Latin American Jewry Today

by JUDITH LAIKIN ELKIN

THE CHIEF OBSTACLE TO an understanding of Latin American Jewry is the difficulty in obtaining reliable information. Coverage of the area by United States media is thin. Until the administration of President Ronald Reagan dispatched military advisers to El Salvador, news from Central America was practically nil. The countries of South America fare no better; Argentina surfaced in the American media only when it invaded the Falklands/Malvinas Islands. Major stories—the possibility of debt repudiation by Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico; the eruption of Maoist insurgency in Peru; a threatened war between Chile and Argentina—go almost unreported. Within this inadequately understood area, Jews are scarcely mentioned at all. An outbreak of antisemitism may be reported, but the event will be treated in isolation, making it very difficult to interpret. For example, the case of Jacobo Timerman, the most widely reported incident concerning Jews to come out of Latin America in years, became the subject of intense disagreement, partly for lack of contextual information.

As might be expected, the Jewish press in the United States is more attentive to Latin American Jewish communities. However, even in this quarter, coverage is inadequate. The Jewish Telegraphic Agency has not had a correspondent in Latin America in years. An examination of its daily news bulletins turns up a few scattered items dealing with the relationship of Latin American Jewry to the rest of the world—the appointment of a new Israeli ambassador or the death of a community leader involved in world Jewish organizations. With the exception of incidents of antisemitism, nothing showing the Jewish communities of Latin America interacting with their own societies is reported. Developments within the communities themselves go entirely unnoticed.

American Jewish newspapers supplement Jewish Telegraphic Agency reports with the notes of recent travellers to Latin America. However, the newspapers are plagued by tunnel vision—if a situation is not directly applicable to Jews, it is not reported. As a consequence, when an event that is clearly relevant to Jews *is* reported, the reader lacks the proper context

---

Copyright © 1985 by Judith Laikin Elkin

Note: Research for this article was made possible in part by a grant from the Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture.

in which to place it. Evaluating reports of atrocities committed against Argentine Jews in the 1970's proved impossible for anyone who was unaware of the scope of the civil war that had engulfed the entire nation.

Scholarly writing on Latin American Jewry is in even shorter supply. Neither Latin Americanists nor scholars of Jewish history have been attracted in large numbers to this population; consequently, there are many characteristics of its presence which are simply unknown. The perspective of scholars who are themselves Latin American is shaped more by the corporate, monolithic vision fostered by Spanish culture than by the cultural pluralism which characterizes the north. In Hispanic cultures, ethnicity is not perceived as an important subject; indeed, Jews and Judaism are likely to be regarded as an irritating departure from the norm.

Until quite recently, little material relating to the actual historical situation of Jews in the Latin American republics was produced by local Jewish scholars. Speculation as to why this should be so has focused on a supposed lack of historical perspective and a failure to appreciate the importance of recording Jewish history. This explanation, however, cannot really be applied to intellectuals who read and write history. Some factor appears to inhibit their writing about their own experience, save in the most superficial terms.

Perhaps the major impediment to an understanding of Latin American Jewry is the policy of silence adopted by the various Jewish communities themselves. For the most part, data on their fundamental characteristics are lacking. Many of the organized communities are disinclined to assemble the data or to permit qualified researchers to do so. Even the size and demographic characteristics of the Jewish communities must be extrapolated from official data that were generated with other purposes in mind. The only other route available is personal observation, which is likely to be influenced by the predilections and prejudices of the observer.

The defensive posture of the Jewish community leaders is reinforced by the Jewish press of the continent, which intentionally maintains a bland facade concealing more than it reveals. Almost every organized community sustains at least one weekly newspaper. Content analysis over a period of years shows that the bulk of space is allotted to news about Israel and the condition of Soviet Jewry. Then there are reports about diplomatic activities and ceremonial occasions, many featuring the Israeli ambassador to the country in question. The fraction of space allotted to local news consists mainly of articles and advertisements occasioned by weddings, *bar* and *bat mitzvot,* and *yahrzeits* of deceased members of the community. Some Argentine periodicals do offer a more sophisticated perspective on Jewish life during periods when political conditions allow press freedom.

To a greater or lesser extent, political circumstances—overt censorship or self-imposed censorship derived from a fear of government repression—

operate to limit the development and dissemination of information about Jews. The degree of inhibition varies between countries and, within countries, between administrations; but it is clear that over time there has been a diminution of political commentary in the Jewish press from its heyday in the 1930's to today.

The silent record, which makes Latin American Jewry so difficult a subject of study, can also provide a clue to its comprehension. The way to understand variations in the behavior of Jews in different countries is to see these as adaptations to the dominant gentile community. Understanding the defensive posture typical of communal leaders will bring us closer to an understanding of Jewish life on the continent and its place in Hispanic American society, for their behavior constitutes their adaptation to the environment. Silence is at the nexus of Jewish need and Latin American toleration.

It should be clear that a full picture of contemporary Latin American Jewry cannot be presented at this time. One must also bear in mind that political conditions prevailing in Argentina from 1976 to 1983 were hardly conducive to meaningful research. Thus, the present article does not follow in the path of earlier studies, which focused primarily on Argentina, home of the largest Latin American Jewish community. Instead, information developed in other countries has been employed as the basis of the work. Use has also been made of the growing body of scholarly literature in Spanish, Portuguese, Hebrew, and English on the Latin American Jewish communities.[1] Numerous interviews were carried out in the United States, Mexico, and Israel. Finally, colleagues in the field (all members of the Latin American Jewish Studies Association) provided valuable information.[2]

---

[1] Among English-language works published in the last decade are Judith Laikin Elkin, "The Jewish Communities in 1982," in Jack Hopkins (ed.), *Latin America and Caribbean Contemporary Record* (New York, 1984); Judith Laikin Elkin, *Jews of the Latin American Republics* (Chapel Hill, 1976); Judith Laikin Elkin (ed.), *Latin American Jewish Studies* (Cincinnati, 1980); Judith Laikin Elkin (ed.), *Resources for Latin American Jewish Studies* (Ann Arbor, 1984); Irving Louis Horowitz, "Jewish Ethnicity and Latin American Nationalism," in Abdul Said and Luis Simmons (eds.), *Ethnicity in an International Context* (New Brunswick, 1976); Ronald C. Newton, "Indifferent Sanctuary: German-Speaking Refugees and Exiles in Argentina, 1933–45," *Journal of Inter-American Studies*, November 1982, pp. 395–420; Martin H. Sable, *Latin American Jewry: A Research Guide* (Cincinnati, 1978); David Schers, "Anti-Semitism in Latin America," in Salo W. Baron and George S. Wise (eds.), *Violence and Defense: The Jewish Experience* (Philadelphia, 1977), pp. 239–253); David Schers and Hadassa Singer, "The Jewish Communities of Latin America: External and Internal Factors in Their Development," *Jewish Social Studies*, Summer 1977, pp. 241–258; and Eugene Sofer, *From Pale to Pàmpa: The Jewish Immigrant Experience in Buenos Aires* (New York, 1982).

[2] Among those who aided the author were Rabbi Clifford Kulwin, Associação Religiosa Israelita de Rio de Janeiro; Egon Friedler, Montevideo; Rabbi Peter E. Tarlow, formerly Círculo Israelita, Santiago; Rabbi Heszel Klepfisz, Congregación Bet El, Panama; Ana Portnoy de Berner, Monterrey, Mexico; and David Jacob Philip Arrias, Paramaribo, Suriname. I thank these individuals for supplying me with information that is more current than any

THE LATIN AMERICAN CONTEXT

While readers of Jewish history may be familiar with its major themes, there is less familiarity with the themes that animate Latin American history. Yet some understanding of these matters is necessary in order to enter into the experience of Latin American Jews, since they determine the historic space which Jews are allowed to occupy.

The themes identified here by no means exhaust the repertoire of historical experience that enriches Latin American life and accounts for its complexity. Only those themes that constrain the Jewish presence are dealt with here, and only insofar as they affect the lives of Jews. It should not be thought that these factors operate at the same level of constraint in all lands at all times. They are put forward merely to indicate the nature of the societies in which Jews settled, and why these environments differed from others in which Jews made their homes.

The conquest of the New World in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, as Spain was just emerging from the middle ages. That conquest took place a full three centuries earlier in the south than in the north, and to a considerable extent represented the transfer of the wars against the Moors to a new locale, with the *indios* now playing the role of the infidel. Military and religious conquest proceeded hand in hand, and ended with the imposition of the entire Spanish apparatus of government, including the union of crown and church. Throughout the centuries of colonial rule, Jews remained under their medieval stigma; they and their descendants (even if converted to Catholicism) were legally prohibited from settling in the Spanish and Portuguese domains. That there was clandestine migration by *conversos* does not alter the fact that Jews, as such, were not allowed to become a part of the concept of the good society. Here, then, is the core of the distinction between Jewish settlement in South America and North America. The latter area, reflecting the values of the Age of Enlightenment, was built on dissidence and non-conformism. Latin America, in contrast, was established by true believers.

The existence of the Catholic church as an institution which predated the formation of the nation state, set behavioral norms for entire societies, and placed a determinative stamp on all legislation relating to civil status. Nineteenth-century Jewish immigrants to Latin America entered societies which not so long before had been subject to the Inquisition. Legislation derived from church teachings initially made it impossible for Jews to register births or bury the dead save through baptism, or to marry outside the Catholic church. Education was permeated with Catholic dogma.

---

appearing in published or unpublished sources relating to their respective communities, while absolving them of responsibility for the interpretations appearing in this article.

The interminable bloody wars which raged across the continent for a century after the Latin American republics had nominally gained their independence turned to a considerable extent on the position of the Catholic church. The struggle was between anti-clerical elements who wanted to separate church and state and conservatives who wished to maintain the church in its preeminent moral and material position. Immigration policy entered into this struggle, since the admission of large numbers of non-Catholic immigrants had the potential of altering the social equilibrium inherited from colonial times. Jews, by and large, immigrated to those nations, such as Argentina, Uruguay, and Chile, which separated church and state in practice, if not constitutionally. Even so, early Jewish arrivals in Argentina had to fight for the right to determine their civil status without recourse to church law. It was only in 1860 that Jews in Argentina won the right to marry; in 1877 a Jewish father went to court to force the authorities to register his children without having them baptized. These battles did not have to be fought in the United States, where separation of church and state was an established reality before large numbers of Jews arrived. In Latin America the entry of Jews into society became part of the struggle between those who favored retaining Catholic norms and those who had a secular vision. In all of Latin America today, there is only one country (Chile) whose constitution does not specify that the president must be a Roman Catholic. Freedom of conscience is a right that non-conformists and dissidents (whether religious or political) had to wrest from society over a long period of time and against tremendous resistance.

The Spanish concept of a Regimen de Castas (society of castes), in which groups of people, distinguished from one another by their racial origins, are arranged in a hierarchy of merit. The civilization that the Spanish and Portuguese created in the New World reflected the hierarchic, estate-based, corporate society of medieval Castile. To be sure, there is great variation in the degree to which the *Regimen de Castas* left its mark on the different Latin American nations. However, throughout the continent, among some sectors of the population, it is not at all agreed that Jews are a legitimate part of the nation, or that they reside in the various countries by right. During the recent Argentine elections, for example, a noted educator was quoted as saying, "The Jews ought to avoid showing themselves too much. They should avoid sticking out—meddling in Argentine politics as a community. This offends. This irritates." Since the majority of Argentine Jews are native-born, the reference to "Argentine politics" clearly shows that the speaker regarded Jews as outside the body politic. This sentiment would be recognized in most precincts of Latin America.

The tradition of authoritarian rule, rooted in both Spanish peninsular politics and the indigenous societies which the Spaniards overthrew. In Latin

America, authoritarian rule is the given and democracy the learned response. Democratic rule has to be fought for over and over again by groups of people animated by ideals similar to those of North Americans, but who, historically, have been a minority in their own countries. Attachment to an authoritarian style of government is most deeply embedded in those nations that were at the heart of the Spanish empire and that were (and are) the home of large populations of *indios*—Mexico, the countries of Central America, Peru, Ecuador, Bolivia, and Paraguay. Where Spanish rule was more tenuous, and frontier techniques of survival had to be learned—Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay—there was more room for exercising a democratic impulse.

The imitative quality of Latin American politics, which led to the adoption of democratic constitutions in the nineteenth century, despite the absence of the requisite economic and social elements that make democracy possible. The Latin American republics gained their independence in the Napoleonic period, and the constitutions they adopted reflected the attitudes of the Age of Reason and the principles embodied in the French and American revolutions. It needs to be stressed, however, that, with the exception of Argentina, the colonies declared their independence under conservative guidance, out of a fear that otherwise the lower classes would take over. Once independent, many nations chose to copy the liberal constitutions that were then in vogue. The social reality behind them, however, was race war (most particularly in Venezuela and Mexico), unbridgeable differences between the descendants of the conquerors and the descendants of the conquered or enslaved, and the institutional momentum of the Catholic church, which had never reformed itself and was prepared to fight to retain its privileges. This was hardly promising soil for the growth of democracy, whatever the constitutions might say.

The absence of powerful nationalizing forces during the formative years of the republics. Throughout the nineteenth century, the social, racial, and economic divisions which prevented the development of democracy combined with Latin America's difficult topography to retard the formation of strong national identities. Prior to invention of the airplane, transportation and communication were obstructed by the difficult terrain. Public school education—the great homogenizer of immigrants in the United States—was slighted everywhere but in Argentina, reflecting the bias of the elite against educating the masses. National armies functioned as praetorian guards to keep the people in line. Industrialization was slowed by global economic forces which had the effect of keeping Latin America provincial far longer than was the case in the north. The nineteenth century was a time of civil war all over the continent, and until the anarchy subsided, recognizable nationalities could not emerge. In the meantime, the only unifying factor was the commonality of Catholic belief. To many Latins, communion in the church and membership in the nation were synonymous.

