

Prologue

People spat and hissed at us on the streets of Vienna. Other people can call Trujillo a murderer, but he saved our lives.

HEINRICH HAUSER

“Dr. Trone asked me if I was afraid of hard work. He chose me because I was young and strong,” my father remembered. Solomon Trone, a recruitment agent for the Dominican Republic Settlement Association (DORSA), interviewed twenty-two-year-old Heinrich Wasservogel at the Hotel Neues Schloss, Zurich, in the summer of 1940. DORSA’s recruiter was looking for pioneers for a new agricultural settlement in Sosúa on the north coast. For the last six months, Heini had worked at a number of labor camps run by Swiss provincial authorities. He had never heard of the Dominican Republic, knew no Spanish, and had no experience as a farmer, but like many refugees stranded in “countries of transit” along Germany’s borders, he had few appealing options.¹

The Central European refugees who came to the Dominican Republic in the early 1940s could not have imagined that they would become, in a few short years, successful dairy farmers. Generalizing about their collective experience is difficult. Although they had much in common—language, customs, faith, exposure to discrimination, minimal experience on the land, and the anguish and uncertainty of leaving family behind—personal histories varied and so, too, did the situations they encountered and the choices they made while in flight. They were fortunate to benefit from the timely assistance of complete strangers, Gentiles as well as Jews, and generous relief agencies. Eighty-seven-year-old Elie Topf might have spoken for all his peers

when he told me, “I will tell you my story, but you won’t believe it. I was a hundred times lucky.”²

In truth, Topf, Wasservogel, and others who reached Sosúa made their own luck, overcoming adversity and thinking on their feet when opportunity knocked or danger appeared. Whether they used their last francs to pay off smugglers to spirit them across borders, presented forged papers, bribed diplomats to purchase visas, eluded capture by authorities intent on deporting them back to Nazi-occupied territory, worked unlawfully in countries of transit, or bartered for cigarettes, chocolate, or a piece of bread, they lived by their wits and did what was necessary to survive. No wonder this time of flight is vividly etched in their memories more than six decades later.

Tracing Wasservogel’s journey to the Dominican Republic opens the door a crack into this little-known chapter in the history of the Holocaust. Most of those who came to Sosúa identified with what he went through before he left his native Austria, what transpired after he escaped, and why he was so grateful that an island nation he had never heard of offered him sanctuary and a fresh start after virtually every other country had turned its back on him.

FLIGHT

Born in Vienna’s largely Jewish Second District in 1918, Wasservogel as a teenager first joined a Zionist youth organization before gravitating to a Socialist youth group. He was not particularly religious, though he sang in his synagogue’s choir for seven years. Instead, he thought of himself as an Austrian of Jewish origin. His father, Albert, was the proverbial struggling artist, earning modest commissions for portraits and restorations of Old Masters. When his commissions faltered, Albert took a job as a salesman, only to be let go during the depths of the Depression. His mother, Victoria, a Serbian-born Sephardi, was a hausfrau occupied with raising five children in their tiny apartment.

Heinrich and his brother Rudolf decided to leave Austria soon after the Anschluss, Germany’s annexation of the country on March 11, 1938, in part because he had a terrifying encounter with “brown shirts, members of the Nazi youth.” After a political demonstration near City Hall in downtown Vienna on the eve of the annexation, where he and his fellow Socialists and a rival group of Fascists hurled insults at each other, he recalled: “I was walking home and they [the Nazi supporters] followed me. I started to run and they were chasing. I tried to hide in an alcove, the entrance to an apartment building, but the building was locked and they found me there. There were about five or six of them and they beat me with metal rods and sticks and called me all kinds of things, ‘dirty Jew,’ ‘Socialist,’ and a lot of things worse than that.

They hit me so hard that my neck and back were bleeding from the blows. I was protecting my head and looked back when one of them recognized me from when we were both classmates in school. Then he said something and they stopped beating me and let me go.”

On the heels of that narrow escape, Wasservogel learned he had been fired from his job as a typesetter’s apprentice, a position he had held for four years. His predicament was not unusual; friends were losing their jobs because they were Jewish. He subsequently had to endure the humiliation of standing in line to collect food for his family at a local charity. These incidents forced him to come to terms with his Jewishness while raising questions about his identity as an Austrian.

He was not alone in considering flight. Discriminatory measures implemented by the Nazis in Germany now were imported to Austria. Citizenship was revoked, property seized arbitrarily, businesses “Aryanized.” Jews were dismissed summarily from places of employment, their newspapers and synagogues were closed down, and more than a thousand people were arrested on suspicion of violating racial purity laws. New identity cards were issued, and Jews were required to register their property.³ This far-ranging assault turned Austria’s Jews “systematically into a community of beggars” and gave greater urgency to finding places of refuge.⁴ But the imposition of an emigration tax that seized anywhere from 60 to 100 percent of their assets turned would-be refugees into paupers overnight.⁵

Within six months, Wasservogel and fifty thousand other Jews had left their homeland; over the next two years, two-thirds of Austrian Jewry emigrated, many of them young males like Heini and Rudi.⁶ Most spilled over into the neighboring countries of Czechoslovakia and Switzerland, while some sought sanctuary in the Netherlands, France, Belgium, Great Britain, or Scandinavia. Indeed, the Wasservogel brothers initially fled to Czechoslovakia but were caught and, lacking papers, were sent back to Vienna. Smaller numbers of Jewish emigrants, including their parents, relocated to Hungary, Yugoslavia, and Italy, even though these authoritarian states had demonstrated solidarity with National Socialism. Many waited in these countries of transit, often under difficult conditions, hoping for something better to materialize.⁷

Later that summer, the two brothers set out by train to Austria’s northwest border with Switzerland and Germany, never to see their parents and twin brothers again. Their father, who left Vienna for Budapest in 1939, overstayed his six-month visa, was detained, and then was sent to a succession of labor camps before moving in late 1944 to a safe house in Budapest established by the Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg. Ultimately, he was a casualty of

shrapnel from an Allied bombing raid in early 1945. Their mother and twin brothers perished in a concentration camp in Serbia in 1942.

