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Snowbirds Spotted in Cuba: Canadian Jewish Congress on The Global Stage in the 1960s

Abstract

The American Jewish community has historically overshadowed Canadian Jewry. In population size, political prestige, and global influence, the power imbalance between American- and Canadian-Jewish organizations throughout the twentieth century has anchored popular understandings of North American Jewish affairs as one dominated by the U.S. Whereas the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) shepherded international Jewish causes throughout this period, its Canadian analogue, the Canadian Jewish Congress (CJC), never achieved such stature. However, on an island ninety miles from the U.S. coast, the fragile geopolitics of the Cold War conspired to recast this relationship. The Castro Revolution initiated a process which culminated in the severing of U.S.-Cuban ties in 1961, leaving a precarious Cuban Jewish community vulnerable. Canada's geographic proximity and close institutional ties with American Jewry transformed the CJC's role as the primary caregivers of Cuban Jewry. Consequently, the sundering of American-Cuban relations elevated the CJC to a position of strategic prominence on the international stage ultimately overshadowing its larger, and more illustrious, cousin to the south in Cuba.

Résumé

La communauté juive américaine a historiquement éclipsé la communauté juive canadienne. En termes de population, de prestige politique et d'influence mondiale, le déséquilibre de pouvoir entre les organisations juives américaines et canadiennes tout au long du XXe siècle a ancré la compréhension populaire que les affaires juives nord-américaines étaient dominées par les États-Unis. Alors que le American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee *(JDC) a dirigé des causes juives internationales tout au long de cette période, son analogue canadien, le Congrès juif canadien (CJC), n'a jamais atteint une telle stature. Cependant, sur une île située à quatre-vingt-dix milles des côtes américaines, la fragile géopolitique de la guerre froide a contribué à modifier cette relation. La révolution de Castro a lancé un processus qui a abouti à la rupture des liens américano-cubains en 1961, laissant une communauté juive cubaine précaire vulnérable. La proximité géographique du Canada et les liens institutionnels étroits avec la communauté juive américaine ont transformé le rôle du CJC en tant que principal allié de la communauté juive cubaine. Par conséquent, la rupture des relations américano-cubaines a élevé le CJC à une position d'importance stratégique sur la scène internationale, éclipsant finalement à Cuba son plus grand et plus illustre cousin du sud.*

Historically, American Jewish institutional life has played a disproportionate role in supporting other parts of the diaspora.[1] From the 1903 Kishinev pogrom relief efforts, onwards throughout the century's historical landmarks of Jewish life—the

1967 Six-Day War, the Free Soviet Jewry movement, and even the Jonathan Pollard case—diasporic affairs has been one dominated by the American Jewry.[2]

In part, this institutional power is a result of demographics. Representing forty percent of the worldwide Jewish population, America is comfortably the largest diasporic community outside of Israel.[3] Equally, American Jewish institutions derive power from the underlying trajectory of the United States. As Henry Luce foreshadowed in his now-famous *Time* article nearly a century ago, the United States was on the precipice of entering, "The American Century."[4] The centrality of the United States throughout the twentieth century as an architect of postwar multilateral institutions as well as a global hegemon elevated the prominence and influence of American Jewish institutional sway.

Nonetheless, the perceived unipolar nature of Jewish diasporic affairs has compressed modern conceptions of its dynamism. Circumstances arise that negate such power. Indeed, throughout this era of American geopolitical ascendance, one notable exception broke the mould. Amid the global forces of the Cold War and alliance blocs, nuclear strategy and economic embargoes, a small nation ninety miles from American shores confounded the most powerful Jewish diasporic institutions. The 1959 Cuban Revolution and the subsequent severing of bilateral ties, barred Americans from travelling to the island nation. Incapable of directly assisting Cuban Jewry, Canada's geographic proximity and close institutional ties with the United States ensured that Canadian Jewry became the primary conduit to the Cuban Jewish community.

Ossified traditional roles were rapidly broken. The Canadian Jewish Congress (CJC), the community's primary organizational body, often depended upon American Jewish institutions. For instance, the CJC relied upon the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) to funnel money to European Jews throughout the Second World War.[5] Similarly, following the Six-Day War, the CJC privately acknowledged the organization's limitations in international Jewish affairs citing the community's size and the nation's restrained presence on the world stage.[6] The power imbalance between American and Canadian Jewish organizational life that shaped the contours of bilateral communal relations throughout the twentieth century was recast in Cuba. Spearheaded by the CJC, Canadian Jewish institutional involvement in Cuba since the 1960s challenges the misconception of Canadian Jewry as inconsequential on the global stage.[7]

Little attention has been paid to this important episode with a particular emphasis on Canadian Jewish institutional involvement. While Robert M. Levine's 1993 landmark publication, *Tropical Diaspora: The Jewish Experience in Cuba*, served as the inspiration for deeper research into this historical episode, this paper is distinguished by an emphasis on the organizational and institutional features of Canadian Jewish

involvement in Cuba. Accordingly, in the entirety of *Tropical Diaspora* the CJC is referenced barely over a dozen times, the overwhelming majority of which is found in the bibliography. Levine's treatment of the subject is rather terse:

> Throughout the Castro period, the major responsibility for looking after the needs of the Cuban Jewish community fell to the World Jewish Congress, mainly through its Canadian affiliate, the Canadian Jewish Congress. Canada never broke diplomatic relations with Cuba; as a result, communications remained open, and Canadians were not required to obtain visas to enter the country.[8]

Such sparseness is extended to the major actors involved. Core individuals such as Ben Kayfetz are cited in the endnotes while left unnamed in the book as an "Ashkenazic Jew." A deeper examination of the CJC is eschewed in *Tropical Diaspora* for a deeper commentary of everyday Cuban Jewish life.

