

Article

Polishing Diamonds in Havana: A Personal Account of the Flight of a Jewish Refugee to Cuba, 1938-46

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Abstract. Thousands of European Jewish refugees found acceptance on the island of Cuba at the outbreak of World War II. The author provides a unique portrayal of this time by utilizing her mother's firsthand account of the safety her family found there as refugees from Nazi-occupied Europe. The article draws from primary sources, including the author's mother's story, photos, diary and documents, and places the event in the context of the Cuban politics, economics, and perceptions at the time. The refugees brought the new industry of diamond faceting to Cuba, though, in the end, it was short-lived. The article illustrates the acceptance of refugees, communal respect, and working together for mutual benefit.

Keywords: Cuba, diamond industry, Holocaust, Jewish refugees, World War II.

Abstract. Miles de refugiados judíos europeos fueron aceptados en la isla de Cuba a comienzos de la Segunda Guerra Mundial. El autor proporciona una exclusiva imagen de la época a través del relato de primera mano de su madre sobre la salvación de su familia que se encontró allá como refugiados contra la Europa ocupada por los nazis. El artículo se basa en fuentes primarias que incluyen la historia de la madre de la autora, fotos y documentos, y coloca el evento en el contexto de la política, la economía, y la percepción cubana del tiempo. Los refugiados introdujeron la nueva industria de diamantes facetados en Cuba, aunque, al final, duró poco. El artículo muestra la acogida de los refugiados, respeto colectivo, y el trabajo en equipo como beneficio mutuo.

Keywords: Cuba, industria de diamantes, Holocausto, refugiados judíos, Segunda Guerra Mundial.

1. Introduction

On white fabric with red lettering, the sign read, "Te Quiero Cuba". The banner was held high by crew members aboard the British cruise ship the *MS Braemar* in March 2020 as it entered Mariel Harbor in Havana. The ship had close to 1,000 passengers and crew, some diagnosed with and others showing symptoms of the deadly virus COVID-19. No

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other country in the area agreed to let the ship land for fear of the virus. But Cuba did². This was not the first time Cuba permitted a ship full of desperate people to disembark on her shores.

Cuba allowed in and granted temporary refuge to close to 12,000 Jewish refugees desperate to escape the persecution by Hitler and the Nazis before and during World War II³. The refugees arrived in two waves. The first half came between 1938 and 1939, primarily from Germany and Austria. The price of safety was high, but the refugees were paying for their survival. The prevailing view is that in addition to fees and costs, graft had to be paid⁴. «The net effect was that through this system of graft Jews escaping from Nazism had a place to flee»⁵.

A major turning point occurred in May of 1939. Several ships were turned away from the Havana harbor, including the SS *St. Louis*⁶. The SS *St. Louis* sailed from Hamburg Germany with over 900 Jewish refugees aboard and was refused entry first from Cuba then from the U.S. and Canada. The ship was forced to return to Europe and many of its passengers subsequently perished in concentration camps. This tragic event increased political awareness and worldwide attention to the plight of the refugees⁷. It also increased compassion towards those arriving in Cuba after the War began⁸. The second wave of refugees arrived between 1940 and 1942. Many of those families and individuals came from Belgium -both Belgians and other displaced people- after Hitler's army invaded the Low Countries in May 1940. Between the two events there was a change of government in Cuba from Federico Laredo Bru as president when the first wave attempted to enter Cuba, to Fulgencia Batista y Zaldívar who became president in 1940⁹. Batista changed the course of the immigration policy and allowed in a considerable number of Jewish refugees for economic, policy, and compassionate reasons.

I have personal knowledge of this event in Cuban/Jewish history because my mother, grandmother, grandfather and aunt were among those that found a refuge in Cuba during Batista's presidency. Their story is being told here, in an academic setting, because it presents a primary source for the event and informs about refugees both past and present, demonstrates the acceptance of minorities, and highlights the effects on the hosting communities.

