

Chapter 1 : Pampas and Patagonia, Appendix

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Back to Search Results European Jewish artisans on horseback in Argentina In the last decades of the nineteenth century, almost , Jews emigrated from Russia and Poland to Argentina. Life in the Jewish communities of both countries, under the dominion of the Czar, was unbearable. Except for a brief respite in the early years of the reign of Alexander II, which began in , Jewish life was limited by cultural, social and commercial laws. Above all, the pogroms, during which the gentile population was allowed to turn on the Jews, looting and killing with complete impunity, forced the Jews to consider ways of escape. The majority of Jews in nineteenth-century Russia were artisans or small businessmen in towns and villages. There were also Jewish farmers, but these were more rare. Few Jews owned land, since forced resettlement and Czarist real estate laws made it very difficult for Jews to purchase property. One was a mattress maker from the outskirts of Moscow; another worked as a sort of gardener or land-keeper on the estate of a Russian princess somewhere near St. Only a few Jewish intellectuals had been involved in the terrorist plot, but the Russian aristocracy encouraged the new Czar, Alexander III, to blame the Jews for the murder. Pogroms of extraordinary violence exploded throughout the Russian territory, so terrible that they elicited protests from both the American and the British governments, and caused Alexander to issue a restraining edict. Unfortunately for the Jews, the edict made matters worse by forcing them to resettle within the confines of a strip of land called the Pale of Settlement, established earlier by Catherine II, extending from Latvia to the Ukraine. Only by special permission were Jews allowed to live outside this crescent. Even in this seemingly desperate situation, Jews believed in the promise of the homeland, Zion, the land of Israel. The political and intellectual stimulus behind this hope came largely through the Hungarian leader Theodor Herzl, founder in of the world Zionist movement. For those who did not believe in or care about a home in Palestine, there were other options, of which the United States was the most tempting. For twenty-five dollars I can get you both into Canada. Baron Maurice de Hirsch was born in Bavaria, into a very wealthy family, whose fortunes he expanded by investing wisely in Turkish, Russian and Austrian railroads. In he created a charity known as the Jewish Colonization Association with an initial capital of 2 million pounds sterling, which he later increased to 8 million. Argentina was a prime destination, since Hirsch felt that because of the comparatively small population, the officially declared belief in freedom of religion and the reported absence of racial prejudice, Argentina would be a splendid haven for the Jews of Europe. Because of an economic crisis, land was fairly cheap. This is where my family first settled. To help the Russian Jews, Hirsch had offered the Czarist government a donation of 50 million French francs, which was turned down because Hirsch had specified how it should be used: However, the government certainly was interested in a plan to remove the Jews from the Russian territory. An agreement was reached by which Hirsch would transport the Jews from Russia and the Russian government would provide them with passports, which until then they had been denied. Hirsch wanted to resettle 25, Jews a year; because of the red tape and mountains of misinformation, only 2, Jews settled in Argentina in the first year. My grandfather was then a young man, still an adolescent, and my grandmother even younger. It was called Colonia Clara and it had been founded in , the year they arrived in Argentina. Colonia Clara comprised three agricultural villages and functioned very much like a small Jewish state. Schuls were built in the style of the locals, and orange groves, with a fair number of cattle for which Argentina was famous and which the new settlers rounded up with cries in their native Yiddish. Soon the Jewish settlers began to dress as the gauchos did, in baggy black trousers, wide belt that on festive occasions was decorated with coins, white shirt and sleeveless black jacket, kerchief and brimmed hat. The diet also changed: Mate replaced Russian tea. No matter where they had originally come from, all immigrant Jews became known as Russians, the rusos. Intellectual life emigrated as well. Either in the colony itself or in large urban centres such as Buenos Aires and Rosario, Yiddish newspapers flourishedâ€”Der Vogenblatt, Di Pampa, Unser Vortâ€”as well as important presses these only in the cities , where much of the early

twentieth-century Yiddish literature from around the world was published. Jewish theatres sprang up everywhere. My grandfather, always interested in world affairs, would read the papers out loud to my grandmother. Years later, when she was living with us in Buenos Aires, we took her to see *Fiddler on the Roof* and she recognized the plot as the stories of Sholem Aleichem, which my grandfather had read to her from *Unzer Vort*. The colony had its heroes. The young son of a recent immigrant couple had been sent, after much parental sacrifice, to study in Buenos Aires, the big city. Desperate to finish his studies and ashamed of returning home defeated, the boy asked for assistance from the president of the Republic, Irigoyen himself. Neither his looks nor his accent spoke in his favour. As this was going on, President Irigoyen happened to ask what all the commotion was about and, upon being told, ordered that the prisoner be brought to him. The boy explained his situation. Imbued with nineteenth-century Russian political ideas, Shmilkel was also an anarchist philosopher and sometimes, during a holdup, he lectured his victims on the evils of private property. Shmilkel came to a sad end: The intellectual hero of the Jewish settlers was a writer by the name of Alberto Gerchunoff, who celebrated the immigrant life in a book of short stories that quickly became a classic of Argentine literature: *The Jewish Gauchos of the Pampas*, published in 1908. One of the members of the editorial board at the time was a violently anti-Semitic Hungarian countess. And whenever you wish I can put the proof in your hands. Less short stories than anecdotes, and less anecdotes than nostalgic sketches, the book is a kind of family album. One of the sketches opens as a Jewish gaucho is praying in his room on a Friday evening. Suddenly he hears a thief climb in through the window and then escape with the silver candlesticks. May God forgive him. In the new Eden of the Argentine landscape, they return to ancestral customs now tinged with exotic features, new senses and new vocabularies. They fall in love with gentiles and follow the laws of their adopted country. They succeed and they fail, sometimes on their own terms and sometimes on terms borrowed from their neighbours. The Jewish gauchos are, in the eyes of their fellow Jews, gauchos, and in the eyes of their fellow gauchos, Jews. Wherever and whoever they are, they continue to be displaced. Not everything was idyllic in the colonies. Life could be hard, prejudice still existed, anti-Semitism made its grotesque appearance here as everywhere. The Jewish gauchos were accused of not assimilating, of preferring their own kind to their gentile neighbours, of not helping non-Jews, of being inefficient farmers, of being dirty, of being dishonest, of engaging in petty trade in the cities. No doubt numbers of them have been true to Jewish instinct and left their farms for trade in the cities, and there have aroused intense hostility and gained much business by selling for much smaller profit than other tradesmen. They were willing to adapt to the new land, to start over yet again, to be something that would not seem foreign to others. In that, as in the foreign land of Egypt so long ago, they sadly failed.

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These pages were written as a result of a journey made in on behalf of the American Geographical Society to study modern European colonization in Chile, the Argentine Republic, and Brazil. The report on Chile has already appeared in this series (Recent Colonization in Chile, Amer. Geogr. Soc.

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