

Raanan Rein

## Searching for Home Abroad: Jews in Argentina and Argentines in Israel<sup>1</sup>

### Hledání domova v cizině: Židé v Argentině a Argentinci v Izraeli

■ **Abstract:** This study deals with the position of the Jewish community in Argentina (the largest in Latin America) and its fortunes, as well as anti-semitic trends in this country since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Argentinian Jews, or Jewish Argentinians, have integrated into Argentinian life and society without giving up the Jewish elements in their personal or collective identity. The author opens his study with an analysis of the image of Argentinian Jews in several films made by various producers over the last few years (*El año que viene... en Argentina, Un abrazo partido, Like a Fish Out of Water*). He then deals with the emergence and development of the Jewish Argentinian immigrant community from a historical and sociological perspective, as well as the image of the community in literary works. Jewish immigration to Argentina (inter alia) was the outcome of economic and social problems in Central and Eastern Europe on the one hand and the liberal immigration policy of the Argentinian government on the other. The author traces where these Jews came from, which waves they belonged to chronologically, which towns they settled in and where they were active; he also provides various details on the size of the Jewish minority in Argentina. Another set of questions hangs over Nazi emigration to Argentina (which helped to create the myth of the country as pro-Nazi and anti-semitic) and various manifestations of anti-semitism that emerged in Argentina. The study is concluded with a look at the genesis of the community of Argentinian Jews in Israel.

■ **Keywords:** Jewish community; Argentina; 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries; image of Jews in film and literature; immigration

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In the midst of a wave of anti-Semitism in Argentina following the abduction of Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann by Mossad agents, the Jewish bi-weekly *La Luz* expressed its deep concern for the future of the Argentine Jewish community:

“For Argentine Jewry, the stormy year we have just left behind us was the saddest of the hundred years of its existence in this country. This intolerable situation has caused Jews in some circles to think that Jewish life may be impossible in Argentina [...] one thing is clear now: The beautiful ideal, enveloped in rosy expectations concerning the future, which the Jewish settlers brought with them... began to crumble with each Jewish child slashed with swastikas, each Jewish institution shot at [...]. The painful dilemma is posed: Does the Jewish community have a future here, and is it worthwhile for Jews to continue living in Argentina?”<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this text appeared as chapter 2 in my *Argentine Jews or Jewish Argentines? Essays on Ethnicity, Identity, and Diaspora*, Leiden – Boston 2010.

<sup>2</sup> *La Luz*, 5 October 1962.

This was neither the first nor the last time that such an alarm was sounded by Jews in this South American republic. The first time was during the 1919 pogrom in Buenos Aires known as the ‘Tragic Week’. The repression of labor unrest in Buenos Aires was accompanied by a series of violent acts by volunteer squads of ‘patriotic’ youth against the ‘*rusos*’, that is, the Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe identified as Bolsheviks and anarchists because of their origins and faith. These ‘*rusos*’ were supposedly plotting to overthrow the Argentine government and establish rule by worker councils.<sup>3</sup>

The future of the Jewish community was most recently the subject of doubts and soul-searching following the 1994 bombing of the AMIA (*Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina*, or Argentine Jewish Mutual Aid Society), and again during the 2001–2002 economic crisis that severely hit the middle classes to which most Argentine Jews belong. On 18 July 1994 a car bomb exploded in front of the AMIA building in the center of Buenos Aires, killing 85 people and wounding hundreds. The attack – which had been preceded by the March 1992 bomb attack on the Israeli embassy in the Argentine capital – destroyed the building that housed the AMIA and several other Jewish community organizations, including a library and community archives. In the aftermath, Jews in Argentina came together to mourn, to fight for justice, and to remember the victims.<sup>4</sup> The financial crisis at the beginning of this century had dramatic consequences for community institutions, which were unable to honor their obligations. Entire families lost the means of living normal lives. This situation gave rise to wide-spread Jewish poverty and, for the first time in the community’s history, hunger among several Jewish Argentine families.<sup>5</sup>

Still, during my many visits to Buenos Aires in the past decade, I could not but notice what a rich and varied life Argentine Jews enjoy. Contrary to the image portrayed in too many studies on anti-Semitism in Argentina, Jews have integrated very well into Argentine society, economy, and culture, often without rejecting the Jewish component of their individual or collective identity.

Before establishing the historical context for the main axis of discussion and analysis in this essay, I would like to share the following story. Several years ago, my wife and I went to Tel Aviv’s cinematheque to watch a documentary entitled *El año que viene... en Argentina* (“Next Year... in Argentina”).<sup>6</sup> Among other issues, the movie dealt with

<sup>3</sup> On the Tragic Week, see John DIZGUN, *Immigrants of a Different Religion: Jewish Argentines and the Boundaries of Argentinidad, 1919–2009*, Ph.D. dissertation, Rutgers University, 2010; Sandra McGEE DEUTSCH, *The Argentine Right and the Jews, 1919–1933*, *Journal of Latin American Studies* 18, 1986, p. 113–134.

<sup>4</sup> On the AMIA bombing see Sergio KIERNAN, *A Cover-Up Exposed: The 1994 AMIA Bombing Case Hits the Wall*, New York, American Jewish Committee, 2004; Federico Pablo FELDSTEIN – Carolina ACOSTA-ALZURU, *Argentinean Jews as Scapegoat: A Textual Analysis of the Bombing*, *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 27, 2003, p. 152–170; Michelle Amy COHEN, *Delving into the Ruins: The AMIA Bombing, the Struggle for Justice, and the Negotiation of Jewish Belonging in Argentina*, Ph.D. dissertation, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2009; Natasha ZARETSKY, *Citizens of the Plaza: Memory, Violence, and Belonging in Jewish Buenos Aires*, Ph.D. dissertation, Princeton University, 2008.

<sup>5</sup> Natan LERNER, *Argentine Jewry in a Period of Economic Crisis*, in: Eliezer Ben-Rafael – Yosef Gorny – Yaacov Ro’i (edd.), *Contemporary Jewries: Convergence and Divergence*, Leiden 2003, p. 335–340.

