



Gratz Insider, February 2013 - Story Continuation

[To return to the newsletter, close this page.]

Gratz goes to Cuba

For the 26 travelers on the Gratz trip to Cuba, their experience was a multisensory mélange of richness and color. They were awed by the beauty of the Santiago Bay and dazzled by the unchanged 1950's luxe of Meyer Lansky's Habana Riviera Hotel. They were intrigued by the Afro-Cuban religion, Santeria, and participated in a traditional folk dance with members of this faith. They were drawn to the Cuban food, music and art, but were also keenly aware of the poverty that characterizes life in this Latin American communist country.

While the country as a whole was a distinctly new and different place for most of the Gratz travelers, a touching sense of familiarity permeated the group when they visited the small but striving Jewish community that exists in Cuba. "To go to the synagogue and be able to sing the same songs I would sing at home was very special," remarked trip participant Betsy Lewinson. Barbara Rosenau, director of Adult Jewish Learning at Gratz who also made the trip, was similarly moved when she realized that the siddurim used in the Santiago synagogue were the same ones she uses at home, only with English replaced by Spanish. "We don't share the same language or national heritage, but we share the same Jewish roots. I really feel a connection as a fellow Jew," said Rosenau.

In addition to making these personal connections, the Gratz group was able to consider Cuban Jewry within a historical context, thanks to the educational content of their trip, provided largely by group leader Dr. Jerry Kutnick, former dean for academic affairs and associate professor of history and Jewish Thought at Gratz. Kutnick described a visit to the Jewish cemetery outside Havana as offering a "social history" of the Jews in Cuba, with Jewish headstones extending back hundreds of years. Ironically, this cemetery is also the site of the first Holocaust memorial ever to be erected in the Western Hemisphere.

The Jewish population in Cuba, now estimated at about 1,500, was at a high of 15,000 before the 1959 Cuban Revolution. Soon after Castro assumed power, however, the vast majority of Jews fled the country. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early nineties, Cuba has been in a state of transition, gradually becoming more accepting of religious practice.

Thanks in part to the support of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, the small minority of Jews remaining in Cuba have persevered, and in some areas, have even experienced a resurgence. The Gratz group witnessed this renewed interest in Judaism during a visit to the synagogue in Guantanamo, where they were treated to a performance of Israeli folk dancing. The Jewish population in Guantanamo is so small, however, that it consists largely of the members of a single extended family, the Esquenazi-Mizrachi Family.

Particularly affected by the experience in Guantanamo was trip participant Patricia Wisch, who described her time there as follows: “At lunch in Guantanamo, I was lucky to sit down with a whole family. I got more smiles and warm feelings—it was so loving. That piece of time was very meaningful to me.”

After such a moving experience, the looming question remains as to what the future holds for Cuban Jews. One of the Gratz travelers raised that very question to a prominent Jewish leader in Havana. She responded by suggesting that the future of Cuban Jewry is linked in part to the future of Cuban-American relations. In other words, a normalizing of the relationship between the two countries would have a positive impact upon Cuban Jews. However, regardless of the geopolitical future of this relationship, the Gratz group unquestionably left Cuba with profound memories of a people who are striving to regain their Jewish heritage.