

ORT Reporter
1990

FIDDLER on the HOOF: The Jewish Gauchos of Argentina By Mark Freeman

"Jews on horseback??!" My friends and family all reacted with surprise and disbelief when I announced my intention to film in Argentina. My plan was to produce a 1/2 hour documentary -- The Yidishe Gauchos -- about the life of Jewish cowboys on the plains of Argentina.. The script called for a combination of oral histories, academic commentary and archival footage.

Too many (North) Americans have only the vaguest idea where Argentina is. Often people would say --"My cousin Sally went to Rio once. She loved it. But isn't it (Here people would usually choose one of the following adjectives.) dirty, dangerous, diseased?" I'd (sometimes patiently) explain that they were thinking of Brazil or sometimes Mexico, and that Argentina was a place with a special history and a Jewish heritage unlike any other in Latin America.

To some (more knowledgeable folks) Argentina is the land of tangos and Juan and Evita Peron. Argentina lies far south of the equator. Here summer begins in December and winter in June. Sandwiched between the eastern wall of the Andes and the shores of the South Atlantic, the country extends 2,300 miles to the southernmost tip of South America.. In this geographically isolated land, far removed from the centers of Jewish history, Jewish life has taken root. Argentina is home to the largest Jewish community in Latin American (more than 250,000 people).

Argentina like the United States is a country of immigrants. From the turn of this century until World War II, millions of Russian Jews fled from pogroms and persecution. "To make America" was their dream. The majority of Jews fleeing Eastern Europe came to the United States. From Ellis Island, they settled in the teeming lower East Side world of Jewish peddlers and tailors. But after the the first World War, the United States shut the door to Jewish immigration. For thousands of Jews, Argentina became the "Promised Land." For these Jews the dream came true in Spanish: "hacer America."

My great-grandparents had come to the States from Germany, Hungary and Russia. But much of our family history has disappeared. In the rush to become American, assimilation always took precedence over memory and tradition. Too many stories had been lost. I went to Argentina on a personal voyage of discovery. I went looking for a sense of history and tales of a lost way of life.

When I left San Francisco I was armed with a few facts --Jews from Russia had been transplanted to the Argentine pampas; a few contacts --names, an organization or two, phone numbers, some partial addresses; and my rudimentary Spanish learned on the streets of Mexico.

My first contact was Professor Avram Swarcz. Avram, a burly, bearded rabbinical looking man in his mid-forties, is Director of the Federation of Jewish-Argentine Communities. Although more than half of Argentine Jews live in the capital, Buenos Aires, thousands more live in cities and towns scattered across the pampas. Avram oversaw these communities in the vast "interior." He listened politely to my explanations in Spanish about who I was and what I hoped to accomplish. Seeing that I was having some difficulty expressing myself he asked: "Do you speak Hebrew?" "No," I replied. "How about Yiddish?" To my apologies he answered, "Are you really Jewish?" We were off to a rocky start. As it turned out, Avram understood and spoke English perfectly. But he refused to speak English in Argentina on principle. So we compromised. I spoke English. He spoke Spanish. And when we were both lost, his able assistant Adriana translated.

From Avram I gained an all important letter of introduction. The Argentine Jewish community is very organized, and like Argentina as a whole depends on a centralized bureaucracy. Armed with the proper credentials I set about to do my research.

My Co-Producer (and wife) Alison Brysk and I were living in Buenos Aires. A large, dense, cosmopolitan urban center of ten million, BA dwarfed San Francisco. Although the city boasted archives and museums, libraries, theaters and cultural centers our work was hampered by the

difficulties of third world living -- strikes of subways, busses and the postal service, an unreliable phone system that could present a hundred ways to misdirect a call, not to mention rampant inflation and adjusting to expatriate living.

But we puzzled out the outlines of the story. At the turn of the century, Argentina was a raw prosperous country looking for immigrant labor. Like the United States, Argentina had largely wiped out the Native American population. The wide open plains in the interior of the country were under-populated. Only migrant gauchos (cowboys), descendants of the vanquished Indians and early Spanish settlers, roamed the pampas. Argentina looked to Europe for strong backs and willing hands. Argentine beef and wheat production would rival that of Canada and the United States. It was a time of great hope and bold undertakings.

In 1889, 824 Russian Jews made their way to the province of Santa Fe, an untamed wilderness about 150 miles north of Buenos Aires. They arrived without tools or provisions. Soon their meager savings were exhausted, and they were stranded on the pampas. William Lowenthal, a Romanian Jew surveying the countryside for the Argentine government, discovered this ragged band of Jewish settlers living at the end of the railroad. They were subsisting on hand-outs from workers extending the line. Jewish children, dying from disease and starvation, were buried in steel drums from the construction site. Appalled, Lowenthal urgently appealed to Baron Mauricio de Hirsch -- a financier, a philanthropist, a man of both wealth and vision. (Hirsch had built the Orient Express-- the legendary rail link from Paris to Istanbul.) He immediately came to the aid of the impoverished settlers. This was the beginning of the first Jewish agricultural colony in Argentina: Moises Ville.

