Latin America

Argentina

National Affairs

Midterm elections in September 1987, in which the opposition Peronists achieved significant victories in Congress and in provincial (state) and local elections, dealt a blow to the moderate center-left government of President Raúl Alfonsín. The victory of Alfonsín's Radical Civic Union (UCR) party in 1983—which brought to an end seven years of a harsh military regime—had created high expectations and hopes for the return of democracy and an amelioration of the country's economic distress. However, only the hopes of a political character had been fulfilled, and those only to a limited degree.

Alfonsín succeeded, especially at the start of his presidency, in creating an atmosphere of reconciliation with the Peronists and in keeping the military under his control as the legitimate president. Cultural life flourished, as seen in both the quantity and quality of intellectual debate, art exhibitions, popular concerts, film festivals, and the like. However, these achievements and the wide support Alfonsín enjoyed at the beginning of this period were counterbalanced by his failure to deal adequately with two serious and basic problems: meting out justice to those responsible for criminal acts during the 1976–1983 period of military rule, and the economic crisis.

The issue of justice had its roots in the last stages of the military regime, when its leaders decided to declare a general amnesty for those who stood to be accused of responsibility for the general repression, for the "disappearance" of leftist political opponents or perceived opponents, and for many other crimes committed during the so-called dirty-war years (1975–1982, including the last year of Isabel Peron's rule and most of the military regime). The government hoped that the amnesty law would preclude any further judicial action. When the democratic government came into office, however, the pressure of public opinion, national and international, combined with the new regime's own principles, created an atmosphere that required bringing the accused to trial. In the end, when only the members of the
military junta were convicted and sentenced to long prison terms, many Argentineans were outraged.

Alfonsín faced a serious dilemma. On the one hand, any attempt to achieve absolute justice raised a threat of possible reaction by the military. (The attempted rightist coups of April 1987 and January 1988 were only the most serious expressions of the danger surrounding Alfonsín during most of his time in office.) On the other hand, the use of pragmatic solutions, such as the “obediencia debida” (due obedience) and “punto final” (full stop) laws, passed in 1986 and 1987, respectively, which in effect granted amnesty to the great majority of military personnel accused of violating human rights, aroused opposition not only from left-wing extremists but also from people who simply believed that democracy could not exist without the uncompromising application of unbiased justice. This lack of support from the left and the center diminished Alfonsín’s ability to face down the military and deal firmly with the country’s economic problems.

The main political opposition, the Partido Justicialista, the successor to the Peronista movement, generally supported the democratic regime, though not all party sectors did so enthusiastically or actively. Some Peronist leaders even maintained close contacts with military figures like Col. Aldo Rico, who was responsible for the failed coups d'état of April 1987 and January 1988. The General Confederation of Labor (CGT), led by the Peronist Saul Ubaldini, expressed its opposition to the government’s economic policies through a continuing series of strikes, including countrywide general work stoppages, all of much longer duration and greater intensity than those experienced during the previous military and Peronist (1973–1976) regimes.

Despite the fact that the chaotic economic situation had been created in great measure by the policies of earlier governments, Alfonsín was held responsible. Fearful that payments on Argentina’s $53-billion foreign debt could not be interrupted without creating a serious international crisis, Alfonsín followed International Monetary Fund advice and implemented strong restraining measures, such as drastic budgetary reductions and a freeze on wages and prices, with the ensuing decline of public services, increased unemployment, and so on. The situation of the majority became increasingly strained, and opposition to the government intensified. Alfonsín’s position was further harmed by the demagogic demands of the opposition that the foreign debt be canceled unilaterally.

The government was shaken when the September 6, 1987, midterm elections resulted in a Peronist majority in the national Chamber of Deputies and Peronist victories in almost all the provincial governors’ races. How this situation would influence both Alfonsín’s ability to push through his policies and the future course of democracy in Argentina was not at all clear. One likelihood was that Alfonsín would complete his six-year term in 1989, having consolidated constitutional rule, and then deliver the office to the next legitimately elected civilian president—most probably Carlos Menem, a Peronist populist leader of Arab origin.
The opposition to the government had introduced a Jewish theme into the country's political debate, especially during the midterm 1987 election campaign. Right-wing members of the military and rightist elements within the Catholic Church and the Peronist trade unions charged that Alfonsin's government was in the hands of the so-called Sinagoga Radical (Radical synagogue), referring to the large number of Jews in high-level government positions.

Jews had in fact served in previous Argentinean governments in high positions, but never in such numbers as under Alfonsin. The fact that the number of Jews in the military administration (they occupied administrative, not military, positions, such as the directorship of the Internal Revenue Service) had been extremely low made the contrast all the more dramatic. Jewish visibility was heightened by the novel tendency among many Jewish officials to make public their Jewish identity or origin. Among Jews who occupied prominent positions in the government were Marcos Aguinis, secretary of culture and adviser to the president, and later the person responsible for organizing the First National Educational Congress; Cesar Jaroslavsky, president of the Radical Civic Union bloc in the Chamber of Deputies; Bernardo Grinspun, the first minister of the economy in Alfonsin's cabinet; Leopoldo Portnoi, president of the Central Bank; Jacobo Fiterman, public works commissioner in the Buenos Aires city administration (an influential, "visible" position). Fiterman had earlier been president of the Zionist Organization and head of the local United Jewish Appeal, called CUJA.

The warm acceptance of Jews by the Alfonsin regime was evident not only in the conspicuous presence of Jewish individuals within the government but in specific indications of support for Jewish issues. For example, the government issued a strong condemnation of the attack against the Jewish synagogue in Istanbul in September 1986. A warm reception was given to Edgar Bronfman, president of the World Jewish Congress, by President Alfonsin in December 1986, when Bronfman visited Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay to express sympathy and support for their renewed democratic regimes. High government officials took part in Jewish community activities, as for instance, the presence of Federico Storani, president of the Foreign Relations Commission of the Chamber of Deputies, at the opening session of the Latin American Jewish Congress, in November 1987.

