



Meat and Memories in URUGUAY

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY *Dr. Ari Z. Zivotofsky and Dr. Ari Greenspan*

We'd heard that there was a crypto-Jewish community in Uruguay dating back to the 1700s, but although the evidence was paltry, we did find a dwindling modern community led over the years by a series of dedicated rabbis doing their best to put the brakes on assimilation. One thing you can't deny though — the friendly Jews holding their *kehillah* together make the best barbecues ever

Uruguay, a small country nestled between the huge territories of Argentina and Brazil on South America's Atlantic coast, doesn't have a large, active Jewish community and is not a common destination for Jews. But we were "in the neighborhood" anyway, visiting *shochtim* and examining the famous South American slaughterhouses of the region, so we took the opportunity to scout out Jewish finds in this tranquil, warm, verdant country.

There were three things that brought us to Montevideo, Uruguay's capital: One was our relationship with the country's current chief rabbi, Rabbi Ben-Tzion Spitz. Second was our close friendship with the former chief rabbi, Rabbi Eliyahu Birnbaum. Rabbi Birnbaum, a native of Uruguay who is today an educator and *dayan* with Jerusalem's chief rabbinate, is often a traveling partner on our "halachic adventures." The final draw was an opportunity to share the adventure with a friend from the US, a rabbi who has been involved with supervision of the kosher slaughterhouses in the area for many years, who agreed to time a visit of his with our planned trip. Figuring that Rabbi Spitz could put us in touch with some interesting local characters to get a sense of the local Jewish history and customs, we hit the ground running in order to start exploring.

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Offer of a Lifetime There are an estimated 20,000 Jews in Uruguay, less than 1 percent of the country's 3.3 million people. It is a relatively open, secular, egalitarian country in which, one local Jew told us, "there may be anti-Semites, but there is no anti-Semitism." Due to its historic stability, it's been dubbed the "Switzerland of South America." This of course made it an attractive destination for fleeing Jews at various periods of the 20th century. In the 1970s the number of Jews peaked at about 54,000, but aliyah, assimilation, and emigration to the US, Spain, Argentina, Panama, and Mexico due to local difficulties have resulted in a much reduced Jewish community.

Rabbi Spitz actually lives in Israel and travels every few weeks to Uruguay. In fact, he never intended to be a religious functionary, let alone chief rabbi of a South American country. He was born in New York, yet spent much of his childhood in South America, where his father worked as a commodities trader, and where he picked up fluency in Spanish and Portuguese. He then spent several years learning in Kerem B'Yavneh and Yeshiva University, and after making aliyah he learned at Yeshivat Har Etzion and received *semichah* from Pirchei Shoshanim.

But he never intended to go into the rabbinate — he has a master's degree in mechanical engineering and worked for a number of years as a nuclear engineer for Raytheon, in his words, "on some of the biggest and coolest engineering projects one could imagine." In Israel he managed several technology start-ups, and also made time to hone his other love — writing biblical fiction novels, several of which have been published.

In 2013, he received a surprise and life-changing offer. He was a learned rabbi who spoke English, Spanish, and Portuguese, and was thus offered to become chief rabbi of Uruguay, an opportunity that he couldn't pass up — especially after having fallen in love with the country several years earlier while working on a team doing a site

assessment for a 200-megawatt wind farm for Aratiri Mines.

Sitting Together Rabbi Spitz has a tough job. For a chief rabbi in a country where intermarriage is rampant, the halachic issues of marriage, divorce, and conversion create a set of unique problems. If a divorce needs to take place, a *beis din* is flown over from Argentina to implement it. And because intermarriage and non-halachic conversions are common, many people who've been actively part of the community for years consider themselves Jewish when in fact they aren't — often discovering that fact when they move to Israel and need proof of lineage from the chief rabbinate if they want to marry.

The main community shul is in the old center of the town, in a big building with a large sanctuary from the *kehillah's* heyday. Today, it has that old musty sort of smell from many years of the same carpet and little change. During our visit, the main sanctuary was dark, lonely, and empty, but the rest of the building was all abustle with activity. Rabbi Spitz escorted us around the large building where we saw signs announcing upcoming events including various Israeli dance groups, a Yiddish theatre, a Yiddish club, various volunteer groups such as Bikur Cholim, a well-stocked clothing *gemach*, and an extremely active group for disabled people that includes catering, Jewish gift production, and light assembly work.

