



## Cuba Letter #8 from Cantor Caplan -- Funny Moments, Poignant Moments

(We're back now, but here's my last letter about Cuba, from our CAI group who visited Jewish communities and brought them donations...)

During our trip, I wrote, "As an American, I had learned since childhood that Cuba is The Enemy, along with Russia and the PLO. There is some truth to this, but we're also meeting lots of people who are just people -- they look and act just like we do, but speak Spanish."

We asked our guide, "If people get only about \$20 a month in salary, do they try to supplement that in other ways, such as the black market?" He said, "Of course. We're communists, but we're not stupid."

Regarding that \$20-a-month state salary, Cubans say, "They pretend to pay us, and we pretend to work."

We see a crew of men mowing down vegetation by the side of the road. Same as in the US? Not quite: They're using machetes, not mowers.

We see a farmer plowing his field using an ox and a hand-plow. Our guide said, "Well, yes, plowing by hand makes production slow and small-scale. But hey -- it's organic!"

Contrast: Here's a photo of our hotel in Havana.



It's a 21-story, almost-five-star hotel, with an enormous breakfast buffet and about six other restaurants, plus a big, lovely pool and a decent exercise room. You can get about 50 different channels on the TV in your room. Most of those are in Spanish (duh), but you can also find CNN International, CNBC International, ESPN, BBC, the Discovery Channel, Cartoon Network, and the Disney Channel -- all in English.

Cuban Parent: What do you want to be when you grow up?

Cuban Child: A tourist!

We ride through Miramar, a very rich Havana neighborhood before 1959, with many mansions, yacht clubs, hotels, embassies, and fancy buildings. Sharon Hammerman said, "What a difference between the haves and the have-nots."

The years in the 1990's after the Soviet subsidies vanished saw widespread hunger, nothing on the store shelves, and random 6-to-8-hour blackouts. That time is now referred to as "The Special Period." How's that for doublespeak?

When things wouldn't work right, our guide would say, "T-I-C. This Is Cuba."

As we entered the main Jewish cemetery outside Havana, a man tried to sell us bags of peanuts. Refreshments while visiting graves -- should we try that here?

Havana Highlight: Irving and Jeffrey Peyser toured the Museum of Rum. Ask them about it.



Jeffrey Peyser and Rabbi Bob Waxman (Wilmington, NC) with Cuban cigars

Ernest Hemingway lived on an estate outside Havana for over 30 years, and wrote seven novels there, including *The Old Man and the Sea*, before receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature. A bookseller in a park had a cheap copy of *The Old Man and the Sea* for about \$5, so I bought it on the run, figuring I could read it before we went to visit the estate. Well, caveat emptor: It looks like the right book, but it's some kind of bootleg version, maybe a translation of a translation. For example, the back cover tells us, "It was his last important work of fiction, published in life, and possibly his more famous work." And on the very first page, we find the old fisherman described this way: "The brown blotches of the benevolent skin cancer the sun brings from its reflections on the tropic sea were on his cheeks." I'm no expert on Hemingway, but I don't think he would have used "benevolent" instead of "benign" in describing skin cancer... Even so, the book is short, so I went ahead and read the whole thing. With the fractured English, it was hilarious.

At Hemingway's estate, I go to find a men's room. A woman is waiting outside, holding a bucket of water. Her job is to go in after each flush, all day, and refill the toilet tank. "The water pipes don't work." What a job.

Beggar Come-on #1: A man in Cienfuegos asks me, "Do you follow baseball? There are two guys from this city who will be playing next year for the White Sox and for Los Angeles. One of them will be

making \$100 million. Amazing, huh? Hey, since you like baseball, can you give me a dollar for my baseball card collection?"

Come-on #2: I trip, and fall on the sidewalk. Three skinny Cubans rush to help me up, even though I don't need it and could get up just fine without them. Maybe they're being very nice and friendly, and maybe they're angling for money. One guy stays with me, showing me photos of "my fodder and modder, in New Chersey." He definitely wants a dollar, and I give it to him.

Come-on #3: A stout man stands at the entrance to one of the synagogues, wearing a kippah on his head and a Magen David around his neck. "Can you give me a dollar for my old mother?" I give him something, as do others. Shortly afterward, he goes walking off, stripping off the kippah. Was he even Jewish? Probably not.

We hear wonderful musicians at the tourist locations. Even so, they're often playing songs such as Cielito Lindo, which my generation knows as the Frito Bandito song.

