

# THE JEWISH COMMUNITY IN MEXICO

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## I

**H**ISTORICALLY, Jews are identified with Mexico as far back as the sixteenth century, when the first Spanish and Portuguese Marranos followed in Cortes' wake. A few years later Francisco Millan and Pedro Ruiz were placed on trial for the "crime" of Judaism. Although the Inquisition was not formally established until 1571, there were, according to the Spanish historian J. T. Medina, "many trials for faith in America before there was established a Tribunal of the Inquisition."

From 1574 to 1600 the tribunal averaged thirty-four cases of "heresy" a year. Nevertheless, Jews continued to seek refuge in Spanish America. From the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries they were not recognized officially in Mexico as such although men who were or still are prominent in Mexican public life can point to their Jewish origin. Limantour, the financial genius of the Porfirio Diaz regime, is one of these. In fact, the ancestral name of the famous Mexican dictator himself is said to have been De-Has. Diego Rivera, the celebrated Mexican painter, admits willingly, even proudly, his Jewish origin, and Silva Herzog, possibly the most outstanding contemporary Mexican economist, as well as Lombardo Toledano, Mexican labor leader, are also of remotely Jewish origin. Madero, the President-martyr himself, is widely believed to have been descended from a Portuguese Jewish family of the same name. The files and documents of the Inquisitorial trial of the famous Marrano family of Carbajal are among the most important in the Archivo de la Nacion. Among the best known of this illustrious family are Luis Carbajal, who became governor of the Mexican province of Nuevo Leon, and his nephew of the same name, who was born in Mexico and became the first Jewish author in America.

A little synagogue frequented by people who call themselves "Indian Jews" still exists in Mexico City. Their leaders claim that they are descendants of the Jews who came with the conquistadores, and that there are about 5,000 scattered throughout the country. Little else, however, is known about these people and their history.

## II

**E**UROPEAN migrations during the regime of dictator Diaz brought Mexico an increase in its Jewish population, estimated at nearly 15,000 by 1910. A

little more than half were German, Austrian and American Jews, together with a few of French origin. While most of them lived in Mexico City, many settled in the other commercial centers of the Republic.

The lot of the remainder—mainly Rumanian, Turkish and Syrian Sephardic Jews—was far from enviable, especially during the numerous revolutionary interludes. A few kept small shops, but most of them were peddlers, dealing in rugs, silks, clothing, notions and trinkets. Only one Levantine Jew had his business in Mexico City, the others preferring to settle in the warmer coastal towns and to deal with the peons. They had little in common with their Ashkenazic coreligionists, and firmly maintained their own rites.

The years following the World War opened a new chapter in Mexican Jewish history. Beginning in 1921, a number of Eastern European Jewish immigrants came to the country. They were the pioneers of the present Mexican Jewish community. Barred from the United States by the quota law of 1921, which drastically curtailed immigration, they came to Mexico hoping to enter North America from there under quotas for subsequent years. Among them were Jews from Poland, Russia, Rumania, Lithuania and some Central European countries in addition to about 2,000 who were driven out of Aleppo and Damascus in Syria by the post-war upheaval and about 1,000 from Turkey. The number of Jews from East and Central Europe, the Balkans and Asia Minor soon totaled 6,000.

The peak of this immigration, however, was not reached until 1924. General Plutarco Elias Calles, the newly-elected president, issued a public statement shortly before he took office, inviting Jews to come to Mexico. In view of the later anti-Semitic charge of a "Jewish invasion" of the country this statement becomes especially significant. General Calles wrote: "I wish to confirm the statement I made in my interview on August 10 in which I extended a friendly invitation for immigration into Mexico of Jews who are prepared to join the Mexican nation in the upbuilding of the national industries in the country, as law-abiding citizens. I am gratified to hear that Jewish organizations are concerning themselves with the project of assisting their unfortunate coreligionists abroad to establish themselves in Mexico and thereby establish an excellent addition to the industry and thriftiness of the Mexican Republic. The Government of Mexico, insofar as their good offices are needed, will help these people to adapt themselves and prosper as citizens of Mexico."

