

## **From the Argentine Mesopotamia to Asia: *Correntinos* in Israel**

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### **Abstract**

Very little research has focused on the small and remote Jewish communities in Latin America or on the past experiences of Jews who settled in the peripheral secondary cities in the Argentine Mesopotamia—a region that includes the provinces of Entre Rios, Corrientes and Misiones. Documentation on Jews living in Corrientes is scarce, and no research has examined their family histories, particularly during the period of the Shoah. The current study is based on the oral testimonies, recorded in Israel, of immigrants who define themselves as *Correntinos*. These testimonies refer to their personal experiences during the Shoah, to antisemitism and to the demographic aspects of their lives in the city of Corrientes. This paper aims to discover whether this group of immigrants has peculiar characteristics and whether they are over-represented among all Argentine immigrants in Israel. The research focused on the relationship between geopolitical factors and Peron's policies, as well as on Argentinean nationalism, antisemitism, and the impact of these factors at the individual, familial and community levels. The data revealed the representative size of this community and through memory and archives made it possible to reconstruct genealogical and communal histories, with particular focus on the immigrants' cultural background, demographic characteristics, and level of integration in Israel.

**Key words:** Secondary cities, Argentine Mesopotamia, Shoah, Education, Migration, Corrientes.

### **Introduction**

Corrientes is one of the northeastern provinces of Argentina and also the name of the provincial capital city. Along with the provinces of Entre Rios and Misiones, Corrientes constitutes the Argentine Mesopotamia, so designated because of its location between the Uruguay and Paraná rivers. Scholarship on small Jewish communities across the globe has focused mostly on secondary centers in Eastern European countries. Indeed, the religious, philosophical, educational and political development and transformations of these communities and the innovations they produced from the 17<sup>th</sup> century until the Holocaust attracted much attention. Most of these communities vanished during the Shoah.

Since the 1990s, there has been a significant increase in the number of scholarly works about the absorption of immigrants in Israel. About 80% of this research focuses on immigrants from the former Soviet Union and, to a lesser extent, on Jews from Ethiopia and other countries of origin. Most research funds and absorption efforts have been devoted to supporting groups of immigrants at risk (The Israel National Council for the Child, Annual). Only 2% of this research has examined Latin Americans, including Argentineans, as part of the overall Spanish-speaking population in Israel (Ran 2004, 2006).

At least 85% of the Jews in Argentina settled in or close to the capital Buenos Aires, while smaller Jewish communities developed in provincial capitals and in peripheral secondary cities. These small communities have not been the object of much research, probably due to their small size. Research in the social sciences indicated that, despite the tiny proportion of Jews within the overall population (less than 0.5%), Argentine Jewry as an aggregate has often been investigated (Bianchi 2004, Devoto 2004). Yet for the most part the target of these studies was the Jewish community in the Buenos Aires metropolitan area. Small and outlying Jewish communities were usually not taken into consideration.

The lack of information concerning small Jewish communities in Argentina stands in contrast to a report from a Jewish Agency emissary dealing with immigration to Israel, which showed that Jews from provincial localities constituted a significant percentage (35%) of Argentinean immigrants to Israel—significantly higher than their proportion among Argentina's total Jewish population<sup>1</sup>. The report also highlighted the need for further investigation of the characteristics and migratory trends of peripheral Jewish communities. Both in oral comments and via rumors, Jewish Agency emissaries referred specifically to immigration from the province of Corrientes (Spanish for streams) as significantly high despite the province's small Jewish population. This study aims to verify this assumption, based upon oral testimonies and a questionnaire survey conducted among a sample of immigrants from Corrientes in Israel.

### ***The Jewish community of Corrientes***

Relatively obscure bibliographical sources concerning small Jewish communities in Argentina were found in local journals, as well as in Jewish newspapers published in Buenos Aires in Yiddish and Spanish. The weekly *Mundo Israelita* reported news from the provinces (*Mundo Israelita* 1938-1941) and provided information on relevant cultural, institutional or social activities that took place in small communities in peripheral cities, including news from isolated communities in the Argentine Mesopotamia. The geographic conditions in the Mesopotamia region allowed interactions across provincial borders. Yet due to the distance from Buenos Aires and the lack of official attention from Argentina's central government towards remote cities, these places remained out of the public eye.

It is relevant to note that while Entre Rios is located closer to Buenos Aires and Santa Fe, the provinces of Corrientes and Misiones are isolated by rivers and are more than a thousand kilometers away from the capital. Corrientes is separated from the rest of the republic by the Paraná and Uruguay Rivers and by other rivers as well. This geographical segregation along with other historical and political processes generated the popular reference to the province and its people as a "segregated republic".

The city of Corrientes was founded in the year 1588 by an order of the Catholic King of Spain as an intermediate fluvial port between Paraguay's capital Asunción to the north and Buenos Aires to the south, to take advantage of the area's natural resources. European settlers along with native Guaraní Indians eventually created the *mestizo* tolerant, yet traditional, society of Corrientes based upon strong Christian beliefs and conservative values. Relevant sources from Corrientes' governmental city archives

contain documents about Jewish citizens who were involved in designing and constructing the city, as well as Jewish soldiers in the military forces who defended the capital city of Corrientes, the province, and Argentina from colonial times. This evidence indicates that independent of their faith and despite the Catholic Church's public *acto de fe o procesión*, Jews were involved in every sphere of life in Corrientes, even though the Inquisition was in effect until the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Lewin 1974, Avni 1983).

The Latin-Sephardim Association in Corrientes was founded in 1914 with an emphasis on religion, rituals and complementary education. The synagogue was built according to the architectonic model of Spanish synagogues (El Liberal 1964), with a central stage and rows of seats for prayers (removed years later) and an upper gallery for women. A classroom was built and used for complementary education. Ornaments included glass-stained (i.e.- *vitraux*) windows and a carved wooden chair of Eliyahu.

