

Sosúa: Make a Better World

A Study Guide for Religious School Students, Grades 8-12

by Judith Sandman

Sosúa: *Make a Better World is a true story. In fact, it is two true stories. It is the story of twenty New York teenagers—ten Jewish, ten Dominican—putting on a musical that tells the story of eight hundred Jewish refugees who fled Nazi-occupied Europe for the Dominican Republic in the early 1940s. Renowned Broadway director and composer Elizabeth Swados created this fascinating show about a little-known historical event; the diverse cast of Sosúa created a community of young performers whose very different lives intersected for the first time on the stage of the YM & YWHA of Washington Heights.*

History

Our stories will give you dreams that last and last. Sit very still now, it's almost time to begin.
We may scare you or take you places that you've never been.

—Cast, singing “Stories”

It's like being in middle school. It starts out with your friends saying things like, “you can't sit there.” And then it goes to things like “you can't come to this party” or “you can't join this club.” And then pretty soon, things that weren't OK before become OK. Violence becomes OK. Hatred becomes OK. Discrimination becomes OK.

—Annie, cast member

In January 1933, Adolf Hitler was appointed chancellor of Germany. He believed in the superiority of the Aryan “master race”—and in the inferiority of Jews. In April 1933, the Nazis ordered a boycott of Jewish businesses. In the coming months Jews were banned from the civil service and from positions as lawyers, professors, journalists, farmers, actors, musicians, writers, artists, and broadcasters. Jewish doctors were barred from working in German hospitals and then from treating any non-Jewish patients. Jewish assets and businesses were confiscated by the government. Though more than one hundred thousand German Jews served in the German army during World War I—and more than twelve thousand died—Hitler barred Jews from serving in Germany's armed forces. Jewish children were restricted and later expelled from German schools. With the passage of the Nuremberg laws in September 1935, German Jews were stripped of their citizenship and prohibited from marrying non-Jews.

In the summer of 1938, representatives from Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, France, Mexico, the Netherlands, Sweden, England, the United States, Venezuela, and twenty other countries gathered for a conference at a beautiful resort in Evian, France, on the shore of Lake Geneva. President Franklin Roosevelt had convened the assembly to address the growing, and increasingly desperate, number of Jewish refugees seeking to escape Nazi Europe.

German Jews greeted news of the Evian Conference hopefully, as did the American Jewish community. By the end of the conference, however, not a single country had agreed to welcome additional Jewish refugees, except one—the Dominican Republic. President Rafael Leonidas Trujillo Molina renewed an offer he had made in 1935 and agreed to take one hundred thousand Jewish immigrants as agricultural settlers.

On the night of November 9, 1938, more than one thousand synagogues in Germany were burned and more than seven thousand Jewish businesses were destroyed on what came to be known as Kristallnacht, the “Night of Broken Glass.” Jewish homes, schools, hospitals, and cemeteries were vandalized. Almost one hundred Jews were killed, and thirty thousand Jewish men were rounded up and sent to concentration camps. Fire companies were directed to stand by while Jewish buildings went up in flames, and police were ordered to arrest the Jewish victims of this violence—not the perpetrators. Kristallnacht marked the beginning of the end. By the time Germany surrendered in 1945, more than six million Jews across Europe had been brutally murdered by the Nazis.

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The Dominican Republic shares the island of Hispaniola, in the Caribbean, with the nation of Haiti. In 1492, Christopher Columbus, on his first voyage to America, landed on Hispaniola and claimed the island for Spain. After periods of Spanish, French, Haitian, and US occupation, Horacio Vásquez Lajara was elected president in 1924. In 1930, President Trujillo assumed leadership of the country, serving until his assassination in 1961. In 1937, Trujillo, had ordered the massacre of between twenty and thirty thousand Haitians living on the Dominican side of the border; some say he was attempting to “whiten” the population of his country. His offer to European Jews may have been another way to do that, or at least to redeem his reputation in light of the Haitian massacre.

Although Trujillo offered to settle 100,000 refugees in the Dominican Republic, fewer than 800 Jews eventually immigrated: the US State Department, reluctant to aid the endangered Jews and ostensibly concerned about Nazi spies, refused to issue additional transit visas. The Dominican Republic Settlement Association (DORSA), a subsidiary of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), worked with the Dominican government to carve out the agricultural settlement at Sosúa. Local Dominicans welcomed and worked with the Jewish refugees. After World War II ended, most of the Jews of Sosúa moved away, but thanks to the generosity of the Dominican Republic, hundreds of lives were saved.

