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**Paraguay as a Safe Haven: Welcoming Victims and
Perpetrators of the Holocaust**

By

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Introduction

In the morning of January 13th, 1939, an ocean liner was expected in Montevideo, Uruguay. Days earlier, the SS Conte Grande sailed from Genoa, Italy, carrying approximately 300 European passengers. From this group, many of them were Jews who had received Paraguayan passports in Europe, and who sailed to the new world in an attempt to escape the Nazis. As the ship docked in Montevideo, they learned that their Paraguayan passports were not valid anymore,¹ leaving their hopes and dreams in a state of limbo. For days, these passengers were left wondering about their future in a foreign land, with no country claiming responsibility or offering assistance.

The story of Paraguay as a land that invited and welcomed foreigners started decades before the SS Conte Grande even left the Genovese port. In the earlier decades of the 20th century, the Paraguayan Government adopted a very welcoming immigration policy to rebuild the country after two devastating wars. However, this policy suddenly changed in November of 1938, and would change again a couple of times in opposite directions throughout the war years. What this change in immigration policy meant for those Jewish passengers aboard the SS Conte Grande was that Paraguay would no longer become the place where they could start their lives all over again. Similar to other South American countries at the time, such as Uruguay and Argentina, the adoption of this restrictive immigration policy exposed their own stance in accepting members of the Jewish community when the international conflict in Europe was escalating quickly.

¹ Evening Star, "300 Jews Stranded in Uruguay as Paraguay Cancels Visas," (Washington, D.C.) 14 Jan. 1939, *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*, Lib. of Congress. Local Uruguayan newspapers reported a different number. According to *El Bien Público*, the SS Conte Grande was carrying 264 Jewish passengers who faced challenges at their arrival.

Dealing with its own internal struggles that spilled over its foreign policy, Paraguay's immigration policy switched back and forth in a span of 20 years. In the final years of the war, and retracting from its 1938 change, Paraguay started issuing passports once more, thus allowing more Jews to emigrate to South America. Unfortunately, this issuing of passports was not only limited to the victims of the Holocaust. As it is widely known, many Nazi officials escaped post-war trials by running away to South America. Perhaps one of the most famous escapees is Adolf Eichmann, a prominent Nazi official who lived in Argentina for several years before being kidnapped and taken to Israel to face trial for the atrocities he committed. Similarly, but with a different outcome, the famous doctor Josef Mengele of Auschwitz, or Angel of Death as he was known, escaped to Argentina and then to Paraguay under the protection of the then dictator of the country, Alfredo Stroessner. He lived in Paraguay using another name, and then moved to Brazil where he died some years after. Like Mengele, there are other Nazi officials who escaped to Paraguay and South America and who, by doing so, shed light on the moral dichotomy in immigration policy in these countries. While domestic politics play a part in this issue, dealing with the uncomfortable reality of having welcomed both Jews who were trying to escape the Holocaust and Nazi officials, leads us to the questions of: How can Paraguay reconcile being a safe haven for victims and perpetrators of the Holocaust? And how does this dichotomy live in the memory of the Jewish community and the larger Paraguayan community?

Rebuilding The Country...

From 1864 to 1870, the biggest war in South American territory was fought between Paraguay on one side, and Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay on the other. It went down in history as the War of the Triple Alliance, and it altered the geopolitics of the region, with significant consequences for Paraguay. Besides the economic and structural devastations that the war caused, the human cost was high, and the Paraguayan population was decimated.



Fig. 1: B.C. (g), according to Mynseen's sketch. *Guerra de América del Sur. Combate de la estancia Asunción, cerca de Mbutuy, el 26 de junio de 1865, entre una división paraguaya y dos brigadas brasileñas del ejército riograndense.* Engraving on metal, 17,5cm x 13cm., L'Illustration, Paris. Imagotheca.

As a result of this war, the Paraguayan government, assisted by the Hungarian Colonel Heinrich von Morgenstern de Wisner, found a solution that would help with the reconstruction of the country. Assigned as the immigration minister for the Republic of Paraguay, Morgenstern devised a plan that consisted of attracting foreigners and offering them land deals in such a way that they would settle down and become farmers of the fertile land that the country had to offer.² That is how, years after the War of the Triple Alliance, Paraguay became the destination for many foreigners who were looking for a place to settle.

In this way, Jewish immigration to Paraguay started slowly in the first decade of the 20th century. As tensions in Europe soared in the first two decades of the century, a new immigration wave carried 1616 foreigners to Paraguay, many of whom were Jews who were being persecuted in Eastern European pogroms.³ In 1926, a law that assisted immigrants upon their arrival was enacted, with assistance that included lodging for the first eight days and medical services.⁴ However, this same law restricted who had and who did not have preference in the immigration process (i.e., deaf, and disabled people).⁵

Furthering this invitation to migrate to Paraguay, on March 15, 1927, the Jewish Daily Bulletin from New York reported that the Paraguayan and Peruvian States welcomed Jewish immigration. The message from the Paraguayan government read as follows:

“The Government of Paraguay is animated by the kindest sentiments toward all able-bodied persons coming into the country and willing to work in order to succeed. I am enabled to assure you that the Jewish people having given abundant proof that the race

² Ben Macintyre, *Forgotten Fatherland: The Search for Elisabeth Nietzsche*, (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1992), 8.

³ Alfredo Seiferheld, *Los Judíos en el Paraguay*, (Asunción: El Lector, 1984), 136.

⁴ Alfredo Seiferheld, 171.

⁵ Alfredo Seiferheld, 172.

has a capacity for work and an enthusiasm for progress, immigrants of this race will be well received in Paraguay.”⁶

Tuesday, Mar. 15, 1927. JEWISH DAILY BULLETIN 3

PARAGUAY AND PERU WELCOME JEWISH IMMIGRATION, HIAS ANNUAL MEETING HEARS

Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society in Conjunction with Ica Embarks Upon Plan to Aid Jewish Immigrants in South American Countries; Annual Meeting Endorses \$500,000 Campaign; Senator Copeland Urges Support of Plan, Criticizes National Origins Feature of Immigration Act

Official communications from two South American Republics, Peru and Paraguay, welcoming Jewish immigration were presented Sunday afternoon at the eighteenth annual meeting of the Hebrew Sheltering and Immigrant Aid Society of America, held at the Hotel Astor. There were two sessions. The morning session, presided over by Abraham Herman, was devoted to the rendering of annual reports by the officers of the Society and election of directors. John L. Bernstein was in the chair during the afternoon session. Representatives of 150 Jewish fraternal organizations, benevolent societies, and philanthropic institutions, including a number from other cities, and annual contributors to the Hias were present. Senator Royal S. Copeland was the principal speaker. James Bernstein, Jacob H. Cohen, Philip Hersh, Leon Kamaiky, Mrs. Leon Kamaiky, Jacob J. Lesser, Rev. H. Masliansky, Albert Rosenblatt, Ezekiel Sarasohn, B. Shelvin, B. C. Vladeck and Morris Weinberg were elected directors for three years.