The Sholem Aleijem Cultural Center of the Ashkenazi community was founded in 1917. The salon was constructed according to the reformist style of Jews in European countries, with an upper gallery for the public. Both institutions were used as teaching premises until the 1950s. During the Jewish holidays women prayed in the upper gallery of Sholem Aleijem, while a central stage for Torah readings and chairs for male prayers were added in the salon. At the front stood a theater stage that was used for performances along with a small room near the stage. Additional small rooms were built in the gallery and used by youth movements. The nearby school, Chaim Weizman, was built due to increasing demands to offer Jewish education in a proper building, deal with the growing organizational and social activities, provide room for both formal and non-formal education, and offer space for the Credit Cooperative Fund (founded in 1939) and TESA-Teatro Experimental Sholem Aleijem (founded in 1956) (Sociedad Cultural Israelita Scholem Aleijem 1967).

The Ashkenazi community of Corrientes grew in numbers in the interwar period (1919-1939), and the number of institutions that provided religious services and Zionist education increased as well. Until the 1950s, the Jewish school in Corrientes —*la shule*— taught mainly in Yiddish, the Ashkenazi language spoken at home. Hebrew as an official cultural language was introduced following the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 and as a result of Zionist educational policies (Sociedad Cultural Israelita Scholem Aleijem 1967).<sup>2</sup> This change also was aimed at attracting the Sephardic community to attend the Chaim Weitzman School. Nonetheless, even after 1948 Yiddish remained a spoken language in Jewish homes, as well as Arabic or Ladino in Sephardic households. The Sephardim of Corrientes also reinforced religious education by sponsoring tutorial services offered by a private teacher (Levy 1994).

### ***Formal and non-formal networks***

Ashkenazi families in Corrientes initiated, created, promoted and nurtured not just the formal supplementary Jewish education within the community but also non-formal Jewish activities and Zionist education for children and youth. Even before 1948, mothers volunteered at the *Organización Sionista Femenina Argentina* or WIZO. Emissaries from Zionist organizations who visited the city reported on the

activities of the children's library and the youth movement. At the time, the children's library and the youth movement's activities<sup>3</sup> took place either at home or in the community (Mundo Israelita 1938-1941). Youth activities were a natural response to Christian and church activities, which attracted all the kids in town. For example, as reported by one of the interviewees, Jewish boys participated in the basketball and football matches at the churches. To be able to play with other kids, they had to make the sign of the cross when entering the church before going out to the play yard<sup>4</sup>.

It is important to note that from the 1960s onwards, Corrientes was home to two ethnically different Jewish communities. Although they worked together with a common aim, they still maintained two different committees and cemeteries, as well as separate annual donation drives for umbrella Jewish organizations and different teachers for their children. Already during the 1930s, the younger generation participated in joint social gatherings. These communities later united to combine efforts in dealing with the needs of the younger generation and the social demands of all. These new characteristics of a united community composed of two differentiated ethnic collectives did not exist in the 1960s in any other Jewish community in Argentina (Ran 2008, 93).

The growing number of marriages between Sephardim and Ashkenazim generated a common religious wedding ritual that took place in the Sephardic synagogue. At the same time, joint educational and socio-cultural activities were held in the Chaim Weizman School building and in the Sholem Aleijem cultural center. With the aim of meeting their children's social needs, which were disregarded both by their non-Jewish surroundings and by the Jewish formal educational system, in the 1960s the two communities collaborated to construct a sport center. Thus they became a united geo-physical Jewish community with two different buildings physically linked through the common ground of sport for children and youth.

## **Background**

### ***Jewish population trends***

Until the 1970s the Jewish population of the city of Corrientes constituted more than 1% of the overall Jewish population. Yet during the following decades, it decreased to 0.2%. This fact may be associated with other demographic changes. For example, even though Corrientes was emerging from a long period of stagnation during the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Scobie 1988) and was beginning to exhibit demographic growth, the city is still marked by high negative migration rates (Meichtry 1987) to the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires and to other countries (Gobierno de la Provincia de Corrientes 2007, 2008), reflecting the area's relatively lower development index compared to the Federal capital.

Some data on the Jewish communities in Corrientes were reported in the *Yiddish Yor Bukh* (1945). Shmelz and DellaPergola provided a demographic analysis of the Argentine 1960 census, and Harvey examined the Jewish presence since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Corrientes' local and national commercial and political arena (Schmelz and DellaPergola 1974, Harvey 2007). An unpublished census of Argentina's Jewry ordered by the Jewish Colonization Association in the early 1940s was conducted by Jedidio Efron

(Mazo 2014). This census concluded that Corrientes' Ashkenazi community, which was devoted to commerce, was prone to disappear quickly due to its secular traits, lack of Zionist education and faith, and poor religious practices. At the same time, Efron praised Corrientes' Sephardic community for providing orthodox religious education to the children (Ran 2008, 83).

As indicated by the 1960 national census, the predicted disappearance of the Ashkenazi Sholem Aleichem community never occurred. On the contrary, it became the dominant community, unlike the Sephardic community, which shrank. Despite the fact that the 1960 census listed all secondary communities, most of their particularities or characteristics remain undocumented (Table 1).

Most demographic studies attributed the reduction of the Jewish population to higher levels of female education, lower registration rates in Jewish schools, diminishing religious practices (including fewer Jewish ritual burials and increasing exogamy), late marriages, as well as low fertility (The Jewish People Policy Planning Institute 2005). Recent publications analyzing the 1895 Argentine census (Rubel 2017) provide information concerning other small Jewish communities in the provinces and in the Jewish colonies, for example the recently published study by Klor (2017), which offers extensive data about Argentine Jewry.

**Table 1: Overall population and Jewish population in Argentina and Corrientes, city and province**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Argentina Jewish population</b>	<b>Argentina overall population</b>	<b>Corrientes province population</b>	<b>Corrientes city population</b>	<b>Jewish population in Corrientes city</b>
<b>1895</b>	6,085	4,044,911	239,618	15,781	A few tens
<b>1914</b>	50-100,000	7,903,662	347,055	25,000	# 220
<b>1947</b>	285,800	15,893,811	525,463	74,000 (1941) 80,000 (1947)	* 1,212 city * 1,657 #1,377 province
<b>1960</b>	309,300	20,013,793	533,201	105,915	**1,130 city 1,401 province
<b>1970</b>	286,300	23,364,431	564,147	137,823	#1,500
<b>1980</b>	242,000	27,949,480	661,454	187,757	#1,200
<b>2001</b>	200,000	36,260,130	930,991	328,868	# 600

Sources:

# Ran (2008); Sociedad Cultural Israelita "Scholem Aleijem" (1967).

INDEC (1909, 1915, 1947, 1960, 1990, 2001), Gobierno de la Provincia de Corrientes (2007, 2008).