² P. Kornbluh, *Cuba's welcome to a Covid-19-stricken cruise ship reflects a long pattern of global humanitarian commitment*, in «The Nation: Foreign Policy», March 21 2020; at the moment it is available at: <Cuba's Welcome to a Covid-19-Stricken Cruise Ship Reflects a Long Pattern of Global Humanitarian Commitment | The Nation>, consulted on 20 September 2020.

³ M. Bejarano, *The Jewish community of Cuba: Between continuity and extinction*, in «Jewish Political Studies Review», vol. 3, nn. 1/2, 1991, pp. 115-140.

⁴ Y. Bauer, *My brother's keeper: A history of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee 1929-1939*, Philadelphia, The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1974; M. Bejarano, *The Jewish community of Cuba: Memory and history*, Israel, The Hebrew University Magnes Press, 2014; R.M. Levine, *Tropical diaspora: The Jewish experience in Cuba*, Gainesville, University Press of Florida, 1993.

⁵ J. Levinson, *Jewish community of Cuba: The golden age, 1906-1958*, Nashville, Westview Publishing, 2006, p. 113.

⁶ Y. Bauer, *Op. cit.*

⁷ G. Thomas, M.M. Witts, *Voyage of the damned*, New York, Stein and Day, 1974.

⁸ L. Maitland, *Crossing the borders of time: A true story of war, exile, and love reclaimed*, New York, Other Press, 2013.

⁹ J. Levinson, *Op. cit.*

Marion Finkels was born on August 6, 1927, near Hamburg, Germany to John and Rose Finkels. In 1934, her younger sister Ada was born. The family owned a small store in Hamburg and lived comfortably there until the Nazi persecution of Jews became ever-more threatening. Marion has stories of her terror while walking to school by herself as a little girl and being pelted with stones by local youth just for being Jewish. She remembers looking longingly out the window from home at her friends playing because she could no longer play with Aryan children. When leaving Germany became inevitable, Marion and her family began the long odyssey of emigrating to a safe place.

2. Escape from Europe. Overland Journey

The family left Germany for Belgium in the fall of 1938, soon after Kristallnacht. This was the night of terror, death, and destruction inflicted on the Jews in Austria and Germany. The name refers to the broken glass that littered the streets after Nazi youth and sympathizers rampaged through cities and towns. More than 200 synagogues and 8,000 Jewish-owned stores were sacked and looted. Many Jews were murdered and tens of thousands were sent to early forms of the concentration camps¹⁰. After Kristallnacht, the family would spend the next three years moving southwards through western Europe in an attempt to escape the advancing German forces.

The Finkels were already in Belgium by May of 1940 when Hitler invaded. John Finkels was deported—along with many other Jewish male refugees—in a cattle car marked “German spies.” The men were taken to internment camps in Southern France. For months, however, nobody in their families knew what had happened to them. Finally, in 1941, John managed to contact Rose and inform her that the likelihood of emigrating to Cuba was good. He implored her to find a way to bring herself and the girls to Marseille to wait for the visa to Cuba, one of the few countries willing to admit Jews.

Rose then contacted an underground organization that smuggled people into unoccupied southern France. The leader of the group was a Russian woman with flaming red hair and «an atrocious accent». She carried nothing but a large, dirty kerchief in which she kept her lipstick and a Kotex pad. She asked the refugees to pour all their money into the kerchief, which they did reluctantly. To their profound relief, everyone got their money back at the end of the journey.

A dangerous and illegal train ride carried them through occupied and unoccupied France. Before the final destination the leader of the group told them to «get out now!» to avoid a roundup of Jews that was happening in the area. The group then found themselves crossing through a field of grass with no idea where they were going, finally being led by my six-year-old aunt Ada who seemed to have an uncanny sense of direction and where they should go. Marion still remembers the mysterious ability of the underground agents to communicate with each other, and the fear everyone felt. They could all be apprehended at any moment and sent to a concentration camp. But this band of refugees was lucky, and they reached unoccupied southern France safely. There, they were able to reunite with my grandfather John who had been interned in a camp

¹⁰ F. Kreith, *Sunrise Delayed - A Personal History of Solar Energy*, Scotts Valley (CA), CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2014.

