Through the second half of 1995 and the first half of 1996, Mexico continued to experience radical change in its political and social structure, with concomitant turmoil. Under President Ernesto Zedillo—the first Mexican leader to reach power through legitimate, democratic means, who was inaugurated in December 1994—progress was seen in a number of areas: a serious review of Mexico's education programs, an increase in internal savings, a transformation of the legal framework, electoral and political reform, and reform of the social security system. During 1995, the more open political mood permeated local elections for governors and representatives in 17 states, with opposition National Action Party candidates elected as governors in three states and leftist deputies elected to a number of state legislatures.

On the Chiapas front, serious headway was made in negotiating a settlement with the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN), which took up arms against the Salinas government at the beginning of 1994, demanding social justice and a democratic regime. The guerrilla army was in fact attempting to become a political movement that could attract opposition forces disenchanted with the existing parties.

However, it was in the economic sphere that Mexico's problems were most sharply evident. Analysts agreed that never in its contemporary history had the country undergone such severe strains as manifested in the latest recession, which paralyzed the economy and caused a 6-percent drop in the gross national product. Foreign and national investment was deterred by lack of trust in the government's ability to surmount the crisis. The devaluation and instability of the peso spurred inflation beyond 50 percent. Mexicans experienced a dramatic erosion of their purchasing power; more than a million people lost their jobs, adding up to the highest unemployment rate ever. Thousands of medium and small businesses, which employed two-thirds of the work force, were frozen out of the credit and capital markets by giant corporations, thus pushing them toward bank-
rupticy. These grim circumstances had devastating effects on the personal finances of the middle class, which saw its dreams of social mobility fading away, while the number of poor rose dramatically. Crime was on the rise, and the security forces were not able or willing to put an end to the wave of violence.

The business community and the unions were at odds with certain aspects of Zedillo’s economic program, such as the increase of up to 50 percent in the value-added tax and a 150-percent rise in the cost of public transportation in 1995 and of services and tariffs at the beginning of 1996. In October 1995 the government signed a pact with business and labor designed to spur economic growth, but experts doubted that economic benefits would be felt until later in 1996.

Israel and the Middle East

Mexico’s foreign policy toward Israel remained essentially unchanged. Relations between the two countries continued to develop, primarily in the cultural, commercial, and technological spheres.

David Tourgeman ended his term as Israel’s ambassador to Mexico and was replaced by Moshe Melamed in September 1995.

The Mexican government sided with the nations of the European Union, with the Holy See, and with other countries around the world in refusing to join the Jerusalem 3000 celebrations, out of reluctance to be seen as legitimizing Jewish sovereignty over the city. Thus Mexico’s ambassador to Israel was absent from the opening of the festivities in September 1995.

Yitzhak Rabin’s death in November evoked a surge of sympathy and praise for Israel’s lost leader. The Mexican government’s statement of condolence denounced the prime minister’s assassination and expressed hope for the continuation of the peace process. José Angel Gurria, Mexico’s secretary of foreign relations, was present at the burial in Jerusalem. The Chamber of Senators observed a minute of silence in Rabin’s memory, and messages of solidarity were issued by dozens of members of political parties and representatives of national institutions, including the Catholic Church.

Several mass events were organized to honor Rabin’s legacy and to pay him last respects. At the behest of the Jewish Central Committee of Mexico (Comité Central de la Comunidad Judia de México), the umbrella organization for community institutions, more than 3,000 people assembled in the Jewish Sports Center to hear eulogies by leaders of various organizations and calls to strengthen unity among Jews in Israel and around the world.

The terrorist attacks in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, and Ashkelon in February–March 1996 elicited reactions of outrage from different quarters. The Mexican government condemned the use of terrorism under any circumstance and reaffirmed its support for the peace process and for Israel’s fight against extremism. Tribuna Israelita — Mexican Jewry’s human relations agency — publicly condemned the attacks and urged the Palestinian Authority to control the fundamentalists who
MEXICO / 259

were endangering prospects for coexistence in the region. On March 7, the Latin American Federation of Zionist Students (FUSLA), the Mexican Federation of Jewish University Students (FEMUJ), and the Council of Zionist Youth Movements held a peace demonstration at the PLO Mission in Mexico City.

In contrast to the sympathy evoked by the above events, Israel’s intervention in Lebanon in April 1996 had an adverse effect on the Jewish state’s image, with Israel portrayed as a militaristic and violent nation, insensitive to the plight of others and interested only in furthering its expansionist aims.