In those places where the Catholic church continues to define the scope of people's mentality, Jews are still perceived as strange and aberrant—either as deicides or as witnesses to Christian truth. This is a far different attitude than that generated by a strong concept of nationhood, which, per force, makes citizens of all people who live within the jurisdiction of the nation. Paying taxes and serving in the army validate citizenship, whereas membership in the church comes about through belief and baptism. In countries where Catholic belief continues to define nationality, Jews have great difficulty in being accepted. To date, cultural pluralism has barely begun to be debated in Latin America, save in Argentina and Uruguay, where the battle rages.

These are the themes which pervade Latin American history. Without doubt, they have had a profound effect in determining the course of Jewish settlement on the continent. Jews stayed away from Mexico and the Andean republics until they became indispensable as places of refuge. By far the largest number of Jews migrated to Argentina, Uruguay, Brazil, and Chile, where secular norms were developing by the beginning of the twentieth century (although Chile did not actually disestablish the church until 1925) and strong nation-states were emerging. Jews felt that it would be easier to adapt to secular societies, and it was there that they settled.

It would be well to keep in mind the themes outlined here in turning to an analysis of contemporary Latin American Jewish life, especially as they suggest cultural milieus very different from those of North America. Even so, among the Latin American nations allowances must be made for changes over time, for differences generated by unique national histories, and for variations emerging from different ethnic mixes.

THE STRUCTURE OF JEWISH LIFE

Demography

While the best estimates place the number of Jews currently residing in Latin America at around one-half million, there is no way of arriving at a precise figure.[3] When, on rare occasions, questions concerning religion are included in national censuses, they tend to be evaded. The organized Jewish communities characteristically resist censuses, so that there are very few reliable studies available. Most of the latter were carried out in Argentina during the 1960's. However, this promising development was cut short by the coming to power of the military junta, creating conditions which were unfavorable for any project relying on voluntary responses. The Jewish community of São Paulo authorized a census in 1968–1969, which was subsequently published. Several attempts at census-taking in Chile during the 1970's foundered on the rock of communal resistance. Despite a determined initiative in 1982, a census of the Mexican Jewish community failed to materialize. Still, based on existing data and anecdotal information, some trends can be observed.

---

[3] See U.O. Schmelz and Sergio DellaPergola, "The Demography of Latin American Jewry," in this volume. See also Judith Laikin Elkin, "A Demographic Profile of Latin American Jewry," *American Jewish Archives*, November 1982, pp. 231–248.

Latin American Jews today are almost exclusively an urbanized population. The largest numbers are to be found in the principal cities, especially Buenos Aires (with possibly half the total Jewish population of Latin America), São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Mexico City, Montevideo, and Santiago. There are smaller communities in the secondary cities of Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, Chile, and Mexico, as well as in the capitals of each of the remaining nations. As a result of specific demographic characteristics, emigration, and out-marriage, the Jewish communities are shrinking.

The birth rate of Jews in each of the countries for which data are available is just half that of non-Jewish populations: one or two among the Ashkenazim, two or three among the Sephardim. In Buenos Aires one-third of the general population is under age 15, while just one-fifth of the Jews are below that age. Jews show very low rates of infant mortality, in contrast to general trends. The life expectancy of Jews (68 years for men, 74 years for women) is about the same as that of the general populations in Argentina, Uruguay, and Venezuela. Jews, however, retain these rates of longevity even in those precincts of the continent, such as Central America, where average life expectancy is closer to 50. Enjoying a longer life span and being less encumbered by dependents, Jews are able to provide better than average opportunities for their children.

The birth rate of Latin American Jews is insufficient to replenish the parent generation. As a result the Jewish population is aging. Mortality rates have overtaken birth rates in several communities, including Buenos Aires. There is no sign of a reversal of this trend.

The negative balance between immigration and emigration is another factor making for a shrinking population. The major waves of immigrants arrived in Latin America in the decades preceding and following World War I. According to the Argentine national census of 1960, fewer than three per cent of Jews aged 65 and over had been born in the country. On the other hand, 98 per cent of Jews under 14 years of age were native Argentines. Clearly, this is a relatively new Jewish community; third and fourth generation Argentine Jews exist, but they are a rarity. The last substantial wave of Jewish immigration to the continent took place in 1957, when Brazil received some 25,000 refugees from Egypt. All the Latin American countries now have restrictive immigration laws. Moreover, even those nations that are open to immigration favor persons of Latin and Catholic culture.

While Jewish immigration to Latin America has dwindled, emigration is draining the communities. A large but unknown number of Latin American Jews presently reside in the United States, including a significant number of Cuban Jews in the greater Miami area. In recent years, substantial numbers of Argentine Jews, fleeing their nation's civil war, have also sought refuge in the United States. They were preceded by exiles from Allende's Chile and the Chile of the junta that overthrew Allende, Nicaraguan Jews anticipating the fall of Somoza, Colombian Jews fleeing the drug wars in their homeland, and Mexican Jews alarmed by government nationalization of the banks. Of course, millions of non-Jewish Latin Americans fled their countries for the same reasons. However, Jewish emigration proceeds from a substantially smaller population base, and a major upheaval, such as the one occurring in El Salvador at present, has the potential to deplete a community entirely.

Since World War II, the Latin American Jewish communities have become increasingly fluid, with population shifts occurring as economic conditions change. Governments that nationalize private property—Cuba in the 1960's, Chile in the 1970's—have seen large numbers of their Jewish citizens depart. Nations in which free enterprise flourishes have attracted Jews. Thus, Venezuela and Ecuador experienced Jewish in-migration during the oil boom years of the 1970's. As the Brazilian government set about developing a mature capitalist economy, Jews stayed in place and flourished, despite the political repression prevailing in the country. The evidence of the past 30 years is that capitalist economies attract and retain Jews, while nationalized economies repel them.

The one emigré population for whom good data exist consists of those who made *aliyah* to Israel. According to figures supplied by the Jewish Agency, 109,865 Latin Americans were living in Israel in 1982. One-third of these *olim* were aged 18 to 29 when they made *aliyah,* thus taking their reproductive capacity with them.

The departure of influential members of the communities brings about the departure of other individuals who take their cue from the former. Furthermore, the departure of wealthy community members triggers the collapse of communal institutions which depended on their contributions, thus encouraging still other Jews to consider emigrating. The flight into exile of university students and political activists so reduces the number of potential mates that parents encourage other children to leave. The result is not just a decrease in numbers, but an impoverishment of Jewish intellectual life.

The rate of intermarriage has always been high in Latin America. It is a curious anomaly that non-Jewish Latin Americans accuse Jews of sticking together and of adopting a defensive attitude toward non-Jews, while Jewish community leaders lament the high rate of intermarriage and the subsequent loss of children to the Jewish people. Assimilation through intermarriage—"the white pogrom"—occupies a higher place on communal agendas than does antisemitism. Thus far, however, the communities have not reoriented traditional thought patterns so as to accommodate Jews involved in mixed marriages, as well as their spouses or children. As one Mexican correspondent notes: "Any relationship with semi-Jewish elements is minimal, because we have no contact with the descendants of mixed marriages. The general attitude is to try to avoid inter-married couples and not to receive the couple or their descendants, in order to set an example to young persons to avoid this type of marriage."

The trend toward intermarriage is accelerating. Research has shown that the most likely candidates are young Jews who are native-born, urban, and who have a university education. University life brings Jewish young people into contact with attractive potential mates who are non-Jews. Higher education is the route to economic and social advancement which, in turn, increases the likelihood of intermarriage. Since young Jews are attending universities in increasing numbers, the intermarriage rate should continue to climb.

The combined effect of low fertility, emigration, and intermarriage is shrinkage of the Jewish community, although the precise extent of the shrinkage cannot be determined. Thus far, the communities have not been able to retain the allegiance of university-educated Jewish youth who are attracted to the larger society. Still, shrinkage of the Jewish population does not necessarily imply a comparable reduction of Jewish elements in society at large. Except for those who emigrate, Jews who sever their ties with the organized Jewish community continue to contribute, and have contributed substantially, to the social, economic, cultural, and political development of their native lands. In every Latin American country, there are persons of Jewish descent who function productively in general society, with or without reference to their Jewish heritage.

The Organized Communities

The imported traditions of Latin American Jews vary widely in detail, depending on the ethnic origins of the immigrants and the periods of their immigration. Polish Jewish artisans who arrived in Cuba in 1924 were not the same people as the German Jews who came to Buenos Aires in 1880 or the Moroccan Jews who settled in Caracas after 1900. Still, despite variations stemming from origin and period of migration, it is possible to say that part of the cultural baggage of all Jewish immigrant groups was a recognizable system of community organization. The institutions which Jewish immigrants founded in the New World resembled those they had left behind in the Old. However, they were not exact replicas, since the novel environment of Latin America determined the social space that Jews were permitted to occupy. Today's communities, being Latin as well as Jewish, exhibit characteristics of both.

Jewish organizations arose in Latin America as a counterpoise to the Catholic church. Cemeteries were needed for burial of the Jewish dead; social welfare agencies were needed to provide services that the Catholic poor obtained from their parish churches; schools were needed both to transmit Jewish tradition and to provide basic education in an atmosphere free of Catholic dogma. The burial society was usually established first, with schools, hospitals, credit unions, orphanages, homes for the aged, and synagogues following soon after. Because of language differences among the immigrants and the desire to form compatible social relationships, the Jewish institutions were bounded by the ethnic groups which formed them. In this, they were similar to the *landsmenschaften* on the North American scene. However, the Jewish institutions of Latin America operated in a different environment. In the pluralistic society to the north, the *landsmenschaften* functioned as halfway houses for immigrants who were moving toward integration into the larger society. In South America this was not at all the case. The perception of Jews as a separate race, with a destiny different from that of the Mexicans, Argentines, or Bolivians, raised barriers to their integration and reinforced the tendency of the *landsmenschaften* to turn inward. The more society resisted the integration of non-Catholics and non-Latins, the more Jews organized to provide for themselves the needed economic, social, and educational services. The *landsmenschaften,* and the ethnic divisions underlying them, remain at the base of Latin American Jewish life today because they have not been eroded by nationalizing forces generated by the host societies.

Once communal institutions came into being, it became apparent that some kind of unifying factor was needed. Here, the East European *kehillah* offered a model, and most Latin American Jewish communities attempted to copy it. However, the Latin American *kehillot* are voluntary in nature and lack the power to tax. Moreover, almost all of them have an ethnic descriptor attached to their names—the Ashkenazic *kehillah,* the *alapeña* or Sephardic *kehillah,* etc. While the *kehillot* serve to bring together people of a particular ethnic background, they separate one ethnic group from another. The Latin American *kehillot* have been described as follows:

> The Latin American communities are . . . "indirectly" or "de facto" recognized communities since they generally try to emulate, at least externally and partly, the structure and programs of the old European communities—but without obtaining, or even seeking, formal recognition by the authorities as organizations based on public law and empowered to levy taxes, and impose other obligations on their members. On the other hand, official authorities, Jewish international organizations and communities generally grant the Latin American community organizations de facto recognition—i.e., the right to represent the Jews of Latin America. This is political rather than legal recognition and is typical of Jewish organizational representation throughout the Latin American continent. In practice, the significance of this de facto recognition is more than purely academic. The Latin American communities exist as consolidated organized units whose existence and competence are generally acknowledged, internally and externally.[4]

In briefly describing some of the Latin American Jewish communities, the aim is not to be comprehensive. Rather, it is to indicate some of the ways in which a general pattern has emerged. The obvious omission of Argentina is explained by political circumstances which ruled out a current survey.

With perhaps 90 per cent of Chilean Jews living in Santiago, the city's Jewish life is organized around several "synagogue communities" and the sports club. The two main Ashkenazic groups, Círculo Israelita and Kehillah Ashkenazi, which had substantial overlapping membership, merged in 1982. B'nei Yisroel brings together German Jews, who are relatively more numerous in Chile than in other countries. Maguen David is the community of the Sephardic Jews, while the Hungarians are grouped in Masje. Recently, with the arrival of religious Jews from Argentina and Israel, a hasidic community has come into being. There is also a non-ethnic synagogue at the Estadio Israelita, the Jewish sports club, which functions on the high holy days and for weddings, and bar and bat mitzvahs. The Estadio Israelita, an impressive facility, is the true center of Jewish life, offering the types of services usually associated with Jewish community centers.

The Santiago Jewish community maintains a day school, two weekly newspapers, two cemeteries, a burial society, a home for the aged, a home for needy children, and a B'nai B'rith center. The Valparaiso-Viña del Mar community has a day school, synagogue, and sports club.

Santiago's Kehillah Ashkenazi, headed by Gil Sinai, controls 50 per cent of the newspaper *La Palabra Israelita* and 90 per cent of the largest cemetery. Building on his power base in Kehillah Ashkenazi, Sinai held the presidency of the Comité Representativo de la Colectividad Israelita for 30 years—from 1953 to 1983. The election of Werner Apt as president of the Comité signalled a split within the Ashkenazic community.

---

[4] Nathan Lerner, "Jewish Organization in Latin America," David Horowitz Institute for Research on Developing Countries, Tel Aviv University, 1974, pp. 4–5.

