From the Ground Up:
La Comunidad Israelita de El Salvador

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Introduction

The Jewish Community in El Salvador was a small yet resilient community of Jewish families. The families that built this community found themselves in a small country located in Central America. El Salvador became home to what seems like the most unlikely community of Jews. The beginnings of this community started in the 1920s growing to its peak in the 1970s. The Jewish community that bloomed in El Salvador cannot be accurately described as a post-World War II community, unlike many other Jewish communities beyond Europe. In that way it was unique, that the majority of Jews that came to El Salvador did not come soon before or soon after World War II. This allowed the community to grow in a way that progressed more naturally. It was individual families, growing together, having children, and raising them in El Salvador that created the community, rather than a huge influx of immigrants. Together with the
expansion of families and the creation of an official Jewish organization did the community in El Salvador truly form.¹

La Comunidad Israelita de El Salvador (CIES), the Jewish Community of El Salvador, was founded and built from the efforts of immigrant families from the Jewish diaspora in Europe and elsewhere. In the late 1800s, Jewish businessmen from Europe traveled to El Salvador to set up new businesses such as import-export houses (mainly for coffee), hardware stores, and various other enterprises. Many of these businessmen did move permanently to El Salvador, while others would often travel back home to Europe. These early years of the community consisted of mostly these unmarried businessmen, who did not gather together as a community. As many traveled back and forth to Europe, eventually some met their wives while in Europe and then moved to El Salvador permanently. Others decided to marry in El Salvador after having moved there together. This is where the community begins, with marriages and the beginning of families.

As Jewish families began to take root, these immigrants saw a need to establish a proper Jewish religious community. During the 1920s there were a small group of families that began to create this community. These families became friends, celebrating high holidays together among other services. Unmarried men in the community also participated and added to the number of Jews active in the community. As families began to grow though, there was a natural progression and need for something more. Although these early immigrants were happy to celebrate in each other's homes there became a need to create a more organized community. Male leaders in the community came together, as a Board of Directors, to create an official organization for the Jewish community that was forming. Therefore, on September 21, 1943, the Board officially founded La Comunidad Israelita de El Salvador. From there the community organized religious services.

observances and built spaces for their community needs. The community subsequently grew not only in number but in strength. More organizations sprang up within the community, which contributed to the growing religious, educational, and social life. Within three decades of the organization's inception, they were able to successfully provide a strong religious experience, facilities to create permanence of the community, and an expanded social life within and beyond El Salvador.²

² Jessica Alpert, “El Salvador Virtual Jewish History Tour,” Jewish Virtual Library, accessed December 16, 2021, https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/el-salvador-virtual-jewish-history-tour. Also see Figure 1
Background and Literature Review

The study of Jewish communities in Latin America has grown tremendously, focusing primarily in the larger countries of South America. Although some scholars have published articles and books on this subject, there is still limited work done compared to the Jewish diaspora in Europe and the United States. The Jewish community in El Salvador though, has some similarities to larger communities. The main focus of many Jewish Latin American works have been countries such as Argentina, Mexico, and Brazil. These countries have fairly large Jewish communities, especially in comparison to El Salvador. Although these larger countries are more commonly studied, some work has been done in Central America, such as with Guatemala. This field has been driven by just a few scholars, one of the most prominent being Judith Laikin Elkin. Elkin is the co-founder of the Latin American Jewish Studies Association (LAJSA). The LAJSA was founded in 1982 and since has contributed immensely to the field of Latin American Jewish studies. Since then, more scholars have contributed to the field in focusing on various communities. Scholar Haim Avni, for example, focuses on Argentina’s Jews and Yaron Harel, writes more broadly on multiple Latin American Jewish communities. Many of these works focus on immigration patterns of Jews and overviews of the building of communities. El Salvador’s community has been researched very minimally, though there have been some interviews conducted and archives do contain original documents from the community. More research is needed to fully understand what happened in the Jewish community of El Salvador and how it fits within the larger Latin American Jewish community.³

Starting in the late 1800s, Latin America saw a huge rise in Jewish populations. Large Jewish communities formed in countries such as Argentina, Chile, Peru, Mexico and various Caribbean nations. This mass migration lasted from about 1880 to 1930. The majority of these

³ State of the field
were Ashkenazi Jews attempting to escape “pogroms, poverty, and discrimination” however, there were some Sephardic Jews that did immigrate as well. El Salvador’s community was similar to other countries, with a majority of Ashkenazi Jews and a few Sephardi. Before this mass migration though, there were some Jews that arrived even earlier, although in much smaller numbers and with different intentions. Although Jews came from different parts of Europe, some countries experienced concentrations of specific countries. In El Salvador for example, most Jews arrived from Germany and France, while in Guatemala, German Jews were a particularly large group, although the overall Jewish population was much smaller. All throughout Latin America, Jewish communities were popping up, mostly in places where Judaism was tolerated and where there were some economic benefits. The community in El Salvador is similar, in that it was most often connected through business, and the Salvadoran government allowed them to remain in the country despite having a fascist sympathizing president.5

The research conducted in Guatemala is important for contextualizing how Jewish communities flourished in smaller countries. Especially given its geographical proximity to El Salvador, Guatemala is essential to understanding how the community in El Salvador may have grown. Guatemala’s Jewish population grew much quicker and larger compared to El Salvador. In 1870, a German Jewish community formed in the capital, Guatemala City. Guatemala's Jewish population had a need to organize themselves much sooner than El Salvador, as its population grew larger many decades earlier. It is interesting that the largest concentration of Jews in both countries were in their respective capitals. This is something to note as it may suggest the need for Jewish communities to form in more urban settings.

