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## INTRODUCTION TO THE ENGLISH VERSION

When I published this book in its original Spanish version, my intention was to combine the fruits of research on the history of the Jewish Community of Cuba with the personal reminiscences of its protagonists, creating a collective narrative of Cuban Jews, particularly those living in Miami, on their historical experience until the Castro revolution.

Most of the interviews in the book were conducted in the 1980s, in Miami, in New York and in Israel, recording the memories of persons who had arrived from Turkey prior to WWI or from Eastern Europe in the 1920s, or as refugees during the Shoa. They depict vivid memories of life in the old home, of the painful trajectory of immigration and of the struggle for survival in Cuba in periods of economic and political crises. I started to record these oral histories as part of my study for my doctoral thesis, and the interviews were based on very detailed questions. Since my study rested primarily on archival documents, the main objective of the interviews was to complement the written sources and to fill in gaps of knowledge. I viewed the interviews not as oral histories, but rather as oral documents – instruments of research valued for their reliability. Interviews were not open: They were based on many questions that focused on public life, including patterns of organization, relations with the Cuban authorities as well as political conflicts, particularly between Zionists and communists. Other questions dealt with the confrontation with existential problems, such as anti-Semitism, restrictions on immigration, illegal ways of rescue, the struggle for the foundation of a Jewish State and the Castro revolution.

In the early 1990s I started a research project on Cuban Jews in Miami, and at the same time I tried to complete the collection of oral



histories for this volume with detailed questions on life in Cuba before the revolution. Most of these interviews were conducted with the Cuban born second generation, that became the first generation of Jewish-Cubans in the United States.<sup>1</sup>

The stories of the interviewees, represented in this volume, are of ordinary people who were trapped in extraordinary events, both as Jews and as Cubans. Their participation in the study as witnesses gave meaning to their personal experience, and they generously shared with me their memories and historical insight. I felt that it was unfair to convert their oral histories into brief quotations and footnotes in articles, and that the appropriate way to express my gratitude was to reconstruct their collective memory using their authentic voices.

Each chapter in the book is preceded by a historical background that presents an abbreviated version of a well substantiated historical study, based on ample documentation in archives (including the YIVO, JDC, HIAS, the Patronato, Adath Israel, National and State Archives of Cuba, U.S.A. and Britain, the Central Zionist Archive) as well as on periodical publications of Cuban Jews that are mostly in Yiddish. These introductions serve as the backdrop for the collection of oral histories in each chapter, outlining the major events and explaining the context.

The first criterion for the selection of the extracts of oral histories for this volume was their reliability, as substantiated by other sources. The second was their diversity: Ashkenazim and Sephardim, men and women, rich and poor, residents of Havana and the provincial towns, Zionists, left wing anti-Zionists or nonaffiliated. The collective story is thus told by different voices, representing a wide spectrum of persons and opinions.

\* \* \*

The publication of the original book, *La Comunidad Hebrea de Cuba – la memoria y la historia*, was made possible by a donation from Esther and Salomón Garazi. Representing the Cuban-born Jews who became

1 The project was supported by a seed grant of the Florida Israel Institute. See: Margalit Bejarano. "From Havana to Miami, The Cuban Jewish Community," *Judaica Latinoamericana*, III, Jerusalem, 1997, pp. 113-130.

leaders of the Miami “Jewban” community, Mr. Garazi was anxious to leave a historical record of Jewish life in Cuba that came to its end due to the Castro revolution, so that the generation of his children will be conscious of their past. At that time it seemed that Spanish was the appropriate language to transmit the Cuban-Jewish legacy. After a few years, however, Mr. Garazi became concerned with the growing of a new generation of Cuban descent – that of his grandchildren – whose language is English. The translation of this work was made thanks to his efforts.

Regardless of this personal aspect, the main question is whether the publication of this book in its English translation is still relevant, in view of the scholarly work that had been published during the last fifteen years. The first comprehensive study on the history of Cuban Jews was Robert Levine’s *Tropical Diaspora*.<sup>2</sup> It covers the period from colonial times until 1991 and rests on historical research, mostly on sources in English. Levine’s book, that was published three years before the publication of my work, dedicates much of its space to the analysis of the background of changing circumstances both in Cuba and in the general Jewish history. It was criticized, however, by Jews who had emigrated from Cuba, as being unfamiliar with their internal life, probably due to the lack of use of the rich store of Yiddish sources. An opposite approach was taken by Jay Levinson in *The Golden Age*,<sup>3</sup> that brings detailed evidence particularly of the internal Jewish life in the pre-Castro era. The main contribution of this book lies in its substantiated information on the development of Jewish religious life – a subject neglected by most scholars – and on the life stories of prominent individuals.

Most of the recent studies on Cuban Jewry deal with the Cuban Jews living in the United States or with the history of the Jews under Castro’s regime, and especially with the revival of Jewish life since the early

2 Robert M. Levine. *Tropical Diaspora: The Jewish Experience in Cuba*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1993.

