

# “We are creating new ways to be Jewish”

Mexico City has a dynamic and creative Jewish community. **Rebecca Taylor** meets some of its cultural movers and shakers



**ELIAS FASJA (66)**

**Musician and founder of Sefarad, a Sephardi performance group**

“My show mixes poetry, Ladino readings and flamenco. It talks about the Jewish relationship with Mexico, in particular regarding the expulsion from Spain in 1492. It also touches on the lives of those who spoke Ladino. We perform to mostly non-Jewish audiences. I used to work in the textile industry. These days, I also work for an entertainment licensing company.

My family is from Aleppo – my grandfather came from Turkey to Syria. We eat Syrian food, such as kibbeh (meatballs), but chilli comes with everything! My family lives in the Mexico City suburbs. Our three children went to Jewish schools and keep varying degrees of observance.

It’s easy to be Jewish here but the Mexican population is not familiar with Jewish history. That is why the culture centre at the Nidje Israel synagogue is important (see p18). There is little assimilation and that might be because the community fears racism. Mexicans who have lighter, European looks don’t experience racism, but those who are darker sometimes do, and the community perhaps worries about experiencing this.”



**BENJAMIN LANIADO (46)**

**Director of CADENA humanitarian relief agency**

“CADENA is able to operate at incredible speed, mobilising the resources of the Jewish world – through partnerships with the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, IsraAID, local communities and humanitarian organisations – to get to disaster zones in record time. We have a team of over 60 people who are trained in Israel and we have worked in Haiti, Turkey, Chile, Guatemala, Ecuador, Belize and Costa Rica. But the Mexican earthquake of September 2017 was a real challenge.

I’ve had the privilege to save a lot of lives. With the earthquake, I controlled the



**ISIDORO HAMUI (31)**

**Director of the Mexican International Jewish Film Festival**

“I always had an interest in culture. The Syrian Jewish community, in which I grew up, is interested in religion, Jewish institutions and textiles – but not culture! But I wanted to put on things that were fun for young people. I organised concerts and became involved in the film festival. I brought in a larger team and films that would attract non-Jews – not just our donors. The audience has grown enormously – it is now a major international festival.

I also help my father with his work – he has a factory producing the sweetener stevia. My grandfather came to Mexico from Aleppo about 100 years ago. He started off in New York but saw business opportunities over the border. On my mother’s side, the family came in 1929. They thought the plane was heading for the US but when they arrived they saw palm trees and realised this wasn’t New York!

Mexicans don’t really learn about Judaism but there is a respect – even a love – for Jews here. We are regarded as part of the culture. The cynical, ‘Jewish’ way of talking is similar to the way Mexicans talk. Both make fun of themselves.” *ficjm.org*

teams in the field. We rescued nine people. It was dangerous and stressful. But helping to save people is the most beautiful thing. The world often displays indifference to global crises and I set up CADENA in 2005 to try and change this. Now CADENA is a Mexican institution. I often talk around the world about the work we do in the name of the Jewish people.

My family is originally from Aleppo and Jerusalem and I grew up in a religiously observant household. I go with my family to synagogue every week. The community is my home.” *Cadena.ngo*



**FANNY SARFATI (55)**

**Actor and theatre producer**

“My family is originally from Istanbul. They came to Mexico in the 1920s to a town just outside Mexico City. When I was a few years old my family moved to La Roma, a prosperous Jewish area of Mexico City. My grandmother and mother cooked Turkish dishes, we children loved the bourekas. We continue Turkish traditions, such as keeping ‘lucky eye’ amulets in the house or on a baby’s cot. I belong to an Ashkenazi synagogue and am not Orthodox but celebrate the festivals with family dinners.

Twelve years ago, I performed and directed a play about the life of the former

Israeli prime minister, Golda Meir. We toured with it to 14 countries. I produced another play based on the true story of three women – Jewish, Arab and German – who are caught up in a drama about an organ donor. I also produced a play about ten people in a café in Tel Aviv who are caught up in a bombing. Recently we performed this play in Tlatelolco, a tough neighbourhood outside Mexico City. It was a new experience for the audience to find out about Jewish issues, but they enjoyed it. Theatre is the best way to communicate our concerns as a community.”



**MONICA UNIKEL-FASJA (55)**

**Director of the Justo Sierra Historic Synagogue at Nidje Israel**

“My father’s family came from Vinnitsa, now Ukraine, in the 1920s. My mother’s family came from near Vilnius. My mom was religious but when she married she left religion behind. We grew up in a secular family but learnt about Jewish traditions and studied at a Zionist school. While my grandparents were alive we celebrated the festivals but when they died that stopped: Sunday meals were and still are the time for family. When I was a child we sometimes attended an Ashkenazi Orthodox synagogue and I went to Jewish Scouts.

I married an Orthodox man of Aleppo origin, so I have learned to live with tradition. We respect each other’s beliefs but we are quite different. I go to synagogue on the holidays, clean my home for Passover, build a sukkah every year and have separate dishes for milk and meat. But outside my home I’m not kosher.

For the last 24 years I have organised walking tours of Jewish Mexico City. I’m also in charge of the cultural centre based at the beautiful Nidje Israel synagogue. I’m proud of overseeing this space (see p18). It is a place where people can overturn their prejudices. In Mexico, there is some antisemitism but it’s not overt. You can find stereotypes, especially in small towns. We also get the fallout from the decisions made by the Israeli government. But we live without obstacles and have a good relationship with the government and feel optimistic about that continuing with López Obrador.” *sinagogajustosierra.com* ■



**CARLOS METTA (27)**

**Musician and sound designer**

“I’m involved with a few bands, including Klezmerson, which is a mix of klezmer and son (Cuban music), mambo, jazz and rock. I also run Freims, a venue and restaurant that features emerging artists and I was the director of Blowie Shyne, a project which aimed to develop young Jewish musicians. Last year I helped organise the first retreat for Latin American Jewish artists called Asylum Arts. Participants were from all areas of film, music, theatre, dance and art. This year I’m setting up PRIMARIO, a retreat to help emerging Jewish artists.

My great-grandparents came to Mexico from Damascus and Aleppo in the early 20th century. I went to a Jewish school and, like most young Jewish Mexicans, I spent a year in Israel. I live in an Orthodox community but I don’t live an Orthodox life. I am part of a generation that is creating a new way to be Jewish. Some of us are involved in international projects, such as Moishe House. We are focusing on how to define ourselves – not by going to synagogue, eating kosher or being afraid of God – but by nurturing a sense of belonging.” *carlosmetta.com*

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