

**Argentinian Jewish History.**

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**Published version**

WATSON, Andrew (2021). Argentinian Jewish History. Chaverim (Novemb), 4-8.

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## Argentinian Jewish History.

We were joined before our Shabbat service on the 16<sup>th</sup> October, 2021 by Claudia Hercman from Buenos Aires for a continuation of her history of the Jews in Argentina. The first instalment, delivered by her some weeks ago, and written about by Lise Magnollay in the last edition of *Chaverim*, was much concerned with immigration beginning in the Nineteenth Century, mainly from Russia. This time we heard a history of very substantial emigration, which took place in three waves during the last century. At the end of the Second World War the Argentinian Jewish population stood at half a million people. It is now some two hundred thousand.

Claudia had previously taken us up to the period between the World Wars to which she returned. Those years were unfortunately disturbed by the growth of a well supported Nazi movement and accompanying anti-semitism. We were shown pictures, almost indistinguishable from those in Germany, of an indoor rally, attended by thousands, in Buenos Aires, to celebrate the annexation of Austria in 1938.

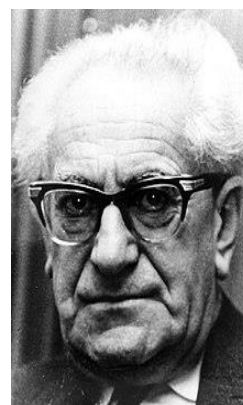
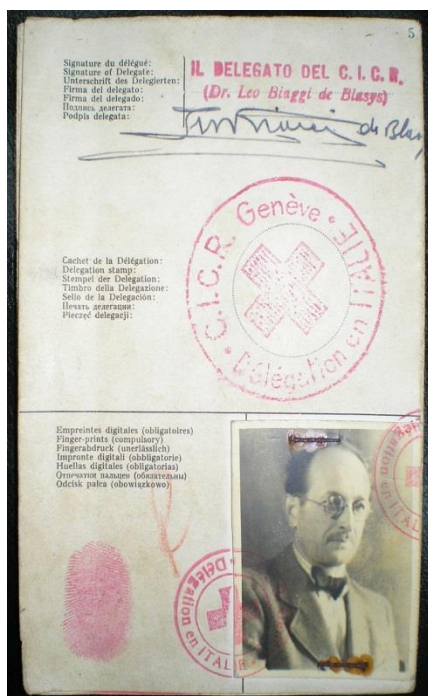
Jewish immigration, which had stopped during the First World War, resumed in the 1920s. In the 1930s it became necessary for immigrants to have received an invitation from a citizen resident in Argentina. Immigrants increasingly came from Europe to escape mounting threats.

During the Second World War Argentina was neutral, despite the presence of an influential Nazi movement and sentiment. Nazi sympathies however resulted in instructions to embassies in Europe to refuse visa applications from people expelled from their countries and those who had supported the Spanish Republic – a thinly veiled policy to exclude communists and Jews. The Argentinian ambassador in Berlin refused to help one hundred Argentinian Jews stranded in Germany. Most were murdered in death camps. What lay behind Argentinian neutrality was preservation of trade with Britain then the country's pre-eminent trading partner. Neutrality also ensured Argentinian vessels were not attacked by the German navy.

The year 1946 saw Juan Peron elected as president. Unlike previous aristocratic and conservative governments, his provided social security and rights for workers. Mainly because of this he was supported by a number of Jews who had previous left wing allegiances. The Peronism Party drew support from both the left and the right and today is supported by about half the electorate, including some Jews.

There is an escapable very dark side of Peron's period of office 1946 to 1955. A former friend of Mussolini, Peron allowed many Nazi war criminals to settle in Argentina. A large number fled Europe to Latin America via escape networks known as Rat Lines (*Rattenlinien* in German). (By coincidence, four days after Claudia's presentation, Philippe Sands QC, an eminent lawyer, historian

and academic, gave a reading at Middle Temple Library from his recently published book *The Ratline: Love, Lies and Justice on the Trail of a Nazi Fugitive*. ). There were three networks. One began in Scandinavia, another in Spain and a third was run by sympathetic elements in the Vatican and Italy. The latter overwhelmingly accounted for those who arrived in Argentina. Amongst them in 1950 was Klaus Eichmann, one of the major organisers of the Holocaust, who had obtained a Red Cross Passport under the name of Ricardo Klement, and later sent for his family from Germany, with whom he then lived in a suburb of Buenos Aires – surprisingly his family still bearing the name Eichmann. Suspicions as to Eichmann’s identity were aroused in a German Jewish immigrant whose daughter had met one of his sons. Information was passed to Simon Weisenthal, who dedicated his life to bringing Nazi war criminals to justice, in Austria and then Fritz Bauer, prosecutor-general of the state of Hesse in West Germany who, because the West German government had previously declined to consider extradition proceedings and feared Eichmann might be warned by elements within it and flee, contacted Mossad. In 1960 Eichmann was captured, interrogated and secretly transported to Israel by Mossad, and Shin Bet, agents, to face charges at trial that included war crimes, crimes against humanity and crimes against the Jewish people. His defence that he was simply following orders was rejected. He was convicted on all counts and sentenced to death – the only person in Israel who has ever been by a court. The trial was widely followed in the media and was later the subject of several books, including Hannah Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem* in which she used the phrase "the banality of evil" to describe Eichmann.