This paper will focus on the centrality of Canadian Jewry's institutional role in Cuba beginning in the 1960s, exploring in greater detail and specificity the personalities, organizational dynamics, as well as geopolitical considerations the CJC navigated. The correspondence and deeds of men such as Ben Kayfetz, Saul Hayes, and Samuel Lewin are vital in reclaiming this forgotten chapter of Canadian Jewish activism.

The Beginnings of the Cuban Jewish Community

The Cuban Jewish community emerged between the nation's independence from Spain in 1898 and the American occupation shortly thereafter.[9] Despite the imposition of a vassal-like status under the United States following the passage of the Platt Amendment in 1901, Cuba boasted of "an open-door immigration policy" since its earliest years of independence. This reputation attracted Jewish immigration from the United States, the Ottoman Empire, and later on, Eastern Europe.[10] Professor Margalit Bejarano identified two distinct waves of Jewish immigration to Cuba: the first beginning in 1902 culminating at the peak of the sugar industry's expansion in 1920 and, the second, spanning the American Quota Act of 1921 to the beginning of the Second World War.[11]

The initial wave of Jewish immigration overlapped with the flourishing domestic sugar industry, drawing Jewish businessmen from the United States and Sephardic Jews from the Ottoman Empire.[12] The former integrated both culturally and economically well within the fabric of Cuban life. The Sephardic milieu eased communal assimilation given their ability to speak Ladino (Judeo-Spanish).[13] Population figures of the community presented by Professor Judith Laikin Elkin suggests that from 1902 to 1914, 5,700 Jews immigrated to Cuba.[14] The American Quota Act of 1921 and the Johnson Reed Act of 1924 spurred a subsequent wave of Jewish immigration.

This movement was largely comprised of Eastern European Jewish émigrés, speaking a mix of Russian, Polish, and Yiddish.[15] Designed to "rebalance" ethnic immigration to the United States, the Quota Acts catalyzed immigration from countries *other than* Southern and Eastern Europe (i.e., Italians, Poles, Russians, Austro-Hungarians). Despite its intent of promoting immigration from Northern and Western Europe (i.e., British, German, Irish, and Scandinavia), the legislation stipulated that one year of residency in the Western Hemisphere conferred exemption from the quota, thus making counties such as Cuba an ideal haven for short-term transit migration ultimately destined for America.[16] Such calculations encouraged Eastern European Jews to immigrate to Cuba as a stepping stone.[17] However, the onset of the Great Depression in 1929 led to the curbing of America's immigration policies, precipitating new Jewish arrivals to plant roots and settle in Cuba.[18]

In many respects, the Cuban Jewish community was better integrated within the larger, national fold than amongst coreligionists themselves. The internal dynamics of the community, namely its cultural diversity, at times encouraged division. Such a communal rift cut along ethnic lines between the Sephardic-Turkish Jews and Ashkenazim hailing from Eastern European. While the former was a close-knit society, striving to preserve its religious traditions, as Zhava Litvac Glaser reflected, the latter lacked a leading communal personality and openly regarded themselves as transients.[19] "The various Cuban Jewish communities, while forming their own societies for mutual benefit purposes, did not generally associate or cooperate," Glaser's writes in her dissertation. "The Sephardim and Ashkenazim continually found fault with one another."[20] Geographically, too, the communities were separated. Whereas Ashkenazi Jews concentrated in Havana, Sephardic communities generally dispersed throughout Cuba, many as itinerant peddlers in small *pueblos* in the countryside.[21]

Despite the temporary, transient nature many Jews envisioned their Cuban stay to be, the country proved itself to be accommodating, enabling communal culture to flourish. Indeed, antisemitism had never been a particularly pronounced phenomenon in Cuba. Religious antisemitism was less potent on the island given the combined absence of religious fanaticism and a historical Cuban Jewish presence. Such dynamics "contributed to the disconnection of the chain of antisemitism that continued to exist in Europe," Professor Bejarano writes.[22] As Jacobo Laufer, a native Cuban whose parents immigrated a few years prior to his birth recalled of his childhood, "As a young boy, playing ball, fighting with the other children of the neighbourhood, religion was never an issue when interacting socially." Cuba left such an indelible mark on Jewish immigrants that, years later, many continued to reminisce about "*akhsanie Kuba*" (hotel Cuba) even after their arrival in the United States.[23] One notable exception punctuates Cuba's reputation as a haven for Jews. The *S.S. St. Louis*, filled with European Jews escaping the unfolding theatre of the Final Solution were barred entry in Cuba.[24] Popularized as "The Voyage of the Damned," the ordeal epitomized the institutional failure of North American Jewry to mobilize and save

Jewish lives in a time of crisis.[25] Despite the incident, Professor Robert M. Levine maintains, "Cuba's overall record in permitting Jewish refugees to enter was among the best in the world."[26]

Thus Cuba on the eve of revolution was a far more tolerant, pluralistic, and promising country for new Jewish arrivals than the lands from which most fled.[27]

The Flashpoint

Cuban Jewish life by the 1950s was a mix of political repression and economic prosperity ushered in under the auspices of the military dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista (1952–1958).[28] As a result, Professor Bejarano writes, the pre-revolution years witnessed the coalescing of the once-dispersed Sephardi community into cities congregating closer to commerce and industry. Nor did political considerations weigh heavily upon Cuban Jewry at the time. Still integrating into Cuban society more broadly, only a minority of Cuban Jews—mostly second-generation offspring—pursued higher education and liberal professions. Accordingly, prior to Castro's communist revolution, the community was neither politically mobilized nor overwhelmingly active within revolutionary underground political circles. For the small cohort that subscribed to radical politics, Batista's suppression of the Cuban Communist Party coupled with the Soviet Union's increased hostility towards Soviet Jewry eroded any communal beachhead that temporarily existed.[29]