<sup>6</sup> *El año que viene en... Argentina*, directed by Jorge Gurvich and Shlomo Slutzky (Israel, 2005).

the almost taboo subject of Jews who had made *aliyah* (i. e. moved to Israel) but later decided to return to their home country. The film portrayed several families of Argentine Jews – whom I have dubbed ‘Jewish Argentines’. They had all discovered that the Argentine component in the mosaic of their individual identities was strong enough to pull them back to their country of origin. The discussion that followed the screening of the film was even more interesting. Several people in the audience expressed clear hostility toward the movie and its creators, Jorge Gurvich and Shlomo Slutzky, who were present in the hall. Gurvich and Slutzky were accused of not being Zionist enough and, by extension, not Jewish enough. An elderly person in the audience stated that after moving to Israel, he had identified so fully with the Jewish national project that, unlike the producers of the movie, he had never felt the need even to visit his native land, Argentina. Like many other Israelis, whether of Latin American origin or not, such people find it difficult to understand why the long series of political upheavals, economic ups and downs, and social crises experienced by Argentina in recent decades have not produced a major exodus of Jewish Argentines to Israel.

Here I might add that some 11,200 Argentines relocated to Israel between January 2000 and December 2006. Some 15–20 percent of them returned to Argentina, but very little writing or research has been done on this group of people.<sup>7</sup> The Zionist bias of historiography on Jewish-Latin Americans, especially works written in Israel, has encouraged this neglect.

Another film on the same subject, a Jewish Argentine production entitled *Un abrazo partido* (“A Lost Embrace”), was far from being a box-office success in Israel.<sup>8</sup> This movie tells the story of a lower middle-class Jewish family in Buenos Aires whose father moved to Israel in the early 1970s and fought in the Yom Kippur War.<sup>9</sup> It transpires that he had left Argentina not so much because of Zionist ideals but because his wife had had an affair with another man. The main problem that Israeli viewers had with the film involved the way it portrayed the life of this family, who ran a little lingerie store in an old Buenos Aires shopping center (*galería*).<sup>10</sup> The movie in fact challenges the particularity of the Jewish experience, since it depicts the lives of middle-class Jews, Italians, Asians, and other immigrant groups living together, working together, and maintaining love-hate relationships with each other. The experiences of the various ethnic groups seem to be similar in many respects, as are their strategies for becoming Argentines. Even the diasporic condition is not a uniquely Jewish phenomenon in the movie; instead, the film stresses the Jewish contribution to the efforts to shape ‘*la argentinidad*’, Argentine collective identity. Ariel Makaroff, a young Jewish Argentine who helps his mother in her small store, tries to obtain a Polish passport in order to

<sup>7</sup> Aryeh DAYAN, *An Expectations Gap [Hebrew]*, Ha’aretz, 23 May 2007. The same is true for earlier periods as well. There is hardly any research on Latin Americans who moved to Israel and then returned to their home countries.

<sup>8</sup> *Un abrazo partido*, directed by Daniel Burman (Argentina, 2003).

<sup>9</sup> Israel is present in many works of Jewish Argentine authors. See Amalia RAN, ‘Israel’: *An Abstract Concept or Concrete Reality in Recent Judeo-Argentinean Narrative?*, in: David William Foster (ed.), *Latin American Jewish Cultural Production*, Nashville 2009.

<sup>10</sup> Burman’s previous film, *Esperando al Mesías* (“Waiting for the Messiah”) (2000), was also set in a traditionally Jewish neighborhood of Buenos Aires, the garment district known as Once.

leave Argentina and become European. His grandmother is a Holocaust survivor and Makaroff, like many other middle-class Argentines after the downfall of President Fernando de la Rúa's government, looks for her Polish documents as part of his search for personal salvation. This search has very little to do with anti-Semitism or discrimination in Argentina. On the contrary, the film depicts Argentina as a tolerant, multicultural society.<sup>11</sup> Naturally, Israelis, including many Argentines who have moved to Israel, find it hard to relate to this pastoral image of Argentina.

At the same time, this same public prefers to avoid discussing the very real difficulties encountered by new immigrants from Argentina, as seen even in a light romantic comedy made in Israel. The movie is entitled *Like a Fish Out of Water*. It tells the story of Marcelo, a new immigrant from Argentina (played by Esteban Gottfried), and Anat, his Hebrew teacher at the Raanana Absorption Center (played by Tal Lifshitz). As a former *telenovela* actor, Marcelo wants to pass the auditions for an Israeli soap opera, and needs Anat's help to improve his Hebrew. Like most Argentine Jews, Marcelo is not religious, while Anat's family is religious.

*Like a Fish out of Water* was produced by Yochanan Jorge Weller, an Argentine-Israeli. As a student at Tel Aviv University in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Weller directed a 38-minute film entitled *Ernesto*. The movie tells the story of Argentine exiles in Israel, youngsters who fled from Argentina's brutal military dictatorship and found refuge in Israel.<sup>12</sup> In their new home they try to demonstrate against the repression of human rights in their home country.

In April 2006, the film was screened on Channel 2, the most popular commercial channel in Israel. Critic Ehud Asheri of the daily *Ha'aretz* was far from enthusiastic about it. He claimed that it was an idealized view of the way Latin American immigrants were absorbed in Israel and that we learn very little about these immigrants from the movie.<sup>13</sup> Viewers, however, to judge from the comments on the *Ha'aretz* online edition, seemed to like it. But the fact remains that both the press and scholarly works by historians, sociologists, and political scientists have almost entirely ignored the difficulties encountered by Latin American immigrants to Israel. Only a handful of psychologists, psychiatrists, and social workers have written about the difficulties that many of these immigrants have faced as they relocated from their homeland. These studies have dealt with problems of adjustment, mental stress, and isolation, as well as many cases of family disruptions and divorce.<sup>14</sup> We have very little data about the many immigrants who vow to be back in Buenos Aires next year, rather than in Jerusalem or Tel Aviv.

<sup>11</sup> On Burman's career and Jewish identity, see Tamara Leah FALICOV, *The Cinematic Tango: Contemporary Argentine Film*, London 2007. Burman holds both Argentine and Polish citizenship, like his films' character, Ariel. A more recent film of his, *El nido vacío* ("The Empty Nest", 2008), explores the emptiness experienced when children grow up and leave the family home. In this case Julia, the daughter of Leonardo and Marta, leaves for Israel.

