

THE FUSION BETWEEN THE SEPHARDIM AND THE DOMINICANS

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Introduction

During its short history, the Dominican Republic has made several gestures toward the Jewish people, most notably in the attitude it displayed at the Evian Conference in July 1938.

Dominican intellectuals, writers, and historians have explained the almost complete assimilation of the Sephardim in the Dominican Republic as a fusion “between the Sephardim and the Dominicans.” The Jews became Dominicans remaining proud of their Hebrew origin and their Jewish heritage.

We should ask ourselves whether this so-called “fusion” was the reason for the very positive attitude of the Dominican Republic toward the Jewish people and the friendly relations it has maintained with Israel, or simply a coincidence.

The Evian Conference

The flight of Jews from Germany began immediately after Hitler and the Nazis rose to power in 1933. The annexation of Austria to Germany in March 1938 brought another 200,000 Jews under Nazi German domination. Austria’s Jews were immediately subjected to brutal repression even more severe than that directed against their co-religionists in Germany proper. The flow of refugees became a torrent. Although several countries agreed to grant a number of Jewish refugees temporary sanctuary, all of them were eager to expedite their departure to other destinations.

The great majority of Jews was trapped, with scant prospect of finding any sanctuary.

Against that backdrop, US President Franklin D. Roosevelt initiated a call for an inter-governmental conference to deal with the issue of refugees. To ensure the participation of as many countries as possible, the scope of the conference was limited to refugees from Germany and Austria, this despite the fact that the condition of Jews throughout Eastern and Central Europe was becoming untenable. There was to be no mention, however, of Jews and no direct reference to the fact that of some 600,000 refugees seeking to leave the Greater Reich, about 300,000 were Jews, and a further 285,000 were Christians who, under Nazi racial laws, were considered Jewish. Only 15,000 were non-Jewish political refugees, opponents of the Nazi regime. But this fact was clearly not lost on any of the invitees.

The venue of the conference was to be the fashionable French spa, Evian-les-Bains, and the date 6–15 July 1938. Invitations were sent to Great Britain, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Italy, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and twenty states from Latin America. Only Italy and South Africa declined to attend. Great Britain, which controlled Palestine under a League of Nations mandate and was entrusted with the responsibility of creating a Jewish National Home, agreed to participate on condition that the issue of Palestine would not be on the agenda. Other countries interested in emigration of Jews, notably Poland and Romania, also decided to send observers. Thirty-nine nongovernment organizations, twenty-one of them Jewish, were welcomed as guests.¹

The participating countries did their best to explain why they could not receive Jews. The United States and France recommended finding a haven for refugees elsewhere. England and Canada declared they were not “receiving countries.” Belgium, Denmark, and the Netherlands were prepared to admit some refugees temporarily, until they could move to other destinations. The Australian representative stated, “We have no racial problem, we are not desirous of importing one.”²

One might have expected a more humanitarian effort on the part of the Latin American participants. Yet we find the following:

1 *Sixty Years Since Evian*, Institute of the World Jewish Congress, Policy Dispatch Nr. 30 (Jerusalem July 1998), p. 2.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 3

Peru: “We would be very glad to see agricultural laborers—traders might upset our economic system.”

Colombia: “Despite our humanitarian feelings we cannot accept undesirable persons (intellectuals, traders, middlemen).”

Venezuela: “We cannot upset the demographic equilibrium essential to our racial diversity.”³

Mordecai Paldiel of Yad Vashem cites the directive given by Brazil’s minister of foreign affairs, Oswaldo Aranha, to his representative in Evian: “When they [the Jews] come en masse [this will] constitute a menace to Brazil’s future integrity.”⁴ (Incidentally there is a street named after him in Tel Aviv, as he presided over the session of the United Nations General Assembly on 29 November 1947 that decided on the partition of Palestine.)

The only ray of light among the shadows was provided by Virgilio Molina of the Dominican Republic, who stated:

The Dominican Republic would be prepared to make its contribution by granting special advantageous concessions to Austrian and German exiles...For colonization purposes my government has at its disposal large areas of fertile land, well irrigated, excellent roads, and a police force that preserves order and guarantees the peace of the country. The government will also be prepared to grant special conditions to professional men...⁵

At the meeting of the Intergovernmental Committee on Political Refugees (IGCR) that convened in London on 12 August 1938, in the aftermath of the Evian Conference, the Dominican Republic announced that it was prepared “to take immediately 50,000–100,000 immigrants and to provide facilities for their settlement.”⁶ On 9 December 1939 the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee and the Dominican Republic chose the village of Sosua as the site of the settlement.

