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## **A Collaborative US-Mexican Partnership to Digitize Endangered Mexican Jewish Periodicals**

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### **Abstract:**

*In 2016, the University of Florida (UF) established an international partnership with the Centro de Documentación e Investigación Judío de México (CDIJUM) in order to engage in joint digital projects. CDIJUM was first established as the Centro de Documentación e Investigación de la Comunidad Ashkenazí (CDICA) in 1990 with a mission to rescue, preserve and provide access to the documents, archives, and books that used to be in the building of the Ashkenazi community. The 1985 earthquake in Mexico City compromised the building, and its holdings were scattered across different store houses of the community. Access was restored in 1993, and in 2009, the center's holdings were declared a World Heritage collection by UNESCO. On March 9, 2015, the CDICA expanded its mission to hold and preserve the cultural heritage of all the Jewish communities in Mexico, and it changed its name to reflect this broader vision. The new partnership with the UF Libraries (specifically, the Latin American and Caribbean Collection, the Judaica Library and the Digital Library of the Caribbean) began with the digitization of the complete run of the long-running Spanish-language Jewish newspaper, Keshet. Other scarce Mexican Jewish periodicals were also identified for future iterations of the project. However, the devastating earthquake in Mexico City in 2017 has further highlighted the vital need for such projects. Thankfully, the newspapers had all been taken off site for digitization, but meanwhile the CDIJUM building suffered irreparable damage and their precious archives had to be transferred to temporary storage while a new building is*

constructed. This paper will describe the above collaborative project and why it is critical to preserve these newspapers and documents.

**Keywords:** Open Access, Jewish Diaspora Collection, Mexico, Newspapers, digital repositories

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## The Partnership

The natural disasters that took place in the Caribbean and Mexico in 2017 exemplify the danger that such phenomena present to the cultural heritage of humankind. This paper discusses a specific case: the project to digitize the newspapers held by the Jewish Center for Documentation and Research in Mexico (CDIJUM). This effort stems from a collaborative agreement that the University of Florida (UF) established with CDIJUM in April 2016, which in turn is a result of the intersection and collaboration between the Latin American and Caribbean Collection (LACC) and the Isser and Rae Price Library of Judaica at the University of Florida. Both libraries are located within the Department of Special and Area Studies Collections at UF.

The acquisition of Latin American material related to the Caribbean began in the 1930s with the creation of the Institute for Inter-American Affairs by UF's president John J. Tigert. Tigert believed that the University of Florida had a special role because of its immediacy to the Caribbean.<sup>1</sup> The institute became the Center for Latin American Studies, and its connection with the Latin American and Caribbean Collection at UF contributed in great part to the pre-eminence of both institutions. In 1948, US librarians developed the Farmington Plan, a collaborative agreement among select US libraries in which each would be asked to specialize in a specific region. Recognizing the strength of UF's Latin American Collection, in 1951, the Farmington Plan assigned UF as the repository for Caribbean material.<sup>2</sup> The exceptional Caribbean collection at UF led to the founding of the [Digital Library of the Caribbean](#), which through shared governance and the participation of more than 40 institutions has established the largest open access Caribbean historical collection in the world.

The Isser and Rae Price Library of Judaica is considered the foremost Jewish studies research collection in the south-eastern United States. The Library was built on the core collection of Rabbi Leonard C. Mishkin of Chicago which, at the time of its acquisition in 1977, was the largest personal library of Judaica and Hebraica in the United States. Mishkin's collection was purchased in part thanks to one of the first National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) Challenge Grants awarded to a US academic research library. Supplemented by two other major acquisitions of core Yiddish and Hebraic materials, the new Judaica library at UF was named in 1981 for Isser and Rae Price, whose sons, Jack and Samuel Price of Jacksonville, Florida, established a fund to support its sustained development. Over the next 30 years, the Price Library's bibliographer, Robert Singerman, was responsible for shaping the collection. Most notably, while conducting research for his seminal bibliographies, *Jewish Serials of the World* (1986) and *Judaica Americana* (1990), Singerman identified and acquired many important and rare Latin American and Caribbean Judaica resources for the Library. In 2014, thanks to the Library's reputation for excellence and its many exciting

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<sup>1</sup>Center for Latin American Studies at the University of Florida, "History," last accessed March 1, 2018, <http://www.latam.ufl.edu/about/history>.

