

Central America

IN 1821 the small republics of Central America—Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica—became independent of Spain. For these nations, which have geography, history, and language in common, it has been a turbulent century-and-a-half. There has been bitter economic, political, and territorial rivalry between them, which has given way to solidarity only in times of human suffering brought on by earthquakes and hurricanes that periodically ravage the region. Political life in the republics was dominated by the army, allied with landowners and big business. For many years the governments of Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Honduras have been headed by generals. Only Costa Rica had an elected government.

All the countries face serious problems of unemployment, poverty, disease and illiteracy. Their economies, which are largely dependent on agricultural production, are shaken by fluctuating world commodity prices. Generally, the governments appear to lack the desire, as well as the funds, to solve their social problems.

In an attempt to promote their economic growth, the five republics, with a total population of less than 17 million, formed the Central American Common Market in 1961. Its start was so encouraging that it was hailed as a model for developing nations. But its success was short-lived. The market has been crippled ever since 1969, when two of its members—El Salvador and Honduras—went to war. The immediate cause was reports of atrocities committed by Honduras against Salvadorans living there, after El Salvador defeated Honduras in a soccer game. Political nationalism, nurtured by both military régimes, escalated until El Salvador's army invaded Honduras to save the more than half a million Salvadorans in that country. Four days of fighting brought 20,000 casualties. El Salvador's army withdrew only after the Organization of American States sent military observers to patrol the border. Despite diplomatic efforts, peace has not yet been restored. Trade between the two countries stopped, and Honduras, unable to cope with its growing trade deficit, left the market.

The future of the Central American countries depends on the rescue of the Central American Common Market for the economic integration of the area and on social reform.

Guatemala

The election of President Kjijel Langerud ushered in a new era in the country's political and social development. Outgoing President Colonel Carlos M. Arana Osorio (1970-1974) of the Partido Institucional Democratico (PID; Institutional Democratic party), established by right-wing military sectors, succeeded to some extent in pacifying the country by using the army and the police to put down the decade-old fighting between the left and right guerrillas. A state of siege imposed in November 1970 failed to put a stop to this internal warfare, which left an estimated 1,000 dead, including moderate political and labor leaders, Communists, students, professors, journalists, and other opponents of the government. The siege was lifted a year later; and while internal peace was not fully restored, no major terrorist incidents occurred.

With world agricultural prices rising, Guatemala's economic statistics brightened, though this meant little to the largely impoverished masses. There was also some progress in implementing the government's ambitious development program. In recent years the number of agricultural workers has declined, while industrial and other urban labor has shown an increase.

JEWISH COMMUNITY

The origin of the Guatemalan Jewish community can be traced back to 1848. Documents in the archives of the Inquisition in Mexico City, where the Inquisition had its seat until 1821, indicate that Marranos had lived in the country as far back as the colonial period.

The first Jewish immigrants, who came from Germany and were related to each other in varying degrees, were the forerunners of industrial development in Guatemala. In 1870 they organized the first communal group, and were joined by a small number of Sephardi Jews who arrived a few years later. By 1917 the settlement comprised some 40 Jewish families, who gathered on some occasions, especially to celebrate Rosh Ha-shanah and Yom Kippur. The first Jewish

cemetery, whose beginnings can be traced to 1915, was located within the general cemetery of Guatemala City. The earliest gravestone, dated June 6, 1903, was that of Sofia Alexander. In the 1920s, there was an influx of East European Jews, most of whom, however, considered Guatemala as a place of transit until they could immigrate to the United States.

The first synagogue, named Maguen David, was constructed in 1924-25 by the Sephardi community, which in those days numbered 70 families.

By 1929 the Ashkenazi community had its own board of directors; its first president was Julio Siedler. It was not until 1965 that the Ashkenazim built a Hebrew Center, with a synagogue and social hall; they had occupied rented premises since 1930. The Jews of German origin, who in 1930 numbered only 100, organized a Jewish Society for Welfare and Protection (*Sociedad Israelita de Protección y Beneficencia*). By 1943 their number had increased to 250. This group later established the Reform Beth-El congregation, of which all Jews of German origin were now members.

