 100,000 Jews from Nazi Germany, U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt's support for the proposal, the efforts of the Intergovernmental Committee to draw up a resettlement program in that country, and the work of American Jewish organizations to implement the program – all these received widespread media coverage. The Dominican Republic has thus been cited in general histories of the Holocaust and has been the subject of several monographs.¹

What was the contribution of Costa Rica, a small country in Central America, to saving lives by opening their borders to Jews on the run? On the following pages, we will attempt to answer that question.

Costa Rica and the Dominican Republic were roughly the same size: Costa Rica had an area of 50,900 square kilometers and the Dominican Republic, 48,442 square kilometers. However, the Dominican Republic was ruled by a dictator who had taken the country by force – all the authorities called him *El Generalísimo* Trujillo Molina, Benefactor de la Patria, whereas Costa Rica was a full-fledged democracy whose president and governments were elected every four years. No revolutions or coups had occurred for decades. The Dominican Republic was the more populous of the two: According to a census conducted on May 13, 1935, it had a population of 1,479,417. A 1927 census in Costa Rica found 471,524 residents, which rose to only 857,069 by 1950. In the second half of the 1930s, Costa Rica presumably had less than half the population of the Dominican Republic, which means there was more room to accommodate refugees.² What effect, if any, did the democratic regime and the sparse population have on the rescue of Jews?

At the various conferences of Latin American countries in the 1930s, and at Evian, too, the countries emphasized that the only type of immigration

- 1 Two leading monographs that also append a full bibliographical listing of previous books: Allen Wells, *Tropical Zion, General Trujillo, FDR, and the Jews of Sosúa*, Durham and London, 2009; Marion A. Kaplan, *Dominican Haven, The Jewish Refugee Settlement in Sosúa, 1940-1945*, New York 2008.
- 2 Carlos Meléndez Chavarri, “El medio Geográfico”, y Marcos W. Borgan Millar, “La población”, in: Chester Zelaya (Prólogo y Dirección), *Costa Rica Contemporánea*, 1979, Vol. I p. 43; Vol. II p. 32, respectively; República Dominicana, Director General de Estadística y Censo, *Anuario Estadístico, Año 1936*, t. I p. 92.

that interested them was immigration for the purpose of agricultural colonization. The condition for allowing refugees into the Dominican Republic was thus the establishment of a major settlement enterprise. What was Costa Rica's view on wide-scale agricultural settlement of refugees/immigrants within its territorial boundaries?

Unlike the Dominican Republic, these issues have not been studied in depth with respect to Costa Rica. That particular issue will be addressed here.

Rescue via agricultural colonization: The Tenorio project

On August 12, 1937, *The New York Times* informed its readers of an ambitious colonization scheme under way in Costa Rica:

“San Jose, Costa Rica, Aug. 9 – A plan for establishing a colony in Costa Rica for Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany, beginning with several hundred families, has just been revealed. The Refugee Economic Corporation, 40 Exchange Place, New York, is backing the plan and has already purchased 50,000 acres of land in Guanacaste for a reported cash price of \$ 50,000. The land, owned by the Bank of Costa Rica, was the historical Tenorio estate, and has been held by the bank for many years as the result of a foreclosed-mortgage. The original grant for the land dates back to the days of the Conquistadores. Only about 30% of the area is cleared pasture. The remainder being a forest from which the big timber has not been cut.

The settlers to be brought to Costa Rica will be farmers of peasant types. The agricultural colony will be modern in every way. An extensive road building program opening up the entire property is part of the plans. Modern farm homes and villages will be built for the settlers. The estate may have its own airport as Costa Rica has adequate commercial air services...”

The notice was followed by this comment:

Charles J. Liebman, the Vice President of the Refugee Economic Corporation, confirmed here [New York] yesterday the purchase of the lands in Costa Rica for a colony of Jewish refugees. He said that the plans for the development were being advanced as rapidly as possible.³

3 New York Times, August 12, 1937, p.13.

The news spread rapidly throughout the American Jewish community and beyond. On August 20, *The American Hebrew* published a photograph of the president of Costa Rica, León Cortés Castro, on its front page with the headline “Costa Rica offers haven to persecuted German Jews.” That same day, *The Jewish Chronicle* in England printed the notice in full. Costa Rica suddenly captured the attention of world Jewry.

What was this all about?

The Refugee Economic Corporation (REC), of which Charles Liebman was vice president, was founded in 1934 by Felix Warburg and other leading members of the American Joint Distribution Committee. Initially called the Refugee Rehabilitation Committee, it sought to alleviate the refugee problem through the development of colonization projects. Warburg was the president. By 1936, the organization had managed to raise \$1,500,000. Over half of all the funds expended until then had been invested in the Hula swamp drainage project and other schemes in Palestine, but its main work was creating a basis for the absorption of Jewish refugees in Latin America.⁴

Costa Rica first came to the attention of the organization in the wake of Liebman’s contacts with the heads of the American giant, United Fruit Company, the country’s largest grower and marketer of bananas, which conducted large-scale operations in Costa Rica and other countries. Based on a tip received from this company, REC’s chief agronomist, Dr. Joseph A. Rosen, was sent to the capital of Costa Rica in 1936. Upon his return, he recommended the purchase of a large estate, Tenorio, although he had not visited it personally. Charles Liebman received a similar recommendation in May 1936 from Arthur A. Pollan, vice president of United Fruit, who was in charge of the Tropical Bananas Division. Apparently this advice did not go unheeded. A clinching factor in this regard came from the U.S. envoy in Costa Rica, Leo R. Sack, who was Jewish. In November 1936 Liebman met with Sack and relayed the content of their meeting to the leaders of the Joint:

4 Yehuda Bauer, *My Brother’s Keeper, A History of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, 1929-1939*, Philadelphia 1979, p. 145. Archives of the JDC, 504a Vice President (Charles Liebman) to Leo Sack, U.S. Minister to Costa Rica, November 24, 1936.