Figure 1. Morro Castle, (Judy Kreith).



called “Les Milles” just outside of Marseille. While they waited for their Cuban visas, meals consisted mostly of just tomatoes and onions from local farms that Rose cooked for them on a small stove.

3. Ocean Crossing

At this point in 1941 it was almost impossible to get out of Europe. But thanks to Rose’s courage and ability to navigate the tangled web of entrance and exit visas between countries, the family was able to cross from Marseille, through Spain, into Portugal. Marion still recalls the level of destruction from Spain’s Civil War that she saw while passing

through the country. On November 11, 1941, they boarded a ship called the *SS Colonial* which would take them to Cuba.

The *SS Colonial* was operated by the Portuguese shipping company *Companhia Colonial de Navegação*. Founded in 1922, the company originally connected Portugal with its overseas colonies. During WWII, *Companhia* was one of the few shipping companies willing and able to provide relatively safe transatlantic service for both freight and passengers because they were sailing under the neutral flag of Portugal. Other ships of the company included the *Guinee I*, *Ganda I*, and *Serpa Pinto*. As I learned in numerous interviews, these ships, which carried thousands of people safely across the Atlantic Ocean were essential in the stories of escape of many Jewish refugees from Europe.

My mother remembers little about the Atlantic crossing. She spent time with people her own age and was unaware of how potentially dangerous the voyage was because of the German U-boats which could have torpedoed them at any time on their journey¹¹. Her first memory of Cuba was seeing the Morro Castle, the famous fortress that sits at the entrance to Havana Bay.

4. Life in Cuba

On entry into Cuba, all immigrants were taken to a detention camp called Tiscornia to wait for official clearance to enter the country. It was the first time Marion had been in any kind of confinement. There was not much to do, and everyone's main occupation each day was to run to the authorities to see if their clearance to be allowed to leave Tiscornia and enter Havana had come through.

When the family was released from Tiscornia in November of 1941, they went to a boarding house. This choice of temporary housing stemmed from the belief that their stay in Cuba to await their American visa would be a matter of weeks. Like most refugees, they believed that Cuba was only a transit stop in the journey to their ultimate destination in the United States. They were at the boarding house when Japan attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. The news stunned the refugees, but also brought with it relief that America had now entered the war and would be fighting against Germany and the Axis nations. This was a momentous event, but it also ended any hope of being able to continue on to America in the near future.

The family rented a small apartment in Vedado, a suburb of Havana, where most of the refugees would settle. They lived in this apartment for the five years they stayed in Cuba. While some news from Europe made it across the Atlantic, the full extent of the horror of deportations and murders during the Holocaust did not become known until after the end of the war.

After their release from Tiscornia, Marion was sent to a school for the children of American officials working in Havana so she could learn some English. The students there were arrogant and condescending, as well as being shockingly unaware of what was hap-

¹¹ H.W. Parks, *Making law of war treaties: Lessons from submarine warfare regulation*, in M. N. Schmitt (ed.), *International Law Studies - Volume 75, International Law Across the Spectrum of Conflict, Essays in Honour of Professor L. C. Green On the Occasion of His Eightieth Birthday*, Newport – Rhode Island, Naval War College Press, 2001.

pening in the world. When it became apparent that the Finkels' stay in Cuba would be indefinite, Marion went to a Cuban public school. The school was called Escuela Superior de Artes y Oficios. There were regular classes in the morning and vocational training in the afternoon. Because Marion had always enjoyed working with her hands, she chose to do leatherwork for the afternoon sessions.

After a few months, the students at my mother's school decided to go on strike. The University of Havana had gone on students' strike earlier in July 1942. Marion remembers the university students brought in rum and mattresses to prepare for the long stay. When her school also went on strike, Marion's parents thought she should join the workforce in the newly burgeoning diamond industry. She was fifteen years old when her formal schooling ended and she joined the diamond polishing industry as a full-time worker to support her family.

