The call of the cha cha cha

Ruth Behar’s parents left Havana for the United States when she was a child but she had always yearned to reconnect with the island that had been a haven for her grandparents and other Jewish immigrants.

There are ways you learn in childhood you are an immigrant and will always be an immigrant. I remember being 11 and begging my mother to let me take piano lessons. She immediately said, “Learn to play the guitar or the accordion, a portable instrument,” she said. I didn't understand my mother's logic. But I took up the guitar and sang Joni Mitchell songs, and I played second violin in the school orchestra.

When I'm at Shabbat services in Havana, I feel the same wonder my ancestors felt when they arrived on the island that seemed permanent. But after the Cuban Revolution in 1959, the dissolution of the community was swift, like a candle snuffed out by the wind. With Castro's turn to communism after the Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961, Jews lost their businesses and even their most prestigious jobs. They weren't persecuted, but they righty feared that their Jewish institutions, particularly their schools, would collapse under the new system, which sought to create national educational and health programmes for all.

Suddenly, it was all over. More than 90 per cent of the Jewish community left Cuba. Some emigrated to the United States, while others went to Israel. Eliezer Behar, my father, left Cuba and moved to Havana so he could send his children – my mother, aunt, and uncle – to the Jewish day school, where instruction was in Yiddish and Spanish. In less than a half century, these people of Jewish heritage, if they remained in Cuba, would no longer be a Jewish community in the sense that there would be a Jewish community.

The contemporary Jewish community in Cuba numbers no more than a thousand. They are professionals, working in health, education, law and business, but salaries are meagre and many people live on modest pensions abroad. Support comes from Jewish agencies in the United States and Canada and from tourists. With the growth of private enterprise, handcrafts are now made by members of the community to sell to visitors and help with the upkeep of the synagogues. The government doesn’t interfere in Jewish life and has supported the existence of the kosher butcher shop in Havana. Recently, the Jewish cemetery in Guantanamo was repaired under the auspices of the commemoration of Havana’s 500th anniversary.

It is impressive how hard the tiny Cuban Jewish community works to be recognized by the global Jewish community. Some are involved in the Maccabees games or by marking Holocaust Remembrance Day. Cuba is still a safe place to be a Jew. Adelí Díaz, the president of the Jewish community, likes to say, “Our door is open. We don’t need security here.”

When I'm at Shabbat services in Havana, I feel a flurry of emotions, happy there are still Jews in Cuba, but also sad that so many of my people emigrated. I have a special connection with Cuba, where I was born and I feel grateful to be able to keep returning and know what it is to be a Jew in Cuba. I have a particular need to visit — it is a connection with my Jewish heritage that remains.

The contemporary Jewish community in Cuba numbers more than a thousand at most. Religious freedom returned to the island in the 1990s after the fall of the Soviet Union, and many who had grown distant from their heritage reclaimed their Jewish identity. But only a handful are Jewish on both their mother’s and father’s side. There are Jews of Ashkenazi and Sephardi background, though those distinctions are no longer significant since the vast majority are converts to Judaism who have entered the community through their marriage to people of Jewish heritage. It is for these converts, who are deeply committed to their new faith, there would not be a Jewish community in Cuba today. The majority are storeowners, merchants, and street peddlers. But there were a few writers, who spoke for all through their passionate denunciations of Cuban patriotism and devotion to Yiddish. Ascher Pereira, poet, Yiddish hawk, Nahyeh Pincus (1931), the renamed 'Native American hero of Cuba who refused to convert to Catholicism and was burned at the stake. In turn, Eliezer Behar wrote another Yiddish poem, Martí (1954), dedicated to José Martí, the poet who fought for Cuba’s independence, and a homage in Yiddish and Spanish was organised in 1954 on the centennial of Martí’s birth.

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