

From Argentina to Israel: Escape, Evacuation and Exile*

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Abstract. During the last military dictatorship in Argentina, between 350 and 400 citizens who feared for their life managed to find shelter in Israel. This article traces the evolving procedures, institutional mechanisms and routes of escape operated by the Israeli diplomats and representatives stationed in Argentina and the neighbouring countries, against the contradictory background of lack of clear-cut official policies in Israel, the latter's cordial relationships with the military government, and an ethos of helping persecuted Jews evinced by some of those Israelis stationed in Argentina. In parallel, the article presents the social and political background of those who chose to appeal for Israeli help and finds – on the basis of a specially designed database covering between fifty-seven and sixty-five per cent of the fleeing individuals – that many were not associated with Israel or Zionism and a minority were not Jews, as defined by religious criteria or even by broader criteria. The broader significance of these contradictory trends is discussed.

Introduction

The brutality and magnitude of human-rights violations perpetrated by the military dictatorship that ruled Argentina between 1976 and 1983 stand out in South America. Repression involved disregard for due legal process, massive abductions, the generalised use of torture, flagrant personal abuses in secluded detention centres, murders without trial, and the disappearance of individuals (*desaparecidos*), whose fate the military authorities claimed not to know. The number of missing and presumably assassinated individuals is nearly 9,000 according to conservative assessments, and between 20,000 and 30,000 according to more radical estimates.¹ The victims included many

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¹ *Nunca más: Informe de la Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas (1984)* (Buenos Aires, 1995). Repression should be analysed within the comparative framework of the Southern Cone and Central America. On the former, see Luis Roniger and Mario Sznajder, *The Legacy*

persons of Jewish background: 1,300 disappeared, in addition to many others who suffered persecution in the country or went into exile.²

Among those who managed to escape abroad are between 350 and 400 individuals who fled to Israel, with partial assistance from Israeli diplomats and representatives stationed in Argentina and the neighbouring countries. This article deals with two basic questions related to those individuals who escaped to Israel. The first is: on what basis and how did the mechanisms of escape develop? The second is: who escaped and went into exile with such partial assistance? We also seek to establish the link between the answers to both questions.

When tackling these issues, the question of personal and collective identity becomes central from the start. Defining who is a Jew is one of the most politically charged questions in Israel and in the Jewish communities worldwide, because it stands closely related to the religious–secular cleavage in Israel and to the connection between that cleavage, the non-Orthodox character of many of the communities of the Jewish Diaspora, and the ongoing debate on the criteria for acceding to Israeli residence and citizenship.³ We claim here that this question had a formal and an informal importance both in the case of the Israeli representatives who were stationed in Argentina and found themselves involved in the process of assisting the victims of repression, as well as in the case of the latter.

Formally, Israeli official representatives in Argentina did not have any legal or diplomatic grounds on which to assist local individuals of Jewish background, since these were Argentine citizens. In parallel, the victims of repression, whether Jewish or not, did not have a special motivation to ask for Israeli rather than any other diplomatic representation as they sought to escape. Informally, however, the Israeli representatives had played an important role in the life of the organised Argentine Jewish community since the times of the first ambassador to Buenos Aires, Yaacov Tsur. In the

of Human Rights Violations in the Southern Cone. Argentina, Chile and Uruguay (Oxford, 1999), pp. 20–38; and Alexandra Barahona de Brito, ‘Trust, Justice, Memory, and Democratization in the Southern Cone,’ in Barahona de Brito, Carmen González-Enríquez and Paloma Aguilar (eds.), *The Politics of Memory* (Oxford, 2001), pp. 119–60. On Central America, see Rachel Sieder, ‘War, Peace, and Memory Politics in Central America,’ *ibid.*, pp. 161–89.

² Delegación de Asociaciones Israelitas Argentinas, ‘Informe sobre la situación de los detenidos-desaparecidos judíos durante el genocidio perpetrado en Argentina’ (Buenos Aires, 1999).

³ As will be explained later, the Israeli representatives and authorities used the ‘widened’ criteria of the Law of Return to define who was a Jew. For the Argentine victims of repression, let us limit ourselves to the external and negative criteria of anti-Semitism (according to which leftist Argentines were seen by society and especially by repressors as Jews) and the victims who approached Jewish and Israeli institutions in their search for help.

period under consideration here, they were not only receptive to calls for help by local Jews, but themselves generated on the ground a 'policy' of helping many to escape and find in Israel shelter from persecution in Argentina. In tandem with this, many Argentines of Jewish origin, who had a distant or only partial connection with Judaism, and at times even hostile attitudes toward Israel and Zionism due to their leftist ideological beliefs, requested assistance from the Israeli representatives *in situ* to evacuate Argentina, moving at least temporarily to Israel.

Bridging this complex interplay of factors is the projection of reaffirmed personal and collective identities and their relationship to the definition of Israel as a Jewish state, ideally and morally conceived to bear the mission of helping persecuted Jews. As shown below, these connotations of identity were stronger as part of an Israeli social ethos, which some of the Israeli representatives in Argentina shared, than as part of formal policy-making. From the standpoint of their Argentine identity, local Jews possessed full citizenship rights, while anti-Semitism was persistently present both among the security forces and in society at large, including some of the very leftist groups, within which some of the persecuted individuals of Jewish background activated. These trends prompted, in tandem with Argentine identity, a reformulation of Jewish identity and some claim to that identity for the sake of escape and the reception of immediate shelter. In both cases, this combined with the practice of 'evacuation' developed by the Israeli side. Whether being a primary or marginal part of self, such aspects of recognition and negotiation of personal and collective Jewish identity played an important part in the saga of those who fled to Israel.

In order to examine these issues we use both primary sources and material that is already available, together with new testimonies by individuals who participated either in diplomatic roles or experienced escape. These primary and secondary sources are complemented by a specially designed database, covering 230 individuals who escaped from Argentina to Israel in the late 1970s, thus enabling an examination of their background and identity at that time.⁴

General background

During the past few years the analysis of the Israeli diplomatic stand and policies towards the military dictatorships of South America during the 70's

⁴ The construction of the data base would not have been possible without the generosity of the late Dany Recanati, who gave us lists of escapees and prisoners whose cases were processed by the Jewish Agency. A preliminary analysis of the data base and its contextualisation will be included in Pablo Yankelevich (ed.), *Los exilios de la Argentina* (La Plata, 2004).

and 80's has gradually developed. A few studies focusing on the complex diplomatic, commercial, military and cultural relationships were published in past decades,⁵ and new studies have been launched in the 1990s and 2000s.⁶

Immediately after democratisation, the publication of *Nunca más* (1984) and the trials against the heads of the ruling juntas revealed the magnitude and brutality of repression, hitherto denied by the authorities. It also became clear that the repressive apparatus had not particularly singled out Jewish individuals as targets, but once captured, Jewish victims suffered a particularly cruel treatment while in captivity. Also, Jewish victims proportionally outnumbered Jews in the general population. A relatively large number of Jews were active in Argentine politics, especially within the ranks of the sectors persecuted by the military rulers. This brought the number of disappeared of Jewish background to a figure of 1,300, far above the percentage of Jews in the population.⁷

Repressors tended to be particularly sadistic toward the victims of Jewish origin. Such cruelty seems to have derived from the diffuse levels of anti-Semitism in various sectors of Argentinean society,⁸ particularly among the armed and security forces.⁹ In the latter case, this was linked to the Doctrine

⁵ Edy Kaufman, Yoram Shapira and Joel Barromi, *Israeli-Latin American Relations* (New Brunswick, 1979); Bishara Bahbah with Linda Butler, *Israel and Latin America: The Military Connection* (New York, 1986), pp. 123–34; and Ignacio Klich's many contributions in *Middle East International*, e.g. 'The Argentine connection', in No. 227 (15 June 1984), p. 18.

