

# **Membership to a Community: A Glimpse into the Jewish-Argentine Experience at Home and Abroad from the 1960s to the 1980s**

**Damian Nemirovsky  
(University of California, USA)**

**Abstract:** *This article historicizes the migration of Jewish Argentines to Mexico during the Argentine "Dirty War" of 1976-1982 by exploring the legacy of early Jewish migration to Argentina and Mexico. Through an analysis of this history this article provides insight into the periodic waves of Argentine anti-Semitism, it examines how individuals have negotiated statelessness, and explores how Argentine-Jewish migrants have dealt with their position as "others" in Mexico.*

## I. Introduction

Five weeks after the 24 March 1976 military coup Miranda Novsky and her husband fled Argentina. Three years later Roberto Novsky, Miranda's brother, left the country with his wife. Their paths diverged as Miranda fled to Israel, while Roberto stayed behind in Argentina during the early years of the military government. Four years later, after Roberto's move to Mexico, the two crossed paths once again as Miranda followed her brother to Mexico, where both lived for nearly a decade as they reconstructed their lives following their migration to new countries. Though separated by a seven-year age gap, both siblings shared a common background of growing up in a middleclass Jewish family. They were in many ways representative of the Jewish-Argentine population residing in Argentina during the latter half of the twentieth century. Their family had immigrated to Argentina in the wake of the First World War and settled in Buenos Aires. Both attended public schools, actively

participated in their community, and were religious but not practicing.<sup>1</sup> A study of the experiences of these siblings offers an excellent opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the migratory histories of Jewish-Argentines to Mexico, and demonstrates that Jewish-Argentine identity, whether in Argentina or in exile, has been contingent on the dominant social constructions of belonging and "otherness."

Roberto and Miranda's experiences serve as a template for a study of the shifting insider/outsider dimensions of the Jewish communities of Argentina within the changing nature of membership in the nation-state. They serve to explore the process and reasons why Jewish-Argentines who left Argentina as "outsiders" arrived to destinations abroad to find themselves as "outsiders" there for different reasons. These siblings' stories answer questions about the political role that certain kinds of historically constructed legal identities play in determining an individual's membership within the nation. By studying how the legal identity of Jewish-Argentines shifted, it is possible to understand central aspects of power and resistance through the lives and experiences of so-called "peripheral" actors and the ways that the nation-state has been constructed.<sup>2</sup>

Their life histories add to the wealth of existing scholarship, paving the way for a far more insightful analysis of Jewish migration and legal identity. Work on Jewish migration from Latin American countries focuses primarily on the migratory experience of individuals leaving for locations such as Spain and France. Very little scholarship exists on Jewish migration from one Latin American country to another.

---

<sup>1</sup> The names of the individuals interviewed for this article have been altered per their request. Roberto Novsky's Personal Interview was recorded on 24 February 2007. Miranda Novsky's Telephone Interview was recorded on 25 February 2007.

<sup>2</sup> A peripheral actor in this case refers to the Jewish-Argentine minority that never constituted more than 2% of the nation's population.

Additionally, most of the work on Jews in Argentina focuses on a few narrow time periods.<sup>3</sup>

This article is the beginning of a broader project on Jewish-Argentine migration in the late twentieth century. Its original contribution comes from its use of oral history interviews with two individuals. While such a small sample of case studies cannot produce a wholly definitive conclusion, their analysis still provides valuable insights. Other works such as *Los Chicos del Exilio* and *Exile from Argentina* have successfully employed the use of oral histories and ethnography to provide glimpses into the experience of Jewish-Argentines.<sup>4</sup> This article makes a similar contribution that when read in concert with these other works will provide a fuller view of the Jewish-Argentine experience.

This article addresses three themes: periodic waves of anti-Semitism in Argentina, negotiating statelessness, and the continued construction of Jewish-Argentines as "others." The first explores fluctuations in the membership of Jewish-Argentines in the Argentine state, historicizing this process and contextualizing the reasoning behind the migration of the 1970s and 1980s. The second delves into the actions that

---

<sup>3</sup> In the Argentine case, the major periods are the commencement of Jewish migration from Eastern Europe during the 1880s to agricultural communities in the *pampas*, the years following the rise and fall of Juan Peron's first two terms as president from 1943 through 1955, and the *Proceso* ("Dirty War") of 1976 to 1982. Peronism emerged in the period between 1943 and 1946, as the cult of personality surrounding Juan Peron led to his election as president. Through his usurpation, control and institutionalization of unionized labor his governmental organization became a party that has continued to thrive both during his time in exile and after his death. The *Proceso* refers to the military dictatorship between 1976 and 1983 when repressive measures led to the exodus of many Argentines and the death of 30,000 alleged subversives. As in much of the related literature on the rest of Latin America, very little work examines Jewish migration out of the country with the exception of migration to Israel. Scholarly studies on the Jewish-Mexican community are fewer than those on Argentina. With new information now made available through the opening of several rich archives previously closed to the public in Mexico, many interesting new studies examining the Jewish-Mexican community will soon expand and enhance this historiography. Judith Laikin Elkin, "Review: Exploring the Jewish Archipelago in Latin America," *Latin American Research Review* 30, no. 3 (January 1, 1995): 224-238.