The influx of refugees from Nazi persecution made possible for the Jews of Guatemala to contribute to the commercial and industrial development of the country by establishing large department stores, import and export businesses, and textile, plastics, toy, and leather-goods factories.

Communal Life

At present, the community numbered some 300 families (about 1,200 people), most of them Guatemalan-born and some third-generation natives. Intermarriages reached a high of 28 per cent in 1963.

The representative institution, the Central Board of the Jewish Community of Guatemala, consisted of the three existing congregations: Maguen David (Sephardi); Hebrew Center (Ashkenazi) and Beth-El (Jews of German origin). Its current president was Roberto Stein. The Central Board had jurisdiction over all matters pertaining to the organization and the safety of the community, which it represented in official business with the authorities. The Jewish Sport Club provided for several communities a gathering place for social and sports activities. The patriarch of the Jewish community, the 92-year-old Enrique Engel, continued to be active and very much concerned about the fate of the Jews in that country.

Religious services were held in the three synagogues of these communities on the Sabbath and on holidays, but attendance has

considerably fallen off. At the time of writing, none of the congregations had an ordained rabbi.

The only Jewish school in Guatemala, the Instituto Albert Einstein, under the direction of Dean Pablo Koplówicz, was built in 1957. The current enrollment in its kindergarten, elementary grades, and high school was 150 students. It offered, in addition to the required secular curriculum, courses in Hebrew and several Jewish subjects.

Civil Rights

The constitution of Guatemala, whose population of almost six million was 90 per cent Catholic, guaranteed freedom of worship for all. Although Jews enjoyed full equality, some newspapers and periodicals now and then published antisemitic, and more recently, anti-Zionist material. This was especially so during the 1973 Yom Kippur war when, for example, the Guatemala City *Impacto* (October 21, 1973) carried an article claiming that the Jewish community had sent \$25 million to Israel—which was later denounced by the *El Salvador Reporte* as a violation of law—and that 10,000 volunteers were standing ready in Central America to fight for Israel. Ten days later, *La Nación* carried antisemitic remarks allegedly made by Benjamin Franklin, to which the author appended a statement supporting the Arab states. Other publications joined the campaign, among them *Ultima Hora* and *El Imparcial*. Understandably, the Jewish community was alarmed.

For the last three decades, there has been no immigration of Jews to Guatemala, except for a few relatives of Guatemalan Jewish citizens who were permitted to enter the country. Among young Jews there was a group of quite successful professionals who had official standing with the government. The community's relationship with the Catholic church was positive, with frequent contact between the two.

Relations With Israel

The government of Guatemala actively supported the creation of the State of Israel in 1947, through the efforts of its representative in the United Nations, Jorge García Granados, who was a member of the Comisión Especial de las Naciones Unidas para Palestina (Special UN Commission for Palestine). Dr. García Granados described his tireless labors in the book, *Así Nació Israel* ("Thus Was Israel Born"), published in 1949.

Since then, the ties between the two countries have been very close. Former President Arana paid an official visit to Israel in 1972. The Guatemalan-Israeli Cultural Institute has been successful in fostering cooperation between the two nations. In this area Erich Heinemann, honorary general consul of Israel in Guatemala, was making an outstanding contribution.

The present Israel ambassador in Guatemala was Brigadier General Itzhak Pundak.

El Salvador

Colonel Arturo Armando Molina, who was sworn in as the republic's new president in 1972 after a stormy electoral campaign, faced innumerable serious economic and political problems. Although the country enjoyed gains from its high-grade coffee in European and other markets, its almost four million people still suffered from their war with Honduras, despite diplomatic talks in Mexico City. The economic burdens resulting from the 1969 war, and the subsequent paralysis of trade with Honduras, called for badly needed reforms of the semi-feudal land tenure system and the hardly less outmoded industrial enterprise in the larger towns. All this was aggravated by the perennial problem of overpopulation. The country had one of the highest population densities in Latin America—39.3 per cent for the urban population.