The majority of the Jews no longer live in the old Jewish neighborhood of the

"centro," so there is no minyan in the main shul, and in any event, the rabbi's abode is not near there either. He lives near a small but vibrant Orthodox synagogue that is part of the Jewish school complex. Like all of South America's Jewish institutions, both are heavily guarded since the Iranian bombing of the Jewish community building in Argentina back in 1994. We accompanied Rabbi Spitz to the Yavneh school for Minchah and Maariv, where we joined what seemed to be a particularly large crowd.

What was going on here? Rabbi Spitz explained: When Rabbi Eliyahu Birnbaum arrived in 1992 to assume the role of chief rabbi, he observed that while funerals were well attended by many of the nonreligious, who showed great respect for the dead and the mitzvah of burial, few people were properly observing shivah or any mourning rituals. As a means of enhancing observance and involving people in the community, he "transferred" the shivah from the home of the *niftar* to the shul. Family members might still not be sitting shivah halachically, but this way they are attuned to the shivah week and do engage in some form of mourning. The entire family of mourners and their friends come to shul for all three *tefilllos* the entire week, where the mourners light candles, say Kaddish, and hear the rabbi speak about the deceased and give strengthening words of Torah. This innovative idea has proven itself: Today in Montevideo even those distant from Judaism show up to shul for that week and say Kaddish, and many realize it's not as threatening as they thought — some of them continue to come and say Kaddish for the whole year.

Then a funny thing happened. After davening, as we were looking at the large poster board highlighting pictures of the famous Israeli dignitaries and rabbis who had graced their community in recent years — people such as Rav Shlomo Amar and Rav Shmuel Eliyahu — a member of the "shivah" family, a *frum* guy from Brooklyn, recognized us from our *Mishpacha*

For a chief rabbi in a country where intermarriage is rampant, the halachic issues of marriage, divorce, and conversion create a set of unique problems



1. Accountant Itche Margulies has archived every Yiddish newspaper to come out of his father's print shop

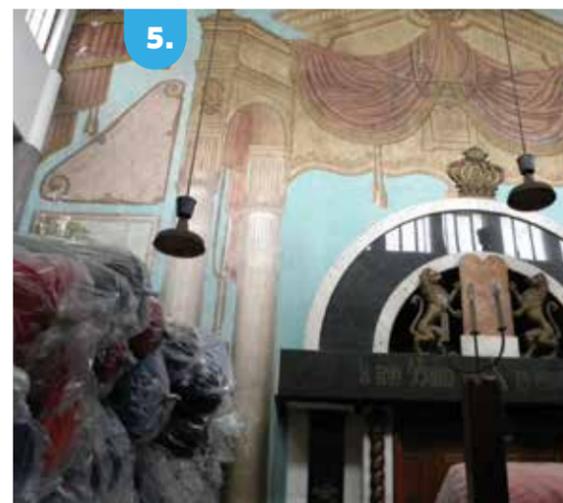
2. We're still not convinced this structure is a classic mikveh, but the halachic discrepancies we found might just indicate it was actually built by anusim

3. Ari G. wasn't breaking and entering, he was just trying to get into an old shul in the town of Colonia del Sacramento. In the end, nothing was left on the inside, but the outside of a shul will always be a dead giveaway

4. While Jews no longer live in the "centro," there is a small vibrant Orthodox kehillah adjoining the Yavneh school, where we headed for Minchah and Maariv

5. The old Satmar shul once served a large chassidic community, but today the empty sanctuary doubles as a storage facility for a carpet business

6. The last offer Rabbi Ben Tzion Spitz, a successful mechanical engineer, expected was to be appointed the country's chief rabbi



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articles. We were pleased but not a little embarrassed when he asked his wife to take a picture of him with the two of us.

Living Links Rabbi Spitz continued with his tour of Jewish Montevideo. Kosher dining is not a big option in Montevideo, but Rabbi Spitz has made sure that at least kosher ice cream is available. He thus treated us to a snack at La Chicharra, although most of the chocolate flavors were not (yet) under supervision.

Back in the chief rabbi's office, we noticed that the chief rabbinate has always played an important role in this community, based on the large framed portraits of each of his predecessors. And the community has enjoyed some illustrious *rabbanim* — we already mentioned our friend Rabbi Eliyahu Birnbaum, who served here from 1992 to 1997 and is today a *dayan* in Israel and a mentor to hundreds of rabbis serving throughout the Diaspora.