As part of the government's program of fostering cultural pluralism, different ethnic communities were given opportunities to present cultural programs in government-sponsored centers, especially the General San Martin Cultural Center in the city of Buenos Aires (an institution comparable to New York's Lincoln Center). The amount of attention given to Jews and Jewish cultural activity actually appeared to be disproportionate to the size of the Jewish population. Many observers regarded this as a reaction to the earlier disregard of a Jewish presence in the country.

The Israel Week organized in September 1986 at the San Martin Center, which
attracted a large attendance, included addresses by the ambassador of Israel, a symposium on science, technology, and education in Israel, an exhibition which occupied most of the center's halls, and other activities. *Herencia* ("Heritage"), a Spanish version of Abba Eban's TV series on the history of the Jewish people, was presented nationally in prime time. (This event was in marked contrast to the difficulties encountered, under the military government, just in getting permission for the screening of a TV series on the Holocaust.) Other examples reflecting the positive change in attitude toward Jews under the democratic regime were the warm reception given to participants in the meeting of Latin American Friends of the Tel Aviv University held in Buenos Aires in August 1986, at which the subject of Jewish communities in the area was featured in the program; the offering by Universidad del Salvador (a Catholic institution) of a course in Yiddish, starting in 1987; and the awarding of a number of literary prizes to Jewish writers. In the Ministry of Culture's 1987 literary competition, second prize for essays and criticism was given to Isidoro Blastein, and third prize to Tamara Kamenszain (the daughter of a Jewish community leader); second prize in the Buenos Aires municipal literary competition was given to Marcos Ribak and third prize to Ricardo Feirstein, while first prize for essays was given to Geula Kosize and third prize for short stories to Eduardo Stilman, all of them Jews.

Jews were generally supportive of Alfonsín, but not all of one mind about how far to go in his support. On the one hand, Alfonsín represented democracy and a positive attitude toward the Jews. On the other hand, with the wounds inflicted on members of the Jewish community still fresh, many Jews demanded a firm stance from Alfonsin in prosecuting the officers responsible for the crimes of the "dirty war" period. (See "Communal Affairs," below.)

Support for the government by the DAIA (Delegación de Asociaciones Israelitas Argentinas), the representative political body of Argentine Jewry, was more outspoken and clear-cut than it had been in the previous 50 years. The greater involvement of the Jewish community in general issues and the feeling that the community had a stake in the existence of a democratic regime undoubtedly contributed to this attitude. In April 1987 the DAIA issued a call opposing antidemocratic attempts; it also signed a declaration, together with political parties and many other organizations, formally pledging to support the legal government. Still, many Jewish leaders, including the DAIA's own president, Dr. David Goldberg, criticized the government and those members of Congress who approved the *punto final* and *obediencia debida* laws mentioned above. In short, the "official" Jewish attitude was one of unconditional support for the legitimate democratic regime coupled with criticism of the failure to prosecute those responsible for violations of human rights during the "dirty war."
Anti-Semitism

Although anti-Semitism was officially opposed, and its manifestations criticized by the president and other high officials, open attacks on Jews, mainly written and spoken, persisted. In theory—following the analysis of Harvard University sociologist Gino Germani, who lived and taught in Argentina for many years—there were two types of anti-Semitism in Argentina, the ideological and the traditional-popular; the former represented by extreme-right groups of upper-class origins and by certain sectors in the army and the Catholic Church; the latter by elements whose attitudes were rooted in more traditional prejudice. In practice it was hard to distinguish between the two types, especially because of the manipulation of popular anti-Semitism by the more ideological elements.

Certain Peronist groups, for example, manipulated popular prejudice for their own political purposes. During a mass political rally in November 1987, General Secretary Ubaldini of the CGT, the central trade-union federation, allowed thousands of demonstrators to shout “Se va a acabar la sinagoga Radical” (“An end to the Radical synagogue”) and other anti-Semitic slogans, including personal insults of Jews in leading government positions. Preaching at a mass in October 1987, the priest Carlos Beltran condemned the Radical government, “que se deja llevar por malos judios” (“which let itself be led by bad Jews”). Public anti-Semitic outbursts occurred in periods of domestic tension, such as that prior to the September 1987 elections, or during the implementation of the government’s new economic program, the Plan Austral, in June 1985, or in response to such international events as the Israeli attack on PLO headquarters in Tunis in September 1985, or the U.S. bombardment of Libya in April 1986.

While the government criticized individual anti-Semitic acts, its commitment to the democratic principle of freedom of expression, even when used by the enemies of democracy, prevented it from taking action. Anti-Semitic literature, for example, was offered freely in the central streets and on the newsstands of Argentinean cities.

In addition to anti-Semitic outbursts in connection with the September 6 elections, the shouting of “Fuera los Judios” (“Out with the Jews”) and, again, “Se va a acabar la sinagoga Radical” at political rallies of the CGT and the Peronista party, 1987 saw intensified attacks on Jews in Alerta Nacional, Masoneria, Cabildo, and other anti-Semitic newspapers and periodicals. Similarly, the “Institute for Research on the Jewish Question” issued five books in a series called Los judios son nuestros enemigos (“The Jews are our enemies”).