JEWISH COMMUNITY

Jewish life in El Salvador dates back to the first half of the 19th century, when a group of French Sephardi Jews settled in the country. They were followed by other French Jews, mostly Alsatians, in the second half of the 19th century and by some East European and Oriental Jews in the 1920s. A small number of refugees from Nazi Germany arrived after World War II. Their total remained quite small, with the present Jewish community counting some 120 families, or 369 persons.

The Comunidad Israelita of El Salvador, officially established in 1944, has been the central communal and representative body. Besides its current president, George Salomon, the outstanding leaders in organizing and maintaining Jewish life have been Herbert de Sola and

Eugenio Liebes, both deceased. Liebes was president of the Jewish community for many years. The Jewish cemetery, established in 1945, was supervised by the Hevra Kaddisha.

The community's synagogue and social center were established in 1950. In earlier years, services and Jewish activities took place in the homes of community members. Since 1958, religious life has been maintained by Rabbi Alexander Granat. Besides teaching religion and Bible to boys in preparation for their *bar-mitzvah*, he has been giving a course on the Bible and its origin to non-Jews, thereby improving Christian-Jewish relations.

No Jewish school existed in El Salvador. Its school-age children, numbering some 30, were taught Hebrew by a volunteer teacher, Mrs. Perla Meissner.

The El Salvador Zionist Organization was founded in 1945, and WIZO, the Women's International Zionist Organization, somewhat later. The community also had a youth group, called Noar Shelanu.

Civil Rights

The constitution guaranteed freedom of worship to all Salvadorans, who were predominantly Catholic. The government has taken a firm stand against discrimination and fostered a healthy relationship among the various religious groups. Very sporadically, the press has carried some antisemitic references, and a number of anti-Jewish books and brochures have been published.

Some Jews have excelled and held high public positions. Among these were Carlos Dreyfus, who became governor of the State of San Salvador; Benjamin Bloom, who donated to the country a modern children's hospital bearing his name; and, more recently, Ernesto Freund, who was director of the El Salvador Board of Tourism.

Relations With Israel

The Israel-El Salvador Cultural Institute, founded in 1956, brought about an active cultural interchange between the two countries. At the same time, Israel honorary general consul in El Salvador, Ernesto Liebes, worked to impart wider knowledge of Israeli culture. Brigadier General Itzhak Pundak, Israel ambassador to El Salvador as well as to Guatemala, did much to bring about close relations between the State of Israel and El Salvador.

Honduras

Chief of State Colonel Oswaldo López Arellano, who had been constitutional president from 1965 to 1971 and returned to power in a bloodless military coup in December 1972, initiated a popular revolution in an effort to save the country's rich natural resources and to achieve an agricultural reform. Having dissolved the National Congress and political parties, and set aside the constitution, he has adopted a so-called national development program to institute urgent reforms in the still primitive banana-exporting economy. After the 1969 war, a number of public-works projects were initiated with foreign aid. Relations between Honduras and El Salvador remained strained, since no settlement could be reached on frontier demarcation despite a series of talks between their respective diplomats at Mexico City.

The population of Honduras was 2,952,000, with 317,000 in Tegucigalpa, its capital. The 1970 annual income per capita was \$251. The illiteracy index was 43 per cent. The great majority was Catholic; all other religions enjoyed freedom of worship.

JEWISH COMMUNITY

Marranos lived in Honduras since colonial times, when the country was part of the Capitanía General de Guatemala (General Captaincy of Guatemala). The proceedings of the Inquisition attested to their presence. Very little else was known about them.