<sup>4</sup> Eduardo Faingold, *Exile from Argentina: a Jewish Family and the Military Dictatorship 1976-1983*. (Charlotte: Information Age Publishing, 2008) and Vera Jarach, et al, *Los Chicos del Exilio: Argentina 1975-1984*. (Buenos Aires: El Pais de Nomeolvides, 2002).

Jewish-Argentines took in order to navigate a society that in some ways rescinded their membership. The third theme analyzes the difficulty of establishing membership in a new nation-state after a self-imposed exile. This study of Jewish-Argentine migrants adds another dimension to our understanding of legal identity and nation-state formation. More broadly, it illuminates the transnational links that permeate Latin America, and serves as a starting point for similar research on the challenges faced by migrant communities relocating to other nations.

## II. Waves of Anti-Semitism

The shifting strength and vehemence of anti-Semitic discourse in Argentina during the latter half of the twentieth century contributed greatly to Jewish-Argentines' decision to emigrate. One of the peaks in these waves of anti-Semitic actions occurred on 21 June 1962. On this date three men kidnapped a 19-year-old Jewish student, Graciela Narcisa Sirota, as she waited for a bus on a street in Buenos Aires, Argentina. These abductors clubbed and then loaded Sirota into their car and drove her to a secluded location. She awoke on a wooden table having been beaten, burned with lit cigarettes, and symbolically disfigured with a three-inch swastika tattooed on her chest. Before dumping her near-dead body close to a railroad track, the abductors told Sirota, "this is in revenge for Eichmann." The victim of this attack survived the abuse, returned home, and received treatment for a "brain concussion, shock, second degree burns, and multiple contusions."<sup>5</sup> The story of Graciela Narcisa Sirota was one of the first to surface during an interview with Roberto Novsky, a

---

<sup>5</sup> Robert Weisbrot, *The Jews of Argentina: From the Inquisition to Perón* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1979), 252-3. Weisbrot includes that at least one source mentions that Sirota's father was involved in the abduction of Eichmann. Roberto, however, had no knowledge of this.

Jewish migrant who left Argentina in 1979 and relocated in Mexico as a result of the unstable and violent political situation. The intensity and viciousness of this assault gave it a particularly memorable quality. It emerged as a central part of Roberto's discussion of anti-Semitism and Jewish identity in the creation of the Argentine state.<sup>6</sup> Both the high and low points of anti-Semitism throughout Latin America and particularly in Argentina explain shifts in the size of the Jewish Diaspora living within individual nations. After the attack on Graciela Narcisa Sirota in 1962, and given the prevalence of anti-Semitism, Jewish migration from Argentina to Israel increased six fold between 1962 and 1963, from 693 to 4,255.<sup>7</sup>

The emigration of Jewish-Argentines in the 1960s occurred within a broader historical context marked by periods of religious tolerance and periods of increased religiously-inspired violence. As late as 1835, Jews living in Argentina faced legal hardships that placed limitations on marriage and funeral processions. Legal restrictions such as these coupled with an exclusive Roman Catholic ideology deterred large-scale migration of Jewish people in the first half of the nineteenth century. Conditions began to change after the overthrow of Juan Manuel de Rosas in 1852 as Argentina began promoting European migration to populate the lands conquered during the Indian wars of the late nineteenth century, and to fuel industrialization.<sup>8</sup> Several important factors made Argentina a desirable destination for Jewish immigrants. These included the rise of a secularist political atmosphere in the decades following the 1850s in Argentina; czarist oppression in Russia, particularly after 1888; a relative lack of anti-Semitism in Argentina; the undervaluation of Argentine land

---

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Roberto Novsky 24 February 2007.

<sup>7</sup> Weisbrot, *The Jews of Argentina*, 97.

<sup>8</sup> The *Unitarios* predominantly resided in the provinces of the interior, they wanted a centralized government and tariffs protecting their businesses. Meanwhile, the *Federalistas* on the other hand wanted a decentralized government and free trade. Elkin, *Jews of the Latin American Republics*. 29-36.

resulting from the depression of 1890-91; the efforts of Baron de Hirsch and the Jewish Colonization Association; and the incorporation of stricter immigration laws in the United States.<sup>9</sup> These developments caused the Jewish community's population to reach 110,000 by 1918.<sup>10</sup>

The initial conditions that attracted the Jews of Eastern Europe in the 1880s to Argentina changed as the twentieth century progressed. Anti-Semitic discourse in Argentina increased, and the farming communities created for the Jewish migrants declined as rural people began moving to the urban centers of Cordoba, Mendoza, and Buenos Aires. By the second half of the twentieth century the total population of Jews in Argentina would begin to decline. The rise of anti-Semitism in Argentina during the early twentieth century contributed to the eventual decline in the Jewish population of Argentina. The ideological roots of this movement reach back to the late 1880s and had ties to the nationalist philosophies of Spain, France, and Italy.<sup>11</sup> Unlike most other Latin American countries, Argentina developed a nationalist movement in the twentieth century based on a conservative ideology that was closely associated to a monolithic Roman Catholic religious perspective. Thus, the "right" in Argentina consisted primarily of two groups. The traditional conservatives from the upper classes "tied to the export economy" and striving "to maintain their privileges through the exercise of political fraud," constituted the "old" right.<sup>12</sup> The "new" right derived its membership from both the upper and middle classes and focused on

---

<sup>9</sup> Morton Winsberg. "Jewish Agricultural Colonization in Argentina" *Geographical Review* 54, 4 (1964) p.487-8. For more information on Baron de Hirsch and the Jewish Colonization Association see Theodore Norman. *An Outstretched Arm: a history of the Jewish Colonization Association*. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985).