<sup>2</sup> Ralph D. Wagner, *A History of the Farmington Plan* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2002), 84.

outreach initiatives, it was awarded a second prestigious National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) Challenge Grant. The grant has enabled the library to build a new endowment fund to support the acquisition and digitization of hidden and endangered Jewish materials from Florida, Latin America, and the Caribbean and thus support vital research in this area.<sup>3</sup>

In the context of the NEH Challenge grant, in 2016 the University of Florida (UF) established an international partnership with the *Centro de Documentación e Investigación Judío de México* (CDIJUM) in order to engage in joint digital projects. CDIJUM was first established as the *Centro de Documentación e Investigación de la Comunidad Ashkenazí* (CDICA) in 1990 with a mission to rescue, preserve and provide access to the documents, archives, and books that used to be in the building of the Ashkenazi Jewish community. The 1985 earthquake in Mexico City compromised the building, and its holdings were scattered across different store houses of the community. Access was restored in 1993, and in 2009, the center's holdings were declared a World Heritage collection by UNESCO. On March 9, 2015, CDICA expanded its mission to hold and preserve the cultural heritage of all the Jewish communities in Mexico, and it changed its name to reflect this broader vision.

After decades of strengthening its collection, in 2017 CDIJUM was once more hit by a natural disaster. The 2017 earthquake in Mexico caused irreparable damage to the CDIJUM building. CDIJUM's personnel had to move the collection to a storage space where they are currently providing limited access to researchers. Fortunately, sixty percent of their newspaper collection was already offsite for digitization. Two months before the earthquake, in July 2017 the UF-CDIJUM partnership had obtained funding to begin digitizing its newspapers. When it became evident that CDIJUM's building would be demolished Enrique Chmelnik the director took the rest of the collection to the vendor for digitization.

## **SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PROJECT**

Providing access to the complete set of Jewish newspapers published in Mexico is a keystone for both Latin American and Jewish studies. The immigration of Jewish peoples to Latin America in the twentieth century impacted the culture, economy, and politics of the region. For this reason, the study of these communities can reveal much about broader Latin American history and society. The study of Jewish communities in Latin America exposes the absence of minority concerns in Latin American political agendas and, more importantly, the weakness of Latin American states which, in consequence, relied on nationalistic ideologies to legitimize their authority.<sup>4</sup> Since the nineteenth century and especially in the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution, the ideology of Mexico was based on the notion of *mestizaje*, i.e., syncretism of Spanish and indigenous cultures and societies. The result was discrimination against people who did not fit into this paradigm, like the Jews. The study of the Jewish peoples in Latin America, in this case Mexico, is essential for understanding the strategies that Jewish communities used not only to survive, but to thrive and develop into a significant sector of the Latin American economic, political, and intellectual elites.

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<sup>3</sup> UF George A. Smathers Libraries, "The Isser and Rae Price Library of Judaica," last accessed March 1, 2018, <http://cms.uflib.ufl.edu/judaica/Index.aspx>.

<sup>4</sup> Gilbert W. Merkx, "Jewish Studies as a Subject of Latin American Studies," in *The Jewish Presence in Latin America*, ed. Judith Laikin Elkin and Gilbert W. Merkx (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1987), 9.

From the end of the nineteenth century to the first decades of the twentieth century, Jews from Central Europe migrated to the Americas looking for better economic opportunities. They also fled from anti-Semitic policies and attitudes. Jewish people from Syria joined the migration to escape the vicissitudes caused by the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire. In the thirties, Jews from Eastern Europe, known as Ashkenazi Jews, also migrated to the Americas. For some of these groups Mexico was a final destination; for others, it was only a stop on their way to the U.S. Each community established its own religious and secular institutions in Mexico, but the most important were the Ashkenazi.<sup>5</sup>