Hirsch had taken the lead in responding to the plight of Russian Jews. Restricted to the crowded shtetls, forbidden to farm or to own land, attacked, raped and murdered by a relentless series of pogroms, the Jews of Russia were the poorest in Europe. It was Hirsch who negotiated with the Czar for their release. It was Lowenthal who persuaded the Baron that Argentina was a land of freedom and opportunity for Jews. Their vision: a new way of life for Jews, as farmers and ranchers on the South American frontier.

With an endowment and bequest worth \$450 million Hirsch created the nonprofit Jewish Colonization Association. Between 1891 and 1932 the JCA purchased 1 1/4 million acres for Jewish settlement in Argentina. The JCA recruited and selected Russian Jewish immigrants. Yiddish-speaking Jews, many with beards and sidecurls were transplanted to Spanish-speaking, Catholic Argentina. The Jewish Colonization Association gave each family a 200 acre homestead and a mortgage, a few cows and some chickens.

Images are the key to making a successful documentary. Where would we find authentic historical footage? At one time Argentina had the largest film industry in all of Latin America -- Argentine features, newsreels and documentaries played from Mexico City to Tierra del Fuego.

Jews in BA like Jews in LA were among the motion picture pioneers. It was Max Glucksman's company which produced the earliest film of the Jewish colonies -- a silent newsreel. This nearly forty-five minute production contained intertitles in both Spanish and Yiddish. After

much searching and negotiations stretching over many months we finally received permission to excerpt this rarely seen material.

Diligent sleuthing and a fair amount of good luck also uncovered home movies of a wedding with a klezmer band, as well as scenes of daily life in the

Jewish colonies. In addition to these films we gained access to family photo archives, and the collections the Argentine National Archives, as well as, those of Beth Hatefutsoth, the Museum of the Diaspora in Tel Aviv. (I was surprised to discover how much of Argentina's Jewish

heritage was no longer available in Argentina, but had been sent to Israel.)

The real story of the Jewish settlers in Argentina was to be found in the countryside. But where to begin? Jewish colonies were spread out in wide area mainly across three provinces -- Buenos Aires, Entre Rios and Santa Fe. I visited the ORT headquarters in Buenos Aires seeking advice and suggestions. ORT schools are the most important Jewish community educational institutions in Argentina. They serve over 2,000 students. In a country strapped for modern resources ORT students have access to a modern computer lab.

And best of all --from my point of view-- the ORT school is equipped with a complete audio-visual studio including a video production and editing facility. But ORT was not just a source of technical information and support.

ORT and the Jewish Colonization Association have had a long history of cooperation in both Russia and Argentina. Both organizations began in the last decades of the 19th century. And both were founded out of concern with the plight of Russia's Jews. They worked together closely assisting agricultural colonies in Russia itself. And in 1951 they created a joint project in Argentina. The JCA awarded ORT a grant to establish a school for agromechanics (for men) and courses in sewing, knitting and design (for women) in Dominguez. It was at the ORT school in Buenos Aires that I made the connection that would contribute most to our success. An ORT staff member suggested that I contact Professor Celia Lopez de Borche in Dominguez. Professor Borche is the founder and Director of the most complete Jewish museum of the colonies.

Our destination was now clear. Dominguez in the Province of Entre Rios was an important center of life in the JCA colonies. Alison and I piled our personal luggage and video equipment aboard a crowded bus filled with families and children and a traveling soccer team. Trips to the "interior" always involved overnight travel and transferring from relatively modern carriers to rattling, dust belching diesels headed across the unsigned dirt roads of the Argentine pampas. We were headed for small remote towns where the Jewish colonists had settled. There we would explore old homesteads, abandoned synagogues, libraries and theaters that were once the sites of a thriving Yiddish culture.

People living in the Argentine countryside are far less familiar with video equipment than most people in the United States. Our hosts had scheduled us to meet and interview more people, in a shorter time, than we had thought possible. They had barely allowed for travel time; not to mention time for setting up our equipment. We soon had our guerrilla technique honed.

We'd be introduced to an old timer --average age 75+. Alison would explain our project and where we were from. She'd attempt

to get the lavalier microphone wire under the interviewee's shirt. I'd throw-up a single light if possible; mount the camera; plug in the mic and off we'd go trying to jog memories.

One of our first interviews in the countryside near Domiguez came about quite casually. We were on our way to a film a cemetery. Bouncing down the dusty rode I spied an isolated homestead. Senora Jruz was dressed in black, her face a road map. Although she clearly had no idea who we were or how we'd found our way to her home, she was more than happy to tell us the story of her life – how the land was a near wilderness when her family first arrived; how their only neighbors were gauchos. She remembered what it was like living alongside them. "People aren't afraid now. Before they were. (But) now the gauchos are good. We all know each other and are friends."

