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Mishpacha

CHOLENT WITH THE GAUCHOS

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We knew there were large Jewish communities in the big cities of Argentina, but entire kehillas of Jewish ranchers on the vast South American pampas? Although today the town of Moises Ville is but a remnant of its Jewish heyday, we were able to meet the last of the Yiddishe gauchos, whose grandparents fled from pogroms and oppression to stake out their turf in the Southern Hemisphere



lthough all of us have heard about fascinating or far-flung Jewish communities around the globe, it's always hard to imagine something so different from how we live. Even

seasoned travelers like ourselves who have become acquainted with a range of Jewish communities would not be quite prepared for what we were to find in the most unusual Jewish town of Moises Ville on the pampas of Argentina.

Argentina, initially settled by Spanish conquistadors in the 16th century, is a huge country taking up most of the lower half of South America. For North American and European-centric Jews it might be difficult to imagine that Argentina has the sixth largest Jewish community in the world, with over 200,000 Jews. But it wasn't the large and vibrant *kehillah* in Buenos Aires that piqued our interest. After driving close to 400 miles over dirt roads, with cows in every direction and open grassy, fertile plains as far as the eye could see, we finally passed the sign welcoming us into Moises Ville, a hamlet with just over 2,000 people including about 200 Jews. Yet in the 1940s, nearly the whole

town of about 5,000 was Jewish. How did an entire Jewish city come to be in these rural South American plains, and then practically disappear within the last 70 years?

Cholent to Go We immediately knew there was something special about this town when we noticed the street signs with names like Baron Hirsch, Estado de Israel (the State of Israel) and Hertzl Street, and saw Hebrew engraved on some of the buildings from the early 1900s. Even the elaborate theater building bore the Yiddish sign “Farain Kadima” — the Kadima Association. In order to really get to know this obviously Jewish (or formerly Jewish) town and its unusual history, we decided to spend Shabbos there and join the remnant community for davening and a Shabbos night meal — even though we suspected that there would probably not be a minyan and that the food they ate

would not be kosher. But the richness of the culture, the unique location, and the inherent kinship of the Jewish People combined to make it an intriguing and enjoyable Shabbos.

Before arriving, we contacted a member of the local Jewish community, Judit Blumenthal. She and Batsheva Fischer, who were our hosts and tour guides, are experts in every aspect of the history of this sleepy town and know every nook and cranny. Batsheva is fifth generation Moises Ville, has never been to Israel (though she hopes to come soon) and yet, having learned in the local Jewish teacher’s seminary, speaks fluent Hebrew. Her grandfather’s grandfather was among the original settlers, although when he became a widower, he made aliyah and died in Jerusalem in 1917. Not religious herself, she wistfully reminisced how as a child she would watch her great-grandmother climb the stairs to the

women’s balcony of the Brenner shul on Yom Kippur and spend the entire day there.

For sleeping accommodations in the tiny hamlet, we were directed to a small bed and breakfast that is owned by a *frum* absentee landlord and so there were mezuzahs on all of the rooms. Although wherever we travel, we always come prepared for Shabbos with challah, wine, salami, and gefilte fish, we also enjoy preparing something fresh that we can share with the locals. Assuming there would be no kosher food to be found, we brought along a *shechitah* knife and some *kashering* salt and were hoping to buy a Muscovy duck (see sidebar), or at least a chicken, and *shecht* and prepare it for Shabbos. But luck was with us and our *chalaf* was unnecessary. We had stopped at one of the large kosher slaughterhouses in northern Argentina the day before arriving in Moises Ville, where, as a parting



gift, the group of *shochtim* gave us a huge piece of prime cut meat. On Erev Shabbos we bought some vegetables and eggs, and presto, a cholent was up and cooking. Actually, obtaining the vegetables wasn’t as easy as we thought, because every store in town is closed for siesta from 12 to 4. Finally, a friendly teenager who wanted to be kind to some foreign tourists woke his mother to sell us some produce (he’d obviously never heard of Dama ben Nesinah of *Kiddushin* 31a, who refused to wake his father to sell a Parah Adumah).