The communication from Paraguay, signed by Consul General William Wallace White, read:

Message from Paraguay Government

"The Government of Paraguay is animated by the kindest sentiments toward all able bodied persons coming into the country and willing to work in order to succeed. I am enabled to assure you that the Jewish people having given abundant proof that the race has a capacity for work and an enthusiasm for progress, immigrants of this race will be well received in Paraguay."

The communication from Peru was in the form of a cable from that government's Commissioner of Immigration approving the establishment at Lima, the chief port of Peru, of a branch of the Hebrew Sheltering and Immigrant Aid Society.

This cable was supplemented by a letter from the Peruvian Consul Edwardo Higginson in which he said:

Peru Welcomes Hias Work

"I will consider it a privilege to be of any assistance toward the successful establishment of the Hebrew Sheltering and Immigrant Aid Society in the Republic of Peru."

Abraham Herman, president of the Hias, stated that the communications from Peru and Paraguay referred to work Hias has begun in conjunction with the Jewish Colonization Association of Paris, the Ica, and the United Jewish Emigrant Aid Committees of Europe, the Emigdirekt with headquarters in Berlin, to facilitate the mi-

not be met out of the regular budget of the three organizations, a campaign will immediately be launched to raise \$500,000 in America. John L. Bernstein, former president of Hias, is the Campaign Chairman. The Philadelphia branch of the organization, Mr. Herman stated, had already accepted a quota of \$50,000. The Rose N. Lesser Auxiliary of Hias has organized a women's division for a drive in New York City, headed by Mrs. Leon Kamaiky and Mrs. Harry Fischel. The women's division will endeavor to raise \$50,000 toward a \$250,000 quota which has been assigned to this city.

Protests Immigration Restrictions

Reporting during the morning session on the immigrant aid work done by Hias in the United States during the past year, Mr. Herman said:

"Legislation introduced in Congress looking towards the admission to this country of wives and children of those who have already declared their intention to become citizens has failed of passage, and this especially cruel situation, one of the most grievous that has resulted from America's new attitude toward immigration, still remains unalluviated, though we are hopeful that some change may be effected at the next session of Congress.

"We must also continue to protest against and resist the enactment of any

Fig. 2: "Paraguay and Peru Welcome Jewish Immigration, Hias Annual Meeting Hears." *The Archive of Jewish Telegraphic Agency*. Mar. 15, 1927.

Following this welcoming atmosphere, the first two decades of the 20th century saw a bloom in Jewish immigration, and thus, cultural, and social life. Organizations and institutions started flourishing in Asunción and other cities. To name a few: the Unión Israelita (Israeli Union) in 1915, the Asociación de Damas Israelitas (Israeli Ladies Association) in late 1915-

⁶ "Paraguay and Peru Welcome Jewish Immigration, Hias Annual Meeting Hears," (*The Archive of Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, Mar. 15, 1927).

early 1916, and the Unión Hebraica (Hebraic Union) in 1925. Similarly, Jewish schools for children were built to teach them how to read and write in Yiddish.⁷ All these organizations and institutions promoted educational, cultural, and social activities among members of the Jewish community in Paraguay.

The Chaco War

While the War of the Triple Alliance was a determining factor in Paraguayan immigration policy in the late 19th century and early 20th century, another war influenced that same policy in the 1930s. From 1932 to 1935, Paraguay fought the Chaco War against Bolivia. During this 3-year long international conflict, the Jewish community demonstrated their full support to the country that welcomed them. For instance, Captain Raúl José Friedman fought and died in battle, and Dr. Isaac Schwartzman actively worked in the medical field of the Chaco War.⁸

As in the aftermath of the War of the Triple Alliance, Paraguay found itself needing to repopulate and rebuild the country. Thus, on November 16 of 1936, the Paraguayan government enacted the law that “Concedes Franchises for Polish Colonization.”⁹ This very extensive decree promised Polish colonizers opportunities to purchase and farm vast pieces of land in Paraguay. As a result of this new law, between 1927 and 1938, 12,000 immigrants from Eastern Europe arrived in Paraguay.¹⁰ Due to a lack of specificity in records,¹¹ and to the very complex

⁷ Alfredo Seiferheld, 138-144; 175.

⁸ Alfredo Seiferheld, 259.

⁹ Gabriela Galecka and Cezary Obracht-Prondzýnski, “Polish Community in Paraguay: Maintaining National Identity in Everyday Life and Festivity,” *Revista del CESLA*, no.20, (2017): 5.

¹⁰ Serge Cipko and John C. Lehr, “Ukrainian settlement in Paraguay,” *Prairie Perspectives: Geographical Essays*, Volume 9 No. 1, (October 2006): 33.

¹¹ The Paraguayan Ministry of Immigration only keeps records starting in 2005. Rodolfo Anibal Milessi Alonso, Letter to author, April 12, 2022.

geopolitical relations in Eastern Europe at the time, specifically between Polish, Ukrainian, and Jewish communities, these three communities sometimes appear as one, and thus, the number of Jewish people within those 12,000 immigrants is unclear. Nevertheless, as tensions escalated in Europe in the second half of the 1930s, South American countries recognized that an influx of migrants would soon reach their shores and have a deep impact in every aspect of their social lives. It was only a matter of time.

