

# HOTEL CUBA

## AARON HAMBURGER



Dear Reader,

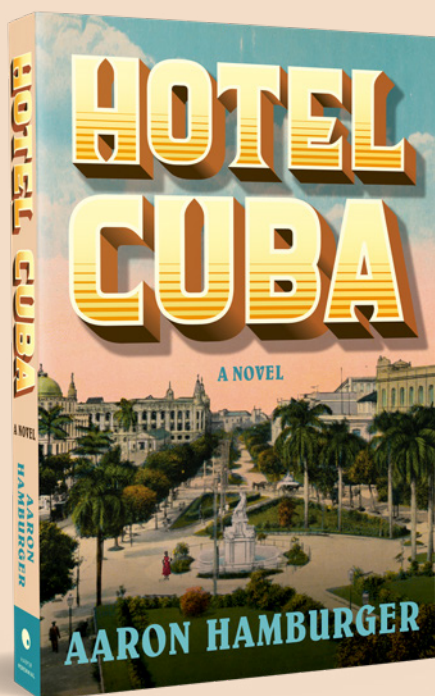
This picture of my grandmother from 1922 inspired my novel, *Hotel Cuba*. Imagine this young woman from a traditional Russian shtetl, beset by anti-Semitic violence, war, and the Russian Revolution, arriving in, of all places, Havana, Cuba, during the time of Prohibition, with the music, the food, and American tourists flocking to the island to get drunk.

When I saw this picture, I had to know: Who was this woman I knew only as my grandmother? What was her story? How did she have the profound courage to leave everyone and everything she knew behind forever and cross an ocean to come to Havana, Cuba, where she lived for a year before coming to the United States? What did it feel like to go from the mud and snow of war-torn, small-town Russia to a tropical Caribbean island with the language, the food, the music, the people, the intense heat—all of this deeply unfamiliar—and how would these experiences transform a life?

I did exhaustive research to try to find the possible answers to these questions, to breathe life into this story that was lost to history. I traveled to Cuba, where my grandmother paid an American couple to pretend that she was their daughter and smuggle her to Key West. I also went to Key West, where my grandmother was arrested as soon as she got off the boat—and in fact, I found the exact spot where this picture was taken, which today happens to be a well-known brunch spot called Sarabeth's. I visited the National Archives to read the original correspondence of the immigration officials of the time dealing with an issue that continues to make headlines. And I read everything I could get my hands on, learning surprising details that I incorporated into my narrative to make it a juicy story, for example: why women used to cross-dress to get into the United States.

As I wrote my novel, I was fascinated by the many resonances between what my grandmother experienced and what we read in the news today. Ultimately, I believe the story of immigration is a quintessentially Jewish story as old as the Passover Seder, and a human story, one that's still with us now as immigrants continue to make the same choices my grandmother made one hundred years ago.

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### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Consider the title *Hotel Cuba*. What does it mean to you? To what extent is Pearl's stay in Cuba a temporary stop in her life's journey and to what extent has it left its mark on her character and the direction of her life?
2. Think about the sacrifices Pearl and her sister, Frieda, must make in leaving their home and adapting to a new way of life. Would you be able to make similar sacrifices in your own life? What are the costs of those sacrifices for the two sisters?
3. Pearl is an artist with needle and thread. How do the clothes that she works on, and wears, relate to what is happening in her life and her mind throughout the novel? What do you think will happen to her career at the end of the book?
4. Compare Pearl's various attractions and love interests in the novel. Do you think she ultimately made the right choice in terms of romance?
5. Frieda makes several key life choices in the novel. Pearl has strong opinions about her sister and the direction of her life. Do you think Frieda has made the right choices for herself in the end? How do you think her marriage will turn out?
6. How has Pearl's time in Key West affected her? What does she take away from the Singer family? And what did you make of the mysterious Rabbi Singer?
7. What do you know about the history of the Jewish community of Cuba? Do a quick search online to find out more. What do you imagine might have happened to Pearl if she'd decided to stay in Havana rather than emigrate to the United States?
8. Compare Pearl's story to other immigrant stories you've read, as well as contemporary debates about immigration. How do we balance competing concerns regarding immigration in a fair and just way?
9. This book was inspired by the true story of Aaron Hamburger's grandmother. In writing it, the author consulted recorded interviews with his grandparents and did extensive research to fill in missing details he was wondering about. He also says that he wanted to uncover more than just biographical facts. "I wanted to breathe life into my grandmother's experience, to find out what she ate, how she felt, what her impressions were of life in such a unique place." What stories do you know about your own family history? Has it been preserved in any way? What do you imagine might have gotten lost in those stories that could be brought back to life through research or imagination?



