

12-31-1995

## Judaica Libraries and Archives in Argentina


Rita F. Saccal

*Seminario Rabínico Latinoamericano, Buenos Aires, Argentina, risacal17@gmail.com*

Irene L. Münster

*Seminario Rabínico Latinoamericano, Buenos Aires, Argentina, imunster@umd.edu*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://ajlpublishing.org/jl>

 Part of the [Bilingual, Multilingual, and Multicultural Education Commons](#), [Information Literacy Commons](#), [Jewish Studies Commons](#), [Latin American Languages and Societies Commons](#), [Latin American Literature Commons](#), and the [Reading and Language Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Saccal, Rita F. and Münster, Irene L.. 1995. "Judaica Libraries and Archives in Argentina." *Judaica Librarianship* 9: 123-125.  
doi:10.14263/2330-2976.1194.

# HOUSES OF THE BOOK

## Judaica Libraries and Archives in Argentina\*

Rita F. de Sacca and Irene L. de Münster

Seminario Rabínico  
Latinoamericano  
Buenos Aires, Argentina

**Abstract:** Describes the situation of Jewish libraries and archives in Argentina that are still operating after the July 1994 bombing of the AMIA building. The majority of the collections are not professionally organized.

*Editor's note: Papers from AJL's 1995 Convention are scheduled to appear in the next issue of Judaica Librarianship. Given that the authors had previously submitted a related paper (which follows), and owing to the timeliness of the report, it was decided to publish it in this issue.*

### Introduction

The SS Weser, a German passenger ship and freighter, arrived at the port of Buenos Aires on August 14, 1889, a cold, wintry day. Close to twelve hundred passengers crowded the decks, worn and weary after their thirty-five-day journey from Bremen, Germany. Eight hundred twenty of them were Russian Jews, many with beards and sidelocks, wearing Eastern European garb. They numbered almost half as many as all the Jews believed to be living in Argentina at the time. Unlike their brethren on shore, they were a close-knit, well organized Jewish community. The two Torah scrolls and religious texts they had brought with them, and the ritual slaughterers, rabbi, and teachers aboard, provided all that was necessary to keep up their Jewish observance en route. That day in August two Jewish communities were brought face to face: one scattered all over the large cosmopolitan city beyond the harbor with only a tiny minority actively Jew-

ish; the other gathered on the deck of the German ship, exhausted, hopeful, anxious about their future. Unknown to the players, the scene was now set for a radical change in Argentine Jewish history. (Avni, 1991)

The immigrants of the SS Weser and those who followed them, aided by the Jewish Colonization Association, settled in agricultural colonies in the provinces of Buenos Aires (colonies: Baron Hirsch, Mauricio), La Pampa (colonies: El Escabel, Narcisse Leven), Santa Fe (colonies: Moises Ville, Montefiore), Entre Ríos (colonies: Avigdor, Clara, Leonard Cohen, Lucienville, San Antonio, Santa Isabel, Louis Ungre), and Santiago del Estero (colony: Dora), where they lived in very poor conditions.

Although most of them did not have enough money to eat, they met during their breaks to study together, give theater presentations, or exchange books from their carriages. They could not imagine a day without learning. Each institution that was established opened its doors with a library, usually if not always with Yiddish books.

Unfortunately, these treasures are getting lost, owing not only to the economic conditions of the country, but because of the lack of interest that the members of the present generation show in their forebears' culture. We should ask ourselves what is happening with us in this country, why we neglect our archives, and, worse yet, why we neglect our memories.

Several libraries developed with the immigrants who settled down in Buenos Aires. These libraries took form in accordance with the readers' political point of view; they included Anarchist and Bundist libraries with their own publishing houses, and libraries organized according to the native countries of their community mem-

bers, such as the one of the Bessarabian Jews.

Over the years, many libraries developed in synagogues (e.g., the Lamroth Hakol Synagogue), but only bestsellers were bought, and the stacks were filled with books that had belonged to deceased members. Something similar happened with Hebrew school libraries (e.g., Scholem Aleichem schools), where for the last ten years almost no Hebrew or Jewish books have been bought, not only because of lack of funds, but also because of the very poor guidance of the Vaad HaJinuj (the Argentinean Jewish Educational Bureau). In the colonies in particular, most of the books disappeared from the stacks, owing to the negligence of their members. The books have been stolen and never replaced. Moisesville colony is a case in point.

In the following we give a brief account of the Jewish/Hebrew archives and libraries that still operate in Argentina. Most of them are located in Buenos Aires, Argentina's capital city.

### Archives

#### 1. DAIA archives

The Delegación de Asociaciones Israelitas Argentinas (DAIA—the representative political body of Argentine Jewry) offices were located in the Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina (AMIA—the Jewish community or *kehilah*) building, at Pasteur 633. When the AMIA building was destroyed in a terrorist bombing on July 18, 1994, most DAIA files and archives located there were lost.

