Brazil

National Affairs

This year marked the first of Luis Inacio Lula da Silva’s presidency. Although his party, the Workers’ Party (PT) had been established as a political voice of the trade unions in opposition to Brazil’s military dictatorship (1964–84), after the return to democracy the PT attracted supporters from the entire range of Brazilian society. Although often portrayed as a socialist, President Lula surprised many international and Brazilian observers by acting as a social democrat and continuing many of his predecessor’s neoliberal economic policies, even negotiating a $14.8-billion agreement with the International Monetary Fund.

To be sure, Lula continued to work in a socially conscious direction. During the World Social Forum of 2003, a gathering of antiglobalization activists from many countries that has been held in Brazil for a number of years, President Lula supported the position of the UN and many European countries by stating: “Just as a new social contract is needed in Brazil, a global pact is needed to reduce the distance between rich countries and poor countries. . . . Rich countries need to distribute the planet’s wealth.” Over the course of the year, however, the new president faced greater opposition from the left wing of his own party than from the business community.

President Lula achieved considerable success in the international sphere. He traveled extensively—visiting 28 nations—and established good relations with a range of leaders from U.S. president George W. Bush to Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez. When a row erupted between the U.S. and Brazil over new fingerprinting policies for visitors, enacted initially by the former and then matched in a retaliatory move by the latter, the personal rapport between the two presidents eased what could have been an extremely tense issue.

The year ended on a high economic note in Brazil with the Brazilian BOVESPA stock market rising rapidly on the heels of a record amount of foreign investment. During the first 12 months of President Lula’s term, Brazil’s credit-risk index dropped by 70 percent to its lowest level.
since late 1997. Although Brazil continued to be ranked as a "B+" international credit risk, the country’s foreign reserves were near 50 billion U.S. dollars and rising, because of the strength of the real (the Brazilian currency) against the dollar. GDP growth in 2003 appears to have been low (perhaps 0.1 percent), in large part because of weakness in industrial expansion, especially automobile sales. Inflation was estimated at less than 10 percent for the year.

President Lula’s main goals for 2004 were job creation and construction of low-cost, "popular" housing projects, which, along with sanitation construction, was expected to create many new jobs. He also argued for an ambitious expansion of the export economy, looking for an increase from $23 billion in 2003 to $80 billion in 2004. In the agricultural sector, Lula hoped for an increase in grain production of approximately 6 percent. Of great interest to the business community was the president’s pledge to lower both the cost of credit and the taxes on machines and equipment, both policies aimed at stimulating production. There was also considerable speculation about the nationwide municipal elections due in 2004, as half the mayors of Brazil’s state capital cities were ineligible to run because of the two-term election limit.

According to the most recent census, completed in 2000, Brazil had a population of slightly less than 170 million, with approximately 80 percent of the population living in urban areas. Although notions of racial identity differed significantly from those in the U.S., Brazil was clearly multiethnic and multicultural, possessing the largest populations of African and Japanese descent of any country in the world. Many Brazilians were of European and Middle Eastern background, and in recent years the country attracted significant immigration from Korea and China, as well as large numbers of Palestinians. In addition, Brazil counted among its inhabitants more than 750,000 people who defined themselves as "indigenous."

The common description of Brazil as the world’s largest Catholic country was somewhat misleading. Many who self-identified as Catholic actually practiced syncretistic Afro-Catholic religions. In addition, the Protestant population was growing rapidly, reaching over 26 million; in some cities there were more non-Catholic Christians than Catholics. Other religions represented in the census in large numbers—concentrated in specific parts of the country—were Buddhism and the so-called New Japanese Religions (centering in São Paulo and numbering some 370,000); Judaism (concentrated in Brazil’s largest cities and numbering
about 86,000); and Islam (in southern Brazil and numbering some 27,000). Leaders of most of the religious communities believed that the census significantly undercounted members of their faiths.

**Israel and the Middle East**

Brazil has taken a "middle road" position in regard to the Middle East. The Brazilian government in 2002 strongly supported all UN Security Council resolutions on the subject, including the one calling for an end, as soon as possible, to Israel's occupation of Palestinian territories. The Brazilian government also supported the peaceful creation of a democratic State of Palestine, based on the Beirut Declaration by the League of Arab States and the proposals formulated by the "Quartet" (the U.S., the European Union, Russia, and the UN secretary general). Brazil was a member of the "Rio Group," which had consistently called for an immediate cessation of all acts of terrorism, provocation, incitement, and destruction in the Middle East. President Lula, in his inaugural address, mentioned specifically that the Middle East problem should be resolved by "negotiated and peaceful means."

