

Shared Roots, Shared Branches: Reconnecting Queer, Trans, and Jewish History in the Argentine Twentieth Century

Marce Butierrez

Abstract

Despite the numerous connections between violence against Jewish, trans, and queer people, the fields of sexualities studies and Jewish studies remain largely unconnected. In Argentina, the figure of 400 disappeared LGBT individuals—used to claim reparations for victims of the last dictatorship, as declared by Rabbi Marshall Meyer and popularized by the gay activist Carlos Jáuregui—serves as a primary illustration of these connections. Rabbi Meyer's original perspective on the specific forms of mistreatment endured by numerous marginalized communities during the last dictatorship provides a foundation for contemplating the complexity of the history of violence propagated by conservative nationalist factions.

From this point of view, the text endeavors to establish connections between strategies, experiences, and locations pertaining to Jewish, trans, and queer subjects by drawing upon the records of the Police Archive of Rosario, Argentina. In particular, it analyzes the similarities between strategies of self-concealment and cleansing used when the repressive context intensified its persecution of individuals labeled as “immorals.” A comprehensive cross-analysis of the conservative ideology embodied in public morality police divisions and their archival practices reveals the potential for reconnecting communities and imagining shared political horizons to combat today's growing conservatism in Latin America.

Keywords: antisemitism, trans, queer, LGBT, public morality, dictatorship, conservative nationalism

INTRODUCTION

In 1983, the National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons (CONADEP, according to its acronym in Spanish) produced a lengthy, though only introductory, report on the crimes against humanity committed by the last military dictatorship in Argentina.¹ The commission was composed of prominent journalists, writers, scholars, religious leaders, and doctors appointed by former President Raúl Alfonsín and the National Congress. Its mission was to gather information about the military junta's responsibility for the disappearance of persons. In nine months of research, it documented the first count of victims: 8,961.

1 This paper is the result of my time as a research fellow at the Frankel Center for Judaic Studies at the University of Michigan. This research would not have been possible without feedback from the other fellows and support from the Frankel Center. I would particularly like to thank my friends, Ana Hajkova and Iris Rachaminov, for their emotional and intellectual support during that time. I was able to conduct my archival research thanks to the company and friendship of Mir Yarfitz, who always inspired and encouraged me in my crazy ideas. Finally, I am grateful to James Richie for his lovely and patient company, as well as for his contributions to improving my writing skills.

The report detailed the systematic nature of an extermination plan targeting individuals labeled as “subversive” by the military dictatorship, the existence of 300 secret detention centers, and the urgent need to ensure that such crimes never happen again. The CONADEP report is considered the most important document on the subject, but it remains only a first draft of the situation experienced in Argentina during the military dictatorship from 1976 to 1983. The commission was accused of partiality and of avoiding addressing the crimes committed by terrorism prior to 1976. However, it repeatedly acknowledged the lack of information and the incomplete nature of its work due to the short duration of its mandate. In particular, the number of disappeared persons was, and still is, a central issue among both defenders and detractors of the military regime. In the prologue, Ernesto Sabato writes: “We have discovered close to 9,000 of these unfortunate people who were abandoned by the world. We have reason to believe that the true figure is much higher. Many families were reluctant to report a disappearance for fear of reprisals. Some still hesitate, fearing a resurgence of these evil forces” (Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas 1986).

Thanks to the work of human rights organizations, the current estimate of the number of disappeared persons is around 30,000. This figure is largely symbolic due to the scarcity of documents, records, and evidence left by the military junta, yet it remains entirely plausible considering the number of secret detention centers established across the country and the growing number of testimonies from relatives and survivors. However, right-wing and conservative sectors have consistently questioned the accuracy of this figure, sometimes weaponizing the number cited by CONADEP members. As Matías Grinchpun notes in his research, the relativization and “revisionism” used to dispute the number of victims of the last dictatorship can be compared to the controversy surrounding the number of Holocaust victims, also exploited by

conservative and antisemitic sectors worldwide (2021). Since 2015, with the rise of the Republican Proposal Party, the debate over the number and characterization of crimes against humanity committed during the dictatorship has intensified. At the same time, among progressive and liberal sectors, a parallel debate has emerged—one focused on making visible the trans and queer victims who were never counted among the victims of military violence. The LGBTIQ+ community has proposed adding 400 trans and queer victims to the figure of 30,000, bringing the total to 30,400 victims.

The origin of this estimate of trans and queer victims and the debate surrounding it is the starting point of this paper, which aims to reconstruct the connections between marginalized groups such as Jews, trans, and queer people during the twentieth century in Argentina under conservative and military governments.

