
Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

From Ukraine to Basavilbaso

Rick Meghiddo · Tuesday, July 5th, 2022

The horrors of Russia's invasion of Ukraine that enters our homes daily get mixed with a tsunami of domestic and international negative news. How to filter through these constructively?

The news from Ukraine triggered in me two sets of questions: 1) What does Ukraine not shown on television look like? What is its history, its geography, its art? 2) What is the link between the centuries-long Jewish presence in Ukraine and the story of my family's emigration from Ukraine to Argentina?

The short documentary embedded here, "From Ukraine to Basavilbaso," is a story of migration from a land afflicted by anti-Semitism to a land that promised freedom and opportunity. It is a story shared by millions of people.

Since the staging of my family's story was Ukraine and Argentina, I wanted to link their story with a hopeful present. In contrast to tragedies and hardships, I framed the main story with images of the ongoing war at the beginning and present-day artists at both ends. Through my research, I discovered Daria Marchenko, Pazza Pennello, the DakhaBrakha–Monakh band, and Stepan Ryabchenko from Ukraine, to name just a few. From Argentina, I brought in the legendary conceptual and performance artist Marta Minujín and also a segment of the Argentum performance at Teatro Colon during the G-20 meeting.



Unbreakable, by Pazza Pennello, Kyiv



Pazza Pennello, Kyiv



The Face of War, by Daria Marchenko



Daria Marchenko



Neon Art by Stepan Ryabchenko, Odessa



Stepan Ryabchenko, Odessa



Ounuka Group – Mask 1



Ounuka Group – Mask 2



Ounuka Group – Mask 3



Great Synagogue, Dubno, 1794



Grand Moscow Hotel, 1904, Odessa



I Love Kyiv



I Love Lviv



Odessa Opera, 1887



Odessa Opera, Interior



Fatz-Fein House, 1899, Odessa

When a couple of months ago a cousin sent me from Argentina photos of the newly discovered graves of our mutual great-grandfather Moises and of our grandfather Aron in Basavilbaso's oldest cemetery, I decided to connect the dots between my questions.

The photographs of my great-grandfather's grave were particularly revealing. In it was written, in Hebrew: "Moises Frenkel. Born in Dubna, died (according to the Gregorian calendar) on February 24, 1917, at the age of 107." Where is Dubna, I ask myself? One hundred and seven years old? That means that he was born in 1810, the year Argentinians celebrate the May Revolution, commemorating their detachment from Spain's monarchy, which for me, as a child growing up in Buenos Aires, was "old history."

Soon I discovered that "Dubna" was the Yiddish spelling of Dubno, a town whose history begins in the 1100s and where its oldest Jewish tomb dates from 1581. I also learned that in 1794 the first Hebrew printing press was established there and that in the 19th century, Dubno was a place of Haskalah activists. Haskalah was the Jewish Enlightenment movement in Europe that promoted rationalism, liberalism, and freedom of thought.

How did all these factors impact my great-grandfather's upbringing? The little I know is that he had been kidnapped by the Russian Army when he was seven years old, which was not uncommon at the time, and was released when he was twenty. He then married but, not having children, he

divorced. He remarried a widow with six children; together, they had four more children. Since grandfather Aron Frenkel was the oldest of these, born in 1870, Moises was sixty years old when Aron was born. Where did they live?

Aron's wife, grandmother Catalina Torgavetzky, referred to the Kherson Gubernia as their place of origin. That is a vast area, about the size of South Carolina. Where in Kherson? Judging from the upbringing of the Frenkels offspring, the Frenkels were well-educated in both the Bible and the Talmud and Russian and Yiddish literature. They probably lived not far from Odessa, already a sophisticated city by the end of the 19th century with an imposing Opera House and large boulevards enhanced by Italian and French architecture.

The Kherson Gubernia was a part of the Pale of Settlement, the area where 5.3 million Jews were allowed to live within the Russian Empire. The Pale of Settlement included modern-day Belarus, Lithuania, Moldova, parts of Poland and Latvia, and most of Ukraine. Their common language was Yiddish, a German dialect with words from Hebrew. They all suffered from anti-Semitic attacks and discrimination. Pogroms, the organized massacre of helpless Jews, were a common occurrence.