Jewish reaction to these events was different from what it had been under previous regimes (with the exception of a strike of Jewish businesses in 1962). Instead of relying solely on declarations or private, behind-the-scenes meetings with government officials, a mass rally was organized in Buenos Aires on November 26, 1987, attended by an estimated 40,000 persons, demonstrating “in repudiation of Nazi fascism and in support of the anti-discrimination law,” namely, the then proposed law which would make expressions of anti-Semitism illegal.
Former Nazis

The democratic government showed itself more willing to prosecute accused Nazi war criminals than had previous regimes, which had in effect protected them. However, the wheels of justice did not move quickly. The long drawn-out case of Walter Kutschmann, for example, ended abruptly with his death in 1986, before legal proceedings against him were completed. Kutschmann’s extradition had been demanded by Germany as early as 1975, but the military coup of March 1976 effectively interrupted all legal proceedings. After years of pressure by Simon Wiesenthal and officials of B'nai B'rith's Anti-Defamation League, and with the help of a well-known Argentinean Jewish criminal lawyer, Elias Neuman, Kutschmann was arrested in 1985. Kutschmann, who had been living in Argentina since 1947, under the name of Pedro Olmos, had been a high-ranking SS officer responsible for mass executions of Jews in the Ukraine.

In November 1987 Josef Franz Leo Schwammberger, aged 75, was arrested in Huerta Grande, Córdoba, on an extradition request from West Germany, which had issued a warrant for his arrest in 1975. A former SS officer who had served as commandant of various labor and concentration camps, he was accused of shooting and torturing hundreds of Jews and stealing their valuables. The Simon Wiesenthal Center had named Schwammberger one of its most wanted Nazi fugitives. The legal proceedings were expected to continue into 1988.

Still other known Nazis who had found refuge in Argentina and whose capture and extradition were sought were Guido Zimmer, Karl Kirchmann, and Eich Heinrich.

Argentina-Israel Relations

Argentinean Jews were gratified by the traditionally good relations that existed between the two countries, which meant that neither as individuals nor as a community were they placed in situations of conflict. With the country moving toward greater pluralism as a basic structural condition of democracy, the issue of “dual loyalty” was viewed as largely academic. Argentina was, however, a member of the developing countries group and as such had economic interests in Arab countries. The one area of tension in the relationship stemmed from Argentina’s criticism of Israeli policies, first in regard to the Lebanon war and, at the end of the period reviewed, in regard to the occupied territories. The latter led to the indefinite postponement of a visit to Israel by President Alfonsin, which had been frequently mentioned as a real possibility.

Among the events which could be cited as demonstrating friendly relations between Argentina and Israel were the meeting between former Israeli president Ephraim Katzir and President Alfonsin, during the 1986 Latin American conference of the Friends of the Tel Aviv University; the signing of agreements on joint technological and scientific projects between the National Council for Scientific and
Technical Research (CONICET), the National Institute for Industrial Technology (INTI), and the Faculty of Physics and Sciences of the University of Buenos Aires, all from the Argentinean side, and the Weizmann Institute, from the Israeli side; the participation by Weizmann Institute experts in a seminar on aging in Buenos Aires; the visit of Peronista leader Antonio Cafiero to Israel in January 1987; and the visit to Israel of the deans of the University of Salvador and the National University of Rosario, Juan Alejandro Tobias and Juan Carlos Millet, respectively.

In April 1987, during the so-called Semana Santa rebellion, led by the rightist Colonel Rico who opposed the trials of senior military leaders on the ground that they had saved Argentina from chaos and/or communism, Foreign Minister Shimon Peres of Israel sent a message of support for the legal government of Argentina. Since the results of the confrontation were still not clear, the message was a breach of an unwritten Israeli diplomatic rule that required waiting until a crisis was resolved, in order not to endanger the position of the local Jewish community. The international backing expressed for the democratic regime, and the outspoken and clear-cut support of the Jewish community itself help to explain the Israeli foreign office's unusual move.

**JEWISH COMMUNITY**

**Demography**

Because the question about religion was dropped from the census after 1960, no reliable figures on Jewish population were available. The best estimate was that Jews numbered around 220,000, or 7 percent, in a population of some 30 million. Since the proportion of Jews was higher in the city of Buenos Aires as well as among the middle classes and in certain professions, Jews were more visible in Argentinean life than their small number would indicate.

In 1960, 80 percent of the Jewish population of Argentina was concentrated in the Buenos Aires metropolitan area (only 33 percent of the general population lived in the same area). The trend toward concentration seemed to be continuing, the other big communities being Córdoba, Rosario, La Plata, and Santa Fe. The trend toward decreasing population in smaller communities and in the few Jewish agricultural colonies also continued, with the exception of the "poles of development," such as the urban areas of Neuquen Province, though there too the figures were low.

Migration out of the country during the military regime included not only political refugees but also persons who had not been persecuted but left for economic or political reasons. The main destination for migration was Israel, but Europe, the United States, and other Latin American countries, such as Mexico and Venezuela, were also chosen. The return to democracy in Argentina influenced the remigration of many of those Jews who had left in the previous decade, as part of a general wave of returning Argentineans. However, when the initial enthusiasm linked with Alfon-
sín's election waned, and under the influence of continuing economic and political problems, this return stream slowed and emigration once again increased. For Jews, the paradoxical situation in which a democratic regime was less able to control anti-Semitism than a repressive one could be considered another “push” factor toward emigration.

**Basic Tensions**

The return to democracy in 1983 opened up debate in the Jewish community on the role played by the community leadership during the period of the so-called dirty war. The families and friends of the estimated 1,500 Jewish “desaparecidos” (the disappeared ones), together with liberal sectors of the community, accused the Jewish leadership of those days of having collaborated with the previous regime by keeping silent. Among the most outspoken critics were Renee Epelbaum, one of the founders of the movement of Madres de la Plaza de Mayo, whose three children had disappeared; Herman Schiller, the editor of Nueva Presencia, since 1977 the first, and for a long period of time the only, newspaper to denounce human-rights violations; and Rabbi Marshall Meyer, who, since coming to Argentina in 1960 from the United States to introduce Conservative Judaism, had been a courageous leader in the cause of human rights. (Meyer returned to the United States in 1985, where he assumed a pulpit in New York City.) These three individuals initiated the Jewish Movement for Human Rights, in 1983—during the last year of the dictatorship—and in 1986–87 actively opposed the punto final and obediencia debida laws that effectively exonerated the military. During the years of the military regime, these leaders and many other individual Jews had been active within the general movement for human rights. The separate Jewish human-rights movement, which developed at the start of the Alfonsín period, played a central role in the community debates over Jewish leadership behavior during the dictatorship years. The movement was particularly influential among many young Jews and in left and liberal Jewish circles.

