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EDITOR'S NOTE

FOR SEVERAL MONTHS NOW, I have been editing the papers of 24 women working in different fields and in different places throughout the world. These women also come from very different parts of the Jewish community and work in a variety of settings: some are academics; some are writers; some are social workers. All originally presented papers in 1997 and 1998 at the Hadassah Research Institute on Jewish Women located at Brandeis University. Reading their work, thinking about their ideas, and sometimes struggling to translate them into English has been an unexpectedly absorbing experience for me and I've wondered what it is, exactly, that I find so rewarding. I've concluded that spending time in the company of an international, interdisciplinary group of Jewish women begins to fill a most basic and persistent need in me: the need of human beings to see themselves sympathetically represented and reflected in their culture.

As a Jewish woman growing up in post-war America, I rarely saw any semblance of my reflection in the mainstream culture. Although I grew up in the middle of New York City where almost everybody in my immediate world was Jewish, representations of Jews were absent from the museums I visited, the movies I saw, or the books I read in school. Except for *The Diary of Anne Frank,* which I consider problematic reading for a young Jewish girl, there was no Jewish heroine in the books of my childhood. I identified with active, adventurous girls like Jo March, Nancy Drew or Cherry Ames and liked reading about the dramatic lives of European and English queens. I didn't then notice that none of the women I was reading about were Jewish, or that Archie and Veronica seemed to have no Jewish friends; that there were no Jewish Mouseketeers; or that there were no Jewish girls in *American Girl* or *Seventeen*.

I was in my forties and listening to West Indian writer Jamaica Kincaid speaking at the Isabella Gardner Museum in Boston, when I suddenly perceived their absence (like Pnina Motzafi-Haller in her essay about *mizrahi* women in Israel, I applied the insight of an African-American woman to my own life). Jamaica Kincaid had done a brilliant and audacious thing: invited to choose her favorite painting at the museum and speak to a large audience about the reasons for her choice, she had beamed an old snapshot of her mother on the museum's large screen and talked about it.

All of us in the audience, of course, had been accustomed to viewing the parade of art history on such a screen – from the Greeks to the Renaissance masters to the Impressionists and Abstract Expressionists. We were accustomed to oil portraits and elaborately framed photographs. The effect of Kinkaid's snapshot was shocking and made the author's point more forcefully than her words: Had we ever seen the image of an ordinary West Indian woman on the walls of a museum? Had we ever contemplated her face? Her body? Her surroundings? Her life? How did we ascribe value to this snapshot when it was viewed in a private photo album, in a newspaper, or here, in the context of other portraits in the museum? We had all read or at least heard of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, but what about the invisible woman? In this case, what about an entire sub-culture usually hidden by the majority African-American minority culture?

I viewed many of these working papers as such snapshots that raised some of these and many other questions.

In addition to experiencing a kind of invisibility as a Jewish girl in America, I also felt an invisibility in the Jewish community as the daughter of Czech Jews (of *ashkenazi* descent on my mother's side; *sephardi* on my father's). We lived on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, where there were many Jewish refugees from Central Europe but where the definition of Jewish culture was determined by people who, like the majority of American Jews, were of Russian and Polish descent.

This particular group, I later learned, had jettisoned their working-class, Yiddish-speaking parents (as well as their working-class culture) in the Bronx, or Brooklyn, or Queens, or the Lower East Side. They were West Siders now, middle-class, highly educated, new Jews, who frequented the American – not Yiddish-language – theater and Lincoln Center, collected art, read the cultural sections of the *Times* and the *New Yorker.* The men worked as professionals; the women were delighted to be full-time homemakers in the image of Betty Crocker. Most were political liberals who had flirted with Communism or Socialism in college; they had friends or aquaintances who were blacklisted and were deeply affected by McCarthyism. They had also been deeply affected by the events of the second world war and were in every way invested in a prototypically 1950s American mainstream lifestyle.

My family entered this Upper West Side Jewish milieu towards the end of 1948 like creatures from another planet. My parents were *both* Holocaust survivors and political exiles from Communism. They had grown up middle-class, did not speak Yiddish, had never seen a bagel, and were not especially interested in Israel. Although they had no sympathy for McCarthyism, they were staunch anti-Communists who regarded Stalin as another version of Hitler. During the 1950s, they struggled to earn money and to adjust to America. Like many Jewish (and other) refugee women, my mother supported the family. My father – a former Olympic water polo player and sometimes officer of the Organization of Czech Sportsmen in-Exile-in-the Western World – was mostly unemployed until I was ten years old.

All this is to say that, as I was growing up, I felt as invisible in the Jewish community as I did in the American one. And when I had finished growing up, although I was counted as an American Jew, I still did not feel like American Jewish culture included me. G.B. could have been describing the Epsteins when she writes "Iranian Jews do not easily mesh with the majority Jewish culture. Those who live in North America feel marginalized: their experience has been that American Jews know nothing about them... The Iranian Jewish diaspora is triggering a re-examination of hegemonic notions of American Jewish identity. Iranian Jews with their own ethnic and cultural tradition are challenging the American Jewish culture that was brought from Eastern Europe and that is presumed to apply to all arriving Jews regardless of their background. This ashkenazi standard for Jews is similar to the WASP standard for assimilation to North American society."

