Part travelogue, part reportage, part memoir, a Jewish exile’s account of her return to Cuba is filled with yearning for a lost childhood and a lost world / By Carol Cook

In 1970, the wife of the president of Mexico made an unusual philanthropic gesture. At a presidential reception attended by the rich and famous, she walked through the crowd with a hat, admiring the women’s jewelry and asking them to put one of their rings or necklaces into it – “for the poor.”

I thought of this incident while reading an unforgettable scene in Ruth Behar’s account of her search for Cuba’s last remaining Jews. Behar was in Cuba as a tour “study leader,” answering questions and providing historical background for a group of prosperous Jewish New Yorkers (“wearing Armani and Chanel to the Revolution,” as she put it). They were in the seaside town of Cienfuegos, listening

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to the president of the tiny local Jewish community, Rebeca Langus Rodriguez, describe how hard it was to practice Judaism until the Castro regime brought back religious freedom. She told them how happy she was to be able to return to her faith, how the Jews of Cienfuegos studied together and how her son was preparing for his bar mitzvah. By the time she finished, Behar writes, everyone had tears in their eyes.

“What happens next is hard to describe,” she continues. Everyone rushed forward and “A stampede of giving ensues, but it all begins with one woman, tears flowing down her cheeks, taking off her pearl earrings and giving them to Rebeca, who whispers ‘gracias,’ slips them on, and hugs her. Soon everyone is putting money into Rebeca’s hands.” A pile of dollars soon builds up.

Behar confesses that she is overwhelmed by “this crazy outpouring of emotion and charity. Is it redemption the gift-givers are seeking? To feel less guilty about the embargo and the way it is hurting regular Cubans? To be at ease with their American privilege... or a desire to affirm that the Jews of the diaspora are one people...?”

Like the book as a whole, this incident tells us as much about the American Jews who visit Cuba as it does about the Cuban Jews they meet there – and also a great deal about the author herself. Carol, professor of anthropology at the University of Michigan, was born in Havana and left at the age of 5, following the 1959 revolution, along with almost the entire Jewish community, which numbered around 16,000 at the time (today there are no more than 1,500). Like many others, her family first went to Israel (to which they were “repatriated” by Castro’s government), then to New York.

Each emigrant was allowed to take one suitcase, and Behar’s family, like everyone else, brought their photographs, the only remaining link with “the beloved island.” Growing up in New York, Behar found herself looking at the photos and wondering what had become of her home, and of the Jewish life – the synagogues, Torah scrolls and cemeteries – and of the scant number of Jews who had remained in Cuba. As an exile, there was no possibility for her to return and answer these questions for herself.

In 1992, Cuba stopped being ‘atheist.’ Jewish life began to revive. It was then that Behar started traveling there: ‘Even though I didn’t want to turn my native land into a fieldsite, anthropology became my passport,’ she writes.

When the Soviet Union collapsed, ending subsidies to Cuba, and with the U.S. embargo stifling development, the Castro regime began to encourage tourism, including from America, and exiles were allowed to visit as well. During the 1990s, hotels were built, the dollar became a legal currency, and America discovered Cuban art and popular music. In 1992, Cuba stopped being “atheist” and became, officially, “secular.” Now religion could be practiced freely. The Joint Distribution Committee came to Cuba that year, and other Jewish organizations followed. Jewish life, which had been largely dormant since the revolution, began to revive.

Behar started traveling to Cuba in the 1990s. At first, she didn’t go as an anthropologist, and she didn’t take notes or photographs. She was searching, she writes, for memories, because, strangely, she had no recollection of her early childhood on the island. “My aim wasn’t to study the Jews. I wanted simply to be a Jew in Cuba.” I found that the combination of Cuban pluralistic tolerance, lax Catholicism, African-derived Santeria beliefs, and revolutionary secularism made it easy to be Jewish in Cuba.”

Over-studied tribe

She wasn’t alone. Jewish Cuba became a popular destination for American Jews looking for a cause, fascinated with what looked to them like an exotic community, and eager to make a contribution. “Missions” organized by synagogues and Jewish organizations proliferated, and Behar comments that these have played an important unifying role for American Jews, a role Israel used to fill. She mentions one man who has traveled there more than 30 times to donate wheelchairs and eyeglasses, and wrote that he had found Cuba’s Jews “the meaning and purpose of my life.”

