

Alan Wells, *Tropical Zion: General Trujillo, FDR, and the Jews of Sosúa*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2009

By Paul B. Miller

It is a somewhat uncomfortable irony that, despite the existence of entrenched anti-Semitism in Latin America in the political, popular and institutional spheres, Latin American Jewry did not fare so poorly under the region's dictatorial regimes of the twentieth century. True, according to some calculations, Jews did amount to approximately 10% of the victims of the Argentine dirty war, a number that surpasses their proportion to the general population. And yet as Judith Laikin Elkin points out in her discussion of the complex relationship of Argentine Jews and the dirty war, the *desaparecidos* and tortured were almost always targeted for putative political reasons--because they were considered either dissidents or communists--and not merely because they were Jews (Elkin 258). The distinction is important. In his powerful testimonial, *Prisoner without a Name, Cell without a Number*, Jacobo Timerman declares that "In 1977, in Argentina, the same ideological convictions that impelled Chmielnitski and the Nazis reverberated in the questions posed by interrogators inside the army's clandestine prisons" (x). As credible as these connections may be, the difference between the torments suffered by Timerman's ancestors in the Ukraine at the hands of the Cossacks in the seventeenth century or the Nazis in 1941 is that Timerman was not arrested in Argentina precisely because he was a Jew; being Jewish was not his "crime." Timerman's transgression was his public denunciation of the corruption and brutality of the junta in the pages of *La Opinión* of which he was editor-in-chief, thereby infuriating and provoking the military (Stavans xii). Despite their belief in some of the most clichéd anti-Semitic myths dating back to the nineteenth century (world-wide Jewish conspiracy, *Protocol of the Elders of Zion*, etc.) the Argentine right wing and military junta maintained a stable relationship with the Jewish community, which was embodied institutionally in the DAIA (*Delegación de Asociaciones Israelitas Argentinas*). To give an idea of the uneasy stability between these strange bedfellows, Elkins observes that by the time of the Falkland Islands (Islas Malvinas) war in 1982, "the DAIA was quick to pledge allegiance in a statement linking Argentina's drive to recover the Malvinas with the Jewish people's desire to recover the land of their ancestors" (Elkin 263).

Disturbingly, the relationship of Chilean Jews to the Pinochet regime was even cozier. After the coup against Allende in 1973, many middle-class Jews returned to Chile and Pinochet "who explicitly rejected anti-Semitism and made a point of attending Rosh Hashanah services in a Santiago synagogue" (Elkin 269), encouraged this return. In Cuba, Robert M. Levine asserts that the pearl of the Antilles had been "one of the friendliest and most welcoming host countries for Jews in the Western hemisphere" (7) and, (despite difficulties under the two presidencies of Ramón Grau) Levine points to the 1950s under Batista as a particularly prosperous decade for Cuban Jews.

Which brings us to the "Jewish question" in the context one of the most notorious of Latin America's dictatorial regimes, that of General Rafael Trujillo, who ruled the Dominican Republic with an iron-fisted brutality from 1930 to 1961. As with the cases of other Latin American dictators, Trujillo's relationship with the Jews was informed not so much by anti-Semitism, and certainly not by philo-Semitism, but rather by a perception that favorable (or at least tolerant) policies towards Jews was a key tactic to currying preferential treatment from the United States. Trujillo had fallen into disfavor with the United States and the international community after the so-called Parsley Massacre, also known as "el corte,"

of 1937, in which Dominican soldiers, on Trujillo's orders, slaughtered at least 15,000 and as many as 30,000 Haitians in order to consolidate and ethnically cleanse the Dominican-Haitian border. Eager to rehabilitate his image in the eyes of Washington after this atrocity and wishing to "whiten" the pigment of the Dominican nation, Trujillo proposed a policy that, had it come to full fruition, would have amounted to a cornerstone event in the history of Latin America and twentieth-century Jewry. Trujillo offered to take in 100,000 Jewish refugees from Europe and even offered them a swath of land located in Sosúa in the Puerto Plata province of the Dominican Republic. Though in terms of scale (less than 800 refugees ever made it to Sosúa), the plan was a spectacular failure, "a source of frustration for everyone concerned" (Wells, xix), the story of how the policy was born out of the Evian conference of 1938, the political and institutional negotiations that both made it possible and prevented it from reaching its potential, as well as the tales of individual refugees that arrived and worked in the dairy farms of Sosúa is the history that Allen Wells recounts in his *Tropical Zion*, here under review. (Another book dealing with this heretofore largely unknown topic was published last year: Marion A Kaplan's *Dominican Haven: The Jewish Refugee Settlement in Sosúa, 1940-1945*.)