Discussion:

1. *Jews were marginalized and often persecuted in Europe for their religious beliefs. What is the difference between religious discrimination and racial discrimination?*
2. *German Jews were forced to abandon their professions and businesses. What was the economic and emotional toll on them?*
3. *Jews are called the “People of the Book,” referring to the Torah. But this expression also refers to the high value Jews place on education. As students, imagine that you are expelled from school—not because of your grades, or because of anything bad you’ve done—simply because you are Jewish. How would that make you feel?*
4. *At the 1938 Evian Conference, only one country out of thirty-two—the Dominican Republic—offered to accept a significant number of Jewish refugees. Many countries had quotas—strict limits on the number of immigrants permitted to enter each year. Why would a country restrict immigration? In “Help the Poor,” Annie, John, Alison, Cody, and Zoe sing about the reasons why world leaders would not allow additional Jews into their countries. What are some of the reasons they give?*
5. *As a baby, Denny Herzberg’s parents had to smuggle him aboard the ship that would take them to Sosúa because they did not have a visa for him. After meeting Denny, Ben says, “...[Y]ou know you can read it in a book, you can see it in a movie...six million dead, and you can say wow, that’s terrible, but when you actually talk to somebody who was involved...it really hits you....” Many schools invite Holocaust survivors to speak to their students. Has your school? How has meeting a survivor, or any individual who has shared his or her personal experience of an event with you, helped you to understand it in a different way?*
6. *Thousands of Jews can trace their families back to the Jews of Sosúa. The Talmud says, “He who saves one life saves an entire world.” What does this expression mean?*
7. *On the one hand, President Trujillo saved hundreds of Jews during the Holocaust by giving them refuge in the Dominican Republic. On the other hand, he perpetrated a massacre that killed thousands of Haitians. Is Trujillo a hero or a despot?*

Building Community

People let's come together and make our dreams come true. People let's climb the mountain and swim the sea and I'll find you and you'll find me. People let's hold on to each other, people let's stand up for each other, people let's heal the wounds our elders made when we were too young to tell them no. Make a better world, make a better world, make a better world.

—Cast, lyrics from “People Let’s Come Together”

...I’m really touched by all the kids and how they’ve stuck it out and how they’ve grown. If nothing else they’ve gotten a feeling of community, and it’s interesting to be doing a show about community where you make a community to do it....

—Elizabeth Swados, director and composer

...Everyone’s personality is so different but it mixes together so well.

—Nomi, cast member

Washington Heights, in New York, has the largest population of Dominicans in the United States. It is also home to one of the oldest Jewish neighborhoods in New York. The chance to work together on this show was a rare opportunity for teens from these two communities to get to know each other. That they share a small slice of history—Sosúa—made the opportunity even more special.

Discussion:

1. *After watching Sosúa, what is your impression of the relationship between Dominicans and Jews in Washington Heights? Why?*
2. *Nomi describes Broadway as the dividing line: the Jews on one side “in their little yarmulkes and synagogues,” and “the Dominicans and their fruit stands” on the other. How can people share a neighborhood, yet have little contact with each other? Think about your own town or city. How diverse is the population? Do you know people from many different backgrounds? In what ways are your friends like you, and in what ways are they different from you?*
3. *Using your synagogue library or online resources, compare and contrast the Jews of Germany with the Jewish communities in other European countries, such as Poland, in the years before Hitler came to power. What kinds of communities did the Jews live in? Were they assimilated—part of the general culture—or did they associate mostly with other Jews?*
4. *What do these lines from the show mean: “Trujillo got the chocolate sauce with the Haitian people...and Hitler got the Jews, who were white, but not*

good enough. Everybody wanted white and vanilla. If you ask me what I think, I say, 'That's crazy!' Everyone knows the best sundaes have all the flavors...." Think about your friends and your community. Do you agree that "the best sundaes have all the flavors"?

5. *The show depicts how the Dominicans of Sosúa and the Jews who came to live there became each other's teachers. In real life, the performers became each other's teachers, too. For example, the entire cast gathers to celebrate the Jewish holidays of Chanukah and Passover. If you could invite people from a different community to visit your synagogue or religious school—in person or on Skype—whom would you invite and why? What would you want to teach them about Judaism? What would you want to learn from them?*
6. *In the movie, John says, "We started separated; the part where we come together is here..." Do you feel that the experience of working on Sosúa has changed the teens? In what ways?*
7. *Derrick says he wants to represent a new generation of Dominicans. How can Derrick, Nomi, Cindi, Hannah, John, Annie, Jordan, and the other cast members maintain and grow their friendships with each other? Martin Englisher of the Washington Heights Y says, "If we show that children can come together, we kind of shame the adults into finding ways to be adults together and live in the world." What can you teach adults about getting along with others?*

The Power of Art

Music unites people. Art unites people. Theater unites people.