José Sarukhan, dean of the National Autonomous University of Mexico and a close friend of Israel and the Mexican Jewish community, participated in the annual meeting of the Interamerican Development Bank, which took place in Jerusalem in October 1995. In November Ambassador Moshe Melamed presented a shipment of medical supplies on behalf of the government of Israel to the Mexican Red Cross, as a gesture of support for the victims of the natural disasters that hit the country throughout the year. The same month, Esther Kolte-niuk, a representative of the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) on Mexico City’s Council, participated in a meeting of Jewish parliamentarians in Jerusalem. Researchers and professors at some of Mexico’s most important universities were invited by Israel’s Foreign Ministry and by the International Development Bank to a seminar in Jerusalem, in June 1996, for the heads of economics departments in Latin America, Spain, and Portugal.

Anti-Semitism and Extremism

A period of political transition, economic hardship, and widespread public uncertainty could well have opened the door to scapegoating—something Mexican Jews had previously experienced in similar, though less severe, circumstances. Despite the crisis atmosphere, however, anti-Semitism remained at a record low. In fact, anti-Jewish expressions were confined to marginal individuals and groups and were repudiated by public opinion.

Jewish issues, however, were not absent from the national agenda. The 50th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz and the end of World War II became relevant topics for the media and for academic discussion. Feelings of solidarity with Jews and other minorities were brought to the fore, and Mexicans were reminded of the dangers of remaining complacent about racism and intolerance.

The fact that former president Salinas, his family, and the members of his administration had become Mexico’s “favorite villains” may partially account for the absence of anti-Semitic diatribes in the media, the traditional channel of defamation against Jews. However, there were also novel developments in the attitudes of Mexicans toward anti-Semitism. In the recent past, radical and sometimes even mainstream sectors were prone to label opponents as “Jews” or to link them to the Jewish group as a way of discrediting them. Thanks at least in part to the campaign conducted in recent years by Tribuna Israelita aimed at sensi-
tizing public opinion to the risks of anti-Semitism, open expression of anti-Semitism or evidence of harboring anti-Jewish feeling had become "politically incorrect." This positive atmosphere was reinforced by progress in the Middle East peace process, with analysts denouncing the threats of fundamentalism and commending Israel for respecting its commitments.

Among the few incidents of anti-Semitism worth noting was the behavior of Chiapas senator Irma Serrano, who ran as a candidate of the leftist Democratic Revolution Party (PRD) but resigned from the party after taking a seat in the upper house. A former chorus girl turned political demagogue, Serrano claimed that all of Mexico’s looms were in the hands of Jews and Arabs, who never forget their backgrounds and only obtain Mexican passports in order to leave the country. "When their capital has reached the highest levels, they run off," she charged. "They go to work or spend their money in more advanced countries." PRD members were outraged by the comments, insisting that they did not reflect the party's official position in any way.

In another episode, the walls of the Institute of Nuclear Sciences of the National Autonomous University of Mexico were covered with graffiti calling its director a "fascist Jew." The perpetrator was an institute employee who had been legally fired. The workers’ union was asked to distance itself from the action, but it hedged. The University Council, the highest academic and political body, denounced the incident for what it was, a racist attack.

Radical right-wing groups continued their attempts to capitalize on the climate of social unrest and uncertainty, particularly among young Mexicans, in order to swell their ranks, pointing to the Jews as responsible for the crisis. Throughout 1995 the Mexican Eagles Party persisted in its anti-Semitic campaign in the area around Mexico City's cathedral in downtown Mexico City. This group, which idealizes Mexico's Indian past while scorning Europe's role in forging the national identity, was unsuccessful in its attempts to promote its activity in the provinces. Homemade materials were distributed and displayed in different suburbs of the capital, denouncing Israel as "the Antichrist" and Jews as responsible for all the crises Mexico was facing. In the last months of 1995 its activity stopped, and the group disappeared from view.

One of its last appearances was in August, when the party joined forces with the Spanish Nazi group CEDADE, which brandished flags with swastikas and donned Nazi-style uniforms. Despite their ideological incompatibility, the two groups formed a tactical alliance to convey that they saw eye to eye in their assessment of the "Jewish problem." During this demonstration, again outside Mexico City's cathedral, fliers signed by the Sinarquist National Union (Union Nacional Sinarquista) and the Sacred Crusade for the Defense of Faith (Santa Cruzada en Defensa de la Fe) were distributed. These ultra-Catholic groups urged Mexicans to "reinforce their love for the homeland in order to stop the Protestant invasion of Jewish-Yanqui imperialism."

Although research supported the impression that these groups contained only
a handful of activists and did not enjoy significant support, the increase in right-wing activity on the international level presumably affected Mexico as well. Groups like CEDADE were attempting to build support through publications and limited exposure, taking advantage of the infrastructure of local groups.