\* Efron (1943, 1944, 1945). See also Mazo (2014).

\*\* Schmelz and DellaPergola (1974, 1985), DellaPergola (1987). ## Rosenswaike (1960).

### ***Immigration to Israel from Argentina and from Corrientes***

The flow of immigrants from Latin America to Israel, mainly from Argentina, began prior to 1948 and has continued uninterrupted since then. Annual data from the Israel Central Bureau of Statistics (annual publication) show that the number of Argentinean immigrants to Israel was significantly higher than the respective numbers for Canada, whose Jewish population had a similar size, and was one-half of that for the United States, whose Jewish population was about 20 times larger. Between 1948 and 2019, 70,520 Argentines arrived in Israel (Table 2).

**Table 2. New immigrants to Israel from Argentina, Canada and the United States, 1948-2019**

Country of origin	1948-1959	1960-1969	1970-1979	1980-1989	1990-1999	2000-2009	2010-2019	Total
Argentina	4,732	11,976	18,799	11,359	9,239	11,661	2,754	70,520
Canada	632	1,384	4,721	2,201	2,164	2,069	2,571	15,292
U.S.	4,495	12,248	40,780	22,074	18,109	18,379	23,345	140,430

Source: Israel Central Bureau of Statistics (Annual data).

### **Methodology**

The present study was conducted among a group of immigrants from Corrientes who reside in Israel (n=42), selected out of a group of 317 Correntinos immigrants and representing families enlisted by the organization of *Correntinos en Israel*. The fact that an organized updated list of immigrants who came from Corrientes was available made it possible to choose a representative sample of immigrants from Corrientes who settled in Israel from 1948 through 2005. Out of this list, only 200 members had reliable contact information. The final research population (n=42) consisted of 25 male and 17 female immigrants. The average age of the interviewees was quite elderly—68 for men and 65.6 for women. The geographical distribution of the sample is fairly representative of the overall geographical distribution of the entire known population of *Correntinos* in Israel. About 21% of the participants settled in *kibbutzim* or *moshavim*, and 60% of them reside in the coastal region: Ashkelon, Tel Aviv and Haifa.

The research aims were as follows:

1. To discover whether the proportion of immigrants from Corrientes living in Israel was significantly higher than the proportion of the small population of Jews in the province out of all Argentine Jews.
2. To delineate how immigrants from a small Jewish community in Argentina bring with them characteristics from their country of origin and maintain or modify these characteristics through their integration in Israel.

The research involved reconstruction of the past based on retrospective-prospective methodology, recording oral testimonies during personal interviews, and collecting answers to an open-ended and multiple-choice questionnaire. The questionnaire also included closed questions related to demographic data, such as address, name, gender, age, immigration year, marital status, number of children in the family. Eighty percent of the interviewees completed the questionnaire, which was finalized after a pre-test conducted prior to the beginning of this research. Data were collected during the period 2005-2007.

A combined multidisciplinary approach was used based on sociological, demographic and historiographic methodologies in order to collect and analyze qualitative and quantitative data. This information was analyzed and compared with bibliographic sources to cross-check information and reliability (Ran 2008, chapter 2, 34-43). The data also enabled the researcher to explore to what extent the traits of the *Correntinos* resembled or differed from those of other Argentines.

## Research Findings

### *Frequency and intensity of immigration*

The findings highlight several little-known political and historical events, such as Peron's short aborted visit to the city of Corrientes, reflecting a distorted historiography managed by political interests<sup>5</sup>.

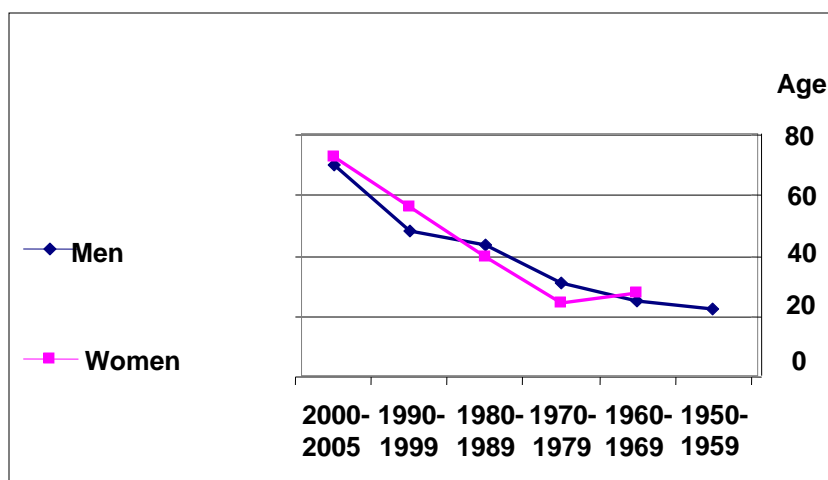
*Correntinos* in Israel are highly representative of their community as at least 40% of the Jewish community of Corrientes migrated to Israel, compared to 20% or less of the overall Jewish Argentine population (Ran 2008, 116). This fact shows a significant difference between the level of migration from a secondary city and that from the central concentrated communities. Furthermore, to date there are no studies on the birthplace of Jews who settled in Buenos Aires, who may originally have come from secondary cities as well.

Table 3 shows the age distribution of our interviewees (n=42), by year of immigration and gender. The higher numbers for the 1960s and the 1970s correspond with the general increase in *aliya* from Argentina during those years. One should keep in mind that the respondents are the survivors among all those who came originally.

**Table 3: Year of immigration to Israel of *Correntino* respondents, by gender**

Gender	1950-1959	1960-1969	1970-1979	1980-1989	1990-1999	2000-2005	Total
Total	7	9	9	4	9	4	42
Men	7	7	4	2	4	1	25
Women	0	2	5	2	5	3	17

Figure 1 shows the interviewees' average age at immigration, by year of arrival in Israel. The mean age for men was 32 and the youngest immigrant was 18, while the mean age for women was 43. From 1960 until 1990, the mean age at migration for both genders increased. That was a period of military and political crisis and not just in Argentina. Israel was involved in wars as well, but that did not affect *Correntinos'* decisions to immigrate to Israel. After 1990, aging did not prevent the emigration of older women: the oldest female immigrant was 80, while the mean age at emigration for men was 74 (Ran 2008, 117-118).