⁶ Leonardo Senkman, 'Israel y el rescate de las víctimas de la represión: una evaluación preliminar,' in Senkman and Mario Sznajder with the collaboration of Edy Kaufman, *El legado del autoritarismo* (Buenos Aires, 1995), pp. 283–324; Joel Barromi, 'Israel frente a la dictadura militar argentina: el episodio de Córdoba y el caso Timerman, *ibid.*, pp. 348–51; Leonardo Senkman, 'El escape de los judíos de la Argentina durante el gobierno militar 1976–1983,' in Dafna Sharfman (ed.), *¿Israel como una luz para los pueblos? La política exterior israelí y los derechos humanos* (Tel Aviv, 1999) pp. 91–124 [in Hebrew]; Avital Appel and Yifat Bachrah, 'The Politics of the Israeli Governments regarding the Jewish Detainees-Disappeared in Argentina,' Hebrew University seminar paper, 2002 [in Hebrew]; Inter-ministerial Commission, *Informe de la Comisión Israelí por los Desaparecidos Judíos en Argentina* (Jerusalem: Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Justice, July 2003), available in Spanish and Hebrew, in the following site: <http://www.jafi.org.il/education/ivrit/argentina/indexspenish.html>, especially the chapters by Efraim Zadoff, 'Resumen de hallazgos en archivos del Ministerio del Exterior y la Agencia Judía,' pp. 58–72; Edy Kaufman, 'El aspecto judío de la represión,' pp. 36–57; and Roniger and Sznajder, 'La dictadura militar de 1976–1983 en el marco de la política argentina en el siglo XX,' pp. 17–35.

⁷ The Center of Social Studies of the DAIA, the official coordinating framework of Jewish institutions registers this number, replacing earlier estimations in the range of 800 to 1.600. See DAIA 1999 (note 2).

⁸ Haim Avni, 'Antisemitismo en Argentina: las dimensiones del problema,' in Senkman and Sznajder with Kaufman (eds.), *El legado del autoritarismo*, pp. 197–216; Kaufman, 'El aspecto judío de la represión,' and Ignacio Klich and Mario Rapoport (eds.), *Discriminación y racismo en América Latina* (Buenos Aires, 1997).

⁹ Cristian Buchrucker, Fabian Brown and Gladys Jozami, 'Los judíos en el ejército: ausencias y presencias,' *Estudios migratorios latinoamericanos*, vol. 43 (Dec. 1999), pp. 303–22.

of National Security, which, along with French and US influences, was also influenced by post-1918 German ideas geared to the need to wage a total war against the internal enemy.¹⁰

Two principles repeatedly appear in the statements of those Argentine military officers who articulated and implemented national security ideology as a state policy. The first, the principle that a state of permanent total war exists within the society, operationalizes the domestic dimension of ideology (Ludendorff 1941; Comblin 1979; Arriagada 1981). Subscribing to a fundamentally conspiracy view of the world, the NSD-minded generals were convinced they were besieged (and the nation's security jeopardized) by communist agents engaged in an international war against 'Western Civilization and its ideals'.¹¹

Erich Ludendorff stood out as a source of military inspiration in their total war against internal enemies. His book, *Der Totale Krieg*, published in Munich in 1935, was by 1941 translated into Spanish and Portuguese and published again in Buenos Aires in 1964.¹² This work was influential among Latin American military elites, especially in Argentina, where admiration for Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy was common before, during and even after the Second World War.¹³ Ludendorff's anti-Semitism, his role in the NSDAP, his links with Hitler and his beliefs in conspiracy theories are well known and partially influenced the Argentine doctrine of National Security, alongside with the more often mentioned French, US and local Catholic integralist influences.¹⁴

In light of the persecution and forced disappearance of so many individuals of Jewish origin, one should analyse the role of Israel. This question emerges not only as a problem created by Argentina's repressive regime but

¹⁰ Prudencio García, *Drama de la autonomía militar bajo las juntas militares* (Madrid, 1995); David Pion-Berlin, *Through Corridors of Power: Institutions and Civil-Military Relations in Argentina* (Pittsburgh, 1997); Raanan Rein, 'Quién es el enemigo? Argentina, los franceses y los orígenes de la Doctrina de Seguridad Nacional,' paper presented at the conference on Human-Rights Violations and the Universalisation of Law, at the University of Haifa, January 2002; Mario Sznajder, 'El impacto de la aplicación de las doctrinas de seguridad nacional en el cono sur,' in Oded Balaban and Amos Megged (ed.), *Impunidad y derechos humanos. Perspectivas teóricas* (La Plata, 2003), pp. 153–69.

¹¹ David Pion-Berlin and George A. Lopez, 'Of Victims and Executioners of Argentine State Terror, 1976–1983,' Kellogg Working Paper no. 117 (1989), <http://www.nd.edu/~kellogg/WPS/117.pdf>, pp. 10–11. ¹² Erich Ludendorff, *La Guerra Total* (Buenos Aires, 1964).

¹³ In this connection it is interesting to watch *Panteón militar*, a documentary film by Osvaldo Bayer, whom his military informants mistakenly believed to have Nazi sympathies because of the German sound of his name. Accordingly, Bayer could record such concealed beliefs shared by many in the security forces.

¹⁴ Luis Roniger and Mario Sznajder, *The Legacy of Human-Rights Violations*, pp. 18–19. On Catholic Integralist influences in the Argentine armed forces, see Loris Zanatta, *Perón y el mito de la nación católica* (Buenos Aires, 1999); on French influences see Raanan Rein, '¿Quién es el enemigo? Argentina, los franceses y los orígenes de la Doctrina de Seguridad Nacional,' paper presented at the conference on Human-Rights Violations and the Universalisation of Law, at Haifa University, Jan. 2002.

also from the vantage point of the self image of Israel as *the* Jewish state, charged with the mission of serving as shelter and homeland for persecuted Jews and of saving them actively, if necessary.

Such a position implies a certain tension in international relationships. On the one hand, as any state, Israel strives to establish normal relations with other states. On the other hand, in terms of its internal and external legitimacy, Israel cannot overlook the situation of Jewish communities abroad. This dilemma became salient in the case of Argentina after 1976, as violence was generated against individuals of leftist sympathies but who were especially mistreated because of their Jewish background. In addition, repression affected many individuals only tangentially connected with the left and some who were beyond any suspicion of ‘subversion’. As is known, some were abducted and disappeared in lieu of relatives; some by mistake; still others for profit-seeking interests or merely due to personal enmity. When individuals of Jewish background fell into the hands of the repressive apparatus, they were especially mistreated and tortured for being Jewish. Most of them were disappeared along with non-Jewish victims.

Israel’s position during those years was especially ambivalent. Relations with Argentina were made more complex by the attitudes of the local Jewish community, the largest in Latin America, and more or less divided like Argentine society as a whole, with respect to the so called ‘Process of National Reorganisation’ (PRN) of the military Junta. This internal division resulted from differing positions towards the political activities and leanings of the young people who were persecuted by the military government.

The political attitude of the DAIA [Delegation of Israelite [Jewish] Argentinean Associations] and of *Nueva Presencia* – the Judeo-Argentinean weekly published by *Di Presse* and edited by Herman Schiller – reflect their clearly contrasted strategies as human rights were being violated ... According to accusations such as those made by Renée Sofia Epelbaum, mother of three *desaparecidos* and one of the leaders of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, the DAIA adopted a position of silence and extreme caution towards other cases of arrests and disappearances of Jews. This behaviour also was connected to a series of measures aimed to mitigate and even improve the image of Argentina abroad, particularly in the USA under the presidency of Jimmy Carter. In sharp contrast, *Nueva Presencia* expressed its support for the cause of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo as a national platform that included the Jewish *desaparecidos*.¹⁵

Prominent sections of the Jewish community put pressure on the Israeli representatives not to ‘interfere’ in Argentina’s internal affairs. Within the Jewish leadership, the supposed principles of communal solidarity clashed with political, social and economic interests supporting a military government

¹⁵ Saúl Sosnowski, ‘El campo intelectual judeo-argentino ante las violaciones de derechos humanos,’ in Senkman and Sznajder with Kaufman, *El legado del autoritarismo*, pp. 274–5.

that ensured 'order and stability.' Consequently, the expression '*por algo será*' (there must be a reason [for the repressive acts against individuals]), used as a justification for the persecution under the military government, had the same echo and validity in parts of the Jewish community.¹⁶ We must also keep in mind the time elapsed and the arduous struggle for human rights waged before the repressive policies of the military were publicly recognised. Despite the efforts of the human-rights movements, for years Argentina's government retained an ample aura of legitimacy within the country, due to the censorship and the misinformation in the media.

The relationship between Israel and Argentina, that had reached a nadir during the period following Adolf Eichmann's kidnapping in 1960 and his transferal to Jerusalem for trial,¹⁷ had improved greatly. At the onset of military rule, they could even be said to be cordial and close. On the international level, Israel had become a clear ally of the United States, confronting the USSR and the Soviet bloc in the Middle East directly and indirectly. In addition, the Argentine military was impressed by the capacity of Israeli Defence Forces to ensure the survival of a country in hostile surroundings. The commercial relationship involved the sale of Argentine meat to Israel and the sale of Israeli arms to Argentina.¹⁸ Moreover, Israel was considered to have a strong influence in Washington.

