

THE ISRAEL STATE ARCHIVES AS A SOURCE FOR THE HISTORY OF LATIN-AMERICAN JEWRY

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The Israel State Archives (I.S.A.) holds the records of government of Israel and of the authorities that governed the country prior to the establishment of the State in 1948. The oldest documents of the I.S.A. date back to 1840, but continuous series of official records begin with the end of World War I, from the period of the British Mandatory Government.

In addition to the official records, the I.S.A. also accepts private or semi-official papers if their origin or content meet the criteria of the Archives. Included in this category are papers of politicians and government officials pertaining to their official functions.

Access to the records in the I.S.A. is governed by the Archives Law enacted in 1955 and regulations issued in accordance with that Law. In 1984 an amendment to the regulations was published, stipulating that a minimum of 30 years must elapse before records can be used – provided access to the material has not been limited by any ministerial committee for security reasons or because of potential damage to diplomatic relations. Therefore, the following brief survey will pertain mainly to material from the first 10 years of the State, which is already open to research.

The main record group in the I.S.A. of interest to researchers of Latin American Jewry is the files of the Israel Foreign Ministry. For administrative reasons, two distinct groups have been established: Files of the Jerusalem head-office (R.G. 130); and files of missions abroad (R.G. 93). A desk for Latin American affairs was established at the Jerusalem head-office in 1949 after the State had been recognized by most Latin American republics and diplomatic relations had been established with Uruguay and later with Argentina. Until that time, the responsibility for contact with Latin American Jewry had been delegated exclusively to the Zionist Organization and the Jewish Agency through their offices in Jerusalem and New York. One should bear in mind, however, that even after the establishment of diplomatic relations, the Zionist Organization and its organs remained the main link with local Jewish communities, institutions and organizations in Latin America. The State played a secondary role in contacts with those communities, and the question of dual loyalty arose as early as January 1949, when Yaacov Tsur, the newly appointed minister to Uruguay, wrote in his report to Jerusalem that the chief of Protocol in

Montevideo referred to the local Jews as “Votre Colonie” as a matter of course, while the Jewish organizations and institutions, including their leaders, were rather hesitant to be identified with the Jewish State nationally or politically, beyond giving moral and financial support.

Most of the documentation on Latin American Jewry in the files at the Jerusalem head-office of the I.S.A. consists of the original dispatches by ministers and ambassadors or their senior staff. Records for the years 1949–1958 available at the I.S.A. amount to 231 files (some 3 m. of shelves). Such reports were written by each minister upon assuming office and include, *inter alia*, general surveys of the local Jewish community. Other documents deal with subjects such as official visits to Latin America by Israeli personalities, mainly for the purpose of fund raising; Jewish gatherings and organizational activities; general elections and changes in governments and their impact on the Jewish community; and antisemitic activities, particularly press campaigns. Most of these files also contain newspaper clippings, sent to Jerusalem together with relevant reports.

Evaluation of contemporary diplomatic reports as historical source material entails certain problems, and historians are careful to distinguish between reports of ongoing negotiations and subjective accounts of contacts or events. Moreover, a report on an action or function based on personal participation or involvement carries more weight than a report intended as a background paper and based mainly on information collected or supplied by others.

The following are examples of characteristic reports:

After David Shaltiel, Israeli Ambassador to Brazil, visited Venezuela in July 1953 as a non-resident representative and presented his credentials at an official ceremony, he wrote a general report on Venezuelan Jewry (file 2574/6). Freely translated, an excerpt of the report reads:

“...In this rich and beautiful country, under complex economic and political conditions and a military dictatorship, 6000 Jews are living in prosperity, 4000 of them in the capital city Caracas... The small Sephardi community originates from Morocco and came to Venezuela at the end of the 19th century. They acquired the Levantine mentality of the Venezuelan merchants, and though they continued to identify as Jews mixed marriages were prevalent. This process of assimilation ended after World War I, with the arrival of a new wave of immigrants, Ashkenazi Jews from Bessarabia and Bukovina. During and after World War II, more Ashkenazi immigrants arrived from Austria, Germany, Belgium and France. Most of them came without any financial means or knowledge of the local language, and made a living as peddlars and small merchants. During World War II,

new opportunities were opened and many of the Jews succeeded as wholesalers and merchants, while others developed the textile industry...

...They are willing to support Israel – as long as their loyalty to their native country is not questioned ... There is no Jewish leadership — the Sephardi Jews have a beautiful synagogue, and although they have difficulty convening a *Minyan* on the Sabbath they do not want Ashkenazim to pray with them. The Ashkenazim have therefore decided to build their own synagogue, but because of their internal quarrels they will build not one, but two synagogues...”

This report may not contain historical information, but it can serve as a valuable illustration of the prevailing atmosphere in that community. Many aspects of the particular Jewish community described in the report are characteristic of the Jewish communities in most Latin American countries, and are portrayed in similar words in most other reports. For example, there are references to material wealth acquired by Jews, particularly since the outbreak of World War II. Support for Israel among Jewish communities has been affected by fear of arousing suspicions of dual loyalty, in addition to the fact that the Jewish communities lack local leadership and are given to internal quarrels.