Historical sources recorded that a Jew, named Jacobo Baíz, who lived in this country (1843–1899) and, as confidant of President Marco Aurelio Soto, averted an expedition of mercenaries allegedly prepared in the United States against Honduras.

A small number of Jews reached Honduras in the 19th century. Immigrants from Central Europe began to arrive in 1920. Another few families from Poland came in 1928. In 1935 Honduras opened its doors to German Jewish scientists and educators, but very few came. Four years later, the government restricted the entry of Jews. However, many Jews were saved during World War II when Honduran consuls issued visas and passports to them, often illegally. Thus, in the years before and after World War II, the Jewish community grew. By 1947 it numbered 129; another 64 Jews came a year later. The newcomers gathered in private homes for religious services and social and communal activities, particularly to aid more recent immigrants.

There was some emigration of Jews in the years following, so that the community today numbered 150. Of these, 86 lived in Tegucigalpa, the capital of Honduras; 53 in San Pedro Sula, a commercial and industrial center, and the rest were scattered in other cities like Choluteca, Comayagua, and Tela. According to the 1967 census, 42 of the 86 Jews of Tegucigalpa were children below the age of 18. Of these, 22 were offsprings of mixed marriages.

Communal life was minimal. The Comunidad Hebrea de Tegucigalpa sponsored some educational activities for young people. Its president was Helmut Seidel. WIZO and a youth organization, Maccabi Hatzair, carried on limited activities, as did the Keren Kayyemet le-Yisrael.

Honduras had no Jewish schools. Youngsters and children wishing to study Jewish subjects gathered in private homes to do so. They generally participated in camp activities as well as in youth seminars, which were annually organized in different countries of the region by the Federation of Jewish Communities of Central America and Panama.

Honduras had only one synagogue, built 15 years ago in the city of San Pedro Sula. There was no rabbi or spiritual leader; religious services were conducted by a member of the community.

Civil Rights

Predominantly Catholic like the other Central American republics, Honduras guaranteed freedom of worship to all other religions. There was no overt anti-Jewish discrimination, though from time to time the press carried antisemitic material. A large group of Palestinians living in San Pedro Sula has been used politically to express antisemitic and anti-Israel sentiments. While the community's relations with the Catholic Church have been good, there has been no dialogue between the two.

Relations With Israel

Relations between Honduras and Israel have been excellent, mainly as a result of the work of the Israeli-Hondurian Cultural Institute. Israel Ambassador to Honduras Eli Nevo was also ambassador to Costa Rica, and had his office in the Israel embassy in San José.

Nicaragua

The earthquake that virtually destroyed the republic's capital, Managua, on December 23, 1972, left an estimated 10,000 dead and 20,000 injured, and destroyed the homes of about half the city's 400,000 inhabitants as well as most of the government and business buildings. The country's small industrial sector, which was located in the suburbs, was affected only insofar as Managua's communications and utilities had been knocked out.

The disaster's political consequence was the public reemergence of General Anastasio Somoza Debayle, whose family has dominated Nicaraguan politics and economics since the 1930s. He had been president from 1967 to 1972, and was barred by the constitution from seeking immediate reelection. With the cooperation of the opposition Conservative party, he set up a triumvirate of one of its members and two of his own Nationalist Liberal party that was to rule for an interim period. During that time it was to revise the constitution to enable Somoza to run for a new term, beginning in December 1974. But as chief of the Armed Forces, he was able to seize power earlier to deal with the national emergency.

JEWISH COMMUNITY

Before the earthquake, some 50 Jewish families, totaling 250 persons, lived in the country, most of them in Managua. After the tragedy, a number of families emigrated, reducing the present community to 150. Fortunately, there were no Jewish victims, only some losses of homes and businesses.

The community can be traced back to 1848 when the first immigrants arrived from France (Alsace), Germany, and Holland. Others arrived years later, at the end of World War I, from Poland, Hungary, and Rumania. As in the other Central American republics, Inquisition proceedings indicated the presence of Marranos during the Spanish period.