<sup>10</sup> Samson Oppenheim, ed. *The American Jewish Year Book 5678* (Philadelphia: The American Jewish Committee, 1917), 410.

<sup>11</sup> Sandra McGee Deutsch and Ronald H. Dolkart eds. *The Argentine Right: Its Intellectual Origins, 1910 to the Present*. (Wilmington: Scholarly Research Inc. 1993), 5.

<sup>12</sup> Deutsch and Dolkart. *The Argentine Right*, xv.

“purifying Argentina of leftist and liberal corruption.”<sup>13</sup> The nationalist movements of the “new” right espoused a policy of anti-Semitism that took hold particularly in the military, where the elites who promulgated the conservative nationalist ideology entrenched themselves.

The nationalist groups that developed in the early twentieth century propagated an anti-Semitic discourse but often occupied a marginal role within the Argentine political system. Their peaks of power arrived only when difficult political and economic situations shifted moderates to the right. The first of such moments occurred during 1919 when exports of beef, grains, and leather dropped at the same time as laborers demanded more rights. During the week of 9 January 1919, confrontations between workers, the army, and the police engulfed Buenos Aires. Upper and middle class citizens, fearing that the government could not control the situation, formed a militia and joined the ranks of the government forces in persecuting those believed to have caused the strikes. They “identified the left with the Soviet Union” and thus “tended to blame local events on Jewish immigrants, most of whom had come from Russia.” The government and militia forces raided working-class and Jewish neighborhoods, damaging property, arresting supposed leftist leaders, while also protecting middle and upper class neighborhoods from any possible worker retaliation.<sup>14</sup> With time the more radical nationalists once again became a more isolated minority, and attacks against Jewish-Argentines diminished. In spite of this violent outbreak of anti-Semitism, the Jewish population continued to

---

<sup>13</sup> Deutsch and Dolkart. *The Argentine Right*, xv.

<sup>14</sup> Deutsch and Dolkart *The Argentine Right*, 38.

grow until it reached its largest size in the 1960s, when Argentina contained the fifth largest Jewish community in the world with 400,000 Jewish people.<sup>15</sup>

In an interview on the wave of anti-Semitism in Argentina during the 1960s, Roberto Novsky did not remember the specific details about Graciela Narcisa Sirota, a student attending the University of Buenos Aires. However, he remembered both the event and its repercussions very clearly. The 21 June 1962 assault on Sirota shocked Argentine society. It galvanized the nation as many Jewish and non-Jewish people voiced their dismay at the situation. The Sirota case emerged as the most significant act of anti-Semitism since the repression of the 1919 *Semana Trágica*, which saw the rise and merging of anti-Semitism and the nationalist parties of the "right".<sup>16</sup>

Roberto remembered that the authorities apprehended the three men who attacked Sirota shortly after the incident, and that all three eluded punishment. The Chief of Police, Horacio Enrique Green, proposed that the accusation of anti-Semitism had been exaggerated and perpetuated by communists. He summarized the events as "nothing more than an act of provocation by leftist Jews trying to undermine the social order in Argentina".<sup>17</sup> By 1962 anti-Semitism in Argentina had a significant effect on many in the Jewish community. In locations such as public schools and in sports clubs, individuals affiliated with rightist groups would question Jewish people, trying to acquire incriminating information about alleged plans to create a Zionist

---

<sup>15</sup> Leon Shapiro, "World Jewish Population" *The American Jewish Year Book*. Vol. 61 (1960). 353.

<sup>16</sup> Raanan Rein, *Argentina, Israel, and the Jews: Peron, the Eichmann Capture and After* (University Press of Maryland, 2002), 199. Deutsch and Dolkart, *The Argentine Right*, 37-47.

<sup>17</sup> Rein, *Argentina, Israel and the Jews*, 218.

state within Argentina.<sup>18</sup> This trend that had only recently emerged altered the membership privileges afforded by the nation to both the Jewish and non-Jewish Argentine population as many felt threatened in public spaces.

While the presence of anti-Semitism increased and became more visible during this period, many Jewish-Argentines felt that the national events did not affect their lives personally. Much like with other crises, a great deal can be learned from both the changes and the consistencies. In the opinion of Miranda Novsky, the egregious deeds perpetrated by anti-Semites constituted the actions of a minor portion of society, which while notable and alarming, did not have an effect that filtered down to the daily activities of her life.<sup>19</sup> Her opinion differs greatly from her brother's in large part due to the age difference between the two. Roberto, seven years younger than his sister, attended public schools during a more volatile time when nationalist groups had obtained a greater influence over the national culture and acted more confidently in public spaces. Between 1962 and 1965 the *Movimiento Nacionalista Tacuara* acted as the "principal anti-Semitic organization of the right", and drew the majority of its recruits from "young high school students of traditional, déclassé, fervently Catholic, anticommunist and anti-Semitic families".<sup>20</sup>

The dramatic changes during the 1960s, however, surprised many. Before the outbreak of this violence, much of the Jewish population in Argentina felt that they were a part of the national culture.<sup>21</sup> In 1960 the Jewish population was roughly

---

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Roberto Novsky 24 February 2007.