Mr. Sack has interviewed the newly elected President of Costa Rica. President Cortés and his foreign Minister assured Mr. Sack that the Government is wholeheartedly in favor of this scheme... President Cortés stated that it must be understood that none of these immigrants would be engaged in commercial pursuits.

This condition was explained as follows:

There has been an infiltration of Polish Jews within the last few years who have become peddlers and small shop-keepers and are underselling local merchants. The Government is now attempting to stop this and, of course, would not consent to colonization unless it were definitely understood that all of the entrants would remain on the land.

Nevertheless, Sack was confident that “there is no ban on any kind of professional people provided that they are engaged by us for our purposes.” He spoke highly of the large estate in Tenorio that was being considered for purchase, and noted that as a Jew he would help REC as much as he possibly could, within the limitations of his office. He advised Liebman and his colleagues to contact George Peters Chittenden, director of United Fruit in Costa Rica. Liebman concluded the report with Sack’s estimation that “President Cortés is completely in sympathy with our project and there is no obstacle in the form of anti-Semitism.”⁵ Liebman’s superiors apparently gave the green light to explore the options further and Liebman appointed Alfred Houston, a New York attorney who handled the Guggenheim fellowships in Latin America, to contact the bank to determine the exact size of the property, the asking price, and the conditions under which the bank would grant a six-month evaluation period before finalizing the deal.⁶ The attorney completed his mission; Leo Sack, the U.S. envoy in Costa Rica, used his pull with the heads of the bank, and after more talks, Liebman received the data and conditions he wanted. For an advance of \$1,000, REC was given the option to purchase Tenorio at the end of a four-month period for the agreed upon price of \$55,000, part in cash and part in Costa Rican government bonds. The

5 Ibid, Liebman to Baerwald, Flexner and Warburg, November 19, 1936.

6 Ibid Liebman to Alfred Houston, November 27, 1936.

size of the property was 17,937 hectares. For the stated price, the Jewish organization would receive the land and all crops, buildings and animals on it. The option period was set to expire at “three o’clock in the afternoon of the eighth of August, 1937.” This agreement, which confirmed the receipt of the \$1,000 advance, was signed by Manuel Montejo, the president of Banco de Costa Rica, on April 15, 1937. This left REC less than four months to check out the location and reach a final decision.⁷

Abraham Joseph Bruman, an agronomist and agricultural expert who had worked in the past for the Tropical Division of the Department of Agriculture in Washington, offered to examine the property. He set out immediately for Costa Rica, made his way to Tenorio, explored the length and breadth of the estate and wrote up a detailed report, complete with photographs he took during the visit. On June 14, the report was sent out to Bernard Flexner, Felix Warburg and other board members in New York, and to Bernhard Kahn and Joseph Rosen in Europe.

Tenorio is in the province of Guanacaste which accounts for over a fifth of the whole country (10,400 out of 50,900 square kilometers), extending along the northwestern slopes of the Central mountain range and the Pacific coast. However, it is the least populated of all the provinces. In 1950, when 857,069 people were living in Costa Rica, the population of Guanacaste totaled 88,190, with only 7,353 in the capital, Liberia. When Bruman visited Tenorio 13 years earlier, the population was even smaller. There were very few transportation links between this vast, geographically diverse region and the rest of the republic, and there were even fewer roads traversing it. To reach the estate from San Jose, the Costa Rican capital, Bruman had to take the train for four hours to the coastal city of Puntarenas and sail six hours on a riverboat to Bebedero. From there, it was another six hours by horseback to Tenorio. The estate encompassed an area of 40 kilometers from north to south, and it was bordered on the east and west by two perennial rivers, Tenorio and Curibici. About a third of the land was 130 meters above sea level, the climate was unbearably hot, and parts of the property were covered with mosquito-infested swamps. At the higher elevations, of 400 meters and even more so at 600-700 meters above sea level, the weather

7 Ibid, Manuel Montejo, Banco de Costa Rica to REC, April 4, 1937.

was better, and it was here that the agricultural fields were located. There were only two seasons: a dry season, from January to early May, and a wet season, from early May through December. Rain fell in copious amounts at this time, sometimes pouring nonstop for days. At the onset of the dry season, the region was buffeted by strong winds. Most of the land was forested with trees of all kinds, some suitable for lumber, but also a large variety of fruit trees – coconuts, oranges, mangoes, avocados, bananas, cashew nuts and pineapples. The forests and marshes were rich in wildlife – wild turkey, wild boar, tapir, badger, wild goat, duck, pheasant quail, puma, jaguar and deer. In addition, there were 3-4 species of monkeys, multi-color parrots and countless species of butterflies. Only a few fields were cultivated, and the main farm stock consisted of herds of cattle that grazed freely. Real-estate was limited to a few buildings, including the central manor house.

