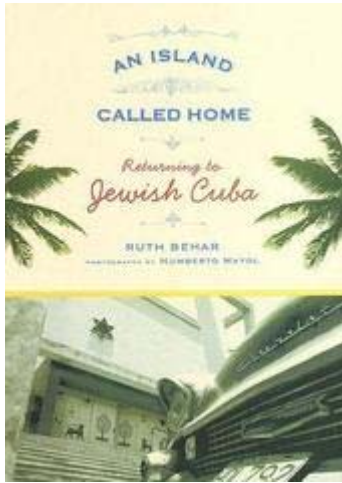


## Los últimos judíos: Returning to Jewish Cuba

jueves 20 de diciembre de 2007 13:38:39  
JORGE FERRER



**An Island Called Home. Returning to Jewish Cuba**, de Ruth Behar, es el repaso más abarcador y ameno que conozco de la presencia de los judíos en Cuba.

Un libro que es a la vez catálogo, porque Ruth se paseó por toda Cuba en busca de las huellas judías, y testimonio, porque el relato es el de su propio reencuentro con una Cuba que abandonó siendo niña -«Se la llevaron», cuenta que decían de ella cuando explicaban en la Habana su avatar de expatriada.

Leído por exiliados cubanos, se trata de necesario ejercicio. Diáspora, palabra que usamos con cierta ligereza para referirnos a la dispersión cubana por medio mundo, es palabra griega, pero traduce el hebreo Galout y se refiere a la (mala) suerte de los judíos, desprovistos de su tierra y provistos, desde entonces, de un destino unido al deseo de su recuperación.

Carecer de una patria, haber sido expulsados de ella, añorarla, vivir soñando con el regreso. Tal es una dimensión del exilio cubano, de su historia.

Así, los avatares de la comunidad judía asentada en una Cuba que concibieron como mera plaza de tránsito hacia los EE.UU. da testimonio de una dimensión diaspórica paralela y dotada de la espiritualidad que imprime una religión. El dolor, y la desesperación de quienes huyeron de los horrores de la Europa en guerra para acabar encontrando una provisional *pax* caribeña que la revolución de 1959 vino a soliviantar. Cerca del 90 % de los judíos que vivían en Cuba se marcharon a los EE.UU. durante los primeros años de afianzamiento del castrismo. Atrás dejaron sus cementerios y sinagogas, sus muertos y sus rollos de la Torah.

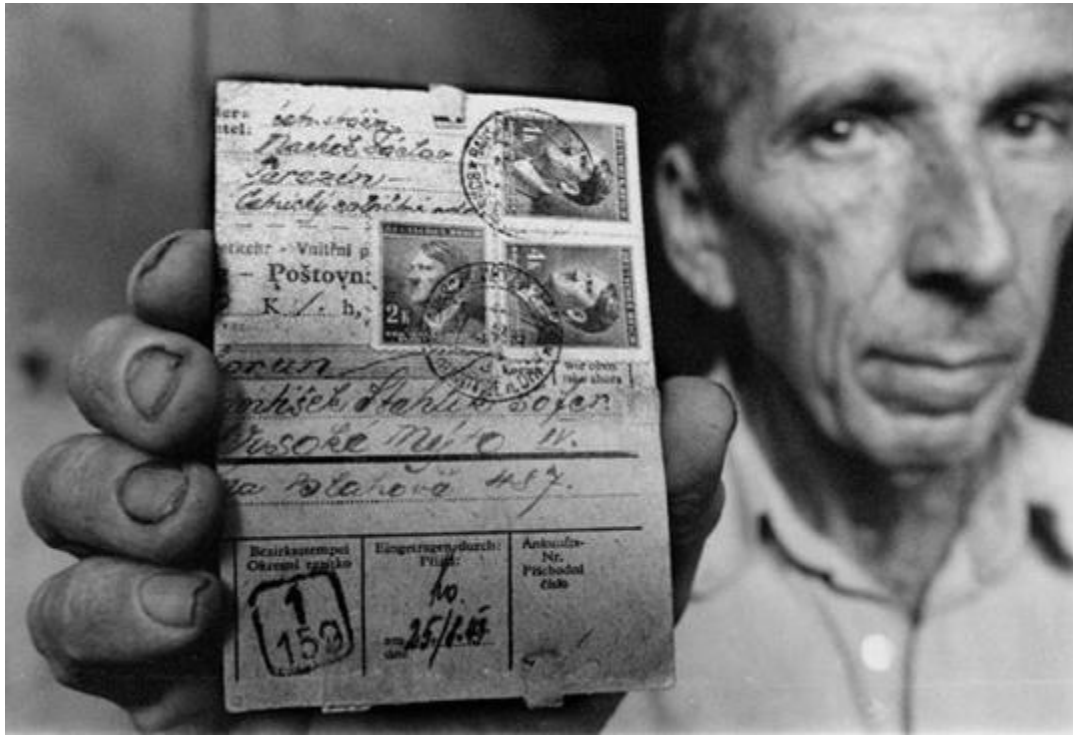
Ruth Behar se reencontró con los últimos supervivientes, secularizados por la fuerza –la cesión de la sede de la Unión Sionista a la delegación en Cuba de la Organización para la Liberación de Palestina (OLP) en 1978 no es más que un episodio del acoso de la revolución a los judíos-, pero ávidos de recuperar una tradición que los apartara del adocenamiento totalitario. Y los salvara de la miseria.

