

EXPLORING JEWISH HISTORY IN HAVANA

Brookline residents discover family's past on recent trip

By Molly Ritvo

Brookline resident Steve Denker recently returned from a licensed, two-week trip to Havana, Cuba, with a suitcase full of photographs, not cigars. Denker, who traveled with his wife, was granted approval to visit Cuba to research his family, which lived in post World War I, pre-Castro, Cuba from 1928 to 1938.

Denker's mother and maternal grandparents arrived in Cuba just as the three-year violent agitation against dictator Gerardo Machado began. His family opened an underwear factory and lived in Havana throughout the Machado and Batista regimes, both periods of heavy political unrest and staged coups.

"My mother had always told me stories about Cuba," said Denker, who grew up near New York City. "She would tell about commuting to school by boat, seeing street violence, and the murders of Ley de Fuga, (a type of painful execution) and student led riots."

But the stories Denker heard as a boy paled in comparison to seeing



The building that housed Denker's family's underwear factory.

Cuba for the first time, he said.

"I have always wanted to visit the places my family lived, walked, and worked in Havana. It was very different in real life than it was in my head," said Denker. "I was too dumb to ask my mother more questions."

Arranging the trip proved challenging, however. In addition to obtaining their own United States Treasury License because of U.S. travel restrictions, Denker and his wife — who are Orthodox — needed to arrange kosher food for the trip.

"It was exhausting," said Denker, who began planning the trip months in advance. "We visited Miami, met other Cuban-Americans who had been to Cuba, searched consular records and old Havana phonebooks, sent thousands of e-mails, learned Spanish, and found some time to pack."

But upon arriving in Havana, Denker said the rest was "surprisingly easy." They had two Habanero friends to guide them, a mentor and a personal driver. Even keeping kosher wasn't too difficult since they bought and cooked all their own food. The Denkers prayed several times at the Orthodox synagogue, Adath Israel, and interacted frequently with local Cubans.

"It was total immersion," said Denker. "We spoke almost all in Spanish, met our landlady's family members, and shared life stories with them in typical Habanero-style, which means talking while leaning over the balcony, tasting the street life of colorful Habana Vieja."

The Denkers spent most of their mornings at the Jewish cemetery, documenting and photographing the 1,600 gravestones. The Jewish Cemetery in Guanabacoa continues to suffer progressive deterioration, according to a 2000 Heritage at Risk Report by the International Council on Monuments and Sites.

"The Jewish Community in Havana maintains it as much as they can, but they do not have the funds necessary to restore it," said Denker. "Unless documented now, further deterioration means irreplaceable loss. We did not realize just how bad the cemetery conditions were until we stood there."

The most profound moment for Denker, however, came when he found the location of his family's underwear factory.

"A lot of it felt familiar," he said. "People remarked that I seemed so happy."

But Denker said he was saddened by the conditions at the Orthodox synagogue, which had a poor water system and whose congregants seemed predominantly elderly and poverty-stricken.

When Fidel Castro came to power in 1959, there were 15,000 Jews in Cuba. Now, there are only 1,500 Jews remaining in Cuba, approximately 1,100 live in Havana.

The underwear factory was a successful business for Denker's family, but they sold the factory, due in part to growing political turmoil. In November of 1938, they moved from Havana to New York City and never returned to Cuba, until now.

"It is a fabulous city and I seemed to know my way around it," Denker said. "My wife and I were extremely relaxed and comfortable. Our trip was just what we hoped it would be."