**a. Centro de Estudios Sociales (CES):** In 1988, after a period of fourteen years, the CES restarted its activities under the

\*Based on a Poster Session presented at the 30th Annual Convention of the Association of Jewish Libraries, Chicago, June 20, 1995.

direction of Lic. Beatriz Gurevich. The archives of DAIA's Centro de Estudios Sociales (Social Studies Center) were located at Pasteur 611, a building beside AMIA's; because of that the archives remained intact after the bombing. The CES is devoted to:

(1) *Historical research*: In 1992, after the opening of the so-called Nazi Files by President Menem, DAIA started a project called "Testimonio" (Testimony), under the auspices of the CES. The goal of Testimonio is to conduct research aimed at the construction of an archive of documents and oral testimonies about the following key topics relating to the period 1930–1960.

(a) the entrance and integration of Nazis and Fascists into Argentina; the role played by official agencies in that process; the penetration of National-Socialist and Fascist ideologies into Argentina and their projection into the political, cultural, educational, and military spheres;

(b) discrimination against and segregation of Argentine Jews during that period;

(c) reactions of the civilians to the two phenomena listed above.

(2) *Social research*: The main themes are human rights, ethnic and religious prejudice, and discrimination, focusing on anti-Semitism.

(3) *Publications*: "Indice" is a periodical of interdisciplinary studies devoted to promoting understanding among various ethnic and religious groups. The periodical also has the goal of the recovery of memory for themes related to Argentine and Jewish history. In addition, it publishes research reports on discrimination and bigotry.

**b. Argentine archive**: DAIA's documents on Argentine Jewish history of the last 60 years, kept at its former headquarters, disappeared during the bombing.

**c. Press archives**: Throughout the past 50 years, DAIA has compiled press clippings. This archive is computerized, but as far as we know, visitors are not allowed to use it.

## 2. Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina (AMIA) archive

**a. Mark Turkow archive**: Begun in 1983, at the initiative of a group of researchers. Focusing on Jewish life in Argentina and

everything related to it, it is directed by Lic. Anita Weinstein. The archive's main areas and forms of coverage are:

(a) *Photographs*: classified by subject. Each subject is, in turn, classified by event.

(b) *Testimonies*: oral testimonies related to the labor movement, education, agricultural colonies, etc.

(c) *Documents*: institutional records, as well as the Solomon Resnick private archive. (Resnick was editor of *Judaica*, a Jewish-Argentine periodical).

(d) *Videos* on immigration and other subjects (recorded by the Argentine National Archives).

(e) *Bibliographies*: information on all Jewish institutions in the country.

(f) *Library* housing books by Jewish-Argentine writers till 1990.

(g) Collection of Jewish-Argentine *journals*.

(h) Information on the *bombing* of the building on July 18, 1994.

This archive was not located in the AMIA building, and as a result it was not damaged by the bombing.

**b. Instituto Científico Judío (IWO) archive**: Founded in 1941 (see also below under "Libraries"). The collection was never classified and was very disorganized. The main documents it had/has are on the Argentine Jewish community, specifically on the following subjects:

(a) Schools/institutions/libraries;

(b) Philanthropy;

(c) Culture;

(d) Yiddish theater;

(e) Music;

(f) Personal archives;

(g) Jewish agricultural colonization;

(h) Jewish political and institutional life;

(i) Eretz Israel;

(j) Judaism.

This archive was going to be microfilmed (with the collaboration of the Jewish National Fund), owing to the very poor conditions under which it was maintained. After the bombing of the AMIA building, a great part of the IWO archive was saved and is now stored off-site in boxes.

## 3. Congregación Israelita Argentina archive

The principal synagogue in Buenos Aires has an archive containing documents on the Jewish agricultural colonies that are stored in boxes and forgotten. These contain the day-to-day registers of the Congregación Israelita Argentina, as well as the first Jewish periodicals published in Argentina. The Congregación Israelita Argentina has a very rich photographic archive, which unfortunately is not available for consultation.

### Libraries

#### 1. Instituto Científico Judío (IWO)

Established as a branch of the YIVO (Yidisher Vinsshaftliker Institut) in Vilna, its original purpose was to gather documents and information on the life of Jews in Argentina, to be sent to Vilna. On September 1, 1939, Samuel Rollansky (IWO's library director until his retirement in 1992) and others inaugurated an autonomous research institute in Buenos Aires, and thus began the life of IWO-Argentina.

In November 1945, the library was relocated to Pasteur 633, where the Hevra Kadisha (later, the Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina or AMIA) functioned until July 18, 1994, the date of the bombing. Mostly all of the IWO library's books survived the bombing of the AMIA building; they were subsequently evacuated by Jewish youth in a dramatic rescue operation (not authorized by the government). All the debris was taken by the police, for future investigation, to an open field next to the Río de la Plata river; the staff of the library were not allowed to examine the debris. Instead, homeless people took whatever they wanted or thought could be sold. Most of the material was ruined as a result of rain and wind—before the librarians were authorized to access the field.

