

## Introduction

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Exactly ten years ago, while a candidate for the Ph.D. at a Big Ten University, I met my newly assigned academic adviser and announced my desire to write my thesis on the history of Latin American Jewry. Professor Smith looked quizzically at me and asked, “Why don’t you write a history of the Smith family?”

My adviser was not alone in this reaction. A senior Latin Americanist to whom I next turned confided that, in his forty-year career, he had seen no scholarly work on the Jews of Latin America. Fortunately, he had a large enough vision to grasp the importance of the topic, and encouraged me to go ahead. Seeking to join two disparate fields of knowledge, I next addressed several scholars engaged in Jewish studies. But none knew much about contemporary Latin America. This ignorance seemed all the more odd since medieval Spain and the Inquisition—prelude to the history of contemporary Latin American Jewish communities—have attracted continuing scholarly interest on the part of Jews and non-Jews throughout the centuries.

How to explain why writers of Jewish history have overlooked the Latin American branch of the diaspora? How to explain the complete silence concerning Jews which characterizes Latin American studies? These dual questions intrigued me then and intrigue me now. They provided the impetus for my own career and contributed to the emergence of a new scholarly subject, Latin American Jewish studies, of which this edition of *American Jewish Archives* is the latest manifestation.

Not surprisingly, Latin American Jewish studies is at this date ill-defined, still struggling for recognition within the older cognate fields of Latin American studies and Jewish studies. It draws upon history, economics, sociology, anthropology, geography, languages, and literature. It embraces the twenty-one Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking republics, with the necessary addition of Curaçao, the former Dutch possession which was the cradle of the Sephardic community in the New World. It concerns itself with Sephardim and Ashkenazim, speakers of Ladino and Arabic, Yiddish, Rumanian, Polish, Russian, German, French—in addition to the more traditional languages for the

study of Latin America, Spanish and Portuguese. It encompasses a period of close to five hundred years, starting with Isabella of Spain's decree of 1501, in which she instructed the governor of Hispaniola to prohibit Jews, Moors, heretics, New Christians, and persons penanced by the Inquisition, as well as their children or grandchildren, from settling in the Indies. The date most commonly assigned to the beginning of the Jewish experience in Latin America is 1492, for one or two *conversos* may have sailed with Columbus. But 1501 is a far more significant date, for the queen's decree, unlike the identity and purpose of those *converso* sailors, was clear and unambiguous. It established beyond doubt that the limits to the Jewish experience were to be set by others—rulers and representatives of a dominant society that was hostile to Jews. It immediately raises hydra-headed questions: To what extent was this hostility ameliorated by political independence? By the different historical paths the republics took when they tore loose from Spain? By *aggiornamento* within the Catholic Church? It forces us to ask to what degree Jews continue to live in Latin America on sufferance, and to what extent they have become accepted as citizens—recognizing that the answers will vary for different precincts of the continent. These are all questions to which Latin American Jewish scholars in increasing numbers are turning their attention.

The extraordinary reach of Latin American Jewish studies, the wide range of disciplines and languages with which scholars are working, imparts excitement to the field. Some of this variety may be sampled in the present issue of *American Jewish Archives*. Stanley M. Hordes addresses the problems of interpretation which study of the Inquisition raises for historians, most of whom are partisans of one legend or another: the Black Legend (Spaniards most cruelly obliterated both dissent and dissenters) and the White Legend (Spaniards were no more cruel than their contemporaries, but they were unlucky enough to have their enemies write their history). Some Catholic historians have viewed the Inquisition as the protector of society from immoral foreign elements and ideologies; Jewish historians have written as though the Inquisition had no other function than to torment judaizers. Neither group has grasped the entire truth, Hordes argues, which will remain obscure so long as we cling to legends instead of studying objective reality.

