The Activism of Rabbi Marshall Meyer
in the Period of the Argentinian Junta,
1976-1983

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Introduction

The years 1976-1983 were horrifying ones for the Jewish community of Argentina as a whole. They were the years of a military dictatorship, referred to as the junta, which was responsible for the disappearance of tens of thousands of Argentinians, who suffered torture and imprisonment, death, or unknown fates.\(^1\) The victims, known as the desaparecidos (the disappeared, specifically referring to those whose fates were unknown), left a gaping hole in the country in the wake of the junta’s downfall, and the tales of the detenidos (the detained), survivors of vicious and brutal torture in state prisons, scarred and horrified the nation. For the Jewish victims, both those who survived and those who vanished, the tragedy was, according to DAIA (the Argentinian Jewish Community Centers Association), five- to twelve-fold; DAIA reported a rate of disappearance of Jewish victims 5-12 times higher than their representation in the Argentinian population (Braylan 9). In a country where Jewish organizations felt little ability to impact the situation, few had the courage to stand up, protest the injustice of the junta’s imprisonments and murders, and work to free those who had been kidnapped and detained. One of those very few, daring to stand up despite the danger, was Rabbi Marshall Meyer, an American Conservative rabbi who had taken a pulpit in Argentina twenty years before. Not only was he the member of the Jewish community most involved in rescuing the victims of the regime, he was one of the most prominent protesters and victim advocates from any religious/ethnic group in Argentina. This led to his being recognized by the only foreign-born

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\(^{1}\) The most often cited numbers (such as by the New York Times [https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/12/us/children-of-argentinas-disappeared-reclaim-past-with-help.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/12/us/children-of-argentinas-disappeared-reclaim-past-with-help.html)) are 10,000-30,000 disappeared and assumed killed, with many more detained who survived/were released. While it is almost certain that 30,000 people did not disappear without a trace (the Argentinian government’s current number is 12,000), the number of those killed or presumed killed by the junta (including desaparecidos) is probably about 30,000. [http://www.yendor.com/vanished/how-many.html](http://www.yendor.com/vanished/how-many.html)
member of CONADEP, the government commission tasked with investigating the junta, which produced *Nunca Mas* (Never Again), a volume containing heart wrenching testimony and statistics by and about the junta’s victims; in addition, he was given the highest honor by the Argentinian government to a non-citizen, the Order of the Liberator San Martin. This study will examine the situation of Argentina’s Jews in the years of the junta’s regime and Meyer’s efforts in general to release Argentine-Jewish prisoners from the junta’s cells, and will then focus specifically on his efforts in two cases, one renowned and one less so: that of Jacobo Timerman, the noted journalist, and that of Debora Benchoam, a young girl who spent a fifth of her life in prison for no crime.

**I: The Junta, 1976-1983**

In theory, according to the junta’s own mythology, its rise was due to a national struggle against left-wing guerrilla terrorists, the *montoneros* and the ERP, who had been reacting against the government of Isabel Peron, the widow of long-time Argentinian populist ruler Juan Domingo Peron. The nation itself, while technically a long-established constitutional democracy, had had 21 administrations (19 presidents, taking into account Juan Peron’s three separate terms in office) in the 46 years before the junta stepped in, with Congress dissolved or inactive for 27 of those years. Only two of the twelve administrations which were elected and served constitutionally completed a six-year term, and the average administration lasted only two years. (Lewis 3). In such a tumultuous country, in which people thought of themselves less as rightist/leftist and more as Peronist/anti-Peronist, violence was used both by the montoneros and Isabel Peron’s government in order to further their goals; however, while Peron’s violence was
seen more as extrajudicial murder for the purpose of control, the montoneros and ERP specifically sought to terrorize the nation, with an elaborate power structure and attention-grabbing schemes involving both kidnapping for funds and murder to make a statement against the police. (Lewis 97-103) When a March 24, 1976 coup replaced Isabel Peron with a junta led by General Jose Rafael Videla, the regime immediately began a campaign of terror and disappearances, which they justified as a means to root out the montoneros, ERP, and other leftist terror groups. While the junta admitted to a 10-15% false positive rate in its imprisonment, human rights organizations believe that in fact only a tiny fraction of those imprisoned and murdered were ever connected to a leftist terror group, with the majority merely generically leftist (often university attendees) or simply connected with those who were, whether by blood, friendship or religion; or simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. (Lewis 148) ²

Ernesto Sabato, in his prologue to Nunca Mas, the official Argentinian government investigation into what occurred between 1976-1983, points out that while several other countries at that time were engaged in a battle of terror between the right and the left, no other country “abandon[ed] the principles of law in its fight against these terrorists…[t]he armed forces responded to the terrorists’ crimes with a terrorism far worse than the one they were combating” (Sabato et al, “Prologue”). Indeed, Nunca Mas is a devastating combination of statistics (one pie chart breaks down the locations where disappeared victims were kidnapped, with 62% taken in their own homes and 24.6% taken from the streets (Sabato et al, “Abduction”), descriptions, and anecdotes, drawing not only a broader picture of the operations of the junta’s secret police and detention camp systems, but also describing individual incidents.

² This paragraph and the next are from an earlier essay entitled “The Argentine Junta and the Jews, 1976-1983” written as a term paper for my International Crimes class, Fall 2017, Prof Douglas Burgess.
While *Nunca Mas*, which was written in 1984, the year after the fall of the junta, only lists about 9,000 known desaparecidos, as mentioned, the number is now known to be much higher.

The report describes the process by which the junta made people “disappear”- a sequence which the report described as “abduction-disappearance-torture” (Sabato et al, “General Introduction”). These had previously been practiced by Isabel Peron’s government on a limited number of people, but was vastly escalated to the tens of thousands upon the installation of the junta- and, unlike in other countries with abduction of suspects, was done in utter secrecy, including a refusal to take responsibility for the disappearance or to give information about the kidnapped suspect after his/her arrest. Abductions were generally (in 62% of cases) carried out at night or in early morning, and often on the weekend, making it difficult for family members to report the kidnappings. Groups of disguised militants in special task forces (sometimes as well as official police) ranging in size from five to, in rare cases, as many as fifty burst into homes with powerful weapons, taking residents of the home hostage (setting what they called a “mousetrap”) until their targets were found and abducted, and often ransacking the home. Abductees were also frequently apprehended at their places of employment and even simply walking down the street. In some cases, torture and interrogation of abductees, or even of their hostage family members, already began in the abductee’s home. However, in most cases, the abductees were usually “disappeared”- colloquially called “*chupada,*” or “swallowed up”- in cars which the militants brought with them for this purpose. They were bound and blindfolded (sometimes even with their own clothing), in a process called “walling up,” in the back seats or trunks of these cars, to be brought to the place where they would be initially imprisoned. (Sabato et al, “Abduction”)
Abductees were then brought to their next stop, which was usually a Secret Detention Center, or SDC. These centers were usually in police stations, but could also be in army barracks, preexisting detention centers, and even civilian buildings; the most famous was ESMA, the Navy Petty Officers’ School (Sabato et al, “Location of the Secret Detention Centres”). They were staffed by police officers and prison officials, under the supervision of military personnel (Sabato et al, “Personnel”). In the SDCs, the prisoners were often kept hooded, with no spatial awareness, as part of the “walling up” process meant to disorient and dehumanize prisoners; trapped in a sitting position for hours at a time with no vision, they relied on sounds and smells to determine their surroundings (Sabato et al, “‘Walling Up’”). Prisoners were left in horrendous sanitary condition, often living in their own excrement and urine if prison guards refused to take them to the bathroom (Sabato et al, “Hygiene”). The filth and mistreatment often led to the cause and exacerbation of many health problems in prisoners, including the interruption of women’s menstrual cycles (Sabato et al, “Health conditions”). Female prisoners were nearly guaranteed to be sexually assaulted, as were some male prisoners (Lewis 152).