Nazism on the Rise in the 1930s

When Paraguay was fighting the Chaco War, Adolf Hitler and his National Socialist Party were gaining more and more political power in Germany. In January of 1933, he became the Chancellor of Germany. In less than two months later, Hitler passed the Enabling Act Law, a law that gave him emergency powers to rule without the need to consult the German Parliament or Reichstag. In 1935, he issued the Nuremberg Laws as the first legal step towards what would become the genocide of the European Jewry. These Nazi laws sought to protect German blood and to limit interactions with Jewish citizens.¹² In the upcoming years, more laws to alienate Jewish individuals from the larger community would be enacted. As such, on November 9 of 1938, a violent outburst of hatred resulted in the death of 91 Jews, and in the destruction of Jewish homes, businesses, synagogues, and schools, in what came to be known as Kristallnacht, or “The Night of the Broken Glass.”¹³

In 1938, the Evian Conference took place to address the topic of Jewish emigration as conditions worsened in Europe, and South American countries, including Paraguay, participated. However, no great commitment was made to attempt to aid the European Jewish community in

¹² United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “The Nuremberg Race Laws.” *Holocaust Encyclopedia*.

¹³ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. “Kristallnacht.” *Holocaust Encyclopedia*.

the eve of WWII and the Holocaust; only quotas per country were established.¹⁴ As the war grew closer and closer and, in this atmosphere full of hatred and fear of what could come next, Jews started to emigrate to Latin America, the United States, and any other country far away from Nazism. Nevertheless, before even boarding a transatlantic ocean liner to start a new life, Jewish emigrants concerned themselves with getting access to the passports that would ensure a smooth transition in their departure from Europe.

Secret Passports

A piece of paper with some personal information and a foreign signature could have meant freedom and life for the people who were trying to escape the Holocaust. While getting access to these passports was not without challenges, especially considering that the requirements to emigrate to foreign countries were fairly extensive at the time, it was not impossible. For a considerable sum of money, Jewish people could get their hands on passports to Paraguay, Costa Rica, Uruguay, among other countries. While in the 1930s many of these Jewish emigrants arrived in Paraguay with passports issued in Poland, when Germany invaded it on September 1st, 1939, the situation changed and applying for these passports became more accessible in other places in Europe.

One of the locations where these transactions were taking place was Berna, Switzerland, a neutral country. There, the Polish Legation devised a plan to help Jews who were seeking to emigrate to South America. They found in the Paraguayan Honorary Consul, Rudolf Hügli, a key ally in issuing these passports for Jewish people.¹⁵ Hügli was not Paraguayan himself but had connections to the country. And while he might have had his own personal motives to participate

¹⁴ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. "The Evian Conference." *Holocaust Encyclopedia*.

¹⁵ Robert Kaczmarek, dir, *Passports to Paraguay*, 2020; Institute of National Remembrance.

in this plan, such as charging CHF 500 per passport,¹⁶ he still played a major role in signing the documents with his name. On the Polish side, Aleksander Lados, Stefan Ryniewicz, Konstanty Rokicki, Juliusz Kühl, Abraham Silberschein, and Chaim Eiss were the main architects behind this project.¹⁷ While this risky collaborative project could have jeopardized international relations between Switzerland and foreign countries, as well as Paraguayan relations with other countries, it is estimated that more than 400 Jewish people were saved thanks to this secret scheme.

While in 1944 the Paraguayan government had approved and validated these passports, in the late 1930s just having these documents turned out to not be enough. It might have been true that at the moment of boarding the ships, these passports gave a sense of security and hope to the Jews who were trying to relocate to Paraguay. However, changes in immigration policy at the moment of their arrival would become another obstacle to overcome; one that would have direct consequences on where they would end up settling and starting a new life.

¹⁶ Andrea Tognina and Helen James. "A tale of passports, profiteers and escaping Nazi persecution." *Swissinfo.ch*. Jan. 14, 2020.

¹⁷ Robert Kaczmarek, dir, *Passports to Paraguay*, 2020; Institute of National Remembrance.