Paradoxically, this admiration was mixed with apprehension and mistrust, as parts of the military high ranks feared a presumed Zionist plan to infiltrate Argentina. According to an imaginary scheme, known as the Andinia plan, parts of the Jewish community were collaborating with Zionists and others of suspect loyalty to Argentina. Needless to say, this mistrust of co-nationals was imbued with open anti-Semitism in sectors of the local armed forces.¹⁹

¹⁶ Marshall T. Meyer, 'El judaísmo y el cristianismo frente a la violencia estatal: el caso de Argentina, 1976–1983,' *ibid.*, pp. 355–64.

¹⁷ Raanan Rein, *Argentina, Israel and the Jews. Perón, the Eichmann Capture and After* (Bethesda, 2003).

¹⁸ In 1977–81 Israel provided 14 per cent of Argentina's military purchases. Germany led the list, providing 33%, the USA 17% – despite the embargo of 1978 –, France 14% and the UK 12%. Israeli sales rose after 1982, when the Western countries imposed the embargo effectively. Bishara Bahbah, 'Israel's Military Relationships with Ecuador and Argentina,' *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 15, 2 (1986), pp. 76–101; and Barrromi, 'Israel frente a la dictadura,' p. 348.

¹⁹ In August 2003 different sources attributed to the chief of the armed forces, General Roberto Bendini a statement – made at the high military academy, the Escuela Superior de Guerra – in the sense that alien interests were trying to steal Patagonian resources. According to the source, Bendini claimed that 'for now there is no definitive enemy' although he added that the activities of 'small Israeli groups' and non-governmental organisations are being closely observed. In the case of these 'small Israeli groups' Bendini explained that they arrive inadvertently under the 'guise of tourism' (<http://www.radio10.com.ar/interior/home.html>). In light of the reactions generated by his comments, General Bendini denied he had singled out any specific groups (*Clarín*, 13 September 2003).

The military junta emphasised that it did not carry out anti-Jewish policies, and it stressed a good relationship with Israel as part of the anti-Communist front, despite its mistrust of the Argentine Jews. Furthermore, the military exhibited a confusion regarding who was 'Jewish', 'Israelite' or 'Israeli'. As shown below, this confusion was tactically exploited by the Israeli diplomats and representatives of the Jewish Agency in helping those fearing persecution.

How were Israeli policies defined when facing political persecution in Argentina?

Israel does not possess a special statute for refugees or political exiles. Nonetheless, the country has received thousands of Jews escaping persecution: the Holocaust survivors, expatriates, who were persecuted by Nazism and rejected by many countries during the Second World War; many Jews escaping Arab countries in the Middle East, who were forced to leave their countries of origin as a consequence of the Arab-Israeli conflict; and recently, the Jews from the former Soviet Union. Israel has taken in such individuals within the framework of its basic constitutional laws, primarily the Law of Return, which entitles every Jew who immigrates to accede automatically to full Israeli citizenship upon arrival. The Jewish Agency is the institutional mechanism in charge of regulating Jewish immigration from countries with which Israel has diplomatic relations. Representatives of the Agency are charged with processing applications of those wishing to immigrate to Israel legally and able to do it openly, through the regular immigration procedures.

The evacuation and exile of individuals of Jewish background from the countries of the Southern Cone, had not until 1976 been an object of discussion and had no priority in the agenda of politicians, officials or in the Israeli Parliament. In previous instances, such as following the Chilean coup d'état in September 1973, several gestures of solidarity had taken place. The Labour party, which governed Israel until 1977 and was a member of the Third International, complied with the resolution by the latter to provide asylum quotas for those escaping from Pinochet.²⁰ In accordance with that resolution, Israeli authorities took in a number of Chilean political refugees, both Jews and non-Jews, who were granted residence and were received through acts and expressions of solidarity.²¹

²⁰ 'Reserved' message from the [Israeli] Embassy in Santiago to the South American desk at the Foreign Ministry in Jerusalem, on the subject of 'the situation of the radical elements after the coup – the intervention of the Social Democrats and the Socialist International', dated 8 Oct. 1973, The National Archive, doc.5376/22, no. 717.

²¹ Interview with the lawyer Nahum Solán who at the time was a functionary of the Absorption Ministry; 12 Aug. 2003. Solán mentioned 'a few dozen inmates' and named,

Similarly, in Argentina, even before the 1976 coup d'état, efforts were made to 'save' young Jews who had joined leftist movements, either of Peronist leanings or other orientations, and who, in some cases, were guerrillas. Nahum Solán, representing the Zionist Youth Organization and belonging to the Zionist-Socialist MAPAM party, remembers his journey to Argentina in 1975 as an envoy of the Jewish Agency. Once there, he tried to contact those who had shifted from the Zionist-Socialist groups towards Argentinean leftist groups, such as the ERP and the Montoneros. Many of them had discovered anti-Semitic prejudices in such groups. But as they were already 'inside' the underground movements, they saw no option other than to remain. At one point, Solán remembers travelling to the province of Córdoba to meet with a score of young people, twelve of whom he reportedly convinced to abandon the local leftist movements and leave for Israel.²²

Under the so called PRN in Argentina a situation with few precedents came about. Jews, whose family members had been detained and disappeared, desperately appealed to the representatives of the Jewish Agency, the consular representatives, and Israeli diplomats.²³ The number of cases largely surpassed expectations, raising the question of how to proceed, especially with regard to those who had often gone underground and were sought after by the local authorities and security forces of Argentina.

We believe that a process of pragmatic decision-making was initiated by Israeli diplomats in Argentina, including the representatives of the Jewish Agency [henceforth, JA]. In theory, the representatives were charged with carrying out the policies of their government, but in fact they became the initiators of policies that were formalised through practice. Some of the representatives of the Israeli institutions felt it was their duty to stand against anti-Semitism, help persecuted Jews to escape to Israel. Accordingly, they

among others, the example of the political non-Jewish inmate in Israel, Chilean writer Manuel Rivano, who years later moved to Sweden.

²² These belonged to a left-wing Zionist organisation that had lost dozens of members to 'subversive' leftist movements such as the ERP. Among these former members six individuals had returned to Argentina from Israel in order to join the guerrilla movement. Interview with Solán, Jerusalem, 12 Aug. 2003.

²³ According to testimonies by Ran Curiel and Dany Recanati, they immediately began receiving family members of detainees and *desaparecidos* following their arrival in Argentina in 1976. Yet, according to Curiel, at first many of the Jews who were persecuted did not appeal solely to the Israeli representatives and only later, when the Israeli delegation received permission to make 'consular' visits to Jewish prisoners, an option not available to other diplomatic missions, did the family members appeal mainly to the Israeli Consulate. This seems to have been buttressed by a diplomatic initiative of Allen ('Tex') Harris of the American embassy in Buenos Aires to direct the relatives of Jewish background to the Israeli consulate for assistance. Testimony of Ran Curiel, Jerusalem, 12 September, 2003, and interview with Dany Recanati, 20 April 1990, available at the Section of Oral Interviews, Institute of Contemporary Jewry [henceforth: ICJ], Jerusalem, no. 216 (2).

began receiving appeals for help, being aware that the local authorities considered many of these individuals to be subversives and terrorists.

