

Like So Many Others... (from Poland to Buenos Aires)

Gregorio Rawin

April 2000

(Gregorio Rawin is to read a paper to the international symposium on 'Anarchists and Jews'. He has sent us a long biography of a Jewish anarchist, from which we can publish only a few extracts.)

Like so many other Argentinean Jewish anarchists, I was born in the eastern part of the former Russian Empire. To be specific I was born in the village of Berezne which was then in Poland (and is today in the Ukraine) on the banks of the river Slutch in the province of Volhynia. According to inquiries carried out by my elder brother, my mother's family (the Berezinskys) had lived in that village for more than 600 years. My mother's family was not so much a family as a clan with offshoots living in the cities of Rovno and Odessa.

My father's family (the Rawins) were distantly related to my mother's and had roots in three other shtetls (villages) in the area – in Bereznitz, Grois Selitsch and Klein Selitsch. Apart from some cousins who settled in Palestine (under the British mandate) before the second world war through the good offices of the Zionist youth movements *Shomer Hatzair* and *Gordonia*, and a sister of my mother's who emigrated to the United States shortly after the 1914–18 war, and the six of us – my parents plus their four children – all the rest of my relations, on my mother's and my father's side, were murdered in common graves in the ghettos or in the Nazi crematoria.

My father left Poland for Latin America in 1929–30 and settled first in the Chaco where he worked as a peddler in country areas. Then he moved to Buenos Aires where he worked as a mattress-maker. We in the meantime had stayed behind in Poland. Poland was at that time a contradictory parliamentary fascist democracy. Thousands of young Jews and non-Jews, socialists, communists and anarchists would sample the harshness of Polish prisons. It was a time of rampant anti-Semitism. Jews had their beards cut off on trains or plucked out on the streets. There was a boycott of Jewish 'business' (if the few sweet kiosks and herring stands can be so described) and a ceiling was set on the number of Jewish students at the universities. Even so, Jewish community life was unbelievably rich: there were newspapers, schools, synagogues, theatres, libraries all over the country, and not a penny of State subsidy between them. There was also a wealth of unlikely political opinions. The everyday language was Yiddish. My father also spoke Russian and Ukrainian, but we children spoke only Yiddish.

I arrived in Buenos Aires with my mother and brothers on 25 February 1936, aboard a French ship, the *Groix*, travelling third-class, of course. By the start of March I had begun at the public elementary school even though I did not have a single word of Spanish. At the same time I was attending the '*Talmud Toire*' (which was located, curiously enough, beyond the corner where the José Ingenieros Anarchist Library is today). I spent seven years at both schools, the public school and the Jewish religious school. My family had always been religious, but more in relation to the spirit rather than the ritual, thanks primarily to my mother's modernistic outlook. We were very poor, six of us sharing one room. My two brothers, 14 and 18 years old, soon started work as labourers. At home we read a lot, especially Yiddish and we were nuts about the theatre and music.

At the age of 15 I started work too, first of all as an assistant in a store supplying travelling peddlers (a fascinating world) where I stayed for two years, and then as a leather worker, cobbler, woodcutter and finally in a garment factory and in a textile factory. In the meanwhile, I attended secondary school in the evenings and for three years a religious seminary run by Jewish teachers from the Libertad Jewish Congregation. At that seminary, which also had boarders, I met the sons and grandsons of the 'gaucho Jews', all of whose surnames ended in '-sky', but whose legs were bowed from riding on horseback and whose accents said that they were from Cordoba, Corrientes and Santiago. This school had no prefects; the older kids looked after the youngest. At the evening classes – on which I was dead keen, whether out of a thirst for knowledge or because I enjoyed mixing with friends, I cannot say – I came into contact with a group of socialist comrades and through them was introduced to the *Casa del Pueblo* and its vast library.

I was active in the Young Communists during the darkest days of the Peronist repression and was youth secretary on its Culture Commission. I mingled with and enjoyed the friendship of splendid, courageous young people – from a wide spectrum of backgrounds: immigrant Jews and Argentinean Jews, natives of Buenos Aires from all sorts of backgrounds and later Middle Easterners and immigrants from Tucuman or Santiago. At the end of the war, in May 1945 I joined the leather workers' Sub-committee and helped out Jewish second world war survivors.

Almost by accident (but also looking for girls) I joined the Jewish Rationalist League in 1948–49 and I hung out there until it shut down, at which point we shipped its entire library out to Israel. The League contained lots of anarchists who were active, I might even say prevalent, in its ranks and who held positions of responsibility. It was there that I met people like Noé Burseck, Jorge Solomonoff, Munie Niezmi and Lazaro Milstein, and there that I went over to the libertarian movement. In September 1955 I arrived at the José Ingenieros anarchist library and became its librarian, in charge of book sales, taking over from the unforgettable Vicente Francomano. At that time I was involved in solidarity campaigns with the water-workers' union, the naval shipyard workers and the FORA (the anarchist labour union) tile-makers. I was also involved right from the start with Editorial Proyección (the anarchist publishing house). This involved a lot of work but was very satisfying work! For years I was also librarian with the IWO (the Yiddish international cultural institute) and, for fifteen years, looked after the newspaper collection of the AMIA (Argentinean Jewish Mutual Association) and that of the DAIA (Delegation of Argentinean Jewish Associations). For ten years I was involved with the IWO's Yiddish theatre and the Jewish national theatre (NIFT). I wrote for the Yiddish libertarian newspaper *Dos Fraie Wort* (Free Speech) and made lots of translations from Yiddish into Spanish and vice versa (especially for the anarchist newspapers *La Protesta* and *Reconstruir*).

Finally, let me state that if I had my life to live over, I wouldn't change a thing, because I enjoyed the blessing (the *zjus*, as the Yiddish has it) to have shared in Jewish rationalism's and anarchism's freedom adventure.

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