And Pioneers Fade not with a Blinking of the Sun

by

Eric R. Lach
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E.L.
April 14, 2008
They came from all over the world
Samarkan, Odessa, Smyrna, Aleppo,
Warsaw, Marrakesh

They brought their identity,
their scrolls of wisdom
and in their hands hardened
by endless despair,
a few seeds
and the dancing steps
to enliven their future harvest-time.

They arrived at the Fresh Sea
as on a new Ararat
there to find the promised fatherland
in a path of men.

They sowed the land and the city
with psalms and fair approach
and they were workers, peasants, cuenteniks,
visionaries at every task,
musicians, poets:
pioneers of our time.

And pioneers fade not with a blinking of the sun!

They go on living in the wit,
the faith,
the gesture of solidarity
and in our hope
of each and every day.

-Manrique Zago
Part One: Morning in the Argentine Countryside

It is 10:30 a.m., and my maternal grandfather Juan and I are moving north at 140 kilometers an hour up a single-lane highway in northeastern Argentina. He is 77, I am 22, and we are on a road trip. We are five hours out of Buenos Aires, traveling the wedge of land between the Uruguay and Parana rivers, a province called Entre Ríos, or between rivers.

The road here cuts a narrow track through endless fields. This land is flat, like nothing I’ve ever seen in New England, where I live. The countryside I’m used to is all hills, trees, and Tudor-style houses with dark shutters. On the left side of the road are soy fields, halfway grown, a green mass that extends all the way out to where the earth meets the sky. On our right stands an army of sunflowers, their yellow pedals surrounding brown faces aimed at the sun high overhead.

The land extends out to the horizon so strictly here that the few trees dotted along the landscape defy any point of reference and stand like optical illusions, making it impossible to judge their size and distance. Above the fields, the sky is blue and enormous, twice the size of the Massachusetts sky I grew up under. Here,
the vast curving limit of our atmosphere is an imposing force that makes everything beneath it smaller and more vulnerable. The white, bloated clouds look cut out of marble—dense puffs with illuminated halos reflecting the brilliant light of the midday sun.

And then there is our tiny, dirt-streaked silver car, protecting us from the heavy summer heat with air conditioning and a thin layer of aluminum. On the stereo, we’re listening to a compilation of Aaron Copeland’s greatest hits, and my view of the landscape is augmented by the flexed horns and thumping timpani of “Fanfare for the Common Man.” The sunflowers end abruptly, and we pass by a great break of open fields, tan and dry but spotted with grazing cattle, dark figures on a bright day. The fat cows stand near and far, immobile except for their jaws which deliberately chew on the grass that they’ve torn from the ground. It’s easy for me to feel adventurous here, and I slip into the spirit as I reach into the back seat for one of the many sandwiches we’ve packed.

As I eat, Juan overtakes a slow-moving, canvas-covered truck. With his right hand, covered as it is with the brown splotches of age, he shifts into fifth gear and accelerates in an effort to overtake the truck. Our engine shouts as we cross into the oncoming lane. For a moment we stare down a car coming toward us, maybe half a mile away, maybe closer, it is hard to tell. It flashes its high beams to make sure we see it. Our engine hums louder and the speedometer touches 160 as we pass the truck. My pulse quickens, and my eyes turn to the fields to my right, which have now blurred together into streams of color that rush by the window with breathless speed. We slow down and settle back into the right lane, back into the overwhelming land of
soy and cattle. For several minutes, a strange feeling lingers in my hands. Breaking a prolonged silence, Juan turns to me and says something peculiar.

“Not even ghosts live here,” he says, glancing past me out the right side of the car and toward the unwavering horizon.

Before they move, immigrants have to decide what to take with them. Here is a complete list of my parent’s belongings on the day they moved from Buenos Aires to New York City in August, 1982: four suitcases of clothes (two each); several boxes of records and books in English, Spanish, and Hebrew, which had been shipped ahead to my father’s brother Sauli who was already living in New York; and a set of dishes given to them upon their arrival as a belated wedding gift by some friends of my mother’s family who had emigrated to the U.S. some years earlier.

My parents met as undergraduates in Haifa, Israel in 1979, both of them Argentine transplants studying in the Jewish nation while their home country was in the throws of a seven-year authoritarian crackdown. They had gone to Israel clinging to a Zionism born out of a frustration with a country which had failed. My father was studying electrical engineering at the Technion, the Israeli Institute of Technology. My mother was pursuing a dual degree in education and art history at the University of Haifa.

In the spring of 1982, both my parents graduated from college—by then they had been living together for almost three years—and promptly sold most of their possessions in preparation for a move to the United States, where they had both in accepted into graduate school programs. Their Zionism had left them. Bed,
silverware, stereo equipment—they didn’t keep any of it. Their move signaled a starting over, a renewal of lives already partially lived. My parents then flew to Buenos Aires, Argentina, where they had both been born and grew up, to have their wedding. They asked their guests to give only cash gifts. And so when they arrived in New York City they arrived with essentially the clothes on their backs, not because of economic hardship, like the iconic huddled masses of immigrants who came before them and who have come since, but because their decision to move demanded that they give certain things up.

It is the starkness of the landscape of Entre Ríos, the way the wire fences, and clouds, and dried-out haystacks are simultaneously a part of and separate from the emptiness that surrounds them, the strange feeling that I’m in an alternate reality, that now brings my mind back to this task of choosing what to carry. It’s a logistical problem. One’s arms are only so strong, and there is so much stuff. How much are you willing to leave behind to get where you’re going? I’m talking about history. What can you carry along of your old history, of your former life? This is the thinking that prompted my trip to Entre Ríos, where, around the turn of the last century, several thousand Eastern European Jews came to try to transform themselves into Argentine Farmers.
The Jewish settlements of Entre Ríos were part of the organized migration of Jews to rural Argentina planned and facilitated by the Jewish Colonization Association, a philanthropic body funded by Baron Maurice de Hirsch, an astoundingly wealthy Jewish banker and railroad developer, who dedicated the last years of his life to changing the fate of his impoverished and oppressed co-religionists. 30,000 Jews immigrated to Argentina under the auspices of the JCA, tempted by the promise of a new life in de Hirsch’s colonies. They came from Poland, Germany, the Balkans, Romania, Hungary, the Ottoman Empire, and Morocco, but the vast majority came from Russia. Among them all was my great-great-grandfather, Juan’s paternal grandfather, Rafael Gurevich.

The JCA bought land in Brazil and the United States, but made its biggest investments in Argentina. Between 1890 and 1930, the organization set up colonies all across Argentina: in Sante Fe, Santiago del Estero, and Chaco in the north and in La Pampa and Río Negro to the west, as well as in Entre Ríos. At the experiment’s peak, in 1935, the JCA in Argentina oversaw operations in 20 colonies of various sizes, comprising 120,000 souls, 650,000 hectares, and accounting for a full two percent of the nation’s cultivated soil. During their brief zenith, the Jewish gauchos of Argentina became a part of this landscape. They developed great tracts of land and established towns and infrastructures in the countryside. They erected temples, schools, and hospitals; they introduced a system of cooperative funds that transformed the way all working-class Argentines, Jewish and non-Jewish, sustained themselves. For a brief moment, de Hirsch’s dream of a thriving, integrated, property-owning Jewish people was realized in the dry grasslands of Argentina.
But somewhere between then and now, these colonies began a decline which has not abated and which shows no sign of reversing course. The Jewish gauchos of Argentina are dwindling, and will soon die off completely, disappearing into history in the same abrupt manner which they appeared. The progeny of the colonists have, for the most part, either intermarried or moved away. Farms have been sold off. Temples and prayer houses have been locked up and knocked down. Jewish schools have been donated to the local communities and have been transformed into public schools. Cemeteries have been left to the weeds. I’ve come to Entre Ríos see what remains of the settlements, of de Hirsch’s legacy, of the people who came here, and of my own family’s connection to this land, and to find what hope, if any, all these things have of carrying on in the world’s memory. I’ve come to try and understand why the Jewish colonies of Argentina are being abandoned.
The sequence of events that ended with my drive through Entre Ríos began in August 2007, in a Thai restaurant in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Juan and I were having lunch in Harvard Square and I was trying to interview him about his parents. I had, a few weeks earlier, gotten it in my head that I had to go out and collect my family’s memories all together, to ask my grandparents about our collective past. My grandparents were getting older, I was getting older, and I was filled with the conviction that this was a kind of duty I had, that I had to do this or else accept being implicated in my past’s evaporation. Something had spurred me to action, had spoken to me and told me that I had a quickly shrinking amount of time to act before my past was sealed off from me forever.

For most of my life, I had been unconcerned with my family’s trajectory from Poland and Russia to Argentina and then to the United States. I had the anecdotes that got passed around like potato salad at family gatherings, the bits and pieces that I had picked up, as if by osmosis, along the years of my life, and that all was enough. Like most children, I suppose, I had a tendency to allow things to be what they looked like on the surface. When I was seven, I thought everyone in Argentina was Jewish. When my family visited, we only interacted with Jews. It’s not that we went to temple or wore yarmulkes. But my cousins went to Jewish private schools, and on weekends we went to the Jewish country clubs outside the city, and everyone seemed to fit right. All the people I saw in Argentina were Jewish and so it followed, to my seven-year-old mind, that Argentina was a country of Jews, unlike the U.S. where my
friends got Christmas gifts and Easter baskets and had to patiently and repeatedly explain to me, slow as I was, how God was Jesus and Jesus was God. In Argentina, these issues did not arise. We were family, and what differences we had were personal, not general.

During my childhood, my family was, for the most part, something distant and far from my everyday existence. Events had taken place which had swept my family across four continents in 80 years, but I wasn’t about to start sorting through them all. I lived my life, they lived theirs, and even when our existences intersected on the same location it would all be shrouded in the veil of special occasions, and constrained by the ever-looming calendar that dictated that goodbyes had to start just as soon as hellos were finished up with. The rest of the time, we all lived with absences. And they were assumed absences, which would sting only in airport terminals or at the end of long phone conversations. These absences had been inherited by each new generation that moved, and most of us were born veterans of separation, a separation which would continue to exist, and which I had never long let myself consider anything other than a given reality.

I grew up in Lexington, Massachusetts, birthplace, as we say, of American liberty. It’s a historic town, a proud little suburb 20 minutes west of Boston. The biggest event of the year happens every April 19th at 4 a.m. when the townspeople gather to reenact the first battle of the Revolutionary War, the Battle of Lexington, on the town green. On these days, all the town’s school children are dragged, runny-nosed and bleary eyed, to the green, and are forced to watch as their fathers pretend to shoot each other down with muskets in the misty dawn. And I had gone to those
reenactments and watched them like everyone else, assumed it as my history. It helped that I didn’t look like a foreigner. Unlike the girl from Kuwait who moved to Lexington in 1996 just like I did, I looked and spoke like the majority and was free to be “American” if I wanted to. And oh did I want to. The only real tribute I paid my past while growing up was my preference for soccer over baseball. Still, I didn’t fit in with the Columbian boys who played on my club soccer team, and who spoke a brand of Spanish so rapid I could not understand a word they said. I also didn’t identify with the large Jewish population in my hometown, whose parents had all grown up in Brookline or New Jersey, went to the local reformed temple with their proud youth group, and who all received Hanukah presents in December (who has ever heard of presents for Hanukah? My parents would ask). When I was old enough to explain a bit of my past, my friends would tell me I couldn’t be Latino and Jewish. It wasn’t allowed. So I thought quite often that I was neither, and as I grew older I threw myself earnestly toward the most American interests I could find: at 15 I read Hemingway and Fitzgerald over and over again, at 16 I developed a horribly snotty taste for jazz, at 17 I wrote editorials in the school paper calling for civic pride and democratic spirit. After I left home for college, the only time people found out about my Argentine background was if I happened to speak to my parents on the phone while they were close by. I hadn’t rejected my past, but I left it in a passive part of my character, untouched and untroubled.

But in the spring of my junior year, that began to prove impossible. I wrote a short story for a writing class, creating a narrative out of a visit I made with my paternal grandparents to the National Yiddish Book Center in western Massachusetts
in 2002. During our visit, we had made inquires to one of the librarians about a book of folk songs. A copy of the book had been one of the few possessions my grandfather’s mother had taken with her from Bialystock, Poland when she left around 1920, but she had misplaced it during the crossing and it never reached Argentina. Yet the book had remained in her memory. Even years later, she would regularly lament the book’s disappearance and chastise herself for her carelessness. It was her symbol of a past left behind, and she had sung my grandfather Fernando to sleep with melodies from the vanished volume. The lost book had been so present during my grandfather’s childhood that he remembered the name of the publisher. Using this information, the librarian had found a copy in the center’s vast stacks, and had brought it out to us. My grandfather took the brown pages in his hand and began singing each song as he flipped the pages, tears welling in his eyes as he finally matched the music he knew to the ink lost so long ago. In writing down those events, I disturbed a careful balance which I had been unconsciously maintaining, and in a few weeks, my mind was consumed with the randomness of it all. What were the odds of this, I wondered. Four continents in 80 years? What pushed us to keep moving and was it worth it? I needed to restore some kind of order.

From the start, I struggled to grasp what I was really after. The lunch in Cambridge was my first attempt at a family interview, a task I had anticipated would be both noble and revelatory, but Juan would not answer me straight. I would ask him about his father and he would talk about his mother. I would ask him about his mother and he’d give me a story about his grandfather. More often still he would change the topic completely. My questions were answered in single sentences,
quickly followed up by long, tangential rambles on topics I hadn’t asked about. Still, I was happy to get the chance to do the interview in person. Juan and I were in the Boston area at the same time for the first time in a long time. He was visiting for a few days from Argentina, and I was home for a week between the end of my summer job and the start of my senior year of college. Juan had always been a kind of intellectual sparring partner for me. He loves debate, he loves to construct and deconstruct arguments. Three years ago, I was in the Buenos Aires airport where we witnessed striking workers protesting en masse and marching through the terminal. The demonstration prompted an argument between us about workers rights, and it only ended after we managed to turn the head of everyone in line for United Airlines, the teenager and the old man screaming at each other over the role of unions. But that was not the Juan I interviewed in Cambridge.

“Why did they leave Russia?”

“To leave the misery,” he said, putting a forkful of food in his mouth. “This is good. What did you get?”

“Chicken curry. It’s spicy.”

“Oh, ok.”

I had ordered for him. I picked out the beef with basil, as he’d never had Vietnamese food before and I had been afraid of picking something too unfamiliar to his tongue. The waiter gave me a funny look as I spoke for the two of us, but Juan didn’t mind. He was used to it. I’ve been translating for my grandfather during his visits since I was a child.
I repositioned my iPod on the table. I had recently bought a little device that let me record conversations directly on to my iPod’s hard drive. You just plugged it in, hit record, and it did the rest. It even transferred the files onto your computer afterwards. I was mesmerized by how simple and sleek the device was, how simply I could go out and record all the things I wanted to. But when I had tried to explain it and my enthusiasm to Juan, he had shrugged and started talking about something else, without even looking at the thing.