Some of the early Jewish settlers achieved prominence. Delisle Krauss, a journalist from Bavaria who came to Nicaragua as a very young man, became a general in the army. He died in New York City in 1925. Carlos Huek, who had been finance minister of Nicaragua, and A. Raczkiewsky, who became mayor of Managua, were of Jewish descent. Huek called himself a "Catholic Jew." The late René Schick

Gutiérrez, Nicaragua's president from 1963 to 1966, also was of Jewish origin.

The central communal organization, the Congregación Israelita in Managua, was the focal point of Jewish life. All the Jewish women belonged to WIZO, which was founded in 1941. Nicaragua also had a B'nai B'rith lodge.

The only synagogue, Beth El, and its adjoining social hall were built in 1964. There was no rabbi; community members conducted Sabbath and holiday services. Now and then, a rabbi or cantor has been invited from abroad to officiate during the High Holy Days. The structure was destroyed in the earthquake. Quite a number of children and young people have been sent to study in the United States, some of them at the Yeshivath Torah Vodaath in Brooklyn.

The Jewish cemetery of Managua, established in 1935, was managed by the Hevra Kaddisha. It is noteworthy that some Jewish tombs found in the cemetery of the city of Granada date back to the year 1848.

Civil Rights

As in the other republics, the vast majority (94.1 per cent) of the 2,086,000 Nicaraguans were Catholic. There was neither religious nor racial discrimination, but there were sporadic antisemitic attacks in the press. Relations between the Jewish community and the Catholic and Protestant sectors were cordial.

Relations With Israel

Relations between Nicaragua and Israel have been very close since the establishment of the state. Nicaragua was one of the first countries to support the creation of Israel, and has been one of its staunchest supporters in the United Nations ever since. When former President Schick visited Israel before his death, he was officially received by then President Zalman Shazar. Nicaragua had a nonresident Israel ambassador, Eli Nevo, also ambassador to Honduras, whose offices were in the embassy at San José, Costa Rica. A distinguished member of the Jewish community was Max Nahman, honorary consul of Israel in Nicaragua.

Israel has developed a diversified technical aid program in Nicaragua. Among the public institutions receiving such aid were the Instituto Agrario and the Banco Nacional de Nicaragua. Israeli experts

have come to the country to advise in the establishment of agricultural settlements and cooperation in farming. And Nicaraguans went to Israel to receive training in modern farming methods and to study community organization. Two agricultural colonies were given the names "Israel" and "Jerusalén" in recognition of the assistance given. After the earthquake, a group of Israeli technicians were asked to come to Nicaragua to make a special study of planning and rebuilding the city of Managua.

The Nicaraguan-Israeli Cultural Institute, with its multiple activities, was doing much to enhance understanding and cooperation between the two countries.

Costa Rica

Considered the Switzerland of the Americas, Costa Rica has been the most advanced and democratic among Central American nations. Its regular army was abolished in 1948, and its reestablishment was forbidden by the constitution. Guardia Civil (Civilian Guard), consisting of 1,000 members and 700 coast guards, maintained peace and security in the country. There were a large number of schools, with an elementary school educational program that reduced illiteracy to only 11 per cent.

Costa Rica's President Daniel Oduber, elected in 1974, succeeded President José Figueres Ferrer, who had held the office twice before (1948-49 and 1953-58).

The population of Costa Rica was 2,050,000, with 400,000 living in the capital, San José. Although the basis of the economy continued to be agriculture, with coffee and bananas the important crops, there has been considerable growth of manufacturing in recent years. The annual per capita income was \$565. The state religion was Roman Catholicism, but other religions enjoyed full freedom.

