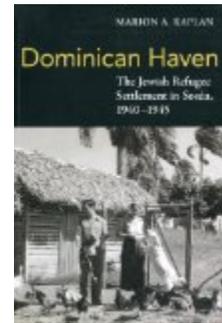


Marion A. Kaplan. *Dominican Haven: The Jewish Refugee Settlement in Sosúa, 1940-1945*. New York: Museum of Jewish Heritage, 2008. xiii + 256 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-9716859-3-2.

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A Refuge for Jews Fleeing Nazi Persecution in the Dominican Republic

Marion A. Kaplan's new book provides an excellent account of the history of the settlement in Sosúa, in the Dominican Republic, which was founded in 1938 as a refuge for Jewish emigrants from Europe. Sosúa was a small agricultural settlement on the northeastern shore of the island where several hundred refugees stayed during World War II, as Dominican authorities granted them asylum. And, although the agricultural colony has vanished, its memory still lives on among the refugees and the local population, as Kaplan shows in her book.

At the Evian Conference convened by Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1938, the Dominican Republic was the only country that offered asylum to refugees from Nazi Germany. Rafael Trujillo, the dictator of the Dominican Republic, was ready to provide a place to escape from Nazi persecution to one hundred thousand Jewish refugees. This was a very generous offer, given that the population of the Dominican Republic was just 1.6 million. Trujillo hoped that his actions would please Roosevelt. His policy of ethnic cleansing, which led to the slaughter of about twelve thousand unwanted black Haitian immigrants in October 1937, had tarnished his international reputation. At the same time, Trujillo was interested in attracting white and therefore "civilized" immigrants. Since "whiteness" was the only precondition for "acceptable" immigrants in Trujillo's eyes, he considered as desirable immigrants not only the Jews persecuted in Germany, but also those persecuted by Franco after his victory in the Spanish Civil War. Their political or religious affiliation did

not, at least in Trujillo's mind, diminish their "whiteness." While the entire world was evolving toward restrictive immigration policies and created barriers against Jewish refugees, the Dominican Republic represented a rare exception. Still, racism was also an underlying principle for Dominican immigration policy, but Jews fell in this country on the right side of the imaginary color line.

Trujillo also hoped that these refugees would mobilize resources to modernize Dominican agriculture and its economy in general. He expected newcomers to have the necessary means of support that would keep them from becoming a burden for the receiving state. In addition, these newcomers were not to become competition for the local population. Agriculture was, therefore, practically the only option left open to them. The American Jewish Joint Committee was willing to support Jewish emigration to the Dominican Republic in the hope that the Dominican case would provide a model for many more Latin American countries.

The Dominican Republic saved the lives of about three thousand Jewish refugees, at times merely by granting them a visa. About two thousand Jews passed through the republic before arriving at their final destination, the United States. Trujillo, in tandem with American Jewish organizations, would have welcomed many more refugees were it not for the lack of funding, and, even more important, the lack of support of the United States during the war. Shortly after the end of the war,

an additional one hundred Jews found a new home in the Dominican Republic, but the founding of the state of Israel and the opening of the United States for Jewish displaced persons precluded the need for new places of settlement.

Kaplan's book, a social and political history of Sosúa, is divided into seven chapters. The first chapter discusses the Dominican rescue operation, starting with the Evian Conference and the Dominican invitation. The second chapter analyzes in detail the preparatory negotiations between Jewish charities and Trujillo's government. Chapters 3 and 4 focus on the arrival of the refugees in Sosúa. Chapters 5 and 6 outline how the refugees settled in Sosúa and problems that arose. The final chapter closes with the postwar exodus and the memories of the refugees and their children, as well as those of the local Dominican population with regard to Sosúa. Very few of the Jewish refugees remained in the Dominican Republic. Most moved to the United States because it offered them a life more similar to the one they were forced to leave behind in Europe.

The first two chapters discuss the reasons for the Dominican Republic's generous immigration policy with regard to German Jews. Here, Kaplan focuses her discussion on the strategies of Jewish aid organizations. The following four chapters provide a social history of Jewish immigration to the Dominican Republic. Kaplan investigates financial support for Jewish immigrants provided by the Jewish Joint Committee. With this support and the help of Dominican laborers, Jewish immigrants were able to create a new home for themselves. The human stories of several hundred Jewish refugees who were confronted with a new climate and the pressures to learn new professions as well as a new language figure prominently in this book. The account of German-Jewish businessmen, artists, and employees forced to leave their home and start anew in the Dominican Republic, where they mostly became farmers in a tropical climate, is based on extensive archival sources and some interviews. Kaplan, an expert in German-Jewish history, draws on sources from various Jewish archives to outline the strategies of Jewish aid organizations and their impact on the lives of the refugees. The manner in which the refugees coped with the new reality is well researched, giving close attention to relations with the local population, the psychological problems linked to their forced emigration, and the impact of the lack of information about the fate of family and friends left behind in Europe. This social history makes the refugees come alive again and is the most impressive part of this book.

