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## ARGENTINE JEWRY BETWEEN DICTATORSHIP AND DEMOCRACY

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**Argentina: Caught Between Spanish Catholicism and the Enlightenment / Condemning the Jews as a Liberalizing Force / Falklands Defeat Brings in Democracy / Revival of Jewish Culture / Democratization Poses Dilemmas for Jews / Freedom of Speech and Anti-Semitism / How Jews Were Caught in the War Against Subversion / The Future: Anti-Semitism and Assimilation**

### **Argentina: Caught Between Spanish Catholicism and the Enlightenment**

The Argentine nation is undergoing a difficult period of transition from dictatorship to democracy, with no clear prognosis of freedom's survival. As Argentine citizens, Jews are experiencing the same difficulties as everyone else, but the alternation of authoritarian and liberal governments poses particular dilemmas for them. There are Argentine Jews who are as apprehensive of democratization as they are of a return to dictatorship.

For those who associate democracy with flourishing Jewish communities, it is difficult to understand such apprehension. But Jewish life in Latin America evolved in a

radically different historical context than it did in Europe or the United States. In the southern Americas, the legal and consensual grounds for Jewish citizenship have never been accepted as valid by large segments of the population.

Two divergent and conflicting traditions produced contemporary Argentine society: Spanish Catholicism and Enlightenment thought. Each of these traditions animates distinct institutions that are antithetical to one another and that have never reached mutual accommodation. Their ongoing struggle for supremacy supplies the dynamic of Argentine history and accounts for the otherwise baffling shifts between authoritarian and democratic modes of government.

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An Iberian heritage bequeathed to Argentina its core institutions: the church, the landed gentry, and the army. Each of these is older than the Argentine state, and each has at one period or another controlled the state to the exclusion of all other elements. Each one categorically repels Jews. This exclusivity characterizes also the institutions spun off from the original three: the national judiciary, the navy and air force, and the diplomatic corps. These core institutions of Argentine society do not recognize Jews as authentic Argentines.

Argentina might have remained just a fragment of medieval Iberia had it not been for two factors related to events in Europe rather than to those in the western hemisphere. The first is that independence was achieved as a byproduct of the Napoleonic Wars. Consequently, Argentina's constitution reflects the enlightened spirit of that revolutionary age. The second factor is that, partly because of this constitution, the country was flooded by immigrants. Most Jews emigrated to Argentina during these days of liberal ascendancy, and, beguiled by the promise of a free life in an open society, struck root in what they took to be congenial soil.

#### Condemning the Jews as a Liberalizing Force

However, the antagonistic elements in Argentine society never blended into one universally accepted version of national identity. Argentine traditionalists reject the enlightenment vision of the nation. To them liberal democracy undermines the authoritarian state; religious toleration undermines the authority of the church; and industrialization converts passive peasants into a militant proletariat. Traditionalists (*nacionalistas* as they refer to themselves) fear that political freethinkers on university faculties subvert students from proper ways of thinking; film-makers subvert public mores through the distribution of pornography; and psychoanalysts subvert the Christian family by licensing the liberation of women from the control of *pater potestas*. In all these liberalizing forces, *nacionalistas* see the work of Jews, Marx, Freud and Marcuse—all members of the "race" that rejected Jesus—are responsible for degrading Argentine society. This condemnation has extended to the point where according to one social critic, "being Jewish has become a category of guilt."

These ideas, far from being confined to the fringe of society, pervade the institutions that

institutions that periodically re-assert their dominance over the nation. The junta that came to power in 1976 had the support of a large portion of the population which favored suppression of armed subversive bands that were harrowing civilian society. The *proceso* (the Process of National Reorganization, as the military rulers called their regime) used the subversion as an excuse to launch a sweeping attack on liberal sectors of society. University faculties, psychologists and psychotherapists, social workers, and student activists were among the special targets singled out for torture and "disappearance." Among these groups, Jews appeared in numbers far greater than their proportion to the population; among prisoners, Jews were subjected to special humiliation and torture.

#### Falklands Defeat Brings in Democracy

While the military took control of Argentina through an act of will, democracy came to the country in 1983 by default. The military were not discredited by their horrendous abuse of human rights nor by their inability to control the economy (inflation was running at 600 percent per year when they left office). It was their bungling of the Falklands/Malvinas War that resulted in their loss of power. Thousands of Argentines had poured into the Plaza de Mayo to cheer the government's decision to recover these insignificant islands. As traditional guardian of the nation's honor, the military were expected to restore Argentina's national territory and tarnished reputation in one swift and glorious battle. Unexpectedly, the British Army fought back, unlike unarmed Argentine civilians whom the government was massacring daily. The army's defeat, combined with revelations of the officers' abuse of their troops in the antarctic winter, was not tolerated. Having lost their legitimacy, the military was forced to step down and call national elections.