THE DEBATE ON 400 DISAPPEARED LGBT PEOPLE

The first mention of 400 trans and queer victims of the last dictatorship in Argentina was published by Carlos Jáuregui, the most prominent Argentine gay activist, in his book *Homosexuality in Argentina*:

But our intimate conviction led us to believe that among the thousands of disappeared comrades, victims of State terrorism, there must have been, at least, some hundreds who were homosexuals. The statistical data is not official, it does not appear in the Report of CONADEP *Nunca Más*, but one of the members of CONADEP affirms the existence of at least 400 homosexuals on the horror list. The treatment they received, he told us, was similar to that experienced by Jewish victims who disappeared: especially sadistic and violent. All of them were raped by their moralistic captors. We did not know them, we will never know them. They are only 400 of the 30,000 cries for justice that beat in our hearts. (1987, 158–159)

This informal communication referred to in the text was attributed, though only as a rumor, to Rabbi Marshall Meyer. Rabbi Meyer arrived in Argentina in 1959 and was appointed rabbi of the main Conservative synagogue in Buenos Aires. In 1962, he founded the first rabbinical seminary in South America, based in Buenos Aires, and in 1963, he established a new Conservative Jewish congregation called Bet-El. During the dictatorship, he was responsible for collecting reports of Jewish disappeared persons, engaging with the embassies of the United States and Israel, and negotiating various options for the release and relocation of prisoners outside Argentina. In 1980, he founded the Jewish Movement for Human Rights. For these remarkable contributions to human rights, he was appointed a member of CONADEP when democracy was restored in 1983. He was the most committed rabbi in the fight against the dictatorship when other Jewish leaders generally kept quiet, and his efforts saved the lives of many Jewish people persecuted by the military regime (Fainstein 2021).

As a result, Rabbi Meyer had firsthand knowledge of the specific mistreatment of Jewish people in illegal prisons. On many occasions, Jewish detainees were assaulted, tortured, and murdered solely because of their religion. Although the military dictatorship denied its Nazi sympathies, Argentina has a long-standing tradition of antisemitism within its armed forces. When Rabbi Meyer visited Jewish prisoners during the dictatorship, he often saw swastikas on the walls of military offices and inscriptions such as the word *nazionalismo* (instead of the correct Spanish spelling *nacionalismo*), deliberately spelled with a “z” in clear reference to Nazism. He himself was mistreated during these visits, as this fragment reflects:

I was left nude in the middle of the winter on the patio of one of the prisons (Villa Devoto, in Buenos Aires), while the prison director walked by and made sure I heard the fact that “This Jew is going to walk in one day through

the front door, and he’s going to go out in a coffin through the back door.” I was searched, and I said, “Look, I’m not a prisoner. The priest doesn’t have to be searched in that fashion.” And I was told, “But you’re a Jew.” Of course, that means, I suppose, that you’re a dog or something like that. (Blum 1984)

Rabbi Meyer perceived his time in CONADEP as an opportunity to speak publicly on behalf of the Jewish community about the long history of hatred against Jewish people in Argentina. In 1984, a few months after completing his assignment with CONADEP, Rabbi Meyer returned to the United States, where he became the chief rabbi at B’nai Jeshurun in New York. There, he built a strong and revitalized community grounded in his principles of inter-faith dialogue and inclusivity, welcoming people of color, the homeless, and members of the gay community affected by the HIV epidemic (Butierrez 2025).

Once settled in the United States, Rabbi Meyer continued advocating for the Latin American Jewish community and supporting former Argentine students. In a 1992 interview with Suki Sandler, Rabbi Meyer stated:

A human being is not disappeared, a human being is made to disappear and killed and murdered and brutally tortured. And the clandestine prisons in Argentina were places of the most disgusting abuses of elemental human rights and human dignity. People were thrown alive from helicopters over the Río de la Plata, people were tortured and raped, men and women, the gay community. In Argentina, for instance, over four, five hundred gays were drowned alive, of course after they had been raped by the macho Argentine military. I mean, they had their initials burned. You’d get stuck if I told you the methods that were utilized. (Sandler 1992)

The mention of these communities as victims of the dictatorship opens a new perspective on

the violence and crimes committed by the Argentine government during the second half of the twentieth century. But was this violence against Jewish people, gays, and lesbians limited exclusively to the last dictatorship? Or does it reflect a longer and deeper tradition of antisemitism and sexism within the army and police forces, perhaps even dating back to the early twentieth century?

While there is a substantial body of literature examining the persistence of antisemitism in the Argentine armed forces and the involvement of certain political parties in such practices, as well as the violence perpetrated against LGBT individuals throughout the twentieth century, there remains a notable absence of a perspective that considers these two forms of violence as part of a unified phenomenon with shared roots. At least in South America, there has been little joint consideration of the relationship between the repression of sexualities, xenophobia, the persecution of sex workers, censorship, and antisemitism. This is despite the existence of an extensive bibliography that would support such an inter-sectional approach.

