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### Title

BOOK REVIEW: Tropical Zion: General Trujillo, FDR, and the Jews of Sosua, by Allen Wells

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Allen Wells, *Tropical Zion: General Trujillo, FDR, and the Jews of Sosua*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009. Pp. 485. Paper, \$27.95.

*Tropical Zion* is a study that aims at large goals. Through a small, forgotten episode of Jewish survival at the hands of a Latin American tyrant, Professor Wells, a historian of Latin America, attempts to portray North-South American dependency politics, Western hand-washing of refugees, and Jewish internal politics and interests. The settlement of European Jews in the Dominican town of Sosua is a surprising story of narrow survival made possible by an unlikely protagonist. As Jews of greater Germany were escaping the Nazis, they met with the reluctance of Western countries to absorb them; they were, however, offered shelter by the murderous, racist tyrant General Trujillo of the Dominican Republic. By asking the obvious question “Why?”, Wells sets out to uncover a series of cynical interests and motivations engulfing Western, American and Jewish politics, inquiring into a number of ends which did not necessarily include the well-being of the persecuted Jews in question.

On General Trujillo’s side, those interests included repairing his reputation following a notorious massacre of Haitians, which had led to a deterioration in his relationship with Washington. In addition, Trujillo hoped to use the relatively “white” Jews to whiten the Dominican Republic. Trujillo’s condition for taking in the Jews was that they settle in an agricultural area on the frontier, as he hoped the settlement of this already-loyal population would serve as a barrier to the insurgent Haitian population. Another condition was that world Jewry finance the settlement. On the American administration’s side, a Dominican solution to the refugee problem enabled it to refrain from liberalizing its own immigration laws, as domestic protests against immigration were growing. For American Jewry, the Sosua solution obviated the need to press the administration to enable Jewish immigration, a move which some feared would jeopardize their status as “Americans first and Jewish second.” In addition, non-Zionist Jews

were interested in seeing Jewish persecution solved by a diasporic solution similar to their own rather than by the national-home project of Zionism, which aimed to change the relationship between Jews and the world at large.

Of course, Wells also portrays the interests of the refugees themselves, whose main goal was survival. Grateful to be offered refuge, these German and Austrian urban professional Jews accepted the conditions of Sosua, which required them to become farmers and live in an isolated tropical environment. Another issue, naturally, was their awareness of Trujillo's terror regime and their role in cleansing its reputation. Ultimately, if given an alternative, most refugees would not have chosen Sosua. And indeed, most of them eventually left Sosua for the US, including Wells' own father. Sosua was for them a temporary safe haven rather than a home. In the words of one survivor whom Wells quotes, "Sosua served its purpose: it saved lives" (p. 339).

While Wells' work is presented within the discipline of Latin American history, addressing American politics and Jewish involvement therein, the book also raises questions surrounding the role of place in the search for a "solution" to the "Jewish problem"; unfortunately, these intriguing questions do not receive adequate analysis and discussion. As Wells' account of Sosua makes clear, place, in the most basic sense, was a crucial condition of any possibility for Europe's Jews to escape persecution and survive. However, Wells does not discuss the centrality of place to the ideological gap at the root of the strife between Zionists and non-Zionists: specifically, the opposition between Judaism of "the place" and Judaism of "any place." While any place can theoretically offer survival (the primary goal of Sosua, as Wells describes it), Zionism maintains that only *the* place – Zion – can enable the formation of a self-

sovereign national entity.<sup>1</sup> As suggested by the formulation *Tropical Zion* in the book's title, Wells tends to downplay the evident differences between these two viewpoints.

Clearly, the comparison that Wells draws between Zionism in Eretz Israel and "tropical Zion" in Sosua (rather than between Eretz Israel and Brooklyn, for example) is not random, and much of his analysis of Sosua is based on his understanding of the two cases as comparable. The comparison is based on the practice of settlement on the land and land cultivation, traditionally considered a "non-Jewish" practice, which was proclaimed by Zionism as a means of transforming the effeminate Diaspora Jew into a potent Zionist (and ultimately, Israeli).<sup>2</sup> Wells devotes a significant portion of his book to depicting the Sosua settlement's agricultural success and its communal (Kibbutz-like) nature. For Wells, the fact that Sosua Jews were successful farmers renders Sosua parallel to the Zionist ideological claim that the Jew will be redeemed by the land and regain his (collective) humanity through a bodily relationship to it.

