



Cuba Letter # 2 from Cantor Caplan -

(In Cuba, with a group from CAI, visiting Jewish communities and bringing them donations...)

Dear everyone,

Apparently you've gotten a snowstorm... Gosh, sorry to hear that. Honestly, the best thing about Cuba is the weather! It's sunny, breezy, and in the high 70's. Hey, it's a Caribbean island. Remember, in Guys and Dolls, Sky Masterson took Sarah Brown to an all-night jaunt in Havana because he thought it would be a real impressive date.

My last letter ended with, ""So if a lot of Jews in Cuba basically look and dress like us, why do they need our help?"

Let's talk about something on which I'm really NOT an expert: Money and economics.

Contrast #1: The airport where we landed seems modern enough; it's in the city of Cienfuegos, a city of 500,000 people on the southern shore of the island, about a four-hour drive from Havana. But almost immediately, as we drove in our modern bus, we saw horse cart after horse cart. Some of them, to be sure, were taking tourists for a ride, like the horse-drawn carriages in Central Park, but most of them were carrying townspeople or hay or bicycles or whatever. People use horse carts because that's the fastest way for them to travel...

Contrast #2: We see some wide avenues and ornate buildings, but many of the buildings look pretty shabby and dilapidated on the outside. I asked, "Are the buildings often nicer-looking on the INSIDE?" (For instance, Arab homes in Israel often seem run-down on the outside, but they're well-tended and lovely on the inside; for many, that's their culture.) Our guide assured me that people generally take good care of the inside, but yes, the outsides often don't look so good, and refurbishing would have to be done by the state when money becomes available (when?) -- residents wouldn't generally have that kind of money.

To start to understand this, here's my version of A Brief Essential Primer on Cuban Economics:

a) The government provides you housing, education, medical care, and enough basic foodstuffs to live on. Rice, beans, flour, oil. Ideally at least, no one starves to death in Cuba, and everyone has a place to live. But your home is likely to be crowded with

extended relatives, your work might not be what you want, the food might not be what you want, and while you can go to a hospital, you need to bring your own medications with you. Our guide says, "If you go to a hospital, you gonna die. Better you call your friend who's a doctor." For the average Cuban citizen, there's not much opportunity to improve these things.

b) In America, we have a minimum wage. In Cuba, there's a MAXIMUM wage: In most cases, no matter what kind of work you do, the state pays you about \$20 per month. Now, you don't have to pay for housing, education, medical care or basic food, but that's still not a lot of discretionary money when other items cost roughly the same as in the US... One author calls it "state-enforced poverty."

c) The Soviet Union had paid subsidies to Cuba, but when the USSR collapsed in the early 1990's, the subsidies disappeared. After several years of hunger and blackouts, Cuba started trying to attract more tourists, and issued a second official currency, which is basically Dollars for Tourists. If an average Cuban can get, say, a \$5 tip one day by cleaning your hotel room, that's a week's worth of "regular" salary. So everyone is trying to work with tourists...

To illustrate some of the contrasts, here are some quotes I found meaningful. They're from "On the Edge of Change," a National Geographic article from November 2012 by Cynthia Gorney:

"...Cuba still grips the international imagination mostly because the dueling narratives of its history are so exaggerated by myth. Either a ruthless revolutionary [Fidel Castro] took power in 1959, seized American corporate property, forced out his own country's professional classes, and silenced all opposition by creating a totalitarian police state...; or a brilliant revolutionary led the overthrow of a corrupt dictatorship, shook off the colonialism of foreign companies and the Mafia, brought literacy and health care and egalitarian values to a mobilized people, and created a university-educated bastion of socialism in spite of a half century of U.S. efforts to destroy it by prohibiting Americans from doing business with or spending tourist money in Cuba. Both narratives contain substantial truth, both at the same time. This is why Cuba fascinates and makes people's heads hurt." (p. 48)

"Eduardo is no sort of dissident. He's not fleeing persecution by the state. He's just young, energetic, and frustrated, a description that applies to a great many of his countrymen.... Nothing WORKS here, Eduardo would cry, pounding the steering wheel of whatever car he had hustled on loan for the day: The economic model is broken, state employees survive on their tiny salaries only by stealing from the job site, the national news outlets are an embarrassment of self-censored boosterism, the government makes people crazy by circulating two currencies at once [one basically for tourists, and one -- worth far less -- for everybody else]. I heard this...so often:...I love my country and it doesn't work." (p. 37)

[Another man disagrees:] "You tell me another place where a kid can grow up so safe, get his vaccinations, get his education, not be involved in gangs or drugs." (p. 38)

"Optimist: Jose Lopez, exactly Eduardo's age, just immigrated back to Cuba after six years in Florida and a growing disenchantment with the values of some of his hyper-acquisitive Cuban emigre neighbors in Miami. Lopez and his wife are going into business for themselves... developing a bed-and-breakfast resort on a few acres they've acquired outside Havana. 'I'm telling my friends who went to the States, ' Lopez told me, in his practiced slangy English, 'Dude! If you want to start something, the place to be is Cuba.'" (p. 38)

"...There'd been a derrumbe in the neighborhood where I was staying. That's a building collapse, a thing that occurs with some regularity, especially in Havana. Buildings that were once beautiful and grand are rotting now in the tropical air, and the country has no money to repair them, so they cave in, partially or all at once, a giant rumbling roar followed by rubble and grief. This derrumbe killed four people, three of them teenage girls..." (pp. 38-39)

[Note: We saw several small parks in Old Havana which had been created after buildings had fallen this way... There's a policy in that neighborhood that when a building crumbles, they'll make a small park in the place where the building stood.]

"The less cynical will tell you... that there remains some genuine national conviction in Cuba, no matter how exhausted the SOCIALISM OR DEATH! slogans may now appear to the young, that it's deeply wrong for certain citizens of a nation to make themselves thousands of times wealthier than others." (p. 58)

[Dr. M is paid about \$30 a month by the state for his work. He moonlights as a taxi driver to get tourist dollars.] "Over one high-season month Dr. M's cabbie days earn him... 15 times his salary as a physician... All he said was, 'I don't get this about us now -- how a taxi driver can make so much more than a doctor.'" (p. 56)

"The currency in which he is paid as a doctor will buy Dr. M the very kind of 1960s ascetic nationalism Che Guevara liked to espouse -- in other words, as long as Senora M uses only the poor-quality peso soap, the M family brews only the peso coffee that comes with fillers ground in, and nobody ever buys deodorant." (p. 51)

"So how do the remaining Jews of Cuba cope?" Stay tuned for the next letter.
-- Cantor Caplan