In light of this, Rabbi Marshall Meyer's thought represents a crucial initial step toward developing a unified framework for understanding how the Argentine state, through its security forces, has historically targeted specific

communities, including Jewish people, gays, lesbians, and transgender individuals, with particular animosity. In this paper, I aim to consider these two expansive fields of inquiry in conjunction, using Rabbi Marshall Meyer's proposal as a point of departure and expanding the chronology to encompass the period from the 1920s to the present. To this end, I draw upon a number of archival sources obtained during my research in the police archive of Rosario (Santa Fe, Argentina). While these sources do not fully illuminate a direct intersection between Jewish and queer individuals, they nonetheless allow us to imagine a shared world in which Jewish pimps, Polish prostitutes, homosexuals, and other stigmatized individuals intertwined their lives.²

TIMELINE OF THE REPRESSION AGAINST JEWISH, TRANS, AND QUEER PEOPLE (1920S–1980S)

The examination of the controversy surrounding dictatorship violence is challenging. In many instances, it is perceived as a means of justifying the crimes or, in some cases, supporting the dictatorship itself. Each time a scholar attempts to investigate the intricate network of violence that existed during the transition to democracy or the years preceding the dictatorship, they are questioned. The memory of the dictatorship's violence remains a significant impediment for some scholars attempting to conduct long-term research in Argentina. Nevertheless, some scholars are investigating and questioning the longer, more complex genealogy of violence against sectors considered minorities, establishing the



Fig. 1 Rabbi Marshall T. Meyer during a Jewish Movement for Human Rights demonstration, April 27, 1984. *Nueva Presencia* newspaper. Photo by Alicia Segel. Marshall T. Meyer Papers Collection, Rubenstein Library, Duke University.

2 In reference to the nomenclature utilized to designate these individuals, I will employ the terms “pimps,” “prostitutes,” *cafén*, and *polacas*, among others, as native categories. These terms are typically used in police documents. It is important to note that my personal political stance on sex work is not a factor in this choice. Instead, it is intended as an ironic representation of the ideology held by police and military forces in Argentina.

requisite connections between disparate historical events that illustrate, on the one hand, the consolidation of certain repressive institutions and the reinforcement of the legal system to validate them and, on the other hand, the intensifying persecution, incarceration, and psychiatrization of individuals labeled as immoral.

In the field of sexuality studies, the debates about dictatorship and state violence have intensified in recent decades, particularly in light of the public debates surrounding the 400 cases of LGBT individuals identified as disappeared. Santiago Insausti (2015) advanced the proposition that the boundaries of governmental violence should be extended beyond the confines of dictatorship, encompassing a period of just a few years before and after it. The lack of available information concerning the LGBT situation during the Peronist era (and the political conflict that necessitates an examination of the anti-LGBT policies enacted during the Perón government in the context of the present) has obscured the analysis of a comprehensive chronology of state violence. From an objective standpoint, there is a significant dearth of primary documents pertaining to the period between 1930 and 1955. This lack of documentation has been interpreted in varying ways by different scholars. In a previous paper written with Mir Yarfitz, I posit that this gap in trans history may be the result of the efficacious implementation of conservative politics in the years preceding the “Infamous Decade” (*Década infame*), which prohibited sex work, established the inaugural divisions of public morality within the police force, disseminated the principles of psychiatry and psychology regarding “non-normal” sexualities, and promoted incarcerations and confinement in mental asylums (Butierrez and Yarfitz 2024). Galeano and Schettini (2022) corroborate these assertions in their recent work on the formation of the police in Argentine provinces during the 1920s and 1930s. They assert that the traditional structure of the neighborhood police, which was

primarily concerned with domestic matters, was institutionalized during the early decades of the twentieth century, coinciding with the rise in migration and the formation of labor unions. The traditional police force, which was dependent on municipal governments and focused on matters such as domestic disputes, control of measures, sanitation, public order, and other domestic issues, gradually assumed a greater number of tasks. These tasks became increasingly linked with matters of morality, order, and the protection of the security of the “honored” people against the new waves of immigrants who were considered criminals, anarchists, and socialists. Indeed, Galeano and Caimari (2023) substantiate that during the latter years of the 1920s and the early 1930s, the majority of state and federal police forces were establishing public morality departments. These departments were tasked with the regulation of various forms of deviant behavior, including prostitution, pederasty,³ anarchist activities, robbery, and alcohol consumption. These actions were perceived as a means of restoring moral order within the nation. Cristiana Schettini (2017) conducted a comprehensive examination of the impact of these departments on the regulation and prohibition of sex work in Argentina, as well as the establishment of a legal framework for the prosecution of any suspicious behavior outside the confines of matrimony and heterosexual intercourse. In a previous article (Butierrez 2023), I established some connections between the evolution of the police structure and the prohibition of sex work with the persecution of any non-cisheterosexual behavior. This is evidenced by the research findings from the police archive records analyzed in this article, which indicate an increase in the number of imprisonments and the stigmatization and persecution of effeminate homosexuals,

3 Pederasty was the common accusation against homosexual men. It did not necessarily imply sex with a minor; it was used to refer to sexual relationships between adult men.

homosexual men, and transgender people since the 1930s. With these data, still entirely unsystematized, it is possible to begin to construct a comprehensive historical account of the violence perpetrated against communities whose sexualities deviated from the dominant norms, despite the fluctuations in political systems and the demarcations between dictatorships and democracies that occurred over the course of nearly a century in Argentine history.