The President-elect's invitation and pledge made a tremendous impression in Eastern and Central Europe and resulted in a sharp increase in the number of immigrants during 1924 and 1925 when between 300 and 500 Jews arrived each month. It was during these years that the Mexican Jewish community began to take definite form. From 1926 onward, immigration

began to taper off, the vast majority of the newcomers being Jewish girls who came to marry the young settlers who had preceded them. A large number of the Jewish immigrants also decided to make Mexico their permanent home because they realized that passage of the Immigration Act of 1924 made their chances of immigration to the United States very slight.

The relatively small number of German refugees who came since 1933 brought no change in the life of the community. While statistics are not available, it is generally estimated that there are only about three hundred in Mexico City. The majority, having escaped during the first two years of Hitler's regime, were able to salvage much of their fortunes. About ten or twelve continue to arrive each month, but these are usually relatives of those already settled. These present-day refugees, however, do not mingle much with the Jews from East European countries, the rank and file of the Mexican Jewish community.

### III

GENERALLY speaking, the attitude of Mexicans toward Jewish immigrants was one of sympathetic curiosity. Jews were especially well treated in country towns, where anyone from a large city was considered a foreigner. When immigrants announced themselves, often hesitantly, as *Israelitas*, they were received with expressions of sympathy because of what is related of *Israelitas* in the Bible. Furthermore, when the more literate Mexican thought of his Jewish acquaintances, he remembered the sufferings of their ancestors in Spain during the Inquisition. Thus, it can be seen that the difficulties facing Jewish immigrants were not primarily social but economic. But they also found it necessary to adjust themselves to an entirely different environment, learn a new language and adapt themselves to the customs and habits of the Mexican people.

In towns and cities, with the exception of the capital, Jews were almost exclusively peddlers. As soon as they had saved enough of their earnings, usually implemented by money sent to them by relatives in the United States, they established small stalls (*puestos*) from which they sold hardware or dry goods. Only a few became artisans and professionals. The large number of Jewish peddlers, however, soon provoked the ill will of Mexican shopkeepers who began to exert pressure upon the administration to charge higher fees for the "privilege" of peddling. As a result of their agitation, licenses at one time were issued for only two days' duration.

In contrast to this unfortunate situation was the occupational distribution in the Federal District. Exclusive of peddlers in the capital, 231 applicants at the B'nai B'rith office for the months of October and November in 1935 listed the following occupations: commercial pursuits, 46; farmers,

31; tailors, 15; blacksmiths, 11; modistes, 8; shoemakers, 7; watchmakers, 7; carpenters, 7; seamstresses, 6; bakers, 6; millers, 6; musicians, 5; students, 5; dentists, 5; lumbermen, 5; jewelers, 4; mechanics, 4; butchers, 3; drug clerks, 3; electricians, 3; dyers, 3; tanners, 2; barbers, 2; painters, 2; weavers, 2; chauffeurs, 2; construction engineers, 2; electrical engineers, 2; mechanical engineers, 1; civil engineers, 1; unskilled, 7. In addition, one worker in each of the following categories was listed: doctor, nurse, artist, sign painter, hotel man, brewer, actor, chemist, egg chandler, miner, *hazzan*, *shohet*, tinsmith, capmaker and photographer.

More than 50% of the Jewish immigrants in Mexico City, however, were peddlers during the first three or four years of post-war immigration. Their standard of living was necessarily low since they earned, on the average, from one to two pesos a day. At that time, the Mexican peso was equivalent to half a dollar, but its actual buying power was equivalent to only thirty-five American cents. No one died from starvation or exposure, but a considerable number suffered from undernourishment, a condition which was aggravated by the fact that Mexican food differed considerably in quality and in variety from the diet to which they had been accustomed.

#### IV

THE YEARS between 1926 and 1930 showed a marked growth in and improvement of the Jewish community in Mexico City and to a lesser extent in the cities and towns of the hinterland. Jewish peddlers began to disappear, and in their place little workshops and stores made their appearance as a new factor in Mexican economic life. Soon the first Jewish-owned factories were also erected, specializing in the production by modern methods of hosiery, men's neckwear and sweaters. Tailors opened fashionable stores on Main Street. Jewish business achievements during this period were striking. One important reason for this turn of affairs was the fact that these four formative years coincided with the era of relative tranquillity and general improvement of living conditions during the administrations of Calles and Portes Gil. Jews, henceforth, were given full credit for their activities in certain fundamental phases of the country's economy.