As the population of Jews began to rise in the late 1800s, so did the differing groups of Jews. Although the Jewish population rose and communities began to form, not all Jews were alike of course, and therefore their differences called for multiple communities within one country. For instance, in one country there may have been a community with almost entirely a Ashkenazi population and another community with solely Sephardi Jews. Communities may also have been separated by different religious traditions and customs, language, culture and nationality. In Brazil for example, there are two large Jewish communities, one in São Paulo and the other in Rio de Janeiro. Within these communities there is a divide between Jews coming from Germany and those from Poland and Lithuania. Eastern European Jews often took more labor focused jobs and lived in lower income housing. German Jews sought to assimilate more and took higher paying jobs, while also trying to distance themselves from other Jews. Although this is important to discuss within the larger context of Latin American Jews, this separation is not true for every community. In countries like El Salvador, there was not such a need for multiple communities, in fact there was more of a need to stay together. Although El Salvador’s community did have different organizations, they were made up of the same people and families. The smaller the community, the larger the need there was for people to stay together, as they had fewer people to lead and participate in the community.⁶

Prior to and during the mass immigration of Jews, there was a movement of Jews that did not intend to create communities. These Jews found themselves assimilating with gentiles and into the culture of the country that they settled in. Many of these Jews arrived in larger countries such as Argentina and Brazil, where economic opportunities were aplenty. These larger and more cosmopolitan countries offered a way of life that was sometimes more similar to lives that Jews left behind. Jews that settled in these countries often also came with the help of immigration

⁶ Elkin, The Jews Of Latin America, 93-95.
organizations created for Jews. Despite the help they received, many of them still did not intend to continue strong relationships with the greater Jewish community. Although many of these families were able to find success and were able to assimilate, this became more complicated as World War II neared.

Leading up to and during World War II, many countries, including El Salvador, were hesitant to allow Jews to settle there. At the time that World War II began, the government of El Salvador did not condemn the acts of Hitler. The sitting president of El Salvador, Maximiliano Hernandez Martinez, was fond of Italian and German facism. Martinez had kept good relationships with the Axis powers, instead of remaining neutral, and he looked to Germany and Italy for arms and even had Salvadoran officers train in those countries. In the 1930s Martinez increased purchases from Germany as well. In 1939, Martinez closed off El Salvador’s borders to Jews that were looking to emigrate and find refuge. Jewish families already living in El Salvador that were looking to have their families immigrate had an even more difficult time helping them out. Martinez was strict in keeping Jews out of the country and even sent back a ship on July 30, 1939 that was holding fifty Jewish refugees. These refugees had paid $500 each for visas to El Salvador in Amsterdam and Budapest but their visas were declared fraudulent on arrival. Jews that were already living in El Salvador therefore struggled to find passage for their family to immigrate to El Salvador.\(^7\)

Despite President Martinez’ ideals, he saw the importance of gaining recognition from the United States of America. In order to gain the favor of the U.S. Martinez declared war on the Axis powers in 1941. Even though El Salvador had declared war on Germany, it was still difficult for Jews to immigrate to El Salvador. It was not until the end of World War II that the

\(^7\) Jessica Alpert, “El Salvador Virtual Jewish History Tour”.
country's attitudes towards Jews became more open. Although more Jews were immigrating at the time, it was still difficult for Jews to be accepted into their new homes. Like other countries, Jews were able to immigrate to El Salvador more freely after World War II, mostly with the help of family.

During World War II though, El Salvador had granted citizenship to a few thousand Jews living in Hungary under the General Consulate. There is significant literature produced on this particular story. Although a very important piece of history regarding El Salvador’s involvement during World War II, it does not consider the development of Jews living in El Salvador. There has been plenty of research conducted around survivors that were a part of this history, but it does not concern the lives of the Jewish community in El Salvador. The Jewish community in El Salvador has a very unique story separate from the stories of Jews that were saved by the General Consul. The history of the Jewish community in El Salvador really lies in the community that they were able to build.
Early Jewish immigrants in El Salvador came from Germany, France, Egypt, Tunisia and Turkey. Initially, men were drawn to El Salvador for business, but over time families began to settle, primarily in the capital of San Salvador. It was those early immigrants that contributed the most to the growing Jewish community. Although, it is important to note that there were a handful of immigrants arriving during and after World War II. La Comunidad Israelita de El Salvador is the established Jewish community of El Salvador. They are located in San Benito, a neighborhood in the capital San Salvador. Despite having a Jewish community in El Salvador for many years before World War II, the first synagogue in the capital wasn’t built until 1949. The community is centered around this synagogue and is recognized by law.8 The community has created close ties to other Jewish organizations across the world. Communications between this community and others have been recorded and kept as documents, although there are still limited amounts. Although the community has remained small they still teach Jewish education to children and have continued the traditions of the Jewish religion. Jews in the community most often worked in firms as business men, in banking, or in other economic fields.9

The Jewish community in El Salvador has been researched primarily by scholar Jessica Alpert. Alpert has a special connection, through family ties, to the community and is well known for conducting multiple interviews with members of the community. Lea Freund has also produced interviews with members of the community, with a specific focus on Zionism. Freund also has a special connection to the community, as she is a part of the Freund family, one of the most significant early families in the community. Although these scholars have done tremendous

8 “Textual Material” New York: Joint Distribution Committee Archives, n.d.
work in capturing the unique oral histories of these members, there has yet to be an analysis on
the greater meaning of these stories. The interviews have provided a lot of insight into the story
of the community, but there is yet to be significant literature produced on the greater history of
this community. What is known lies within the work of just a few articles and within the context
of more generalized work.