**Figure 1: Respondents' year of immigration to Israel, by age at immigration and gender**

### ***Demographic characteristics***

Based upon my analysis of available data, the Ashkenazi community grew significantly, unlike the diminishing Sephardic community—a trend also identified in other Jewish communities in Argentina (Bejarano 1976). Fifty percent of the parents of the studied population were born in Argentina. Ashkenazi parents who immigrated to Corrientes came mainly from Poland, Russia and Rumania, in descending order.

Most Sephardic parents were born in Argentina, while others arrived from Turkey and Syria. All but one of the interviewees were married. Most families had three children on average (as in the previous generation). More than 97% of the participants in this study were in endogamous marriages. These findings contradict data on Argentine Jewry that show up to 45% exogamic marriages and two or fewer children per family (The Jewish People Policy Planning Institute 2005, 265-276) (Table 4). Interviewees' children or siblings who remained in Argentina had a higher index of exogamy, though lower than the reported Argentinean data.

**Table 4: Average number of children per family, Jewish and non-Jewish population in Corrientes, in Argentina and in studied population of *Correntinos* in Israel.**

Average number of children per family in Corrientes	Average number of children per family of the studied population	Average number of children per family of parents of the studied population	Average number of children per Jewish family in Argentina, 1960
# 3,2	** 2,7	** 3	* 2,2

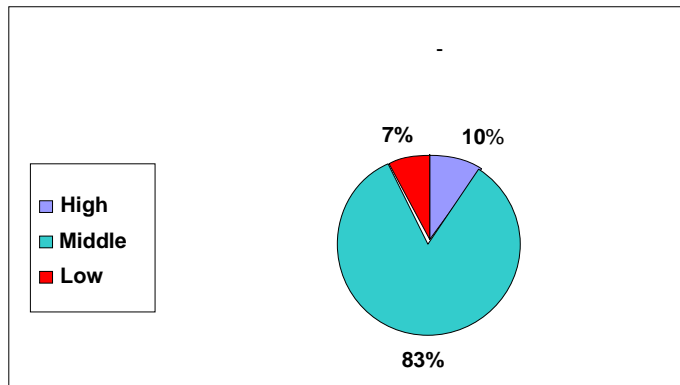
Sources: \* Schmelz and DellaPergola (1974).

\*\* Ran (2008). # INDEC (2001).

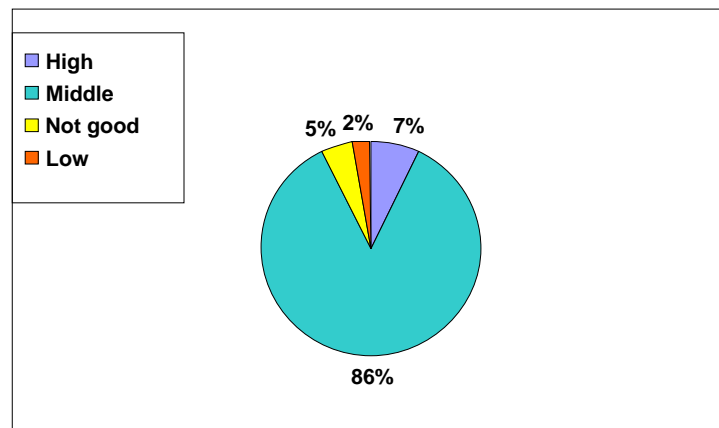


### ***Socioeconomic characteristics***

The studied population of *Correntinos* in Israel did not experience any major changes in their socioeconomic status. They represented the middle and upper classes, both in Corrientes and in Israel (according to classifications based on number of years of study, housing ownership and occupation or profession) (Figures 2 and 3).

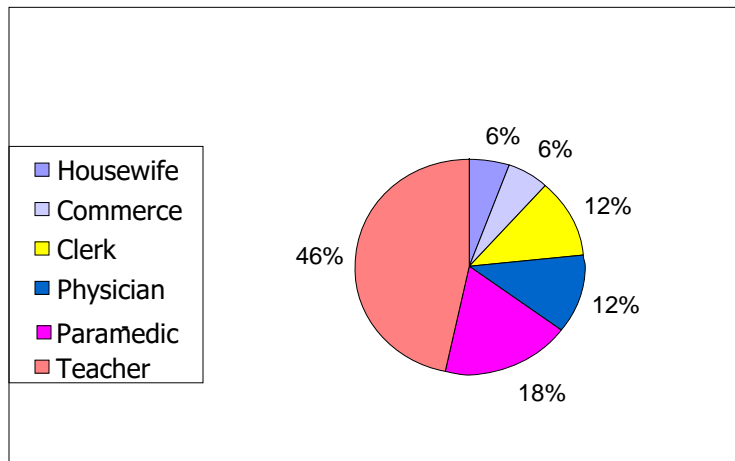


**Figure 2: Socioeconomic status (SES) of interviewed population (n=42) before immigration to Israel**

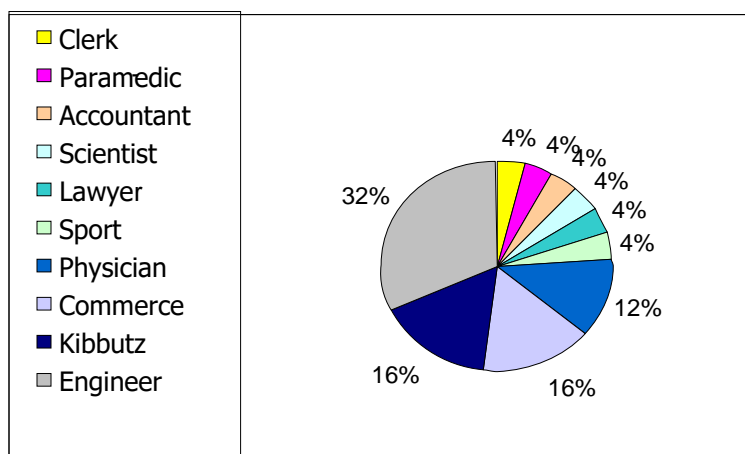


**Figure 3: Socioeconomic status of interviewed population (n=42) after immigration to Israel**

Figures 4 and 5 illustrate the different occupations of Jews from Corrientes by gender, showing a predominantly white-collar composition.