I do not think Juan meant to be difficult. I suppose he was pleased to share some memories, to have his grandson come rooting around the family’s attic. But he didn’t share my need to investigate, or dig into the story. In fact, quite the opposite, he seemed totally indifferent to my urgency. He came off as disinterested. I wanted to know, from him, about my great-grandparents. His parents were both alive when I was little, but all I remember of them is a shadowy, musty apartment and two old people who yelled during conversations. I was terrified of them, especially of my great-grandmother’s teeth, which were so old and jagged they looked like they might crumble or maybe devour my arm. I knew that they came from Russia in the early 20th century, and that they settled in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Beyond that, I knew little, so I was hurling my questions at Juan and ignoring his reticence.

“What do you want for dessert?” he said, as the waiter took our plates.

“Oh, I’m not hungry,” I said.

“Coffee?”

“No, no thanks.”
“I think maybe they won’t have coffee here,” he said, looking at the faux-bamboo walls.

“I don’t know,” I said. “They probably do.”

“I would think not,” he said with a laugh.

It was late, almost 3 p.m., and we were the only customers left in the place. I realized then that no one in the restaurant was speaking English. Juan and I were speaking Spanish, while the waiters were laughing at jokes in what I assumed was Vietnamese. We were two blocks from the Harvard University quad, but we might as well have been in Saigon or Caracas. With much effort, I managed to get Juan speaking on a track I wanted.

“Well, my father never became a great businessman,” he said, suddenly picking up my line of questioning. “But what he had was a solidarity with his… let’s say community. He was on the board of the Israeli Hospital. Why? Well, because he felt very tied to all the Jews. And—I don’t know if you can say this—for my old man, there weren’t any Jewish sluts or cheats, if you know what I mean.”

“Was he religious?” I asked.

“No, no,” Juan said quickly. “Of course, we came to learn that there being no Jewish cheats wasn’t true. But for him… Obviously, he sent his kids to Jewish schools.”

We continued on like this for some time, and I left lunch that day feeling discouraged, unsure what I was doing wrong. This disappointment did not abate until a few weeks later, after I had already gone back to school for fall semester. I had taken out the three volumes in my college library on the history of Argentina’s Jews
that there were three in my library alone was surprise enough. Reading through the first one, I came across the name of Baron de Hirsch for the first time. As I began to read about de Hirsch and his project, I was amazed I had never heard of him before. Still, the name sounded familiar. On an impulse, I returned to the tape of my interview with Juan.

“How did your father arrive in Argentina?” I heard myself ask Juan.

“Well, his father had gone down to Brazil with money from Baron Hirsch,” Juan had said to me. My feelings of discouragement dissipated instantly and I listened to my grandfather’s words with a newfound purpose.

“He didn’t like the land in Brazil though, so he traveled down to Argentina and spent some time in the colony of Carlos Casares. He didn’t like that either. He sent a letter to his wife, my grandmother, telling her that he was returning to Europe. But letters took months back then, and in the meantime my grandmother had packed up with her four children, including my father, and set out for Argentina. She must have crossed paths with the letter.”

This was a way to my answers, I thought, the genesis of my own personal history, and the moment where my family emerges from the anonymity of history and into its own narrative. A few weeks later I decided to travel to Entre Ríos to see if some of my answers lay with de Hirsch and the last remains of his colonies.
As a New York Times’ obituary writer suggested only a day after the Baron’s death, any would-be biographer of Maurice de Hirsch must be willing to accept a slew of unwieldy contradictions as the first steps toward unearthing the man, whose life was as shadowy as it was famous. The Baron’s obituary ran in the Times on April 22, 1896:

To investigate the Baron is to accept the irrational. And the first thing to know is that he was, above all else, the most rational of men.

Part Three: The Moses of the New World
Despite his obituary’s suggestion otherwise, there are many things about the Baron’s life that we can report with great certainty. Still, to date only one book length biography of the Baron has been written, a work published in 2002 by French historian Dominique Frischer. I owe much of my knowledge of the particulars of de Hirsch’s life to Frischer’s work, but even she notes how strange it is that history has almost completely forgotten the Baron and his work.

Moritz von Hirsch auf Gereuth, who would later Westernize his name to Maurice de Hirsch, was born in Munich on December 9, 1831. De Hirsch was the third child and second son of Joseph von Hirsch auf Gereuth, banker and gentleman farmer, and his wife Korlina Wertheimer. By the time of Mortiz’s birth, the de Hirsch family had been a prominent Jewish family in northern Bavaria for three generations, as bankers to the court of the King of Bavaria. The family was one of the few Jewish families in Germany who had been granted the right to own property and raise cattle, and they were part of a select group of German Jews who flourished individually while being officially oppressed. This tenuous position was the first and fundamental paradox of de Hirsch’s life, and it underlies all that follow. It is from this internal family conflict of conscience that a need not just to live but to excel was instilled in a young Maurice, and from there that the horrors and costs of success were learned.

Despite their increasingly secure place atop Bavarian society, the Baron’s parents knew their second son had no future in Germany. German law stipulated that only the first-born sons of Jews had the right to live in the same city as their parents after their 18th birthdays. To prepare him for life abroad, Maurice’s parents sent him
to school in Belgium when he was 13 years old, the year of his Bar Mitzvah—an exile so formative that even when de Hirsch’s older brother died five years later, Maurice chose to decline his newly appointed rights as oldest male child and did not return to the city of his birth. There was no going home for de Hirsch. At 13, Maurice lost not his home, but his concept of home. When he did actually return to the city of his youth, it was as an official foreigner. From 1852 to 1855, after having receiving Belgian citizenship, de Hirsch worked in Munich as a special consul to the Belgian ambassador. He became a citizen of transience. He spoke German, English, and French flawlessly, and changed nationalities four times over the course of his life from German to Belgian to Austrian to French.

Young Maurice took quickly to his new life in Belgium. He was athletic and gregarious, an especially avid fan of horse racing, and he sported a handsome curled mustache from high school onward. He was very popular with the young women of a certain social standing in Brussels, but he fell for the austere and staid Clara Bischoffsheim, perhaps because she was one of the Baron’s few acquaintances of his generation in Brussels who spoke German, the language they shared their whole lives. They were married on June 26, 1855 in a widely publicized wedding featuring two buffets: one kosher, one not.

Disdainful of liberal arts, De Hirsch began following the stock market while in high school, and soon was astounding his classmates with the remarkable accuracy of his forecasts. He began investing his money and soon gained a reputation for recklessness, someone willing to take a big loss on the way to bigger gain. As the years went on, de Hirsch’s rise through the banking world was constantly tempered
by this perceived penchant for risky investments. His father-in-law, Jonathan
Bischoffsheim, who was a partner at the international banking house Bischoffsheim
and Goldschmidt, could never quite decide whether his magnetic son-in-law was
brilliant or simply hard-headed.

While Maurice displayed an almost preternatural understanding of
international finance, his life long passion was the railroad. As soon as he grew
enough capital, he made his first ventures into railroad speculation. De Hirsch and
his father financed much of the track laid down in southern Bavaria. It is little
wonder that the new breakthrough in high-velocity travel attracted a young Maurice,
displaced from his family at such a young age and understandably drawn to the great
industrial innovation which promised to minimize the importance of distance.

Whatever his motivations, when he was nearing the age of 40 Baron Maurice
de Hirsch grew restless with banking and small time railroad ventures, and began
actively seeking a task no one else would even be willing to try. He wanted more
than just money, he wanted to make his name. He found such a project in the
Ottoman Empire, which was then trying to modernize itself, and wanted to build a
railroad connecting the capital of Constantinople with the Balkan states and then up
to Vienna and the rest of Europe. But the Empire was so unstable, and its reputation
so poor, that no major European financier would consider backing such a project. At
the same time, no railroad developer had experience working in such an
underdeveloped part of the world. De Hirsch took the job. It took him 20 years to
complete, but made his fortune one of the largest in the world, and de Hirsch would
eventually use that money to send 30,000 Jews across the Atlantic on a colonizing
mission to Argentina. De Hirsch’s railroad would be known to future generations as the Orient Express.
I return to Buenos Aires, the city of my parents’ childhood, about once a year. The city is huge and dense. The urban grid seems never ending, each block packed with apartment buildings, shops, restaurants, and newspaper stands; each street jammed with taxis, buses, scooters, and cars; and each sidewalk full of men in overcoats, old women with canes, dog walkers holding 12 dogs on leashes, thin women in designer sunglasses sporting bleached blonde hair, children in soccer jerseys, and homeless people sifting through bags of garbage. Buenos Aires is what I picture when I imagine New York City in the 1930s: an economically depressed city still maintaining a luster of urban splendor. Many streets are paved with cobblestones. Older men wear tan overcoats over grey business suits and spotless white shirts with stiff collars, and they stride benevolently by, projecting an air of confidence and purpose, even during rush hour. Women of all ages dress smartly and are perfectly made up, hair in place just so, bag hanging off the crooks of arms with perfected grace. Newspaper stands appear on every corner, along with shoe shine boys and flower booths. People here take two-hour lunch breaks and sit at business
meetings in wood-paneled cafés. Waiting tables is considered a profession. Usually, your server is a serious, middle-aged man with grey temples who sternly takes orders without the aid of pen and paper. In the city, people are up and walking around during all hours of the day. In the city, they discuss politics in the street, and eat dinner at 10:30 p.m. Shop owners walk a half pace behind you in their stores, selling their wares. They suggest you touch this piece of cloth, or smell this or that soap. But in the city, there is also an ever-present danger. Street lights at night shine a little too dimly, casting dark shadows more than bright light. Crime and corruption get discussed over lunch and dinner, on the televisions, on the front page of newspapers. It’s a city where people would sooner spit at you than hold the door for you into their apartment buildings, where people shudder and avert their eyes, fearing a mugging, if you ask them the time on the street.

I arrived in Buenos Aires on the morning of January 2, having taken an overnight flight from Boston that had made a short stopover in Dallas. I bought a magazine at an airport newsstand in Dallas and, during the first part of my second flight, I read an article about the effects of global warming in Australia, which are expressing themselves much more quickly there than in the rest of the world, making the island nation a kind of coal-mine canary for scientists but also, it turns out, for psychologists. The piece interviewed a psychologist who was studying a phenomenon he had coined “solestalgia,” the sadness caused in humans by the effects of environmental change. According to the article, this distressing state of mind was overwhelming people across the country. As the physical appearance of their surroundings changed, they experienced a kind of homesickness while still very much
at home. Until I fell asleep, I thought about how this was as good a way as any to understand the mindset of the successful immigrant, the one who embraces an adopted home, and yet always knows another home has been left behind. I slept through the rest of the flight, awaking only after the cabin lights were illuminated and the smell of coffee and microwaved bread floated over to me from the carts being pushed down the aisles. It took a moment for me to get my bearings, to remind myself I was in an airplane and that I had fallen asleep in one hemisphere but was now awake in another. I opened the window shade next to me, releasing a blinding flood of sunlight into the plane. After my eyes adjusted, I looked out over the Argentine plains, the same open ground I would be driving through only a few days later, although that thought did not then occur to me. From above, the landscape had order. The fields were geometric, the whole area tan and green except for the rivers, which streaked like muddy scribbles across the landscape.

Once I’m in the Buenos Aires, it usually takes about a week for my Spanish to really entrench itself, to readjust to the rhythms and mannerisms that go stale with disuse and distance. I learned Spanish before I learned English, and as a five-year old I could recite both alphabets with similar ease. But soon after my school days began, my English overtook my mother tongue. A fragile equilibrium was broken—to this day I stumble through the Spanish alphabet… H, I, and J throw me off. But after two weeks in Buenos Aires, Spanish starts to take reclaim my brain. I know I have reached a turning point when I start to dream in Spanish, and when the English books I read before bed become portals to another dimension rather than simply nighttime reading.
I always stay at my paternal grandparents’ apartment in Barrio Norte, the very center of the city, a few blocks from the old Jewish neighborhood. Buenos Aires is bounded on one side by the Rio Plata, which lies to the northeast of the city—a fact surprising to most tourists familiar with maps of the city, where the river usually figures on the bottom. I’ve never seen a map of Buenos Aires that puts the river in its proper place. Perhaps this accident of cartography is the reason I’ve always had difficulty navigating the streets. No matter how many times I visit the neighborhoods, or how many streets I walk down, I can never grasp the relation of one place to another. I can tell you a great pasta place called Campo di Fiori downtown, but I can’t tell you how to get from their to Plaza Seranno for the bar scene.

My family’s trips to Buenos Aires have always been times to reacquaint ourselves with family and friends, to reinsert ourselves into a social structure to which we belong but of which we are not actually a part. Our lives unfold 10,000 kilometers away from each other and even when we collapse that distance it is hard to compensate for so much lost time. My cousins don’t grow up so much as morph in leaps and bounds from blonde toddlers to acne-covered teenagers. The majority of my time in Buenos Aires, it seems to me, has been spent eating. A typical day: phone calls in the morning to set up lunch with one relative or another, followed by an afternoon tea with a cousin or family friend, then, a few hours later, a taxi ride across town to a restaurant in time to make our reservation for eight at 9:30. These rituals are familiar and unchanging. My entire family, even my brother, who has always been tall and rail-thin like Juan, gains weight on these trips. People’s biggest
concern, it seems, is to make sure we are well fed. As if, lacking an everyday understanding of our mutual likes and wants, we fall back on over-addressing the most basic need. After two or three days, my system has had all the red meat and tiramisu it can handle, but the flow of generosity can not be stopped. We are compelled to continue to give and take from each other, as much as we can, as fast as we can, before our time runs out.

Juan rang the bell from the street at 7:30 this morning, January 15, 13 days after my arrival. I had been up for an hour already, eating some cereal and packing my backpack with two changes of underwear, two t-shirts, my notebook, three pens, my iPod, and Joseph Roth’s *The Wandering Jews* in paperback. My grandfather is an elegant man, tall and thin, with a full head of grey hair, neatly parted. I’m used to Juan in tweeds and wools, dark sweaters and ironed slacks. Usually, he never goes anywhere without his handkerchief. But when I walked out of the elevator to meet him this morning, there he was in the lobby, dressed like a tourist in Miami with an aquamarine t-shirt, light shorts, and dark sunglasses.
For a man his age, Juan is in remarkable physical shape. Still, in the last couple years, the scope of his life has begun to shrink noticeably. Juan retired from his law practice four years ago. Until two years ago, he played doubles tennis twice a week at a club in the city, but the group disbanded when one of the members of the longtime foursome died. He has since tried taking up golf, but found it boring. A passionate soccer fan, Juan has been a passionate follower of Racing Club, one of the many professional soccer teams that play in Buenos Aires, his entire adult life. Juan began following the team with his father, who began rooting for the blue- and white-clad squad in the 1920s, and who had a habit of bringing the television into the dining room on Friday nights, so as to not miss the game while saying Sabbath prayers. Juan held season tickets to Racing games from the 1960s until 2004, when my uncle Pablo, who had been his long-time companion to the games, moved to Barcelona to look for work. Since his second child left Argentina, Juan has gone to the stadium less and less. Until last year, he had also been a member of a group called Memoria Activa, or active memory, dedicated to commemorating the 1994 car bombing of the AMIA Jewish cultural center in Buenos Aires. Memoria Activa met every Monday in the square across from the Department of Justice, usually 40 or so middle-aged Buenos Aires Jews standing solemnly across the street from the massive neo-classical columns. Every week, they had a speaker and held a vigil to remember the victims and to remind the government that the investigation, which has dragged on inconclusively for years, could not be forgotten. But Memoria Activas numbers dwindled and eventually the Monday rallies were called off and the group scattered.
I remember vividly the day the bomb went off. My mother was frantic, and I was frantic watching her. I was nine. She knew Juan went to the AMIA building on Mondays, and was trying to get a hold of anyone in Buenos Aires on the phone. She was trying to find out where he was. It was one of the days when the distance between us seemed insurmountable.