The elections of October 1983 brought to power the Radical Party headed by Raul Alfonsin. The new president had a public record of opposition to the dictatorship and of personal devotion to democratic norms. But having a president dedicated to democracy is not enough to ensure its success. In the past twenty years, Argentina has had no period of democracy lasting longer than four years, and there are few people around with the experience of implementing a democratic system of government. The judiciary and civil service were padded with

appointees of the *proceso* whom the new government, committed to democratic behavior, declined to dismiss. Furthermore, Argentine culture offers only equivocal support to democracy. The authoritarian nature of the family, the church, and police power exert a powerful pull in the direction of strongman rule. These forces cannot be transformed overnight. Democracy as a style of life must be learned and practiced. The question on everyone's mind throughout 1984 was, "Would there be time?"

### Revival of Jewish Culture

The elections touched off heady days of celebration in Argentina among the many who yearned for a dismantling of the government's repressive apparatus and return to a life free of fear. Cultural activity exploded with the pent-up creativity of artists who had been stifled by the dictatorship. In the frenzy of publishing and broadcasting, film-making, radio and TV production, and the staging of drama and dance, Jewish names and Jewish themes surged to the surface with a vigor that startled anyone who was aware of the anti-Semitism of previous years. A *porteno* (citizen of Buenos Aires) could attend a ballet interpretation of *The Diary of Anne Frank*, a concert of songs by Mozart and Grieg sung in Yiddish, the presentation of a new magazine of Sephardic culture, or a lecture on the alienation of Jewish Argentine writers. Perhaps most startling was the appearance at bus stops of posters announcing the return of *Nueva Sion*, organ of the leftwing, Zionist youth group Hashomer Hatzair that had been suppressed by the *proceso*. "We're back!" exulted the paper's first headline.

Jews became as visible in politics as in the arts. The enlightened Argentine electorate always elected Jews to public office when given the opportunity to do so. This time, six Jews were elected to the Chamber of Deputies; one was chosen by his peers to become house majority leader. In the Senate, the chair of the Foreign Relations Committee went to a Jew. Considerable numbers of Jews were appointed to positions in the executive branch, including all three subsecretaries in one ministry and about one-third of the deans at the University of Buenos Aires. With liberals in the ascendancy, society seemed totally open to Jews.

### Democratization Poses Dilemmas for Jews

Some Jews now began to worry that they were becoming too visible. After all the integration of Jews into Argentine society could be annulled once more by the return of the military to power. The coexistence of two Argentine cultures, side by side, lends a cyclical character to Argentine politics. In the past the failure of civilian government to resolve the country's economic and social problems led to military takeovers, and this could happen again. Convinced of the inevitability of another coup, some regard it as foolhardy to adopt political or artistic positions now that will open them to reprisal later. Thus, democracy poses insoluble problems; its operation requires citizen participation, but the price of participation a few years hence may be physical torture and execution. Caught in this dilemma, parents are particularly concerned for the safety of their college-age children, for the universities are the traditional training ground for politics. As the old parties resumed operation and graffiti reappeared on university walls, Jewish parents feared that their sons and daughters would be the first victims of the next round of repression.

Democratization posed other dilemmas for Jews. Jewish organizations had increased their membership during the *proceso*, apparently because of the perception that these offered a safe haven. The military did not overtly interfere in the functioning of Jewish institutions, a fact that contributed substantially to the confusion abroad as to whether or not the junta was anti-Semitic.

During the period of democratization, a commonly expressed fear was that, with the opening up of society, Jewish youth would quickly assimilate. In Argentina, while anti-Jewish prejudice is strong, assimilation has always been easy. Liberal Argentines accept Jews so long as they stop being Jewish -- a position enunciated very clearly by, among others, Juan B. Justo, founder of the Argentine Socialist Party and himself married to a Jew. Today, one in every three marriages by Jews is to a non-Jew, and the recent estimate that there are only 230,000 Jews left in the country attests to the shrinkage of the community. As the majority society presses for assimilation and the organized Jewish community opposes conversion to Judaism, the trend continues.<sup>1</sup>

Some community leaders appear to believe

that the survival of Jews as Jews can be better assured under a repressive regime that causes them to band together than in a democracy where entry into general society is welcome and attractive options abound. The slogan of these Jews is that "anti-Semitism is not the enemy; assimilation is."