In a speech delivered in July 1998, at an event organized by the present author and the Israeli Council for Foreign Relations to mark the sixtieth anniversary of the Dominican gesture, the Dominican minister of foreign relations, Dr. Eduardo Latorre, declared:

3 Hyman Kisch, “Sosua the Golden Cage,” 1970 (in manuscript), citing Proceedings of the Intergovernmental Committee at Evian (Verbatim Report), July 1938, p. 40.

4 Mordecai Paldiel, *Diplomatic Heroes of the Holocaust* (New York 2007), p. 41.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 32.

6 *Sixty Years*, p. 4.

One year after the Evian Conference, World War II broke out. That alone made it almost impossible to select, transport, and settle refugees. Nevertheless, the Dominican Government ratified its offer, and a small group of 2,500 people arrived in Sosua, another 4,500 went to different places in the country, and 7,500 received papers or Dominican visas that they used to settle in other nations of the world. This means some 14,500 Jews accepted the Dominican offer. It is not a large figure, but when compared to the size of the country, the number is significant.⁷

The number of Jews who settled in Sosua is estimated at 663.⁸

Many skeptics—Jewish and non-Jewish alike—wondered what had made the Dominican dictator, Rafael Leonidas Trujillo, take this unique step. Some explained that he preferred to have settlers from the white race, others think he was interested in his position in the eyes of the United States government. This is not the sole instance in which Jews were saved, with people looking for obscure explanations, as if it were not logical to rescue Jews. In this case the Jews were quite warmly received by the local population. Every Dominican, to this day, is very proud of the Evian gesture. The best reaction is to thank the Dominicans for their exceptional attitude and not look for other reasons.

Jewish Presence in Santo Domingo

Jewish history in Santo Domingo begins early. The historian of Spanish rule there, Carlos Esteban Deive, writes

During the first decade of the sixteenth century Santo Domingo was practically in Jewish or Converso hands, who were sent to the island by three persons—Bishop Juan Rodriguez de Fonseca, a Converso from Aragon; Lope de Conchillos, a Converso from the Jewish neighborhood of Calatayud and secretary to King Fernando; and

7 “From the Evian Conference to the End of the Twentieth Century: 60 Years of Solidarity between Israel and the Dominican Republic,” speech delivered in Jerusalem, July 1998.

8 M. Arbell, personal research.

Miguel Perez de Almazan, also the king's secretary.⁹

Moreover, this was not the only reason for this Converso influx to Santo Domingo. It was one of the very few Spanish colonies in which Jewish Conversos were accepted with the help of the Conversos in the Spanish royal court. Research in various Dominican Republic archives shows that the majority of those accused by the Inquisition were of Portuguese origin. This might lead us to the deduction that the individuals of Spanish origin had rapidly assimilated into the local population.¹⁰ At the end of the eighteenth century, there was another wave of Jews settling in Santo Domingo, coming mainly from the neighboring Caribbean islands.

When Santo Domingo was ceded to France in 1795, the "Real Audiencia," the high Spanish court of the region, was transferred to Cuba. This coincided with the British occupation of Curaçao, which all but destroyed the island's economy. This situation prompted Curaçao Jews to begin settling in Santo Domingo. They were later joined by Jews coming from St. Thomas and Jamaica, all holding foreign citizenship.¹¹ From 1781 to 1785 Jews also arrived from the destroyed community of St. Eustatius.¹²

Some Jewish families who had established themselves in Haiti (Sainte Domingue) moved to Santo Domingo after the Haitian slave revolution.¹³ This influx of Jews angered the Catholic hierarchy, and Archbishop Isodoro Rodriguez launched a series of intents of persecution and incitement. A French voyager described a Catholic procession he witnessed in 1795:

In these processions... fanaticism is manifested with great furor, and is aimed mainly against the Jews. In Santo Domingo there is quite a number of Jews... during the processions, women and children hold effigies representing Jews, they are hanged in city corners and squares, the soldiers shoot at them. Sometimes Jewish houses are

9 Carlos Esteban Deive, "The Jews in Santo Domingo during the 16th Century" [in Spanish], in *Presencia Judia in Santo Domingo*, ed. A. Lockward (Santo Domingo 1994), p. 187.

10 Research conducted by Mordéchai Arbell and Antonio Dominguez Ortiz, "Los Judeo-conversos en España y America" (Madrid 1978), p. 131.

11 Hyman J. Kisch, "Los Memorables Sefarditas de la República Dominicana," in *Conservative Judaism* 28, no. 2 (1974).

12 Mordechai Arbell, *The Jewish Nation of the Caribbean* (Jerusalem 2002), p. 317.

13 *Ibid.*

pillaged and destroyed. Last year three Jews were killed.¹⁴

During the Haitian occupation of 1822–44, owing to the religious tolerance established in Haiti, more Jews from Curaçao arrived in Dominicana.