So, in the case of the Dominican Republic, not only does the pattern of Jews prospering under Latin American dictatorial regimes repeat itself, it is even more disquieting than that, since the survival offered to the Jewish refugees bears a causal link to the massacre of the Haitian in 1937 and the "whitening" of the Dominican nation. This knot of ethnic identity is tangled even further by the realization that this "whitening" was also conferred back on the Jews themselves, in stark contradistinction to the racial "verminization" attributed to them by Third-Reich ideology.

Wells writes: "A word about the book's title is in order. No one ever accused the Joint Distribution Committee of being staunch Zionists; nor were the great majority of refugees who found shelter from the Nazi storm fervent proponents of a homeland in Palestine. But at that hateful moment, when a Jewish state was little more than a pipe dream, this tiny agricultural settlement did represent a Zion in the tropics for Jews who yearned for places they could call and make their own" (xxx). And therein lies the contradiction in Wells's study: as this disclaimer about the title indicates, there is a historical tension, a bathos if you will, between the momentous event that the Sosúa colony could have been and the inconsequentiality of what it turned out to be. But Wells remedies this tension by redirecting a large portion of his analysis from the story of the individual refugees to the institutional and political jockeying that took place among Roosevelt, Trujillo, the Joint Distribution Committee, and the DORSA (Dominican Republic Settlement Association). To give an example of the political and institutional complexity that Wells unravels, he analyzes the infighting among Zionists, non-Zionists and anti-Zionists that created complications for the Jewish settlers. "Non-Zionists were smeared by their rivals with the pejorative label of court Jews, medieval elders who placed greater emphasis on emulating their Christian sponsors than defending their community's interests" (xxviii). The Zionists, for whom the only solution to the crisis of European Jewry was a homeland in Palestine, opposed the Sosúa solution, considered it a "boondoggle" and a distraction from the main strategy, which was to pressure both FDR and Great Britain to encourage settlement in Palestine. They excoriated the DORSA for the expenditure of hundreds of thousands of dollars that were spent in the colony to construct buildings, provide for each family and individual, and establish a strong settlement on which to build and expand, in the hopes of rescuing more settlers from Europe. This opposition probably doomed Sosúa from the start.

Wells depicts FDR as particularly indecisive on the refugee issue. While the Roosevelt administration was preoccupied with relocating the Jewish refugees pouring out of Europe, proposals for resettlement colonies ranged from the overly-ambitious to the absurd, from Alaska to Angola. References are repeatedly made to the president's desire for a single, large-scale settlement that could potentially absorb millions of people. Tropical colonization was discussed on a much smaller scale. There were concerns raised about the ability of these panic immigrants to adapt to agrarian life in the tropics. Wells portrays FDR as not only failing to come up with any solution to the refugees' plight but also as tightening existing immigration quotas in the United States. In a high-profile incident Roosevelt even refused political asylum to the passengers of the MS *St. Louis* ocean liner, forcing them back to Europe. Interestingly, the number of European Jews on the *St. Louis* who were refused entry in both Cuba and the United States was 937, roughly comparable to the 757 refugees who were saved at Sosúa. And yet the former incident has taken on an almost emblematic significance, represented in the 1976 film *Voyage of the Damned* (starring Faye Dunaway, Orsen Welles, and James Mason) and represented by the Cuban painter Victor Manuel in a painting titled "Diáspora," while the Sosúa colony has remained (until now) in relative obscurity.

Two of the major players in the Sosúa resettlement project (also treated at length in Marion A. Kaplan's study) were James Rosenberg and Joseph Rosen, who had worked together on a successful project organizing agricultural cooperatives for Jews in the Soviet Union. Wells illustrates the ideological disparity between the two men very clearly. Rosenberg was a second generation American, the son of German Jewish immigrants, and a prominent corporate bankruptcy attorney in New York. Rosen was an agronomist by trade and had both his national and ideological roots in the Soviet Union. Trujillo treated Rosenberg like a visiting head of state, and the two began a Maussian gift exchange that would last for two decades. Trujillo entreated Rosenberg for help lobbying the United States government on other issues of import to the dictator. There were two main issues: limits on Dominican sugar exports and control of Dominican customs. Eventually, with Rosenberg's intervention, an agreement was reached that allowed Trujillo to regain control of Dominican customs (under US control since the American occupation).