A rumor quietly circulating in Vienna had it that the best way to make it across the Swiss border was to pose as a tourist and tell border guards, if asked, that you had been invited to visit real or imagined relatives.⁸ Years later, Heini recounted how he and Rudi escaped with four others on foot across the Swiss border. “We dressed as tourists, carrying our belongings in rucksacks on our backs. I brought along my father’s lute and my brother, Rudi, wore a Tyrolean hat. . . . We were all very nervous. There was a guardhouse and a barricade across the road. It was early evening, dark and rainy. The [Austrian] border guards knew we were Jews, not really tourists. We gave them all our money, every last penny. What did we care? We were running for our lives.”⁹

Their fear was palpable as the guards crowded them into the back of a truck and then drove along back roads before coming to a clearing in the woods. After ordering the travelers off the truck, the guards motioned to a narrow trail ahead. If they kept to the path, they were told, eventually they would reach the Swiss border. “We started walking and . . . it was raining very hard. We walked for hours on mountain paths and came to a place in the woods where there were two marker stones. It was about two or three o’clock in the morning and we were . . . wet and exhausted. The stones had letters engraved on them that we did not recognize. We later learned that they had been carved with centuries-old initials that we would not have understood. We decided to go in a certain direction, and that was fortunate, because that turned out to be Switzerland, not Germany. We were so lucky.”¹⁰ The Was-servogels were two of the six thousand who crossed the Swiss frontier in the months immediately following the Anschluss.

Quickly apprehended and arrested by the Swiss Alien Police and taken to a nearby jail, where they spent the night, the shivering refugees were met there in the morning by a local representative of a Jewish relief agency. The police released them to his custody, and he led them on foot to the northern city of Schaffhausen near the German border. Two days later, they were moved to a refugee camp near the mountain village of Buchberg—one of fifteen camps established by Jewish agencies in northeastern Switzerland.¹¹ There, Heini performed a variety of tasks, including cooking for the sixty refugees at the camp. Although not permitted to work for wages, he hired himself out occasionally to local farmers, cutting and turning hay in exchange for bread, bacon, and apple cider.

After March 1940, Heini and others were moved to labor camps run by provincial authorities, where they laid roadbeds, dug drainage systems, built

barracks, cleared land, cut trees, and hauled stones from quarries. Until he left for the Dominican Republic in September 1940, he rotated from one camp to another every few months.¹² In his mind, the skills he acquired and the work ethic he demonstrated in the camps explain why he (and not others) was selected for Sosúa.

His recollection of the time spent in Switzerland was similar to those of others who have left memoirs.¹³ Astounded by the country's natural beauty, grateful for the skills learned and friends made, and appreciative that he was not turned back, in retrospect, he knew he was fortunate. At the same time, he carried bitter memories of the treatment he and his peers received and of the anti-Semitism he encountered. With economic conditions deteriorating and food rationing the order of the day, there was little incentive to treat the internees well. What modest funds the Swiss government appropriated for the refugees were deposited in an emigration fund. Although some camp supervisors were humane and individual acts of kindness have been documented, the newcomers, by and large, were made to feel unwanted. Every effort was made to quarantine them from the general population and dissuade them from putting down roots. The threat of expulsion hung like a cloud over the internees.¹⁴

Faced with such inhospitality, the refugees were consumed with the idea of leaving for somewhere, anywhere. Heini recalled, "Everyone in the camp was trying to immigrate to different places, America, all over. You needed a sponsor in those days, connections. One man went to New Zealand and . . . everyone was jealous."¹⁵

Conditions in the camps did little to lessen feelings of displacement. Hygiene varied considerably, and most people slept on straw in barracks. Authorities forcibly separated married couples and families; men were sent to the make-work camps while women and the elderly were kept under supervision in private homes, where they sewed, mended, and knitted for those in the camps. Frequently, children were segregated from their parents and taken to foster homes, where they were brought up outside their faith. Even siblings were separated and dispatched to different foster homes. Male workers were shuttled from camp to camp, undermining solidarity. Heini Wasservogel's experience—three camps in six months—was not unusual.¹⁶

Many emigrants who had been professionals, merchants, and intellectuals had difficulty adapting to the uncertainty and the mandatory regimen of manual labor and became despondent. Heini related a chilling incident: "One night, several of us walked into the village, and I decided to go back earlier than the others for some reason, I can't remember why. . . . When I got back to

the cabin and opened the door, there was a boy hanging there from the rafter, a suicide. I ran all the way back to the village, which was a long way. There was no moon, and you couldn't see your hand in front of your face. I remember it to be the darkest night I ever experienced. I was so scared. I don't forget those things.¹⁷ That suicide was one of two he recalled, and in both cases he believed the victims, who came from families of means, had difficulty coping with "our primitive state."