Although sidelined from the political undercurrents roiling pre-revolutionary Cuba, the Jewish community benefited greatly from the era's economic mobility. "Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, Cuba's Jews, riding the crest of the economic boom, on the whole continued to live in their own world," Professor Levine writes.[30] During these decades, a Cuban Jewish *nouvelle richesse* emerged. Nonetheless, such progress was constrained as prestigious clubs and social groups within the broader national fabric remained unwelcoming to the community.[31]

Despite such progress, as Levine writes, growing public clamour against well-known problems of graft, corruption, and predatory foreign direct investment under the Batista regime escalated in the late-1950s. The latter points weighed heavily upon the minds of Cubans. Core economic national assets—resorts, petroleum, industries, and public utilities—overwhelmingly exported wealth to foreign shores depriving the nation of vital revenue. The asymmetric relationship between Cuba and United States was on full display in the economic arena. "The only foreign investments of importance are those of the United States. American participation [ownership] exceeds 90 per cent of telephone and electric services, about 50 per cent in public service railways, and roughly 40 per cent in raw sugar production," a 1956 American Department of Commerce survey reported.[32]

Fidel Castro captured the discontent of many Cubans summarizing the need for political revolution by harkening back to the country's history as an imperial possession.[33] "The Republic was not freed in 1895 and the dream was frustrated at the last minute. The revolution did not take place in 1933 and was frustrated by its enemies. However, this time the revolution is backed by the mass of the people, and has all the revolutionaries behind it."[34] The upheaval placed Cuban Jewry in a particularly awkward position. Though sympathetic to the causes of social justice, Castro's assault on pre-revolutionary Cuba, termed the "neocolonial era," was deeply unsettling. Those successful during this time, disproportionately among them Cuban Jews, came to be called lackeys of international capitalists.[35]

Such rhetoric less than a hundred miles from the mainland United States did little to assuage fears. Bilateral relations unravelled following the overthrow of Batista on 1 January 1959. Among Castro's first acts in reasserting Cuban sovereignty was the nationalization of American property holdings without compensation. The precipitous deterioration in Cuban-American ties devolved into a vicious cycle of tit-for-tat. America applied retaliatory economic sanctions, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) sponsored Cuban exiles to depose Castro, and the United States strove to isolate Cuba within international forums such as the Organization of American States (OAS).[36]

Increasingly apprehensive amid countless failed assassination plots and American attempts to undermine the political regime internationally, Castro accepted the construction of Soviet nuclear facilities in early-1962. Revelations of these sites led to an American blockade and activation of Defense Readiness Condition (DEFCON) 2 protocols entailing preparations for imminent nuclear war.[37] Popularly known as the moment which brought the world closest "to the brink of nuclear disaster," the Cuban Missile Crisis was eventually resolved diplomatically, though the incident illuminated the divergent foreign policy approaches between the U.S. and Canada during the early stages of the Cold War.[38]

Historically, Canadians were largely sympathetic to Cuban grievances and Castro's nationalist economic policies. The tropes of American economic and political dominance over Cuba reminded many Canadians of the overbearing and stifling existence living beside a world superpower had upon domestic political discussion of national autonomy. Capturing this sentiment, historian Jocelyn Maynard Ghent reiterated how, "many Canadians also felt they shared with Cuba the status of economic satellite to American industry. Hence, they tended to view Castro's expropriation of United States property as the 'legitimate efforts of a small economy to free itself from excessive foreign influence.'"[39] Similarly, the United States' punitive trade war aroused Canadian denunciation. A *Globe and Mail* article entitled "Cuba and the OAS Resolution," echoed the common fears felt by many Canadians. Condemning America's successful campaign to expel Cuba from the OAS, the article exclaimed that the epi-

sode had "provided the world with a working demonstration of U.S. colonialism: how many of the states which voted with the United States are heavily dependent upon U.S. aid?"[40] Maintaining ties with Cuba, many Canadians believed, was an assertion of national independence.

Canadian Prime Minister John Diefenbaker remained critical of "American emotionalism" over Cuba, asserting that the United States' unwavering stance supporting policies of Cuban isolation only accelerated Cuba's departure to the Eastern Bloc.[41] These views were repeated in a December 1960 *Globe and Mail* article in response to the American embargo of Cuba. "The U.S. embargo, in our view and in the view of many people south of the border, is a mistaken strategy. If Cuba cannot obtain from the *free world* the goods she requires to live, she will certainly turn to Russia . . . and be driven even deeper into the Communist embrace."[42]

Diefenbaker's single decision to maintain normal ties with Cuba permitted the CJC to operate in an environment in which *no* Americans, and by extension American Jews, could operate within. Consequently, the discrepancy in national foreign policies between Canada and the United States precluded the JDC from partaking in Cuban Jewish affairs, while Canada, unhindered by such political considerations, enabled the CJC to remain active. As such, the JDC and the CJC evoke the imagery of passengers strapped into their respective national cars. Only by virtue of the American government's departure from Cuba, did the JDC become ineffectual and thus the CJC indispensable.

