

## Legacy of Jewish Settlement in Dominican Republic Lives On

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SOSUA, Dominican Republic — Framed by lush vegetation and spreading palms, the simple wood-framed house of worship off main street isn't so different from the other small churches you find on this Caribbean island.

Except there are no crosses or statues of the Virgin.



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[\(enlarge photo\)](#)

Luis Hess, 99, in the front yard of his home in Sosua, Dominican Republic. A Jewish refugee who fled Hitler, Hess was hired as a translator for other Jewish refugees brought to Sosua during World War II.



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[\(enlarge photo\)](#)

Benny Katz stands in front of the Jewish synagogue in Sosua, Dominican Republic. Katz's father was one of 700 Jewish refugees fleeing Hitler who settled at Sosua in 1940 after the

Instead, a menorah etched in glass graces the window over the door, while the Star of David — painted a jaunty tropical blue — is fixed to the gate.

The small Jewish synagogue and museum in Sosua is a testament to a unique bit of Caribbean history, a time when this heavily-Catholic nation stepped forward on the world stage with a humanitarian gesture unmatched by larger, richer countries.

"No other country made such an offer," said Luis Hess, a German Jew who came here in 1939 at the invitation of the Dominican government after escaping the terrors his people faced at the hands of Hitler's Nazi Germany. "We were accepted by the Dominican people. There was no prejudice."

The settlement at Sosua became home to some 700 Jewish refugees, most of whom fled Europe's cities. Few were farmers, but they learned to farm, transforming a rugged, isolated stretch of coast into a productive dairy center complete with a cheese factory.

Along the way, they inter-married with their Dominican neighbors, creating a unique blend of New World and Old World cultures, a Jewish-Caribbean-Spanish mix that survives today.

"Coming here was a gift from God," said Benny Katz, 44, whose father was one of the original settlers of what became known as the Sosua colony. "My father left Frankfurt and came here in 1940. Most of our family died in Auschwitz."

The origins of the colony date to 1938, when the great powers held a conference at the behest of U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt to debate what to do about Hitler's persecution of the Jews. The Holocaust, with its death camps and mass exterminations, was yet to take full shape, but already Jews were fleeing Germany, where they were confined in ghettos, stripped of their businesses and made to wear yellow Stars of David.

"I left in 1933, as soon as Hitler came to power," said Hess, who is amazingly hale and lucid at 99.

After much sympathetic rhetoric at the international conference, only the tiny, little-known Dominican Republic made a concrete offer to accept Jewish refugees. Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo agreed to take up to 100,000.

Some accounts link his generosity to an effort to "whiten" his island, or to put a public-

Dominican Republic became the only country willing to accept Jewish refugees.



MIKE WILLIAMS/Cox News Service  
(enlarge photo)  
Benny Katz at the small Jewish synagogue at Sosua, Dominican Republic. The town became a colony for Jewish refugees during WW II.



MIKE WILLIAMS/Cox News Service  
(enlarge photo)  
Luis Hess, 99, in the front yard of his home in Sosua, Dominican Republic. A Jewish refugee who fled Hitler, Hess was hired as a translator for other Jewish refugees brought to Sosua during World War II.

relations patch over a recent massacre of some 25,000 Haitians at the hands of Dominican forces.

Whatever the motivations, the colony was soon organized, spearheaded by American Jewish groups.

Hess, after fleeing Germany for Spain and then France, had moved to the Dominican Republic on his own, establishing a translation service and language school in Santo Domingo, the capital. He was quickly hired to translate for the colony's American organizers, and then agreed to move to Sosua to teach Spanish to the settlers.

The first group arrived in May 1940. About three dozen refugees, most fresh from Europe, suddenly found themselves plopped down in a tropical jungle, hours by rough road from the nearest city.

"It was very primitive," Hess said. "It was terribly hard work for little pay, and there were very few Jewish girls. Most of the settlers were men."

Stunned by the rugged conditions, Hess didn't plan to stay long.

"I stayed because I fell in love with a Dominican girl," he said, his eyes going misty at the memories of a Sunday afternoon dance where he met his bride-to-be. "We had two boys and we were married 60 years. She passed away seven years ago."

The colony struggled as the settlers learned farming by trial-and-error. The thousands of additional refugees that Trujilio had agreed to take never arrived, unable to cross the submarine-infested ocean in the midst of World War II.

After the war, many of the settlers left, worn out by the hard life and eager for opportunities in the United States.

Those who stayed eventually built a prosperous farming operation. Over the decades, a few new Jewish families came, but more left. Most of the men who stayed married Dominicans, and the slow mingling of the cultures began weaving its unique pattern.

Today, only a handful of the colony's original residents are still alive, while about 60 of their descendants live in the area. The synagogue still holds services, and Jewish-Dominican boys still receive bar mitzvahs.

But Sosua's Jewish identity has been supplanted by a boom in tourism, which has transformed the area into a tropical getaway for foreigners.

Benny Katz, for one, vows to keep Sosua's unique history alive. Like others, he supports the museum, which has fascinating photos and other displays depicting the colony's early days.

"Years ago my father had the opportunity to move to America," he said. "But he didn't want to leave. He said that in America he would be just a number, but here in Sosua, he's 'Mr. Katz.'"



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(enlarge photo)

Luis Hess stands near a photo showing the early days of the Jewish colony at Sosua, Dominican Republic. Hess, himself a refugee from Hitler's Germany, was hired as a translator for the colony of 700 Jewish refugees who settled at Sosua during World War II.