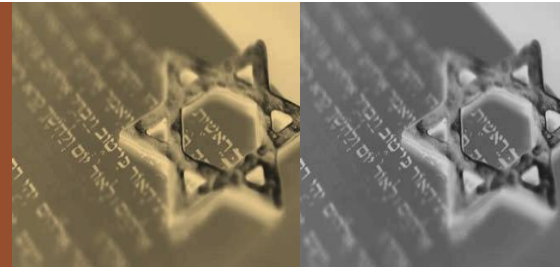


# CHAPTER TEN:

## COMMUNITY NUMBER THREE

### THE JEWS OF ARGENTINA



With a little under 190,000 Jews, the community in Argentina is the sixth largest Diaspora community in the world. It is also the most troubled. Despite many times of challenge and difficulty, up to the early 1990's, it was a vibrant and very successful community. But a whole series of events (that will be described below) shook up the community and sent it spiraling downhill in a giddy dive from which it has not recovered. Major international Jewish rescue operations are taking place in Argentina and Jews around the world must hope that the efforts succeed and manage to return the community to some kind of stability from which perhaps it can try and recover some of the glory of its past years. Welcome to Argentina!

#### **1. Who are the Jews in the national community? Where did they come from? How many are there? What is their geographical distribution inside the country?**

There are an estimated 187,000 Jews in Argentina today. They form the largest community by far in Central and South America. The present community dates back to the mid-nineteenth century. The fact is that there were secret Jews who came to the country several hundred years earlier, escaping from the Inquisition in Spain and Portugal but they all appear to have been absorbed in the outside community.

The founders of the current community consists of Ashkenazi Jews who came from western Europe (especially France) in the second part of the nineteenth century when Jews were allowed in without legal persecution. However the majority of the community traces itself back to the eastern European immigration that came to the country from the late 1880's. Some of these settled in the agricultural settlements that formed an important basis of the early community. Within a generation, many of these settlers had made their way to the towns, settling in the immigrant ghettos and tenements of the big towns, especially Buenos Aires. However, even today, there are small Jewish communities, including farmers, in some of the settlements.

Another element in the Jewish population was those Sephardi or Eastern Jews who came from Turkey, Syria or North Africa around the turn of the century. The population is currently divided in the ratio of approximately 85% to 15% in favour of the Ashkenazi element. The vast majority – around 90% of the Jews of Argentina – live in the capital city of Buenos Aires, with the rest divided up in relatively small communities such as Rosario, Cordoba and Santa Fe.



## 2. How can they be defined economically? What are their professions and occupations?

As mentioned, many of the earliest Jews were farmers on the Jewish farming settlements that developed at the end of the nineteenth century. Fairly soon, however, most Jews had moved to the cities and if the first of the city dwellers were peddlers and day labourers, they soon developed into traders, shopkeepers and artisans. Large numbers of the community have remained a middle-class population of traders and shopkeepers till recently but they have been augmented by a largely professional second or third generation who have made their mark in cultural fields such as art, films and music as well as journalism.

## 3. What is the religious orientation of the Jewish community?

Among the synagogue going Jews of Argentina, the population is divided between Jews who belong to Orthodox synagogues and those connected with the Conservative stream. There has been a Conservative movement active now for several decades including one large dominant synagogue in Buenos Aires and there is also a miniscule Reform movement. The congregants of these synagogues, it should be noted, do not necessarily identify with the respective streams on an ideological basis. What drives many of them, it seems, is a search for a sense of community that they find within their frameworks. There is also a small Haredi presence which includes those who identify with the Lubavich movement and a few others, but in the wider scheme of things they are very small.

In the context of discussing synagogue affiliation, it is important to mention that unlike the situation in some other national communities where the principal way to identify as a Jew is through religious affiliation and membership in a synagogue, the situation in Argentina has long been different. The identity of the majority of Jews in the community is not connected with religious affiliation but with a more cultural and political definition. Organisations such as the Jewish socialist Bund have lasted far longer than in almost any other places in the Jewish world and left-wing political frameworks within the Jewish community have made their mark socially and culturally.