The economic improvement in the status of Jewish immigrants aroused antagonism and ill feeling, not only because they were Jews but also because they were conspicuous for certain characteristics and tendencies to which native Mexicans were unaccustomed, and which could not be understood in a climate where relatively little work was required for a modest living, Mexican fashion. The ambitious strivings of the poor immigrant had no meaning whatsoever for the average Mexican. Thus, a mutual lack of understanding became the first and perhaps the most formidable stumbling-

block in the way of friendship and cooperation between the native Mexican and the Jewish immigrant. Small Mexican traders and merchants were convinced that the newcomers were attempting to eliminate them. This fear manifested itself in a National League Against Chinese and Jewish Penetration, which proposed limitations upon businesses owned by Asiatics and Jews. A false report that 40,000 Jewish immigrants were on their way from Poland and neighboring European lands caused a flurry of protests from Mexican chambers of commerce.

The real roots of these differences, which took definite shape in 1931, however, were to be found in the world economic depression. It was aggravated by the drop in the price of silver and the expulsion from the United States of thousands of unemployed Mexicans. These developments stirred up the nationalistic feelings of the Mexican people to a high degree of chauvinism. Anti-Jewish propaganda in certain newspapers and the irritation of some market men over the competition of Jewish merchants led, in April, 1931, to the expulsion of these vendors from a Mexico City market, an act which at first was feared as a portent of what might happen to all Jewish merchants. The government was finally exonerated of any blame for the expulsion, and responsibility for the incident was charged directly to newspaper propaganda inspired by the economic competition. Other national groups, Turks, Arabs, Chinese, and even Spaniards, were the objects of similar attacks.

In June, a large parade of merchants carried anti-Jewish slogans. Demagogues and politicians with dubious reputations, ever ready to take advantage of unemployment and economic discontent, were quick to introduce the racial issue when they found it an excellent weapon with which to extort graft and gain political advantages. The most vociferous of these demagogues, and the original anti-Jewish racketeer, was a certain federal deputy named Angel Ladron de Guevara. Cleverly playing upon the prejudices of the non-Jewish traders, de Guevara acquired a considerable financial return from his anti-Semitic activities. Sensing the possibility of even greater profits, he decided to build a definite nationalistic anti-Semitic movement. Haranguing the people on the "Jewish menace in Mexico," he became outspoken on the necessity for "direct action should the Mexican Federal Government fall short of its historic trust and miss the opportunity for a great house cleaning."

Despite the fact that the government repudiated this demagogue in strong terms, branding him publicly as "irresponsible," the anti-Semitic campaign continued. Little doubt is held, too, that it was fostered by Spanish, French and German commercial interests who feared the ever-increasing competition of small Jewish merchants. Knowing that they could not afford to bring the fight out into the open because the Jewish merchants, by creat-

ing small manufacturing enterprises of their own, had considerably lowered many commodity prices, these foreign interests decided to exploit the situation. To this end they financed anti-Jewish movements. Leagues of tradesmen and small merchants were also organized and helped spread the slogan, "Buy from Mexicans; Boycott the Jews," throughout the country. Hitler's assumption of power in Germany in 1933 added Nazi fuel to the flame of agitation. Mexico became a key point for Nazi penetration into the Western Hemisphere, with German diplomatic representatives directly engaged in promoting anti-Jewish propaganda. But, as is so often the case, these anti-Jewish activities turned out to be a boomerang. Nationalistic feeling, once aroused, refused to confine itself to the Jews alone and resulted in an openly expressed campaign against all foreign elements.

Another campaign against Jews was begun in 1934 by an organization known as the Gold Shirts, led by ex-General Nicolas Rodriguez and supported by some large and many small businessmen, as well as by certain revolutionary political elements. Rodriguez patterned his organization after certain European colored-shirt groups, but this campaign, too, was doomed to failure. When workmen of the northern Mexican city of Monterrey took violent exception to the use of Gold Shirt "troops" by local industrialists, the government clamped down on Gold Shirt headquarters and later ordered the dissolution of the organization throughout the country.