Swindled In the late 1800s, hundreds of thousands of Jews suffering under the great burdens of widespread pogroms and oppression immigrated to the US, Western Europe, Palestine, South Africa, and even South America.

In 1881, although there were only 1,200 Jews in Argentina at the time, the Argentine president signed a decree promoting Russian Jewish immigration. Eight years later, a group of 813 Jews set sail on the steam ship *Wesser* to Argentina and to the parcels of farm land they thought they had bought while in Russia.

The short version of the story of those first immigrants is that they were cheated, arriving only to find that the land was not theirs. Eventually other land was found for them, and so they made their way by train to Palacios, where the alternate parcels were located. Aside from the newly procured land, however, there was nothing. No tools, no food, no houses, no water

to drink. The Jews would not eat the nonkosher meat some friendly gauchos offered them, and instead survived on a few hard cookies that had to be soaked to become eatable. They were living in boxcars in Palacios’s unfinished train station when Dr. Wilhelm Lowenthal, a Jewish European doctor hired by the Argentinean government, found them floundering after 62 of them, mostly children, had already died of typhus, exposure, and malnutrition. There was of course no Jewish cemetery yet, so the bodies of these children were stored in kerosene cans until a cemetery was later established.

The survivors of this particular group moved a few miles over and founded what would become the town of Moises Ville.

In 1889, when the first Jews arrived, the Argentinean pampas was a vast, wild territory, similar in many ways to the Wild West of the US. But in Argentina the Jews didn’t have to worry about Indians because most of the natives had been killed off first by the Spaniards and then by an extermination program of the Argentinean government. The main enemy of the first settlers were the gauchos, equivalent to cowboys of the western US. Wary of the newcomers, they killed more than a few of them. It seems that in those early days, the Jews fought back and killed a fair number of gauchos as well. The two groups eventually learned to put up with each other, and a new breed developed: Jewish gauchos.

Moises Ville became an essentially Jewish city in the middle of the South American plains. The Jews who found a safe haven in these territories braved the tough conditions and became farmers and cattlemen, paving the way for other immigrants who found their way to these parts right up to World War II; by 1940 there were 5,000 Jews in the town. More of these Jewish villages began to develop during the early 1900s, and soon entire swathes of land were almost completely



1. LIVING PROOF The old horse-drawn hearse of the *chevra kaddisha* was broken and rotting, but we could imagine how it separated between life and death through the village streets

2 JEWISH COWBOY Zelig, our new friend and authentic Yiddishe gaucho, proudly led whatever he knew of the Friday night services

3. SIGN LANGUAGE Who would think that on the pampas of Argentina there would be a town whose streets were named after the Jewish state?





4. FROZEN IN TIME While the Baron Hirsch shul is still active, in nearby Palacios— although the synagogue hasn’t been used for years— siddurim, and even celebratory *pekalach*, are set out to keep the memories alive

5. ATTACKED The multiple grave of the Waisman family, murdered in 1897, is a reminder of the heavy price of freedom



Jewish. Yiddish was the lingua franca, and even today we communicated with rudimentary Spanish, Yiddish, and Hebrew in order to make ourselves understood. In fact, on the previous Shabbos, which we spent in Buenos Aires, we met a dinner guest in his 80s who spoke to us in Yiddish, recounting his childhood in a town called Avigdor. He would ride his horse eight kilometers to and from school, which he attended for just two grades. And although he said he can’t remember a thing of what he supposedly learned, the Jewish schools were considered the best in the area and he said the non-Jewish gauchos would send their kids there too — becoming fluent in Yiddish.