Snowbirds Spotted in Cuba

The deterioration of Cuban–American ties was met instantaneously with executive action on the part of the JDC's Executive Vice Chairman, Moses A. Leavitt, rerouting organizational responsibilities to the CJC in March 1961.[43] The task, as the first CJC fact-finding representative Joseph Kage, then the National Executive Director of the Jewish Immigrant Aid Services of Canada (JIAS), discovered in a debriefing with Leavitt was daunting. A passage from Kage's account of the conversation illustrates the breath of issuing confronting the Cuban Jewish community at the time. Reporting back to the CJC after the meeting, Kage maintained, "The opinion of Mr. Leavitt appeared to indicate that unless the Jewish community of Cuba can mobilize its own forces to conduct and be responsible for whatever welfare programme they need, immigration included, the work of outside agencies in trying to help them would have a limited efficiency. By the same token, should the Jewish community of Cuba organize itself, then the facilities of the U.H.S. [United HIAS Service], the A.J.D.C. [American Joint Distribution Committee], etc. could be utilized effectively in various phases of communal needs, immigration, relief activities, etc."[44]

Such demands touched core aspects of Cuban daily life. From emigration and religious supplies to economic sustainability, none of these pressing issues could be explored nor resolved without the cooperation and express permission of both the Canadian and Cuban governments. Accordingly, the CJC had to preserve a delicate balance between Canada and Cuba as well as Castro's own perception of a foreign interest group intervening in domestic affairs. If managed improperly, the CJC could find itself barred from the island for veering too close to political activism or perceived subversion jeopardizing the mission.[45] Saul Hayes, the Executive Vice-President of the CJC, took pre-emptive steps to ensure full transparency informing the Canadian Department of External Affairs in early-1961 of the organization's presence and purpose in Cuba. Equally fearful of the perception of interfering in Canadian foreign policy or undermining bilateral relations, Hayes reiterated to the Consular Division in the External Affairs Department prior to Kage's departure in March 1961:

> It is obvious, but I nevertheless state it, that Mr. Kage has strict instructions not to discuss matters of the policy of the Cuban Government, nor to intervene even in the slightest way in these matters, since it is not our concern in the slightest and our mission is solely in the Jewish social welfare and communal organizational field.[46]

Aware that any misstep in Cuba could endanger the mission's sustainability, the CJC consistently stressed its apolitical, nonpartisan role in assisting the Cuban Jewish community.

Kage's twenty-four-page report spanned daily meetings with community leaders and synagogues, to conversations with Canadian diplomats, and even the state of the local Jewish education system. According to Kage, at a meeting of the Sephardic community in the newly rebuilt synagogue Union Hebrea Chevet Ahim, "I brought greetings from Canada, told them briefly about the [Canadian] community, about the purpose of my visit and also touched on the various current issues."[47] Kage continued, "The bulk of the evening was related to the question period and as a group they were much less guarded in their questions as well as remarks pertaining to the specific issues of immigration, movement of the children, etc."[48] Although the questions would change in the years to come—following the flight of the vast majority of Cuban Jewry –a consistent theme throughout the CJC's involvement in Cuba to explore the existing condition of the community, and secondly, to prioritize the needs, demands, and relief they required.

Among Kage's prospective initiatives was to amalgamate the approximately nine communal Cuban Jewish agencies under an umbrella organization:

> The attitude towards the setting up of an overall communal body was fully explained above in this report. I personally feel the establishment of such a body is not only desirable from the point of view of communal organization, but is almost a must to meet the exigencies and contingencies of the time. I have also reason to believe that the majority of the population and the leadership of the various organizations would not oppose this move.[49]

Meeting with community leaders, Kage discerned a desire for unifying disparate organizations. Diagnosing the situation, Kage concluded, "Therefore, such a relief programme might be of an evolving nature and may encompass certain aspects such as religious needs, some Jewish educational needs, immigration aid, resettlement help, and help in the economic readjustment of those who will stay."[50] Kage report illustrated the importance such primary research gleaned from the Cuban Jewish community situation and wellbeing serving a roadmap upon which future missions would emulate.

The most telling feature of Kage's report of March 1961 was that it was sent from the CJC to the JDC. Although at face value, it may be overlooked as a mere record of correspondence, the circuit by which information and intelligence on the Cuban Jewish community flowed is important and symbolic in understanding the changing intra-diasporic relationship. In retrospect, it was remarkable that a representative of the CJC (i.e., Kage) was notifying one of the major American Jewish institutions and, more broadly, international diasporic life, of the developments mere miles from American shores.[51]

The Kage report is equally surprising in what it omits. Kage expounded little upon the community's economic condition or size in the wake of mass emigration. In actuality, the CJC inherited a situation far from ideal in Cuba. On the eve of Kage's mission in 1961, nearly half of the 12,000-member Cuban Jewish community had left. Unlike earlier historical examples of Jewish migration in which antisemitism played a central role, in Castroist Cuba it was noticeably absent. According to Cuban Jewish Historian Dana Evan Kaplan:

> Scholars have stressed that the Jews who left did not do so because they felt they had to flee religious persecution. Rather, they wanted to escape from a socialist or communist economic system that had confiscated their businesses and would not allow them the economic latitude they needed in order to fulfill their economic aspirations.[52]

Correspondingly, the emigres disproportionately came from the middle- and upper-classes. The growing absence of the latter, particularly, remained a pressing concern raised repeatedly in subsequent CJC missions and hindered the communi-

ty's recovery in later years. Thus, and in increasing proportion in the years to come, the remaining Cuban Jewish community was largely comprised of the socio-economically disadvantaged, the elderly, and the infirm.

Such realities were echoed by fellow CJC representative Samuel Lewin's mission three months later. Revisiting the core issues set forth by Kage, Lewin concluded that the situation remained urgent. Community organizations had been unable to unify as Kage earlier suggested. According to Lewin, "Local organizations and synagogues are in a state of almost total disintegration. The leaders and the bulk of active membership have left."[53] The two sole Jewish day schools had been nationalized, "and there are no facilities whatsoever for any kind of Jewish Education."[54] Dedicating himself to the most immediate problem, Lewin's report is largely directed toward facilitating emigration.[55]

Why Stay?

