THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE

Anti-Semitism in Argentina and Uruguay

Report on My Visit to Buenos Aires and Montevideo
August 6 - 18, 1962
by Maximo Yagupsky

Introduction

In accordance with the exchange of cables with Abraham Monk, director of the AJC's Latin American program, we met at the Rio de Janeiro airport and worked out a basic program of activities. We agreed that he should join me a few days after my arrival there in order to work together and to exchange views. Therefore, this can be considered as a joint report.

My first meetings were with leaders of the Instituto Judío Argentino, Simon Mirelman, Dr. Ignacio Winizky, Dr. Mario Schteingart, Captain Carlos J. Korinblum, Dr. Samuel Tarnopolsky, and Rabbi Guillermo Schlesinger, chief rabbi of the Congregación Israelita de la República Argentina. Except for Mr. Mirelman and Rabbi Schlesinger, they seemed to me to be reacting emotionally for the most part in their analyses and evaluations of the situation. In their approaches, factual information was often combined with individual attitudes, guesswork and even personal reactions toward other leaders of the Jewish community and toward Argentine political groups. Nevertheless, the information gathered through them was most useful as a starting point for a first-hand evaluation.

Following these initial talks, I met with non-Jewish personalities to secure a picture of the over-all situation. They included: Army officers — General Pedro Aramburu, General Bernardino Labayru, General Osorio Arana; leaders of political parties — the Socialist party, both radical parties, the conservative party and the Democratic-Catholic party; the Minister of the Interior, Dr. Carlos A. Adroguè, and the Minister of Economics, Mr. Alvaro C. Alsogaray;
leading figures of the press — Aldofo Lanus and Gainza Paz of La Prensa and Mr. Manrique of an influential evening newspaper; leading professors of the University of Buenos Aires, and leaders of student groups, who play an important role in the political life of the country.

Other meetings were held with a number of leaders of the various Jewish organizations and with the President and Secretary-General of the DAIA.

My major conclusion is that anti-Semitic attacks on Jewish individuals and organizations, Jewish institutions, synagogues and, occasionally, on Jewish shops, must be understood in the context of the political, social, and economic situation in Argentina today.

General Background

Argentina's economy, which had deteriorated during Peron's regime, has not recovered despite the efforts made by ex-President Arturo Frondizi. This is partly due to the strong opposition Frondizi encountered from various political parties and mainly from Army and Navy leaders who objected to his efforts to "make peace" with Peron and the Peronists, and to the good will he demonstrated toward Cuba despite his anti-communist statements. These maneuvers provoked a long series of interventions by the Army into the administration of the government, until the generals finally decided to overthrow Dr. Frondizi and to install as President the then president of the Senate, Dr. Mario Guido, who became a puppet in the hands of the Army.

To maintain an atmosphere of political crisis, so that public opinion would consent to the ousting of Frondizi, provocations and frequent disorders were "necessary." Therefore, fascist groups, nationalist groups, and particularly the Tacuara became useful. Given a free hand, these groups carried out numerous provocations and attacks, especially against liberal groups and Jews, on the pretext that they are "traitors." Perhaps in order to please the United States, those activities have been conducted on the basis that "We must rid the country of communists." When the violence reached its peak, Frondizi was overthrown and the Army openly became the ruling power of the country.

The Army believed that as long as there was continued fragmentation among the political parties of the country the Peronist party would continue to be the strongest and could poll the largest vote in free elections. Thus Army leaders felt they could recover
the political balance of power only by either not holding elections for a long period, during which their puppet government would function under strong Army control, or by amending the election law to institute a system of proportional representation (in contrast to the present system whereby the party with the largest numerical vote wins). The latter course, naturally, is opposed by the Peronists, the communists and small fascist-minded groups. Internal upheaval, therefore, is "still necessary" to the Army in order to justify their strong intervention into the country's political life. As a result, troublemakers, dangerous tools though they are, act under the protection of the authorities -- and anti-Semitic groups operate almost without restraint.