Curiously, the dual threat of assimilation into a liberalized society or a possible return of the military has had the effect of turning some Jews in the direction of religion, one they have never taken before. Historically, this has been a secular community. Out of indifference, perhaps, or a sentimental attachment to the past, Argentine Jews allowed the Orthodox rabbinate exclusive control over the levers of religious life in a way similar to what developed in Israel at the same time. The result was an overemphasis on the ritualization of religion and the alienation of successive generations of Jews. In the aftermath of the repression, various Orthodox groups also rejoiced in the new freedoms allowed. Schools and yeshivas were established under the sponsorship of the Satmar and Lubavicher Chasidim, Agudath Israel, and Mizrahi. They are funded in large part by parents who, themselves the products of a secular upbringing, were stunned by the loss of their children to assimilation or to radical politics. They hope that, cloistered in religious schools, their children will develop a firm Jewish identity and at the same time be safely removed from Argentine politics.

#### Freedom of Speech and Anti-Semitism

The lifting of censorship and the emergence of a marketplace of free opinion present special concerns to the Jewish community, especially in a country that harbors as many anti-Semites as does Argentina. When an Italian touring company presented an iconoclastic play, a mob of demonstrators turned out chanting, "Mazorca, mazorca, judios a la horca!"\* During the repression, all demonstrations were prohibited, and many publications were suppressed, including anti-Semitic ones. Dictators who control the lives of nations can also control anti-Semitic manifestations when it is in their interest to do so. Under democratic rules of the

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\* Mazorca refers to the armed bands that enforced the will of the nineteenth-century dictator, Rosas. The rest of the phrase means "Jews to the gallows."

game, freedom of expression poses a severe problem for the Jewish community. Efforts to censor anti-Semitic utterances set the Jewish community in opposition to those liberal elements who might otherwise be their allies. Nevertheless, it was the decision of the kehillah (the umbrella organization of Argentine Jewry) to lobby to have such publications declared illegal.

Free speech also poses internal difficulties for the kehillah, whose form of community organization was imported from Eastern Europe. Transplanted to an entirely different environment, Jewish leaders continued trying to make it work as it had in the old country without reexamining its fundamental premises. Whereas in Europe the kehillah had carried out certain quasi-governmental functions such as selecting young men for the army and collecting taxes, the Latin American kehillot were never called on to fulfill such functions. Under European conditions, the basic organizational principle of the kehillah was unity against society at large and government in particular that would utilize divisions among the Jews to the latter's disadvantage. In Argentina, membership in the kehillah is voluntary, yet this unity of opinion remained the basic organizational principle of the kehillah. The expression of unsanctioned opinions--especially before a non-Jewish audience--is particularly frowned upon. The decision by an individual to act outside the boundaries of the kehillah whether through intermarriage, participation in a non-sponsored action, or refusal to pay contributions to the United Jewish Appeal placed him or her beyond the limits of the community for which the leaders are willing to take responsibility.

Democratization of Argentine society was perceived by many kehillah leaders as a threat to Jewish unity. For example, when the Jewish Movement for the Defense of Human Rights announced it would lead a public demonstration against the growing wave of anti-Semitism that preceded the national election of 1983, its leaders were denounced as communists, *olpistas* (members of the PLO) and homosexuals, and the community was urged not to attend. Activity which is at variance with the position adopted by the kehillah leadership is not tolerated. Diversity appears as a threat and not as a rich mother lode of intelligence and creativity from which new energy can be drawn. The kehillah's posture in the face of democratization was correspondingly problematic.

### How Jews Were Caught in the War Against Subversion

As the momentum of Argentine politics picked up, destroying the political stasis of the repression, one group of people was left increasingly far behind. Fixated on the past by their inability to find out what had happened to their lost children, the families of the *desaparecidos* (disappeared persons) face peculiar difficulties in adjusting to democracy. The lack of evidence left many of them unable to bring their tormentors to justice. As the epoch of repression recedes into the past and voices coming from the right (and particularly the church) call for reconciliation and the covering over of old wounds, those who have been deprived of justice feel themselves cheated and psychologically unable to move forward to normalcy with the rest of the country. Though they follow with interest the trial of the nine accused military leaders, they believe that justice is not reaching down far enough into the ranks of those who tortured, executed and trashed their children into unmarked graves.

