

Finding, Assembling and Digitizing the History of Jewish Settlement in the Republic of Panama

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Lyanne Lindo Wassermann, a descendant of old and distinguished lines of Western Sephardi families, in 2011 as a way of honoring the memory of her beloved parents, Ralph Jeshurun Lindo and Marguerite Toledano de Lindo proposed to Kol Shearith Israel Congregation, the first organized synagogue in Panama, establishing an archive to collect and preserve the Congregation's history and that of its original settler families.

It should also be known that this synagogue established in 1876, was founded by these settlers who were the descendants of Jews who had escaped the Inquisition. Many first initially relocated to Holland, then to the Islands of the Caribbean and eventually to what is now called Panama.

Unfortunately, after Lyanne's initial effort, there was no initiative taken within the synagogue community to follow up on her vision.

Robert Jacobvitz, an American Ashkenazi Jew upon settling in Panama in 2012, realized as an American Jew living in a Latin America country he had no knowledge of Caribbean or Latin America Jewish or Western Sephardi history.

In an attempt to gain better knowledge of the congregations founding families' history and as a way to educate himself and other more recently arrived members of the congregation, he organized the English speaking KSI Jewish Literature Book Club: **Living as a Jew in the Caribbean and Latin America.**

During the course of meetings there were times when participants shared their family histories since members of the club came from diverse Jewish communities from throughout the world.

One meeting focused on the history of Jewish settlement in Panama.

Two Club members who unknown to Robert at that time had been filling the roles of being the community's genealogists. Rita Sasso and Anita Henriquez presented an overview of the community's history by unravelling their family tree and began to relay family stories and identifying individuals since after the Inquisition.

This meeting was the catalyst in making Robert understand that there was potential for exploring the idea of creating an oral history project, since this was when he was informed that in addition to this one family tree, there were many more in other families possession along with valuable documents.

Additionally, he had members of the book club who were 70, 80 and 90 years of age and he was not then knowledgeable of anyone else making any effort at video recording community elders or collecting the community's history. But all this was about to change!



Adelaide Goldfein Fidanque being interviewed for the Jewish Oral History Project at the age of 99. She will very soon celebrate her 101st birthday.

It was through the “community grapevine” that Robert was informed that Lyanne previously had made an effort to do what he was thinking of with unfortunately no results.

They made contact & realized that they both had the same goal in mind and partnered 4 years ago. Today they have created a number of complementary organizations fulfilling Lyanne’s original vision.

There now exists the Panama Jewish Oral History Project, Panama Jewish Archives and just recently with the support of Rabbi Gustavo Kraselnik and congregation President Moises Abadi Maduro are housed in the newly created Panama Jewish Museum, on the campus of Kol Shearith Israel.

To insure world knowledge of these entities, Robert has secured the website (URL) names for these entities.

In addition to the creation of the above activities, and as a way to complement these efforts, work is underway to organize the Panama Jewish Genealogical Society in the near future. A website (URL) has also been purchased.



Anita Leonard Henriquez discusses family history with Book Club Members



Rita Perkins Sasso traces for others her family branch on the Maduro Fidanque tree

Lyanne continues to be work selflessly to insure the continuing success of the projects. With her familiar connectedness to many of the original founding families her effort in having many understand the value of the Archives and agree to allow many precious documents, family trees, photos and physical possessions become a part the collection either by loan or gifts, as she and her husband Barry have done is a tribute to her strength and perseverance.

Robert continues to work with a group of loyal volunteers when called upon to assist and a part time student intern. Currently in addition to collecting and organizing material contributed from community members, he and assistant, Bernardo Baca are both digitizing documents and creating a data base.

They also collect contemporary material relating to the synagogue and its members who make contributions to the welfare of the country and her citizens.

Additionally, by being an International Member of the Council of American Jewish Museums (CAJM), the assistance of the Council's executive director, Melissa Martens Yaverbaum, has allowed Robert to meet with directors and curatorial staff of Jewish museums in New York City, between visits with his children there, and their assistance has been invaluable for him to be able to expand his knowledge base in managing the Panama Jewish Museum.



Partial view of Archives and Museum Display Areas

If you have any questions or are planning to visit Panama City and wish to visit the museum, please do not hesitate by emailing Robert at: robert.jacobvitz@sbcglobal.net