Latin American Jewish studies has a clear focus on the immigration process within these
countries. The size of their communities were so great that the immigration process included
many moving parts. Aid organizations assisted in these mass movements, but this was not so
important for other countries. El Salvador is unique in that the immigration stories of Jews were
very individualized. Jewish families came through word of mouth for business opportunities, or
simply because they heard of El Salvador from a friend, cousin, etc. There was no established
organization looking to move Jews into El Salvador. The country itself was not very well known
as well, making the likelihood of immigration even smaller. The story of El Salvador’s Jews
really begins upon arrival and how these families came together, however, the literature that
exists today lacks this knowledge. Very few people have looked into the Jews of smaller
countries situated in Central America. General Latin American Jewish studies is still very small
and creates the opportunities for these untold stories to finally be researched and revealed. The
history of El Salvador’s Jews is one such example, and is a significant history that is yet to be
given its spotlight.
Religious Experience

Before CIES was founded in 1943, religious life in this Jewish community was very modest. The very first established Jewish families in El Salvador arrived in the 1920s, when Jewish men were joined by their wives and began to have children. Previous to this time, the Jewish immigrants that did live in El Salvador had not yet created families. Among these earliest families were the Freund Family, Widawer Family, Ftenhel Family and the Mugdan Family. Besides the estimated five families, there were other Jewish men living in the community that had not yet married. Herta Freund was among these earliest settlers, who joined her husband in El Salvador in 1923. Max Freund, her husband, first came to El Salvador in 1913, and ten years later married Herta and brought her to El Salvador. Freund remembered the very humble Jewish life that existed when she first arrived, such as the prayer services and dinners held in the homes of families, and the lack of a rabbi. In the late 1920s the Widawer Family opened their home to the community to come together for high holidays. Together the small community held services for Passover, Rosh Hashanah, and Yom Kippur. In the following decade the community had expanded, but communal prayer services did not grow much. The community was still in need of creating a stronger religious education and religious organization.¹⁰

In 1937, the Jewish community had grown its population and continued making steps towards religious practice. Ernesto Freund, Herta’s son, was the first child in the community to be bar mitzvahed after he and his family traveled eight hours to Guatemala in order to borrow a Torah from the community there. At this time there were not many people that were able to read the Torah or prepare a Jewish boy for his Bar Mitzvah. A member of the community, Moishe Levy, was among the few men that could read the Torah. He prepared Ernesto for his Bar Mitzvah, which was held in the Freund Family home. They had about 50 guests that witnessed the Bar Mitzvah, which was about the whole community of around 15 families. This celebration of the first Bar Mitzvah marked an important step in the progress of religious life. It serves as an indicator that the community was growing older and that a Jewish education and the practice of the Jewish faith was increasingly necessary.\(^{11}\)

Nearly a decade later, in 1945, religious life was still fairly modest and concentrated to a few families. Despite this, services were still conducted and practiced in family homes. Alfredo Widawer continued to open his house for the celebrations of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. During these high holidays and others, members of the community closed their businesses in order to celebrate. The closing of these businesses was seen as a triumph as it marked the rising importance of a religious life that the community was slowly creating. The community continued to expand and more and more children were able to have a Jewish education, although the community still had no rabbi. As the community children became older, there was a sense that creating a religious education was needed. At this time the community relied on educated men to teach the children and assist in prayer services. Alex Freund was in charge of teaching the children in the community. Freund led Hebrew classes as well as religion classes for the community children. Although this was now being provided, not every family had their child

\(^{11}\) Freund, interview.
enrolled and participating in the educational services. In order to raise interest about the Jewish faith, children were given small presents on the last day of Hanukkah. These gifts were only given to those children that participated in the Jewish and Hebrew classes, thus they understood the significance of the religious holiday. In just under a decade these families were able to establish a Jewish education system and raise interest in the Jewish faith overall. Their continued organization is seen in the following years as well.\textsuperscript{12}

During the next year, 1946, religious life had already seen improvements and growth. It was recorded in this year that there were a total of about two hundred Jewish persons living in El Salvador. About half were men, and of those men, about half were married to Salvadoran women. Even though the population of Jews in El Salvador had grown, the community did not represent all of these people. Those families that did participate in the community did their best to create a Jewish life with the resources they had. Although the community still did not have a synagogue to hold services, family homes were still being shared. The Widawer family home was used mostly for the high holidays. Business owners in the community continued to close their businesses in observance of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. This reflected the greater commitment to the high holidays. Along with high holidays, Shabbat services were also being held, whereas previously Shabbat was only observed within individual families. Although Shabbat services were now done by the community members, there was often an issue of participation, as not everyone in the community attended. Shabbat services required a Minyan, or ten adult men, in order to perform certain prayers. The Board recognized this lack of participation as an issue and took it upon themselves to try and mitigate the problem by creating a rotation system. This system required that at least two members of the community be present every Saturday to join the other congregants that attended. The implementation of this system

\textsuperscript{12} Memoria De La Comunidad Israelita De El Salvador 1945
shows the growing dedication to an established religious life that the community hoped to develop. In this year, Alex Freund continued to teach Judaism and Hebrew classes to children. In the memorandum for 1946, the board encouraged more families to send their children to these classes. The board was able to aid in the efforts to create a sturdy foundation for the religious aspects of the community which carried into the next decade.\footnote{Memoria De La Comunidad Israelita De El Salvador 1946; Letter from JDC Buenos Aires to JDC New York, Re: Immigration Possibilities to El Salvador.}

By 1952, the vigor of religious life seems to have stayed consistent, with a continued emphasis on solving remaining issues. The community continued to experience low participation rates in some services. Shabbat services, for example, often lacked a Minyan, making it difficult for the community to continue practicing. Although the community had been steadily growing, it seems that religious life had not yet reached a level of participation that was necessary. In order to alleviate the issue, the Board sent a letter to the “Religious Commission” for advice.\footnote{The identity of this “religious commission” could not be determined.} The board wrote in their memorandum for this year that they hoped this commission could give them advice, however it was not made clear who ran this ‘Religious Commission’ or where it was located. Despite the lack of weekly attendance, Judaism and Hebrew classes still continued under the teaching of Alex Freund. Classes had grown to about thirty students, made up of three groups of different ages, a significant improvement on participation levels in these classes compared to the previous decade. Emphasizing the importance of a Jewish education allowed for the growth of higher participation as the children grew older.\footnote{Memoria De La Comunidad Israelita De El Salvador 1952.}