By the beginning of the 1900s, when pogroms became more murderous, Moises decided it was time to leave, but where to? The United States, "the Goldene Medina," had strict immigration quotas that took years to qualify. Palestine was a poor land that had only Zionist ideals to offer. At the time, Baron Hirsch's Jewish Colonization Association offered 150 hectares (about 370 acres) per family to settle in Argentina, subject to a down payment and repayment in 25 years, starting three years after arrival. It seemed like a definite possibility to sustain the livelihood of a large family.

In 1904 the Jewish Colonization Association selected one-hundred families in the south of Russia to settle in Argentina's Jewish colonies. Where in the colonies? "Basavilbaso," they were told. Basavilbaso was a train station of a major railway intersection, about 320 km from Buenos Aires. Founded in 1887, the Jewish immigrants called the colony Lucienville, about 40,000 hectares of cattle pasture.

The Frenkels accepted the offer. They moved to Argentina in 1904 as a group of about eighty people: Great-grandfather Moises, 94, and his married sons and daughters, already in their thirties, with their spouses and children. The whole family must have traveled by train to Hamburg in Germany to board a ship crossing the Atlantic Ocean in two to three weeks.



Poster of ship to Buenos Aires



Hamburg Harbor, early 1900s



Buenos Aires Harbor, early 1900s

They reached Buenos Aires in June-July 1904. It was winter in the southern hemisphere. They had to endure several days of Argentina's bureaucracy in crowded, terrible conditions. From Buenos Aires, they traveled 320 km to Basavilbaso, where there was not much more than a train station and plenty of mud. Basavilbaso was an Argentinean version of a small shtetl, yet the surroundings had wide horizons, and for the first time in their lives, they did not fear pogroms.



Basavilbaso Area

The Jews that settled in Basavilbaso were well-educated. Contrary to the romantic image generated by writer Alberto Gerchunoff of Jewish gauchos, the immigrants were not farmers and did not aspire to become farmers. They became farmers to make a living and to be able to provide their children with a good education.

Grandfather Aron chose to be a merchant rather than a farmer. He bought a lot in the new village's center and built a house to accommodate his family. His son and two daughters born in Ukraine were followed by five daughters born in Basavilbaso, among them, my mother.

Stories tell that great-grandfather Moises built Basavilbaso's first synagogue, Tfila Le-Moshe, completed in 1912. Yet religion was not central to the Frenkels. The food they prepared was not kosher, and they limited their celebrations to the High Holidays and Passover, yet education was an essential subject.

The Frenkels' home had a well-supplied library with many books in Russian and Spanish. There was a pianola, and the siblings had to learn to play music and do their regular school chores. By 1900, the colonies already had twenty elementary schools teaching 1,200 pupils. The classes included Spanish, Argentinian history, and Hebrew and Jewish rituals. Children learned to read and write both in Spanish and in Yiddish. However, since there were no high schools in the vicinity, the new generation moved to Buenos Aires during their teens. Many became professionals.

My father emigrated to Argentina in 1925, when he was twenty years old. He was born in Kalarash, a shtetl located about 50 km from Kishinev, the present-day capital of the Republic of Moldova, which was called Bessarabia between 1818 and 1919.

His parents were poverty-stricken religious Jews with ten children. The boys all studied Hebrew at the local yeshiva, but my father also got a secular education by going to a gymnasium, the Russian high school. There he discovered his talent for math and memorizing long Russian poems. It was this unusual combination that would impact his future life. Although he dreamed of becoming a

writer, he soon became a businessman using his learned skills to achieve his goals.

My mother, a heavy reader like my grandmother, became self-educated. She performed poetry declamations, wrote in impeccable Spanish, and sang with an opera-level mezzo-soprano voice. She married my father in her early twenties. I showed up eleven years later.

Today approximately 180,000 Jews live in Argentina, and about 140,000 in Buenos Aires. About 100 are part of my family. Most of them live in Buenos Aires.



Marta Minujin in Buenos Aires

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