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Author's heritage draws her back to Cuba's Jews

BY ANA VECIANA-SUAREZ

The idea for the book came to Ruth Behar gently, seductively, like the ocean breeze that cools the tropical heat of her homeland. As an anthropologist, a Jew and a Cuban in an ever-lengthening diaspora, she had been searching for explanations and identity for as long as she could remember. This time she wanted something more.

"I knew the stories of the Jews in Cuba, but it was all about looking at them as a community," Behar says, who will speak at the Miami International Book Fair Nov. 10 at Miami Dade College's Wolfson Campus downtown. "I wanted something more nuanced, more individual. I wanted to answer the question of who are the people keeping the Jewish traditions alive in Cuba?"

She answers that question, and raises some others, in *An Island Called Home: Returning to Jewish Cuba* (\$29.95, Rutgers University Press), a poignant but clear-eyed collection of anecdotes and observations accompanied by black and white images shot by Cuba-based photographer Humberto Mayol. In one-on-one interviews, Behar uncovers not only why some Jews stayed behind but how many have returned to the religion of their ancestors after generations of intermarriage, making the island's tiny Jewish community among the most diverse in the world.

In many respects, this may be Behar's most personal work. The University of Michigan anthropology professor has written poems and essays about the nostalgia, grief and displacement of exile. She was also awarded a MacArthur Foundation "genius" grant 18 years ago and even has a short feature film about Cuban Sephardic Jews, *Adío Kerida*, to her credit. But here she lovingly intertwines her own thoughts and feelings with the more analytical observations of her profession. The result: a narrative that tugs at the heart.

"What tormented me," she writes on page 25 of the book, "was that I had no memories of the island. So I went looking for memories."

Indeed she returned to the apartment on Calle Aguacate in La Habana Vieja, where her mother had lived above her grandfather's lace store, Casa Maximo. She returned, too, to the tenement where her father had lived and her Abuela had tossed a package of unkosher meat that her husband had brought home during a time of hunger. She also went to cemeteries and synagogues and Cienfuegos and Palma Soriano and to the Plaza de la Revolucion where a Jewish *comunista* gave her a hat to protect her from the sun. "I was lucky," she says now. "This book allowed me to come out of the role of anthropologist. It afforded me some intimacy."

Behar is speaking by phone from San Francisco, her first stop on a book tour that, in addition to Miami, will include several cities in the Northeast as well as Detroit and Omaha, ending with a talk at B'nai Torah Congregation in Boca Raton in February. In January, she will also start a four-month stint in Miami, teaching "Cuban Jews: Diaspora, Identity and Search for Home" at the University of Miami.

"She's a premiere anthropologist and we're very happy to have her," says Perri Lee Roberts, senior associate dean for arts and humanities.

JEWBAN RESEARCH

Behar also plans to use her time here to research Miami's Jewbans, as Cuban Jews like to call themselves. It is, she says, "a natural and obvious extension" of her research in Cuba. In many ways, this, too, will be a homecoming. Though Behar grew up in New York, her grandparents retired to Miami Beach. She has visited frequently and lived occasionally for weeks at a time. On her way to Cuba during those 15 years of research, she would always stop at her Baba'a apartment and she would always hear the same admonishing questions: Why are you going back to Cuba? How long are you going to keep doing this?

"They were afraid for me, not angry," she explains. "They were afraid that I would say something wrong and I would be arrested."

Behar, 50, fled the island with her parents soon after Fidel Castro took over. She was 5, and the only real memories she would preserve of her homeland during her childhood were taken from photographs the family had managed to spirit out.

At that time, there were 16,500 Jews scattered around the island, with most of them living in Havana. They comprised a thriving community, having founded a wide range of education, social and cultural institutions. In Havana alone there were five synagogues, the oldest built by the Sephardic community in 1914. Most Jews, however, left after the revolution.

Behar returned to Cuba for the first time with a group of students and professors from Princeton University, when she was a graduate student. She had hoped to do her dissertation research on the island, but never received permission. By the 1990s, when Behar began her trips again to Cuba against her family's wishes, Jews numbered between 1,000 and 1,500. She jokes that this figure has remained the same for the past few decades, even as Jews have left the island for other countries, particularly Israel. Maybe there have been births, maybe there have been converts. "It's like there's this supply of replacement Jews, even when some people move away or die."

BACK TO ISLAND

Like other Cubans returning home, Behar usually flew south loaded with supplies for friends' relatives. Her mission was twofold: to study the Jews there but also to learn how to be a Jew in Cuba, a place that bewitched her.

"The more I went to Cuba, the more I needed to go," she writes. "I had become a Cuba addict. And like any addict, I needed my fix. My Cuba fix."

In the process of traversing the island, she learned plenty about the Jews in Cuba, but she also discovered something about herself. "I reconciled myself to the fact that I *am* home," she adds. "Maybe one day I'll have a part-time place in Cuba, but I no longer have the illusions – or delusions, some would say – that I started with. I wonder if home really isn't all in the imagination."

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