In the field of Argentina's Jewish studies, the question of the origins of antisemitism is clearly defined. Most scholars agree that the country has witnessed a prolonged discourse surrounding the "Jewish issue" throughout the twentieth century. Some scholars, such as Daniel Lvovich (2003) and Nathan Lerner (1989), posit that local anti-Jewish narratives had their roots in the late nineteenth century, with the local repercussions of the Dreyfus Affair in France and the advent of the first nationalist literature, coinciding with the first Jewish immigrants arriving in Argentina. Other scholars have highlighted how the more overt expression of antisemitism was a consequence of their prominent role in the initial protests and workers' organizations (Avni 1991). However, the majority of scholars concur that the primary source of antisemitism was not only the participation of Jewish migrants in the labor movement, but also the conspiracy theories espoused by certain nationalist and Catholic sectors of the Argentine population regarding the central role of Jewish people in an international plot to sow chaos (Waisman 1989).

The main example of the rise of antisemitism were the events that transpired during the so-called Tragic Week, which involved numerous Jewish individuals who were wrongfully accused of being "maximalists" (a term used to describe Marxists) and the leaders of the workers' protests that rocked the city of Buenos Aires in January 1919 (Wald 1998). These acts are not merely connected to Marxist or worker strikes; rather, they are driven by antisemitic and xenophobic sentiment. Furthermore, the ascendance of the

Patriotic League following the Tragic Week contributed to the proliferation of a nationalistic fervor, characterized by an intensified animosity towards foreigners, anarchism, and the vices and prejudices associated with it, according to the research of Sandra McGee Deutsch (1986). At the same time, McGee Deutsch illustrates, Jewish people were depicted by the nationalist sectors as both Marxist Bolsheviks and avaricious capitalists who lacked loyalty to their homeland. This robust suspicion of Jewish people for their purported "double loyalty" and their perceived devotion to financial gain and personal interests constitutes a compelling narrative with varying effects between the working class and the upper middle class.

Additionally, Jewish people were considered immoral because many of them were involved in sex work in the early twentieth century in Argentina. Jewish women born in Poland were identified as prostitutes, and the term *polacas* (Polish women) became popular to refer to sex workers in general. This identification has a paradigmatic moment with the Zwi Migdal affair, which took place in 1930, but, as Yarfitz mentions, there are debates and controversies around Jewish sex work before its peak moment. The Zwi Migdal scandal strengthened a narrative associating the Jewish community with white slavery. In the wake of Raquel Liberman's allegations against the Warsaw Society, a scandal emerged concerning a shadowy Jewish group engaged in the illicit trade of women from Poland. This contributed to the intensification of prejudice among some Catholic and conservative sectors of Argentine society regarding the perceived illicit origins of Jewish wealth, the immorality of their business practices, and their perceived threat to societal norms (Yarfitz 2019).

A series of statistical studies conducted during the 1960s demonstrated that the antisemitic narrative had a deeper impact on the military than on the working class. Gino Germani (1963) surveyed 2,078 individuals to ascertain their perceptions of the Jewish community in the northern area of Buenos Aires. The findings of

this report indicate that antisemitic sentiment was more prevalent among those in the upper class and the military. Enrique Pichon-Rivière (1964) conducted a parallel investigation with 500 individuals (440 civilians and 60 military), demonstrating that among diverse groups of migrants, Jewish people were the most marginalized. This was evident in their reluctance to engage in various forms of social interaction, including employment, marriage, and residence. Pichon-Rivière's perspective aligns with Germani's in that they both believe that antisemitic sentiments were more prevalent among the middle and upper classes, particularly those residing in urban areas of Buenos Aires. These prejudices were shaped by the pervasive conspiracy theory about Jewish people, which was prevalent among the military, police, and upper-class individuals, largely influenced by the values defended by the Patriotic League and conservative Catholic sectors.

Despite the government's apparent neutrality toward the Jewish community and lack of significant antisemitic actions during the Peronist era, the Peronist movement was deeply intertwined with the military forces, largely affiliated with Catholic and traditionalist sectors, and on occasion admirers of Nazi political ideologies. Juan Domingo Perón attempted to portray himself as a politically neutral figure. For instance, he emphasized the Justicialist Party as a "third position," neither Marxist nor capitalist, and neutral about the Second World War on the global political stage. This was a means of justifying his support for Nazi emigrants, many of whom were sponsors of some Peronist organizations. In contrast, the reception of Jewish refugees was at times hindered or used as a bargaining chip between Peronist leaders and Jewish community organizations (Weisbrot 1979). These clandestine connections were ultimately revealed in 1960 with the capture of Adolf Eichmann, who had been residing in Argentina since the conclusion of the Second World War and was protected by Argentine accomplices (Rein 2023). As a consequence of Eichmann's kidnapping,

organized by the Israeli government and understood as an attack against Argentine sovereignty, many nationalist organizations emerged in the country. The most important of these was Tacuara, a pro-Peronist commando with a strong right-wing, traditionalist, and Catholic discourse (Bohoslavsky 2012). This organization was responsible for several attacks against Jewish institutions, including cemeteries and synagogues. Additionally, Jewish individuals were targeted, with some being beaten and marked with swastikas on their faces with knives. The 1960s and 1970s were a period of significant turmoil for Argentine Jewish people. The complex political landscape, characterized by intense violence between right- and left-wing organizations, the return of Perón in 1973, the María Estela Martínez government, and the subsequent ascension of a dictatorship, resulted in a climate of heightened tension and violence.