A few years later, in 1956, Perla Meissner joined her husband and the larger Jewish community in El Salvador. Werner Meissner first came to El Salvador in 1948 in hopes to work with his cousin after Meissner’s mother, in an attempt to help her sons, wrote a letter to her
cousin in El Salvador, Herta Freund. The Freunds quickly replied and soon Werner Meissner and his brother arrived by boat in El Salvador, greeted by Ernesto Freund. Perla and Werner Meissner met through friends while she was teaching in Israel, and she joined him at the end of the school year in 1956, beginning her life in the community that had been established there. Meissner describes how she was able to fit right into the community upon arrival. In an interview she stated, “my life was almost a continuation of my life in the stetle-- having just Jewish friends.”

By this time the community had grown to an estimate of a hundred families, although Meissner explained that she only saw about seventy of these families at the synagogue during the high holidays. She also explained that despite the number of reported families, only about forty families showed active participation in the community and services. When Meissner attended service for Yom Kippur, she noticed that the synagogue was full. This was a clear indication that the community had in fact grown much larger over the previous decade. At this time they also finally had a rabbi, and when this rabbi experienced medical issues, Meissner stepped in to help teach the children. Meissner focused more on the historical aspects of Judaism. She taught the children about Jewish customs and Jewish history primarily, in order to aid the rabbi while he was not well. This rabbi came from Miami and stayed until about 1958, when at that time another rabbi took over; Alexander Granat and his wife, Marianne Granat, arrived in San Salvador in March 1958. While Rabbi Granat took his job as educator and

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16 Perla Meissner, Interview by Lea Freund, University of Florida, November 27, 1981.
spiritual leader, Marianne also became involved in the community. Friday night and Saturday service participation also saw improvements as a lack of a Minyan was no longer a problem. This is due in part to the growth in numbers but also the higher attraction to the community.17

By the early 1960s, religious education grew as more children reached an age where education was expected. The newest rabbi, Alexander Granat, took over the teaching of Hebrew and Judaism classes. As had been established in previous years, classes were split into three groups of specific age groups. There were a total of about thirty students at this time, and one of these students was Jean Paul Joseph. Joseph was born in San Salvador in 1950, after his parents married in 1949 and then moved together to El Salvador. Although the Joseph family only chose to settle in 1949, Jean Paul’s father, Andre Joseph, had first come to El Salvador in 1927. Andre was attracted to El Salvador as he already had a brother that lived there. Finally in 1949 when he married, he was able to start a family with his wife. Jean Paul Joseph was raised in this community and expressed the positive experience he had while growing up in El Salvador.18

Jean Paul was one of many children that participated in classes along with Friday and Saturday services. These classes were held in the Escuela Americana after regular schooling hours at four in the afternoon. Joseph and the other children had a designated spot where they would meet Rabbi Granat. He described the feeling of going to these classes, that he and the other children, “felt very comfortable saying that we were going to religious classes.”19 It was customary that children at the same school had Catholic classes at the same time. This allowed a sense of comfortability for the Jewish children, as it did not seem out of the norm for anyone to participate in a religious class. Although these classes were not completely favored by the children, other aspects of Jewish celebration were highly adored.

17 Meissner, Interview; Perla Meissner, Interview by Jessica Alpert, Personal Blog, October 25, 2005.
19 Joseph, Interview.
Shabbat services and high holidays were particularly remembered for the social aspects that it brought for children. Joseph described that going to Shabbat services, “was as much a religious activity as it was a social activity.” During Shabbat, after the kiddush, a prayer, there was a short social activity that took place, which allowed the children to get more excited about prayer services. Older children also participated in prayers and services, as such they served as role models for the younger children. Other social activities and aspects of the community were geared towards children and allowed them to participate in the community.

CIES used social activities, such as plays, in order to involve children in some of their most celebrated services and high holidays. Plays were organized by leading women in the community including Perla Meissner, Inge Bernhard, and Marianne Granat. Granat had training in vocal performance, having sung in choruses throughout Europe and was also a piano player. As the Rabbi’s wife, this allowed her to participate in the community and give back. These three women helped put together plays that were specifically designed for Jewish holidays and special religious celebrations. The first introduction of songs and dances started during Hanukkah in 1956. Purim was also remembered as being one of the biggest of these celebrations that incorporated plays, songs, and dance. From then, the celebrations became more elaborate and plays became a bigger production. There developed an intertwining of entertainment and participation in these religious services that children gravitated towards.

Not only did children participate in these activities, but they also participated in other special services and Shabbat services. Simchat Torah was a big celebration that the children participated in, as they walked throughout the synagogue holding Torahs and flags. Jean Paul Joseph remembered this high holiday in particular, and that he and the other children, “always

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20 Joseph, Interview.  
21 Joseph, Interview; Meissner, Interview; Marianne Granat, Interview by Annie Friedlander, USC Shoah Foundation, January 31, 1996.
looked forward to that.”\textsuperscript{22} By this time the children had become essential community members. During Friday evening services they often read and occasionally ran the whole service. Perla Meissner described that, “without the children, the community would not have had such an enriching experience on every holiday.”\textsuperscript{23} It was clear that by this time the community had grown to a point where the children were taking over and beginning to become essential to the functioning of services. Many parents came to services because of the participation roles that their own children had during services. As the community had grown older it was beginning to reach a point where the children were becoming leaders and taking over the community.

