14. Through Her Eyes: German Jewish Immigration to Argentina

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In 1732, Markgraf Karl-Wilhelm von Baden-Durlach allowed Jews to inhabit his territories in the southwest of Germany. By 1740, only three Jewish families had settled in the village of Graben, among them the Baer family. On October 22, 1940, two of the three remaining Jewish inhabitants were sent to Gurs concentration camp in Vichy France.

By 1887, there were forty-nine Jews (2 percent of the total population) living in Graben, a small village situated in Baden-Durlach territory. They owned the A. Baer & Co. distillery, the Weil Brothers cigarette factory and the Zur Sonne bed & breakfast, all of which were “Aryanized” by 1940. In 1923, Graben’s Jewish community consisted of twenty-three people (0.9 percent of the total population) under the leadership of Robert Baer and Isak Weil. That same year, Marianne Baer, daughter of Robert Baer and Else Grumbacher and sister of Hermann, was born.

When the Nazis came to power in 1933, Hermann and Marianne were attending the Volkschule in Graben. A new teacher arrived to inform the students what Jews looked like—by dehumanizing them. He said that Jews had a hump, a long hooked nose, dark curly hair and a tail, thus describing the physiognomy of Jews as taught by the Nazi ideologues. Marianne jumped on the table, turned her back and shouted “where is my hump and my tail?” That night, the teacher went to the Baers’ home to apologize.

In 1937, Marianne was expelled from the German school system, as was the case a year earlier for all Jewish students and teachers in Germany. She then enrolled in the Jüdische Volksschule in Karlsruhe (some twelve miles from Graben). At this school for Jewish children as well as German mentally ill students, she met Jewish students coming from the Realschule or Gymnasiums and from elementary schools from Karlsruhe and surrounding areas. Here, prominent university professors taught students on different topics that could be useful to them in the near future, while their families tried to get a visa to leave the country. “This transitory state became a hallmark of the school and
we spent a lot of time discussing legal and illegal means of emigration to many lands” (Maier 1995).

In July 1938, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt convened a League of Nations conference in Evian with delegates from thirty-two nations, mostly Latin American, to help Jews fleeing Hitler. The Evian Conference resulted in total inaction as no country wanted to increase their immigration quota or to accept additional Jews. In fact, Argentine immigrant regulations became more restrictive when the government realized that the United States and Great Britain were driving masses of Jews into Latin America that they themselves were not prepared to accept.

Like many other German veterans of World War I, Robert Baer felt very German and believed he was safe, that he was untouchable. He would not acknowledge the danger Jews were facing until the night of November 9, 1938, when he and his family experienced and survived what later would be known as Kristallnacht. Their neighbor and friend, Heinrich Ebel, and members of the Hebel Loge in Karlsruhe had warned the Baers of an uprising that would take place that night. Aware of the danger, the Baers hid in their house and did not respond to provocations from some of their neighbors. That night nothing happened to them or their property.

Still oblivious to the rising hatred against Jews and the destruction of Jewish property that had occurred that night, they sent Marianne to school in Karlsruhe the next day. She arrived at the school, but none of the male teachers were there. The female staff told her to go back home. On her way back to Graben, she saw the Karlsruhe synagogue still burning.

We took the streetcar back to the railroad station. When we passed through the entrance gate to the train platforms we were stopped by police officers in civilian dress. Are you Jewish? Where are you going? How old are you? were some of the questions they wanted answered….We didn’t fully understand what this was all about, so we did as we were told and stayed where we were. They left, but returned after a while. They must have realized that children under sixteen were not to be arrested in this “action.”…Shortly afterwards, we took the train home. We ran most of the way to our houses, because by then we started to feel that something was very wrong. (Maier 1995)

When a totally distressed Marianne got home, her parents, still unaware of the magnitude of the destruction, sent her to Heidelberg to see what was happening to her mother’s cousin, Sally (Salomon) Goldscheider, who was the head of the Jewish community. When Marianne entered his apartment, she was surrounded by destruction. All his furniture, paintings, and Meissen porcelain had been destroyed and he had been taken to a concentration camp. Another twenty-five thousand men from different parts of Germany were also taken to concentration camps where they were brutalized by S.S. guards and, in some cases, randomly chosen to be beaten to death. A few days later, the
Baers received a coffin from Buchenwald with the corpse of Max Grumbacher, another cousin of Marianne’s mother, inside. They were forbidden to open it.