The debate in the Jewish community was a familiar one, centering on the conflict between ethical principle and pragmatic strategies of survival. The leaders of the Jewish Movement for Human Rights derided the “passive” behavior of the community leadership, and the leadership defended itself by arguing that using quiet influence with the junta had been more effective in saving lives and improving prisoners’ conditions than lofty declarations and international pressure. On a personal level, some leaders also maintained that discreet measures were the only prudent ones, given the fact that they did not carry U.S. passports—a clear reference to Marshall Meyer’s privileged position as an American citizen.

The role of the State of Israel and its representatives was greater than circumstances permitted making public. Jews were taken out of the country, and conditions of prisoners, once located, were improved, through the direct intervention and with the active help of Israeli representatives.
THE ECONOMIC SITUATION

The continuing economic crisis resulted in increasing economic polarization of the Jewish population. This in turn produced a situation in which those who had become richer and those whose economic situation had worsened—especially the latter—found it increasingly difficult to share the same social and institutional frameworks. In the case of membership in Jewish organizations and institutions, it was not just a matter of—for example—paying the dues, but of being able to afford appropriate clothes, tickets to the right social and cultural events, and so on. Among well-to-do Jews it had become common to purchase weekend cottages and apartments, frequently located on the extensive grounds of Jewish country clubs which offered all types of recreational facilities. Some of these clubs had started as relatively modest Jewish sport or social clubs that over the years became increasingly luxurious. The country-club installations were located within a radius of 10 to 35 miles of the center of Buenos Aires (where the clubs had their main social-cultural and sport centers), and those members who had houses at the country clubs used them as weekend retreats. Members who did not own houses were able to come just for the day, or to use the popular “dorms” (the English term was used) for an overnight, a weekend, or a brief summer vacation.

By contrast, wide segments of the Jewish population were not able to pay the tuition in Jewish schools (or to keep up with the style of life that sending children to these schools implied: presents for birthday parties, extracurricular activities, and the like). Parents were frequently not ready to accept—for psychological and cultural reasons—the scholarship aid generally available to those who needed it. This was not a new phenomenon, but economic conditions aggravated the trend. It should be noted that the majority of the Jewish community in Argentina was middle-class, not upper- or upper-middle class, as was the case in most Latin American countries.

The behavior of both the more and the less affluent posed dangers for the community's functioning. Growing assimilation among the former, as indicated, for example, by increased tendencies to bury the dead in private (not confessional) cemeteries and to join non-Jewish social circles and clubs, could result in loss of membership and income; so could the abandonment of Jewish institutions by the less affluent, for economic and social reasons—all this at a time when heavy demands were placed on institutional services by those in need. Reports based on professional social-work surveys showed that dealing with the poor was an important element in the work of the AMIA, the Buenos Aires kehillah, and many communal agencies. Despite a reluctance (as in the case of school fees) to turn to social services for help, numerous requests did come from people who had no income, or very low income; who needed a place to live or assistance with rent; who were unemployed, or had physical or mental health problems, or needed scholarships or services for the aged. In 1986 some 2,000 individuals were aided by various services of the AMIA, though the number of Jewish poor was estimated to be many more. In that year over
$600,000 was spent on these social services, a significant sum for the Jewish community's resources.

Communal Affairs

Several basic processes continued in the period surveyed, among them the trend toward greater professional management of community affairs. In the past, askanim, lay volunteers, were the leaders and doers, and the only professionals were teachers and rabbis. One major impetus for change was the expansion of Jewish institutional life that took place during the "dirty war" and junta years, as large numbers of Jews sought a haven from the turmoil around them, and as professionals who lost jobs in government and universities took positions in Jewish institutions. Other factors were a decrease in Zionist ideological factionalism and the example of Jewish communities elsewhere in the Diaspora, which put more emphasis on programs and service-delivery than on geographic origin or social standing or ideological ties among their members. Despite the growing influence of professionals, lay leaders maintained a prominent role; the normal kinds of conflicts occurred, and efforts were being made to forge a new type of relationship between professionals and volunteers.

The central organizations in Jewish life continued to be the local kehillot, or community bodies, such as the Buenos Aires AMIA (Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina), which provided educational, cultural, social, and religious services; the representative national political body, the DAIA (Delegación de Asociaciones Israelitas Argentinas); and the OSA (Organización Sionista Argentina), the Zionist roof organization. Communal activities centered around Jewish schools, the Jewish sport and social clubs, and the synagogues, which also provided cultural, social, and educational activities in addition to religious ones.

Elections in 1987 to the AMIA and the OSA gave some indication of the changes taking place in Jewish attitudes and communal life. The AMIA elections produced a surprise second-place victory for a brand new list, a coalition of representatives of certain sport and social clubs, lay leaders not identified with any Zionist political platform, and other groups, under the name Breira ("alternative"; not linked to the former U.S. Jewish organization of that name), whose platform called for changes in institutional life on a nonpartisan basis. A total of 9,518 voters (out of 25,000 members who had the right to vote) gave 49 percent of the votes to the Avoda-Labor Zionist list, 20 percent to Breira, and 16 percent to an Orthodox Aguda-Mizrahi list. In the previous election, in 1984, the total number of voters had been smaller, only 7,148. The increase was believed to be the result of the new democratic atmosphere prevailing in the country and the strong competition between the lists.