Although divided by ethnic and cultural origins, in 1938 the different communities established a centralized committee –the *Comité Central Israelita*—constituted by representatives of each of their communities. The *Comité* represented them in a corporate way before the Mexican government, and it also provided assistance to the different communities and support for the continual influx of Jewish immigrants.<sup>6</sup> The establishment of the *Comité* and of the *Cámara Israelita de Industria y Comercio* (The Israelite Chamber of Commerce) in 1930 were strategic for the survival of the Jewish communities in the anti-Semitic environment prevalent in Mexico during the first half of the twentieth century. In 1921, the Mexican government began to restrict the immigration of groups that were considered difficult to assimilate because of their ethnic, racial, religious, cultural, and national traits. As the 30s progressed, Mexican laws of immigration became harsher, and they especially targeted the Jews. The Mexican government considered Jews as racially, culturally, and psychologically different and incompatible with Mexican identity. Underlying such immigration policies were other concerns, including the economic impact of the Great Depression, uncertainty about the socialist practices of president Lázaro Cárdenas, the great quantity of Jews seeking refuge from the Holocaust, and the nationalistic policies that followed the Mexican Revolution. The result was that only 2,250 Jews from the 500,000 fleeing the Holocaust received asylum in Mexico.<sup>7</sup>

Cultural, political, and artistic activities provided strategies for the Jewish communities to develop social cohesion, which in turn helped them face anti-Semitism. The Ashkenazi community was the most active; it was the most radical in its political positions and the one that edited the most newspapers and magazines.<sup>8</sup> Newspapers in particular became very important for the Jewish communities in Mexico, especially for the Ashkenazi. At first, they lacked printing presses with Hebrew characters, thus Ashkenazi printers used hectograph printing for newspapers in Yiddish. In 1928, they imported from the U.S. the first press with

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<sup>5</sup> Guadalupe Zárate Miguel, “La comunidad judía en México.” *Revista de la Dirección de Estudios Históricos del Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia* No. 4 (April-December 1983), 49, 50. Natalia Gurvich Peretzman, *La memoria rescatada. La izquierda judía en México: Fraiwelt y la Liga Popular Israelita 1942-1946* (Mexico City: Universidad Iberoamericana. Departamento de Historia, 2004), 27-28. Liz Hamui-Halabe, “Re-creating Community: Christians from Lebanon and Jews from Syria in Mexico, 1900-1938,” in *Arab and Jewish Immigrants in Latin America*, eds. Ignacio Klich and Jeffrey Lesser (London and Portland: Frank Cass, 1998), 130.

<sup>6</sup> Zárate Miguel, “La comunidad judía en México,” 50.

<sup>7</sup> Zárate Miguel, “La comunidad judía en México,” 51. Olivia Gall, review of *El exilio incómodo. México y los refugiados judíos, 1933-1945* by Daniela Gleizer. *Historia Mexicana* 62, No. 4 (248) (April-June 2013), 1794-1797.

<sup>8</sup> Zárate Miguel, “La comunidad judía en México,” 53-54.

Hebrew characters; it enabled the profusion of publications in Yiddish, such as newsletters, weeklies, and monthly publications. Newspapers contributed to the popularity of the Centro Cultural Israelita in Mexico City. Immigrants went to the center to read Yiddish newspapers that connected them with the rest of the world and with their own community. In fact, at the center they had to take turns to read the newspaper.<sup>9</sup>

In 1923, the newly-founded Jewish political party *Poalé Sion* published the first Jewish magazine in Mexico: *Undzer Vort* (Our Word). It later became the newsletter of the Centro Cultural Israelita. Five more newspapers were published in the 20s, and in the 30s the number rose to twenty. Most of them reveal a socialist and Zionist tendency; some were in Yiddish; others, in Spanish. The most important Yiddish ones were *Der Weg* (The Road), founded in 1930, and *Di Shtime* (The Voice), founded in 1939. The most important Jewish newspaper in Spanish was the *Prensa Israelita* (Jewish Press), founded in 1945 for the Jewish communities that did not speak Yiddish, including the Sephardic Jews. These three were published until the 80s and 90s.<sup>10</sup>

The world-wide Jewish press of the twentieth century, amounting to approximately 600 titles by the 1960s, was a vibrant and important tool of social change. Jewish newspapers reported on the key events of the day, but they also led the way in major political movements, gave new Jewish authors their first publishing platform, provided a voice for Jewish women, enabled acculturation and provided a connection back to the community for those already assimilated.<sup>11</sup> Likewise, Mexican Jewish newspapers reveal the political activism of Jewish communities in Mexico, their views on Zionism, the support given to immigrants fleeing the Holocaust, their commercial activity, their forms of entertainment, their social life, their insertion into the Mexican economic elites, the disappearance of Yiddish, and the integration of Jewish communities into Mexican culture.<sup>12</sup>

## THE PROJECT

Once the digitization of CDIJUM newspapers is completed both institutions will provide open access. At UF, the digital content will be part of the [Jewish Diaspora Collection](#) (JDoC), a collaborative and cooperative digital library designed to preserve and provide wide access to Jewish heritage materials from Florida, Latin America and the Caribbean. Modelled on the [Digital Library of the Caribbean](#), JDoC provides a host site and portal for digitized versions of hidden and/or endangered Jewish cultural, historical and research materials currently held in archives, libraries, and private collections. JDoC is being built with the support of the [National Endowment for the Humanities \(NEH\) Challenge Grant](#) awarded to the George A. Smathers Libraries in 2014.