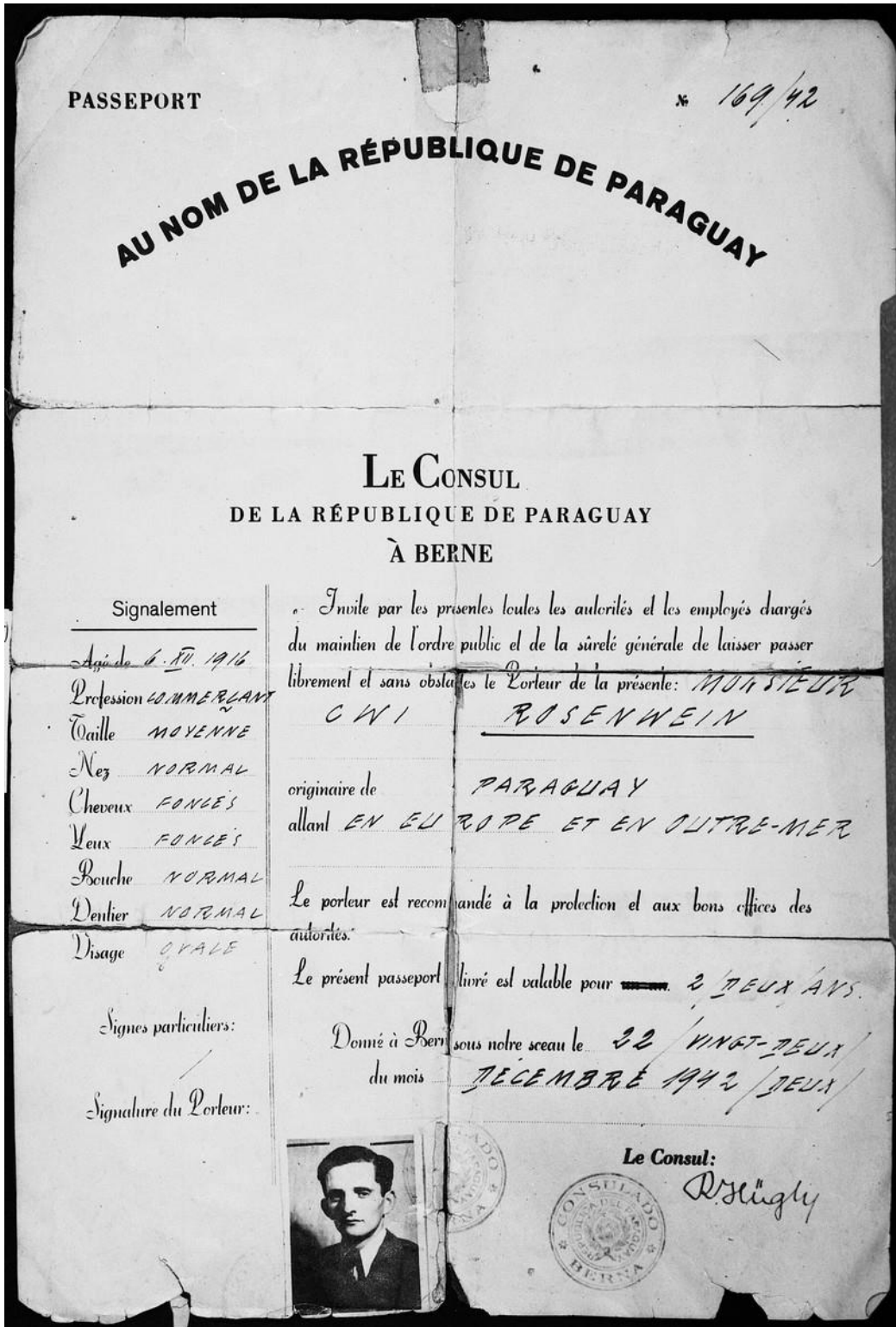


Fig. 3: Reproduced with permission from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Zvi Rosenwein, Paraguayan passport issued to Cwi Rosenwein by the Paraguayan consulate in Bern, Switzerland and valid for a two-year period, Source Record ID: Collections: 2000.323, December 1942.

From Genoa to Montevideo Aboard the SS Conte Grande

For years in the 1930s, ocean liners had little to no challenges when crossing the Atlantic Ocean and sailing towards South America with European immigrants aboard. Thus, when the SS Conte Grande ship left the Genoa port in January of 1939, its passengers were unaware of the obstacles that awaited them in Montevideo. Two months prior, and in a sudden twist of immigration policy, the Paraguayan Government declared that all passports issued after November 18th of 1938 were void. As a result, 264 passengers were stranded in Montevideo while the Uruguayan government devised a solution, and the ship carried on with its journey to Buenos Aires.¹⁸ The Paraguayan government's response was that because these Jewish immigrants were not farmers, they did not fall into the category of European immigrants they hoped to attract. However, and as noted in several newspapers of the time, the fact that these Jewish immigrants were not farmers should have been known by consular officials at the moment of applying for these passports.¹⁹

While waiting in Montevideo, these Jewish passengers requested asylum from other South American countries such as Argentina. However, like Paraguay, they refused to take them in. Because the SS Conte Grande had docked in Montevideo, it immediately became an issue for the Uruguayan government. Dealing with their own immigration challenges, the Uruguayan government had to make the important decision of granting asylum or not to these Jewish immigrants. The Italmar Navigation Company, which owned the SS Conte Grande and managed all its trips, stated that the Italian Government would not allow them to go back.²⁰ Further complicating matters, Paraguay also remained silent and refused to validate their passports. Not

¹⁸ El Bien Público, "Llegó Ayer el Conte Grande," 14 Jan. 1939

¹⁹ The Nebraska State Journal. "Doors Closed to Jews in Paraguay," Jan. 15, 1939.

²⁰ St. Louis Globe-Democrat. "Paraguay Bars 300 Refugees," Jan. 15, 1939.

being able to ignore the problem, Uruguayan authorities took this issue that divided its own society to the Parliament, and eventually voted to allow them to remain in the country,²¹ with no commitments to accepting more Jews in the future. As for the SS Conte Grande, on January 18th, 1939, it sailed back to Europe, and unlike the infamous MS St. Louis which faced a similar fate in May of that same year, the 264 Jewish passengers aboard the Italian ocean liner were allowed to stay in South America before the war broke out in Europe. However, this did not end up being a lone incident. On June 2nd, 1939, The Evening News from Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, reported that three ocean liners, the Caporte, the Monte Oliva, and the Mendoza, encountered the same fate.²² As in the SS Conte Grande case, the Paraguayan government refused to recognize their passports, and the 200 passengers were unable to land in Montevideo, which was supposed to be their land passage to their final destination, Paraguay. Unlike the SS Conte Grande, there are no more reports on what happened to these passengers. Similarly, other cases throughout Central America and the Caribbean (Costa Rica, Mexico, and Cuba) appeared in that same reportage. Thus, in 1939, denying the validity of passports seemed to have become a pattern in immigration policy in several countries of the Americas.

²¹ El Bien Público. "El Consejo de Ministros se Ocupó Ayer del Problema Inmigratorio," 17 Jan. 1939. Also see José Kierszenbaum, "El Episodio del Conte Grande," *Centro Recordatorio del Holocausto*, Apr. 19, 2016.

²² Wilkes-Barre Times Leader, "907 Jewish Emigrants leave Cuba," *The Evening News*, June 2, 1939.



Fig. 4: CONTE GRANDE – SCALO IN CROCIERA AD ALGERI. Courtesy of Thomas Conte.

**SOCIETA
ANONIMA
— DI —
NAVIGAZIONI
GENOVA**

PROXIMAS SALIDAS

"CONTE GRANDE" 18 Enero 1939

**2o GRAN CRUCERO A LOS CANALES FUEGUINOS
"NEPTUNIA"**

Salida 27 Enero 1939
Regreso 8 Febrero 1939

"AUGUSTUS" 4 Febrero

**"ITALMAR" — S. A. de Empresa Maritima
25 DE MAYO, 557**

Fig. 5: Advertisement in the newspaper Evening Star, (Washington, D.C.), 15 Jan. 1939. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress.



Fig. 6: Collage by author of the titles of newspapers' articles. Located at the top is *The Nebraska State Journal*, followed by *The Johnson City Chronicle* to the left, *The Salt Lake Tribune* to the right, and the *Hollywood Citizen News* at the bottom.

Paraguay: A Safe Haven for Nazis

During the war, Paraguayan passports were used to escape from Europe. With the favorable change in Paraguayan immigration policy in 1944, Jewish immigrants kept on arriving in the South American country and reuniting with the Jewish diaspora that had settled there. Thus, when the war ended, Holocaust survivors arrived in Paraguay, were reunited with their families, and hoped to start their lives over again, leaving the catastrophic war behind.

However, painting a black stain on Paraguayan history, Holocaust survivors were not the only ones to arrive. Escaping trials after the defeat of Nazism and the Allies' discovery of concentration camps and mass graves, Nazi officials also found in South America a safe haven. Taking advantage of predominantly authoritarian regimes in South American countries, some of which had Nazi tendencies themselves, high-ranking Nazi officials like Adolf Eichmann, Klaus Barbie, and Josef Mengele escaped to Argentina, Bolivia, and Paraguay/Brazil respectively. In the Argentinian case, Eichmann lived a comfortable life in the South American country under the protection of the dictator Juan Domingo Perón, until he was discovered by a Holocaust survivor, kidnapped (not extradited) by Mossad, and taken back to Israel where he faced trial and was hanged for his countless crimes against humanity.

