

# The Jewish Community

## IN MEXICO

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While today's Jewish community originated in the waves of migration to the Americas at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, there have been Jews in Mexico since colonial times.

After being expelled from Spain, the Jews sought freedom in the New World. Both for Jewish converts to Catholicism (new Christians) and those converts who practiced their Judaism in secret (crypto-Jews), New Spain was a life option. As actors in the drama of the conquest of Mexico and, as some of the first Old World settlers, participants in its reconstruction, Jews took part in different trades and professions in New Spain. They

distinguished themselves as merchants, in small trade, in medicine and in letters. However, the new horizons did not guarantee the freedom they sought, and they had to hide their faith to avoid the persecution of the Inquisition, which they often were unable to escape. The prohibition of their nurturing their original identity and culture led to their gradual assimilation into the mainstream of society.

When Mexico won its independence, it began to see immigration as a fundamental way to increase its small heterogeneous population, dispersed throughout an enormous territory with deficient communication. However, the country's political and economic instability rendered it unattractive to immigrants. Of the growing stream of Jewish migrants who abandoned Europe for the Americas to escape the romantic Christian reactionary movement, only a few came to Mexico. Despite this, throughout the nineteenth century there was a permanent, though small, Jewish presence in Mexico.

After 1879 and during the three decades of the *Porfiriato* (the 30-year regime of Porfirio Díaz), the Jewish population began to grow slightly in answer to incentives to immigration and foreign investment. Natives mainly of Western and Central Europe, these immigrants took an outstanding part in different spheres of national life: in the development of trade, industry, mining and railroads; in the establishment of the national banking system; and in intellectual and cultural life. The free and prosperous living conditions in their countries of origin and their motivation to participate in Mexico's development gave this wave of immigrants an eminently individual character.

It would not be until the last years of the *Porfiriato* that Mexico would see the arrival of Jewish immigrants in groups. The growing political and economic deterioration of the Ottoman Empire and religious intolerance propitiated emigration. Recent arrivals had to support each other to be able to fit into the country's occupa-

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A family portrait, Poland, *circa* 1920. On the table, a photograph of a son who emigrated to Mexico.

tional structure. This, together with their strong religious and traditional Jewish identity, fostered their banding together as a community. At the same time, the immigration of the Sephardic Jews from the European countries under Ottoman domination began around 1900. The organizations founded at that time supported the immigrants who arrived during the second decade of the century and constitute the initial nucleus of Mexico's contemporary Jewish community.

During the Mexican Revolution, an important number of foreigners

left the country, among them, the majority of the Jews who had come from Western and Central Europe. At that time, the Jewish community was about 100 families strong. During this period, however, immigrants from the Ottoman Empire continued to come, and by 1921, around 6,000 had arrived in Mexico.

Jews from Eastern Europe arrived throughout the 1920s, mainly from Poland and Russia as a result of increasing discrimination and socioeconomic and political marginalization. Their need to emigrate coincided with the explicit interest expressed

by Presidents Obregón and Calles in fostering immigration to rebuild Mexico's war-torn society and national economy. This meant that the period of greatest Jewish immigration to Mexico was between 1921 and 1929. About 15,000 immigrants entered the country, 9,000 Ashkenazim from Eastern Europe and 6,000 Sephardim.

In the next decade, however, new Mexican demographic and economic policies that established growing restrictions on immigration, as well as pressure from nationalist organizations and interest groups, would cause the immigration to lessen. The

1936 Population Law did not consider immigration a central strategy for increasing the population, and therefore restricted and prohibited the entrance of workers and foreign immigrants. The establishment of a quota system to protect Mexican nationals according to criteria of ethnic similarity or affinity would directly affect the entry of Jewish immigrants to the country precisely at the time when they most needed to be able to leave Europe because of the rise and consolidation of the Nazis. Between 1939 and 1949, about 400 families of German and Austrian Jews and 200 from Eastern Europe entered Mexico. At the end of the 1940s, Jewish immigration stopped being significant. By 1950, there were about 24,000 Jews in Mexico; today, there are about 35,000.

