

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE JEWISH SETTLEMENT IN SOSUA, DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

Compiled by Oisiki Ghitis

- 1- **The evian conference:** By the end of the thirties in the twentieth century, while Nazi terror was fast expanding all across Europe, the countries of the ten so called "Free World" from Australia to the United States, were eagerly implementing immigration laws that were ever harsher from a racial or religious point of view. The world stood divided to paraphrase the Jewish leader Hayim Weitzmann, into "two factions: one formed by the countries that are expelling the Jews and the other formed by those who refuse to admit them".

In July 1938 the President of the United States Franklin Delano Roosevelt convened in Evian-les-Bains a meeting of the European countries plus Australia and U.S., and some Latin Americans, in order to discuss "The Organization of the Emigration and Resettlement" of "Political Refugees and Those Persecuted by Reason of Race or Religion". (Note the Absence of the word "Jewish" from the titles).

At the time a large number of refugees were fleeing Austria and Germany, while already many others faced confinement in concentration camps; most affected were the Jews. A delegate of the League of Nations also attended the Conference, but no representative of the "refugees" was accredited since this was deemed a "governmental level" event; eventually they were allowed to meet with a low level sub-commission.

The conference achieved very little; Germany and Australia conceded a slight easing of the exit procedures for Jews, allowing some of them to expatriate portions of their possessions; Australia agreed to grant 15,000 entry permits spread out over the next three years, and some Latin American countries accorded visas to small groups.

The outstanding exception to this bleak outcome was the Dominican Republic; it was the only country that was willing to unconditionally receive the Jewish refugees.

- 2- **THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC:** The representative of the Dominican Republic at the Conference of Evian announced that his government was willing to accept up to 100,000 Jewish immigrants.

Because of bureaucratic difficulties in the countries from which the Jews were to leave, both in their countries of origin and the countries of passage, and the slow pace adopted by the institutions responsible for the implementation of the project, its success was less than satisfactory. Between 1940 and 1942, when because of the War no more Jews could make it, less than 600 persons finally settled there. After the War a few families arrived

from Shanghai, where several thousand Jews had been stranded during the conflict. By 1947 a total of 705 people had passed through Sosúa, the region at the northern end of the country where then President Trujillo had sold 22,200 hectares for that purpose. By that time about half of the Jewish settlers had already emigrated. Although the initial conception of the project foresaw it as an eminently agricultural enterprise, a study of the occupations of the settlers in 1947 worked in agriculture. The balance, almost 60%, was in small industry or commerce.

Nonetheless, it has to be noted that between 1939 and 1942 the Dominican Republic issued more than 5000 visas to Jews, and by so doing, although these Jews never came to the country, it undoubtedly helped save them from the Holocaust.

- 3- THE "DORSA": As an outcome of the Evian Conference two Jewish American aid organizations "The American Joint Distribution Committee" aka the JDC or JOINT and "The American Joint Agricultural Corp." a subsidiary of the first, aka AGROJOINT, Created the "Dominican Republic Settlement Association, Inc." that was dubbed DORSA. DORSA negotiated with the Dominican Government an Accord that was later unanimously ratified by guaranteed the settlers freedom of religion, granted them expedited migration procedures and offered them taxes and customs exemptions; DORSA in turn was responsible for the selection of the immigrants and the cost of their administered the funds donated by the parent institutions and acted both as the representative of the Jews vis a vis the Dominican government and their governing institution.'