Still another anti-Jewish campaign was begun in September, 1937, when a group of senators headed by Guillermo Flores Muñoz supported a petition to the government submitted by the "Small Retailers Bloc," demanding legislation to restrict the rights of Jews, whether Mexican citizens or not, and also to restrict their right to engage in or operate small business enterprises and industries. Two organizations were formed to support this petition. At the same time a bill embodying its principal points was introduced in both chambers of the Mexican legislature, and a press campaign was initiated in the principal metropolitan journals as well as in news dispatches to publications in other sections of the country. An important part in this anti-Jewish campaign was played by the press attaché of the German legation whose efforts resulted in the distribution of Nazi propaganda in the Spanish language. Despite this organized campaign, however, the proposed legislation failed. A new group, the Mexican Nationalist Front, openly fascist and anti-Semitic, attacked the labor movement and the Cardenas administration under the guise of a patriotic campaign against Jews and communists. By October, 1937, its agitation for the restriction of Jewish immigration was successful enough to obtain the approval of a special Senate committee for such a measure.

The general anti-alien drive resulted the next month in the adoption of the first immigration quota in the history of the country. Though the law

did not legislate directly against Jews, its motives were undoubtedly anti-Jewish, for it restricted immigration from such East European countries as Poland and Rumania to a mere one hundred persons for 1938 while West European nations were given an annual quota of five thousand. These measures, however, failed to satisfy the alien-baiters, who continued to agitate for further restrictions.

A renewed campaign against the Jews began in 1938 following a serious depression in the textile industry and the report that the government was studying the possibility of admitting Jewish refugees. In November a minor furore was created by propagandists exploiting a plan sponsored by a New York English-Jewish monthly for a Jewish state in Lower California. Mexican anti-Semites and Nazi propagandists made the most of the blatant publicity given the plan by its sponsors. Their agitation resulted in an assault on a Jew in Mexico City, but after proper steps had been taken by Jewish defense organizations, the disturbance was soon eliminated. The press, however, continued its attacks. Even the government-sponsored Mexican Population Congress, which met in Mexico City on December 16, included a debate on the "Jewish Question," in which anti-Semitic opinions were openly aired and special legislation against Jews was advocated. This vicious propaganda came to a head in the anti-Jewish outbreaks in Mexico City on January 26, 1939. These riots served to clarify the position of the government toward Nazi and fascist propaganda.

The Mexican Confederation of Labor issued a manifesto directly after the riots in which the government was warned that anti-Semitic outbursts were merely the smoke-screen for a rebellion against it. Government spokesmen, however, soon assured the Jewish community that the events of January 26 would not be repeated. Steps were taken to protect Jewish life and property. The anti-Jewish drive, nevertheless, led by German and Italian propagandists, is continuing.

## v

**A**LTHOUGH actual population figures are not available, it is generally accepted that about 16,000 Eastern European Jews are now living in the country. From 9,000 to 10,000 are settled in the capital and some 6,000 are scattered throughout other cities and towns. This means that despite the post-war immigration, there has been a comparatively small increase since the days of Porfirio Diaz. While there are no official figures as to the number of Jews in Mexico today, currently accepted estimates place the total at about 25,000.

Families living outside the capital are distributed approximately as follows: Cuautla, 6 to 7; Cuernavaca, 12 to 14; Guadalajara, 150; Minatitlan,

12 to 15; Monterrey, 150; Pachuca, 20; Nuevo Laredo, 5 to 7; Puebla, 50; Saltillo, 15 to 20; San Luis Potosi, 30; Torreon, 50; Tuxpan, 10; Veracruz, 35 to 40; Tampico, 25; a few families are also found in Empalme, Guaymas, and Hermosillo, where earlier settlers had to leave because of hostility.

The Jews in Mexico, having reached a state of fair prosperity, not only stand today on their own feet but even contribute generously toward European and Palestinian relief funds. Their charitable organizations as well as their economic aid and cultural institutions are at least equal to those of Jewish communities in many European countries. In order to handle community problems effectively, the Central Jewish Committee of twenty-one members for all Jewish affairs, embodying two sub-committees, one for refugee work and one to combat hostile propaganda, has been established. The membership represents the various groups in the community.

