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Photographing fusion: 'Lox with Black Beans' exhibit shows subtle differences in lives of Cuban Jews

BY FABIOLA SANTIAGO

In the late 1990s, Miami photographer Randi Sidman-Moore was on a trip to Israel and Jordan with the Greater Miami Jewish Federation when she lost her spot in the crowded media bus.

Call it divine intervention.

Sidman-Moore ended up in a bus loaded with Cuban Jews from Miami – a twist of fate that launched her on a journey into a unique culture and a years-long project to document one of South Florida's lesser-known communities.

"They had me in tears they were so funny," the photojournalist recalls. "The other Jews were so quiet, but they were having this party on the bus. They embraced me and took me under their wing. They were having the time of their life, and they introduced me to the whole subculture."

Sidman-Moore says she knew immediately that she wanted to explore the lives of Cuban Jews, to tell in photographs the story of what makes them different from other Jews, and different from other Cubans.

The results of her work can be viewed at the Miami Beach Regional Library through Feb. 13 in the photo exhibit *Lox with Black Beans and Rice: A Portrait of Cuban-Jewish Life*. There's also an upcoming book collaboration with Ruth Behar, a University of Michigan anthropologist who is teaching a course on Cuban Jews at the University of Miami this semester.

"Cuban Jews, like any bicultural group, have a foot in each culture," says Behar, author of *An Island Called Home: Returning to Jewish Cuba* (\$29.95, Rutgers University Press). "The mix is unique because they are part of two communities that have an intense diasporic consciousness. As Cubans they are part of a promised island, and as Jews they are part of the promised Israel where they choose not to live."

Sidman-Moore's large-scale photographs, accompanied by brief oral histories of her subjects, offer an intimate view of Miami's Cuban Jewish community through births and *brises*, family life and holidays, work and worship.

"I had no idea that there were so many Cuban Jews," says Sidman-Moore, who grew up in New York, studied photography at Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs, N.Y., and at Studio Art Centers International in Florence, Italy, and lives in South Miami.

Statistics for Cuban Jews in South Florida, however, are hard to come by, pointing to the need for research, Behar says.

"I assume that there are about 10,000 Cuban Jews in the United States as a whole," Behar says. "I'm

guessing at this number. There were approximately 15,000 Jews in Cuba before the Revolution and the majority left in the early 1960s. Since many in the grandparent generation have died, I'm assuming the number can't be that high."

Sidman-Moore's photographic project took five years to complete, and she funded it with grants from the Palm Beach Community Foundation, the Ford Foundation, and Florida Atlantic University, which first exhibited the photographs. (Her work also has appeared in *Elle*, *Life*, *Time*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Ocean Drive* and *The Miami Herald*).

STRIKING PORTRAITS

In *Lox with Black Beans*, some well-known Cuban Jews are featured in striking portraits: Painter Baruj Salinas in his studio; George Feldenkreis, chairman and CEO of Perry Ellis International, at his beach estate; television personality Mauricio Zeilic at work.

But it is in the ordinary everyday moments, captured in 24 x 36 lambda prints and mounted by hand on high quality Plexiglas, that the strongest narrative unfolds.

There's Carmen Rodríguez, born to a Cuban father and a mother who is a Jewish New Yorker, raised Catholic but now a Jew. There's Ori Meneses, a black Cuban who converted to Judaism, and Mariano Moshe Otero, a former Evangelical minister who became an Orthodox Jew after learning that his grandmother was Jewish.

There's Cuba-born Nellie Egozi, who along with the traditional Seder plate, prepares Sephardic dishes she learned from her Turkish parents, including *albondigas*, ground meatballs that non-Jewish Cubans also love.

"What makes Cuban Jews different from other Cubans is that they have ancestral ties to cities, towns and villages in Poland, Russia and Turkey, though Sephardic Jews, like other Cubans, also have ties to Spain," Behar explains. "Their ancestors spoke Yiddish and Ladino. They lost relatives in the Holocaust. They lived through a double diaspora that was traumatic – the grandparent generation left Europe on the eve of the Second World War or during the war, and then the parent generation had to leave Cuba after Castro came to power."

The ties to Judaism give Cuban Jews not only a religious difference, but a connection to another ritual calendar and to dietary laws that prohibit pork, which is a central part of the Cuban diet, Behar notes.

ASSERTING IDENTITY

But they have found ways to assert their identity by tropicalizing traditional Jewish foods.

"My mother makes *guayabahumentaschen* for the holiday of Purim," Behar says.

Cuban Jews form part of the world Jewish community, and like other Jews in diverse locations, they found ways to integrate into Cuban life while also maintaining the traditions and customs that kept them separate, Behar says.

Her father, a Sephardic Cuban Jew, went to the memorial service for Celia Cruz in New York "because he felt connected to her as a *cubano*."

"What makes Cuban Jews in South Florida different from other Jews is that they feel a strong tie to Cuba and Cuban memory, to Cuban food and Cuban customs, and to the Spanish language," Behar says. "They can identify with other *cubanos* and with *latinos* in a way that American Jews cannot. They feel comfortable among *latinos*. They don't view *latinos* as 'other' in the way that Americans, including American Jews, so often do."

But who is a Cuban Jew -- or a "Jewban," as many call themselves -- is becoming harder to define.

"For how many generations can one be a Cuban Jew?" Behar asks. "Is my son Gabriel, born in Michigan, also a Cuban Jew because I am? Or is he now an American Jew or a *latino*?"

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