5. The Diamond Industry in Cuba

At first, refugees as a group were not allowed to work in Cuba because they came on temporary tourist and transit visas and had to depend on the meager resources of charitable organizations, primarily the Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (Finkels, n.d.). This was a worldwide organization that helped Jews wherever necessary, and at that time its funds were very limited due to the war. However, some refugees, diamond merchants from Antwerp, Belgium, convinced the Cuban government to re-establish their industry in Cuba (Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, n.d.). «They were able literally to bring the diamond industry with them because it required little equipment beyond cutting and polishing machines, which could be manufactured anywhere. Prototype machines were brought from Brazil and then copied»¹².

Marion had a friend named Jacques Grosbard. He and his family were refugees from Antwerp. Thanks to his early training as a draftsman, and in cooperation with a brilliant Cuban mechanic by the name of Pico, Jacques was able to manufacture the needed machinery. Using Jacques' drawings and specifications, Pico built some of the best machines in Cuba for use in the diamond industry. The Grosbard machines are mentioned in a lively article about the industry entitled *Di Diamentn industrie in Cuba* [The diamond industry in Cuba] by L. Lande (1944).

One of the biggest government incentives for these factories to operate was the participation of Cubans, which was mandated by the 1933 Law of Nationalization of Labor «The Cuban diamond industry, all refugee-generated, became quite successful, employing not only many refugees, but also a significant number of Cuban citizens (due in good measure to the 'The Fifty Percent Law' of 1933, which was still in force)»¹³. This law made it so that any foreign industry in Cuba was required to employ at least fifty percent Cuban citizens in the workplace. «They talked to the authorities and were allowed to open diamond polishing factories as long as half the workforce was Cuban and half the refugees. It was a total win-win situation... people could earn their own living again»¹⁴.

¹² R.M. Levine, *Op. cit.*, p. 162.

¹³ J. Levinson, *Op. cit.*, p. 130.

¹⁴ J. Manning, *A time to speak*, Paducah (KY), Turner Publishing Co., 1999, pp. 39-40.

The creation of the diamond industry was a lifesaver. As Levine says in *Tropical Diaspora*, «The diamond people had contacts all over the world. Most of the rough stones originated in South Africa and were exported from New York into Cuba under a strict quota system. Brokers then re-exported them to the United States for sale at the retail level»¹⁵. The agreement to send quotas of rough diamonds to Cuba was controlled by the British government because the center of distribution for this raw material was in London¹⁶.

Soon thousands of European refugees and Cubans -both men and women- were working and making a living in the diamond polishing business. Marion and her father, John, were among those given employment in this new Cuban industry.

6. The Process of Polishing Diamonds

Precision and dexterity were called for in the manual labor of cutting diamonds. To learn the trade, employees would apprentice under skilled diamond workers. According to both my mother and Marion Frolich, another young refugee who worked in the industry, they apprenticed with a friend or another worker working six weeks for free while they learned the trade. As Maitland (2012) describes in *Crossing the Borders of Time*, «Novices in Cuba perfected skills in cutting eight-sided stones predominantly used in jewelry settings»¹⁷. Marion Finkels' friend Esther Birnbaum taught her the trade. Esther's father ran one of the factories where they both worked.

The diamond polishing sequence has three basic steps: cutting, girdling, and polishing. The uncut diamond is a double pyramid. The first cut divides it into two parts; the bases of the pyramids become the face of the stones. The diamond splitters and cutters earned the highest wage because they were on their feet all day and this was physically demanding and exacting work. They could cut up to 100 stones per day, depending on both on the number of machines that were available and the supply of diamonds.

The next step was called girdling, which was primarily done by women. This was Marion's job. The square edges of the cut stones were rounded off so that the facets could be polished to create a finished stone. The girdlers could sit to do their work, so their pay was less.

The final step was the actual polishing of the diamonds. Creating the facets required specific machinery consisting of a row of horizontal discs rotating at a fast speed. Grandfather John was one of the polishers. He was not a dexterous person, and handling the tiny diamonds was very difficult for him.

Many of the factories were set up in approximately 24 private homes throughout Vedado. The refugees employed in the industry often lived nearby and walked or took the bus to work. Dozens of workers and machines were necessary for the work required. «In each factory the employees were directed by several foremen called *Mijstergast* as well as workers who weighed, counted, and distributed the rough and finished diamonds»¹⁸.

