



Gratz Insider, March 2012 - Story Continuation

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### **Cuba: A Country in Transition and a Jewish Community Reborn**

Travelers returning from a trip abroad are easy to spot - their suitcases bulging with souvenirs and piles of wrinkled clothes. But the Gratz trip to Cuba was different, as evidenced by the Soffa Family, who actually came back with less than they brought. "We gave everything away - shoes clothes and even soap from the hotels - to people who had so little," said Kris Soffa. What her family and their 38 travel companions did come back with, however, was far more valuable. They gained a firsthand understanding of life in Cuba and of the inspiring commitment of Cuban Jews to revitalize the local Jewish community.

From dining on black beans and a Cuban fish delicacy to donating baby supplies at an at-risk pregnancy clinic, the Gratz group was exposed to as much of Cuban life as possible. And everything they saw was contextualized by trip leader Dr. Jerry Kutnick, who provided background and commentary on each day's events. He described Cuba as a country in transition, a characterization captured in this comment by trip participant Wendy Weingarten: "It's a time warp in many ways - cars from the 50's, formerly beautiful houses left to fall into disrepair, little technology. On the other hand, things are beginning to change. Raul Castro has allowed some private businesses and things are loosening. The most uplifting part is the enthusiasm of the children and young adults."

Experiencing Cuban life the way the group did was not only a unique opportunity open to few travelers, but it was also important for understanding Cuban Jewry, according to Dr. Kutnick. A thriving pre-Revolution Cuban Jewish population was virtually decimated by mass emigration in the early 1960's. With the easing of some religious restrictions in the 1990's, however, the current community of perhaps 2,000 Jews has begun to experience a rebirth.

The Gratz group encountered this rejuvenated Jewish spirit in the home of a woman they visited in Cienfuegos, a Cuban town with fewer than 30 Jews. Once a month, her home, decorated with Judaica, becomes a makeshift

synagogue for local Jews. Since there are no rabbis in Cuba, a Chilean rabbi visits the island several times a year, teaching Cuban Jews how to conduct services. “It was very moving for our group to see people so committed in their efforts to create a real Jewish presence despite severe economic and political limitations,” said Dr. Kutnick.

The challenges are indisputably great. Even the largest synagogue in Havana rents its social hall out as a gym in order to stay afloat. However, on the last day of the trip, as the Gratz group danced to “Hava Nagila” and other Jewish songs played by Cuban musicians, they felt hopeful that the Jewish community in Cuba would survive.

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*There are other opportunities to participate in the rich experience that is Gratz travel-study. In July, Dr. Michael Steinlauf, Gratz professor and director of its Holocaust and Genocide Studies program, is leading a trip to Poland. For more information about this trip, contact Dee White at [dwhite@gratz.edu](mailto:dwhite@gratz.edu) or 215-635-7300, x186. A trip to Greece and Israel is also currently in development. For more information about that trip, contact Dr. Ruth Sandberg at [rsandberg@gratz.edu](mailto:rsandberg@gratz.edu) or 215-635-7300 x168.*