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<sup>9</sup> Gurvich Peretzman, *La memoria rescatada*, 97. Harriet Sara Lesser, "A History of the Jewish Community of Mexico City 1912-1970" (Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, New York, 1972), 100.

<sup>10</sup> Zárate Miguel, "La comunidad judía en México," 55-56. Gurvich Peretzman, *La memoria rescatada*, 98, 100.

<sup>11</sup> Fraenkel, J., Cohen, Y. et al, "Press," *Encyclopedia Judaica*, Michael Berenbaum & Fred Skolnik, eds., Vol. 16, 2nd ed. (Detroit, 2007): Macmillan Reference USA.

<sup>12</sup> Zárate Miguel, "La comunidad judía en México," 57-58. Gurvich Peretzman, *La memoria rescatada*, 101.

The Digital Library of the Caribbean (dLOC) is a cooperative Open Access digital library for resources from and about the Caribbean and circum-Caribbean that provides access to digitized versions of Caribbean cultural, historical and research materials currently held in archives, libraries, and private collections. With 40 content contributing partners and 16 financially supporting members, dLOC is a stable digital resource for Caribbean researchers worldwide. The [Caribbean Newspaper Digital Library](#) (CNDL) is a collaborative international digital newspaper library held within dLOC that preserves and provides access to valuable resources for the study of the Caribbean and the advancement of Caribbean Studies. In July 2009, dLOC was awarded a [TICFIA grant](#), beginning in October 2009, to build the *Caribbean Newspaper Digital Library (CNDL)*. CNDL built upon earlier successes such as the Mellon funded Caribbean Newspaper Imaging Project which digitized newspapers.

In 2016, the UF-CDIJUM partnership obtained funding from the Latin Americanist Research Resources Project (LARRP), a consortium under the umbrella of the Center for Research Libraries (CRL) that seeks to increase Latin American Studies open access content, to digitize the Mexican Jewish newspaper [Keshet](#). This project served as a prototype to request further funding for the digitization of CDIJUM's newspapers. In the preparation of the final LARRP proposal, Enrique Chmelnik, Director of CDIJUM, provided UF with a database specifying information about CDIJUM's newspaper holdings. A comparison between the database and the bibliographic records found at Worldcat (see Table 1), indicated, first, that CDIJUM had the most complete runs of the selected titles; second, except for *Tribuna Israelita*, there were incomplete runs of all the other titles in the U.S. This fact suggested that there is high interest among US patrons for this type of material but inadequate access.

Because of the volume of the content to be digitized and its location in Mexico, CDIJUM and UF decided to digitize the newspapers through a Mexican vendor. They selected DocSolutions which presented the best and most professional bid.<sup>13</sup> At the time of writing, the project is ongoing. Once DocSolutions delivers the digital images and the corresponding database, the George A. Smathers Libraries at the University of Florida will create METS/MODS bilingual English-Spanish metadata for all materials. Citation information for each digital object will also automatically be transformed into MARCXML and Dublin Core. These records will be widely distributed through library networks and through search engine optimization to ensure broad public access to all online materials. Metadata for the digitized items will include LARRP as the funding source, following best practices. As mentioned above, access to the digitized content will be through JDoC but also through CDIJUM's digital repository once it is operational.

Uploading CDIJUM's digital content to JDoC ensures that it is preserved long term in the UF Digital Collections (UFDC). UFDC provides a comprehensive approach to digital preservation, including technical supports, reference services for both online and offline archived files, and support services by providing training and consultation for digitization standards for long-term digital preservation. In addition, strategies used to safeguard against natural or man-made disasters are the production and preservation of redundant digital

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<sup>13</sup> University of Florida Digital Collections, "Digitization of a UNESCO World Memory Collection: Mexico's Jewish Heritage Newspapers," last accessed March 1, 2018, <http://ufdc.ufl.edu/IR00009776/00001>.

archives, adherence to proven standards, and rigorous quality control methods to protect digital objects.