The next stage was torture. This could begin immediately upon apprehension in the abductee’s home (Sabato et al, “Abduction”), but generally would begin upon the prisoner’s being brought to the SDC. There was an initial period of torture in order to “‘soften up’” the new inmates and dehumanize them, even before there was any interrogation to discover whether the prisoner was actually a person of interest who could give them information. A person could merely be, as an example in Nunca Mas describes, a visitor in the apartment of someone who is in the address book of a person of interest, and, only due to this terrible fortune, be abducted and then tortured at the SDC. Generally, in these cases of absolute mistaken identity, such prisoners
would be released. Those who were determined to be persons of interest, however, were then taken to what were colloquially called “operating rooms,” where they were subjected to extreme brutality in the name of interrogation into their subversive activities. Often, the names extracted from prisoners during their torture sessions formed the list of those who would next be abducted. (Sabato et al, “Torture”) The actual tortures themselves were barbaric.³ Prisoners were often beaten, sexually assaulted, waterboarded, and burned, among many other methods. One of the most common methods was the use of the *picana*, an electric prod which was often applied to the victim’s genitals. Prisoners were also subject to psychological torture, such as mock executions. While the vast majority of tortures were done by low-ranking members of the armed forces, even some high-level officials, such as General Ramon Camps and Admiral Emilio Massera, would administer tortures themselves. (Lewis 152-153)

Many of those kidnapped who did not die from torture were subsequently executed. Though the junta had technically reinstated the death penalty in Argentina at this time, in reality the thousands of executions carried out were all extralegal murders- no prisoner was ever condemned to death in a court of law (Lewis 157). The most common method of execution was via firing squad; many of these murders were committed in pits at the La Perla prison, where prisoners would be “transferred” (to use the feared colloquial term) from prisons and SDCs (Sabato et al, “Mass executions by firing squad”). However, other prisoners were executed in such a way as to set up the illusion that they were killed in a shootout with police forces, with the junta seeking to imply that the deaths were due to legitimate provocation by dissidents. In both of these cases, executions would be justified as prisoners being shot while trying to escape.

³ I will provide a list of often used tortures here, but as a general rule in this paper I will not go into detail. In these matters there is always a risk of being gratuitously gory in one’s description, and many of the details of the tortures are horrifying enough that this is a concern.
Another method of execution was even more viscerally horrifying; prisoners would be drugged, hailed into airplanes above the Atlantic Ocean, and shoved out into the ocean still alive. According to one military official who participated in two of these flights, he was told by his superiors at ESMA that this method of execution was a “‘Christian form of death.’” (Lewis 157-158) No matter what the method of execution, the junta, by and large, preferred to hide the bodies of those murdered. In its analysis of the situation, Nunca Mas lists several reasons for this: covering its tracks, prolonging the horror of uncertainty in the victims’ loved ones, and enforcing obedience in victims’ families by allowing them to believe that their actions could still impact the safety and well-being of their relatives behind bars. (Sabato et al, “Why did the bodies disappear?”)

One of the most horrifying and well-known of the junta’s crimes was its treatment of pregnant prisoners, and subsequently their babies. Pregnant women in the junta’s SDCs and prisons, who already had endured the tortures inflicted there, would give birth to babies in prison, only to be separated from their newborn children, and subsequently murdered. Some of these women were brought to the Campo de Mayo hospital, where they were tied to their beds and blindfolded for the duration of their labor and delivery (usually by Caesarian section); subsequently, the babies would be taken away and the mothers would be drugged and dropped from airplanes. (Sabato et al, “The Campo de Mayo Hospital”) In other cases, women gave birth in the prisons and SDCs themselves, in sordid conditions and, sometimes, without medical attention. The babies would be taken away after a few days, with promises from the guards that they would be brought to the prisoners’ families. In fact, these babies (as well as those born in the hospital) were often given for adoption by couples who were part of the military regime and
could not have children of their own. The mothers were nearly always killed. (Sabato et al, “Births in captivity”)

Even for those political prisoners in official government facilities, where some were transferred after leaving the SDCs, conditions were scarcely improved. At the Villa Devoto prison, for example, prisoners were locked “in positions of complete isolation” in their cells for 19 hours a day, with one hour given to manual work and brief indoor and outdoor recess, during which they cleaned their own cells and showered. During recesses, prisoners were allowed one heavily censored newspaper. Visitors (only family, clergy, diplomats and sometimes lawyers) were allowed twice a week, one hour for men and another hour for women, but regulations were instituted to make it as difficult as possible to visit, such as by only publicizing the dates of the visiting hours two days in advance. Medical treatment was often neglected, even when prisoners were in serious medical distress. (Benchoam, “Testimony to CONADEP”)

Throughout all of this, the population of Argentina was, by and large, silent. It was assumed by many Argentinians that the government would not make mistakes when arresting dissidents, as they were already aware that the junta had been assembling lists of left-wing activists for years. Therefore, bystanders often assumed that those who were captured and imprisoned must have been guilty of some crime. (Lewis 149) In addition, public institutions such as the Catholic Church refused to take a stand against the junta’s actions, and, indeed, Catholicism was often used as a justification by many of the junta’s members for their actions. There were several Argentinian human rights groups which formed to stand up for the plight of the victims, but perhaps the most prominent was a group formed largely of relatives of the disappeared, Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo (the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo), whose constant
militant protest of the government’s abduction, detention and murder of their children was “initially dismissed, then ridiculed, then later on brutally prosecuted” as they attempted to discover the truth about their children’s fates. (Navarro 241-258)

II: The Jewish Community of Argentina and Anti-Semitism

While scattered Jews emigrated to Argentina in the first half of the nineteenth century, the community did not truly become a popular destination for Jews fleeing Europe until the very end of the century, due to a combination of the Argentinian government’s creation of incentives for European immigration, the easing of Catholic influence on the nation’s laws, and, of course, the change in circumstances for European Jews at that point in history (Laiken Elkin 32-34).

Although these factors came into play in the 1870s-1880s, it still took more than a decade for significant influxes of Jews to enter the country. While, even at the early stage before mass immigration, elements of public opinion in Argentina protested the entry of Jews, this did not prevent massive influxes of Jews from entering the country at the turn of the twentieth century, and, overall, they were treated in the same manner as any other immigrants and were able to self-organize and become involved in national politics and culture. (Laiken Elkin 53-57)

However, even during this relatively open period of immigration and acceptance of Jews into Argentinian culture, their reputation was greatly tarnished due to the participation of some of their community members in forced prostitution; although Jews were only a small fraction of the pimps (or “caftans,” as they were called) in Buenos Aires, and although the Argentinian Jewish community went to lengths far beyond any other immigrant community in censoring and
banning its pimps, the overall community still suffered a stain on their reputation in the eyes of the rest of the country (Laiken Elkin 96-98).

After WWI, Argentina was one of many countries across the world to restrict its immigration policies. While part of the reason for this was the influence of the United States, which, in the early 1920s, put severe limitations on immigration (Laiken Elkin 77), Argentina was also influenced by the Red Scare, wanting to limit the immigration of “labor agitators.” In 1919, Jews, who were so identified with Russia that an alternate term for them was “rusos” and who were often involved in socialist labor movements, were targeted by a surge of nationalist fervor. During what became known as the “semana tragica,” or week of tragedy, an ironworks strike led to a pogrom against the Jewish community in Buenos Aires, perpetrated by mobs of Argentinians which included the members of the youth movement Guardia Blanca, who were led by Rear Admiral Manuel Domecq Garcia. Hundreds of people, the vast majority Jews, were killed and wounded, and many Jews were arrested on charges (soon shown to be baseless) of revolutionary incitement. When a delegation from the Jewish community urged President Hipolito Yrigoyen to call upon the Argentinian people to stop the violence, he agreed that anti-Semitic violence was un-Argentine and should be stopped, but disapproved of the Jews identifying as their own group rather than simply as individual members of the Argentinian community. Judith Laiken Elkin attributes, in part, to the semana tragica a feeling that would linger among Argentinian Jews for decades: that it was dangerous for them (more than for others) to represent themselves politically, and that the entire community could be “held hostage” by the actions of only a few. This feeling discouraged the mainstream Argentinian
Jewish community to distance itself from radical political activity and activism, and encouraged a non-confrontational relationship with the government. (Laiken Elkin 98-100)

There had always been an undercurrent of Catholic anti-Semitism in Argentina, encouraged by priests who spoke out against Jews in churches and on street corners (Laiken Elkin 99), and there had always been a perception by the elites of Jews being “other,” threats to a stable Argentinian society. This undercurrent remained steady in the ensuing decades, though there were no real expressions of it. Argentina was seen by many as sympathizing with the Nazis during WWII due to its determined neutrality, as well as a long-standing influence of the German army on that of Argentina (Rein 69) and general Argentinian Germanophilia (Rein 104). However, Raanan Rein argues that, despite a collective memory of Juan Domingo Peron, who came into power at the end of WWII as a Nazi sympathizer who equated Catholicism with being an Argentinian, in fact, the first Peronist period was, overall, a peaceful “golden age” for the Jews of Argentina (Rein 100-102).