The issue of cultural hegemony is addressed in an even more dramatic way by South African Sally Frankental."It is a truism to note that all Jewish communities, in all times and places, reflect the context in which they are located," she writes."In the South African case, the segregationist policies of the colonial authorities, the Boer republics, and the Union, followed by the apartheid system of the past fifty years, form the inescapable frame for all who live in South Africa... the disproportionate numbers who arrived from one region, Lithuania, gave the community an unusual degree of homogeneity relative to other diaspora communities. This was reflected in the virtual absence of Hasidism (until the 1970s), in the particular form of Yiddish

spoken, and in a variety of foods and customs particular to Lithuanian Jewry. In addition, the east Europeans' lack of exposure to Reform Judaism meant that Reform or Progressive Judaism was established in South Africa only in 1933, far later than in most diaspora communities." All this, of course, shaped the lives of South African Jewish women.

In reading these papers, I was struck by how many kinds of Jewish women there are, how profoundly we are influenced by our country of origin and the continuity or discontinuity of Jewish life within its borders, and by our experience of such factors as entitlement, dislocation, prejudice and outsider status. History, particularly this century's history, has not treated all Jewish women equally. In writing their papers, some authors – like Katalin Talyigas of Hungary – was reconnecting to and reconstructing the history of Jews in their country for the first time. Others, like Micaela Procaccia, who lives in Rome, is steeped in her history and writes with the surety of long immersion in the past: "In the year 1537, a Roman Jewish working class girl named Lariccia cried for days because of an unwanted match," begins her paper. "The day before the *qiddushin*, or betrothal, a washerwoman named Clemenza heard Lariccia saying to her father: "I do not like this man, nor do I desire him. I refuse him and reject him, nor do I want him." She declared herself to be "the unhappiest of all women," and on the next Shabbat, she told her father that she would not agree to let "the *qiddushin* become *nissu'in*.' Her father then hit her with the butt of a knife."

The biographical section of this volume itself makes for fascinating reading – as much for the wide geographical spectrum represented as for the facts each woman deemed important to include. As different as each woman is, I find much in common with her. It was easy for me to enter into her world.

Although this first HRIJW collection of writing by Jewish women around the world is inevitably uneven and incomplete, it is a respectable beginning. The authors represented here are, in some countries, part of a larger scholarly and cultural project of researching and writing about women's lives; in others, they are pioneers – the first of their kind. In some countries, they have been able to draw on a large body of data and literature; in others, they are themselves creating that data and literature. Ana Lebl from Split (now in Croatia) lives in an aging and relatively poor community of only 100 Jews

with scarce resources; Americans Riv-Ellen Prell and Pamela Nadell enjoy the support of Jewish Studies as well as Women's Studies departments at major American universities. Our Israeli and Latin American contributors bring both these realities into yet another perspective.

Some of the authors chose to spend time reworking their original presentations; others were content to have published what they originally presented. Many have struggled to express themselves in English – their second or third or fourth language. As a writer who has often had to communicate in foreign languages, I admire their pluck; as editor, I hope they forgive my journalistic bias, my many questions, and my inadvertent mistakes. Parts of all their work – even where it represents a starting point – moved and inspired me. I hope it will move and inspire you.

Helen Epstein
October, 1999

JEWISH WOMEN IN MEXICO

by Paulette Kershenovich

Mexico is a country of more than 92 million people, a crossroads between the first and third worlds."Mexico is so far away from God," a former Mexican president once mused, "and yet so close to the U.S."[1] From the poor indigenous "*Marias*"[2] begging for their livelihood, to young "*Gueritas*" (little female blondes) in their Versace suits carrying Gucci bags, the women of Mexico are as diverse and contradictory as the environment where they live.[3] Entirely European-descended people account for only about 10% of all Mexicans. Jews do not comprise even one per cent. The immense gap between the culture of the latter two groups and the poor, indigenous population is one of Mexico's distinct characteristics.[4]

At the turn of the twentieth century, Mexico was not considered a desirable emigrant destination. Of 22 million people that emigrated from the old world to the Americas between 1885 and 1910, only about 116,000 reached Mexico.[5] Jewish immigration reflected that pattern. It is estimated that from 1881 to 1914, more than 2.35 million Jews left their country of birth however only a miniscule number arrived in Mexico.[6] In 1900, Mexico had 134 Jews. Ten years later, the number had risen to only 254.[7]

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1 President Porfirio Díaz

2 Maria (after Mary the mother of Jesus.) Since Maria is the most popular name in Mexico for both women and men (second name), this term is applied to women beggars. It also denotes the heavy religiosity in Mexico where 90% of the population is said to be Catholic. On poverty and women, see Mercedes Barquet, *"Condicionantes de GÈnero sobre la Pobreza de las Mujeres, [Gender Condition Variants of Poverty and Women]."* in Javier de la Torre, et al, *La Mujeres en la Pobreza, [Women in Poverty].* (Mexico: Colegio de Mexico, 1994), 73-89.

3 While Indians are still said to represent nearly a quarter of the population, in 1980 there were only slightly more than 5 million people (about 8% of the population) who spoke an Indian dialect and just over one million who spoke only an Indian dialect. Over the last four centuries descendants of Indians and Europeans, sometimes called *mestizos* (mixed bloods), have become the dominant group in Mexico. Today they account for at least two-thirds and perhaps three-fourths of the total population.