What could be done with all this? After partial deforestation, fields could be planted with legumes, corn, rice and fodder for raising beef cattle. After a few years, the same land could be used for sugar cane, bananas, coffee beans and higher quality pasture for dairy cows. After experimentation to see what crops would succeed, it might be possible to grow wheat, cotton, tobacco and soybeans. The transportation problem could be solved by paving a landing strip for airplanes. Two domestic airlines were already operating in Costa Rica, and flight time from Tenorio to San José was only 50 minutes. If a dairy farm were established, cheese could be transported by air to markets in the capital.

After a careful calculation of land requirements per family, Bruman assessed that 250 families could be settled on the estate, with 50 acres of agricultural land and 60 acres of pasture allotted to each. The expenditure for housing and equipment would not exceed \$500 per family, although this sum did not include deforestation and land reclamation. Nevertheless, Bruman stressed that

...the colonization of Tenorio will not be a very easy matter. It will take people with courage and stamina to become adapted to a new climate and to an entirely new mode of living, to clear the forests, to help maintain the trails, to build some of the necessary roads, to construct homes, to plant, cultivate and harvest crops by hand,

without the help of modern tools or machinery. For the right kind of people, however, and with the willingness to look ahead, Tenorio has its possibilities and a promising future.

He envisaged families beginning to repay their debts after two years on the land, and predicted that within five years, they would be economically viable, although some might reach that stage earlier.⁸

Charles Liebman received this report from Bruman when they met in New York on June 14, 1937, and he conveyed his upbeat impressions from that meeting to Bernard Flexner, secretary of the REC and an influential member of the American Joint Distribution Committee. He cited a higher figure for the number of families – 350 – and noted that “under the resolution passed by the board of directors, the officers are empowered to acquire the property. I am in favor of doing so. Felix [Warburg] has assented and we would like your assent by return mail.” Liebman appears to have received the confirmation he sought, and REC voted unanimously to purchase the Tenorio estate. A month later, on July 13, Liebman informed Bruman that he had been appointed official director of the project. He was promised an annual salary of \$5,000 plus traveling and living expenses. Three weeks later, on August 2, 1937, REC instructed the National City Bank of New York to transfer \$34,000 in cash and \$20,000 in Costa Rican government bonds to Banco de Costa Rica. As far as REC was concerned, the deal was complete and all that remained to be done was register this large property in the organization’s name.⁹

Bruman was in Costa Rica at the time. On August 3, he sent a congratulatory telegram to Bruno Shachner, the vice secretary of REC: “Heartiest congratulations to all concerned. Refrecom [!] ownership Tenorio just effected.” From this telegram, the heads of REC could easily infer that the transfer of ownership had already occurred. Indeed, a letter Bruman sent that same day, which arrived on August 9, states that he and attorney Luis Castro Ureña had begun the process of legal transfer, although “[Ureña] still

8 Ibid, Report of A.J. Bruman appended to his letter to REC, June 14, 1937, quotations from pp. 16, 19; description of the fauna, *ibid.*, his letter to Liebman, June 8, 1941.

9 Ibid, Charles Liebman to Bernard Flexner, June 14, 1937, and to A.J. Bruman, July 13, 1937; REC to National City Bank of New York, Attention Mr. W.S. Schaterian, August 2, 1937.

has to satisfy *the Registro Público* with regard to certain requirements as to his power of attorney, but was given this power of attorney provisionally for the duration of six months.” Bruman and his attorney were certain that this problem would soon be resolved and title to the estate could be legally transferred.¹⁰

Meanwhile, Bruman continued the groundwork for the project. In previous letters, he had asked REC in Europe to appoint a small team of advisors to join him in Costa Rica – an accountant who would also help purchase equipment, an expert in cattle breeding, and a lumber industry expert knowledgeable in wood construction. Now he urged the organization to send them earlier than planned, and to forward to him the questionnaires and personal data about the first group of colonists that he hoped Dr. Joseph Rosen and the JDC in Europe were assembling, so he could ascertain whether they were indeed pioneering types capable of carrying out the first stage of colonization. As lumber for building houses was urgent, he tracked down the necessary sawmill equipment and negotiating its purchase. Soon after, he traveled to Tenorio to take over the estate from the previous owners.¹¹

It was the height of the rainy season and the rivers on the estate overflowed, temporarily cutting Bruman off from any contact with San José. On September 27, he received news that had been published previously in the San Jose newspapers: The authorities had turned down Ureña’s request to transfer ownership of the estate to REC. Bruman was thunderstruck. Until then, it had never occurred to him that the legal procedure would encounter problems. His immediate response was to hire “a daring native cowboy” to cross the rivers on horseback and take a letter to Cañas, a village 15 kilometers from the estate. “I am curtailing all the work except what is absolutely indispensable to the maintenance of the property,” he wrote. He noted that Attorney Ureña was submitting an appeal, and recommended that the organization support it.¹²