It was in 1960 that anti-Semitism returned to the fore after the kidnapping of Adolf Eichmann from Buenos Aires by the Israeli Mossad; and, in fact. Rein calls the two years between Eichmann’s capture and execution “the hardest… since the semana tragica” (Rein 173). A feeling arose among many Argentinians that the Jews held a dual loyalty, to both Argentina and Israel, and, therefore, could not be trusted as true Argentinians; this, combined with various socioeconomic and political factors, led to the rise of Tacuara and other right-wing groups which viewed the Jews as scapegoats for all of the country’s problems. There were episodes of anti-Semitic violence, including attacks at high schools and at a Zionist summer camp, as well as bombings of Jewish-owned buildings; these attacks led to the creation of a Jewish school and the
formation of Jewish self-defense groups. (Rein 173-181) The Argentinian government under Arturo Frondizi largely chose to ignore Tacuara for political reasons, preferring instead to prioritize the war on Communism, despite pressure from the United States to resolve the situation (Rein 182-184). After the fall of Frondizi’s government and the rise of one even more open to anti-Semitism, which coincided with the execution of Eichmann in Israel, tens more anti-Semitic incidents were logged in Argentina, with the most famous case being that of Graciela Sirota, a Jewish girl who was abducted, tortured, tattooed with a swastika and burned with cigarette butts; she was told that her attack was revenge for Eichmann’s execution. The aftermath of her attack was simply the unearthing of even more institutionalized anti-Semitism, with the federal chief of police claiming that the attack had been perpetrated by leftist Jews trying to undermine Argentinian society, and with many claiming that the Jews were simply using the incident to gain sympathy and power. This led to massive protests by Argentinian Jewry, including a mass commercial strike in which even many non-Jewish Argentinians participated, and also initiated a permanent trend toward immigration of Argentinian Jews to Israel. (Rein 186-192)

The US State Department, in a six page document published in October 1980, discussed the presence of anti-Semitism as a force in Argentina. The analysis was initiated after a television interview on a popular program (on a government-run channel) of a member of the Argentinian Jewish community, Jaime Rozenblum, by the TV host Enrique Llamas de Madariaga (incidentally, the brother of General Videla’s press secretary). In the interview, Llamas conducted “an inquisition of Rozenblum” with questions which doubted Jewish loyalty to Argentina, doubted the existence of poor Jews, and, to further quote the State Department
document, “reflected a belief that Jews are essentially Fagins- loyal only to the State of Israel-who probably deserved whatever treatment they have received over the years.” The condoning of this program by the Argentinian government led to an analysis of anti-Semitism in Argentina which determined that while the government itself was not repressing Jews (and, in fact, in some respects Jews had more freedoms than in previous governments), it did little to nothing as far as discouraging the “relatively high level of popular anti-Semitism” in the country, even “through omission, tolerat[ing] a level of overt, active anti-Semitism within its ranks.” To the State Department, the anti-Semitism in Argentina was “of a nineteenth century variety,” a kind which the United States and Europe had left behind and which was seen as a sign of Argentina’s backward conservatism: while nonviolent, it promoted nationalism and prejudices against Jews, amongst other minorities in Argentina. While this kind of anti-Semitism was ingrained in the country’s fabric, it contributed as well to smaller groups within Argentina having something of a more 20th century anti-Semitism- more violent, as had manifested itself in the 1960s. The report confirmed that there was no restriction whatsoever on freedom of religion for Jews, but that unofficially the government “through omission, tolerates a level of overt, active anti-Semitism within [its] ranks.” (“Anti-Semitism in Argentina”)

One of the most devastating effects of this anti-Semitic attitude was the “special treatment” given to Jewish prisoners of the junta. As mentioned in the introduction, Jews were abducted by the junta in disproportionate numbers; however, this may not have been entirely due to anti-Semitism, but also due to disproportionate representation of Jews in the liberal intelligentsia, which was targeted by the junta (Kahan 302). However, though this was the official explanation for the large number of Jewish abductees, there is reason to believe that Jews
must have been specifically targeted, as their increased numbers could not be accounted for through this explanation alone (Kaufman 490). Nunca Mas reported cases where Jewish homes would be raided for address books from which the names of other Jews would be extracted to be abducted and interrogated later (Sabato et al, “Anti-Semitism”). Besides for the traditional anti-Semitism of Argentina, which attributed to Jews a dual loyalty to Israel and blamed them for the country’s economic problems, there was a conspiracy theory popular among many of the junta’s members which alleged the existence of the “Andinia Plan,” a scheme in which Israel wanted to annex and form a Jewish nation-state in Patagonia (Braylan et al, 15). In addition, Catholic prejudices often led guards and interrogators to believe that they were being good Christians by targeting Jews (Sabato et al, “Antisemitism”).

Both during abductions and in captivity, guards would often target Jews in brutal and violent ways. In many cases, Holocaust analogies were deliberately invoked by guards influenced by pro-Nazi officials in the leading ranks of the junta; guards would call themselves Nazis and Gestapo, hang photos of Hitler and swastikas on the wall, force Jews to say “Heil Hitler” and attempt to draw and even tattoo swastikas on Jewish prisoners’ skin (Braylan et al, 14-15). In fact, this even worked in the opposite direction; one prison inmate of German descent who was “Aryan looking” actually received preferential treatment from prison guards (Sabato et al, “Antisemitism”). In interrogations, Jews would be asked questions specifically about Israel and Jewish conspiracies (such as about the Andinia Plan). They would also be targeted with specific tortures, such as the rectoscope⁴, and were often targeted as well for beatings and humiliations by guards who specifically sought out prisoners with Jewish names; this was so

⁴ See footnote 3- a description of the rectoscope is available in Nunca Mas, “Antisemitism” (Sabato et al)
prevalent that many Jews claimed to be Polish Catholics in order to avoid this extra torture. (Sabato et al, “Antisemitism”) Jewish prisoners could be targeted for torture which would be considered too barbaric for a typical prisoner; while guards generally did not torture pregnant women, one Jewish woman was tortured while six months pregnant because she was Jewish, and she subsequently lost her pregnancy (Kaufman 483).

The disproportionate effects on Jews were not just noted and reported by the Jewish victims themselves, but also by the non-Jewish prisoners alongside them, human rights organizations which investigated the junta’s activities, and, in turn, the American news media and government. In the 1979 Congressional Record, Senator Ted Kennedy placed not only a speech which he delivered about the plight of Argentinians under the junta, but also many articles which were published by various human rights organizations and newspapers. The Council of Hemispheric Affairs noted the disappearance of 600 Israelis under the regime, a significant number due to the massive disproportionality of Jewish disappearances. The Washington Office on Latin America discussed the anti-Semitic tendencies of the regime, and that while the junta held it as a point of pride that in 1977 it cracked down on propagation of anti-Semitic material, for a year prior to this it was disseminated completely openly in Argentina, implying a tacit sanction by the junta’s censors. An uncited news article wrote about the drive to free Jacobo Timerman, with a great emphasis on the interrogation about Zionism and anti-Semitic conspiracies and a comparison of the junta to the Nazis. (Kennedy 2-5) Even in public interest stories about non-Jewish prisoners, such as a New York Times profile of a pregnant teenager, Ana Maria de Careaga, who had been imprisoned by the junta, the unique

5 This paragraph is from an earlier essay entitled “The Argentine Junta and the Jews, 1976-1983” written as a term paper for my International Crimes class, Fall 2017, Prof Douglas Burgess.
plight of Jews was mentioned; in Careaga’s words, “the treatment of Jews was incredible...the police asked them if Jews were persecuted in Argentina. If they said no they were beaten and told ‘all Jews will have to be killed.’ If they said yes they were beaten because they were saying that human rights were violated in Argentina” (Oakes 1).