In December 1938, a law was issued for the compulsory Aryanization of all Jewish businesses. Robert Baer finally recognized that there was no future for his family in Germany and so began a long period of letter writing. He wrote to relatives and friends who had immigrated to different countries in North and South America, requesting their help. A trip to the United States consulate in Stuttgart to request a visa was unsuccessful as the United States had closed its doors to Jews. In August of 1938, the Nazis required Jewish women to add “Sarah” and men to add “Israel” to their names on all legal documents, including passports. In October, Jewish passports had to be stamped with a large red “J.” Everyone knew why they wanted to leave Germany.

In preparation for his departure, Robert Baer started sending his belongings to different people in different countries. He sent seven boxes to Belgium, which included his stamp and coin collections, Meissen porcelain, the Torah scroll, and all the Jewish ceremonial objects which belonged to the Graben synagogue. To Genoa, he sent some furniture that he had bought specially for emigration. None of these were ever returned to the family.

In February 8, 1940, the Baers finally received the llamada (call) allowing them to enter Argentina. Their son Hermann had already escaped through Switzerland and England, arriving in Buenos Aires on November 29, 1939 on the Highland Monarch vessel from Southampton. With a cousin, Carlos Weil, who was already a resident in Buenos Aires, Hermann worked hard to obtain that precious permit for the rest of his family.

Argentina is primarily an immigrant nation. Most of the early waves of immigrants came from Europe during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in search of better economic opportunities. The economic crisis and the nationalistic tendency of the 1930s led Argentine authorities to a policy that was less than friendly to immigrants and to the distinction between less desirable refugees and more desirable immigrants. It was not until the Spanish Civil War that Argentina tightened its immigrant regulations, fearing the arrival of Socialists and Communists escaping Franco’s Spain as well as Jews fleeing Hitler’s Germany. As of 1937, Argentine consuls in Europe were ordered to refuse entry to all refugees who did not provide a police certificate of good conduct. This document was almost impossible to obtain for most of the Jews fleeing Germany. However, Ronald Newton reminds us it was not so easy to keep Jews out, as “Argentina was unable to patrol effectively its long borders with the neighboring republics of Chile, Bolivia, Paraguay, Brazil, and Uruguay. The overseas consuls of these nations, especially the first three, did a brisk and lucrative trade of visas and entry permits for persons desperate to escape the Nazi terror” (Newton 1982). In their attempt to cross the border, many lost their lives—either murdered for their belongings or abandoned to their fate by guides they paid to take them to Argentina. Moreover, on July 12,
1938, the Argentine Foreign Minister signed a “secretly confidential” order, known as Directive 11, which ensured that none of the Jews fleeing Europe found their way to Argentina. A copy of this directive was found recently by Beatriz Gurevich in Sweden (Zylberman 2007).