Ureña appealed, and on December 14, 1937, the appeals court delivered its judgment: REC’s charter, as presented in the documents submitted to the court, did not meet Costa Rican legal requirements for the type of work

10 Ibid, Bruman to Bruno Schachner, REC, August 3, 1937.

11 Ibidem.

12 Ibid, Bruman to Charles Liebman, September 27, 1937.

that the Jewish organization intended to carry out.¹³ Attorney Ureña raised objections to this line of reasoning, but was forced to admit there was no way to appeal the court's decision. REC, which had bought the estate – from the point of view of the sellers, the deal was signed and sealed – now had to find some legal way of gaining possession of it. Ureña proposed that REC formally transfer ownership to Bruman, while legally ensuring that REC would retain its rights, but the organization opted for a different tactic. It sent again the lawyer Alfred Houston to San Jose to establish a local company that would take possession of the estate. In October 1938, *Compañía Agrícola Costarricense* was founded, and Abraham Joseph Bruman was appointed its general manager. This company handled the economic development and business side of the estate, but as we shall see, was not involved in any way in the rescue of Jews and refugee relief.¹⁴

Why did the Costa Rican property registration office decide as it did, and what lay behind the court's rejection of the appeal?

The San Jose press first reported the sale of Tenorio to a Jewish organization on Sunday, August 1, 1937. "The first notice created a mild stir here," Bruman wrote to REC on August 3, attaching the newspaper clippings. On a reassuring note, he continued, "there is so much sympathy, even some enthusiasm on the part of the Costa Rican population that I feel the best course will be to ignore as much as possible any adverse notices, should they appear." *The New York Times* correspondent in San Jose asked to interview him, but Bruman referred him to New York.¹⁵ The outcome was the story that appeared in the paper on August 12, reprinted in full in *Diario de Costa Rica* under a headline reading: "Jewish Colonization in Guanacaste **Impossible!**". Subheadings then conveyed two highly exaggerated statements: One, that "a company...proposes to found...a colony of 1,500 Jewish families expelled from Germany by the Nazi regime"; and two,

13 Id., Translation: "Refugee – Cassacion #10 and 5 AM, December 14, 1937.

14 Id., Luis Castro Ureña to A.J. Bruman, January 5, 1938; Huston was paid a total of \$5,646.50 for his work and expenses for the period September 12 – October 30, 1938, including a trip to San José, September 24–October 30, 1938. See: Id., Alfred Huston to REC, November 9, 1938; also see Bruman's report on his activities and opening of bank accounts for the company, id., A.J. Bruman, General Manager, *Compañía Agrícola Costarricense* to Charles Liebman, October 28, 1938.

15 Id., A.J. Bruman to Bruno Schachner REC, August 3, 1937 (received August 9).

that “the organization is capitalized at 12 million dollars.” According to the newspaper, these families “will never be absorbed by the population and will remain...foreign to national interests, concentrating in absorptive [parasitical] nuclei of the regional economy.” Furthermore, the economic power of this Jewish association – \$ 12 million, which was equivalent to 67 million *colones* (the local currency) – “will serve to constitute a state within a state, and a foreign economy within the national economy.” The newspaper stated that these concerns had been expressed by “official circles,” and were based on “conversations with functionaries.” However, it reassured readers that this “Jewish colonization has little probability of being carried to a prompt realization...” Just how exaggerated these figures were can be learned from the fact that the total revenue of Costa Rica in 1939 was 42,716,831 *colones*.¹⁶

Those who opposed the plans for Jewish colonization hung their hopes on the country’s immigration laws. Until March 1931, entry into Costa Rica was unrestricted: All a person needed was \$25 in his pocket. The law did bar some nationalities and religions – Chinese, Hindus and Syrians – but Jews were not on the list. On May 5, 1931, new legislation was passed. The president of the republic was authorized to turn away “*nocivos*” – anyone posing a danger to the country, and immigrants had to show they had 1,000 *colones*, or approximately \$180 in private funds. This regulation was meant to be in force for two years. However, on March 18, 1933, it was approved as Costa Rica’s permanent immigration policy, and the president now had the right to order the money deposited in the state treasury. Again, the president could invoke the law as he saw fit: He could demand a deposit, waive it altogether, or bar entry to suspected *nocivos*.¹⁷ The law was open to interpretation, but there is no question that the president’s views were the determining factor.

16 Id., translated into English from the Spanish translation of *The New York Times* article as published in the *Diario de Costa Rica* and the newspaper’s response to it. For the income of the Costa Rican government in 1939, see Mensaje del Dr. Don Rafael Ángel Calderón Guardia, Presidente de la República al Congreso Constitucional, San José, 1 de Mayo de 1941, p.110.

17 Lowell Gudmundson K. “Aspectos sociales, políticos y económicos del antisemitismo en Costa Rica, (1900-1960)”, in: Jacobo Schifter Sikora et. al. *El Judío en Costa Rica*, San José 1979, pp. 142-143.