However, while Jews in both Zion and Sosua successfully practiced a life of the land, the two settlements ascribed very different meanings to this land. While Wells emphasizes Sosua's meaning as a site for survival, the meaning of the place of Zion included not only saving lives, but also providing self-sovereignty and national identity. By comparing Sosua and Zion based on the practice of land cultivation, Wells shows a deep misunderstanding of the very different roles played by the practice in these two cases. Zionist ideology was not about the land but enacted through land, its ultimate goal being Jewish self-determination and not agriculture. Sosua, or Brooklyn, never attempted that, and indeed these alternatives represent the rejection or abandonment of such attempts.

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<sup>1</sup> Taylor, A. R., (1987), "Vision and intent in Zionist Thought," in Abu-Lughod, I., ed., *The Transformation of Palestine*, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

<sup>2</sup> Oz Almog, (2000), *The Sabra: The Making of the New Jew*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

It should be noted that national homes other than Eretz Israel were openly discussed by Zionists, the most noted and concrete of these suggestions being the Uganda plan for a Jewish homeland in the African British Empire, backed by Theodor Herzl at the 6<sup>th</sup> Zionist Congress in 1903 and rejected by most delegates for its ideological corruption of the idea of place.<sup>3</sup> This plan was brought back to discussion in direct relation to the Nazi final solution as news of the Jewish holocaust in Europe emerged, triggering laments of the ideological rejection of Uganda in favor of Zion even by Ze'ev Jabotinsky, as a Jewish Uganda could have served as a safe haven for escaping Jews.<sup>4</sup> It should be noted as well that Trujillo's was not the only questionable regime that offered to "take in" some Jews escaping the Nazis for the purpose of advancing regime goals. The most bizarre of these cynical plans was perhaps the Japanese Fugu plan to settle Jews in Japanese territories, based on the belief that Jews were rich and would advance the Japanese economy. The plan's name, after the poisonous Fugu fish, signifies the Japanese perception of the Jews as beneficial yet poisonous.<sup>5</sup> Wells refers to the cynical use of Jews by various regimes in attempting to meet questionable goals, quoting Zionist leader Morris Rose, who stated, "The Jews are no longer treated as a people to be saved, but as a group of pariahs to be sent wherever they can best serve other peoples' interests" (p. 39).

The study of Sosua enables Wells to contribute to his main field of Latin American history, uncovering deep political workings and contributing to an understanding of large-scale political processes in this region and the way conflicting interests and minority groups play (and are played) in it. Wells uses rich archival research that reveals the workings of FDR's regime in both domestic and foreign policy, as well as the ways in which this regime enabled Latin

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<sup>3</sup> Gevron, Daniel, (2003), *The Most Intriguing Question in Modern Jewish History*, in *Ha'aretz* (Hebrew).

<sup>4</sup> Weisbord, Robert G., (1968), *African Zion: The Attempt to Establish a Jewish Colony in the East Africa Protectorate, 1903-1905*, New York: The Jewish Publication Society of America.

<sup>5</sup> Shillony, Ben Ami, (1991), *The Jews and the Japanese: The Successful Outsiders*, New York: Simon & Schuster.

American tyrants to remain in power. The book is also a contribution to the field of Jewish Studies in its detailed ethnography of the survivor experience and rich archival study of Jewish American politics. However, Wells' story of Sosua as an alternative to Zion fails to foreground the basic Jewish ideological strife of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which should have been analytically discussed within the theoretical framework of place. Though useful in describing the forgotten episode of Sosua and giving a detailed account of its survivors and everyday life, Wells' book does not realize the potential of Sosua's story to add to an ideological discussion of the various Jewish "solutions" and their consequences. As a contribution to Jewish Studies, the book thus misses the opportunity to expand the field beyond its limited understanding of place as a mere backdrop for everyday life and politics, thereby offering little to an understanding of the role of place in Jewish ideology and practice. As the field of Jewish Studies finally starts to regard the study of physical space, as shown by Fonrobert<sup>6</sup>, such a discussion could have made a significant contribution to this emerging discourse in the field.

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<sup>6</sup> Fonrobert, C. E., (2009). "The new spatial turn in Jewish studies." *AJS Review* 33, (01): 155-64. Fonrobert is referring to three recent publications, two of them in German.