In Montevideo, Uruguay, Rabbi Nehemia Berman leads the Ashkenazic community, Rabbi Fritz Winter the German community, Schalom Edery the Sephardic community, and Rabbi Beck the small hasidic community. Overall synagogue attendance is appreciable only during the high holy days. The issue of conversion to Judaism is a divisive one, with Berman, who is Orthodox, being strongly opposed, and Winter, who is Conservative, taking a more open approach. All of the congregations are represented in the Comité Central Israelita, a political grouping which speaks in the name of Uruguayan Jewry. The Comité sponsors a symposium series, Círculo de Reflexion Judía, which offers sophisticated discussions of Jewish issues.

There are 18 synagogues in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, all but one of them Orthodox, and each representing a specific ethnic group. Several synagogues run their own religious schools and are closely identified with particular social clubs, thus constituting "synagogue communities." The rabbi of União Israelita Shel Gemilut Hassadim, a congregation of 320 Sephardic families, is Moroccan-born Abraham Anidjar, who has lived in Brazil for many years. Rabbi Herz Torenheim, who was born in Poland and speaks Yiddish, leads Sinagoga Beit Aharon. The most emphatically religious community is Bar Ilan, which imports its rabbis from Israel. Other Orthodox synagogues are Associação Religiosa Krasnik, Centro do Grande Templo Israelita, Sinagoga Agudat Israel, União Israel, Beit Aharon, Talmud Torah Hertzlia, Monte Sinai, Beit Yacov, União Beneficente Maghen David, Sociedade Israelita Templo Sidon, Sociedade Beirutense, Centro Israelita de Niteroi, Israelita Brasileira, and Yeshiva Colegial Machane Israel.

The single Reform temple in Rio de Janeiro is the Associação Religiosa Israeli, which was founded in 1942 by refugees from Nazism. Affiliated with the World Union for Progressive Judaism, it follows the German Liberal tradition. Associação Religiosa Israeli's rabbis, Roberto Graetz and Clifford Kulwin, were trained at Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati. The temple's membership of 950 families makes it the largest congregation in Rio.

There are three "synagogue communities" in Panama. Shevet Ajim, comprised of Arabic-speaking Jews, is Orthodox; its rabbi, Sion Levy, is Moroccan-born. Also Orthodox, but Ashkenazic, is Congregation Bet El, which is led by Polish-born Rabbi Heszel Klepfisz. Congregación Kol Shearit Israel, which celebrated its 100th anniversary in 1976, is Reform; its rabbi, Alejandro Granat, comes from Hungary.

Though Dutch in culture, Suriname is included here because of its location in Latin America. Paramaribo has two congregations but no rabbi. The Nederlands Portugees Israelietische Gemeente (originally Sephardic) and the Nederlands Israelietische Gemeente (originally Ashkenazic) have become indistinguishable from one another due to marriage across ethnic lines and common use of the Sephardic rite. Both are Orthodox, although few individual members adhere to the *halakhah*. Each congregation maintains its own cemetery. One cantor serves both congregations; there is no *shochet* and, consequently, no kosher meat. A Jewish doctor performs circumcisions.

During 1982–1983, the Ashkenazic synagogue, Neve Salom, was restored with funds provided by the Surinamese and Dutch governments. Restoration of the Sephardic synagogue, Sedek ve Salom, remains to be carried out. Religious services, which until 1980 were held alternately in the two synagogues, are currently being held only at Neve Salom. There also exists in Suriname the ruins of the old synagogue at Jodensavanna, constructed in 1685.

In Mexico City the pattern of Jewish communal life has been particularly resistant to change. The largest group is Nidje Israel, the Ashkenazic *kehillah,* founded in 1922. Nidje Israel maintains a cemetery, a teachers seminary, a home for the aged, and three schools of differing ideological orientations—Hebrew-Zionist, Yiddish-Bundist, and Orthodox. The proceedings of the *kehillah* are conducted in Yiddish, while the organization's governing council is elected along Israeli party lines. Despite regular elections, the same individuals continue to hold office for decades.

La Union Sefaradi, comprised originally of Turkish Jews, came into being in 1923. Although the organization was founded on Orthodox premises, it has since adopted many elements of Reform Judaism. It has been reported that Ashkenazim who object to the use of Yiddish at Nidje Israel are apt to join the Union. The organization claims only half as many members as Nidje Israel, but is reputed to have more than that number. While a larger reported membership would enable the Union to ask for greater representation on the Comité Central (see below), it would also lay the group open to a demand for an augmented financial assessment.

Alianza Monte Sinai was founded in 1912 by Arabic-speaking Jews from Damascus. The group maintains a cemetery, three synagogues, a school, and a battery of religious personnel. In 1938 some members of Alianza Monte Sinai who originated in Aleppo broke away to form Sedaka y Marpe. The latter organization maintains its own schools and synagogues.

Aging and marriage across ethnic lines have brought about the disappearance of two communities in recent years—the German Tikvah-Menorah and the Hungarian Emunah.

Two "synagogue communities," Beth El and Beth Israel, are not ethnically based. The former, a Conservative congregation, was founded in the 1950's by native-born Mexican Jews who did not feel at home in the older, immigrant-dominated congregations. The founding of Beth El was also an expression of rebellion against the entrenched communal leadership.

Today, Beth El exhibits a vitality that is absent in the older congregations. At one Friday night service in 1983, fully half the congregation of approximately 500 people were children; the service was capably led by high school students. The Beth Israel Community Center, founded in 1953, represents a different adaptation to the Mexican environment. While officially Conservative, it appears to be closer to Reform in its prayer service. English is the language in general use in this multi-ethnic congregation. Beth Israel's spiritual leader, Rabbi Semuel Lerer, is actively engaged in outreach to the Mexican population, and has performed numerous conversions of persons who have little or no claim to Jewish ancestry, including *indios* and *mestizos.*

Despite talk about merging the various Mexico City communities, the obstacles are generally regarded as insurmountable. The schools, for example, are dominated by distinct ideologies, and compromise on a value-free educational system is not even considered. Another obstacle is the relative autonomy of the communities, with each one maintaining its own budget and formulating its own policies. On a wider scale, the ethnic communities remain, now as in the past, separated by bitter animosities. Individuals freely express their lack of esteem for one another, invoking crude racial stereotypes. Only in the younger congregations and in the Centro Deportivo (Sports Center) are these divisions being left behind. The Centro Deportivo is the only Mexican Jewish organization that does not suffer a chronic shortfall of funds, which is eloquent testimony to the secular lifestyle of Mexican Jews.

The diverse communities act together through the Comité Central Israelita, the political arm of the Mexican Jewish community. Nidje Israel has six representatives on the Comité; Union Sefaradi, Alianza Monte Sinai, and Sedaka y Marpe have three each. The Consejo de Mujeres (National Council of Jewish Women) also has three representatives. Beth El, Beth Israel, and the Sports Club have one each. A respected elder of Tikvah-Emunah also retains a seat. The number of representatives that each group has on the Comité determines the size of the financial contribution that it is expected to make. The officers generally belong to the younger generation and are arguably more responsive to the times. The Comité is oriented to external relations and has no authority over the internal affairs of its member communities.

The Jewish community of Monterrey, Mexico maintains one synagogue, which is predominately Ashkenazic but has attracted the few Sephardic families in town as well. Although weekly attendance is sparse, the major holidays attract substantial numbers of worshipers. Yiddish-speaking Moises Kaiman, who came to Monterrey from Russia more than 40 years ago, functions as rabbi, cantor, *mohel,* and *shochet;* he is strongly opposed to intermarriage. Kaiman is also the community spokesman in dealing with the Catholic church and the government.

The Guadalajara, Mexico Jewish community, consisting of some 140 families, may be unique in that it was established through a cooperative effort between Ashkenazim and Sephardim. To accommodate the Sephardim, the use of Yiddish in the curriculum of the Jewish day school was abandoned soon after its founding in 1928. The community supports a Conservative synagogue, although a rabbi is not always present. The Club Deportivo Macabi is the social center of Jewish life.

A survey of the *kehillot* shows that they share many elements in common, the most important being that they are voluntary associations. Having no guaranteed source of revenue, they have financed their activities by taxing access to the cemetery. The burial society is at the heart of each *kehillah*, with the sales of plots and services generating as much as 90 per cent of community income. However, the practice of basing membership in the Jewish people on the purchase of a burial plot is quite problematic. Increasingly, where the purchase of a burial plot is required of couples desiring to be married by a rabbi, the decision is made to marry under civil law. The withdrawal of consent to be taxed by increasing numbers of potential constituents has greatly weakened the power of communal leadership. Interestingly, the use of access to the cemetery in order to impose conformity is a cultural pattern that proceeds directly from the Catholic church, which also denies burial to non-conformists.

Another important characteristic of the communities is their governance by authoritarian methods. A high proportion of community leaders are in their seventies or even eighties and have held office for decades. A frequently heard pleasantry is that "Paraguay has its General Stroessner, and we have our. . . ." (Alfredo Stroessner, dictator of Paraguay, came to power in 1954 and is still firmly in control of the government.) The president of one major Jewish umbrella organization led his community for 30 years. In 1983 the membership split when an attempt was made to limit the tenure of the president to "only" nine consecutive terms in office. Characteristically, the split reflected ethnic strains, with Ashkenazim and Germans on one side, and Sephardim and members of the Sports Club on the other. An attempted reconciliation through a national convention ended in a fistfight, duplicating in miniature the street violence that was then occurring outside as the government maneuvered to keep itself in power by subverting the constitution. There are now two rival Jewish *kehillot* functioning, a result that has been hailed as a victory for communal integration, since the two largest ethnic groups did indeed merge, retaining "the Jewish Stroessner" as their president and keeping control over the cemetery.

Only two of the communities surveyed here—Montevideo and Rio—have undergone a renewal of leadership, with second-generation Latin

Americans assuming important positions. Elsewhere, there is extreme recalcitrance at bringing in new leaders. Women are seldom inducted into leadership roles, save as representatives of gender-distinct groups.

The operation of the *kehillot* must be assessed within the context of the overall political scene. No Latin American political system functions on the principle of a peaceful alternation of power between opposing factions. Elections are widely regarded as a form of manipulation of the popular will, alongside the mass media, foreign exchange controls, organized street demonstrations, and the secret police. One does not have in Latin America what analysts of United States politics call a "democratic mold"—a social construct that creates an expectation of democracy in all the component units of society. Despite the electoral apparatus with which the body politic is bedecked, there have been very few windows of opportunity for democracy in Latin America—Uruguay in the 1930's and 1940's, Chile in the 1950's and 1960's, Argentina briefly in the 1960's and again in 1984. In Latin America the social construct is authoritarian, and many citizen organizations adopt the same style. Thus, it is not surprising that the *kehillot* do not function in a democratic fashion. Elections are held, but, with some important exceptions, power does not pass from the incumbents. Within the *kehillot,* as within society at large, the breakdown of authoritarian control does not lead to the spontaneous birth of democracy. Rather, there is anarchy, followed by the reimposition of control.

Why, then, trouble with elections at all? The question as it relates to the larger society has been addressed by many scholars of Latin America, who, as noted above, identify a certain imitative quality in Latin American political behavior. Mimesis likewise characterizes the behavior of the *kehillot,* but in this case the model is Israel. The party designations and lists of candidates in communal elections follow Israeli party lines; the Buenos Aires voter faces the same political choices as does the voter in Tel Aviv. This element of unreality helps to account for the diminishing number of Jews who take part in *kehillah* elections.

Every Latin American Jewish community passed through a period of bitter confrontation between Zionists and Communists. The Zionists won out, and today all the *kehillot* are Zionist in orientation. (In some places the Bund, the Jewish socialist party, retains a foothold.) Historically, Latin American Jews have contributed proportionately more funds and personnel to Israel than have Jews in the United States.

Today, Israel is the focus of attention of the Latin American Jewish communities, and is often the only unifying element among the various ethnic groups. The United Israel Campaign provides the major occasion for cooperation among competing factions. Israeli diplomats, personifying the ideal of Jewish unity and Jewish power, are accorded great deference. An Israeli ambassador is widely regarded as a leader of the local Jewish community.

For the *kehillah* leaders themselves, immersion in communal politics serves as an outlet for political energies that are stifled on the national political scene. Being excluded from the central decision-making bodies of society—the church, the army, the landowning jockey club set, the labor unions, etc.—they have no other arena in which they can exercise political skills and give expression to political ideologies.

Nowhere in Latin America are there sufficient numbers of Jews to enable them to function as a political interest group. In fact, any such organized Jewish participation in national politics would probably be severely criticized. The *kehillot* strive mightily to maintain neutrality in national politics, the goal being to get along with whatever government is in power. This motivation fortifies the drive for Jewish unity, which will always be preferred over a generous display of democratic pluralism. There is a conservative bias inherent in Jewish communal conduct, since any misstep might lead to severe negative consequences. Characteristically, when under pressure, the *kehillot* have not hesitated to jettison radical elements within the Jewish community.

Ideological tolerance, legal protection for dissent and dissenters, and a willingness to compromise are not qualities for which Latin American politics is noted. In societies riven by class and racial divisions, the issues appear too important to be resolved by compromise. Under these circumstances, the Latin American *kehillot* continue to follow the pattern established in Europe, where survival required a united front in the face of host societies which were always potentially hostile. The fluidity of Latin American politics and the frequency with which Jews are forced into zero-sum games persuade community leaders that this is the only reasonable course of action.