Similarly, Josef Mengele lived a relatively peaceful life in the countryside of Paraguay by assisting farmers with his medical skills. He was known as the "Angel of Death" for his macabre experiments in Auschwitz, and for being responsible for the death of approximately 400.000 Jews. Mengele first escaped and lived in Argentina for a few years until finally relocating to its neighbor country, where a clandestine branch of the Nazi party was still functioning.²³ At the

²³ The first branch of the National Socialist Party in a foreign land was founded in Paraguay in 1929. For a more detailed history of the presence of Nazism in Paraguay during the interwar years, see Alfredo Seiferheld, *Nazismo y Fascismo en el Paraguay: Vísperas de la II Guerra Mundial* (1985), and *Nazismo y Fascismo en el Paraguay: Los Años de la Guerra 1939-1945* (1986), (Asunción: Editorial Histórica).

time of his first visit to Paraguay in 1951, Alfredo Stroessner was not yet the all-powerful dictator who would rule the South American country for 35 years. However, when Mengele finally decided to settle in Paraguay and apply to Paraguayan citizenship in 1959, Stroessner had already consolidated his uncontested supremacy in politics. As the supreme dictator, Stroessner had power over everyone and everything, and whoever dared to contradict him would have faced terrible consequences that ranged from exile, to torture, to death.

Under Alfredo Stroessner's dictatorship, Mengele "Paraguayized" his name by changing it to José Mengele.²⁴ With allies who protected him along the way, such as Hans Ulrich Rudel, a Nazi war hero and a close friend to Stroessner, Mengele lived a good life in the countryside of Paraguay, reading, writing, and sometimes even offering medical attention to people who needed it. While with Stroessner's protection Paraguay seemed to be a safe place to live, after Eichmann's kidnapping in 1960, and after being recognized by a Holocaust survivor in Asunción, Mengele decided to move and spend the rest of his days in Brazil. A few years after relocating, Mengele drowned due to a stroke, once more avoiding trial for the crimes he committed.²⁵

²⁴ Andrés Colmán, *Mengele en Paraguay*, (Asunción: ServiLibro, 2018): 162.

²⁵ Andrés Colmán, *Mengele en Paraguay*, 314.



Collage by author of all the known names or aliases utilized by Josef Mengele during his stay in Argentina, Paraguay, and Brazil. From Andrés Colmán, *Mengele en Paraguay*, (Asunción: ServiLibro, 2018).

Another Nazi official named Eduard Rochsmann, known as the “Butcher of Riga,” escaped to Argentina and then to Paraguay, where he ended up dying in a public hospital.²⁶ Unlike Mengele, Rochsmann did not received protection or assistance from the supreme dictator. However, similar to Mengele, Rochsmann was a prominent SS Nazi official in Latvia who was in charge of the Riga ghetto, and who had the blood of hundreds of thousands of Jews on his hands. While it could be argued that the regime or the clandestine Nazi Party’s support to Rochsmann was nonexistent, it should also be considered that he entered the country without any obstacles. Perhaps if he had escaped death after only being in Paraguay for a couple of days, he could have followed Mengele’s fate of an ensured protection and assistance from Nazi sympathizers and governmental authorities.

²⁶ Juan Cálceña Ramírez, *Un nazi en el sur: El carnicero de Riga en Paraguay*, (Asunción: Tiempo Ediciones & Contenidos, 2017).



Fig. 7: Reproduced with permission from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, *Josef Mengele*.



Fig. 8: Eduard Rochsmann.