In the elections for the OSA, Breira fared poorly. The surprise this time was provided by Convergencia, a coalition of left-wing Zionists, intellectuals, and Voz Libre, an interesting group of leftists who had developed a sympathetic attitude toward Israel some years earlier, after becoming disenchanted with the policies of
the Soviet Union. (In the thirties, forties, and early fifties, the leftist “progressive” sector had been much more active and influential in the Jewish community.) Convergencia publicized its slogans in the streets of Buenos Aires, “taking ‘Zionism’ into the open,” as they put it.

The election results were as follows: Avoda (Labor Zionists)—3,538; Convergencia—2,166; MAS (linked to Breira)—1,092; Zionist Federation (Liberal Zionists) and Iona—999; Herut-Betar—521. The rest of the votes went to smaller lists.

While the 1987 elections did not mandate a clear direction of change, they did highlight the tension between those seeking changes which could be loosely defined as “modernization,” and those who saw change in the structure of the community as a threat to Jewish life and to traditional Zionist attitudes. Those favoring modernization advocated nonpartisan community organization, rationalization of institutions, new techniques of community and institutional work, and so on. Modernizers, for example, considered the links of the “traditional” Zionists with Israeli ideologies or political parties an abnormal and negative phenomenon, whereas the traditional Zionists considered ideological differences a basic requirement for a democratic community and a sound Jewish education (in the youth movements, for instance). The traditionalists believed that pragmatic approaches, less emphasis on ideology, and a weakening of the Zionist parties would lead to greater assimilation, a less democratic community, and domination of communal life by the economically powerful. In actuality, while the main lines of debate were clear, the division between the two sectors was not so sharp, and there were many middle-of-the-road or “combined” positions. Historical loyalties to certain ideologies or institutions, class and other economic interests, and other factors all came into play.

**Education and Culture**

Despite the serious economic crisis in the country, Jewish schools maintained high enrollments. According to the First Census of Jewish Schools in the Diaspora, carried out by the Israeli government, the Jewish Agency, and the World Zionist Organization in the early 1980s, the number of Jewish children in Argentina aged 3–17 was around 34,000; of this number 21,400 attended Jewish educational institutions, most of them all-day schools. This proportion, around 63 percent, was one of the highest among large communities in the Diaspora. In addition, hundreds of youngsters visited Israel through the Tapuz program (work in kibbutz, tours, seminars), and other educational tours and study programs.

Buenos Aires was home to several college-level Jewish educational institutions. Michlelet Shazar prepared Hebrew teachers for elementary and secondary schools. Sponsored by the AMIA and the WZO Education Department and academically supervised by the Tel Aviv University, the college had over 200 students. The Seminario Rabinico Latinoamericano of the Conservative movement trained rabbis, teachers, and youth leaders for Conservative congregations in Argentina and throughout Latin America.
ORT, which opened a new school in Buenos Aires, offered educational services to non-Jews as well as Jews. The organization had been successful not only in the area of higher technological education but also in the social and cultural spheres.

The director of the Va'ad Hachinuch (the Jewish board of education), J. Barilko, was designated a member of the Honorary Commission of the First National Pedagogic Congress. Jewish educators participated in this congress and in other conferences involving institutions in the private education sector.

Only one Yiddish newspaper, Di Presse, continued to appear, several times a week. Several weekly Spanish newspapers, such as Mundo Israelita, Nueva Sion, La Luz, and Nueva Presencia—under a new publisher, not Herman Schiller—continued to publish.

An interesting phenomenon was the popularity of Israeli culture, especially folk-dance groups—often sponsored by clubs or organizations—which performed at public and private functions. A well-attended dance festival took place once a year, as did a "Hassidic" festival (actually featuring many non-Hassidic Israeli and Jewish songs). Jewish Book Month, in September, continued to be an annual cultural event of great importance. Holocaust Memorial Day and Israel Independence Day were occasions for mass gatherings.

The Va'ad Hakehillot, in which the Buenos Aires AMIA was the main partner, continued to help small Jewish communities maintain their functioning. The Jews of La Plata celebrated the 80th anniversary of the creation of the local kehillah, while the community of Parana commemorated the 75th anniversary of its central organization.

The Seminario Rabinico Latinoamericano in Buenos Aires celebrated the 25th anniversary of its founding with a series of festive events. Through the Seminario's activity, the Conservative movement had succeeded in creating a new type of religious institution, one that offered an alternative to the basically non-Orthodox Jews of Argentina and other Latin American countries. Graduates of the Seminario headed Conservative congregations in Buenos Aires and several provincial cities.

The celebration of the 90th anniversary of the founding of the Bund party in Argentina (December 1987) had a nostalgic character. The Bund, a socialist-Yiddishist Jewish party, which had once had considerable influence in the development of the Jewish community, was now reduced to a small group of elderly members.
Brazil

National Affairs

The situation in Brazil at the end of 1987 was one of profound crisis. Politically, the transition from dictatorship to democracy could be considered successful, since rule of law, freedom of the press, and civil rights prevailed. However, the country faced crushing social and economic problems that were not being solved and that raised doubts about the viability of the country’s future as a stable democracy.

The process of “abertura” (opening), which opened the way for democracy at the beginning of the 1980s after 16 years of dictatorship, was mainly the result of the military regime’s inability to deal with the economic crisis which its own adventurous plans of the 1970s—for Brazil to become a “big power”—had created. The military were also influenced by pressure from President Jimmy Carter’s administration and the mass protests and demonstrations within Brazil which gained steadily in momentum. A key issue was “diretas,” direct election of the president, which the press and public opinion demanded, instead of the existing system of presidential selection by members of the National Congress and state legislatures. Although this demand was never met, Tancredo Neves, a popular candidate of the opposition Brazilian Democratic Movement party (PMDB), was elected. The present president, José Sarney, who once belonged to the rightist, promilitary Liberal Front party (PFL), had been added to the presidential slate as vice-presidential candidate in order to achieve a better political balance. Sarney assumed the presidency after Neves became ill and died before taking the oath of office; he set the country in a political direction more conservative than the one the late Neves was expected to follow.