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Miranda Novsky 25 February 2007.

<sup>20</sup> Deutsch and Dolkart, *The Argentine Right*, 126.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with Miranda Novsky 25 February 2007.

400,000 and constituted 2% of the total Argentine population.<sup>22</sup> While it has been stated that Argentina allowed large numbers of Nazis to enter the nation clandestinely at the end of the Second World War, this has to some extent been exaggerated and misrepresented. Furthermore, Juan Peron, president of Argentina from 1946 to 1955, pursued a policy that minimized anti-Semitism and actively strove to improve relations with the Jewish community. He was very successful in curtailing abuses against the Jews from both the government and the general populace.<sup>23</sup> What then, led to an abrupt reversal experienced in the early 1960s?

Two separate events occurred during the presidency of Arturo Frondizi (1955-1962) that had a profound effect on the way that the Jewish community was viewed both externally and internally. The climax of this occurred in May 1960 when the Israeli government sent a covert operations team to Argentina to capture and kidnap Adolf Eichmann, a leading Schutzstaffel officer in the Nazi regime.<sup>24</sup> Roberto remembered the confusion surrounding this event. In the days before Eichmann's abduction, the Israeli government attempted to mislead the public by stating that they had located him but claiming that he was not in Argentina. In reality, Eichmann had been living in Argentina since 1950 under the name Roberto Klement, and the Israeli government, privy to this information, authorized a clandestine military group to undertake a covert operation. The Mossad agents' mission required the successful capture of Eichmann and his extradition to Israel where the government insisted on trying him for crimes against Jews in an Israeli court.<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> Shapiro, "World Jewish Population" 353.

<sup>23</sup> Rein, *Argentina, Israel and the Jews*. 231.

<sup>24</sup> The Schutzstaffel or SS began as Hitler's personal body guards and during the Second World War this organization expanded and served as an independent force within the German army taking on the lead in the German process of racial purification.

<sup>25</sup> Rein, *Argentina, Israel and the Jews*, 162-187.

The political consequences of this violation of sovereignty proved much easier to resolve than the effects it had on public opinion. The Eichmann incident coincided with the economic downturn stemming in large part from the transition from import-substitution industrialization to free trade. Economic woes created a volatile situation, and in their general unhappiness, non-Jewish Argentines found a scapegoat in the Jewish population. As violence increased against the Jewish community, many began to retreat and shut themselves off from the rest of Argentina. Soon thereafter, the patriotism of the Jewish community came under closer scrutiny, and they began to be accused of a "Dual Loyalty".<sup>26</sup> Nationalist groups, such as the *Movimiento Nacionalista Tacuara* (MNT), began to pursue a vehement anti-Semitic policy.

The leaders of these groups came predominantly from the youth of the upper and upper-middle class. Several of these leaders, who began in Catholic nationalist groups, continued on to contribute to groups such as the *Montoneros*.<sup>27</sup> They believed that the Jews were endangering Argentina's national identity. Rein states that the Catholic nationalist groups' "extremist concept of Argentina as a melting pot in which all immigrant communities had to assimilate marked Jews as foreigners and separatists, and therefore dangerous." Further, it was also claimed that "besides spreading disintegrative ideas that worked against Christian religion, the homeland, and the Argentine family, the Jews were responsible for disseminating

---

<sup>26</sup> Rein, *Argentina, Israel and the Jew*, 197.

<sup>27</sup> Roberto Novsky mentioned that while these youths publicly stopped advocating anti-Semitism once they joined the Peronist *Montoneros*, a group that did include a good number of Jews, in private he did not feel that they had changed their ideology. Interview with Roberto Novsky 24 February 2007.

communism."<sup>28</sup> Roberto remembered the prevalence of these individuals' ideological work and the extent to which their views permeated throughout society.

The situation for the Jewish community deteriorated quickly after the kidnapping of Adolf Eichmann, and continued to do so under the two military governments and Peron's third presidential term. The Eichmann controversy increased antagonistic sentiments within Argentina because it fed fears of a Zionist plan that aimed to create a Jewish state within the country. This fueled the controversy between the right and the Jewish community because of the blatant disregard for Argentine sovereignty shown by Israel. Furthermore, Argentines on the right felt that the resolution passed by the United Nations Security Council in June 1960 prevented Argentina from resolving these issues, thus making reconciliation more difficult as those on the right perceived that this decision supported the desires of Zionists.

These peaks of anti-Semitism in 1919, 1962, and later during the *Proceso* (the Argentine military dictatorship from 1976-1982), resulted from a shift in the popularity of the views espoused by the rightist and nationalist movements. This particular ideology developed in response to the specific political and economic situation in Argentina during the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century in conjunction with similar philosophies in Europe. During these times, Jewish-Argentines' legal identity and membership in the nation-state shifted. They became symbols of the nation's problems, "depicted as 'creeping along in darkness with a dagger in one hand and dynamite in the other'".<sup>29</sup> Jewish-Argentines ceased to be true Argentines. They became second-class citizens who chose to support a foreign

---

<sup>28</sup> Rein, *Argentina, Israel and the Jews*, 200-202.