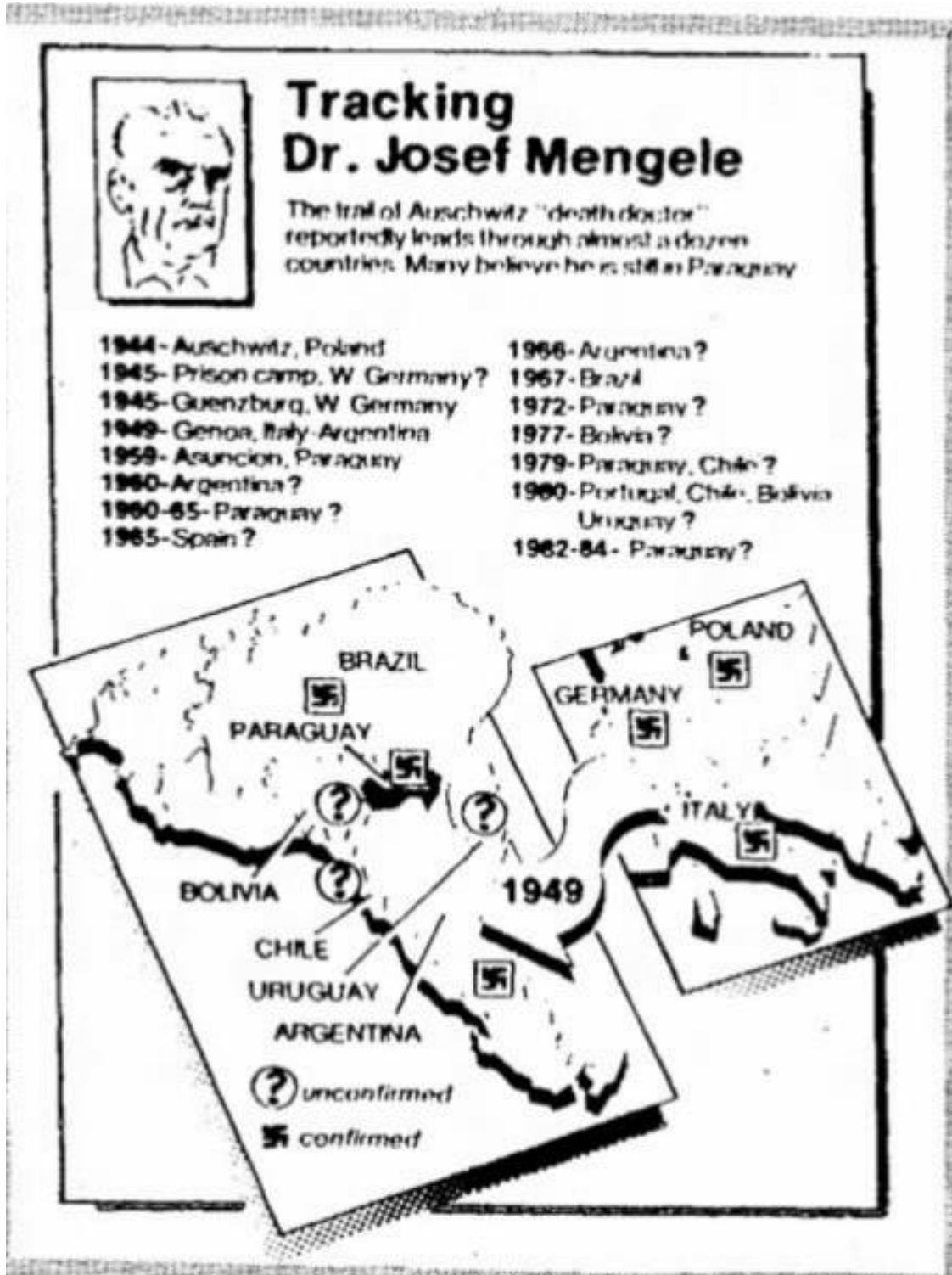


Fig. 9: Chart tracking Josef Mengele's presumed whereabouts in Charles J. Hanley, "Elusive Dr. Mengele: unpunished symbol of Holocaust," *The Galveston Daily News*, (Galveston, TX), May 20, 1985.

With Friends in High Places...

Nazi officials hid from justice in Paraguay. In the 1930s or 1940s, for any Jewish immigrant getting a passport and moving to a faraway land such as Paraguay, was a process full of requirements to meet and challenges to overcome. On the other side of the spectrum, after the fall of the Third Reich in Europe, that same process of obtaining immigration documents and crossing the Atlantic also became available and accessible to Nazi officials who were escaping the law. Perhaps, the most important factor was the protection offered by authoritarian regimes that took over Latin America in the second half of the 20th century.

For Mengele and Rochsmann, among other Nazi officials who lived comfortably in Paraguay, having Alfredo Stroessner in power and as an ally represented this safety net that they needed. Alfredo Stroessner came to power in 1954, and would despicably rule Paraguay for 35 years, until 1989. According to “The Final Report of the Truth and Justice Commission,” during his regime there were: “19,862 arrested either arbitrarily or illegally; 18,772 tortured; 59 executed extrajudicially; 337 disappeared; and 3,470 forcibly exiled.”²⁷ In other words, it was a regime founded upon violence, repression, and fear. In this atmosphere of constant terror, Nazi officials found a safe haven by being in good terms with the dictator. And while Stroessner’s dictatorship in and of itself represented a paradox of having close ties with the United States, which “stood for” democracy and human rights while supporting these dictatorships to antagonize communism, it also opposed the West’s demands to arrest and try Nazi escapees for their crimes. In this complex environment, Nazi officials stayed safe by being on the dictator’s good side.

²⁷ Andrés D. Ramírez, “The Final Report of the Truth and Justice Commission.” In *The Paraguay Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).

With Stroessner as an ally, it was not only safe for Nazi criminals to escape and live in Paraguay, but the whole process of immigration was sometimes expedited and supported by the supreme dictator. In 1957, Stroessner himself wrote a letter to a European consul asking him to grant a passport to a Nazi official who was supposedly travelling to Paraguay to conduct research.²⁸ Similarly, due to his close relationship with Hans Rudel and after having met Mengele, according to some documents in the Archives of Terror, an extensive document collection of police and governmental repression during the dictatorship, Stroessner provided Alban Krug, one of Mengele's helpers in Paraguay, with money to support the Nazi criminal.²⁹ While Stroessner was the head of the country and of these illicit operations of covering up war criminals, some of his loyal employees in governmental institutions also played a role. When in 1958 an extradition order for Josef Mengele arrived at the Palace of Justice in Asunción, the judge Oscar Cuevas ordered that the document be immediately archived,³⁰ thus protecting Mengele from the law by doing so.

Furthermore, an episode that took place in 1960 clearly portrays the differences in treatment between a Jewish immigrant and a Nazi escapee in Paraguay. During a meeting with the German Consul in Asunción, Stroessner was once more asked by the diplomat to help with the extradition of Josef Mengele to Germany so that he could face trial. The German consul suggested that Mengele's documents were obtained illicitly because the Nazi criminal claimed to have lived in Paraguay for years when applying for Paraguayan citizenship when he truly had not. Thus, the consul claimed that he should have not been granted citizenship, that the Paraguayan government should aid in the extradition, and ultimately not protect someone who

²⁸ Andrés Colmán, *Mengele en Paraguay*, 134.

²⁹ Andrés Colmán, 147.

³⁰ Andrés Colmán, 162.

was not truly a Paraguayan citizen. Nevertheless, the consul did not receive a positive response. His request unleashed the dictator's anger and as a response he said: "Once a Paraguayan, a Paraguayan forever!"³¹ The day after the German consul met with Stroessner, the German Embassy's walls were covered with the following writings: "Jewish Embassy. Free Mengele! It's an order!"³²

Moreover, while the time frames are not the same, and the documents in question are not entirely the same either, this episode exposes the dissonance between Paraguayan immigration policy. In 1939, when the passengers of the SS Conte Grande were denied entrance to Paraguay because of their passports, they were not granted the same treatment as Mengele, who fraudulently became a Paraguayan. In other words, for Jewish immigrants, Paraguay as a safe haven did not always end up being what they had imagined, and in some cases, the doors were closed before they even arrived. On the other hand, for Nazi officials who also embraced Paraguay as a safe haven, an authoritarian regime with an all-powerful dictator meant safety from the international actors that attempted to enforce justice for their war crimes. Unlike the Nazi officials who, as Stroessner claimed, were once Paraguayan and therefore always Paraguayan, Jewish immigrants with Paraguayan passports were not always welcomed in the country that they had envisioned as their future home.

³¹ Andrés Colmán, 288.

³² Andrés Colmán, 289.

Fear in the Atmosphere

As discussed before, Stroessner's dictatorship was one of the main factors that enabled Nazi criminals to stay and settle down in Paraguay without fear of retribution. With the fear of retaliation, no one dared to question the dictator's decision, and foreign diplomats and activists could only do so much. As a result, an atmosphere of fear surrounding the dictator's Nazi friends governed the country. However, this was not the only type of fear that existed at the time. Some Paraguayans equally feared these Nazi officials themselves. This is why, even decades after Mengele's death was made public, and decades after the fall of Stroessner's regime, some people living in the countryside where Mengele had settled, were still afraid to talk about the topic.