Furthermore, the differential treatment of Jews and non-Jews in captivity, of which the survivors have given ample testimony, casts new light on the status of Jews as Argentines. Many of the *madres* (mothers of the *desaparecidos*) have lost their confidence that there can be a future for Jews in this country. One woman showed me a copy of the ship's manifest of the *Weser*, the vessel that brought the first Jewish colonists to Argentina in 1889. The last name on the list was a boy who became her grandfather. The agricultural colonists thought they were rooting themselves in the Argentine nation at the most basic level, but a century later their grandchildren and great-grandchildren were attacked and slaughtered as aliens.

For those who did not suffer a personal loss during the repression, democratization forced an evaluation of their own behavior. Press censorship during the *proceso* had kept the facts of the dirty internal war secret, or worse, muddled. Many assumed that the kidnappings and assassinations they heard about were either due to guerrilla attacks or to the government's response to guerrilla attacks. Quite a few Argentines first heard about the government's dirty war while travelling abroad, where reports of government atrocities had been published in 1980 by Amnesty International and an investigatory commission of the Organization of American States. By that date, the guerrillas had been eliminated, but

government terror continued against suspect elements of society. The violence of the subversion masked the violence and illegality of the government's response, and likewise licensed its continuance long after the subversion had been liquidated. If the guerrillas expected people to withdraw their support from government because of its fascist overreaction, they were wrong. People acquiesced.

Following democratization and the freeing of the Argentine press, the atrocity stories came out. Persons of any moral weight had to ask themselves whether they had behaved ethically during the repression. One who has not lived in similar circumstances cannot assign blame, but it raises an objective question: in a time of terrible danger, what can be reasonably expected from human beings? What is one's moral obligation to society? To the Jewish community? To family? To oneself? With democratization, people came to realize that the repression had taken place not only in the streets and in private homes but within their minds; they had suppressed what they did not want to know. As the irrefutable evidence of massive despoliation of human rights came to light, people began asking themselves why they had not asked more questions at the time these events occurred. From this agonizing self-appraisal, few emerged as heroes.

The assessment of most Argentine Jews is that the government's war was not against the Jews, but against subversion, which hit Jews harder as members of the social sectors that were under attack. While acknowledging that many innocent persons were wasted by the government, some community leaders stated that they did not consider those labeled by the government as subversives to be Jews. In other words, the Jewish community, like the rest of Argentine society, split along class and ideological lines. Writing off Jewish liberals and radicals and, incidentally, many innocent Jews who were arrested by mistake obviously made it easier for community leaders to advise Jewish organizations outside Argentina that no unusual anti-Semitic activity was going on in Argentina. As proof, it was always possible to point to the Jewish institutions, which were thriving. No wonder the international community was confused!

### The Future: Anti-Semitism and Assimilation

"Anti-Semitism is not the problem, assimilation is." This cliché is repeated by Jewish community leaders throughout the continent. Perhaps some of the mystery attached to this

eagerness to deny anti-Semitism has been cleared up; but what of assimilation? Is it really, as these community leaders imply, a question of desertion by weak and ill-educated young Jews, a matter that can be rectified if only intermarriage can be stopped and the correct educational formula can be found--and funded?

The Jewish understanding of the problem ignores the societal command that Jews must abandon their Jewishness if they are to be accepted as Argentines. It ignores the truth, stated most succinctly by Jean-Paul Sartre, that the demand for total assimilation is at its heart anti-Semitic.

The passage to democracy, stormy for all Argentines, is particularly traumatic for Jews. The overt anti-Semitic acts that were licensed by the repression are no more, but isolated anti-Semitic incidents can be expected to recur and to find sympathetic resonance at the heart of the nation's core institutions. Society has opened up to Jewish creativity and Jewish political initiatives, affording a taste of what life could be like in this beautiful, misgoverned land. But liberal ascendancy is not assured, and even if it were, anti-Semitism can take a variety of forms, including the demand that Jews

cease to be Jews. What democratization offers is the opportunity for Argentina to achieve harmonization of the country's two warring souls, the *nacionalista* and the liberal. If this were to happen, the matching Jewish responses that have been noted here -- ghettoization or assimilation -- would be rendered obsolete, and Jews could take the place which they have earned -- through their lives and through their deaths-- in Argentine society.

NOTE:

1. For the latest projections, see U.O. Schmelz and Sergio Della Pergola, "The Demography of Latin American Jewry," in *American Jewish Year Book* (1985):51-102.

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