Following the revolution, emigration remained the leading concern for CJC and JDC representatives. The community of 12,000 on the eve of revolution, had by the time of Samuel Lewin's visit in June 1961, dwindled rapidly. Lewin estimated that "over 50% left the country already. There is a literal exodus from Cuba."[56] Kage's report two-months prior reached a similar conclusion. "There is no question that there is, and is likely to continue to be, a demand for immigration and resettlement."[57] Fearful of the deteriorating political and economic climate, as early as September 1960, 3,000 Jews had emigrated from Cuba, comprising between one quarter to one third of the overall community, overwhelmingly bound for the United States.[58]

In Samuel Lewin's estimation, Cuba had been a "paradise" for Jews prior to the Castro Revolution. "It is only the change of regime and the introduction of Communism and all which it entails that cause the mass movement."[59] According to Cuban émigré Ruth Behar, for Ashkenazi Jews in Cuba, Castro's embrace of communism harkened back to painful memories of the Russian Revolution and the deleterious consequences nationalization of education and state interference in the family brought.[60]

Such fears were confirmed following another CJC mission conducted in October 1962 by Ben Kayfetz, the National Director of Community Relations, which revealed troubling patterns.[61] According to Kayfetz, Cuban Jews often bickered about Castro and the regime. "I hadn't opened a conversation of more than a few words privately either in a house or in the privacy of the synagogue when anyone I met told me quite openly about the terror of the regime, the ruination which has failed upon the country as a whole, and the brutal nature of the communist regime."[62] Kayfetz's report provides valuable insight into the increasingly repressive and authoritarian character of the Castro regime. "I was told of a case of a person who received a gift of bananas

from a friend. It was found that this gift of bananas exceeded the permissible limit of 25 pounds," Kayfetz reported. "This person was put into prison for six months and his Mercedes Benz was confiscated."[63] Kayfetz also noted the imprisonment of seventy-two Jews for currency crimes. "This is one of the most serious offences next to political crimes and once you are caught there seems to be no way out of it."[64]

Like all Cubans, Jews had to also contend with property nationalization and ruinous economic policies. By the time of Lewin's mission in June 1961, "two Jewish Day Schools" had been nationalized.[65] According to Kayfetz, by 1962 "It was not only a question of having spoken to persons of the middleclass bourgeois origin who had been expropriated and regretted the loss of their holdings. I spoke to persons who were in no way effected by the regime as, for instance, the president of Adas Israel who is an old-fashioned traditional Jew and whose trade—watchmaking—was not restricted. What these people are distressed by (to use a mild word) is the constant terror, the uncertainty, the informing or as they use the Hebrew word — '*m'seer-ah*'—that goes on."[66] A typical emigrant's experience was covered in *The Globe and Mail* in January 1961. A jeweller by trade, the man "left because he was forced to pay for imported jewels in hard currency, while the Cuban money he received for them was practically worthless."[67] Leaving Cuba because of its "shaky economics," the man resettled in Canada.[68]

The progressively restrictive emigration policies further complicated matters. Upon Kayfetz's arrival in October 1962, the practice had become extremely complex. "The process of applying for exit is a very painful and tortuous one. Once [the] application is made, the officials come to your home and take inventory of every single item you have in your home," Kayfetz wrote. "People applying for departure have even been known to purchase items of furniture and household appliances which they didn't have because they would be suspected, if these things were absent, of having deliberately sold them prior to making application to leave."[69] These initial CJC-sponsored missions implicitly concluded that the economic policies implemented as well the dictatorial undercurrents of the Castro regime were the key drivers of Jewish emigration.

Nonetheless, religion discrimination was seldom reported. As Kayfetz reported in 1962, "All the Jews I spoke to, even those who are most bitter about their experiences and about what happened to them, concluded they are not suffering any special disabilities as Jews, but they share the loss of Cubans in general which, of course, itself is bad enough."[70] It was more an issue of class, for which a Jewish community overly represented in the middle and upper echelons of society were more responsive to. In the words of Joseph Kage, "Representing a largely middle class element, the Jewish community may perhaps suffer to a greater degree from any trends of business curtailment, etc."[71] Nevertheless, Jews were but a part of the hundreds-of-thousands of well-to-do Cubans partaking in "a massive exodus" from the island.[72]

Leaving *Akhsanie Kuba*

During the earliest stages of the CJC's involvement in Cuba, the aspect of immigration that proved to be the most troublesome was logistical, not political. An internal memorandum from the JDC in March 1961 cited that, "the biggest problem in emigration from Cuba is the serious limitation in transportation facilities."[73] Similarly, Joseph Kage noted the absence of political obstacles upon his return from Cuba a month later. Reiterating Castro's earlier comments upon hearing the news that a former supporter's wife and daughter sought asylum in Costa Rica, Kage reported, "The policy of the Revolutionary Government is to let anyone leave Cuba who wants to go."[74] Moreover, "It is also clear that the number of people who have left Cuba to date, children included, have left with the full knowledge of the Cuban authorities because they had passports and exit permits."[75] Samuel Lewin encountered a similar experience two months later writing, "There are no restrictions whatsoever on emigration. The Government put itself openly on record as being anxious to get rid of all 'treacherous' and 'undesirable' elements."[76]

Given the transportation limitations, the JDC reported in March 1961 that HIAS, the principal body working on behalf of Cuban Jewry to assist in their emigration, "hopes to have a representative in Cuba if they can find someone with a Canadian or South American passport to serve in that capacity."[77] The lack of an American Jewish representative or organization prior required an immediate remedy. The obvious choice favoured the Canadians. According to CJC member Jack Silverstone, Canada had "a rather good relationship [with Cuba] compared to the Americans."[78] Capable of visiting and conducting business, geographically proximate, and sharing a good working relationship with the JDC, the conditions were aligned in favour of Canadian Jewry.[79]

The purpose, then, of Samuel Lewin's mission of June 1961, was "to inquire into the possibilities; to assist in the arrangements; and to set up HIAS operations on a continuing basis."[80] Unlike Kage, who set about meeting community leaders and investigating the state-of-affairs of Cuban Jewry, Lewin's primary objective was understanding the emigration issue.[81] Commercial airplanes, according to Lewin, appeared to be among the most popular modes of emigration but also severely backlogged. "Transportation is practically impossible at the present, as all flights are booked up to the end of the year."[82] With air transport effectively crippled to year's end, other alternatives emerged including a transportation black market.

