



MUSEUM
OF JEWISH
HERITAGE

A LIVING
MEMORIAL
TO THE
HOLOCAUST

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“A COMMUNITY BORN IN PAIN AND NURTURED IN LOVE”
JEWS WHO WERE GIVEN REFUGE BY DOMINICAN REPUBLIC
FOCUS OF UPLIFTING BILINGUAL EXHIBITION
Sosúa: A Refuge for Jews in the Dominican Republic
Sosúa: Un Refugio de Judíos en la República Dominicana
at the Museum of Jewish Heritage—A Living Memorial to the Holocaust

NEW YORK, NY – In the late 1930s, when most of the world’s nations were unwilling to help the Jews, one country opened its doors and its hearts. The few hundred Jewish refugees who made their home in the Dominican Republic, and their Dominican neighbors, are the subject of the new, extraordinary exhibition *Sosúa: A Refuge for Jews in the Dominican Republic/Sosúa: Un Refugio de Judíos en la República Dominicana*, opening at the **Museum of Jewish Heritage—A Living Memorial to the Holocaust on February 17. A press preview will take place on February 15 from 10 a.m.-12:00 p.m.**

During the latter part of the 1930s, the Nazis were still allowing Jews to emigrate, but few countries were willing to take them in. But following the Evian Conference in 1938, where 32 nations met to discuss the refugee crisis, one nation — the Dominican Republic — welcomed the Jews. The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee provided passage and ongoing support in order to establish a small refugee agricultural settlement at Sosúa, an abandoned banana plantation on the northeastern shore of the Dominican Republic. The settlers, with the help of their Dominican neighbors, began to cultivate the land and built a thriving town that still exists today. It was a daunting task, as settler David Kahane remembered. When the first settlers arrived, there was almost nothing in place. “There were two barracks and a few shacks, no electric lights, and the mosquitoes were humming,” Kahane said.

In 2005, the American Jewish Congress, New York State Senator Eric T. Schneiderman, the CUNY Dominican Studies Institute, and the Sosúa Jewish Museum joined forces with the Museum for a collaborative effort to archive, preserve, and interpret original artifacts related to the Jewish refugees in Sosúa. The project was launched formally at a free public program at the Museum in April 2005.

The result of the project is a bilingual exhibition in English and in Spanish, presented in association with the Sosúa Jewish Museum. The exhibition brings to light the stories of Jews forced to make the terrible choice of leaving home for a strange place they had never seen — other than on a map. Edith Gersten, a Viennese urbanite who settled in Sosúa, writes of her experience in her new home, “So we stared at the cows. What happens next? Does one get a hold of the tail and pump until somehow milk comes out?” The Jews did not have an easy time adjusting to their surroundings, as German settler Ruth Kohn said, “It was all very difficult. The language, the climate, the social situation — but we were saved.”

“We are often told about Jews being turned away from country after country, but this exhibition will tell the story of Jews who found a haven, half-a-world away,” Museum Director Dr. David G. Marwell said. “Despite the indifference and intolerance many Jews faced in Europe from their neighbors, none of the Jewish settlers to Sosúa interviewed for this exhibition experienced anti-Semitism in the Dominican Republic. On the contrary, their dealings with their Dominican counterparts were congenial and friendly. This is a positive story, and one that should be told.”

(More)

“As a State Senator representing both Jewish and Dominican communities, I am very proud to have participated in the development of the Sosúa exhibition at the Museum of Jewish Heritage,” said New York Senator Eric Schneiderman. “The story of Sosúa speaks poignantly to the shared history of the Dominican and Jewish people, and the Museum’s exhibition will bring this little known tale of survival and generosity to a larger audience.”

This exhibition will shed light on how the settlers were recruited, how they came to Sosúa, what awaited them there, how the settlement grew, and the ultimate fate of this small Jewish community. The settlers were mostly urban Austrian and German Jews who were professionals or craftsmen. Once in Sosúa, they were given land and farm animals, such as cows and mules. Together the settlers created a prosperous meat and dairy cooperative. The settlers also created their own school, where children of settlers and local children studied together; all the classes were conducted in Spanish. The settlers ran small businesses, and organized a children’s choir of Sosúa settlers’ children and Dominican children. They also refurbished a synagogue with a handmade Torah enclosure and menorah.