Classic anti-Semitic books such as *The International Jew* and *the Protocols of the Elders of Zion* continued to be available in some bookstores, particularly those that specialized in radical literature. The revisionist books of Salvador Borrego, Mexico's most prolific anti-Semitic writer, could also be found in respectable outlets. Nevertheless, the list of anti-Semitic titles was shrinking, due in part to the effect of the economic crisis on the book market and to the local Jewish community's efforts to prevent wide distribution of such material.

In the context of the tenth anniversary of the earthquakes that shook Mexico City in 1985, a new book appeared about the exploitation of seamstresses in sweatshops—ostensibly at the hands of their Jewish bosses, who were accused of rushing to save their goods and machinery from the earthquake rubble rather than their workers. *Seamstresses Below the Rubble* was edited by Angelica Marval and Gonzalo Martre, the latter the author of one of the most virulent articles that appeared in the Mexican press in 1985 as part of a two-week anti-Semitic campaign surrounding the "seamstress issue." The new book, a compilation of articles published at that time, is filled with anti-Jewish sentiment. Two weeks after publication, because of negative reviews and feedback from leading public figures, the publisher withdrew the book from the market.

**JEWISH COMMUNITY**

**Demography**

According to a sociodemographic study conducted by the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and El Colegio de Mexico in 1991, sponsored by the Mexican Association of Friends of the Hebrew University, the Jewish community of Mexico was estimated to number 40,000. Most of Mexico's Jews lived in the capital and its suburbs in the state of Mexico, while the rest (about 2,500) resided in the cities of Guadalajara, Monterrey, and Tijuana.

**Communal Affairs**

Mexican Jewry was severely affected by the economic crisis, and its institutional network had to develop innovative programs to aid those in need. Fund-raising events, such as concerts and conferences, featuring important figures, both local and international, were organized. Ad hoc committees were created to address particular issues and to implement contingency plans. To meet the needs of the high proportion of families unable to cover the costs of Jewish education, for ex-
ample, scholarships were given to hundreds of students. Basic staples were provided to the needy in the community.

Because of the critical economic situation, many organizations with an Israel focus geared their efforts toward raising funds to support local causes. Such was the case with Na'amat, which channeled monies for scholarships within the Jewish educational network, and Friends of Assaf Harofeh, which organized a concert with well-known Mexican and Israeli talents, the proceeds going to the General Hospital in Mexico City.

Organizations that offer psychological and emotional support were extremely active, among them Retorno (Return), created in the early 1990s to promote awareness of the pernicious effects of alcohol and drugs and to provide counseling and treatment, and Kadima (Forward), a support and advocacy group for the disabled.

The Jewish Central Committee helped to promote local initiatives and continued to participate in Jewish international forums. In the context of the General Assembly of the Council of Jewish Federations, held in Boston in November 1995, Mexican Jewish leaders met with representatives of communities of similar size and characteristics to exchange ideas and plan future cooperation.

In September 1995, Abraham Hamra, the former chief rabbi of Syria now living in Israel, was a guest of Mexico's Monte Sinai community—whose founders came from Damascus in the early 1920s—to share his personal experiences and to provide information on the current situation of the remnants of Syrian Jewry.

Israel-Related Activity

During the year, the community organizations that foster closer ties between Mexico and Israel carried out a number of projects. At a meeting with community leadership, the Mexican Association of Friends of the Hebrew University officially presented the final edition of Jews in Mexico: A Demographic and Socio-Cultural Profile, a research project conducted jointly by the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and El Colegio de Mexico. Two Hebrew University professors, demographer Sergio DellaPergola and anti-Semitism scholar Yehuda Bauer, commented on the report's findings.

Other distinguished guests from the Hebrew University during the year were Israel W. Charny, director of the Martin Buber Institute, who lectured on "A Jewish Humanist Perspective on Denial of the Holocaust and Other Nations' Genocides," and Avraham Meschulach, director of the Faculty of Business Administration, who exchanged views with Mexican colleagues. Raquel Hodara, researcher on contemporary Judaism at the Hebrew University, gave courses for the Conservative Bet-El Community and lectured on the causes and effects of Jewish fundamentalism.

The Mexican Association of Friends of the Weizmann Institute organized a series of conferences on "The Third Millennium: Perspectives and Challenges";
the yearly Weizmann Awards were presented by Mexico's Scientific Research
Academy for outstanding Ph.D. theses; and several high-school students received
scholarships to attend the 27th International Science Camp at the Weizmann In-
stitute in Rehovot.