Lewin connected with both the Israeli Consular General and the Canadian Ambassador to Cuba to explore the possibilities of immigration and resettlement. While the former was cooperative and proactive, the latter remained noncommittal. "He did not think the Government in Ottawa would make special provisions for Jewish cases

in Havana," Lewis reported of the Canadian Vice Consul.[83] Lewin spoke at length with the Canadian Ambassador and the interim Charge d'Affaires.

> Both were very cordial and interested in the reaction of the "Jewish colony." I was told that since January the Canadian Embassy had up to 1,500 applications for tourist visas to Canada and refused them all, as they did not think the applicants were *bona fide* tourists and suspected they wanted to come to Canada to just wait for a U.S.A. visa.[84]

With or without official help, Cuban Jews were leaving. By the time of Kayfetz's trip in October 1962, an estimated 80% of the community had left. In Kayfetz's words, "The Jewish population has, of course, almost in a literal sense been decimated."[85] Kayfetz identified two chief reasons "inhibiting persons from leaving." Foremost were the economic costs associated with emigration. "These persons simply cannot face the prospect of winding up as penniless refugees in a new country at their age, sans means and as a burden either on the community or on their children who themselves are also refugees."[86] Secondly, there was an expectation that better days were ahead. "There was a general feeling that tension could not last, that there would have to be a showdown in the political and international crisis and that this crisis would likely occur around New Year."[87]

Kage, Lewin, and Kayfetz's accounts further reveal the rapid change in protocols enacted by the Castro regime to severely curtail emigration. Gone were the libertarian days of government rhetoric permitting any desiring individuals to leave Cuba as Kage and Lewin's earlier visits documented. By the time of Kayfetz's mission less than a year-and-a-half later, he reported back that Cuban officials would visit a prospective emigrant's house and inventory their belongings to ensure they did not sell their possessions prior to departing. "A man who had an empty grandfather clock frame went to buy a clock to put in it to avoid this kind of suspicion. A man who had a broken-down old car had it repaired at a cost of 200 pesos because otherwise he would have been accused of deliberately sabotaging his car."[88]

The progressive emptying of Cuba's Jewish community throughout the 1960s led to an organizational rebalancing of priorities. For the vulnerable, remaining Cuban Jews less emphasis was to be placed on expediting emigration as opposed to alleviating the community's economic and religious exigencies. A 1967 mission sponsored at the behest of the JDC directing HIAS Argentina Branch representative Marek Schindelman to serve on its behalf in Cuba illustrates grave condition of Cuban Jewry.[89] Remarkably absent from Schindelman's plea is a demand for aid on the emigration front. "It is disastrous—the rich have left, some having foreseen the situation have sent part of their disposable funds out of the country, but these are few. Most of them have left real assets, houses, apartments—with all their furniture, objects of all

kinds, including art—businesses, cars, etc."[90] Schindelman concluded:

> Help is needed immediately and at all cost! Today perhaps it is feasible, tomorrow perhaps it will be too late! Let us do all that is humanly possible on behalf of those unfortunate condemned to live in the convulsive Cuba. This is reported to you by one who spent ten days of hell and has not yet been able to recuperate.[91]

Accordingly, by the mid-1960s the CJC's role in Cuba began shifting away from a concern of emigration and resettlement. A letter from James P. Rice, President of the United HIAS Service, addressed to Richard Mayer, a lay leader from Madrid, outlined an agreement with the National Bank of Cuba whereby the Standing Conference of European Jewish Community Services could send monthly payments to be disbursed to the Cuban Jewish community.[92] The CJC's mission, according to HIAS, moving forward, would eschew its earlier emphasis on procuring transportation, exit permits, or coordination with the Cuban government. Henceforth, such issues would be the purview of HIAS.[93] Thus, in the decades to come, the CJC's operational imperative was increasingly financial seeking to alleviate the cascading impact the community's economic vulnerability confronting Cuban Jewry.

Financial Straits

The economic plight, long a struggle for Cuban Jewish institutional life, was only exacerbated following the 1959 revolution.[94] With the departure of roughly four fifths of the community by 1962, Cuban Jews became increasingly dependent on foreign donations and aid. The CJC's Saul Meyer sent Astorre Mayer of the Standing Conference of European Jewish Community Services a letter entitled, "Aid to Needy Jews in Cuba." The Conference had received several urgent appeals from, "at least 250 aged, sick and destitute Jewish people in Cuba who, after having sold practically all their belongings, are now threatened with starvation."[95] Now, having secured the funding from European institutions, the Conference sought to enlist the CJC's cooperation "in this project of aid to the Jewish people in Cuba."[96] The conventional means by which dues and income were collected in the Cuban Jewish community had all but evaporated with mass emigration. On the subject of financing, Kayfetz's 1962 report rhetorically asked, "How are these committees financed?"[97] The Patronato, the largest Cuban Jewish institution, had been running monthly deficits of 1,500 pesos and was compelled to seek funding by which time only 200 pesos remained in its treasury.[98]

While primary stewardship had been transferred to the CJC, in terms of international financial support, the Council of European Jewish Communities spearheaded fundraising. With complications arising from the political climate in Cuba, the Council by "special arrangement" had donated $18,000 annually to the community.[99]