## 4. What Jewish educational and cultural life is there in the community?

Traditionally, there has been a very strong and vibrant cultural and educational life within the Jewish community. There are currently about forty Jewish schools (of which some thirty are in Buenos Aires). In these schools there are some 16,000 students. A few years ago some 50% of the age group went to Jewish day schools, a very large percentage for any Diaspora country. Today, the numbers and the percentage are lower. However impressive these statistics still are in themselves, it is essential to see them in the context of the downward trend. Today's situation results largely from the fact that many parents have taken their children out of the system in recent years either because of economic difficulties or because of security fears. (Both of these themes will be explored below). Recently schools have closed



and many more are threatened with closure by the current economic crisis. In this respect, the situation is very serious and does not necessarily reflect a decline in Jewish identity and identification with the community and its institutions.

In cultural terms, the community has developed many vibrant institutions. Many of them were connected in one way or other with Zionism and Hebrew culture, both of which have left deep marks on the community. There are many Hebrew speakers in the native community as a result of the educational process through which many have passed. Up to recently, Zionist youth movements were strong in the community although they too have been affected by the recent difficulties.

In terms of the language of the community, the early generations tended towards Yiddish and Ladino, but the second and third generations moved comfortably into Spanish. Buenos Aires was one of the last places in the world to boast a Yiddish daily newspaper, although the Yiddish press disappeared essentially in the 1970's. The community has produced many writers. A 1991 survey counted more than three hundred Argentinian Jewish writers from the beginning of the twentieth century.

#### **5. What is the situation of assimilation and intermarriage in the community?**

There has been considerable assimilation in the community. There are cases of intermarriage recorded in the Jewish agricultural colonies in the early years of the twentieth century but the numbers went up greatly among the native born second and third generation. The numbers of out-marrieds today are very high, especially in the smaller provincial towns outside of Buenos Aires. There the Jewish population seems to be simply too small to allow satisfactory choice of marriage partners and the results of this situation are very clear. The current estimate for the whole of Argentina stands at about 45% of all marriages.

As far as assimilation in terms of loss of subjective Jewish identity is concerned, here too the numbers in recent years have climbed high. Recent surveys among Jewish students show that a high proportion are not concerned with their Jewishness.

#### **6. Are there any major historical circumstances that affected the inflow or outflow of Jews to and from the community?**

If we leave aside the original reasons that brought the Jews to Argentina (especially the pogroms and economic difficulties of the Eastern European community in the late nineteenth century), there are three major historical events that influenced many Jews to enter or leave the community. The years preceding the Holocaust were not hospitable for Jewish immigrants but nevertheless between thirty and fifty thousand refugees from Hitler's Europe are estimated to have entered Argentina by 1943. Ironically, this stream dried up almost completely in subsequent years as Jewish immigration was entirely stopped (although Argentina became one of the most hospitable places on earth for ex-Nazis).



A second event that had great effects on the community was the terrible period of the military government - the “government of the generals” that lasted from 1976 to 1983. One feature of this period was the kidnapping and torture of tens of thousand Argentinians. Well over a thousand of these were Jews and the vast majority were never found. This same period saw the emigration of about a million liberal Argentinians to countries such as Mexico, the United States, France and Spain and these included quite a large number of Jews. Some of these returned later when democracy was restored in 1983, but many left forever.

A third event that affected the community in terms of emigration was the setting up of the State of Israel. Since 1948 many tens of thousands of Jews are believed to have left Argentina and come on Aliyah. There are signs that the recent crises (see below) have paved the way for many more immigrants to Israel.

## **7. Are there welfare problems within the Jewish community? Are there welfare organisations within the community?**

One of the most persistent of the realities of Argentina over at least the last half-century is that of economic instability. For decades the Argentinian economy has been teetering on the brink of crisis and has sometimes gone over the brink plunging the country into economic chaos. The present period is clearly one such period but it is by no means the first.

In the early 1990’s, the government under President Carlos Menem, took some determined steps to gain control of the country’s runaway inflation. Linking the local currency to the dollar, they managed to break the violent inflation but in so doing they created a peso (the local coin) that was very strong which kept many of the local prices very high, and encouraged cheap imports especially from countries such as Brazil. These steps were very bad for the middle commercial class of traders and shopkeepers in which many Jews had found their place.

