

# **B'NAI B'RITH CUBAN JEWISH RELIEF PROJECT**

## **A Special Mission by the B'nai B'rith Cuban Jewish Relief Project to Santiago de Cuba and Havana A Week in Cuba: Snapshots from a Visit**

October 23 - October 30, 2009

The B'nai B'rith Cuban Jewish Relief Project was founded in 1995 by Stanley Cohen who has traveled to Cuba over 36 times and is the current International Chairman. The principal goals of the Project's missions to Cuba are to meet with members of the Cuban Jewish community, develop strong relationships between Cuban and American Jews, assess the needs of the community, and help meet these needs. About 1,500 Jews of all ages currently live on the island, a decrease from the approximately 16,000 who lived in Cuba just before the revolution. Through the years the Project has helped many by bringing in needed medicines, Judaica and daily necessities and helping to improve the synagogues. With the help of the Project, a Jewish community of largely elderly people that was barely surviving and in much disarray now is growing stronger and better able to take on daily challenges especially with the youth of the community.



Santiago Community Celebrating Sabbath

Jews have been part of Cuba's daily life for centuries, and while there is no anti-Semitism, we know that daily life in Cuba is hard and many, including Cuban Jews, fear that their lives will only get harder. Cuba has been hard-hit by the global economic recession, has not recovered from the destruction caused by three recent hurricanes, and that as a cost-cutting measure, the government no longer offers workers subsidized lunches. We also know that the Cuban government is considering doing away with ration books (through which people can acquire perhaps two weeks worth of food each month), and that its crackdown on the black market, which had been unofficially tolerated in the past, has almost totally eliminated another means by which Cubans have learned to cope on an average monthly income of about \$20.

While the Project's missions usually begin in Havana, with trips to the nearby Cuban cities of Cienfuegos and Santa Clara, and less frequently a side trip to the central Cuban city of Camaguey, this mission was different. We had been invited by the Jewish community of Santiago de Cuba, on the island's east coast, to take part in their 85<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration. I was joined on this trip by Judy Golub, a Project Board member, to



Stanley Cohen with Eugenia Farin



Santiago teen dance group

represent the B'nai B'rith Cuban Jewish Relief Project at the festivities.

Eugenia Farin, the President of Santiago's Jewish Community had invited us, along with William

Miller, Vice President of Havana's Bet Shalom Synagogue, Rodolfo Mizrahi, President of Guantanamo's Jewish community, and David Pernas, President of Camaguey's Jewish community, as their honored guests. Santiago and near-by Guantanamo together have a population of about 125 Jews. The members of these two communities, along with the 50 member-strong Camaguey community of central Cuba, and the Havana community where the majority of Cuban Jews live, are determined to practice their Judaism in an often challenging environment. The Project for many years has worked with these and other communities and helped make possible this anniversary celebration that lasted for three event-packed days. Along with Sabbath services, each day featured different activities, including teen members of two synagogue dance groups performing, and musicians playing guitars and singing. We were mindful, however, that the Santiago community is in the midst of working to build a classroom where members of the community can learn Hebrew, Jewish history, English and computer skills, and that they need a Hebrew teacher. The Project is focusing on finding sponsors to help make that happen.

Three weeks prior to our arrival in Cuba we had learned about a group of about 20 Jews from two communities, Campechuela and Manzanillo, who wanted to attend Sabbath services in Santiago, the



Sabbath Service Santiago



Group from Campechuela celebrating their visit to Santiago

nearest synagogue to them. Both communities are about 180 miles away from Santiago with bad roads and no public transportation available. Given the distance and lack of transportation, they had been unable to attend services in Santiago for more than one year.

Our Project succeeded in arranging and paying for their transportation to the celebration which, given road conditions, involved a 10 hour round trip. We never saw a more excited group of people who participated that Friday night and Saturday morning in Sabbath services. The President of the Campechuela community, Henry Bali, said that the Project did the ultimate mitzvah for the community. The Project hopes to make it possible for Henry and others from Campechuela and Manzanillo to participate on a regular basis in the Santiago synagogue's Sabbath services. To that end, we are looking for sponsors to help pay the car rental expenses and defray other travel-related costs.

