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Calle Emilio Reus
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Visiting the dwindling Jewish community of Uruguay

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SPECIAL TO THE CJN

Upon our arrival in Montevideo, Uruguay, we were met by our tour guide, Fanny Margolis. At the beginning of our journey, the mini-bus maneuvered through narrow streets lined with graffiti and abandoned buildings, some of which were in the process of being revitalized.

I listened as Margolis talked about the first Sephardic immigrants, who lived and worked near the port. They arrived from Turkey between 1907 and 1908. Sephardim from several other countries eventually joined them. They started working as peddlars, expanded into family businesses and, by the 1920s, they were opening retail stores in the old city.

This small Jewish community organ-

ized a school, communal organizations and formed a synagogue. Beit Barishona was built in the Villa Munoz Quarter, but since it's used infrequently, our group was unable to visit it.

Our bus parked in front of a 20th-century synagogue. Between 1954 and 1956, the Sassoon family constructed the Comunidad Israelita Sefaradi, also known as Synagogue Beth Israel, on Buenos Aires Street. The architecture is similar to New York's Portuguese synagogue, Congregation Shearith Israel.

I needed to use my imagination, as Margolis described the interior – marble columns, stained glass windows, a ballroom and a sanctuary that seats 1,000 people. Concrete blocks and a sterile metal gate barred our entry. The front door was bolted. Nowadays, it's only open for the High Holidays and special events.

Due to the rise in anti-Semitism in Europe in the 20th century, some Ashkenazi Jews migrated to Montevideo. The two groups, the Sephardic Jews and the Ashkenazi Jews, worked to establish the communal organizations that would service their growing community. They built synagogues, schools, libraries and a cemetery.

In the 1930s and '40s, European pressure caused Latin American governments to deny visas to Jews who were attempting to flee the Nazis. Uruguay's Socialist party promoted anti-Semitic acts on the street. By the end of the Second World War, the community reached its peak of 50,000 people.

After hearing about these threads of anti-Semitic behaviour, I was surprised when Margolis told our group that Uruguay supported the Balfour Declaration and was the first Latin American

country to recognize the state of Israel. Montevideo was the first Latin American capital to establish diplomatic ties with Israel. Even though the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem in the '60s caused neo-Nazi groups to stir up trouble on the streets of Uruguay, nowadays, Margolis says that anti-Semitism is virtually non-existent.

Today, Uruguay's Jewish community is considerably smaller. During the military dictatorship that ruled from 1973 to 1984, many Jews relocated to other countries for political and economic reasons. Margolis estimates the population to be around 15,000 people, while Google searches put the population at 10,000, out of a total of 3.5 million citizens. The majority of the country's Jews live in the capital city of Montevideo, near one of the Jewish community centres.

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Structures filled with meaning

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As we weaved our way from one Jewish location to the next, Margolis identified secular sites and provided us with tidbits of Uruguayan history.

When we arrived at the three-story Kehila community centre, our attention was refocused on the Jewish community. This multipurpose building without any signage or symbols is located in a residential area. For security reasons, we were not allowed to take any photos of the neighbourhood, or the outside of the building and our passports were kept until we exited the building. Once inside, we learned a little bit about the community's 100-year history and the building's current amenities – a mikveh, a synagogue, a museum, day schools, an arts and craft room, a kitchen and services for the developmentally disabled. The most memorable feature was a gigantic glass menorah that stands prominently in the red-carpeted sanctuary.

Our next stop was at the Holocaust Memorial. A prime spot along the Rambla on the Rio de la Plata shoreline was selected for the monument, so that it would be accessible to everyone.

The location and the outdoor structures are filled with symbolism and meaning. Railroad tracks from one of the concentration camps lie in a grassy area near the entrance. A pathway leads down to pink granite walls that are meant to resemble the Western Wall in Jerusalem.

At this memorial, the wall is split, to represent the Shoah. Walking down the path toward the opening and looking toward the river, the designers hoped that visitors would imagine the divine intervention associated with the biblical parting of the sea. The setting likewise encourages people to appreciate the river view that represents the arrival of immigrants and the acceptance of individual differences.

In the meditation square, engineers effectively blocked out the noise from the nearby thoroughfare. Instead of being easily distracted, one is left to reflect on the Spanish inscriptions that emphasize life, rather than death. Margolis translated the Spanish quotes from Elie Wiesel, Maimonides, the Baal Shem Tov and Proverbs.

From there, we headed to the Yavne Institute – another multipurpose campus where the city's Jews congregate. The site includes a school, a synagogue, a kosher bakery and



Memorial to the Holocaust of the Jewish People (Memorial del Holocausto del Pueblo Judío) adjacent to the shoreline SANDRA BORNSTEIN PHOTO

a Jewish gift shop. The school teaches classes in Spanish, English and Hebrew.

The leadership of the community has attempted to respond to the rise in assimilation and the large number of Jews choosing to move to Israel. During our visit, Rabbi Yacov Kruger, who was born in Canada, talked about his attempt to make all Jews feel at home in his synagogue and the need to provide education to adults, as well as to kids. He is now in Israel and another Orthodox rabbi has taken his place.

As I waved goodbye to Margolis and walked toward the cruise ship, I couldn't help but wonder about the future of the Uruguayan Jewish community. With an aging population that sees more deaths

than births, it appears that the population will continue to decline. This trend is accelerated by two more factors: intermarriage rates are approaching 50 per cent and the community's Zionist leanings have encouraged people to make aliyah. Margolis estimates that there are already 10,000 Jews who have moved to Israel. The outflow of people causes a decline in available funds. Communal organizations will have to adjust accordingly, as the population continues to decrease. Unless there is a resurgence of interest in living in Uruguay, its Jewish core will fade away like so many other Jewish communities around the world. For now, people like Margolis will continue to keep Uruguay's Jewish spirit alive. ■



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