

From Norwich to the Pampas and Back:

The Archive of Rabbi Marshall T. Meyer at Duke University

By Irene L. Munster

Description: Argentina has been a hospitable country for many immigrant groups, including Jews, who arrived en masse from Eastern Europe during the 1880s. The Jewish community grew to almost 400,000, but assimilation, mixed marriages, immigration to Eretz Yisra'el, and a search for identity depleted the community during the second half of the twentieth century. Rabbi Marshall T. Meyer, a graduate of the Jewish Theological Seminary, arrived in Argentina in 1959. Through his approach to Judaism – a combination of traditional religious services and social outreach – he was able to attract many young people and thus saved much of Latin American Jewry from assimilation. His active intervention during Argentina's Dirty War saved many lives; his active work in B'nei Jeshurun (New York City) transformed a moribund congregation into a leading one. In all of these efforts, his fight for human rights was always present.

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Argentine History:

What happened in Argentina from the mid-50's till the 80's?

During September 1955, a coup d'état (misnamed *Revolución Libertadora/Liberating Revolution*) overthrew Juan D. Perón. Repressive measures were enacted against Perón supporters: unions fell under military control and their leaders were persecuted, Peronist symbols were banned and even Perón's name was forbidden from broadcasts; he became *el dictador prófugo* (fugitive dictator), Evita's body disappeared. In other words, there was an attempt to erase Perón and his movement from the collective memory.

In 1958, elections were held, and the country returned to democracy with Arturo Frondizi as its new president. He signed a secret electoral agreement with Perón, which led to the animosity of the Armed Forces. After resisting more than 30 coup attempts, Frondizi was overthrown in 1962.

In 1963, Arturo Illia was elected president in a controlled election, where the Peronist party was not allowed to participate. During Illia's presidency the military continued to exercise strong influence. This 'democratic period' only survived for a few short years.

It should be noted that the military were not alone. As Robert Potash, emeritus professor at University of Massachusetts writes: "*The successful military coups which took place in Argentina in this century, before Alfonsín's presidency, didn't occur in a political vacuum; on the contrary, they were always escorted by a substantial civil support*" (Castrillón, 1997).

In 1966, following Illia's physical removal from the *Casa Rosada* (Pink House), General Juan Carlos Onganía was appointed president. The first three years of his presidency were relative peaceful and he didn't enforce a state of siege; common under military governments. In 1969, students and workers started to protest. Opposition from military and civilian circles to his regime intensified until 1970 when an internal coup took place, and he was deposed. In April 1969, the first attack by an urban guerrilla group took place in Buenos Aires. And in 1970, another group known as *Montoneros* kidnapped and murdered ex-President Pedro Eugenio Aramburu, who was responsible for the disappearance of Eva Perón's body and, along with other high officers for Perón's overthrow. This was only the start of another era of terror.

In 1971, General Alejandro A. Lanusse was appointed president. Faced with violence and political disintegration, Lanusse announced elections for 1973 after returning the body of Eva Perón to her husband, who was exiled in Spain, as a way of starting negotiations for a restoration of democratic government. In 1972, elections were held and Perón's stand-in, Héctor Campora was elected as the new president and with him, the Peronist left wing

took control of the country. Perón returned from exile after almost 17 years and ordered Campora to resign. In the meantime, bombs, kidnappings and all kinds of bloody attacks, on civilians and Armed Forces alike, took place throughout Argentina. Perón (3rd term) and his third wife, Isabelita, won the election with 62% of the votes, but Perón died eight months later. Under the leadership of Isabel and her 'éminence gris', José Lopez Rega, who organized the clandestine *Asociación Anticomunista Argentina* (known as the Triple AAA), responsible for the assassination of left-wing leaders and their sympathizers, the country exploded. The violence continued to increase, till Isabel allowed the Armed Forces "to neutralize and annihilate the action of the subversive elements". With the support of many civilian sectors, Isabel Perón was removed on March 24, 1976, and a military *Junta* took power. The press became silent. The *Buenos Aires Herald*, with Robert Cox as its director, and *La Opinión*, with Jacobo Timermann as its director, were two of the few newspapers to raise their voices and subsequently suffer of political persecution. The military leaders started to 'eliminate' not only those who were involved in subversive attacks or acts, but also those who they considered responsible for disseminating 'subversive ideas that were alien to the Western and Christian order'. To 'eliminate' was synonymous with clandestine arrests or kidnappings, torture and execution. The *Junta*, first headed by General Jorge R. Videla, transformed the State into an instrument of terror and lost any prior legitimacy, real or perceived.