Judy and I attended the Santiago festivities and met with community leaders



Guantanamo Jewish Community Dancers

from Friday, October 23 through Sunday, October 25. On October 26, we flew to Havana to meet with representatives from the other Jewish communities, including the leaders of the B'nai B'rith Maimonides Chapter of Cuba that is 90 strong: Most all of the Jewish leaders in Cuba are members of B'nai B'rith. Next stop the Havana Jewish Community.

### Visit to the Havana Jewish Community

The new Maimonides Lodge President, Samuel Zagovalov, and Simon Goldsztein, the immediate Past President, proudly took us to visit the kosher butcher shop located in a section of the city called Habana Vieja. Samuel is the butcher and is leading the effort to enlarge and remodel the butcher shop so that kosher meat would be available to more people. We committed to help with this project, and also gave money to the B'nai B'rith Chapter, and made a donation to the Tzedaka Project (through which the Jewish community helps about 80 elderly retired people meet their daily needs).

While in Havana we also had several others meetings. One was with William Miller, Vice President of the conservative Bet Shalom synagogue. We were pleasantly surprised to see the new young people's facilities that had just been completed there that includes a meeting room for teenagers and an exercise area. We had helped Bet Shalom with this project which is designed to encourage young people to socialize and make friends in the Jewish community. Bet Shalom also has a pharmacy that is administered by Dr. Rosa Behar and filled with medicines, many of which have been donated by the Project, that are difficult, if not impossible, to find elsewhere in Cuba. Both Jews and non-Jews can have their prescriptions filled there.



In front of Kosher Butcher Shop (left to right)  
Samuel Zagovalov, Stanley Cohen, Simon Goldsztein

Another day found us meeting was with Dr. Mayra Levy, President of the Sephardic Center. Many of the members of her congregation are elderly with needs that reflect the consequences of age, ill health, and poverty. Mayra highlighted some of the Center's projects, including Sabbath meals provided weekly to over 200 people and the adult Sunday school. We discussed the needs of her community members and pledged our continued help.



While in Havana, we also visited the Adath Israel Orthodox Synagogue. There, synagogue leaders told us that they, like the other synagogues we had visited, had not had many visitors from the US for almost a year, and emphasized the importance of such visits for monetary, spiritual and emotional support. The Project through the years has helped support many of Adath's projects, including restoring the once-crumbling synagogue, and currently is supplying them with a new water filter system. Along with holding services three times a day for their religious population, Adath also organizes activities to generate some funds including making dolls and baking challah for some of the other synagogues.

Challah in Havana at Adath Israel orthodox synagogue

While in Havana we had the good fortune to be able to meet with David Tacher, President of the Santa Clara Jewish Community, a small city a few hours east of Havana. The Project had earlier donated a Torah for the synagogue David is in the process of rebuilding from a remodeled home (and when finished there will be six synagogues in Cuba). To fulfill David's request for stained glass for the



synagogue (which the community could not have afforded), I designed a faux stained glass window made of transparent plastic to be put between two pieces of glass and when hung would look almost like stained glass. One subject was Moses parting the Red Sea and the other a Jewish letter with a design David met with us in Havana to pick up the “stained glass,” and during our meeting, we discussed our hopes of fulfilling David's request for a Hebrew teacher.

Stanley Cohen with faux stained glass window “Moses parting the Red Sea” for Santa Clara synagogue

I hope this report gives readers a sense of what our Project does, underscores the importance of continuing our work with the Cuban Jewish community, and motivates you to become a part of this wonderful effort. For further information about the Project in general, and/or how to make a donation or join a mission to Cuba, please contact Stanley Cohen of the B’nai B’rith Cuban Jewish Relief Project.

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