Fritz Bauer.

The false passport used by Eichmann to enter and settle in Argentina and Fritz Bauer who played a key role in his capture.

Eichmann's removal and trial in Israel led to sections of society to be enraged as what they saw as invasion of their country's sovereignty. Hostility to Jews and some attacks resulted, leading to departures to other countries – the first wave of Jewish emigration from Argentina.

The second wave occurred during the period of military dictatorship, the Junta, which began in 1976 and ended in 1983 – a period marked by severely brutal repression. A particularly vicious aspect of this was the “disappearance”, torture and murder at secret locations of at least thirty thousand people, mainly young and left wing. Mothers of the disappeared banded together and formed an organisation, “The Mothers of May”, to investigate what had happened to their children. Each day they demonstrated in white clothing outside the house of government in Buenos Aires. Amongst those kidnapped and killed were over nineteen hundred Jews, a vastly higher proportion than in the general population (Twelve percent as opposed to less than one percent) . This, and knowledge that the dictatorship was riddled with Nazi ideas, led many Jews to leave the country. Some of those in direct danger were assisted to escape by Marshall Meyer, an American Rabbi who had arrived in Argentina to help establish the Conservative Movement. During those years at least two international Jewish organisations requested support from the governments of Brazil and the United States in case an evacuation of Argentine Jews proved necessary.

The humiliating defeat of the Argentinian military forces in 1982 in the Falklands (Malvinas) War did much to precipitate the fall of the dictatorship and the return of democracy in 1983.

During the 1982 war with Britain around 250 Jewish soldiers served in the Falklands and strategic points in Patagonia. (During their service, some suffered anti-semitic attacks by officers and other ranks.) After requests were made the Argentine Junta allowed five rabbis to visit them. These were the only chaplains permitted to accompany Argentinian forces during the conflict and the only non-Catholic chaplains ever permitted to serve in the military. According to Hernán Dobry, whose book “*Los Rabinas De Malvinas*”, published in 2012, was referred to by Claudia Hercman, the rabbis were permitted to visit Jewish soldiers because Argentina had purchased arms from Israel, and did not want to risk the relationship "for the sake of five rabbis". Some of the young conscripts became Bar Mitzvah during their period of conscription.

The elected government which replaced the military dictatorship established a group of thirteen honourable persons to investigate the disappearances. One of its members was Rabbi Meyer. Its report was entitled *Nunca Mas* ( Never Again). In 1988 the Argentine parliament passed a law against racism and antisemitism. This was followed in 1989 by the ordering the release of files about the country's role as a haven for Nazi war criminals.

The third wave of Jewish emigration from Argentina took place in the 1990s, mainly to Israel, Iberia and the United States, in the wake of two bomb attacks in Buenos Aires. The first took place in 1992 in the residential area which accommodates diplomatic buildings of a number of countries. An explosive device

in truck driven by a suicide bomber detonated in front of the Israeli Embassy. The building was completely destroyed. Twenty nine people were killed and two hundred and forty two were injured, among the victims were 4 Israelis. No one yet has been prosecuted for this attack. The second occurred in July 1994 when the centre housing AMIA (Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina - Argentine Israelite Mutual Association), the umbrella organisation for Jewish organisations in Argentina, also suffered a suicide bomb attack. Eighty five people were killed and more than two hundred were wounded. The AMIA building was located in the heart of the Jewish commercial area. Unlike the bombing of the embassy, which many believed could have happened in any capital city, reflecting relations in the Middle East, this attack was seen as striking at the very roots of the Jewish Argentinian community. Three days later a big demonstration attended by Jews and non-Jews took place in front of the National Congress. The centre was rebuilt five years after the attack. The protective barrier in front of the building (similar security walls are now found in front of almost all Jewish and American buildings) bears the names of all who died. Every 18<sup>th</sup> July a demonstration calling for justice for them takes place outside. Large photographs of each person are displayed. Their names also appear between platforms in nearby Pasteur Underground station which after the bombing was renamed Pasteur – AMIA station. Cartoons, including those of an image of blind justice – the potent symbol of the campaign for justice for the victims of both attacks – are on a station wall. Large striking murals, including blind justice, which can be seen from afar, have been painted on a nearby hospital where victims were taken after the atrocity.



