

Written Statement of Amy Rosoff for the Committee on Foreign
Affairs Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere

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Subcommittee Hearing: The Future of Property Rights in Cuba

My name is Amy (Schechter) Rosoff, and I'm representing the three Certified Claims my family has filed with the Foreign Claims Settlement Commission. I'm here today on behalf of my mother, who is 80 and an heir to CU-0611 filed by Rainbow Development Corporation, CU-1090 filed by Roy Schechter, and CU-1458 filed by Jeannette Schechter. Thank you for the opportunity to share my family's story.

Joseph Steinberg, my grandfather's cousin, lived in Tampa, Florida and was a supporter of Jose Marti, the great Cuban liberator. Born in Romania, he came to the United States as a child with his parents who settled in Tampa, Florida. He financed the Cubans in Tampa in their campaign for Cuba's independence and fought in the war for the liberation of Cuba, rising to the rank of Captain in the Cuban army. He settled in Havana after the Cuban-American war, and his cousin Morris Schechter joined him there.

Morris Schechter started a business, was a founding member of the United Hebrew Congregation in Havana. He married his wife Jeannette and they became pillars of the Cuban-American Jewish community. They hosted many Jewish visitors to their home and were active in philanthropic activities. Jeannette and Mauricio (Morris) raised their 4 children Israel, Nancy, Roy, and Silvio. Mauricio, Israel, and Silvio all died in Cuba and are buried in the Guanabacoa Jewish cemetery that the Schechter's and Steinberg's had helped to get consecrated in 1910.

Jeannette's house is the main part of CU-1458. When the house was first confiscated, we heard through grapevine that it was being used as a sewing school, however, my cousin Robert Schechter visited Cuba as part of a mission trip several years ago and was able to visit the house and take some pictures. At that time (and as far as I know, to this day), it was being used by the Chinese Embassy. Although Bob was allowed to take photographs of the front of the house, he was denied access past the gates, so a nice Chinese soldier took some pictures of the back of the house for him.

Claim #CU-1090, filed by my father, Roy Schechter, is based on the value of stocks and business holdings, including a shirt factory and wholesale business, a farm, and a portion of my grand mother's house. My father was born in June of 1924, and had dual Cuban and American citizenships. He attended Ruston Academy, a bilingual American college prep school, and then matriculated to University of Michigan, but soon enlisted in the U.S. Army, and fought in the Pacific Theater in WWII. He returned to Cuba after the war, working in the family business, Compania Onyx, which was comprised of a shirt factory that made guyaberas and other apparel, and a wholesale textiles and findings company. My father took over the running of the Compania Onyx following the deaths of his father and older brother Rael (Israel).

In 1957 he met and married my mother, Lois Levine, an American woman from Nyack, NY, who joined him in Cuba. My brother, Michael Schechter, was born in 1958, in Nyack, NY, where my maternal grandparents had a shoe store. My grandfather, Herbert Levine, enjoyed dabbling in real estate. He asked my father to look for an investment in Cuba. My grandfather and a group of other investors from Nyack formed Rainbow Development Corporation as which filed claim CU-0611. The land my father found was Finca Santa Barbara, a tract of 14,000 acres in Pinar del Rio, comprised of timber, highly pure silica sand, and lakes. The long-term plan was to develop part of the property as a resort. In the meantime, they grew tobacco, vegetables, and built a sawmill, which provided jobs for local residents. They had planned on using the sand to produce cement to be used in housing construction. We do not know how this property is currently being used, but today this sand may have much more value than in the past as uses for such pure silica has changed.

Immediately after the revolution, business was actually good. In fact, my father invested money in updating machinery at the factory. After about six months however, Castro imposed regulations that made it impossible for the factory to be productive. With these restrictions, essential commodities such as buttons were impossible to find.

The last time my mother and father drove the 150 miles to Finca Santa Barbara, with plans to the payroll, they were met by armed soldiers and after a brief discussion with them, drove away, never to see the farm again.