At this time, the average Jew in Argentina, while not living the most secure existence, was, as mentioned, not the target of anti-Semitism by the government or even, officially, with the consent of the government. The Jewish community remained politically free, held public events, and its central governing body, DAIA, maintained a cordial working relationship with the government (and has subsequently been often criticized, whether justly or not, for “collaboration” with the junta and cowardice and denial of the grievous situation of Jewish prisoners). (Kahan 293-300) However, they were often targeted with anti-Semitism by both fascist and Arab League circles, such as with bombings of Jewish institutions (“Memorandum of Conversation,” 11/13/79) and the junta, during its existence, only ever officially denounced one specific act of anti-Semitism, the desecration of several graves in a Jewish cemetery in Buenos Aires. More usually, complaints about anti-Semitic behavior were generally either scoffed at or tacitly acknowledged and ignored by high-ranking junta officials. In one extreme case, after complaints of anti-Semitism by the president of DAIA, Nehemias Resnitzky, his son Marcos was abducted and sent to a SDC; he was later released following international pressure. (Kaufman 482-3)

Perhaps the best statement on Argentinian anti-Semitism, in this period and throughout the nation’s history, is that of the US State Department in the aforementioned memo: “The issue
of anti-Semitism here [in Argentina] is a complex one and any simplistic statements about it are wrong.” (“Anti-Semitism in Argentina”)

III: Rabbi Marshall Meyer in Argentina

Marshall Meyer was born in Brooklyn in 1930 to a non-religious family and spent his childhood in suburban Norwich, Connecticut. At age seven, he began to study religion and he maintained this connection through his time at Dartmouth College, where he decided to become a rabbi. He was ordained by the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, one of the centers of world Conservative Judaism, and was strongly influenced by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, a rabbi who would soon become an important Jewish voice in the civil rights and anti-Vietnam War movements, and whose theology included a strong emphasis on Judaism’s imperative to support social justice. In 1959, several years after Meyer’s marriage to his wife, Naomi, he chose to take a break from his dissertation by accepting a temporary rabbinical position in another country- the young couple chose Congregacion Israelita in Argentina by chance (they were the only congregation Meyer called which answered the phone), knowing no Spanish and intending to stay for only two years. (French-Fuller, “The Young Marshall Meyer”)

Rabbi Meyer became extremely involved in efforts to expand a Jewish community which he saw as stagnant, and lacking religious feeling and guidance, disappearing through either assimilation or immigration to Israel. There were a mere dozen elderly rabbis ministering to hundreds of thousands of Argentinian Jews, and he sought to provide more resources for the community. He established a summer camp, a Spanish language Jewish publishing house, and a rabbinical seminary to train native-born rabbis. After four years at Congregacion Israelita, he left
and started his own congregation, Comunidad Beth El, where he was able to more fully develop his projects and expand the Argentinian Conservative Jewish community. His three children were born and raised in Argentina. For more than fifteen years, he established himself as a leader of the local Jewish community, until in 1976, the military junta took over and his self-perceived role as a Jewish communal leader expanded. (French-Fuller, “You Changed My Definition of Jewishness”)

In fact, Meyer’s rabbinic role had begun to include counseling families ravaged by kidnapping, murder and terror before 1976, back when the guerrilla groups were still terrorizing Argentinians. Even then, he worked to find those who had disappeared on behalf of their families, working on behalf of both Jews and non-Jews. The guerrillas’ reign of terror soon seemed so bad that the military junta’s coup was actually briefly welcomed by the Argentinian community as a hopeful change of status quo; however, Meyer would soon be facing the biggest challenge of his rabbinic career yet, standing up en masse for the disappeared of the newest regime and working on behalf of both human rights as a whole and individual prisoners and families in particular. (French-Fuller, “The 1970s: ‘Where is Argentina Now?’”) While Meyer was not an activist from the very beginning of the junta’s rule, initially toeing the party line, after several months he became secure in his belief that protest was needed and became outspoken in his opinions (Tarnopolsky).

Occasionally, it seemed to Meyer that part of his effort was merely in convincing his congregation that there was anything wrong at all. He recalled in a speech at his New York congregation many years after he left Argentina, that from 1976 to 1978, he would speak in the synagogue and try to convince his congregants that the disappearances of the young people in the
community were not benign and were not due to legitimate criminal activity, even as his congregants would respond that there must have been some reason and the disappearances must be justified, as Argentina was a civilized country (Meyer 151). He attributed at least some of this to fear, given the tremendous amount of terror to which the Jewish community was subjected through bombing attacks and threats; however, he did not believe that these fears should prevent a person with “spiritual depth” from making the decision to speak out (Meyer 154).

Meyer’s efforts did not merely extend to speaking out in his own congregation. He was a stalwart supporter of the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo, joining them in their marches and welcoming them to his synagogue, bemoaning the fact that so few stood with them (Meyer 153). Later in his life, Meyer told his New York congregation that “as a rabbi, [he] felt obliged to visit prisons, and to try to comfort parents of the disappeared people, be they Christian, Jew, or agnostic” (Meyer 28) He considered his dedication to a liberation theology as completely originating from his understanding of Judaism, describing the Jewish people as a nation which “taught the world to strike out for freedom” when they left their enslavement in Egypt (Meyer 54). In his worldview, having a “narrow, nationalistic, chauvinistic worldview paralyzes and brutalizes man’s creative energy” and is antithetical to being a believing Jew (Meyer 32), and “if God is only interested in Jews… by definition He can’t be God” (Meyer 29). To him, God-fearing Jews are duty-bound to continue the fight for the “welfare and inherent sanctity of man” under all circumstances, without bowing to moral relativism (Meyer 52).

Meyer was personally horrified and worried by the anti-Semitism which he saw expressed openly throughout Argentina, including by prominent members of the government and intelligentsia. He wrote one memorandum in August 1979, after attending a meeting of the
Dinner Debating Society in Buenos Aires, in which he voiced his utter shock at the anti-Semitism and xenophobia which were freely spoken by the others in the room. After Meyer, the only rabbi in the room, attempted to counter arguments that Israel’s wars were draining Argentina of its resources, he was the focus of a diatribe by General Roberto Levingston, a former president of Argentina, in which he accused Jews of wielding power over the media. Meyer noted that “it [was] hard for [him] to express what [he] felt when [he] heard the ex-president of the Argentine Republic mouth cliches about international Jewish conspiracy, as though he was quoting from the Protocols of the Elders of Zion.” A Protestant minister at the same event told Meyer that “the anti-Semitism in the air could have been cut with a knife.” (Meyer, “The Message of Puebla”)

As an active leader of the Jewish community, especially once he was protesting the junta, Meyer was on first name terms with multiple international diplomats, including multiple members of the US Embassy in Argentina and the US State Department, notably Assistant Secretary for Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs Patricia Derian (“Letter,” 7/25/78); Israeli Ambassador Ram Nirgad (“Letter...to Ambassador Ram Nirgad 7/5/78); and Canadian Ambassador D.W. Fulford (“Letter from Canadian Ambassador,” 9/30/80). He was considered a generally trusted source of information on happenings in and about the Jewish community, passing on to the American and Israeli embassies information which he received from his various sources in the community, general population and prisons which he felt was important for them to know (“Memorandum of Conversation,” 11/13/79); while not all of his information proved to be accurate (and some misinterpretations were the result of a lack of understanding by him or his informants of international politics), Meyer was respected as a source of important information
with his ear to the ground about developments related to the junta and the Jewish community ("Memorandum of Conversation," 12/6/79). Through his work on behalf of Jewish prisoners and the Jewish community, Meyer was also brought into contact with leading junta officials like Generals Videla and Massera. In one instance, Meyer reported that what was meant to be a 15 minute private audience with Videla soon became “an 80 minute serious dialogue on anti-Semitism and the Timerman case.” ("Detention of Jacobo Timerman: Latest Developments") In a circuitous relationship, Meyer became acquainted with these people through his activism, and was then able to harness his relationships with them to help as many people as possible.

Meyer’s activism could not only seem thankless but even caused him serious problems in his personal life. Meyer testified that he and his family received death threats due to his activism ("Testimony of Rabbi Marshall Meyer,"); he also received a stream of sporadic threatening calls for years, and was the subject of defamatory posters plastered in the streets of the Jewish neighborhood of Once in Buenos Aires ("Reported Allegations of Threats"). He was even the target of anger and threats by members of the Jewish community, specifically from the older-established and generally less outspoken Orthodox community (Tarnopolsky). While he received a great deal of support from his family in his humanitarian efforts, explaining to them the moral imperative which he felt to help in every possible way, the repercussions of his actions did not escape them; his children were shunned at school due to his activities and they often resented him for that. However, he also brought his family into his activities and they became deeply involved on personal levels; on one occasion he brought his father-in-law, Rabbi
Theodore Friedman, and brother-in-law, Rabbi Hillel Friedman⁶, with him on a visit to Jacobo Timerman in prison and to speak with Videla and Massera ("Rabbis Visit Timerman"), and several days later, his father-in-law had a phone conversation with Patricia Derian about his impressions of Argentina (Derian, "Memorandum of Telephone Conversation").