<sup>12</sup> Mario SZNAJDER - Luis RONIGER, *From Argentina to Israel: Escape, Evacuation and Exile*, *Journal of Latin American Studies* 37, 2005, no. 2, p. 351-377.

<sup>13</sup> *Ha'aretz*, 18 April 2007.

<sup>14</sup> José A. ITZIGSOHN, *Los inmigrantes latinoamericanos en Israel: Aspectos clínicos*, *Judaica Latinoamericana: Estudios Histórico-sociales* 1, 1988, s. 248-258; Ronaldo Marco DELIGDISCH, *Un estudio analógico de la integración social de inmigrantes: El caso de los judíos alemanes en Argentina y de los judíos argentinos en Israel*, Ph.D. dissertation, Atlantic International University, 2008.

## Another Promised Land

The Argentine Jewish community, the biggest in Latin America, is mainly the product of the great wave of trans-Atlantic immigration from Eastern Europe, and, to a lesser degree, the Middle East and the Balkans to the Americas during the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the twentieth.<sup>15</sup> As with any other immigrant group, we have to analyze the factors that pushed certain people to leave their homes and the factors that drew them towards other places, as well as the patterns of immigration adopted by that particular group. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Jews in Eastern Europe – especially those from the Pale of Settlement, an area containing a high proportion of Jews that encompassed part of what is today Poland and Russia – felt a growing pressure to seek a better future outside Europe. Physical harassment, social pressures and economic hardship all contributed to this urge.

At more or less the same time, from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century onward, the crisis of the Ottoman empire was accompanied by the persecution of religious minorities, growing Arab nationalism, and forced military service. Economic changes made life difficult for a growing number of craftsmen and small merchants. Thus, Syro-Lebanese immigration – Christian, Jewish and Moslem alike – arose out of a combination of political, economic, religious, and cultural factors. The Americas, both North and South, seemed to promise prosperity and a better future for both Jews and Arabs. Argentina became home for hundreds of thousands of them, most of them arriving between the late 1870s and 1930.

While a few East European Jews sought refuge in Palestine, their real or imagined homeland, others looked for ways to cross the Atlantic and find a new home in the Americas. Jewish organizations considered various proposals for settling these Jews in new countries. One such proposal focused on a practically unknown land in South America. Theodor Herzl himself, in his *Judenstaat* (1896), described the choice facing the Jewish masses in Eastern Europe as one between “Palestine or the Argentine”. Although most Jews settled in the capital city, a significant minority of the East European Jews became farmers, thus giving rise to the myth of Jewish *gauchos* (a common name for Jewish immigrants who settled in fertile regions of Argentina). Those immigrants were masterfully portrayed by Alberto Gerchunoff in his epic work, published in 1910 to celebrate the centenary of the Argentine May Revolution that set the country on its way to independence.<sup>16</sup> In later works by many Jewish Argentine writers the emblematic figure of the Jewish *gaucho* is a recurrent theme.<sup>17</sup> The agricultural settlements established in Argentina, and later in Brazil, by the Jewish philanthropist, Baron Maurice de Hirsch seemed to offer a partial solution to the Jewish national question at the time.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Jews constituted, of course, a small minority of the 11 million immigrants who arrived in Latin America between 1854 and 1924. For a general overview on Jewish immigration to Argentina, see Haim AVNI, *Argentina and the Jews: A History of Jewish Immigration*, Tuscaloosa, Ala., 1991; Victor A. MIRELMAN, *Jewish Buenos Aires, 1890-1930: In Search of an Identity*, Detroit 1990.

<sup>16</sup> Alberto GERCHUNOFF, *Los Gauchos judíos*, La Plata 1910. For an English translation, see Alberto GERCHUNOFF, *The Jewish Gauchos of the Pampa*, trans. Prudencio de Pereda, Albuquerque 1998.

<sup>17</sup> Ricardo FEIERSTEIN (ed.), *Los mejores relatos con gauchos judíos*, Buenos Aires 1998.

<sup>18</sup> These agricultural settlements have received much scholarly attention. The most comprehensive account is Haim AVNI, *Argentina, “The Promised Land”: Baron de Hirsch’s Colonization Project in the Argentine Republic* [Hebrew], Jerusalem 1973. The works, which are complemented with the word “Hebrew” in the brackets, were published in Hebrew, but are cited, according to the usage, in translation (redaction).

Coincidentally, at the same time that Jews were looking for a safe haven, Argentine authorities adopted a well-conceived policy, inspired by positivistic ideals, to encourage European immigration. The desire to increase the relatively small population and to improve – that is, ‘whiten’ – it by bringing in European immigrants, ideally from Northern Europe, in order to foster development and modernization, was the main motivation behind the demographic policy of Argentine statesmen. ‘*Gobernar es poblar*’ (‘to govern is to populate’) was a maxim coined in 1853 by Juan Bautista Alberdi, a prominent liberal intellectual and politician. And, indeed, from the 1870s until the economic recession of the early 1930s, a huge wave of immigrants descended on Argentine shores. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, about half the population of the federal capital, Buenos Aires, was foreign-born.<sup>19</sup>

Determined to turn their back on the former colonial power, Spain, members of the Argentine governing elite looked towards republican France as a secular, progressive model to emulate. This cultural and political orientation, together with the country’s growing economic and commercial ties with Great Britain, contributed to the institution of a liberal constitution in 1853 (which guaranteed freedom of worship), the adoption of a liberal immigration law in 1876 (which did not discriminate against non-Catholic immigrants), and the enactment of state-education as well as civil-registration laws in 1884 (thus limiting the power and influence of the Catholic Church).