On November 19, 1936, when Charles Liebman met with Leo Sack, the U.S. envoy in San José, he was told that the Costa Rican president supported the plan and would help to implement it. In May 1937, when Bruman visited Tenorio to check out the property, Sack wrote a warm personal letter to President Cortés with a copy to REC. In the letter, Sack reminded him of their talks on the subject, and repeated his wholehearted recommendation of the “very distinguished North American business men” who were seeking to establish “an agricultural colony to be settled by German Jewish farmers,” but without noting the name of the organization in question. He wrote that the plan involved settling “250 high grade families who would be selected on the basis of their mental and physical fitness,” and spoke highly of the benefit that they would bring to the country. He ended his letter with the hope that Cortés would send him a reply confirming that the government “would cooperate with the project and that the immigrants would be welcomed so that steps can be taken immediately to complete the purchase of the property... and arrange for the actual transportation of the people.” However, Sack was writing three months after his diplomatic mission was over. He was just a private citizen by that time, and we have no way of knowing whether Cortés sent him an answer or what that answer was. So when the purchase of the estate was complete and obstacles cropped up that halted further progress, REC no longer had anyone at the U.S. consulate in Costa Rica to intercede on its behalf.¹⁸ REC associates in the United Fruit Company – which operated as a kind of state within a state in Costa Rica and other countries in Central America – had been trying to broaden their collaboration with the Costa Rican government. When the terms of the agreement were presented to the House of Representatives in April 1938, they drew harsh criticism from the opposition, which felt the concessions were too generous. President Cortés approved the deal at the end of July. Under these circumstances, it seems very doubtful that asking the president to intervene on behalf of the Jewish colonization scheme would have done much good.¹⁹

18 JDC 504a, Leo R. Sack to “My dear President,” May 13, 1937.

19 Carlos Calvo Gamboa, *León Cortés y su época*, San José 1982, pp. 96-99 (El contrato bananero Cortés-Chittenden de 1938. On the activities of the United Fruit Company, see: Atalia Shragai, “Iguanas and Apple Pie: The colonies of the United Fruit Company in Central America as a hybrid space,” *Historia, Journal of the Historical Society of Israel* 23, May 2009: 43-77 (Hebrew, summary on p. VI).

In the months that passed between the acquisition of Tenorio in August 1937 and the ruling that prevented REC from registering its ownership of the estate, Costa Rica was in the midst of a boisterous parliamentary election campaign. León Cortés found himself in a head-on clash with *La Tribuna*, one of the country's leading newspapers, which made him and his party all the more dependent on the other papers. The attack launched by *Diario de Costa Rica* on the Jewish colonization scheme, citing the country's immigration laws, was useful to him because this subject, and especially Jewish immigration prior to the REC project, was one of the issues raised by Cortés' opponents.

Under his predecessors, Cleto González (1928-1932) and Ricardo Jiménez Oreamuno (1932-1936), several dozen Polish Jews had settled in Costa Rica. Most of them arrived in 1930-1933, and hailed from Zelechów. As was the norm for immigrants, their families and others from their home town soon followed. Many of the newcomers earned their livelihood doing what immigrants, Jews and non-Jews, did in all countries that took them in: They worked as peddlers, selling from door-to-door and offering payment in installments. This soon brought down the fury of shopkeepers and large and medium-sized businesses, who regarded it as unfair competition. A large proportion of these people were immigrants themselves, from Spain, Germany and Lebanon. Their protest and opposition to these "Polish" competitors was directed at the outgoing president, Jiménez, and his successor in 1936, León Cortés. The Cámara de Comercio in San José was very powerful. It held great sway over the press, and had close ties to the president. Allegations arose that Cortés was "flooding" the country with *polacos* who were undermining veteran and legitimate businesses. German expatriates in Costa Rica were an important factor in shaping public opinion. Germany was much admired, and a handful of Germans expatriates living in San José enjoyed great influence. Most prominent was Max Effinger, who was appointed Director General de Obras Públicas by Cortés. Effinger had been working under Cortés since 1932, when he was Minister of Development. Effinger was not the only German in the Costa Rican civil service.²⁰

20 Jacobo Schifter Sikora, "Características Socioeconómicas, Religiosas y Culturales del

Meanwhile, the president of Costa Rica, like the presidents of all the Latin American countries, received an invitation from President Roosevelt to take part in the Evian Conference in 1938. Like these other countries, Costa Rica was basically forced to attend. When it became clear at Evian that the United States did not intend to serve as a model for solving the problem for which the conference was convened, and did not plan to use its full clout to get others in the region to cooperate, everyone breathed easy.²¹ Prof. Luis Dobles Segreda, Costa Rica's representative in Paris, sat with the delegates of Nicaragua, Honduras and Panama, and drafted a joint position paper. The Nicaraguan delegate read it aloud at the fourth session of the conference on the morning of July 11, 1938. After praising the President Roosevelt's initiative and consenting to the establishment of an intergovernmental committee to address the problem, the Latin American team promised to discuss the absorption of refugees with their governments on condition that the quota be calculated in proportion to the territorial area of each country, regardless of the number of refugees taken in by the countries before the conference. While acknowledging that the foreigners who had settled in their midst in the past had greatly enriched their countries economically and culturally, they claimed to be "limited by the scantiness of our resources and our small power of assimilation and, while we cannot refuse, we equally cannot exceed the quota which, on a territorial basis, would be proportionate to that of other nations represented here."

