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THE ARGENTINE JEWISH SITUATION: NEGATIVE DEVELOPMENTS OFFSET THE POSITIVE

Two negative trends have in significant measure offset positive developments affecting the Argentine Jewish community during the past year. The trends which concern us are: 1. The intimidation of Jewish community leaders and 2. Anti-Semitism within the security-panel system. In addition, there are other negative trends, affecting the entire Argentine nation, which pose a threat to the security of Argentine Jewry.

Negative Factors

Last week, the government announced that Jacobo Timerman, one of the most prominent members of the Jewish community, has been deprived of his civil rights and will be detained in prison indefinitely, without charges. His property has been placed in state custody. This most recent development came as a blow to those who believed that Timerman, the editor-publisher of La Opinion, would soon be released from prison because two courts had found no cause for his continued detention.

Seven months ago, Timerman was dragged from his home by a dozen heavily armed men in civilian clothing. Twenty-four hours later, in response to widespread and insistent inquiries, the government announced that he was being held prisoner; the "kidnapping" had been done by government agents. Initially, he was suspected of having links to the "Graiver case", and he was held for alleged subversion. After that allegation was dropped, he was held for alleged economic crimes. After a second court found insufficient basis for preferring charges, his wife, early this month, filed a petition for his release. The response of the government has been to make him a political prisoner.

The Timerman case has had a shattering effect upon the entire Jewish community. The Jewish masses have lost a champion and a voice. Under Timerman's direction, La Opinion, one of Buenos Aires leading dailies, did battle with Argentine anti-Semites and championed the cause of Zionism and Israel. Now, Timerman is silenced and humbled, and his paper is controlled and run by the army. That a world-famous journalist could be dealt with in this manner suggests to Jewish leaders that a similar fate could also be theirs, if they are too outspoken.

In June, Jacobo Kovadloff, the director of the Argentine office of the American Jewish Committee, received threatening phone calls warning him that "... if he does not leave the country the same thing that happened to Timerman will happen to him." A note delivered to his home warned, "Go away before it will be too late. We do not want Yankee or Jewish offices." Kovadloff fled the country, followed several days later by his wife and children. When officials of AJC subsequently closed the office, the Jewish community was the weaker.

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U.S. DEPT. OF STATE, A/RPS/TPS

Margaret P. Grafeld, Director

Release () Excise () Deny

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Exemption(s): _____

Declassify: () In Part () In Full

() Classify as ___ () Extend as ___ () Downgrade to ___

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A frontal attack on the leadership of the Jewish community occurred several months ago when agents kidnapped the adult son of Dr. Nehemias Resnizky, the President of D.A.I.A., the representative body of Argentine Jewry. First public mention of the kidnapping appeared in an anti-Semitic right-wing magazine, Cabildo, which said that Resnizky's father "would not be able to continue with his campaign denouncing anti-Semitism in the Argentine government." It took three days to secure his release, after which he left the country.

It is obvious that the Timerman, Kovadloff and Resnizky cases have had a chilling effect on Jewish leadership. Less apparent, but also disconcerting, is the fact that the kidnap and release of Resnizky has given rise to some resentment and suspicion within the Jewish community, where people have been heard to say, "He got his son out, why not mine?" Some have been heard to wonder aloud whether there was a quid pro quo for his release, thus spreading seeds of suspicion which tend to undermine the confidence of the community in its leadership, at the very moment of crisis when solidarity is most crucial.

A second cause for concern is the prevalence of anti-Semitism within the security-prison system. This is manifest when Jews are interrogated about communal affairs and bizarre issues such as the Protocols of the Elders of Zion and alleged Jewish plans to create a second Zionist state in Argentina, a calumny first disseminated in Argentina about four years ago in a tract called The Andinia Plan. We have reliable information that Jews are also being subjected to more cruel physical mistreatment than non-Jews who are picked up for investigation. Some who have been detained and interrogated by the Argentine security services have said that elements of Nazism are prevalent, including Nazi symbols and recordings of Nazi speeches and music. Given the prevailing climate of fear, little is said or done to bring this practice to an end.

POSITIVE DEVELOPMENTS

As the foregoing trends have emerged, there have also been some positive developments in matters affecting the Jewish community of Argentina. When the House of Representatives Subcommittee on International Organizations held hearings on Human Rights in Argentina in September, 1976, the Anti-Defamation League offered testimony on anti-Semitism in Argentina. At that time, we described an eighteen-month series of bombings of synagogues and Jewish communal buildings and other violent manifestations of anti-Semitism. We also reported on the proliferation of Nazi books, in Spanish translation, and other anti-Semitic propaganda.

Since October, 1976, there have been few bombings and the volume of Nazi literature has been reduced. Although the Nazi books are still available, successive government decrees ordered the seizure of some titles and closed several publishing houses that produced Nazi tracts. The government also imposed modest sanctions against the anti-Semitic magazine Cabildo, which used the "Graiver case" as a vehicle for branding the entire Argentine Jewish community as part of a Zionist-Marxist-Montonero plot against Argentina. The ban was effective for only two months, so the magazine is again free to foment anti-Jewish prejudice.

A very promising development occurred in mid-October when the government proposed the legal prohibition of anti-Semitism. The Executive asked the Legislative Advisory Committee to study a proposed law which provides prison sentences for incitement to acts of violence and/or any discriminatory actions against people because of their race, religion, ethnic origin or color. The new law, which has been proposed by the Ministry of Justice, is apparently in response to a request made early this year by leaders of the Jewish community.