La conversión de esa pequeña comunidad en objeto de deseo de las organizaciones filantrópicas de judíos norteamericanos y argentinos, su rápida transformación en destino turístico, es asunto al que Behar dedica las que probablemente sean más atrevidas páginas de **An Island Called Home**. Esos pocos representantes del «pueblo elegido» tuvieron la suerte de ser «elegidos» para ofrecerles caridad. El drama moral que tal elección conlleva es narrado desde un discurso antropológico trufado de anécdotas, conmovedoras escenas, truncas, o retomadas, «historias de vida». Las fotografías de Humberto Mayol jalonan la narración con la impronta de rostros y lápidas.

Los testimonios de muchos judíos dispersos por la geografía cubana dibujan un extraño paisaje que parece invención literaria. No lo es. Pero hay historias, como la de Jaime Gans Grin, el «último judío de Palma Soriano», que muestran los horrores del siglo y la desolación privada con esa terrible belleza que es patrimonio del espacio literario.

**An Island Called Home** en [Amazon.com](#); en [Rutgers University Press](#); en [Books & Books](#).

El fragmento que inserto a continuación es cortesía de Ruth Behar y Rutgers University Press.



## The Last Jew of Palma Soriano

(Fragment)

By Ruth Behar

[...] Eugenia and I sit side by side in the van that belongs to the synagogue of Santiago de Cuba. It is ten o'clock in the morning and, just as she promised, Eugenia is taking me to Palma Soriano, a town an hour away from Santiago, so I can meet Jaime Gans Grin, the only Jew who still resides there. For the last twenty years she has worked in the provincial headquarters of the Ministry of Culture and she has explored every alley in the city of Santiago and every town in the Oriente region. If there are any hidden Jews to be found around these parts, Eugenia will certainly know who they are.

When I met Eugenia in 1995, during the reopening of the synagogue in Santiago, she was modest and unassuming. Now, as the president of the Jewish community in Santiago, she has become a confident leader and has published her own books about the history of the Jews in the region, while maintaining a united family.

"Don't judge Jaime by his appearance," she warns. "He's a jewel of a person—es una joya en su propio estuche, a jewel in his own unique case." And she adds, "Don't be taken aback when you hear him stutter. He's a very learned man. He reads a lot. He's helping me write a book about the Jews in Cuba using maps."

Eugenia is taking me to Palma Soriano to meet Jaime because she has faith that I won't misrepresent him. She considers me a fellow Cuban Jew, she says, "one of us." Foreign visitors, she's certain, would draw the wrong conclusion if they saw the ruined state of his house and his forlorn appearance. It distresses her to read articles in Jewish American magazines that portray Jews in Cuba as backward, mired in poverty, and desperate to be saved by "missions" from the United States.

Arriving in Palma Soriano, I have to admit I'm glad for Eugenia's warnings. Jaime's house is dark as a cave, but more than simply gloomy, it's a house that feels abandoned. If a house can be shipwrecked, this house is shipwrecked. Two stuffed chairs, coated with a thick layer of grime, are the only furniture in the living room. The one touch of color is a fishnet bag of limes, which Jaime offers to me and Eugenia.

Jaime has a bed and clean sheets, as well as a television, thanks to Eugenia. She wants to move him to Santiago, but Jaime won't leave Palma Soriano. Once upon a time, his house, located in the center of town, had been among the plushiest homes in Palma Soriano. In the front room, Jaime's parents, both Hungarian immigrants, had a well-stocked general store, with everything from sewing needles to mattresses. Attired in a white tuxedo, Jaime had celebrated his bar mitzvah in the synagogue of Santiago de Cuba in 1953. Six years later, the Revolution began and Jaime and his parents chose to stay. He never married. His parents passed away and he considered leaving for Israel, but this was back in the years when the desire to immigrate was viewed as a counterrevolutionary act. He made the mistake of speaking too soon of his dream to the postman, who turned him

in to the authorities. Now he just wants to spend the rest of his years in Palma Soriano.