IV: Comforting the Imprisoned

One of Meyer’s most significant accomplishments— as well as one of his bravest— was his success as both a chaplain and an advocate of those imprisoned by the junta. While he later became well known as an advocate for Jacobo Timerman (see later section), a prominent journalist imprisoned by the junta, Meyer put this same effort into working to both support and rescue many who were imprisoned, as well as to provide comfort and assistance for their family members, who were trapped without any knowledge of their children’s or siblings’ whereabouts. Doing so meant extending his sphere of influence far beyond that of the typical synagogue rabbi, being on first name terms with ambassadors and junta leaders, and risking kidnap, bombing and murder in retribution against himself, his family and his institutions. However, none of these daunting prospects stopped him from working tirelessly in order to comfort and rescue those in need.

When he first heard about a prisoner in need of assistance, Meyer’s initial moves included filing writs of habeas corpus, contacting Argentinian government officials and the embassies of other countries, and contacting the press and human rights groups. Another important step was to contact those who may have been in the circle of the prisoner, whether

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⁶ Interestingly to me, he apparently at this point lived in my hometown.
family, friends, classmates or work colleagues (with one example of “psychiatrist and patients”), in order to notify them and to potentially help them escape Argentina, due to the network-based nature of the abductions taking place. (“Testimony of Rabbi Marshall Meyer”) While generally Meyer visited prisons with the intent to visit specific inmates, he often employed a sneaky tactic to gain access to others: when he would arrive at the prisons, he would catch a glimpse of lists of prisoners, and attempt to memorize as many names as possible. He would then request to visit these prisoners, forcing the guards to acknowledge their existence; this, in all probability, saved many of their lives. (Tarnopolsky)

Meyer could often be found visiting prisoners, often in incredibly squalid and depressing conditions. In a sermon to his New York congregation, Meyer described one visit which he made to the Villa Devoto prison, speaking with a teenage girl through “an inch-thick glass” in a “dark, wet, cold cubicle whose “floor is always covered by an inch or more of water, and [his] feet, shoes and socks [got] wet.” As he sat in the room, he was surrounded by “an unbearable mixture of must and dampness and the smell of sweat, vomit and urine.” (Meyer 142) When visiting the prisons, he would sometimes be treated with incredible indignity. At one point, he described visiting the Villa Devoto prison where he was “left nude in the middle of the winter on the patio... while the prison director walked by and made sure[he] heard the fact that ‘this Jew is going to walk in one day through the front door, and he’s going to go out in a coffin through the back door.’” (French-Fuller, "How Is a Human Being Made to Disappear?") In a memo about a visit to some female prisoners at the Villa Devoto prison, he reported arriving at the same time as a priest, who was ushered immediately into the prison; Meyer, on the other hand, was forced to
wait nearly two hours, was subjected to a longer than usual search, and was forced to partially undress in order to be able to visit the prisoners (“On Tuesday…”).

Before long, Meyer became known as the destination for Jewish community members whose family members were imprisoned; they would beseech him to ascertain their children’s and siblings’ whereabouts and make sure they were alright. Family members would write to him with only prisoners’ names, dates of disappearance, and ID numbers, with no return addresses so as not to risk their own safety. (French-Fuller, "How Is a Human Being Made to Disappear?") The requests for his help transcended borders throughout South America, as he even received requests from rabbis in other countries, such as one request from a rabbi in Venezuela relaying a request from a Colombian woman who had a daughter imprisoned at the Villa Devoto prison (“Note to Marshall Mayer re Blanca Becher”). As a rabbi, he was especially in a position to help, as clergy were among the very few permitted to visit the prisoners, and, as he was in Buenos Aires, he was able to visit in place of those families who were unable (Benchoam, “Testimony to CONADEP”). Years after the junta collapsed and Meyer moved to the US, he estimated in court that “thousands” of people had come to him for help at this time, and that he had spent “countless hours” counseling prisoners and their families, advocating on their behalf with government officials, and working on writs of habeas corpus (“Testimony of Rabbi Marshall Meyer”).

Meyer left detailed notes about many of his visits to the prisons and the reports which the prisoners gave to him, detailing the abuse and horror which they suffered. In one document, he wrote of his visit to two imprisoned young Jewish men, Maximo Sprejer and Jorge Podolsky, who were imprisoned in the La Plata prison. He wrote of beatings which Sprejer reported
receiving both for anti-Semitic reasons and not, and listed tortures which Sprejer suffered, including frigid-water showers, electric shock, isolation and waterboarding, adding that Sprejer feared that even if he were to be released, he might still be killed. Meyer recorded that Podolsky told him of, aside from usual tortures, many anti-Semitically motivated attacks, including verbal abuse, Nazi-like selections of Jews from among the prisoners, and being threatened with a razor to the genitals; according to Podolsky, anti-Semitism was not spontaneous but rather an “approach” [quotes his]. Meyer takes note not only of these complaints but of requests by Sprejer and Podolsky, such as canteen money and interceding with the Israeli embassy. (Meyer, “Notes on prison visits with Maximo Sprejer and Jorge Eduardo Podolsky”) While in these notes Meyer writes in a clinical and factual tone, it is clear that he is shaken by what he hears, and the echoes of these reports are clearly resonant in the pleas and efforts which he makes on behalf of the prisoners.

As a rabbi, Meyer was often asked by those he visited that he provide religious guidance and comfort, but was often unable to provide it due to the rules of the Argentinian government and the obstacles which were placed in the way of his attempts. In his notes upon visiting Sprejer and Podolsky, he wrote that Podolsky requested a service for all of the Jews in the prison. He had already made this request of a priest in the prison, who responded that “[t]hat will be very difficult- but why not talk to me- I’ve spoken with so many boys- and so many Jews have converted with me”; as Podolsky continued to request a rabbi, the priest promised to bring one in but never followed through. Frustratingly, Sprejer and Podolsky, along with many other prisoners, requested Jewish ritual items and books in order to allow them to study and observe Jewish traditions, but these requests were refused. (Meyer, “Notes on prison visits with Maximo
Sprejer and Jorge Eduardo Podolsky”) Meyer himself, in a later sermon at his synagogue in New York, stated that “in all of the years that [he] went to prisons… in Argentina, the Bible was considered the primary subversive text, especially if it contained Hebrew. I could not get a Bible or prayer book into any prison…” (Meyer 141)

V: Jacobo Timerman

Jacobo Timerman was probably one of the most internationally prominent of those kidnapped by the Argentinian junta. In April 1977, he was abducted from his home by civilian militants and taken to an SDC; later in his captivity, he was moved to a legal prison and then to house arrest. In his harrowing memoir of his imprisonment, Prisoner Without A Name, Cell Without A Number, he ascribes his targeting by specifically extremist elements within the juntato his subversive work as the publisher of the moderate newspaper La Opinion, as well as to the Nazi sympathies of his captors, who believed that, in him, they had found a source of information about Zionist conspiracies (J Timerman, 27-31). It is probable, however, that another factor was his involvement with David Graiver. Graiver, the Argentine-Jewish financier who owned La Opinion, had laundered money for the Montoneros and had died in a plane crash soon after stealing millions of dollars from his partners and businesses (his death precipitated bank failures on several continents); the junta subsequently pursued many of his family members and associates, including Timerman, suspecting financial crimes and association with far-left groups. In the government’s official report of his capture, they listed his offenses as purely financial. Regardless of the reason for Timemans’s capture, no criminal charges were ever proven against
him in the more than two years between his kidnapping and his release in September 1979 (Lewis 170-178).

Timeman’s book describes, in a non-linear order but in harrowing detail throughout, the tortures which he experienced as a prisoner of the junta. The title of the book evokes the idea of dehumanization which the prison imposed upon its captives, removing their own identities and those of their fellow prisoners and forbidding them from knowing their whereabouts. His encounters with fellow prisoners in the SDC are always anonymous and fleeting; once he is transferred to a legal prison with better conditions, he is kept in utter isolation besides for the sounds of the torment of prisoners outside his cell (81-84). He describes torture by electric shocks and by humiliation- and by specifically anti-Jewish humiliation, a form of entertainment for the guards (60-61). He describes his interrogations by Nazi-oriented guards, who demanded that he tell them about such outlandish conspiracy theories as the Andinia Plan under threat of torture; he specifically identifies a particular interest in Zionism as a threat and enemy to Argentina (72-77).