Those who were more optimistic and threw themselves into their work were better positioned to cope with the rigors of camp life. Felix Bauer, who worked alongside Wasservogel in the Dipoltsau labor camp and later accompanied him to the Dominican Republic, thought the hard labor "felt so good. Most of us were in the best condition of [our] youth. [His friend] Walter enjoyed climbing on a sheer wall and hacking rocks from it with a pickax. Heini and I became experts in smashing them to small chunks and rolling them in wheelbarrows to the place where others constructed the roadbed."¹⁸ A classically trained musician and a graphic artist, Bauer took it upon himself to organize small-scale theater productions and a music appreciation course in the camps "to make people do something and keep them busy." In addition, crash courses were given in shoe repair and tailoring to provide internees with skills that might prove useful in the future.¹⁹

In Heini's case, his father's lute opened doors. He recalled how nature lovers came to Buchberg on the weekends for day hikes and stopped by the camp to hear his group of friends play and sing Austrian lieder. Unfortunately, though, such conviviality was unusual. The relief agencies discouraged the internees from conversing with their hosts. Local priests, Heini was warned, had spoken out from their pulpits against the rising tide of immigrants entering the country.²⁰

His timing, however, had been fortunate. Just weeks after he crossed the frontier, Swiss authorities, under pressure from Berlin for harboring enemies of the Reich, took measures to restrict future immigration.²¹ "To protect Switzerland from the immense influx of Viennese Jews," the chief of police, Heinrich Rothmund, announced that henceforth Austrians were required to obtain visas. Fearful of what journalist Alfred Häsler called "the dread of inundation," on August 19, 1938, authorities closed the borders to those without proper documentation. A federal official invoked a melodramatic analogy that struck a chord with proponents of the government's restrictive policy, comparing his tiny nation to "a lifeboat in a great sea disaster, with only very limited space and even more limited provisions."²²

To mollify relief agencies, Rothmund gave assurances that those already in

Switzerland would be permitted to stay. Border police were instructed, however, to return those entering illicitly to German border guards.²³ More than 24,000 were turned back, and the Swiss Foreign Service denied 14,000 additional requests for entry permits.²⁴

To differentiate Jewish emigrants from others, Berlin agreed, at Rothmund's insistence, to stamp their passports with a large red *J*.²⁵ This edict would have far-reaching consequences: now other countries refused to accept Jews seeking to leave Germany.²⁶

Such restrictions were disquieting to some Swiss, because “the right of asylum” for political and religious reasons had long been an article of faith. The nation had enjoyed a reputation as a haven for the persecuted ever since the Reformation, when Protestants fleeing Catholic repression found shelter in certain provinces.²⁷ Indeed, some sympathetic officials not only looked the other way but actually defied the new regulations and lent a helping hand to those crossing the frontier.

Denied a work permit, unable to reside permanently in Switzerland or secure a visa from the United States or elsewhere because of restrictive quotas, grateful to be alive but uncertain if he would see his family again, fearful of deportation, Heinrich Wasservogel said goodbye to his brother—who stayed on and married a Swiss woman—and accepted Dr. Trone's “offer.”²⁸

Accompanied by a Swiss police escort and representatives of a well-endowed philanthropy, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (the JDC or Joint), Wasservogel, Bauer, and sixteen others were taken by train to Geneva and then bused to Barcelona in late August 1940. From there they took another train to Lisbon, where they finally embarked on a Greek steamer, the *ss Nea Hellas*, headed for New York.

The refugees had no clue what a logistical nightmare it was for JDC officials to get that first Swiss contingent out of Lisbon. While they rested up for their transatlantic crossing and experienced some semblance of normality while reconnoitering the Portuguese capital, their scheduled departure was repeatedly delayed. The JDC's Joseph Schwartz wondered whether he would ever be able to get them out of Europe: “In view of the present uncertainties . . . many doubts exist as to whether the *Nea Hellas* will be able to leave Lisbon. . . . [If not] it will be a major catastrophe here because as it is, there are hardly enough shipping facilities for the people who are waiting to go to New York and other points on the American continent. . . . Should they have to wait for accommodations . . . I am afraid it will be a matter of months, with all that this will mean in increased unrest and greatly increased expenditures for relief. In view of the state of our present budget, I hesitate to even think

about these things.”²⁹ Six days later, Schwartz cabled DORSA officials in New York with distressing news. Their U.S. transit visas had expired while the ship still languished in port. He begged U.S. consular officials in Lisbon to extend their visas. After protracted negotiations, the extensions were granted, and a relieved Schwartz cabled that the first Swiss group was set to depart for Ellis Island on September 4, 1940.³⁰

They stayed at Ellis Island for a week, awaiting the arrival of the New York and Porto Rico Line’s ss *Coamo*, which would take them to their final destination. Unbeknownst to Wasservogel, their arrival in New York attracted the attention of the press. Eager to garner favorable publicity and build momentum for the colonization project, DORSA had alerted the *New York Times*. A reporter met with the refugees and wrote up a human interest story that tugged at readers’ heartstrings. “18 Refugees Sail for Sosúa Colony” focused on the youngest refugee, two-year-old Monica Maas. Monica’s mother was already in the Dominican Republic, anxiously awaiting her daughter’s arrival. The photographer also captured for posterity the fair-skinned, earnest-looking, well-dressed group of pioneers aboard the ss *Coamo*.³¹

On September 27, 1940, the fortunate 18 reached Ciudad Trujillo, and a week later were welcomed at Sosúa. The newcomers were no longer unwanted, stateless exiles; they were about to become farmers in the tropics.

“HE WAS *THE ONLY ONE*”

Like others who arrived in the Dominican Republic during what scholars now call the panic emigration, Wasservogel was eager to talk about Sosúa when interviewed in 1999. In his prime an ox of a man, he was by this time eighty-one, blind, frail, and infirm, living out his “golden years” in retirement in southern Florida. Even though his eyesight and body had betrayed him in recent years, he relished the opportunity to discuss his past—his flight from Austria, the two years in Switzerland, the subsequent, painful loss of much of his family in the Holocaust, and his resolve to reinvent himself from typesetter to farmer and cabinetmaker in the tropics. “I was never afraid of hard work,” he related, wagging his finger in the air for added emphasis; and then, lowering his voice, he added, “I am a survivor.” Pride in his accomplishments in the face of adversity was leavened with other emotions: the relief he shared with other Sosuaners about their safe passage, the anguish over his inability to get loved ones out, and the utter incomprehension of why he was spared when so many were not.

