

## GEORGE A. SMATHERS LIBRARIES' CELEBRATING CUBA! INITIATIVE

BIBLIOTECA  
LA CASA DE LA COMUNIDAD  
HEBREA DE CUBA



### LA BIBLIOTECA DE COMUNIDAD HEBREA DE CUBA ONLINE

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*Thanks to its National Endowment  
for the Humanities Challenge Grant,  
UF's Price Library of Judaica has been  
working collaboratively to help identify,  
preserve and provide access to Jewish  
cultural heritage materials in Latin  
America and the Caribbean.*

One such project, part of the George A. Smathers Libraries' Celebrating Cuba! initiative, has enabled the digitization of rare publications from the historic synagogue library in Havana, Cuba. The synagogue library (la Biblioteca) was established in 1955 as part of a new community center, known as la Casa de la Comunidad Hebrea de Cuba. This large building complex, designed by Cuban architect Aquiles Capablanca, was built to meet the needs of a growing and thriving Jewish population (estimated at between 10,000 to 15,000 people) and, in addition to offering religious services, it was also meant to serve as a gathering space for inter-communal events and cross-cultural exchanges.

According to a report in the library's own journal *Ha-Sefer* (the book), la Biblioteca's

opening ceremony took place on October 4, 1955, with about 400 community members in attendance. The inauguration featured speeches by two distinguished guests, Dr. Lilia Castro de Morales, Director of the National Library of Cuba, and Dr. Guillermo Francovich, UNESCO's Director General for the Western Hemisphere, both of whom promised wider community cooperation with the library. Abraham Marcus Matterin, an author, community leader, and the new library Director, delivered the main speech, explaining the reasoning behind the library's establishment, how it promised to support the community's intellectual and cultural growth, and how it would serve the educational needs of their youth. The inauguration ended with the ceremonial placing of the first book in the library, a Hebrew Bible



(Tanakh), the first edition printed in the newly established state of Israel.

During the first two years of its existence, as recorded in *Ha-Sefer*, the library was exceptionally busy: by the summer of 1958, it had gained 252 donors; almost 7,000 books had been classified and catalogued (including a gift of books from the University of Havana), and 5,248 items had been borrowed by 606 registered borrowing members. The library also held several book exhibitions, including one celebrating Cuban-Jewish authors and one on the life of José Martí; it hosted an Israeli philatelic exhibition and another commemorating 350 years of Rembrandt. The community's enthusiasm for its library was manifest in the number of fundraising events, such as banquets, musical soirées and bridge tournaments held to support its growth.

Sadly, this lively and informative journal was never published again as greater events would overtook the community and its library. In response to the Cuban Revolution, and the resulting nationalization of private businesses under the communist regime, most of Cuba's Jews had left the island by the early 1960s. Those who remained went into what historians have described as a "dormant state" enabling the community to continue functioning under a political system outwardly opposed to religious practice. Indeed, the almanac ceased to be published after 1960 and *Comunitarias*, the last community publication from that period, already reveals in its slim pages that leadership changes had occurred and that activities by comparison had diminished.

# Publicaciones Hebreas

DE CUBA



Nevertheless, la Biblioteca continued to be managed by Matterin until his death in 1983. Although it did not expand in the way its founders had envisioned—in 1958, Isaac Gurwitz, General Secretary of the Board of Trustees, had declared in *Ha-Sefer*: “[the library] must grow and develop continuously, enlarging and surpassing itself”—its existing contents continued to serve as a great resource for the local population. Today, Adela Dworin, the community president, champions the library’s historic importance and campaigns tirelessly for its upkeep.

In 2018, I visited Cuba together with Dean Judith Russell and Professor Lillian Guerra to initiate a digitization partnership with the synagogue. Adela Dworin shared the library’s inventory of books and our team produced a priority scanning list. A UF graduate student, Lauren Krebs, was hired to scan on site between June and August; Krebs was followed by another graduate student, Katie Coldiron who completed the project from October to December. The scanned materials have since been uploaded to our new Cuban Judaica website (<https://ufdc.ufl.edu/CUBANJUDAICA>).

The website contains the library’s rarer pieces, particularly Cuban-Jewish imprints and those pertaining to the community’s history, such as the abovementioned library journal *Ha-Sefer* and the community’s almanac, *Havaner Lebn* (*Vida Habanera* or *Havana Life*). Historic photographs were also scanned, some of which show the various events—exhibitions and bridge tournaments—that had taken place in la Biblioteca during its heyday. Nine issues of the short-lived,

Havana-based, Spanish-language journal *Israelia*, edited by Matterin, are also available. The complete run of the journal was only previously available in hardcopy at la Biblioteca. Other rare books, now freely available to researchers online, include works by Cuban Jewish authors, most notably the great Yiddish poet, Eliezer Aronowski. Arguably, one of the most important pieces published in Havana, and now in the new online collection, is Aronowski’s Yiddish historical work, *In kontsentratsye-lager Bukhenvald*, Havana, 1939, which was the first account of the notorious Buchenwald concentration camp ever published.

All of the writings produced by members of the vibrant Jewish cultural group *la Agrupacion Cultural Hebreo-Cubana* are included in the Cuban Judaica collection. Established in February 1953, *la Agrupacion* aimed to promote greater community synthesis through the organization of cultural events, such as public talks, concerts, and film screenings, and through an active publishing program. As stated in the group’s 14-page list of regulations, they also created the Comisión de Bibliotecas (libraries commission) to assemble and organize Jewish libraries in Cuba. The group founders were among Cuba’s leading Jewish intellectuals, and many of them were actively involved in creating la Casa de la Comunidad Hebra de Cuba and its Biblioteca. Their documents, largely pertaining to *la Agrupacion*’s operational activities, are likewise now available online; these records include the official termination decree issued to the group in 1960 by the government’s department of associations. 