Probably the most notable former community leader was Rabbi Aaron Milevsky (1904-1986), under whose guidance the community expanded and became more traditional. He had studied in the venerated yeshivos of Grodno and Slabodka, moving with the yeshivah to Chevron where he remained from 1924 until the Chevron massacre in 1929. He then returned to Europe, where he served as rabbi in Alitus, Lithuania, from 1930 to 1937, when he was invited to take on the post of chief rabbi in far off Uruguay. Sensing the impending doom on the

horizon, he accepted. He later proved instrumental during World War II in the funding and relief of countless Jewish refugees in Shanghai. He is the author of *Nachalos Aharon*, a book of *teshuvos* published in Montevideo.

But as important as the pictures are, we were more interested in a living link to the community's past, and so Rabbi Spitz arranged for us to meet Isaac (Itche) Margulies. An accountant and professor, he is in his late 70s, with a smile lurking at the corners of his mouth — and is without a doubt the repository of community history and lore. From the moment we met, we clung to his every word as he led us around the city's Jewish sights and engaged us with its history. He spoke a flawless Hebrew — all learned in Uruguay, had studied Torah, became a prominent accountant and professor of finance, and today also lectures on Talmud at the local university. He also used to be in charge of the shul in which he grew up — the Vaad Ha'ir Synagogue, which his father had built and which was once the center of religious life in the country.

Printer-Friendly He reminisced about what a bustling, vibrant shul it had been, with *shiurim* and minyanim. But that was when he was young. The shul he took us into was locked and in disrepair. It was silent, empty, and dusty, and standing in the vacant main sanctuary, he told us about his family. He and his sister were both born in Uruguay and are the only descendants of their parents, who were both European born, his mother having arrived on those shores in 1931. They are both childless.

The shul, once full to the rafters but now deserted, had been his baby as he had kept it alive year after year, even having renovated it not long ago to maintain a minyan. But history had other plans, and the year we came was the first that no davening was held there on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. His sadness was almost palpable. He told us that because of the meat industry, Israeli *rabbanim* and *shochtim* have come to the community for many years. He bemoaned the fact that as the shul went into decline, they would “borrow” *seforim* from the *beis medrash*.

His father's business was the most prominent of the three Jewish publishing houses. What truly demonstrated the vibrancy of the Jewish community in the 1940s and '50s was that each of these publishers produced a daily Yiddish newspaper. Imagine enough interested people in Montevideo to support three daily Yiddish Jewish newspapers! Their paper was the religiously slanted daily *Der Moment*.

We asked him where the printing had been done and he said his dad had a print shop that his sister still runs as a business.

We got very excited because we have an interest in old-fashioned printing and we thought we might find something interesting and even historic. He asked us if we would like to go see it and we jumped at the opportunity.

He took us in and the first thing we noticed was the cluttered, dusty desk at the front of the store, with a cup holding miniature flags of Uruguay and Israel. While the shop is a bit more modern, he did take out the old Hebrew type for us to see. Each letter is reversed so when printed it reads the right way. Each letter was set by hand and once the entire page was set up, it was inked and printed. All the letters were then removed and returned to their boxes for the next page. In our era of laser printers in every house, it is hard to imagine the effort that went into printing not all that long ago. The Hebrew type was imported from Europe in the early part of the 20th century, the letters representing a world that no longer exists, and the technology too would soon be surpassed by modern printing.

For the Record The most valuable heirloom in the little shop was a collection of the bound volumes containing all those old newspapers. It is truly a historical treasure trove. What is clearly evidenced by the newspaper articles, pictures, and ads is a vibrant Torah-observant life. But the community never had the privilege of a yeshivah in its midst, and just like in other communities around the world, that is a recipe for ultimate extinction. Today the community is struggling to maintain itself, clearly a shell of what it once was.

Itche Margulies proudly flipped to the edition from May 14, 1948, and other significant days, informing us that he has the only complete set of this historical record. Concerned it may be lost, upon our return to Israel we checked in with the Israel National Library and although they indeed don't have a hard copy, they actually have the entire thing on micro film.

Mr. Margulies then took us to see a smaller shul in the business district on Brecha Street, where *frum* Jews used to come in during the business day to learn and daven while in the thick of their commercial affairs.