Throughout his imprisonment, Timerman was the focus of international media attention, and his imprisonment was termed “The Timerman Affair.” Only a few days after the kidnapping, an internal US State Department document was already expressing concern that the Judaism of Timerman and others arrested in connection with the Graiver case might be a motivating factor behind their imprisonment, and was already making comparisons to the Dreyfus Affair (Todman)- comparisons which would soon be repeated in the State Department, in the media, and in Congress. The United States government took a specific interest in Timerman’s case from the outset, at least, in part, due to the intercession of Timerman’s son, Hector, who, at the time of
his father’s kidnapping, was 23 years old and living in New York (“Detention of La Opinion’s Director Jacobo Timerman”). The US government, along with that of Israel, remained invested in releasing Timerman from his imprisonment; and interceding on Timerman’s behalf, from the beginning, was Timerman’s friend and rabbi, Marshall Meyer.

Though Timerman’s family was not at all religious in the years before his imprisonment, Meyer became one of Timerman’s most valued supporters in prison, whether for spiritual guidance or as an advocate on his behalf. In fact, he was the only person who was in constant contact with Timerman from his kidnapping to his expulsion to Israel (Krause). Timerman himself believed that Meyer would be the one most likely able to reach him in jail, leading him to request that, when Timerman planned a hunger strike while under house arrest, he requested that Meyer stay in Buenos Aires in case Timerman was rearrested (“Detention of Jacobo Timerman”). On a personal level, he served as a comfort and support to Timerman in prison, and later under house arrest, as Timerman told him about the conditions of his imprisonment and the horrors which he had seen and experienced. The two even had room for gallows humor in their conversations; in one conversation later relayed by Meyer in a State Department Memorandum of Conversation, Timerman told Meyer that he had asked the guard which way was east, telling him that it would enable him to Jerusalem in his prayers; the guard then responded that he was unable to tell Timerman the direction for security reasons. “Timerman and the Rabbi laughed at the story as in the tunnel cell in which he was imprisoned Timerman could neither stand nor roll over.” (Memorandum of Conversation 10/13/77)

As Timerman’s closest confidant in prison, and as part of his preexisting close connections with the American and Israeli embassies, Meyer often served as an intermediary
between them and Timerman during the efforts to obtain Timerman’s release. He was interviewed by State Department officials about Timerman’s reports of his imprisonment, with Timerman’s information being treated as intelligence on the state of prisoners of the Argentinian junta (with some of the Memoranda of Conversation being treated as NODIS, or NO DIStribution, due to a risk to both Timerman’s future release and US national security) (Memorandum of Conversation 10/13/77). In this capacity, Meyer not only relayed information from Timerman to the embassies but was also given information which he was asked to pass on to Timerman. In one such case, diplomats from both embassies agreed that Timerman’s behavior while under house arrest should be toned down, as he was having conversations (in a house which was almost certainly bugged by the Argentinian government) about the “mental inferiority of most Argentines” and offers which he had received from American institutions; they convinced Meyer, as their go-between and as Timerman’s spiritual advisor, to speak with Timerman about this matter and ensure that he was moderating his tone (“Strategy Discussion with Israel Ambassador on Timerman Release”).

Meyer’s efforts in aiding Timerman were not limited to his dealings with embassies. Meyer also worked closely with Timerman’s entire family, both in comforting them and in joining their efforts to obtain Timerman’s release. In fact, when Timerman’s wife, Risha Timerman, met with government officials to discuss the possibility of Timerman being released to house arrest, she brought Meyer with her (“Timerman Case: Possible Movement”). Each week, Mrs Timerman would attend Beth El Congregation for Sabbath services and to hear Meyer’s sermons on behalf of the imprisoned, including Timerman; after the fall of the junta, the Timerman family would return to Argentina to attend synagogue and eat a Sabbath meal with the
Meyer family (Timerman, “Return to Argentina”). Hector Timerman later described the friendship which he forged with Meyer as “intimate… yet we never made the time to discuss the simple issues that surround a friendship. Instead, disappearances, tortures, kidnapping, threats, rape, secrecy were the issues that fed our relationship.” This, he said, was due to the fact that their relationship was forged during the many hours which they spent together, waiting to visit his father in prison, and the countless more which Meyer spent with the rest of Timerman’s family in efforts to get him released (H Timerman, “A Friendship Made During a Dirty War”).

Meyer’s intercessions on Timerman’s behalf went well beyond the State Department to Congress. He embarked on a letter-writing campaign in 1978 in which he pleaded with several senators and congressmen that, given the fact that the Argentinian government had already declared Timerman innocent of connections with terrorists, the US government should embark on a campaign to obtain his release (at that stage, from house arrest). He sent the letters to Congressman Ben Gilman, Dante Fascell, Lago Marino, Gus Yaton, and Silvio Conde, and Senators Abraham Ribicoff and Jacob Javits, urging them to write letters to the president of Argentina and enter these letters in the Congressional Record. (“Letter… to Gus Yaton”). Congress did indeed pay attention to these pleas, including those whom Meyer had contacted; in the March 26 1979 Congressional Record, Senator Edward Kennedy submitted, along with eight other pages of information about human rights abuses, a vivid description of the attempt of Rep. Conde, one of those whom Meyer had contacted, to visit Timerman. While Conde had initially been pro-Argentina, he was given a great deal of difficulty in seeing Timerman, and eventually came to call him “a symbol of what happens in a repressive society,” making comparisons to Nazi Germany and announcing a campaign to obtain Timerman’s release (Kennedy, “Human
Rights Violations in Argentina”). In August of that year, eighteen congressmen, including Ben Gilman, another recipient of Meyer’s letters, launched a bipartisan campaign to obtain Timerman’s release, filling ten pages with letters denouncing the Argentinian government for the continuing unjust imprisonment of Timerman (“18 Congressmen join battle to save Timerman”).

Indeed, while Timerman was certainly not the only prisoner on whose behalf Meyer worked tirelessly, he is the one with whom Meyer became most identified, whether because of Timerman’s high profile or because of the genuine closeness which Meyer built with Timerman and his family over the course of the years of Timerman’s imprisonment. Meyer’s intense involvement did not go unnoticed by one diplomat at the US Embassy in Argentina, Maxwell Chaplin, who, in a letter to a State Department official back in Washington after Timerman’s release and expulsion to Israel in 1979, wrote sardonically that “in the Embassy we are wondering how Marshall Meyer will occupy himself, since he has tended to neglect his congregation in favor of Timerman” (“Letter from Maxwell Chaplin”). The connection between the two men was not soon forgotten, with Timerman dedicating his memoir, Prisoner Without A Name, Cell Without A Number to Meyer. To this day, on those occasions when Meyer is mentioned in English language media in reference to his time in Argentina, Timerman is invariably mentioned.

VI: Debora Benchoam

When Debora Benchoam was only fifteen years old, she and her brother Rubén, as well as several of their friends, “noticed the widespread military repression and wanted to voice [their] opposition.” She saw that, at her all-girls school, representatives of various minority social
classes continuously disappeared, kidnapped by the military; and she was spurred into action. Her actions, carried out with her brother, would seem innocuous in an open and democratic society; they petitioned against the firings of teachers who disagreed with the curriculum changes enforced by the military regime, and they created literacy education groups for poor children living in shantytowns. However, under the junta, both of these activities were illegal. At age 16, Rubén Benchoam, the head of his high school student council and a member of the Union de Estudiantes Secundarios (UES- Secondary Students’ Union), realized that he was in danger and entered into a clandestine lifestyle, moving around in order to prevent himself from being found and captured by the military police (Benchoam interview).

This is Benchoam’s account of the night on which she was captured:

On the night of July 25, 1977, my home was violently attacked by hooded and heavily armed Argentine security forces. The military blasted open the downstairs doors of my home with explosives and violently burst into the bedroom where my 17-year-old brother Rubén and I were sleeping. In an instant, the military shot my brother in cold blood and took us to an unknown site, blindfolded and with our hands and feet tied. Our abductors yelled at us, and used physical violence; and uttered death threats with a gun to my forehead. They told me that we were detained because we were subversives and because we were Jewish, then they raped me. During the first month of my detention I was in an isolation cell in a police station, blindfolded and in handcuffs, subjected to sexual abuse, and continuously interrogated and threatened with burning cigarettes near my skin. I survived with only one piece of bread and a cup of tea a day….. [this
was] followed by the delivery of my brother’s tortured dead body to my family.