As for the Army itself, aside from the traditional rivalry that exists between it and the Navy, an internal struggle has developed within recent months. Two groups have polarized. One is a pro-democratic and legalistic group which includes the followers of General Pedro Aramburu. The other is a more reactionary group with obvious fascist tendencies. The successive coups d'état which occurred during my short visit there were a result of this internal struggle. At this moment, the democratic group prevails, but no one can foretell how long this will be the case. General Aramburu might be the man who could solve Argentina's problems. He is highly respected by a large segment of the Argentine population, as well as by the Army. But as a real democrat, he is reluctant to take over the government unless elections are held. In my opinion, and in the opinion of many leaders, free elections at this time would mean a repetition of the present vicious circle.

Undoubtedly, the turbulent political scene has opened the door to the anti-Semites and neo-fascists, and it is more than likely that anti-Semitic attacks will occur again and again if they are considered "necessary" by those who encourage or promulgate them.

The question arises: Where were the police during this period and why were they unable to arrest and bring to trial the anti-Semitic aggressors? Leaders of the Jewish community are right when they maintain that the police do not want to act effectively. During the attempted coups d'état that marked the Frondizi regime and during the months when military forces were battling for control of key government positions, the Navy succeeded in taking over the national police. Among those who now head the police are neo-Nazis and Tacuara men. Neither Frondizi nor the new Minister of the Interior, Dr. Adrogue, a sincere and conservative democrat, were able to rid the police of them. General Aramburu stated to me (and I am inclined to believe him) that when the country becomes politically "normalized" and a strong leader heads the government, these fascist-oriented officials will be removed from the high ranks of the police.

Recent Anti-Semitic Activity in Argentina

Although there is no question that Tacuara and other fascist-minded groups are responsible for the anti-Semitic attacks, their strength is disproportionate to the size of their membership.
It is clear that they are supported by others who lead them, feed them, provide them with arms, persuade the police to ignore them, and secure the cooperation of some Army and Navy men. Thus, in a time of political crisis such as this, it is easy for them to become aggressive and daring.

Anti-Semitism is undoubtedly their primary motivation, as has been demonstrated by the night-time bursts of gunfire in Jewish sections, the smearing of walls of Jewish community centers, and other outrages. But they make clever and effective use of anti-communism as a pretext for their activity, and they have found appropriate subjects among Argentine Jews. The three Jewish individuals who were slashed with the Nazi swastika, I was told by respected Jewish leaders, were either communists or fellow-travelers, who had never been known to participate in Jewish community life. They were known to have been involved in meetings where clashes between communists and anti-communists had taken place. Thus, the anti-Semites used tactics designed to hurt all Jews, but carefully selected victims who could be labelled as communists.

It would seem that the police, who gave the troublemakers a free hand, warned them in advance that there must be no bloodshed and no killings. The fact that public opinion — the press, the radio, TV, student groups both democratic and reactionary, the "man in the street" — condemned these attacks might indicate that anti-Semitism is not deeply rooted among the Argentine masses. It may be that if the country "normalizes" soon, the situation will change for the better. But great watchfulness is essential because anti-Semitism has been spreading in certain circles and, if a demagogue such as Peron or Castro gains power and voices anti-Semitic sentiments, Argentina could become a bulwark of renascent Nazism in the Western Hemisphere.

At a time of economic crisis such as that plaguing Argentina today, when living costs and unemployment rise simultaneously, bitterness and resentment spread. Since there seems to be no solution in sight, people look for a scapegoat. The Jews — and especially those in the upper middle class who have not known poverty and are highly "visible," — may become the obvious and most useful scapegoat.

Jewish industrialists, bankers and others who play an important part in Argentina's national economy are comparative newcomers on that scene. The Army man, who usually belongs to the old Catholic aristocracy, still regards the Jew as the undesirable element, the parasite, the profiteer. In the post-Peron and Frondizi periods some Jews, along with many non-Jews, were involved in widely publicized illegal or quasi-legal business affairs. The detailed press accounts of these scandals gave the aristocracy as well as the Army another justification for believing that the Jew is undesirable.
The Argentine Jewish Community

The AJC’s national office is fully acquainted with the situation of the Jewish community through the frequent, detailed reports by Abraham Monk. From my conversations with community leaders (actually there are no leaders in the real sense of the word, except Mr. Mirelman), I had the impression that they were bewildered, confused and depressed. Their Zionist orientation leads them to believe that, in view of the spread of anti-Semitism in recent months, they have no future in Argentina. Some feel that if Jews will be driven to leave sooner or later (and they regard Israel as their eventual haven), then the sooner the better. They are emotionally convinced of this; they speak of it openly in both the Yiddish and the Spanish-Jewish press. But fundamentally they are not planning to leave, at least not in large numbers.