After the suicide bombing of The AMIA building and the protective wall built after its reconstruction bearing the names of those who were killed.

In 2006, Argentinian prosecutors indicted seven high-ranking former Iranian officials and one senior member of Hezbollah for the planning and executing the AMIA bombing. Interpol issued a notice for their capture. Iran refused extradition of its nationals. In 2014 Argentina reached a Memorandum of Understanding with Iran allowing Argentinian prosecutors to question suspects in Iran. This was denounced by Alberto Nisman, who was Jewish, the prosecutor in charge of the AMIA case. He foresaw that the suspects would merely deny all allegations against them leading to the case being closed for want of sufficient evidence. In newspapers and on television Nisman condemned the Argentinian President

Cristina Fernández de Kirchner who he saw as anticipating this outcome and whose real motive was to permit large scale trading between the two countries. He was invited to formally make these accusations before the National Congress on 18<sup>th</sup> January, 2015 but was found dead the evening before in his apartment which was well guarded and in a very safe part of Buenos Aires. It remains unsolved whether his death was suicide or murder. The BBC produced a documentary on events surrounding Nisman's death "*Nisman the Prosecutor, the President and the Spy*".



Alberto Nisman and a public protest after his death.

Claudia Hercman emphasised good aspects of Jewish life in Argentina should not be obscured. The Archbishop of Buenos Aires, and Cardinal of Argentina, who preceded the present Pope Francis in that role, Archbishop Quarracino, did much to foster inter faith dialogue with Jews, often in cathedrals and churches, and for this cause received a decoration in Israel. The Archbishop, who died in 1998 expressed a wish to be buried in Buenos Aires Cathedral with memorials to those who had died in the Embassy and AMIA bombings and in the Holocaust. In accordance with this an installation was placed by his tomb consisting of two plate glass between which are pages taken from books recovered from the two bombings and from books taken from death camps and ghettos in Europe. Interestingly, unlike most Latin American countries, Christian religious symbols are not found in public places which are generally occupied by monuments and statues about Argentinian history.

A replica of Ann Frank's House in Amsterdam was built in Buenos Aires. Unlike the original it contains a room comparing the period of dictatorship with the Nazi regime which was an influence upon it. Also in the city is a Holocaust museum which additionally explains the disappearances and repression under the dictatorship of the generals.



Anne Frank House in Buenos Aires.

The only rabbinical seminary in Latin America is located in Buenos Aires. The Seminario Rabínico Latinoamericano (Latin American Rabbinical Seminary, also known as the Marshall T. Meyer Latin American Rabbinical Seminary) was founded by Rabbi Marshall T. Meyer in 1962 under the auspices of the Conservative (Masorti) Movement. Its primary purpose is education and ordination of rabbis from Latin America to strengthen and sustain Jewish communities throughout the continent.

More than one hundred rabbis have graduated been ordained by this seminary including nine female rabbis They work in Jewish communities throughout Latin America, including Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Colombia, Ecuador, Dominican Republic, Mexico, Paraguay, Peru, Puerto Rico, El Salvador, Uruguay and Venezuela . Other graduates work in Israel and the United States.Over five thousand people have completed the Introduction to Judaism offered by seminary.

The great majority of Jews in Argentina – about eighty five percent - reside in Buenos Aries. The remainder live almost exclusively in other cities. Despite the reduction in population caused by the waves of emigration active Jewish life very much remains. Eighty Jewish institutions, including soccer and country clubs, exist in Buenos Aries with a similar number outside. There are forty Jewish schools in Argentina, twenty four of which are in Buenos Aires. Some two hundred thousand children are receiving education in the Jewish School Network. Ten thousand students study at ORT technical schools, part of a global network founded in nineteenth century Russia, where part of the curriculum includes Hebrew and Jewish History.

Perhaps it is less than well known fact that Buenos Aires is home to the only kosher McDonald's Restaurant outside Israel.

Responding to questions at the end of her presentation Claudia Hercman considered there are certainly worse places to live than Argentina and that she has always felt safe there and no less secure than the population as a whole, many of whom experience problems with the economy and personal security. She did express concerns about left wing parties unable to distinguish Israel and Jews – sadly something increasingly observed elsewhere.

Rabbi Jackie, on behalf of the community, thanked Claudia for her interesting, well presented and memorable talk.