4 There are more than 50 Indian dialects spoken in Mexico. Some of the existing indigenous cultures are: Tlaxcalans, Tarascans, Mixtecs, Chchiemcs, Zapotecs, Mayans, Huastecs and Otomis.

5 Judit Bokser de Liwerant, *Imágenes de Un Encuentro: La Presencia Judía en México Durante La Primera Mitad del Siglo XX, [Images of an Encounter: The Jewish Presence in Mexico During the First Half of the XX Century].* (Mexico: UNAM-Tribuna, 1992), 10. [Spanish]

6 Sergio Dellapergola and Susana Lerner, *La Población Judía de México:* Perfil Demogr·gico, Social y Cultural, [The Jewish Population in Mexico: Demographic Profile, Social and Cultural]. (Jerusalem: Hebrew University Press, 1995). [Spanish]; Corinne Krause, *Los Judíos en México: Una Historia con Enfasis Especial en el Periodo 1857 a 1930,* [The Jews in Mexico: A History With Special Emphasis on the Period of 1857 to 1930]. (Mexico: Iberoamericana University,1987). [Spanish]; Leon Sourasky. *Historia de la Comunidad Israelita de México, 1917-1942,* [History of the Israeli Community in Mexico, 1917-1942]. (Mexico, 1965), 273. [Spanish]

7 Dellapergola and Lerner, 28; Sourasky, 273.

By the end of the 1920s, it is estimated that almost 10,000 Jewish immigrants had arrived in Mexico, coming first from the Ottoman Empire and then from Eastern Europe.[8] By the end of the 1940s, as a result of Holocaust-related and other migrations, the Jewish population had reached 14,167 in a general population of 20 million.[9] Although the number of Jews living in Mexico has been much higher, the current number fluctuates between 50,000 to 55,000 with 49.7% women and 50.3% men.[10] This is because Mexico has traditionally been viewed as a temporary country of residence by immigrant Jews and as well as the changing demographic composition of the new Jewish collective.

Although there are Jewish communities in Monterrey, Guadalajara, Tijuana, Cancun and the *Kahal Kadosh Bnei Elohim* (Holy Congregation of the Sons of G-d) in Venta Prieta[11] in the state of Hidalgo, this study will focus on Mexico City where 95% of Mexican Jews live.[12]

There are three ethnic groups within this community: the *Ashkenazim*, the *Sepharadim* and the *Mizrahim*, (originating mainly in Syria and called Arab by Mexican Jews). The *Mizrahim* are divided into the Halebis (also called *Maguen David*) from Aleppo, and the *Shamis* (also called *Monte Sinai*) from Damascus.[13] Successive immigrations have had a disruptive effect upon the family, transforming the place of its members and redefining the role of women. *Ashkenazi* immigrants had experienced secularization and political and ideological liberalization, but the *sephardi* and *mizrahi* communities were more traditional and religiously oriented. The extended and patriarchal family constituted an important element of social standing. The traditional profile of values and organization of the community as the space for identity and development was central to the discourse of integration. The older generations have tried to maintain the original profile of an immigrant community while its younger members are continuously questioning that structure.

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[8] The Ottoman Empire had two main areas of Jewish settlement: (1) the Balkans and Turkey; and (2) North Africa, Syria, Palestine and the Arabian peninsula. As a result of the fall of the Ottoman Empire, coupled with the colonial expansion of Europe, the religious tolerance towards non-Muslims ended. This influenced and curtailed Jewish economic activity which had been in full splendor during the previous centuries. The instability and the general deterioration of the Ottoman Empire due to the Young Turks and the law they dictated which obligated all subjects of the Ottoman Empire to serve in the military (no matter their religions), propelled migration. Therefore, Jews fled out of fear that their children's physical welfare would be threatened. The socio-political configuration of the Ottoman Empire was characterized by collective corporations of *millets*, a system of governance that placed Jews and Christians under the jurisdiction of their own religious authorities for most legal, social, cultural, and religious affairs. Jews lived confined to *mellahs* (neighborhoods), where they were subjected to periodic aggression from both Muslims and Christians and were obligated to pay a tax. The census in 1921 did not indicate the number of Jews in the country, since they were grouped in the same category as the Chinese, Israelis and Bundists.

[9] Dellapergola and Lerner, 28; Sourasky, 273.

[10] Dellapergola and Lerner, 116.

[11] Dellapergola and Lerner, 114, The indigenous community in Venta Prieta is said to be descended from the crypto-Jews who hid their true identity and escaped persecution during the *Santo Oficio* (Holy Tribunal) during the Colony period (1519-1821). Since they do not maintain pure Jewish rituals, they are not recognized by the Central Committee as a sector of the Jewish community in Mexico.

[12] Jews in Mexico City live primarily in Polanco (23.6%), Condesa (5.1%), Tecamachalco (22.3%), Herradura (9.6%), Chapultepec (7.1%) and Bosques de las Lomas (14.3%) suburbs in Mexico City. Mexico City now covers an urbanized area of some 15 by 20 miles (24 by 32 kilometers) and the greater metropolitan area occupies 890 square miles (2,310 square kilometers). Despite its already enormous population of 21 million, Mexico City gains more than 350,000 people per year. By the end of the century the city's population could easily exceed 25 million.

[13] 39.5% Ashkenazim, 47.4% Sepharadic and Arabic sectors combined, 13.1% unknown or indifferent to their origins. Dellapergola and Lerner, 104.

