



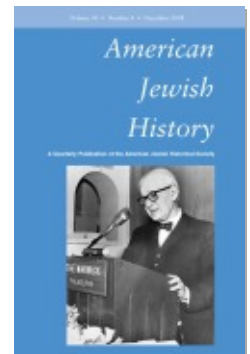
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Dominican Haven: The Jewish Refugee Settlement in Sosúa, 1940–1945, and: *Tropical Zion: General Trujillo, FDR, and the Jews of Sosúa* (review)

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Davis' judicious epilogue, provide a suitable framework through which to view points of convergence and divergence among the contributors, as well as the comparative and thematic import of the contributions.

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Dominican Haven: The Jewish Refugee Settlement in Sosúa, 1940–1945. By Marion A. Kaplan. New York: Museum of Jewish Heritage—A Living Memorial to the Holocaust, 2008. xiii + 256 pp.

Tropical Zion: General Trujillo, FDR, and the Jews of Sosúa. By Allen Wells. Durham: Duke University Press, 2009. xxi + 448 pp.

In July 1941, the famous Austrian-Jewish writer Stefan Zweig hastily penned an autobiography. He had learned first-hand what it meant to be a man without rights and, therefore, proved a keen observer of the pathos that overwhelmed the lives of refugees. He recalled his encounter in London with a

once very wealthy industrialist from Vienna, who had been one of our most intelligent art collectors; he was so old, so grey, so weary that I did not recognize him at first. Weakly with both hands, he clung to the table. I asked him where he was going. "I don't know," he said, "who asks about one's wishes nowadays? One goes wherever one is still admitted. Someone told me that I might be able to get a visa for Haiti or San Domingo here." My heart skipped a beat: an old worn-out man with children and grandchildren, atremble with the hope of going to a country which hitherto he would not have been able to find on the map, there only to beg his way through and again be a stranger and purposeless! Someone next to him asked in eager desperation how one could get to Shanghai; he had heard that the Chinese were still admitting refugees. There they crowded, erstwhile university professors, bankers, merchants, landed proprietors, musicians; each ready to drag the miserable ruins of his existence over earth and oceans anywhere, to do and suffer anything, only away, away from Europe, only away!¹

For Zweig, Haiti, San[to] Domingo (the name of the capital city of the Dominican Republic was often used as a synecdoche for that state) and Shanghai represented the very ends of the world. Yet for Jewish refugees without any options, these names represented possible if indeed uncertain havens—or at least so did the Dominican Republic and Shanghai.

1. Stefan Zweig, *The World of Yesterday* (London: Cassel and Company, 1943), 320.

The latter destination was an option because the so-called International Settlement in Shanghai was an open city for which Europeans arriving by ship did not need a visa to enter. As an extraterritorial city it offered an aberration within the realm of international law—an anomaly in which the normal rules governing the access of strangers to sovereign territories were suspended. Unlike Shanghai, the Dominican Republic was an ordinary sovereign state with the usual immigration controls. But unlike any other state, it appeared in 1939 that Jewish refugees were welcome there—as many as 100,000! Between January 1933 and May 1939 some 400,000 Jews had left Germany, Austria, and the Czech lands. Half had been able to immigrate into overseas countries of permanent settlement such as the United States (63,000), Palestine (55,000), and so on. But 200,000 were stuck in European countries of temporary refuge such as Britain (40,000), France (30,000), and the smaller democracies. The small and poor Dominican Republic was willing to take half of those stranded in limbo. As a token of his seriousness, Generalissimo Rafael Trujillo, the Dominican dictator, committed 26,000 acres of land that included the remote village of Sosúa.