There were many of these small towns, each with at least one synagogue. Moises Ville had four shuls, a Jewish bank, a Yiddish newspaper, and a teacher’s seminary that for many years provided Jewish teachers for all of South America. The town’s Jewish school — which wasn’t specifically religious but produced graduates fluent in Hebrew and Jewish culture — closed two years ago, but up until the 1970s had youngsters dorming from all over Argentina and even some other South American countries. Today, with only about 200 Jews left — none of whom remained Torah-observant — the only thing left for the children is a youth group that meets every other Shabbos and attracts about 15 kids, probably the last generation of Jews to live in Moises Ville.

This community lived and breathed Jewish culture and tradition much more than religion after that first founding generation, although there were some *shomrei mitzvos* along the way. Today there remains one woman who is careful to eat only kosher. In the mid 1940s, as the prospect of a Jewish state appeared to be on the horizon, Zionist *hachsharot* were established to teach young people the skills necessary for agriculture in Eretz Yisrael. The community still has a Yiddish library and a huge 700-seat theater called Kadima in the town’s central square. In its heyday, Yiddish plays were performed and Jewish music and community festivals were featured. We noticed a skylight right in the center of the theater, so that during a wedding, a *chuppah* could be set up under the open sky. The theater is still tended by the municipality, which uses it for public school graduations, and the village’s lone succah is built in the town square out in front.

Today, Moises Ville is a shadow of its former glory. The upscale buildings

of yesteryear are today’s decrepit old haunted houses and boarded up storefronts. Dogs roam the streets in packs. We continuously recited the pasuk “*U’lechol Bnei Yisrael lo yecheartz kelev leshono*,” which is traditionally recited to protect us from dogs. The dogs literally came into the library and restaurant and one even managed to get into the shul, before being promptly ejected. Garbage cannot be left in cans, lest the dogs get into them and make a mess. In front of each home there is a tall pole with a metal basket on top to hold a garbage bag beyond the reach of the dogs. On Motzaei Shabbos, we needed to dispose of our leftover cholent and the local woman in charge of the hotel told us to just dump it on the grass. Sure enough we did, and the dogs devoured it in minutes.

No Gemaras As strong as Jewish culture was, Moises Ville was never a bastion of Torah scholarship. Although we looked through “*genizah shmutz*” and went through many long-closed cabinets, we could find no evidence of advanced Torah books. There was no shortage of *machzorim* and Yiddish literature, but Talmudic literature was not to be found. If there were no Torah books, it means the people didn’t learn. Nor was there ever a yeshivah in Moises Ville despite the many other educational institutions the city hosted.

Yet the most significant rabbinic figure

to grace the town is far from forgotten. His name was Rav Aharon Halevi Goldman, and the local history museum even bears his name. The rabbi had one of the first cars in the town and, as the communal leader, he had a flashing blue light (that we saw on display in the museum) attached to the front. And despite the small size and remote location of Moises Ville, this *talmid chacham* had a halachic impact that still reverberates today. It was under his influence and halachic backing that a ban on conversion in Argentina was instituted. He felt that a convert could only be accepted if he lived in a fully observant community — something that was nonexistent in Argentina.

Born in 1853 in Podolia, Russia, Rav Goldman received *semichah* at 18 and supported himself as a *shochet*. Asked to join as the religious leader of the initial group of 136 families that set out to settle the pampas, it was he who suggested the city be named “Kiryat Moshe” in honor of Moshe Rabbeinu who led the Jews to freedom. That name became transformed into Moises Ville. As a fierce defender of tradition, he insisted that the Jewish stores in town all be closed on Shabbos. And as a recognized *gaon*, he carried on correspondences from the pampas of South America with the greatest leaders of the time, including Rav Yitzchak Elchanan Spektor, the Chofetz Chaim, Rav Shmuel Salant, Rav Shmuel Mohliver,

and Rav Avraham Yitzchak Kook. He also acted as *gabbai tzedakah* and would raise funds for Torah and charity institutions in Europe and Israel. He was *niftar* on 6 Adar 5692 (1932) and his *sefer Divrei Aharon* was published posthumously by his family.

