COSTA RICA


History

Costa Rica was sparsely inhabited by Indians and in colonial times was considered unattractive to immigrants. Its inhabitants were mostly industrious farmers from Northern Spain who cultivated small landholdings, and their descendants are thus characteristically more European than any in any other Latin American country. There is no evidence of the presence of *Crypto-Jews* in Costa Rica, and the myth of the Jewish ancestry of the Costa Ricans is not substantiated by historical evidence. In the 19th century Jews from Jamaica were involved in the illegal trade of cocoa with Cartago, but Jewish settlement in Costa Rica started only in the middle of the 19th century, with a few Portuguese Jewish families, such as Maduro, Robles, Piza, Sasso, and Chumaceiro. Originally from Curarao and St. Thomas, these Sephardi Jews arrived in Costa Rica from Panama, which remained their religious center. Most of them settled in the capital San José, and a few in Cartago, Puntarenas, and Puerto Limón. Being affluent merchants they integrated into the local bourgeoisie, acquiring social and political prominence. A high rate of intermarriage resulted in assimilation, but a few still maintain the memory of their Jewish origin.

Following wwi and the imposition of restrictions on immigration to the U.S., a small number of Jews from Turkey arrived in Costa Rica. They were followed by Jews from Eastern Europe, particularly from Poland, who became the dominant Jewish group. Immigration until 1930 was relatively free, but Costa Rica was an unknown destination. From 1931 the government required a deposit from immigrants, but relatives of former immigrants were generally exempt. In all, 556 Jews entered Costa Rica between 1930 and 1936, the largest group coming from the Polish town of Zelechow. The Polish Jews engaged in petty trade, many of them as peddlers who provided cheap merchandise on credit to the lower classes, introducing to Costa Rica the idea of installment buying. Competition and rivalry with the local merchants, many of whom belonged to other groups of immigrants, such as the Spaniards, Lebanese, Italians, and Germans, provoked a wave of antisemitism. President Ricardo Jiménez was accused by his rivals of tolerating illegal immigration of *polacos* (Polish Jews). His successor, León Cortés (1936–40), restricted Jewish immigration, and his administration was considered to represent the high point of antisemitism in Costa Rica. Nevertheless, 159 Polish Jews were admitted during his term.

During the Holocaust period Costa Rica did not become a haven for refugees. In 1937, when the Refugee Economic Corporation acquired land around the area of Guanacaste for the purpose of settling Jewish refugees from Central Europe, a court ruling decreed that the purchase of land by a foreign company for settlement purposes was illegal. Jewish immigration to Costa Rica was interrupted between 1940 and 1945, and was partially resumed in the postwar period with the arrival of refugees from Poland, probably relatives of older residents, whose number was estimated at between 165 and 250. Jewish economic security was also imperiled in 1941 in the wake of the official nationalization of all foreign-held commercial establishments, but the legislation was not enforced. Again in 1944, an abortive attempt was made to prohibit peddling, which would have been a blow to the economic position of many Jews.

Following wwi the Jews became pawns of political struggles. During the presidency of Picado Michalsky (1944–48), the government party, led by Calderón Guardia, denounced Fascism and manifested solidarity with the Jewish cause. Its Communist image, however, was used against the Jewish community by antisemitic members of the opposition, particularly by Ottilio Ulate, whose election to the presidency (February 8, 1948) was not accepted by the former administration. During the civil war of 1948 Jewish houses were sacked by revolutionary forces. Two emissaries of the Jewish community, Salomón Shifter and David Sikora, approached the leader of the armed revolt, José Figueres Ferrer, and obtained his promise to respect individual liberties.

Antisemitism in Costa Rica was directed explicitly against the Polish Jews. Oubursts of anti-Jewish feeling intensified with the appointment of Ulate as president, culminating in a wave of virulent antisemitism motivated by business competition (1951–52). The Junta Patriótica Costarricense agitated for a law restricting commercial activities to native Costa Ricans, attacking Jewish homes and institutions in San José. The situation began to improve with the presidency of José Figueres (1954–58), who publicly affirmed the principle of equal rights for all Costa Rican citizens.

Communal Organization

The early Sephardi immigrants worshipped in private homes on High Holidays, but permanent communal institutions were founded by the Jews from Poland. Around 1930 they purchased a plot for a Jewish cemetery and established a *Chevra Kadisha* and two years later they established a synagogue. The communal organization, Centro Israelita
Sionista, was officially founded in 1934 serving both as a religious and a Zionist center. Costa Rican Jews were not very observant, and for several years they lacked rabbinical leadership. The strongest leader of the community was David Sikora (until his death in 1968), and religious functions were filled by Herman Reifer. With time, new institutions were formed as part of the Centro Israelita Sionista – *wizo*, *B'nai B'rith*, Sociedad de Damas Israelitas de Beneficencia, several Zionist and youth groups, and a social and sports club. The community maintained ties with other Jewish communities in Central America through the Federación de Comunidades de América Central.

Jewish education in a complementary framework started in 1934 on the initiative of teachers, who saw to a Jewish religious and Hebrew education. During the 1950s the school system was modernized by Heszel Klepfish, who also introduced the study of Yiddish. In 1960 the Centro Israelita opened the Jaim Weizmann day school, starting with a kindergarten and first grade. Each year a new class was opened, and in 1970 it had a full program of primary and secondary grades with 300 students. Practically all the Jewish children in San José at primary level attend the Jewish school, and the number of students remained stable at around 300. Many young Jews completed their studies in Mexican or American universities, though of late most university students preferred to complete their studies in Costa Rica.

Religious life in Costa Rica centered around the Shaare Zion Congregation, the main Orthodox synagogue in San José. The Reform Congregation B’nei Israel was founded in 1984, building its own synagogue in 1989. In addition, there was a Chabad House in San José.

Relations with Israel
Costa Rica voted in favor of the partition of Palestine and was among the first nations to recognize the State of Israel in 1948. Diplomatic relations between the two countries were friendly, based on mutual values of freedom, tolerance, and democracy, Costa Rica being the only country (apart from El Salvador) that resisted international pressure and did not remove its embassy from Jerusalem.

bibliography:

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