The story of the Shanghai refuge is well known: both the adventurous journey to, arrival in, and adaptation to the exotic location of some 15,000 Jewish refugees, their tribulations under Japanese occupation, and their attempts to escape the Chinese civil war provide a dramatic narrative that produced many interesting memoirs and triggered some substantial historical studies. The story of the Dominican refuge has attracted little attention. The remarkable offer made during the Évian Conference (1938) by the Dominican government to admit 100,00 Jewish refugees is normally ignored because “Évian” stands for the *failure* to respond to the refugee crisis, and the Dominican offer is considered either as the exception that proves the rule, or as crude example of the political opportunism of a client (Trujillo) to gain favor in the eyes of his patron (Roosevelt). In addition, the fate of the 757 refugees who made it to the Dominican Republic seemed of little interest because their number was so small, both in relation to the refugee problem in general and in relation to the initial promise of 100,000. Furthermore the history of the agricultural settlement in Sosúa established by these refugees was remarkably and blessedly undramatic, which might explain why there are no English-language memoirs of life in Sosúa. Finally the Dominican refuge did not fit within the Zionist perspective that has structured the Jewish interpretation of viable *collective* solutions to the refugee crisis of the late 1930s. There has been a tendency to belittle the fancy proposals to create Jewish colonies in, for example, Guyana or Australia. This criticism not only derives from the fact that almost all schemes were,

in the words of a contemporary observer, “half-baked” proposals, but also goes back to the Zionist reception of the British proposal to provide for Jewish “homeland” in Uganda (1903).² This was an unworkable proposition, the majority of Zionists argued, because Jews would only be willing to accept hardships in Palestine. Only in Palestine there was to be no option to give up and return to the place of origin.

Indeed, when the labor Zionist Marie Syrkin visited Sosúa in 1941, she reported in *The Jewish Frontier* that she missed the *Begeisterung* (inspiration) and the high sense of purpose she had seen in Palestine. “It would be foolish to expect a refugee from a concentration camp to burst into a *hora*, or its equivalent, when he spots the shore of Puerto Plata or Ciudad Trujillo, as a *chalutz* does when he sees Mount Carmel in the distance,” Syrkin observed. Yet the future of Sosúa as a Jewish colony depended on it. “We know that when Hitler is defeated, and the world resumes a human aspect, immigration to Palestine will proceed with even greater impetus.” No Jews would bother to settle in Sosúa when the emergency had passed. Hence it stood condemned.³ And subsequent developments proved her right if the measure of success was to establish a permanent Jewish colony in Sosúa: today there are hardly any Jews left in Sosúa.

In the past two years the history of the Dominican refuge has emerged from the shadows. From February to July 2008 the Museum of Jewish Heritage—A Living Memorial to the Holocaust hosted a bilingual English–Spanish exhibition about Sosúa. Remarkably, the initiative for the exhibition had a political overtone. Proposed by Eric Schneiderman, the New York state senator who represented the Washington Heights neighborhood in Manhattan, which is a largely Dominican constituency, an exhibition on the history of Sosúa would show not only a proud moment in the history of the Dominican Republic, but also stress the historic bond that had been created during the Holocaust between Dominicans and Jews—something of practical value in the give-and-take of New York politics. Marion Kaplan’s *Dominican Haven* appeared as a companion volume. It is beautifully produced with many high-quality illustrations on glossy paper, tempting the visitor to an impulse purchase upon exiting the exhibition. And the buyer would not have been disappointed: as one may expect from an experienced social historian who twice won the National Jewish Book Award, the scholarship of *Dominican Haven* is nothing less than excellent, and the book is beautifully written, moving

2. On these proposals as “half-baked,” see David H. Popper, “Mirage of Refugee Resettlement,” *Survey Graphic* 28 (1939): 23ff.

3. Marie Syrkin, “Rebirth in San Domingo?” *Jewish Frontier* (Feb. 1941): 12.

effortlessly between the political and social context and all the private problems and joys that provide the texture of ordinary life amidst extraordinary circumstances. Kaplan knows how to tell the story of how an uprooted collection of individuals, thrown together by circumstance in what was for them the end of the world, tried to create a community—against terrible odds. After all, how does one imagine a Jewish future in Sosúa when the ratio of men to women was four to one? Yet one does feel the shadow of the political origins of the exhibition. At times *Dominican Haven* struggles to negotiate the tension that exists between a feel-good story that stresses the welcome offered by the Dominicans and the deliverance of a small group of Jews, and the deadly gap that exists between the promise made in Évian and the reality of Sosúa. Even the failure of the colony to prosper as a Jewish village is given a positive turn when Kaplan quotes Schneiderman, quoting in turn a Sosúa comedian's witty observation that one "can't build a shtetl in a country without antisemitism" (177).