(Benkoam interview)

After her detention at the police station, Benkoam was transferred to the Villa Devoto prison. While it was possible to assert that prisoners in the police station had been imprisoned for a crime, by transferring her to Villa Devoto, there was an acknowledgement that she was a purely political prisoner. She was held in that prison for 4 ½ years, and, in the course of that time, was not charged with any crime, let alone given a fair trial. Since she had just turned sixteen, Benkoam was placed in a prison with adult women, all of whom had been through very similar ordeals to hers—abducted, whisked off to police station prisons without charges, sexually assaulted, tortured, and held in harsh and inhumane conditions. She was placed in a section of the prison which was exceptionally harsh—designated for female prisoners who were classified as G-1, or unable to be “rehabilitated” due to their protests against and outrage at the regime. Aside from the inhumane conditions of her regular cell, she was regularly placed in solitary confinement for such offenses as “singing, looking out the window, exercising, or drawing”—while in solitary confinement, she received no mattress or blankets and was allowed to use the bathroom only once per day. Her imprisonment, as with all prisoners, was frequently interrupted by interrogations by the military police, which, as a rule, included torture. When the Inter-American Commission for Human Rights came to inspect Argentinian prisons, Benkoam and other young female prisoners were moved to an isolated cell block so that they would not be interviewed by the commission. Her three applications to leave the country were rejected, and her writ of habeas corpus was initially accepted, but later overturned (Benkoam, “Lecture”).
Meyer first heard about Benchoam’s case nine months into her imprisonment, from the family of her boyfriend, Mauricio Weinstein, a desaparecido. To quote her description of their first meeting:

“On April 21, 1978 after my first 9 months in a prison for female political prisoners, I was called to meet a rabbi. As I entered the small interview room, Marshall Meyer presented himself through the glass window that separated us. He said: ‘I come to give you hope. I want to know all that happened to you so that I can tell your story to others. I will help you to gain your freedom.’”

(Benkoam, “Lecture”)

Benchoam proceeded to tell him her story, and from that day on, Meyer worked tirelessly to obtain Benchoam’s release, as well as to support her while in prison. When he visited her almost a year after that first time, Meyer took note of her deteriorated health and her desire to go to Israel, and noted that the Jewish book, which he had attempted to send to her, had been confiscated (“On Tuesday…”). While in prison, she maintained a correspondence with him in between his visits, when she was able to, both before and after her release, in which she shared details about her imprisonment, inquired about current events in the Jewish community, and discussed her coping mechanisms while incarcerated. From the tone of the letters, it is clear that she formed a strong bond with Meyer, writing with fondness and sending good wishes to his family. It is clear that Meyer was not only an advocate for Debora, but also a friend, something which she sorely needed (“Letter from Debora Benchoam”).

Meyer worked with various embassies in order to request permission for her immigration, which would allow her to leave Argentina. In particular, he engaged in a lengthy correspondence
with the Canadian embassy, including personally meeting with the ambassador, D.W. Fulford (“Letter from Canadian Ambassador,” 9/30/80). The efforts to obtain permission were initially stymied by the fact that, while her grandmother successfully filled out her application, Benchoam was, of course, unable to sign them herself (“Letter from Canadian Embassy”), and, subsequently, it was determined that, as Benchoam still had an open application with the Israeli embassy to emigrate to Israel, she would be unable to apply for immigration to Canada simultaneously, but that, should her Israeli application fall through, she was welcome to reapply (“Letter to Mr. B. P. Pollack”).

Benchoam’s case was publicized in the American media by Hector Timerman, the son of Jacobo Timerman, who was then living in New York, who heard about the case through his father and Meyer. In a letter to the editor of the New York Times, titled “Argentina’s Courts Not Open to Debora,” he responded to a letter from Jorge A. Aja Espil, the Argentinian ambassador to the United States; Espil had in turn been responding to a letter by Timerman about his father’s experiences in prison. In response to Espil’s claim that all Argentinians had the right to a fair trial, he brings up the cases of two unjustly imprisoned Argentinians, jailed with no charges brought against them: Gustavo Westerkamp, the son of a prominent Argentinian physicist, and Debora Benchoam. He mentions that while he never met her, he “think[s]” of her all the time,” and he tells the story of her imprisonment, emphasizing that one sixth of her life up until that point had been spent in prison and that she would be “horrified” to hear that the ambassador was claiming the universal right to a trial in Argentina (H Timerman, “Argentina’s Courts Not Open To Debora.”). Timerman’s intervention on Benchoam’s behalf, as well as his relationship with Rabbi Meyer, led to a very charming and heartwarming exchange between Meyer and a young
New York schoolgirl, Diana Erbsen. In a letter scrawled on unlined paper, Erbsen told Meyer that she and a friend had interviewed Timerman for their school newspaper, and he had told them to write to Meyer asking what they could do to help in the release efforts for Benchoam. In a letter dated several weeks later, Meyer sent Erbsen a typed letter notifying her, in excited terms, that only a few minutes before, he had discovered that Benchoam would soon be released and given the opportunity to leave to the United States (“Correspondence between Marshall Meyer and Diana Erbsen”).

In the end, it was not due to a specific effort on her behalf, but due to Meyer’s general advocacy on behalf of the victims of the junta, that Benchoam was released. Upon the release of Jacobo Timerman, both Meyer and Timerman spoke before the House Committee on Appropriations in Washington DC, attempting to have the US suspend military aid to Argentina in light of its many human rights violations. The two of them recounted the stories of many victims, among them Benchoam, and, after the meeting, Congressman William Lehman of Florida approached Meyer and Timerman to express his interest in Benchoam’s story. She in particular had caught his attention as her Hebrew name was the same as that of Lehman’s daughter, Cathy, who had died of cancer two years earlier. Lehman soon became Benchoam’s advocate, visiting her in prison, sponsoring her immigration, and participating in the hue and cry for Benchoam’s release (Benchoam, “Lecture”). While the Argentinian government attempted to justify her detention as a “potentially dangerous rebel,” they soon realized that the international community was not sympathetic to such claims about a girl who had been sixteen when imprisoned and who had never been tried (“The Benchoam Case”). In November 1981, after months of intervention by Lehman’s office, Benchoam was released.
Once Meyer had succeeded in lobbying for Benchoam’s freedom, he did not stop there. After discovering that, upon her arrival in the United States, Benchoam would be staying at Lehman’s home in Miami, he wrote letters to several rabbis and individuals in the Miami area, asking them to do what they could on Benchoam’s behalf as she adjusted to American life. He wrote four drafts of the letter, adding more and more detail in an attempt to emphasize the importance of his request as he progressed from a basic letter, in which he gave the details of her imprisonment and release, to one in which, after writing that he had been visiting her in prison for four years, he added that “she is a living testimony to the power of the spirit in a human being.” In each letter, he argued that it would be “one of the greatest mitzvot [good deeds] that he could think of… to help this young lady to find herself in the free world again,” and in each letter, he concluded with the brief but poignant line, “I beg you to help her!” He sent the letter to a list of six friends in the Miami area whom he felt would be willing and able to assist, as well as to a New York City publisher at Random House, who had instructions to relay the news to the Timerman family (“Debora’s release letters and addresses”). Not long after the letters were sent, one of the recipients, Rabbi Irving Lehrman of Temple Emanu-El in Miami, sent back an effusive letter expressing his support of Benchoam and his desire to help her as she settled in Miami (“Letter from Irving Lehrman”).

When Benchoam arrived at the airport on her way to the United States, Meyer was there to greet her, where he hugged her and whispered in her ear that she should “tell [her] story, let people know what is happening in Argentina, never forget, [he] will see [her] soon in freedom.” Indeed, she had already begun, as, having discovered that she would soon be released, she had written on a candy wrapper all of her information about missing persons and testimonies which
she had learned while incarcerated, rolled it under her tongue, kept it there for three days, and subsequently copied it out to personally hand to the Executive Secretary of the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights. (Benchoam, “Lecture”) She traveled first to Miami, where Congressman Lehman and his family attempted to distract her from her experiences with “driving lessons and trips to Disney World,” and soon accompanied him to Washington, where she worked in Congressional offices, learned English, and, eventually, was accepted to Georgetown University, where she studied International Relations with an emphasis on Latin America (Mann). She soon settled in Washington DC, where she became a human rights lawyer working for that same Commission, where she says she is upholding the message which Meyer whispered in her ear, and the mission which he lived during his time in Argentina, working “toward a path for justice to help others” (Benchoam, “Lecture”).