The main achievement of the democratic government was the very fact that it survived. In addition, it successfully brought about the drafting of a socially progressive new constitution, through an open participatory process including presentations to the Constitutional Assembly and its committees by organized groups, among them the Jewish community. Adoption of the constitution had not been completed by the end of 1987, however, due to a dispute over the length of the presidential term of office, which could also affect how long Sarney himself remained in the position.

The Sarney government’s “Plan Cruzado” (the name of the new monetary unit) was launched in February 1986. Based on strong control of inflation through price and wage freezes and budgetary restrictions, it produced positive short-term results that helped the PMDB perform well in the November 1986 elections to Congress.
and the state legislatures. However, many of the controls were abandoned after the election, and there was a return to double-digit monthly inflation. Another cause of the country's financial woes was the huge foreign debt incurred for large-scale development in the 1970s. When debt service depleted foreign reserves, early in 1986 the government decided to partially suspend further payments, which cut off access to new loans.

Social problems became ever more acute, with millions of children suffering from malnutrition and disease and millions of persons living in conditions of extreme poverty in rural areas or in the shantytowns, or favelas, of the cities, and urban violence on the increase. At the same time, because of the rapid economic development that had occurred over the previous 20 years, the already wide social gap between rich and poor grew even wider. While capable individuals in the lower and lower-middle classes often had a chance to better themselves, the underlying problems of economic and class structure and distribution of land and income mitigated against foreseeable improvement for the masses.

Because of Sarney's failure to take effective action, opposition to him grew stronger, even within his own party. The economic crisis and the lack of unity within the government and the ruling party in turn fostered a lack of faith in the democratic regime's ability to find solutions to Brazil's woes. Increasing emigration to Australia, Spain, Portugal, and elsewhere were clear and unprecedented indicators of the prevailing mood. Although a return to military rule was not likely, and support for democracy was strong, the result of any further deterioration in the situation was unpredictable.

Brazil-Israel Relations

The attitude of Brazil toward Israel was complex and far from clear-cut. The central government continued to foster relations with the Arab countries and to observe a correct, cool attitude toward Israel. Its policies essentially followed the principle of "relative pragmatism." Israel's imports from Brazil, worth tens of millions of dollars a year, could not be compared with the billions of dollars of goods and services imported by Arab and Muslim countries, much of this in the form of weapons and the services of Brazilian companies in road building and other construction. Brazil imported 601,000 barrels of oil a day (21 percent from Saudi Arabia), and despite the drop in oil prices, because of its foreign debt, Brazil sought to maintain good relations with the Arab oil-producing countries, which were not only suppliers but also good customers. An additional element was the fact that millions of Brazilians were of Arab origin, some of them increasingly active in pro-Palestinian groups. The Parliamentary League of Arab-Brazilian Friendship and Cooperation, made up of 71 senators and representatives, 54 of them of Arab descent, functioned in effect as an Arab lobby demanding legal status for the PLO in Brazil (at the time, the PLO representative worked within the Arab League
embassy). By contrast, there were only around 100,000 Jews in Brazil—and only one Jewish member of the National Congress.

Despite the central government's reserved policy, state governments, trade unions, and other public groups showed interest in increasing ties with Israel and acted accordingly. Some examples of this were: the celebration of Israel's Independence Day as an annual event in several cities; the sponsoring of an Israel Week in the city of Curitiba, capital of the important state of Paraná, on the occasion of the 39th anniversary of the State of Israel, in 1987, despite strong local Arab opposition; the naming of a Ben-Gurion Street in São Paulo, Brazil's biggest city, in November 1987; and an Israel Week held in the state of Goias in December 1987. Local politicians and officials, church, and trade-union leaders visited Israel, among them Bishop Ivo Lorscheiter of São Paulo, president of Brazil's Bishops' Conference, in April 1987, accompanied by Rabbi Henry Sobel, of São Paulo's leading Progressive congregation; and Joaquim dos Santos Andrade (Joaquinzao), the president of the CGT, the central trade-union federation, in November 1987, as a guest of the government and the Histadrut. The latter's attitude contrasted sharply with that of "Lula" (Luis Ignacio Lula da Silva), a member of the Constitutional Assembly and popular union leader, who stated publicly that he would not accept an invitation to visit Israel because of his identification with the PLO cause. In addition, groups of politicians, journalists, and other public figures visited Israel on tours organized by the Rio Jewish Federation. Local Jews encouraged these ties with Israel by initiating and supporting special events and visits by leading figures to Israel.

A high point in Brazil-Israel relations was the opening of new Israeli consular offices in São Paulo in August 1986. Shimon Peres's official visit to Brazil in December 1987 (the first by an Israeli foreign minister since Abba Eban's inauguration of the Israeli embassy in Brasilia, in 1973), during which he met with the highest officials, was viewed as a serious opening for improved relations. However, the eruption of violence in the occupied territories of Israel during the period that Peres was in Brazil created new tensions that neutralized the positive gains that had been made.

On the other side of the equation, in August 1986 an agreement was signed between the PLO and the Methodist University of Piracicaba—located in the interior of the state of São Paulo—for "cooperation and cultural exchange." Both parties declared themselves "dedicated to the democratic, anti-imperialist, anti-Zionist struggle." The Iranian embassy was forced by the Brazilian Foreign Ministry to stop publishing and distributing the "Protocols of the Elders of Zion," based on a 1967 Brazilian law banning that document. The PLO office, which functioned within the embassy of the Arab League, was active in distributing propaganda material and creating ties with Brazilian organizations. Farid Sawan, the PLO representative, was accused of distributing sabotage manuals to members of a union with which the PLO had close relations (Central Unica dos Trabalhadores, with which the above-mentioned Lula was associated) and to the Communist party of Brazil. A poster campaign in the streets of Brazil's major cities was mounted in
behalf of Lamia Maraf Hassan, a Brazilian-Palestinian woman sentenced to life in
Israel for the murder of an Israeli soldier. Still, while the PLO was visible, from a
wider perspective it seemed that that organization’s links with terrorism diminished
the ability of its representatives to recruit any substantial public support in Brazil.