Understandably, the defensive posture of the *kehillot* is not attractive to Jewish youth, who are increasingly drawn to the political arena of the university. Being far more politicized in Latin America than in the United States, the universities offer a challenge that is both dangerous and potentially rewarding. The issues which engage students have to do with national concerns—economic development, political reform, redistribution of wealth, and identification with the Third World. Ultimately, this may mean alignment with the Arabs and antagonism toward Israel.

In Latin America as elsewhere, successive generations of left-wing Jewish intellectuals have made important contributions to their national societies, without regard to their Jewish origins. Zionism tends to become irrelevant for these people when they place their ideals at the service of general society. Individuals whose political formation took place in Hashomer Hatzair, the left-wing Zionist movement, have gone on to assume positions in left-wing governments in Chile, Cuba, and Mexico, while dropping their associations with the Jewish people. A most notable example is Velodia Teitelboim, who designed the land reform program put into effect by the Allende government in Chile. In the case of Cuba, Jews have played a role in political organizations and the government since the beginning of the Castro regime. These Jews have no contact with the small organized Jewish community that remains on the island. "They are apart from us, they never come here," says an affiliated Jew. "So if somebody tells you that in the Jewish community everybody is to the right—there are no leftists in the community—I say, 'you know why? Because leftists don't come here, that's all.' "

Argentine Jewish leftists, exiled in Mexico, did not seek to establish ties with the Jewish community, nor did the community encourage them to do so. The alienation of Jewish intellectuals is graphically illustrated in the fact that Jewish exiles often chose Mexico or Spain, rather than Israel, as their place of refuge. Indeed, some Argentine Jewish leftists, faced with the option of deportation to Israel or continued incarceration in Argentina, chose to remain in jail. Jewish leftists regard the *kehillot* as hopelessly reactionary, tied to the "imperialist" politics of Israel and the United States.

As a result of some of the factors just mentioned, an unknown number of persons who are ethnically Jewish do not affiliate with the organized Jewish community. In earlier generations it was the isolated Jew—the peddler in Bolivia, the rubber tapper in the Amazon—who drifted out of contact with the Jewish people. Today's assimilator is likely to be an urban-dwelling, university-educated professional who ignores Jewish institutional life and joins the national mainstream. In Latin America, moreso than in other sectors of the Diaspora, it appears that a choice must be made between being in or out of the Jewish community. As in national life, there seems to be little room for compromise.

In order to fully understand Jewish experience in Latin America, it is necessary to know more about the lives of Jews who are outside the *kehillot.* Unfortunately, however, little or no information is available. Still, it is probably fair to say that the unaffiliated account for at least half the potential population of Jews.

Religious Life

From the very beginning, the Latin American Jewish communities were characterized by a strong secular bent. During the period of heaviest migration, European rabbis condemned those Jews who opted to go to South America, arguing that they would quickly assimilate. In part, at least, this proved to be correct. Given the absence of organized community life, Jews who settled in small towns in the interior nearly always married non-Jewish women, saw their children raised as Catholics, and disappeared as Jews. Likewise, in the cosmopolitan centers, where a nascent middle class was emerging, Jews tended to adopt the ways of anti-clerical, non-practicing Catholics—an important element of the urban population. Small wonder, then, that by 1917 a qualified observer could estimate the Jewish population of Latin America at 150,000, with missing or assimilated Jews numbering between 50,000 and 60,000.[5]

Those Jews who continued to identify as such most often cast their Jewishness in a secular mold. Zionist organizations appeared on the scene prior to religious congregations, and attracted more members. Schools, social welfare agencies, and mutual aid societies absorbed and generated tremendous organizational talent, while *minyanim* were often *ad hoc* affairs brought into being by an individual's need to say kaddish. Synagogues were established without a financial base, and even today few assess annual dues. Instead, fees are solicited for services rendered, a system which does not provide an assured annual income and encourages competition between synagogues.

Since the rabbis who inveighed against Jewish migration to Latin America did not themselves go there, a shortage of religious leaders prevailed from the start; there has always been a need to import religious personnel, including rabbis, cantors, *shochetim,* and *mohelim.* Compounding the problem was the lack of a pool of Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking individuals on which to draw, considering that there had been no Jews in the Iberian peninsula since the fifteenth century. Present estimates of the number of rabbis serving Latin American Jewry range between 30 and 50. Some of these men are quite old.

Among the laity, the scarcity of rabbis finds its parallel in scanty synagogue attendance. The AMERICAN JEWISH YEAR BOOK estimated that only 13,000 of the 225,000 Jews in Buenos Aires attended Rosh Hashanah services in 1978. A rabbi in Rio de Janeiro estimates that only one-fifth of that city's Jews are affiliated with synagogues. A recent survey conducted by the World Jewish Congress' Institute of Jewish Affairs found that only 143 out of 510 Jewish faculty members at Mexican universities belonged to a synagogue. In striking contrast, 406 professors contributed to the United Israel Appeal. Zionism, in short, is the religion of Latin American Jews.

Despite the fact that only a minority of Latin American Jews are moved by a religious sensibility, and even fewer observe the *halakhah* in daily life, Latin American synagogues are, with few exceptions, Orthodox in form. Rabbis are hired by congregations to suit the most observant members, and even secular Jews seem more comfortable with Jewish rites that are traditional. The role of the rabbi in the Latin American Jewish communities is more that of a religious functionary than a spiritual guide. In general, Latin

---

[5] See Harry O. Sandberg, "The Jews of Latin America," AJYB, Vol. 19, 1917–1918, pp. 35–105.

American rabbis have not seen themselves as leaders. Thus, the election of Salvador Allende to the presidency in Chile precipitated a flight by all the rabbis who were able to travel. Only in recent years have individual rabbis in Argentina and Brazil (all of them educated in the United States) emerged as true leaders of their congregations in any but the narrowest sense.

The most important development in decades in the religious sphere was the founding of the Conservative Seminario Rabinico in Buenos Aires, under the patronage of the World Council of Synagogues. This institution, the first of its kind in South America, came into being in 1962 mainly through the effort of Rabbi Marshall Meyer, a Connecticut yankee trained at the Jewish Theological Seminary and Columbia University. The Seminario enrolls some 300 high school and college students for Hebrew study four nights a week. At any one time, about 30 students are passing through the eight-year program of rabbinical training. Thus, for the first time, Latin American congregations are able to secure rabbis who are native Spanish speakers. Graduates of the Seminario are now serving in pulpits in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Peru, Venezuela, and Colombia. The Seminario also supports an extensive translation program; more than 60 major Jewish works have appeared in Spanish, making them accessible to Argentine readers.

The origins of Progressive Judaism in Latin America date back to the 1930's, when refugees from Nazi Germany arrived on the continent. Akin to Reform in the United States, Progressive Judaism is not always clearly differentiated from Conservative Judaism on the Latin American scene. Whether closer to Reform or Conservatism, however, the Progressive movement is beginning to develop options that appeal to a modern religious sensibility.

In Brazil the notable Progressive congregations are São Paulo's Congregação Israelita Paulista, led by Rabbi Henry Sobel, and Rio de Janeiro's Associação Religiosa Israelita, led by Rabbi Roberto Graetz and his associate Clifford Kulwin. All three men are graduates of Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, and are members of the Central Conference of American Rabbis.

Temple Emanu-El in Buenos Aires, led by Rabbi Nissenboim, a graduate of the Seminario Rabinico, is the only Reform synagogue in Argentina. The Conservative congregation, Comunidad Bet El, led by Rabbi Marshall T. Meyer, is in the forefront of efforts to revive Judaism in the country. Other Progressive synagogues in Buenos Aires include Culto Israelita de Belgrano and Lamroth Hakol. Kol Shearith Israel in Panama and Mikve-Israel-Emmanuel in Curaçāo follow the Reform path. Círculo Israelita in Santiago has engaged both a Conservative and a Reform rabbi; the former, Angel Kreiman, is an Argentine, while the latter, Peter Tarlow, is a North American.

The Progressive synagogues utilize Spanish/Portuguese as well as Hebrew in their services. Few, however, permit mixed seating. In sharp contrast to the Orthodox synagogues, the Progressive congregations reach out actively to young people through youth groups and summer camps. Most importantly, they convert non-Jews who wish to marry Jews, thus reversing a process that has been carrying off the intermarried and their offspring for the past century. These conversions are not recognized by the Orthodox rabbinate.

It is among the Progressive rabbis that Latin American Jews are beginning to find new leaders. Rabbi Meyer, in particular, breathed life into Judaism as a system of ethics by dealing with the Argentine military regime on the matter of Jewish prisoners. His courage in a difficult situation gave meaning and dignity to the role of religion in Jewish life.

It is reasonable to speculate that the secularism of Latin American Jews has reached a dead end. In those places where nationality is circumscribed by Catholic norms—e.g., Mexico, or the Argentina of the junta—Jews remain outside the nation as a suspect "race." However, in such countries as Chile, Peru, and Ecuador, Judaism finds a recognized, if subordinate, place as a tolerated religion. It is not the secular solution favored by Jews in the United States, but it works under the prevailing conditions.

Sephardic Jews long ago made this adjustment. For them, the religious attraction has generally been stronger than the Zionist tie—one of the principal ways in which they differ from Ashkenazim. The latter have been less than successful in integrating themselves into Latin American societies through various secular strategies. Zionism, the strongest unifying element among the Ashkenazim, functioned effectively only so long as it focused on an idealized country that was far away. Once the State of Israel came into being and entered the Western hemisphere as an active participant in its politics, it necessarily became an element of contention. Jewish socialism (the Bund) kept *yiddishkeit* alive for a generation and more, but had little attraction for native-born youth who spoke Spanish and Portuguese.

With the growth of Progressive Judaism, the principle of choice has been introduced into Jewish religious life. Increasing numbers of congregations are likely to exercise that choice, bringing about a religious renaissance among Latin American Jewry. Both believers and nonbelievers will contribute to the process of redefining Jews as a religious, rather than a secular, group.

Jewish Education

Jewish schools in Latin America reflect the ethnic and ideological divisions within the communities. Over the years, they have developed as independent entities, frequently in competition with one another for pupils and funds. Many major cities operate boards of Jewish education to bring the competition under control and regularize the fundraising process. However, the boards do not determine the curricula of Jewish schools.

In those countries that have been relatively open to the integration of Jews into the civic culture—Argentina, Uruguay, and Chile—Jewish schools have been only minimally effective. Schools have been most successful in those parts of the continent where Jews stand at the margin of society, e.g., Mexico, Ecuador, and Peru.[6]

Ninety-five per cent of Jewish children in Lima, Peru attend the Colegio Leon Pinelo, a Jewish integral school offering a comprehensive Jewish and general curriculum. Ninety-two per cent of Jewish children in Cali, Colombia attend the Jorge Isaacs Jewish integral school. In San José, Costa Rica, 90 per cent of Jewish children attend the Instituto Jaim Weizman Jewish integral school. In 1983 all but two of the Jewish children in Monterrey, Mexico were enrolled in the Hatikva Jewish day school.

Uruguay reports 2,200 students in three Jewish schools—Ariel, Escuela Integral Hebreo-Uruguaya, and Yavne. An additional 500 children are enrolled in the ORT-sponsored Institute of Technical Studies. Taken together, these students comprise less than one quarter of the total Jewish school-age population.

Recent data for Argentina are not available, but 1967 figures show 2,450 students enrolled in Jewish integral schools and another 320 enrolled in three-day supplementary schools. In total, 8,900 Jewish children were receiving some sort of Jewish education. This figure comprised no more than 19 per cent of Jewish children of school age believed to be living in Argentina at the time. A breakdown of the figures shows steadily diminishing enrollment by age; the 1,885 children entering the first grade had dwindled to 798 by the sixth and 126 by the twelfth.

The overarching reason for the abandonment of Jewish schooling is the existence of an acceptable alternative. This is clearly illustrated in the case of Chile, which has an excellent system of private and public secular schools. The Jewish community of Santiago maintains the Instituto Hebreo, a school which fuses all religious tendencies, is Zionist oriented, and emphasizes the acquisition of Hebrew language skills. The school is housed on a large campus, and enrolls more than a thousand students in grades one through twelve. In addition, there are several supplementary schools in

---

[6] The literature on Jewish education in Latin America is large, but extremely uneven. A review of the subject will be found in chapter 7 of Elkin, *Jews of the Latin American Republics, op. cit.* Two papers delivered at the second research conference on the Jewish experience in Latin America, held at the University of New Mexico in March 1984, are highly relevant: David Schers, "Culture, Identity, and Community Institutions of Latin American Jewry" and Daniel Levy, "Jewish Education in Latin America."

Santiago which offer instruction toward bar and bat mitzvah. Still, if the Chilean Jewish population is anywhere near the 30,000 figure usually cited, it is apparent that most Jewish children are not receiving any Jewish education at all.

In some countries the popularity of private schools among upwardly mobile, middle-class families has placed Jewish schools in a strong competitive position to attract non-Jews. This seems to be the case in Panama, where the two Jewish integral schools, La Academia Hebrea and Instituto Alberto Einstein, are said to attract 100 per cent attendance by Jewish children. The schools also attract substantial numbers of non-Jewish Panamanians, including the children of General Omar Torrijos, former president of the republic. The same phenomenon is also evident in various cities of Colombia. The outstanding example, however, is Brazil.[7] In that country, where worldly ambition has acquired the status of a patriotic virtue, it is widely recognized that professional success requires a good education, something which Jewish schools offer. As a consequence, in 1978 there were nearly as many non-Jews as Jews enrolled in schools bearing the names of Max Nordau, Scholem Aleichem, and Eliezer Steinberg.[8]

In the Jewish integral schools, individuals who teach subjects required by the state must have the necessary pedagogy certificates. Teachers of Jewish subjects have varied educational backgrounds, ranging from casual to intense. In Buenos Aires the Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina supports several normal schools: a teachers' seminary, which offers a twelfth-grade course; a school for teachers and technicians in institutional work, which functions at a higher level; and a Hebrew Academy, which graduates prospective teachers who complete their studies at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. The Seminario Rabinico also trains teachers. Graduates of these programs are to be found in most of the Jewish school systems on the continent. Indeed, it is common to find in any one school a mixture of local, Argentine, and Israeli faculty.