JEWISH COMMUNITY

The first Jewish immigrants of Costa Rica were Sephardim from Curacao and Aruba, who began to arrive at the end of the 18th century. This group disappeared through assimilation. The present Jewish community was founded by Turkish and Polish Jews, who began to flow into the country in the 1920s. They were followed by German and

Austrian refugees between 1936 and 1938. Costa Rica was traditionally opposed to foreigners, and in 1937, when the Refugee Economic Corporation acquired a tract of land on which to settle Jews from Central Europe, a court ruled that the purchase of land by a foreign company for purposes of settlement was illegal. Internal unrest led to two other restrictions against Jews. In 1948 Jewish legal status and immigration permits were investigated, and all visas granted to Jews before April of that year were canceled. And in 1952, during agitation for a law restricting commercial activities to Costa Ricans, Jewish homes and institutions in San José were attacked. At the end of World War II, about 70 families, mostly young people who survived the Nazi holocaust, were permitted to enter the country.

The present-day community numbered some 1,500, most of whom lived in San José. A few established themselves in different parts of the country. Their representative communal organization, the Centro Israelita Sionista de Costa Rica (Jewish Zionist Center of Costa Rica) of which all Jews were members, was founded in 1930. Its president was Abraham Meltzer. Other active organizations were WIZO; the Jewish Women's Welfare Association, which did all kinds of charitable work throughout the country; B'nai B'rith; the Zionist youth organization Hanoar Hatzioni; an Atid youth group, and a Jewish sports center, where young and old gather for both social and sport activities.

Outstanding was the work carried on at the Chaim Weizmann Institute, the only Jewish school in Costa Rica, which had 350 pupils of whom 15 per cent were non-Jews. It consisted of kindergarten, and elementary and secondary grades. Its staff consisted of the director, Professor Yehuda Rzezask, and 35 teachers, 5 of whom taught Hebrew and Jewish culture. The school's curriculum complied with the requirements set by the Ministry of Public Education, thus permitting its graduates to continue their studies at universities. The Jewish studies curriculum qualified students to continue advanced studies in the United States or in Israel. The Ministry of Public Education of Costa Rica recognized Hebrew as one of the foreign languages in the school curriculum, thus enabling students to receive credit for Hebrew, and to take a final examination in that language toward the bachelor's degree.

The Costa Rican Jewish community had only one synagogue, Shaarei Zion in San José, which was founded in 1930 and recently rebuilt. For the first time since its founding, it had an Orthodox rabbi. The community also had a cemetery and a Hevra Kaddisha.

Civil Rights

The attitude of government toward the Jewish community has been most cordial. There was no discrimination or persecution of any kind. As in the other republics of the region, here too there has been sporadic publication of an antisemitic brochure or book, or an antisemitic article in the press.

The *Confraternidad Judío Cristiana*, devoted to interfaith understanding, has been active in San José. It published a bulletin entitled *Shalom*, sponsored courses and conferences, and did Jewish defense work. It maintained a large, well organized Jewish library.

There have been several meetings in behalf of the Jews in the Soviet Union. One organized in San José in March 1973 and chaired by Dr. Benjamin Nuñez, dean of the University of Heredia and former Costa Rican ambassador to Israel, was attended by representations from all Latin American countries. The most recent meeting, the Reunion of Latin American Women, took place in April 1974 and was chaired by Costa Rica's first lady, Mrs. Karen Figueres.

Relations With Israel

Relations between Costa Rica and Israel were very friendly, dating back to the strong diplomatic and political support for the establishment of the state. Former President José Figueres called on Israel twice to bring about even closer relations. The Israeli-Costa Rican Cultural Institute has been doing important work in promoting better understanding and closeness. Israel, on its part, has given Costa Rica technical and scientific aid in various fields.

Panama

This small republic, situated on the isthmus that links America's northern and southern continents, has been going through a period of relative political calm. General Omar Torrijos Herrera, who in 1969 unseated the elected government and ruled until 1972 as commander-in-chief of the country's National Guard, has been confirmed as supreme leader with wide powers by an Assembly of Community

Representatives elected with Torrijo's sanction. Also in accordance with his wish, his appointee, Demetrio B. Lakas, was elected president of the republic.