Rumors about the possibilities offered by immigration to Argentina, where anyone could live freely and prosper, spread among urban and rural Jews in Central and Eastern Europe. In reality, for the majority of Jewish immigrants, Ashkenazi and Sephardic alike, Argentina did indeed prove to be the ‘promised land’, a place where they could secure a living for themselves and an education for their children, and which they could try to make their new home. Within a short time, they established community institutions and Jewish schools that satisfied their social, economic, and cultural needs. Thus they created a rich mosaic of social, cultural, political, and ideological life, which reflected a wide variety of faiths, identities, and social practices: Communists and Zionists, Orthodox and secular, those who emphasized their Jewishness and others who preferred to stress their Argentine identity. Many of these immigrants rose to prominent positions in social, economic, artistic, and political spheres.<sup>20</sup>

This does not mean that Jews, or any other ethnic immigrant group for that matter, were welcomed at all times and by everybody. Jews and Arabs benefited from Argentine open-door policies but also suffered, from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century onward, from the Argentine elites’ disappointment over the outcome of the immigration project destined to ‘whiten’ or ‘Europeanize’ their country. Both ethnic groups encountered general anti-immigrant sentiment as a result. With growing nationalism, authoritarianism and xenophobia, especially in the 1910s, 1920s and 1930s, Semitic immigrants – whether Christian Arabs, Eastern European Jews, Moslem Arabs, or Arab Jews, all immigrants

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<sup>19</sup> For a general overview of immigration to Argentina, see Carl SOLBERG, *Immigration and Nationalism, Argentina and Chile, 1890-1914*, Austin, Tex., 1970.

<sup>20</sup> Haim AVNI, *Argentine Jewry; Social Status and Organizational Profile* [Hebrew], Jerusalem 1972; Robert WEISBROT, *The Jews of Argentina: From the Inquisition to Perón*, Philadelphia 1979; Efraim ZADOFF, *A Century of Argentinean Jewry: In Search of a New Model of National Identity*, Jerusalem 2000.



who were not considered 'white' or Catholic - were targeted sometimes as the most undesirable of immigrants. Positivist Argentine discourses often looked at the non-Northern European immigrant as racially inferior, diseased, and contaminating.

An 1898 article from the *Buenos Aires Herald* reflected this attitude: "Are we becoming a Semitic republic? The immigration of Russian Jews is now the third largest in the list, while Syrian Arabs (Turcos) and Arabians are also flocking on these shores." Similar articles were published by the Spanish-language newspapers. Thus *La Nación* wrote in 1910 that the deplorable peddling of trinkets by the Syro-Lebanese was a dishonor to the nation, and called for the restriction of Levantine immigration. Race, and not just economic concerns, could be used against both Arab and Jewish immigration.

Among the liberal elites, even the staunchest supporters of immigration embraced the concept of the melting pot. All newcomers, especially non-Catholics, were expected to abandon the customs and idiosyncrasies they had brought with them from their countries of origin in favor of the new culture that was emerging in the immigrant society of Argentina. This attitude and the pressure toward cultural homogeneity and assimilation were particularly pronounced among those belonging to Catholic nationalist and xenophobic sectors within Argentine society. Albeit a minority, these elements have always existed in Argentine society and in certain periods they have managed to exert influence in political, military, and clerical circles, as well as on the contemporary intellectual climate. This phenomenon was a source of permanent unease among Argentine Jews who, because of their mostly European origins and family ties with the Old World, could not but view local events in Argentina through a European perspective of growing hostility towards Jews.

Debate continues as to the number of Jews living in Argentina both during the 20<sup>th</sup> century and today.<sup>21</sup> Part of the problem lies in the tendency of most studies to focus on those Jews affiliated with formal community institutions, despite the fact that research indicates that most Jews - in common with members of other ethnic communities - have never been affiliated with such institutions. Furthermore, in national population censuses many Jews have preferred not to define themselves as such, either because they feared identifying themselves ethnically in government databases, especially in times of authoritarian rule, or because the option of a hyphenated identity was not included and they did not wish to give Jewishness priority over their Argentine identity. Moreover, the use of religious rather than cultural criteria to define Jews has created additional barriers to data collection in a community known for its highly secular character.

According to demographer Sergio Della Pergola, the number of Jews in Argentina grew from 14,700 in 1900 to 191,400 in 1930, reaching 273,400 at the end of World War II and a peak of 310,000 in the early 1960s. From then on, numbers began to decline, with Jews emigrating from Argentina to Israel, the United States, or to other countries

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<sup>21</sup> For recent studies, see Adrián JMELNIZKY - Ezequiel ERDEI, *La población judía de Buenos Aires: Estudio sociodemográfico*, Buenos Aires 2005; Yaacov RUBEL, *La población judía de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires. Perfil sociodemográfico*, Buenos Aires 2005; Sergio DELLA PERGOLA, *Jewish Autonomy and Dependency: Latin America in Global Perspective*, in: Judit Bokser Liwerant - Eliezer Ben-Rafael - Yossi Gorny - Raanan Rein (edd.), *Identities in an Era of Globalization and Multiculturalism: Latin America in the Jewish World*, Leiden 2008, p. 47-80.

in Latin America and Europe. There has also been an increasing rise in the number of exogamic marriages. Whereas in the mid-1930s the rate of marriage to non-Jews was 1–5 percent of all marriages involving a Jewish partner, in the early 1960s it rose to 20–25 percent, reaching 35–40 percent in the mid-1980s. Current estimates put the number of Jews now living in Argentina at around 250,000.

Jewish immigration to Argentina has been mostly Ashkenazi, although Jews from Morocco were among the first immigrants, back in the mid-1800s.<sup>22</sup> Later in the century they were joined by Jewish immigrants from the declining Ottoman Empire, especially from Aleppo and Damascus, who arrived alongside the wave of Jews from Eastern and Central Europe.

Chronologically, the first Jewish immigrants began to arrive as early as the 1840s (in Argentina, unlike Brazil, evidence of *conversos* during the colonial period is scant) and the first synagogue was established in 1862. However, the first important milestone in Jewish immigration was recorded in 1881 when, following pogroms in Russia, the Argentine government decided to encourage Jews to immigrate and a special emissary was sent to invite Jews from Tzarist Russia to settle in Argentina. The first organized group of immigrants, consisting of 820 Russian Jews, arrived in August 1889 on board the ship *Wesser*. They were sent to the Jewish agricultural colonies and some of its members founded the by now almost mythological colonies of Moisesville (1889), Mauricio (1892), and Villa Clara (1892), among others.