Reflecting fifty years later on his seven-year sojourn in the tropics, he sounded grateful for the opportunity. Without prompting, he lavished praise

on the Dominican dictator, General Rafael Trujillo. “No one wanted us,” he recalled. “He was *the only one* who took us in,” his resonant voice punctuating those three small words for added emphasis.³²

Wasservogel was not alone in expressing gratitude. Martin Katz, one of only a handful of the original pioneers still remaining in Sosúa, recently told a journalist that he did not know why Trujillo did what he did, but “the important thing is that he did. He saved my life.”³³ While most refugees professed to be apolitical, they were well aware of Trujillo’s brutality. Years later, Judith Kibel recalled, “He was a bad man who killed many, many people. . . . But to the Jews he opened his country.”³⁴ It is one of history’s small ironies that a man so feared and despised by many of his fellow Dominicans—and by neighboring Haitians—was admired by these immigrants.

Indeed, Trujillo had stunned the world in the summer of 1938 when his representatives announced that his nation was prepared to accept up to one hundred thousand Central Europeans. Why did a ruthless dictator admit these cast-offs fleeing fascism when few nations would accept them? What did these exiles have to offer him, and why did President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and State Department officials give their public blessing to the enterprise? Why, moreover, did the Joint Distribution Committee invest several million dollars in this modest colonization effort at a time when so many European Jews were in dire need of rescue and resettlement?

Tropical Zion speaks to the settlers’ experience, a despot’s racist efforts to remake his own society, the high cost of Washington’s complicity with a brutal dictatorship in its backyard, and the reasons why a gritty, unconventional experiment saved lives and, given its small size and the numerous obstacles arrayed against it, flourished to the extent that it did. Within a decade, Jewish professionals from Berlin and Vienna, who had never set foot on a farm in the old country, had become successful pioneers. Their employee-owned dairy cooperative was producing one hundred thousand pounds of butter, a million pounds of cheese, and one-and-a-half million gallons of milk a year, and its prize-winning dairy products were marketed throughout the country.

Yet Sosúa failed to live up to Trujillo’s lofty expectations, and at one time or another, the colonization project also confounded the Roosevelt administration, resettlement experts, Western diplomats, and philanthropists. For one thing, only 757 refugees made it to Sosúa, a fraction of Trujillo’s initial offer.³⁵ That small number was a source of frustration for everyone concerned.

What is striking about the Sosúa episode is how securely these stateless exiles were tethered, without their knowledge or consent, to larger geopolitical

concerns at a moment of world crisis—to Washington’s anemic immigration policy, to Machiavellian diplomatic currents swirling around the refugee question, to the Dominican Republic’s determination to assert itself as a power-broker in the Caribbean, to the wartime U.S. “Fortress America” strategy to cordon off the hemisphere from Axis aggression, to real and imagined fears of Nazi espionage and fifth column threats, and to fissures within the American Jewish community. As the colony repeatedly became a flashpoint for a number of heated debates, Sosuaners became pawns on *realpolitik* chessboards in Washington, Berlin, Ciudad Trujillo, New York, and London.

Sosúa’s numbers pale in comparison to the nearly one hundred thousand Jews who escaped Hitler and reached Latin America.³⁶ But if the Sosuaners were a drop in the bucket, the initiative’s timing, and its unique ability to capture the imagination of statesmen, relief organizations, and the general public on three continents suggests that the hopes and aspirations of many were riding on this diminutive experiment in social engineering.

Since the colony’s fate was intimately bound by contingencies not of its own making, it is to this broader canvas that we now turn. We begin with General Trujillo himself, who from the outset cast an imposing shadow over the colony.

THE GENERAL, THE PRESIDENT, AND THE PHILANTHROPY

Trujillo had wasted little time in acquiring a well-deserved reputation for brutality during the first decade of his thirty-one-year dictatorship (1930–61).³⁷ His ruthless mistreatment of both the political opposition and Haitians living in the Dominican Republic compares with the most heinous Latin American dictatorships. The most egregious example was his army’s unprovoked massacre of fifteen thousand unarmed Haitians during a ten-day rampage in October 1937.³⁸ The aftershocks of this tragedy continue to scar relations between these neighbors.

International public opinion condemned the massacre, and the dictator, reliant on U.S. military and economic assistance, quickly sought to defuse the crisis and restore his image abroad. He announced that he would not stand for reelection as president in 1938.³⁹ Although he continued as chief of the armed forces and ciphers occupied the presidency for the next four years, relinquishing *de jure* power was viewed favorably by his patrons in Washington. Welcoming German and Austrian Jews must be understood in this same light: as part and parcel of the dictator’s efforts to re-establish good relations with Washington.

Roosevelt and his advisers knew full well who was responsible for the killing spree, a gruesome operation despicably labeled *El Corte* (the cutting down) because Dominican troops used machetes and clubs to murder their defenseless victims. A confidential U.S. intelligence report filed two months afterward laid the blame squarely on Trujillo's doorstep: "It is difficult to conceive that under a dictatorship such as exists in Santo Domingo a systematic massacre of the extent and duration of this one could have been carried out without his orders or against his will."⁴⁰

Though it publicly condemned the massacre, the Roosevelt administration was reluctant to meddle in Dominican affairs. Building on the policies of his predecessor, Herbert Hoover, FDR had proclaimed that the United States would be a "Good Neighbor" in the Americas; and military intervention, a recurrent feature of U.S.–Latin American relations since 1898, was inconsistent with the principles of hemispheric cooperation.⁴¹ Hoover had not stood in the way of the 1930 coup that brought Trujillo to power; nor did his successor encourage Trujillo to step down after horrific news reports first surfaced about the massacre.⁴²

Instead, the State Department worked to lessen tensions between the Dominican Republic and Haiti. Undersecretary of State Sumner Welles, who was no friend of the dictator, sounded remarkably restrained when he recalled a conversation with Andrés Pastoriza, the chief of the Dominican legation in Washington, shortly after he learned of the massacre: "Our whole attitude was one of friendly concern in seeing that steps be taken sufficiently and promptly to prevent the controversy's assuming serious proportions."⁴³ Secretary of State Cordell Hull, although shaky on regional geography, was even less inclined to berate Trujillo publicly: "I have long considered President Trujillo as one of the biggest men in Central and most of South America . . . and being a big man, I feel we can only look to him to avoid friction with another country and to find ways to clear up such misunderstandings as exist between his country and Haiti."⁴⁴ Preoccupied with events in Europe and a looming Nazi threat in the backyard, Hull and Welles eschewed punitive action against Trujillo and focused their attention on a diplomatic solution.