Empty Spaces We wanted to see what was left of some of the satellite towns, and thus drove down a rustic, dirt road from Moises Ville for ten minutes, reaching the nearest town of Palacios, where the original settlers first stopped. The unfinished train station where they encamped is still there, more than 130 years later. No Jews live here anymore, but the synagogue building is still standing and there are even some *seforim* arranged on *shenders* in a museum-like fashion — but the thick layer of dust on the floor attested to the long time since the building had visitors.

We took a peek in one of the books and were fascinated by what we saw. There was a letter written by the local *rav* dated precisely the same week we were visiting, only 69 years earlier. The letter — part of a book of handwritten communal bylaws — gave permission to the local *shochet* to *shecht* exclusively for the community.

While the Moises Ville Jewish cemetery is packed with over 2,000 graves, the Palacios cemetery was huge but had relatively few graves, attesting to the future communal growth anticipated by

the founders, but which would never be realized. In the *chevra kaddisha* building we found an intricately carved, old broken wooden stretcher to transport the deceased and a *tefillah* of the *chevra*, posted but rotting on the wall.

In the larger Moises Ville cemetery, along one fence is a section for infants, including many of the reburied children who died in that first horrible year. There is a separate section for suicides, where one can see young men who buckled under the pressures in those early years and took their own lives. There is the white plastered grave of the legendary Rav Goldman. There is a section for those murdered in the early years. And then, in a different section, is an extremely long grave. We were told that it's the grave of the murdered members of the Waisman family, killed in 1897 by drunken non-Jews who attacked the family in their isolated Palacios house. In the ensuing struggle, Gittel, her husband Mordechai Joseph, their eight-year-old-daughter Perl, and three-week-old-son Baruch were brutally murdered. The rest of their children survived.

Shabbos Tunes Friday night in Moises Ville we went to the Brenner Shul (officially known as the Beit Midrash Hagadol and currently the only remaining functioning synagogue, as the main Baron Hirsch synagogue is being repaired) to observe their Kabbalat Shabbat service. There we met a true Jewish gaucho. Zelig (Luis) Liebenbuk was standing at the *bi-mah*, with a smile that lit up the entire room. He is officially the *baal tefillah* but is more like a social director. Five days a week he's out in the field with his small herd of 90 head of cattle, and although not fully observant, he remembers his grandfather as a *shamash* and a learned man. He led the congregational singing, pointing here and there like the host of a talent show. Then he coaxed our friend and trav-

Duck Soup

When he arrived with the initial immigrants to Argentina, Rav Aharon Goldman became acquainted with a common local bird, the Muscovy duck (*Cairina moschata*). It looks a bit different from the ducks we are familiar with, with a strange bump on its forehead, and instead of a quack, it emits a hiss. Since a bird needs a *mesorah*, or tradition, to be considered kosher, he pondered its similarity to other kosher ducks. He was seemingly unaware that Rabbi Bernard Illoway of New Orleans had come across this duck in 1862 and then, unsure of its permissibility, had asked Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch of Germany and Rabbi Adler of London for their opinions on the duck's status. Both rabbis forbade it and as a result, until today, it is not accepted as kosher in the US by any kashrus organization.

Rav Goldman, meanwhile, raised the question of its status to the rabbinic world in 1906 in the European Torah journal *V'yalkut Yosef*. After impressive halachic reasoning, he reached the conclusion that the Muscovy was indeed permitted, despite critics both at home and abroad. In order to settle the issue once and for all, two birds were put on a boat and shipped off to Jerusalem for Rav Shmuel Salant to see and *pasken* on. One bird actually made it alive. Rav Salant initially refrained from ruling on the matter, but eventually acquiesced and ordered his *shochet* to slaughter the bird in honor of Pesach; a letter was promptly dispatched to Argentina stating that the bird "was being cooked in a pot in Jerusalem following the instructions of Rav Salant to his *shochet*." As a result, the Muscovy duck is to this day *shechted* and eaten in Eretz Yisrael.



eling partner Ethan Shuman to the *amud* to lead Lecha Dodi. Together they sang and harmonized the Lewandowski cantorial Tzaddik Katamar and Zelig glowed like a man slaking his thirst for Yiddishkeit. At the end of the service, Kiddush was recited over kosher Argentine wine, but the challah used for *hamotzi* was from a nonkosher Italian bakery. They have been baking the challah for the community for decades and although we tried, there was no way to arrange for them to make it kosher the week we were there.