This does not mean that these representatives did not consult with their superiors in the JA or the Ministry of Foreign Affairs [henceforth, MFA] in Jerusalem, in order to receive precise instructions, establish the limits of what was permissible, and approve whatever was being practiced *in situ*. However, the modules of escape, evacuation and exile were shaped on the spot. In fact, it was the contrasting attitudes and sometimes clashes between the ambassador Ram Nirgad and senior JA representatives as Dany Recanati and Itzhak Pundak, which seems to have led to upper-level meetings in Jerusalem and to the formalisation of the procedures and their rerouting to the JA and MFA representatives in South America.²⁴

The confrontation was shaped by the cautious position of an ambassador who in 1976 was only willing to intercede on behalf of Israeli citizens in trouble, whilst the representatives of the JA and some of the junior staff of the embassy followed a wider mandate to help Argentine citizens of Jewish background. This confrontation became evident when, on 22 July 1976, five JA envoys were arrested along with three Argentine Zionist activists in the province of Córdoba. Their release 13 days later began with the intervention by Recanati of the JA and a junior staff member of the embassy, who located the detainees and prompted the official protest of Israel. This was the first case of open recognition by the Argentine authorities of the *locus standi* of Israel regarding Argentine Jews.²⁵ It was also the first case of conflict-ridden cooperation between the Israeli ambassador and JA representatives.²⁶

A series of meetings took place in Jerusalem in June and July 1976, aimed to coordinate the activities of the MFA, the JA and other agencies (especially the ministry of interior and the absorption ministry). JA officials raised the issue of the families of the persecuted individuals, specifically those of within which some members were not Jewish. They decided to assist any such individual – whether Jewish or not – in escaping the country, since it was assumed that their arrival in Israel would accelerate the rescue process of

²⁴ Documentation on this confrontation abounds in the archives. See, for example, Itzhak Pundak to Avraham Argov, 14 Feb. 1977; to Almogi and Dulzin, 6 Sept. 1977; and to Almogi, 12 Oct. 1977, Central Zionist Archives, C85/199, and a telegram of protest by Dr Reznicki of the DAI to Almogi against the declarations of Pundak aired on Israeli radio on 30 June 1977 about the situation in Argentina. We are grateful to Dr. Leonardo Senkman who made available copies of these still undisclosed documents.

²⁵ See Barromi, 'Israel frente a la dictadura,' pp. 325–35; and the testimony by Israel Even Shoshan, 11 Nov. 1990, ICJ, No. 216 (1).

²⁶ Ambassador Nirgad and JA director's representative Yitzhak Pundak had serious differences of opinion concerning the characterisation of the military rulers as anti-Semitic. See Senkman, 'Israel y el rescate'; and Marcel Zohar, *Free my People to Hell. Betrayal in Blue and White; Israel and Argentina: How the Jews Persecuted by the Military Were Neglected* (Tel Aviv, 1990) [In Hebrew].

those left behind.²⁷ Instructions were similarly drafted regarding the possible treatment and evacuation of individuals whose lives were at risk in South America.²⁸

These specified the procedures to be followed with regard to individuals at danger, defined as ‘those who were persecuted for their Judaism, their participation in Zionist activities or their political activity in general, and who were under physical threat due to their personal background or their relatives’ activities’. Included were the cases of Jews as well as those of non-Jews whose spouses were Jewish, defined in accordance with the reformed Law of Return that greatly extended the definition of who is a Jew. The instructions explicitly excluded individuals who were fleeing the authorities for having committed financial offences, terrorist acts or common crimes.

It was the functionary’s task to carefully interrogate the individual with regards to his/her personal history in order to test the authenticity of the motives of persecution The Israeli Embassy, the Jewish Agency in Jerusalem, and a local security official (at the Jewish Agency), were to receive a synopsis of the investigation. Following the ambassador’s consent, the immigration emissary was to organise the evacuation via neighboring countries or directly to Israel. Under precise instructions, the Department of Immigration was to be on the side but unnoticed during the immigration procedure and the escaping individual was not to carry compromising documents mentioning Israel as the final destination; only in outstanding cases, when there was no other alternative, could the Jewish Agency offer Israeli transit documents [*laissez passer*] subordinated by the approval of the local [Israeli] Ambassador. When possible, it was recommended that the individuals should travel themselves to neighboring countries after receiving economic aid from the Jewish Agency [and only abroad would receive an Israeli *laissez passer*].²⁹

In addition to being a compromise between the different agencies, the instructions formalised the operating procedure already implemented by the JA delegates.³⁰ The plan for escape and rescue had to be approved by the Ambassador in Argentina. In cases of disapproval, the functionaries of the JA could forward a request to their Executive Board in Israel, in order to obtain an authorisation that could nullify the initial rejection. At times, these disagreements prolonged the decision-making process. In early 1978, when the ambassador considered the repression to be receding, he requested from the JA authorities in Jerusalem that they order the immigration officers in Argentina thoroughly to check the identity and history of persecuted

²⁷ Secret memorandum sent by Joshua Wolberg, chief of the Latin American section of the Department of Immigration of the Jewish Agency in Latin America, 11 June 1976.

²⁸ ‘Procedures for the treatment of people escaping from South America’ (In Hebrew: Nohal tipul benimlatim me-artzot Drom America), PADR, Jerusalem, no date, probably June 1976.

²⁹ Senkman, ‘Israel y el rescate’, pp. 302–3.

³⁰ In April 1990 Recanati recalled that ‘we had built an operational framework we defined as evacuation’. Testimony in ICJ, 216 (2).

individuals, and to confer with the Israeli embassy, even though this could prolong proceedings.³¹ Such assessment indicates a misunderstanding of the impact of state terror under military dictatorships.

Behind the cautious attitude of the ambassador was a more generalised attitude of some Israeli circles advising discretion. A series of arguments were put by the ambassador and his superiors at the MFA in Jerusalem to justify diplomatic caution: (a) not to endanger the work of the Jewish Agency in the realm of legal immigration; (b) not to affect the relationships with the military Junta at a time when Israel was being censored in the U.N. and its diplomatic connections were being reduced internationally; and, finally, (c) that discretion was required to help the politically persecuted individuals in escaping Argentina. A fourth argument, often used by the local Jewish community, was that an open confrontation with the military Junta would increase anti-Semitism. Behind the scenes were interests connected to the armaments industry, the impact of which can only be guessed at until the National Archives release such documentation in the future.

It is clear that there was ambiguity in the highest circles. On the one hand, any public condemnation of the Junta's repressive policies was eschewed by Israel. Members of the Israeli Parliament presented eight urgent motions regarding the issue between 1976 and 1981, the critical period of human rights violations in Argentina. The Knesset's secretary did not approve any of these motions which never even reached the stage of debate. In their testimonies, the Knesset members Geula Cohen, Dror Zeigerman, and Menachem Hacohen claimed that this was because the president, Menachem Savidor yielded to the pressure of the Israeli MFA.³² This was a clear case, in which problem identification did not lead to the issue gaining agenda status, albeit maximising the chances of criticism and issue expansion on the long run.³³

On the other hand, the foreign minister and other leading political figures expressed an wholehearted commitment to rescuing those individuals who feared for their physical integrity. Menachem Begin, leader of the Israeli

³¹ The internal telegram sent by Nirgad and Aaron Ofri, Ambassador of Israel in Uruguay, to Anug (Jerusalem), stated that, given the decreasing repression in Argentina, the representatives of the Jewish Agency should limit their use of 'urgent transactions' and special means [of escape] in favor of regular 'un-hasty, organised, and controlled' proceedings. The telegram adds: 'you are probably aware that in several cases, the special 'channel' was misused, for no reason whatsoever. You are aware of our observation regarding the character of certain immigrants.' PADR, telegram 10 Feb. 1978.

³² Testimonies by Geula Cohen (ICJ-216/42); Dror Zeigerman (ICJ-216/40); and Menachem Hacohen (ICJ-216/23); Appel and Bachrach, 'The Politics of the Israeli Governments,' p. 28 and note 85.

³³ On these aspects of agenda-setting and agenda-denial see, among others, Roger W. Cobb and Marc Howard Ross, *Cultural Strategies of Agenda Denial* (Lawrence: KS, 1997) esp. pp. 3-4; and David Dery, 'Agenda Setting and Problem Definition', *Policy Studies*, 21, 1 (2000), pp. 37-47.

National Right opposition that within months would overthrow Yitzhak Rabin's Labour coalition, voiced this view as he visited Argentina in August 1976. In a closed meeting with the Zionist representatives in Argentina, Begin reportedly said that 'Israel has to help every persecuted Jew. This should bear no regard to his/her political ideas, whatever these may be.' In response to one JA representative who held that many belonged to the extreme left, and that, upon arriving in Israel, they would join the extra-parliamentarian anti-Zionist groups, Begin responded: 'They can associate with Matzpen in Israel for all I care. Israel is obliged to save them.'³⁴ This mandate for a universal defence of Jews became especially crucial in cases where elements of political persecution were being mixed with anti-Semitism, as was the case in Argentina. It was shared by the head of the JA in Argentina, Dany Recanati, other diplomatic representatives, and local figures such as the Rabbi Marshall Meyer and Rabbi Roberto Graetz.³⁵ Yet once in power, Begin failed to shape policy because of the positions of the ambassador, the local Jewish leadership and other diplomatic and commercial interests.