In 1824 a cemetery for foreigners was opened in the city of Santo Domingo, and was generally used by its Jewish residents. The oldest Jewish grave there is that of Jacob Pardo, a native of Amsterdam, who died on 6 December 1826. The inscription is in French, the language of Haiti.

The Jews were dispersed in various areas of Santo Domingo, including, among others, the capital Santo Domingo, —Puerto Plata, Monte Christi, La Vega, and St. Pedro Macoris. They dealt mainly in export of tobacco and timber from the Santo Domingo and imported general merchandise from St. Thomas and Curaçao. They most often used their own ships and owned maritime companies. Their main contact in Europe was with Hamburg and its Sephardi community.

The Jews and Independence from Haiti (1844) and Spain (1865)

When independence from Haiti was achieved, the general population exhibited two types of attitudes toward the Jews. On the one hand were those supporting remnants of the Spanish, anti-Jewish influence—once the Haitians had retreated—and on the other, the Dominicans who formed their own national consciousness and saw the Jews as a progressive, positive, and patriotic element. This is best demonstrated by the letter of President Santana in response to an anti-Jewish petition from the city of La Vega.

Sept. 16 – 1846

God, Country and Liberty

Dominican Republic

To the Supreme Chief of La Vega,

The Council of ministers, convened under the chairmanship of the President of the Republic, discussed a petition submitted to the President by the Supreme Chief of La Vega, asking that the Government take measures against some Jews who are in commerce in this

14 Emilio Rodríguez Demorizi, *La Era de Francia en Santo Domingo* (Ciudad Trujillo 1955), p. 63.

settlement, and after serious investigation decided to give the following reply to the petitioners through the Supreme Chief.

I have in my hands [the petition] of the date of the 9th of this month, submitted by you to various authorities of the Province.

In the petition it is said that four to five Jews are damaging the nation by purchasing ounces of gold and the fruits of the country in exorbitant prices, etc.! Only these words clearly indicated that it is not the nation that complains, for there will not be a peasant who will complain that a Jew[ish merchant] gives him a hundred pesos for a quintal of tobacco, when a Dominican one will give him only fifty. Not only does this not damage, on the contrary it is very beneficial, and if those purchasers grow in numbers, they will stop the unfortunate enrichment of three to four well-known monopolists, at the expense of the unhappy workers, whom they sacrifice. These monopolists are the authors of this petition. They had incited you and many others of the signatories. If you think about consider the real interests, you will be convinced that you served as instruments of lowly passions.

The desire in the 19th century in a free Republic, to persecute peaceful individuals and prevent them from purchasing tobacco under the pretext of religion, is a scandalous abuse of the teachings of Christ... The conduct of these Dominicans must be different. Instead of listening to the voice of the passions, listen to the voice of justice and gratitude. Those four Jews who are persecuted there and others residing there, were the first to prepare funds for the expenses of the war, in moments when some Dominicans have done nothing and weakened the morale of the patriots who defended the Liberty of the Republic... The Jews do not teach others their beliefs, and do not conquer others for their religion. In the capital, there are more Jews than in any other place on the island, and by far we have not experienced any difficulty; they come to our ceremonies and maintain our cult with their donations...

Signed by President Santana
and by the Minister of Justice,

Interior, Foreign Affairs and War¹⁵

The return of Spanish rule in 1861 put an end to a regime of religious tolerance and a peaceful life of equality for the Jews and caused them to live in a state of anxiety and tension. Archbishop Monzon, newly appointed by the Spanish authorities, reintroduced religious extremes. Protestant churches were closed (there were no synagogues to close). Many Jews were persecuted as Freemasons! The reinstated Spanish regime prompted the Jews to actively join the Dominican resistance against the Spanish in what is known as the “War of Restoration.”

Ambassador and composer Enrique de Marchena found a document written by the restored Dominican government in 1865 thanking his great-grandfather, Rafael de Mordecai de Marchena, and other Dutch subjects for their help in the restoration and the supply of ammunition.¹⁶ (Jews from Curaçao, St. Eustatius, and Surinam in Santo Domingo were Dutch citizens.)