Yet the only signal that Juan is really aging occurred last year, when he collapsed on the street one afternoon. The doctors thought it was probably due to dehydration, but couldn’t quite pinpoint why Juan had suddenly fallen unconscious on a sidewalk on a hot summer day. It’s just one of those things, they said. Since the incident, Juan has become seriously concerned with the end of life. Falling just sort of morbid, he has developed a tendency to turn conversations toward the impact of endings. Oddly, this hasn’t meant that Juan spends his time talking about the past. No, what seems to concern him the most is what he calls the “end of anticipation,” as if death were not a moment for reckoning but simply the elimination of the future.

At 7:35, Juan and I drove off from Barrio Norte, heading out of the side streets, onto a main drive, down to an avenue, and then onto the four-lane beltway called El General Paz that aimed us out of the city. It took us an hour to leave behind the aging white apartment buildings and taxi-clogged streets. First the highway became three lanes, then two, then one, and then at some point there was a break in the conversation where I looked around and realized the city had vanished and we were out in the country. As we moved north, I stared out the window for a long time, silent and transfixed. We had been talking about foreign policy, on the relation of China to the West… or maybe we had been talking about the U.S. presidential
elections. Whatever we were talking about dissolved in my mind as I tilted my head and confronted, for the first time in my life, the horizon.

Our trip will span two days and two nights, at Juan’s insistence. This goes against my impulse to wander. I had imagined something long and spontaneous, something touch and go, getting lost and roughing it. That’s what I had in mind when I first called Juan and asked him if he would go with me, if he would take me to see the colonies. No problem, he said, leave it all to me. That was in December. But when I got to Buenos Aires and we sat down to talk about the trip, I found that Juan’s plan was totally different from my vision. He insisted that two days were more than enough. I held my tongue. Our trajectory is like that of a bullet fired directly into the air: we will head straight up until we reach our apex and then descend right back toward where we came from. Our first stop will be a town called Villaguay, where we will eat lunch and meet with a woman who has organized our entire itinerary for the next 48 hours. In 48 hours, we will be back in Buenos Aires.

I handle all the maps and directions on our trip. Juan does all the driving. We have already crossed the Zárate Bridge that spans the Paraná River, the border of the Buenos Aires and Entre Ríos provinces and are now heading up Route 12, which will
take us nearly all the way to Villaguay. After several hundred kilometers, we are to take a right at Route 18, and from there we are supposed to drive until we see a sign for the road to Villaguay off the right side of the road. After making dozens of turns and stops in the hour it took to get out of the city, we’re only to make two turns in the remaining five hours of our drive.

And yet, somehow, we’ve gotten ourselves lost.

“Why are the mile markers descending?” Juan asks me. “They’re supposed to be ascending. We’re headed away from Buenos Aires.”

The Argentine national highway system isn’t an infrastructure so much as a lot of strips of concrete that intersect each other. It turns out that Route 12 splits off at some point and the road that was previously Route 12 had in fact become Route 14 which would take us not to Villaguay but to Colón, Concordia, and then Uruguay. I deduce this by looking at the map, and we confirm it with a police officer parked on the side of the road, who salutes us as we approach. We turn around and drive back the way we came, until we find the Route 12 proper. It’s unclear how we missed it the first time. It’s like it had been hiding in the daylight.
The town of Villaguay feels like a tenuous proposition—at once populated and empty, established but fragile—it’s like a town in a John Ford Western. We arrive shortly after 1 p.m., and the well-maintained sidewalks are empty. The shop windows are fully stocked but closed for siesta. Down one of the side streets we drive by, I spot a donkey tied to a tree standing next to a red Fiat sedan up on blocks. The same road we followed into town takes us to our hotel, El Hotel Arandu. I spot it easily: it’s the first two-story structure we come across.

We park on the street in front of El Arandu and collect our things from the car, hurrying into the hotel to escape from the heat, which tightens my throat and beats down on the back of my neck. We check in and settle into our room, turning on the air conditioning immediately. Juan steps out to telephone Pánela, the woman who has organized our itinerary for the next two days, to set up lunch. We were recommended to Pánela by a friend of Juan’s in Buenos Aires. She and her husband had visited the colonies in October, and she had encouraged us to let Pánela make all the arrangements. This friend had even offered to telephone Pánela and to make arrangements for us. While Juan goes to make the telephone call, I lie down on the smaller of the two beds in the room and fall deeply asleep. I’m exhausted from the early morning spent in the car, and I dream that I’m home, or what I think is home, except the dream is in Spanish. That’s all I remember.

Juan wakes me an hour later, and we drive to Villaguay’s main square and find Manolo’s. The name is written in big, red letters above four large windows in a Spanish-style, two-story building. Pánela is waiting for us. We park in a slanted parking spot in front of the restaurant, between a blue pick-up truck and a white
coupe. Pánela is standing outside the restaurant, leaning against the side of the building with one foot up, resting her sole on the wall. Her arms are crossed, as if defying the heat of the day. She is a young woman, thin, with large brown eyes and thin brown hair which is matted down with sweat on her forehead. Some of her hair is collected in a pony tail behind her head.

“She is not Jewish, but she is married to a Jew,” Juan says quickly. “Imagine that.”

With that he steps out of the car and I follow. We approach Pánela and she unfolds her arms and welcomes us to Villaguay and Entre Ríos. Pánela has taken a leading role in the region’s tiny but emerging Jewish tourism industry. In the last few years, there has been a renewed interest in the colonies, just as it has become apparent that they have run their course. Pánela’s job is organizational. She contacts local guides, hotels, and restaurants and creates itineraries for travelers, like us. This region is new to tourism, and everything is very much in its early stages, including the formal history of the place. The narratives have yet to be pulled together, and there seems to be a great need for people like Pánela, who can serve as links between this place and the rest of the world. As we meet, she hands both of us a printed-out copy of our itinerary and we enter the restaurant and sit down at a table inside.

“Well, why don’t I explain everything to you while we wait for your lunch,” she says. She speaks with a local accent. It’s a kind of Spanish I’m unfamiliar with. Argentine Spanish is more clipped and staccato than its siblings in the rest of Latin America. The infusion of Italian and German accents, which Buenos Aires in particular experienced, created a dialect that favors consonants, not vowels. But
Pánela’s accent is even more closed up than the Porteño speech of the city. She speaks by swallowing her syllables.

Manolo’s looks like an Old West saloon. It’s located on the bottom floor of a hotel, separated from the main lobby by a set of swinging doors. The restaurant has high ceilings, big front windows, and a wood bar in the back, where an apron-wearing waiter is leaning, craning his head to look back and size us up. The tables are empty except for an old man wearing dark sunglasses sitting in the far corner and a pair of young men sitting in a haze of cigarette smoke in the middle of the room. We take a table next to the window, and the waiter comes over to the table and offers today’s options: milanesa, a kind of chicken-fried steak; matambre, flank steak rolled up with vegetables and then roasted; or ravioli. I opt for the milanesa, suddenly hungry for the first time in weeks. Juan chooses the ravioli. Pánela declines anything.

While we wait for the food, Pánela goes over the itinerary with us. After lunch, we will visit a nearby village named Villa Clara. Tonight, we will return to Villaguay for dinner. Tomorrow, we will make our way south to Dominguez for a tour, and from there we will drive to Basovilbaso before continuing on to Gualaguaychu, on the border with Uruguay, where will sleep before returning to Buenos Aires early Thursday. Pánela draws on a map of the region as she explains our route, using a blue pen to trace the places to which we’ll travel. Juan looks on, squinting through his reading glasses and occasionally asking for directions or names to be repeated. I nod as if I knew everything Pánela is saying in advance, trying to project some knowledge of these unknown places. Tomorrow, Pánela explains, circling a dark point on the map, you will go to Dominguez in the morning to meet
with Osvaldo. As she says Osvaldo’s name, she smiles and informs us that Osvaldo is the local historical expert.

“Save all your tough questions for Osvaldo,” she says, as if he were the Wizard of Oz.

The food arrives, and we finish discussing the logistics. My milanesa is tough and greasy and comes with a huge portion of tough, greasy French fries, but everything tastes delicious, especially after I cover the whole little mound in a generous amount of ketchup. Formalities ended, Pánela folds up the maps and a printout with her phone numbers and other relevant data and slides them across the table. I stuff the papers into my jean pockets. After that, the conversation opens up. I ask Pánela about herself and about Villaguay. She is married and has a daughter. She shakes her head when she mentions that she’s not Jewish and looks apologetic. But her husband is, she assures us. She has been organizing regional tours to make a little money for herself, although her husband inherited a large piece of land and has been doing quite well planting soy, which has recently reached record prices. At this, she glances out the window toward the sky.

“We could use some rain, though,” she says.

Pánela’s family, it turns out, is German. Her ancestors emigrated from the Volga in the late 19th century, and when they first arrived in Argentina, her great-grandmother did house work for some of the wealthier Jews in the region, who had already established themselves. She speaks about this casually, as if that is the way it has always been, Germans serving Jews.

“I grew up making knishes,” Pánela says. “But I thought they were German.”
I suppose what spurred my need to give form to my history was the imminent approach of a new transition in my life. I will soon graduate from college, and my anxiety about the future had expressed itself as a new preoccupation with the past. It wasn’t the first time this had happened. During the winter of 1998 and the spring of 1999, I prepared for my Bar Mitzvah, the Jewish ceremony commemorating a child’s passing into adulthood. Unlike most Jewish boys and girls who are Bar and Bat Mitzvahed in the United States, however, my ceremony was to be a secular affair.

My parents have never been members of any temple in the United States. When I was 7, I had been sent briefly to a Jewish after-school program. The group met on Tuesdays and Thursdays at 4 p.m. in a shadowy basement room below Temple Shalom, in Burlington, Massachusetts. The teacher, a small blonde woman in her early 20s named Rachel or Rebecca, taught me that I could always talk to God, that He was everywhere around me. Even if I whispered, God would listen to me. Even when I thought, God could hear. If the idea was to comfort me with the knowledge that I would never be alone, I didn’t get it. I found no comfort in an omnipresent God.

What I remember is feeling a horrible new self-consciousness. My sense of privacy dissolved into a feeling that I was part of something I could not understand but from which it was impossible to escape. I began talking to the walls of my room before I went to sleep, pleading with the all powerful plaster, bargaining with it. I developed an unreasonable fear of street lights at night, equating the brightness, I
believe, with the image of the burning bush in Cecil B. DeMille’s “The 10 Commandments” (the later, Charlton Heston version of course). It was that film that also provided me with a model for God’s voice, frightfully deep and layered, 14 laconic men intoning at once. The feelings stirred in me by blonde Rebecca or Rachel have never settled back down. Even now, whenever I walk into a room with fake wood-grain paneling on the walls, I feel the echo of that mystical voyeur that monitored my youth.

My parents took me out of the Temple Shalom class after a year, I think intuiting some of the effects the classes were having on me, and sparing me from further paranoia about God’s presence in the basement furnace, or in the knots of wood on my closet door. My parents were not religious, did not believe in God, and must have been uneasy answering the questions the class had inspired in me. They were non-believers, but Jewish. They wanted me to be like them, culturally proud but religiously tolerant, if not outright skeptical. And so my formal religious studies ended quickly and weren’t resumed until six years later, in anticipation of my Bar Mitzvah.

Shortly after my 12th birthday, my parents began talking to me about having a Bar Mitzvah. They wouldn’t force me to do it, if I didn’t want to. This was my decision. But they really wanted me to think about it. It was an important thing for me to do, a kind of responsibility. I was the oldest of my cousins, on both sides of my family, and the weight of precedent must have influenced my parent’s interest. One way or another, I was going to be setting an example for a new generation of Lachs and Gurevichs.
My parents had both had Jewish upbringings in Argentina. In the 1960s and 1970s, they had been part of a cohesive community of Jews in Buenos Aires, home to the vast majority of the country’s more than 200,000 Jews, and had lives that were un-anxiously Jewish in a way made possible by the untroubled compromises allowed by many of the city’s Jews. They both attended Jewish private schools, went to Jewish summer camps, and spent the weekends with their families at Jewish country clubs.

As adults, my parents had drifted even further from the religious rules and regulations, but not from Judaism. Jewish titles line their bookshelves. My mother reads novels, which she usually buys in paperback: Isherwood’s *Berlin Stories*, Anita Diamant’s *The Red Tent*, Philip Roth’s *The Plot Against America*. My father prefers scholarly non-fiction, printed in thick, serious hardcover editions featuring historically weighted names: James Carroll’s *Constantine’s Sword*, Rebecca Goldstein’s *Betraying Spinoza*, countless others.

Of my two parents, my father had a more practical motivation for encouraging my ceremony. My grandfather had given my father his tallit, a Jewish prayer shawl, for his Bar Mitzvah in 1972, and my father felt compelled to pass along the shawl properly, even if the intangible functions of the blue and white cotton cloth had been long since discarded. A line of history and expectation had been set up. The threads had crossed oceans and decades, and had to be passed on.

For a number of years, my family had been attending a humanistic Jewish congregation called Kahal B’raira. KB met two Sundays a month, and for many
years meetings were held at the Winsor School, a private, prestigious all-girls school in Boston, located near the corner with Brookline, and not far from Harvard Medical School. The Winsor school was founded by Miss Mary Winsor in 1886, and had, for much of its existence, been a bastion of traditional, elite education, preparing Boston’s blessed daughters for Wellesley, Vassar, and Bryn Mawr. But every other Sunday during the late 1990s, the stoic red brick school building was invaded by a group of suburban, New Age Jews who were ploddingly trying to reinvent a 4,000 year religion.

Kahal B’raira provided its members a place to exercise their culture without bowing. Members were generally people from 40 to 60 years of age, couples, middle-class, with master’s degrees, jobs in social work, and school-age children—that kind of thing. The residue of the members’ college years in the 1960s permeated almost every aspect of the congregation. Grey-haired women sang Bob Dylan protest songs at High Holiday services. The fourth grade Sunday school teacher had his students read Allen Ginsberg. Tie-dye was not uncommon. Nor were men with pony tails. They were people conflicted about their Judaism. They had made decisions to be secular, assimilated, and culturally open (indeed, some were practicing Buddhists). But something, history or identity or maybe the guilt they felt at even having had the impulse to abandon their religion, demanded that they find some way of reconciling their forward looking lives with their ancient culture.

While the congregation had never had a rabbi (and talk of one a few years back had inspired heated protest from a fair number of the congregation’s anti-hierarchical members), many of the community’s children were Bar Mitzvahed by
Rabbi Don Pollock. Don had been associated with KB for many years, advising the group occasionally, but never officially. He had an uncanny ability to live a modern life without regarding his deep-felt Judaism as anything but an earnest expression of that same life. This ability, plus his almost magical temperament, encouraged many Boston-area secular Jewish parents to seek him out for their children’s ceremonies.