Panama's population was 1,619,000, of whom 93 per cent were Catholics. Freedom of worship was guaranteed to all others. Forty-seven per cent of the population was urban, with nearly one-third living in Panama City and Colón. The illiteracy index was 20.6 per cent. Per capita annual income was a relatively high \$667, mainly as a result of the economic stimulus provided by the Panama Canal.

Construction of the Canal, begun in 1880 by the French engineer De Lesseps, was finished in 1914; it was opened on July 12, 1920. In 1971 alone, 14,617 ships passed through its gates.

Panama has granted the United States limited jurisdictional authority over the Canal Zone, a strip of land extending for a distance of five miles on either side of the waterway; but a convention signed in June 1967 that modified one signed in 1920 gave Panama effective sovereignty over it by providing for joint administration of the Canal. The treaty was broadened and ratified in 1974. The Canal Zone was a free port and one of the world's important trading centers. Its civil government, health department, and security were headed by a governor, who also was president of the Panama Canal Company, an agency of the United States government charged with the maintenance and operation of the canal.

JEWISH COMMUNITY

It has been said that the Jewish community of Panama was the oldest in Central America. The first Jews who arrived in Panama in the 16th century were of Dutch and Portuguese origin. In 1876 their number was increased by immigrants from Curaçao, Jamaica, Saint Thomas, Barbados, and the Virgin Islands, who settled in the city of Colón on the Atlantic coast and established the Kol Kodesh Yaacov community.

When work on the Panama Canal began in 1880, there was an influx of Europeans; Panama City became an active center. The Kol Shearit Israel community, founded in 1876, attracted Jews of Dutch and Portuguese origin as well as newcomers from the Antilles.

In the years before and after World War I, Sephardi Jews came from North Africa, the Balkans, and several countries of the Middle East. There was also an Ashkenazi immigration from Poland, Russia, and Rumania, and the community grew when Austrians and Germans began to arrive just before World War II. A few years later, the Ashkenazi group founded the Bet El congregation, while the various

Sephardi Jews joined the Shevet Ahim congregation, founded in 1931 and now the largest congregation in Panama.

The present Jewish population was 2,500, of whom 2,200 lived in Panama City, and the rest in Colón, Chitré, David, Bocas del Toro, and elsewhere.

The Jewish community of Panama has been a very active one, with a variety of institutions, among them WIZO, B'nai B'rith, the Zionist Organization of Panama, and a number of youth groups. The Hebrew Central Council was the central coordinating institution for Kol Shearit Israel, Bet El, Shevet Ahim, and the Human Rights Committee of B'nai B'rith. It was founded in 1964 by Moshe Mizrachi, who has remained active to this day. Its president, Manuel Perelis, has been promoting closer ties and joint programs among all sectors of the Jewish community.

Panama had four synagogues: those of the Kol Shearit Israel, Bet El, and Shevet Ahim communities, and a fourth in the Canal Zone that has been established and maintained by the National Jewish Welfare Board in the United States. The Kol Shearit Israel synagogue was Reform; its spiritual head has been Rabbi Joseph Melamed. The Bet El and Shevet Ahim congregations were Orthodox. The pulpit of the former was vacant; Zion Levy was rabbi of Shevet Ahim. The rabbi of the Reform synagogue in the Canal Zone, A. Grinspan, ministered to the small group of Jews living in that part of the country. Kol Shearit Israel and Shevet Ahim each had their own cemeteries.