There is a teacher-training institute in Mexico, the Seminario Idish-Hebreo de Maestros. One hundred and six of the 148 teachers currently found in Mexican Jewish schools are graduates of the program. Their formidable linguistic skills are a tribute to the quality of instruction at the Seminario. Unfortunately, since knowledge of Yiddish is a prerequisite for entry, Sephardic applicants are handicapped. On the other hand, many of the Ashkenazic graduates take positions in Sephardic schools.

---

[7] See "Brazilian Jewry: The Jewish School System in Rio de Janeiro," David Horowitz Institute for Research on Developing Countries, Tel Aviv University, 1980.

[8] The Jewish enrollment figure in the integral schools was 4,059, approximately 46 per cent of the total Jewish school-age population. Rio also has an ORT technical high school with some 280 students.

In Brazil a large proportion of the teachers of Jewish subjects have university degrees, although not always in the areas they are teaching. Their salaries match those of teachers of general subjects.

Outreach by Israeli agencies, both governmental and semi-private, is emerging as a crucial factor in sustaining Jewish education in Latin America. Zionism has always been a major dynamic of Jewish communal life in Latin America, and Israeli teachers who epitomize the Zionist ideal are welcome collaborators in the school systems. Numerous Israeli agencies offer direct assistance to Latin American Jewish schools. However, there is no effort at coordination, either in Israel or in the recipient countries.

The department of education and culture of the Jewish Agency had 88 teachers working in eight Latin American countries in 1977. More than half —12 in Uruguay, ten in Argentina, eight in Chile, two in Paraguay, and 14 in Brazil—were paid either in full or part by the Israeli government. The department for Torah education fielded 55 Israeli teachers in Latin America in 1977, almost all of them paid in full by the Israeli government. Other Israeli agencies provided technical assistance to Latin American Jewish schools and youth movements. These programs have been important in raising the level of instruction in several school systems.

Israel has also been an important center for the training of teachers destined to teach in Latin America. Haim Greenberg College (operated by the department of education and culture) and Gold College (sponsored by the Torah education department), both in Jerusalem, have trained hundreds of teachers since the 1950's.

The problems of Jewish schools in Latin America are many, but they are hardly unrecognizable to those familiar with Jewish educational systems elsewhere. Low salaries and low status serve to keep well-qualified individuals, particularly men, out of the teaching profession. Schools rely heavily on female teachers, who are sometimes poorly trained, and usually inadequately compensated, particularly those women who are well qualified. Economic difficulty in any particular country rather quickly translates into diminished support for Jewish schools, since they rely on voluntary contributions or subventions from communal agencies.

There is widespread agreement that Jewish schools serve as an excellent launching pad for entry into universities and professional careers. There is less agreement about their ability to transmit Jewish knowledge and values. On the whole, negative assessments are more common than favorable ones. In the opinion of one former communal official in Chile: "Jewish teachers tend to be underpaid, overworked, and not terribly effective. So much so, that during local camp sessions, those Jewish youth who receive no Jewish education have been found to have a greater loyalty to Judaism than those who attend the Instituto. One almost senses an inverse ratio between Jewish education and loyalty to Judaism." A correspondent from Uruguay observes: "There have been no real studies of effectiveness [of the school system]. I am afraid that if such a study were undertaken, the results would be disappointing." From Mexico comes the comment: "With respect to Jewish education, I fear there are deficiencies and the youngsters are ignorant of the essence of Judaism. They are totally unacquainted with some important aspects, above all the differences between Judaism and Christianity."

The Position of Women

The first clue to the unique situation of Jewish women in Latin America is that their demographic characteristics run counter to those of women in the surrounding populations. Rates of birth, infant mortality, family size, and longevity all distinguish Jewish from non-Jewish women, although there are variations between countries, as well as between social classes.

Jewish women, relative to all other women in Latin American societies, have fewer children and are preoccupied with child care for fewer years. They are less likely to be devastated by the loss of "angelitos," infants destined to die at an early age. Jewish women have broken the link between sex and reproduction, thus freeing themselves from the biological servitude which is the lot of most Latin American women. This single fact sets them apart from the majority of women on the continent and groups them with non-Jewish middle-class women in the major urban centers.

In Latin America, as elsewhere, literacy correlates positively with late marriage and limited births, while illiteracy correlates with early marriage and multiple births. Jewish community surveys establish that there is universal literacy among Jewish Latins, male and female, while illiteracy continues to be rampant in most of Latin America—e.g., 40 per cent in Brazil and 35 per cent in Mexico—with female rates running considerably higher than those of males. Moreover, the education of Jewish women does not stop with basic literacy. In 1960, 21 per cent of Argentine Jewish women aged 20–24 were either in college or had already graduated from college. In Brazil in 1969, 52 per cent of Jewish women aged 20–24 were attending college, a figure that has almost certainly grown in the intervening years. In contrast, only 3.3 per cent of the general population of Brazil attended institutions of higher education.

The ability of Jewish women to limit their births and their high levels of education have combined to create occupational opportunities that are far superior to those enjoyed by most non-Jewish women. The single country for which occupational data are available is Argentina. These derive from an analysis of the 1960 census, in which 119,425 Jewish women aged 14 and over were identified.[9] Out of the total, 69 per cent were classified as homemakers, while 20 per cent (23,560 individuals) were in the work force; the remaining 11 per cent comprised students, retired people, and institutionalized persons. Three-quarters of the women workers were white collar, while one-quarter was blue collar, a distribution similar to that prevailing among Jewish men. The distribution, however, differed markedly from that of the general population of Argentina, in which more than half of all working women were in blue-collar occupations.

Among Argentine Jewish working women, 4,731 were classified as members of the free professions, with about half being teachers. Lesser numbers were in the higher-status professions—medicine, engineering, architecture, etc.—which Jewish men favor. Some 5,720 Jewish women were office employees, while another 5,155 worked as proprietors of wholesale or retail stores, saleswomen, and so forth. Over 5,000 Argentine Jewish women held blue-collar jobs—3,334 as factory workers and 2,014 as household employees (maids, cooks, etc.). An additional 2,510 Jewish women worked as peddlers or operators of street kiosks.

In a survey conducted in 1963, contact was made with 221 university graduates, including 61 women, living in the city of Tucumán.[10] One-third of the women had taken degrees in biochemistry or pharmacy; another third held degrees from one of the faculties of philosophy and letters at the University of Tucumán, but their fields were not specified. The fact that the researchers did not identify the occupations of the women while doing so for the men suggests that breadwinning was still very much in the hands of the latter when the survey was conducted.

It is clear that there is a considerable number of Jewish women professionals in Argentina, although there are Jewish proletarian women and penny capitalists as well. A researcher who was studying Buenos Aires women engaged in stereotypically masculine occupations found that one-third of the sample was Jewish.[11] Observation confirms that there are Jewish women pharmacists, college professors, dentists, physicians, and psychoanalysts throughout Latin America.

Jewish women, like their non-Jewish counterparts, benefit from the availability of cheap domestic labor. Combining marriage, children, and a career is made easier by the presence in the household of extra hands to cook, clean, and drive the car. A 1969 study of São Paulo Jews found that only 20 per cent of Jewish families were without domestic help in the home. Nearly 12 per cent of the families had two domestic employees, and approximately two per cent had even more than that.[12]

---

[9] The information in this and the following paragraphs is derived from U.O. Schmelz and Sergio DellaPergola, *The Demography of the Jews of Argentina and Other Countries of Latin America* (Tel Aviv, 1974), in Hebrew.

[10] See Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina, Instituto de Investigaciones Sociales, *Primer censo de la población judía de la provincia de Tucumán: Datos y comentarios*, Buenos Aires, 1963.

[11] See Nora Scott Kinzer, "Women Professionals in Buenos Aires," in Ann Pescatello (ed.), *Female and Male in Latin America* (Pittsburgh, 1973), pp. 159–190.

Two cultural hallmarks distinguish Jewish from non-Jewish women in Latin America. One is the attitude toward women's education. The other is the response to *machismo.* The education which facilitates the entry of Jewish women into business and professional life issues directly from the Jewish tradition of respect for learning and the learned, a tradition which may initially have been confined to males, but which long ago spread to encompass females as well. In this regard, Jewish women emerge from a different cultural matrix than Catholic women. Historically, Catholic women of intellect needed to take vows of sexual abstinence and seek shelter in a cloister in order to gain the freedom to use their minds. Jewish women, on the other hand, have not had to abjure family life and isolate themselves from society in order to be intellectually active.

Machismo, a powerful force in Latin American life, has been defined as "exaggerated aggressiveness and intransigence in male-to-male relationships and arrogance and sexual aggression in male-to-female relationships."[13] Given the realities of the Latin American situation—the juxtaposition of great wealth with great poverty, a long history of racial exploitation and miscegenation, and a lack of opportunity for most disadvantaged women—large numbers of women enter into liaisons with married men who derive status from the luxuries they bestow on their mistresses. Married women, it is said, gain strength by identifying with the spiritual superiority of the Virgin Mary. Thus, the male aggressor is matched by the female defender; sexual aggression confirms that "men will be men" and offers women the opportunity to prove their greater spirituality.

Jewish culture has been devoid of both *machismo* and *marianismo,* its feminine counterpart. Traditional Jewish culture exalted intellectual and spiritual pursuits, not male aggression. It has been observed: "The absence of the macho mystique . . . freed Jewish men and women—until they assimilated into modern Western societies—from the sharpest differentiation of gender characteristics: the strong, emotionally controlled, yet potentially violent male versus the weak, emotional, and tender female. Jewish culture 'permitted' men to be gentle and emotionally expressive, and women to be strong. . . ."[14]

---

[12] See Henrique Rattner, *Tradição e mudança: A comunidade judaica em São Paulo* (Sao Paulo, 1970).

[13] Evelyn P. Stevens, "Marianismo: The Other Face of Machismo," in Ann Pescatello (ed.), *Female and Male in Latin America, op cit.,* pp. 90–91.

Jews in Latin America experience a jarring disjuncture in sexual mores, since the *machismo/marianismo* syndrome presents contradictions which men resolve more easily than women. The education of Jewish women, the culture in which they are raised, and their access to meaningful employment work against the development of an attitude of submissiveness to men. For Jewish men, however, *machismo* may prove so attractive that they will be increasingly drawn to non-Jewish women who have been socialized to accept it. Anecdotal evidence suggests that this is in fact taking place in countries such as Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico. Jewish women in these countries are caught in the contradiction between *machista* Latin society and the categorical monogamy of Judaism as practiced since the twelfth century.

Catholic-Jewish Relations

The age-old involvement of the Catholic church in the teaching of antisemitism was implicitly acknowledged and explicitly renounced at the second Vatican council in 1965, which issued the following statement as a part of the declaration *Nostra Aetate:* "Remembering, then, her common heritage with the Jews and moved not by any political consideration but solely by the religious motivation of Christian charity, she deplores all hatreds, persecutions, displays of antisemitism leveled at any time or from any source against the Jews." The guidelines issued for the implementation of *Nostra Aetate* were even more explicit: "The spiritual bonds and historical links binding the church to Judaism condemn, as opposed to the very spirit of Christianity, all forms of antisemitism and discrimination, which in any case the dignity of the human person suffices to condemn."

The Catholic church in Latin America has chosen to disregard Vatican II's teachings about Jews and Judaism, even as it has undergone a process of renewal and liberalization. The liberalizing spirit first manifested itself at the Conference of Latin American Bishops, which was convened by Pope Paul VI at Medellín in 1968, with the aim of implementing Vatican II. Medellín has since become a code word for the emergence of a group of radical priests and theologians, influenced by philosophies allied to Marxism, who sought to use the evangelical message of Christianity to promote social change. The more extreme among the proponents of "liberation theology," as this trend came to be called, have been prepared to bring their message to the people at the point of a gun, by joining various guerrilla movements.

---

[14] Charlotte Baum, Paula Hyman, and Sonya Michel, *The Jewish Woman in America* (New York, 1976), p. 14.

Liberation theology is Latin America's major contribution to Catholic thought, a contribution which has recently been rejected by the papacy. It is rooted in the book of Exodus, which liberation theologians interpret as containing an injunction to struggle against misery and exploitation in order to build a just society.[15] Oddly enough, while liberation theologians have become involved in revolutionary movements in Nicaragua, Peru, El Salvador, Colombia, and Guatemala, as well as other Third World nations, they have taken no position on the original liberation movement—that of the Jews. About Zionism and antisemitism they have been silent.

A session of the Conference of Latin American Bishops, convened at Puebla by Pope Paul VI in 1977 and reconvened two years later by John Paul II, became the scene of a confrontation between followers of liberation theology and the intensely conservative hierarchy of the church, which stressed the need for national security, interpreted as the right of governments to suppress subversion by the use of armed force. The final draft of the Puebla document, some 240 pages long, criticized the exploitation of the poor by the rich, and the exploitation of developing nations by multinational corporations. An early draft of the conference resolutions, prepared by Msgr. Jorge Mejia of Argentina, included a statement on the church's relationship to the Jews, referring to "the permanent values of Judaism" and deploring the persistence of antisemitic attitudes. However, this statement was omitted from the final declaration.