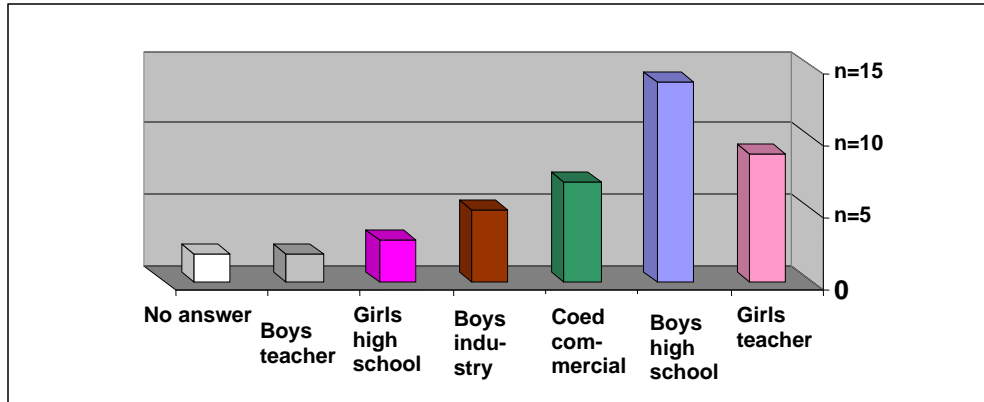
**Figure 4: Occupations of women among the studied population (n=17)**



**Figure 5: Occupations of men among the studied population (n=25)**

### ***Pre-aliyah socialization and social change***

Gender differences related to cultural, political and social influences (Puiggrós and Ossana 1993, Rein 1998), such as the various educational options chosen by parents (Figure 6), reflecting trends in future participation in society. Gender gaps were also found in occupational and professional choices, as well as in age, marital status, and timing of migration. Male parents tended to have more influence on the choices of their female children. Some female interviewees reported that their fathers had asked them to postpone their *Aliyah* until they concluded their studies or got married, while others were requested by their parents to wait for the entire family to immigrate together. This traditional pattern contradicts the pattern displayed by most of the interviewees' mothers, who migrated to Argentina alone, at a young age and single, in charge of their younger siblings.

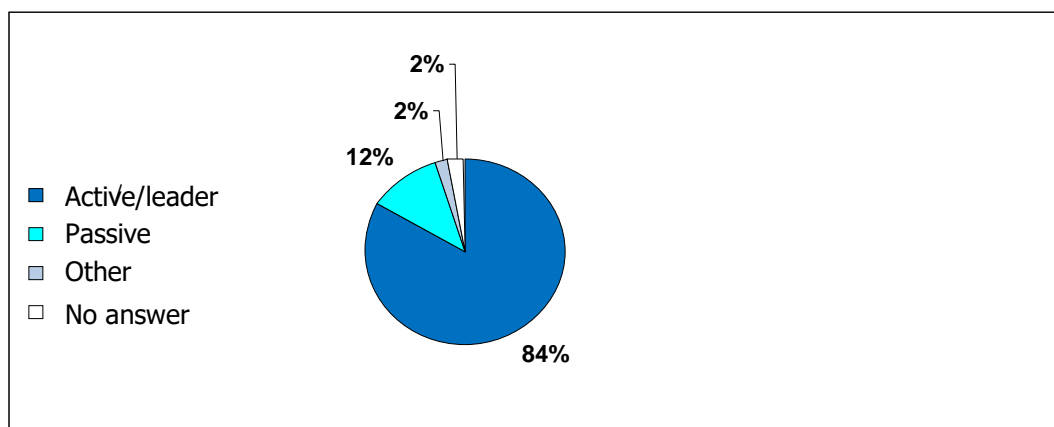


**Figure 6: Gender differences in school choices (n=42)**

At least 60% (n=25) of the studied population reported internal migration before emigration. This can be explained by the location of central Jewish organizations in Buenos Aires, which necessitated increased travel expenses and consumed a lot of time. As a result, some settled near or in Buenos Aires prior to emigration. Moreover, the only international airport and seaport are located in the Buenos Aires area.

Interviewees also reported deciding to work in other Jewish communities as teachers, instructors or leaders of Jewish organizations while taking advantage of their family ties, the proximity of academic institutions and other occupational venues.