<sup>29</sup> Deutsch and Dolkart, *The Argentine Right*, 9.

nation at the expense of Argentina. This shift in identity served the nationalist cause by offering a scapegoat for the ills of the nation that nationalists proposed to remove in their plan to mend Argentine society. The altered status of Jews in Argentina during these periods served the political purposes of a minority group that capitalized on the political and economic difficulties facing Argentina. As the political crisis waned, so did the power of the rightist group, allowing Jewish-Argentines to regain a status as members of the nation.

### III. Negotiating Statelessness

The alteration of the political status and rights suffered by the Jewish community living in Argentina during peaks of anti-Semitism required individuals to modify their lives. Not all Argentines exhibited anti-Semitic tendencies. In the wake of the Sirota affair, large portions of the gentile population joined the ranks of the Jewish community in requesting an end to the anti-Semitic violence. This showing of solidarity, nevertheless, could not fully change the situation that arose out of the economic and political events of 1960-1962.<sup>30</sup> Important sectors within the Argentine population now viewed the Jewish community as outsiders, and through migration many within the community appeared to accept this opinion.<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup> In *Argentina, Israel, and the Jews* there appear several studies asserting that anti-Semitism was even higher in the lower classes than in the upper class. The prevailing opinion among scholars, which is also that of Raúl, was that the Catholic nationalist groups such as the MNT that were composed predominantly of the latter socio-economic group exhibited more anti-Semitism, however, these studies demonstrate the opposite. This is important because it speaks to the real prevalence of prejudice and explains to a greater degree how great the pressure was on the Jewish population.

<sup>31</sup> Roberto felt that at this point the anti-Semitic perspective had infiltrated both the police and military, in effect robbing the Jewish community of its primary line of governmentally provided protection. Interview with Roberto Novsky 24 February 2007.

It was at this time that many Jewish-Argentines began leaving Argentina in greater numbers. Figures indicate that the number of Jewish people emigrating from Argentina to Israel increased more than six fold between 1962 and 1963.<sup>32</sup> While the majority of emigrants settled in Israel, many others moved to the United States and Europe. Part of Roberto's family, not including Miranda or her older sister, followed this pattern, moving in 1966 to Israel. Within two years Roberto returned to Argentina with his mother, however, many other Jewish migrants remained in Israel.<sup>33</sup> The period between 1960 and 1962 greatly changed the relationship between the Jewish community and the greater Argentine nation as well as the relationship among members of the Jewish community. During this period the Jewish community forged a stronger Jewish identity as a result of the external pressures extended against them by the gentile society that found them a convenient scapegoat for the downturn of the economy and of the violation of national sovereignty by the Israeli government, and in the context of a more general opposition to the failure of the Frondizi presidency to defend the Argentine national interest.

While the military cracked down on the groups perpetrating violent acts against the Jewish population during their first dictatorship, most of the prominent anti-Semitic leaders remained. Leaders such as Dardo Cabo, who formed the *Movimiento Nueva Argentina* (MNA), formed other groups and, while they refrained from publicly disclosing their anti-Semitic views, they continued to participate in the national political system. The generation of Jewish-Argentines who suffered through the prevalent anti-Semitic atmosphere as children during the early 1960s found itself

---

<sup>32</sup> The figures indicate the number of Jewish migrants to Israel was as follows: 1960-337, 1961-495, 1962-693, 1963-4,255, and 1964-1,998. These figures demonstrate the impact of the anti-Semitic atmosphere, especially as 1963, the year after the Sirota affair, had the largest leap before stabilising at lower rate, (yet far higher rate than before). Weisbrot, *The Jews of Argentina*. 97

<sup>33</sup> Interview with Roberto Novsky 24 February 2007.

under further political oppression during the mid to late 1970s as the military dictatorship engaged in a war against subversion.

The *Proceso* began in 1976 when a military Junta overthrew the publicly-elected government. The new conservative administration described their plan as follows:

“First we will kill all of the subversives; then we will kill their collaborators; then...their sympathizers, then...those who remain indifferent; and finally we will kill the timid”.<sup>34</sup>

During the reign of the Junta, 10% of the “disappeared” were of Jewish decent, while Jews only made up a little more than 1% of the total population at the time.<sup>35</sup>

Dissenters used these numbers to support an argument that the Junta, influenced by anti-Semitism, targeted the Jewish population. However, these statistics reflect the role that Jewish individuals played in social movements, since more recent scholarship has shown that the Junta did not target the Jewish population as Jews.<sup>36</sup>

When captured, however, Jews received harsher treatments than other “subversives.” The security forces took pleasure in torturing Jews by making racial jokes and inflicting more pain on the victims because of their religion.<sup>37</sup> Roberto’s testimony supported this view of the events, arguing that the Jewish leadership remained silent as a calculated decision, since other actions would do more harm than good.

---

<sup>34</sup> The *proceso* (*Proceso de Reorganización Nacional*), National Reorganization Process was the dictatorship that ruled Argentina between 1976 and 1983; Rita Arditti, *Searching For Life* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), 7.

<sup>35</sup> Edy Kaufman “Jewish Victims of Repression Under Military Rule 1976-1982” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, 4, no. 4 (1989), 489.