Tacuara, the Argentine Anticommunist Alliance, and a number of magazines (*Cabildo* and *El Caudillo*, among others) served as the primary communication outlets for the right wing during the preceding years of dictatorship (Waisman 1989). In their various publications, they explained the ways in which certain ideas could jeopardize the stability and progress of Argentina. The right-wing positions exhibited by these publications gave rise to significant debate, the production of reports, the imposition of censorship, and the facilitation of open dialogue between journalists who were in favor



Fig. 2 Tacuara's attack on the Jewish community. *Crónica* newspaper, July 1962. Archives and Special Collections, National Library "Mariano Moreno."

of or opposed to the conservative, nationalist, and Catholic project that was embodied in the aforementioned magazines. The most significant provocations included the dissemination of two posters, which represented two distinct ideologies regarding societal structures. One depicted the perceived dangers of communism, Zionism, and Freemasonry, while the other portrayed the Catholic, traditionalist, and Hispanic order as an inherent and natural phenomenon. The poster, colloquially designated as the “Subversion Tree” (Árbol de la Subversion) delineated the three principal roots of subversion as Marxism, Zionism (used as a synonym for Jewishness), and Freemasonry. The branches, designated as “indirect aggression,” illustrated homosexuality and prostitution. The “Subversion Tree” represents one of the most compelling examples of how the conservative-nationalist-Catholic sector has consistently viewed sexual freedom, feminism, and the progressive attitudes of younger generations as unfortunate consequences of the “Jewish issue” in Argentina. The upper class and military forces adhered to the conviction that Jewish people disseminated immorality and leftist ideas.

The fields of sexuality and Jewish studies converge in their examination of the role of conservative-nationalist-Catholic sectors of Argentine society in the perpetration of violence

against populations deemed different. Thus far, only a limited number of scholars have attempted to draw a connection between these two issues. However, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that the violence perpetrated against queer and trans individuals can be situated within the context of the aggressions and persecutions experienced by Argentine Jewish people. In other words, it is the flip side of the “Subversion Tree,” as it sets out to demonstrate that the same military and paramilitary forces are responsible for Argentina’s darkest era for Jewish, trans, and queer people. As an archive, the two folders of sexism and anti-semitism have remained separate for an extended period. The primary objective of this paper is to integrate the documents, conduct a comparative analysis, and contextualize their production. The following documents serve as testimonies not only to the individuals mentioned therein but also to the eras and locations in which they were created. These documents reflect the experiences of individuals subjected to the scrutiny of state power. The objective is to repair these *legajos*, an Argentine term used to describe personal records collected by the police and other governmental institutions. This process entails contextualizing the archives, envisioning their production environment, reestablishing connections with other *legajos*, and comprehending their evolution and trajectories.

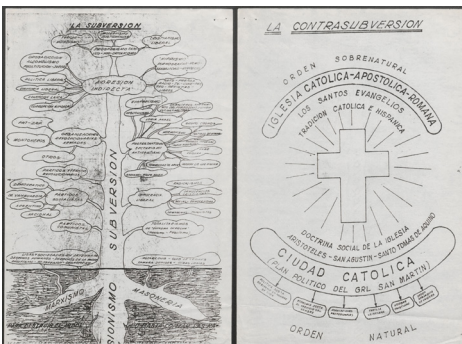


Fig. 3 “Subversion Tree and the Counter-Subversion,” ca. 1970s. Marshall T. Meyer Papers Collection, Rubenstein Library, Duke University.

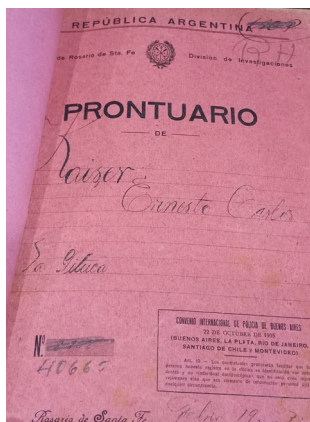
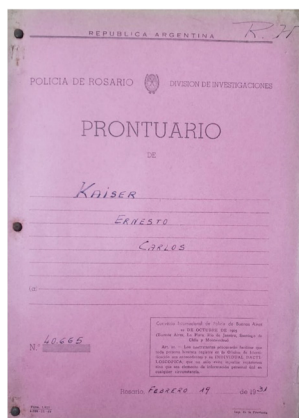
SHARED STRATEGIES OF SELF-CONCEALMENT AND MORAL CLEANSING

There are few cases in Argentina where police archives are kept in good condition and are accessible to researchers. In general, the laws permit these archives to be purged every few years, which makes it difficult to study long-term processes. In addition, the archives are always at the center of political disputes, which affects their preservation. In Argentina, archival policies are framed by legislation concerning the preservation of documents from the last dictatorship. Documents produced between 1970 and 1983

were given special protection by the legal system, as were the oldest documents from the colonial era to 1920, which were considered historically valuable. The period between 1920 and 1970 is the least documented, as many of these archives were destroyed, lost, or simply forgotten in old warehouses without custody or preservation procedures. Only in some cases have these archives been recovered or conserved. In this research I will analyze the documentary collections of the Rosario Police Archive, an exceptional case in Argentina that allows the reconstruction of a large gap in its history.