After receiving the llamada, the Baers were able to get the three good conduct certificates and health certificates. They were allowed to leave the country with only one suitcase per person. They bought third class tickets on the Oceania, which sailed from Italy. Not knowing what their future life would bring them or allow them to do, Robert and Marianne went to the Obergrombach cemetery to honor their ancestors for the last time. The Obergrombach Jewish cemetery dates back to 1760; it stands on the Eichelberg mountain and served various Jewish communities. It holds more than twenty-three hundred tombstones, of which more than eighteen hundred were vandalized during the Nazi period. Robert and Marianne arrived on bicycles to collect a piece of earth from each of their relatives’ tombs. While visiting the graves of Robert’s parents and his brother, who died fighting in the First World War in Flanders, the tombstone fell on Marianne’s ankle, destroying her muscle. This was a trap set by the students of Bruchsal. With great difficulty, Robert and Marianne walked back to Graben to seek help from Dr. Hass, an old friend of the family, who now refused to help Marianne because of her Jewish origin. That night, hidden by darkness, the village nurse arrived at their home to immobilize Marianne’s leg. A few days later, the Baers left for the train station located between Graben and Bruchsal. Behind closed shutters, neighbors watched how the Jews who lived with them for so many generations abandoned their lives, their belongings, and their past. The Baers were lucky that they were still able to escape. On October 31, 1941 Germany prohibited Jews from leaving.

The train took them to Basel. As soon as they crossed the border into Switzerland, Marianne pulled all the World War I decorations from her father’s chest and threw them back into Germany. From Basel they traveled to Genoa where they boarded the Oceania which would take them to a safe haven. When the ship stopped in Marseille, the Nazis surrounded the vessel and ordered all men under fifty-five to abandon the ship. Most of them were Czechoslovakian Jews, who were sent to concentration camps. Robert was able to remain on the ship, as he was almost at the age limit of fifty-five. The ship continued its journey to Barcelona. There, Marianne learned her first Spanish word: pan (bread). The Spanish Civil War had devastated the country, leaving many people hungry. The Spanish children ran to the ship in search of food, calling “Pan, pan!” The Baers threw the children what they had. The Atlantic crossing was uneventful. In April 1940, at the Brazilian port of Santos, Marianne bought and tasted her first banana.

On May 1, 1940, Marianne (age sixteen) and her parents arrived in Buenos Aires. Marianne expected to be received by feathered Indians; she felt rather disappointed when she encountered her cousin and brother instead. For a day,
they stayed at the Hotel de Inmigrantes before being allowed to leave for a rooming house the following day.

Of the one hundred thousand Jewish, German, and Austrian emigrants who fled to Latin America, Argentina received the largest quota: forty-five to fifty thousand. But not all were allowed to enter Argentina; 474 refugees who were not allowed to disembark in other Latin American countries (Uruguay, 293; Brazil, 134; Panama, 27; Paraguay, 13; and Venezuela, 7) were denied entry to Argentina. Upon arrival, German émigrés encountered an established German community with some three hundred organizations, institutions, schools, and newspapers—most of which very soon fell under Nazi influence. It is estimated that of the 237,000 Germans living in Argentina, about 1,500 Germans became members of the Nazi party. Before this menacing manipulation of German institutions by the Nazis, Germans and Jews had frequented and worked for the same organizations. There was important German influence on the Argentine military which ultimately assured a pro-Nazi and fascist sentiment, especially during the Década infame (infamous decade, 1930–1943) and when the ultranationalist Grupo de Oficiales Unidos (G.O.U.) took power in 1943, spreading totalitarian ideas among the army and creating an anti-American and anti-British sentiment.

When, in 1933, the Jews were expelled from Argentine-German institutions, they started to create their own groups and organized new associations with the anti-Nazi German community. In the following years, the émigrés revitalized some anti-Nazi and Jewish institutions and associations, such as the socialist club Verein Vorwärts, which had been in existence since 1882; the Swiss liberal newspaper, Argentinisches Tagelblatt; the Jewish German philanthropic association Hilfsverein Deutschsprechender Juden. They founded new political and cultural organizations such as the Pestalozzi Schule and Colegio Tarbut, Editorial Cosmopolita and Editorial Estrellas, Freie Deutsch Bühne, S.O.S., and several synagogues in the Belgrano and Olivos neighborhoods.