In addition to his unique freelance-rabbi services, Don had earned a master’s in psychiatry, and he worked primarily as a therapist for hospice patients. He was in his late 50s, the son of two New York social workers who ran an institute for children with developmental disorders in Queens. Don grew up in the same institute, which doubled as the Pollock home, with his parents essentially on call 24 hours a day. Perhaps as a result of his exposure to the range of human capacities and sensitivities, Don had developed an almost perfectly rounded disposition, warm and jovial, yet possessing a razor sharp wit. Don was a large man, at least six foot two, with huge shoulders, stomach, and hands. He was bald except for a short band of white hair that wrapped around the side of his head.

In December 1998, I began preparing with Don for my Bar Mitzvah. Every Sunday, my parents would drive me the 40 minutes from Lexington, to Don’s home on the border of Brookline and Allston. He and his wife lived on the top floor of a two-family house near Coolidge Corner. My father and mother alternated weekends, and after dropping me off at 1 p.m. they would head to a nearby Starbucks and wait out my two-hour session with a copy of the Boston Sunday Globe. Each week, after watching my parents drive off, Don would close the door behind us and, wrapping
one of his large arms around my shoulder, would lean in close and say “And Eric? How are you today?”

My sessions with Don were a mix of class and therapy. We would sit in Don’s living room, next to the windows, in two leather-backed chairs. Along the opposite wall were a bookcase with glass doors, and an upright piano. The effect of the room on me was a lesson in itself. I was a long way from classrooms with macaroni pictures tacked to the walls. From now on, I would learn in rooms lined with books, smelling of leather and ink. On the table between Don’s two chairs there was always a bowl full of Star Fruit jelly candies, which I would eat during our talks, while Don, who sat in the chair nearest the window, explained the development of Kosher rules or the relevance of historical evidence to the events in Exodus. When he spoke, his right elbow balanced on the arm rest, and his hand would turn over and over in rhythm with his words, back lit by the sunlight that would enter though the window. My parents said that they would know when our session had ended by glancing up at the window. If Don’s hand was still there, moving about, my parents would know to circle the block again before ringing the doorbell.

Don and I started our sessions in December, shortly after my 13th birthday, and continued to meet, every Sunday, until my ceremony in May. We talked about a wide range of issues, from Jewish humor (one week’s assignment was to watch Mel Brook’s “The Producers”) to Don’s work with hospice patients. It was during these sessions with Don that I first started to think critically about Argentina from 1976 to 1983. Each emerging teenager that prepared for a Bar or Bat Mitzvah with Don had to pick a research topic to investigate over the several months they met with him.
The idea was to weave history with the ostensibly Jewish notions of justice and humanity that Don valued. I chose to focus on Argentina.

It wasn’t an immediately compelling choice, but it was the obvious one. Other children (including my brother a few years later) did projects on the Holocaust, or McCarthyism, or Civil Rights. But my head was elsewhere. Before that time, I had absorbed little about what the most recent Argentine military dictatorship had meant for my family. My mother, not one to hide anything, had explained to me the basic history. And there were little things I noticed, but couldn’t explain, like how I was shushed with a squeeze on the shoulder whenever we crossed paths with police officers on the street in Buenos Aires. Don knew that Jews had been particular targets of the repression, and he had been the first to suggest I do the project. My parents took to the idea immediately, my mother and I would talk about the history on our drives to and from Brookline on blustery March Sundays.

In 1974, after the death of President Juan Perón, an army general who had first risen to power in the late 1940s and had served as Argentine’s de facto dictator in various incarnations since then, the horde of political factions operating in the country all made attempts to gain power. Perón’s widow, Isabel Perón, inherited her husband’s government, but was incapable of either improving the country’s stalling economy or keeping the nation’s disparate political factions under her thumb the way her late husband had. As tensions rose across the country, she allowed a policy of force against subversive elements of the populace to become standard practice. An extreme left wing socialist group called The Montoneros, along with several others,
began amassing small arsenals and undertaking political assassinations. During the 1970s, The Montoneros and dozens of their spin-offs and permutations killed over 400 policemen, 143 military members, and 54 civilians. The Montoneros’ political opponents responded with violence, not only against The Montoneros, but against all individuals identified as subversives. With the country increasingly unsettled, the three branches of the military, led by General Jorge Videla, staged a military takeover of the government on March 24, 1976, a move that was widely hailed, from all parts of Argentine society, as “The Gentlemen’s Coup.” Videla in particular attracted widespread support, a lower-class born man who had worked his way up to the head of the Army and exhibited a slender, quiet grace people associated with nobility.

The “Gentleman” took over to fix a national crisis, but their ascension only signaled the beginning of the true disaster. In the seven years of military rule that followed, Argentine’s military leaders exploited a self-created “State of Emergency” to legitimize a policy of government terrorism. Between 30,000 and 40,000 Argentines were disappeared, the word assigned to those kidnapped and murdered by the government. The word implies some kind of inexplicable vanishing of individuals. In reality, the disappeared were often heavily sedated, stripped naked, and then loaded onto helicopters and thrown into the icy waters of the Southern Atlantic.

My project on Argentina occupied my time during the three months leading up to my Bar Mitzvah. During March and April, my research consisted of four books: Jacobo Timerman’s *Prisoner Without A Name, Cell Without A Number*, Alicia
Partnoy’s *The Little School*, Tina Rosenberg’s *Children of Cain*, and *Lexicon of Terror* by Marguerite Feitlowitz. I even attended a talk Feitlowitz gave at a local temple while on book tour supporting *Lexicon*, I sat in the back of the room with my mother and counted the number of bald heads in the audience. My end product was to be a two and half page essay that I would read aloud during my Bar-Mitzvah ceremony. Toward the end of April, I started to think I was in over my head. I didn’t like my project anymore. It had taken me nearly a month at a time just to read each of the books. They were complex texts (Feitlowitz’s was even end-noted. I remember very dutifully flipping to the end of the book every time a number in superscript appeared after a sentence) and now that I was finally done with them, I had to write about them? I read them, what more could I say?

I had no idea how to comment on what I read. I took everything in them as facts, and, like so many things I learned when I was a child, I assumed everyone older than myself already knew them, that facts were the things we acquire as we grow, a quantity we kept adding to until our brains were full and we were deemed adults. It seemed pointless and impossible for me to retell all the facts I had learned from my reading to a group of people who already knew them. So I procrastinated. I ignored my work and thought about other things, like baseball and The Simpsons. Things I didn’t have to learn.

One night in early May, my mother, trying to jump start my writing process, suggested I write about her high school friend Betina. Start small, she suggested, with a single story, and then move out to the larger history. It was before dinner, and
I was sitting at kitchen table. My mother was wearing a maroon apron, and was
standing against the granite countertop next to the oven.

I already knew the story. My mother had told it to me months earlier, when I
was first starting my project. Betina’s older brother had been identified as a
subversive, and the military designated him an enemy of the state. One night in 1976,
Betina went to sleep at her grandmother’s house. That night, the police came and
disappeared not only her brother, but her entire family. She never saw them again.

I had put Betina’s story out of my mind soon after my mother had told it to
me. If the books I read seemed too distant to approach, my mother’s story seemed
too personal. I was afraid of approaching it, it was impossible to separate it from my
mother’s emotions. She retold the story to me again that night in May. Her intention,
I think, was that I could get attached to a story that happened to someone not too
much older than myself, and use that as a way in to my topic. But I felt inadequate
appropriating the event, as it was obvious to me then that the story was my mother’s.
She told it so intensely, with such solemnity, it was as if it had happened to her. I
didn’t think I could just write someone else’s story like that. It hadn’t happened to
me, it would be like lying.

My mother pressed on. She only wanted me to start working while there was
still time, but I got more and more uncomfortable in my chair. She asked more
questions. I dodged answering for a number of minutes. My mother suggested other
things. She suggested I write about the torture described in the Timmerman book I
had read. She suggested I write about the political practices Feitlowitz described. I
withdrew from the conversation. My mother sat down at the table across from me
with a severe look. It began to dawn on me that writing about Betina was a good idea, that it would be real, that it would be the kind of thing Don wanted to hear about, that everyone would want to hear about. But there remained a nagging embarrassment.

I thought my feelings toward Betina’s story were a kind of transgression. I knew I was supposed to feel things, sadness, empathy, or horror. But I didn’t, exactly. I could see how my mother identified with the story, how she held it close to her heart, this terrible event that had motivated her to leave Argentina 23 years before. But I didn’t feel the same way. I didn’t see yet that one of the consequences of Betina’s story was my very existence. That her tragedy had contributed directly to my coming into being eight years later.

By that point my mother was simply probing me for any response, to get me going on any topic, with the event fast approaching. She asked and asked, so I got impatient and blurted, “Fine! I’ll just write the story about that friend of yours!” My mother’s cheeks flushed. “My friend?” she screamed. “My friend’s story?” My mother’s hand smacked the wood table top, and I stared hard at my feet. I felt my mother had guessed my motives. I did not write about Betina.

I finally did finish an essay about Argentina in time to deliver it at my Bar Mitzvah ceremony. The week before the event, a dozen or so relatives from Argentina flew to Boston. My mother’s mother stayed in our guest bedroom, while my mother’s father, my father’s parents, and my three sets of uncles and aunts stayed at a nearby hotel. I was over-stimulated all week. My new suit needed some final adjustments, and I needed a haircut, and Don and I had a last session, followed by a
session with a Torah tutor who was helping me memorize a Torah portion that I would intone in Hebrew (my parents didn’t mind that God was mentioned in Hebrew during my Torah portion) at the ceremony. Plus my paternal grandfather Fernando bought me my very own computer, a Hewlett-Packard desk top with a 17-inch screen. My uncle produced a Sony surround-sound stereo system with a 5-CD changer. And Juan took me out to buy a very fine Swiss watch with a silver-titanium band.

The night before my Bar Mitzvah, my mother invited all our visiting relatives over for dinner. Everyone had come from Buenos Aires for my Bar Mitzvah, and the dinner was our thank you. After the dinner, I was to give a reading of my essay in the living room. My mother had diligently translated the report into Spanish the previous day. My reading at the Bar Mitzvah would be in English, so this evening would provide my Argentine relatives a chance to understand my words ahead of time. All 19 of us crammed into the living room, my grandparents on the black leather couch, my aunts sitting in the white living room chairs, my uncles standing behind them, and my cousins sitting cross-legged on the floor.

I read tentatively, both nervous and stumbling over the Spanish. I had never had much practice at reading in Spanish, and it took some effort to identify the words as they appeared on the page. But I was excited and proud. I had finished my project and I was confident I had all the facts in order. My family listened smilingly. The last two sentences of the report read: “What the world chose to see was a modernized society and glimmering cities and everyone going about their business. We did not bother to take a closer look.” It was a very adult line, I thought, and I was proud of it. I was proud of the way it sounded coming out of my mouth, like I was smart, smarter,
even, than much of the world in the 1970s. Everyone clapped, and said *muy bien*, and my uncle Pablo slapped me on the back and shook my hand. My mother brought out a large chocolate cake, as well as a plateful of assorted packaged cookies, and set them down on the coffee table.

After dessert, my family dispersed around the house, my cousins downstairs to watch *Aladdin* on the basement television, my uncles outside for some air, and my mother and father into the kitchen to start on the dishes. I remained in the living room, nibbling on a butter cookie. My step-grandmother approached me. She took my shoulder and brought me aside quietly, as if unsure if she wanted to say what she was about to say. She was a psychiatrist, and had spent several years in Barcelona during the worst of the dictatorship.

“Eric,” she said. “That was a very lovely report.”

“Thank you, Alba,” I said. “I had some trouble reading in Spanish.”

“No, no, you did splendidly,” she said. She brought her glasses back up to her face and said to me, quietly. “But you used the phrase *Guerra Sucia*.”

“Yes?” I said, uncomprehending. Guerra Sucia was the literal translation of Dirty War, which is what the dictatorship is called in history books.

“Well,” she said, delicately. “That’s not really the term people use. When you say that, it makes you wonder what side you’re on.”

“What do you mean, side?” I asked.

“Well, Guerra Sucia is what the generals called it,” she continued. “The ‘dirty war’ was the one fought supposedly by the subversives. But there was no real war.”
Alba left me dazed. I didn’t really understand the politics then, but I understood enough that the problem wasn’t that I had my facts wrong, but just that I had different facts, or, more to the point, that the facts were fluid. I had gotten it right and yet still gotten it wrong. The words that had sounded so smart to me only moments before suddenly rang in my ears again and sounded hollow and ugly. I went to bed that night still bothered by the tone of those words. The next day I gave my report in English, and no one mentioned my inclusion of the phrase “Dirty War.”
As de Hirsch’s fortune increased and his influence grew, three factors influenced him to become one of world’s leading and brashest philanthropists.

First was the Baron’s railroad work in the Ottoman Empire. His contract with the Ottoman government was finalized on October 7, 1869, and for the next several years the Baron spent much of his time in either Constantinople or out in the desolate countryside overseeing the work. During these years, the Baron witnessed a kind of poverty he had never seen before. The Jews of the Ottoman Empire, descendents of the Sephardic Jews expelled from Spain in 1492, were uneducated, starving, and without prospects. They lived in a kind of squalor completely foreign to the Baron’s sensibilities, and, despite his life-long aversion to Jewish religion and practice, he was compelled to give them aid. Throughout his years in the Empire, the Baron donated funds for schools, and would regularly check in with the classes he was underwriting, to evaluate the progress of the students. To the most promising he went one step further, providing them with money so that they could study in Paris or Brussels.

Second, like many wealthy Western European Jews with Eastern European roots (and there were many), the Baron became concerned with the future of Jews in Russia, where civil rights were being systematically limited and where pogroms were taking place with greater frequency and horrifying ferocity. And while the Baron initially hoped to use his money to help the Jews of Russia improve their lots where they were, the reticence of the Russian government and the constant threat of
pogroms left the Baron increasingly convinced that emigration was the only possible solution.

But the last, and most important, factor in the Baron’s decision to become a major philanthropist was the death of his only son and heir, Lucien de Hirsch. Lucien died of pneumonia on April 6, 1887 in the de Hirsch home in Paris. He was 29 years old. The event had a profound effect on the Baron, who had lived his whole life trying to put himself above the laws that had denied him his right to live close to his family. When bacteria took his son, the Baron tried to put himself above nature. “I have lost my son,” the Baron is reported to have said a few days after Lucien’s death. “But I have not lost my heir. Humanity is now my heir.”

De Hirsch began actively seeking a way to single-handedly change the fate of all his impoverished coreligionists. As he understood it, the Jews were destined to fail in Eastern Europe because they were not granted the right to own land. Without land, Jews would never be able to live as equals with other citizens. They would be relegated to the class of petty trades: tailors, boot makers, small-time money lenders. They would remain different and that difference would continue to inspire hostility from local communities, which would always perceive them as rootless outsiders. For de Hirsch, unconcerned as he was with religion, assimilation was the ultimate goal. In fact, many Russian and Ottoman rabbis opposed the Baron’s interventions into their communities. They considered de Hirsch’s promotion of secular education sacrilegious.