¹⁵ R.M. Levine, *Op. cit.*, p. 163.

¹⁶ E. Laureys, *Meesters van het diamante*, Tielt, Lannoo, 2005; T. Sjenitzer-Sanders, *Jewish diamond workers find refuge in Cuba*. [Unpublished paper]. Israel, Hebrew University, 2011.

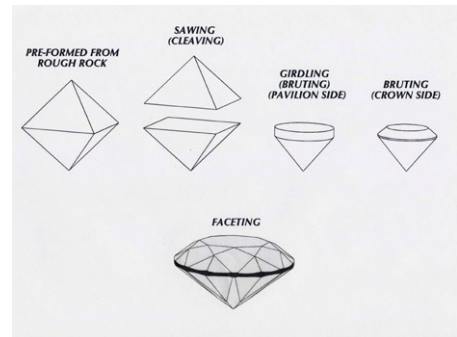
¹⁷ L. Maitland, *Op. cit.*, p. 276.

¹⁸ R.M. Levine, *Op. cit.*, p. 163.

Figure 2. Marion Finkels girdling diamonds, circa 1943. (Kreith Family Archives).



Figure 3. Diamond cutting and polishing, (Courtesy of Randal Fird, with permission).



During the war, both Axis and Allied powers were dependent on the continued availability of industrial diamonds to help in the manufacture of weapons and machinery. According to Marion, «The rough diamonds were shipped from New York -diamonds to be polished, as well as 'bord'- the diamonds of lesser quality, which were necessary to polish other diamonds. The control was very keen because merchants in Cuba were accountable to American authorities

whose fear was that the rough diamonds would find their way into the German war effort through Argentina. The weighing scales and the magnifying glasses- those were the two symbols of the diamond industry»¹⁹.

Marion Frolich (2014) recounts that one day a packet of diamonds went missing. The entire factory was locked down and the police were summoned while the workers searched for the missing stones. The packet was eventually found in a corner of the factory, but the story illustrates the strict monitoring of the number of diamonds that passed through the factories.

The diamond trade was deeply based on trust. According to Levine (1993): «The system by which the stones were exchanged and handled utilized a network based on such trust and honor among its participants that transactions rarely involved cash... Diamonds were exchanged every Saturday morning through an informal ritual on the grounds of Hotel Plaza in Havana, underneath its arcade, the Corso»²⁰ simply by one person handing a packet of uncut diamonds over, and receiving polished diamonds in return. At the end of each day the floors of the factories were carefully swept to collect the diamond dust,

¹⁹ J. Manning, *Op. cit.*, pp. 39-40.

²⁰ R.M. Levine, *Op. cit.*, pp. 163-164.

Figure 4. Diamond Workers, (Photo courtesy of Sandy Ray with permission).



which was then also utilized in the cutting process. Occasionally, an errant stone was also found in the sweeping. Often young Cuban boys, who worked on tips, would sweep the floors in search of stray diamonds that had been dropped during the work day.

The Cuban government issued identity booklets to the foreign diamond workers: red for the cutters, blue for the girdlers, and green for the polishers. These booklets needed to be updated periodically. Marion remembers feeling embarrassed because she knew that she was earning more than the Cuban civil servant who signed the renewal.

Workers were paid by the number of stones they completed in a day. There is an entry in Marion's diary dated January 21, 1944: «How this week went by quickly! Had my record, almost 60!». The supply of diamonds, however, was not always assured. There are other entries in her diary expressing fear and despair because of lack of work. In an entry dated August 18th, 1944 she stated, «I no longer have any work. I am very depressed. From what are we going to live?». She did find work again and continued to work in the industry for almost two more years. To save electricity, many factories would shut off the power during the lunch hour. Marion remembers that the Cuban workers, with their love of music, would pick up any of the tools at hand and use them to create the most fabulous Cuban rhythms to pass the time. These improvised lunch-hour sessions provided a welcome break from work that required one's full concentration.