The Baers visited the Hilfsverein Deutschsprechender Juden to ask for work. The Hilfsverein Deutschsprechender Juden, later known as Asociación Filantrópica Israelita (A.F.I.), was founded in 1933 by those Jews expelled from Argentine German institutions who realized the needs and hardships facing the refugees. Some of the names of the early contributors to that organization were Adolfo Hirsch, Ernesto Oppenheimer, Ricardo Sadler, Ricardo Hirsch, and Bernardo Zollfrei. They started to organize themselves by negotiating permits for refugees to disembark and getting them out of the Hotel de Inmigrantes, by finding temporary lodgings for the refugee families, providing clothing and furniture for those arriving after 1939 because they could only bring one suitcase, retraining people in different professions needed in the new country, organizing Spanish classes, establishing an orphanage and a home for the elderly, and ultimately finding jobs to get the immigrants established. A lending library was also established for them to read in German and satisfy
their cultural interests. Most of them stayed in Buenos Aires; others ventured to the provinces. Some established the last agricultural settlements with the help of the Jewish Colonization Association: Avigdor and Villa Alcaráz in Entre Ríos, but with limited success due in part to government obstructionism. A.F.I. kept their associates informed through the Mitteilungsblatt, later known as Filantropía, which started to appear in 1934 and is still being published.

At first Robert Baer found work at the busy Buenos Aires port, loading crates onto ships while Else cleaned rooms in boarding houses and Marianne worked as a maid in different homes. Only once was she asked to leave her job while working for an Argentine high society family who found out she was a Jew. Hermann, who had worked as an apprentice in a chocolate factory while in Switzerland, had found work at different patisseries in Buenos Aires and had learned the art of handling marzipan. Being very entrepreneurial, he began renting a table at one of the patisseries, where he manufactured and marketed his own products. Robert and Else Baer helped Hermann by packaging and selling the products door to door. They also sold goose oil and other products that came from the Avigdor German Jewish colony.

By 1942, they were able to rent a house where Hermann could use the backyard to open his own chocolate factory. Later, the Baers bought this house and it became their home. Meanwhile, Hermann became a successful chocolatier and founded Gustavo Bar and later the Bariloche chocolate factory. Today, at age eighty-nine, he is still manufacturing truffles in his most recent chocolate factory: El Viejo Oso (The Old Bear).

Marianne studied to be a nurse at the Red Cross and worked several different jobs until she became a masseuse. Like most of the emigrants, she started from the bottom of the ladder and worked her way up. Other started as waiters, workers in textile factories or at the port, teachers, traveling salespersons, painters, carpenters, masseurs, insurance brokers, etc. and, in time, were able to save money which they used to build or buy their own establishments. Networking was essential and those community and family ties remain strong to this date.

These German émigrés were eager to learn what was happening in Europe and elsewhere in the world to their family and friends who were scattered by the Diaspora. There were two leading German newspapers published in the country. One was the daily Deutsche La Plata Zeitung that, as of the 1930s, supported the Nazi Party. It had been founded in 1863 and was owned by Herman Tjerks; it had a circulation of forty-five thousand. The other, Argentinisches Tageblatt, had been founded in 1889 by Johann J. Alemann, a Swiss émigré, and supported the liberal and democratic point of view. The Argentinisches Tageblatt’s anti-Nazi editorial policy led to vicious attacks by the Nazis and an advertising boycott by the German community which was supported by the German embassy. Because of a signed Alemann article that appeared in 1933 and a cartoon by the political exile Carl Meffert (pseudonym
Clément Moreau) who published some of the most ferocious and poignant anti-Hitler caricatures, the *Argentinisches Tageblatt* was banned in the Reich. Dr. Ernesto Alemann, who earned a degree at Heidelberg University, was stripped of his doctoral title and Meffert was stripped of his German citizenship. The *Argentinisches Tageblatt* received strong support from the new wave of immigrants, which increased its circulation and allowed it to carry on its activities during those difficult times.