Only in 1983, was it possible for the country to return to democracy, after 10 years of blindness.

Argentine Jewish History:

Argentina was for many years a safe haven for Jews coming from all parts of the Old World. Before and after World War I, many Jews left the cities of Aleppo & Damascus, Syria, to settle in Argentina. The Ashkenazim, who came from Eastern Europe, with the help of Baron Maurice de Hirsch in 1880 and onwards, were the majority until World War II. During and after the Holocaust, Jews from Western Europe arrived, although the quota for those entering the country was restricted by Perón's bureaucrats.

Different tensions between Jewish groups arose, because each of them tried to preserve their heritage, their customs, and their traditions. As a consequence each group brought their communal models and tried to fit them in their new society. Local traditions, as were the discrepancies between ashkenazim and sephradim, between western European and oriental European Jews, between Litvaks, Galitzianer, Besarabier or between those who spoke Ladino or Arabic, were held and imposed on the new generations; as were the fear of new persecutions and their isolation of the native population.

Many Jews were able to move up the social ladder from the working class to the emerging middle class. Argentina was one of the Latin American countries in which Jews, although not completely accepted by the dominant Catholic society, were able to grow and establish themselves as merchants, professionals, bankers and industrialists.

However, Argentina didn't turn out to be the haven those Jews fleeing from their villages, towns and cities in the Old World and seeking peace, prosperity and a new place to live, imagined.

Some facts:

Argentina has been a hospitable country for many immigrant groups, including Jews, entering the country in different periods; but we should not forget that it has been a country with a strong anti-Semitic tradition. We need only remember Perón's silent alignment with the Axis powers and his welcoming Nazis after 1945. The fascist groups, which multiplied after Perón's defeat, bombed synagogues, defaced Jewish property with swastikas, and slandered Jews in nationalistic newspapers and pamphlets.

After Eichmann's capture in 1960, fire-bombings and beatings increased sharply; with the *Tacuara* nationalistic group as the foremost virulent group, along with *Guardia Restauradora Nacionalista*. After Onganía seized power in 1966, he "nullified two decades of Jewish political integration by effectively removing all Jews from positions in government" (Weisbrot, 1979). In 1971, a professor of political economics at the national university, *Universidad de Buenos Aires*, Walter Beveraggi Allende, accused Jews through a letter he sent to the general secretary of the country's largest union (José Rucci) of plotting against the Nation to convert the southern third of Argentina, the Patagonia region, into a Zionist state to be named *Andinia*. This charge gained immediate attention and was seized as true by several nationalist groups. Unfortunately, this was not the only letter 'denouncing' the Jews as responsible for the social, economic and political unrest in the country. As always, a scapegoat was needed and was found.

With Perón's return in 1973, the fear of many Jews who had witnessed his former presidency returned, but he had the admiration and support of many of the younger generation, including many Jews, who had no memories of what happened or who still saw him as an alternative to the established rule of large landowners. After Isabel Perón

was deposed, and the *Junta* came to power, Jews kept on being natural targets and a new wave of anti-Semitic sentiment arose in the country. Some government officers believed that most Jews sympathized with the guerrillas and tended to link arrests of prominent Jews to them, as was the case with Jacobo Timmerman, owner of *La Opinión* newspaper, José Gelbard, former minister of economy who was able to seek refuge in the United States, and Jacobo Kovadloff, representative of the American Jewish Committee (AJC) who had to close the AJC office after 29 years of existence and leave the country.

It was this country which the newly ordained American rabbi, Marshall T. Meyer, chose as his pulpit; he faced the challenge and it transformed his destiny.

Marshall Theodore Meyer:

Who was he? What has he done to deserve special attention today? What would have happened if he had not faced the challenge imposed to him? What made him different? Why are there so many people who either adore or hate him with a passion?