The 'Option' and the problématique of exile

From a theoretical point of view, the existence of the Law of Return in Israel and the automatic bestowal of citizenship upon any Jew who opts for it when s/he arrives to the country, presents a conceptual problem. Can a person who arrives in a country and automatically accepts its citizenship still be considered an exile? What are the implications for the personal and collective identity of the Argentine expatriates receiving assistance in escaping and finding shelter in Israel?

There is no doubt that escape from persecution minimised for some the relevance of the place in which they would receive refuge. Nevertheless, being accepted by any such host country would imply the closure of other countries as haven. Furthermore, the specific problems related to the

³⁴ Aryeh Dayan, 'Thanks to Menachem Begin,' *Kol Hair*, 9 Sept. 1987, p. 34 [In Hebrew]. Matzpen was a small, Trotskyist and anti-Zionist extra-parliamentary group, ostracised by most political forces in Israel. Various Israeli figures visited Argentina during those years, including former PM Itzhak Rabin, Yigal Alon and the President of the Jewish Agency, Arie Dultzin. The Israeli diplomats who received and accompanied them in Buenos Aires repeatedly brought up the problem of the persecuted and missing individuals. In light of reactions such as Begin's during his visit to Argentina in 1976, it is difficult to understand how the issue was not projected to the center of public concerns in Israel.

³⁵ Meyer and Graetz were key figures in the defence of the politically persecuted. Without enjoying diplomatic immunity and often endangering themselves and their families, they undertook a huge effort in the area of human-rights preservation. When Argentina returned to democracy, Meyer was nominated to the CONADEP and received the highest Argentine decoration, the Order of General San Martín.

Arab-Israeli conflict also played a role. Undocumented Argentine expatriates who needed to adopt Israeli citizenship, were subject automatically to the duties of such status, including the mandatory military service in Israel. The intensity and long duration of military service were a source of pre-occupation for many.³⁶ Adopting the Israeli citizenship implied a compromise that went much further than a simple formality.

It is not surprising then that ‘the Option’, through which Israel was willing to receive hundreds of detainees and which was granted by the Argentine authorities to a few dozens, was adopted by a very small number of political prisoners. The Option implied renouncing Argentine citizenship and adopting an alternative citizenship. On this basis, the individual would leave the country permanently and migrate to the foreign country willing to accept him or her.³⁷

We possess a list of 34 transactions of detainees at the disposal of the National Executive Power – in Spanish: PEN – involving the request of undertaking the Option as of 22 September 1978.³⁸ In an internal JA message sent from Buenos Aires to Jerusalem on 18 January 1980, 58 Jewish prisoners are mentioned, 36 of whom were in touch with the Agency. Israel was willing to grant citizenship to all of them in order to activate the Option. An analysis of their location shows a high concentration of prisoners in Buenos Aires and its outskirts (See Table 1). Efraim Zadoff mentions an Israeli MFA document indicating that Argentina had validated 57 requests for granting Israeli citizenship to the current PEN detainees approved by Israel.³⁹ Joel Barromi, Vice-Director General for Latin America in the Israeli MFA between October 1981 and November 1983, mentions the approval of four Option requests during November 1977 and 24 cases of detained Jews who were liberated in July 1979, as a result of Israeli willingness to accept them. Nineteen of them left for Israel, and five for other destinations.⁴⁰ During an

³⁶ Telegram from Inbar, Embassy of Israel in Buenos Aires to the Latin American desk 2, relating the problems of the status of the immigrant/citizen: military service, PADR, May 1978. The Foreign Minister Moshe Dayan along with Jehuda Dominitz, director of the Department of Immigration of the Jewish Agency, finally decided to provide visas of temporary residence and financing of the trip to Israel, which did not oblige the individuals to accept Israeli citizenship.

³⁷ The procedure was initiated in Sept. 1977, when Ambassador Nirgad handed the minister of the interior a list of 262 names and announced that Israel was willing to welcome all of the individuals included. On 4 June 1978 Dany Recanati sent a memorandum to his superiors stating that the first individual had been liberated ‘that week’. PADR, 4 June 1978.

³⁸ Source: ‘Situación de detenidos PEN con relación al pedido de opción, actualizada al 22-09-78’ PADR, 1978.

³⁹ Document No. 7042/9 in Zadoff, ‘Resumen de hallazgos’, p. 4.

⁴⁰ Barromi, ‘Israel frente a la dictadura’, p. 346.

Table 1. *Location of the Jewish Prisoners which the Israeli representatives knew about*

City	Number of Jewish Prisoners
La Plata	20
Devoto (Buenos Aires)	18
Sierra Chica	7
Rawson	5
Córdoba	2
Coronda	1
Subtotal	53
Conditional Release	4
Domiciliary Arrest	1
Total	58

interview in July 2003, Recanati said that the figure grew to 70 people, out of whom 19 chose to immigrate to Israel (17 arrived while two others remained in the European stopovers), and at least eight of those who left for Israel, eventually reached other countries.⁴¹

Visits to the jails and detention centres began in late 1977. Although access to such places in Buenos Aires and its outskirts was easier than in other parts of the country, the young Israeli functionaries made use of their diplomatic immunity to search for individuals detained and disappeared outside the capital. The norms of security dictated that these visits be conducted by more than one person. Nevertheless, facing a lack of manpower and the need to visit many prisons and detention centres, the functionaries constantly ignored the norm, and visited remote areas without any escort.⁴² Official visits to the Jewish prisoners, following initial visits of reconnaissance, were possible due to the confusion that reigned among the military regarding the relationship between Israelis and Israelites, which the Israeli representatives consciously used to the benefit of the prisoners.⁴³

Not only were the visits a way of providing moral and material support to prisoners, but they also publicly established their existence and place of detention at a certain date, on a case-by-case basis. The Israeli diplomats in Argentina used the visits to compose lists of detainees that were later presented to the local authorities, accompanied by an Israeli request of release from jail. Not only were these requests presented to the minister of the interior and to the police, but in meetings with the members of the military

⁴¹ Interview with Dany Recanati, Jerusalem, 7 July 2003.

⁴² Interview with Pinhas Avivi, then a junior diplomat at the Embassy in Buenos Aires and later vice-director for Latin America of the MFA, Jerusalem, 25 June 2003.

⁴³ Interview with Ran Curiel, Jerusalem, 12 Sept. 2003.

Juntas as well.⁴⁴ However, it must be recognised that the number of individuals located in this manner is minimal in comparison to the number of individuals who disappeared arbitrarily.⁴⁵

Cases of house arrest and supervised freedom also existed in limited numbers. The most famous case in which Israel intervened actively, even if not openly, along with the USA and various international organisations, was that of Jacobo Timerman, the former editor of *La Opinión*, who was expelled from Argentina and received in Israel.⁴⁶

The escape of the persecuted

The majority of those Jews persecuted by the repression did not have a strong connection with Israel. Their universalistic leftist orientations; the perception of Israel as an ally of the arch-enemy, the United States and the Western Block during the Cold War; Third World condemnation of Zionism; and, the elements of national and religious character associated with Israel, all turned Israel into an unattractive location for exile. However, in circumstances perceived as life-threatening and knowing that it was possible to escape Argentina with Israeli assistance, Jewish backgrounds or links became relevant and activated. A Jewish family name, a relative in Israel, a grandparent, memories of past Jewish education and many other background factors served victims of persecution to re-establish somehow and ‘negotiate’ a Jewish identity.

In general, immigration procedures take time; they require a series of informative explanations, interviews, and checks where both parties evaluate one another. In the case of Israeli procedures, the checks normally involved medical and psychological evaluations, a certificate of good behaviour, and ample orientation about the possibilities of study, work, and residential options after immigration. Information could also cover community integration and support networks. Such procedures normally took months to

⁴⁴ The embassy submitted to the authorities the lists of the detainees and individuals who had disappeared and requested their release. According to Joel Barromi, the lists were submitted in on the following dates: Jan. 1977 (fourteen detainees), Aug. 1977 (ninety-two), Sept. 1977 (262 individuals, to whom Israel was willing to grant citizenship under the Law of Option), May 1978 (347), and May 1979 (357, including sixty-four detainees). In December 1982 Israeli Foreign Minister Itzhak Shamir personally presented to President Reynaldo Bignone a list of 350 individuals that included ten detainees and 340 missing individuals (Barromi, ‘Israel frente a la dictadura military’, pp. 343–50).

⁴⁵ Interview conducted by Avital Appel and Yifat Bachrach with former Ambassador to Argentina Dov Shmorak on 3 March 2003 (ICJ 216/49).