Though its historical roots can be traced to the re-discovery of the Americas, the contemporary Jewish community in Mexico began with the reign of Porfirio Díaz in 1876.[14] During his reign, known as the *Porfiriato*, he encouraged foreign investment and attempted to modernize the nation. Diaz accepted bribes in exchange for concessions of land to friends and foreign speculators in order for them to invest and colonize Mexico. This policy, in tandem with the Russian pogroms, the Turkish Revolt, the Balkan War, World War I, and later the Great Depression were the main motives for the immigrations to Mexico. The country was seen largely as a temporary haven, a stepping stone for later immigration to the US.

The most predominant Jewish immigrants were of French and German descent, who were quite close to the governmental élite. This group was composed mostly of emancipated and assimilated Jews, who did not identify themselves as Jews, sometimes married Mexican Catholic women and thus, integrated totally into their new society.[15] As a result, the early part of the *Porfiriato* cannot be identified with organized Jewish life. Jews negated their identity as a consequence of the Spanish colonial heritage of religious intolerance and the anti-religious stance of the *Republica Retaurada* (Restored Republic) initiated in 1867 and implemented during the *Porfiriato*.[16] During this regime, more than 95% of rural families became landless and in 1911 a revolt forced Porfirio Díaz into exile in Europe.

By 1900 in Mexico there were 94 male and 40 female Jews who enjoyed full religious freedom.[17] From 1901 on, a group of Turkish Jews took part in religious services, and in 1904 *ashkenazi* Jews did the same in a Masonic temple.[18] However, during the *Porfiriato*, no Jewish schools, no exclusive Jewish cemetery or religious centers existed.

In the last years of the *Porfiriato*, Mexico witnessed a new Jewish presence, one that was endowed with religious fervor. This group of Jewish immigrants lacked economic resources and thus could not invest in government-sponsored projects. Most of the men were shoemakers, furriers, traveling salesmen and tailors. However, the economic needs of the first years dictated the participation of women in these activities as well. In commerce, the family business and in the home, the Jewish women, just as other immigrants, affirmed their importance as breadwinners. The traditional obligation of the Jewish male toward religious study historically allowed women to be economically active. In Mexico, the modification of the masculine stereotype altered the Jewish women's space. The redefinition of their roles was expressed in the strengthening of the home and maternal chores as a privileged feminine sphere.

The 1910 Mexican Revolution and the consequent fall of Díaz brought socio-political and economic instability. Jews had to contend with discrimination and the rise of nationalist sentiments. As a result, the majority of ashkenazi Jews and many other foreigners abandoned the country. The Jewish community was reduced to only 100 families, however 2000 Jews from the Ottoman Empire entered Mexico at this time.[19]

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[14] Silvia Seligson, *Los Judíos en México: Un Estudio Preliminar, [The Jews in Mexico: A Preliminary Study].* (Mexico: National Institute of History and Anthropology, 1973), 115-139. BA Thesis. [Spanish]

[15] Martin Zielonka, "Letters from Mexico." *American Israelite.* Letter of 16 July 1908.

[16] Krause, chapter 2.

[17] Gloria Carreño, "La Formación de la Comunidad Judia Mexicana, [The Formation of the Mexican Jewish Community]." in *La Presencia Judia en México, [Jewish Presence in Mexico].* (Mexico: Tribuna Israelita, 1987), 29. [Spanish]; Sourasky, 273.

[18] Carreño, 29; Krause, 113.

[19] Seligson, 153.

The acquisition of a Jewish cemetery and the reorganization of the Benevolent Society of the *Alianza Monte Sinai* in 1912 were significant steps in the development of future community organization. Establishing the cemetery demonstrated the intention of staying in Mexico. A plot of land on Justo Sierra Street was purchased in order to build a synagogue. Then, between 1917 and 1920, thousands of Jews from Russia, Poland, Lithuania, the Balkans and the Near East reached Mexico. They soon saw the necessity of creating a *Talmud Torah* in order to educate their children in the Jewish tradition. The language of instruction was Arabic. It was not until 1939 that it was replaced by Spanish and girls were admitted.

The wave of immigration that would comprise the bulk of the Jewish collective was initiated in 1921 as a consequence of U.S. immigration quotas. These quotas obliged potential immigrants to redirect themselves to neighboring countries and take up residence for at least two years prior to entering its territory. As a result, more and more Jews stayed in Mexico. In October 1924, the vigorously anti-Church President-Elect Plutarco Elías Calles publicly invited Jewish immigrants to come into the country, offering them government assistance.

The resulting immigration developed a large sphere of Jewish organizations that reflected the forms of collective Jewish identity: the *Radfe Zadek* and *Maguen David Synagogues*; the *Young Men's Hebrew Association*; and the *I.L. Peretz Farein*, the first institution of Jews from Eastern Europe. Later renamed the *Kultur Geselschaft* (Cultural Society), it published the first Jewish paper *El Mecsikaner Idishn Lebn* (Jewish Life in Mexico) and set-up a theater. In 1927, the *Kultur Geselschaft* was again reorganized and was renamed the *Radicaler Arbet Tzenter* (Radical Workers' Center) to reflect its composition of workers, industrialists and merchants from the radical left. Another institution of similar Bundist leanings was the *Yungt Geselschaft* (Young Jewish Society) founded in 1921.[20]

Jewish men began to open fixed open-market stalls, merchant stores and small enterprises. Women worked in hat production, selling products at open stalls in the local markets, as seamstresses, housekeepers, or with their husbands. As Jews gradually attained more wealth, they began to give their money to religious centers, schools and institutions. Most women now attended elementary school and some even finished.