The government's immigration policy dramatically changed the demographic profile of the country, as became apparent in the 1914 census. Within 20 years, the country's population had almost doubled (to about 7.9 million). More than a third of the inhabitants were foreign-born. In the capital city of Buenos Aires, this figure was around 50 percent. As for Jews, the rate of growth was much higher – from 1895 to 1919 the Jewish population increased from 6,000 to 125,000.

At any rate, the original vision of a Jewish agricultural enterprise as the main focus of attraction for Jewish immigration did not last long. While in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century most Argentine Jews were concentrated in the Jewish Colonization Association (JCA) colonies, by the end of World War I the majority of Jews were urban dwellers, with Buenos Aires housing the largest Jewish population.<sup>23</sup> In urban centers, Jews were inclined to concentrate in certain neighborhoods – in Buenos Aires, Once and Villa Crespo are among the most well-known – which added to their urban and social visibility.

With the exception of a temporary break in immigration during the Great War, when dwindling commercial ties with Europe contributed to economic recession and unemployment, the flow of immigration to Argentina continued, including many Jews. In contrast to the limitations imposed on immigration by the United States and other countries, Argentina's liberal immigration policy remained almost unchanged, with

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<sup>22</sup> For a general overview on Jewish immigration to Argentina, see H. AVNI, *Argentina and the Jews*. On Sephardic Jews in Argentina, see Margalit BEJARANO – Edna AIZENBERG (edd.), *Contemporary Sephardic Identity in the Americas*, Syracuse, NY, 2012.

<sup>23</sup> On Jewish social life in contemporary Buenos Aires, see Eugene F. SOFER, *From Pale to Pampa: A Social History of the Jews of Buenos Aires* (New York, 1982); Mollie LEWIS NOUWEN, *Oy, my Buenos Aires: Jewish Immigrants and the Creation of Argentine National Identity*, Albuquerque, New Mexico 2013.



minor revisions instituted in the mid-1920s. It was only the world economic recession in the wake of the Wall Street crash that brought immigration virtually to a halt. The ensuing political upheaval provoked the first military coup in the country's history (September 1930), in turn reinforcing nationalist, Catholic, and xenophobic tendencies in Argentine society.<sup>24</sup>

During the 1930s the Jewish population had grown in number to approximately a quarter of a million. Contemporary restrictions on immigration were based on political as well as economic considerations. The social and political ferment in Europe aroused fears among the Argentine elites concerning the possible entry of 'undesirable' elements, people who might constitute a potential danger to the existing social and political order. Consequently, Republican exiles and refugees fleeing from the Spanish Civil War and the new dictatorship of General Francisco Franco faced all kind of barriers in their efforts to enter Argentina. National authorities feared that they might bring with them a leftist 'virus'.<sup>25</sup> The same was true for Jews, who were often considered 'Bolsheviks'. Moreover, in view of the economic recession, priority was given to those professionals who were needed by the local economy, while xenophobic attitudes constituted further obstacles in the way of non-Catholic immigrants or those who might supposedly have difficulties in adjusting to Argentine society and culture.

Those Jews who had pinned their hopes on Argentina's position at the Evian Conference (France), convened by the League of Nations in July 1938 to discuss possible solutions to the problem of refugees from Nazi Germany and Austria, were disappointed. Argentina, like most other countries, was unwilling to open its gates to these refugees. This same restrictive policy was maintained throughout World War II, although between 1933 and 1945 around 40,000 Jews did enter Argentina, legally or illegally, almost a fifth of them during the years of the Holocaust.

In the mid-1940s, following the defeat of Fascism and the end of hostilities in Europe, immigration to Argentina resumed, albeit not in the same magnitude as in the past. The populist president, Juan Perón, lifted most restrictions to immigration in 1947, and during the next three years some 300,000 immigrants entered the country, chiefly from Spain and Italy, the two 'mother countries' of most Argentines. Although only 1,500 Jews arrived in the second half of the 1940s, the Peronist regime's decision to grant amnesty to all illegal residents enabled some 10,000 Jews to obtain legal status. At the same time, Nazi war criminals and collaborators who had found shelter in Argentina, mostly under false identities, also benefited from this amnesty. Their presence in the country has greatly contributed to the myth of Argentina being an anti-Semitic, pro-Nazi society.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup> See the important works of Federico FINCHLSTEIN, *La Argentina fascista: Los orígenes de la dictadura*, Buenos Aires 2008, and *The Anti-Freudian Politics of Argentine Fascism: Anti-Semitism, Catholicism, and the Internal Enemy, 1932-1945*, *Hispanic American Historical Review* 87, 2007, no. 1, p. 77-110.

<sup>25</sup> Leonardo SENKMAN, *Argentina, la segunda guerra mundial y los refugiados indeseables, 1933-1945*, Buenos Aires 1991.

<sup>26</sup> Debate continues on this issue. For two opposing views, see Uki GOÑI, *The Real Odessa: How Perón Brought the Nazi War Criminals to Argentina*, London 2002; Ronald C. NEWTON, *The "Nazi Menace" in Argentina, 1931-1947*, Stanford, Calif., 1992.

The 1950s witnessed the last wave of Jewish immigration to Argentina (and to neighboring Brazil). These were mainly refugees from the Communist repression in Hungary in 1956, or Jews who had fled Egypt because of the hostile policy adopted by the Nasser regime after the joint attack by Israel, Great Britain, and France. From that point onwards, the number of Jews in Argentina began to decline.

While it is true that anti-Semitic manifestations have always accompanied the Jewish presence in Argentina, it is important to differentiate between the various types of anti-Semitism, which is possibly one of the most studied aspects of Jewish life in South America. Haim Avni has pointed to three levels of anti-Semitism in Argentina: popular, organized, and government-sponsored.<sup>27</sup> Popular anti-Semitism is difficult to measure. Deeply rooted in Catholic precepts, it has at times been fueled either by Nazi propaganda (during the 1930s and World War II) or by Arab propaganda (from the 1960s onwards). Polls in recent years, however, indicate that Jews are hated no more than other ethnic or social groups, while many people consider multinational corporations, the Catholic Church, banks, politicians or the Army to be 'too powerful', more so than Jews.