This response was emblematic of Roosevelt's predilection for "nonintervention." When, at an Inter-American Peace Conference in Buenos Aires in 1936, Roosevelt underscored the need to improve policy coordination, economic relations, and cultural understanding, he earned the admiration of Latin American statesmen. Lessening barriers to trade through reciprocal tariff reduction was of particular importance to Hull, who concluded bilateral trade agreements with ten Latin American states.⁴⁵

Liberalizing trade and renouncing the deployment of military forces, however, did not mean autonomy for client states. If the new Pan American spirit fostered by the administration entailed recurrent trade talks and official visits by heads of state, it came with only a thin veneer of what one student of U.S.–Latin American relations has termed surface respect.⁴⁶ Diplomatic jawboning, dangling carrots of military and economic assistance, and delaying recognition to recalcitrant regimes were tactics the State Department employed to guarantee support for its initiatives.

Nonintervention, such as it was, often had unintended consequences. As U.S. forces withdrew from former protectorates, they left behind military leaders and armies they had trained and equipped, which ruled with impunity, no longer fearing intervention. In practice, Pan Americanism meant that Washington was less likely to criticize authoritarian regimes. By 1939, all but five countries were ruled by military strongmen, and all enjoyed U.S. backing.⁴⁷

With atrocities such as the massacre, Washington's muted response did not go unnoticed. Critics like journalist Carleton Beals reminded readers that something was amiss when an American president criticized totalitarian regimes in Europe yet showed unflinching support for the "Dictator Trujillo, in the Dominican Republic, [who] was butchering 12,000 peaceable Haitians—men, women, children and babes."⁴⁸ By feigning impartiality and upholding the twin principles of national sovereignty and nonintervention, the administration left itself wide open to charges of hypocrisy.

Despite Washington's kid glove treatment, Trujillo, coveting U.S. aid, was anxious to mend fences. To placate the Roosevelt administration, the general sent representatives to Évian, France in July 1938, to an international conference on refugees from Nazism, proposed by FDR to deflect criticism of restrictive U.S. immigration policies. Thirty-two nations sent representatives, but only the Dominican Republic agreed to open its doors to those fleeing Nazism.

The dictator was not just making amends for murdering Haitians. He wanted to "whiten the Dominican race." Obsessed with stemming the tide of Haitian migration across his nation's western border, he welcomed Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi Aryanism—ironically themselves the object of scorn and derision in Europe because of their "racial" characteristics. After El Corte, Trujillo sought to seal off the ill-defined frontier with Haiti, encourage white immigration, foster intermarriage with Europeans, and establish agricultural colonies in underutilized parts of the country. At roughly the same time it welcomed Central Europeans, and for similar reasons, the Dominican Republic admitted several thousand Spanish republican expatriates living in

France who had been driven into exile by General Francisco Franco after the Spanish Civil War.

Although “improving the race” through European immigration had been a desideratum for decades, and political leaders throughout Latin America actively promoted miscegenation to erase “blackness and indianness,” the Dominican case was exceptional because the dictatorship went to extremes to recast racial categories to suit its ideological ends.⁴⁹ At a time when the country’s population was predominantly mulatto, the 1935 census patently denied their existence. Astoundingly, the two out of three Dominicans of mixed black and white ancestry were labeled mestizos, even though it was common knowledge that the indigenous had been eliminated from the island centuries before.⁵⁰

Race had been a persistent preoccupation of elites well before Trujillo, but it was under his rule that it became a pliable and effective tool to foment nationalism, cultural homogeneity, and a new Dominican identity. Although popular perceptions of ethnic and racial identity differed from official discourse, regime propaganda shaped how Dominicans of all social classes perceived themselves and their neighbors.⁵¹

During Trujillo’s reign, the nation’s Hispanic heritage (white, Catholic, and colonial) was celebrated while its “Africanness” was denied. While Mexico celebrated *mestizaje* and Brazil proclaimed racial harmony, Trujillo sought, in the historian Robin Derby’s words, “to police the purity of the race” by stemming the tide of Haitian-Dominican miscegenation and contriving preposterous racial categories.⁵² Although we know a great deal about Trujillo’s regime, historians only now are beginning to understand the dictatorship’s ideological underpinnings, its emphasis on “whitening” the race, and the measures it took to promote conformity.⁵³

Recognizing the dictator’s racial motives, a pragmatic JDC nevertheless embraced Trujillo’s offer, hopeful that successful colonization in the Caribbean would persuade other Latin American states to open their doors. They knew they had exactly the right leaders to oversee this venture. Both James Rosenberg, a prominent New York corporate bankruptcy attorney, and Joseph Rosen, an eminent Russian agronomist, were fervent believers in colonization who boldly predicted that Jews would prosper in the tropics.