Many of the artifacts in the exhibition have never been seen outside of the Dominican Republic. Highlights will include travel documents that illustrate how difficult the trip was from Europe to the island. In many cases, a journey involved weeks or months of difficult conditions. Other items on display relate to the planning and construction of the community, including original maps and blueprints marking the roads and structures. Also on view will be the community’s original telephone switchboard which connected Sosúa’s different offices and businesses to each other.

As the settlers were clearly homesick for European culture, they brought with them sheet music from German operettas, which will be seen along with settler Otto Papernik’s mandolin that he used to entertain his fellow immigrants. The Sosúa residents often performed in their own theatrical and dance performances. Religious life in the settlement mostly focused on festive holidays and life-cycle events, as evidenced by a circumcision gown and a large wooden hand-made Hanukkah used in the Sosúa synagogue.

The voices of Sosúa settlers, which will be heard in three exhibition films and seen in wall text, will animate the artifacts and images in the exhibition. As part of the exhibition project, the Museum will also publish *Dominican Haven: The Jewish Refugee Settlement in Sosúa 1940-1945*, the first major work in English about Sosúa, which is authored by Professor Marion Kaplan of New York University.

While most of the Jews left Sosúa after the war to rebuild their lives in the United States or Israel, some families stayed in the Dominican Republic where they remain to this day. A still active synagogue and a Jewish museum stand as a testimony to the resilience of the Sosúa Jews and the humanity of their Dominican neighbors. As the community museum’s last plaque reads, Sosúa is truly “a community born of pain and nurtured in love.”

This exhibition was made possible, in part, through major funding from the Leon Levy Foundation, with additional support provided by: NY State Senator Eric T. Schneiderman, Former City Council Speaker Gifford Miller, City Council Member Miguel Martinez, and the American Jewish Congress.

Public Program

On Wednesday, March 12 at 7 p.m., Septeto Rodriguez —featuring acclaimed percussionist and composer Roberto Rodriguez — will perform a unique blend of Cuban jazz and klezmer. In addition to performing Rodriguez’ musical tribute to the blending of Dominican and Jewish music and culture, “Sosúa La Bella,” the ensemble will offer arrangements of traditional Jewish Horas in the Dominican style of meringue. The program will take place in the Museum’s Special Events Hall. Dominican beer and mojitos will be served. Admission includes one drink per person. Tickets are \$30, \$25 for members.

Also opening this month

“To Return to the Land...” Paul Goldman’s Photographs of the Birth of Israel

In observance of the 60th anniversary of the State of Israel

Opening February 17

Hungarian-born photojournalist Paul Goldman fled to the British Mandate of Palestine in 1940, where he chronicled the events leading up to the foundation of the State of Israel. Goldman’s photos of life before statehood, during the War of Independence, and the ingathering of dispersed Jews are complemented by rich memories of individuals who lived through those same events. Images and words together tell stories of the birth of Israel through the lenses of photographic and human memory. From Tel Aviv streetscapes to the bombing of the King David Hotel, from street vendors to Prime Ministers; both the extraordinary and every-day document this monumental story.

This exhibition is made possible through the generous support of Spencer M. Partrich/Photo Art Israel, with additional funding provided by Harvey M. Krueger.

About the Museum

The Museum’s three-floor Core Exhibition educates people of all ages and backgrounds about the rich tapestry of Jewish life over the past century--before, during, and after the Holocaust. Current special exhibitions include *Daring to Resist: Jewish Defiance in the Holocaust*. The Museum offers visitors a vibrant public program schedule in its Edmond J. Safra Hall. It is also home to Andy Goldsworthy’s memorial *Garden of Stones*, as well as James Carpenter’s *Reflection Passage*, Gift of The Gruss Lipper Foundation. The Museum receives general operating support from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, and is a founding member of the *Museums of Lower Manhattan*.

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