He also mentioned the Satmar shul, which took us a bit by surprise. Satmar in Uruguay? Indeed, after the war some Satmar Jews found respite in Montevideo, but they have subsequently nearly all moved on to larger Jewish communities. Mr. Margulies said it was locked and there was no way to get in. We prevailed upon him to show it to us and trusted that a miracle would happen. We drove by and were amazed to see a young chassid walking out. We approached him asked to be let in: he was reluctant at first, but when he saw Margulies, his tune changed. It clearly had once been a beautiful shul, but today it is in a state of disrepair and is even used as a temporary storage facility.

Throughout our conversations with Itche Margulies, he repeatedly mentioned an almost mythical character in Uruguayan Jewish lore — someone named “Monsieur Chouchani.” We had never heard of him, but he seems to have been an awesome *talmid chacham* with a photographic memory. Much about him remains

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Walking down a tiny cobblestone street, we encountered some dilapidated houses on whose doorposts we were able to clearly discern marks where mezuzahs once hung

shrouded in mystery, although recent research indicated his real name was Hillel Perlman and he was born in Brisk, and was a student of Rav Kook in his short-lived yeshivah in Yafo around 1910. Chouchani's epitaph (he died in 1968) was written by Elie Wiesel, a one-time student, and states simply: "The wise Rabbi Chouchani of blessed memory. His birth and his life are sealed in enigma." Chouchani was a master of many disciplines, including all of Shas, in which he was famous for passing the "pin test." All this made us feel that we would have loved to have known him too.

Old News While Mr. Margulies and most of those we met are descended from the early and mid-20th century Ashkenazi influx, there appears to have been an older community in Uruguay, and we set out to see if we could find any hints of it.

Our destination in this search was the city of Colonia del Sacramento, about 200 kilometers (124 miles) from Montevideo. One of the oldest towns in Uruguay (founded in 1680 by the Portuguese), it is small (population about 27,000), located in the southwest, sitting on the water opposite Buenos Aires, Argentina, to which it is linked by a 50-minute ferry ride.

The historic quarter is a popular tourist destination and the town center is crowded with visitors walking on some of the original cobblestoned streets built by the Portuguese in the 17th century. But keeping in mind the history of the place, it is difficult to imagine a Jewish presence in that period, owing to the fact that from 1680 to 1811 the city ping-ponged back and forth between Spanish and Portuguese rule, and both those



We couldn't be guests of the community without participating in an *asado*. Forget the salads and sides — here every course is another kind of grilled meat

countries still had active Inquisitions.

But some suspect the Jews had arrived all the way back in 1760. At the time, a priest by the name of Pedro Lago reported to the Inquisition that there was Jewish life in Colonia del Sacramento. Whether these were overt Jews or *anusim* is not known, but the clue was enough to keep us looking for signs of Jews in this historic district.

Our first target was the Posada Plaza Mayor Inn. We weaved our way around the fortress walls, historic streets, and 17th-century Portuguese architecture searching for our destination. After seemingly asking every person in the street for directions, we arrived at a charming hotel with thick stone walls. It is typical of this small town — only 15 rooms. The desk clerk understood immediately what we were looking for and led us through a central courtyard garden full of trees, flowers, and a flowing water fountain.

About ten years ago during excavations, they uncovered an unusual rectangular structure that has since been declared by many archaeologists, historians, and some rabbis as a *mikveh*, dated to approximately 1722. They are further convinced that

crypto-Jews had made their way to this port city based on the similarity of ceramics excavated in Colonia del Sacramento to those found in the Jewish quarter of Amsterdam during the same period. While we were glad to find this well-publicized but difficult-to-find site, we are still not convinced that it is a classic *mikveh*, based on the lack of some of the standard features typical of *mikvaos*, such as a convenient way for the rainwater to enter the *bor*. However, if it was indeed constructed by *anusim*, it could be that their halachic knowledge of *mikvaos* was limited, explaining the discrepancies.

There is no definitive evidence of Jewish life existing in this town prior to the time when Uruguay indeed became a welcoming haven for Jews. Beginning in about 1880, Sephardim from Syria, Morocco, Egypt, Greece, and Turkey began arriving. Those with means settled in Montevideo; the others settled in outlying areas, particularly ports such as Colonia del Sacramento. And they left their mark. Walking down a tiny cobblestone street, we encountered some dilapidated houses on whose doorposts we were able to clearly

discern marks where mezuzahs once hung.

