

# PEOPLING THE LAND

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“for us, for our progeny, and for all the people of the world who want to make their home on Argentine soil”

*Preamble to National Constitution 1853*



Photo: Organización Sionista Femenina Argentina

Under the slogan *gobernar es poblar* (to rule is to people) the Argentine government sent agents to Europe to promote immigration in order to people the *pampas* and develop agriculture.

Under the aegis of laws that guaranteed justice, freedom and work, the epic of colonisation began. Italians, Spaniards, Russian Jews, Arabs, Frenchmen, Danes, Dutchmen, Welshmen arrived from faraway Europe, with the hope of forging a future by working the land.

**1856** Colonia Esperanza is founded in the Province of Sante Fé. Catholics, Protestants and Jews live together.

**1860** Some 20 Jewish families live in Buenos Aires. They are English, French, German merchants and agents of foreign firms. The first religious marriage of a Jewish couple is officially recognised by the Superior Court of Justice.

**1861** It is *Yom Kippur*. Two Jews, of different origin, spend the day in Recoleta Park, some distance apart, absorbed in their books. When they finally get together, they discover that they have independently arrived at the same idea: to spend the day in the open air, praying. They decide to go around the city seeking more Jews, to gather a *minyan* for the festivals, *Yom Kippur* and *Rosh Hashana*. Thus the Congregation is born.

**1862** The Israelite Congregation is established.

**1875** The first synagogue is founded.

**1881-82** Pogroms, persecution and poverty in Russia persuade the Jewish masses to start looking for new homes. The industrialisation of the USA and England attracts great numbers of Jews who quickly assimilate.

Many others try to fulfil their biblical dream of working the land, some in

Eretz Israel, some in distant and unknown Argentina.

**14 August, 1889** 136 families from Russia arrive in Buenos Aires, aboard the *Wesser*. They are swindled but finally manage to acquire some land. They take a boat up the Paraná River to Santa Fé, and from there continue by wagon to Palacios railway station. They are abandoned in the middle of the desert, without water, without food, and with just a shed made of zinc sheets. They live in abject poverty without the farm tools the landowner had promised. They survive on alms and the scraps travellers throw from trains going northwards. Many fall ill; they have no medicine or doctors. An epidemic breaks out among the children and many perish. Where they are buried is where the colony is founded. Blood had sealed a covenant with the land and they refuse to leave it.

**October 1889** The train coming from the North stops at Palacios. On it is Dr. Wilhelm Lowental, commissioned by the Argentine government to study rural conditions. Shocked by what he sees and moved by the tragedy of the settlers, he takes responsibility for helping them. He reports the situation to the government and takes the necessary measures to make the landowner fulfil his obligations.

Back in Paris, he conceives a plan to bring thousands of Jewish families to Argentina, to work the land. He writes a report, highlighting the bounty of the land, where Jews can live in freedom and find honest employment working in agriculture. He suggests the foundation of a colonisation organisation to provide protection for the families. His friend, the great French rabbi, Zadok Kahan, reports his idea to the Alliance Israelite Universelle, and they pass it on to Baron Maurice Hirsch, who by then lives in London. The Baron, overwhelmed by the

demise of his only son, has decided to make the Jewish people heir to his fortune.

**January 1890** In a letter to the Alliance, the Baron approves a vast enterprise, destined to found great colonies in Argentina, a country that will become “the home of all those of my people who might be forced to seek refuge in distant countries, in order to forge for themselves a new life, away from the horrors of their fatherland”.

**August 1891** The Jewish Colonisation Association is established, its first beneficiaries being the Jewish immigrants from the *Wesser*. The first years of colonisation are hard. The colonists suffer from their ignorance of agricultural practice and of the local language; from inadequate equipment and from natural disasters: locusts, drought, frost and floods as well as isolation and solitude. Many leave to find jobs as labourers on other farms or emigrate to towns where they become merchants or employees.

The resolute and tenacious who are determined to fulfil their dreams sow virgin fields, open up new roads, found schools, hospitals, libraries and cooperatives. Proudly they carry the name of ‘Jewish gauchos’. The colonies thrive and become the breeding ground of intellectuals, artists, doctors, engineers, teachers.

**By 1930**, with the industrialisation of the towns, there is a big exodus from the land. It is said: “the colonists sowed wheat and reaped doctors”.

Although Baron Hirsch’s project was not realised in the way he had dreamed, Jewish colonisation has a positive effect in all those regions where colonies are founded, and it contributes to the development of our community, which becomes one of the most prominent minorities in Argentina.