During this period of intense immigration, no organization assisting the immigrants existed. In 1922, the *Comité de Damas* (Women's Committee) was formed to address this issue. It provided job placements, medical care, loans, housing, dental clinics, education, and moral support. It also dealt with women's protection in case of abandonment or abuse.[21] At this time, North American Jewish organizations such as the *B'nai B'rith* supported the development of Jewish life in Mexico by easing some of the financial burdens caused by immigration. Immigrants began to be received in the Veracruz Port by a representative who helped them obtain housing, food, and other help. *B'nei B'rith* maintained a hospital, hostel and soup-kitchen, and distributed care packages that were donated by the first immigrants.[22] Women comprised the majority of the *B'nei B'rith* membership and played an important role in this endeavor. This wave

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[20] For a detailed description of organizations founded in the 1920s and 1930s, see Seligson 1973, 130-146; Alice Backal "Los Judíos en México, [The Jews in Mexico]." in *WIZO*, No. 236-243, April 1983 to March 1985; and Liwerant 1992, 361-365.

[21] Headed by Lily Sourasky, Lily Rader, Clara Weinstock, Libnick, and Verlinsky. Sourasky, 137.

[22] Sourasky, 132, 143-145.

of immigration started to decrease due to the world economic depression, and Law of Immigration of May 1929, which prohibited temporary entry to foreign workers. This produced a hostile attitude towards immigration during the 1930s.

The 1930s were difficult years for Jews in Mexico.[23] The first organized attack against Jews occurred in the Lagunilla Market in 1931. Later the pro-Nazi *Acción Revolucionaria Mexicanista* (Revolutionary Mexican Action) and their *Camisas Dorados* (Golden Shirts) continued the anti-Semitic campaign by demonstrating against, boycotting and attacking Jewish businesses.[24] Jews were charged with taking jobs from local workers. The national press portrayed Jews as expendable.[25] Anti-Jewish demonstrations were staged in many states of Mexico with the support of the Catholic hierarchy through its *Cristero* movement.

Such circumstances discouraged immigration. Some Jews abandoned the country. However, the election of General Lazaro Cardenas in 1934 changed the politics of the nation and relegated anti-Semitism to the periphery where it has remained.[26] Cardenas developed a vigorous modernization plan, redistributed land, built rural schools, nationalized the petroleum industry and strengthened the unions. But in 1937, the Senate approved the Population Law which limited immigration to 100 persons yearly from Poland or Rumania, with exceptions for political refugees or by Presidential decree alone. In that way, 400 people arrived in Mexico from Casablanca. By 1939, it was estimated that 400 families from Germany and Austria, and 200 from Poland and Russia immigrated to Mexico. This began a major wave of wartime immigration.

In the *sephardi* and *mizrahi* sectors, men worked in small businesses; in the *ashkenazi* sector, they worked in light industry. When a comfortable standard of living was attained, Jewish women returned to the private domain. In the 1930s, few women studied in the university. They participated on an individual level in all sectors (e.g., political, educational and cultural) towards the 1940s. They were instrumental in consolidating associations of mutual assistance and charity and they developed activities in cultural and social spheres.

During this time, we see the emergence of women's benevolent societies. Most were comprised of women from the *ashkenazi* sector, mainly on the political left, beginning with the Commission of Women in 1932. It helped men and women develop administrative skills, get job placements, and conduct vigils for the dead. The charity committee *Fröien Farein* (Yiddish – Women's Union) was created in 1932 to solve the economic problems that afflicted Jewish families. The *Damas Pioneras* (Pioneer Women) founded in 1935 by Sophie Udin followed close behind. Pioneer Women were the first to initiate assistance to battered women. Then the Feminine Union of the Monte Sinai established the *Bikur Holim* (Visit of the Sick) Benevolent Society in 1936, to care for the sick and gather funds for medicines. The Women's International

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[23] Anti-Semitism was initially sparked by debates surrounding the immigration quotas of the 1920s and nationalist sentiments during the *Porfiriato*. The Anti-Chinese and Anti-Jewish Leagues were the first anti-Semitic groups in Mexico. A rightist nationalist campaign was promoted in the early thirties by President Pascual Ortiz Rubio with the ideology of local insurgency compounded by economic depression, rising anti-religious and Nazi tendencies.

[24] An off-shoot of the Nazi youth movement, it dissolved in 1936. See interviews with Clara Gurvich and Sonia Zack in *Testimonios de Historia Oral; [Testimonies of Oral History].* (Mexico: Hebrew University in Jerusalem, 1990), 81, 149.

[25] Cimet, 31.

[26] Some organizations such as the Israeli Youth Anti-Fascist League – (*La Liga Juvenil Antifascista Israelita* and the Israeli Chamber of Commerce and Industry – *Cámara de Comercio y Industria Israelita,* 1938) that resisted anti-Semitism from European roots as well as the Mexican home-grown and lobbied against the government to restrict the arrival of Jews.