In the absence of official condemnation of antisemitism, traditional church teachings continue to color popular attitudes, sometimes outlasting the willingness of church leaders to defend them. Thus, in February 1978, toward the end of the war of extermination against political dissidents, the Argentine military government established a national register of religious sects, requiring all groups except the Roman Catholic church to register within 90 days. The purpose, as stated in the decree, was to establish "effective control" over non-Catholic religions. At the time, the junta had already banned the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Hare Krishna, and the Divine Light Mission on grounds that they were "conspiring against the constitution." Under the new law, any group of believers (except Roman Catholics) considered "injurious to the public order, national security, morality, or good practices" of Argentine society could be prevented from practicing their religion. The most remarkable fact about the register was that it was assigned to the ministry of foreign relations. The implication was clear: to be non-Roman Catholic was to be non-Argentine. All this, as both the Buenos Aires *Herald* and *La Prensa* pointed out, was in direct contravention of the Argentine constitution.

---

[15] Liberation theology is addressed from a Jewish perspective in Leon Klenicki, "The Theology of Liberation: A Latin American Jewish Exploration," *American Jewish Archives,* April 1983, pp. 27–39.

The heightened identification between Roman Catholicism and Argentine nationality was reinforced the following year, when the ministry of culture and education issued guidelines for a new course on "moral and civic development" that was to be required of all junior high school students.[16] The new course imposed a curriculum that was totally christological in nature, including papal encyclicals and pastoral letters. According to *La Luz*, a Jewish periodical, the works of notorious antisemites were also included in the program. Jews, Protestants, and even Roman Catholic spokesmen made representations to the government to have the course withdrawn on grounds that it violated the constitution as well as the education law of 1870, which prescribed lay education for all children. The Delegación de Asociaciones Israelitas Argentinas (DAIA), the representative body of Argentine Jewry, issued a formal protest that the course would inculcate religious concepts alien to Jewish students, thereby violating their freedom of conscience and introducing a divisive factor into Argentine society. As a consequence of the various protests, the government modified the decree by revising the curriculum to exclude "confessional elements" and to include books by Jewish philosophers and political thinkers.

The nature of the groups that favored retention of the "moral and civic development" course in its original form can be gathered from press comments at the time. According to *Cabildo*, an admirer of the fascist right, "only the corrupt and the corruptors could feel themselves violated by this law. *Falange de Fe* labelled the DAIA's protest irreverent and disrespectful. A statement issued by Catholic lay institutions attacked the DAIA for asserting that the teaching of Catholic morality could be divisive, noting instead: "Weakening the [Catholic] identity [of the state] is betraying the national being."

Elsewhere on the continent, ecumenical feelings are beginning to stir. There have been denunciations of antisemitism by individual bishops, interfaith Passover celebrations, and discussions of Catholic-Jewish relations in the bulletin of the Conference of Latin American Bishops. Cardinal Silva Henriquez of Chile, a strong proponent of human rights and a major supporter of the victims of the political struggle in Chile, maintains friendly relations with Jews. A Jewish representative was invited to attend the third general assembly of the Conference of Latin American Bishops held at Puebla. Cardinal Ernesto Corripio Ahumada, archbishop primate of Mexico, has made several statements on Jewish-Christian relations that are in harmony with the second Vatican council. In 1982 Corripio Ahumada made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, where he was received by Israeli president Chaim Herzog and Mayor Teddy Kollek of Jerusalem. The pilgrimage was widely covered by the Mexican press and established a foundation for Christian-Jewish dialogue.

---

[16] This incident is the subject of an unpublished paper by Roberta J. Astroff.

If a trend can be observed in these events, it is in the direction of a willingness on the part of some traditionally conservative elements in the church hierarchy to open a dialogue with Jews, despite their failure to openly endorse the teachings of Vatican II on the matter. On the other hand, those who espouse liberation theology reflect a prevalent left-wing attitude in overlooking the situation of the Jews and in failing to classify attacks against them as human rights infractions. The same observation holds true for the American-based church organizations that are involved in the Latin American liberation movements. The Maryknoll Order, for example, which has made a major effort to promote human rights in Central America, has no record when it comes to the Jews. Overall it can be stated that, with some honorable exceptions, neither the church nor the counterchurch have risen to the challenge of redefining the humanity of the Jews in the light of Vatican II.

THE INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

Latin American Jews and the United States

In the minds of many Latin Americans, it is international capitalism which supplies the link between Jews and the United States. Indeed, it has been said that the very word "Jew" has become an ideograph for capitalism. How did this situation come about?

For deep-rooted cultural reasons, capitalism was not the mode of production in Latin America when Jews settled there during the nineteenth century. The traditional sources of wealth were land ownership, the administration of church affairs, and control of the government and the government patronage system, none of which were accessible to Jews. Jewish immigrants entering the Latin American scene found it difficult to get a foothold in any of the traditional occupations. However, being literate and experienced in commerce and industry, they established a role for themselves in the local economies. Jews became peddlers, carrying combs, tableware, clothing, and religious artifacts into the homes of people who did not have the money or the shoes to enter a respectable store. Jews also started cottage industries, manufacturing socks, underwear, buttons, and all the other homely items that the poor had never been able to afford. By way of their own labor and savings, some Jews succeeded in establishing permanent retail stores and factories. Some were in a position to fill domestic needs when World War I closed down the shipping lanes, cutting off the supply of imported consumer goods on which the Latin American market had previously relied. Jews became the initiators of "import substitution" industries in textiles, aluminum, plumbing materials, wood pulp for paper, shoes, and ready-made clothing. Today, as a result of having entered on the ground floor, Jews are owners of important commercial and industrial facilities throughout Latin America. Not all Latin American Jews are wealthy, but some belong to a class of entrepreneurs—the majority of them non-Jews—who have become rich through their activities in the industrial sector.[17]

Throughout the Third World, capitalist pursuits lead entrepreneurs to identify with the United States, the bulwark of the capitalist system. On the ideological level, it is a matter of sharing the same value system, one based on achievement rather than ascribed status. On the practical level, entrepreneurial activity brings the United States into play as the major market for raw materials and as a prime source of manufactured goods and investment capital. On the personal level, middle-class people simply enjoy spending time in the United States. All of these factors apply directly in the case of Jews. Beyond that, many Latin Jews regard New York as the worldwide center of Jewish life.

As a system for the production of wealth, capitalism has been responsible for considerable development in Latin America. However, Latin Americans have observed that the greater the development, the greater the underdevelopment; increased prosperity for the few has been accompanied by increased poverty for the many. The free enterprise system is all too often experienced in Latin America as a form of international piracy, one that arouses anger in those who believe they have been robbed.[18] Thus, while alignment with the United States has come naturally to Jews, it has had the result of making them targets of those groups that are anti-American.

Latin American Jews and Israel

Latin American Jews identified with the Jewish homeland from the start. Indeed, in the absence of a strong religious core, Zionism became the central Jewish passion. Thus, a Hovevei Zion group was formed in Buenos Aires in 1897, even though there were only a few thousand Jews in the city at the time. The Balfour Declaration was publicly hailed in communities such as

---

[17] Detailed accounts of Jewish entrepreneurial activities can be found in Rattner, *Tradição e mudança, op. cit.;* Jacobo Schifter Sikora, Lowell Gudmundson, and Mario Solera Castro, *El judio en Costa Rica* (San Jose, 1979); Alfredo M. Seiferheld, *Inmigración y presencia judías en el Paraguay* (Asuncion, 1981); and successive editions of *Comunidades judías de latinoamerica* (Buenos Aires, 1966, 1968, 1970, 1971–1972, 1973–1975).

[18] See Stanley Stein and Barbara Stein, *The Colonial Heritage of Latin America* (New York, 1970); and Andre Gunder Frank, *Development and Underdevelopment in Latin America.*

Santiago, where there were no regular religious services and where Jews usually kept a low profile. The Jewish national movement provided an emotional focus for immigrants who were having difficulty feeling their way into their new countries of residence. The Zionist cause also served as an outlet for political activity for individuals who could at best play marginal roles in Latin American political life.

The "melting pot" psychology that was long dominant in the United States can be said to have taken root only in Uruguay, of all the Latin American countries. It was more characteristic of immigrants to Latin America to retain their identification with their countries of origin for several generations. Jews, however, showed no such attachment, and this circumstance aroused suspicion, activating the myth of the Wandering Jew. The creation of the State of Israel brought this situation to an end, and to a certain extent legitimated Jewish existence.

The Zionist orientation of the organized Jewish communities was reinforced by an internal struggle against Communist elements, an ideological battle that was waged between the two world wars and in the immediate post-World War II period. The Zionists won the battle for control of the *kehillot* in every country of Latin America, and they continue to dominate the organized communities today. Life within the *kehillot* typically revolves around Zionist activities—sale of Israel bonds, celebration of Israel Independence Day, etc. Other activities focus on a world that is gone, e.g., the uprising of the Warsaw ghetto. Few activities link the *kehillot* with their specific national environments. Indeed, one Mexican synagogue group reported that "the Mexicans" would not look favorably on Jews celebrating Mexican Independence Day.

To a certain extent, Latin American Jews live vicariously through Israel. They shared in the worldwide euphoria at the creation of the state. Moreover, Israel's smashing victory in the Six Day War enhanced Jewish status in Latin America as elsewhere. At various times, Israeli technical assistance has reaped goodwill for the Jewish community in countries as disparate as Cuba and Peru. Occasionally, Israel has extricated Jews who have fallen out of favor with the powers that be; Jacobo Timerman, the Argentine journalist, was not the first individual to be released to the custody of an Israeli consul.

The other side of the coin is that Jewish stock has fallen when Israeli actions have proved unpopular. The kidnapping of Adolph Eichmann from a street in Buenos Aires touched off a wave of antisemitism. Anti-Israel as well as anti-Jewish demonstrations took place all over Latin America in the summer of 1982 in the wake of the Sabra and Shattila massacres. Newspapers formerly known for their pro-Israel stance began to question Israel's actions, and indeed its right to exist. Phrases such as "Nazi-Zionism" and "the Palestinian holocaust" surfaced in respectable Mexican and Brazilian newspapers. Relations between the Arab and Jewish communities, traditionally benign in Latin America, became inflamed to a troublesome degree. In certain sectors of Latin American society, the distinction between "*israeli*" (a citizen of Israel) and "*israelita*" (a Spanish term for "Jew") was completely lost. Thus, Roberto Ottalagano, former rector of the University of Buenos Aires, stated: "So far as I am concerned, a Jew is an Israeli and an Israeli is a Jew." Acting on this confused premise, a Peruvian government official called in the leaders of the Lima Jewish community to warn them that if Israel failed to sell Peru the same Kfir fighter planes it had sold Ecuador, the government could not be held responsible for the enraged reaction of the populace. Unqualified support of Israel, combined with confusion about the difference between "Jew" and "Israeli," has led to a situation in which Jews have become hostage to Israel's foreign policy.

What is Israeli foreign policy in Latin America? Prior to creation of the state, and during Israel's early years, the objective was to gain Latin American support in the United Nations and other international forums. This support, however, became less decisive over the years, as a result of the expansion of United Nations membership. While the Latin American states comprised more than a third of the original membership, 20 years later they constituted less than a fifth. During this period, Israel was providing technical assistance to every country of Latin America, most of it in the form of Peace Corps-style programs in hydrogeology, agricultural development, and other such things. The programs brought hundreds of Israelis face-to-face with Latin American government officials, union leaders, and members of youth movements, while Latin Americans, in turn, were trained in Israel.

The goodwill generated by Israeli technical assistance proved to be insufficient to stem the tide when anti-Israel feeling began to emerge. Latin Americans, after all, had for centuries only been distant observers of the European scene. The great events of modern Jewish history—the Holocaust and the creation of the State of Israel—took place far away and did not engage everyone's attention. "Their passions run on a different plane," one Argentine Jewish scholar has observed. As the 1960's unfolded, many Latin Americans found themselves aroused by a quite different historic trend—the rise of the Third World. Latin American governments at this time were also declaring their independence from United States foreign policy. The logic of opposition to United States "imperialism" in Latin America and the Near East called for fraternal relations with the Arab "freedom fighters" and negation of the claims of Jewish nationalism.

Cuba's increasing conformity to Soviet foreign policy positions and Fidel Castro's bid for leadership of the Third World brought an end to the unanimous support that Israel had previously enjoyed among the Latin

American governments.[19] Cuba initiated fraternal relations with the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) at the first conference of the Organization of Solidarity of the Peoples of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, which was held in Havana in 1966. Breaking relations with Israel in 1973, the Cuban government licensed the opening in Havana of a PLO office with diplomatic status. (Cuba's anti-Israel stance, however, was not accompanied by antisemitic manifestations against Cuban Jews.) Shortly thereafter, the Cuban government began training PLO military and intelligence cadres at camps in North Africa, Iraq, and the USSR. In turn, the PLO trained Nicaraguan, Brazilian, and Argentine guerrillas in its camps in Lebanon, South Yemen, and Libya. (A large number of Nicaraguans, taken in Lebanon by the Israelis in the summer of 1982, were quietly returned to their homeland.)

In the 1970's the PLO established links with revolutionary groups all over Latin America, including the Montoneros in Argentina, the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, the FDR-FMLN in El Salvador, and the URNG in Guatemala. In addition, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine developed ties with Chile's MIR and other revolutionary groups.[20] Most important of all was the climate of approbation that grew up around the PLO and the coupling of Latin America's struggle against American imperialism with the Arab world's struggle against Israel.