3 Jay Levinson. *Jewish Community of Cuba: The Golden Age, 1906-1958*. Nashville: Westview, 2006.

1990s. These publications include a number of autobiographies that look back with nostalgia at the Cuba of the 1950s focusing on personal and family memories.<sup>4</sup> Cuban-born anthropologist Ruth Behar wrote a number of studies and produced a film, analyzing her own experience as a paradigm of a hybrid identity of an Ashkenazi-Sephardi-Cuban-American.<sup>5</sup> Caroline Bettinger Lopez<sup>6</sup> wrote the most comprehensive work on the “Jewbans” – the Cuban Jews of Miami. While these works are important contributions to our knowledge about the Cuban-Jewish transnational Diaspora, they prove the relevance of the works on the pre-Castro era as essential tools to the understanding of the roots of the multiple identities of the Cuban-Jewish Americans.

The “Jewbans” in Miami saw themselves as the heirs of the Jewish community that had existed in Cuba prior to the revolution, practically ignoring the continuity of Jewish life in the island. The demographic decline caused by the mass exodus and the severance of relationship with Israel (1973) pushed the Cuban Jewish community into long years of isolation. As individuals – similarly to members of other denominations – practicing Jews were subject to repression by the atheist government, but as an organized religious community they were granted special privileges. While the Jewish organizations in the provincial towns ceased to exist, the religious congregations in Havana continued to function, manifesting the government’s respect for religious freedom.

The disintegration of the Soviet Union, followed by the “Special Period” of recession, changed the attitude of the Cuban government towards religion, legitimizing the revival of Jewish life. The discovery of the new Jewish Cuba by tourists and by humanitarian missions from the North was accompanied by a wave of journalistic publications. The most comprehensive study on Cuban Jewry after the revolution was

- 4 See for example: Betty Heisler-Samuels, *The Last Minyan in Havana*. Aventura, Fl.: Chutzpah Pub., 2000.
- 5 See for example: Ruth Behar, *An Island Called Home: Returning to Jewish Cuba*, New Brunswick, N.J. & London: Rutgers University Press, 2007; *Adio Kerida*, documentary 2002.
- 6 Caroline Bettinger-Lopez, *Cuban-Jewish Journeys: Search for Identity, Home, and History in Miami*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2000.

made by Dana Evan Kaplan,<sup>7</sup> who contributes to a better understanding of the present situation by studying the hidden chapter of Jewish survival up to 1990, using the archives of the Canadian Jewish Congress – the major protector of Cuban Jewry during that period.

A serious research on the history of the Jews in Cuba is being conducted by the Cuban historian, Maritza Corrales Capestany, whose studies cover the colonial period and the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Her book, *The Chosen Island*,<sup>8</sup> is a collection of testimonies that sheds light on different aspects of Jewish life throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and on the biographies of Jews living in Cuba. It brings the narratives of persons who were tied in the revolution, who expose their Jewish affiliation under the present situation.

\* \* \*

The present volume intends to be a contribution not only to the history of Cuban Jewry, but also to the field of oral history, being based primarily on the voices of interviewees. The confrontation of history with memory is one of the major subjects treated by oral historians, who analyze interviews not only as historical evidence but rather as interpretations of past experience that reflect the period and the historical context in which the interviews were conducted.<sup>9</sup>

Theories in the field of oral history deal with themes such as the interpretations of the narratives, the changes of memory in different contexts, the relations between myths and history, and the role of the interviewees in the writing of their history.<sup>10</sup> The collection in this

7 Dana Evan Kaplan, “The Jews of Cuba since the Castro Revolution,” *American Jewish Year Book* 2001, 101, 21-87.

8 Maritza Corrales Capestany. *The Chosen Island: Jews in Cuba*. Chicago: Salsedo Press, 2005; Spanish version: *La isla elegida: los judíos en Cuba*. La Habana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 2007.

9 See for example: Paul Thompson. *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, 3rd Edition. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000, 1-24.

10 Literature on this subject is vast. See for example: Alessandro Portelli. *The Order has been Carried Out: History, Memory, and Meaning of a Nazi Massacre in Rome*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003; Michael Frisch. *A Shared Authority: On the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History*. Albany: State

volume is thus open to different readings depending on the interest of the reader.

Interviews can be analyzed according to the perspective of the interviewees when they gave their testimony. I found differences between witnesses living in Israel and New York, whose testimonies covered a distant period in their past, with little relevance to their normal life, and those living in Miami, in a close knit community, and under a political impact of the Cuban exile. The former didn't use any auto-censorship, the latter seemed more sensitive to the possible reaction to their stories, particularly when dealing with the role of Jewish communists in Cuban history and were more bitter in their criticism on the Castro revolution.<sup>11</sup>

It should be clear, however, that the collection in this book is composed of edited extracts of the testimonies. The full interviews are deposited in the Oral History Division of the Avraham Harman of Contemporary Jewry.<sup>12</sup> Only by listening to the authentic voices of the interviewees, with their accents that disclose their origins and their language that mixes Spanish with Yiddish, English, Hebrew and Ladino, can we fully appreciate the richness of their cultural baggage and understand better the meaning of their words.

Margalit Bejarano  
Jerusalem 2013

University of New York Press, 1990; Raphael Samuel and Paul Thompson. *The Myths We Live By*. London: Routledge, 1990.

- 11 For a methodological analysis of my interviews on Cuba see: Margalit Bejarano. "Memories of a Lost Paradise: The Jews of Cuba Before the Revolution," Proceedings of the International Oral History Conference 'Memory and Globalization.'" Rome, 23-26 June 2004, CD edition.
- 12 The online catalogue can be accessed by: <http://www.hum.huji.ac.il/english/units.php?cat=4246>