Organized anti-Semitic groups first appeared in 1910, the year of the centennial celebrations of Argentina's de facto independence. In 1919 they took advantage of a workers' strike in order to attack Jewish neighborhoods, which they perceived as hubs of revolutionary ferment. In the early 1960s they exploited the kidnapping of the Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann in Buenos Aires (May 1960) by Mossad agents to accuse the Jews of their country of dual loyalty and to carry out a series of violent anti-Semitic attacks, led by groups such as *Tacuara* and the *Guardia Restauradora Nacionalista*.<sup>28</sup> These incidents were not repeated, although in subsequent decades nationalist organizations often distributed anti-Semitic propaganda and even carried out isolated attacks on Jewish institutions. Usually small in number, these groups occasionally gained some influence in military, clerical or political circles. Since the 1960s, anti-Semitic propaganda has sometimes been couched as anti-Israeli or anti-Zionist discourse.

In any case, government-sponsored anti-Semitism has been rare in Argentina. It manifested itself in the limitations imposed on Jewish immigration during the 1930s and the 1940s, and was also noticeable during the years of the brutal military dictatorship that ruled the country between 1976 and 1983. The Jewish community suffered disproportionately from the terror of those years: Jews amounted to 1 percent of the population, but about 10 percent of the *desaparecidos*.<sup>29</sup> According to many testimonies, Jews arrested by the military suffered more than non-Jews; yet community institutions continued with their normal activities, no anti-Semitic laws were ever instituted and government relations with the State of Israel were excellent.

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<sup>27</sup> Haim AVNI, *Antisemitism in Argentina: The Dimensions of Danger*, in: Michael Brown (ed.), *Approaches to Antisemitism: Context and Curriculum*, New York 1994, p. 57-77.

<sup>28</sup> See Raanan REIN, *Argentina, Israel, and the Jews: Perón, the Eichmann Capture and After*, Bethesda, Md., 2003, ch. 7.

<sup>29</sup> On anti-Semitism during the military dictatorship and the high percentage of Jews among the *desaparecidos*, see Edy KAUFMAN, *Jewish Victims of Repression in Argentina under Military Rule (1976-1983)*, *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 4, 1989, p. 479-499.

The transition to democracy in the 1980s and 1990s witnessed the adoption of a tolerant policy toward ethnic minorities and a growing awareness of the multicultural nature of Argentine society. However, this did not signal the complete disappearance of anti-Semitism or even of its occasional violent manifestations. In fact, the two bomb attacks on the Israeli Embassy and the Jewish community center in Buenos Aires – in 1992 and 1994, respectively – represented a different kind of danger for Jews in Argentina: transnational terror with local support. These bombings triggered grassroots mobilization and a continuing polemic among Argentine Jews as to their individual and collective identities, their place in Argentine society, and their relations with their imagined homeland, the State of Israel.

### **Not Invisible Anymore: The Individual and Collective Identities of Latin Americans in Israel**

There are currently 65,000 Israeli citizens of Latin American origin. Together with their children, they number over 100,000, and most of them are Argentines.<sup>30</sup> These numbers do not include the thousands of undocumented Latin Americans in Israel, most of them from the Andean countries (Colombia, Ecuador and Bolivia), and this essay does not deal with them. It is worth noting, however, that this group of migrant workers has received more scholarly attention than the Jewish Latin Americans who have made *aliyah* – that is, relocated to Israel.<sup>31</sup>

Many Israelis of Latin American origin have attained prominent positions in the liberal professions, academia, industry, or agriculture, and therefore they project an image of successful integration as individuals. Until recently, however, they have been collectively an ‘invisible community’, a term coined by sociologist Luis Roniger<sup>32</sup>: a group that prefers individual mobility to communal assertiveness. In contrast to the experience of other communities of Jews relocating to Israel, such as Moroccans, Russians, or Iranians, Latin Americans so far have refrained from assuming a communal public visibility. This has to do with the fact that there has never been a ‘wave’ of immigration from Latin America to Israel.

In sharp contrast to other groups that have acquired a distinctive ethnic identity in Israel because they arrived in one or several massive waves, the Latin American immigration was

<sup>30</sup> Luis RONIGER – Deby BABIS, *Latin American Israelis: The Collective Identity of an Invisible Community*, in: J. Bokser Liwerant – E. Ben-Rafael – Y. Gorny – R. Rein (edd.), *Identities in an Era of Globalization and Multiculturalism*, p. 297–320; Florinda GOLDBERG – Iosef ROZEN (edd.), *Los latinoamericanos en Israel: Antología de una alíá*, Buenos Aires 1988; Donald L. HERMAN, *The Latin American Community of Israel*, New York 1984.

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, Adriana KEMP – Rebecca RAIJMAN, *Foreigners in a Jewish State: The New Politics of Labour Migration in Israel*, *Israel Sociology* 3, 2000, no. 1, p. 79–110; Adriana KEMP – Rebecca RAIJMAN – Julia RESNIK – Silvina SCHAMMAH-GESSER, “Making It” in Israel? *Non-Jewish Latino Undocumented Migrant Workers in the Holy Land*, *Estudios Interdisciplinarios de América Latina y el Caribe (EIAL)* 11, 2000, no. 2, p. 113–136; Barak KALIR, *Latino Migrants in the Jewish State: Undocumented Lives in Israel*, Bloomington, Indiana, 2010.

<sup>32</sup> Luis RONIGER, *The Latin American Community of Israel: Some Notes on Latin American Jews and Latin American Israelis*, *Israel Social Science Research* 6, 1988/89, no. 1, p. XXX.

a cumulative rather than an abrupt process. Between 1948 and 2005 some 100,000 Latin Americans immigrated to Israel in a steady trickle, with some peaks in the 1970s and 1980s.

As a result, these immigrants were perceived as Westerners who arrived in comparatively small numbers. Their arrival did not precipitate a sudden revolution in Israeli public opinion, as the massive flood of immigration from the Soviet Union did, or the much smaller but nonetheless dramatic waves of Ethiopian Jews – both of them immigrations that impacted Israeli society at large and required substantial absorption efforts on the part of the state administration.

