



Tropical Zion: General Trujillo, FDR, and the Jews of Sosúa (American Encounters/Global Interactions)

By Allen Wells

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Seven hundred and fifty Jewish refugees fled Nazi Germany and founded the agricultural settlement of Sosúa in the Dominican Republic, then ruled by one of Latin America's most repressive dictators, General Rafael Trujillo. In *Tropical Zion*, Allen Wells, a distinguished historian and the son of a Sosúa settler, tells the compelling story of General Trujillo, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and those fortunate pioneers who founded a successful employee-owned dairy cooperative on the north shore of the island.

Why did a dictator admit these desperate refugees when so few nations would accept those fleeing fascism? Eager to mollify international critics after his army had massacred 15,000 unarmed Haitians, Trujillo sent representatives to Évian, France, in July, 1938 for a conference on refugees from Nazism. Proposed by FDR to deflect criticism from his administration's restrictive immigration policies, the Évian Conference proved an abject failure. The Dominican Republic was the only nation that agreed to open its doors. Obsessed with stemming the tide of Haitian migration across his nation's border, the opportunistic Trujillo sought to "whiten" the Dominican populace, welcoming Jewish refugees who were themselves subject to racist scorn in Europe.

The Roosevelt administration sanctioned the Sosúa colony. Since the United States did not accept Jewish refugees in significant numbers, it encouraged Latin America to do so. That prodding, paired with FDR's overriding preoccupation with fighting fascism, strengthened U.S. relations with Latin American dictatorships for decades to come. Meanwhile, as Jewish organizations worked to get Jews out of Europe, discussions about the fate of worldwide Jewry exposed fault lines between Zionists and Non-Zionists. Throughout his discussion of these broad dynamics, Wells weaves vivid narratives about the founding of Sosúa, the original settlers and their families, and the life of the unconventional beach-front colony.

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Editorial Review

Review

“[A] fascinating tale that combines a passionate devotion for one’s patrimony with the dispassionate critical perspective honed in decades of superb scholarship. It makes for the best kind of history.” - Robert Jan van Pelt, *American Jewish History*

“Allen Wells has written the definitive history of a controversial refuge for Jews escaping Nazism: an agricultural enclave in the Dominican Republic at Sosúa, created by Jewish charities and the country’s dictator, Rafael Trujillo. . . . [A] fascinating, behind-the-scenes portrayal of highlevel negotiations among diplomats and Jewish organizations, coupled with a social history of the experiences of the Sosúa settlers that brings the account up to the present.” - Max Paul Friedman, *History: Reviews of New Books*

“[T]his fascinating book is an important contribution to the study of the role of Latin America in the rescue of Jewish refugees, as well as to a better understanding of Trujillo’s dictatorship and U.S.-Dominican relations. Allen Wells, the son of a colonist in Sosúa, confronts the collective memory of the refugees with the contrasting factors that determined their fate, demonstrating their vulnerability.” - Margalit Bejarano, *The Americas*

“[F]ascinating. . . . The reader will find in this excellent book rich hindsight on these and other unintended workings of human action as well as ample documentation to follow the complexities of this historical experiment of Jewish refugees escaping Europe and forced to recreate their lives in the tropics.” - Luis Roniger, *Journal of Latin American Studies*

“Allen Wells has written a fascinating book. . . . This is an original, well researched and well written text. Wells discusses the settlers’ experience in the Dominican Republic, at the same time as he sheds light on a wide variety of other, larger issues: U.S. restrictive immigration policies, the attitudes of American Jewry on the eve of World War II and during the war, Zionist and non-Zionist struggles over the ‘solution’ to the ‘Jewish problem,’ U.S.-Latin American relations, the Trujillo regime and the high cost of Washington’s complicity with the brutal dictatorship of the Dominican tyrant.” - Raanan Rein, *Latin American Jewish Studies*

“This illuminating and irony-laden study deftly integrates twentieth-century Latin American, Jewish, and American history with that of the Holocaust. Readers interested in any of these fields will be rewarded and have their perspectives widened. An admirably researched and crafted book, and a touching one, too.”—**Peter Hayes**, Theodore Zev Weiss Professor of Holocaust Studies, Northwestern University

“This is a masterful study of Jewish refugees who found an unlikely haven in Rafael Trujillo's Dominican Republic, written with the head and the heart by a gifted historian of Latin America. Their full story is firmly

anchored here in its salient contexts—personal and local, national, New World, European, global, and temporal. It will be of lasting value to students of Latin American, European, and world history, as well as modern Jewish studies.”—**William B. Taylor**, Muriel McKeitt Sonne Professor Emeritus, University of California, Berkeley

“This is an extraordinary and original contribution to Latin American, Jewish, and U.S. history. In a remarkable work, Allen Wells describes and assesses how and why one of Latin America’s bloodiest dictators was willing to rescue Jews from Nazi persecution.”—**Friedrich Katz**, Morton D. Hull Distinguished Service Professor Emeritus of Latin American History, University of Chicago

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(Max Paul Friedman *History: Reviews of New Books*)

From the Back Cover

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About the Author

Allen Wells is the Roger Howell Jr. Professor of History at Bowdoin College. He is the author of *Yucatán's Gilded Age: Haciendas, Henequen, and International Harvester, 1860–1915*; a co-author of *Summer of Discontent, Seasons of Upheaval: Elite Politics and Rural Rebellion in Yucatán, 1876–1915*; and a co-editor of *The Second Conquest of Latin America: Coffee, Henequen, and Oil during the Export Boom, 1850–1930*.

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