Some people in Buenos Aires were saying while I was there that approximately 8,000 Jews have registered at the Jewish Agency office. Jewish Agency personnel told me that the actual figure was much smaller and that, in their judgment, if anti-Semitic attacks continue possibly some 2,000 families would leave in the next year and a half. On the other hand, upon my return to Israel I was told by the Foreign Office in Jerusalem that they expect about 2,400 families during 1962 and 1963, if anti-Semitism continues.

The anti-Semitic attacks have had a great impact on Argentine Jewish youth. Many students who will soon graduate from the University are planning to leave for Israel. I spoke with some of them. Theirs is an emotional reaction -- and also an adventurous reaction. They belong mainly to the middle class and have led comparatively easy lives. Discouraged by present-day conditions in Argentina and a little fearful about starting out on their own, they are attracted by the idea and the adventure of Zionist redemption. Emigration to Israel offers them a way out, a solution which is acceptable to their parents and their community leaders.

Some well-to-do Jews are also planning to leave for Israel. Among them are a few who are thinking of maintaining two homes, one in Israel and one in Argentina, and of continuing to operate their businesses and factories in Argentina and simultaneously establishing businesses in Israel until they can make final decisions. This creates a psychological atmosphere of migration.
As a result of much open discussion and press comment, the fact that this atmosphere exists has become known to the non-Jewish world. In a time of economic depression, when every dollar is important, such talk of migration and of taking capital out of the country is dangerous. It provides fuel for the fire of anti-Jewish attitudes. Some government officials asked me if it was true that the Jews are planning to leave. Statements by Zionist leaders, such as the recent one by Rabbi Israel Goldstein, and editorials in the Israeli press (which surely reach Argentine government leaders through their Embassy in Israel) certainly do not help.

During my short stay in Argentina, the situation changed for the better, so far as open anti-Semitic attacks were concerned. Many Jews began reversing their earlier statements. As they put it: "It is too hard to leave for Israel at once. We would rather wait, watch and see." Dr. Isaac Goldenberg, president of the DAIA, told me he was sorry he had told the Minister of the Interior that: "In the event of further anti-Semitism, 80 per cent of the Jews would leave, which would harm the national economy."

Leaders of the Jewish community also reacted strongly in another way to the anti-Semitic manifestations. Since the police were indifferent, they organized defense groups. While such action per se is probably not very healthy, it was psychologically useful in that it gave Argentine Jews the feeling that they were doing something concrete in the emergency. I also think that the effort to create a basis for self-defense will eventually produce recognition of the fact that in times of emergencies the emphasis should not be on flight, but rather on the rights of citizenship and full participation in the country’s life.

Suggestions for AJC Action

Current conditions in the Western Hemisphere make it necessary for the United States to play a major role in speeding Argentina’s economic recovery. This aid must be given not only through the Alliance for Progress and other kinds of loans but through a realistic program designed to assist Argentina in making proper use of U.S. financial help. Argentina deserves the close friendship and cooperation of the United States for these important reasons: Although anti-Yankee sentiment exists in Argentina, it is not as deep-rooted as in other Latin American countries such as Mexico and Peru. The average Army officer in Argentina is basically anti-communist. Argentine Army officers, who formerly were followers (and admirers) of the German military school, now increasingly lean toward the American approach, buy their arms from the United States and are trained by officers of the United States defense forces. Geographically, Argentina is becoming more important to the United States from a strategic point of view.
It seems to me that the State Department has not had much success in its attempts to draw the Argentine population in general, and Army officers in particular, into the framework of the political and social philosophy of the United States. Perhaps there is not sufficient coordination between the State Department and the United States Defense Department. In terms of Jewish problems, we have always sought to obtain the cooperation of the State Department to the extent that its officials could be helpful in Latin America. But State Department officials have not always seen eye to eye with us. Most American officials were surprised but not notably concerned by the recent anti-Semitic manifestations; few made any link between them and the possible dawn of a dangerous era in Latin America.