At the same time, because many of the colonies in the countryside were predominantly German, and in fact some of them even had Nazi tendencies in the 1930s,³³ the leaders of these colonies kept the secrets within their own community. Whenever foreigners wanted to know about Mengele's stay in Paraguay, the locals quickly became uncomfortable and secretive about the topic. As expressed by the journalist Andrés Colmán Gutiérrez, "...his dark shadow – and everything it meant – was still roaming the streets of the industrious colony of German immigrants, causing fear in the old residents, keepers of the secret..."³⁴ Under this pretense, many people kept the secret, and Mengele was able to live for years in Hohenau before moving to Brazil.

Similarly, when Emilio Wolff, a Holocaust survivor, claimed to have recognized Rochsmann after his death at the public hospital in Asunción, he also became a victim of attacks. A day after publicly declaring that the man who had died at the Hospital de Clínicas was the

³³ See Alfredo Seiferheld, *Nazismo y Fascismo en el Paraguay: Vísperas de la II Guerra Mundial* (1985), and *Nazismo y Fascismo en el Paraguay: Los Años de la Guerra 1939-1945* (1986), (Asunción: Editorial Histórica).

³⁴ Andrés Colmán, 38.

butcher of Riga, his business was attacked with gunshots by two men in the early hours of the morning. Wolff's declarations were not only about Rochsmann, but also about concentration camps during the Nazi regime.³⁵ This led the media to believe that the attack could have been an act of retaliation for speaking out about a Nazi criminal and about Nazi crimes against humanity.³⁶ In this tense atmosphere, and perhaps with an intentional message sent by the people who performed the attacks, Holocaust survivors were silenced. At the same time, these attacks and this pressure for silence coincides with the movement that surged in the second half of the 20th century known as the denial of the Holocaust. While in other places of the world the Holocaust was being denied by academics and people in important places, in Paraguay, the victims of the Shoa were being silenced by the authoritarian regime and terrorized by people who did not want their stories to be told. But if they were not able to tell their story, then who would?

The Role of Memory in the Jewish Paraguayan Community

When concentration camps were liberated, the entire world saw what was going on behind the wired fence. At the sight of so much hatred and death, many people around the world chose to remain silent. Many reasons prompted people to avoid talking about what happened in places like Auschwitz, Dachau, or Bergen Belsen. In some cases, people were unable to comprehend and process what they had experienced and survived. As a result, they were incapable of sharing this with other people, even if they were relatives or friends. In other cases, people were deliberately trying to forget, move on, and assimilate to the new places they were now living in, such as the US or other countries they had travelled to after liberation. And in perhaps other

³⁵ Juan Cálcena Ramírez, *Un nazi en el sur: El carnicero de Riga en Paraguay*, 137-140.

³⁶ Juan Cálcena Ramírez, 151; 160-163; 165;170.

cases, survivors were scared or unsure that people would not believe them because some societies had become skeptic, especially at the time of Holocaust deniers.³⁷ All of these reasons, and maybe even others, made silence reign, and what happened to 6 million Jews, as well as other communities such as the gypsies and disabled people, was not spoken about.

In Paraguay, the first two Holocaust survivors who arrived were Sonia Tauber and her sister Ester Brom.³⁸ With the assistance of the Paraguayan consul in Paris, Sonia and Ester were able to migrate to Paraguay and bring with them the memory of what they had endured in Auschwitz. For the Jewish Paraguayan community, their arrival awakened the possibility of reunions between family members who had been separated before the war started, or who had been unable to obtain the necessary documents to migrate. Recognizing the importance of memory, Sonia told her children stories about the Holocaust and how she and her sister Ester had managed to survive the concentration camp. Through these stories of suffering and injustice, Sonia made sure that her children did not forget. Flora Tauber, one of Sonia's daughter, recognized the importance of keeping memory alive and to take on the responsibility of being the voice for the Jewish community.³⁹ As such, she has become an active speaker for the cause, and through her is that we know the story of how Mengele was recognized by Sonia Tauber in Asunción.

After having settled in Asunción, Sonia Tauber and her husband opened a jewelry shop to make a living. One morning, Sonia was called to the front of the store because there was a foreigner who wanted to purchase something but could not communicate properly in Spanish. Sonia proceeded to the front desk and asked the foreigner what he wanted to buy. When he asked

³⁷ Annette Wieworka, *The Era of the Witness*. (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2006). Also see United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. "Holocaust Denial: Key Dates." *Holocaust Encyclopedia*.

³⁸ Andrés Colmán, 265.

³⁹ As part of the annual celebration in commemoration of Holocaust victims, the United Nations in Paraguay hosted a panel to raise awareness. As in many other occasions, Flora Tauber participated by giving a speech about her mother's encounter with Mengele. See Naciones Unidas Paraguay. *27 de enero. Día de conmemoración anual en memoria de las víctimas del holocausto*. 2022. YouTube.

to see a watch, Sonia extended her arm beneath the glass, leaving her tattoo exposed: **29458**. At the sight of her tattooed number, the foreigner became visibly uncomfortable and said he forgot his wallet in his car. This discomfort made Sonia remember and, pointing at the door, she screamed Josef Mengele's name.⁴⁰ After this encounter, and possibly due to other reasons such as Eichmann's trial, Mengele left the country. However, this encounter portrayed the reality of the Jews in Paraguay. They were simultaneously living in a country that had welcomed and sheltered them, as well as the Nazi officials who had caused their suffering. As Flora Tauber expressed: "Right there, in her new homeland and in her own city, in her own store, trying to buy watches, as if nothing had happened."⁴¹

Sonia's story lives through her children who have bravely told her story to raise awareness about the remembrance of the Holocaust; but they are not the only ones. In a short novel, Susana Gertopán tells the story of Barrio Palestina, a Jewish neighborhood that housed various immigrant communities who migrated from Europe. This story recreates the painful and challenging reality that many families encountered in the 1930s, when migrating seemed like the best option in the face of rising antisemitism in Europe. The themes of the book range from the struggles within the family, to missing and worrying about family and friends left behind, to hope and bonding in their new homeland, to facing the reality of the Holocaust.⁴² In the short novel, the character of uncle Iosel is the one who brings the news about the Holocaust and the news about what happened to their loved ones who had stayed behind. With phrases like "it is not possible to tell everything we went through," and "what happened there I cannot tell, I still cannot believe how we could live inside so much madness, thousands and thousands of people

⁴⁰ Andrés Colmán, 268. Also refer to previous footnote.