My reading of Meyer spans almost 30 years. It starts with an admiring gaze and grows through a mature and objective perspective of some of the obstacles he overcame and the challenges he met.

I'll portray him through the eyes of a 20 years old student, who had the privilege of working with him at the Buenos Aires Rabbinical Seminar, and had him as a boss for almost ten years.

Meyer was charismatic and strong: his presence was felt wherever he went. Charmingly aggressive, he had a smile for everyone. He possessed a wonderful and powerful voice that transported you during the liturgical prayers. He loved to sing! He was a leader. He

gave you confidence in yourself; he made you trust in yourself. He was there for each individual who looked for his assistance as a Rabbi, as a human being.

He was born in Brooklyn on March 25, 1930, to Isaac and Anita Meyer. His family moved to Norwich, CT where he was raised and educated. During his youth he had an opera program in the local radio station. He earned his Bachelor of Arts degree from Dartmouth College in 1952 (where he studied with Eugen Rosenstock Huessy); a Masters degree in Hebrew literature at the Jewish Theological Seminary in 1958, guided by Abraham J. Heschel. He was at Heschel's side for almost eight years, first as a Rabbinical student and then as his private secretary. His post graduates studies were completed at the Hebrew University, where he studied with Martin Buber, followed by studies at Columbia University and the Union Theological Seminary of New York. He was ordained rabbi at the Jewish Theological Seminary in 1958.

He married Naomi Friedman in 1955, daughter of late Rabbi Theodore Friedman. They have three children all born in the 60's in Argentina: Anita, Dodi and Gabriel.

Let's return for a moment to Buenos Aires. In 1862, the *Congregación Israelita de la República Argentina*, first Jewish institution recognized by the Argentine government for its religious character, was founded by Western European Jews (mostly German and Alsatian). Those who gathered together in this Institution mainly during the Holy Days, weddings or other special occasions, were referred by the Eastern European Jews as *Die Zilinder Iden*, because of the type of hat (cylinder) they wore, which resembled those used by fellow Jews in Europe. The religious tendency was 'traditionalist', a mixture between orthodoxy and liberalism; and the Sidur was all written in Hebrew with no

vernacular translation. Not until 1955, with the help of the educational center which became known as ‘Majon’, where future teachers and leaders for the community were formed, youth services for Iamim Noraim were held.

Citing the words of a member of the community, who was on its Board since 1945: *“What to say about the religious services? Sometimes a bar-mitzvah, generally a kid with no preparation, who didn’t know how to recite the Berajot, but favored having a party. The wedding date contracts subject of a supply and demand offer. Iamim Noraim services were prolonged on the Bima for two or three hours, with special misheberaj and discussions on the amount of the donations. The greater part of the community participated by, talking between them or resting. All these seemed to me a real market”* (Weil, 1988).

In 1956, Rabbi Morris Silverman, visited the *Congregación* and suggested that it affiliate with the Conservative movement by becoming a member of the United Synagogues of America; that its Rabbi, Guillermo Schlesinger, be incorporated into the Rabbinical Assembly; and that the Sidur be translated into Spanish. In 1957, Rabbi Maxwell Abell, president of the United Synagogues of America, visited Buenos Aires and insisted on the *Congregación’s* affiliation to the Conservative movement. On both occasions, most of the board of the Institution rejected the proposition, but it did allow Rabbi Schlesinger to attend a convention at the Rabbinical Assembly. In 1958, a meeting proposed by the United Synagogues of America, was organized in Buenos Aires and all Latin-American Jewish communities were invited to participate. The presence of Rabbis Abraham J. Heschel and Ernst Simon, from the Jewish Theological Seminary (J.T.S.), as well as rabbis and representatives of the Sephardic communities, was a turning point for the

future of the Jewish youth and for the Conservative movement in Argentina and Latin America. During the meeting, topics such as *'fight against assimilation through the teaching of Hebrew, its religion, its modern literature, closer contacts with the State of Israel, and the formation of leaders and rabbis'* (Weil, 1988), were discussed. After the convention, the board of the *Congregación* decided that a professional rabbi from the ranks of the J.T.S. was needed to organize the youth movement. A request was sent and a newly ordained rabbi was sent in June 1959, from the United States with a two year contract.