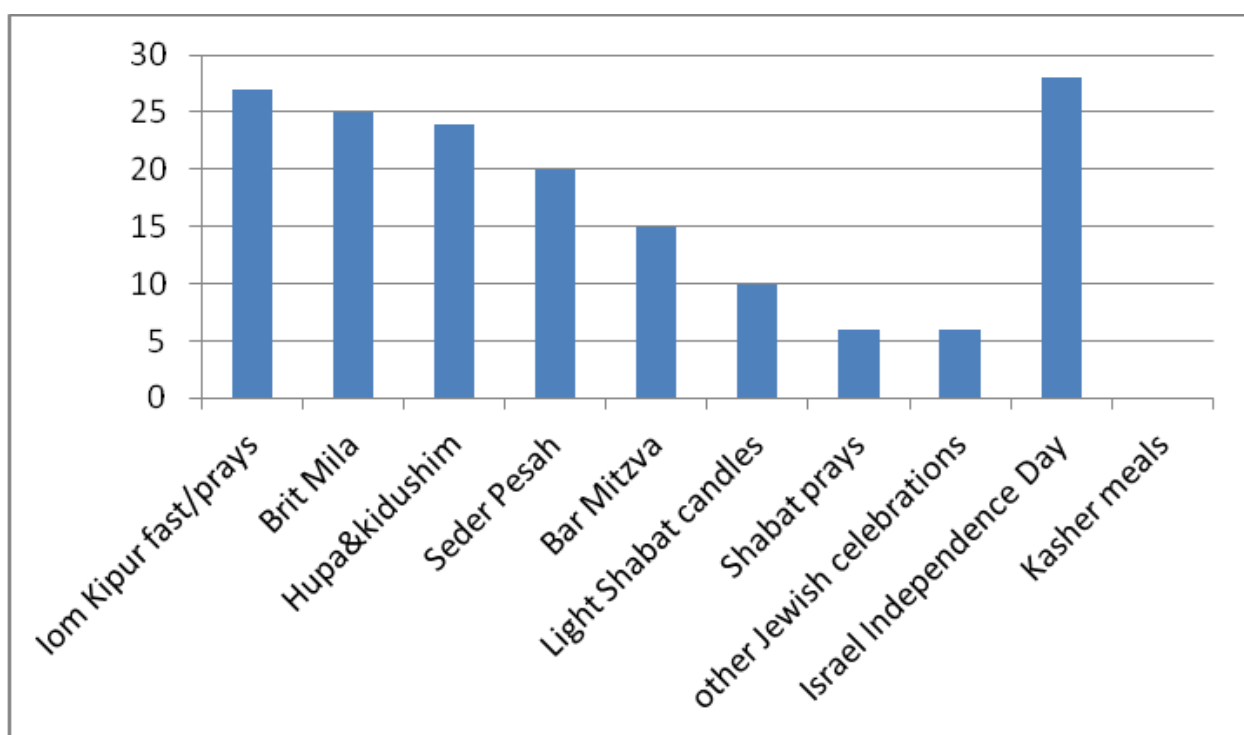
Most *Correntinos* in Israel played an active role in Corrientes' social and cultural arenas, as well as in public and institutional organizations, mainly within the Jewish communities, prior to their emigration (Figure 7). A third of them studied or worked at Nordeste University.



**Figure 7: Jewish community roles of studied population in Corrientes before migration (n=42)**

### ***Jewish identification characteristics***

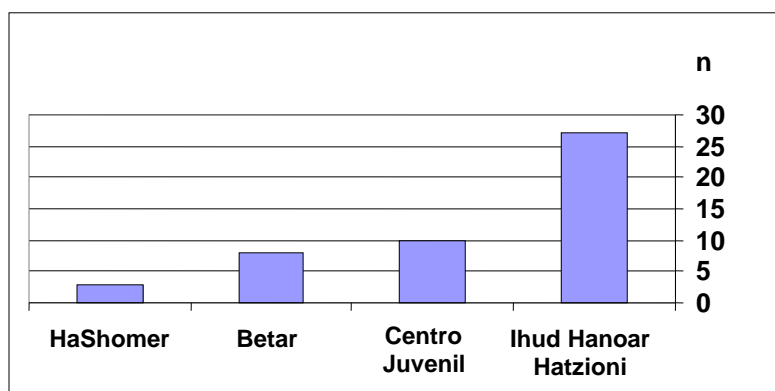
Jewishness cannot be measured simply by counting how many of the 613 Jewish commandments an individual observes. This study found that none of the *Correntinos* was orthodox, and none of them followed a kosher diet in Israel or even before immigration. Although they defined themselves as secular Jews, all of them and all of their children were circumcised, and they married according to Jewish tradition. More than 60% (n=27+) answered yes to the multiple choice question concerning their adherence to religious traditions, such as fasting and praying during Yom Kippur or celebrating Passover and Israel's Independence day. Most of them expressed their longing for celebrating the Jewish holidays in Corrientes, mainly based upon their answers (Ran 2008, 112) (Figure 8).



**Figure 8: Jewish and Israel holidays observed and other religious practices of the studied population - Percentages**

As indicated by the interviewees, in Israel they continued to identify themselves as *Correntinos*, even if only two-thirds of them were actually born in Corrientes. Some arrived at a young age from other Argentine cities, including Buenos Aires. One participant came from Poland. The national Argentine identity was the least apparent in their oral histories, while their local and new national identities in Israel were clearly apparent. Their Jewish and Israeli identities were clearly declared, as was as their identification with and recognition of their teachers and instructors from the youth movements, who had reinforced their personal and collective identities.

The Jewish and Zionist identities of the studied population developed during childhood. The involvement of their parents and the community was crucial. Their oral histories clarified that a byproduct of the non-Jewish environment was the reinforcement of their Jewish and Zionist identities as a reaction to discrimination and lack of identification with Christian activities. Jewish parents established other frameworks for their children to avoid assimilation and to prevent the loss of Jewish identity. More than 90% of the studied population reported participating actively in non-formal educational activities in Corrientes, such as in youth movements, which by the 1970's had become one of the biggest Jewish youth movements<sup>6</sup> in Argentina. As shown in Figure 9, more than 60% (n=27) of the studied population joined the *Ihud Hanoar Hatzioni* movement.



**Figure 9: Membership in youth movements among the studied population (n=42)**

*Correntinos* inherited and acquired values that were embedded either in the image of the modern State of Israel or the image of the old biblical Land of Israel in Asian Mesopotamia. The oral histories of *Correntinos* who chose to settle in gated communities such as *moshavim* or *kibbutzim* indicate that the communal lifestyle was a feature already familiar to some of them. They had experienced living with their extended families in Corrientes in a big household comprising two, three or four related families. Common work facilities and a single family account were some of the characteristics of these family units<sup>7</sup>. In Israel, at least 25% of the interviewees settled among community-oriented populations such as *moshavim* or *kibbutzim*. These findings have not corroborated been by other studies due to the lack of research on this subject.

The revisionists who became *Betar* members or the socialists who chose *HaShomer* or *Ihud* settled in Israel to realize the political ideology of their youth movements. Yet all of them mentioned that nothing remained of these diverse political ideals and that Zionism became the sole feature shared by all.