Bar Mitzvahs were a special celebration that became an indicator of how far the community had come in just over 2 decades. Nearly 25 years after the first Bar Mitzvah was held, Jean Paul Joseph remembers his Bar Mitzvah as, “a rather extraordinary event in the community.”\textsuperscript{24} He described how any special celebrations such as a Bar Mitzvah or wedding were special to the community as they did not happen very often. Joseph’s preparation experience compared to Ernesto Freund give insight to how the community had made many advances. For instance, Joseph was prepared by Rabbi Granat for about nine months, compared to Freund who was only prepared by a man who mostly read the Torah. Joseph was also able to study from one of the many Torahs the community had and also studied the Haftorah, passages from the books of prophets. Joseph’s Bar Mitzvah included a Friday night dinner along with a reception on Saturday afternoon. He even had family from Europe fly into El Salvador just for this celebration. It is clear that by the mid 1960s the community had cultivated a rigorous and exciting religious experience along with other important aspects of the community.

\textsuperscript{22} Joseph, Interview. 
\textsuperscript{23} Meissner, Interview. 
\textsuperscript{24} Joseph, Interview.
In just over three decades CIES was able to build a religious experience that emphasized the importance of a Jewish education and community. From the lengths that families went to to celebrate a Bar Mitzvah, to the growing class sizes that taught Judaism and Hebrew. In this community, the burden of education and religious participation was not just on the shoulders of the rabbi. Instead parents and leaders of the community came together to help in any way they could. Together they were able to build a community that filled up a synagogue on high holidays and yet still shared their homes for more intimate services. Parents encouraged their children to become educated in Judaism, some surpassing their parents. These children in the later years became the epicenter of the Jewish religious experience. As parents grew older, the children found themselves carrying the duty of continuing traditions and did so happily. Although the religious experience was a huge part of the community, there were other aspects of the community that helped to build it up. One of these was the involvement with Jewish communities outside of El Salvador. Members also participated in and ran organizations that did not focus on religion. This allowed the community to come together in different ways and kept more people active that felt especially passionate about those interests.
External Social Engagement

Beyond their own small Jewish community, members stayed involved and aware of outside issues. The year 1945 was a very important year for the Jewish community as it marked the end of World War II and the terror inflicted upon the Jewish community. At this time CIES was still fairly small, but many had relatives that were directly impacted by the holocaust. Within Central and Latin America, the community was able to build relationships with large Jewish communities. CIES was very well connected with the Jewish communities in Guatemala, Honduras, and other Latin American countries. Previous to 1945, they were able to give aid to Jewish refugees in neighboring Honduras through connections with the World Jewish Congress. By 1945, however, CIES suspended this activity to focus on disabled and sick refugees within their own community.25

Although not many Jews joined the community in El Salvador, the ones that did often needed a lot of extra help. The government of El Salvador made it difficult for any Jewish person seeking immigration to the country. In a memorandum published in 1946, discussing the immigration possibilities to El Salvador, it was made clear that immigration permits were only given to those that had relatives in the country that could support them financially. This was an essential component as finding a job in the capital was very hard for any immigrant living in El Salvador. Policies of San Salvador made it so that 80% of all employees must be citizens of the country. This caused immense hardship on any immigrant that joined the Jewish community. For this reason many of those immigrants that traveled to El Salvador left only a few years after arriving. Those that were able to stay were cared for by the community and aided by any

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25 Memoria De La Comunidad Israelita De El Salvador 1945
relatives that they had living in the country. Despite an adjusted focus on their own community members, they were able to maintain relationships with various organizations.  

Starting in 1946, they were able to expand their relationship with outside organizations. They noted that they received help and advice from the Jewish Community in Columbia as well as the Jewish National Welfare Board. These organizations, for example, aided the community with construction plans regarding the new synagogue. In keeping contact with these organizations and outside communities, they were able to gain help and knowledge. As the community grew they would be able to get ideas from other communities, as well as seek help from organizations when needed. Besides these relationships, the community was also eager to help Jews in need that had been impacted by World War II. In 1946, they were able to raise $850 to aid Jews that were placed in internment camps on the Island of Cyprus. The board also noted in their Memorandum in 1946 that they also concentrated on helping community members and locals in need. They focused on providing aid to those that needed it, as well as raising money to help them. Although at this time the community was not very large, philanthropic pursuits were a key component to the social activities of the organization. They raised money for various people, groups, and of course for the benefit of their own community. Despite not being able to support very many local groups, they did what they could to help.  

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26 Letter from JDC Buenos Aires to JDC New York, Re: Immigration Possibilities to El Salvador.  
27 Memoria De La Comunidad Israelita De El Salvador 1945; Memoria De La Comunidad Israelita De El Salvador 1946
The Role of Zionism

Zionism and Zionist organizations also became a key component to the community beginning in the earliest years of the 1940s. In 1941 the Women’s International Zionist Organization (WIZO) was founded by Herta Freund. The Freund family at this time were at the center of the community and because of this Herta was visited by a representative of WIZO from Canada. Founding WIZO in El Salvador gave many other women, like Freund, a new purpose and sense of involvement in the community. At first, the purpose of WIZO was to help women in Israel to start schools there. Together with the community they were able to raise money to send to these women. Over time though, the purpose of WIZO became much more than this. In the earliest years, women came together to read about Zionism and become more educated. Freund served as President for about the first ten years until they grew large enough to organize a full board. WIZO continued to expand for the next few decades, becoming a more permanent and influential fixture in the community.²⁸

By the 1950s WIZO had become a highly respected and important aspect in the community. This organization played a part in almost every celebration that the community held. As Meissner recalled, “I do not think that it could have existed the way it existed without the group of women who volunteered to help.”²⁹ Although Meissner herself was not a part of WIZO, it was clear to her and others that WIZO was instrumental in helping the community to function. The Board of Directors for CIES also regarded WIZO highly and made it a point to fulfill any requests that they made. Herta Freund and other members of WIZO took it upon themselves to organize celebrations and make food for high holidays such as Passover. Although these women were important to the community, the greater WIZO did not take them as seriously. Freund

²⁸ Freund, interview.
²⁹ Meissner, interview.
recalls that they were shut out of meetings and conventions that were held, and only in the 1950s were they taken seriously. Only once WIZO in El Salvador was seen as being the center of the community were they invited to attend special events. Although it did seem as though they were the center of the community, Freund made it clear that that was not necessarily true. She stated, “but as we were small, the member of one were the members of the other. That was very natural.”