The following is the text of Article One of the Accord subscribed between DORSA and the Dominican government: ***"Article 1: The Republic, in accordance with its Constitution and Laws, hereby, by means of this Accord, guarantees the Settlers and their descendents the opportunity to continue their lives and their occupations free from interferences, discrimination or persecution with rights of freedom of religion and religious ceremonies, with equal civil, legal and economic rights, as well as all other rights inherent to the Human beings."***

- 4- SOSUA: In the northern coast of the Dominican Republic, in an almost completely uninhabited region called Sosúa, the new immigrants, most of them young-the average age was 25-from urban backgrounds with scant or none farm work experience, almost all of them tragically separated from their families, commenced a new life. In the beginning the purpose was to establish a communal agricultural colony; sleeping barracks and a dining hall were built. Little by little the settlers began developing a self sufficient village that boasted its own water works, sanitation system, clinic, pharmacy, school, library, synagogue, theater, newspaper, shops and even their own bank. Being isolated by land forced them to process their perishable agricultural production to assure a longer shelf life that would allow them to ship it to market under the precarious transportation conditions available; that is how cheese and sausages industries were born. "Productos Sosúa", the

common name of the now very large factories, until recently still owned by descendents of the first settlers, is a leading brand in the country.

Nevertheless, besides agriculture and its derived agro industrial activities, the Sosuans created other industries, developed commerce and generally projected into the whole northern region of the country all their enthusiasm and ingenuity, enriching the whole area and its inhabitants both economically and culturally. The population of the region grew and became enmeshed in the destiny of the Jews, both through partnerships in work or trade and through matrimonial unions. Surely this integration facilitated progress, softened transition pains, and helped ease the effects of the numerous problems that the colony faced during its first years.

In 1960 Sosúa reorganized its economic model, moving to a less collectivist system that allowed for more economic independence of each member, thus reflecting what was already a reality, namely that most of the settlers were engaged in private activities alongside their communal commitment. The land was parceled out and a production cooperative system was implemented following the model of the Israeli Moshav.

Over time Sosúa became a living model and an authentic demonstration of what the human spirit can achieve when it applies itself fully to hard work, faith in life and to firm belief that regardless of how bad things are, hope must never be abandoned.

For 40 years Sosúa survived as an isolated and bucolic township. Only in 1980 it finally got connected to the national network of paved roads and soon thereafter an international airport was built nearby. Thus began a new phase in its development, having become now a tourism destination, thanks on one hand to its welcoming beaches, the warm hospitality of its people and the beauty of its landscape, and on the other to having been integrated in to the whole Dominican Northern Region`s tourism map. Sosúa now boasts a number of hotels that cover the whole range of the demand; this of course has brought new challenges, pressure on the physical infrastructure and a change in the composition of population.

The Dominican Republic is a country where Jews are respected and treated as equals by all its citizens; but in Sosúa this is especially noticeable: despite the fact that currently the Jewish population is just a few dozen, their influence manifests itself in the outspoken pride of this link that the average Sosuan expresses; the two large food processing plants are the undisputed motor of the large, in the economy but also in the town`s social and administrative fields; alongside those companies, the Jewish founders or their offspring are heavily invested in other enterprises, mainly in the hotel business, but also in agribusiness. Several streets carry the names of settlers that left their mark. The oldest school in town is named after the Jewish educator who for decades was the principal.

- 5- THE JEWISH MUSEUM: In order to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of its inception, in 1990 the Jewish Community held a number of commemorative ceremonies that were attended by many ex-Sosúans who gathered from around the world. These events were given both domestic and international highlight, on account of their profound meaning. A Museum was dedicated in center of town, that document and perpetuates this one of kind story. In 2003 the Museum reopened after a lengthy renovation. It houses documents, pictures, objects and testimonies, some written and others in audiovisual format.

- 6- THE SYNAGOGUE: The Community carefully and lovingly preserves its small Synagogue, which functions in a totally wooden frame house, and was recently renovated. Periodically, Religious Services are held in it; with the increase in tourism, the Temple is certainly destined to become an attraction for Jewish and non Jewish tourist alike and for Jewish couples who wish to be wed in the Dominican Republic. It is adjacent to the Museum, in the midst of a small garden; the two are a major Sosúa landmark, right in the middle of town. The Museum is open on weekdays and its patrons are welcome to also visit the Synagogue.

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