The vitally important social work carried on for years by the B'nai B'rith Bureau was taken over in 1930 by the Jewish Social Service Bureau. The organization was subsidized by B'nai B'rith in its first year but today is self-sustaining. Its budget is balanced by membership dues, gifts and the proceeds of social functions. It provides medical help, assistance and loans. Another important social as well as economic element in the community is the Jewish Bank, capitalized at 500,000 pesos, whose contribution to the economic existence and progress of the Mexican Jewish community is incalculable. There are also two smaller Jewish loan associations.

The Yiddish press in Mexico, now twelve years old, has made considerable progress. The most representative Yiddish newspaper is *Der Weg*, (The Way) a tri-weekly published since 1929. In 1937 and 1938, there also appeared a Spanish-language weekly called *La Verdad* (The Truth) whose principal aim was to promote a better understanding of and a deeper insight into Jewish problems, particularly among the Mexican *intelligentsia*, and to serve as a means for systematic defense against anti-Semitic attacks. The paper lacked support, however, and was soon forced to discontinue publication. Another Jewish periodical, also published in Yiddish, the weekly *Di Shtimme* (The Voice) is a paper with Socialist leanings while *Der Weg* is more moderate and has Zionist tendencies.

Other Jewish publications include the *Annual* of the Young Men's Hebrew Association, the Zionist Organization's Yiddish bi-weekly, *Di Tribune*, and the left wing, bi-annual publication, *Der Oifboy* (The Reconstruction). For the past few years, the Jewish School in Mexico City has published a year book, distinguished by a wealth of information not only on the activities of the school but also on Jewish cultural life and achievements. In addition, the Jewish Social Service Bureau publishes occasional bulletins.

Of interest also is the fact that during the twenty years of the existence of the modern Mexican Jewish community several books were published in



Yiddish and Spanish by Jewish immigrant writers. Jacob Glantz wrote two books of poems and contributed to Yiddish periodicals in the United States. Isaac Berliner, whose poems have often appeared in the famous New York monthly, *Zukunft*, published a book of poems called *Di Shtot fun Palatzen* (City of Palaces), which received favorable notice. Other authors include Meir Corona, a short story writer, J. Vinietzky, the director of the Jewish school in Monterrey, and the author of this article who has published books on musical subjects in the Spanish language.

Among Jewish cultural institutions the most prominent is the Young Men's Hebrew Association, called for the past few years *Di Yiddishe Yugend Gezelschaft* (Jewish Youth Association) and lately renamed the "Yiddisher Cultur Club."

Another important institution is the Jewish Cultural Club, with its library of more than 2,000 volumes. Lecture courses have been made available to members by this and similar cultural organizations. The lectures, for the most part in Yiddish, are delivered by local scholars as well as by prominent summer visitors from New York. There is also a Yiddish theatre in Mexico City which gives performances every summer with the help of guest-artists from the United States.

Among Jewish schools in Mexico are the parochial school conducted by the *Nidchei Isroel* Association, and others in Monterrey, Guadalajara and Puebla. The Monterrey school has achieved a high reputation and has been incorporated into the Mexican federal school system.

The pride of Mexican Jewry, however, is the *Colegio Israelita de Mexico* in the capital city. Established in 1925 with two classrooms, three teachers and fifty-one students, the school now has 534 students. The curriculum includes Yiddish and Hebrew, Jewish history and Yiddish literature, Jewish demography and current Jewish problems, as well as subjects of general interest. Its public and high school courses are given in Spanish to comply with the requirements of the Federal Department of Education, which has included the *Colegio Israelita* in its list of private schools whose graduates are eligible to enter the government colleges. It is interesting to note that fifteen of the 534 students are native Catholic Mexicans and that seventeen are the offspring of mixed marriages, the father in every case being a Jew. The teachers of Jewish subjects are all immigrants trained in the seminaries of Eastern Europe. The director, Professor Meyer Berger, is a well-known historian who taught Hebrew at the National University of Mexico for several years.

Jewish immigrants have made a number of notable contributions to Mexican life. It is not generally known that the builder of the famous Pan-American highway from Laredo to Mexico City is a Jew. Two Jewish professors have lectured at the National University. One Jewish instructor

has lectured on the history of modern civilization at the National Teachers College in Mexico. A professor of chemistry teaches in the high schools of the Mexican capital. An engineer directs important irrigation works in the country. Two young Jewish musicians play in the Mexican Symphony Orchestra, and a Jewish conductor, a refugee from Austria, is art director of a successful theatre of classical operetta.