Freund made it clear that although WIZO did much for the community, it was only natural that it would be as such. As it was a women led organization, it was common that the women had the time to prepare for celebrations, compared to the members of CIES which was almost exclusively men. Being a member of the community and in WIZO also allowed for people to participate in activities that were done for people outside of the community.

Once the State of Israel was established, WIZO in El Salvador was able to help the local community in a way that they were not able to previously. A government founded school named Estado de Israel, or State of Israel, was looking for help when WIZO was able to step in. At this time WIZO was more organized and was able to fundraise in order to support this school. Although the name was Estado de Israel, it was a Salvadoran school and served Salvadoran children. By supporting the school through the purchase of materials, food for fiestas, and even the donation of a piano, WIZO brought the Jewish community to involve themselves within the local community. Even the children of the community were brought into this fundraising. 20 years later, Ricardo Freund, Herta’s grandson, remembered selling honey with other children during Rosh Hashanah. These proceeds were then

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30 Freund, interview.
given to WIZO to help with any funds that they needed. It was clear that although WIZO was a Zionism organization, it was much more to the community and this may have been due in part to that it was not the only Zionist organization within the community.\textsuperscript{31}

Between 1936 and the early 1940s, The Zionist Group of El Salvador, or Grupo, was loosely formed. Carlos Bernhard remembered that its beginnings were humble, the group coming together to share lectures and learn songs. It was not until 1943 that a formal organization was established known as, the Zionist Organization of El Salvador (ZOES). Bernhard served on the first board, along with Ernesto Liebes as President, who had heavily influenced his ideas on Zionism. Other members of the first board included Enrique Guttfreund and Jose Koch. The purpose of this organization was to be in contact with the building of the Jewish state as well as to educate and influence the children in the community. The members of ZOES met once a month to share a lecture on Zionism or a Jewish topic. ZOES also worked to shape the public opinion of El Salvador on the State of Israel. Although the government of El Salvador abstained in the vote for the establishment of the State of Israel, this was still seen as a triumph. They were also able to gain some support from non-Jews living in El Salvador. Once the State of Israel was established in 1948 the organization remained involved. They continued to hold meetings and lectures and even had visitors come from Israel. Eventually, a few months later El Salvador did recognize the State of Israel after the work done by ZOES. Although this organization continued to operate for many years, it was officially dissolved between 1970 to 1975. Bernhard stated, “my feeling was that the Zionist Organization had fulfilled its purpose, at least in [El] Salvador.”\textsuperscript{32} By the 1970s the whole community was interested in Israel and was no longer in need of a specific Zionist organization. With the presence of WIZO as well it was not necessary

\textsuperscript{31} Freund, Interview; Ricardo Freund, Interview by Lea Freund, University of Florida, June 9, 1981.
\textsuperscript{32} Carlos Bernhard, Interview by Lea Freund, University of Florida, May 7, 1981.
to have two organizations dedicated to Zionism. A Zionist education had also become standard in the community, with teachers such as Perla Meissner, who always had positive words to say about Israel. ZOES had played its part in the greater Jewish community of El Salvador and had fulfilled its purpose.33

Religion, social activities, and Zionism had all become key components of the Jewish community in El Salvador. Although these were all very important, one specific aspect helped to create a sense of community that everyone could enjoy. These were the facilities, primarily the synagogue and cemetery that CIES built. In the early stages of the community, family homes were the central meeting space for worship and social events. This was viable for many years when there were less than 20 families. As the years went on and the community grew in numbers, these homes were no longer suitable to house the community. Not only was a synagogue necessary, but it would allow for services and high holidays to feel more elevated. A cemetery also became crucial as older members of the community began to pass. Having a special Jewish cemetery would allow for the community to have a place to call their own. With these campaigns and building of these spaces, the community was able to visibly see the progress that the community had made.

33 Bernhard, Interview.
Facilities and Community

In 1945, the Board of Directors announced the plan for a Jewish cemetery. The cemetery was almost completely finished this year and was ready for burials. Two prominent members of the community, Leon Liebes and Max Van Buren, were the first to be buried. In the Memorandum for 1945, families were invited to begin buying plots for themselves. The money raised by the buying of plots were to be used for upkeep and improvements. This included the building of an enclosing wall that was still under construction. The upkeep of the cemetery, like other projects in the community, became possible because of the donations from members. In this year there was still much work to be done to improve the cemetery. The Board of Directors made note that in the next year they hoped to improve the cemetery with a wall, a pavilion, and improved landscaping. In the following year, 1946, construction of the cemetery wall was still underway. Although there was still work to be done, members of the community were still buried that year. Some families even had bodies previously buried elsewhere moved in order to be placed in the Jewish cemetery. A Jewish cemetery was clearly an important installation for the community. Even though death was not an exciting aspect of the community, it did allow the members to feel more connected. It also allowed for people to feel safe and grounded, and know that their loved ones were buried in a place built specifically for them. Creating a Jewish cemetery was also instrumental as it guaranteed a space for members in the community where they did not have to look or travel very far. The building of a facility such as a cemetery greatly improved the overall Jewish life, which continued into the following years. A few years later in 1952, the community felt a need to make improvements on the cemetery. Through donations made by members of the community, they were able to raise about 3,000 colones which allowed for the continuing upkeep of the cemetery and any necessary improvements. The community
clearly saw the importance of their cemetery and special facilities. By continuing to put emphasis on community facilities they were able to cultivate special places where the community could gather together.\textsuperscript{34}

