

Interviewee: Adolfo Gass

November 9, 1990

Interviewer: Professor Monica Salomon

Adolfo Gass was born on May 25, 1914, in the section Trece Ranchos of the Mauricio colony, in Carlos Casares. Adolfo's mom arrived in Argentina on the Petropolis ship that had departed Hamburg in August 1891. She was 11 years old, and arrived with a married sister. They arrived to the squalid Hotel de Inmigrantes, where they stayed for a week before being moved to the primitive colony. They lived in makeshift tents, like all the other recent immigrants to a new colony. Adolfo's mother married another colonist at the age of 15. Adolfo's father had wanted to study Medicine, obtaining passage to England. He soon realized that without the language he could not do it. Looking for what to do, he came to the port where many Jews were going on a ship to "America". (He thought North-America) but ended up in Argentina. There, the JCA, the Jewish Colonization of Argentina, gave him 150 hectares to work in the same section of Mauricio colony as Adolfo's mother. The sections were grouped up for safety, as women and children were all alone during the day while husbands were working the fields, and they were afraid of murders, rapes, etc. The perpetrators were either "Indians" or "violent gauchos".

Adolfo's father died young, and it fell upon the older siblings (they were 11 all together) to maintain the fields.

The school they attended was called "Alice" and he taught the children of the colonists the national and the Yiddish curricula. It was very laborious to reach the school by horse. In the case of Adolfo, he and his 2 brothers shared a horse.

Some people begin to leave the colony despite the conditions stipulated in the contracts, that they could not do so for 15-20 years. The reasons were both economic (plagues, drought) and educational (the colony offered only 2 years of instruction.) Adolfo wanted to be a doctor. He was sent to live in the home of friends in Buenos Aires. Eventually, Adolfo's mother also moved to Buenos Aires, in 1928, leaving the land to be worked by a son. Adolfo would spend school vacations in the colony, helping out.

Adolfo was very taken by the politics of President Yrigoyen, whom he loved and who was deposed in the September revolution. In 1935, Adolfo became affiliated to a political party as a reaction to the activism of the Fascists of the Legion Civica (that preceded the Alianza Libertadora Nacionalista) at the University. The Jewish students,

in the School of Medicine, were harassed by them, but defended by the other students. The students' strike, and they take over the School of Medicine. President Justo unleashed the police on the students. (The students called the police "the Cossacks" because of the shape of their berets.)

Adolfo's Judaism took a step back after his arrival in Buenos Aires. In the Mauricio colony there had been 5 synagogues, and there was no discrimination against any religious group. But in the disturbances of 1935, there had been anti-Semitic expressions, and that's when Adolfo reconnected with his Jewish roots.

After obtaining his degree, Adolfo went to practice in the Patagonia and, later on, in the Tigre locality, where there were maybe 2-3 Jews. That year, Illia was president and he nominated Adolfo to be his ambassador to Israel. Illia hadn't known Adolfo was a Jew, and despite his surprise, he chose him. Adolfo's first declaration upon his arrival to Israel was to make clear that he represented not only the Jews of Argentina, but the entire country. Responding to the comments that Argentina was an anti-Semitic country, Adolfo reiterated that there were some anti-Semites in the country, but that the country in its totality, was not anti-Semitic.

In 1973, Adolfo was elected to the Argentinean congress; in 1976, after a coup, he was exiled in Venezuela; in 1983, he was elected Senator.

Limits to who can become president in Argentina: he/she has to be Roman Catholic Apostolic. President Alfonsín tried to reform the constitution to cancel that condition but it was Adolfo who proposed it formally, as a senator, in 1984. Governors of states have that condition too, which was unknown when someone proposed Adolfo for the position.

### **Addendum of January 1, 1994**

The AMIA and the Embassy of Israel's attacks are discussed. Adolfo faults the government immersion in foreign policy for the attacks.