Kaplan's account of Jewish migration to the Dominican Republic makes one curious about the fate of other refugees arriving on that island during that time. Spanish refugees, in particular, deserve attention. Further, many more Jewish refugees arrived outside of the "official" migration. What happened to those who arrived on their own and did not settle in Sosúa? It appears as if most individual applications for asylum from Jewish refugees were rejected: Trujillo wanted only a selective and subsidized immigration of refugees. When, in 1938, leaders of the Dominican Republic thought penniless refugees would flood the country, Trujillo decreed Law 48 (December 1938). This law increased the amount of money required upon entering the country to five hundred dollars for people of Mongolian and African races, but also for foreigners who were stateless. According to Kaplan, the last provision included German and Austrian Jewish refugees and produced almost ninety thousand dollars in revenue in 1939. It appeared as the "Jewish entrance tax" in the Annual Statistics of the Dominican Republic.[1] In addition, the Dominican residence tax required ten dollars per year for Jewish residents and only six dollars for non-Jews. These decisions are very much in line with developments in other Latin American countries. Simone Gigliotti writes, however, that the immigration tax of five hundred pesos was meant for "foreigners of the Semitic race" and that, in 1940, Trujillo went one step further and prohibited all Jewish immigration, except to Sosúa, in spite of "how much money they can provide." [2] Kaplan considers this issue as largely irrelevant and mentions that the authorities, under pressure from Jewish aid organizations, quickly abolished this legislation. Kaplan pays little attention to Law 48. A closer understanding of the law's impact would have required additional research in Dominican archives, if they exist, to better understand the contradiction between the restrictive, if not anti-Semitic, Dominican immigration policy and the rescue efforts for Jewish refugees in Sosúa. The latter is central to this book, but the Sosúa story could have benefited from a stronger integration in a global analysis of Dominican immigration and refugee policy. In particular, a comparison of the Spanish and Jewish refugees' experience in the Dominican Republic would have furthered the analysis of the reception of the refugees and of anti-Semitism and nativism among the local population. It would also have been useful to include the experiences of Jewish refugees who arrived in the Dominican Republic on their own. Kaplan could arrive at the conclusion that there was no anti-Semitism and nativism in the Dominican Republic because of her selective approach.

The book on the rescue efforts for Jewish refugees in Sosúa is a very valuable contribution to research on the German-Jewish refugee experience, Dominican immigration policy, and interethnic relations. It is written with much attention to the human dimension.

Notes

[1]. The author writes that Jewish refugees of Nazi Germany were affected “because when they left the expanded German Reich, their passports declared ‘without citizenship or nationality.’ Thus Germany would never have to allow Jews to reenter because they were no longer citizens” (p. 39). This contention is valid only for stateless Jews under the protection of the German authorities (the holders of a German *Fremdenpass*) who seem to have had no right to return. The validity of their travel documents was not extended once they were abroad. However, Nazi Germany did not create a legal obstacle to the return of German Jews. Although they did not want the Jews to return, few were denaturalized in the 1930s. Upon return, German Jews were not stopped at the German border, but as early as 1935 and later they were taken to concentration camps. This

punishment was most effective in convincing Jews to remain in the countries where they had asylum. The legal fiction of upholding (second-class) German citizenship for German Jews lasted until 1941, when they were collectively denaturalized. This legal Germanness of these Jews was probably upheld so as not to endanger emigration opportunities. In addition, immigration restrictions would have affected Aryan German nationals too. Holger Berschel, *Bürokratie und Terror: Das Judenreferat der Gestapo Düsseldorf, 1935-1945* (Essen: Klartext, 2001), 262-274; Martin Dean, “The Development and Implementation of Nazi Denaturalization and Confiscation Policy up to the Eleventh Decree to the Reich Citizenship Law,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 16 (2002): 217-242; Michael Hepp, *Die Ausbürgerung deutscher Staatsangehöriger 1933-45 nach den im Reichsanzeiger veröffentlichten Listen* (Munich: K. G. Saur, 1985-88); and Frank Caestecker and Bob Moore, eds., *Refugees from Nazi-Germany and the Liberal European States, 1933-1939* (Oxford and New York: Berghahn Books, in press).

[2]. Simone Gigliotti, “Acapulco in the Atlantic’: Revisiting Sosúa, a Jewish Refugee Colony in the Caribbean,” *Immigrants and Minorities*, 24 (2006): 29.

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