

Argentina: The Land of the Jewish Gauchos” by Naomi Meyer

Argentina is a large country (3/10 the size of the United States). It borders on Chile, Bolivia, Paraguay, Uruguay, and Brazil. Its total population is 37 million, most of whom are descendants of Spanish and Italian immigrants. The official language is Spanish. It won its independence from Spain in 1816.

The land of Argentina, the great pampas, is very fertile and some say that the best beef in the world comes from there. At one time, landowners were so wealthy that, when they traveled to their chateaux in Paris, they would take their own cows on the boat so that they could have fresh milk every day.

Many years ago, Argentina was home to the largest Jewish population in the Diaspora after the U.S. and the Soviet Union, and Buenos Aires was the fifth largest Jewish city outside of Israel. Today, its Jewish population is approximately 220,000, who live mainly in the capital, but are also spread out among the 23 provinces of the country. They comprise 2% of the total population.

The first Jews came to Argentina in the 1880s from Russia. The Jewish philanthropist Baron de Hirsch was their main sponsor. The Baron believed that, by buying them land there and helping them to form agricultural colonies, they would have a future of freedom from want and from religious persecution. It was not that simple. It took a long time and many hardships to enable them to endure and then later to succeed. They spoke Yiddish, built schools and synagogues and became the Jewish gauchos (cowboys). They formed settlements called “Moisesville,” [see Essay 2 below] “Claraville,” etc. (There's a documentary called “The Jewish Gauchos,” made by the daughter of the famous Argentine Yiddish writer and journalist Alberto Gerchunof.) Today, the colonies are practically empty. Most of the descendants of the original Jewish settlers have moved to the big cities, the large teacher's seminary has closed, and there are few Yiddish signs left in these areas.

Many more Jews joined the first immigrants to Argentina before and after the First World War, both from Europe and North Africa (Sephardic Jews). When Hitler came to power in the 1930's, Jews tried to escape from Germany. It was difficult to get into the U.S. and hard to go to Palestine, so that many Jews landed in the Caribbean countries and Latin America, hoping eventually to find their way to the U.S. But many stayed there, especially in Buenos Aires, the capital city. It is strange to think that a country known for its anti-Semitism and affiliation with Nazis was open for the Jews. Actually, the

government saw an opportunity to increase the white, professional middle class population. Nazis were also let into the country during and after World War II.

Some said that the Nazis and the Jews came on the same boat, with the Nazis traveling first class and the Jews in steerage. In 1961, Adolph Eichmann, the infamous Nazi who devised the plan to exterminate Europe's Jews, was hunted down and caught by the Israeli secret police in a suburb of Buenos Aires. (There is also an exciting movie, "The House on Garibaldi Street," about this story.) He was secretly taken out of the country and brought to Israel, where he was tried for war crimes and condemned to death.

The vast majority of the Jews who came to Argentina are Ashkenazi, that is, they came from central and eastern Europe. Argentinean Jews have held and continue to hold important positions in business, politics, the professions, and the arts.

The educational and cultural life of the Jews in Argentina has been rich. There are about 70 Jewish schools throughout the country. These institutions provided their students with both an outstanding secular and an exceptional Jewish education. Many of the students were able to speak fluent Hebrew (which is now helping those emigrating to Israel) and many studied for a semester or a year in Israel. Until the current financial crisis, many Jewish children studied in these schools. Now, many cannot afford the fees and so can no longer attend these schools.

[Jews, like other Argentines, have suffered political persecution.] The most infamous dictatorship was during the "Dirty War" between 1976 and 1983, when democracy was once again restored. The military government declared that they were cleansing the country to make it a Christian nation, free from corruption and free of dissidents. Their methods were to arrest, and, in most cases, torture, anyone whom they thought might be opposed to their ideas. Many people disappeared (30,000, including some 2000 Jews) and their bodies were never found. Jacobo Timerman, a well-known Argentine Jewish journalist was arrested and tortured. After he was released, he wrote about his story in "Prisoner Without a Name and Cell Without a Number." Rabbi Marshall T. Meyer*, an American-born rabbi who went with his wife to Argentina in 1959 and founded the Seminario Rabinico Latinoamericano for rabbis and teachers, became one of the most outspoken persons on human rights throughout this time, despite the danger to his own life.

After the military government's defeat, some of the perpetrators were put on trial and found guilty, but many were given amnesty by subsequent governments. Today, grandmothers still are searching for their grandchildren, who were born after their mothers were taken away and before they were killed. A few have been found.

In 1992, the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires was bombed and destroyed. Twenty-six people were killed. In 1994, the AMIA (The Central Organization of the Jewish Community) was bombed and destroyed with a death toll of 96 people, both Jews and non-Jews. While it is not clear who the actual perpetrators of these bombings were, a trial is now underway of 10 former Argentine police members thought to be involved in the AMIA attack. There is not much hope of positive results, either in the trial or in finding who was behind the bombings. Those looking into the bombings have focused on Iran, the Lebanese-based Hezbollah (Party of God), and members of the Buenos Aires provincial police as likely perpetrators.

In the last few years, the economic situation in Argentina has been deteriorating. In the past months, the country has totally collapsed financially. People have lost their life savings. Banks have restricted the amount that depositors are allowed to withdraw from their own accounts. Unemployment has risen to almost 30% and the number of people thrown into sudden poverty has been enormous.

This situation has been especially hard for the Jews, since most of the Jews belonged to the middle class (professionals, white-collar office workers, etc.), which has been totally impoverished. They are now called “the new poor.” Many people own their own homes, but can no longer afford to pay the electricity and gas bills. Many cannot even afford to pay for public transportation. Many are lacking food and must turn to the soup kitchens run by synagogues and other groups. This is a very tragic time for a country that once was a breadbasket for the world.