The library consisted of approximately 80,000 books (most in Yiddish, with many duplicates). It was classified as follows:

- (1) Dictionaries/encyclopedias;
- (2) Jewish themes, except for belles-lettres;
- (3) Periodicals;
- (4) Children's literature/pedagogy/psychology;
- (5) Yiddish literature;
- (6) Argentine Jewry;
- (7/8) Religious books;
- (9) Hebrew literature;
- (10) Music/theater;

- (11) World literature;
- (12) Other.

The IWO library had a card catalog, but only a small portion of the library's books were classified; that is why it was usually impossible to find specific items. Readers had to be lucky and meet Samuel Rollansky, in the hope that he could locate what they were searching for. In the last years before the bombing, hardly any researchers visited the library. A few months before the bombing, Ester Szwarc was named the new library director, with a mandate to reorganize the collection. She now has the chance to organize a library not only with all modern technological methods, but employing concepts of librarianship as well.

## 2. José Mendelson

In 1969, the Palacio de la Educación—Eijal HaJinuj was built by AMIA's leaders. Its main purpose was to bring together the following educational centers:

- (a) *Rambam*: a Jewish complementary secondary school. It aimed to provide some Jewish background education to Jewish youth who studied at public schools.
- (b) *Midrasha*: a center for the training of secondary Jewish teachers.
- (c) *José Mendelson Library*: José Mendelson, the director of the Seminario de

Maestros de AMIA (AMIA's Teachers' Seminary), donated his private library. With this and other donations, the library specialized in materials for Jewish educators. At the end of 1993, the collection was incorporated into the IWO library. Since it was located at a different site, the José Mendelson library was not damaged by the bombing of the AMIA building.

## 3. Sociedad Hebraica Argentina

Belonging to a Jewish club that is analogous in its functions to those of a North American Jewish "Y" or Community Center, this was a large and important library during the 1950s. Nowadays the library circulates only bestsellers. All of the Yiddish books were sent to Florida Atlantic University (Boca Raton, FL).

## 4. Seminario Rabínico Latinoamericano

The library of the Seminario Rabínico Latinoamericano is described in detail in a separate article, which follows this one.

## Conclusion

As stated in this brief survey, the situation of Judaica libraries and archives in Argentina is very poor. No Jewish libraries exist in the interior, except for those in Hebrew schools; the archives of the agricultural colonies were brought to Buenos Aires, or else they disappeared.

Hiring a professional librarian to develop a library/archive has not been considered in institutions other than the Seminario Rabínico Latinoamericano, and therefore it is locally considered the only Jewish library that is worth visiting. Although this statement may sound very partisan and strong—since the authors of this article work at the Seminario's library—this is what we hear from researchers, students, and teachers who come to the seminary.

## Acknowledgment

*The editor thanks Zachary Baker, Head Librarian of YIVO, for reviewing the manuscript. Mr. Baker visited Argentina after the bombing of the Jewish community center.*

## Reference

Avni, Haim. *Argentina and the Jews: A History of Jewish Immigration*. Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1991

*Rita F. de Saccal has been the Assistant to the Head Librarian of the Seminario Rabínico Latinoamericano since 1990. She previously worked in reference at the Library of the United Nations Information Center.*

*Lic. Irene L. de Münster is Head Librarian of the Seminario Rabínico Latinoamericano. She received a degree in librarianship from the Museo Social Argentino (licenciada en bibliotecología y documentación).*

# The Library of the Seminario Rabínico Latinoamericano (Latin-American Rabbinical Seminary)

*Irene L. de Münster and Rita F. de Saccal*  
*Seminario Rabínico*  
*Latinoamericano*  
*Buenos Aires, Argentina*

**Abstract:** The history, organization, and current financial situation of the Library of the Seminario Rabínico Latinoamericano in Buenos Aires, Argentina, are described. Besides a card catalog for books, the Library maintains an analytical catalog for journals and collections. Sample entries from the two catalogs, as well as an excerpt from the authority list of Spanish subject headings, illustrate the paper.

## History

The library of the Seminario Rabínico Latinoamericano was founded in 1963, two years after the Seminary opened its doors, by librarian Dr. Suse Halenstein Harf (of Germany), under the supervision of Rabbi Marshall T. Meyer (USA) and Rabbi Mordechai Edery (Morocco).

Rabbi Meyer, with a great vision of what could be achieved for Argentine Jewry,

sought someone to take charge of the library who possessed both a Jewish background and knowledge of how to manage a library. He chose Dr. Harf, who had worked before the war at the Library of the Hochschule für Wissenschaft des Judentums in Berlin, and who emigrated to Argentina with the "Riegner Gruppe" during the '30s to escape the Nazi regime. (The Riegner Gruppe was organized in 1938 by Kurt Riegner [a lawyer] and Günther Friedländer [a rabbi]. They led the first