With the restoration of the Dominican Republic began a period of sympathy and admiration for the Jewish population. The Jews were hailed for supporting and actively helping the cause of the Dominicans for liberty and were subject to the highest consideration by the government and population. The Dominican writer Enrique Ucko writes about this phenomenon: “There are very few places in our world where the word “Hebrew” or “Jew” has such a pure sense. The old generation of Dominicans speaks about the Sephardi families as an aristocracy living among the Dominicans.¹⁷

The Proposal by General Luperon to Save Jews from Russia

The active role of the Sephardi Jews of the Dominican Republic in the struggle for liberation was noted by Dominican historians. The Jewish

15 Document found by the director of the National Archives in Santo Domingo, Emilio Rodríguez Demorizi, and published in 1944 by Enrique Ucko in “Presencia Judía en Santo Domingo,” as a pamphlet by Imprenta La Opinión, Ciudad Trujillo.

16 Enrique de Marchena Dujarric, in *Cuadernos de Jerusalem*, Nov. 1974.

17 Enrique Ucko, *La Fusión de los Sefardíes con los Dominicanos* (Santo Domingo 1994; first published in 1944 in Ciudad Trujillo (Santo Domingo).

families Curiel, Leon, Aybar, Ricardo, and de Castro are mentioned among the Jewish activists.¹⁸

The Dominican hero of the “War of Restoration,” who became the ruler of the republic, General Gregorio Luperon (1880–1882), was convinced that the settlement of Jews in Dominicana could be very beneficial. During his voyages in Europe in 1881, he became aware of the pogroms against Jews in Czarist Russia. As a result he sent a letter (17 January 1882) to the Alliance Israélite Universelle:

I have heard of the persecution of the Jews in several European countries. I inform you that here in the Dominican Republic your coreligionists will be received with open arms. It is not only hospitality that I offer in my country, in the name of my government and the Dominican people, but at the same time an insured nationality, land to be cultivated, land that will be in their possession.¹⁹

The letter was co-signed by five Jewish leaders, headed by Jacob de Lemos, who added: “We have been received by all groups in Dominican society with generous hospitality and we have established relations that we cherish greatly.”²⁰

Charles Netter of the Alliance Israélite took the project seriously, but with his sudden death the endeavor collapsed. Luperon’s act enables us to better understand the Dominican attitude at Evian.

The Theory of “Fusion”

With the restoration of the Dominican Republic began a period of sympathy for the Jewish population. Though held in the highest regard by the government and population, the Dominican Jews never organized themselves into a community. One of their number served as a cantor and

18 Emilio Rodríguez Demorizi, *Actos y Doctrinas del Gobierno de “la Restauración”* (Santo Domingo 1963), pp. 29–30.

19 Alfonso Lockward, *Presencia Judía en Santo Domingo* (Santo Domingo 1994), pp. 35–36.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 37.

performed marriages. For example, the cantor, Raphael Namia Curiel, acted in these capacities until 1900.²¹

As early as the second generation of the Sephardi Jews of the Caribbean who settled in the Dominican Republic a phenomenon began, called by the historian Enrique Ucko: “The fusion of Sefardies and the Dominicans.” In his book he explains:

In the Dominican Republic there was no hate or aversion to the Jews and no obstacles to their assimilation. It was a process very rare in Jewish history—a complete fusion of the Jewish element with the native population, a voluntary fusion, not a forced one.²²

He adds that the Sephardi of Santo Domingo who fused with the Dominicans was very different from the converted Jews in Europe:

The European Jew was baptized in order to erase his Jewish past and to obtain positions to which he was not admitted before. The Dominican Sephardi calls himself Hebrew even after his conversion and does not try to deny it.²³

The above-mentioned Enrique de Marchena, himself converted as a child, adds:

Conversion in the Dominican Republic is a form of assimilation, and there were no other causes. The interesting phenomenon is the pride to be of Jewish origin, which continues for five or six generations.²⁴

I have made a follow-up study to see if this theory of “fusion” still exists among the former Sephardi Jewish families in the Dominican Republic and their attitude to their Jewish ancestry.

It is noteworthy that these descendants of Jews reached the highest strata of Dominican society. One of these was the president of the republic, Francisco Henriquez y Carvajal, who took office in 1916. He used to say, “I am the son of a Jewish father and a Converso mother. Her family was forced to convert.”²⁵ (She used to say that she belonged to the family of Luis de

21 Arbell, *The Jewish Nation*, p. 319.

22 Ucko, p. 67.

23 *Ibid.*, p. 68

24 Enrique De Marchena Dujarric, “Presencia Hebrea en la República Dominicana,” in *Presencia Judía in Santo Domingo*, ed. A. Lockward (Santo Domingo 1994), p. 93.

25 Personal communication to me by his grandson.

Carvajal el Mozo, members of which were burned at the stake in Mexico by the Spain Inquisition.) The president's brother, the well-known Dominican writer Federico Henriquez y Carvajal, wrote the play *La Hija del Hebreo* (Daughter of the Hebrew, 1882), in which he shows the problematics of a mixed marriage.