Like almost all Latin Americans, Argentinians are usually emotional and sentimental. Personal friendships and personal influences on a man-to-man basis are often more important to them than ideological convictions. Therefore, in order to change the feelings or opinions of Argentinians, an educational program must be supplemented by frequent and effective personal contact.

It is more than likely that the Army will play an important role in the future government of Argentina. Therefore, while continuing to maintain our contacts with the State Department, we should try to influence Army leaders through the good offices of the United States Defense Department. With its cooperation, we should endeavor to establish contacts with Argentine Army officers who visit the United States. We have done this on a small scale, with good results, among Argentine intellectuals, newspaper men and politicians, but we must extend these activities to Army men — as we have with General Pedro Aramburu, the former President, and Adolfo Lanus, recently appointed Minister of Defense.

The old aristocracy is being gradually displaced by a new industrialist class. The direct person-to-person approach should also be used by the AJC with this group. Also, our educational program has been directed too much toward intellectuals and other public opinion molders and too little toward the military and other classes of the population. Up to now we have mainly published material of a "high-brow" nature, aimed at the highly literate, and have neglected to conduct regular, continuous radio and TV programs designed to reach large segments of the population. This was primarily due to lack of sufficient financial resources, as was our failure to make use of the possibilities in the flourishing film world in South America. In the future we should invest more of our energies in a popular educational program, even at the cost of our current "high-brow" program.

We have cooperated quite successfully with Catholic groups in organizing Christian-Jewish brotherhoods in Latin America. They could become an exceptionally useful tool for our efforts. The
Catholic Church in Argentina was not pleased with the activities of the anti-Semites although, in recent months, open condemnation was relatively seldom voiced. A popular educational program aimed at Catholic churchgoers should be developed, possibly with the aid and advice of our friends in Pro DoO in Rome.

We have sponsored a study on "Prejudice in South America" at the Institute of Sociology of Buenos Aires University, headed by Professor Gino Germani. The first completed findings, encompassing the Buenos Aires area, indicate that one in four working-class persons is a potential anti-Semite, and one in three members of the Army considers Jews "undesirable." The entire study will cover all of Argentina, as well as neighboring countries. Together with Professor Germani, experts in the United States should be asked to analyze the results and to devise a program of action.

I also recommend that we seek frequent meetings with U.S. Senators and Congressmen, with important newspaper men and contributors to national magazines, with executives of the Voice of America, with bankers and industrialists who have business relationships in Argentina, and with non-Jewish organizations active in molding international public opinion. Those meetings should be devoted to explaining current problems relating to Jews and their effect on democracy in general and the United States in particular.

In addition, and despite the negative reactions of the Jewish community in Argentina, statements and releases should be made frequently to press agencies. This may hurt the pride of Argentinians, but they should not, at this time, be "left in peace." These statements should emanate from the Institute of Human Relations rather than from the American Jewish Committee.

Montevideo

Montevideo, the capital, is in a real sense the "whole" country. And Uruguay, although an independent country and a place of asylum for political refugees from Argentina and Brazil, is actually a province of Argentina. Argentinians commute to Uruguay as if it were in their own national territory. Whatever happens in Argentina is reflected immediately in Uruguay. Tacuara and other fascist groups can move to Uruguay easily and act as they do in Buenos Aires.

Uruguayans are convinced that the anti-Semitic acts were of Argentine origin and that, after "doing their deeds," the anti-Semites fled back to Buenos Aires with the complicity of the
Uruguayan police chief, a Nazi fellow-traveler during the Hitler era. It is said that the police chief is now a "convinced" democrat, but he had to close an eye to the outrages in order not to be denounced sooner or later by his ex-comrades. Uruguays also firmly believe that the headquarters of the Arab League in Latin America is located in the Egyptian Embassy in Uruguay, which employs a huge staff such as is clearly unnecessary to conduct the regular business of the Embassy.

The anti-Semitic occurrences in Uruguay had an even stronger impact on the Jewish community than in Buenos Aires. This is understandable since the community contains comparatively few native-born citizens but is composed mostly of newcomers.

The desire of these Jews to leave for Israel, therefore, is quite strong. Nevertheless, the Israel Embassy in Uruguay has advised the Jews to avoid public statements and act with care and prudence.

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