These administrators were not just incurable romantics. They had hands-on experience moving more than 150,000 Russian Jews from towns and cities in the Pale of Settlement in western Russia to the Crimean steppes. From 1924 to 1938, Rosenberg and Rosen, with the assistance of the Soviet state, which made available nearly two million acres of land, were the architects of a novel

social experiment that transformed citified Jews into farmers. The JDC spun off a subsidiary, the Agro-Joint Corporation, to manage the multimillion-dollar collaboration between a capitalist philanthropy and a communist state. As the attorney raised funds in New York, the agronomist directed 250 cooperatives, preaching the gospel of crop rotation and high-yield seed varieties and bringing American-made tractors and water-drilling equipment to the Crimea.

It is interesting that these disciples of Jewish agrarianism were, like Trujillo, enamored of scientific racism, reasoning that thousands of years of living in cities had contaminated the Jewish gene pool. Toiling on the land, whether in the Crimea, Palestine, or the Caribbean, they contended, would cleanse the soul and regenerate the “Jewish race.”

After the Crimean project was shut down by an increasingly xenophobic Josef Stalin in 1938, the Joint turned to the fundraiser and the colonization expert and asked them to direct the Sosúa initiative. Given the Agro-Joint’s superb track record, it was not surprising that diplomats and relief agencies were bullish on Sosúa. After Évian, Sosúa was one of a slew of sites under consideration for possible resettlement. FDR liked to think big, and his aides were scouring the globe for large swaths of territory where hundreds of thousands of refugees could be relocated. But colonization experts, scholars, and politicians were still undecided on whether it was feasible or desirable to let Europeans settle in the tropics. These racially tinged debates, influenced by the pseudoscience of eugenics, had a long history; but at that juncture, when governments on both sides of the Atlantic were being pressured to revise their immigration policies, such “scientific” debates gave policymakers the political cover they needed to explain why their own colonial possessions or territories were unacceptable for resettlement. As potential sites fell by the wayside, Sosúa became, by default, one of the last best options.⁵⁴

As Sosúa emerged as a plausible alternative, Trujillo, FDR, and DORSA became complicit partners, each demonstrating public support for the others. For more than two decades, this friendship never wavered, even as pressure mounted against the dictatorship from within and without.

For DORSA, the joint venture necessitated blind allegiance to Trujillo while papering over its differences with the Roosevelt administration regarding the quota system. DORSA administrators may have professed that they were apolitical, but their cheerleading for Trujillo and Roosevelt belied that claim. Rosenberg and his associates steered DORSA through turbulent, politically charged waters, and they seldom second-guessed themselves. To their way of thinking, loyalty to Ciudad Trujillo and Washington did not mean collusion,

it meant survival. The association remained a steadfast supporter of the dictator until his assassination in May 1961, long after Washington had distanced itself from him.

Trujillo made sure of DORSA's fidelity in classic patron-client fashion, by personally donating a 26,000-acre tract along the north coast. The gift's symbolic value proved much greater than the property itself, which colonists soon learned had serious limitations. Since clients were expected to return favors by pledging loyalty, personal assistance, and service to the regime, lobbying policymakers in Washington quickly became a *quid pro quo*. In return, Trujillo signed a contract with DORSA that gave the refugees, who had been stripped of fundamental rights in their homeland, religious freedom and civil and legal rights. This bill of rights was no token gesture; it proved to be a persuasive fundraising tool for the philanthropy.

In such relationships, obedience and allegiance purchase favors, deference is expected, and transgressions are not taken lightly. If DORSA leaders had any misgivings, they were seldom apparent. Perhaps that is because it is not unusual in such vertical relationships for all parties to believe that they benefit disproportionately. DORSA considered lobbying the Roosevelt administration as simply the price of doing business with the dictator. But gift giving in patron-client relationships always reinforces the relationship's asymmetrical character.

For Washington, this partnership meant sustaining in power a reprehensible figure at a time when the United States was publicly critical of totalitarianism in Europe and reluctant to address the refugee problem forthrightly at home. Even though the dictator benefited the most from this uncommon alliance, he, too, was forced to accede to urgent requests from the administration and the philanthropy to give temporary asylum to prominent Jewish refugees. In reality, he never felt secure about the depth of Washington's support. He also had to fend off criticism from political opponents, who viewed Sosúa as little more than a publicity stunt. Indeed, Trujillo and FDR left themselves vulnerable to charges of bad faith when the promised one hundred thousand settlers never materialized.

The Sosúa initiative also sheds light on the rivalries within the U.S. foreign policy establishment. FDR deliberately provoked competition and jealousy among his advisers because he was convinced that infighting and personal and professional animosities inspired loyalty and fostered creative tensions that often led to imaginative solutions. Hull and Welles, in particular, were at odds on policy matters, and Sosúa was no exception. Welles's contempt for Trujillo diminished his enthusiasm for the small colony, which he dismissed as a Band-Aid on a gaping wound.

Despite Welles's reservations, Roosevelt understood that a successful Sosúa would deflect attention away from America's restrictive immigration policy.⁵⁵ Even though much has been written about FDR's refugee policies per se and the Good Neighbor policy in general, historians have yet to examine how Washington's geopolitical and domestic interests dovetailed, and how the administration's immigration policies and its overriding preoccupation with fighting fascism worked to strengthen relations with Latin American dictators like Anastasio Somoza (Nicaragua) and Fulgencio Batista (Cuba) for decades to come.⁵⁶

By all rights, Trujillo should have had little room to maneuver with Washington, because his regime was a creature of U.S. policy. FDR's predecessors had turned the Caribbean into an "American lake." U.S.-Dominican relations fit this pattern to a tee. Considerable North American investment in the island's sugar industry during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had led to ever greater involvement in the Dominican Republic's internal affairs. After the Dominican government defaulted on its debts to North American creditors in 1905, Washington assumed control of Dominican customs houses, garnishing their receipts; and when political instability precipitated a military occupation from 1916 to 1924, the Marines created a modern army meant to discourage unrest, which made it possible for an unimportant military officer like Trujillo to ascend to power in the first place. National sovereignty was further compromised by the Convention of 1924, an agreement that ensured that even after the Marines had departed, North American creditors continued to hold liens on customs receipts.⁵⁷