In addition to the political and institutional analysis, Wells also provides a more "intimist" portrait of the settlers and their travails: the colonists grappled with conflicting emotions of happiness and survivor's guilt regarding their escape, exacerbating their difficulties in adapting to such a radically different culture and climate. Upon comparing the Jewish settlements in the Russian steppes to that of Sosúa, Rosen observed, "It is not a difference of psychology but of geography...In our Russian work, we did not transplant single people thousands of miles from everything—of their upbringing and their past. We didn't take them to an entirely different climate, an entirely different government, and entirely different language, and an entirely different society" (188). This settlement was a geographical and psychological uprooting that had a debilitating existential impact on many of the refugees.

Despite the material, administrative and psychological problems plaguing the colony, the success of the dairy farm operated by the colonists was celebrated throughout the Dominican Republic and abroad. This colonists formed a co-operative that allowed settlers to buy shares in the company and colonial life soon began to revolve around operations and exports. A small urban center began to form as returns from the dairy farm increased, replicating in some measure the urban life they had left behind in Europe. And yet, as fewer

and fewer colonists arrived from Europe, a steady stream of colonists in Sosúa began to emigrate to Europe and the United States. Additionally, the Zionist movement grabbed the attention of the JDC and other Jewish organizations and Sosúa and DORSA funding and maintenance suddenly became a low priority for Jewish organizations. With Sosúa losing its financial support and supervision, the community soon diminished. Remaining residents realized the small community would have to achieve self-sufficiency quickly or fade. Although Sosúa director David Stern, DORSA, and even Trujillo attempted to salvage the settlement, the political turmoil and economic crises in the Dominican Republic, the minimal attention from the press, and the relentless emigration eventually resulted in the abandonment of the project. By 1978, only the 23 families remained in Sosúa, and many of these individuals would soon relocate to other areas of the Dominican Republic or to the United States.

Towards the conclusion of Wells's account of the Jewish settlement in Sosúa, a series of entrenched paradoxes emerge. Despite the years of persecution the Jews had suffered in Europe they tended to reproduce class and ethnic prejudices regarding the native Dominicans: "The homesteaders' views of Dominicans continued to reflect their class and racial prejudices. They thought Dominicans were 'lazy, had little sense of investment or hard work and multiplied much too quickly'" (293). Throughout their residence in Sosúa, the Jewish settlers persistently rejected the idea of a completely communitarian society, and entreated DORSA for more autonomy and the right to individual property and business decisions. The Jews in Sosúa sought increased agency over their professional and personal lives, yet paradoxically, the refugees were always the pawns of Dominican and American governmental, political and administrative decisions.

But, in the end, the most persistent paradox of the Sosúa affair remains the figure of General Rafael Trujillo himself, who continues to exert fascination in such recent works of historical fiction as Mario Vargas Llosa's *The Feast of the Goat* (2000) and Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007). Despite the slaughter of thousands of Haitians, Trujillo saved the lives of the hundreds of European Jews. As one survivor stated emphatically, "No one wanted us...He was *the only one* who took us in" (xviii). In 1945, only eight years after "el corte," Trujillo sponsored an article in the New York Times that declared the dictator would offer refuge to "all persons endangered by racial, religious, or political persecution" (272). Furthermore, as Wells details, for years Trujillo maintained amicable relations with the United States by promoting himself as a humanitarian and a "benevolent statesman who deserved their thanks" (274). To reward the dictator for his so-called commitment to human rights, the United States armed the Trujillo regime.

As the book concludes, we learn that the Austrian refugee who had crossed over the border into Switzerland in the opening section to arrive later in Sosúa was in fact the author's father. In the study's closing irony, Wells observes, "It is sobering to realize that I have been working on this book for as long as my father lived at the settlement" (358). The personal note with which Wells concludes his history of the Jews in Sosúa is effective, but it also reinforces the lingering sensation that despite the personal impact for the author, the more important story to emerge from the Sosúa episode is what might have been rather than what was.

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