The Mexican Committee for Jerusalem 3000 kicked off its activities in Octo-
ber 1995 with a monthlong program, held in a commercial-cultural center in
southern Mexico City, that included concerts, photo exhibits, dance perfor-
mances, and conferences on the Holy City. For 1996 the committee scheduled one
week of "Israel in Mexico" and one of "Mexico in Israel," with programs high-
lighting different aspects of both countries' historical and cultural resources. The
Mexico-Israel Cultural Institute joined the celebrations, and many activities took
place on its premises in downtown Mexico City. Early in 1996, Daphna Sharf-
man, a researcher at Haifa University and a specialist on civil rights, participated
with representatives of Amnesty International in a forum on that subject spon-
sored by the Cultural Institute.

Avraham Burg, chairman of the Jewish Agency, visited Mexico in March 1996.
In meetings with Jewish Mexican leaders and students he spoke on the status of
Israel-Diaspora relations. In an interview in the daily News (March 16), Burg re-
ferred to Mexican Jewry as "a role model of both continuity and tradition for
other communities around the world."

Community Relations

In September 1995, in commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the end of
World War II and the liberation of Auschwitz, and in the context of the UN's
Year of Tolerance, a weeklong program devoted to the subject of racism—the
first of its kind in Mexico—was organized by Tribuna Israelita in conjunction
with the Public Education Secretariat, the Human Rights National Commission,
the National Autonomous University of Mexico and other academic institu-
tions, and nongovernmental human-rights organizations.

The program included sessions in which local specialists on diverse facets of
racism, including anti-Semitism and xenophobia, analyzed the state of these phe-
nomena in Mexico and the world over. A book titled The Good Old Days, a col-
collection of memoranda and personal diaries written by perpetrators and by-
standers during the Holocaust and compiled by three German researchers, was
introduced to the Spanish-speaking market. A workshop for teachers on the re-
sources available to educate elementary and high-school students on the values
of tolerance and coexistence was presented by the Public Education Secretariat.
The program also featured a dance and theater performance by the Jewish Mex-
ican troupe Anajnu Veatem as well as the photo exhibit "One Day in the Warsaw
Ghetto." At the opening of the exhibit, Jorge Madrazo, president of the Human
Rights National Commission, issued a call for the passage and implementation
of antiracist legislation in Mexico.
More than two hundred political and social leaders supported a national call against racism and for tolerance, urging Mexico’s government and legislature and society at large to increase educational efforts to fight prejudice as well as to promote an antiracist law in the country. Racism, a topic that until recently was considered taboo in Mexican society, was openly and profusely analyzed by the media, with writers warning of the dangers of prejudice, not only to the targeted groups but to the entire social fabric.

As part of their public relations and advocacy programs, both the Jewish Central Committee of Mexico and Tribuna Israelita continued to foster relations with representatives of the different social and political sectors. In November 1995 community leaders attended a luncheon with President Zedillo at the Jewish Sports Center at which he reviewed the progress made by his government in resolving Mexico’s crisis and urged the Jewish community to continue supporting his efforts for Mexico’s future development. Alfredo Achar, president of the Jewish Central Committee, conveyed the community’s views on some of the most pressing national issues.

During the second half of 1995, Tribuna Israelita participated in the First National Encounter of Nongovernmental Organizations, at which more than five hundred groups met to discuss aspects of the national agenda, such as democracy, the media, Indian rights, and ecology. The meeting produced a “Letter of Citizens’ Rights,” urging Mexican authorities to follow specific guidelines to insure a better quality of life for all Mexicans.

Mexico’s economic and political crises were magnified by natural disasters, such as the hurricanes that hit the southeastern rim of the country in September 1995. The Mexican Council of Jewish Women launched a campaign to collect food, clothing, and other goods for the distressed inhabitants of that region.

**Jewish-Christian Relations**

The Mexican Catholic Church continued to be indignant about the missionary activity carried on by evangelical groups whose social message was especially appealing to those hard hit by the recession. The numbers of these “sects” had swollen to the point of their being seen as a genuine threat to the “original” identity of Mexico, once almost exclusively Catholic. Every so often, the local Catholic hierarchy issued statements warning that these groups were undermining the values that Mexicans hold dear. The Church also targeted for criticism contemporary movements identified with New Age philosophies and groups advocating more progressive legislation on abortion, population control, and women’s rights. In addition to a growing rhetorical offensive, the Catholic Church initiated practical strategies to counteract the activity of these Protestant churches and secular groups. One of the Church’s goals was to own and manage media outlets—an activity barred to religious organizations by law—in order to “clarify the truth of our faith and the doctrines that can be misconstrued.”
Within this atmosphere of confrontation, Protestant groups were becoming more assertive in demanding their rightful place in Mexico's religious mosaic. They, too, spoke of the need to channel their message through the media and even advanced the possibility of creating a political party, a notion that runs completely counter to the spirit of the secular state enshrined in Mexico's ruling constitution. At the beginning of 1996, Protestant representatives met with President Zedillo to discuss these issues. Although he insisted that his government was deeply respectful of all religious denominations in the country, he also made it clear that there would be no change in the present status of relations between church and state.