In the late 1880s, the Baron began actively soliciting ideas for the mass migration of up to three million Russian Jews. De Hirsch had very strict criteria for
potential colonies. He was looking for land suited to assimilation. It had to be empty and arable, but at the same time it had to be close enough to a city so that settlers would learn a new language and participate in a new culture. It was decided that rural land near railroads leading to a major city would be ideal. Canada and the United States were early favorites of de Hirsch and his advisors, but had to be discarded for reasons of cost and difficult immigration quotas. Many American Jews even opposed the Baron’s plan because they felt it would raise resentment toward Jews, who would be the sole beneficiaries of this enormous charity. The idea of Palestine was floated initially, but discarded for practical reasons: the Baron wanted to establish agricultural colonies, and needed large amounts of arable land, not desert.

Despite his dismissal of religious law and customs, the project was, above all, a Jewish one. De Hirsch felt that the colonies would provide his fellow Jews with a chance to return to the land after 2,000 years of exile, as if, beneath the veneer of the people of the book there remained the sinewy arms of the ancient farmers of the Jordan river valley. De Hirsch, who approached all other aspects of life with the utmost pragmatism, solving problems with logically applied effort, displayed a puzzling faith in his fellow Jews. Despite their unfamiliarity with the climate, crops, and practices of agriculture in Argentina, de Hirsch believed the poor Jews of Eastern Europe would succeed—by simply tapping into the regenerative power of plowing, sowing, watering, tending, weeding, and reaping.

Set up in 1891, the JCA charter pledged “to facilitate the migration of Jews from Europe and Asia where they are oppressed by restrictive legislation and where they are deprived of political rights, to other regions of the world where they can
enjoy these and all other rights inherent to man.” The JCA would recruit prospective settlers, sail them across the Atlantic, and then provide them with rudimentary agricultural training and outfit them with basic equipment like plows and seeds. Once set up, these settlers would sign a kind of mortgage on their land, which they would pay back to the JCA over a period of eight to twenty years. The funds taken from the settlers would then, in theory, go to finance the emigration of more Jews. In this way, de Hirsch thought, he could create a kind of self sustaining charity, one which, he estimated, would eventually transport three million Jews across the Atlantic and deliver them to the promise of farming life in Argentina.

For de Hirsch, the JCA represented his greatest effort to demand the world’s attention. It was to be vindication for a man who had, since childhood, felt restricted and held back. But from the beginning there were problems. For one, de Hirsch was never able to find administrators up to the task of ushering the settlers into their new lives. One of the first administrators allowed a group of 500 refugees who had sailed to Buenos Aires into the colonies before the initial preparations were finished. The administrator’s act of benevolence led to the death of many of the group of 500 from disease and malnutrition. As a result, the JCA’s name was tarnished before it could even begin to bear fruit. Logistical errors abounded. The JCA was as ad hoc as it was ambitious. And even de Hirsch conceded that the fate of these colonies rested, above all else, on the harvests, subject though they were to the random elements, locusts, and drought. Still, even in the tense early days of the colonies, the sparks of success appeared. In 1895, settlers across the colonies gathered in demonstrations against the JCA. They were upset at certain clauses in their contracts that denied
them full ownership of their land. The JCA had wanted to be able to re-appropriate land for canals or railroads in the future, but the settlers felt their rights had been violated. In their anger, the settlers—beneficiaries, every single one, of JCA funds—went to the Argentine police to make their case. It was an act of defiance, and proof that the experiment was working. Russian Jews were becoming Argentine citizens.
In 1892, when the first colonizing Jews arrived at the JCA colonies, the land was empty. The terrain was so overgrown in some places, the first thing some colonists did when they arrived in the country-side was erect tall flag poles so that they might be able to find their way home through the thick brush. Deprived of roads, houses, or prepared fields, the colonists were forced to cut their society directly out of the earth. The first settlements that would eventually be called Villa Clara were founded by 48 immigrants in 1892, near the tracks that run through the 80,265 hectare Clara colony named in honor of de Hirsch’s wife. The town served the JCA as a kind of training camp for new settlers. Here, colonists would be quickly instructed in the basics of farming: handling a plow, teaming oxen, irrigating, harvesting... the equivalent of 6,000 years of human agricultural development laid out in a 15-day tutorial. From these training grounds, the people were sent out to the savannah, to use their newly learned skills and try to coax sustenance out of the land.

Most of the towns born out of the JCA project followed a similar pattern of settlement. First, settlers would arrive and set up the basic colonies, a series of houses on a single lane. They would then draw straws to see whose land would be used to build a temple, a cemetery, and a school. As clusters of these hamlets reached a certain density, especially in areas near train tracks, townships would be planned and constructed in a central location. The towns, which featured merchants and libraries and hospitals, soon began to draw the people away from the original
settlements. The towns are now what remain of the JCA settlements, while the hamlets lie abandoned.

Street lights arrived in Villa Clara in 1930, but it was another 40 years before homes received power and running water. At its height, 1,000 Jews lived in the town. Of those, only 40 families remain, and of those most are elderly. Soon, the Jewish population of Villa Clara will dwindle back to its original numbers and then, over time, it will die off and disappear completely. Though small, its Jewish community remains operational. That is, services are still held at the temple on Fridays, even the occasional wedding takes place in the town. Pánela had indicated that, along with Marta, we’re to visit three landmarks in Clara: the museum, the temple, and the cemetery.

We arrive at 3 p.m., still well within siesta hours, and no one is on the street. As we drive along, I spot a sign off the side of the road with the words “Argentina Shalom” printed above a map of the town. I laugh out loud when I see it, and point it out to Juan.

How this sign came to stand on the main thoroughfare in a town of 3,400 in rural Argentina is hard to say. Argentina has a history as an anti-Semitic country.
Nazis were given asylum here. Jews were targeted in the military dictatorships in the 1970s. The Israeli embassy and the AMIA community center were blown up by car bombs in the early 1990s. But in Villa Clara, the town greets the passerby with an earnest “Shalom.”

Villa Clara’s Jewish museum is housed in what once was the train station. Our guide, Marta Muchinik, is standing on the platform when we arrive, expecting us. She greets us effusively.

“Hello!” she says in a voice that is much too loud and overeager. “Welcome, welcome. Come inside. How was the drive? I’m Martha Muchnik, pleased to meet you.”

Martha appears to be in her early 60s, and her frayed blonde hair is starting to turn white, like she’s in a picture that was overexposed. Her shoulders have started to sag a little with age, and she’s bulging out in the stomach slightly. She’s got a lazy eye that stares downward as if half of her is perpetually lost in thought. But she is terribly enthusiastic, and seems unreasonably excited at the sight of us, two people she’s never met before. Her accent is heavy and rapid. She jumps from sentence to sentence with off-kilter gusto.

“Whew, what a day, huh?” she says. “I tell you, we keep waiting for rain, but it just doesn’t come!”

We walk through the doorway of the station and into a small, dark room, even hotter than the air outside. Martha scurries to the corner and turns on a stand-up lamp and an oscillating fan. The walls of the room are covered with old photographs and blunt oil portraits. Several posters are taped to the wall next to the exterior door, and a
chart that looks like a hand-written family tree is hanging at the far end of the room. The pictures and portraits feature the stern faces and severe brows that seem to have been standard practice before the advent of the point-and-shoot camera. The few labels that identify the subjects of these photographs are yellowing and peeling at the corners. A few candlesticks and other artifacts are arranged on various ledges around the room in no discernable order. On the wall closest to the door we walked in through hangs a poster that catches my eye. Above the image, the inscription reads: “Municipality of Villa Clara, Entre Ríos.” Beneath the words a sun appears superimposed over stalk of wheat. The grains of the wheat have been arranged in a way as to unmistakably conjure a Jewish menorah.

For a few moments, Marta lets the silence embrace us and we wander about the room looking at the assortment of images. After a moment, I turn back to her and catch in her eyes an unmistakable look of pride. She exhales deeply and begins to speak—in fact she will not cease speaking for the next three hours. The words from her mouth pour forth in an inexhaustible stream that quickly has Juan and I sharing smirking glances. Her words come so relentlessly that they become part of the
background, her excited sing-song becomes one with the faded pictures and dusty jars we’ll see in the museum, and with the town we’ll see later on.

“Well,” Marta says, clasping her hands together. “Welcome to the Villa Clara Museum. This used to be the train station, but a few years ago was converted into a space to preserve the legacy of the Jewish settlers who founded the town and… well, just wait until Osvaldo in Dominguez tells you all about what we do here.”

Marta’s narration is jumbled. It meanders from item to item. She points to a clock on the wall and tells us it was the clock from the first bank located in Villa Clara. Then she moves on to a series of photographs, although she admits she doesn’t know anything more than that they are very old, probably from the very beginnings of the town. She is a collector, not a curator, and she avoids any kind of editorial voice. She assumes we’ve come to do as she does, to bear witness.

“Look up here,” she says, “here is the first dentist chair ever brought to the town. And over here, over here are some coins and bills used by people in the town. Behind you, you can see some old soda bottles. On the wall to left are some rifles, which may have been used to fight off Indians.”

Jews shooting Indians in the Argentine countryside. They’d come a long way from the pogroms in Poland.

The museum consists of five spare rooms and an adjacent garage, the spaces roughly divided into what one might be tempted to call themes: the first room might be called Introduction, the second is History, then Life in the Country, Culture, Home Life, and finally, in the garage, Transportation. As we enter each room, Marta turns on the overhead fluorescent lights and then runs back to the previous room to retrieve
the electric fan and set it up again, doing her best to clear out some of the heat. The Villa Clara Museum boasts a collection of 500 artifacts, including silverware, china, books, photographs, farming equipment, a 1929 Ford, three wooden carriages, and one glass case in the Culture room which I linger on for several minutes, filled with various items and labeled, simply, “curiosities.”

The walls here are so bare and the layout so haphazard, it’s more like an attic than a museum. It’s the amassed leftovers of a community, cared for by those few people the departed have left behind. Looking at a shelf full of filters once used to determine the fineness of grain, I am overcome by a feeling of empathy with the impulse these people have had to document themselves by any means necessary. This is not a place of historical research or cultural triumph, it is the result of the humble wills of a small group of people with the desire to preserve themselves before it’s too late. I can’t help but think of what will happen to these rooms when the last of the Villa Clara Jews dies. Will anyone even remember them enough to clear them out, or will the building simply be shuttered, with the contents left on display like treasure in an Egyptian tomb?
In the final room dedicated to home life, Marta points to a bookcase. The books are in Yiddish, and soon there will be no one to read them, no matter how well they are preserved. They will be no more than ink stains on moldy paper, and soon enough they’ll be thrown out or they will simply dissolve into dust. On another wall we look at a collection of china: plates from France and Romania, crystal glasses from Russia, a samovar from Belgium. I stare at these items for a long while. They are the items not left behind, the items carefully packed and carried along. And now they are here, having outlived those they came with. They are the relics of the un-chosen people.

The museum’s final room is actually a garage located apart from the rest of the museum, requiring us to turn back through the building, back out on to the platform outside, so as to enter through another door. The garage houses four horse drawn carts, several large well pumps, a red 1929 Ford, as well as the archives of a local newspaper, stacks of which are crookedly piled in one corner, the pages yellowed and brittle. Marta informs me that the green cart belonged to Germans, who painted their vehicles either green or red, while the brown ones were Jewish owned, as the Jews never painted their vehicles.
Before we leave the museum and head to the town’s temple, Marta has us sign the guest book, which she produces as if by magic and hands to us. I glance through the other entries, the last one dated a few weeks ago, and linger on them enough to notice a certain uniformity of tone, a vague gratefulness, peppered with exclamation points and easy with praise. I want to leave something more for these people, but my mind cannot think of anything, and I end up leaving the same vague, enthusiastic thanks as everyone else.

Beith Jacob synagogue in Villa Clara is larger than I expected. It’s a two-story brick building in the center of town, with a white plaster frontispiece studded with a representation of the Ten Commandments plastered above a large, arced wooden doorway. The building was erected between 1912 and 1917, a few years after the colony had taken hold, and it was built with bricks purchased by a community proud of its new prosperousness. It is well maintained, and the green grass outside is freshly cut, the low standing trees neatly pruned. Marta unlocks the gate and then the large wooden front door and lets us inside.

The air inside the synagogue is cool and fresh, and a soft light enters the space on an angle through the opaque windows on the left side of the large room. As we step in, Marta goes in ahead of us and grabs two yarmulkes inside a cabinet next to the door. On the wall are pictures of the last wedding held in Villa Clara. The photograph is dated 2001.

“We’re not conservative here,” she says, handing us the caps. “But we are traditionalists.”
As I mentioned, the synagogue still holds Friday services. A dozen or so elderly believers regularly attend and the congregation recently raised enough money to buy cushions for the chairs. After we cover our heads, Marta takes off again and goes trotting to the altar, where she lifts two plants that had been set on the floor up on to the banister next to the podium. Then she turns to us and sweeps her hands as if to say here it is as it should be.

“Of course, it’s better to see it all arranged,” she says after a moment.

The temple has two levels, a main floor and a balcony overhead. Both are filled with chairs and long wooden stands on which to rest prayer books. The walls are freshly painted white, and the windows have a blue trim. The floor is ceramic tile, a tan and red pattern making small squares across the whole open space. Behind the podium, I spy a large black amplifier and a microphone. The building was renovated in 2004. Marta tells us they tried to preserve every detail. I think on this for a moment. Is it actually possible to renew and conserve at the same time?

“The women prayed upstairs until 1980,” Marta says, glancing at the balcony above our heads. “But there were so few of us left we would have lost the congregation if we hadn’t made the change.”
Not to mention that the women would have been less and less physically capable of climbing up the stairs to their section, I think. These are the compromises of conservation, of change without change. You have to believe that there is a vital essence existing beneath everything that can be preserved, no matter what situation arises. Otherwise, all is lost. It’s an act of faith.

Marta ascends the altar and touches the cloth of the altar piece.

“In here,” she says, “is the Torah. It hasn’t been opened since our last Rabbi died. But we save it anyway.”

Our next stop is the school, which Marta takes us to with particular excitement.

“Oh, you just have to see our school,” she says in car as we drive down the empty streets of Villa Clara. “Oh, here it is!”

The Jewish school of Villa Clara is one of the last remaining religious schoolhouses in the region. There was a time when the Jews of the JCA colonies sent people to Europe to recruit young Sephardic Jews who spoke Ladino (a language that mixes Spanish and Hebrew), and were thus uniquely suited to the needs of the settlers, who needed both religious instructors and Spanish tutors for their children. There was a time when the libraries of the colonies were filled with volumes in Yiddish, Russian, Spanish, and Polish, when children of farmers read Tolstoy in their spare time. The Jewish school of Villa Clara has a current enrollment of 10 students.
The school consists of a single classroom with a single shuttered window. The walls of the room are covered in colored cardboard-paper cut-outs and perspective-less crayon drawings. In the middle of the room is a chest with drawers serving as cubbies for the students, but the chest has far more than 10 drawers, and most are empty and unclaimed. From the ceiling, decorated cups hang on a string, each cup covered in colored Hebrew letters. It’s an overcrowded room full of cheer and hope, and I get the feeling the whole thing is a carefully constructed illusion, a community-wide effort to maintain appearances even as the children dwindle. In this vast, empty land, the few remaining children are crammed all together, protected from the lonely realities of their elders by close-built plaster walls.