Building a synagogue was an important goal that the community and Board hoped to accomplish. In 1945 the board found roadblocks in searching for a house that could be used for a synagogue. Instead they bought a plot of land that would be used to build the first synagogue in El Salvador. Although this was a huge step in finally having a synagogue, the land had issues. In order to fix the uneven plot, the board worked with the neighbors of the land to come to an agreement. One the issue was settled they hoped that construction could begin soon. In 1946 construction had not yet begun, but plans were underway. The board made contact with other organizations that offered help in creating building plans. Together the community was also able to raise 5,000 colones to go towards the building of the synagogue. There was a clear desire in the community to have a synagogue where they could worship together. At this time the community was growing in numbers and subsequently was growing out of the space that families shared with each other. This caused a desire for a proper synagogue not just for the purposes of religious activity, but also for the practicality that the community needed. The synagogue finished construction just a few years later and became a permanent fixture in the community.

In 1952, the synagogue had been completed and was beginning to be used for prayer services. The board of directors at this time now turned their focus on finishing payments for the construction bills. The construction of the synagogue did incur a large amount of debt for CIES. With help from businessmen in the community and other members they were able to pay off about 20,000 colones of the total debt. The next year the board was able to continue paying off

\textsuperscript{34} Memoria De La Comunidad Israelita De El Salvador 1945; Memoria De La Comunidad Israelita De El Salvador 1946
the debts and made a payment of about 13,000 colones. Although the construction of the synagogue caused financial strain, it was a necessary and vital step in the growth of the community. The synagogue would soon become the center of religious life in the community as it created a specific space that the community could use to gather and celebrate. In 1953 the board began making improvements on the synagogue, despite not having finished paying off the construction debt. They put in a ramp at the front of the synagogue as well as improve the ventilation at the almemor, the raised platform where the Torah sits and is read from during services. It was clear that the community was eager to take full advantage of their new synagogue and were excited to make any adjustments or improvements.  

1953 was a particularly special year, as the first two weddings were performed in the newly constructed synagogue. One of these wedding ceremonies was held for Marta Freund, daughter of Herta and Max Freund. Marta was the youngest sibling in her family and grew up in the community alongside her brothers, Ernesto and Roberto. The Freund family by this time had been active participants in the community for thirty years. Celebrating the marriage of a long

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35 Memoria De La Comunidad Israelita De El Salvador 1952; Memoria De La Comunidad Israelita De El Salvador 1953
standing family was truly special for the community and indicative in how far they had come. Now that the community had a proper synagogue they would be able to celebrate ceremonies such as weddings and Bar Mitzvahs in a way not possible before. The community was no longer constrained to the homes of the Freunds, Widawers and others. The synagogue and these weddings were significant as it marked not only the growth of the community, but the continued devotion to Judaism.³⁶

The Jewish life created in the synagogue became special to those in the community. Over time it became a symbol of where they stood, and became the center of the Jewish community. Although the synagogue was an important step forward for CIES, it took a few years for it to become the center of Jewish life. Perla Meissner remembered the importance that the synagogue held for the community when she first arrived in 1956. She stated, “When I came to Yom Kippur, the synagogue was full.”³⁷ It was clear by this time that the facility improvements allowed for more celebrations and attracted higher participation. Although this was true, Meissner also made it clear that, “it was not yet the center for the Jewish community.”³⁸ The synagogue as the center of the community can be seen a few years later, primarily in the 1960s and onward.

By the 1960s the community had grown significantly and the participation of the younger generation brought the synagogue to the center of community life. Jean Paul Joseph remembered much of his childhood as time spent in the synagogue with the community for various services and high holidays. Joseph recounted that, “the synagogue in El Salvador served very much as the community center.”³⁹ Joseph belonged to the younger generation of this community that grew up at a time when the synagogue had already been established. As discussed earlier, the children by

³⁶ Memoria De La Comunidad Israelita De El Salvador 1953.
³⁷ Meissner, Interview.
³⁸ Meissner, Interview.
³⁹ Joseph, Interview.
this point started to become the center of the community. This was made possible by the addition of the synagogue and the ability to create more elaborate and fulfilling services.

As the children in the community became the main driving factor for the consistent participation in the Jewish life, the synagogue became the center. As discussed earlier, plays and elaborate celebrations during the high holidays were made possible by women and children in the community. Meissner explained that, “a great majority of the parents used to come to the synagogue because of the children having an important role.”40 The roles that Meissner refers to here are ones that children had in plays put on for the community. Although the plays did serve a social aspect, they were, at their core, for religious observance. The participation in the plays by children added to the excitement of coming to synagogue. It served two purposes, one was to excite the children in their growth with Judaism, and the second was to draw parents back into the community and synagogue, reminding them of their faith. Whether this was intentional or not, it created an outcome that benefited the whole community.

The use of the synagogue added a new level to the excitement of religion for various high holidays. For example, Sukkot was not really celebrated in the early years of the community but now that there was space for the community to celebrate, it allowed for this high holiday to become a part of their worship. The community built their Sukkah outside the synagogue and there the whole community was able to gather. Joseph recalled saying, “it was one of the holidays essentially designed for the children.”41 Along with the other high holidays celebrated in the community, this one was made possible by the synagogue. Unlike in the early years where celebrations were mostly in homes, now the community had the space to accommodate the larger number of people that attended.

