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Jewish Heritage Center Spotlight

A Lithuanian Transplant in Cuba and the United States: The Papers of Harry Spiro

In 1924, the United States passed the Johnson-Reed Act, an immigration law that severely restricted the number of Southern and Eastern Europeans entering the country. The formula, based on the 1890 census (largely destroyed by fire and flooding in 1921), allowed just two percent of each nationality reported in the 1890 census to immigrate to the U.S. after 1924.The law favored English, Irish, and German immigrants. The quota for Lithuania was 344 per year.[1]

One of the many immigrants impacted by the Johnson-Reed Act was nineteen-year-old Tzvi Hirsch Shapiro, a Lithuanian Jew. His mother, Etel, feared that her son would be conscripted into the Lithuanian Army, and appealed to Abraham I. Spiro, a New York City attorney and director at the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) for assistance in obtaining a passport for him. Abraham "Abe" Spiro was also Tzvi's much older half-brother. Tzvi Shapiro, or Harry Spiro, as he was later known, was excited about the possibilities the United States offered and wanted to study philosophy at New York's Columbia University. Abe obtained a passport for his brother, but it only got Harry so far. By the end of 1924, Harry was not in Manhattan, but instead in Havana. Cuba had quickly become a waystation for immigrants attempting entry into the United States—specifically, immigrants who had the misfortune to originate from countries with very low quotas.

In 1887, following his parents' divorce, 10-year-old Abe had left Butrimantz, Lithuania, and settled in New York with his mother, Sara Basha Shapiro, and his sisters, Fannie and Henrietta. Sara died a year later. Abe's father, Dov-Ber Shapiro, then joined his children in New York but after four

Above: Harry Spiro on a Havana street, circa 1925–27. *Right:* The volunteer firefighter association in Butrimantz, Lithuania, circa 1920s. This photograph was among Harry Spiro's papers; perhaps Harry or one of his brothers was a volunteer firefighter.

years returned to Lithuania in 1892. Dov-Ber later married Etel (Marcus), with whom he had four children: David [Schlomo], Sarah, Tzvi Hirsch [Harry], and Eliahu [Eli]. Abe and his sisters remained in New York.

Abe and Harry, virtually unknown to one another, forged a relationship through correspondence that was often fraught with misunderstanding. Abe disapproved of Harry's "running away" from military service; Abe felt the young man's duty was to serve and help rebuild Lithuania after years of Russian rule.[2] But ultimately the immigration decision was Etel and Harry's to make, and Abe sent the paperwork and advanced money for the trip. The letters that Abe and Harry exchanged during Harry's years in Cuba show the collision between Abe's pragmatic world view and Harry's eager determination. Abe, bound by American immigration law, continually advised Harry on what to do while in Cuba—find employment, advance his education, and, above all, remain patient. Inexperienced, sheltered, and disenchanted with his forced detour, Harry nonetheless remained persistent in his attempts to realize his dream.

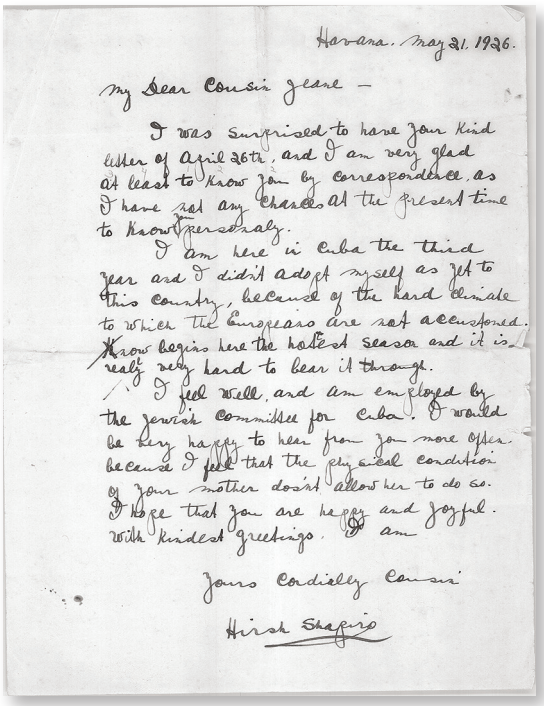
Harry Spiro's situation was not unique. In the early twentieth century, Cuba saw an increase in Jewish immigrants, mostly Sephardic,[3] and with the introduction of stricter immigration laws in the United States, more Jews from Eastern Europe and Turkey began to stream in, working as peddlers, in factories, and, in some cases, owning their own businesses. Sephardim felt more comfortable with Cuban culture, as it was similar to the cultures they had left behind. But for Ashkenazi Jews like Harry, the Spanish language, climate, and culture were vastly, and often bewilderingly, different.[4]

Harry, too, disliked the heat and humidity of Cuba. In a May 1926 letter to his cousin Jeane (Schlossberg) Buffman of New York City, he wrote, "I am here in Cuba the third year and I didn't adopt [sic] myself as yet to this country, because of the hard climate to which the Europeans are not accustomed. Now begins here the hottest season and it is really very hard to bear it through."[5] Harry felt adrift in the small Jewish community of mostly Sephardic Jews, and suffered from loneliness and homesickness. He first worked at a custodial job at a Havana hotel, had very little money, and was struggling to learn English and Spanish simultaneously.