⁴⁶ On this case see Barromi, ‘Israel frente a la dictadura militar’. Efforts on behalf of the persecuted Jews in Argentina were also made by international and US Jewish institutions. On these efforts see Víctor A. Mirelman, ‘Las organizaciones internacionales judías ante la represión y el antisemitismo en la Argentina’, in *El legado del autoritarismo* (Buenos Aires, 1995), pp. 239–72.

complete. Starting with the 1976 military coup, the Israeli representatives in Argentina, in particular those in charge of immigration continued their work assisting those who wanted to immigrate to Israel on normal terms. The number of these immigrants is estimated at 3,000 for 1977, tripling the 1976 figure.⁴⁷

It is in this period when a division of labour took place. The Israeli ambassador in Argentina used his contacts in diplomatic circles and met the Junta to request the freedom of prisoners, and to try to clarify the whereabouts of the disappeared detainees. The functionaries of the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires visited the prisons and were in touch with the persecuted and the families of the missing individuals. The immigration officers of the Jewish Agency received the persecuted individuals, either directly, or, by referral of the embassy's functionaries, and processed the urgent requests for help.

This division of labour created a negative image for Ambassador Ram Nirgad, who was portrayed as more concerned with the arms trade than with the fate of the persecuted and missing.⁴⁸ We also note above the early uncommitted attitude of Nirgad. Yet, some internal communiqués of the MFA show that he later tried in vain to convince his superiors in Jerusalem to use the arms sales as a source of pressure on the Argentinean authorities:

We should use the arms sales as a political catalyst. It is inconceivable that the links [with the armed forces] will be dealt solely at a commercial/technical level without exploiting their political side.⁴⁹

Weeks later Nirgad engaged in a conversation with General Videla and directly touched upon the topic of the Israeli arms sales that, according to Videla, would strengthen the links between the two peoples and would be seen in a very positive manner. After the interview, Nirgad wrote to his superiors in Jerusalem:

Within the context of 'good relations' I turned to the issue of the prisoners and missing individuals. I described it as something that stains the Argentinean image in Israel and as an obstacle to the development of desirable relations between the two countries. I described the Israeli sensibility for the lives of Jews anywhere, deriving from the traumatic experience of our people, and I argued that it is very difficult to explain the Argentinean situation to the Israeli public I indicated that the process of classification and liberation of prisoners is too slow and unsatisfactory The President replied that he could add no new information about the missing individuals The President asked for details about the prisoners. I summed up the

⁴⁷ Senkman, 'Israel,' p. 301.

⁴⁸ Michal Kapra, 'The Dilemma of the Devil,' *Maariv*, 28 March 1986, 'Sofshavua,' pp. 6–9 (in Hebrew); Dr Mario Rovner, 'An Open Letter about the Missing Individuals in Argentina,' *Semana*, 22 Nov. 1990; Zohar, *Free my People to Hell*.

⁴⁹ Telegram sent to Jerusalem by Ambassador Nirgad, Sept. 1978 [No. 270].

situation with the Minister of Interior and his aides. He promised to act in favour of a more flexible attitude towards those who were interested in immigrating to Israel.⁵⁰

Victims of persecution, relatives, friends and observers harshly criticised the failure of the Israeli representatives to locate the missing and liberate the detainees.⁵¹ Indeed, as indicated above, orders were issued not to help those who had been directly involved in murderous acts or armed actions.⁵² The usual argument concerns Israeli arms-industry interests, but one should also note the fear at that time of a possible collaboration between individuals who had participated in guerrilla groups in Argentina and the anti-Israeli guerrilla groups in the Middle East.

In practice, the fugitive members of underground-armed groups such as the Montoneros or the ERP were not rejected, as long as they had not participated in armed acts and murdered people. Neither were members of political organisations such as the Peronist University Youth or the Association of 17 October rejected.

The Israeli authorities demonstrated a clear wish to compartmentalise information relating to the escape, rescue, and transfer of the threatened individuals to Israel. The instructions given to the Israeli representatives mentioned this point and recommended complete discretion. Argentine citizens could enter countries such as Uruguay or Brazil without a passport, using an identity card, a national identification card (DNI), or by crossing the borders illegally.⁵³

During each step the escape procedure could threaten the participants, if the information would become known. One example throwing light on the difficulties of concealment took place in July 1977, following the arrest of a non-Jewish psychologist. One of his patients was a Jewish man [name is omitted] who had previously described the escape of his cousin [name is omitted] to his therapist. As was customary, the psychologist taped the sessions with his patient:

Two days ago the psychologist was arrested and his tapes were confiscated. The man [name is omitted] approached us, explaining his regrets and his fears after having given his psychologist details about the Jewish Agency's involvement in the escape.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Telegram sent by Ambassador Nirgad to Anug in Jerusalem, PADR, Oct. 1978.

⁵¹ Zohar, *Free my People to Hell*; Mario Rovner, 'Carta abierta sobre los desaparecidos,' *Semana*, 22 November 1990.

⁵² Interview with Dany Recanati, 7 July 2003. Recanati, who personally interviewed the fleeing individuals, recalled having rejected only two cases on the basis of involvement in murderous acts.

⁵³ The road to Chile was less likely to be used, due to the repressive character and image of the domestic regime, but there is at least information about one Argentine escapee receiving an Israeli laissez-passer in Chile (testimony by one of the anonymous reviewers for JLAS).

⁵⁴ Telegram sent by Recanati to Dominitz, July 1977, PADR, no. 34.

This level of protection or shelter under diplomatic immunity did not exist for the majority of the individuals escaping from repression. After escaping from Argentina at the age of seventeen, Abel Bratman remembers the moment when his documents were checked at the border: it became the scene for a recurrent nightmare that lasted for years.⁵⁵ Although it was still unproved, the cooperation between the security forces of South American countries governed by military dictatorships, the so-called Condor Operation, was a looming problem. In certain cases, the Israeli representatives accompanied the fleeing individuals until the border with the neighbouring country was crossed, taking all the necessary measures so that the escape would be successful.⁵⁶

An analysis of the evacuation procedures indicates that there was no rescue 'operation' planned. The *modus operandi* elaborated by the Israeli representatives in Argentina was approved, as it progressed, by the authorities in Israel. This was not unique in the context of the Southern Cone. The research by Guadalupe Rodríguez de Ita indicates that in the case of Mexican diplomatic delegacies, the right of exile recognised by Mexico was applied differently, in the cases of Chile, Argentina and Uruguay, according to decisions taken by the diplomats in each of the embassies. Pablo Yankelevich's research identifies the effectiveness of the political or military 'fence' around the embassies as a defining factor in the number of fleeing individuals who hoped and managed to enter each embassy.⁵⁷

The persecuted individuals

We have assembled a database that includes the cases of 230 individuals who escaped to Israel.⁵⁸ The information comes from: (a) a list of personal archives, made available by the representatives of the Jewish Agency in Argentina until August 1978,⁵⁹ complemented by (b) five additional individuals that come from an almost identical list copied by the journalist Marcel Zohar in the Central Zionist Archive and published in his

⁵⁵ Interview held in Jerusalem, 12 Aug. 2003.

⁵⁶ Those who held a valid Argentine passport took flights from Buenos Aires to Europe and Israel without transiting through a neighboring country.

⁵⁷ Guadalupe Rodríguez de Ita, 'Experiencias de asilo registradas en las embajadas mexicanas,' in Silvia Dutrenit Bielous and Guadalupe Rodríguez de Ita (eds.), *Asilo diplomático mexicano en el Cono Sur* (Mexico, 1999), pp. 133–53; personal communication by Pablo Yankelevich, 15 Sept. 2003.

⁵⁸ We would like to thank Deby Babis-Cohen, doctorate student at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, for her extensive help in preparing the database and the selection of graphs included in this paper.

⁵⁹ The list comes from the personal archives of Dany Recanati, representative in chief of the Immigration Department of the JA in Buenos Aires during those years.

Table 2. *Age of the Fleeing Individuals and Joining Persons*

Age Groups	Fleeing Individuals	Joining Persons	Total
0–15		53	53
16–25	110	9	119
26–35	33	8	41
36–45	7	4	11
46+	3	1	4
Total	153	75	228

N = 228, Missing Values = 2.

controversial book in 1991,⁶⁰ and (c) interviews with individuals not included in the previous lists, who were located through third parties in Israel during 2003.

