

Interviewee: Rafael Bekenstein

Interviewer: Monica Salomon

Rafael (Efroim) Bekenstein was born in 1907, in White Russia, in the town of Berechin (?) (formerly Poland.) His parents died when Rafael was but 8 years old, and he moved in with his aunt. Rafael's family was very poor. Both parents had been married before, and there were many mouths to feed. Rafael began to work at age 10-12. At age 20 he emigrated to Argentina (1928.) His sisters, who had lived in Argentina with their families since 1905, sent him the ticket. First he went to Victoria, in the province of Entre Rios and, in 1930, he moved to Uruguay. He always worked in his profession as a tailor.

The Jewish Cultural Center in Uruguay was an amalgam of two centers that existed prior. One was the Zionist group Kadima, and the other was the non-Zionists, Renovacion (which eventually ceased to exist.) The activities of the Jewish Cultural Center, and mention of the big parties at the end of the war and after the declaration of the State of Israel.

Rafael did not experience anti-Semitism not in his personal life nor in his professional life or as a member of the Tailors Union.

In Uruguay there were Jews since 1900. Later on, many came from the Jewish colonies of San Antonio and Basavilbaso. Reasons for abandoning the colonies: locust, bad harvests, wish to have the children educated. When they came they joined the religious activities in the synagogue, celebrated the holidays, etc. The decline of observances nowadays. Although Rafael came from an observant family, his practice diminished with the passage of time.

Interview with Mrs. Bekenstein

Juana Primo de Bekenstein was born in Argentina, of Russian parents. They were both orphaned at a young age, and were taken in by aunts and uncles. Juana's father's family ended up in England but the father emigrated to Argentina. He first went to the colony of Dominguez, where his cousin Liberman lived. Later he moved to Uruguay and worked in the furniture industry. Father met his future wife in Uruguay, and they married in 1912.

Juana's mother, Rosha Wainsztub, arrived in Argentina with uncles, aunts and cousins. They tried to enter the US but, a cousin's eye ailment prevented them from being accepted here. They went then to Buenos Aires and, apparently, received a contract from the Jewish Colonization of Argentina (JCA.) First, they went to Basavilbaso, where they got a parcel of land, a horse and some cows. Mother was a seamstress. 4 years later, Juana's mother met and married her husband. The husband had come with some money, and bought a lot in Uruguay. Other Jewish families were: Barach, Mesman, Chibanier, Shinder. Juana's mother began the Ladies Society in order to help the Jewish poor.

Juana did not go to a Jewish school as a child. She learned Yiddish from her parents (who hired a private tutor to teach them Spanish.) Father never learned Spanish, but he managed in English and Yiddish. They observed the Jewish holidays and Juana learned about them by seeing.

The games they played, with a tablet and hazelnuts.

Juana's father arrived in Argentina as a young man. He had come from a family in a good position. He was a master furniture builder, but had to start with doors and windows.

Juana's youth was spent with many Jewish friends in Uruguay. The Szwartzman family hosted the young people many times. All their activities were conducted in Spanish.

The decline of Jewish observances.