Above left: The January 15, 1928, issue of *Oyfgang* in Yiddish and Spanish. *Above:* Harry Spiro, 3rd from left, with fellow journalists in the offices of *Oyfgang*, circa 1925–27.

From Havana, Harry wrote numerous letters to family members back in Lithuania and his brother in New York.[6] His Lithuania relatives wrote often: their letters illuminated the struggles they faced as the political climate in Lithuania and Europe generally began to affect their livelihoods, their friends, and themselves. Harry's older sister, Sarah, provided some tough love for her younger sibling: "In a word, there's nothing good. It seems to me that no matter what will be, you shouldn't have any regrets about your trip. We understand that in the early stages it isn't easy, particularly being homesick. But don't be so immature. Can you forever be attached to your mother's apron strings?"[7]

Despite his inability to fully embrace his life in Cuba, over time Harry became



Havana, May 21, 1926.

My Dear Cousin Jeane –

I was surprised to have your kind letter of April 26th, and I am very glad at least to know you by correspondence, as I have not any chance at the present time to know personaly.

I am here in Cuba the third year and I didn't adopt myself as yet to this country, because of the hard climate to which the Europeans are not accustomed. Now begins here the hotest season and it is really very hard to bear it through.

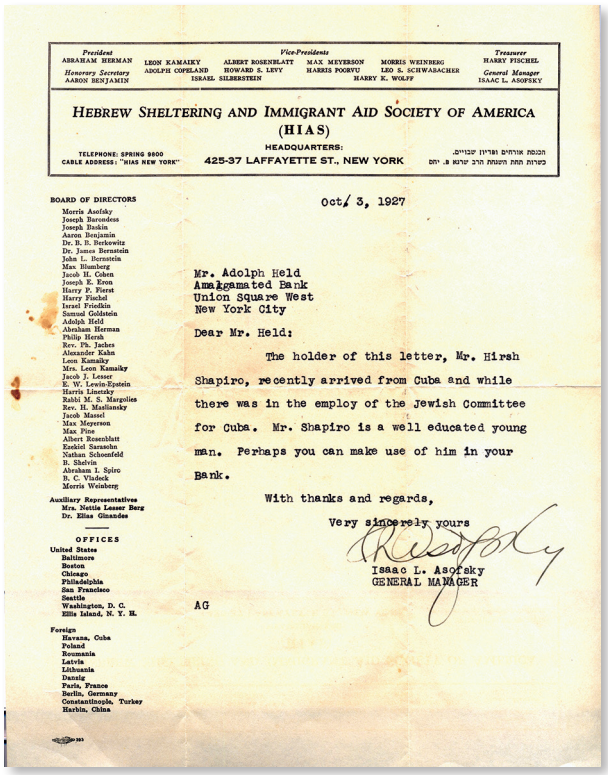
I feel well, and am employed by the Jewish committee for Cuba. I would be very happy to hear from you more often because I feel that the financial condition of your mother doesn't allow her to do so.

I hope that you are happy and joyful.

With kindest greetings I am

Yours Cordially Cousin

Hirsh Shapiro



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Oct. 3, 1927

Mr. Adolph Held
Amalgamated Bank
Union Square West
New York City

Dear Mr. Held:

The holder of this letter, Mr. Hirsh Shapiro, recently arrived from Cuba and while there was in the employ of the Jewish Committee for Cuba. Mr. Shapiro is a well educated young man. Perhaps you can make use of him in your Bank.