VII: POST-“DIRTY WAR”: CONADEP AND BEYOND

In 1983, the junta collapsed following the catastrophic Falklands War, and, after democratic elections, President Raul Alfonsin took power, upon which he issued an executive order to investigate the horrifying effects of the junta. Meyer became the only non-Argentinian to become a member of the investigating committee of CONADEP (National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons), which heard witness testimony about human rights violations under the junta’s rule, later compiled into a harrowing volume called Nunca Mas, or “Never Again” (the testimony would then be used in trials against junta officials in 1985.) As part of his duties as a member of the investigating committee, Meyer visited New York, Washington DC and Los Angeles, collecting testimony from the many prisoners who left the country after their release,
whether as refugees or after being expelled by the junta. In addition, he was appointed as a delegate to the UN Working Group on Human Rights; along with his duties there, he had the opportunity to collect testimony in Geneva and Paris (Sabato et al, “Creation and Organization of the National Commission on the Disappeared”). Originally, Meyer had not intended to remain in Argentina; drained by his years of working with prisoners, he had planned to return to the United States and had already taken a position at the University of Judaism in Los Angeles. He was surprised by the appointment, but felt compelled to accept it, viewing it both as an honor and as a necessary extension of his numerous efforts to bring the junta to justice and aid its victims. (French-Fuller, "An Extraordinary Appointment")

Meyer’s efforts were often seen as revelatory by those he interviewed, who were shocked that the Argentinian government was a democracy, let alone one which was reckoning with its past and cared about hearing their experiences. Many of them were wary of telling their stories, with raw memories of living in an Argentina in which they could be severely penalized for criticizing the government and expressing what was on their minds, to the point that some refused to speak with Meyer, fearing a trap; however, those who chose to speak were happy and relieved that they were being heard. Meyer heard the stories of both Jews and non-Jews as the official representative; in addition, when he was in Washington, DC, Meyer was accompanied by the Argentinian ambassador to the United States. When he arrived, the embassy sent letters to Argentinian expatriates in the area, inviting them to give in-person testimony to Meyer. While some expatriates had never met him before and merely treated him as a representative of Alfonsin’s government, two of them, Debora Benchoam and Alicia Partnoy, had been visited by him when they were imprisoned; Benchoam called it “wonderful” that she was able to
specifically tell him her story, knowing his prodigious background in human rights (Murphy). While these interviews served as the vast majority of his duties, he also engaged in other documenting activities, such as when he accompanied Jacobo Timerman back to Argentina in 1984, visiting with him all of the prisons in which he had been kept, and insisting that they be photographed and filmed as evidence (French-Fuller, "An Extraordinary Appointment").

While Meyer could certainly have had ample reason to distrust this government effort at self-reflection and self-castigation, he expressed a confidence that the process would be fruitful and was initiated in good faith by the new Argentinian government. At a meeting between him, US diplomats in Buenos Aires, and Adolfo Perez Esquivel, a Nobel Peace Prize winner and activist who had also been imprisoned by the junta, Perez Esquivel, when asked about the commission, said that he did not believe that the commission was truly interested in making a full reckoning of all of the many disappeared and murder, and that the commission was a weaker version of one which otherwise would have been formed by Congress, which would have been more incisive and stronger. When, after the meeting, Meyer was asked his opinion on Perez Esquivel’s statement, he said that he disagreed, believing that the committee was working in good faith, and stating that should he be proven incorrect about this, he would resign in protest from his position on the committee rather than be a part of a cover-up operation; in addition, he said that “he thought President Alfonsin was certainly smart enough to realize this,” making Perez Esquivel’s theory less likely (“Memorandum of Conversation 12/19/83”).

Working on CONADEP was by no means Meyer’s last involvement in human rights and social justice- even after he had moved to the United States to first teach at the University of Judaism in Los Angeles, and soon after to become the rabbi of B’nai Jeshurun, he retained his
interest in social advocacy, “[reaching] out to Christians and Muslims, establish[ing] a homeless shelter and offer[ing] meals to AIDS patients,” and establishing himself and his synagogue as advocates for Israeli peace (Saxon). His Argentinian connection did not end, either; he was honored with the Order of the Liberator San Martin, Argentina’s highest award available to a non-citizen, and testified at length in a US court case brought by several former prisoners of the junta, including Debora Benchoam, against Carlos Guillermo Suarez Mason, one of the junta’s leading officials, for the murders for which he was responsible as overseer of many of the prisons. In his testimony, Meyer stated that not only did he counsel former prisoners of the junta after their release, but that, even while living in New York years later, he was still involved in helping them (“Testimony of Rabbi Marshall Meyer”).

For several years after his relocation to New York City, Meyer continued to be involved in his many causes, and rejuvenated the struggling B’nai Jeshurun congregation, until his death in December 1993, at age 63, following a sudden cancer diagnosis (Saxon).

Conclusion

The situation in Argentina under the junta from 1876-1983 can be hard to comprehend. On one level, so many in the country were tortured and killed in ruthless and violent ways, treated with a complete lack of human dignity. On the other hand, so many in Argentina, whether out of fear, ignorance or misjudgment, did nothing in the face of horror. This was true just as well for the Jewish community, which did not- or perhaps could not- react forcefully to the anti-Semitism and violence which afflicted them. This only makes what Marshall Meyer did
even more remarkable and significant. He became one of the foremost protesters against the junta, taking a stand for what he felt was right, even as a relative outsider; however, he went even further and not only spoke out with words, but saved and improved lives with his actions, even at a risk to himself and his family. As a rabbinic figure, he had the ability to give comfort and solace to those who needed it in extremely trying times; as a public figure and foreign national, he was able to raise a hue and cry, and work on behalf of the many prisoners he met. This is true whether for the Jacobo Timermans, the high profile writers who became world-renowned in their struggles for freedom, or for the Debora Benchoams, the young and innocent prisoners who were swept up in the madness: he was an advocate, and a spiritual and emotional beacon. There has been very little in English written in depth about Meyer’s work in Argentina, and while this still must be done by someone with access to the Spanish sources, it seems important that this has been begun, even if in a small way.
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Notes

All non-published documents in this thesis were obtained from one of three sources: the Marshall Meyer Papers in Duke University’s Human Rights Archive, accessed via the Digital Repository; The Argentina Declassification Project of the US State Department; and the personal collection of Debora Benchoam.

All documents used were in the English language (whether in the original or in an official translation) with the exception of the correspondence of Debora Benchoam to Marshall Meyer, which was translated for me from Spanish.

This project could not have been possible without the exemplary mentorship of Professor Perelis, who guided me to the topic, who referred me to the Marshall Meyer papers and Meyer’s book of sermons, and who shared with me his own personal enthusiasm for and connections with the topic.

Dr. Perelis also invited me to the LAJSA regional conference in May, where I was privileged not only to hear amazing lecturers speak about Latin American Jewish history, but where I was privileged to be part of an undergraduate paper presentation session, where he and Professor Natasha Zaretsky gave me extremely helpful advice, and directed me toward the Argentina Declassification Project.

I would also like to thank Gabriella Englander for editing this thesis, and of course my parents, for supporting and encouraging me through all sixteen months of work.

This project would not have been the same without the help of Debora Benchoam. I first settled on this topic after reading the many items about her in the Marshall Meyer Papers, and being struck by her story and her bravery. I was thrilled first when I discovered that she lived in the United States and then even more when she agreed to be interviewed via email and sent me valuable testimony. She has been incredibly kind and helpful to me in my research, despite her extremely busy life, and it has been a privilege to work with her.
I write this thesis in memory of my grandmother Nelida Frydman Ismach. Though she left Argentina in the early 1960s, she never forgot her family and roots there; and I was privileged to hear her recount her childhood and adulthood in Buenos Aires, even if she omitted the bad parts.

I also write this in honor of my great aunt, Esther Frydman. It wasn’t until quite recently that I learned what happened to Esther, my grandmother’s younger sister- and what I learned is that we do not know what happened. As with all of the desaparecidos, we know that Esther disappeared in the time of the junta and nothing more. While I had hoped that perhaps my research would shed some light on what happened to her, in the end, the quest led me to a topic which was important for me to write about, not just for Esther but for all of the junta’s victims.