For the Catholic hierarchy, the only possible allies in this struggle for Mexico's soul were the "historical Churches." Hence, the relationship with the Jewish community, spanning three decades, had been strengthened in recent years, particularly in the search for a common political agenda. Once barely audible when it came to denouncing anti-Semitism, the Church now openly supported Tribuna Israelita's campaign against racism. The presence of the archbishop of Mexico City, Norberto Rivera Carrera, at the opening of the interdisciplinary program held in September 1995 (see Community Relations), attested to the Church's new willingness to take a public stance on the matter.

Mexican Jewry fostered links with Catholic orders of diverse ideology, such as the Jesuits and Christ's Legionaries, as well as with the Baptist and the Lutheran Churches.

Culture

The International Research Conference of the Latin American Jewish Studies Association (LAJSA) took place in Mexico City, November 11–14, 1995. Some one hundred researchers in the field—from the United States, Israel, Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico, among others—who specialize in the area of contemporary Judaism and who have studied the past and the present of this region, analyzed topics such as immigration, demographics, anti-Semitism, identity and ethnicity, and culture. The conference received the academic support of Mexico's National Autonomous University and the Jesuit Iberoamericana University.

Yiddish culture continued to play a vital role in the life of Mexican Jewry, which, since the very beginnings of a modern Jewish community, had made serious efforts to keep it alive, including the maintenance of schools where the language, literature, and history of the Old World were still taught from kindergarten through high school. In an effort to stem the inevitable erosion of interest in the language, a group of former teachers, community activists, and social scientists created the Pro Yiddish Committee in 1990. The group organized periodic readings of literature and lectures, including talks by visiting U.S. professors Samuel Kassow on East European Jewry, David Roskies on Yiddish literature, and Adina
Cimet on Jewish culture and language. It also arranged film festivals and concerts of Yiddish music and folklore.

The Fourth Habima Theater Festival in May 1996 featured original plays in Spanish by aspiring Jewish Mexican writers, directors, and actors.

The program of Jewish studies at the Iberoamericana University marked its tenth anniversary in 1996. It offered a degree in Judaic studies, with an emphasis on contemporary Judaism. The courses, taught by visiting Israeli professors, were on the Holocaust, Zionism, socioeconomic and demographic trends in the Jewish world, and different philosophies of Judaism.

In March 1996, Mercaz Sfarad, the Center for Sephardic Studies, sponsored a week of events related to different aspects of Sephardic culture and tradition. Among the participants was Hebrew University professor Matilda Koen-Sarano — storyteller, lecturer, writer, and folklorist — who addressed a large Jewish and non-Jewish audience.

Publications

Two noteworthy works on the history and sociology of Jews in Mexico appeared in 1995: La Comunidad Israelita de Guadalajara by Cristina Gutierrez Zuniga, published by the Jewish community of Guadalajara together with the prestigious academic think tank El Colegio de Jalisco; and a second edition of La Vida Entre el Judaismo y el Cristianismo en la Nueva Espana (Life Between Judaism and Christianity in New Spain) by Jewish Mexican historian Eva Uchmany, first published by Mexico’s Interior Ministry and the National Archives. The book exhaustively documents the life of “Marranos,” Jews who arrived in Mexico from Portugal after the Conquest, fleeing the Inquisition.

Personalia

A retrospective exhibition marking 50 years of professional accomplishment by world-renowned architect Abraham Zabludovsky was shown in the capital’s prestigious Rufino Tamayo Museum in October 1995. Zabludovsky was responsible for some of Mexico City’s more important buildings, such as the National Auditorium and El Colegio de Mexico.

Clara Jusidman, an economist and former public administrator who is involved in development projects for marginal communities in Mexico and other Latin American countries, was part of the Mexican delegation to the 1995 Women’s Conference in Beijing, China.

Jacobo Landau, founder and president of the Jewish Chamber of Commerce, which in the 1930s acted as Mexican Jewry’s representative body and defense institution against anti-Semitic attacks, died in January 1996.

Dina Siegel