The quest for Zion constituted part of Jewish family traditions. Taught at school or in youth movements, Zionism became the main reason for the diminishing presence of the Jewish population in Corrientes and the high proportion of *Correntinos* in Israel. At least 86% of interviewees did not speak

Hebrew prior to their arrival in Israel; they spoke Spanish, and 25% also spoke Yiddish. Prior research has indicated that previous knowledge of the receiving country's language is a good predictor of successful integration (Beenstock 1993a and 1993b, Chiswick and Repetto 2000). Despite this fact, the present study indicates that the lack of knowledge of Hebrew before *aliyah* did not jeopardize the chances of these secondary-city immigrants to find jobs within a month to a year after arriving in Israel. *Correntinos* learned to speak Hebrew in Israel and 40% of them studied a third or fourth language, mostly English or French.

### ***Integration patterns***

*Correntinos* exhibited a high capacity to integrate and confront the difficulties of absorption, most of which were due to health, family or work issues. As reported by the interviewees, they needed to cope in Israel as best as they could. Research in Argentina and abroad shows that Jews are more aware of and take better care of mental problems and health issues than others, due to past traumatic experiences. The process of immigration itself is a factor related to personal and family crisis (Ran 2008, 115).

More than 62% of the interviewees considered their first years in Israel as "good" or "very good" ones. Two of them mentioned family, health or economic difficulties. All interviewees returned at least once to visit Corrientes or Argentina, but they did not consider leaving Israel or migrating again.

The *Correntinos* interviewed in this study in Israel were not members of OLEI (Organización de Latinoamericanos en Israel), even though two-thirds of the interviewees reported occasional participation in OLEI social gatherings. Nevertheless, they did not relate OLEI to their absorption period. Family and friends, *kibbutz* or *moshav* representatives, and youth movement emissaries were the main figures who assisted the *Correntinos* by welcoming them to Israel during the first stage of absorption.

*Correntinos* integrated within Israeli society and participated actively in all spheres of life: politics, culture, Zionist movements, education, science and economy, some holding outstanding positions. Their absorption in Israel was peaceful, and most of them maintained contact with Corrientes and its people. They reported their longing for the river Parana and its *costanera*, Corrientes' folk food and music, old friends and the community. In particular, they expressed their nostalgia for the meetings that took place on Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur in both communities and the Simchat Torah celebrations. Additionally, the interviewees mentioned the lack of a similar religious atmosphere in Israel, unlike what they had experienced in Corrientes. Some reported that in Israel everybody celebrated Jewish holidays anyhow.

Most *Correntinos* mentioned discrimination, otherness, alienation and lack of identification with their non-Jewish peers or colleagues while in Argentina. At least 50% of them reported antisemitism in the form of physical violence<sup>8</sup> towards them or as abuse<sup>9</sup> and insults. This led to their isolation within the gates of their communities. Some reported discrimination in schools before and during Peron's regime<sup>10</sup>.

One of the most important and previously unacknowledged findings concerns the fact that close to 75% of the research population mentioned having relatives who were victims of the *Shoah*. More than 80% of the *Correntinos* who participated in this study reported learning about the *Shoah* from their parents,

who maintained transnational ties with Jewish networks and organizations to obtain news on their families left behind. The *Shoah* was also taught in the *shule* or at the youth movement.

### ***Global networks and transnationalism***

With the spread of modern antisemitism, Zionist movements and organizations have provided hope for Jews around the world. From a globalized and transnational perspective measuring the ability to transfer information and people beyond national and international borders, Zionist *Correntinos* helped facilitate immigration and movement of relatives, materials and documents. They established international channels and remained connected.

Corrientes is a single isolated example of an organized community whose members connected through international networks with other co-nationals, including via non-Jewish organizations, in order to acquire, send or buy items or exchange news concerning the destiny of Jewish communities in Europe. By studying the various legal or illegal methods employed to locate and rescue survivors and to exchange information and materials in an official or semi-illegal way by cooperating<sup>11</sup> with local, regional and international agencies, we can point to the different stages of transnational enterprises, which can be measured by economic, political and social investments.

### **Concluding remarks**

The findings of this study show that Argentine immigrants in Israel are not a homogenous group. Indeed, among this group of immigrants, the representative size of the studied population from Corrientes was twice or more than that of all Argentines in Israel taken together.

The parents of the studied population, who were either born in Argentina or who arrived from Eastern Europe and Asia, developed a strong sense of group solidarity with common goals. Despite their lack of religious orthodox practices, they maintained their Jewish and Zionist identities through educational measures, endogamous marriages and a higher number of children per family. Neither secular behavior nor assimilation was responsible for the shrinking size of the Jewish community of Corrientes, but rather emigration. More than half the studied population reported antisemitic experiences and more than two-thirds reported that somebody in their families was a victim of the Shoah.

A good command or previous knowledge of Hebrew was not found to be indicative of an easier absorption process in the studied population. On the contrary, lack of Hebrew knowledge did not affect their ability to integrate more quickly and better than most researched migrants.

The Asian Mesopotamia is referred to metaphorically in Chapter 15 in the Book of Genesis as the territory given by God to Abraham extending from the river of Egypt until the great river, the Euphrates river. The Argentine Mesopotamia is an emblem for describing the *Correntinos*, who lived mainly along the Paraná River, isolated among Christian society and far away from the main Jewish population centers of Argentina. The participants in this study group were nurtured at home by their parents and inspired by

their extended family and their community until their *aliyah*. While they have never been in the public eye in Israel, they contributed to their chosen land while remaining attached to their place of origin in Corrientes.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Arie Abir, Head of The Jewish Agency Delegation, phone interview, 22 January 2008, by F. Ran on the proportion or distribution of immigrants from Argentina in Israel by city of origin: "Up to 2003 the situation was that 35% of all olim from Argentina came from the provinces."

<sup>2</sup> D.G. "en el salón se ponían los bancos y nos sentábamos todos los chicos judíos, y se daban clases, desgraciadamente de idish...Ivrit era *sfat a Kodesh* y no se podía....primer marco educacional fue la escuela con el maestro Rubin...vivencias muy lindas, ...hay chicos que estudiaban inglés, chicos que estudiaban dibujo y nosotros estudiábamos idish...todo un acontecimiento."; Goldstein (1993).