## **CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED**

The goal of the UF-CDIJUM initiative is to preserve and provide open access to a UNESCO World Memory Collection: Mexico's Jewish newspapers. However, the project has had to overcome challenges that will become lessons learned for future collaborations. The most important one is the difficulty of working with international partners and vendors. First UF had to make contact and, most importantly, establish trust. To do so, a UF librarian visited CDIJUM in Mexico in 2015 and invited its director to contribute content to JDoC and to visit UF in 2016.<sup>14</sup> As a result of these visits, UF and CDIJUM initiated the partnership. Despite the cordiality of the UF and CDIJUM project leaders, long distance and over all the hardship experienced by CDIJUM with the 2017 earthquake has resulted in project management problems, which in turn have led to problems with the vendor. For the future, both institutions should discuss and establish the main contact with the vendor in order to avoid conflicting messages. In addition, they should prepare a contingent emergency plan for natural or man-made disasters. Regarding the vendor, it is important to know that different countries have different business cultures, which might conflict with the quality and service expected by US institutions. So far, the vendor has presented us with good digital images but a very poor database. Fortunately, CDIJUM is aware of the quality needed for the success of the project and has requested that the vendor make the necessary improvements to the database. These lessons will be applied in future projects we have discussed with CDIJUM, such as the digitization of the Central Committee Archives and of CDIJUM's photographic collection.

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<sup>14</sup> Both the visit of the UF librarian to Mexico in 2015 and of Enrique Chmelnik to UF in 2016 were funded by Title VI.

Title	Repositories	Format	Years of holdings	Digitized	Pages
Di Tzait/Di Shtime	CDIJUM	Newspaper	1937-1981	No	3,530
	Harvard Library	Newspaper	Unable to tell	No	
Der Weg	CDIJUM	Newspaper	1931-1977	No	23,601
	Library of Congress	Newspaper	Unable to tell	No	
Prensa Israelita	CDIJUM	Newspaper	1945-1981	No	1,115
	University of Texas Libraries	Newspaper	1966	No	
	Harvard Library	Microfilm	1974-1979	No	
	University of California Libraries	Newspaper	Dec.(1967)Jan.-Feb., Apr., July-Sep., Dec.(1968), Apr.(1969)	No	
Kesher	CDIJUM	Newspaper	1987-2016	No	4,347
	University of Florida Libraries	Microfilm	1987-1990	Yes	
	Hebrew Union College Library	Newspaper	Unable to tell	No	
	New York Public Library	Microfilm	1990-1999	No	
Optimismo Juvenil	CDIJUM	Newspaper	1949-1971	No	3,176
	University of Texas Libraries	Newspaper	1954-1956	No	
	University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill	Microfilm	1951, 1952, 1958, 1959	No	
	University of Michigan	Microfilm	1951-1959	No	
Tribuna Israelita	CDIJUM	Newspaper	1971-1981	No	4,224
Fraiwelt	CDIJUM	Newspaper	1943-1945	No	886
	Harvard Library	Microfilm	Unable to tell	No	
	University of California Libraries	Newspaper	1943	No	
Meksikaner Lebn	CDIJUM	Newspaper	1993-1994	No	152
	Yivo Institute for Jewish Research	Newspaper	Unable to tell	No	
	American Jewish Historical Society New York	Microfilm	Unable to tell	No	
	Harvard Library	Newspaper	1958, 1959, 1960	No	

**Table 1.** Runs of the newspapers *Di Tzait/Di Shtime*, *Der Weg*, *Prensa Israelita*, *Optimismo Juvenil*, *Tribuna Israelita*, *Fraiwelt*, *Meksikaner Lebn*, and *Kesher* at CDIJUM and at US repositories. Information taken from CDIJUM Database and WorldCat.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> OCLC WorldCat, “Jewish Mexican Newspapers by mvargasb,” last accessed March 1, 2018, <http://www.worldcat.org/profiles/mvargasb/lists/3717618>. University of Florida Digital Collections, “Inventory for Digitization of a UNESCO World Memory Collection: Mexico's Jewish Heritage Newspapers,” last accessed March 1, 2018, <http://ufdc.ufl.edu/IR00009388/00002>.

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