
Rethinking the American Jewish Experience

Argentinian and Jew: The Ambiguity of Identity

Leon Klenicki

Two books have had a unique influence in my life and reflect my youthful search for a working definition of what it means to be an Argentinian and a Jew. The two books, so present at this time in my mind, are Eduardo Mallea's *The Story of an Argentinian Passion* and Nahum Glatzer's *Franz Rosenzweig: His Life and Thought*.

Mallea was my generation's hero. He was looking for an expression of the Argentinian being beyond the fascist aspirations of many in the middle class and the dreams of easy-going Marxist solutions nourished by a romantic Stalinism. He was looking passionately for being. How many nights were devoted to discussing his book! Walking and discussing became our second nature. I remember long, long walks with Isaias Lerner, presently teaching in New York and a prominent scholar, analyzing every aspect of being Argentinian through Mallea's eyes and those of other writers.

Our vision came from European literature, and especially Unamuno, Ortega y Gasset, and Jean-Paul Sartre. We were walking through Buenos Aires, echoing the walks of French writers like Romain Rolland and Camus in their own cities. We were doing this to avoid being overheard by the secret police. We also imitated other literary traditions, spending much time in cafes. But here we had to be careful of our conversations being overheard. We were living under the dictatorship of Juan D. Peron, a sweetheart compared with the murderers who would follow him years later.

We wanted to be Argentinian, as defined by a culture and ideology, but mainly by the philosophy of existentialism. Existentialism was a product of the social and economic crisis occurring in France and Germany after the Second World War, but it was also an expression of a millennial civilization. Ours was an imitation, an artificial attempt in the midst of a country that did not have centuries of culture behind

it. We were dreaming in a neofascist society, and nothing seemed to be authentic at the time.

Why are Argentinians condemned to imitate? Why not follow the Latin American way? Why not accept, even exercise, the Banana Republic reality? Sad to say, however, Peronism, the carnival of the dictator's speeches and the populism of his first wife, Evita, was more representative of the aspirations and dreams of the people than our own search. It was more realistic than our dream of an Argentinian being. Ironically, Mallea, as time passed, became a writer of exquisite psychological pieces difficult to read, inviting readers to escapism. His desire for authenticity was followed by total inauthenticity.

Our walking took us nowhere. It was a dead end that precipitated exile, both inner (intellectualism) and outer, looking for new horizons, mainly in Europe. It was at that moment of experiencing a wasteland that I discovered Franz Rosenzweig. His writings came at a moment of questioning the Judaism I knew, questioning the Jewish experience of our parents and my own generation. We were offered few chances to express a meaningful Jewish commitment. One was Zionism, expressed in youth movements inspired by Hashomer Hatzair, Mapai, and Herut, faraway ideological movements, though near our hearts because of Israel's strength, the bravery of Jewish soldiers, the strength of saying *no* to the enemy. It was once again a sort of romanticism, except for those who made aliyah and woke up to a different reality in Israel. My Jewish questioning related to an inner need to understand Judaism in relationship to God. My questioning was essentially about living with God.

I started visiting synagogues and attending services. There were only Orthodox synagogues, with the exception of one called "Reform," though it followed what in the United States would have been Conservative Judaism. I was devastated by the spiritual emptiness of the services. The Orthodox *shulen* were places devoted to general discussions about the situation of the Jewish community, business, Israel, and other matters, with no attention paid to spirituality or the meaning of being religious. The young Orthodox men were mainly interested in halakhic pursuits, and more concerned about kashrut than with a religious point of view that would allow for an understanding of our social condition and our place in the world.

My discovery of Rosenzweig enabled me to realize that I could be

religious beyond folklore and thinking in terms of the shtetl. I could believe while considering the challenge of our Argentinian condition. After Rozenzweig, I read Martin Buber and Milton Steinberg (whose *As a Driven Leaf* has recently been translated into Spanish), the work of Eliahu Benamozegh, an Italian Jewish thinker of the nineteenth century, and Emmanuel Levinas. These and other thinkers opened me to a new understanding of being Jewish in a non-Jewish society. They answered intellectually my thirst for God.

It was interesting that parallel to our own search, young Catholics were looking for a meaningful Catholicism. My contacts with certain groups, rabid opponents of the regime though the church sympathized with the Peronist movement, made it possible for me to read certain writers who shaped a whole Catholic generation—mainly Jacques Maritain, Emanuel Mounier, and Gabriel Marcel. Maritain was a thinker who deeply influenced my own search, though at no time did I consider a conversion to Catholicism, as was the case with other Jews reading his books. He was an example of a religiously committed person living in the midst of the twentieth century. Finally, I went to Cincinnati to study at the Hebrew Union College.

This note of mine is an existential testimony, not a sociological study. I, like many, was shaped by the ambiguity in Argentinian life as well as the ambiguity of the Jewish condition. Some overcame it by a political or a religious commitment. Others, many, continued, continue in the realm of ambiguity.

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