Zionist Organization (WIZO) established a branch in 1938, followed by the *Comité Central de Damas* (Central Ladies Committee) in 1941. Among the main activities were the raising of funds for public schools, shelters for the homeless, food distribution among the poor, and the pledging of scholarships. The *Comité Femenino de Damas Auxiliares del Centro Medico OSE* (Feminine Committee of Auxiliary Ladies of the Medical Center OSE or DACEM) helped the sick and needy with free medical supplies and services. It donated funds and a summer house for needy children. Some of the general activities women participated in the 1940s were gathering handicrafts for charity, volunteering at the Red Cross, and distributing clothes among needy gentiles.

Modesty required a Jewish women to work at her husband's side if her work was needed outside the home. Mixing with the indigenous population was discouraged unless it was associated with charity work. Partly due to economic necessity, and partly due to the modesty factor, most women did not finish high school and even fewer attended university. Women were married-off relatively young (usually before the age of twenty). Those who wished to study could attend the Jewish Seminar for Hebrew and Yiddish Teachers founded in 1947, which did not require a high school diploma, allowed married women with children to attend with ease, and sheltered single women from indigenous men. Most of these women went on to teach in the nascent Jewish schools, which were run by men.

The Jewish community of the 1940s reflected the full spectrum of trends and institutions – Bundist and socialist, Zionist and non-Zionist, ORT, Yivo or Ivo *(Idisher Visenshaftlejer Institute or the Jewish Scientific Institute)*, the Worker's League of Israel, the *Kultur Tzenter* (Yiddish Cultural Center), and the *Hilfs Farein* (Union of Help) to name a few. The youth (15-30 year olds) also formed the Comité *Juvenil del Colegio Israelita* (Spanish-Youth Committee for the Israeli School), the *Cultural Renaissance Group Oif Lebung* (Yiddish-Live Life), the *Youth Chapter of Kultur Tzenter* (Cultural Center), the Sports Organization *Macabi*, the Zionist youth movement *Hanoar Hatzair*, *Yungt Gesbir* (Young Society-1935), the Pro-Hospital Youths, the *Unión y Progreso* (Spanish-Union and Progress) Group (1932), and The Arabic Youth Club *Maguen David* among others.[27]

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[27] This period of institution building marked the end of this period of search and thus became the foundation for the Jews of Mexico and was espoused by the *Kehilah Nidje Israel* (The Community of the Exiles of Israel, religious *Ashkenazi*-1922); *Talmud Torah of Nidje Israel* and from this evolved the *Yidishe Shule* or *El Nuevo Colegio Israelita* (Yiddish-The New Israeli School-1924). *Agudat Ahim* (Hebrew-Union of Brothers) and *Tiferet Israel* (Hebrew-Israeli Pride) also founded in the twenties, were the religious congregations of the Jews from Galitzia and Poland, and the Zionist organization *Poalei Tzion* (Hebrew-Workers' of Zion) were also founded. The representative institution of the community formed in 1932 was the *Federación de Comunidades* (Federation of Communities) and was renamed two years later *Unión de Comunidades* (Spanish-Union of Communities). In 1938, the *Comité de Refugiados* (Spanish-Refugee Committee) was organized which later became the *Comité Central* (Central Committee) on 9 November 1938 and since 1942 was legally responsible for representing the Jewish community to the Mexican government. Originally it dealt with resolving the problems of the World War II refugees and to counter-attack the anti-Semitic campaign through its *Comité Unido de anti-difamación* (Spanish-United Anti-Defamation Committee) which gave way to the establishment of the Tribuna Israelita (Israeli Tribunal). Currently, the Central Committee is comprised of seven sectors of the Jewish community, according to their place of origin: (1) *Alianza Monte Sinai* (Damascus-1912 and 1935); (2) *Sedaka Umarpé* (Help and Assistance - Aleppo -1909 and 1937); (3) *UniÛn Sefaradi* (Turkey, Balkans, Greece and Italy -1924 and 1943); (4) Hatikvá-Menorá (Central Europe - 1938); (5) *Emuna* (Hungary-1942); (6) Beth Israel Community Center (US-1953); and (7) *Kehila Nidje Israel* (Eastern Europe -1922 and 1957). Each one has its own educational, social and recreational centers.

In 1950, the *Centro Deportivo Israelita* (the Israeli Sports Center) was founded to provide a space for integration and development of sports, art, culture and Jewish communal life in Mexico.[28] The CDI became the focal point not only for social activities but for social integration and exists today: WIZO and *Na'amat* hold their annual bazaars and meetings there. Women organized elderly activities,"Baby and Me" gymnastics groups, and charity luncheons. Throughout the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s women continued these activities and began to help Israel with funds, clothing, and medicines. The Ladies' Committee now worked closely with the Israeli Benevolent Society. Women not only demanded to be heard, they challenged the status quo by pushing the religious authorities in their own sectors. As their challenges were met and their standard of living improved, women gradually became more empowered through better access to education and exercising leadership roles within the general Jewish community.