This basic condition was accompanied by two other fundamental clarifications: The refugees admitted to Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras and Panama would pay their own way and settle there at their own risk because the governments did not have money to invest in them. Furthermore, "we declare that no persons engaged in trade or intellectual work can be accepted as immigrants by our countries, as their occupations are already overcrowded."²²

Inmigrante Judío a Costa Rica", in: Jacobo Schifter Sikora et-al, *El Judío en Costa Rica*, pp. 90-91; Carlos Calvo Gamboa, León Cortés..., pp. 142-143.

- 21 Haim Avni, "Latin America and the Jewish Refugees: Two Encounters, 1935 and 1938", in: Judith Laikin Elkin, Gilbert W. Merx (editors), *The Jewish Presence in Latin America*, Boston 1987, pp. 58-68.
- 22 Proceedings of the Intergovernmental Committee, Evian, July 6th to 15th 1938, verbatim record of the plenary meetings of the Committee, resolutions and reports, July 1938, pp. 35-36.

This strategy of calculating the refugee quota by territorial size – Costa Rica had an area of 50,900 square kilometers compared to Argentina’s 2,776,655 square kilometers, for example, or Venezuela’s 912,050 square kilometers – was sufficient to exempt Costa Rica from taking in any refugees at all, and if any doubts remained about its willingness and/or ability to absorb Jews, the second condition made it clear. The REC colonization scheme for Tenorio fit in with this second condition – agricultural settlement that was not funded by the government – but President Cortés had to be willing to admit Jews into Costa Rica in the first place. This was not the case. Thus *Compañía Agrícola Costarricense*, which had been officially registered in October 1938, remained a commercial enterprise owned by REC, a subsidiary of the JDC, although it had been founded for another purpose: resettling Jewish refugees.

Absorbing refugees

Kristallnacht and the pogroms that followed in November 1938, triggering a global outcry, did not lead to any change in Costa Rican willingness to allow Jews into the republic. On November 30, the top story in *Diario de Costa Rica* – sporting a banner headline on the front page – reported the efforts of the Costa Rican government to keep the “Hebreos” out:²³

The government has declared that it will not handle further requests to enter the country by *Hebreos*. This is being done in order to facilitate the recently ordered investigation of individuals of this race who are currently in the country and whose legal situation should be normalized within a period which has already been indicated to them. We do not possess the exact number of the applications which have been presented to the Ministry of the Interior but we can say that it is quite large. All have been submitted by Hebreos who are at presently in various European and American countries who wish to come to Costa Rica, where those who have already arrived are engaged in commerce without any difficulty. The

23 *Diario de Costa Rica*, San José, November 30, 1938, pp.1, 8.

restrictions preventing the entry of new individuals of this origin will be maintained at least until the legal situation of those already residing in the country is clarified.

The inquiry into the legality of the Polish Jewish presence in Costa Rica was not completed during President Cortés' term, and bringing it to a speedy conclusion was one of the presidential campaign promises of his successor, Rafael Angel Calderón Guardia, in 1939. Indeed, early on in his presidency, in 1940, an investigating committee was appointed, whose findings were published on March 7, 1941. According to the newspaper reports, during the entire period, from 1917 when they first registered, until February 1941, a total of 556 "Poles" had entered Costa Rica. Of these, 157 arrived between 1936 and 1939, the four years that Cortés had been in power. This was the extent of the scandalous "flooding" of Costa Rica with Jews.²⁴

In the two years that preceded World War II and first two years after its outbreak, Costa Rica was thus hermetically sealed to legal Jewish immigration with very few exceptions. This did not stop the consuls of the Central American republic from issuing tourist visas to Jews. In the wake of *Kristallnacht*, the mass round-up of Jews in concentration camps and the release of those who could find somewhere to go, huge crowds lined up outside the consulates. When they were refused immigration visas, they settled for tourist visas. Having no other choice, they purchased round trip tickets in tourist first class and boarded ships that took them out of Europe.

On December 24, 1938, Christmas Day, 15 of them reached the shores of Costa Rica. They were members of four families from Austria who had fled to Italy and set sail from there to Latin America. One of them was Dr. Friedrich Reif, who, according to his declaration, had been an officer in the Austrian army for four years, won four citations for bravery and served as vice president of the Jewish war veterans association *Bund Jüdischer Frontsoldaten*. He arrived with his wife and two sons. The other families were also couples in their 40s with young sons and daughters. Six days

24 Jacobo Schifter Sikora, "Características socioeconómicas...", p. 95; Carlos Calvo Gamboa, *León Cortés y su época*, p. 150. Data from *La Tribuna*, 7 de Marzo de 1941, p. 2.

later, eight more Jews reached the port of Puntarenas on the Pacific coast, and on January 10, 1939, another five reached Puerto Limon. These three groups consisted of 28 people in all, including four children under the age of 18. Their visas were valid for a one-month stay that could be extended to a maximum of 90 days. Nevertheless, these tourists were identified as Jews – apparently because their passports, like those of all Jews leaving the Third Reich, were marked with a “J” – and the Costa Rican authorities refused to allow them in. Some of them were even arrested. The authorities only agreed to their release if someone living in the country personally guaranteed their departure when their visas expired. Luis Feigenblatt, a Polish Jew who had been educated in Britain and served in the British army in World War I, came to their aid. During his 13 years in Costa Rica, he had become a major importer of supplies for clothing manufacturers and had close ties with the upper class in Costa Rica. He deposited 500 colones for each of the 24 adult refugees – a total of 12,000 colones – as a financial guarantee that they would leave the country at the appointed time. However, more ships were known to be heading towards Costa Rica at this time with Jews on board. Indeed, at the end of January, the figure had risen to 42 and dozens more were on their way.²⁵

