

Sosua75's Story: Yom HaShoah Celebration in Sosua, DR

By Eliyahu Baver

On the Northern coast of the Dominican Republic (DR) in a small beach resort town named Sosua lies a wonderful story and a little known piece of Jewish history. Considering the huge spectrum of events which encompasses the Holocaust with its' many stories of human strength, spirit, and perseverance, this story may seem small... but it is as true and as significant a story of redemption as "Schindler's List", yet few Jews, if anyone, even know about it...

It was by mere coincidence that I first learned of Sosua's interesting origins back in 2010 while staying with close friends in nearby Santiago. At that time the purpose of my trip to the DR was completely unrelated to Judaism.

It has taken me nearly 4 years to return back to the island's North coast but finally I just did so in early February. It turned out to be a fascinating and awe-inspiring week long investigative journey to learn more about the Jewish heritage of the area and to speak with some of the few remaining original descendants who still live there.

Stemming from Nazi persecution, this story begins back in the summer of 1938 when then US President Franklin Roosevelt came under increasing international pressure to call a conference of nations to discuss the growing Jewish refugee problem in Europe. On the shore of Lake Geneva at a spa resort in Evian France, "The Evian Conference" was convened with delegates from 32 world countries, 39 private organizations, & over 200 global journalists in attendance. During the 8 day meeting, delegate after delegate from every country, including the US & Britain, rose to express sympathy for the Jewish refugees but most countries offered only excuses and an unwillingness to ease their immigration restrictions.

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The only country represented at the conference which agreed to accept a large number of Jews was the tiny Dominican Republic. It offered to accept up to 100,000 Jewish refugees and do so on generous terms. In 1940, a formal agreement was signed with Dominican Dictator Rafael Trujillo who donated 26,000 acres of his land and properties for Jewish settlements. In May of 1940 less than 700 new settlers arrived in Sosua. These new settlers came from France, Spain, Germany, Austria, Czechoslovakia, Lichtenstein, and Poland. One of the new settlers to arrive was a young Joe Benjamin.

One of my many trip highlights was the privilege of sitting with Joe to interview him on the former site of his father's ocean side farm. He also graciously provided me with his valuable insights and a personalized tour of both the Sosua Shul, with its' beautiful stained glass windows, and the adjacent small Museo Judio. (Jewish Museum) Joe is a local businessman, hotel owner, & currently co-president of the local synagogue. Although having grown up there, Joe was actually born in Shanghai & arrived in Sosua when he was 6 years old. He has the distinction of being the first Jew in the DR to have celebrated his Bar Mitzvah & then left Sosua after high school, traveling back to the US from 1959 until 1976. However, he came back every summer to visit his parents & spend time with them. **"I never got disconnected from Sosua"**. Joe adds.

When asked were the refugees who came here in imminent danger of being exterminated Joe emphatically replied: **"Oh yes, all of them, these are people who were wandering through Europe already without a visa or passport, & they were running. They were refugees and this was their last resort. My father was in the Buchenwald concentration camp for 6 months and then my mother got him out because she obtained a passport. They left to China but that was a last resort. Everyone who came here was running"**



Back in 1939, Hitler had not come to the final solution yet. He wanted to get rid of the Jews but he wasn't killing them. Instead he was just sending them to concentration camps. In 1940' '41, and '42 that's when he started killing all of the Jews and came to the "Final Solution". Before then, refugees could still get out if they had \$ to bribe German officials or if they could show that they could leave. To quote noted Bowdoin History Professor Allen Wells & the author of Tropical Zion **"In many ways the story is ironic that these Jews were ultimately saved by one brutal dictator, Rafael Trujillo from probable death at the hands of another"** Regardless of the underlying motives of General Trujillo to save them, all were simply grateful to have been saved...

When asking Joe how he would best characterize what happened here and why more Jews did not come, Joe explains: **"At the time it was just fulfilling the need. Only roughly 600 people came and most of them left as soon as the war was over. The few that remained certainly changed a lot in this country. Had there been more available ships it could have been much bigger because the country actually offered to take in 100,000."**

That would have changed history if 100,000 Jews come to a country with an only 2 million, largely illiterate population." This could have been Israel "

For all of these refugees coming to the Tropics from European urban life was a strange and new world. Few had any prior agricultural experience and the land which was given to them wasn't of the best quality. It was eventually determined the best usage was for pastureland. After first attempting a few failed industries including tomato growing, basket weaving, and mattress making, the colonists eventually mastered dairying which resulted in a successful and profitable dairy cooperative. In the late 1940's and early 1950's the Sosua cooperative produced large quantities of butter, cheese, salami and ham. Joe adds: ***"My father was never on a farm before but when he came here he fell in love with this farm & the animals and he was successful"***

When I asked Joe about his youth & first memories growing up in Sosua, Joe commented: ***"Our youth was so wonderful here, it was a very peaceful existence. We were so free & could run around on the farm and the beach and we weren't lacking anything. We didn't really have anything but we were all well fed & well kept. School was interesting because it was almost individual instruction. We went to school 4 hours a day, 5 days per week and school was relatively easy, because our class had only 6-7 students with an excellent professor. We weren't formally taught Spanish but we just grew up in it so we learned it just being here. I don't remember Spanish being a problem for me or others, we just picked it up."***

The timing of my trip was perfect as two extremely rare events took place the weekend I was there. The first was a Friday evening Shabbat service at the Sosua Shul where the Israeli ambassador Bahij Mansour addressed the congregants ***"Its an honor for me to be in this synagogue now going on 75 years that this area has existed with the Jewish community which came from Europe during a very difficult time & situation"***. The following evening, set under the stars and amidst the backdrop of crashing ocean waves, an inspiring Holocaust commemoration memorial service was held at Parque Mirador, the Sosua Beach pavilion park.