Exiled politicians, journalists, and authors such as Paul Zech, Alfred Dang, Paul Walter Jacob, Günther Ballin, Balder Olden, Hans Silber, and Livia Neumann were published by the *Argentinisches Tageblatt*. The *Argentinisches Tageblatt* founded a publishing house, Editorial Alemann y Cía, which mainly published translated books and played an important role offering a piece of the lost “fatherland” to the émigrés, as well as the Transmarc Verlag, which published some educational material for the Pestalozzi Schule.

Other small publishing houses founded by German political exiles struggled to survive. That was the case of *Das Andere Deutschland* (DAD), established on June 7, 1937, by a group of ten German and Austrian socialists under the leadership of Dr. August Siemsen (the publisher and editor who wrote most of the leading articles) and Heinrich Grönewald and Dr. Hans Lehmann (who wrote and edited most of the articles), both of whom were also teachers at the Pestalozzi Schule. The first year they published a column in the *Argentinisches Tageblatt* and in 1938 they started to publish a monthly magazine under the title *Das Andere Deutschland/La otra Alemania* (Órgano de los Alemanes libres de América del Sur). DAD’s circulation grew rapidly, and by 1945 it was sold in various Latin American countries. In 1941, DAD published for the young immigrant generation a pamphlet titled: *Heute und Morgen: Jugendzeitung für Kultur und Fortschritt* edited by Pieter Siemsen. And from 1940 to 1942, they published a Spanish language bulletin: *Informaciones para la prensa sudamericana*, compiled and written by Heinrich Grönewald. They wrote of the atrocities committed by the Nazis in Europe and in Argentina, and about political and economic issues. In 1940, some of DAD’s members formed the famous theatrical organization under the leadership of an exiled German Jew, Paul Walter Jacob, Freie Deutsche Bühne (Teatro Alemán Independiente), which played an important role mainly among Jewish immigrants. This group performed some 750 performances in the ten years of its existence, allowing young emigrant actors to perform on stage antifascist German-language plays.

In 1939, a new publishing house appeared under the direction of James Illy Friedmann, a German Jewish refugee, former bookseller and publisher in Berlin. First known as Freie Deutsche Buchverlag, it changed its name to Editorial Cosmopolita, publishing several German exile literature books, antifascist novels and novels about life in Argentina. Among the authors whose manuscripts were accepted were Günther Ballin, Doris Dauber, Fred Heller, Hans Jahn, Paul Walter Jacob, Karl Kost, Johan Luzian, Livia Neumann, and
August Siemsen. These books were sold in different bookstores that were established in the city or circulated in the libraries they organized.

Another publication, aimed at the Jewish German-speaking immigrants, was *Die Jüdische Wochenschau*, later known as *Semanario Israelita*, which appeared on April 26, 1940, and emphasized Jewish traditions and Zionist ideals. It was directed by Hardi Swarsensky, a German lawyer who arrived in 1939 on the same ship as Hermann Baer, and Günther Friedländer, a rabbi from Berlin who arrived as a member of the Riegner Grouppe. It was published in German and only in its last years did it appear in a bilingual edition, until Swarsensky’s death in 1968. Some controversies arose between the *Jüdische Wochenschau* and the DAD because of the distinction the latter made between political exiles and the apolitical Jewish emigrants, not acknowledging that Jews were persecuted because of racial motives. Werner M. Finkelstein was the editor of the *Semanario Israelita* for the last twenty years of its existence. It ceased to appear in 1999, when he returned to Germany. In 1942, Hardi Swarsensky also founded Editorial Estrellas, which issued works by German-Jewish and Argentine-Jewish authors.