The children of the colonists were taught well, and left. Across the colonies education was a priority, and the second generation of JCA Jews became doctors and lawyers, writers and scientists. And they left the colonies to pursue these careers. They left the country, pinning their hopes on the promise of the city. We, too, leave the school quickly.

Marta asks us if we’d like to see the cemetery. Very much, we say.
“Good,” she says. “Then we’ll go get the keys from the president of the community. You’ll just love him.”

Sergio Kreiseman, the president of the Jewish community of Villa Clara, is the owner and operator of The Wrestler butcher shop on Baron Hirsch Avenue in Villa Clara.

The store is a little one room structure with a single door and window out front and a large green yard behind it. When the three of us arrive, Kreiseman is napping with his shirt off in a plastic lawn chair out back.

“Hola!” Marta exclaims as we approach. “Venimos para comprar carne kosher!”

“Carne de ayer?” Kreiseman says, rhyming the word for yesterday in Spanish. “I think I’m all out.”

It takes me a moment to realize that this was a joke, that Kreiseman didn’t sell kosher meat, that this was an inside joke between two very particular kinds of Jews. We enter through the front door and the butcher enters through the back, buttoning up a short-sleeved plaid shirt as he does so. He is a tall man, around 60 years old, with large, knotted hands that grasps mine forcefully as we shake. He’s the kind of man
that is proud of his chest hair, and something about his smile makes me trust him immediately. The butcher speaks with an easy confidence, and he commands the space around him with a posture you would go to war with. I can tell Juan likes him immediately.

Marta explains that we’ve come for the keys to the cemetery. Kreiseman asks if we’d already been to the museum and the synagogue. Very quickly, Kreiseman and Juan, two Jewish alpha males, begin to exchange information and acquaintances. Kreiseman knows some of the people Juan has worked with in the city, and Juan knows several transplants from the colonies that have long been in Buenos Aires. They speak in the same tone, boastful of community and connections. Juan, who has been mostly silent since lunch, begins to ask questions of the butcher, and Kreiseman seems only happy to talk.

“Well, I was born here. I knocked around for a bit, spent four years in Buenos Aires,” he says. “Doing handy work, odd jobs. Then in ’85 I came back and opened up this place with my old lady. Been here since.”

He says this as if there hadn’t been any choice in the matter, as if returning here was the only thing to do, as if he had sighed and taken up his stewardship of this vanishing people armed only with an attractive smile and a cleaver.

“We’ve got the community center still up and running. Meet there about once a week, but the rule is no religion and no politics. It’s a community place.

“So you’re going to the cemetery, huh? Let me tell you, we’ve had some recent trouble with that place. See, we didn’t know what to do about mixed marriages.”
Jewish cemeteries are sacred lands, and they can not be polluted with bodies of non-believers. In Jewish communities all around the world, the problem of mixed marriages divides communities. Some assimilated Jews see the biblical burial laws as antiquated, but many, many Jews still hesitate to bend the rules, to say nothing of the Orthodox. Dilution is the big fear, even among the unreligious. In Buenos Aires right now, one of the most prominent rabbis has gotten the community to stand fast and refuse to bury non-Jewish spouses within religious cemeteries.

“After all these years, it’s natural that many people here have intermarried,” Kreiseman continues. “Well, how do we bury them? So we sent someone to Israel to find a rabbi that could solve our problem. He said to us, you have three options: one, plant a six foot tall bush to divide the mixed areas from the Jewish areas. Two, build a six foot high fence instead of a bush. Three, put in a six foot wide sidewalk. So we built the sidewalk. We needed one anyway.”

While Kreisman is speaking, a teenage boy with long black hair enters the shop through the back entrance and puts on an apron. He silently begins arranging some supplies on the back counter, and the butcher gives him the slightest of nods to acknowledge his presence. Moments later the phone rings and the boy interrupts Kreisman.

“They want to know if we’ve got any sirloin,” the boy says.

“Sirloin,” Kreiseman says, thinking. “Tell them two days, tell them Thursday.”

Kreiseman turns back to us.
“This one here,” he says, thumbing at the boy. “We’ve got to teach him some Yiddish. He looks like a Yid, doesn’t he?”

Marta, Juan, and the boy all laugh and I chuckle along uneasily. Kreiseman steps behind the counter for a moment and takes out a knife and hands it to the boy, whispering some instructions to him. As he steps back toward us, Juan starts the conversation again.

“So, what about your own progeny?” he asks.

Kreiseman looks right past Juan and changes the subject.

“Anyway, you guys are going to the cemetery. The town has had a recent tragedy, and that’s why I’m holding the keys. We’d hired a boy to maintain the place, and he occasionally slept in the little hut next to it. Well a few months ago the place burned down overnight. No idea how it started. Burned him up. Real tragedy.”

“Oh, be careful!” Marta screams, as Juan and I take a few steps inside the gates of Jewish cemetery. “You’re stepping on him!”

Juan looks down and sees the smooth, white stone of a crypt beneath him and immediately jumps backwards.

“This man died just last year, and was 102,” Marta says. “He was one of the last of the first generation, so we put him in front.”

Villa Clara’s cemetery is located 15 minutes from the center of town, down a dirt road that takes us back into the soy and sunflower fields. The plot of land is about the size of a baseball field and surrounded on all sides by a high, barbed-wire
fence. The cemetery dates from 1892, and the graves, stone sarcophagi packed closely together, all face east toward Jerusalem. This is where the pioneers have been laid to rest, but, like the rest of these communities, the graves are being abandoned too. Few fresh flowers can be seen, and the sidewalks need weeding.

Next to the cemetery are the charred remains of the house where the young caretaker was burned to death. The black wood and grey ashes haven’t been cleaned away. The sky is cloudless overhead and seems bigger than ever. As I walk silently among the graves, I can hear the sound of cows mooing in the fields beyond. In the oldest corner of the cemetery, the gravestones have been worn smooth by time, the names and dates of the people buried beneath lost forever.
Juan and I return to Villaguay, leaving Marta and Villa Clara behind. At 9:30 we sit down to dinner in a restaurant called Anyber, where Pánela has arranged a reservation for us. Anyber is located on a street corner 10 blocks from our hotel, and all the windows and both doors to the restaurant are thrown wide open to allow for maximum ventilation against the lingering heat from the day. A dark-haired waitress seats us at one of the restaurants’ six tables, at the one along the innermost wall and directly below the lone ceiling fan, which hums loudly as it pushes the heavy air about the room. I am starving and exhausted, and Juan has bags under his eyes. Sometimes I forget how incredible it is for a 77-year old to be able to run around with me all day.

The waitress brings us a large bottle of cold mineral water. I drink the crisp, icy liquid in long draughts and quickly have to refill my glass. Juan sips his glass. The sun is setting outside, and a pale light reflected from the street casts everything in stark shadows. My legs have that dead-tired feeling it get in museums. The waitress comes over and tells us the dinner options.
“Well, the first thing we’ve got are varenikes,” she says. “Which are potato and oni—”

As she says this, Juan breaks into a smile. Varenikes are Russian for pierogi, and they are a food Juan grew up eating, one of the staples that contributed to his six foot two frame. I’m smirking too. I’ve come to find out what happened to the Jews of Entre Ríos and here I’ve found them, included on the specials menu at a local restaurant.

“—don’t worry young lady,” Juan interrupts. “We know what they are.”

Neither of us wants varenikes. Juan orders flank steak while I choose lamb. After the waitress leaves, both Juan and I look up at the television playing up on the wall. The news is on: city workers are striking in Buenos Aires. Juan turns back to me.

“So are you finding what you want out here?” he says.

“Yes, this is all really good,” I say, unsure if I’m placating him or really believe it. “All of this counts. I’ve just come to see. All of this is useful to me.”

“What is?” he says.

“Just looking at what remains,” I say. “At what’s still here, and what survives from where all these people came from. They really seem Argentine, and that’s interesting. More and more I’m thinking about what we select about ourselves and our past. I think we have options according to our environment. And I think I can see this here.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, for instance, would you say I’m Latino?”
“No, no,” Juan says, laughing and clapping his hands together. “No, you’re not.”

“Ok, sure, but aren’t my parents Latino?” I say, assuming a didactic tone as I lay out my argument.

“No,” Juan says quickly and seriously. My next thought stalls.

“And so—wait, why not?”

“Well, because they did not grow up in Latino houses,” he says. “To begin with, I don’t even consider people from Buenos Aires Latino… they’re Porteño, which is something else.”

“So you’re not Latino either?”

“Well, no, I grew up in a Russian household.”

“In Argentina, a Russian house in Argentina?”

“Yes.”

“Fine but you’re not Russian. So don’t we get to choose? Don’t immigrants get to choose?”

“No I don’t think so. If you can choose, it means you can change. And I don’t think you can really change.”

“But what about when you move? My parents aren’t American then? And you say they aren’t Argentine. But they’re definitely not Russian. So what are they?”

I realize I’m getting frantic in my argument, and I stop talking and drink some water. Juan, on the other hand, doesn’t sense my anxiety. He isn’t troubled by these loose ends. Well then what are we? I want to scream at him. If we can not change,
moving means giving up home for good. If we can change, it becomes a question of inheritance. What are we supposed to take? How should we choose what to carry?
On June 2, 1895, Baron Maurice de Hirsch took a meeting with Theodor Herzl, then 35 years old and still just a failed playwright turned journalist. Herzl came to the Baron with an alternate approach to Jewish regeneration and emigration. Only months earlier, the younger man had undergone a drastic change in his thinking about the Jewish situation in Europe. Until 1894, Herzl had been an advocate of mass conversion and assimilation. But during the fallout of the Dreyfus affair in France, he began to think that assimilation was impossible and that emigration might be the only solution. His ideas were still undefined when he wrote the Baron requesting a meeting, but he had an impulse to seek out the wealthiest and most important advocate of Jewish emigration and solicit him to his new cause. Herzl and de Hirsch’s conversation lasted only a few minutes, and quickly turned into an argument, but Herzl would later recall the discussion as the moment of conception for political Zionism.

A few weeks before the meeting, Herzl had sent a letter to de Hirsch, asking for an audience where he could lay out a new plan he was developing regarding Jewish migration. De Hirsch’s initial response was tepid. He asked Herzl to send him his plan in writing. Herzl, unwilling to settle for paper, sent de Hirsch the following note:

“What you have undertaken so far is as over-the-top as it is poorly executed, as costly as it is useless. You have succeeded in being a philanthropist, a Peabody, I will show you the way to become something more. Do not think that I am a dreamer
or a new kind of nutcase, although the form in which I am writing to you falls a bit outside the normal. From the start, I admit the possibility of my being wrong and I will accept objections. I do not expect to convince you immediately, as my project would force you to change some of your current outlook…”

The Baron, still stinging from the JCA’s initial stumbles, may have been piqued by Herzl’s promise of “something more.” He sent the young man a short response: “You can avoid writing a long exposition if you have not already. I will be in Paris for 48 hours, and I will gladly receive you Sunday July 2 at 10:30 in the morning.”

Herzl, who had not yet fully formed his ideas about Jewish nationalism, was both excited and terrified to be granted the meeting. He was not entirely comfortable in the presence of the rich and powerful. The day before the meeting, he bought a new pair of gloves, then wore them around all afternoon so that they would look new but not bought for the occasion the next day.

The meeting took place in the Baron’s magnificent study, and Herzl launched right into his ideas. The young man, who knew little about the particulars of the Baron’s work with the JCA, argued that the most pressing problem facing the Jewish people was the lack of any coherent, central direction. Without a motivating force, Herzl told the Baron, Jews would remain untethered.

“The method to follow should conform to the objective we give ourselves when we have a center, a direction. The alternative is simple: stay where we are or emigrate,” Herzl said, who later recorded the conversation in his diary.
Herzl was convinced that the Baron’s plan was simply charity, that it put too much emphasis on material gains, and that it ignored a vital energy that had to be captured before a plan of emigration could succeed. Herzl argued that instead of helping the very poor emigrate to distant lands, what was needed was the elevation of a Jewish elite and Jewish achievement, to fly in the face of anti-Semitic rhetoric and to achieve some kind of unified Jewish respect and pride. He suggested to the Baron that he establish a generous prize to recognize and encourage the achievements of Jewish intellectuals.

“That way, the people would discover that there are many good Jews,” Herzl told the Baron. “But first and foremost it would result in the common good. That’s why it wouldn’t matter who won the annual prize; what interests me is that everyone would strive to win it. That way, we would elevate the morale—“

The Baron, up to this point listening politely to the young man’s ideas, could contain himself no longer and burst out in disagreement.

“No, no and no! I do not want to elevate the general position of the Jews. Our problems originate because the Jews aim to high. We have too many intellectuals. My goal is to prevent the Jews from advancing too much. They shouldn’t take such long steps. All the hate toward the Jews stems from there.”

Both men argued what they did not have: the Baron advocated humble living, Herzl advocated cultural triumph. Soon, both men stood up and began yelling at each other, perhaps realizing that neither of them had a satisfactory answer.

The meeting ended soon after, and Herzl left dejected. Upon returning home he wrote yet another letter to de Hirsch.
“I would have showed you my flags and how I plan to fly them. And if you had asked me ironically ‘What is a flag? A rag at the end of a pole?’ I would have responded ‘No, sir, a flag is more than that! With a flag you can conduct men wherever you want, even to the Promised Land! For a flag, men live and die, and it’s even the only thing for which they are willing to die…”

That same night, unhappy with the Baron’s unwillingness to listen to the whole of his argument, Herzl began drafting the essay he would publish in February 2006 as *L'Etat Juif*, the founding text of modern Zionism.

Three months before he died, in January 1896, Baron de Hirsch sent a letter to a British lawyer named Herbert Lousada, where he expressed his doubts about the success of the colonization experiment:

“At the time I established the foundation’s statutes, I had more confidence in the success of colonization organized by the JCA than I do today. I will not say that this project will not succeed, but I do not believe it is possible to achieve it on the grand scale I had envisioned upon creating the foundation and providing the donation in question… The moment (country?) that I chose for the experience (due to different aspects regarding climate, the properties of the soil, and fertility…) of colonization was not the best one. Secondly, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to find capable men who possess, moreover, an iron fist (essential when dealing with the uneducated masses) to complete an undertaking of this kind. I have convinced myself, then, that I must advance bit by bit in this work. I think that it can succeed within certain limits,
but not on a grand scale, and, in any case, I have serious doubts about the possibility of that success.”

Three months later, the Baron died, still probably fraught with doubts over what exactly he could hope to achieve in the JCA. Upon hearing of his death, the colonies of Argentina went into seven days of mourning. According to Frischer, the settlers mourned him like a father well-loved who they had not known how to honor in life. As a symbol of gratitude, the colonists named every boy born to them during 1896 Moises, de Hirsch’s Hebrew name, translated into Spanish.
Part Ten: The Only Historian in Entre Ríos

I do not sleep deeply after our first day in Entre Ríos. I lie on a small, unfamiliar bed and listen to Juan snore for what feels like the entire night, and only realize I’ve fallen asleep when the alarm goes off at 7 a.m. I shower and eat a breakfast of buttered rolls and orange juice in the small bar on the bottom floor of the hotel, Juan takes only espresso. We climb back into the car and settle into our seats. After a day on the road, the car is home.

