Margalit Bejarano describes her text on Jewish Cuba not as a history, but rather as a contribution to the field of “oral documentation,” an invaluable type of testimony in which oral narratives are taped and transcribed when no written record exists. As a product of human memory, oral documentation can be at once vivid and detailed, but ever-tempered by its tendency toward “stylization,” or subjective summary of what ought to have occurred in the mind of the narrator. Given this, Bejarano’s role as an author and compiler of The Jewish Community of Cuba: Memory and History is also that of an arbiter between extensive, empirical knowledge of Cuban history, and the authentic voices of her Cuban-born interviewees in New York, Miami and Israel, who, primarily throughout the 1980s, responded to her carefully-crafted questions.

Bejarano’s function of striking the balance between collective memory and historical evidence thus shapes her textual form: she introduces each of her five chronological chapters (covering the period from 1898 to the early 1960s), with a short version of a study based on extensive archival data, and only then provides selected extracts of the interviews (recordings of the full interviews are housed in the Oral History Division of the Avraham Harman Institute for Contemporary Jewry at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem). Historically valuable in their own right, the appendices of the book act as what editor Haim Avni calls an “x-ray” of Cuba’s Jewish community. Bejarano’s appendices indeed provide a glimpse inside the body the community and include: a comprehensive list of the over eighty organizations in Cuba from 1906-1957, the street addresses of their headquarters over time, and their dates of foundation and closure; an index of the proper name of every Jewish activist from this 50-year period; a glossary of culturally-specific terms essential to readers unfamiliar with either Spanish, Yiddish, Hebrew or Jewish ritual terminology; and finally, a list of more than fifty interviewee names with the year and location of the interview. Vintage photographs and rare personal documents (letters, exit visas, identity cards) and institutional documents (bulletins, circulars, resolutions) also help periodize the narratives. Indeed, if anyone could maintain this delicate balance between history and memory, data transparency and lively personal accounts, it would be Bejarano, who has been a scholar of Cuban Jewish history for the duration of her career.

Originally published in Spanish in 1996, the motivation to translate the book into English and reach a broader audience was in response to a global surge of interest in Jewish Cuba from the early 1990s to the present. Characterized by not only a proliferation of organized heritage tours to Cuban synagogues and Jewish community centers and cemeteries, this trend in interest, celebrating a nationally-specific survival narrative, also produced a stream of publication on Jewish Cuba, both popular and scholarly. One of Bejarano’s many valuable contributions to scholarship in the sub-field is in her first chapter, “In the Beginning,” where she provides the sole up-to-date review of the scholarly literature on Cuban Jews, succinctly noting the distinct contribution of each piece to the growing corpus.
Continuing with her craft of exceptionally succinct yet complete overviews in chapter 1, Bejarano goes on to present the migration history of the Jewish population, starting with the sporadic arrival of Jews during the Spanish-American War (1898) and extending to the Jewish exodus during the years immediately following Fidel Castro’s rise to power (1960-1961). In the remainder of the chapter, through protagonists’ stories, Bejarano reconstructs immigrant motivations to leave their countries of origin, their initial encounter with Cuba, and the process of adaptation. She goes on to focus on four more specific eras.

Chapter 2, “Between Tradition and the New Environment,” traces the growth and integration, from 1906-1935, of the three primary Jewish migrant groups to Cuba: American Jews, Sephardim and Eastern European Jews. It highlights their involvement with Cuban government and society, and the development of their own communal societies and institutional networks. Chapter 3, “In the Shadow of the Holocaust,” describes the impact of Nazi Germany on Cubans between 1933-1945, exploring the rise of antisemitism, the Nationalist-socialistist propaganda in Cuba which often blamed Jews for the economic downturn, and how the Jewish refugees from Germany were perceived as a threat to native workers and the “Hispanic race.” Chapter 4, “The Struggle for the Foundation of the State of Israel,” covers the expansion of the Zionist movement in Cuba during World War II, the strength of Jewish Cuba’s financial contributions to the cause, and establishment of the Cuban Committee for a Jewish Palestine. Finally, Chapter 5, “Years of Blossoming and a Great Disillusionment,” provides a retrospective view of the stable and flourishing decade of 1947-1958, emphasizing the financial ease, integration, Jewish institutional strength, and lack of antisemitism, soon disrupted by Castro’s revolution, which nationalized all businesses, threatened religious freedom through state atheism, and eventually led to the voluntary mass emigration of most of Cuba’s Jews.

Such thoroughly detailed specificity of individual stories offered in each chapter remains both the book’s greatest strength, but also its greatest weakness in capturing the attention of a broader audience. In other words, *The Jewish Community of Cuba* will remain of most interest to students and scholars of Jewish Latin America in general, and scholars of Jewish Cuba more specifically. It may also serve as the definitive collective memory for the fewer than 1,000 Jews who remain in Cuba, and the Jewish Cuban diaspora population. That said, it is unlikely to garner significant attention in Latin American Studies or Jewish Studies at large. Furthermore, for some critics, documenting the minuitia of the migrant lives may place too great an emphasis on the particular, and lack a theoretical framework to contain or arrange them. A theoretical advancement, however, was never the intent of this book of oral testimony. The reader will find a universality in these migrants’ stories, one that is full, as Bejarano states, of “ordinary people trapped in extraordinary events,” and captured in this case by the author’s deep sensitivity to both history and memory.

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