With thanks and regards,

Very sincerely yours

Isaac L. Asofsky
GENERAL MANAGER

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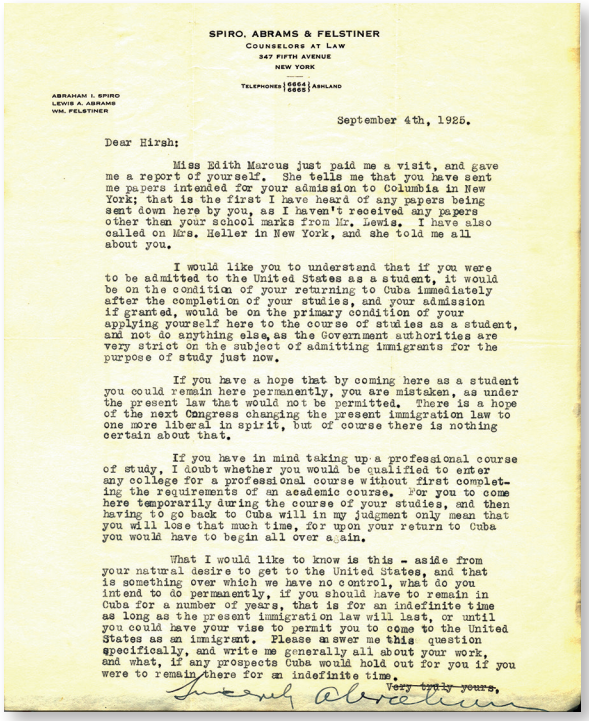

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COUNSELORS AT LAW
347 FIFTH AVENUE
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ABRAHAM I. SPIRO
LEWIS A. ABRAMS
WM. FELSTINER

September 4th, 1925.

Dear Hirsh:

Miss Edith Marcus just paid me a visit, and gave me a report of yourself. She tells me that you have sent me papers intended for your admission to Columbia in New York; that is the first I have heard of any papers being sent down here by you, as I haven't received any papers other then your school marks from Mr. Lewis. I have also called on Mrs. Heller in New York, and she told me all about you.

I would like you to understand that if you were to be admitted to the United States as a student, it would be on the condition of your returning to Cuba immediately after the completion of your studies, and your admission if granted, would be on the primary condition of your applying yourself here to the course of studies as a student, and not do anything else, as the Government authorities are very strict on the subject of admitting immigrants for the purpose of study just now.

If you have a hope that by coming here as a student you could remain here permanently, you are mistaken, as under the present law that would not be permitted. There is a hope of the next Congress changing the present immigration law to one more liberal in spirit, but of course there is nothing certain about that.

If you have in mind taking up a professional course of study, I doubt whether you would be qualified to enter any college for a professional course without first completing the requirements of an academic course. For you to come here temporarily during the course of your studies, and then having to go back to Cuba will in my judgment only mean that you will lose that much time, for upon your return to Cuba you would have to begin all over again.

What I would like to know is this - aside from your natural desire to get to the United States, and that is something over which we have no control, what do you intend to do permanently, if you should have to remain in Cuba for a number of years, that is for an indefinite time as long as the present immigration law will last, or until you could have your vise to permit you to come to the United States as an immigrant. Please answer me this question specifically, and write me generally all about your work, and what, if any prospects Cuba would hold out for you if you were to remain there for an indefinite time.

Very truly yours,

Clockwise from top left: Letter from "Hirsh [Harry] Shapiro" in Havana to his cousin Jeane (Schlossberg) Buffman, May 21, 1926; Letter of reference for Harry Spiro from Isaac Asofsky of HIAS, October 3, 1927; Letterhead detail from Harry Spiro's company, Best Lumber; Letter from Abraham Spiro to Harry Spiro, September 4, 1925.

more involved with the growing Jewish community in Havana and the Zionist cause. He wrote for *The Oyfgang*, a Jewish Cuban newspaper, and spent time with friends, including the Yiddish poet, Eliezer Aronowsky. Eventually Harry worked at the Jewish Committee for Cuba as secretary and librarian, and earned his high school diploma equivalency at Candler College. Harry was determined to apply to Columbia University, despite Abe's warning that Harry would receive only a student visa for the U.S. and would very likely be sent back to Cuba as soon as he graduated. "I know your anxiety to come to the U.S. and I wish it were possible under the law, but under our immigration laws you could not remain here if you came temporarily. We will have to hope and wait until the law will make it permissible for you to come and remain here permanently," Abe wrote in a January 1926 letter to Harry.[8]

After three years in Havana, Harry was allowed entry to the United States. During his time in Cuba, Harry had matured and he left the island as a much beloved compatriot of his fellow exiles. By October 1927, he was in New York.

Harry could finally pursue his dream of a college education, and he attended City College and Columbia University. In New York, he became a member of *Avukah*, the American Student Zionist Association, and wrote several op-ed pieces for various newspapers.

On September 10, 1933, Harry married Caroline Shlevin. Like Harry, Caroline was a native of Butrimantz. After her parents died, she emigrated, at age three, with her older sister and two brothers. She was raised in Fall River, Massachusetts, by an uncle, and Caroline and Harry settled in that city after their marriage.[9] A loan of capital from Abe allowed Harry to start a lumber and building supply company, Best Lumber, in 1935, which provided a comfortable livlihood for the family. Harry and Caroline had two children, Lionel (b. 1939) and Leah (b. 1942).