Although he's gaunt, Jaime's dark brown eyes shine with intelligence and this makes him handsome. He also looks younger than his years because he has a full head of hair. In his gaze I see decency, a trusting nature, and a recluse's terror of being humiliated.

Jaime does, indeed, stutter, but once he's charged up about a subject he speaks fluidly. When he learns I'm an anthropologist, he takes me into his library, a small room adjoining his back yard.

In the room it smells like the beach after a storm. The book bindings are coated with green mold, as if they've been rescued from the bottom of the ocean. Jaime, who clearly knows his way around his library, pulls out a Spanish edition of Claude Lévi-Strauss's *Structural Anthropology* and shows me his copy of *Pelea contra los demonios*, the classic work of Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz. He collects history books, he says, and has an 1858 history of Cuba published in Paris. It is the first time I've ever seen the edges of a book worm-eaten into delicate lace. I ask if he has a favorite author and Jaime says it's Kafka. Who else? I think to myself—who else but the Jewish author who was excruciating in his depiction of our anxiety and petrified smallness before the invincible structures of the modern state?

Surrounding Jaime are the ravages of time and yet he's found a Zen serenity amidst the deterioration. It's almost as if he welcomes decay. I'm not surprised when he announces that he's an amateur archaeologist. From a room next to the kitchen he brings out boxes of objects he's collected—arrowheads, stones, shells, and buttons from military coats worn by Spanish soldiers in the nineteenth century. But this, he tells me, is only a fraction of what he has. He's donated his more precious finds to the municipal museum.

As I look at his collection, Jaime says, "When they discovered a pre-Colombian archaeological site in Palma Soriano, I dedicated myself to doing excavations on my own. I had the good fortune to find a clay pot bearing an anthropomorphic figure. That pot is now the most important piece in the municipal museum."

Maybe because I'm in awe of all the things he's kept, Jaime takes me into the front room of the house, once the location of the family store, which is now his bedroom. From a dresser he retrieves a box of old pictures and letters.

He clasps a photograph of a young couple. Then he holds up a letter. It is written in Yiddish. He says it's from relatives who were killed by the Nazis.

Humberto, who strives for a conscious invisibility during my interviews, patiently watching as I gather testimonies and waiting for natural pauses in conversations before he snaps a picture, now suddenly tells Jaime to be very still. Jaime holds the letter higher, as though it were a veil, and looks straight into Humberto's lens. As Humberto prepares to take the picture, he turns to me and says it's going to come out very well. The darkness and shadows are going to make for a very dramatic image in black and white.

We all gasp when Jaime reaches deeper into the box and shows us the postcard with the Hitler stamps.

"The writer of this postcard was dead by the time it arrived at its destination," Jaime says.

I start to feel as if this visit is anthropology at the end of the world. Here, in an isolated shipwreck of a house, the angel of history seems to have stashed away the fears that scare us to death, the fears that keep us awake at night, the fears that threaten to turn us into sleepwalkers.

Later, on the way back to Santiago, Eugenia will tell me that she's visited Jaime numerous times and she's never known he had this postcard in his possession.

"Jaime has shown you things he's never shown anyone. You won his trust," she will say.

I will wonder why I won Jaime's trust.

And I will find it strangely appropriate that the last Jew in Palma Soriano should have this document in his possession, which tore away brutally at my illusion that Cuba, a refuge for Jews, was the one place that Hitler—even Hitler's likeness—never got to.

Humberto photographs Jaime holding the postcard with the Hitler stamps, getting close enough to show his ripped-up nails, for Jaime spends long days wielding a machete. Then, as if glad to finally part with it, Jaime gives the Hitler postcard to Eugenia.

"Thank you, Jaime," she says. "You couldn't have chosen a better moment. Tomorrow is Yom HaShoah, the day of remembrance of the Holocaust. I'll show it to everyone in the synagogue."

Jaime nods and promises to be there—he'll get to Santiago standing on the back of a truck, if he's lucky, and if not

he'll walk, but he'll be there.

*La fotografía de Jaime es de Humberto Mayol.*

Publicado en: [El Tono de la Voz](#) | Actualizado 20/12/2007 13:43

**Dirección URL:**

<http://www.cubaencuentro.com/es/blogs/el-tono-de-la-voz/los-ultimos-judios-returning-to-jewish-cuba>

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