The coupling of Arab and Latin American nationalism was most clearly manifested in Nicaragua. In the guerrilla war led by the Sandinistas against dictator Anastasio Somoza, the rebels had the support of the PLO from 1970 on, while Somoza, who had always been on good terms with Israel and the local Jewish community (consisting of some 65 families), retained the support of the United States and Israel to the bitter end. The Jewish community was largely engaged in industry and commerce, and prospered economically under Somoza. Nicaragua continued to support Israel at the United Nations even as other Latin American votes were melting away. By the late 1970's Israel was exporting arms to Nicaragua, which were used by Somoza to put down opposition to his regime. When, in 1978, the Carter administration in Washington embargoed arms sales to Somoza, Israel became Nicaragua's chief supplier, sending shipments until just two weeks before the dictator's fall.

The fall of Somoza led to the departure from the country of those who had supported him, including the Jews, and the expropriation of their property. Anti-Israel sentiment surfaced at that time. "We do not forget," one Sandinista stated, "that when we were fighting for our lives, the weapon in the hands of our enemy was an Uzi." On July 20, 1980 the revolutionary government of Nicaragua extended diplomatic recognition to the PLO and authorized it to open an office in Managua.

---

[19] See Yoram Shapira and Edy Kaufman, "Cuba's Israel Policy: The Shift to the Soviet Line," *Cuban Studies*, January 1978.

[20] See "O.L.P.-Victima o Verdugo?" a supplement prepared by the American Jewish Committee for distribution by *La Nacion* and other Argentine newspapers on October 1, 1982.

From 1973 on, the Arab states exerted increasing pressure on Latin American governments to abandon their historic support for Israel and recognize the PLO. These efforts began to bear fruit when oil prices quadrupled, placing the Latin American economies in jeopardy. Representatives of the Arab League were in a position to promise that no underdeveloped country which backed the Arab cause would suffer from an energy shortage.

Taking advantage of an increasing tilt in their direction, Arab representatives meeting in Tunis in 1979 decided to concentrate their efforts on Latin America, aiming to oust the Israelis from the region, as they had previously been ousted from Africa. According to the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, the Arabs also decided to "unleash an antisemitic campaign designed to undermine the status of Jews in Latin America [in order] to nullify the political and economic support which the Latin American Jewish communities provided Israel."[21]

The chief impediment to gains by the PLO in official circles in Latin America was fear that the group would import terrorism to the continent. The hardline military dictatorships in Chile and Argentina rebuffed PLO overtures. Brazil's military government waffled, recognizing the PLO as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, but refusing to authorize the opening of a PLO office in Brasilia. Toward the end of its tenure in October 1982, the Argentine junta permitted press distribution of a pictorial supplement prepared by the Latin American division of the American Jewish Committee, which dramatized PLO terrorist activities and the group's links with terrorist elements in Argentina.

PLO propaganda proved effective where governments cooperated. In Bolivia the left-wing government that took office in 1982 welcomed to its inaugural ceremonies not only the usual official delegations, but also "fraternal delegates" from Eritrea, Cuba, Nicaragua, and the PLO. Scrapping protocol, the fraternal delegates were admitted first, ahead of officially accredited ambassadors. The American and Israeli ambassadors were hissed by the throng, to the accompaniment of chants of "PLO! PLO!" In the Dominican Republic, a country that had been most hospitable to Jews in the past, vicious anti-Israel propaganda occasioned by the Lebanon war spilled over into antisemitic statements in some opposition newspapers. The national legislature adopted two resolutions condemning Israel, although it rejected a proposal to break diplomatic relations with the Jewish state.

---

[21] "P.L.O. Activities in Latin America," report prepared by the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, revised edition, May 1982, p. 3.

The activation of the PLO had severe consequences for Israel. In 1980, 13 countries had embassies in Jerusalem, and 12 of them were Latin American nations. Two years later, the Latin Americans had all moved to Tel Aviv, withdrawing their acknowledgment of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel.

At the same time that Israel was losing ground on the political front in Latin America, it was expanding the dimensions of its trade with the continent. Israel exported $180.4 million worth of goods to Latin America in 1981, and doubled that amount in the following ten months. Some of this was in straight sales, while some was in barter, with Israeli industrial products being traded for needed raw materials, e.g., aircraft exchanged for Ecuadorean oil. Israel had a huge trade imbalance with Mexico, which, to the chagrin of Mexican leftists, supplied about 40 per cent of Israel's oil. There was also an increase in joint Mexico-Israel investments in agriculture, electronics, solar energy, and construction. Israeli banks entered Latin America in strength, with the number of branches located in Uruguay, Mexico, Panama, Brazil, Venezuela, Argentina, and Chile increasing from three in 1977 to 25 in 1982.[22] Israeli agribusinesses started up in several locations in the Caribbean, including fish-farms in the Dominican Republic.

The nature of Israel's trade with Latin America has changed substantially over the years. Armaments long ago surpassed Jordan River water as the principal export. Originally, small arms made up most of Israel's weapons exports; the Uzi machine gun was sold to various countries, and large orders were filled for the Galil rifle, which became standard in the Guatemalan army. By 1981 Israel was exporting the Gabriel ship-to-ship missile, the Merkava tank, the Reshef patrol boat, and the Kfir C-2 fighter plane. In 1982 the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute reported the following Israeli arms sales:[23] Argentina—22 Nesher fighter planes; Brazil—8 205 UH-ID helicopters; Columbia—12 Kfir C-2 fighter planes; and Ecuador—12 Kfir fighter planes. In the same year, the *Latin America Weekly Report* mentioned other sales: Honduras—Kfirs, RBY armored cars, missiles, captured PLO tanks, self-propelled guns, and rocket launchers; and Venezuela—25 multiple artillery rocket launchers.[24] According to an analysis published in the journal of the radical North American Conference of Latin Americanists, Israel has supplied variants of the US-made AIM90/G and AIM9/L guided air-to-air missiles, called the Sharir, to Argentina and Chile. Israel's Westwind executive jet, which can also serve as a military air reconnaissance plane, has been exported to several Latin

---

[22] See *Latin America Weekly Report*, December 24, 1982, p. 11.

[23] See *Register of Arms Trade*, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 1982, pp. 307 ff.

[24] See *Latin America Weekly Report*, December 17, 1982, p. 6.

American countries.[25] Described as Israel's most successful export is the Arava, a short take-off and landing (STOL) craft that functions effectively in rough terrain. About 50 have been sold to Guatemala, El Salvador, Ecuador, and Colombia.

Israel has been selling French Mystere combat jets to Honduras since 1977, making that nation the strongest air power in Central America. In September 1982 it was revealed that Israel was training Honduran pilots in techniques for countering the SA-6 surface-to-air missile system that the Soviet Union had supplied to neighboring Nicaragua.[26] A visit to Honduras by Israel Defense Force chief Ariel Sharon in December 1982 led a correspondent of the *Christian Science Monitor* to assert that Israel was playing "a growing role as United States arms broker and proxy in crisis-ridden Central America." Six months later, the Reagan administration confirmed that Israel was supplying weapons captured from the PLO to Honduras for eventual use by Nicaraguan rebels. A New York *Times* correspondent observed that "Israel's coordination with the Americans marks a departure from its previous activities in Central America as an independent supplier of arms. The new role brings Israel closer to acting as a surrogate for the United States. . . . American officials, in confirming Israel's cooperation in Central America, said it was a factor in the recent improvement of Israeli-United States relations."[27]

Increasingly, Israel has been joining forces with the United States and conservative Latin American governments in an attempt to quell leftist uprisings and guerrilla movements. Of course, there is a trade-off, in that Israel has inherited the United States' old quarrels with the Latin American left. In the process Latin American Jews have become pawns in a game of military diplomacy being played by their own governments, Israel, and the United States. The actions taken by Israel directly impinge on the well-being of the Jewish communities in Latin America, but the latter have no input in the decision-making process.

LATIN AMERICAN JEWRY IN TRANSITION

Economically, 1982 was the worst year for Latin America since the great depression of the 1930's. The 19 countries of the area (excluding Cuba) had a combined foreign debt of $289 billion, and several nations were on the brink of bankruptcy. Out of a total population of 344 million people, at least 27 million were unemployed, creating the potential for social anarchy. Needless to say, Latin American Jews felt the negative impact of these developments as well.

---

[25] See *Report on the Americas,* North American Conference of Latin Americanists, January-February 1982, p. 50.

[26] See *Report on the Americas,* North American Conference of Latin Americanists, September–October 1982, p. 7.

[27] New York *Times,* July 21, 1983, pp. 1, 4.

In 1982 antisemitism rose sharply on the political left, masked as anti-Zionism. The Palestinian cause attracted the loyalty of radicals and progressives, including Jews, all over the continent. The two hatreds coalesced in the summer of 1982, when the massacre of Palestinians in refugee camps in Lebanon became the occasion for demonstrations and armed attacks on Jews. In Medellín, Colombia six masked men invaded a synagogue, threatened the congregants, and desecrated the sanctuary; in Barranquilla participants in a street demonstration chanted, "Death to the Jews." In Caracas, Venezuela a gang of 20 persons broke into the Israeli embassy and painted antisemitic slogans on the walls; a few weeks later, the Jewish center in Maracaibo was attacked by university students. Following the opening of a PLO office in Lima, Peru, the country was flooded with antisemitic literature; in December, Lima's main synagogue was bombed. The Israeli embassy in Quito, Ecuador was bombed, resulting in the deaths of two Ecuadorean policemen and the maiming of a passerby. In Brazil, where public demonstrations had been outlawed for ten years, the first march to be licensed by the government took the form of an anti-Israel protest.

These events were all linked: Israel was targeted as the oppressor of subject peoples; Latin American Jews were identified with Israel; and the delegitimation of Jews as citizens of their own countries proceeded apace. Paradoxically, more antisemitism surfaced in countries undergoing a loosening of government controls—Brazil and Peru—than in those nations where the press was strictly controlled. Some governments conducted a dual policy, maintaining correct relations with Israel while licensing hysterical anti-Israel street demonstrations as a way of siphoning off anger that might otherwise have been directed against themselves. Reciprocally, Israel showed little concern for the growing unease of Latin American Jewry. Yosef Priel, Washington correspondent for *Davar,* was but the first to allege that the Israeli foreign ministry and its embassies in Latin America deliberately playing down the increase in antisemitic incidents so as not to jeopardize Israel's relations in the area.

"Is There Anti-Semitism in Argentina?" an article by a well-informed Jewish journalist, appeared in *Midstream* in February 1983.[28] It is extraordinary that after years of worldwide debate, engaging some of the keenest political minds on the contemporary scene, the question could still be mooted. And yet, the confusion which followed in the wake of Jacobo

---

[28] See Egon Friedler, "Is There Anti-Semitism in Argentina?" *Midstream,* February 1983, pp. 56–58.

Timerman's exposé of the Argentine military junta—in *Prisoner Without a Name, Cell Without a Number*—is understandable in light of the complexity of the situation.

From the time it seized power in March 1976 until it was forced to hold elections in October 1983, a military junta, dominated by a succession of generals and admirals, ruled Argentina. Taking the doctrine of national security to its limits, the junta attempted to exterminate all political dissidents and expunge "morally subversive" elements who were thought to be preparing the country for a Communist takeover. In the terror which ensued, thousands of Argentines were killed or held in confinement for years without trial. The government's anti-subversive campaign swept up the guilty as well as the innocent, Jew and non-Jew, men, women, and children. General Ramon Camps, chief of the Buenos Aires police during the worst days of the repression, stated that "everyone acting against subversion did so, always, under orders from the highest military authorities."[29] Robert Cox, editor of the English-language Buenos Aires *Herald,* characterized the acquiescence of the Argentine people in what came to be known as "the military process" as "a breakdown of the conservative conscience."

It was clear from the start that more Jews were being killed in Argentina than might have been expected from random action against the population at large. It was also clear that many members of the military junta subscribed to a conspiratorial view of Jewry: Jews were responsible for Marxism; they had invented psychoanalysis in order to undermine the Christian family; they controlled the international banking system; and they selfishly guided the destinies of both the capitalist and the communist worlds.[30] This view found its confirmation—a self-fulfilling prophecy—in the fact that from 15 to 20 per cent of the guerrillas killed in the early stage of the "dirty war" were Jews. But long after the subversive guerrilla forces had been liquidated, the government went on killing people, focusing on suspect elements of the population. Scientists, academics, politicians, and students were all victimized by the regime, and many of them were Jewish. Although dozens of politicians were implicated in the failures of the previous Peron administration, only José Ber Gelbard, a Polish-born Jew who was Peron's minister of the economy, was stripped of his citizenship and forced into exile by the military rulers.

The belief of many non-Argentines that there was a pogrom in progress was modified by a puzzling phenomenon: the Jewish community was staying in place, despite the opportunity to flee. Gradually, it became apparent that Jews were not alone in their suffering, and that individual Jews were paying a price for belonging to sectors of the population that had fallen under the suspicion of the military. People who were deeply involved in Jewish community life generally remained free of attack during this period, and Jewish institutions thrived as they were perceived as safe places. Jewish organizations functioned normally: meetings were held; the uprising in the Warsaw ghetto was commemorated; Hebrew was taught; and funds were collected for Israel. For many Jews, as for many non-Jews, life went on as usual. "Argentina is not Poland," said a Jewish psychoanalyst who took refuge in Israel after his name became linked to a subversive group. "There are plenty of antisemites in Argentina," said another exiled Argentine Jew, "but it is not an antisemitic country."