JEWISH COMMUNITY

Demography

The Jerusalem-based demographers U.O. Schmelz and S. DellaPergola estimated
the Jewish population of Brazil in 1986 at 100,000 (out of a general population of
over 138 million). Past overestimates of well over 100,000 were due mainly to lack
of statistical sophistication; however, the present leaders of the community and of
some international Jewish organizations were reluctant to accept the reduced figure
suggested by the experts.

Recent estimates showed the majority of Brazilian Jews living in São Paulo (over
50,000) and Rio de Janeiro (over 30,000). Pôrto Alegre had fewer than 10,000 Jews;
Curitiba, around 2,000; Belo Horizonte, 1,500; Belém, and Brasilia—the new capi-
tal—several hundred each. There were Jews in smaller cities as well. The São Paulo
Jewish Federation had been active in the previous 10 years offering support to small
communities in the state of São Paulo, such as Santos and Campinas.

The general demographic characteristics of Brazilian Jewry matched those of
Jews in other Western countries: concentration in urban areas (although in Brazil
this was not one main city, such as the capital, as in other countries, but two big
cities and other less populated centers); aging of the population; low birthrate;
increasing levels of education and income. As a result of these factors, and despite
a small influx of Jewish immigrants from Egypt and Hungary in the 1950s, as well
as from Israel and other South American countries, the Jewish population appeared
to be stable in numbers, while raising its socioeconomic status. The one city with
an increasing Jewish population was São Paulo, because of its dynamic economy,
but the increase was based on internal migration from other parts of the country.
There appeared to be an increase in the number of Brazilian Jews returning from
Israel (though figures were not available). The number of Jews settling in Israel
remained low, around 200 a year. (In 1985, 173 went on aliyah through the Zionist
Organization; in 1986, 129; and in 1987, 134. Since others went to Israel as tourists
and then decided to settle, the total immigration from Brazil could be estimated at
around 200 persons a year.) Brazilian Jews were less sensitive to economic “push”
factors than Argentinean Jewry; nevertheless, economic factors seemed to be deci-
sive in most cases.
Jewish Status and Identity

In Brazil, as in other developing countries, the lack of general economic development created conditions that enabled minority groups from Europe, the Middle East, and the Far East, including Jews, to advance rapidly, professionally and financially, and to enjoy greater access to higher education and other benefits than the citizenry as a whole.

For the majority of the Jewish community, the economic expansion and even the generally negative inflationary economic conditions prevailing during long periods of the previous 20 years had provided opportunities for economic advancement. Jews continued to move to better dwellings in better areas of the main cities, some of which offered private police protection, an important guarantor of well-being in the prevailing conditions of urban unrest and crime. As in other Latin American countries, many of those who had improved their economic status during the dictatorship tended to accept the regime, arguing that there was no other alternative to terrorism and leftist upheaval. Also, as in other countries and communities, these attitudes of many of the affluent, coupled with the organized Jewish community's failure to offer meaningful criticism of the government's human-rights violations, added to the alienation of liberal and leftist intellectuals and youth. Rabbi Henry Sobel, who was active in interfaith activities and also openly critical of human-rights violations, was a notable exception, as was Ronaldo Gomlevsky, president of the Jewish Federation of Rio de Janeiro. They, and a few others, served as a focus of identification for many of the estranged. (The criticism by some of Sobel's social activism, based on his enjoying the privilege of American citizenship, was similar to that voiced against Rabbi Marshall Meyer in Argentina.)

Liberal and leftist intellectuals and youth were further alienated by the complete identification (as they saw it) of the organized Jewish community with all the policies of the government of Israel, even in cases in which public opinion in Israel itself was sharply divided. This aloofness, in turn, served to accelerate the processes leading to assimilation. (A different reaction, active rather than passive, was that of a group critical of Israeli government policies that formed a local branch of the Israeli Peace Now movement.)

As elsewhere in the Diaspora, individual Jews faced problems of defining their Jewish identity and giving their links to the Jewish people concrete and positive expression. In Brazil these problems had a special character, owing to the powerful attraction of a tolerant, multiracial, culturally open society that displayed little anti-Semitism but that exerted both overt and subtle pressures for absolute loyalty to the country. These conditions, together with the opportunities for personal, professional, and economic advancement, made assimilation a pressing practical dilemma for many individuals and families and presented the community and its institutions with a major challenge.

Unlike Jewish politicians in Argentina, Brazilian Jewish politicians stressed their Jewishness in the hope of winning Jewish support and votes, even if the Jewish
proportion of the electorate was not substantial. (This was part of a general social
trend; members of spiritualist “macumba” groups, for example, also stressed their
“religious” affiliation.) In politics, Jews had more influence than their numbers
would indicate, because of their high status in the economic, social, and intellectual
realms. In local elections, in areas in which Jews were concentrated, and because
of the literacy qualification for voting, their votes weighed more heavily than their
percentage in the population. Still, Jewish candidates for state and local office could
not rely only on Jewish support. They ran on a variety of issues and had their own
“clients,” frequently—as was common in Brazilian “personalist-paternalist-patron-
age” politics—in poor areas, including favelas, where hundreds of thousands of poor
people, mostly recent arrivals from rural areas, built their primitive huts and lived
in extreme poverty.

Communal Affairs

As in Argentina, the Jewish community was predominantly secular. In recent
years, however, small ultra-Orthodox groups (mainly Chabad), on one side of the
spectrum, and Reform and Conservative congregations, on the other side, continued
to expand the alternatives available to those who did not find their place either in
traditional Orthodoxy or in completely secular activities and frameworks.