Yet as the Sosúa episode makes clear, a subordinate position in an asymmetrical relationship does not mean that a shrewd leader cannot wring concessions to tighten his grip on power. Loyalty and deference became extremely effective weapons in Trujillo's diplomatic arsenal. Receiving Jewish refugees brought with it considerable residual benefits. When Washington pressured Latin American "republics" to clamp down on Nazi espionage activities in the summer of 1940 and curtail the numbers of refugees they took in, Trujillo complied, and welcomed North American training of his secret police. He then used those forces to crush domestic opposition. The dictator never invested a centavo in Sosúa; he believed the philanthropy was flush. Nor did he provide the essential infrastructure for a successful colony. But Sosúa restored his tarnished reputation abroad and helped bring about significant political victories at home that helped secure his hold on power for two more decades.

The Évian offer and the cooperation that ensued among the State Department, refugee organizations, and Dominican authorities smoothed the way

for a revision of the 1924 Convention that had long rankled Dominican nationalists. The Trujillo-Hull Treaty, ratified in 1941, enabled the dictator to declare financial independence from the United States (although the treaty's fine print belied that claim). To sweeten the pot, the U.S. Export-Import Bank awarded the Dominican Republic two loans, and assistance from the U.S. Lend-Lease program, whereby the United States supplied war materiel to its Allies between 1941 and 1945, again bolstering Trujillo's armed forces. The Sosúan case, then, not only accentuates how FDR's emphasis on hemispheric solidarity and nonintervention dampened the prospects for democratic reform; it shows how loyalty and altruism bred longevity for crafty, purposeful tyrants within the "contact zones of the American empire."⁵⁸

Less than two years after the massacre, Trujillo, trumpeted by regime panegyrists as The Benefactor, was not only back in Washington's good graces, he was touted as a humanitarian and faithful ally. Much has been made in the recent literature on U.S.–Latin American relations about the flexible character of hegemonic relationships and how weak client states can achieve limited successes when negotiating with the imperial state. Never a puppet on a string, Trujillo for three decades conducted relations with Washington that were characterized by constant negotiation, tactful redeployment, and measured resistance.⁵⁹

Washington's attitude toward Trujillo and other dictators was never static, and Trujillo (and DORSA) often had to adjust to changes in U.S. policy. Periods of friction between Ciudad Trujillo and Washington, such as the short-lived tenure of Assistant Secretary of State Spruille Braden immediately after the Second World War, put the general on the defensive. But until his last years, Trujillo skillfully leveraged his assets in the U.S. foreign policy establishment, either waiting out the rough patches or articulating policies, be they antifascism during the war or anticommunism after, which he knew would play well. When that was not enough, he tapped his strategically placed retainers on the Hill, at the War (later Defense) Department, in the media, and in the private sector to outmaneuver his opponents.

COMPETING VISIONS

The Sosúan scheme also exposed the fault lines that rent American Judaism.⁶⁰ Even with Europe about to go up in flames, a plethora of decentralized American Jewish organizations repeatedly proved unable to set aside their differences and respond more aggressively to the needs of the refugees. Non-Zionists like the JDC never viewed Palestine as the only answer. They encouraged assimilation and dispersion; Jews, they insisted, must bloom where they

were planted and prove themselves adaptable to all types of environments. Unlike Anti-Zionists, who vehemently opposed immigration to Palestine, Non-Zionists sought an elusive middle ground, opposing a Jewish state but not resettlement in Palestine per se. The Non-Zionist leadership of the American Jewish Committee (AJC) considered Palestine as *a* home for Jews, but not *the* Jewish state.⁶¹

Reluctant to pressure policymakers to liberalize quotas or participate in demonstrations or boycotts against the Third Reich, Non-Zionists were smeared by their rivals with the pejorative label of court Jews, medieval elders who placed greater emphasis on emulating their Christian sponsors than defending their community's interests. Although Non-Zionists contended that they had the best interests of American Jewry at heart, their reluctance to contest immigration policy earned them the enmity of many Jews who thought that persistent voices of protest were needed against Nazism. That is why the Sosúa experiment had tremendous symbolic importance for Non-Zionists, above and beyond its small numbers, and explains why the JDC was willing to invest as much as it did in Sosúa.⁶²

Zionists, on the other hand, wanted FDR to pressure Great Britain to keep Palestine open for resettlement; any strategy that diverted attention away from that goal they viewed as a mistake. Although Zionists were far from monolithic—they disagreed on everything from tactics to ideology—they closed ranks on Sosúa's impracticality, calling it variously a boondoggle or a misguided attempt to save a few souls. It is understandable that Sosúa posed a threat to doctrinaire Zionists. It was not just a question of cornering competing resources, although that should not be underestimated. The project cut too close to home, raising the same vision of turning urban Jews from Central and Eastern Europe into farmers. Both Zionists and Non-Zionists wanted to turn these city dwellers into farmers, but the Non-Zionist vision of "bloom where you are planted" offered stiff competition to the Zionist obsession with a homeland as *the* home for Jews. Sosúa therefore was viewed in heretical terms, and every effort was made to discredit it.

The Zionist rhetorical assault on Sosúa did not go unanswered. Speaking to potential donors in October 1940, just months after the first refugees arrived in the colony, Rosen poignantly responded to DORSA's critics:⁶³

You get the feeling of being so helpless before the magnitude of the problems confronting the world today. I consoled myself by remembering that years ago when I was young and handsome, I had to go through a fire and was

badly burned. The doctors grafted tiny islets of skin on my face, and in time, these islets grew and became part of the whole skin, and I now stand before you today, still alive, though not quite handsome. In much the same way I tried to console myself with the thought that like the tiny islets of skin that were grafted on my face, so our settlement in Sosúa is but a tiny isle on the ocean of human misery, but it is these islets which may help bring light out of darkness, and civilization out of chaos. With this in mind, I tried to justify the saving of a few hundred people at the most—which is all it is as yet—in the face of hundreds of thousands now being destroyed throughout the world.