One of the president's sons, Max Henriquez Ureña, as Dominican ambassador to the United Nations, in his emotional welcome speech when Israel was admitted to the organization brought many of the attendees to tears.²⁶ The president's other son, Pedro Henriquez Ureña, is considered one of the major linguists of the Spanish language.

The Lopez-Penha family, which was expelled from Spain, fled to Portugal, then to Izmir in Turkey, Amsterdam, Curaçao, Barranquilla, Colombia, and finally to Santo Domingo. This was a family that had provided many Jewish leaders and writers, yet it converted. One of its sons, Haim Horacio Lopez-Penha, was sent to study in Germany. There, shocked by the advent of Nazism, he wrote the polemic "Los Paisanos de Jesus" (Jesus Countrymen), in which he tried to prove that Christianity is a Jewish religion, and that Jesus and his apostles were Jewish leaders serving the cause of humanity and peace.²⁷

With the birth of Israel, when the USA imposed a boycott on the supply of arms to the new country, Haim Horacio, then minister in Washington, told the Israeli military attaché, Chaim Herzog, that the Dominican Republic could supply arms to Israel.²⁸

Enrique de Marchena, as previously mentioned, a converted Jew who was a pianist, composer, and ambassador to the United Nations, served as president of the Institute of Cultural Relations Dominicana-Israel. His visits to Israel resulted in his composing the suite *Hebraicum*, expressing his strong emotions upon being in the Jewish state. After he passed away, in May 2000 the Dominican postal service issued a stamp commemorating him. Along with the stamp they printed the notes of *Hebraicum*, which has become his most famous work.

I encountered the same attitude of pride in belonging to the Jewish Nation

26 Personal observation.

27 Mordechai Arbell, "History of the Lopez Penha Family" [in Hebrew], *Peamim* 48 (1991): 131.

28 Conversation with Chaim Herzog.

and love for Israel while at the same time being patriotic Dominicans when interviewing the Naar, Leon, de Castro, and other families.

Conclusion

The attitude of the Dominican Republic to the Jews and the State of Israel can be summed up in the words included in the speech by the foreign minister of the Dominican Republic mentioned above: “The friendship between the Dominican Republic and Israel is today even more firm, with clear demonstration in the field of facts throughout our history.” Truly so. Dominican history clearly shows a very positive and active attitude toward the Jews. Was this the result of the so-called “fusion”? It is difficult to reach this conclusion.

The relatively large number of Conversos from Spain who settled in Santo Domingo were not part of this “fusion.” They are part of the Dominican Catholic Nation of Spanish origin. It may be that many of them were true converts. The remainder did not have the internal strength to maintain their Jewishness during the hundreds of years since the expulsion. There are very few cases of Dominican “Judaizantes” in the archives of the Spanish Inquisition in Cartagena.

The phenomenon of fusion relates to the second wave of Jewish settlement in Dominicana, the Caribbean Jews from Curaçao, St. Eustatius, Jamaica, Surinam, and the Virgin Islands. Those Jews from Dutch, British, and Danish colonies, when settling there, again encountered the Spanish language and Spanish customs, which they had kept and cherished for ages—this time as equals with almost no cases of discrimination. Their patriotic actions against Spanish rule as well as their active participation in the political, economic, and academic life of the country made them an admired elite in Dominican society. The obvious result was assimilation, purely voluntary, in which the Jews were not ashamed of their origin; on the contrary, they took pride in it.

Therefore, it is not surprising that high social status and admiration could influence the active pro-Jewish stance of Dominican politics. Nevertheless, we must admire the humane and just attitude of the Dominican leaders throughout their history toward the Jewish Nation.

As for “fusion,” the pride of those converted Jews in their Jewish origin could last several generations. From the viewpoint of the Jewish people, however, we have lost them. In the long Jewish history, we have lost people due to pogroms, exterminations, and the Holocaust; in this case the cause of their loss were acts of love and equality. We may therefore conclude that display of love toward Jews may be as dangerous to Jewish existence as hatred. In the case of the Dominican Republic. I would call it “comfortable disappearance.”²⁹

As for the Jews who came from Germany and Austria and settled in Sosua, they have almost completely assimilated into the local population, but proudly show you their synagogue and museum in their flourishing settlement. They are also fervent supporters of Israel. We can call this another case of “fusion” in the Dominican Republic.

29 Mordechai Arbell, *Comfortable Disappearance*, Institute of the World Jewish Congress, Policy Study 15 (Jerusalem 1998), pp. 18–19.