Despite these problems, one will find that nearly all of these communities had a Jewish or Hebrew school. Even Caracas had a Jewish school, reported by David Shaltiel to have 400 pupils – 60 percent of the total number of Jewish school children in the country at the time. According to Shaltiel the school, located in a modern building, could accommodate twice that number of pupils, in addition to 40 boarders from other countries. The curriculum consisted of general subjects, taught in Spanish by non-Jewish teachers, and Hebrew and Jewish studies taught by Israeli teachers. It should be noted, however, that in addition to the reported enrollment of 400 Jewish pupils, it is mentioned that 40 non-Jewish pupils also attended the school because of its relatively high level.

A report by Israeli Minister Yosef Kessari (file 2574/8, 12.2.1954), indicates that some 80 percent of all Jewish children in Mexico attended Jewish schools. Kessari also describes the diversity of Jewish schools in the country, which seems to be quite characteristic of large Jewish communities. The Yiddish-speaking school was reported to have an enrollment of 1200 pupils; the Spanish-speaking school, 500 pupils, mainly from Sephardi families; the “Mizrahi” school (Yiddish and Hebrew-speaking), 500 pupils; the Zionist Hebrew school, 350; and the Yiddish-speaking school of the “Bund”, 200 pupils. In the report, Kessari explains that the motive for establishing most of the Jewish schools was fear of intermarriage and not inclinations towards Hebrew or Jewish religious education.

One of the most important topics dealt with in all of the general reports and surveys by Israeli diplomatic representatives is antisemitism. Very often Israeli diplomats feel a need to explain the roots of Latin American antisemitism in view of the small number of Jews and their insignificance in the economic and political life of their countries. The explanations given range from indoctrination by Catholic clergy and Arab propaganda to general xenophobia, which is particularly characteristic of Latin American countries with a long history of foreign suppression and exploitation. The most prominent factor, however, was the personal attitude of the presidents, which determined whether the antisemitic trends grew or declined. The reports, therefore, consistently emphasize the character of the president and his attitude towards the local Jewish community as well as his attitude towards Israel.

There are numerous reports on antisemitism in Bolivia, particularly in 1952 after the electoral victory of a nationalist anti-American party which had been pro-Nazi at one time. The immediate result of the elections was a military uprising aided by America, and although the immediate danger for Jews in Bolivia was eliminated, popular antisemitism survived. The file on Bolivian Jewry (file 2574/9) at the Archives contains a report written two years after the uprising (June 11, 1954) on behalf of the World Jewish Congress, depicting the regime as oppressive, although most of the allegations seem to be exaggerated.

The frequent political upheavals and revolutions in the Latin American republics were naturally a constant source of tension for the Jewish communities, since Jews were identified by most politicians either as left-wing socialists or as right-wing, pro-American capitalists, and hardly ever as a group with nationalist inclinations.

Such tensions were caused by the revolution against Perón in September 1955, as described in the following passages from unofficial reports on the situation in Argentina (file 2579/18). It should be noted that the reports were received by the Foreign Office in Jerusalem via New York, and not via the Israeli embassy in Argentina.

"...This morning we had a meeting of our Coordination Committee. It was decided that the DAIA (Delegación de Asociaciones Israelitas Argentinas) should wait with sending a message of congratulations and making a public statement till after Yom Kippur, when the situation will become clearer ... The future *for us* is a big question mark... Prominent generals, well known for their extreme nationalist leanings, who supported wholeheartedly the Perón regime and played a notorious part during the Nazi period, surrounded the new President during the ceremony of taking the Oath of Presidency...

The support for the new regime coming from such persons causes grave concern for our future... Among the arrested Peronist Deputies whose activities are going to be investigated by the new government is also Dr. Pablo Manguel [a former ambassador to Israel]."

The above post-Peronist report can be compared with another one written five-and-a-half years earlier (March 6, 1950, file 2574/3), after Yaacov Tsur attended an assembly organized by the O.I.A., the Jewish Peronist organization. All Jewish institutions and organizations were invited to hear a speech by Perón, and according to Tsur's report no one dared be absent:

"...It is difficult to describe the atmosphere at such an assembly held under a totalitarian regime. One after another, the leaders of the O.I.A. stood and praised Juan and Evita Perón. They spoke about antisemitism that prevailed prior to Perón's regime, and praised the President and his wife for everything they did. Every few minutes the chairman rose to cheer Perón and Evita; he was joined each time by the entire Jewish community, who rose to cheer and applaud. Naturally, we too – who were sitting beside them – also rose and applauded each time."

I regret that this short summary cannot recreate the nearly hypnotic atmosphere of the shouting and applauding mass, which I sensed while I was reading the dispatch.

These few examples from five different reports should suffice to illustrate the diversity of material in the files of the Jerusalem head office and its potential value for research. Let us move now to the second record group, the files of Israel Missions in Latin America. For the first 10 years following the establishment of the State of Israel, the I.S.A. held some 300 files on the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires and some 150 files on the Israeli embassy in Brazil; it may be assumed that the I.S.A. held a total of over 1000 files, or 30 m. of shelves, for this period.

