

## Moshav in the Caribbean—Sosúa Revisited

**F**EW OF THE German and Austrian Jews who were seeking a haven of refuge from Hitler's Nuremberg Laws took seriously the offer made by Rafael Leonidas Trujillo to the international conference on refugees held at Evian-les-Bains in France in July 1938. The dictator of the Dominican Republic announced on that occasion that he was willing to absorb 100,000 Jewish refugees to offset the increasing immigration of landless peasantry from Haiti, the neighboring black republic occupying the western third of the Caribbean island of Hispaniola.

With the outbreak of World War II in 1939, the options were rapidly closing for Jews attempting to flee Europe. Thus in 1940, the Agro-Joint (now the Joint Distribution Committee) took Trujillo at his word and purchased an area of 8,952 hectares at Sosúa on the northeastern coast of the island. The United Fruit Company of the United States had established an experimental station on this site in 1908, but because of the extreme salinity of the soil, the area had been abandoned in 1922, at the time of the withdrawal of the American Marines who had occupied the republic since 1916.

The Agro-Joint rented a ship sailing under the flag of the then neutral United States, and in 1940 transferred 600 Jews from Germany, France, Poland, and Czechoslovakia to the port-capital of Santo Domingo (AJYB, 1941–1942 [Vol. 43], p. 355). These were joined in 1941 by four other groups, each consisting of 50 Jewish settlers of similar background. Trujillo's aim was to integrate the refugees by intermarriage with Dominican women. Visas had in most cases been issued to single young men who could claim some experience in agriculture. It soon became clear, however, that very few of the 800 had a farming background and that claims that they had were made in a desperate attempt to sail virtually on the last refugee-ships leaving war-torn Europe.

On arrival at Sosúa, a rocky strip at the edge of the jungle adjoining the small town of the same name, the Jews set up the Dominican Republic Settlement Association (DORSA) and organized themselves into two co-operatives: La Cooperativa Industrial Lechera (CILCA) for dairy products and La Cooperativa Ganadera for meat products. Produce was to be sold cooperatively at the weekly market in the capital.

The settlers lived communally in four barracks that had been left intact by the United Fruit Company. These buildings, having been refurbished, now served as the community's synagogue, the cooperative offices, and a cinema-lecture hall.

### *First Years of Settlement*

In the period 1941–47, the settlers established: a general store, now privately managed by three of the original settlers; a hotel, which was later sold to local non-Jewish Dominicans; a small hospital with its own power generator, which introduced electric power into the area; an elementary school for the settlers' children, now mainly attended by Sosúa town children; a German-Spanish monthly, *La Voz de Sosúa*, which ceased publication in 1947, and a library.

During these years the community dwindled to less than one hundred members, as most of the settlers left for the United States or Israel. Those who remained were each allocated a 30-hectare parcel of land from the Agro-Joint holdings, with an interest-free mortgage repayable over 20 years. Since 1947, the community has diminished even further: despite the arrival of 12 families from Shanghai, in 1946, and three from Israel, in 1953 and 1955, it now counted only 50 families, most of them based on mixed marriages.

### *The Community Today*

Nevertheless, the forms of Jewish religious and communal life have been maintained. Though the rabbi, who had come from Berlin with the first group of settlers in 1941, left for the United States in 1949, a *minyan* continued to gather in the synagogue each Friday night. Most prayers were recited in Hebrew, but few of the worshipers understood their significance. Spanish was introduced for the sake of the Dominican wives, especially at *bar mitzvahs*. A *mehitzah* (physical division) separated men and women congregants. Although *kashrut* was not being observed, a communal Pesach Seder was held in the synagogue. All male infants were circumcized in accordance with the ritual. A separate cemetery was maintained by Mr. B. Arnoldi, a Berlin Jew and current president of DORSA, who still maintained a traditionally observant home.

The Christopher Columbus elementary school founded by DORSA served 65 children, of whom only 15 were from settler families. The four teachers, all Jewish, devoted three hours of instruction weekly to Judaism. Beyond the age of ten, however, the pupils of Jewish origin attended high school in the nearby city of Puerto Plata, where they received no Jewish education. However, Arnoldi provided pre-*bar mitzvah* classes for the boys. The school's budget, established at \$3,000 per annum, was being maintained by an annual contribution of \$60 from each family. Scholarships were provided from these funds for the education of the children of the 25 Dominicans employed by the cooperative.

Communal affairs were managed by two representative committees. The

annually-elected eight-member Administrative Council of the Cooperatives, meeting each week, governed factory production and marketing policies, and supervised the school and hospital. Since much of the land which once had been part of the Agro-Joint holdings was bought by Dominican neighbors, it was recently decided to seat non-Jews on the Council in the next two years. Moreover, the 14-bed hospital, founded in 1946 by Joseph Rosen, then New York chairman of the Agro-Joint, was recently sold to a non-Jewish physician and now served the town of Sosúa, though it continued to be maintained out of community funds.

The second administrative committee, the Association of Jewish Settlers of DORSA, represented the community in relations with the Dominican government, managed the repayment of outstanding debts to the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, and was responsible for the synagogue and the cemetery. Elected every three years, the current administrative director was T. Philip, honorary consul of Israel and resident of Santo Domingo.

The settlement now had certain marked similarities to the Israeli *moshav* in that all produce was marketed cooperatively; credit was obtained and policy set by the Cooperative Council, and every effort was made to make the settlement self-sufficient in social services. Each member had authority from the Council to specialize in the product most suitable to the soil quality and location of his parcel of land. In this fashion farms on the rocky shoreline, unfit for the cultivation of crops, concentrated on raising poultry or pigs. Farms further inland had enough pasture to raise cattle for the beef and dairy markets. Milk was pasteurized in the cooperative's dairy and delivered daily to nearby Puerto Plata for sale. Sosúa cheddar-type cheese and butter were the only cheese and butter produced in the Dominican Republic, and were, therefore, transported by truck through the jungle to the capital at the southern end of the island. Profits were shared unequally, according to what each settler produced.