Brazil had strong, ongoing trade relations with Israel in the areas of agriculture, technology, and water usage, which continued under the new Lula administration.

In March 2003, Brazil's largest newsmagazine, *VEJA*, reported that Al Qaeda operatives, including one of the top leaders, Khalid Shaikh Mohammed—captured in Pakistan on March 1—had spent time along the Brazilian frontier with Argentina and Paraguay, a region where many Muslims lived, in December 1995. There were also unsubstantiated rumors that Osama bin Laden had visited the area around the same time. The Brazilian government claimed it had no evidence to indicate that either man had been in the country.

While insisting on UN inspections and other steps to prevent Iraq from developing weapons of mass destruction, Brazil sided with the major EU countries, notably France and Germany, in opposing the American war on Iraq in the absence of UN Security Council approval. On March 20, the government issued a statement calling the U.S. strike "an act of disrespect to the UN and the rest of the world." Public opinion in Brazil tended to view U.S. policy as motivated by considerations of oil. With the onset of hostilities, antiwar protests took place at the consulates of the U.S. and its coalition partners in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. Sergio Vieira de Mello, the 55-year-old Brazilian diplomat who was
named UN High Commissioner of Human Rights in 2002, was killed when the UN headquarters in Iraq was bombed on August 19, 2003. He had been serving there on a temporary basis as special representative of the UN secretary general.

**Racism and Anti-Semitism**

Racism, especially targeted against people of African descent, was noticeable in the social and economic spheres. While Brazil's elite had always insisted that the country was a "racial democracy," such claims were becoming increasingly harder to sustain. Brazilians of African descent regularly complained about their treatment. The correlation between race and income was very high, with darker-skinned people generally belonging to the lower classes. And as Brazilians from the impoverished northeastern part of the country moved south into the large urban centers like São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, the number of physical attacks on them grew.

In contrast, there was little open anti-Semitism. One factor explaining this was the limited contact between the relatively small community of Jews, on the one hand, and the mass of Brazil's impoverished urban and rural people, on the other. In addition, Jewish communal organizations were careful to keep internal Jewish issues (as opposed to ones related to Israel) out of the spotlight. Also, Brazil's strong rhetorical commitment to ethnic, cultural, and racial tolerance was backed up by law, making public anti-Semitism a potential crime. And finally, the wide publicity given to the active involvement of some Jewish community leaders in popular movements to combat hunger, poverty, and discrimination presented Brazil's Jews in a favorable, socially conscious, light.

Outright anti-Semitic movements in Brazil attracted only a tiny number of participants. One moribund old group, the Integralist Party, based in the interior of the state of São Paulo, revived with the return to democracy in 1988. In the 1930s, its precursor and namesake, the Ação Integralista Brasileira, had some members who engaged in a virulently anti-Semitic campaign that was tolerated by the government. At their height, those Integralists had claimed one million members, but in late 1937 they were banned along with all other political parties. The new Integralist Party appeared to be supported by only a few hundred people, at most.

There was a formal neo-Nazi political party, the Brazilian National Revolutionary Party (PNRB), which had about 200 sympathizers. A
number of other groups popularly associated with neo-Nazism were Carecas do Suburbio, Carecas ABC, Carecas do Brasil, SP Oi!, White Power, S.P.F., and Neo-Nazis. They were based in the industrial suburbs surrounding Brazil's largest cities, where the economic crisis of the previous half-decade had created high levels of unemployment. While their discourse was frequently anti-Semitic, these groups seemed to have non-specific bigoted ideological roots, and were committed to little more than generic thuggery. Much of the "evidence" that some used to suggest that Brazil's neo-Nazi movement was growing was the result of better reporting and an increasing unwillingness, among both Jews and others, to let anti-Semitic rhetoric or actions pass without comment.

During 2003, there were a handful of reported skinhead attacks as well as some posters put up in public places. They targeted mostly migrants from Brazil's impoverished northeastern states, those of African descent, and homosexuals—Brazil had the highest rate of recorded homosexual murders in the world between 1980 and 1999—and sometimes Jews.

It is important to note that in 2003, as in previous years, government officials took a firm public stand against such actions. For example, when the musical group Zurzir gave an interview to the Internet site www.opinionlibre.com defending the superiority of the "Aryan race," the Public Ministry of Rio Grande do Sul, where the site was based, ordered the Federal Police to bring a charge of racism against it. Then the Commission on Citizenship and Human Rights of the State Assembly sponsored a public meeting on the topic. By year's end the site apparently no longer existed. In another case, a link found deep within a highly respected human-rights Web site led to a copy of the infamous Protocols of the Elders of Zion. When this was brought to public attention, the Web site removed the link. Other cases of public anti-Semitism were also aggressively attacked.