Feigenblatt’s first mission was to find cheap housing for the refugees and look for other countries in Latin America that might take them. Possibilities raised in his correspondence were Honduras, Nicaragua, Mexico and Bolivia. He felt that the hostility towards Jews and refugees expressed in the newspapers was due at least in part to the German community that had put down roots in Costa Rica. Due to the widespread antagonism toward “polacos,” he did not advise working through the local Jewish community organization that he himself had helped to found. Instead, he hung his hopes on his influential non-Jewish friends.²⁶ He managed to recruit Alberto Echandi, one of the leading attorneys in San José and president of a major hospital, to serve as the chairman of a refugee aid committee. The British vice consul, the Dutch consul, a respected journalist in the president’s inner circle and another high profile attorney – all agreed to sit on the committee

25 JDC 504, Louis Feigenblatt to Cecilia Razovsky, National Coordinating Committee for German Jews, New York, January 17, 1939 and January 28, 1939.

26 *Ibid*, his letter of January 28, 1939.

and demand a stop to the deportation of the refugees. A number of Portuguese Sephardi Jews, long-time residents of Costa Rica – the Sasso, Salas and other families – were prepared to help with advice, but refused to appear in public for fear that they would be associated with the “Polacos.”²⁷

In their efforts to keep the refugees from being expelled, Feigenblatt and his colleagues hoped that setting them up as farmers would solve the problem. The Tenorio estate that belonged to REC could have been used for this purpose, but the San José newspapers reported in March 1939 that the government fiercely opposed Jewish colonization there. A farm closer to the capital was thus sought. Cecil V. Lindo, a Portuguese Sephardi Jew who owned coffee plantations was prepared to pitch in. With his own money, he bought a coffee plantation about 50 kilometers from the capital, and 16 of the refugees were brought there. The manager of Tenorio, agronomist Bruman, was summoned to provide farming advice, and Feigenblatt looked forward to the government now permitting them to stay for good.²⁸

In the third week of May 1939, the newspapers published a presidential decree calling for all the refugees to leave the country by the end of the month. A delegation of four lawyers dispatched to Cortés by Feigenblatt was assured that the refugees who had settled on Lindo’s plantation were exempt. Nevertheless, Feigenblatt was ordered to pay the 12,000 colones he had posted as a bond. These were the orders of the president, and no dispensation would be given to those who engaged in farming. Displeased, Feigenblatt demanded to speak to the president, and a meeting was arranged at which he and attorney Arturo Volio, a member of his committee, received confirmation that the colonists would not be deported. That same week – in fact, two days later – he received a letter from the immigration officer, Abelardo Brenes, “a terrible Jew hater,” that all the refugees without exception had to leave Costa Rica by June 18. On the appointed day, the police rounded up the colonists on the Lindo plantation and drove them to San José for expulsion. Volio, accompanied by three members of the House of Representatives, went to the president and only through tremendous

27 Id., Leon Obermayer to Cecilia Razovsky, March 22, 1939. Obermayer, a Philadelphia lawyer, spent a week in San José in March 1939.

28 Id., id.; Louis Feigenblatt to Cecilia Razovsky, May 13, 1939.

efforts were they able to extract another promise that the colonists would not be touched.²⁹

From a report of the American envoy in Costa Rica to the U.S. State Department, we learn that the whole dispute revolved around a total of 21 refugees. The envoy explained the problem as follows:³⁰

The clamor in Costa Rica against the admission of Jews is based on the contention that they will not remain on the land; that they will turn instead to commercial enterprise..... The Government apparently takes the same position as the business interests in view of its refusal to permit the refugees to settle on the land, either on the farm alluded to above or on any other.

Public opposition to allowing Jewish refugees to remain in Costa Rica did not let up even after most of them were gone. Feigenblatt became the butt of violence and threats in the wake of his efforts on their behalf, to the point where it affected his health. Disputes within the community – some Jews argued against his exclusive maintaining the ties exclusively with American Jewish organizations – also took their toll. An organization of rabid anti-Semites that was founded in the meantime, *Unión Patriótica Costarricense*, stirred up hatred toward the long-standing Jewish community and the refugees, and the government acted accordingly. On Saturday, September 9, 1939, nine days after the outbreak of World War II, three German ships docked at Puntarenas on their way to Los Angeles and San Francisco. They were carrying a large number of passengers, six of them Jews who had visas for the United States and Guatemala. “All the Aryan passengers landed in Costa Rica, only the German Jews were detained on board; they were left without food,” Feigenblatt informed Robert Pilpel, secretary of Latin American affairs at the JDC office in New York. Feigenblatt had food sent to them and requested a meeting with the president to arrange permission for them to disembark until their ships sailed. This harassment of Jewish passengers en route was a carry-

29 Id., Louis Feigenblatt to Cecilia Razovsky, May 27, 1939 and June 9, 1939

30 JDC 504a, George L. Warren, President’s Advisory Committee on Political Refugees, to Charles Liebman, June 23, 1939, transmitting to him the report of the American legation in San José signed by Wm H. Hernibrook on June 12, 1939.