In addition, some major banks under Jewish ownership where both the Jewish community and many of the Jews in the community had invested their savings, went bankrupt. For many of the Jews in Buenos Aires in particular, the combination of these factors was disastrous and sent them tumbling down an economic ladder which had never been too stable. The situation has not improved in recent years, and many of the community have needed financial support of one kind or other. The bottom line in the Argentinian community is that the numbers of the Jewish poor has sky-rocketed in recent years. Large numbers of families that not so long ago belonged to the comfortable middle class, either as professionals or as business people have fallen down a steep slope towards poverty. Professional status is no longer seen as the key to economic stability. The phenomenon of the professionally unemployed is widespread and undermines the basic social-economic-educational strategy that most families had adopted to ensure a better future.

The community has its own welfare organisations including the very large Argentina Jewish Mutual Aid Society (AMIA), an Ashkenazi organisation that has become the



central community institution. But the crises of recent years have left the official community unable to cope on its own. Two other important players have moved into the vacuum. One is the local organisation “Tzedaka” set up by some of the wealthy members of the community but outside of the official community framework, and the other is the American Joint Distribution Committee, that has increased its investment in welfare projects in Argentina in recent years. Both organisations do an enormous amount of welfare work which spans a whole range of activities from distribution of food packages and medicines to help in the housing and employment field.

The situation at present is extremely serious. At least 20,000 Jews are in need of welfare – about 10% of the community and the number is increasing all the time. There are those who place the figure much higher. There are thousands of homeless. The pensioners and the elderly are especially hard hit as the value of pensions is eroded and basic needs and services become more expensive. The welfare institutions in the community are trying their best to help but there is increasingly a feeling that without the mobilisation of the Jewish world as a whole, the crisis will not be adequately dealt with. The Joint and the Jewish Agency are moving strongly into the vacuum and are bringing much larger sums to bear than they have done in previous years. International Jewish aid to Jewish communities in distress is, of course, not new. But in the Argentinian case there is a factor operating that has rarely been seen before. The community until recently had an image – and a self-image – of vibrancy and success. This is a successful community that has fallen on bad times, because of external economic and social factors. It is part of a wider picture. In Argentina as a whole, the poverty level is very high. The whole country, in a sense, is fighting the same battle. But there are, as mentioned, some specific aspects to the Jewish plight.

## **8. What is the feeling of physical security of the Jewish community? Has there been and is there today a problem of anti-Semitism?**

Compared with the situation in many other western countries, the Jews of Argentina have experienced many periods of relatively recent anti-Semitism and the resultant feeling of insecurity accompanies many Jews today. The first major outbreak of hostility to the Jews followed the outbreak of the Russian revolution. This was a time of violent labour unrest in Argentina and the blame was placed largely at the feet of the Jewish radicals and socialists. Attacks on Jews broke out and these came to a climax in the Buenos Aires pogrom of January 1919. This was a seminal event that caused many Jews to question the faith that they had placed in the government up to this time.

The 1930's were a bad time for the Jews. The military intervention in civilian life led to many anti-Jewish measures and the country was involved in a downward spiral of chaos and unrest, conditions that never bode well for a Jewish population in Diaspora. Such was the case now.



The mid-fifties were once again difficult but the situation worsened after Israel's capture and abduction from Argentina of Adolf Eichman by Israel in 1960 and his trial in Jerusalem the following year. Assaults on Jews became widespread and bombings of Jewish buildings and institutions was common. Governments came and went but the attacks on the Jews continued, often condoned by the government. By the mid-sixties Argentina was a world centre of anti-Semitism. Figures for 1967 show that out of 313 incidents of anti-Semitism recorded world-wide, 143 occurred in Argentina.

The rise of the military regime of the Generals in 1976 showed an increase in activities against Jews. The regime was dedicated to crushing the liberal and radical unrest and it used the most brutal methods to suppress the opposition. As mentioned the regime claimed well over a thousand Jewish victims, and evidence of recent years suggests that the Jews came in for harsher torture than other prisoners. When the regime was toppled and democracy restored in 1983, the security situation of the Jews improved immeasurably but in the early 90's, two major terror attacks against Israel and the local community, shattered the feeling of fragile security that had built up over the last decade. In 1992, the Israeli embassy was bombed with the loss of some thirty lives and in the summer of 1994, the AMIA building, the centre of the Jewish community institutions, was blown up at the cost of about a hundred lives. President Carlos Menem had previously appeared as a friend of the Jews and had shown outrage when a synagogue was desecrated but here no progress was made in the investigations and Jewish distrust of the integrity of the police and the state has grown strong in subsequent years.