The 1980s brought socio-economic instability for the Jewish population. Mexico was wracked by severe inflation and an enormous foreign debt, which culminated in the 1982 economic crisis. Then, in 1985, a powerful earthquake killed an estimated 5,000 to 20,000 persons, left more than 100,000 homeless, and caused 4 billion dollars in damage. Jewish women under the auspices of *Na'amat*, WIZO and CMMI helped organize emergency relief funds and volunteered at centers of distribution and aid. Many Jews were severely affected by the crisis and the slump following the earthquake and many fled Mexico. However, the situation was not severe enough to deprive Jews of their now customary high standard of living. Jews, for the most part, still employed two or three housekeepers, had more than two cars per household, took annual trips abroad and generally enjoyed a lavish lifestyle.

Another severe financial crisis hit Mexico in December of 1994. This crisis triggered the deepest recession in Mexican history.[29] The standard of living for the Jewish community has gradually dropped and Jews are now facing situations that were previously foreign. They include having to take out a mortgage on a home as opposed to paying in cash, postponing higher education, limiting trips abroad, and having women and teenagers work to help support the family. Working outside the home as well as obtaining a university education has become common for Jewish women. Pursuing a higher education is no longer restricted by societal norms but by economic considerations.

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[28] In 1950, fifteen youths (Jose Belkind, Jaime Dorotinsky, Samuel Dultzin, Moises Derzavich, Carlos Fishbein, Isaac Grabinsky, Rosendo Gervitz, Moises Gitlin, Fernando Katz, Jacobo Krumholtz, Felipe Libnic, Jose Steider, Edmundo Stern, Carlos Szapiro and Maz Udinsky) along with 250 other founding members established a collective center. Some prominent women athletes that participated in various Olympics were: Linda Bejar, 1968 Mexico, Fencing; Tamara Oynick, 1968 Mexico, Swimming; Deborah Weill, 1976 Montreal, Diving; Hellen Plaschinski, 1980 Moscow, Swimming and Marlen Bruten, 1988 Seoul, Swimming.

[29] with the country's GDP falling nearly 7% in 1995. More than $50 billion in international loans and a government austerity plan announced on 9 March 1995 combining spending cuts with tax increases were designed to help the economy out of recession. Hoping to stop the free fall of the peso and the Mexican economy along with it, President Ernesto Zedillo's government announced a tough austerity plan designed to control inflation and move the economy quickly out of recession. The plan unveiled by Finance Minister Guillermo Ortiz increased gasoline prices by 35% and electricity costs by 20%, with more increases in the price of the two state-produced commodities planned for later in the year. In addition, the plan raised the national value-added tax from 10% to 15% and increased the minimum wage by 10%. With an estimated inflation rate of 42%, and the nation's GDP expected to decline by 2% in 1995, the Zedillo administration hoped that its harsh stabilization plan would help the Mexican economy get on the road to recovery.

A college degree is very much a passport to social mobility in Mexico.[30] Most Jewish women who want to study and are able to afford to do so attend university but usually obtain only a Bachelor of Arts since higher degrees are seen as deterrents to marriage. Most marry during the course of completing their academic degree. Today, 22.5% of Jewish men and women actually complete a BA. Only 7.6% attend graduate school.[31] Professionals and academics are more common among *ashkenazi* women; their number is increasing slowly in the *sephardi* and *mizrahi* communities.

Marriage is viewed in Mexican-Jewish culture as a requirement for happiness, and it is expected of women.[32] Women who are not married by a certain age are highly stigmatized. It is readily assumed that they are socially unfit, lesbian, mentally disturbed, unattractive, promiscuous or too highly educated. Exceptions are made if a tragedy occurred in the family during those marriageable years, or if the woman lived or studied abroad and just re-entered the community. Once married, woman are torn between a home life and a public one. Women are able to work outside the home as long as they do not negate their familial duties.

Once they have settled into married life most women employ housekeepers, who are seen as their liberators from domestic chores, and as status symbols. Some Jewish women even employ more than one maid, as well as a cook, nanny and chauffeur. However, despite ample time for study, few engage in their field of study. An average of 18.1% of all Jewish women are housewives, but this figure is higher in the *Monte Sinai* (25.8%) and lower in the *ashkenazi* (15.2%) sectors.[33] There is a small percentage of young women who work while married, primarily due to the new economic conditions that resulted from the economic crash. Older women, who traditionally do not have any formal education, work together with their husbands while the younger generation is employing their once-forgotten degrees. Younger women tend to be employed in Jewish education, graphic design, writing or managing stores.

Although there is much research and writing carried out by Jewish women, there is no scholarly research *on* Jewish women in Mexico, only small accounts contained in greater studies of the Mexican Jewish community. A Jewish Studies master's or diploma is offered at the Ibroamericana University (UIA) and in the Hebraica University, a Jewish institution sponsored by the *Kehillah Ashkenazi Community*. Women's Studies in Mexico began in 1983 with the establishment of the first Interdisciplinary Women's Studies university program at *The Colegio de Mexico*. Since 1990 it has been offered at the graduate level. The

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[30] Of the fewer than 50 universities in the country, 20 percent are located in Mexico City; and a staggeringly high percentage of university students – perhaps more than 80 percent – are in the city. This helps to maintain a socio-economic imbalance in educational levels that greatly favors the middle and upper classes. Dellapergola and Lerner, 118.