Although the CJC did not lead the financial campaign, as a later CJC-sponsored mission chaired by Lavy Becker in 1971 illustrated, once more, the organization's indispensable role in Cuba providing essential information for international decision-making.[100] Becker's trip updated the World Jewish Congress (WJC) and the Council of European Jewish Communities to the prevailing conditions in Cuba as well as the Jewish community's needs. For instance, Becker chronicled the widespread impoverishment of Cuban Jewry. "The poor," Becker reported accounted for, "some 175 [people], approximately 12% of the community. They undoubtedly include not only those who were poor earners before the revolution, but also those whose lot was aggravated by the changed economy, as well as those who aged sufficiently to be affected by the change."[101] That more than a tenth of the Cuban Jewish community was dependent upon financial aid led Becker to conclude, "We will need to continue to support them financially and morally."[102]

Generally speaking, the economic circumstances of the Cuban Jewish community from the mid-1960s onward was as an unmitigated disaster. All the major communal institutions were financially dependent or economically unstable. The departure of roughly a further quarter of the population between 1962 and 1973 exacerbated the already struggling community's reliance on membership fees. Consequently, Canadian, American, and European Jewish organization contemplated various means of addressing the dual problems of Cuban Jewry, and its institutions, economic precariousness. One was found in an unusual place with the annual Passover shipments spearheaded by the CJC. In years to come, such seemingly innocuous goods would become the major lifeline of economic sustainability for the community. Distributed to the local synagogues, the supplies which included "matzos, horseradish, tea, chicken loaf, and ceremonial wine," were then resold to Jews registered on the Passover list.[103] The resulting income would then deposited into a community welfare fund and, in Kayfetz's opinion, amounted to the "main source of revenue to maintain the Jewish institutions."[104]

Passover in Havana

Following the Second World War, the distribution of Passover supplies, especially to European Jews in displaced person (DP) camps, gained new symbolic meaning for the diaspora. A 1950 news bulletin from the *Jewish Telegraphic Agency* (JTA) captures the sentiment. "The Passover holiday, which begins April 1, will this year be marked by thousands of Jews in DP camps and in J.D.C. transient centres, waiting to re-enact the Biblical story of the Exodus from Egypt."[105] In the case of the Cuban Revolution nearly a decade later, North American Jewry's concerns were intensified by Cuba's progressive departure toward the Soviet sphere of influence.[106] Passover, requiring a strict dietary regimen, ensured Cuban Jewry's utter dependence on foreign supply, thus became a principal concern of the CJC.[107]

Even prior to the severing of American—Cuban relations, the Comunidad Religiosa Hebrea De Cuba (Adath Israel) notified HIAS of their alarming situation. The absence of matzos, "is not merely a religious problem, but a general Jewish problem, because our community is being made gradually to appear just like the general population."[108] The rationing of food had left all Cubans, according to Ben Kayfetz, in "a very bad" situation.[109] Further compounding Cuban Jewry's "food situation" was the chronic unavailability of kosher food, religious products, and a *shochet* (an overseer of kosher food production).[110] The timing of the American—Cuban split in January 1961, and the arrival of Passover in early April, was unpropitious.[111] By the time of Kage's visit he reported, "With reference to the matzos, I was asked to transmit to the Canadian Jewish Congress and the A.J.D.C. the deep appreciation of the Adath Israel for this gift which for them, and probably for many other members of the community, is of great significance."[112] The importance of the issue was resounded in a WJC announcement on March 21, 1961, entitled, "Cuban Jewry Will Have Passover Supplies."[113] In the press release the WJC explicitly acknowledged, "Another World Jewish Congress affiliate, the Canadian Jewish Congress, has undertaken to ship the Passover supplies as part of its relief program in cooperation with the Joint Distribution Committee."[114]

Lavy Becker's 1973 report illustrates both the significance Cuban Jewry assigned to the CJC's transferring of Passover supplies as well as how consuming the initiative had become for the organization's activities. Appended to Becker's initial report was a detailed account dedicated to "the distribution of Passover products to Jews of Cuba as learned on a visit to Cuba from January 29 to February 2, 1973."[115] Becker's report is three pages of minute detail on the CJC's operation:

> In accordance with their decision each Jewish family is entitled to receive the following: Matzah—4 pounds per person, Matzah Meal—2 pounds per person, Meat—3 tins a person, Oil—1/10 gallon per person, and Wine—1 bottle for families of less than 4 persons and 2 bottles for families of between 5 and 8.

Becker further parses the minutia by its corresponding distribution among the principal organizational benefactors in Cuba, such as the Adath Israel Congregation, the Centro Hebrea Sefaradi (the Sephardi synagogue), and the Union Sionista.[116] Ben Kayfetz's subsequent 1985 mission similarly enumerated the importance of supply, distribution, and coordination of the annual Passover donation. According to Kayfetz, "The annual shipment from Canada has been the only source of Passover food for this isolated community since it was cut off from USA trade [sic] by the American embargo after the Castro uprising."[117]

Despite the CJC's early fears of an uncooperative (or even wholly obstructionist) Cuban government, Becker's 1975 report spoke glowingly of their cooperation. "The

role of the Cuban government, active and passive, in its relationship to the Jewish community is so unusual as to deserve not only recording, but the gratitude of Jews everywhere."[118] "The Cuban government allowed the Jewish community a special license to receive the rather large quantity of Passover foods. It was a concession towards their religious requirements," Becker reported.[119] More broadly, Cuban society remained supportive of the Jewish community and saw them as fellow citizens who similarly "endured the discomforts of other middle-class Cubans." Remarkably, during this time even the Cuban media depicted Passover as a celebration of national liberation.[120] According to Donna Katzin, a correspondent for *The Nation*, who conducted a study in Cuba of the Jewish community in 1974 concluded, "it is all too easy to assume Cuba, which receives much aid from the USSR, must follow parallel policies. But the Cuban Jewish community itself testifies that the island's Socialist economic and political reorganization neither discourages religious observance nor tolerates antisemitism."[121]