This touching rationalization, how he sought to “justify the saving of a few hundred” while “hundreds of thousands” remained at risk, mirrored the embattled character of Non-Zionism. Its inability to find common ground with its rivals and mount a concerted campaign to assist European Jewry did not win it contemporary admirers.

Historians have been equally unkind. It is revealing that most contemporary scholars have mimicked the Zionist critique of Sosúa; even Yehuda Bauer, who has written the most comprehensive histories of the JDC, bemoans the organization’s “less than judicious” decision to invest “hundreds of thousands . . . into the fiasco that was the Sosúa venture.”⁶⁴ The historian Henry Feingold demurs, contending that American Jewish leaders did not have the luxury of predicting the future, but did have the moral obligation to weigh all their options carefully when so many were in such desperate straits. Belittling Zionist obstructionism, he has concluded, “many more might have been rescued had there been more Sosúas”⁶⁵ (see figure 1).

Unfortunately, so much of the historiography on the rescue of the Jews centers on the fixing of blame. An enduring pitched battle considers (and reconsiders) the merits of who could or should have done more to save the lives of those who perished.⁶⁶ Without demeaning the relevance of that important question, this extended debate has so overshadowed the discourse about the international response to the Nazi regime that the fixing of culpability ultimately obscures as much as it reveals about the principals’ motivations and responses. A careful examination of the documentary record indicates that the Joint, arguably with greater success than any other relief organization, worked tirelessly to rescue its European kindred.

The Joint’s wealth and political clout made it a force to be reckoned with, but its influence was used to conciliate and accommodate. Sosúa was an important rhetorical weapon in its arsenal. Promotional literature for the project sought to persuade Latin American governments that Jews would flourish



FIGURE 1. View of Sosúa Bay, c. 1940. JDC ARCHIVES.

in the tropics while it helped to blunt the Zionist campaign to create a homeland. Not until devastating reports of the Holocaust reached American Jewish leaders after 1942 did the Joint set aside its differences with the other Jewish groups and reach a consensus on the need for a homeland.⁶⁷

To Roosevelt, American Judaism's turf battles were a godsend. Such dissonance made it easier to resist responding more aggressively to the refugee crisis. The 1924 Reed-Johnson (or National Origins) Act permitted only 160,000 immigrants to enter the United States annually, 2 percent of each Caucasian nationality represented in the 1890 census.⁶⁸ But bureaucratic indifference, nativism, anti-Semitism, and concerns about low-wage immigrants displacing unskilled U.S. workers ensured that only 36 percent of the quota was filled between 1933 and 1945.⁶⁹

The savvy Roosevelt, unwilling to buck public opinion that was dead-set against liberalizing the quotas, masterfully played Jewish organizations against each other. Certainly no one could have foreseen, or imagined, for that matter, what transpired in the gas chambers and concentration camps; and historians must be wary of criticizing politicians for not responding to events that had not yet occurred.⁷⁰ Nevertheless, the president was well aware by the time of Évian, and certainly after Kristallnacht in November 1938, that the treatment of Jews in Germany and Austria was unconscionable, that panic migration was spiraling out of control, and that urgent solutions were needed. The steps taken by the administration were reactive and ineffectual. Rhetorical indignation coupled with inaction was emblematic of Franklin Roosevelt's response to the refugee crisis.

Memoirs and celebratory tracts have been written about Sosúa, but many of them treat the colony as an island unto itself, cut off from Trujillo's police state and North American policy.⁷¹ Just like the displaced and dispossessed fleeing fascism who relocated to such far-flung destinations as Shanghai's International Quarter or the Bolivian *altiplano*, Sosúa's pioneers met challenges head-on and proved remarkably resilient while building the island's most successful agricultural colony. Even though more than half the settlers took advantage of easier visa regulations and packed their bags for the United States after the war, the core that remained at the colony and put down roots on the island's north coast was a more cohesive and committed group.

It is not an altogether heroic saga, however. Sosúa was a contentious place, and its bifurcated character—part agricultural colony, part refugee camp—had a corrosive impact on morale that threatened to tear apart the fragile social fabric. Lacking an idealistic ethos, which Zionism had afforded pioneers in Palestine, the settlement was painfully short on trust and cooperation. Moreover, for all its commercial success, Sosúa met the same fate as other unplanned communities forged in the Diaspora during the panic emigration. As the bonds that were formed under duress frayed and the United States continued to beckon to the younger generations, the settlement ineluctably withered away.

Recovering the world that Topf, Wasservogel, Bauer, and other colonists made in the tropics occupies much of the second half of this study. But what distinguishes *Tropical Zion* is the narrative's intersecting threads: the colony's fitful evolution, U.S.-Dominican relations, Trujillo's multifaceted domestic agenda, and American Jewry's squabbles. These threads track the story from Europe to the United States to the Caribbean. They illustrate how exogenous forces affected the settlers and how, in turn, the colony and its founders prompted, in often surprising ways, diplomatic responses abroad.

A word about the book's title is in order. No one ever accused the Joint Distribution Committee of being staunch Zionists; nor were the great majority of refugees who found shelter from the Nazi storm fervent proponents of a homeland in Palestine. But at that hateful moment, when a Jewish state was little more than a pipe dream, this tiny agricultural settlement did represent a Zion in the tropics for Jews who yearned for places they could call and make their own.

To unravel the twisted skein that led to Sosúa, we turn next to the Évian Conference, which dashed hopes for so many but ultimately carried the seeds of a life-saving Dominican offer for refugees.



MAP 1. The Dominican Republic.