[31] Dellapergola and Lerner, 118. Some exceptions did exist: Elizabeth Glantz (73) studied medicine in the 1920s; Gucha Bielak, studied medicine and Ruth Ferry (63) became a gynecologist in the 1930s; Mira Yasonovsky, Dentist; Sara Dumont, Pediatrician; Henriette Begun, Gynecologist-obstetric; and F. Yavits, Pediatrician, all in 1950; Esther Aliphas (30) became a psychologist in 1962; Architect Sara Topelson de Grinberg was women of the Year in 1996; in the literary world: Sara Sefchovich, Gloria Gervits (70), Miriam Moscona, Esther Seligson, Sabina Berman, Margo Glantz, Rosa Nissan. Ethel Krauze. Numbers in parenthesis indicate the pages in *Historia Oral*, where their interviews and others can be found.

[32] Among the Jewish-Mexican population between the ages of 15-24: 79.4% single; 20.3% married, 25-34: 84.2% are married; 35-44: 89.3% are married.

[33] Dellapergola and Lerner, 119.

Metropolitan Autonomous University (UAM) developed a research area on Women, Identity and Power in 1983 and since 1994 has offered it at the graduate level. In 1992, the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) established the Gender Studies Program, and two years later the UIA developed one as well.

The Jewish women's institutions that still exist are the CMMI, *Fröien Farein*, ORT, *Na'amat*, *B'nei B'rith*, WIZO and the sisterhood organizations from various institutions such as the *Keren Hayessod* (National Fund for Palestine). *Na'amat* women have volunteered for the General Hospital Manuel Gea González, the Red Cross, disaster relief, the pre-school Ponciano G. Padillla, and have campaigned arduously concerning violence against women. More than seventy per cent of Jewish women contribute to Jewish communal organizations in a significant way and 15.3% are directly involved in their administration on a voluntary basis.[34] They are actively involved in charity or Zionist organizations (67.2% of the Jewish population in Mexico consider themselves to be Zionist).[35]

The political status of Jewish women remains low. They are generally not active in politics and unaware of the political circumstances surrounding them.[36]

There is a growing apathy in the *ashkenazi* community concerning religious life.[37] The *Maguen David* are 18% Orthodox, 33.8% Conservative, 44.5% Traditional, 1.3% Reform, 2.3% non-religious. The *Monte Sinai* are 6.1% Orthodox, 32.5% Conservative, 56.4% Traditional, 1.2% Reform, 1.8% non-religious. The *Sephardim* are 14.6% Conservative, 70.7% Traditional, 2.4% Reform, 11.4% non-religious, and community religious observance is usually adhered to. Nevertheless, 88.7% of all Jews appear in synagogue only during the high holidays. Most deeply identify with their Jewishness but not with their religiosity.

The community is very close-knit and unified in its Jewish identity. Nearly 90% of the children belong to a youth movement and nearly 75% support and participate in the community. Most Jews in Mexico consider themselves Jews first and Mexicans second. This bond is due to their isolation within the greater Mexican Catholic culture. Jews in Mexico for the most part do not mix with other Mexicans. The intermarriage rate is a low 3.1%.[38] Most children attend one of the nine Jewish schools.[39] These do not include the six *Kollelim* (Orthodox higher institutes of learning) or two *Yeshivot* prominent in the Orthodox community.

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[34] Dellapergola and Lerner, 126-127.

[35] Dellapergola and Lerner, 128.

[36] One notable exception is Maria Elena Nahmad (Secretaria del Medio Ambiente, Recursos y Pesca, [Secretary of the Environment, Resources and Fishing]). For a study on socio-political participation of women in Mexico, see Anna Fernández Poncela (ed.), *Participación Politica de Las Mujeres en México, [Political Participation of Women in Mexico].* (Mexico: EL Colegio de México, 1995).

[37] This community is now comprised of 6.3% Orthodox; 19% Conservative; 56.3% Traditional 5.6%; Reform, 10.8%; non-religious; 1.0% other members.

[38] Dellapergola and Lerner, 117.

[39] *Colegio Israelita* or *Yidishe Shule* (Israeli School) - 1924 (reorganized as the *New Colegio Israelita* in 1950), *Yavne* -1942, *Tarbut* -1942, I.L Peretz School or Naye -1950, *Atid* – only elementary, and *Beit Ha'yeladim* – only elementary *(Ashkenazi)*; *Colegio Hebreo Sepharadi* (Sepharadi Hebrew School) - 1945 (Sepharadi); *Monte Sinai* - 1942, and *Maguen David* -1950 (Arabic).

To conclude, the Jewish community is isolated from the general Mexican culture. Most young Jewish men and women live in a sheltered bubble until they reach university where they discover a kaleidoscope of cultural and religious views. After their bubble has burst, a series of questions arise about the kind of society that they inhabit. For most, university is the first place where they have come into contact with non-Jewish intellectual circles and where their ideas can be debated and refuted. For men, this experience leads to sexual encounters with non-Jewish women and the potential of fatherhood. For women it is a phase of de-flowering and the possibility of bringing shame upon the family. If a man dates a non-Jewish woman it is neither encouraged or discouraged unless he fathers a child.

If a woman dates a non-Jewish man, it is totally frowned upon and seen as a blemish on her social standing. A woman's sexual activity outside of marriage, if discovered, weighs heavily upon her family's honor. For men, it is seen and dismissed as boyish fun. The sexual differences that exist today are only small indicators and reminders of the traditional nature and history of the Jewish-Mexican community. Religion and traditional Jewish values are a basic component of a collective identity and as a catalyst for behavioral patterns of Jews in the greater Mexican non-Jewish culture.

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