Because of the nazification of Argentina’s German schools, the antifascist refugees, socialists, and all who stood against the Nazis and their indoctrination founded the Pestalozzi Schule in 1934. It opened its doors on April 2, 1934, thanks to funding by the Alemann family (A.T.) and the director of Bunge & Born (a large Belgian grain exporting company), Alfredo Hirsch. Pestalozzi Schule’s first director was Dr. Alfred Dang, who was stripped of his German citizenship that same year. Many of the teachers were members of Das Andere Deutschland, among them Hans Lehmann, August Siemsen, Carl Meffert, and Heinrich Grönewald. During their first years, the schools received emigrant students with knowledge they had acquired at schools in Germany and who were able to adapt to the new environment very easily. But the situation changed dramatically after 1936 with the avalanche of Jewish émigrés, who had been traumatized by persecution. These new students came with “severe traumas” because they had been thrown out of the German school system for being Jews and had experienced the hardships and misery of trying to survive. Dr. Alfred Dang commented: “Qué hacer cuando uno de esos niños preguntaba tímidamente si le era permitido sentarse al lado de un ‘ario’ en el aula o si podía tomar agua en el mismo bebedero que el ‘ario’ en el patio?” The school, as pointed out by Nora Avruj (2008), provided them with protection and psychological restraint and taught them the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity, stressing that Nazism had nothing to do with German culture.

Marianne still remembers this school fondly. There she studied under the guidance of Dang, Siemsen, the Ballins, Soldati and other great educators. She worked in the afternoon and attended the official Spanish public school at night (in the Belgrano neighborhood). She was unable to finish her secondary education because everyone was needed to survive in a society so different
from the one to which they were accustomed. After all, one must remember that of over two hundred German schools in Argentina, only three were anti-Nazi: Pestalozzi Schule, Cangallo Schule, and the Germania Schule.

The German Jews established many cultural and religious institutions where they gathered, worshiped, and socialized. The best known are Nueva Comunidad Israelita and its branch, Lamroth Hakol, under the guidance of Rabbi Hans Harf and Rabbi Gunther Friedländer, Benei Tikva and Beit Israel, Ajdut Israel (Asociación Concordia Israelita, Moldes), Jüdische Kulturgemeinschaft (J.K.G), later known as Asociación Cultural Israelita de Buenos Aires (A.C.I.B.A). These were shelters for the emigrants seeking to recreate the Jewish life they had left behind. During the first few years, the services were held in German until a new generation began to demand Spanish and Hebrew worship. These congregations published their own prayer books, yearbooks, and bulletins.

Marianne married Walter Lubasch in 1946, another German refugee who later became a very well known physician. In 1961, they founded the Tarbut School, which became the leading Hebrew school in the country, where both their children were educated. One of the reasons for creating a new school was that their son, who attended a prestigious English school in the Olivos neighborhood with a strict quota for Jews, was denied the possibility of learning about Judaism during religion class. With a group of other co-religionists, the Lubaschs set the foundations for what has become one of the best known schools in Argentina defined by a liberal, pluralist, and democratic Jewish approach, regulated by its values of developing solid personalities and responsible citizens. The Tarbut School, a trilingual school where Spanish, English, and Hebrew are taught to students at the kindergarten, primary, and secondary levels, stands on three principles as written by Dr. Lubasch: “formación del carácter y de la conducta, transmisión de los conocimientos y experiencias básicas de la época actual y pasada e inducción a una actividad creativa” (Revista Tarbut 1962).

Many of the emigrants arrived in Argentina when the country was beginning to industrialize itself. Some were able to found metal, paint, leather, and textile factories or pharmaceutical laboratories. Others—with less capital but greater creativity, professional knowledge or expertise in a trade or entrepreneurial skills—were able to establish small and medium-sized enterprises and produced chocolate and confectionery delicacies, leather goods, metals and textiles businesses, publishing houses, or opened bookstores, fur shops, furniture shops, etc. Those holding professional degrees, such as physicians or lawyers, found recertification extremely difficult. Some, mainly men, were not able to cope with the harshness and difficulties of their migration and committed suicide. But most of them moved up the socio-economic ladder, thanks to the value they placed on education and their drive. Still others, when the opportunity arose, left the country for Palestine or the United States for a
German Jewish Immigration to Argentina

more stable and democratic society or just migrated with their children some decades after their arrival to the country, searching for better havens. This has been their fate!

REFERENCES