The three communities of Panama jointly financed the establishment in 1953 of the Albert Einstein Institute, a state-recognized Jewish day school comprising kindergarten, elementary school, and high school. The Institute's enrollment was slightly more than 900 pupils, one-third of whom were non-Jews including the sons of Panama's government officials. The school had a teaching staff of about 50. Some of the instructors of Hebrew and Jewish subjects came from Israel, but were hired on a limited-time basis. Others were graduates of the Albert Einstein school who had received their pedagogic training in Israel. The school's director, the well-known intellectual and educator Dr. Heszal Klepfisz, had been professor at the National University of Panama. The school's reputation and prestige as an educational center was excellent throughout the country.

Civil Rights

The Jewish community enjoyed full religious freedom and the high regard of the government and the Panamanian people. There was no discrimination or overt antisemitism. A very few incidents of this kind

could be traced to individuals or groups having neither political power nor roots in the republic.

Numerous Jews have held high public posts, among them Dr. Max Del Valle, who was vice-president of the country and a presidential candidate; Eli Abbo, presidential secretary; Sholem Kliksberg, economic adviser to the president; Herbert De Castro, founder of the National Symphonic Orchestra, and a number of members of the Assembly of Community Representatives like Moshe Cohen and Nessim Bassan.

The Jewish community's relations with the Catholic church have always been marked by mutual understanding and solidarity.

Relations With Israel

Through the activities carried out by the Panama-Israel Cultural Institute close ties of friendship have been established between the two countries. Mordechai Arbel was Israel ambassador to Panama.

Federation of Jewish Communities of Central America and Panama

In 1963 a group of leaders of various Jewish communities of Central America met in the city of Panama to discuss Jewish life in their respective countries. At this meeting the idea was born to establish a federation that would unify all communities of the area and direct joint efforts in various fields of Jewish activities. Then and there the participants established the Federación de Comunidades Judías de Centro-América y Panamá (Federation of Jewish Communities of Central America and Panama; FEDECO) as an instrument to serve and unify its affiliates, the six Jewish communities. The charter, which designated the Federation as the permanent representative body of the Central American communities, provided that it encourage closer cooperation and mutual assistance among its constituents to create a favorable climate for educational, cultural, and communal interchange; that it, above all else, give utmost attention to youth problems and to the continuity of organized Jewish life in the republics. The Federation was also empowered to maintain close ties with Jewish communities all over the world and with international Jewish

organizations, including the World Zionist Organization, the Jewish Agency, and the World Jewish Congress.

FEDECO planned to have biennial conventions. The first met in Guatemala City in 1964 and was chaired by Eric Heinemann; in 1966 the convention took place in San Salvador, with Enrique Gutfreund as chairman; in 1968 in San José, Costa Rica, with Jacobo Grynspan as chairman; in 1970 in Panama City, with Moshe Mizrahi as chairman; in 1972 again in Guatemala City, with Roberto Stein as chairman, and the 1974 convention met in San Salvador, with Ernesto Freund as chairman. The next convention of FEDECO, which will mark its 13th anniversary, was scheduled to meet in San José in 1976.

Thus far the Federation has been a vital instrument in maintaining Jewish life for the 6,000 Jews now living in Central America. The youth camps, or *mahanot*, held annually in the various countries have been a means of encouraging coexistence among the participating children and youngsters. They held classes in Judaism—often the only Jewish education the children received—and inculcated a sense of Jewish identification. The educational and scouting activities have been directed by communal leaders.

At the same time, FEDECO was instrumental in organizing the Federation of Jewish Students in Central America (FECEJJ), which established closer bonds among members, created a forum for the free expression of ideas, and involved them in all communal activities. FECEJJ's aim was to prepare its members for lay leadership roles in the Central American Jewish communities. The Federation has also held a series of seminars for students in the different countries of Central America.

From the very beginning, FEDECO laid the groundwork for the publication of a monthly organ, *Baderej*, to be circulated to the six Jewish communities of Central America. As the only Jewish publication in the area, it also was to serve as a communication and information medium for all Jews. *Baderej*, which was produced in Costa Rica, in fact appeared for many years before it recently ceased publication.

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