In August 1959, Meyer arrived in Buenos Aires with the impetus of a young rabbi (only 29 years old) ready to work and perform 'his duties'. I shall share with you extracts from his first letter to Dr. Louis Finkelstein, head of the J.T.S.: *"There is no question but that Conservative Judaism as we understand it, can have enormous appeal in South America. This is not to say that we can export in a wholesale fashion every element of our movement. ... At the moment, suffice it to say that there is an enormous need for spiritual leadership here, that all of the teachers are enormously over-worked, that in a city of 300,000 Jews or more there is not even a Minyan of Rabbis, and that one of the most important areas of our foreign concentration should be South America, without a doubt"*.

That same year the first Ramah camp was held with just 49 participants; in coming years they would not be able to absorb all those who wanted to join. In August 1960, it was decided to lay the grounds for the foundation of a Rabbinical Seminary, which started in April of 1962 with four students, two of whom are now rabbis in the US: David Algaze and Victor Mirelman.

But things didn't turn out as expected. A big schism took place in the Board of the *Congregación*, when two different candidate lists were presented for the Board's renewal. One list, representing the younger generation wanted to modernize the liturgy as suggested by Meyer, but this was not accepted by the old members. This generated such animosity that the younger group decided to found a new synagogue, which they named *Comunidad Bet El*. Meyer, who just was completing his two-year contract and was returning to the JTS to assume his new role, found himself in the middle of the fight. With the new old board of the *Congregación* taking charge of the Institution, Meyer's own situation weakened and finally he had to decide whom to help before his departure. This was also the start of an eternal battle Meyer would have to fight with the Jewish establishment in Argentina and in United States.

After many meetings with the members of *Comunidad Bet El* and seeking advice from his professors: Finkelstein, Heschel and Buber, he decided to stay in Argentina and organize, develop and establish the foundations of the Conservative Movement.

Why did he decide to stay? Why did he decide to turn down an offer from Dr. Finkelstein, which would have brought him back to Academia, and be one of the reorganizers of the JTS?

Comunidad Bet El, a small community which started with a handful of families grew to a thousand members. In 1964 the *Seminario Rabínico Latinoamericano* (SRL) was moved to its current location, where Meyer taught Midrash, theology, practical rabbinics and pastoral psychiatry. The SRL supplied Latin America and the United States with 78 rabbis (6 of whom are women); with a research library and the book collections *Biblioteca de Ciencia e Historia de las Religiones* (Library of Science and History of

Religions) with over 70 titles, and the *Ediciones Seminario Rabínico Latinoamericano* all edited under Meyer's guidance. *Maj'shavot*, a Spanish Jewish quarterly appeared in 1963. Quoting Meyer's words to Heschel "a journal had to be published to bring South American Jews in contact with the theological problems encountered by other questing Jews in other parts of the world". After several years Bet El Day School started to operate. Keeping these elements in mind we are in a position to believe that Meyer's work saved much of Latin American Jewry from assimilation.

As mentioned, in 1976 after Isabel Perón was overthrown by the *Junta Militar*, the life of Meyer and all those who surrounded him changed drastically. Disappearances of 'ordinary people' began and continued with varying degrees of murderous intensity, for the following seven years. Some 15,000 people disappeared and the reaction of most of the Argentineans was: *por algo será* (there must be a reason for it). But Meyer started to fight against the system, against the *Junta*, against the Jewish establishment, and that increased the animosity of many sectors of the society against him. Meyer, his family and those who worked with him, received death threats almost daily until it became part of their lives. He preached against the regime, spoke to the press and spoke to the community. But almost no one could believe him; the community thought he was exaggerating. The D.A.I.A (political arm of the Jewish community) accused him of interfering with their position of 'no-interference'. He went to the prisons to give comfort to Jews and non-Jews alike: "When Marshall visited prisons, he was subjected to some of the same humiliation the prisoners suffered. "I was left nude in the middle of the winter on the patio of one of the prisons [Villa Devoto, in Bs.As.] while the prison director walked by and made sure I heard the fact that 'this Jew is going to walk in one

day through the front door, and he's going to go out in a coffin through the back door'. I was searched and I said 'Look, I'm not a prisoner. The priest doesn't have to be searched in that fashion and the minister doesn't have to be searched in that fashion' And I was told 'but you're a Jew'."(Hall,1984). He was the only one allowed to visit Jacobo Timerman during his home-prison period, as well as opened *Comunidad Bet El*, for the *Madres de la Plaza de Mayo* (Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo), to attend services with him. He became a fighter for Human Rights.