Upon receiving her first wages, Marion permitted herself to spend twenty-five centavos to go to La Concha, a lovely beach in Havana, which she had not been able to afford before. Spending time on the beach was a welcome respite for many of the refugees from daily work and the fears and concerns about the war and what was happening in Europe.

7. News From Europe

Thoughts of family and loved ones left behind in Europe were constantly present. When mail did arrive, it often brought devastating news. On October 18th, 1943, Marion learned of the death of her beloved Grandmother, Omama Berta. «(Today) at the Factory as always. I came home in a bad mood. There was a letter saying 'Brussels, Cemetery Grave 527'. I know what I feel and what my father must feel and suffer» (Marion's Diary). Her father John had never been able to communicate with his mother again after he was taken away to the south of France in the cattle car in May of 1940.

As more information about the war and the death camps arrived in Cuba, Marion expressed her sense of guilt of being one of those who survived while others perished. «More news about deportations and deaths. Why do I have the privilege to be away ...? Why does my family have this luck while so many others ... stayed in hell? ... Destiny - Is it divine or does it depend on men?» (Marion's Diary, October 20th, 1943).

Figure 5. Ada, Grandpa John, Marion, and Grandma Rose, Havana, circa 1944. (Kreith Family Archives).



Further entries in Marion's diary talk about her friends and good and bad moments with boyfriends. She was concerned about her parent's health and worried about the uncertainty of the future. «... I am afraid. Afraid of what will become of us. For right now, nothing has been decided» (Marion's Diary September 23rd, 1945).

When the long-awaited American visas finally came in January 1946, the family decided to stay on for a few more months to make some extra money in order not to arrive in the U.S. penniless. It was only after coming to the United States and meeting women her own age that Marion realized how atypical her teenage years had been. She was nineteen, with no formal education, but with a lifetime of experiences.

8. End of Cuban Diamond Industry

After the war, the diamond industry in Havana ended very quickly. In a letter dated July 17, 1946 that Marion received from Jacques Grosbard, he says: «The diamond factories are going through a crisis like never before. Eighty percent are closed down, and salaries have been lowered by twenty-five percent». Many of those who worked in the industry returned to Belgium or emigrated to Israel, where the diamond trade was continued²¹. Some of the diamond merchants and workers went to New York and continued working in the diamond industry, with great success in many cases.

The Cuban government wanted to keep the diamond trade active in Havana, and tried to do so by insisting that departing refugees leave their machinery. But when the European experts left Cuba, they took their skills, connections, and their knowledge of the sources of diamonds with them. The Cuban government sent a delegation to London with the hope of continuing the diamond business in Havana. They wanted to meet with the London Diamond Syndicate to request that Cuba continue to receive quotas of rough diamonds in order to keep the industry going. Their request was denied, and the vibrant, but short-lived diamond industry in Havana soon came to an end²².

9. Conclusion

The story of Marion Finkels' escape from Fascist Europe to Cuba illustrates the potential life or death reality many refugees face as they undertake great and dangerous treks -some with young and precious families- to find safety and a better life. It highlights the benefits refugees can bring to countries accepting them, and shows the mutual advantage of people working together.

I have felt compelled to document this story and record it from the first person perspective so my mother's personal history would not be forgotten. The article broadens the scope of work that is documented in the film *Cuba's Forgotten Jewels: A Haven in Havana*, directed by Robin Truesdale and myself (<<https://forgottenjewelsfilm.com/>>). My hope is that through the article and the film people will learn more about this brief episode in history and further consider the act of accepting refugees at this tumultuous time.

²¹ J. Levinson, *Op. cit.*

²² E. Guede, *Pasado y presente de la industria del diamante en Cuba*, Bohemia, November 7, 1948; E. Laureys, *Op. cit.*

Acknowledgements

With this article and the film *Cuba's forgotten jewels: A haven in Havana*, I want to express my deepest appreciation to the island and Cuban people for accepting my mother, her family, and thousands of other refugees. May this story give others a glimpse into the act of acceptance. Cuba is essential to me. I am also deeply grateful to the people for their music and dance, and their strength, humor, and sense of place and family through good and hard times.

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Further Reading

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