over of the official policy toward refugees and a direct consequence of the anti-Semitic propaganda that had been mounting as the 1940 presidential election campaign gained momentum.³¹

The rise to power of Rafael Angel Calderón Guardia in early May 1940 only made things worse. In promising to investigate the legality of the “Poles” in Costa Rica, he bowed to the shrill demands of the anti-Semites. The door of the new president, unlike that of his predecessor, was not open to Feigenblatt and his Jewish colleagues. Costa Rica remained off limits to Jews, and the small Jewish community feared for its existence.³²

Feigenblatt continued to care for passengers in transit and, over time, the aid was also extended to non-Jews. All his activities were financially backed by the JDC, which received detailed reports from him on how the money was used. In all, JDC’s outlay for refugee assistance in 1938-1947 came to a grand total of \$4,834.³³

Thoughts and conclusions

The Republic of Costa Rica thus contributed nothing whatsoever to the rescue of Jews during the Holocaust. A reliable indication of its reticence to offer such aid can be seen in its slyly worded joint statement at the Evian Conference, where Costa Rica and its Central American neighbors, Honduras, Panama and Nicaragua, agreed to take in refugees in proportion to their land mass. The enmity of the country’s leading businessmen toward a small group of Polish Jews who arrived in the late 1920s and early 1930s, some of whom worked as peddlers, turned the government and the public at large against a small group of refugees.

The Refugee Economic Corporation was not able to carry out its plan for settling Jewish refugees from Germany, and the property it acquired – the vast Tenorio estate – stood empty and useless. Abraham Joseph Bruman was retained as the manager of the estate. He tended herds of beef cattle, and

31 JDC 504, Louis Feigenblatt to Robert Pilpel, Secretary of the Committee on Central America, September 12, 1939 and to Cecilia Razovsky, September 20, 1939.

32 Id, Louis Feigenblatt to Robert Pilpel, June 1, 1940; July 4, 1940.

33 AJDC Archives, Catalogue of Files, pp. 191-192, summary of Costa Rica files Nos. 504 and 504a.

harvested and sold whatever crops he could with the help of hired hands. During the critical year for the refugees – October 1, 1938 to September 30, 1939 – when Tenorio was declared out of bounds for them, net losses on the estate came to \$7,218.49.³⁴ Two years later, Bruman proposed turning the property, with its lush forests, plants, wildlife and butterflies, into a nature park and tourist attraction.³⁵ He continued his duties until November 1949, a period of 12 years, until REC sold the estate to the party that had recommended its purchase – the United Fruit Company. The organization received \$110,000, a sum that on face value, at least, was double what it had paid back in 1937. A careful financial calculation of all the balances submitted by Bruman and a real evaluation of the fluctuation of the dollar over this 12-year period would show whether REC gained or lost in this transaction. What is clear beyond a doubt is that sinking money into a property that was of no use for rescue purposes kept the funds from being used elsewhere, where they might have helped to save lives.³⁶

A tiny handful of Costa Ricans stood behind the Polish-British Jew Luis Feigenblatt in his untiring efforts on behalf of the refugees. Feigenblatt's dedication to the cause – documented not only in his own reports but in the testimony of others – greatly eased the plight of the Jews, both those who spent time in Costa Rica and those who were shipped elsewhere. Although criticism and disparaging remarks were received about him in the Jewish relief societies in New York, Feigenblatt, making use of his high profile contacts, was a key factor in getting financial aid to those who needed it. It appears that he received much less appreciation than he deserved from his beneficiaries and the local Jewish community.

While that sums up the facts, questions remain about the conduct of the Republic of Costa Rica.

Costa Rica stood out among the countries of Latin America for the stability of its democratic regime. Presidents were elected every four years

34 JDC 504, Balance Sheet, September 30, 1939, annexed to A.J. Bruman's letter to Charles Liebman, October 1939 (received October 7): Total expenditures 9,941.78; net loss for period October 1, 1938 to September 30, 1939 – 7,218.49.

35 JDC 504a, Bruman to Charles Liebman, August 6, 1941.

36 JDC 504c, Julius Weiss, Attorney in Law to REC, Att. Mr. Liebman, November 2, 1949, enclosing checks; A.J. Bruman to Walter M. Hamer, Cia. Bananera de Costa Rica San José, November 1, 1949.

as set out in its constitution, and despite the raucousness of the election campaigns, presidents came and went without incident. León Cortés and his successor, Calderón Guardia, held profoundly different views. Cortés' conservatism and indifference to social issues gave way to a president who placed important social reforms at the top of his list. Calderón Guardia was elected with help from opposite sides of the spectrum – the Church and the Communist party. His term began just a few days before May 10, 1940, when Nazi Germany invaded Holland, Belgium, Luxembourg and France, and he adopted a policy that was fully aligned with the United States. Costa Rica was the first Latin American country to declare war on Germany, Italy and Japan, and it allowed the American air force to set up a base near the capital as a second line of defense to safeguard the Panama Canal.

And yet, Costa Rica was guilty of extraordinary hostility toward Jewish victims of the Nazis, and did nothing to rescue them.