The bizarre adventures of one José Diaz Pimienta, Cuban-born priest, convert to Judaism, and double apostate, are recounted with scholarly vim and vigor by J. Hartog. Pimienta was very much a creature of his time: the seventeenth century was fraught with mythology about the Jew, a creature whom many practicing Catholics had never met in the flesh. In this case, it would seem that a private neurosis blended with a social psychosis, meeting its apotheosis at an *auto de fé* in Seville.

The modern search for identity is pursued through an analysis of Argentine Jewish literature by Stephen Sadow in his essay "Judíos y gauchos" ("Jews and Cowboys"). The inner struggles of the fictional characters will sound familiar to readers of Saul Bellow or Philip Roth, but they are rendered more poignant by the feeling of marginality which Jews experience as they seek to find a permanent home in Argentina.

Nora Glickman looks to Latin American writings for a reflection of Jewish life. Her subject, however, is the Jewish white slave trade which, under the protection of the Argentine police, flourished at the turn of the century. It is symptomatic of the status of Latin American Jews that more attention has been focused on prostitutes than on any other group of women.

Studies of the Sephardic communities in Latin America are scarce, and so Victor Mirelman's monograph on early Zionist activities among the Sephardim of Argentina is particularly welcome. Sephardim were slower than Ashkenazim to mobilize on behalf of a Jewish homeland, a reluctance Mirelman ascribes to greater religiosity among them and a fear that the needs of Sephardim in Eretz Israel would be subordinated to those of the Ashkenazim. How prophetic those fears were is left to the reader to judge.

A small but elegant study of intermarriage among Jews of São Paulo authenticates trends and motivations which we have hitherto known largely from anecdotal evidence. Rosa Krausz has constructed a scale for correlating the degree of Jewish education with the probability of intermarrying; replication of her study for other communities would provide us with a better understanding than we have at present of the forces urging toward intermarriage.

Even those with an interest in Latin American Jewish studies lack sufficient knowledge of the demography of this subject: myths

abound. Judith Laikin Elkin's essay on the demography of Latin American Jewry brings together in one place the very disparate and uneven data that have been gathered thus far, and points to gaps in our knowledge. Significantly, Latin American Jewish communities are dwindling in size, a phenomenon that may be attributed to a low birth rate, intermarriage, and assimilation.

Your editor is particularly proud to be able to include in this issue new poems by the Peruvian-born Jewish poet Isaac Goldemberg. As in his novels, Goldemberg has an uncanny talent for evoking the evanescent nature of so much of the Jewish experience in Latin America. It is an experience which can be nullified by a queen's decree, by a happy intermarriage, or by the expulsion decree of a military junta.

Before inviting the reader to read on into the substance of this journal, I would like to announce that a Latin American Jewish Studies Association was recently formed. Our network includes 124 scholars and resource persons living and working in fifteen countries around the globe. Scholars are defined as teaching at academic institutions or publishing on Latin American Jewish studies. Resource persons include diplomats, businessmen, film makers, physicians, and others with hands-on knowledge of the Latin American Jewish scene.

LAJSA held a working conference in October 1982 on the campus of the Hebrew Union College—Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati, at which time we sought to develop some of the basic research tools that are needed if scholarship is to advance. Next year, LAJSA plans to co-sponsor with the University of New Mexico a conference on major themes in the Latin American Jewish experience. Readers who wish to join our network and receive the *Newsletter* advising about these and other developments are invited to write to the editor in care of the American Jewish Archives.

This introduction would not be complete without a word concerning the role which the American Jewish Archives has played in the development of Latin American Jewish studies. The American Jewish Archives was one of the first institutions in the United States to recognize the importance of this field of study. It was while I was Senior Fellow at the Archives that I assembled the research materials and scholars' directory which the Archives published under the title *Latin American Jewish Studies*. The Archives continues to publish and distribute the *LAJSA Newsletter*. Opening the pages of its journal to us,

and offering to host our first conference, confirm its continuing interest and support. For this, our warmest thanks to Director Jacob R. Marcus and Associate Director Abraham J. Peck.

Judith Laikin Elkin  
Guest Editor