All in all, the Jews of Argentina have suffered very badly over the past fifty years. There is no question that there is anxiety and concern among the Jews of Argentina regarding what the future might bring in this respect. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the current crisis has, as yet, not manifested itself in terms of anti-Semitic outbreaks among the local population. Given the history of the community, however, it is easy to understand an underlying concern on this point.

## 9. What are the major problems on the agenda of the Jewish community?

All the major problems of the community have been outlined. Economic crisis – both individual and to a large extent, collective has been a major factor in community life for decades. The present uncertainty in the country, however, has, increased the fear and uncertainty considerably. The Jewish community is sliding downhill economically and socially with larger and larger numbers of Jews facing poverty and economic ruin. One result is that many Jews are withdrawing from active participation in different institutions of the Jewish community (schools, synagogue activities, social and cultural activities) because they simply do not have the economic means to continue to be involved in the costly activities of the community. Marginalisation of substantial sections of the community due to economic factors rather than assimilation and alienation, are relatively new problems and offer very difficult challenges for the community's future. In addition to all of these problems, the anti-Semitism which seems so endemic in Argentina has



done little to reassure the Jews that better times are ahead and to make them feel more confidence in their future.

Assimilation and intermarriage have taken a heavy toll on the community. To make things worse, a number of top community officials have been discredited in economic scandals and bank closures in recent years and this has left many in the community distrustful of its official leaders. At this particular point in time, the community faces a number of very large problems. Taken individually, they would be challenging. Taken all together, there are many that might find them overwhelming.

#### **10. What are the demographic trends within the community? Can anything be said about the future of the community?**

The community at present numbers under 200,000. A generation ago it was over 300,000. Some of the numbers have been lost to Aliyah, while others represent emigration to western countries. But much of the drop in numbers represents assimilation and intermarriage. One of the seeming truths of Jewish demographics is that when a community is in difficulty with its back to the wall, it is sometimes a prelude to a new stronger coming together in social and cultural terms. There are perhaps some signs that such a situation is beginning to develop in Argentina but it is too early to say whether or not such a cultural and social renaissance is on the point of happening. Certainly, there are signs that many Jews want to leave Argentina, either to Israel or to other destinations.

Part of the answer to this question depends on which of these trends gets the upper hand in the community. In other words, will the centrifugal tendencies leading to more people leaving the community either through assimilation and intermarriage or through emigration and Aliyah, be offset by the forces that could lead to a tighter community, bound together by a sense of common destiny in difficult times.

#### **11. What is the general contribution of the community to Argentina as a whole?**

It is difficult to talk about a specific contribution that the Jews have made to Argentina. One notable feature of their community life has been the left-wing orientation of much of the community and this has expressed itself, among other things, in the strong Jewish participation in the socialist and anarchist movements that developed in Argentina in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, since the government and the institutions of state made strong attempts to uproot the phenomenon of left-wing politics in general, it is questionable to what extent this can really be considered a contribution to Argentina. Generally it might be said that Jews have attempted to make a strong contribution to freedom, civil rights and democracy in a land where the regime has often been oppressive and hostile to liberal ideas. Apart from that, the Jews have contributed strongly in certain cultural fields, especially literature (where the partly Jewish Jorge Luis Borges, strongly involved with Jewish themes in his writing, became known as one of the significant



writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century), and have played a significant role as an educated middle class in a country often plagued by instability and economic crisis.

