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## Havana Bound: NJ Jewish Federation visits Jews in Cuba

*Schwartz, as part of a 30-person December mission organized by the Jewish Federation in the Heart of New Jersey, had the historic opportunity to visit with members of Cuba's shrinking – yet surviving – Jewish community.*



(Photo: ~Courtesy of NJ Jewish Federation)



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After teaching Spanish for more than 25 years in the Edison Township Public Schools, Marcia Schwartz welcomed the chance to put her language skills to use in Havana, Cuba.

More importantly, Schwartz, as part of a 30-person December mission organized by the Jewish Federation in the Heart of New Jersey, had the historic opportunity to visit with members of Cuba's shrinking – yet surviving – Jewish community.

"They have a very strong spirit, or *ruach* (in Hebrew)," said Schwartz, of South Brunswick, the mission's co-chair.

Currently estimated at less than 1,500, Cuba's Jewish population is not large enough to maintain a rabbi.

But that didn't deter the celebratory atmosphere of the Friday night Shabbat service the Federation group attended at Temple Beth Shalom, the largest of Havana's three remaining synagogues, and part of the Patronato – a cultural center for the island nation's Jews.

"The youth group led a lovely service in Hebrew and Spanish," Schwartz said, likening the melodies and rituals to the Conservative Judaism practiced at her own synagogue, B'nai Tikvah, in North Brunswick.

"They're nice, kind, warm people - some of the happiest people you've ever seen," added fellow mission participant Leslie Gaber, of Manalapan, in describing the Cuban synagogue's congregants. "They don't have a lot, but they're still happy."

At least 100 worshippers came to welcome the Sabbath, and partake in the weekly chicken dinner following the service.

### STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Currently estimated at less than 1500, Cuba's Jewish population is not large enough to maintain a rabbi.
- At least 100 worshippers came to welcome the Sabbath, and partake in the weekly chicken dinner following the service.
- Approximately 90 percent of Cuba's Jewish population – estimated at over 15,000 in Havana alone in the late 1950's – opted to leave after Fidel Castro seized control as the country's dictator in 1959.

"They offer the dinner to anybody who wants to come in for a meal," Gaber said. "Despite their limited resources, their doors are open."



Iris and Jeff Acker, of Long Branch, shown in front of a wall featuring pictures of past members at Temple Beth Shalom in Havana, Cuba. Iris Acker, whose mother fled Cuba and emigrated to the U.S. in 1949, was pleasantly surprised to find a picture of her mother and grandmother in the picture archive. The Ackers participated in the December 2015 mission to Cuba sponsored by the Jewish Federation in the Heart of New Jersey. (Photo: ~Courtesy of Leslie Gaber)

### Returning home

The mission was particularly meaningful – though bittersweet – for Iris Acker, of Long Branch, whose late mother, Lea, was born in Cuba and a part of its Jewish community until emigrating to the U.S. in 1949 at the age of 21.

"My grandfather made pocketbooks out of alligator and crocodile," Acker said. "When they left Cuba they had to leave their business, their money, everything. They fled (to the U.S.) with nothing."

However, upon visiting the Patronato, Acker was pleasantly surprised to learn that her great-uncle was a founding member of the synagogue, and to find a news clip photo of her mother and grandmother hanging on one of the walls.

"It was a very nice feeling to be in a place where they actually were," said Acker, who had not previously been to Cuba.



While those on the trip did not report seeing any signs of anti-Semitism or prohibition against the free practice of religion, they did take note of the hardscrabble existence faced by much of Cuban society.

"With Cuba, it's all about money," said mission member Marc Liechtung, of Wayside, a dentist and owner of the Old Bridge Dental Arts practice. "It's a poor, downtrodden community whether you're Jewish or non-Jewish. They rely so heavily on contributions from outside of Cuba."

Told before departing New Jersey that a litany of essential medical and hygienic supplies were needed at the Patronato, which houses a pharmacy, trip-goers packed their suitcases with antibiotics, ibuprofen, Tylenol, vitamins, catheters, deodorant and other requested items.

Dr. Lance Markbreiter, an orthopedic surgeon from Ocean Township, brought sutures, syringes, Novocain and other supplies contributed by Monmouth Medical Center, along with medication samples he obtained from pharmaceutical company representatives.

Liechtung, who delivered several thousand toothbrushes and containers of toothpaste donated by Crest, described the pharmacy shelves as being "for the most part, barren."

"The need was greater than we anticipated," he said. "They rely on these missions to make the quality of life better for the elderly and infirmed. Even the general population has a hard time getting these things because they're so poor."

### **Leaving Cuba**

Approximately 90 percent of Cuba's Jewish population – estimated at over 15,000 in Havana alone in the late 1950's – opted to leave after Fidel Castro seized control as the country's dictator in 1959.

