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MAXIMO YAGUPSY

Interviewed December 1, 1988

Interviewer: Daniel Bargman

Maximo was one of the last remnants of the first generation of Jewish immigrants to Argentina. His parents arrived in Argentina at the end of 1890. His mother was 7 and his father, 14. His father arrived with his father in order to avoid the long military service. They were from Bessarabia, from a little town called Klein Cernowice, by the Dniester. Father belonged to the Jewish intellectual movement, the Illuminists.

Grandfather was a ritual slaughterer, and was sent to Argentina to do that job on the ship Pampa. (The cows were transported live, and were slaughtered in the ship.) Another passenger in the ship was one Leib Vinocur, who authored the first Hebrew-Spanish dictionary. Upon arrival in Buenos Aires, the grandfather was sent to one of the colonies near Dominguez: Sonenfeld. There were about 50 families in that colony, and the fields were behind the homes. This whole enterprise was funded and managed by the Jewish Colonization of Argentina (JCA) started by the French philanthropist Baron de Hirsch. Maximo's father became a ritual slaughterer also. He had to go to study to other colonies, where there were schools with more grades, and finished his studies after he was married (at the age of 18. The wife was 16.)

The story of how Maximo's father was given the final Jewish examination, and how the two different "sects" of Judaism examined him, and one of them wouldn't let him pass because he did not know their "creed". (He is talking about the difference between the "litvaks"- which he was not, and the "bessarabers", which he was. The latter studied and deepened the studies in Hebrew.)

The family moved to the colony “La Capilla”, (“ the chapel”,) in the province of Entre Rios, where the father established himself as an independent “shohet” (ritual slaughterer) The father encouraged the foundation of a modern Jewish school, where Hebrew was taught as well as secular studies. He was admired and respected by the native gauchos, by the school principal, the Postmaster, and the head of the Civil Registry. On the day of Argentina’s independence, he was given an Argentinean flag to carry, and marched first in the parade. Both the Jews and non-Jews in the parade sang Psalms in Hebrew! When the synagogue was founded, many of the little gauchos would listen to the lessons and the songs from outside, and learned them. The Gentile housemaids spoke Yiddish too.

The story about the church (“capilla”) where an unloved priest officiated, which Maximo’s family bought after the priest was transferred, and they moved in (offering Talmud classes in the living room.)

Father’s influence to open a post office in La Capilla, so that the inhabitants did not need to travel 18 km to the nearest town (Dominguez) to get their mail. The first farmers’ cooperative was started in La Capilla (the “Fondo Comunal”)

The arrival of the first doctor sent by the JCA from Germany to Argentina, Dr. Yarcho. He became prominent in the history of Medicine in Argentina, as he studied the infectious foci in the waters, and also introduced aspirin for the first time.

Maximo was sent to high school in Concepcion del Uruguay. There, he learned among other things, to milk cows, to tame horses and to deliver cows.

Education at home for Maximo included studying The Ethics of the Fathers with his 7 siblings, on Saturdays afternoon. Father would sip mate while teaching his children, and the little gauchos and the neighboring children would be sprawled on the floor, listening to him too. (Note from the translator: as an adult, Maximo instituted the practice with his own children and their friends.)

Maximo's father worked hard to support his family. He also read Torah in the synagogue, and officiated as a mohel. Once he even had to travel to Paraguay for a circumcision. Upon his return, he brought home a parrot. After Maximo's grandfather died, prayers were recited every morning at home. The parrot would join in, with a perfect intonation!

The first cemetery was began in a field donated by a colonist. When the first person died, the young people (some of them believing in mysticism) would sleep by the grave to keep the body company. They would be on guard, two at a time, sleeping in the ritual purification little room, because they were afraid to be alone with the dead.

The geographic arrangement of the colony Baron de Hirsch.

Life in the colony, weather, professions, giving birth. Rituals of passage among the Jewish colonists. Education. Countries of origin of the different Jews in the colonies. The different Yiddish accents, and the prejudices of one group respect the other.

Maximo's education. His move from the colony to Buenos Aires.

The differences they felt between Sephardic and Ashkenazic Jews, and the geographic origin of the Sephardic Jews who arrived in Argentina (recruited by the Alliance Israelite Universelle.) The first "mixed marriages" between the two groups.

The influence of the Jewish colonists over the non-Jewish gauchos in food, customs, education, health.

The geographic arrangements of the colonies around the big town.

Maximo earns a living in Buenos Aires by teaching Judaism to four children of a family.

Maximo's first contact with the pimps who operated prostitution homes.

Anti-Semitism during the Tragic Week in Buenos Aires had repercussions in the colonies too. Ethnic jokes.

The language of the immigrants according to their age.

Cultural activities at the end of the Sabbath. Theatre.

Maximo's studies in High School, in Buenos Aires. His transition to being a teacher at the age of 17, and then preparing people to teach. The creation of the Vaad Hachinuch (the Board of Jewish Education.)

The failure of the Baron de Hirsch project to make farmers out of the Jews, and their move to the cities to provide a higher education to their children.

Maximo becomes inspector of the small Jewish schools in the colonies at the beginning of the 1930s. Other inspectors were Iedida Efron, rabbi Alfon, Fridman and Carmel. The well-liked Jewish teachers. Searching Jewish teachers.

The push and pull for the teaching of Hebrew or Yiddish in the Jewish schools.