The central importance of these records for the history of South American Jewry lies in the fact that they emanate from direct contacts with local institutions, organizations and individuals. Many of these contacts were formal and ceremonial, but even these rather dull records contain an abundance of information on activities, elections and publications. It is also interesting to note the role played by Israeli ambassadors in the local Jewish communities, given the differences and quarrels that prevailed. One brief example may suffice: In 1952 elections were due to take place for the *Va'ad ha-Kehilla* (the committee of the *Kehilla*) in Buenos Aires, one of the most important and influential institutions of Argentine Jewry. Internal quarrels within the Zionist camp between the socialist-oriented Mapai faction and

the General Zionist party led to the rather dangerous possibility that the Communist-oriented party would eventually prevail in the *Kehilla*. At an emergency meeting held at the home of the ambassador, the Zionist parties agreed to postpone the elections in order to arrive at some form of compromise. Yaacov Tsur reports (file 471/17, October 21, 1952): "...This is one of the few instances when an Israeli emissary cannot remain detached, although he should try to avoid mixing in local affairs".

To conclude the brief survey of this second archival group, let us mention a file (no. 472/6) entitled "Jewish Colonization", from the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires. The file contains a detailed memorandum by Yaacov Tsur dated January 18, 1951, on the I.C.A. colonies in Argentina and Brazil founded 60 years earlier. The paper was intended as a proposal to negotiate with I.C.A. in London to conclude that organization's business in South America and transfer the Jewish farmers and the revenue of I.C.A. to Israel. The proposal itself is not as significant as the complete description of the I.C.A. project in 1951. Even if one takes into consideration that there was some bias in Tsur's description, the analysis makes sad reading. Of the 33,000 Jews who had been in the I.C.A. colonies after World War I – 20,00 of whom made their living as farmers and the rest of whom lived in towns – barely 12,000 remained. Most of the land purchased by I.C.A. became the private property of the individual farmers after they paid off their loans to I.C.A., and since the value of the property increased tremendously, these farmers sold their land to non-Jews – mainly peasants from Poland or Italy – and the former I.C.A. colonists found more comfortable sources of income in Buenos Aires and other towns.

In a somewhat different category, let us mention the files of our delegation in New York. Some of them were opened prior to 1948 at the offices of the Jewish Agency and maintained at the office of the Israeli delegation to the United Nations. Among the documents are the files of Moshe Tov (boxes 66–99), another file of the "World Committee for Palestine" (box 2276), all aimed at influencing the political leadership in Latin America through various contacts – Jewish and non-Jewish. Some of the files of Moshe Tov contain a set of daily DAIA bulletins, first typed and later stencilled, from 1951–1954.

Some information on Latin American Jewry can be found in Record Group 105, the records of the President of Israel. Of special interest are reports on Indian Jews and on Marranos. Since the second President of Israel, Yitzhak Ben Zvi, was particularly interested in dispersed Jewish communities – *Nidhei Yisrael* – information and reports on such Jews were sent to him by the Foreign Ministry or directly by Israel embassies or representatives in Latin America.

Browsing through some files, I found three reports from our legation in Mexico on Indian or Mexican Jews. Two of them, however, tell the story of some Mexicans in Venta Prieta and in the Toluca vicinity, who converted to Judaism after studying the Bible, although they have no apparent connection with the Marranos (reports by Shimon Amir March 5, 1958, 105–53/1942; October 25, 1956). The fact that the President did not react personally to that report may have been an indication of his deep frustration with the primitive self-converted Catholics who had no connection with “the lost tribes”. It is quite touching, however, to hear how these people tried to practice Judaism within their hostile Catholic surroundings, even if they denied any identification with the State of Israel.

The last Record Group I wish to mention is the personal papers of Yaacov Tsur (R.G. 70/20), who served as Israeli ambassador to Uruguay and Argentina from 1949–1952. The available material dealing with Latin America include press clippings pasted in scrap books, a diary of meetings and events, ceremonial letters and photographs. It would be a mistake to underestimate the research value of these records, especially of the systematic press clippings arranged chronologically, whereas the diary may raise unjustified expectations beyond the knowledge about dates of meetings and contacts and the names of participants in these encounters and conferences.

Let me conclude by saying that the staff of the I.S.A. will do all they can to help researchers take advantage of the material available on Latin American Jewry. Just one warning: Not every title mentioning Latin America necessarily contains information relevant to the subject. In March 1942, for example, the Palestine Government opened a file entitled “Visas for Argentine Jews” (R.G. 2 – box 228, file 5/25/42). That file was closed a year-and-a half later in November 1943, when some 20 Jewish families “who apparently came from Rumania” were admitted to Palestine as War refugees. They had received their Argentine passports either on humanitarian grounds through a representative of a neutral country or by paying bribes, and successfully crossed the Rumanian-Turkish border in 1941. Besides the appeals to the British authorities by Argentina’s ambassador in Austria, the material has no connection with Latin America.