---

[29] *Latin America Weekly Report,* February 4, 1983, p. 3.

[30] See Pablo Lopez, "El anti-semitismo en Argentina," *Areito,* Vol. 5, No. 18, pp. 24–27.

In a strange twist of fate, the 1982 Falklands/Malvinas war helped improve the status of Argentine Jews. This came about as a by-product of Israeli foreign policy. When a boycott of Argentina was proclaimed by Great Britain, the United States, and other countries, Israel declined to observe it. Instead, the Israeli government announced that it would continue to make delivery on pre-existing contracts, although it would not enter into any new agreements while the war was going on. The association of Israel with Argentina's patriotic war could not but benefit the Argentine Jewish community.

It was in this context that the DAIA became the first organization belonging to a "foreign" community to come forward with an expression of loyalty to the government. The DAIA's statement read in part: "The Jewish people . . . for so long seeking to recover the land of their ancestors . . . have the experience to understand and feel solidarity with the act of restitution of the Malvinas to the national inheritance." During the Falklands/Malvinas war, the Jewish community established rapport with the most antisemitic elements in Argentina. The military junta reciprocated by permitting the appointment of Jewish army chaplains to provide for the spiritual needs of Jewish conscripts—this, in a military service that since the 1930's had permitted no officer of Jewish origin to rise higher in rank than captain.

Beginning in March 1982, the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith and the American Jewish Committee, both of which had been working on behalf of Jewish prisoners in Argentina, were able to announce a series of releases, including persons who had been held in confinement under conditions of extreme duress for as long as eight years. Also in 1982, the television program "Holocaust" was permitted to be shown in Argentina, although its presentation was marred by the desecration of a Jewish cemetery in Mar del Plata. The repudiation of this act by President Leopoldo Galtieri represented a change of policy on the part of the government, which shortly thereafter also promised to stamp out neo-Nazi literature.

A visit to Argentina by Israeli foreign minister Yitzhak Shamir in December 1982, following the Argentine retreat from the Malvinas, led to agreements on scientific and cultural exchange, the sale of combat aircraft, and the release of additional Jewish prisoners. During the final months of 1982, the Argentine Jewish community returned to normalcy, subject only to the same hazards that beset all Argentines.

Immediately following his election, civilian president Raul Alfonsin appointed a presidential commission to investigate the cases of persons who had been detained and made to "disappear," and to prepare criminal charges against those who were responsible. While various human rights commissions continue to probe this area, there are many, both within and without the Jewish community, who feel that the time has come to close the books on this deplorable chapter of Argentine history.

Following the end of military rule there appeared to be a new and growing acceptance of Jews as legitimate members of Argentine society. No fewer than six Jews were elected to the Chamber of Deputies in October 1983, including Cesar Jaroslawsky, who was subsequently elected majority leader of the Chamber. Senator Adolfo Gass became chairman of the foreign relations committee. Alfonsín won the Argentine presidency despite his being depicted as the candidate of the Jews. Once in office, he appointed numerous Jews to public posts, including the secretary of state for science and technology, Manuel Sadosky; the subsecretary for information and development, Roberto Schteingart; the coordinator of the national commission on computing, Jorge Edelman; and the subsecretary of the ministry of culture, Marcos Aguinis. In one ministry all three subsecretaries were Jews. Approximately one-third of the newly appointed deans at the University of Buenos Aires were Jews. The admittance of Jewish talent to public life contrasts sharply with the earlier policy of attempting to impose a single Catholic standard on the entire nation.

In recent years the Central American Jewish communities have been drained by civil war. As noted above, those Jews who had business or personal ties with General Somoza left Nicaragua when the dictator fell from power in 1979. In 1983 the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith charged that their departure had not been voluntary. Relying on the testimony of two Nicaraguan Jews, the claim was put forward that the Sandinistas were antisemitic and had confiscated Jewish property, including a synagogue. This charge was taken up by President Ronald Reagan, who told a White House gathering: "The results of the self-proclaimed blood unity between the Sandinistas and the PLO are evidence for all the world to see and are an evil echo of history. Virtually the entire Jewish community of Nicaragua has been frightened into exile." The president urged his listeners to "please share the truth that Communism in Central America means not only the loss of political freedom but of religious freedom as well."

President Reagan's concern for Nicaraguan Jewry was seen by some as an attempt to manipulate American Jewish opinion in support of his Latin

American policy. Sources close to the Sandinistas, as well as many North American scholars familiar with the situation in Nicaragua, denied that antisemitism was part of the Sandinista program. The confiscations that took place, it was claimed, were limited to property abandoned by Somoza supporters, and affected Jews and non-Jews alike. For its part, the Nicaraguan government issued an invitation to American Jewish organizations to send representatives to Managua to view the situation firsthand, offering to discuss all the points at issue, including the expropriation of property and the return of Nicaraguan Jews. This invitation was not accepted.

As violence escalated in El Salvador, increasing numbers of Jews abandoned the country for a safe haven in the United States. The typical pattern was for a businessman to resettle his family in Miami, Houston, or some other southern city, and commute back and forth to his place of business in San Salvador.

The situation was somewhat different in Mexico, where no insurgency was taking place and no physical threat to Jewish life existed. However, an acute fiscal crisis led to a sudden nationalization of Mexican banks by outgoing President José Lopez Portillo y Pacheco, a step that severely damaged the economic position of many middle- and upper-class businessmen, Jews included. The move created panic in the Jewish community and stimulated the flight to the United States of an estimated 1,500 to 5,000 Jews. An important element in the situation was a remark by the president concerning "minorities" who were damaging the economy by sending dollars out of the country. Mexican Jews feared the worst; the rabbi of a major synagogue used his Yom Kippur sermon to warn the congregation that there was no future for Jews in Mexico. The rabbi then resigned to take a better job in San Diego, California, leaving the community to cope with the public scandal that his words evoked. A subsequent statement by the government indicating that President Lopez Portillo had been referring to a minority of entrepreneurs and not an ethnic minority helped calm the situation. Many Jews who had left the country returned, leaving a high water mark of condominiums purchased in Houston and Dallas.

Why had Mexican Jews reacted this way? The Jewish communities in Latin America are extremely vulnerable to national chauvinism, which invariably functions so as to exclude Jews. This is particularly true in Mexico, where the concept of *raza* (race) occupies the same emotional space that nation has in other countries. There is no way in which Jews can be *raza*. Standing somewhat apart from the rest of society, Mexican Jews become an easy target when, as happened in 1982, people begin to perceive themselves as the victims of the international economy. Paradoxically, it was also the link to the international economy that eventually corrected the situation, since the new administration of President Miguel de la Madrid

Hurtado was all too aware of the losses that Mexico had suffered during the short Jewish boycott that followed Mexico's Zionism-equals-racism vote at the United Nations in 1975. President de la Madrid displayed good judgement in appointing several Jews to government posts, including undersecretary of commerce and chairman of an important economic commission. Jewish life settled back on its former foundations, but with an increased awareness of just how fragile these were.

CONCLUSION

What are the major trends in Latin American Jewish life as they emerge from this review? There has been a substantial change in the way in which Jews relate to their national societies. A generation or two ago, Jewish immigrants arriving in Latin America from Europe and the Near East felt far superior to the peoples surrounding them. Being literate, family-oriented, and in control of their birth rate, Jews looked with disdain on the masses of Latin Americans who were illiterate, uncommitted to the standard of a monogamous nuclear family, and able to tolerate staggering rates of infant birth and mortality. Furthermore, Jews were kept at arm's length by the unremitting Catholicism of Latin America, which made them feel like outsiders. In those places where mass immigration provided the basis for developing a Jewish community, Jews typically drew together in search of mutual support. The more tightly these communities organized, the less need there was for Jews to establish ties with the rest of society. Over the long run, the result was the enclosed *kehillot* described above.

This pattern is now changing, as a result of developments in both the host societies and Jewish communities. Social mobility, industrialization, and improved transportation, communication, and educational systems—developments in which Jews themselves have taken an important part—have substantially broadened the base of Latin American societies, increasing political, social, and economic participation by all classes. A recognizable middle class has emerged, characterized by relative affluence, a high level of education, and a modern outlook. The flowering of Latin American literature and art, exemplified in the novels of Gabriel García Marquez, Mario Vargas Llosa, Julio Cortazar, and Carlos Fuentes and the paintings of Rodo Boulanger and Fernando Botero, bespeaks a culture that outsiders can enter and find rewarding. Native-born Jews are themselves contributing to this culture, not as Jews *per se,* but as Jewish Argentines, Jewish Mexicans, etc.[31]

---

[31] Among literary works deserving mention in this context are Mario Szichman's *A las 20:25 la señora entró a la inmortalidad*; Gerardo Mario Goloboff's *Caballos por el fondo de los ojos*;

The entry of Jewish intellectuals into the mainstream of cultural life may signal a reduction of antisemitism, since Latin Americans hold their writers and artists in high esteem. In Argentina, Jewish novelists, poets, social critics, and film producers have been participating in the remarkable cultural florescence that has accompanied the changeover from dictatorship to democracy. In Mexico the two most popular radio personalities are Jewish, bearing the non-Latin names Yankelevich and Zablodowski. Some of Chile's best-known actors are Jewish, including Shlomit Baytelman, Alejandro Cohen, Anita Klesky, Jael Unger, and Mario Kreutzberger. Significantly, these individuals have succeeded without the name-changing that would probably have been necessary in the United States. Many Uruguayan journalists and art critics are Jews, as are the directors of the national museum and the national comedy theater. Throughout Latin America, acceptance of Jews in the artistic and entertainment worlds is far in advance of their acceptance in the political and military spheres.

As members of the expanding middle class, young Latin American Jews pursue advanced education together with other middle-class sons and daughters; they share similar concerns for the future of their homelands, and enjoy the same lifestyle. Such Jews are light-years removed from the poverty and stagnation that their parents and grandparents experienced. For many of them, the vitality and relevance of contemporary Latin American culture contrast favorably with the provincialism of the organized Jewish communities, which are frozen in patterns derived from nineteenth-century experience. Generational differences go beyond the merely political, involving such questions as whether Judaism has the ability to develop and grow, and whether the defense of Jewish interests can be distinguished from the defense of class interests.

Until recently the highly secularized Latin American Jewish population has acceded to the strictures imposed by the Orthodox rabbinate—a phenomenon not confined to Latin America. Orthodox rabbis, for their part, have maintained a stance of unreconstructed Judaism rivaling that of the pre-conciliar church, heedless of the alienation of increasing numbers of Jews. At present, however, Progressive rabbis, educated either in the United States or at the Seminario Rabinico in Buenos Aires, are revitalizing Latin American Jewish religious life. Progressive congregations are growing in strength throughout Latin America, a trend that will accelerate as more Spanish-speaking rabbis become available. In response, there are efforts at renewal among such Orthodox groups as Agudath Israel, Mizrachi, Lubavitch and Satmar, and these groups are in fact attracting new followers. If

---

Pedro Orgambide's *Adventuras de Edmund Ziller en tierras del Nuevo Mundo*; Margo Glantz's *Las genealogias*; Esther Seligson's *La morada en el tiempo*; and Isaac Goldenberg's *Fragmented Life of Don Jacobo Lerner.*

these trends continue, Latin American Jewry may redefine itself as a religious rather than as a secular minority.

Another change that is taking place is the diminution of inter-ethnic rivalries. Ethnic differences are of little importance to young Jews, and youth-oriented sports clubs are eclipsing the *landsmenschaften* in popularity. The sports clubs provide a focus for ethnically mixed activities, libraries, day schools, and even religious services. Nevertheless, ethnic differences continue to be strongly reflected in the representative bodies of the communities, which perpetuate a compartmentalized form of Jewish life. Small wonder, then, that these bodies have become irrelevant to younger Jews.

U.O. Schmelz and Sergio DellaPergola have indicated that the Jewish communities are shrinking at the rate of some one per cent a year. The shrinkage in total population is exceeded by shrinkage in the number of communities on the continent. Responding to the same factors that cause Latin Americans generally to register the highest rate of urbanization of any population in the world, Jews are becoming more urbanized and more centralized than at any time in the past. In the not too distant future there will be very few Jews left in the interior of the continent.

The Latin American diaspora is now creating its own diasporas. As much as one-fifth of Latin American Jewry may now be living in Israel. A comparable number probably reside in the United States, with other groups scattered throughout Europe, most notably in Spain and West Germany. The departure of Jews from Cuba under the spur of Castro's economic reorganization did not result in the relocation of Cuban Jews to some other Latin American country. For the most part, Cuban Jews, like other Cubans, settled in Florida. The exodus of Jews from Allende's Chile swelled the small Jewish community of West Germany. Radical Jewish exiles from Argentina, like their compatriots, went to Spain. The political, economic, and social aspirations of emigré Jewish Latin Americans can evidently be better satisfied outside the continent than on it.

The factor that weighs most heavily in the evaluation of the status of the Latin American Jewish communities today is the foreign policy of the State of Israel. Clearly, past Israeli actions have served both to stabilize and destabilize these communities, and the growing involvement of Israel in the political and military conflicts of the Western hemisphere assures that there will be a continued impact in ways that cannot be wholly foreseen. The nature of the impact will depend on what policies Israel adopts, as well as the situations in the various countries. But the experience of recent years makes it clear that Israeli policy seriously affects the ways in which Latin American Jews can work out their destinies within their own national societies.