Upon arrival, Jewish immigrants faced the double challenge of becoming part of and adapting to their new country and, at the same time, preserving and developing their own group identity, their values, tradition and Judaic culture. This led them to carry out an intense and varied organizational process, reproducing in Mexico a historical organizational tradition, the community or *kehilah*. The *kehilah* was able to answer the group's different needs and facilitate its encounter with existing society since ethnic, cultural and linguistic differences made it necessary to have a buffer in the process of adapting to and interpreting a new situation. In other words, it aided in meeting the serious challenge that immigrants faced as they attempted to integrate themselves into their new homeland

without having to renounce their original identity and culture.

Two tendencies interacted simultaneously during this process of community structuring. On the one hand, the small size of the community, its lack of resources and the similarity in conditions favored centralization; on the other hand, the diversity of traditions, customs and cultural practices favored internal differentiation and diversity. Therefore, they organized according to countries or areas of origin: the Jews from Damascus, Syria, organized around the first charity and mutual aid society, the Mount Sinai Alliance; those from Aleppo, Syria, established the Israelite Sedaka Umarpeh Charitable Society; and the Sephardic immigrants from Turkey and the Balkans set up the Sephardic Union.

In the beginning, the Ashkenazim also had to congregate at the same time that they maintained internal differentiations. From the very beginning, parallel to the mutual aid societies emerged cultural and political groups that reflected the ideological currents and different world views that came from Europe. A vigorous cultural life made it possible for immigrants to express themselves through lectures, cultural events and a great deal of literature and journalism produced in their mother tongue, Yiddish. The 1920s saw the development of an equally diversified press, and by 1927, the first book published in Yiddish. This diverse and heterogeneous sector would gather around the Nidje Israel community.

The different parts of the community developed educational insti-

tutions that, with time, became complete schools that had the dual aim of integration and maintenance of the original culture to educate the new generations in both cultural codes, the Jewish one and the Mexican one, which was gradually being incorporated. At the same time that this functional and sectoral diversity was evolving, the community developed central institutions that assembled and represented all the groups, reflecting the similarities in their situation and needs. This community mosaic continues to exist today, although its functions and internal structure have changed successively as a result of the transformations in the population itself and its needs.

The generation of original immigrants was followed by other born in Mexico, for whom the conditions and opportunities for integrating into society culturally and socially and in terms of employment have broadened. An initial community composed mainly of itinerant salespeople and artisans transformed itself into formal merchants and participants in small and medium-sized manufacturing. Later, industrialization policy which developed and diversified these activities

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ancient culture.*



Leaving Lithuania.

*From Moscow, I went to Sebezh [Russia] and from there to Holland, where I took a boat to Mexico. All the hubbub of the trains and meeting new people could not drown out my sorrow over saying goodbye to my loved ones. I had one consoling thought: soon I will bring them all out with me.*

Meyer Rapoport, *Judíos mexicanos entre los montes*  
(*Mexican Jews in the Mountains*) (Yiddish), Mexico City, 1956, p. 19.

led the community to broaden its participation to the different branches of the economy. Government import substitution policy in the 1970s reinforced this tendency.

For the generations born in Mexico, the university and the sciences, the liberal professions and the arts are the new channels which have allowed them to develop their abilities and commitment. Their marked tendency to enter professions like medicine, dentistry and engineering has broadened out to include the humanities and the social sciences. Unlike the majority of the intellectual activity of the first generation immigrants, which in the main stayed within the cultural bounds of the original communities, particularly because of the language barrier, the creativity of later generations is a visible, substantial part of Mexican national culture. Among the Jewish community in Mexico are nationally and internationally recognized scientists, writers and artists who project creativity of the Mexican people as a whole.

Together with their growing participation in national life, the Jews have been able to maintain their ancient culture, putting down the different kinds of roots that nurture their identity. This, of course, reflects the complex and successful creation of ways of living together which has allowed the Jewish community to open up to new alternatives for individual and collective development and Mexican society as a whole to benefit from the diversity and cultural pluralism that enriches it. ❧



Photo: Elias Poplawsky

Street vendor selling ties in Córdoba, Veracruz.