<sup>36</sup> The argument that the military targeted people because of their religious belief was strongly put forth by Jacobo Timerman and other journalists. More recent work presented by journalists and scholars such as Daniel Feierstein, “Political Violence in Argentina and Its Genocidal Characteristics,” *Journal of Genocide Research Vol. 8 No. 2 (2006)* 152 refutes this view, explaining that it was the political activities of victims that elicited the Junta’s reprisal.

<sup>37</sup> *Nunca Más: The Report of the Argentine National Commission of the Disappeared* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1986), 67-72.

Roberto was not alone in this interpretation of events. Jacobo Timerman, editor of *La Opinión*, agreed. Timerman was one of the few who challenged the military, printing articles about the “disappeared” and publishing a list of the names of the kidnapped. These activities resulted in his abduction. Fortunately for Timerman, he was saved by international pressure. It was in large part through accounts like Timerman’s and Alicia Partnoy’s, survivor of the Junta’s clandestine prison and author of *The Little School: Tales of Disappearance and Survival*, that information on the treatment of the “disappeared” began to emerge in the 1980s.<sup>38</sup> Amazingly, Jewish leaders in Argentina refrained from criticizing the dictatorship throughout the *Proceso*. They feared the repercussions of not complying, and some even denounced Jacobo Timerman’s attempts to use his newspaper for raising the awareness of anti-Semitic acts. Timerman felt that “the Jewish leaders of Buenos Aires viewed [him] as an irritating element”.<sup>39</sup> The silence of the Jewish community makes little sense when leaders knew of the atrocities their people suffered.

During late 1970s and early 1980s up to 2.5 million individuals, both Jewish and non-Jewish, left Argentina, many of them motivated by the difficult political situation.<sup>40</sup> For those who wished to leave the country, there existed several routes. People of dual nationality found fewer problems in departing the country and relocating, but for others, the situation proved far more complicated. During this time many individuals searched for a destination of political exile. Miranda and her husband Ronaldo, found

---

<sup>38</sup> The accounts of these two individuals appear in Jacobo Timerman, *Prisoner Without a Name Cell Without a Number*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981); Alicia Partnoy, *The Little School: Tales of Disappearance and Survival* (San Francisco: Midnight Editions, 1998).

<sup>39</sup> Timerman, *Prisoner Without a Name Cell Without a Number*, 139. On this same page Jacobo Timerman recalled from a meeting with Dr. Nehemias Reznitsky, the president of the Argentine Jewish community, that the president’s views dictated that [the country’s anti-Semitic acts] ought not all be protested, for that would create a confrontation with highly powerful sectors of the army. There was a better tactic: to protest some and maintain silence over the others, in an attempt to negotiate and survive.”

<sup>40</sup> M. Edurne Portela, *Displaced Memories: the poetics of trauma in Argentine women's writing* (Bucknell University Press, 2009), 16.

themselves in such a situation a week after the military coup in 1976. Due to their participation in a subversive group, Ronaldo went into hiding. Miranda recounted that, unlike under the previous military dictatorship, the political situation deteriorated very quickly: "The change was abrupt, while there was already a situation with a degree of persecution to some sectors of society [before the military coup of 1976], when the military rose to power it was terrible how quickly the issues of persecution, disappearing, torture, etc. started".<sup>41</sup> At that point in time it was very unsafe for either Ronaldo or Miranda to remain in Argentina. However, they were unable to leave the country because the government's security forces had flagged Ronaldo as a subversive. Had Ronaldo been identified by government forces as he tried to cross Argentina's borders, he would have been incarcerated and most likely have disappeared. Such situations persisted throughout Argentina for both Jewish and non-Jewish people.

With the help and advice of Miranda's father, both she and Ronaldo decided to migrate to Israel. Ronaldo, using a contact within one of the local churches, began communicating with the Israeli embassy. After some time Ronaldo, using a false passport, and Miranda boarded a plane to fly out of the country. They migrated first to Israel, living for four years in a kibbutz, before moving to Mexico where they remained for a prolonged period. As a result of leaving Argentina with illegal documents, Ronaldo could never return without encountering legal troubles.<sup>42</sup>

In the case of Ronaldo, some interesting issues about legal identity arise. By leaving Argentina with falsified papers, he was forced to maintain a silence about his real

---

<sup>41</sup> Interview with Miranda Novsky 25 February 2007.

<sup>42</sup> Interview with Roberto Novsky 24 February 2007.

national identity while adopting a new legal identity based on these falsified papers. Faced with the choice of a life with permanently severed links to aspects that defined him, or retaining his legal identity and in all probability becoming a casualty of the government's war on subversives, Ronaldo chose the former. In this manner the government found a way to politically "disappear" a person even though he physically remained to those who knew them. By choosing to renounce his legal identity Ronaldo ceased to exist in the political world. In addition to the loss of his true nationality, the Junta deprived him of the Argentine physical space that constructed and defined him. Through his permanent expulsion from Argentina, Ronaldo became an orphan in a social and political system that bases itself on the nation state. He, like the countless others who disappeared either politically or both politically and physically, became a victim of that governmental identity theft to which human rights activists have worked to give voice and memory.<sup>43</sup>

Accused subversives found other avenues to escape from the Argentine government in situations when they could not obtain forged identification papers. Roberto commented on Héctor José Cámpora, a long time Peronist who served as president between May and July of 1973.<sup>44</sup> Cámpora realized that when the Junta came to power in 1976 they believed him to be a subversive. For his protection, Cámpora sought refuge from the Junta in the Mexican embassy of Buenos Aires. He spent three years in the embassy awaiting either the end of the dictatorship or permission

---

<sup>43</sup> Interview with Roberto Novsky 24 February 2007.

