

# JEWISH COSTA RICA –*Into the 21<sup>st</sup> century*

**Robert W. Case**

The Jewish roots of Costa Rica started with the Marranos in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century, with merchants arriving in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The present Jewish community originated from two *shtetls* in Poland in the 1930's. The Jewish population is estimated to be approximately 3,500. Costa Rica is 98% Catholic, and the total population of this democratic country is 4 million people. The country has had a very good relationship with the Jewish community, and has had a Jewish woman vice-president, and Jews have been elected to responsible positions. Costa Rica was the first country to establish an embassy in Jerusalem; the only other country to do so was El Salvador. (Most countries have their embassies in Tel Aviv, in order not to offend the Palestinians). There is little anti-Semitism.

There are four synagogues in San Jose: a small sephardic synagogue, A reformed synagogue, a Chabad, and the orthodox synagogue, which is, By far, the most significant. (I tried to contact the first three by e-mail and Fax, but never received a response!) I then contacted the orthodox synagogue, *Centro Israelita Sionista de Costa Rica* and received an immediate response from Guita Grynspan, the executive director. I informed her that we were a group of Jews traveling in Costa Rica, and since we were there on Friday, we would like to visit and perhaps attend the Friday night services. I was told that in order to visit, they would need the following information: (1) Names, (2) Passport Numbers, (3) Name and telephone numbers of the Synagogue of which they are affiliated members. In my world travels, I have never encountered this request before, however, I obtained this information and send her the list. There was also a request of the name of the driver(s) who would bring us to the Synagogue, however, Mrs. Grynspan arranged for their school bus to pick us up at the hotel and return us after the service. (This was the first time in about 50 years that I had taken a school bus!)

Now, the adventure begins!

The ride to the synagogue was about 30 minutes up and down hills, through the city in the peak traffic hour. When we finally arrived, we saw nothing but a wall, with a small entrance for a vehicle.



As our bus entered the entrance, two security police greeted us. They then checked the list I had provided against our passports, and we were required to surrender our passports, check our cameras, and the women to check their purses! *(I must confess that I took the above picture and two pictures of the exterior building Before I was caught and had to surrender my camera)* After we had “cleared” security, the wall opened, and the bus entered. Then the wall closed behind the bus, and another wall opened *(very similar to banks, jewelry stores, etc. in high-crime areas)* we now saw what we thought was the synagogue! Wrong! This was only



the exterior building!

Note the driveway, which accesses an underground parking lot with 190 spaces for members of the congregation. We now enter the building complex, which we thought was the synagogue. Wrong again! On the next page, you will see the entrance to the synagogue.



The marble columns, you will notice, take the form of a menorah. This is the actual entrance to this magnificent synagogue! As you enter the synagogue, there is a huge lobby, with Shabbat elevators for the women to go upstairs. There is a library, a museum under construction, a kosher kitchen, offices, and the school. *(Most of the children attend the full-time Jewish day school from kindergarten through 11<sup>th</sup> grade, and in addition to Spanish, is fluent in Hebrew and English)*

The synagogue complex is 175,000 sq. ft., encompasses approximately 10 acres, and was built at a cost of \$10 million US Dollars. *(According to one of our group, an engineer, this same complex would cost easily \$25 million in the States!)* A Venezuelan architect, Susana Weisleder, who is married to a Costa Rican Jew, designed the Synagogue.

The complex security system was developed with the assistance of the Israeli Government. Construction started in March 2003, and the official inauguration took place on December 12<sup>th</sup>, 2004. Services were first held in the temple on September 12<sup>th</sup>, 2004.

The synagogue is “orthodox” by definition, although in reality it is “modern orthodox” since congregants drive to the synagogue, and kashruth by most members is optional. Some members keep kosher in their homes, but eat out in restaurants, etc.

The rabbi is orthodox, but “closes his eyes” to non-orthodox practices. The synagogue was originally orthodox because the original settlers from Poland would not join the synagogue if it were conservative.

The service we attended was a *Kabbalat Shabbat* service, and lasted about one hour. We were most impressed with the fact that there were over 200 women upstairs, and about 175 men downstairs-and this was not a special occasion! (*Most synagogues would envy this kind of attendance!*). There were about 100 children in attendance (*many of them 6 years or under*) and all during the service, Many of the young ones went independently up to the bimah, where the rabbi gave them a piece of candy! Another point-most congregants were young (*under 55*) and There were very few “senior citizens”. Many of them were dressed in blue-jeans (*especially the women*). Apparently the only requirement for dress is that the women have their shoulders covered!

I asked one of the men if it bothered them that the children were “running up the isles” and somewhat disrupting the service. He answered, “ **This young generation is the future of Judaism**” .....



## Interior view of the Synagogue



The rabbi at the Aaron Hakodesh. The background is all plate glass, illuminated and faces the interior courtyard of the synagogue – A spectacular view!

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Robert W. Case

[bobcele@yahoo.com](mailto:bobcele@yahoo.com)