## 12. What is the relationship with Israel in the community as a whole?

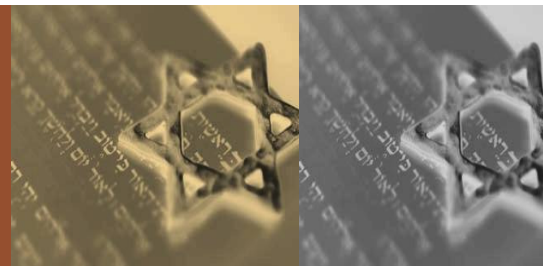
The Jews of Argentina have long boasted a strong interest in Zionism. The first Zionist organization was set up in the Jewish agricultural settlements in 1897 and from there its influence spread to other parts of the community. The cultural and political character of the community expressed itself largely in a strong Zionist orientation and an education system that emphasized both Zionism and the learning of Hebrew as a spoken language. Tens of thousands of Argentinians have made Aliyah since the founding of the state of Israel. With the largely left wing socialistic atmosphere which pervaded the community in general and the Zionist youth movements specifically, it is not surprising that many found their way to the kibbutzim and other forms of pioneering settlement. Argentinian Jews who have come on Aliyah to Israel have tended to integrate relatively easily into their new country because so many knew the Hebrew language before they came and had more than a passing acquaintance with the reality of the country.

Since the economic and other problems became so acute, many started to consider Aliyah as an option and in the last few years, a number of initiatives have been made by mayors of Israeli towns who have tried to bring Argentinian olim to their towns, seeing them as a strong and positive element which they would like to attract to their towns. All in all, some 50% of all Argentinian Jews are believed to have visited Israel.





## Introducing Argentinian Jewish voices.



**Alberto was born at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to a family of Jewish farmers in one of the early Jewish agricultural settlements. He is twenty three years old.**

*"They all ask me if I want to remain a farmer. It's difficult to say this because I feel like a traitor to my parents but the honest answer is no. My father and mother decided to be farmers. They took advantage of an offer that was made to them to leave Russia and start a better life as Jewish farmers in the Argentine. They took the offer with both hands and have never looked back. That was their challenge and they rose to it and succeeded in building a new life for themselves. I feel differently – or at least, perhaps I should say that I want the same kind of challenge. I want to start a new life for myself, conquering an aspect of life which up to now had been closed to me.*

*I want to go to the town. I want to go into a trade and start a small shop or a business of my own. My parents laugh and say that I hanker for the life of my grandparents and those who came before them, generations of Jewish traders in Russia, who made some kind of a living from buying and selling – "luftgescheft" – air business - is what my parents call this. They say that they decided to get something solid under their belt and that there is nothing as solid as land, as crops in a field or cattle in a barn. They say I'm crazy, nostalgic, sentimental. I say that I want to take advantage of the new opportunities for Jews that are opening up in the cities. This is a great place for Jews and it is going to get greater. The future is in the cities, and I want to be there to take advantage of it. The land is the past. I am grateful for whatever it gave my family. But the future lies elsewhere, of that I'm sure."*

**Sylvia is David's great granddaughter. She lives in Buenos Aires where she works as a translator. She is twenty three years old.**

*"My great grandfather moved off the land and we have been a city family ever since. That's what happened to the old Jewish farming families. We've changed in almost every way from the lives of the founders who came over to start the first Jewish farms. Romantic ideas they had! Farmers, pioneers, Yiddish speakers...very little of that still lives on. We are not religious, we are left wing in our politics, we are an educated urban middle class – or at least we were up to a few years ago. Then it all started to crash down on top of us. I don't know what middle class means any more. I have two uncles who are unemployed doctors, and a cousin who was trained as an engineer and now works collecting garbage for the municipality! What's the world coming to? I know only that our world – our tight, comfortable, Jewish, middle-class professional world, where education was always seen as the passport to a better life – has fallen apart. I am ashamed to say – no, not ashamed, just very, very sad – that I have spotted an occasional acquaintance looking into trashcans to see if there is*



*anything that can be used or sold. Now that's not typical but it happens. The bombings, the economy, the bank scandals, they all blew our lives totally apart and we spend long hours thinking how and if we can get our lives together. Some have taken advantage of the Israeli government's offers, but that's no solution for 200,000 people! And anyway, I know that it's not so easy over there either, whatever the mayors of Israeli towns who have come to visit us, tend to say. I hope that things will get better, but at the moment it's difficult to see how that can happen. My sister took her kids out of Jewish schools because she could no longer pay. The schools have emptied out and some have closed their doors. And this was our pride and joy, at least for those of us who feel still strongly Jewish. Maybe my great great grandparents were right when they said that you need to produce food and work in something solid. I remember that saying. It's been passed down in the family. I don't think that the farmers of today are doing so well either, but I understand the sentiment. When everything around you seems so unstable, you need something to hang on to. That's exactly what I'm feeling that we haven't got any more."*