For Harry's family, life in Lithuania continued to grow increasingly difficult. Harry's sister, Sarah, married Joseph Poritz in 1929 and the couple managed to leave Lithuania the same year, moving to Cape Town in South Africa, where they raised five children. Harry's younger brother Eli managed to escape Butrimantz with his wife and infant son, Boris, and survive World War II in Russia. (Eli died in a drowning accident in 1951.)[10] Harry's older brother, David Schlomo, was murdered in Alytus, a nearby town. David Schlomo's wife, Tsila, daughters Rochel and Berta, and his—and Harry's—mother, Etel, were killed in Butrimantz in the autumn of 1941, when the German Einsatzgruppen, along with their Lithuanian collaborators, massacred the community's Jewish population. Of 2,000 Jews in the shtetl of Butrimantz and surrounding villages, only ten survived.[11]

Back in New York, Abraham Spiro died on December 20, 1943, leaving his wife, Annie (Wyzanski), daughters Esther (Spiro) Prager and Beatrice (Spiro) Sheldon, and three grandchildren. In 1948, after her husband died, Harry helped his sister Sarah as their brother Abraham had helped him; Harry aided in procuring visas for Sarah and her children, and they moved to Fall River.

Harry became active with the Fall River District of the Zionist Organization of America, which elected him president in 1953. He remained dedicated to Israel and to the United States, his adopted country. He tirelessly ran his business until retirement, and continued his work in the community. Harry died on January 12, 1982, age 76, and was buried in Beth-El Cemetery in Fall River. In his eulogy, Rabbi Norbert Weinberg reminisced about a conversation he had with Harry one evening about the African violet, and "how this plant was transposed from a different climate; how it can be made to adjust to a new environment—with love and care." Not until later did Rabbi Weinberg realize that the African violet was a metaphor for Harry Spiro's own life story.

The Harry Spiro Papers contain photographs, correspondence in Yiddish and English, several copies of the *Oyfgang* newspaper, financial records, legal documents, genealogy, speeches, articles, copies of *A Thousand Threads* and *If I Forget Thee*, and other materials related to Spiro's business and charitable work. The Harry Spiro Papers have been digitized and will be available online soon. For more information or to request access, please email reference@ajhsboston.org. ◆

Notes

1. "'Who was Shut Out?' Immigration Quotas, 1925–1927"; historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5078.
2. A Spiro cousin, Olga Zabludoff, along with Miriam Beckerman and Lily Poritz Miller, compiled and translated family letters collected by Harry Spiro. The resulting book was *A Thousand Threads: A Story Told through Yiddish Letters* (Washington D.C.: Remembrance Books, 2005). The quote is from a March 24, 1922, letter reproduced in *A Thousand Threads* on page 12.
3. Sephardic Jews are from Spain, Portugal, North Africa, and the Middle East. Within Sephardic Jewry is the further division of Sephardim—Jews from Spain and Portugal—and Mizrachim, Jews from the Middle East and North Africa. Ashkenazi Jews are from France, Germany and Eastern Europe. Although Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews share the same tenets of beliefs, cultural and language differences exist. Sephardic Jews, for example, often spoke Ladino, a combination of Spanish and Hebrew, while Ashkenazi Jews spoke Yiddish, a combination of German and Hebrew.
4. In his article, "Counting Shadows: a Broader Look at Cuban Jewish History," Robert M. Levine writes about the difficulty Ashkenazi Jews had in settling into the very different lifestyle of Cuba, which included adapting to Cuba's climate. From the Jews of Cuba website, jewishcuba.org/shadows.html.
5. Letter from Hirsch Shapiro (Harry Spiro) to his cousin Jeane, May 21, 1926. From the Papers of Harry Spiro.
6. These letters were published in *A Thousand Threads: A Story Told through Yiddish Letters* [note 2].
7. Letter from Sarah Shapiro to Tzvi Shapiro, March 23, 1924, in *A Thousand Threads*, p. 43.
8. Letter from Abraham Spiro to Hirsch (Harry) Spiro, January 18, 1926. From the Papers of Harry Spiro. Congress did not revise The Johnson-Reed Act until 1952.
9. Harry's wife, Caroline, was born Kuna Shlevin in Oran, Lithuania. Orphaned as an infant, she was raised by her grandparents in Butrimantz before immigrating to Fall River in 1921, where she lived with her uncle and aunt, Myer and Dora Shapiro. She adopted their last name as her own. *A Thousand Threads*, p. 281 [note 2].
10. Eli's fate is documented in Riva Lozansky, I*f I Forget Thee: The Destruction of the Shtetl Butrimantz*. Edited by Olga Zabludoff and Lily Poritz Miller. Translated by Eva Tverskoy (Washington, D.C.: Remembrance Books, 1998).
11. Published accounts from *If I Forget Thee: The Destruction of the Shtetl Butrimantz* [note 10].