So I have to laugh when one guitarist, promoting CDs of his band, says earnestly to me, "Look, the guys in my band all live in this area, and we write our own songs. This is real contemporary Cuban music -- no Guantanamo or any of that old crap on here!"

Speaking of Guantanamo, Rabbi David Saltzman said, "I was in Guantanamo 41 years ago with the Navy. Now I'm seeing Cuba from the other side."

About 25% of Cubans practice some kind of Catholicism, about 50% aren't affiliated with any religion, and about 25% are involved with what our guide named "the Afro-Cuban religion", a facet of which is called Santeria. Lots of slave trading took place in Cuba up to the 1860's, and since African slaves were forbidden from practicing their native religion, they clothed it in Catholic symbols, both merging the religions and creating something new. For example, Santa Barbara is the special Catholic saint of Cuba, but the slaves equated her with the African water god Yemaya. Thus they might pray to Santa Barbara in public, but this was a cover for praying to Yemaya. The Afro-Cuban religion involves many gods and goddesses, animal sacrifices, and a year-long initiation phase during which you're treated as a newborn baby. "Many young people are now choosing this. They think it's cool."

We visited a 19th-century sugar plantation, which used lots of slave labor, and some of us climbed a six-story tower there which was used in part to spot runaway slaves. Rabbi Richard Hammerman said, "I got to the top, but didn't see any slaves. Then I remembered that I, too, was a slave in the land of Egypt..."

At an emotional meeting with Adela Dworin, the leader of the Havana Ashkenazi synagogue, Rabbi Hammerman led us in reciting a b'racha: "Blessed are You, O Lord, who frees the bound." He meant this as, "Religious practice used to be restricted here in Cuba, but you are now making Jewish life flourish again." But with the release of Alan Gross just a few days ago, it seems clear that Rabbi Hammerman may have a pretty direct line to heaven.

In Old Havana, we see several statues of people who led rebellions against the Spanish, including Simon Bolivar. One small park contained this statue of Ruminawi, an Ecuadorian Indian chief of the 1600's, who led an unsuccessful revolt against the Spanish.



The locals call this "Deodorant Park".

Also in Old Havana, we peek inside an old hotel, several blocks away from the large Franciscan church. The Franciscan monks didn't want to sleep at the church, because it was surrounded by merchants hawking wares. So they stayed in this hotel -- it has no windows in any of the rooms, shutting out the noise.

Near Havana's capitol, we see an elegant building which was built in the 1920's to be used for the House of Representatives. The Cuban strongman at the time, Gerardo Machado, fell in love with it and took it for his own Presidential Palace. Now it houses the "Museum of the Revolution". Rulers come, rulers go...

A man approaches me and says in a low voice, "Listen, I'm a cigar roller in a factory. I have these nice Cuban cigars here in this bag; want to buy some?"

"No, but maybe others in our group would like some. Let me make an announcement."

"No, no! Don't say it out loud; your tour guide will hear."

"Why is that a problem?"

"Well, I don't want trouble at the factory."



Postcard rack containing nothing but various photos of Fidel Castro

"What is a Cuban minyan?"  
"Eight Jews, a Torah Scroll, and God."

At one synagogue, our guide was translating from Spanish to English, and told us that some downstairs rooms were used for a "Dominican school." Were they renting out space to local Catholics? No -- it took a few seconds, but the Spanish word "domingo" means Sunday, so what they had there was a Sunday school.

It's our last day in Cuba, and I'm standing in front of a large old church, wearing my last set of clean clothes: A white shirt, black pants, and my black kippah. A tourist walks up, looks at the church, looks at me, and says, "Is this now a synagogue?"

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Thanks for reading, and consider joining our World Jewry Committee's upcoming trips to visit Jews in Europe and South America! -- Cantor Caplan



Our Cuba Travelers, in front of the Sefardi synagogue in Havana, from left to right: David Saltzman, Judy Fabricant, Irving Peyser, Sharon Hammerman, Jeffrey Peyser, Richard Hammerman, Barbara Waxman (Wilmington, NC), Hynda Feit (Cliffside Park, mother of Liz Liss), Marian Rothenberg, Sandy Welsher (Toms River), Diane Philips-Hampel (Virginia Beach, VA), Joel Caplan, Robert Waxman (Wilmington, NC), and Shoshana Silberman.