Holocaust-Related Issues

Virtually all the literature denying the Holocaust published in Brazil was privately funded by 71-year-old Siegfied Ellwanger Castan, a wealthy industrialist living in the state of Rio Grande do Sul. Castan's publishing company, Editôra Revisão (Revisionist Publishing House), distributed an unknown quantity of books, for free, to politicians all over Brazil, but there was no sign that this material had any effect on policy. Castan's books were not available in any of the major bookstore chains, but could occasionally be found in independent and second-hand shops. His Holo-
caust: Jewish or German? was said to have reached its 30th edition in 2002, but no one knew how many copies had actually been printed. His The Lie of the Century, published in 1993, called the accounts of Nazi murders of Jews “Zionist lies.” In 1994, Castan offered a prize to anyone who “has lived in Brazil for 20 years and can prove that any Jew was killed in a gas chamber.” A number of Jews took up the offer, but Castan refused to entertain their claims. Castan also reprinted a number of anti-Semitic books originally published in the 1920s, such as the Protocols of the Elders of Zion and Henry Ford’s The International Jew. In spite of its small circulation, Castan’s literature was widely attacked, and consequently received disproportionate publicity.

All such publications were in fact banned by Brazil’s antiracism laws (Brazilian Constitution of 1988, Article 5, paragraph XLII). But attempts to enforce the laws and suppress this material were generally not supported by politicians; indeed, when cases were prosecuted, the courts often found for the racists on the basis of Brazil’s guarantees of freedom of speech and of the press. Thus, when Editôra Revisão was removed as a member of a publisher’s consortium in Rio Grande do Sul, a local judge reinstated it. Also, in April 2002, after a trial lasting several years, Castan received a two-year conditional sentence (to be served as community service) from a federal high court judge for “inciting racism.” In December of that year, however, the Supreme Court threw out the conviction, agreeing with a defense argument that since Jews were not a “race,” there could be no racism against Jews in the juridical sense of the term used in the constitution.

But the case was returned to the Supreme Court, and in August 2003 the judges decided by seven to three that Castan could be charged with racism. The majority opinion pointed out that victims of racism, in the historical sense, have not only included people of African descent, but also Jews and others. Furthermore, it went on, Castan himself treated Jews as a “race” by using language in his Holocaust denial literature that referred to the “racial and parasitic inclinations of the Jews.”

JEWISH COMMUNITY

Demography

The Jewish community of Brazil, formed primarily after 1920, was ethnically diverse, encompassing Ashkenazim (mostly of Polish and Ger-
man descent) and Sephardim (the largest plurality was of Egyptian descent). Preliminary information collected for the 2000 census showed a Jewish population of 86,825, almost all living in urban areas. Some Jewish organizations in Brazil disputed this figure and argued for a considerably higher number, between 120,000 and 140,000. Probably the most reliable estimate came from Israeli demographer Sergio DellaPergola, who placed the 2003 number at 97,000, a slight decline from the 1980 figure of 100,000. This made Brazilian Jewry the tenth largest Jewish community in the world. Early breakout numbers from the census suggested that the population self-identifying as Jewish was diminishing, in large part because of intermarriage.

The largest Jewish community in Brazil was in São Paulo, Brazil's largest city. In 2002, the Albert Einstein Jewish Hospital sponsored a study of the Jewish community of that city. It showed a Jewish population of 60,000 out of a total population of 10.4 million, significantly higher than the official census figure of 44,000. These findings must be used with caution, however, since DellaPergola, a consultant on the project, has suggested publicly that the methodologies used were not fully reliable. According to the Einstein data, some 60 percent of Jews in São Paulo attended synagogue only on High Holy Days or for social activities, 13 percent never attended, about 14 percent attended weekly, and 3 percent—representing, to a large degree, a small but growing Orthodox community—went every day. The study also indicated a low number of students in Jewish day schools.

The second largest Jewish community was in Rio de Janeiro, 25,000–30,000 Jews out of a population of 5.85 million. The third largest was in Porto Alegre, Rio Grande do Sul, 10,000–12,000 Jews in a population of about 1.36 million. There were other significant communities in Belo Horizonte, Curitiba, Santos, and Recife.