The Rosario Police Archive is an archive of criminal records, divided into different sections according to the category of crime: theft and robbery (crimes against private property), social order (crimes against public order such as anarchism and union protests), special laws (a variety of minor crimes against public health and municipal laws), and public morality. The latter is particularly significant because it contains records on prostitution, pederasty, sexual inversion, proxenetism, and other sexual crimes against morality (Fernández-Galeano and Yarfitz 2023). Within these sections, each person has an individual *legajo*, a folder containing multiple documents that recorded their first contact with the police and the subsequent situations in

which they became involved in affairs with the police. These might include other crimes but also requests for official documents, minor contraventions, or investigation orders from other police jurisdictions. Each *legajo* testifies to the life trajectory, in some cases showing only a few events, but in others documenting many events at different times and for different purposes throughout the subject's life. The *legajo* is titled with the surname and first name of the subject and numbered with the initials of the section and a number corresponding to the order in which it was created. The cover page may also list other names and pseudonyms by which the person was known. According to a letter signed by the political chief of the city of Rosario, Domingo Borghi, around 1930 and included in some *legajos*, “the individual *legajo* must be, for society, the book in which the life of each of its members is recorded,” and each *legajo* “is sacred and its data must remain absolutely reserved: it is entrusted to the rectitude of the employee, who must bear in mind that above all expediency there are the dictates of his conscience and the penal provisions that the laws establish.” Nevertheless, some strategies proved effective in altering or omitting details in the *legajos* that exposed individuals as “immoral,” thereby enabling them to evade police surveillance.



Figs. 4 and 5 The *legajo* of Ernesto Kaiser aka La Pituca, 1931, both cover pages. Rosario Police Archive, Public Morality Collection (Argentina).

Ernesto Kaiser's *legajo* begins in February 1931, when they were arrested for being a well-known pederast. However, the cover page does not display this information, and the *legajo* number is registered under the theft and robbery section (*RH*, for the Spanish *Robos y Hurtos*) instead of public morality (*MP*, for the Spanish *Moralidad Pública*). From the outside, this could easily be mistaken for another routine robbery police report, but analyzed in detail, it is possible to reveal the full story of Ernesto, aka La Pituca. Turning the first cover page reveals another cover beneath it. This one contains a different number, this time under the public morality section, and the curious female pseudonym La Pituca, which is an Argentine slang term used to describe a conceited, arrogant, or extravagant woman. This second cover, which is obviously the oldest, is the original front page of Ernesto Kaiser's *legajo*, but it was covered by the first one with the apparent intention of hiding the immoral condition of La Pituca.

Her first arrest was in 1931, when she was accused of being a pederast, a term used to refer to men who have sex with men. There is no more information about this first arrest, but the second arrest occurred in 1932. The report says that La Pituca was arrested along with Félix Moncada, aka Liberta, both known for organizing "meetings with immoral purposes" and having "no legitimate means of livelihood." The absence of a registered job was always noted in the police files, as it meant that these people were earning money by selling sex or engaging in illegal activities.⁴ A third arrest took place in 1940, for a background check, perhaps because La Pituca was found in a suspicious context. The fourth arrest was in March 1943, when she was

again accused of being a pederast, and she was released after paying a fine. But a new and fifth arrest, in October 1943, was for another reason. It is important to highlight that between March and October—more specifically, in June 1943—a new military government took power in Argentina. This dictatorship is one of the least analyzed in Argentine history, perhaps because it set the stage for the rise of Juan Domingo Perón, then Minister of Labor. For José Luis Romero, this dictatorship was a consequence of the debates surrounding the Second World War, and was promoted by the Nazis, who opposed the pro-American position of President Ramón Castillo. The military saw Castillo's sympathy for the American government as a risk to Argentina's international position and to the secret link between the Argentine army and the Nazis. In any case, a major political change like this affected daily life for La Pituca. In her aforementioned fifth arrest, she was accused of robbery, and this opened a new entry in her *legajo*.

La Pituca was arrested and accused of robbery, but a few days later the charge was changed to theft, and finally to concealment of theft. Each time the accusation became less serious, perhaps because it was mostly fabricated and self-provoked just to add some statements, witnesses, and official documents to clean up La Pituca's moral condition registered in her *legajo*.



Fig. 6 Ernesto Kaiser, aka La Pituca. Police portrait, 1940. Rosario Police Archive, Public Morality Collection (Argentina).

⁴ "Selling sex" was not illegal in Argentina, but, depending on the city, it was illegal to manage sex work or to offer sexual services in the streets or other public places. In fact, selling sex is not illegal in Argentina today, but police persecution has always found a way to criminalize sex workers.