We next headed out to find the remnants of their shul. Finding it would not be simple — directions here went something like, "at the old bank turn right, then at the former grocery turn left," and of course you were never in that town and have no idea where the former anything is. All we knew about the shul's location was that the building had most recently been a bar named Exotica. We eventually found people who could tell us on what street Exotica had been, and the tourist office (located in an out-of-place glass-and-steel modern building) directed us to the desired intersection, where we found an abandoned shuttered building. Just next to it was a modern office. We pestered the occupants until a man behind one of the desks named Gustavo Carro (who made sure we took his business card) located for us online pictures of what the shul had looked like, together with a real estate agent with a key to the crumbling building.

Our hopes escalated that the key would get us into a long-abandoned but still intact shul. It was not to be. The key got us into only part of the shul, and then Ari G. dismantled the shutters to the other half of the building, as curious onlookers stopped by to ask what we were up to. It would have been too good to be true, but after 80 years of non-use, there was nothing left on the inside, although the external structure still matched those seen in the pictures, including remnants of Magen Davids.

Where's the Beef? Although we didn't find any ancient shuls, Montevideo still has a small active community, and we very much were looking forward to meeting the locals. Our standard way of doing that is by giving a *shiur*, and the standard way for the Montevideo community to get to know a guest is in classic Argentinean and Uruguayan style, by hosting them at an "*asado*," an abundant meat party for which the loose translation "barbecue" barely does justice. There is a joke in Uruguay that when little kids learn

what sounds animals make, they learn that a cat says meow, a dog says woof, and a cow says sizzle.

So we agreed to give a *shiur* at an *asado*. In Israel, an *asado* is a particular cut of meat. In this neck of the woods, an *asado* is a ritual, a tradition, a social linchpin. No one prepares an *asado* for himself — it's always with a crowd, an excuse for a get-together. Rabbi Spitz had us go back to our hotel to freshen up for the *asado*, and then picked us up at what we thought was a late hour for dinner, taking us to a high-end apartment building where we would be meeting the locals.

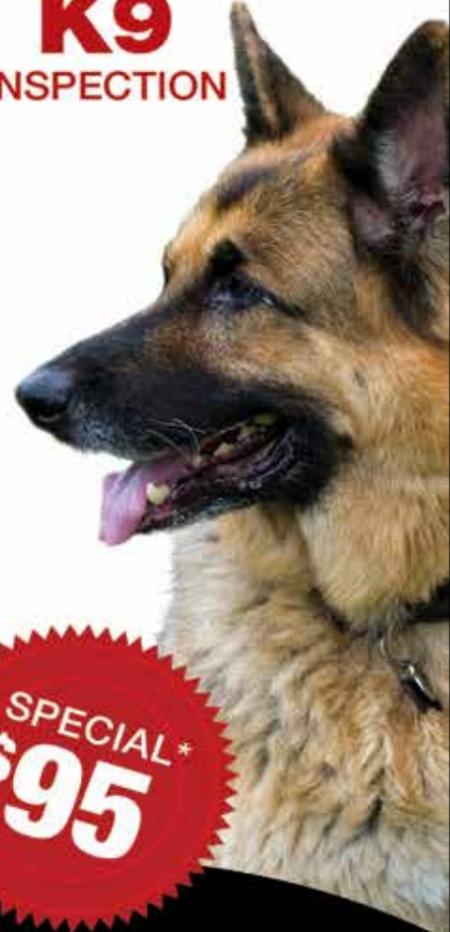
Every such building has a designated "*asado* room," which must be reserved in advance. We entered to find about 40 to 50 men (this was a boys-only party) from the community, aged about 25-65. The event begins with what an outsider would call a smorgasbord, where "cheaper" types of meat such as hot dogs, hamburgers, and assorted grilled meat were being eaten by the mingling crowd. There was wine, some nuts, and one bowl of salad for the entire crowd (vegetables were obviously not the main attraction here).

A subset of this group gets together over large quantities of meat about once a week, and the whole herd about once a month. So they had a group dynamic. At some point we were seated around tables for our *shiur* and for the "main course." They brought out the fancier cuts of meat, including massive cow ribs (remember the Flintstones?). We obviously had no choice but to give our *shiur* about the kashrus of exotic animals, including giraffe. The crowd loved it and we enjoyed meeting the active members of the Uruguayan Jewish community. Our host that evening was Sergio Hochman, who also proved to be an expert "*asadero*" — sort of like the chief barbecue chef — and he indeed presented us with an exquisite and unforgettable dining experience.

Next time we're out grilling Israeli hot dogs on our *mirpeset*, we'll think of them fondly. ●

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