The demographic distribution of the Latin Americans throughout Israel is such that on one hand, their presence is felt everywhere, but on the other hand their geographical distribution has made it difficult for them to assert themselves collectively.<sup>33</sup> Another factor hampering the emergence of a collective 'ethnic' assertiveness is the huge diversity of Latin American Israelis. Whereas a pan-Latin American identity has been constructed in Israel – based mainly on language and cultural manifestations – there are still many sources of division and discord between Argentine immigrants, who constitute the majority, and immigrants from countries such as Peru, Colombia, Brazil, Mexico, Chile and Venezuela. Even Argentines are divided between those originally from the capital city of Buenos Aires, known as *porteños*, and immigrants from the provinces of the interior.

Among the first Jews to leave Argentina for Jewish Palestine, it is worth mentioning the 53 volunteers who in 1918 joined the British forces in their campaign to end Turkish rule in Palestine.<sup>34</sup> Most of them went back to Argentina at the end of the war. There were also many Jewish Argentines among the 350–400 Latin American Jews who fought for Israel's independence in 1948.<sup>35</sup> However, it was not until the 1960s that substantial numbers of Jews relocated from Argentina to Israel.

From the 1950s to the 1970s, the motives behind Argentine immigration to Israel were in part ideological, based on Zionist ideals or Jewish identity, with the prime concern being the younger generation's future as Jews, and in part economic. This was demonstrated in a survey that the late David Hurovitz, a Jewish Agency envoy in Argentina in the 1960s, conducted among 150 Jews in Argentina and another 150 Jewish Argentines who had moved to Israel.<sup>36</sup> During the ruthless military dictatorship that began in 1976, several hundred Jews fled to Israel in order to save their lives.

By contrast, in more recent years economic upheavals have constituted the main impetus for emigration to Israel. The December 2001 crisis alone almost immediately more than doubled the number of Argentine immigrants to the country, which reached a total of over 6,000 in 2002. Many of these immigrants encountered difficulties in integrating into Israeli society and consequently some of them went back to Argentina.

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<sup>33</sup> In the early 1980s most immigrants from Latin America (80 percent) were still concentrated in four cities: Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Haifa and Beersheva. See D. L. HERMAN, *The Latin American Community of Israel*.

<sup>34</sup> See Rafael DORON, *Legionarios de Argentina: Voluntarios a la legión judía en la primera Guerra mundial* [Hebrew], Givat Chaviva, Israel, 2007. The author is the son of one of those volunteers.

<sup>35</sup> See Henrique Cymerman's documentary, *Valió la pena*, Tel Aviv University 2008.

<sup>36</sup> David HUROVITZ, *The Jewish Community and Aliyah from Argentina, 1962–1973* [Hebrew], Ph. D. dissertation, Tel Aviv University, 2006; Sebastian KLOR, *The Aliyah from Argentina to the State of Israel in the years 1948–1967*, Ph. D. dissertation, University of Haifa, 2012.

Taking into account the fact that around this time 61 percent of Jewish Argentines were not affiliated with community institutions and only about one-third sent their children to Jewish schools, this is not surprising.<sup>37</sup>

In social terms, the Latin Americans' passion and cultural orientation are assets in the informal, improvisational climate of Israeli society. As one of my informants told me, "It is cool to be Latino in Israel". Bars with Latin names, such as Evita in Tel Aviv and Che Guevara in Rishon Letzion, are popular with young people. In addition, interest in Spanish-speaking cultures has grown dramatically in recent decades as a result of increased numbers of young Israeli backpackers traveling to South America, usually after completing their obligatory military service, and the rise in popularity of Spanish-language soap operas, or *telenovelas*, and Latin American music among the Israeli public.<sup>38</sup> In 1977, for example, several of Israel's leading singers joined together to produce a radio show, later made into a best-selling album, of Brazilian songs translated into Hebrew. The program and album, entitled *Eretz Tropit Yafa* (A Beautiful Tropical Land), marked the beginning of a kind of Latin American music craze in Israel.<sup>39</sup> A decade later the Latin sound of a band called *Atraf* and led by Peruvian-born musicians Victor Azuz and Ruben Salamon became very popular in Israel. The members of this group emphasized their Latin identity and their albums included Hebrew versions of popular songs like 'La Bamba' or 'Guantanamera'. One of their albums, released in 1995, was entitled *Latini Ivri Latini* ("Latino Hebrew Latino"). Is there a better indication of the emergence of an Israeli-Latino identity?

As for *telenovelas*, it is worth noting that two popular channels in Israel, Viva and Viva Platina, are devoted exclusively to *telenovelas*, and that *telenovelas* are broadcast regularly on several other channels as well. These series are subtitled, so the Israeli audience is accustomed to hearing Spanish. Although the first Latin American *telenovela* to be broadcast in Israel was the Mexican *Los ricos también lloran* (The Rich Also Cry) two decades ago, the *telenovelas* channels are actually dominated by Argentine rather than Mexican or Colombian programs. Interestingly enough, one of the main producers of Argentine *telenovelas* in recent years is an Argentine-Israeli, Yair Dori, wounded in the 1973 Yom Kippur War. In the movie *Like a Fish out of Water* the father of one of the main characters is an avid fan of Argentine *telenovelas*. Certain Israeli blogs and talk-back sites are devoted exclusively to *telenovelas*.

All these factors have encouraged students to take Spanish courses in both high schools and universities. Since the early 1980s Spanish has been taught as an elective subject in middle schools and high schools. The number of students taking Spanish as a foreign language has steadily increased, reaching 3,500 in the 2006/2007 academic year; 400 of them took the matriculation exam in that subject.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Adrián J MELNIZKY - Ezequiel ERDEI, *La población judía de Buenos Aires: Estudio sociodemográfico*, Buenos Aires 2005, p. 51 and 58.

<sup>38</sup> On Latin American *telenovelas* in Israel, see Tomás LÓPEZ-PUMAREJO, *Telenovelas and the Israeli Television Market*, *Television & New Media* 8, 2007, no. 3, p. 197-212; Gerald ERICHSEN, *Argentine Telenovelas Popular in Israel*, *Miami Herald*, 19 Sept. 2003.