Looking back upon the events of the past year it is apparent that the Argentine government is sensitive to the issue of anti-Semitism and has taken some measures to deal with the problem. Unfortunately, these measures have generally been late in coming and far less forceful than one would reasonably anticipate. The adoption of the proposed group libel law, which would impose severe penalties upon those inciting to or committing anti-Semitic acts, would be a major step forward, if the law were adopted and enforced in a meaningful way. The past record of government prompts a wait and see attitude.

The Argentine government has also endeavored to assure Jews, at home and abroad, that it is not anti-Semitic. High-level officials have met with delegations of D.A.I.A. to discuss their complaints about conditions which threaten the security of the Jewish community. Representatives of ADL were invited to meet with Argentine President Jorge Rafael Videla and Foreign Minister Oscar Antonio Montes when they visited the United States last month.

Despite the assurances we have received from government officials, the negative trends previously cited are sufficient to largely offset the positive developments. We must remain preoccupied by incidents which undermine Jewish leadership and the existence of anti-Semitism within the security system, an area which is largely beyond the reach of the law and public scrutiny.

GENERAL FACTORS

Any attempt to assess the security of Argentine Jewry must take into account not only those trends which are directed specifically against Jews as Jews, but must also include developments which affect Jews as part of the total Argentine population. Here too, there is ample cause for concern. The suspension of certain basic legal guarantees has created an environment in which the rights of Jews and non-Jews alike are being violated on a major scale.

During the past year, the ADL Latin American Affairs Department has been deluged by pleas for help coming from relatives and friends of Argentine citizens who have either disappeared or are being held for long periods of time without formal charges against them. There is no indication that Jews are being singled out for arrest, but the dimensions of the problem are so huge that hundreds of Jews are affected. Some estimates as to the total number of disappeared in Argentina range up to 20,000.

When requests for aid are received by ADL, we turn to representatives of the Argentine government, the U.S. State Department and other organizations concerned with the problem of political prisoners. Because the Argentine government has persisted in its policy of not acknowledging whom it is holding we have had little success in locating those who have disappeared. We have, however, had modest success in helping to secure the release of prisoners. In October, the Argentine Foreign Minister accepted from ADL a list of more than 100 names of people disappeared or in prison; we have had no response yet, though six weeks have elapsed.

The problem of disappeared persons is distant and anti-septic when reported in statistical form. The overwhelming majority of cases get no public attention, even when an entire family disappears. For example, in June, 1976, five members of the Tarnapolsky family were kidnapped. Blanca, age 52, is a distinguished psychologist, author and educator. Those taken with her were her husband Hugo, daughter Betina, son Sergio and his wife Laura. All are still disappeared.

The Deutsch family is the exception. When five members of the Deutsch family of Cordoba, Argentina were kidnapped on August 27, 1977, their relatives in the United States launched a massive effort to publicize their disappearance and generate pressures on the Argentine government to disclose where they were being held. Ten days after the kidnapping, the army announced that they were being held for investigation of alleged subversive links. The case was reported in the New York Times and by wire services in papers around the world. An unprecedented number of U.S. Senators and Congressmen inquired about the Deutsch family and President Carter personally discussed the case with President Videla in September. Last month, Mrs. Deutsch and two of her daughters were released from prison. However, the father and youngest daughter remain in jail, despite the publicity and the intervention of President Carter. Ironically, the family was jailed in error by low-level police officials looking for the Deutsch's son.

CONCLUSION

So long as the Argentine government, as a matter of policy, permits security agents dressed in civilian clothing to routinely kidnap individuals and hold them indefinitely without acknowledging that they are prisoners, the security of all Argentine citizens will be tenuous. Jews will be in greater peril because of the prevalence of anti-Semitic sentiment among members of the security services.

The military forces justified their seizure of power in March, 1976 by the need to prevent the disintegration of the social and economic structure of the country. Once in power, they waged an aggressive "dirty war" against subversion and imposed stringent economic controls designed to turn the economy around. Now, the economy has improved and the guerrillas have been largely defeated. President Videla has said that 80% of the guerrilla strength has been destroyed and expressed the belief that the guerrillas would be eliminated by Christmas. However, government agents continue apace their war against "the enemy". Having eliminated gun-toting guerrilla subversives, they are now seeking out those whose ideas are considered subversive. On November 2, a worker was shot down and killed as he spoke in a main street of Buenos Aires. The official army communique on the incident said that "a patrol of the legal forces surprised an activist inciting a work stoppage and trying to stop some workers from going to their jobs, and shot him down....The legal forces are carrying out their mission of guaranteeing the right to work..."

In schools, there is an active effort to identify subversives. Anybody over the age of 15 is considered a potential subversive, so students are subject to denunciation by teachers and teachers to denunciation by students and other teachers. A journalist of the Buenos Aires Herald, the most outspoken paper in Argentina today, wrote, "If the recommendation of some would-be schoolmasters to the nation are followed, Argentina will become a paradise for the busy-body, the nosy parker, the part-time spy, the informer.....The mood in Argentina today is of McCarthyism triumphant. If anyone, particularly anyone in a position of authority, wants to destroy somebody he simply points his finger at him and yells "Commie" or "Subversive" at the top of his voice. If he has intellectual pretensions, there are euphemisms like "dissociative". These double whammies can also be used with deadly effect to discredit institutions and humane attitudes."

The columnist concludes by saying that "the prevailing atmosphere is unhealthy and bodes ill for the future." In such environment, Jews are especially vulnerable.

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