In addition to the Israeli ambassador, other local dignitaries attending the ceremony included the German ambassador, the governor of Puerto Plata and the Sosua mayor. Joe Benjamin was assigned the honor of torch bearer for the memorial service by the Dominican Embassy. Speaking of Ambassador Mansour and the beach ceremony Joe commented: ***"I think it is a first for him in a little town like Sosua to get together the German ambassador and the Israeli ambassador. That's quite an event because that's never happened anywhere else."***

Having just concluded the Pesach holiday we recall the Exodus from Egypt and the greatest miracle of our history when God parted the Red Sea allowing Moses and the Israelites safe passage to the promised land. Well, another great ocean miracle happened at Passover time here in Sosua too. It happened during a tropical storm, except it was only a few short years ago. Locals there call it "Miracle Beach". When I asked Joe about the beach where the memorial ceremony was held and the miraculous story of how it came about Joe explained: ***"You would have to ask some geologists about it but the beach really did just show up. It was a rocky coastline for ages, for centuries, there was never a beach there and then all of a sudden some years ago a beach started showing up and very quickly. Some people might interpret that as a sign from heaven but none of us really know how it happened."*** Coincidentally the hotel Joe owns is right on the street where this beach was created.



The first Jewish influence introduced in this region of the world stems back over 500 years to 1492 when Christopher Columbus reached "the new world" in neighboring Puerto Plata. He himself had a Jewish blood line and on his ship he brought along a Hebrew companion or murrano ("secret Jew") by the name of Luis de Torres. *Continued on page 5.*

Currently, there are estimated to be 3000 known Jews with proof of genetic Jewish heritage &/or are practicing Jewish customs or religion. The DR is home to 3 Jewish synagogues, 2 in the capital Santo Domingo & the 1st, original one, in Sosua.

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When asked how the original settlers were selected, Joe explained: **"They were selected for success. That's why they brought a lot of young Jewish boys, they thought if they bring people who can't survive this is not going to work out. The project could have failed" . They wanted mostly young people who were strong and could farm to make a good farming community.**

It is interesting to see how many tourists, including Jews, come and leave Sosua and don't even know the origins of the community. I was amazed to have witnessed this first hand having literally run into a couple of well educated early 30ish Jewish men from NYC on the beach. They chose Sosua as a vacation destination spot but had no idea of its Jewish significance. I also had a similar experience last November while attending an Anne Frank Sapling dedication ceremony at the Holocaust Memorial Center in Detroit. Not only was there no reference or documentation of this story at the center, even the Center's Executive Director was completely unaware of it.

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Now there is talk in town of plans for next year's 75th Anniversary celebration. The Dominican president came to the 50th Anniversary ceremony. One of the hopes expressed by locals is to have the Museo Judio renovated & expanded. Another original descendant expressed her hope for the establishment of a 3 week summer camp to immerse teenagers in the culture & history of the area. Funding dependent, other suggestions being considered include the construction of a larger Memorial park, botanical gardens, cooperative community farm, or butterfly sanctuary. Both the German and Israeli embassies have expressed interest in participating along with Jewish synagogues & organizations from the US.

When I asked Joe if we are losing Jews from this area Joe explained: **"Of the older original settlers there are now just a handful left. In the next generation, some are very integrated to the Jewish life, but others which are from mixed marriages, are proud of their heritage but not living a Jewish life. Some do. Most do come to the synagogue however on the high holidays"**

On my way back home, upon coming back through customs at the Puerta Plata airport, I was pleasantly surprised to see a small Jewish immigration display with photos & storyboards! At the base of the escalator which led up to my departing gate a Merengue quartet was playing for tourist tips. Being early for my flight, I lingered there for 15 minutes or so. I wanted to watch & see just how many travelers who passed by even glanced at the story or large photos, let alone stopped & read it – Not a one... How ironic I thought, like the story itself, it seems to go on relatively unnoticed...

So as we celebrate Yom HaShoah this year lets not let this wonderful story of redemption & of precious lives saved, be lost. This trip of a lifetime has left me feeling more convinced than ever that the events which happened in Sosua are an important piece of Judaic history which is well worthy of both preserving & passing along to others. My new friend Joe sums it up this way **"From my point of view, I'd like for the story to be known, not necessarily promote Sosua, but especially not be forgotten. That is very important"....**

I dedicate this article in loving tribute to my wonderful parents Howard & Ruth Baver who raised me with their deepest love and in the proud traditions of our Jewish Heritage.

I also extend my heartfelt thanks to the wonderful people of Sosua. I am forever in your debt for so graciously welcoming & hosting me, and for provided me with memories which will last a lifetime. You all know who you are...