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### MAKE COOKIES INSPIRED BY HOTEL CUBA

#### *Mojito Cookies*

*These cookies are inspired by the torticas de Morón (Cuban shortbread cookies) Pearl craves while in Havana, as well as the classic tropical cocktail, the mojito. The cookies are delicious without the rum extract if you want to keep them alcohol-free. Or, if you want to dress them up, top with melted white chocolate, dulce de leche, or a quick icing made with one cup of powdered sugar and the juice of a lime. Yield: about two dozen.*

1 stick (½ cup) unsalted butter, room temperature  
½ cup confectioners' sugar  
½ tsp Diamond kosher salt or ¼ tsp table salt  
1 tbsp minced fresh mint leaves  
1 lime, zested (if you want to add icing,  
save the lime to juice)

1 tsp vanilla extract  
¼ tsp mint extract  
¼ tsp rum extract (optional)  
1 cup flour  
Green sanding sugar

1. With an electric mixer, beat the butter until smooth, then reduce speed and gradually add confectioners' sugar. Once combined, cream butter and sugar until light and fluffy, about 3 minutes. Add salt, mint leaves, lime zest, vanilla extract, mint extract (and rum extract, if using) and mix until incorporated.
2. Reduce speed to low and add flour ½ cup at a time, occasionally scraping bowl. Transfer dough to a sheet of plastic wrap and form into a disc. Wrap and refrigerate for one hour.
3. Preheat oven to 350°F. Line baking sheet with parchment paper. Roll out dough to ¼-inch thickness and cut with a 1-inch circular cookie cutter (with fluted edge if you have one). Place on baking sheet about 1 inch apart and sprinkle with green sanding sugar.
4. Bake for about 12 minutes, until just golden brown at the edges. Let cool on baking sheet for 5 minutes, then move cookies to a rack to cool completely.

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### LISTEN TO A PLAYLIST INSPIRED BY HOTEL CUBA

CLICK HERE TO OPEN  Spotify

- 1 I'LL SEE YOU IN C-U-B-A • *Billy Murray*
- 2 AY-LYE-LYU-LYE-LYU-LYE • *Ruth Rubin*
- 3 CANTA MONTERO • *Arsenio Rodríguez*
- 4 AVINU MALKEINU • *Barbra Streisand*
- 5 BEI MIR BIST DU SCHOEN • *The Andrews Sisters*
- 6 LA CURA • *Frankie Ruiz*
- 7 LA VIDA ES UN CARNAVAL • *Celia Cruz*

- 8 CUBAN SLIDE • *Pretenders*
- 9 JEWISH WEDDING SONG • *Xavier Cugat*
- 10 MI TIERRA • *Gloria Estefan*
- 11 HAVANA AFFAIR • *Ramones*
- 12 EL CUARTO DE TULA • *Buena Vista Social Club*
- 13 HAVANA (FEAT. YOUNG THUG) • *Camila Cabello*


### ABOUT THE AUTHOR




**AARON HAMBURGER** is the author of a story collection titled *The View from Stalin's Head*, winner of the Rome Prize by the American Academy of Arts and Letters and nominee for a Violet Quill Award. He is also the author of two novels: *Faith for Beginners*, which was nominated for a Lambda Literary Award, and *Nirvana Is Here*, winner of a Bronze Medal from the 2019 *Foreword Reviews* INDIES Book of the Year Awards. His writing has appeared in the *New York Times*; *Washington Post*; *Chicago Tribune*; *O, the Oprah Magazine*; *Details*; *Village Voice*; *Poets & Writers*; *Tin House*; *Out*; *Michigan Quarterly Review*; *The Forward*; and numerous other publications. He has taught creative writing at Columbia University, George Washington University, New York University, Brooklyn College, and the Stonecoast MFA Program.

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