We don’t speak much. I direct Juan out of Villaguay with the help of the map which Pánela had marked for us in blue pen yesterday at lunch. By following the ink, we reach the dirt road that will take us to Dominguez. Juan suggests I put on a CD. The car is filled with the sounds of the Count Basie Orchestra. I settle into the passenger seat. 500 miles and a full day away from the city, we’ve started our south-bound return and we’ll be on the way home from here on out. I watch the road, the landscape, and the sky with a new attachment that comes with the knowledge that I’m leaving.

After driving for some time, we come across a tall blue sign indicating Dominguez on the side of the road. In white letters at the top of the sign is written:
“Villa Dominguez, Cradle of the Jewish Cowboy of Entre Ríos.” The rest of the sign is taken up by a list of what I can only assume are the landmarks of Dominguez.

Juan and I stop at the sign and walk up to it for a closer look. The day is getting hotter as the sun rises in the sky, and the surrounding area is totally silent, as if conserving energy.

We return to the car, and a few minutes down the road reach the town. The town’s outlying houses are crooked affairs. Their roofs hang precariously over crumbling white walls. Many of the houses have no doorways at all, only black empty spaces that serve as entranceways. Donkeys and horses walk the yards untethered. Not a soul appears outside. As we get deeper into the town the houses start to bunch closer together, but the state of repair remains just as bad.

We turn onto Dominguez’s main street, a wide dirt strip divided into two lanes by a row of small trees. At the far end of the street I see an excavator and several men in orange vests working with shovels. Behind them, a steamroller is parked. We’ve arrived in Dominguez on the day that they are paving their first road. All the buildings on the street look the same, squat one-story structures with chipped paint, windows open to let in the breeze. On the opposite side of the road, a larger building
with corrugated iron walls and a tilted roof has been decorated with a large blue Star of David. An inscription reads: Villa Dominguez Centennial 1890-1990.

Dominguez was once the capital of the Clara Colony, and is referred to occasionally as “The Paris of Entre Ríos.” While the surrounding hamlets date from the late 1880s, the town proper was founded in 1908, set up as a long-term home for the administrators of the JCA. The administrators, for the most part, were aristocratic Western European Jews doing the 19th century equivalent of Peace Corps volunteering. Unlike the other towns in the region, which are arranged in a Spanish style, with a grid of streets framing a large town square, Villa Dominguez was planned to be an urban and cultural landmark. A round plaza was planned as the center of the town, and the avenues shoot out like Parisian avenues. While it once was the center of all the Jewish villages in the region, the town now counts 1,900 inhabitants, among whom there remain a total of 40 Jews. Planned as a crowning achievement, the town of Dominguez heralded the unraveling of the JCA experiment.

I’m eager to see what someone who works as a historian in a town of less than 2,000 looks like, and as we approach the museum, a small man with graying hair steps out of the doorway to greet us. He waves at us. Osvaldo has dark skin and wears a pair of worn jeans and a plain white t-shirt two sizes too big.

“Well,” he says. “Welcome to Dominguez.”

I quickly get a feeling of worldliness from him. Something about him seems out of slightly place about him, like he could be doing his work anywhere but just happened to have ended up here. Osvaldo suggests that we get right back in the car and head out to what is left of one of the nearby villages, one once called Sonenfeld
Colony, but now, no longer inhabited, renamed San Gregorio, after the nearby woods. Osvaldo gets in the passenger seat and directs Juan down the roads and out of the town. As we drive, Osvaldo explains that for the past few years he has been doing work with an anthropologist from the University of Maryland. She comes down for a few weeks every summer to research the colonies, and often brings a group of students with her. He informs us that the Holocaust Museum in Washington D.C. recently procured funds for the museum to purchase a scanner and two computers. He talks to us about recovering the history of these colonies, and he talks about the process collectively. Everything is “when we decided” or “when we started.” He speaks like a man who knows what he’s doing.

“The first settlers arrived here in 1889, when all this was nothing,” Osvaldo says, gesturing at the open landscape outside the car, as if some great change had taken place. The original settlers lived on ranches averaging 350 hectares each. They first lived in tents, then built adobe huts. After the JCA bought the land in 1892, they started to partition the land systematically. 409 hamlets like the one we’re about to visit were set up along the countryside over this whole region. Like a Russian shtetl, houses would be arranged in the center of a large tract of land, along a single dirt lane. On that street, a temple and a school would be built. Close proximity to their neighbors encouraged cooperation and community among the settlers.

“Families would arrive in Buenos Aires and then take a ferry to a city called Concepcion de Uruguay. From there, it was a two-day train and then cart ride to Dominguez. Once they reached Dominguez, the settlers would stop at the Immigrants Hotel, which we passed earlier. There, they would sign their contract
with the JCA and then they would spend the next 15 days learning basic agricultural

with the JCA and then they would spend the next 15 days learning basic agricultural
techniques. The families would then be assigned plots ranging from 75 to 150
hectares depending on the number of male children.”

The JCA required a minimum of two male children in each family group. As a result, some 19th century Jewish nephews and cousins became sons and brothers on a boat somewhere between Poland and Argentina.

“Still, many of the colonists struggled. They were not farmers, after all. And they often found it difficult to negotiate with the administrators, who came from a world so different from their own.”

The administrators spoke French, the settlers spoke Yiddish. They were bound to a protocol, the settlers were subject to the random elements. They held short-term posts, the settlers were here for life. Many colonists grew frustrated with their administrators’ deliberate approach to urgent requests. The administrators developed a bitterness to the colonists’ apparent ingratitude.

The settlers were, in many ways, the subjects of the JCA. They depended on the organization for supplies and repairs, and had to get approval from the administrators before making any large changes to their land. Still, the JCA was not a governing body. It was not a nationalist project, looking to unify an area and a people. Yet the Argentine government’s presence in these distant colonies was minimal. So the colonists themselves existed between a nation and a foundation, unable to fully participate in either. As a result, they created a system of self-support.
“A group the leading colonists in Dominguez founded the cooperative movement, which soon spread to the other colonies and then to many parts of Argentina.”

Cooperatives existed all over Argentina for much of the 20th century, as Juan would explain to me later. In practice, these organizations worked like peasant mutual funds. Communal funds were set up to leverage the buying power or bargaining power of the colonists. The cooperatives existed for all sorts of interests. There were agriculture funds that bought seeds in bulk; there were housing funds that gave loans to colonists who couldn’t make their payments to the JCA; later in the century there were drinking water funds which raised the money to pay for running water to the colonies. In the Sonnenfeld colony, a section of the land was cooperatively farmed for the benefit of the public library.

The funds were organized by an elite group of intellectual Jews who came to colonies. These were educated Jews: doctors, lawyers, and engineers. Some came for economic opportunity, but others fled political repression—the Russian government in the late 19th century had placed further restrictions on the amount of Jews allowed to practice professions, putting many educated Jews out of work. They all brought with them their practical knowledge, but also the political currents they had picked up in the old country. Anarchism, socialism, and collectivism arrived in the colonies along with medicine, jurisprudence, and architectural design. In Dominguez, the man who founded the original communal fund was Miguel Sajaroff, an agronomist from a wealthy Russian family who arrived in the colonies in 1899. He came at the urging of his brother-in-law, who had emigrated a few years earlier.
Sajaroff did not need to sign a contract with the JCA. Instead, he bought outright 500 hectares of land near Dominguez and established his ranch. But after watching the failures of his brethren as they struggled to work the land, he established the first cooperative, El Fondo Communal, in 1904. He was compelled to help and he dedicated the rest of his life to helping his fellow Jews scrape by in this harsh new home. Other community leaders followed Sajaroff’s model and established communal funds in their own settlements. Across the JCA lands, settlers organized themselves in the first mass movement against the de Hirsch’s project, but also perhaps its greatest success.

All that remains of San Gregorio is an empty lane 10 minutes away from Dominguez. The dirt road is torn up, and Juan slows down as the car dips and rises in and out of the shallow ditches. The brush on both sides of the road has grown thick. The land is reclaiming its territory.

We drive slowly, and Osvaldo offers his understanding of the decline of the colonies.
“You have to remember, these people were not farmers. Most had been trained in some craft or trade. When the town of Dominguez built itself up as an urban center, most of the people in Sonnenfeld left the land and went to set up shop in the town. They went back to being boot makers, tailors, and bakers. On the other hand, those that stayed in Sonnenfeld often had children who left for the town, or even for Buenos Aires.”

Across the colonies, Jews returned to the towns, returned to their old professions. They left the land and opened up shops, eager to reestablish a way of life they had once fled.

Many second generation JCA Jews left the countryside completely. The Jewish colonists of Argentina had a saying: we planted wheat and corn and we harvested doctors and lawyers. While many first generation Jews committed themselves to the land, the second generation drifted back to the city. This was partly the fault of the JCA. In their zeal to create a new kind of Jew, JCA administrators looked to prevent the kind of cultural isolation that had been bred in the shtetl. They wanted to avoid what they thought was the natural tendency of these people to huddle together. So when the second generation of Jews came of age and went to the JCA to ask for land, the administrators informed them that policy dictated they be settled far from their parents. They wanted to disperse the Jews, and they did. The children of the Jewish cowboys opted out of the JCA system, and moved to Buenos Aires. The terrible irony here is of course that de Hirsch had been subject to similar rules in his home of Bavaria. He too had been forced from the place of his birth. He too had gone to make his living elsewhere.
Osvaldo tells Juan to pull over up ahead, near a clearing in the brush. As we get out, the stench of manure fills my nostrils. In the distance I hear the sounds of dogs barking. The grass grows long and wild here, and the ground is hard and cracked.

“We need some rain,” Osvaldo says, snapping some dry grass up in his hands.

All that’s left of the village is the temple, a structure now surrounded on all sides by grass and trees, an isolated altar that stands without purpose. The curved top of the façade gracefully ascends into the sky and ends in a gentle arch. The exterior walls are potted and stained with a combination of dirt and decay. At the top of the façade, I make out the faded outline of a Star of David. Osvaldo walks ahead of us and unlocks the blue wooden door. He motions for us to enter.

“The temple was built in 1893,” he says. The structure was the first solid construction erected in the colony. All other buildings at that point were one- or two-room sheds with tin roofs. The large room in the temple was divided by a wall to separate the men from the women, until 1980, when the wall was torn down and the people began to worship together. In this region, religious laws bend to the will of
the people. They are traditionalists, not conservatives, but above all they are pragmatists, as if they all inherited a part of de Hirsch’s personality.

“When I opened this place up last year,” Osvaldo says. “The floor was all torn up. No one had been in here in years. They just left. While I was clearing out the mess I found, beneath the stones, a shofar.”

A shofar is a Jewish instrument made from a ram’s horn. It is blown on Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year. It is not used for musical purposes, its piercing sound is useless in the context of melody or harmony. Instead, its sound is supposed to call the Jew to his or her way of life. When the Jews of Sonnenfeld left, they left decisively. The inside of the temple is almost completely empty and bare except for a pile of stone tiles which once made up the floor. The rubble sits next to the doorway. The walls are white, and the ceiling naked wood. Two Stars of David on either side of the doorway are the only adornments. This was once a house of God, but was He still here, or had he left with everybody else? I recall Juan’s first comment to me about this place. Not even ghosts live here. This place is utterly and completely abandoned. I suppose if de Hirsch’s legacy survives anywhere, it is here. This vacant synagogue is an altar to him now, and a fitting one.

We leave the temple for the cemetery, a kilometer away from the center of what was once the colony. We park the car next to a wire fence that demarcates the end of some unseen ranch. Another, taller, metal fence encloses the cemetery. The entrance is locked with a deadbolt, which Osvaldo removes, and the metal creaks slowly as he holds the door aside for us to enter. Juan whispers to me that we’ve
forgotten our yarmulkas, but Osvaldo either doesn’t notice or is too polite to point it out. He isn’t wearing one either, I tell Juan. So we enter the cemetery with the tops of our heads exposed.

Dominguez’ cemetery is larger than Clara’s, the graves cleaner and fresher looking. Two leafy trees rise over the graves, both taller than anything I’ve seen in Entre Ríos so far. Their shade provides some protection from the sun, which is so hot today it feels like it’s pressing against my skin. Like Clara’s, Dominguez’ cemetery follows Jewish rules of grave division: men over here, women over there, every grave pointed east toward Jerusalem. Osvaldo, like Marta, has an easy familiarity with the people buried at our feet. As we weave in and out among the stones, he places a gentle hand on this or that block of granite and pauses a moment to name an old school teacher or a former town official. This was Miguel Kipin, Osvaldo says over one. He was one of the leaders of the cooperative movement. He had been expelled from Russia after his involvement in the Potemkin uprising. Osvaldo stops for a long while over the grave of Noé Yarcho, a physician hired by the JCA to serve as the colony’s first doctor. Osvaldo talks about how he’s culled information from wives and children and grandchildren. Speaking to Osvaldo, without ever having seen any other people in Dominguez, I get the feeling the town has distilled itself into a single individual, as if Osvaldo wasn’t born so much as amalgamated.

The cemetery was hastily sanctified in 1892 when one of the women in the original group of settlers died only days after reaching the colony. The colonists, anxious to fulfill their responsibility for the dead woman, and perhaps for the first time understanding that they too would die on Argentine soil, quickly held a raffle to
decide who among them would donate the land for a cemetery. Aarón Yankelevich
was chosen, and a portion of his property was converted into the burial site. In the far
corner of the plot, a grassy mound marks the common grave of 50 colonists who died
in a typhus epidemic in 1894. They were buried collectively, without undergoing the
proper cleansing rituals, presumably to prevent the spread of the disease. Among
those buried beneath the mound is Isabel Yarcho, one-year old daughter of Dr.
Yarcho. She contracted the disease after Yarcho turned his house into a clinic for the
sick. On the single grave, a Hebrew epitaph commemorates the tragedy, and Juan,
Osvaldo, and I stand for a silent moment looking at it, but none of us know enough
Hebrew to actually read it. In the sunniest part of the cemetery, Osvaldo pauses in
front of one of the only graves here with fresh flowers. It’s the grave of Miguel
Sajaroff, the community organizer.

After half an hour or so, we’ve seen most of the memorials, and the sun forces
us back to the car. We begin to walk silently out of the cemetery. Juan and I walk a
few paces ahead and turn around to notice Osvaldo is no longer behind us. He’s
walking toward a water fountain a few feet from the entranceway. He’s gone to wash
his hands. Jews are directed to clean their hands after coming in close with the dead.
These are the kind of things I never remember about being Jewish, the little rules and
regulations that time and college and vacations in Italy have rubbed out of my family.
But Osvaldo has made a move toward the fountain, and Juan and I look at each other
and shrug. Despite his age, I know Juan is thinking the same thing I am: if Osvaldo
does it, I guess I’ll do it too. We’ve got nothing against the rules, we just don’t think
about them. But when Osvaldo reaches the fountain and turns the valve, no water

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comes out. It’s broken. So we leave the cemetery without washing our hands after all.