The list covers only those individuals that escaped from Argentina to Israel prior to August 1978. We are still missing a comprehensive list of those who fled to Israel subsequently.⁶¹ Previous research by Leonardo Senkman, Joel Barroni, and the report by Israel's Inter-Ministerial Commission detailing the fate of the Jewish people who disappeared in Argentina (2003), mention a total between 350 and 400 rescued individuals. Nevertheless, and acknowledging the partiality of our database, if the total figure is estimated as being between the 350 and 400 cases, our sample constitutes between 57 and 65 per cent of the cases.

The list of the 230 individuals is made up of 154 fleeing individuals and seventy-six family dependents. In most cases the information is complete. Among the individuals, three cases include fleeing Uruguayans who were 'rescued' through Argentina and left for Israel with five dependents. The inclusion of the Uruguayans in the escape from Argentina reflects the sequence of military repression in Uruguay and Argentina, as well as the impact of the collaboration of repressive apparatuses under the Condor Operation.⁶²

Taking into account the age distribution (see Table No. 2), we have 53 cases between the ages of 0 and 15 who accompanied the fleeing individuals. The 16–25 age group consists of 52.2 per cent of the individuals (119 cases, out of which 110 were persecuted and nine were their dependents). This figure underlines the fact that young people felt particularly threatened.⁶³

⁶⁰ Zohar, *Free my People to Hell* (note 27).

⁶¹ Escape continued after that date. We are trying to gain access to classified documentation at various archives to complete the database, which currently contains only one case for later dates, specifically May 1979.

⁶² Patrice J. McSherry, 'Tracking the Origins of a State Terror Network: Operation Condor,' *Latin American Perspectives*, vol. 29, no. 1 (2002), pp. 38–60.

⁶³ According to CONADEP, 43.23 per cent of the disappeared individuals belonged within this age range. *Nunca más*, p. 294.

In the case of individuals over the age of sixteen, the percentage of dependents grows with age, a trend which reflects the sustained impact of persecution on entire families. Hence, among 16–25, 26–35, 36–45 and over 46 age groups, the percentage of dependents moves from 7.5 to 19.5; 36.3 and 25 per cent respectively.

In terms of gender, 55.2 per cent of the fleeing individuals were male (N = 85), and 44.8 per cent were female (N = 69). The percentage of female dependents was 54.8 (N = 40), while the male dependents comprised 45.2 per cent (N = 33). By comparing these figures with the information of the victims of forced disappearance published by CONADEP (70 per cent male and 30 per cent female), one may observe a much higher percentage of females among those who were forced to escape.

Civil status: the first majority of the fleeing individuals were married (49.7 per cent); 44.3 per cent of the individuals were single. The divorced and widowed individuals formed the remaining 6 per cent. We confirmed a high percentage of married individuals among the younger age groups. We learned from oral testimonies that some of the marriages took place in view of the imminent escape to Israel.

From the point of view of the human capital and level of education, we see that over half of the individuals about whom we have information on this subject had a partial education at university level. Due to the circumstances of the escape, many could not complete their studies and careers. In Israel a special procedure was rapidly developed allowing the people who had left Argentina without the necessary educational or academic documentation to continue their education. In these cases, they had to make a declaration under oath before a notary regarding the courses they had approved in Argentina. The declaration was used instead of a transcript in order to admit the candidate to the level of academic studies that would allow for the completion of her/his studies at an Israeli university.⁶⁴ Among the registered individuals, another 17 had full university degrees, 9 had degrees from technical and professional colleges, and 8 had secondary school degrees.

More than half of the 83 cases of fleeing individuals were students (See Table No. 3). In terms of percentages, according to CONADEP, students constituted less than 21 per cent of the victims, while among those who fled to Israel the percentage is of 53.4 per cent. In our list, 14.4 per cent were professionals, a figure slightly lower than the one registered by CONADEP, which lists 18.3 per cent professionals among the *desaparecidos*. According to CONADEP, 30.2 per cent of the disappeared were manual workers,

⁶⁴ Testimony by Nora Bendersky, director of Latin American students in the Rothberg School for Foreign Students at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem since the 1970's. Interview in Jerusalem, 17 July 2003.

Table 3. *Occupational Profile of Fleeing Individuals*

Occupation	Number of Fleeing Individuals
Students	44
University Graduates	17
Professionals	12
Independents	4
Working Class	3
White Collar	2
Other	1
Total	83

N = 83, Missing Values = 71 (Total of Fleeing Individuals = 154).

while the same category constituted only 3.6 per cent of the individuals who escaped to Israel.⁶⁵ These figures reflect quite accurately the socioeconomic and employment situation of the Jewish groups in Argentina during those years.

The information we have on the students and university graduates reports that 30 of the 55 individuals studied in the fields of applied or biological sciences, especially medicine, while 25 majored in social sciences and humanities, particularly psychology.

As already noted, Israel followed a policy of immigration modeled by the definition of who is a Jew. This issue was cast aside when the need to help individuals persecuted by military dictatorships arose. Out of the 230 persecuted individuals and their dependents, 83.47 per cent were Jewish according to Orthodox criteria (N = 192); 8.26 per cent of the individuals fell within the category of the Law of Return, meaning, they had to have at least a Jewish grandmother or grandfather (N = 19); and the remaining 8.26 per cent were not Jewish under any criteria but were helped since they were part of a family that included a Jew within the qualifying criteria. (See Chart No. 1.)

A great majority of the fleeing individuals and their dependents did not play an active part in the organised Jewish community in Argentina. Susana Mindez, a member of the Socialist Revolutionary Students group in Córdoba until mid-1976, provides a clear testimony for this case:

I don't know if I was aware of my status as an exile, but now that I think about it, going to Israel added to my state of confusion. Israel received me as a Jew and I left Argentina as something other than a Jew. At that point, I was very angry about my Jewish identity; it had to do with my adolescence. My Jewish identity came from my father and at that point, I wasn't talking to him. But yes, I remember that in 1978, when we visited you, Betty and Dany, I thought to myself: 'now they are real exiles'.

⁶⁵ The data is from the CONADEP, in *Nunca más*, p. 296.

Table 4. *Activism in Jewish Youth Movements*

Activism in Jewish Youth Movements	Fleeing Individuals	Joining Persons	Total
Own Activism	27	3	30
Acquaintances	4	7	11
No	123	66	189
Total	154	76	230

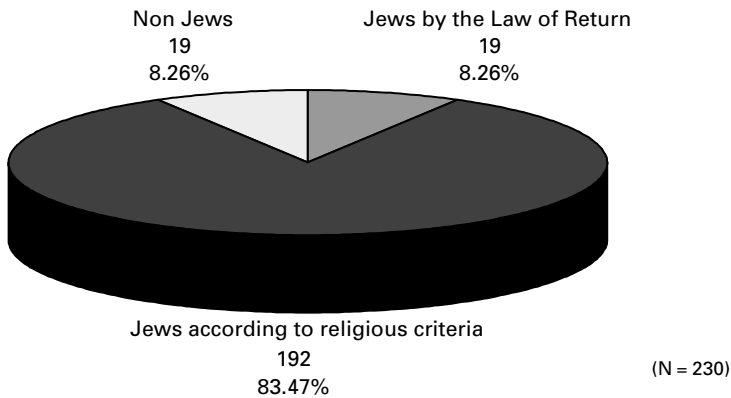


Chart 1. *Jews and non-Jews.*

It was as if in Israel they didn't even understand us. I was there as a Jew and I had to be thankful for having been received, and it's true that we had so many advantages over you in Spain. But in Spain I discovered the difference between those who had left like me and political refugees, or those who didn't even have proper documentation Now that was different.⁶⁶

The participation index in Jewish youth movements is another referent of the relationship between these individuals with Israel before searching for an escape route; 79.9 per cent of the fleeing individuals and 86.8 per cent of their dependents had not been active in these youth movements. (See Table No. 4.)

If we take into consideration the political background and participation in social movements of the individuals, we know that 67 of the 154 individuals (43.5 per cent) were politically and socially active, while almost the same percentage (N = 65) had no political trajectory. Lastly, 14.3 per cent (N = 22) declared that even though they did not form part of any group, they were acquainted with political activists and therefore were in danger. None of the 76 dependents had a past of political activism, while 81.6 per cent

⁶⁶ Diana Guelar, Vera Jarach and Beatriz Ruiz, *Los chicos del exilio. Argentina 1975-1984* (Buenos Aires, 2002), p. 234.