If Kaplan's book arises from today's civic, social, and political realm of the world's greatest multicultural city (and I refer here to New York, not to Sosúa), Allen Wells's *Tropical Zion* emerges from a more personal if not private world: Wells' father, the Austrian-Jewish refugee Heinrich Wasservogel, belonged to the first group of settlers in Sosúa. Wells had grown up with his father's adventure stories about his flight from Europe and his seven years in the colony—these were the "fairytales" of his youth. But he had resisted investigating the topic until 1999, when his father was eighty-one, blind, and infirm. Realizing that time was running out, he began to interview his father seriously and he began to share his fixation. Yet the story became much more than a son's attempt to reconstruct a crucial juncture in his father's life. A well-known historian of Latin American history, Wells decided to unravel the intricate domestic political realities and diplomatic relations that informed Trujillo's initial offer to accept 100,000 refugees and that ensured American political and financial support. He has produced a fascinating tale that combines a passionate devotion for one's patrimony with the dispassionate critical perspective honed in decades of superb scholarship. It makes for the best kind of history.

Both *Dominican Haven* and *Tropical Zion* throw a spotlight on a small but fascinating chapter in modern Jewish history, one that raises a tantalizing question that refuses to be silenced by the stern fact that, in the final analysis, Sosúa represents the deliverance of 757 Jews, and not the 100,000 originally imagined. Both the history of the murder of six million Jews symbolically labeled as "The Holocaust," and the history of collective Jewish response to the murder symbolically understood as

“The State of Israel” have defined a single ideological arch that has offered no place for the kind of haven symbolized by the name “Uganda” and rejected by the Sixth Zionist Congress. In showing the dignity of the effort to establish a Jewish colony in Sosúa, both Kaplan and Wells implicitly suggest that, perhaps, the history of all of the Jewish colonization projects in the New World deserve another look—both because they are of intrinsic historical interest and because they might prove to be of some possible future relevance.

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The Art of Being Jewish in Modern Times. Edited by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Jonathan Karp. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008. xii + 449 pp.

What makes a work of art Jewish? Should a painting, a piece of music, or a documentary film created by an artist with merely peripheral Jewish associations be considered *Jewish art*? Is there anything particularly Jewish about the American entertainment industry or about the urban layout and atmosphere of Tel Aviv, which was nicknamed “the first Hebrew city” by proud Zionists in the early twentieth century? Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Jonathan Karp’s edited volume *The Art of Being Jewish in Modern Times* does not offer one straightforward answer to these questions, and deliberately so. For them, and for the sixteen additional authors contributing to the volume, the aim is not to find a solution to the “Jewish art question” but, rather, to historicize and contextualize the problem. By relating cultural texts—architecture, film, dance, painting, music, sculpture, exhibitions, and vaudeville—to their local and historical specificity, the editors employ the aesthetic as a central conceptual category in the study of modern Jewish history. What makes a work of art Jewish is, from this perspective, less important than the question of what aesthetics can tell us about the modern Jewish experience.

The volume is organized thematically and divided into six sections, each of which includes a short and useful introduction. In “Culture, Commerce, and Class,” Nina Warnke, Judith Thissen, and Jonathan Karp explore the role of the New York art and music businesses and Yiddish theater in shaping Jewish artistic agendas. The second section, “Siting the Jewish Tomorrow,” delves into the political domain by observing music, architecture, and exhibition practices in the context of communist and Zionist ideologies, while “Lost in Space” engages the question of a