Many Jews, including children, attended the big Jewish sport and social centers,
such as Hebraica and Macabi. The Zionist youth movements had smaller numbers
of members than in the past.

Jewish communal life continued to be organized along traditional Zionist party
lines. In the 1987 elections for representatives to the World Zionist Congress, the
Labor Zionists (Labor Alignment and Mapam) sent five delegates, and the other five
places were distributed among other Zionist parties.

The Jewish federations in each state, united nationally under the Jewish Confeder-
ation of Brazil, were the roof organizations for all Jewish institutions in each state.
Although the federation had started out as a political body, like the Argentinean
DAIA, it aspired to a broader “kehilla” role, like that of the Argentinean AMIA.
However, unlike Argentina, where the Hevra Kadisha (the burial society) was the
central financial body in the community and basically supported the kehilla’s
activities, in Brazil the federations depended for their support on the Fundo Comu-
nal, a joint fund-raising appeal for local needs. In some cases competition between
the federation and Unificada (the Zionist Organization) created tensions, as when
the Rio federation organized visits to Israel for local politicians, a function consid-
ered by Unificada to be in its domain. The federation in Rio, under the leadership
of Ronaldo Gomlevsky, in fact had become the center of power within the local
community.

The tension between the federations and Unificada was not unlike that in Argen-
tina between “modernizers,” who stressed local needs, and “ideologues,” for whom
Israel and traditional Zionist political issues were paramount. The state federations
and Zionist organizations, especially those of São Paulo, Rio, and other main cities, tended to be more influential than the national roof bodies and were frequently competitive with each other. In this respect they followed the national Brazilian pattern, which stressed federalist-decentralized tendencies rather than the centralized pattern of other Latin American countries.

In São Paulo, the CIP (Congregação Israelita Paulista), led by Rabbi Henry Sobel, and in Rio de Janeiro the ARI (Associação Religiosa Israelita), led by Rabbi Roberto Graetz, were the largest non-Orthodox congregations. Both rabbis were active in interfaith activities and in behalf of civil rights. “Shalom” was a new Reform congregation developing in São Paulo. Although many small Orthodox synagogues were to be found in the main Jewish areas, attendance at religious services was generally low, except during the High Holy Days, when it increased dramatically. As in other Latin American communities, the Jews of Brazil expressed their Jewish identity mainly through cultural, social, and Zionist activities.

In the area of Jewish education, no major changes had taken place since the early 1980s. Out of an estimated 22,000 Jewish children aged 3 to 18, over 10,000 attended Jewish schools, almost all of them all-day institutions. The high proportion of enrollment in Jewish schools reflected the important place of private education in Brazil generally, especially for the middle and upper classes. Public, government-run schools which served the lower classes, had high rates of drop-outs and repeaters. Most of those Jewish children who did not attend Jewish schools attended other private schools. The Jewish schools, which maintained high standards of instruction, especially in the general subjects, were independent bodies. They received some communal support but were mainly financed by parents and interested groups of lay leaders who identified with the ideological character of a particular school—secular, traditional, or religious, more or less Zionist, and so on. The majority of schools were not Orthodox, but defined themselves as “traditional.”

A board of Jewish education, the Va’ad Hachinuch, existed in cities with several schools (Rio and São Paulo), offering various services and distributing some financial help to the schools with funds received from the Chevra Kadisha or the Fundo Comunal. Some of the teachers were locally trained and received further training in Israel, mostly at the Machon Greenberg in Jerusalem. The role of Israeli teachers and advisers, who were sent through the World Zionist Organization education departments, was crucial in the area of Jewish studies. A central problem was the gap between the high level of attention paid to general studies—the ground on which competition took place with other Jewish and non-Jewish private schools—and the relatively low status of Jewish studies, especially in the higher grades. Still, the Jewish schools served as centers of Jewish social and cultural life for the Brazilian Jewish communities, and contributed to fostering—along with the family and other Jewish institutions—Jewish identity and links to the Jewish people and Israel.
Although Brazilian Jewry was largely nonreligious, interfaith activities were understood by most Jews to enhance the prestige and position of the community within the general society, at the same time helping the Jewish people worldwide and the State of Israel. The pluralistic character of Brazilian society—the majority of its people Catholics but with a substantial minority of Protestant and spiritualist groups—combined with the progressive character of the Church leadership, provided a context conducive to successful collaboration and educational work between Jews and the Catholic Church. Bishop Lorscheiter's visit to Israel, mentioned above as an example of nongovernmental relationships with Israel, grew out of a process that had begun in 1981, when the National Commission for Jewish Catholic Dialogue was created. The process reached a high point with the first Pan-American Conference on Catholic-Jewish Relations, held in São Paulo in November 1985, which was attended by influential Catholic and Jewish representatives and theologians from all over Latin America. The sponsors of the meeting were the Brazilian Bishops' Conference (CNBB) and the American Jewish Committee, and the occasion, the 20th anniversary of "Nostra Aetate," the Vatican declaration on the Jewish people. Among the resolutions adopted was one stating that "Zionism is not racism," repudiating the infamous UN resolution of 1975.

The National Commission published a 187-page "Guide for Catholic-Jewish Dialogue in Brazil" and distributed it to all Catholic communities. The guide contained sections on the history of the Jewish people, anti-Semitism, the Holocaust, and how to deal with problems of prejudice. Among both Catholics and Jews some elements had reservations about the dialogue process—Orthodox Jews on the one hand, and Catholics who opposed the liberal, progressive attitudes of the CNBB in general, not only in regard to relations with the Jews. The Orthodox boycotted the 1985 conference because of the presence of Bishop Jean Lustiger of Paris, a converted Jew.

David Schers
Shlomo Slutsky