After being charged with theft, La Pituca was arrested. She signed a letter to the chief of police asking for her freedom, as she was responsible for looking after her parents and was the only breadwinner in the family. Responding to her letter, the police opened an investigation to determine La Pituca's moral values. The police inquired among some of the neighbors, and they testified to the morality of La Pituca's behavior, saying that she worked as a vegetable seller and looked after her parents. One of the neighbors said that La Pituca had good behavior and was innocent of the theft charge. The police investigation confirmed La Pituca's good moral standing and decided to release her. Throughout the trial, testimonies about La Pituca's moral condition were inserted in the *legajo*, and almost everyone explained something about the theft. Finally, the last arrest of La Pituca, in 1946, was for a minor offense—being drunk in the street. One of the most important things that happened with the charge of theft was the change of the cover page, replacing the MP label (which signified her immoral condition) with the new RH label; this, at first glance, seems equally disgraceful but does not involve sexual morality. In addition, the *legajo* shows a few sentences in which the police requested that the matter be treated with confidentiality—a treatment different from that usually given to other *legajos*. Was the robbery real? Was it just an attempt to cover up her past? Was it a way to clean up her *legajo* in the face of the threat of dictatorship? It is impossible to know for sure, but the effort made by La Pituca to present witnesses to her moral purity and to reformulate the accusation looks like a conscious effort to protect her privacy and reputation.

It is possible to frame these decisions of La Pituca as a way to save her life in the face of a changing political context where her identity was targeted. She prefers to be seen as a robber rather than a homosexual, simply because she understands the risk to her future of having a large sign with her female pseudonym and her immoral condition on the front page of her *legajo*. It is

better to be suspected of theft than to be guilty of having sex with people of the same sex. Like members of many other communities, La Pituca tries to fit in with the “normal” people and to adapt her own personality to the expectations of the national identity, that is, to be a hard worker, a good neighbor, concerned about her parents, honest, and publicly recognized as a good man. But she is not the only one who has used this strategy; in the Rosario Police Archive, there are other documents in which people try to clean up their lives in order to fit in with the political changes, the changing political context, and the new configuration of national identity.

Saul Friedman, born in October 1878 in Galicia (Poland), arrived in Argentina in 1912. He was first imprisoned in the city of Rosario in 1915, accused of being a pimp. His *legajo* contains many details reminiscent of those of La Pituca, especially because of his efforts to publicly demonstrate his moral purity and his legitimate means of livelihood. The almost sixty pages of his *legajo* show many attempts to prove to the police that he was not a *caften* (according to Mir Yarfitz's research, this is a term mostly used to refer to Jewish pimps, perhaps inspired by the long coats or caftans characteristic of Orthodox Jewish men), like most of the Jewish people in the city. Friedman submitted many documents and letters to the police to verify that his real job was “laundry broker.” His *legajo* also shows a significant event around 1937, during the period known as the Infamous Decade, a long period of military dictatorship marked by conservative nationalism.

The cover page of Friedman's *legajo* has not changed, although it has strikethroughs and overwrites following the changes of category names at the Rosario Police. The Public Morality Department was opened in 1930, and the first attempts to regulate legal brothels began in 1933. However, thanks to Friedman's *legajo* and the *legajo* “Nómina de Casas Clandestinas” (list of legal brothels) MP 1158, it is possible to know about the existence of some committees, such as the Public Morality Committee against Sex

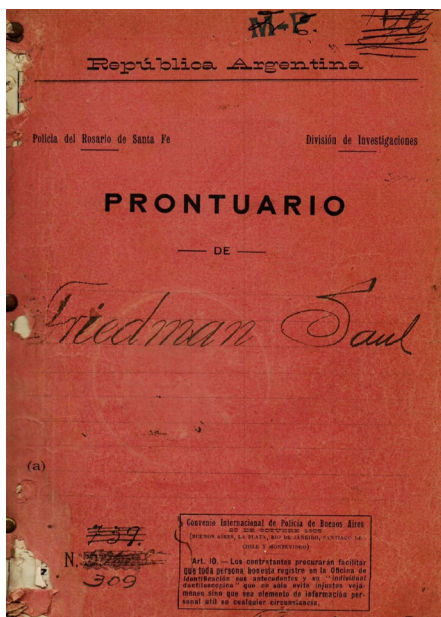


Fig. 7 The *legajo* of Saul Friedman, 1915, cover page.

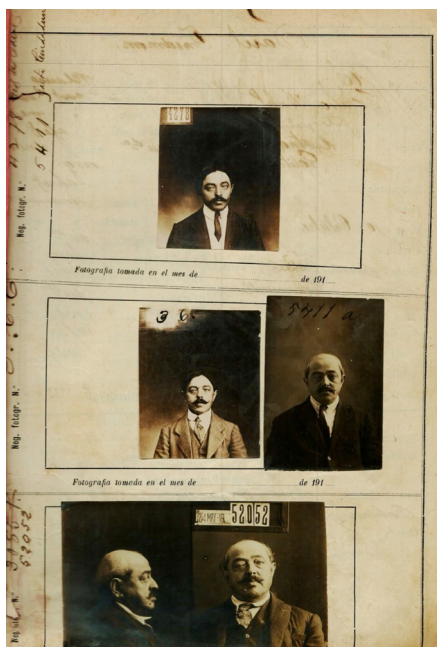


Fig. 8 Mugshots, 1915–1931. Rosario Police Archive, Public Morality Collection (Argentina).