<sup>44</sup> Roberto first mentioned Cámpora when he spoke about the Ezeiza Massacre that left 13 people dead. This event occurred at Buenos Aires international Airport, Ezeiza, when Peron was set to return from his exile in 1973. The road from the city to the airport, six miles, were packed too tight for cars as people traveled to see the return of Peron who they believed was going to fix the political violence that dominated the early 1970's. Before the plane landed, however, a gun fight erupted between the right and left factions of the Peronist party that forced Peron to divert his plane to a military airport. Roberto's expressed surprise at the surprisingly low level of violence that resulted from the chaotic situation.

from the Mexican Government to emigrate. In 1976 the Mexican Government offered Cámpora asylum, but unfortunately he passed away shortly after his arrival in Mexico.

Similarly to Ronaldo, the Junta robbed Cámpora of his ability to occupy Argentine national space. While crossing into the confines of the Mexican embassy moved him beyond the reach of the Argentine government even though he was still located within the border of the nation, he lost the freedom that a national identity offers citizens. Cámpora's case differs from Ronaldo's in the degree to which his legal identity was stolen. The ex-president still possessed his true name and birthplace in his legal identity; nevertheless, the theft of the space that constituted a large part of his identity, as it is socially constructed by a system that focuses on the nation-state in the formation of citizenship, still constituted a significant absence.

Negotiating "otherness" and statelessness poses many difficulties. In the case of Jewish-Argentines living through the peak of anti-Semitic activity of the early 1960s the two solutions available were isolation within the Jewish community or self-imposed exile. In both cases, individuals whose role and membership within the state changed as a result of shifts in the political discourse of the time faced a denial of space that had defined them. This situation assisted the group of ultra-right nationalists as they were striving to increase their political power and to pursue their agenda. The ascent to power of the military in 1976, after a failed return to Peronist politics, created a critical situation for those whose membership of the nation had been marginalized or revoked. This turn of events made negotiating exile far more complex, because many individuals whose membership to the nation had been affected could not legally emigrate to save their lives. In these cases, negotiating

Argentine statelessness implied finding a new legal identity and national membership through either legal or illegal channels.

#### IV. Continued Construction as "Others" Outside Argentina

Assimilating into a new nation proved difficult once the exiles of the *Proceso* found a way to escape Argentina. In addition to struggling to find a receptive society, exiles found that attaining a new membership proved difficult because "belongingness is a reciprocal process".<sup>45</sup> Miranda and Ronaldo left Argentina five weeks after the military coup of 1976, arriving in Israel and settling in a kibbutz. However, while both identified as Jewish and were readily accepted by the community, they continued to feel like outsiders in Israel. They found that differences in language, age, and background separated them from those living in their community. Of those who emigrated to this kibbutz from Latin America, the vast majority arrived in the early 1960s and came from an older generation. Furthermore, the vast majority came because of a devotion to the Jewish cause. Both Miranda and Ronaldo came from a far more secular Jewish community in Argentina. Due mostly to a lack of funds and the poor health of Miranda's father, the two stayed in Israel for four years, giving birth to their daughter there.<sup>46</sup>

During the four-year period that Miranda and Ronaldo lived in Israel, Miranda expressed that she felt more separated from life in Argentina than she expected. Communication with family and friends remained difficult. She said:

---

<sup>45</sup> Cimet, *Ashkenazi Jews in Mexico*. 26

<sup>46</sup> Interview with Miranda Novsky 25 February 2007.

“We only spoke with family to make sure that they were doing well, but we could not talk much because we could not be sure that the phone lines were not compromised...I suddenly found myself on the other side of the world in a reality that I did not understand and one that I had never imagined. I was separated from my history”.<sup>47</sup>

The fear that the Argentine government was tapping the phone lines in search of incriminating evidence of alleged subversives prevented Miranda and Ronaldo from maintaining important relationships and ties to their past. Furthermore, Miranda felt disillusioned with the state of Argentina's government and society. While she spent the first 32 years of her life in Argentina she never wanted to return and resettle there.<sup>48</sup>

After the death of Miranda's father, and with funds from the sale of the property in Argentina that Miranda and Ronaldo still possessed, the two moved to Mexico with their daughter. The selection of Mexico differed from that of Israel four years earlier. Miranda explained that while in both cases she followed family connections, first her father to Israel and then her brother to Mexico, “Ronaldo and I always felt certain that we would leave Israel because we did not identify with Israel as a country”.<sup>49</sup> She explains that they stayed for four years because of economic reasons and her father's health. The move to Mexico resulted not from a reaction to political turmoil and a need to leave with haste but from a desire to move to a nation where Spanish was spoken and that possessed a culture with which she associated more deeply. In

---

<sup>47</sup> Interview with Miranda Novsky 25 February 2007.

<sup>48</sup> Interview with Miranda Novsky 25 February 2007.