One farm visited by this author was rather typical of the entire *moshav*. The owner, Mr. Koch, a former concentration-camp inmate originally from Vienna, explained that the region's major problem was lack of water. The few existing wells were inadequate for irrigation, and their water far too saline. The lack of rainfall between June and September made his land too dry to provide fodder for his 30 cows and one bull, and they therefore had to be fed on sugar-cane molasses. The cows were milked twice a day by hand, for labor was much cheaper than the installation of milking machines.

According to Koch, the cooperative never had any labor problems; the Dominican employees received \$150 per month, the highest wages for farmhands in the country. The average annual per capita income in the Dominican Republic for 1967 was only \$264! As a foreign element, the Jews treated their workers with considerable discretion, and the result was great interest in obtaining jobs at the cooperative. Indeed, a large proportion of the 6,000

Dominicans in the nearby town of Sosúa were, directly or indirectly, dependent on it for their livelihood.

### *Attitude Toward Jews*

There was little antisemitism in the Dominican Republic. The church was not very active and the peasantry practiced a form of folk-Catholicism that has little to do with the catechism. Moreover, the average Dominican who was racially *mestizo* (half-breed) regarded all whites with curiosity, but with little awareness of religious or national distinctions. However, resentment can be racially or nationally motivated, and in 1963, after the election of trade union leader Juan Bosch as president of the republic, there was a propaganda campaign to expropriate by force the lands of "the rich foreign imperialists" living in the country.

The Jews, who until then had been dispersed, residing on their plots of land, quickly came together for protection and now were living in houses surrounding the police-station. This campaign came to an end after the Jews invited President Bosch to visit their farms. He came away highly impressed with their contribution to the nation, expressing the hope that Dominican farmers would learn from their methods. Though nonpolitical and nonparty, the Jews generally tended to support the president of the moment. But when the peasantry was incited against them once more during the civil war of 1965, several of the settlers claimed that their lives had been saved indirectly through the intervention of the United States Marines. Infrequent incidents, such as the theft in 1971 of the whole stock of 1,000 chickens from a Jewish poultry farmer, have been due more to extreme local poverty than to antisemitism. The large Syrian and Lebanese minority in the Republic were, in the main, shopkeepers in the capital. Those not assimilated into the Dominican population shared the same anxieties as the Jews, and Jewish-Arab relations therefore were relatively cordial.

### *Relations With Israel*

The existence of an Israeli embassy in Santo Domingo and a highly successful rural settlement project sponsored by Israeli technical assistance experts at Azua on the southern coast of the republic, has had little effect upon the Jews of Sosúa. To quote one of them: "The Israelis come here to help the poverty-stricken Dominicans and to settle them; we Jews are already settled." The settlers did, however, make to this correspondent the following unusual suggestion: Most of the eighty-odd developing countries of the world, which have received technical assistance from Israel, had small and transient Jewish communities. Only Latin America had established Jewish communities of some size, but their members were mainly urban

merchants and intellectuals having little relevance to an Israel technical assistance program of agricultural or youth development. However, Jewish *moshavniks* of Sosúa felt that their expertise and knowledge of local Dominican conditions put them in a unique position to act as filter between the Israeli technicians (who despite their qualifications and good-will, still were foreigners) and the Dominican peasantry, who were being assisted. Indeed, it could be said that cooperation of this sort began with the visit to Sosúa of this correspondent in the company of two Israeli technicians, who had come to learn whether the methods of dairy production used by the Jews were adaptable to other areas of the country.

The Dominican Republic has had a tradition of sympathy and support for Israel. This has been attributed to a variety of reasons: United States influence; religious affinity based on the Judaic-Christian heritage or guilt for past Catholic antisemitism; admiration for the prowess of the Israeli armed forces; inertia in foreign policy making; Israel's technical assistance and cooperation; the pressure of the local Jewish community. The settlers at Sosúa claimed it was mainly Dominican admiration for their efforts and successes in agriculture that maintained the generally pro-Israel attitude of the country. They further mentioned the impression made on the *campesinos* of Sosúa by film-shows on the six-day war which the cooperative presented in 1967. Though some members of the settlement have made short visits to Israel to see relatives, their children showed no sympathy for Zionism nor, for that matter, did they feel loyalty or sentiment for the Dominican Republic.

### *The Future*

Some of the young have intermarried with Dominicans, but, following the example of their parents, neither of the partners converted to the other's religion. It was asserted that Dominican girls from Sosúa town would expressly seek husbands from the cooperative because they knew that they would be well treated; thus far, no Jewish husband has left his Dominican wife.

However, the majority of the *moshav's* youth snatch at the first opportunity to leave the island, usually to continue their studies, and most never return. They generally attended university at nearby Miami, Florida, where their parents could visit them regularly. Though parents have made some efforts to involve their children in Miami's Jewish community, most have gone their own way and were lost to Sosúa and to the Jewish People.

The community was growing smaller each year, despite the great potential of the Sosúa holdings. The cooperative did not exploit much of its land, and the members felt that production could be doubled if only they could obtain new blood. But there have been no Jewish newcomers. As a result, local Dominicans were now buying into the cooperative and building their homes alongside those of the Jews. This development, though regarded as

necessary, was seen as an added impetus to intermarriage and assimilation among the young who remained.

Thirty years have passed since the establishment of the cooperative, and it was clear that, though the Jews of Sosúa have made their mark on the Dominican Republic, their future as a Jewish community was bleak.

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