A group of 15-year-olds from the Jewish school in Tucuman, Argentina, was visiting Moises Ville as part of their annual school trip and they also joined us for Shabbos. While many of these Jewish students spoke Hebrew, they — like the

local population of 2015 — knew little about Judaism or halachah.

The communal Friday night dinner was held in a local restaurant. We sipped our water and ate some fresh vegetables, having made Kiddush and washed and eaten a quick Shabbos meal at our hotel before joining them. Sitting across from us was another Jewish cowboy who introduced himself as Avraham ben Pinchas Halevi. Better known to the locals as 72-year-old Armino Seiferheld, whose parents fled Nazi Germany in the 1930s, he lives in a respectable house surrounded by trees, has leathery skin, and when he takes his massive hand in yours you feel like a warm mitt has enveloped you. Those hands bespeak a lifetime of hard work. He has a herd of 600 cattle at a farm in Palacios



BLOWN AWAY Armino (Avraham ben Pinchas Halevi) is a proud shofar-blower, having learned on the monogrammed shofar he inherited from the previous *baal tokeia*

and his engaging smile and excellent Yiddish made him delightful to converse with. He is also the local shofar blower, and on a visit to his home, he proudly showed us the old shofar he had inherited from the previous *baal tokeia*, engraved with the words Moises Ville on the side. He also showed off a *shechitah* knife he inherited from his great-grandfather. From our seats across the table on Friday night, we noticed something silver nestled in his mighty hand and thought it might be a flask of some schnapps. But to our surprise it was a harmonica; the cowboy was soon serenading the group with *zemirot* on his instrument. It wasn't easy experiencing Shabbos in this nonreligious environment, but on some level, Armino and his friends were an inspiration — holding on to tradition as best as they know how.

Meanwhile, we hit it off with Zelig and invited him back to our place for Shabbos lunch the next day. We sort of commandeered the guesthouse, put a table in the center lobby, and had a regular Shabbos *seudah*. Sitting around the cholent, he taught us the ins and outs of choosing a good bull and how much hay to buy. He told us about the best year of his life, as a single guy working in the barn on an Israeli kibbutz. "*Ich bin an emesdike Yiddishe gaucho* — I'm a real Jewish cowboy," he told us. Enjoying his company, we invited ourselves to his house to make Havdalah. He showed up after Shabbos to

guide us home on his bicycle. He pointed to the bike and told us, "My horse died, this is my horse now," although in reality most herdsmen use a pickup in lieu of a horse today. He led us to his modest house, where after Havdalah, he put on his *bombachas*, the loose baggy trousers worn by gauchos, and his *boina*, the beret-like cap of the gauchos. But that was merely for the pictures. His wife is of Jewish Turkish origin from another wave of immigrants and they proudly showed us pictures of their two kids, who, like most of the next generation, have moved on — either to larger cities in Argentina, or to Israel or other countries.

The cyclic nature of many Jewish Diaspora communities is well described. But in the case of these communities on the Argentinean plains, it was particularly fast and stark. In the course of 100 years, thousands of Jews moved from the Eastern Hemisphere to the Western, and from the Northern to the Southern, settling the vast, open Argentinean plains. They prospered and bore children, who grew up and moved on — leaving behind tens of weathered and empty shuls, closed schools, and libraries gathering dust. Buildings with Jewish stars dot the countryside as weeds reclaim the land.

Leaving Zelig after Havdalah, we understood that not only were we finishing Shabbos, but that we were watching the setting of the sun on another unusual chapter of Jewish history. ●