The gauchos were nomads riding the plains, following herds of cattle. Fiercely independent, they wore black hats and wide belts, and always carried a well-sharpened knife. They say that some Jews at first mistook the bearded gauchos for Rabbis on horseback. But gauchos were quick to anger, and not a few colonists paid with their lives for insults --intended or otherwise. Ultimately it was the gauchos who taught the Jews how to survive.

Soon Jews --dressed like gauchos, playing guitars and sipping mate (a strong, bitter stimulant) --could be seen strolling the village plazas in the Argentine colonies. Jews blended and borrowed in Argentina as they have everywhere that they have settled. Here this meeting of Argentine cowboy and Eastern European Jew produced a man of strength and independence unknown in the Old World-- the "Jewish Gaucho." Where there had been a roadless wilderness the pioneers built schools and libraries, hospitals and theaters, synagogues and agricultural cooperatives.

The days of self-sufficient Jewish communities are largely past. Today Yiddish and Hebrew schools in the countryside are shuttered. Abandoned synagogues are surrounded by overgrown fields. Primarily it's a few old women and men who remain with their memories. They fondly

recall when stars of New York's Yiddish theater like Maurice Schwartz, Ben Ami, Molly Picon and Josef Bulow came to Argentina and toured in the colonies. They remember a lively Yiddish press: newspapers, magazines and literary reviews. They proudly recite the names of Miguel Sajaroff, Isaac Kaplan and Miguel Kipen, the founders of agricultural cooperatives-- the first in Argentina. They avidly tell stories of Dr. Yarcho, the "miracle doctor," who controlled a typhus epidemic, and traveled through storms and acres of mud to deliver babies. ("Don't go to the pharmacist," he advised his undernourished patients, "go to the grocer.") The old timers clearly remember the hardships: the plagues of locusts, the droughts and windstorms, the failed crops and forced evictions.

Today only a few Yidishe Gauchos still ride the pampas. Don "Sito" Borodovsky is a third generation Jewish gaucho. He owns the farm his grandfather settled not too far from Dominguez. Now Sito is himself a grandfather. He wears bombachas, gaucho-style wide floppy pants, wears espadrilles on his feet and carries a knife at the back of his belt. Instead of the black hat of the gauchos, he wears a woven watch cap.

Now Don Sito rides a tractor as often as a horse. He says it was 80 year old "Gaucho Rodriguez" who taught him everything he knows about living in the country -- "how to ride, how to sing and how to give women the eye." Sito's getting on in years and mostly he just keeps an eye on things. (Argentines often claim, "It's the eye of the owner that fattens the cattle.")

Against all the odds and adversities facing small farmers in an underdeveloped country the Borodovskys have held on to their land. His two daughters are doctors and live in the city. He has no sons. And he's not at all sure his grandchildren will want to work the land. He's concerned and uncertain about the future of his family farm. "This land is everything to me. I'll stay here until the end. After that it's in G-d's hands."

We videotaped over the course of a year in Dominguez and Moises Ville (the first colony). We also continued to work back in Buenos Aires. There the 80 year old "grandchildren of the pioneers" were more than delighted to talk with us. (It's an ironic fact that we were

much more interested in their tales than their own children and grandchildren.) We spoke with Leible Schwartz a cantor and performer who remembers Jewish gauchos traveling by night in horse drawn carriages with "little lanterns" to attend the Jewish theater. "For them it was like a wedding. A happiness," he said smiling. Professor Maximo Yagupsky told us about young boys spending the night alone in the first Jewish cemetery -- keeping the first buried soul company until a second funeral was held.

And Natalio Gieger, a leader of the agricultural cooperative in Moises Ville, is animated recalling his struggles to prevent the evictions of colonists unable to meet their mortgage payments.

We collected wonderful stories, and made many friends. I shot from slow moving tractors and towering grain elevators. I was invited to cover the restoration of an ancient steam locomotive. I learned to drink mate. And I discovered Yiddish parodies about life in the colonies. But I never did master the tango. The legacy of the colonies is a rich heritage. Today Jews in Argentina participate in all facets of national life. (The first colonists often said, "We planted wheat, and grew doctors.") But Jews, like all Argentines, are preoccupied with the daily struggles in an increasingly impoverished Argentina. Argentina returned to democracy in 1983 after suffering tens of thousands of forced disappearances at the hands of a brutal military dictatorship. But instead of harvesting the fruits of freedom Argentina suffers under the burden of an enormous foreign debt, increasing unemployment and inflation, which has been as high as 100% per month. Although the future remains uncertain, Jewish life and Jewish institutions manage to persist in cities throughout the country.

Nevertheless, younger Jews in increasing numbers are emigrating to the United States and Israel. Not fleeing from persecution, but seeking a better life, they are leaving behind friends and family just as their great-grandparents did when they fled from Europe. They take with them their memories of South America and stories of the days when Jewish cowboys rode the range. "Yippie-I-A -- `Oy-Vey!"