Table 5. *Political Activism*

Political Activism	Fleeing Individuals	Joining Persons	Total
Own political activity	67		67
Acquaintances	22	14	36
No	65	62	127
Total	154	76	230

Table 6. *Escape Route by Documentation*

Type of Document	Fleeing Individuals	Joining Persons	Total
Laissez Passer	100	36	136
Passport	47	39	86
Total	147	75	222

N = 222, Missing Values = 8.

(N=62) were defined as ‘people involved in no political activity whatsoever.’ We may infer that the motives to escape from Argentina went beyond the atmosphere of generalised fear. They clearly included a past arrest, sometimes with torture, or the arrest or disappearance of a friend or relative, which heightened the risk of becoming a detainee-disappeared (See Table No. 5.)

The problem of possessing or lacking valid documentation was crucial to the escape. People who presumed that their names appeared in lists of suspects feared to petition the authorities for travel documents. We have heard testimonies by escapees of attempts of falsification of official documentation.

In the cases examined, 68 per cent of the persecuted individuals and 48 per cent of their dependents left for Israel with an Israeli *laissez-passer* provided in the country of transit, which was usually Uruguay or Brazil (See Table No. 6.)

The logic of using a neighbouring country in transit to Israel was based upon the relative ease of border crossings into those countries: there was no need to present a passport if an identity card (or a DNI) was available. The escaping individuals usually crossed into the neighbouring country on their own without the direct help of the Israeli representatives. However, in some extreme cases, the company of the Israeli representatives was necessary and the border was crossed in a clandestine way.

There is a detailed registry of the diachronic sequence of the dates of arrival of 217 fleeing individuals and their dependents in Israel from June 1976 until August 1978. The individuals in this time-span mostly left Argentina between December 1976 and December 1977; 30.3 per cent of

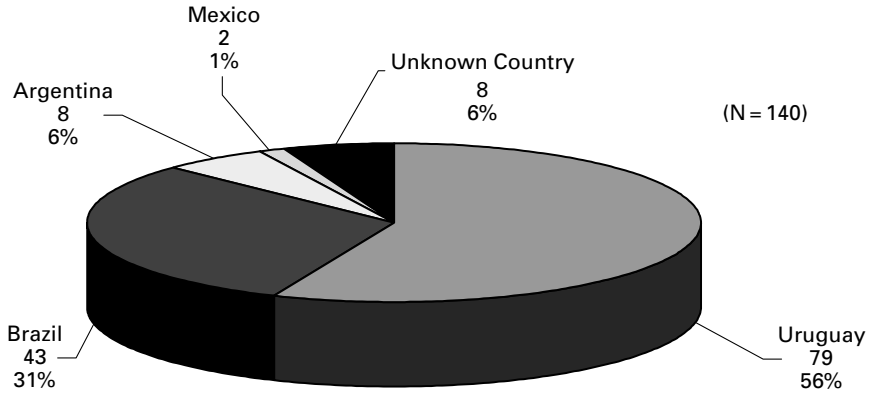


Chart 2. *Escape Routes.*

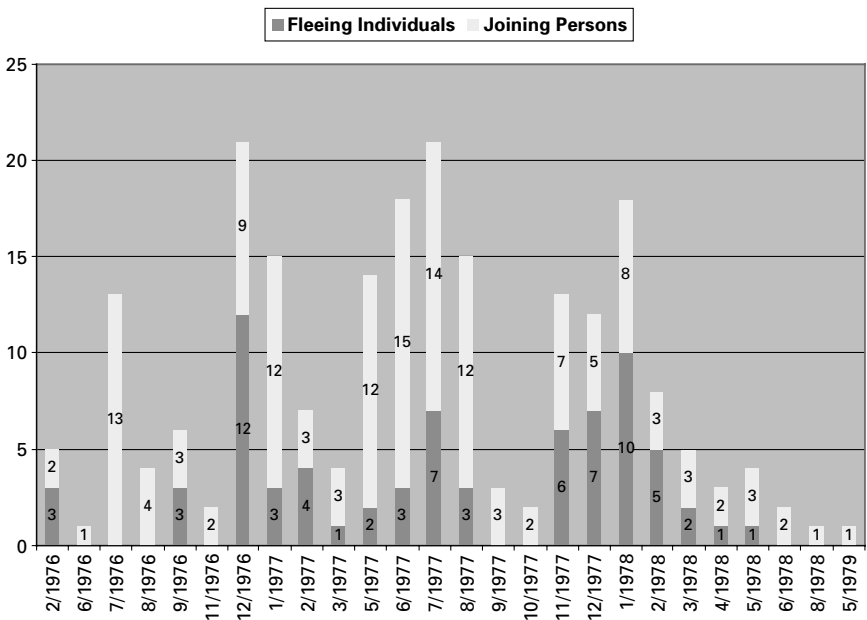


Chart 3. *Date of arrival (N = 218).*

the fleeing individuals (N = 66) left Argentina in 1976; 58.2 per cent of the individuals (N = 127) left in 1977, and 11 per cent (N = 24) in 1978.

Conclusions

Like other states, Israel failed to locate and save individuals who had disappeared. In the collective imagination, and especially from the perspective of some of the families of victims of repression, this failure – in direct

contrast to the cordial diplomatic, commercial and military relationships between Israel and the military government – generated mistrust and projected an image of complicity.

Our findings indicate that the escape of the persecuted Jews from Argentina was not the result of a plan structured in Israel. Rather, policy was generated on the ground and once disagreements developed among the Israeli diplomats and JA representatives stationed in Argentina, the high echelons of the JA and the Israeli administration stepped in, formalising procedures and guidelines. Israeli representatives stationed in Argentina and political figures visiting the area such as Begin showed sensitivity in the face of the persecution and reaffirmed the obligation of Israel to endangered Jews. The representatives helped a few hundred individuals in evacuating Argentina. Nonetheless, at that time the issue of persecuted Argentine Jews did not occupy the centre of public attention in Israel and neither did it generate any serious public debate. Top governmental officials put obstacles on the way of those interested in pursuing the issue into the centre of the public sphere. And although major political figures, diplomats, and Jewish Agency officers were aware of the problem, its magnitude and severity were probably not understood then, at the worst stages of repression in 1976 and 1977, only later on.

Once in Israel, the fleeing individuals found their place in different environments, from universities, to Hebrew language learning centres, cities, and kibbutzim. There, the new environments forced them to test previous assumptions and reshape their various identities. Many of the newly arrived individuals found in the kibbutz structure a source of political affinities to their leftist leanings. The testimonies of dozens of people who arrived indicate that the fleeing individuals did not develop into a community with its own identity and political agenda. Moreover, they dispersed throughout the entire country. Left-wing movements such as MAPAM's Youth, tried to 'convert' or 'reconvert' them into Socialist Zionism. While some became active on the margins of Israeli politics, many refrained from any political activism. Indeed, their experience contrasted with that of Chilean exiles in Israel and elsewhere, who worked tirelessly in the political and international arena to keep Pinochet's record of human rights violations in the news and to pave the way for the eventual restoration of democracy in their homeland.⁶⁷ The presence of the Argentinean newcomers did not have a notable impact upon Israeli public life and did not affect the political debate on state

⁶⁷ Thomas C. Wright and Rody Oñate, *Flight from Chile: Voices of Exile* (Albuquerque, 1988). There were organisational moves by relatives of the victims of disappearance, amongst which was 'Memoria', led by Luis Jaimovich, father of Alejandra, abducted and disappeared, but their impact was limited.

terror and forced disappearance of Argentinean citizens, at least until the early 1980s.⁶⁸

Many continued to experience the syndrome of 'living with the suitcases packed', in a situation of suspended reality. With the passing of time, most of the escaped individuals left Israel for Europe, Spain in particular, or for Latin America. Others returned to Argentina in the period of democratisation initiated in 1983. A minority remained in Israel, joining the other Argentines and Latin Americans who had immigrated voluntarily. Like many of those other immigrants, the fleeing individuals became 'invisible' in Israeli society as they integrated into the different spheres of everyday life and spread their residence throughout the entire country, rather than forming a cohesive community.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ See Appel and Bachrach, 'The Politics,' *passim*.

⁶⁹ On the Latin Americans in Israel see Luis Roniger, 'The Latin American Community of Israel: Some Notes on Latin American Jews and Latin American Israelis,' *Israel Social Science Research*, 6, 1 (1989), pp. 63–72. The assessment of processes of reconstruction of identity in Israel deserves separate analysis. It is currently being developed by Orit Gazit, in thesis in progress at the Hebrew University on the 'Shifts of Identity of Political Exiles from Latin America in Israel'.