<sup>49</sup> Interview with Miranda Novsky 25 February 2007.

the study of national identity and the reciprocal process of belonging, both individuals and nations can create an "otherness" and renounce memberships.<sup>50</sup>

Upon his arrival in Mexico, Roberto encountered a very close knit Jewish-Mexican community. This community, far smaller than that of Argentina, numbered around 35,000. Furthermore, roughly ninety-five percent lived in the nation's capital.<sup>51</sup> Its members were predominantly wealthy and involved in the industrial sector. The Jewish-Mexican community placed great importance on their socio-economic status and nationality, preventing the community as a whole from fully identifying with the Jewish community living in Argentina. While the extent of the violence suffered by Jewish-Argentines received some notice, they predominantly viewed the situation in Argentina in nationalist terms. To them the plight of the "disappeared" was an Argentine issue. The foundation of the connection between the Jewish-Mexican community and the Jewish-Argentine community was not religion, but their shared identity as Latin Americans. In the experiences of both Roberto and Miranda, the Jewish-Mexican community felt disconnected to the situation in Argentina, and as a result appeared to care little to incorporate the migrants who fled persecution and arrived in Mexico.<sup>52</sup>

The circumstances under which Roberto emigrated from Argentina afforded him only partial membership into both the Mexican state and Jewish-Mexican society. Through the employment opportunity he received in a Jewish organization that hired him, he was, to a degree, placed in the privileged position of being partially incorporated into the Jewish-Mexican community. In spite of his employment position, however,

---

<sup>50</sup> Interview with Miranda Novsky 25 February 2007. Cimmet, *Ashkenazi Jews in Mexico*, 26

<sup>51</sup> Elkin, *Jews of the Latin American Republics*, 193.

<sup>52</sup> Interview with Roberto Novsky 24 February 2007.

Roberto never achieved total acceptance from the Jewish community as two issues separated him from it. The first of these, his nationality, resulted from the Jewish-Mexican community's strong identification with their national origin. Nationalistic and patriotic affiliations proved as important as religious association. Moreover, the Jewish-Mexican community's identity was defined to a large extent by aspects of their lifestyle. Members married within the Jewish community, attended Jewish school, and did not stray from Jewish practice. Roberto suffered a degree of exclusion because he married an Argentine Catholic, sent his children to non-Jewish schools, and was not a practicing Jew. Thus while Roberto had been able to remain a member of the Jewish community in Argentina in spite of his life choices, he could not do so in Mexico.

Roberto's migratory experience challenged his affiliation to the Jewish community and to Argentina. As a result of this lack of connection, Roberto soon found that his connections to news and events in Argentina ran through other, not necessarily Jewish, exiles, and not through the Jewish community that he had joined.

Communication networks take many different forms as people affiliate with one another for a variety of complex reasons not captured through a single aspect of an individual's legal identity or spatial proximity. Roberto formed many networks based on different aspects of his life, with some overlapping and others remaining independent. Connections based on work, religion, neighborhoods, life experiences, schooling, and family represent just a few of the types of bonds that create networks and offer membership to new members.

In the case of Roberto, family connections with members living within Argentina and with those living outside Argentina joined with connections made with others in similar situations to create a support network and facilitate the dissemination of information. This process proved important for two reasons. The first relates to the censorship imposed by the Argentine Junta that silenced the voices of the repressed. Since an official journalistic news source did not exist, informal networks that functioned through word of mouth became the primary means of acquiring knowledge. This informal network provided a means to overcome the spatial separation that removed exiles from the experience of those who remained. Secondly, the informal network served to conserve a sense of identity within the exile community. It maintained a connection to the land, culture, religion, and society that shaped them. For those who left Argentina this connection reinforced their national identity, and for those who were never included into the communities into which they relocated, the informal connection also served to reinforce the feeling that they still belonged to a group.

## V. Conclusion

The three sections examining waves of anti-Semitism, the negotiation of statelessness, and the continuation of "otherness" after emigration, explore the historical process of the denial of membership to Jews living in Argentina. Furthermore, they illuminate the struggle to re-establish membership abroad, and the ways that many in the Jewish-Argentine community resisted the political forces that gained strength in the nation. The changes of a Jewish-Argentine identity comprised of religion, nationalism, and memory during the *Proceso* need to be viewed in the

context of the dramatic rise in anti-Semitism of the 1960s. The experience of this time led to a solidification of an identity of Jewishness separate from the Argentine nation. This process created a community that became more of an "other," through a process of space usurpation, spatial violation, and intimidation. Moreover, this alteration to an identity that became more Jewish and less Argentine resulted from the external pressures coming from the gentile population of Argentina and also from the internal reactions of the Jewish community. The new identity, created through both an internal and external process, shifted again with the escalation of state violence during the *Proceso*. This violence led many to leave the country, and the impact of the joining with new communities profoundly affected Jewish migrants' identity.

The interesting challenge faced by Jews who relocated abroad during the *Proceso* involved the ways that the greater communities defined them. While the Jewish community living in Argentina from 1960 to 1962 viewed themselves as Argentine, the greater national community viewed them differently. Looking for a scapegoat for national anxieties, they refused to identify that group as Argentine. After migrating, however, Jewish-Argentines like Miranda and Roberto faced challenges when attempting to join Jewish communities abroad. Therefore exclusion defined the identities of these people in both countries. In Argentina, when they wanted to be identified as Argentines they were marginalized and defined as Jews, while abroad, when they wished to join the Jewish community, members of that community defined them as Argentine.