The Historical Origins of Anti-Semitism in Argentina

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This year marks 25 years since the July 1994 bombing of the Argentine Israelite Mutual Association (AMIA) in Buenos Aires as well as 25 years without any convictions. 85 people died in the act of terror and hundreds more were injured. Just last month in Buenos Aires, a father and son were arrested after allegedly threatening a Jewish group online. Law enforcement found guns, ammunition, and Nazi propaganda in the pair's home. Also in March, Argentina's chief rabbi made his first appearance after he was brutally assaulted and robbed in his home. Just like many leading nations, Argentina has a long and conflicted history with its Jewish population. Perhaps by understanding the history of the Argentine Jew, we can better understand the source of and antidote to anti-semitism in Argentina.

In May 1810, Argentina began its rebellion against Spanish occupation that would last six years and result in Argentina's independence. Following Argentina's victory was nine years of internal strife and instability. In February of 1825, Argentina signed a treaty of friendship and trade with Great Britain. Four years later, dictator General Juan Manuel de Rosas came to power and would remain in power for 23 years. Rosas was defeated in 1852 and the nation fell into a civil war that would last until 1860. Due to decades of war and instability, Argentina's population had dropped dramatically. The capital city of Buenos Aires held only 40,432 people in 1810 and the nation as a whole held barely half a million.

At the same time, Jews in Europe, North Africa, and the Near East had a demographic explosion with populations estimated to have increased from 2.5 million in 1800 to 7.7 million in 1880. Jews in Eastern and Central Europe faced discrimination, persecution, and economic hardship with emigration emerging as the only viable solution. In Russia and Eastern Europe, frequent pogroms, organized massacres of Jews, forced Jews to emigrate in larger numbers than

ever before. Jewish organizations, such as the Jewish Colonization Association and HICEM, were created to facilitate international immigration.

Faced with a population crisis, Argentina implemented the Immigration and Colonization Law of 1876 as part of an aggressive campaign to increase immigration. The law subdivided farmland into hundred-hectare sections that would be given for free to the first hundred families to immigrate and for two pesos a hectare for everyone after. Millions settled in Argentina leading up to World War I, including hundreds of thousands of Jews. Unfortunately, not every Jewish immigrant was able to farm. Many Jewish immigrants came from urban environments and had little to no experience with agriculture. For urban Jews, Argentina could be less than kind. Jews in urban Argentina, such as Buenos Aires, were often discriminated against by the elite class due to their lack of adherence to the traditional race and class based hierarchy. These urban Jews pushed into the middle class and were prevalent in business, education, and politics. The Argentines elites were unhappy with the linguistic and cultural pluralism, but had few ways of stopping Argentina's open door policies.

When Argentina finally did begin to close its borders, it was because of the state of employment following World War I. An abundance of labor without enough capital to expand the nation's industry resulted in thousands of people without work and strict laws to prevent further immigration of those from urban backgrounds. Argentina once again began encouraging agriculture for its immigrants and the divide between public opinion of the rural Jew and the urban Jew widened. In the public eye, the rural Jew was an honest farmer who adopted the culture of the "criollo", the rural Argentine, creating Jewish gauchos who embraced the Argentine identity. The urban Jew, on the other hand, was perceived as the embodiment of the "other". Although most urban Jews were secular and religiously decentralized, their language,

traditions, and socialist, democratic politics made it easy to be ostracized in the eyes of the public. It is from this ostracization that anti-semitism outside of the elite class would become popularized in Argentina and remain in some form even today.

Being Jewish in Argentina has always meant something different to each individual. Jewish immigrants were able to embrace Argentine culture without abandoning their own Jewish identities. The Argentine and Jewish identities seemed to be especially complementary to each other in ways not found everywhere that Jews migrated. Early immigrants bonded not only with each other, but also non-Jewish Argentines. Non-Jewish neighbors, coworkers, and friends helped Jews to acclimate rather than assimilate to life in Argentina. By 1930, the identities of Argentina, Buenos Aires, and its Jews were linked irrevocably in the forging of the modern Argentine identity. It becomes clear from the intertwined histories of Argentina and its Jewish population that an attack against Argentine Jews is truly an attack against Argentina itself.

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