Communal Affairs

As in many other countries with relatively large Jewish populations, there were numerous nationwide and local community organizations seeking to represent Jews. The central body representing all the Jewish federations and communities in Brazil was the Confederação Israelita do Brazil (CONIB), founded in 1951. This umbrella body included 200 organizations engaged in promoting Jewish and Zionist activities, as well as groups involved in Jewish education, culture, and charity. The Federação Israelita do Estado de São Paulo (Jewish Federation of São Paulo)
had a standing commission dedicated to fighting racism, and the federation held a permanent seat on the advisory board of the city’s police unit that investigated racial crimes. The São Paulo-based Latin American Jewish Committee Section for Interreligious Affairs actively combated racial hatred, with support from the Brazilian National Commission for Catholic-Jewish Dialogue, an affiliate of the National Conference of Brazilian Bishops. All of the major international Zionist organizations and Zionist youth movements were represented in Brazil. Brazilian Jews published a number of newspapers and journals in Portuguese, and much Jewish activity took place in Jewish community centers that were called “Hebraica.”

Poverty was apparently growing among Jews in Brazil, although it was far less of a problem than in neighboring Argentina. Claims in the Jewish press that there were “thousands of impoverished Brazilian Jews” were simply untrue. In fact, most of the Jewish social-welfare organizations in the country had largely non-Jewish clienteles. Much of the assistance that foreign Jews supplied to the Brazilian Jewish community went toward scholarships for day-school tuition or to help pay dues for synagogue membership.

The decision of the Israeli government to close down its consulate in São Paulo, home to the largest Jewish population in Brazil, caused great dismay. This followed the closure of the Rio de Janeiro consulate, leaving only the embassy in Brasilia formally to represent Israel. Concerns were raised with the Israeli Foreign Ministry that the closure would harm Brazilian-Israeli business ties and that the consulates of Arab nations would now have a monopoly on public activity, but to no avail.

In 2003, Sandra Kochman became the first female rabbi in the history of Brazil when she was named assistant rabbi of the Associação Religiosa Israelita (ARI), the Liberal congregation of Rio de Janeiro.

Culture

The official Jewish community tended to shy away from publicity, with the exception of responding to the rare instances of anti-Semitism. Thus the decision in 2003 by São Paulo’s Centro de Cultura Judaica to take two public initiatives promoting Jewish life led to some controversy. First, it sponsored a famous samba school in Rio de Janeiro to present the Ten Commandments as a theme during Rio’s annual summer carnival. According to press reports, which the center vehemently denied, about a million dollars was spent on the project, leading many activists to argue that
the money could have been better spent helping support Brazilian Jewish institutions. Second, the center, in cooperation with the São Paulo Jewish Federation, drew criticism for initiating an advertising campaign in which famous public figures not generally known to be Jewish promoted the value of Jewish ethnicity and religion. Using the motto “Judaism feels good and does good,” the campaign targeted both Jews and non-Jews.

Books about Jews and Jewish issues were published regularly in Brazil. Those about Brazilian Jewry tend to be either hagiographic or memorializing, or discuss the varying interpretations of Brazilian immigration policy during World War II. Books of scholarly value that appeared in 2003 were: Marilia Freidenson and Gaby Becker, Passagem para a América, Relatos da imigração judaica em São Paulo, oral histories of Jews in São Paulo; Reuven Faingold, D. Pedro II na Terra Santa, a reproduction with commentary of the diary that the Brazilian emperor kept during his trip to the Holy Land in 1876; and Alberto Moghrabi’s collection of short stories and personal memories, Pequenos Contos de Enredo Indeterminado.

The major cities held Jewish film festivals that presented a wide range of features and documentaries from around the world on Jewish themes. The German film Nowhere in Africa was the most successful such film in 2003, running for months in major art-house cinemas. The Casa de Cultura de Israel in São Paulo, inaugurated in 2002, continued to be a major sponsor of Jewish culture.

Jewish studies was growing as a field of research at major Brazilian universities, as evidenced by the impressive proliferation in M.A. and Ph.D. theses in Brazil on Jewish topics. In 2003, the Center for Jewish Studies at the University of São Paulo produced a special issue of its journal on “The Integration of Jews in Contemporary Brazil.”

**Personalia**

Rabbi Henry Sobel of the Congregação Israelita Paulista was perhaps the best known Jewish leader in Brazil, in large part because of his active stance against discrimination and poverty, and his engagement in interreligious dialogue. Rabbi Nilton Bonder of Rio de Janeiro’s Congregação Judaica do Brasil, known as the “green rabbi,” was a prize-winning and best-selling author who used Jewish tradition and mysticism to discuss a wide variety of spiritual matters, as well as social issues such as the environment.
José Mindlin, now retired as director of Metaleve Industries, a large international producer of metal products such as pistons, bearings, and oil pumps, did much to preserve rare Brazilian books. The Safras, former owners of Banco Safra, constituted one of the most prominent Sephardi families in Brazil. Silvio Santos ("Senor Abravanel"), Brazil’s most popular television personality, continued to assert his Jewish identity publicly, even though his wife and daughter were evangelical Christians.

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