When democracy was restored in 1983, President Raúl Alfonsín appointed Meyer to the National Commission for the Disappeared (CONADEP) which forced Argentineans to confront their recent past. The Commission wrote the report *Nunca Más* (Never Again), about the tortures, kidnappings and murders carried out during the *Junta's* period.

In 1984, Meyer returned to the United States, first to Los Angeles as vice-president at University of Judaism and in 1985 moved to New York city. There he was appointed rabbi to the second oldest Ashkenazi synagogue (1825), B'nai Jeshurun, located in the Upper West Side. But what he inherited was an old destroyed synagogue, where floors were missing, the roof was cracked and trash and broken furniture abounded. A moribund community with barely 80 families attending its service. "*If Meyer was attracted by the possibilities B'nai Jeshurun offered him, his concept of social justice, community and worship was a magnet to Jews who had never been affiliated with a congregation*"(Spero, 1988). After a year the community revived, with thousands of congregants attending a traditional and joyous service infused with the pursuit of social justice. Meyer reached out to Christian, Muslim and Hispanic communities, established homeless shelters, offered Pesaj sedarim for gays and lesbians and offered meals to AIDS patients. After the

roof of the synagogue collapsed, he moved to St. Paul and St. Andrews United Methodist church from where he continued his effort to help solve problems of the surrounding community.

He died from liver cancer at age 63, Dec. 1993.

Conclusion:

Why did he leave Argentina after so many years of fighting? Why precisely when he could have played a pivotal role and contribute to restructuring the ‘new’ emerging society? Why did he choose instead to be the leader of a moribund community? Why did he fight against the United States and Jewish American establishment from the podium of B’nei Jeshurun? Why did his combination of traditional services and social outreach attract so many young people? These and many other questions arise when we look at Meyer’s life. Part of the puzzle will be answered when researchers immerse themselves in his personal archive, held at Duke University’s Rare Book, Manuscript and Special Collections Library; others will take much longer because the archive has major missing pieces and time will be needed to bring together that which is still misplaced.

When I look back over my professional career I always have to think of Marshall. He encouraged me to pursue this profession; he believed in me, he always stood beside me. This paper is my way of saying thank you and to bring a glimpse of his life and achievements to you!

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Member of:

Theological Executive Committee of the Argentine National Institute of Mental Health
(1966-1971)

Argentine Permanent Assembly for Human Rights (1977-1980)

Argentine Secretary of Human Development and Family (consultant in 1983)

National Commission Investigating the Disappeared Persons (CONADEP) (1983 -)

Founder of:

Jewish Movement for Human Rights (co-president)

Argentine United Jewish Appeal (vice –president)

Latin American office of the World Council of Synagogues

Tikkun, journal editor with Michael Lerner

Honorary degrees:

J.T.S.: Doctor of Sacred Theology (1981)

Dartmouth College: Doctor of Humane Letters (1982)

Kalamazoo College: Doctor of Divinity (1985)

Hebrew Union College: Doctor of Humane Letters (1990)

Universidad de Buenos Aires: Doctor of Humane Letters (1993)

Awards:

Argentina's Order of the Libertador San Martin (1984), for work in the defense of HR

B'nai B'rith Dor L'Dor award (1984), for outstanding achievements in the service of
humanity

Human Rights award New Jewish Agenda (1985)

Maimonides prize Instituto Superior de Estudios Religiosos (1987)

Louis D. Brandeis award American Israeli civil liberties coalition (1990)

Rabbi Marshall T. Meyer working retreats on Social Justice (The Interfaith Center of New York).

Rabbi Marshall T. Meyer risk-taker awards (Jews for Racial and economic Justice)