"Most of them left Cuba in the early 1960's and settled in the Miami area, and some even settled in New Jersey," Schwartz said. "Many of the people who stayed were older people, or people who had family members who were ill."



Shown after departing their bus in Havana, Cuba are New Jersey Federation in the Heart of New Jersey mission co-chairs Marcia Schwartz and Joe Hollander, with tour guide Alain Rubio at center. Participants in the December 2015 mission visited with members of Cuba's Jewish community. (Photo: ~Courtesy of Leslie Gaber)

At present, Cuba's Jewish community must still grapple with the dilemma of how to hold on to its youth.

After taking "Birthright" trips to Israel to connect with their Jewish heritage, many younger Jews choose to depart permanently for Israel or the U.S. in quest of greater economic opportunity.

For those who want to stay, finding a Jewish mate can be challenging.

The result has been an acceptance of inter-marriage that, ironically, may be necessary to perpetuate a Jewish presence in Cuba.

"There's a lot of conversion into the Jewish community," Schwartz said. "They're welcoming to take others in."

Liechtung relayed the story of a young Jewish woman with whom the group spoke who found Jewish male prospects scarce when she wanted to get married, resulting in her decision to become engaged to a non-Jew.

"She's a beautiful 28-year-old girl who works as a meteorologist and loves her country," Liechtung said. "She said she wanted to meet a nice person who respected her religion, so 'at least my children will be Jewish.'"





Adela Dworin, president of Temple Beth Shalom and the Patronato Jewish cultural center in Havana, Cuba, is shown reading a 'thank you' letter to members of the Jewish Federation in the Heart of New Jersey's December 2015 mission to Cuba. (Photo: ~Courtesy of NJ Jewish Federation)

Adela Dworin, president of the Patronato, and considered the leader and matriarch of Cuba's Jewish community, thanked mission participants for coming – and the Federation for providing monetary support through its partnership with the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee.

"You touch us deeply and give us hope," said Dworin, a dynamic woman believed to be in her 70s.

Schwartz and her husband, Jeffrey, presented Dworin with a gift of 10 Passover haggadahs with text in Hebrew and Spanish.

"She was ecstatic to receive them," Schwartz said.

### **Impressions of Cuba**

Many on the trip found Cuba to be a country of contrasts - rich in color and beauty, but seemingly lost in time.

"Cuba must have been magnificent in the 1940s and 50s," said Sheryl Grutman, of Manalapan, the Federation's co-chair of financial resource development. "You can see that from the architecture of the buildings that are still standing."

Vintage cars from 50 years ago in an array of pastel colors dot the roadways, in testament to the resourcefulness of Cubans who must keep the vehicles operational out of necessity.



Vintage cars continue to be used for everyday transportation in Havana, Cuba. Stopping to admire the car shown above during the Jewish Federation in the Heart of New Jersey's December 2015 mission to Cuba are, from left, Sheryl Grutman, Marc Liechtung, Louisa Liechtung and Jeff Acker. (Photo: ~Courtesy of Leslie Gaber)

"On every block there is somebody fixing a broken car," Liechtung said.

A visit by the group to a state-owned cigar factory dispelled a few presumed stereotypes about the age and gender makeup of the workforce.

"I pictured the old Cuban guy with the hat rolling cigars," Dr. Markbreiter said. "But most of the workers were young men and women. One young man had a pair of Beats (headphones) on his head. As he was rolling cigars, he was rocking to the music."

A sad note to the trip was the group's stop at the Centro Macabeo cemetery, final resting place of several hundred members of the once flourishing, but long shuttered, United Hebrew Congregation of Cuba.

It was "really horribly dilapidated," Gaber said of the cemetery, which was established in 1906. "Tombs were open. Some of them were cracked in half. Headstones were cracked and broken. Unfortunately, there's not the funding available to take care of it."



Yet signs of optimism for the preservation of Cuba's Jewish community were also present, including a thriving Sunday school that drew more than 50 children to the Patronato during the mission visit.

Joe Hollander, of Holmdel, who co-chaired the mission, was impressed by the resilience and upbeat spirit of the Cuban Jews he met.

"They showed remarkable togetherness and a remarkable amount of joy in the face of a difficult living standard," he said. "They were warm and welcoming. For me, it was very emotionally stirring."

The five-day mission was part of the South River-based Federation's Jewish Journeys program, which, the organization says, allows participants to "explore the past, present and future of Jewish life worldwide," connect to "the greater Jewish family" and "help Jews wherever, and whenever, in need."

#### **TAKE ACTION**

The Jewish Federation in the Heart of New Jersey is planning missions to Israel and Berlin, Germany, later this year. More information is available at <http://www.jewishheartnj.org/>, or by contacting chief development officer Elena Herskowitz, 732-588-1800; [elenah@jewishheartnj.org](mailto:elenah@jewishheartnj.org).