<sup>39</sup> Judah M. COHEN, *The Ethnic Dilemmas of Latin American Jewry*, in: Jeffrey Lesser - Raanan Rein (edd.), *Rethinking Jewish-Latin Americans*, Albuquerque 2008, p. 266-284.

<sup>40</sup> On Spanish studies in Israel, see Ivonne LERNER - Beatriz KATZ, *La enseñanza del español como lengua extranjera en Israel*, in: Instituto Cervantes (ed.), *El español en el mundo, anuario del español*, Madrid 2003, p. 205-252; Ivonne LERNER, *El lugar de la lengua española en Israel*, Real Insti-

Concerning the influence of *telenovelas* on learning Spanish, Sitman and Lerner have correctly argued that whether one likes them or not, they cannot be ignored. Spanish teachers have reported that many students do not start their Spanish studies as complete beginners but have some previous knowledge of the language, particularly in comprehension and speaking.<sup>41</sup>

Another factor that helped Argentines integrate into Israeli society was their comparatively better knowledge of Israel and of the Hebrew language prior to actual immigration. Studies show that a large proportion, especially of those who immigrated before 1974, reported being aware of both Zionism and their Jewish heritage while they were still living in Argentina.<sup>42</sup>

To sum up, Latin American immigrants have placed great importance on their cultural and social absorption into Israeli society, and they have succeeded in attaining a degree of integration that is in striking contrast to the place occupied by Latinos in the United States. And yet, collectively speaking, it is only recently that Latin Americans in Israel have begun to assert their communal cultural identity. It was not until May 2002 that the first public congress on the contribution of Latin American immigration to Israel was held. In the past decade there has been a stream of autobiographies, biographies, and books documenting the history of Zionist organizations in Latin America and the contributions of immigrants from Latin America to the kibbutz movement.<sup>43</sup>

Another measure intended to raise the public profile of Latin American Israelis was the ceremony that took place in February 2006, on which occasion honorary membership in the Organization of Latin America, Spain and Portugal in Israel (OLEI), which has 25 branches around the country, was given to two immigrants of Argentine background. The honorees were neurosurgeon Dr. José Cohen, a leading member of the team that operated on former Prime Minister Ariel Sharon at the Hadassah Hospital in Jerusalem (and which included another Argentine-Israeli, Félix Umansky); and singer Pablo Rosenberg, who, born in Rosario, Argentina, in 1965, had arrived in Israel with his parents at the age of 10.

Music, along with language<sup>44</sup> and sports, has always been a major element of collective identity among Latin Americans in Israel, legal and illegal, Jews and non-Jews

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tuto Elcano de Estudios Internacionales y Estratégicos, see [http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/portal/rielcano/contenido?WCM\\_GLOBAL\\_CONTEXT=/Elcano\\_es/Zonas\\_es/Lengua+y+Cultura/ARI+50-2006](http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/portal/rielcano/contenido?WCM_GLOBAL_CONTEXT=/Elcano_es/Zonas_es/Lengua+y+Cultura/ARI+50-2006).

<sup>41</sup> Rosalie SITMAN - Ivonne LERNER, *La enseñanza del español como lengua extranjera en Israel*, in: Jesús Sánchez Lobato - Isabel Santos Gargallo (edd.), *Problemas y métodos en la enseñanza del español como lengua extranjera*, Madrid 1994, p. 591-602; Rosalie Sitman - Ivonne Lerner, *Queridas, odidas pero nunca ignoradas: Las telenovelas en le clase de ELE*, in: Francisco Javier Grande Alija et al. (edd.), *Tendencias actuales en la enseñanza del español como lengua extranjera II: Actas del VI Congreso Internacional de ASELE*, León, Spain, 1996, p. 245-247.

<sup>42</sup> D. HUROVITZ, *The Jewish Community and Aliyah from Argentina, 1962-1973*.

<sup>43</sup> See, for example, Dvora GROKOP SHECHNER, *A Political Girl* [Hebrew], Tel Aviv 2002; Noemi KITRON, *A Personal Saga: The Life of Moshe Kitron* [Hebrew], Jerusalem 2005; David HUROVITZ (ed.), *The Chutz HaTzair Generation in Argentina* [Hebrew] (n.p., n.d.); Irene STOLIAR, *Los Shomrim de los Andes: Historia del Movimiento Kidma-Hashomer Hatzair en Chile*, Tel Aviv 2007.

<sup>44</sup> Graciela SPECTOR-BITAN, *Spanish Is Well and Living in Israel: Spanish Maintenance among Second Generation of Latin Americans in Israel* (paper delivered at the 23<sup>rd</sup> Annual Conference of the Association for Israel Studies, The Open University of Israel, Raanana, June 2007).



alike. Research on migrant workers in Israel has shown that each community of foreign workers has a typical social activity that reflects their cultural background and sense of identity: Filipinos – beauty contests; Africans (mainly from Ghana) – church and religion; Romanians – social drinking; Latinos – religion, soccer and *salsa*.<sup>45</sup> With respect to soccer, for example, mention must be made of the Israeli branch of the fans of the Atlanta soccer club in Buenos Aires. Atlanta has been the soccer club of Villa Crespo, the quintessential Jewish neighbourhood of Buenos Aires, since 1922. The Atlanta soccer club has been a central force in the popular culture and collective ethnic identity of many Jews, especially unaffiliated Jews. No wonder, then, that Atlanta was the first Argentine soccer club to visit Israel (in April 1963) and that the fans of the club have an active branch in Israel.<sup>46</sup>

Finally, the Internet now provides the space where Latin American identity is asserted most noticeably. In recent years, there has been an exponential increase in the number of Latin-Israeli sites. Accessed by many non-Latinos, they serve simultaneously as an instrument of cohesion among Latinos and a means for their integration in Israel.

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<sup>45</sup> Yitzhak SCHNELL, *Foreign Workers in Southern Tel Aviv Yafo* [Hebrew], Jerusalem 1999, 42; Moshe MORAD, *Salsa and Falafel – Music and Identity among Illegal Latino Immigrants in Tel Aviv*, see <http://www.moshemorad.com/Hobby.html>.

<sup>46</sup> See Raanan REIN, *Los bohemios de Villa Crespo: Judíos y fútbol en la Argentina*, Buenos Aires 2012.