WHY SOSÚA? TRUJILLO'S MOTIVES FOR JEWISH REFUGEE SETTLEMENT IN THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

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ABSTRACT

This paper deals with the motives of Rafael Trujillo Molino in offering European Jews sanctuary at Sosúa, a town located on the northern coast of the Dominican Republic. Background information is furnished on the Evian Conference of 1938 and the deteriorating situation of European Jewry leading to the Holocaust. Trujillo was a complex personality with many motivations for his Sosúan proposal. Among them include: racial and demographic considerations, economic development, publicity, a desire to improve U.S.-Dominican relations, domestic political concerns, personal reasons, and personal financial aggrandizement. Thus Trujillo masked baser and more pragmatic considerations with his professed humanitarianism. The paper concludes with the placement of Sosúa within the larger context of United States foreign policy concerns and resettlement and rescue attempts. A brief discussion and history of the community itself is also included. Trujillo's motives reveal, in turn, a great deal about his personality.

While on the subject of motivations, my major motivation in writing this paper stemmed from a desire to study the Holocaust within a specific Latin American framework. In other words, what was Latin America's role during this trying period in Jewish history? This paper admirably provided such an opportunity.

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There were precedents in both European and Dominican history for Jewish settlement offers. For instance, Trujillo's importation of Jews for economic and self-aggrandizement purposes, is similar
to the ways in which Polish and German nobility imported Jews onto their lands in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteen centuries. Regarding Dominican history, Jewish economic and demographic contributions to the country in the past, may have contributed to Trujillo’s Sosúa offer,1 and thus reflect a stratagem utilized by Dominican presidents since 1850, for a country deficient in agricultural workers and merchants. The formula was, to permit immigration of settlers, especially in underpopulated areas, promote land cultivation, foster intermarriage with Dominican women, and thereby increase identification with the Republic and take necessary measures to control them.2 A writer supportive of Trujillo, Ismael Heriaiz, surmises that under Trujillo there were economic opportunities and political stability, two conditions attractive to settlers. These incentives, Heriaiz asserts, were lacking in past attempts to attract immigrants, such as under the dictator Ulises Heureaux who ruled from 1882-18993 and the ambitious, though ill-fated 1882 colonization project promoted by General Gregorio Luperon (1839-1897).4

Trujillo’s offer occurred against the background of Nazi persecution of the Jews, and a consequently desperate refugee plight, compounded by the lack of willing host nations. Confronted by the enormity of the situation, thirty-three nations convened a conference at Evian, France, on July 6, 1938.5 While President Franklin D. Roosevelt gave impetus to the conference, Trujillo was the key figure, since the Dominican Republic was the only country with a concrete refugee offer. The other nations, in effect, only voiced platitudes of humanitarianism.6 Trujillo, in fact, offered his own 26,685 acre estate at Sosúa, located on the northern coast east of Puerto Plata, which included twenty-four houses worth approximately $100,000. A contemporary observer noted that Trujillo’s position was “generous to the point of seeming unreal.”7 In addition, he offered a 50,000 acre site in the Cordilleras Dominicanas to serve as a mountain recreational retreat. “For Jews to be invited by a government to come and settle is a rare phenomenon. When the Jews are penniless, hounded, cast out refugees, it is little short of a miracle.”8 Or was it? This essay will seek to explain Trujillo’s magnanimity towards the Jews.9

A brief sketch of Trujillo’s personality and methods, is a start in answering the riddle. Democratic forms of government, such as a Senate and Chamber of Deputies, were observed, so long as they were not an inconvenience. Trujillo was “purely a personal dictator, unhampered by ideology,” who did what he pleased. As