On Dominguez’ main street the construction workers continue to put down the layer of gravel that will rest between the asphalt street and the dirt below. Osvaldo tells Juan to park and we get out and walk across the street to the warehouse with the large painted blue Star of David I had seen when we first arrived. This is the Immigrants’ Hotel, Osvaldo explains. The walls, like the roof, are made of sheets of corrugated iron, painted white and gleaming in the midday sun. The entrance to the building is simply a spare piece of metal fence leaned over a break in the wall and held in place by some thick wire tied to a hook nailed to the iron. Osvaldo undoes the wire and moves the fence aside and we take a step up into the building and onto the dusty wood floor. The room is enormous and empty, except for a few wooden carts, some randomly assembled benches, and a curious collection of cut-out paper t-shirts hanging on string against the wall to my right. White wooden beams support the roof and fall to the floor at regular intervals, replicating themselves with an eerie precision and dividing the space into a kind of geometrical exercise. The heat in the room is overwhelming, the air thick with hot dust.
Osvaldo explains that the space was once a temporary home for Jews who
came to settle the lands. After taking the train from Buenos Aires, they slept here for
two weeks before being assigned their JCA lands. In the Immigrants Hotel, new
arrivals were given a cart, some stakes, some seeds, and a two-week crash course on
subsistence farming—then sent out into the wilderness to work the land for their
lives. The JCA decided to keep the Hotel empty and bare, and not provide beds,
because they didn’t want the colonists to get used to any comforts they wouldn’t have
out in the country. So whole families slept on the pinewood floor, the same floor,
Osvaldo says, that we’re standing on now.
I ask Osvaldo about the paper t-shirts. He says they are a memorial to the AMIA bombing. Some students from one of the Jewish high schools in Buenos Aires had recently come here on a field trip, and had brought their hand-made memorial and left it for the town. The work was a paper version of a piece done by some Argentine-Jewish artists in Buenos Aires. Each shirt commemorates one of the lives lost in the attack. Osvaldo tells me the 1994 attack sparked a new interest in the JCA colonies. Many of those who left here over the years had taken with them memories of hard work and deprivation.

“People don’t tell that story,” Osvaldo says. “But after the bombing, things changed. People were burning to find this stuff.”

We leave the warehouse and cross the street back to the museum. The heat is at its peak now, and I feel the back of my shirt now damp with sweat. Osvaldo asks Juan about his grandfather. Juan tells him how he spent some time in a town called Carlos Casares.

“Good,” Osvaldo says. “We’ll look him up in the JCA records in the museum.”

A minute later we are standing inside the museum. The lobby doubles as an exhibit space, and the walls are covered with maps, charts, pictures, essays. As in Clara, most of it looks more like a middle school student’s history project than a working museum. The lobby has a doorway in each wall, and Osvaldo walks through to the one to our left, and we follow. We enter an elegant room with high ceilings
and dark wood cabinets on every wall. In the middle of the room stands an old wooden counter, and next to that, an old stand-up scale.

Osvaldo explains that this room was once, in fact, a pharmacy. The cabinets which once displayed remedies and elixirs are now packed with beige boxes. On the wall to my left, each cabinet has a label in Spanish identifying a different language: Yiddish, Polish, Russian. The wall behind me is labeled with names of what I assume are different small colonies. These are the archives of the Entre Ríos’ colonies. Sometimes Osvaldo seeks material out, other times families of deceased locals send in what they find tucked away in attics or closets but it is all coming here, eventually it will all end up here.

Osvaldo talks about collecting, about storing. He points to the computer that was the purchased with money given to the museum by the Holocaust Museum in Washington D.C. It’s an old machine, a tall desktop PC that hums loudly. Osvaldo talks about the slowness of digitizing the holdings, of the trouble of translating from the Yiddish texts. He explains to Juan about the handwritten rolls kept by the JCA, detailing each colonist’s personal information. Osvaldo becomes a hum and I turn around to take pictures of the cabinets. Juan and Osvaldo murmur to each other and
walk out the doorway and back out into the lobby. Before following them I examine some pictures taped to a metal filing cabinet in one corner of the room: snapshots, unnamed people with their arms around each other, old people with white hair and mottled skin, no dates, no names, a long table full of people at restaurant. The people are all smiling and look vaguely familiar. I feel like I can almost talk to them, sitting there in the moment before a meal arrives. I walk to catch up with Juan and Osvaldo.

Juan and I wait for Osvaldo while he makes a phone call from the office, and in the meantime two men and a woman enter the museum. They look a few years older than myself, maybe 25, and are from Buenos Aires. One of them is doing social work in the colony. Like me, it seems, they have come to the museum to do a bit of investigation.

With his audience swelling in size, Osvaldo begins the tour. We walk out of the office, through the lobby, and into the main exhibit room of the museum. Osvaldo stops at a framed document and asks us to look at what was one of the JCA contracts. He begins to talk about the conflict between the colonists and the JCA administrators, the class tensions that erupted, the hard life led by many of the colonists, especially those who didn’t take to farming. Some colonists who couldn’t make their payments on time turned to the communal funds. Others simply turned and ran, abandoning their contracts and the empty land they’d been brought to. Juan takes out his reading glasses and sticks his face right up close to the contract hanging on the wall. He reads out loud, like a lawyer at a deposition.

“The JCA retains all rights to the land and can reclaim it at any time ipso facto,” he turns to us and exclaims: “ipso facto!”
The contract reads like a prison sentence, the various clauses limiting and restricting the rights of the settlers on almost every level. If the fantasy of a new life had ever really existed, this contract was a dark marker of the reality of the settlers’ situation. They were still poor, they were still powerless. It’s hard to figure what motivated the different parties involved. It’s hard to understand how the JCA could function so heartlessly and how the settlers could act so blindly. Perhaps the only reasonable explanation is that everyone involved had put their faith in the promise of new land. Soil and property came first, and everything else was supposed to follow.

The rest of the museum is filled with the clutter of 100 years of rural life. Pictures of settlers, kitchenware, faded wedding dresses, typewriters, an old movie projector—all the odd pieces of 20th century culture that trickled out to the displaced shtetls of Argentina. After a half hour or so, Osvaldo yells to us from inside the pharmacy room. We find him at the table in the center of the room with several of the beige boxes from the cabinets open on the table.

“Here is the folder for Carlos Casares,” Osvaldo says. “Are we looking for the name Gurevich?”

“Yes,” Juan says, leaning over Osvaldo’s shoulder.
Osvaldo flips past E and F and finally gets to G. The pages are photocopies of the JCA registers, each name written in neat script on a line that also identifies age, place of birth, and colony destination. He scans the pages with a finger and turns each one over as he approaches where Gurevich should be.

“It’s not here,” Osvaldo says.

“Oh well,” Juan says. “What are you going to do?”

“These names,” Osvaldo says, “are so often difficult to track down. So many changes happened, so many different things came up. It’s hard to know what you’re looking for sometimes.”

I cannot believe they give up so quickly. Osvaldo starts to stack the papers back up neatly and put them back in the boxes. Juan has walked away and has given his attention to a book on one of the shelves at the far end of the room. What is left for us if we don’t keep looking?

The six of us approach Dominguez’s temple. It’s a proud synagogue, and the walkway leading up to it is framed by two parallel rows of elegant trees.
Inside, the air is cool and the walls are tan. The synagogue is well maintained, but infrequently used. None of us wear yarmulkes inside, despite the fact that they are available in a box next to the door. Juan pokes me in the shoulder and points to the walls.

“Look,” he says, “portraits.”

Jewish law prohibits the creation of images of people. But on each side of the wooden altar at the front of the room, black and white engravings of Baron de Hirsch and his wife hang from the wall. Osvaldo tells us about the temple and about the Torahs. He doesn’t hesitate to climb the altar and open up the ark, showing us the three torahs inside. It doesn’t feel sacrilegious. He works with this history, and these torahs are some of his material. There is no rabbi here anymore, only Osvaldo.

The Torahs of these colonies were made in Europe. Many small villages emigrated en masse, and when they did so, they brought their scrolls with them. While immigration to Argentina was relatively easy in the late 19th century, it was common knowledge among immigrants that customs officials would confiscate anything of value a new arrival was careless enough to tempt him with. As a result, those villages carrying torahs devised a way of concealing their most prized and valuable possession: They would break the scroll into pieces and each townsperson would carry a bit of scroll in the folds of his or her clothes. The strategy successfully eluded the Argentine customs officials. But when the people were assigned to villages and colonies by the JCA, the organization would settle people far from those people they had lived with in Europe. They did not want shtetls in Argentina, they wanted Jewish Argentines. And so, the pieces of torah ended up scattered across the
Our visit over, Juan and I leave Dominguez and set out for Basovilbaso, about 100 kilometers south. Before we drive off, Osvaldo tells us to just drive straight on the dirt road out of the town.

“Just follow the road,” he says. “You’ll get there.”

So we drive out onto the dirt, and we go for about a half hour before I spot the storm in the distance: to the east, an enormous stretch of dark clouds has wedged itself between the sky and the horizon. It appears like a dusty curtain swaying back and forth over the earth, covering everything beneath it with a thick layer of gray soot.

The rain is coming straight for us, and Juan is anxious about what will happen to the road we’re traveling if it starts to rain heavily. He’s sped up so that the pale dust rises even further behind us. The road is bumpy and I bobble in my seat as the car speeds forward. We’re listening to the Aaron Copeland record for the third or fourth time.

“Is Aaron Copeland popular in America?” Juan asks to make conversation. I think on this for a minute.

“I guess so,” I say, staring out toward the coming storm. “It’s a little past his time. You hear him in movies, though. And a whole lot of movie soundtracks sound like him.”

Then we both sit in silence for what feels like a long time.
Osvaldo said stay straight, but we both feel we are going the wrong way. It has been too long since we have seen a house, or another car. The solitude makes us anxious. And then we come to an unmarked fork in the road. Juan stops the car.

“Well,” he says. “Which way should we go?”

“I don’t know,” I say.

“I think it’s to the right,” he says.

I glance down the right road. It’s impossible to tell, both the roads set off through the same yellow-brown terrain, and both go on straight as far as I can see.

“Fine,” I say. “Let’s go to the right.”

Juan starts up the car again and we drive off. After 15 minutes and no noticeable change of scenery, I start to feel like it might be impossible to ever escape this place.

“Could it be this way?” Juan says. “Osvaldo said to stay straight. This was relatively straight. Don’t you think it was more straight than going the other way?”

“No, you’re absolutely right,” I say. “We went straight, like he told us. It’s all we could do without more information.”

“Well, maybe there will be some place to ask for directions,” he says. I look out of the car. There is nothing around, except the storm clouds creeping closer. A few silent minutes go by and a truck appears, coming toward us, trailed by an enormous cloud of dust. After we pass the truck, we’re engulfed in the dust, every window blocked by the brown haze. It’s impossible to see in front of us, and we drive like that, blind, for a good 10 or 20 seconds.
When we emerge, I look up and see that the storm has arrived. The sky is gone. All that’s left is a lowered ceiling of dark vapor that threatens us and everything around us. The color has been sucked out of the world, and all that’s left are gray shadows, and the silver glint of our hood. A crease of lightening flashes in the distance off of the left, followed shortly by a boom. Then another bolt cracks down behind us, much closer, and thunder follows.

For some reason, the rain hesitates. It gives us time. We have to get to solid ground. If we stay on the dirt too long, the rain might flood the road and trap us here. The lightening now cracks frantically, all around us and without mercy. The thunder rolls all together in a single continuous rumble. And then I see we’re reaching the end of the road. Only a few hundred meters in front of us, the dirt road slopes up and ends at a T with a paved road. Juan slows up. A few fat drops slam against the windshield. As we reach the top of the little mound, a gas station appears on the other side of the highway. The intersection is unmarked. Which way do we go? We will, of course, stop and ask for directions. The rain starts falling, arriving like a charging army, hitting the roof and windshield with countless violent thuds that blend
together in one terrible roar. We cross the highway and roll into the gas station’s lot.
The station is a small white building with two pumps in front.

“Go and ask directions,” Juan says.

I look out the window for a second and then nod. It is fifty feet to the station, but I can barely see through the rain. I push my door open slowly, but a terrible gust of wind takes hold of it and it flies open, soaking my half of the car and allowing all the papers I’d stuffed into the door pocket to fly out free into the air. They twist away from me as I reach out my hands for them. I watch transfixed as our itinerary, Pánela’s contact information, and some of my notes are washed away into the quick running streams forming on the ground. It takes all my strength to shut the door back up, and I am drenched in the process. My jeans heavy with water, I run up to the doorway of the station and quickly open and shut it behind me. Once inside, I lean my back to the door and breathe deeply, water running over my face and down the small of my back.

I look up and see a family. There are three children and four adults in the small room, all staring both at me and out at the storm. The room is empty except for a counter in the back, stacked high with cartons of cigarettes, and a payphone on the wall. One of the children, the smallest one, a girl, is barefoot. Both the men are smoking. The look happy, standing here all together, waiting out the storm.

“Which was to Basovilbaso?” I say.

“That way, hombre,” one of the men says, indicating to his right down the paved road.

“Great,” I say. “Thank you.”
And with that I turn back out into the storm and sprint back to the car. I take care to hold on tight as I open the door and I leap into the seat, landing with a wet squish beside Juan. I laugh out loud.

“God,” I say. “I’m soaked.”

Juan looks at me unamused. His car is soaked, our maps and remaining papers are soaked, the CDs strewn about beneath my seat are soaked. He is only dry thing left in the car.

“Well, which way is it?” he asks.

“That way,” I say, pointing out into the storm.

“Fine,” Juan says. He drives the car a few feet, but the ground is flooding and the water splatters across the windshield, making it impossible to see. We’re trapped.

“Well,” he says, “we’ll have to wait here until the rain lets up.”

He finally grins.

“How long could it last?”

Juan cuts the motor and tilts back his seat. In a few moments he’s asleep, and I’m alone in the car, looking over my notebook, which is now partly wet with rain water, the moisture seeping into the pages, coming perilously close to washing away my precious scratches of ink. Without the air conditioning, the car heats up quickly, and my clothing clings to me in a warm, soggy mess.

Outside, the rain comes down every which way. It falls from the sky and it pours out of the station’s gutters and the surplus even cascades over the sides of the gutters and falls fourth onto the ground where it runs down the paths of least resistance. It rises up from the ground and forms pools in the parking lots. It washes
the sides of the car and it nourishes the earth which had been dry and now accepts the water and I imagine the joy of the farmers who have been waiting for water and hoping for rain and now it is here. Out here everything depends on the harvest, as the Baron said, and the harvest depends on the rain. And even when rain does come, it can not rain too little or too much. The conditions have to be perfect.

Juan has started to snore and I go back to my notes. We’re trapped in this little car. I’m stuck next to this old man, who is snoring and has a little dribble running out of the left side of his mouth. I flip through my notes, I stare out the window, I check the time.

I find solace in the knowledge that I’m not the first member of my family to fail to find what he was looking for in de Hirsch’s colonies. I’ve repeated the mistake of my great-great-grandfather, and I suddenly take a strange comfort in that fact. Maybe de Hirsch was right, we aim too high. We go too far. We know no other way. In a moment the rain will stop, and the sun will return, and we’ll continue on our travels. I will spend the rest of the day with my grandfather, and then I will be ready to go home.