The Jews of Iquitos

Rita Saccal
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“If you were born a Jew genetically, wouldn’t you have that instinct?”

“Maybe it was there, but it makes no difference because now we are all Jews”

(These were the words pronounced by Jorge Abramovitz, the actual president of the Sociedad Israelita de Beneficencia de Iquitos)
This group of Jews maintained a quiet existence.

The Jewish Community of Lima wasn’t even aware of their presence.

Lima’s Orthodox Jewish leaders rejected them.

Conservative Jews patiently instructed them in full Judaic protocol.

Formal conversión ceremonies.

Many resettled in Israel.

Great effort to assimilate into a very different cultural environment.
Iquitos

Largest Peruvian rainforest

Population: 380,000

Surrounded by the Amazon River and two other smaller ones

1200 miles from Lima
Iquitos is a difficult city by any measure, it is hard to reach, hard to digest and hard to live in, buried so deep northeast into the Peruvian Amazon that you can’t even drive there, since no roads connect it to the outside world.
Rubber boom
1885
1880: Alfredo Coblentz, German Jew, was the first immigrant.

1885: Moises, Abraham and Jaime Pinto.

Another 150 Sephardi Jews from Morocco (Fez, Tanger, Tetuan, Casablanca, Sale, Rabat and Marrakesh), Gibraltar, Malta, Alsace and Manchester.

Family names: Bohabot, Bendayan, Edery, Toledano, Assayac, Cohen Levi, Nahmias, Sarfatti, Azulay, etc.

They spoke all Ladino, Hebrew and Hakatia.
JEW'S OF THE AMAZON
Self-Exile in Paradise

ARIEL SEGAL

Ariel Segal, the author, during a visit to the Amazon River. The children of a community living on stilts that line poor Iquitos.

The children of a community living on stilts that line poor Iquitos.
Cosmopolitan City
“Who is a Jew in Lima?”
“Who is a Jew in Iquitos?”
“Who is a Jew in this complex world?”
“What is it to be a Peruvian Jew?”
“Is it merely a matter of citizenship or also of heritage?”

“The notion of a Jew who looks like an Indian and lives in a poor house in a small city in the middle of the jungle is an exotic footnote to the official history of Peru’s Jewry”
“Jewish obsession”

Despite their isolation they struggle to gain a Jewish identity that they consider was their birthright.

They define themselves as members of the “chosen people”.

In Peru everyone is a mixture of natives and all kinds of conquerors, but there was a great deal of Jewish influence through the Marranos and through Columbus, who, they believed, was Jewish.

Jewish blood, Jewish race, the pride of belonging to the Jewish people and bearing a Jewish last name is part of the historical consciousness of these descendants of Jews.

These feelings were the natural consequence of Iquitos mentality. To be a Jew in Iquitos was a privilege and a hope.
If their numbers are small, their story is compelling

Alfredo Rosenzweig obtained a list of 138 immigrants who lived in Iquitos during 1890 and 1912

“If Iquitos is a city hidden in the jungle, its Jews are a Community hidden deeper therein”

“Everything Jewish is like this, quiet but proud, hidden but obvious”
SOCIEDAD DE
BENEFICENCIA ISRAELITA
KEHILA DE IQUITOS
DESE 1909
CEMENTERIO
ISRAELITA

ESTE INMUEBLE
ES PATRIMONIO
DE LA NACION
Moises Cohen B.
2 de Agosto 1869
7 de Septiembre 1944
Recuerdo de sus hijas
AQUI YACE EL NIÑO
MARCOS TAPIERO
SUBIO AL CIELO EL
24 JULIO 1925

LA REVELA CHER DE NOBLESSE
EMMEN, EMBRACÉN EL QUE FUE
BRAHAM EDUAR PERUTI
TALCE EN 1784
FALLECIO EN 1824
EL 8 DE AGOSTO DE 1824
HUEPORRO DE SU ESPOSA Y HIJOS
“Our community stayed dormant for some time”

Mr. Jorge Abramovitz
President

Rabbi Guillermo Bronstein
The Sociedad Israelita de Iquitos was officially established in August 1991, with the corresponding legal status. Victor Edery (the son of one of the first Immigrants, Abraham Edery) conducted services up to his death in 2000.
Rabbi Bronstein, chief Rabbi of Lima, sent photocopies of prayer books and collected works on Judaism.
Plaza de Armas, the main part of the city
Sociedad de Beneficencia Israelita de Iquitos
Jorge Abramovitz and his wife Paquita (Rivka)
Friday night Shabbat Services
Rabbi Guillermo Bronstein (Lima)

Rabbi Ruben Saferstein (Buenos Aires)

Rabbi Alex Felch (Chicago)

Rabbi Claudio Kupchik (NY)

Rabbi Roberto Feldman (Chile)

All these rabbis are Argentine natives
Israeli Delegation With Rabbis Bronstein, Felch, Saferstein and Kupchik

“The jungle is not a pleasant place to live. Opportunities are rather limited”
Ten years after the “seeking of Traces”

Beit Din
“If we had not had the help of Rabbi Guillermo Bronstein, the community of Iquitos would not exist,” Abramovitz said.
"We found a small lake – Lake Quistococha - and everyone immersed in it".
98 new immigrants, comprising 18 families, have emigrated to Israel in 2010, and were taken straight from the airport to two new settlements, first in Beer Sheva and then in Ramle.

"We, as the Jewish Agency, bring to Israel anyone who has been defined as being entitled to aliyah - that is, anyone who has been recognised as a Jew by the chief rabbinate or the interior ministry". (Leah Golan, director of the Jewish Agency)
Entering the new Torah scroll over 100 years old rescued from Nazi Germany

This Torah scroll was donated by the Family Igdaloff, from the Asociacion Israelita de las Pampas in Argentina.
“These people were imbued with a love of the land of Israel in a way that it is hard to describe”

(Rabbi David Mamo, deputy president of the Conversion Court)
Second and third Aliyah (Ramle)

Siblings Linda (left), Jacob (center), and Hopena (right) Carpio Cohen in their apartment in Beer Sheba, Israel. They immigrated to Israel in 1967. Their parents and two siblings still live in Lima.
They are trying to revive the lost faith finding shelter in the back of Abramovitz house. They continue to practice Judaism together, and regularly convene for events such as High Holidays services. In doing so they preserve their ties with their ancestors who arrived in the Peruvian Amazon almost 140 years ago.
“We want the community to continue”
“Or at least to maintain”.

“There has been a community for more than a century”

“They will continue with their Jewish identity,”.
“They already have an organization”.

“They are smaller, but they will continue”.

“Even if three, four or five people remain, they have the structure, they have the community.”

The Iquitos Jewish community is part of Peru's Jewish history. It is part of the Latin American Jewish history, and Jorge Abramowitz is dedicated to maintain this culture.

The ineextinguishable sparks of Jewish comunal life continue to be stoked on the edge of the rainforest.