All the new attention has turned tosynagogues and cemeteries, synagogues and institutions, and encounters with Jews from all walks of life.

She starts out by looking for the grave of her second cousin Henry, who died in 1954 at the age of 12. She visits the Sephardic cemetery, where she finds her father’s family name on many tombstones. (Behar’s family – Ashkenazi on her mother’s side and Sephardic on her father’s – came to Cuba from Russia, Poland and Turkey in the 1920s.) She visits the Patronato, the Ashkenazi synagogue and community center splendidly restored by the Joint and wealthy Cuban Jews from Miami, and remembers the dilapidated building she visited in 1991. She describes Fidel Castro’s visit to the Patronato in 1998, and explains that as the daughter of Cuban exiles, she could not bring herself to join the others who were having their picture taken with the Comandante.

Behar meets Jews who grew up without religion because of the revolution, and who are now trying to regain it. She visits Havana’s oldest, and now abandoned, synagogue, the Sephardic Chevet Ahim; the Orthodox Adath Israel, affiliated with the Lubavitch...
Miriam Turnovsky - A house in Rehovot

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Ruth Behar

Clockwise, from left: Danielito Fernandez Langus and a friend; a couple on the Havana Malecon (promenade); Alberto Behar Medrano teaching his bar mitzvah class; men at a synagogue service.

Most of these encounters are illustrated by Humberto Mayol’s photos of the interviewees, along with the Cubans’ own family photos, documents and all kinds of memorabilia linked to their Jewish heritage. This material, along with the book’s design, gives it something of the intimacy of a family album.

Behar obviously loves Cuba, and is torn between her two identities as a Cuban-American. Perhaps because of this, she has a tendency to project her feelings and interpret those of her interlocutors, something I found quite distracting. But she is certainly honest about the baggage she brings to her work in Cuba: As the daughter of exiles, she has been brought up to condemn “communists” and admits she is afflicted with “Fidel-phobia.”

Despite this, the benefits of socialized medicine and education are mentioned, and some of the people she meets do present the revolutionaries’ view. One, born to a poor rural family and married to a Jew, says she is grateful to the revolution for the education and medical care she and her husband received. And the Jewish communist is disturbed by Jewish organizations “providing aid in exchange for religious devotion” – a view also confirmed by some of the new synagogue-goers themselves.

Overall, Behar looks at Cuba from an American point of view, and this is, I suppose, inevitable. As someone who lived for many years in Latin America, I felt uncomfortable with her application of the term “underdevelopment” to Cuba, as though comparing its situation to that of its neighbors. Despite its poverty, Cuba has an illiteracy rate of less than 5 percent (compared with 11 percent for Latin America as a whole); twice as many doctors per capita than the U.S. and a universal health care system that 40 million Americans envy. I would also have liked Behar to see more than marginal references to the 45-year U.S. trade embargo against Cuba, which remains in place mainly thanks to the unyielding pressure of the powerful Cuban exile lobby, which is the major reason for the country’s poverty.

But these are minor complaints. Anyone with an interest in what is left of the Jewish communities of the world will be grateful for Behar and Mayol’s contemporary snapshots of Cuban Jewish life. This is not a return to Jewish Cuba, as the subtitle promises, but a glimpse of something quite different, and it is changing even as Behar observes it. With so many members of the community leaving for Israel, most of them probably on route to the U.S., it seems that she undertook this project just in time.

The reader is left wondering how it is that Behar, having lived there until she was 5, remembers nothing of Cuba. Even as she tells us she was searching for memories, and revisits the places she knew as a child, she does not really address this question. I would have been happy to read an interview with her nanny, for example (who only merits a mention in the book), and others who knew her family and might have shed light on the old Jewish Cuba that she once left behind but that would be another story entirely.

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Gertrude Stein’s well-known phrase of a family album.

Carol Cook is an editor at Haaretz English Edition.