If the CJC had played the role of "observe and report" on emigration in later decades, the organization had served dutifully as the point person for the religious supplies initiative. It is remarkable the extent, perhaps even fixation, with which the CJC, JDC, and HIAS remained constantly aware of the status of religious supplies in Cuba. The CJC's fact-finding missions to Cuba, repeatedly reference the issue alongside what, to an outside observer, would appear to be far more pressing concerns: antisemitism, Israel, religious freedom, emigration, and the standard of living. As such, the issue of religious supplies in this context ought not to be considered subordinate to those of seemingly vital significance. As Lavy Becker asserted following his fact-finding mission in 1973:

> One cannot overemphasize the importance to Cuban Jews of this great gift [Passover supplies]. It is not only that in a land of shortages extra food items are especially welcome. It is that these foods help them observe the Festival of Freedom. But of greatest importance is that they know that they are not forgotten, that people care.[122]

The tradition has continued unabated to the modern day, and the spirit and rhetoric behind the CJC remain largely the same. Revealing the continued significance of this annual tradition, Len Rudner, a former member of the CJC, recounted in an email correspondence that although the mission originated well before his tenure:

> . . . certainly the sense that I had was that [the] CJC and the [Canadian] Jewish community engaged in this decades-long effort because of a strong sense of communal responsibility. I don't think I ever heard of anyone say that we were doing this because the Americans weren't. Rather, it was because it was the right thing to do. As the Passover *Haggadah* says, "let those who are hungry come to eat."[123]

Rudner's explanation captures the essence of the Passover holiday in Jewish tradition. Reflecting on the organization's commitments which began in Cuba in 1961, the then-CJC CEO Bernie Farber wrote in 2011, "There is a centuries-old custom, known as *Maot Chitim*, whereby Jews gathered wheat to provide the poor with matzo and other items for the observance of Passover." Farber continued:

> That's why, when the Joint Distribution Committee, an international Jewish aid agency, approached the Canadian Jewish Community to help Cuba's Jews. Ben Kayfetz, the lead professional at the Canadian Jewish Congress at the time, immediately stepped up. I remember how importance it was to Ben to help every Jew in Cuba live a full Jewish life by finding a way to get them kosher-for-Passover food.[124]

Imbibed with a fraternal sense of assisting fellow Jews, the CJC of the early-2000s continued the example set by the previous generation. Keith Landy, a former CJC President, reiterated the same spirit and resolve his predecessors had on the importance of the shipment of religious supplies to Cuba. "This is a festival of freedom, a festival of joy, and we've recognized that the Jewish community of Cuba really has not lived as a free community."[125]

The political landscape has shifted dramatically since the halcyon days of the CJC's leadership in Cuba. Prior to Fidel Castro's death, power was transferred to his brother Raul, and a once-hopeful rapprochement between America and Cuba has turned into dissolution and mistrust. Nonetheless, the seeming transition of institutional power, its gravitational return to the mean, away from the CJC and back to American Jewry marks the end of a unique chapter in Canadian Jewish history. In 2015, Bernie Farber alluded to the likely changes to arise amid such developments. "It may not happen tomorrow or the day after, but some day in the foreseeable future, American Jews will step to the plate and deliver to their co-religionists in Cuba the goods and products that today are provided by Canadian Jews."[126]

In many ways, this story is one which could not have been told without the Cold War, superpower politics, and competing transnational alliance blocs.[127] It was here, amidst these tremendous global forces, in which the CJC was able reach new heights. In retrospect, the achievements of the CJC are notable and all the more so because of their popular oversight. Contrary to public conceptions of Canadian Jewish institutions as solely engaging in secondary/supportive roles, the CJC's involvement in Cuban Jewish affairs since the 1960s is a testament against such generalizations. The dedication and passion with which the CJC sprung forth into Cuba is witnessed with the near-instantaneous acceptance of responsibility for the Cuban Jewish community in the wake of the severing of American—Cuban diplomatic relations. The CJC's impact was felt instantly and acknowledged by the WJC as early as March 1961, mere months after assuming responsibility for the community.[128]

Time and again the CJC, alone, provided invaluable insights which American Jewry and the JDC could not. More importantly, the CJC exhibited a remarkable tact for political finesse. Be it cautioning against antisemitic fears or warning against publicizing the issue as "rescuing" or "saving" Cuban Jewry for the potential political blowback it would engender. The CJC conducted itself during these critical years with great professionalism and impartiality.

Unfortunately, the organization's efforts have been largely forgotten over the years. Despite the hopes rekindled by recent political developments, no genuine popular recognition was extended to the CJC for its service over the preceding half-century. The main page of the communal website for Cuban Jews is draped with a banner touting, "The Cuba—America Jewish Mission."[129] Under the banner, a history tab brings visitors to a short history of the community which seemingly progresses as every standard narrative of Cuban Jewry would. However, following the Castro Revolution, the story skips ahead thirty years to the collapse of the Soviet Union. There is a historical void of thirty years in which unsuspecting visitors peer ahead, beyond the Cold War, unaware of the tumultuous history which bridges the ostensible beginning and ending of Cuban Jewry's "Dark Age." Neither Canada nor the CJC are mentioned in their history.[130] Similarly, in recent articles by *Haaretz*, *JTA*, and the *Miami Herald*, there is no mention of the CJC's involvement.[131]

Perhaps this is the ultimate irony for Canadian Jewry: that the CJC spearheaded operations dedicated to Cuban Jewry for the past half-century remain unacknowledged is disappointing, yet unsurprising. This essay has been a story chronicling the achievements and dedication of the CJC, in stark contrast to the often-misconceived view of Canadian Jewry's role in international affairs. And yet, ultimately historical reality has receded like ocean waves to popular imagination. The story is one of historical tragedy in social memory, but seemingly with a happy ending. How ironic that of Cuban Jewry's fears of being forgotten one day, it was the CJC which eventually suffered such a fate.

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