—Victoria Neznansky, Chief Program Officer,
Washington Heights YM & YWHA

Theater has so much power. It can make you cry, it can make you laugh, it can make you love somebody on stage that you don't even know.

—Cindi, cast member

The audience that comes...wants something to move them. They're not coming to judge you. Don't get on the stage and think "Oh my god—I better be good." That's not what we do. What we do is give as much as we can to these people who want something. Let's give as much of ourselves as we can.

—Elizabeth Swados

Discussion:

1. *Victoria Neznansky talks about the ability of music, art, and theater to unite people. In what ways do these art forms unite people?*
2. *How did Sosúa unite the cast? The audience? Think about the activities in which you participate in and out of school. How does working together as a group or playing together as a team unite people?*
3. *To celebrate the holiday of Purim, Jews often dress in costume and perform in "Purim-shpils," acting out the story of Esther, Mordecai, Ahasuerus, and Haman. Online, or in your synagogue's library, research Jews in the movies and theater. What surprising information did you learn?*
4. *Elizabeth Swados tells the teens that an audition is not a competition. On opening night she encourages the cast to give as much of themselves as they can during the performance. As a renowned Broadway director and composer, how does her advice inspire the cast? How does it inspire you?*
5. *The cast was asked to write monologues from the point of view of a Nazi or a Dominican fascist. When Nomi sings "Hitler Is Going to Save You," she says she disconnects herself from her body: "At the same time, I understand why we do have to sing the song....[The Germans] were so poor, so miserable, susceptible to any convincing person who came along." Would you find it difficult to sing this song? When is it helpful to look at things from a different point of view?*
6. *How do you typically study historical events in school? Do you think writing a musical or drama could help you understand a historical event more effectively than reading about it in a book?*

7. *Choose an event in Jewish history, and with a partner or in a small group, write a song or scene about it.*

Self-Identity

A lot of people have told me, you know, that I'm not going to be anything, and I want to try to prove them wrong...I wanna show them that I could be something.

—Jordan, cast member

I'm going to decide who's going to live and who's going to die based on what you look like. That's what happened to the Jews and the Germans and that's what happened to the Haitians and the Dominicans.

—Elizabeth Swados

Many people express their identities through their clothing or their jewelry. If you're Jewish, you may wear a mezuzah around your neck or a T-shirt that says "Coca-Cola" in Hebrew. In the movie, Elizabeth Swados asks the teens to think about a time when somebody made fun of them or wouldn't let them do something because of who they were. Ben was called a "fat ass"; Thalia was made fun of for listening to Spanish music; Cindi was told she didn't look like the "smart type"; Alison had sand thrown at her because she was white.

Discussion:

1. *Have people ever made fun of you or your friends for the way you look or dress or for any other reason? How did it make you feel? How did you respond?*
2. *Examine photos of anti-Jewish Nazi propaganda illustrations, online or in your synagogue library. Jews were often depicted by the Nazis as having hooked noses and long beards, or as being a threat to children. Why were they depicted this way? What did this make people think about Jews?*
3. *In 1941 all Jews living in Nazi-occupied Europe were forced to wear a yellow Star of David whenever they went out in public. Why do you think the Nazis made them do that? How would you feel if you were forced to identify yourself as Jewish every time you went out?*
4. *Do you think the cast members of Sosúa are proud of who they are? What makes you proud of who you are? Are you proud to be Jewish? Why? How do you show your pride?*
5. *On the web or in books, find pictures of Jewish life in Germany before World War II. Now think about the Sosúa newsreel in the movie. Compare and contrast these two very different ways of life.*

6. *John, who's from Washington Heights, but who attends school in Princeton on a scholarship, describes what it's like living in two different worlds: "There was a lot of times where I felt like I was two different people—the prep school John and then I'm the Washington Heights kid John...." Do you think the Jews of Europe felt like they were living in two different worlds when Hitler came to power? How about the Jews of Sosúa?*
7. *After the show opened to wide acclaim, do you think the teens looked at themselves differently? Do you think they look at each other in a new way?*