<sup>3</sup> M.T.: "la colectividad, mamá era muy activa en la WIZO y para hacer algo en la Sociedad armó para los chicos la Biblioteca Infantil en la casa y cuando se levantó el Estado y empezaron a llegar *shlijim* de *Tnuot* y propuso entregarles la *sifria*, la organización para que hagan una *Tnuat Noar* y así empezó el *Dror* en casa."; I.T.M.: "mamá agarró la WIZO infantil que ella ídem a había creado y que tenía una pieza en casa y la *sifria* en casa y no recuerdo qué *sheliaj* vino de Buenos Aires... hubo un *tekes en el* 45 o 46, estaba Angel Zaskin, el que estaba en el *Ihud*, que *irguen* y pasaron toda la WIZO infantil, se creó el *Dror*...al

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principio actividades en casa y después en el salón, así que nosotros mamamos todo el tiempo *tzionut*,... *afilu* si salí de la *tnua*...seguimos."

<sup>4</sup> H. B.: "era muy amigo con *goim*, ...yo jugaba al fútbol en el equipo de...la Iglesia Catedral... contra el Saleciano (colegio secundario cristiano y de curas)...tenía que pasar para ir...a jugar,...por la iglesia, y...tiene que santificar...me decían, no te preocupes."

<sup>5</sup> Y.F.: "todos los del gremio Metalúrgico teníamos que ir a la costanera a firmar presencia...sería el año 53...Perón viajaba a Asunción en barco y Perón tenía que bajar en Corrientes....había una manifestación muy grande en contra de Perón y le recomendaron a Perón que no baje y él saludó desde ahí del barco y siguió adelante, yo estaba ahí adelante en la costanera. El que no firmaba presencia tendría algún problema luego. El pueblo...no estaba en contra de él. Los autonomistas ...eran contrarios."

<sup>6</sup> R. M. "entré de chiquito al *Ken Palmah*, hasta el año 1970...estuve en la *Tnuá* como *hanij*, *madrij* y *maskir*, *el ken* llegó a tener *mifkadim* con cienes de chicos, una cantidad muy grande, toda la cancha de basket llena...era uno de los *kenim* más grandes de la Argentina, uno de los pocos que quedaron, el *Palmah* de Corrientes fue un semillero de *olim*."

<sup>7</sup> P. B. "algo que ocurrió en mi niñez y influyó en toda mi vida: ... mis padres, porque siempre fue *shutafut*... sociedad, mi abuelo...David Blanck, él y toda su familia, hijos casados, ...nietos,... todos vivieron en una casa grande con sirvientas,... cuando mi padre y su hermano se casaron con dos hermanas,...hicieron una casa grande y un...negocio en sociedad y ...las mujeres una casa de moda ...una sola cuenta."

<sup>8</sup> D. F.K.: "hice la escuela Centenario,...2do. grado, 8 años y allí fue mi primer drama de judía: ...una de las nenas,...cosas que me fijaron el futuro de venir a Israel, pienso yo, me grita: "Fleshler, ah! vos sos judía. Uds. mataron a Cristo"...peleando las criaturas y con una Gillette me corta acá en la muñeca y hasta ahora tengo la cicatriz, chiquita y vengo a casa llorando cuento a mis padres...y enseguida me anotan en la *shule*...para ir a la tarde y sentirme un poco mejor y allí encuentro a chicas como Femy Rabinovich...que están también en la escuela centenario y...en los recreos me siento mucho más protegida...y entro en los movimientos juveniles. El *Ihud Hanoar Halutzi* y estuve allí hasta los 17 años."

<sup>9</sup> Ch.F.: "en la hora de religión nos separaban y nos daban clase de moral, me molestaba...pero me acostumbré, para mí era natural ser judío y ser distinto,...me decían ruso...cortado,...no iba al baño...que no vean que me cortaron,...la secundaria fue más fácil."; J.T.S.: "Siempre hubo antisemitismo en Corrientes, yo lo viví, era criatura y estaba en la Escuela Normal de Maestras...cada vez que había un problema: 'Judía de mierda'."

<sup>10</sup> B. S.G. "en la escuela...cantaba el Himno peronista, se estudiaba La Razón de mi vida...15 años fui maestra suplente,...toda la época peronista y ...murió Evita, teníamos que recorrer en la casa de Gobierno...nos obligaban a usar una cinta negra e ir alrededor de un cajón, como de Evita, y nos obligaban a eso...sentí bastante el antisemitismo en la escuela también,...en la reunión de personal a alguna se le ocurría decir 'Ah, ese judío de mierda' y ...todo eso duele."; M.T. "La Razón de mi Vida, había clase de moral y religión,...ir a moral,...perder el tiempo,...se cantaba el Ave María,...'judío de mierda'."

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<sup>11</sup> M.T.: "el hermano mayor de papá...fue a Argentina, tenía tres hijas, ...vino la guerra y la mujer con las tres hijas las llevaron a Auchwitz,...dos chicas que alcanzó a tirar se escaparon por los montes, cada una por su lado y una fue recogida por los *partisanim*...se quedó con ellos y se casó con uno de ellos,...y está acá en Israel...la otra era muy linda y sabía muy bien alemán, del secundario y era en Polonia y se colgó una cruz y se hizo pasar por cristiana y enseñaba alemán porque todos querían saber alemán y cuando sospechaban se iba a otro pueblo y así pasó la guerra y después de la guerra empezó a averiguar y a conectarse y lograron hablar con papá y con el padre de ella que estaba en Corrientes... no se podía entrar a Argentina y lograron venir al Paraguay por medio de un judío,... papá quería extorsionar para papeles para traerla y por medio de unos amigos, conocidos de papá, la familia Von Fritz, alemanes, que vivían en Paraguay arreglaron para recibirla y ellos son los que adoptaron a Stroessner como hijo, ellos lo criaron, esa familia la ayudó. En esa época no era Presidente todavía, pero era... la persona más fuerte ahí para ayudarlos, cuando supieron que se perdieron o le robaron los papeles, y por eso querían extorsionar a papá, él mismo fue a recibirla a ella al aeropuerto y la ayudó...Guta que vino a Corrientes con papeles falsificados."

I. K.: (my translation from Hebrew) "at home they spoke about 'there,' in Europe, in Yiddish, I knew Yiddish from home... And school...my grandparents were probably killed...they didn't speak a lot and we didn't ask... my father participated... helping to bring Jews that survived ...due to the geographical location of Corrientes, near Paraguay....that was a secret."