That all this is possible indicates that there is no such thing as official anti-Semitism in Mexico. Certainly the regime of President Cardenas has permitted no discrimination against the Jews. With very few exceptions, however, Jews do not participate actively in politics, even though they are citizens, primarily because of a desire to avoid giving reactionary elements the slightest pretext for anti-Jewish attacks.

The public relations activities of the Jewish community have been limited to defense work through the Anti-Defamation Department of the Central Jewish Committee. In addition, all possible assistance is given to the democratic elements in their struggle against homespun as well as imported fascist movements. In this work the Central Jewish Committee maintains permanent contact with leading American Jewish organizations.

## VI

**T**HE FORTHCOMING national elections add significance to the attitude of Mexican political parties toward matters of Jewish interest. The government party, El Partido de la Revolucion Mexicana, in its official organ, *El Nacional*, has frequently denounced race chauvinism, race hatred and nationalistic intolerance. After the horrible November pogroms in Germany in 1938, *El Nacional* published a sharp editorial condemning the Hitler barbarians and expressing the hope that in Mexico the ideals of democracy would continue to prevail.

At the same time, however, the PRM, as the government party is known, maintains its restrictive immigration policy. Although it is always careful to stress the point that this is not an anti-Jewish policy, the fact remains, nevertheless, that only Jews are affected by it. More encouraging is the action of the government party in branding the racial hatred program of the reactionary parties as dangerous to the democratic regime.

Even more outspoken against anti-Semitism is the Mexican Confederation of Workers (Confederacion de Trabajadores Mexicanos), headed by the well-known radical politician Vicente Lombardo Toledano. This non-communist, but pro-Soviet organization, in its organ, *El Popular*, fights energetically against all anti-Semitic agitators. Furthermore, it carries on a vigorous educational program among its members, urging them not to be influenced by anti-Semitic agitation since anti-Semitism is one of the weap-

ons of fascism. Lombardo Toledano's organization is the strongest in Mexico, both in number and influence.

With the exception of the government party, political parties in the strict sense of the word do not exist in Mexico. Before the presidential or parliamentary elections a number of small parties spring up, but they disappear as soon as they have served the particular purpose for which they were created. Some of them, controlled by a number of wealthy families striving to regain the influence they exercised during the thirty-year dictatorship of Porfirio Diaz, make use of the political unrest to attack the progressive regime and at the same time the Jews of Mexico. They have at their disposal an obscure newspaper called *El Omega*.

Anti-Semitism is at present exploited by all sorts of adventurers trying to make their way into politics. Thus, for example, a "Party of National Salvation" recently opened an office on one of the main streets of Mexico City. From the balcony, amplifiers blared abusive, rabble-rousing speeches first against the Jews and then a little later against President Cardenas and the government. The agitators, several former officers with obscure financial connections, were arrested, but public opinion suspected the German Embassy of being the real fomenters. The government, however, has not taken any further steps in the matter.

Communists, too, have found anti-Semitism a handy weapon to slander those opposed to their policies. When the "Jewish Youth Society" sponsored a meeting in protest against the Hitler-Stalin Pact and its terrible consequences for the Jews of Poland, the Stalinists and their organ, *La Voz de Mexico* (The Voice of Mexico), published a vicious attack against those who organized and attended the meeting. They were slandered as Trotzkyites, as active enemies of the Cardenas regime and as supporters of the reactionary candidate for president, General Almazan. The Stalinists further stated falsely that at a meeting the Jews strongly opposed the candidacy of the progressive Manuel Avila Camacho: "Let the Mexican people know who the new friends and followers of Almazan are. They are the Jew-capitalists, exploiters of the Mexican workers, rich businessmen who hide their merchandise in order later to demand higher prices, and persons who wish to starve the Mexican people."

Such outbursts, however, occur only sporadically and provide little reason to fear anti-Semitic excesses in the future. Certainly no serious situation can arise within the next six or seven years, because as long as the candidate for president, Manuel Avila Camacho, an ideological follower of Cardenas and personal friend of Lombardo Toledano, is in power—and his victory in the coming elections is a foregone conclusion—the Jews of Mexico will be secure in the enjoyment of their civil and political rights.