40 Meissner, Interview.
41 Joseph, Interview.
The building of the synagogue and cemetery gave the community the opportunity to practice their faith with all the tools they could need. By the 1970s the community had reached their peak of about 130 families. The synagogue gave them a space that they could grow into, although even then the whole community did not fit during certain high holidays. Nevertheless, it allowed them to see a place that they could call home. Ricardo Freund reflected on the feeling that the synagogue gave him stating, “it gives me a sense of identification, security.”42 It was a space where members could feel at peace, where they could worship together, and where their most intimate and special moments could be shared. This was felt when the synagogue was first built in the early 1950s and nearly two decades later that feeling continued.

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42 Ricardo Freund, Interview.
The Community Today

The Jewish community in El Salvador remains to this day, but unfortunately it no longer stands at the strength that it once did. The community today stands at just about 100 people, a significantly reduced number from its peak in the 1970s. This is due to a few factors that community members have pointed out. The first is that many children that grew up in the later half of the community were sent to the US for education in high school, college, or both. Many of the women sent away often stayed in those countries after getting married. The ones that did return were overwhelmingly men. This caused a disproportion within the community and caused the growth of families to slow down. Another factor of the reduction in numbers happened after the State of Israel was established. Once the State of Israel was established, a few families made their way to Israel and permanently left El Salvador. Although the number of families that did leave were few, in a small community it made a big difference. These families did not move away immediately, but once they found the opportunity to do so, they did. As time went on and the community reached a sense of stability, issues within El Salvador impacted the community.43

In October of 1979, the Salvadoran Civil War began, impacting the lives of El Salvador’s citizens and the Jewish community. Although the Jewish community did not immediately flee there was one incident that added to the terror of the civil war. On January 17, 1979, Ernesto Liebes was kidnapped by a leftist group and unfortunately assassinated. Liebes had for many years been a pillar in the community. At the time of his kidnapping, Liebes served as the Honorary Consul General for Israel. The assassination of Liebes along with the dangers brought by the Civil War caused unrest within the community. The uncertainty of the fate of El Salvador caused many families to flee the country to other Latin American countries, Israel, or the United States of America. Although many families hoped to return to El Salvador, many did not as the

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43 Bernhard, Interview; Ricardo Freund, Interview.
Civil War lasted until 1992. By the time the Civil War had ended, the community was no longer how it used to be.44

The Jewish community in El Salvador changed by the end of the Civil War for a number of reasons. The biggest issue facing the community was the dwindling number of Jewish families that stayed. The synagogue had also been destroyed sometime in the late 1980s, presumably through a natural disaster. Although the original synagogue that the community built no longer stands, there is a smaller one that exists today. The current synagogue is the converted home of long standing member, Jean Paul Joseph. When Joseph left El Salvador in 1979, his childhood home was left with the community. The Joseph house now serves as the center of the community and is blocked off by an unmarked black gate. The new synagogue serves as a reflection of what the community used to be and what it is now. Inside the synagogue, photos of families that impacted the community and their stories adorned the hallways. Photos of presidents of CIES and the first synagogue are also hung in various rooms. There is a lasting impact and memory that is preserved in the current synagogue. These memories serve as a reminder of how far they have come and the history of the community.

44 Meissner, Interview.
Conclusion

Between the mid 1920s to the 1970s the Jewish community in El Salvador built an exciting Jewish religious and social experience. Early immigrants in the community served as leaders, pushing for the founding of a proper organization. As these adults saw their families grow, they prepared for a community that everyone could benefit from. With the establishment of CIES, WIZO and the Zionist Organization of El Salvador, a strong foundation was laid. These three organizations fulfilled the many aspects of a Jewish community that felt necessary for these families. CIES served the community in its relation to Judaism, religious education and community building. WIZO assisted in every aspect of event organization in the community and assisted CIES for religious purposes as well. The Zionist Organization of El Salvador fulfilled the need that some had in feeling connected to Israel. Many people in the community were interested in Israel and felt a strong attachment to its cause. Together, these three organizations served their purpose in the community, working together at times to bond the community.

La Comunidad Israelita de El Salvador allowed the community to be recognized as well as connect with organizations in other countries. Their relationship with the Jewish community in Central and Latin America enriched the lives of those in El Salvador. By maintaining these relationships the community benefited by feeling connected to the greater Jewish diaspora. CIES was also in contact with Jewish organizations in the U.S. and in Europe. CIES served as book keepers and historians, preserving the community's story. The memorandums that the Board of Directors wrote, although may have been only for administrative purposes, served as snapshots into the community. These Memorias allowed the community to track their progress and for others to see how they improved the community in various ways. Each year the board was
hopeful to fix any issues in the community and always ended on a hopeful note, that any unfinished business would be fixed in the coming years.

The Zionist organizations served as organizers in the community and political leaders. WIZO brought the community together and ensured that all events were properly celebrated. As WIZO was a women run organization it was very natural that it took on the duties that it did. It was also natural that it became such an integral part of the community, as many mothers served in the organization and the community itself was small enough that every activity overlapped. Although WIZO did have their own events separated from religious celebrations, they were so intertwined with the community that it felt as if it was all one. The Zionist Organization of El Salvador brought the education of Zionism and of Israel. Many families in the community were active members and felt that it was important to be connected to Israel. These organizations helped the community to gain recognition in Israel as well as with the government in El Salvador. It is truly an accomplishment that such a small group of people were able to make the strong influence that they did.

Although the Jewish community in El Salvador no longer stands today as it once did, its history is rich and deep. The work that every member in the community did never went unnoticed. The traditions that the children continued on for decades became a testament for what the community was hoping to achieve. In the beginning of the community not many members had a strong Jewish education, but they were able to create one for future generations. They built stability for their children, allowing them a sense of security in an aspect of their family identity and history. As Jean Paul Joseph adoringly stated, “this was a most extraordinary community. I don’t think you could find a community like this in many other places.”

45 Joseph, Interview.
this community was extraordinary and that the accomplishments it created left a lasting impact on its members and the ones that remain in El Salvador today.
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