Leaving Cuba was a difficult decision, but they could no longer make a living there. According to new Cuban laws, people leaving the country were not allowed to take anything of value out of the country, so my parents sold my father's car and household appliances. This money was used to pay all of their debts so that when they returned to Cuba, they would be in good standing. Their furniture was packed, containerized and arrangements were made for it to be shipped to Miami. They left on one of the last ferries to Key West in April of 1961, taking only clothes with them. My mother hid her wedding ring in a cloth diaper she stained with vanilla and smuggled it out in my brother's diaper bag. She figured that if the police wanted to search a dirty diaper bag they were welcome to it. They were lucky enough to be able to take out my mother's car since it had been purchased in the United States. The furniture never left the dock.

They ended up in Nyack, N.Y., staying with my mother's parents. My father had great difficulty finding a job and eventually went to work in my grandfather's shoe store. My father worked 6 days a week, rarely took vacations, and from what I understand, really disliked selling shoes. However, this was his new life, and was his means to supporting his family.

My grandmother, Jeannette Schechter did not plan on leaving Cuba, since she had her husband and two children buried in Guanabacoa. She came out on what she thought was a vacation to visit her daughter Nancy, who lived in Goshen, N.Y., but the political

climate in Cuba changed during this visit, so that she could not return. When she left, my grandmother was in her 70's and frail. She had left her home with just clothes for traveling, so had with virtually nothing. She settled in Miami and lived with her sister-in-law, where they lived frugally in a small apartment. In her 90's, she moved north to be near her daughter and son and spent her last years in a nursing home. She passed away at the age of 96, heartbroken that she never returned from her 'vacation'. One day, I hope to be able to bring her remains to the Guanabacoa Jewish Cemetery in Havana, so she can finally join her husband 'Mauricio' Morris Schechter and children.

I grew up with my father's hope that he would be able to return to Cuba, a palpable presence in our house. My father changed when he spoke Spanish. I used to say that when he spoke in Spanish, he smiled when he talked, and when he talked in sleep, it was always in Spanish.

I lived in Union City, New Jersey for a few years, and my father loved it. Union City likely has the largest Cuban community in the U.S. outside of Miami and Tampa. It was great to see him happily chatting in Spanish while getting a café solo on Bergenline Avenue. It was a taste of home for him. He passed away in 2004, and I know a part of him is still in Cuba.

What's next for the Schechter's legacy in Cuba? People ask me if we want the property back or if we just want to receive a settlement and be compensated financially. That's a difficult question, and it has a mixed answer. I would love to reclaim ownership of the house. It's truly a family legacy and has great sentimental value to us. It is a piece of family history that was stolen from us. As far as the other two claims, I think that a fair, just financial settlement may be the best outcome.

My hope is that the United States and Cuba restore diplomatic ties, but only after a fair settlement of the claims has been reached. Our property may have been stolen over 50 years ago, but we've seen our parents and grandparent's lives altered irrevocably because of the confiscations. My father and grandmother were American citizens who had their homes, businesses, property, and investments stolen from them; in effect, everything they owned, everything they worked for their entire lives up to that point. The effects of this on my family was life-altering. There is no way to quantify it; their lives were redefined without their consent, and multiple generations of our family have been affected.

I hope that politics can be removed from the equation in discussion regarding settling the claims. It isn't a political issue to me; it is a personal one, as it is for every American citizen affected. My politics do not define my desire for justice. We are United States citizens whose land was stolen. When my father filed the claims, it was in good faith that they would be honored and settled fairly.

I, along with the many other families who have lived in the wake of irrevocable change, loss and sadness, look to the United States and you as our representatives to champion not just a new chapter in the political play book, but to work side by side and as innovators in advocating justice. We ask you to use the pain of our circumstances as the pen by which to forge a new future in newly emerging landscape of trust and collaboration. There is bound to be burgeoning opportunity in Cuba in the next few years. It should not be at our expense. In this way, perhaps a plan can be crafted that ensures fair compensation to those of us who had property seized while also allowing investment in a brighter future for Cuba.