⁴¹ Andrés Colmán, 267.

⁴² Susana Gertopán, *Barrio Palestina*, (Asunción: Arandurá Editorial, 1998).

were murdered in cold blood every day...,”⁴³ we find out about these first encounters were collective memory was kept alive through literature.

➤ **Jewish Museum of Paraguay Dr. Walter Kochmann**

Located in a strategic location in Asunción, the Jewish Museum of Paraguay was founded in 2013. This museum was created with the goal of maintaining the memory of the Holocaust alive, but also to acknowledge and to honor the history of Jewish immigrants in Paraguay. The museum is divided thematically into three rooms. The first room is red, and is dedicated to the culture, tradition, and history of the Jewish community. The second room is black, and it represents the Holocaust. In it, we can see the names of the main concentration camps, read about the history of the Holocaust, and find the names of the 17 Holocaust survivors who made of Paraguay their homeland after the war ended. Lastly, the blue room highlights Jewish migrations to Paraguay. This room contains documents, suitcases, and pictures of the Jewish Paraguayan community. Because this museum also serves as a teaching center, it has an auditorium where panels take place throughout the year.⁴⁴ Through this museum and the oral and written histories that have been preserved, the Jewish Paraguayan community attempts to maintain the memory of the Holocaust alive. However, there are still some aspects of Paraguayan history that leave us wondering how two antagonistic concepts, such as victims and perpetrators, can coexist in the same space and in the memory of the larger Paraguayan society.

⁴³ Susana Gertopán, *Barrio Palestina*, 190.

⁴⁴ Museo Judío del Paraguay, *Recorrido virtual por el Museo Judío del Paraguay*, (2021. Facebook).



Fig.10: Blue room in the Jewish Museum of Paraguay. Courtesy of ABC COLOR.



Fig. 11: Black room in the Jewish Museum of Paraguay. Courtesy of ABC COLOR.

Welcoming Victims and Perpetrators

The Cambridge Dictionary defines the verb “to reconcile” as “to find a way in which two situations or beliefs that are opposed to each other can agree and exist together.”⁴⁵ For decades, the fact that Paraguay was a country that welcomed both victims and perpetrators has been publicly known. However, even though there was and there is acknowledgement of this situation, there has been no attempt to reconcile these two contradictory stances. We might ask ourselves then, can we actually reconcile an immigration policy that aided the people who caused and executed the Holocaust, as well as the people who were targeted by that same genocide?

In the process of reconciliation, there are factors to be considered for both sides. In the case of Jewish immigrants, welcoming them into the country in the 1930s was a matter of strategic planning to rebuild the country. During and after the war, it turned into helping them escape Nazism and into reuniting them with their families who had successfully emigrated in the past. However, throughout all these processes, there were many obstacles to overcome, mainly economic challenges, that did not always allow the process of emigrating to go very smoothly. Thus, what facilitated and promoted Jewish migrations to Paraguay was the country’s own economic and demographic agenda, the international conflict that specifically targeted Jews, the existence of diplomats in Europe who were willing to risk their own safety to help, and ultimately, the desire to reconnect with family.

The other side of the coin tells a different story. In the case of Nazi officials who ran away to Paraguay, there were also a few factors that enabled this migration. First and foremost, the defeat of Nazism urged prominent Nazi officials who were responsible for countless of lives lost to run away to safer places. With well-known fascist and Nazi organizations, as well as

⁴⁵ “Reconcile.” Definition in the Cambridge English Dictionary. “Reconcile.” dictionary.cambridge.org.

tendencies, South America became one of these safe havens where Nazi criminals could hide from the trials that took place in Europe after the war. In close connection to the international context, the domestic spheres of these countries also enabled this specific type of migration. Regionally, in the second half of the 20th century, Latin American countries found themselves in a web of authoritarian regimes with ruthless dictators. In the Paraguayan case, Stroessner and his dictatorship were one of the determining factors in the welcoming of Nazi officials. His close relationship to the former Nazi pilot Hans Rudel, and his own affinities towards Nazi Germany, made him a key ally to the Nazi criminals who found in Paraguay a safe haven. Ultimately, an important element to consider and that allowed this Nazi migration to Paraguay is fear. Not only fear of the Nazis themselves, but also fear of the dictator's despicable methods with whomever challenged him. Therefore, the factor that enabled both antagonistic groups to live in Paraguay at the same time was fear. However, this does not mean that the Jewish Paraguayan community stayed silent. As mentioned before, Sonia Tauber bravely called out Mengele's name, and Emilio Wolff publicly identified Rochsmann as the man who died in the public hospital, later suffering the consequences for doing so.

Thus, in Paraguay, victims and perpetrators of the Holocaust were coexisting in the same space. Nevertheless, the act of reconciliation takes more than just recognizing that both groups were existing in the same geographic place. For Paraguay, reconciling the fact that it became a safe haven for both Nazis and Jews requires an acknowledgment of the factors that enabled these processes. It requires us to identify the uncomfortable elements that people want to forget, such as the voided visas of the passengers of the SS Conte Grande and the prevalent fear during the dictatorship. In other words, reconciliation as acknowledging the missteps, as well as the good achievements and deeds in Paraguayan immigration policy. At the same time, while

acknowledging constitutes a process of looking at the past, to fully reconcile this dichotomy of being a safe haven for both victims and perpetrators of the Holocaust, there must be a process that involves memory and awareness. As such, the Jewish Paraguayan community has kept the memory of their ancestors alive. Through the Jewish Museum of Paraguay Dr. Walter Kochmann, the Jewish Paraguayan community works to maintain the memory of Jewish immigration and the Holocaust alive, while at the same time educating through testimonies and panels about the risks of forgetting what is considered to be one of the worst atrocities in history.

All those actors who have been actively working to keep memory alive, such as survivor's relatives, authors, activists, and museum educators, are in the process of reconciling this dichotomy in their roles as social actors. Ultimately, only by acknowledging the past, with all the factors that influenced how the decisions were made, while also looking at the future and keeping memory alive, will we be able to reconcile Paraguay's position as a safe haven for victims and perpetrators of the Holocaust.

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