Trafficking, established in the city of Rosario since 1912. Considering the long period of Friedman's *legajo* (1915 to 1937), he had only a few arrests. Most of the *legajo* consists of requests for official documents and passports, letters of citizenship, and documents aimed at proving Friedman's honorable condition and his legitimate means of livelihood. In his *legajo*, Friedman had only three detentions: the first one for being a *caften*; the second for violating the professional rules for laundry brokers; and the third again for being a *caften* and for a background check related to the famous Zwi Migdal affair. Once again, the *legajo* shows few arrests, but Friedman seems to have been involved in a large network of crimes, such as the Zwi Migdal affair, which ended with the arrest of many Jewish "pimps" and "madams" belonging to the Warsaw Society in 1930. Only one document mentions this background check, and a large gap in Friedman's *legajo* occurs between 1930 and 1937.

Although some of the documents in the *legajo* are about crimes, most of them are requests for different kinds of official documents needed at that time. In Argentina and other countries in the region, the police requested certificates of good conduct⁵ to determine whether a person had a criminal record; sometimes, to work, people needed this certificate or an ID certificate (a rudimentary document before the ID card). In the case of migrants like Friedman, a letter of citizenship was often requested—a previous step to obtaining Argentine citizenship—and this letter had to be requested at the police office. Also, Friedman served as a witness for other Jewish people without documents. In various

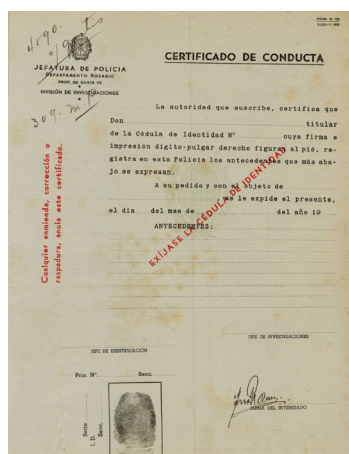
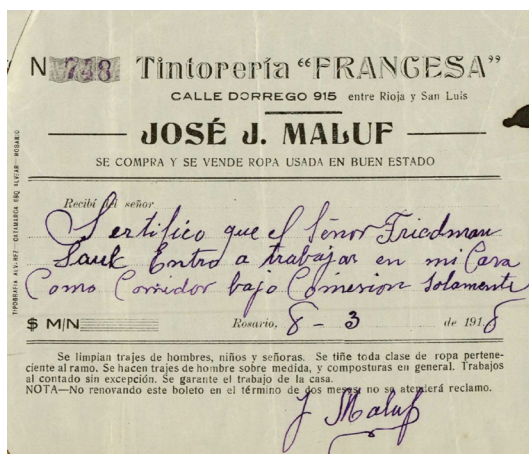
5 A certificate of good conduct is an official document similar to a background check. In Argentina, when people register for a new job, apply for certain positions, request a passport, or complete other types of bureaucratic paperwork, they must request a certificate of good conduct from the police office. The police check their criminal record and issue the certificate.

documents, the police recorded how Friedman requested official documents for himself and other Jewish people from 1915 to 1930, even requesting some documents to travel to Europe during this period. But the certificate Friedman most frequently requested for himself was an employment certificate, especially for his job as a laundry broker. Apparently, the laundry regulations allowed any broker to have a certificate if the police confirmed that the person did not have a criminal record. The laundry broker's job was to enter people's homes, take their dirty clothes, and bring them to the laundry. This is why the laundry brokers were able to enter the homes of random people, which could be also useful for the pimps who visited and collected money from their prostitutes. There's no way of knowing if Saul Friedman used this laundry broker certificate to work as a pimp, but it is plausible. Perhaps one of the strongest clues is the mention of particular names of other Jewish people who also have *legajos* linked with sex work—those whom Friedman helped with their official documents.

Friedman asked for his certificate as a laundry broker several times and showed the police many letters and papers in order to prove his honorable profession. A curious piece of information is that

in 1918 Friedman tried to become a police agent but was rejected because of his antecedents as a *caften*. Why did Friedman try many times during this long period to show his moral purity? Did he do it to show that he was different from the other Jewish people who were associated with sex work? Was it a strategy to get documents and work for his community—for example, to help them with their letter of citizenship? Was Friedman an honorable Jew who refused to be unfairly accused of being a *caften*, or was he a very clever person trying to get documents and legal status in order to help other Jewish people like him? What happened to Friedman after the investigation into the Zwi Migdal affair? Did he stop working as a laundry broker (if he ever did work as one)?

Some pieces of evidence support the idea that Friedman was a *caften* or at least a key person in the development of sex work activities, who used many strategies to present himself to society as an honorable worker, while at the same time using his reputation to hide his role in Jewish sex work. He was a witness to letters of citizenship for many Jewish people who, according their *legajos*, were involved in sex work, and his attempts to become a police officer could have been a way to control a key point in Jewish sex



Figs. 9 and 10 Different official documents presented by and requested for Friedman, 1918–1938. Rosario Police Archive, Public Morality Collection (Argentina).

workers' community life. Friedman appears very dedicated to his role as a community manager, processing citizenship letters, permits, passports, and IDs, not only for himself but for other Jewish people, many of them proven *caftens* and *polacas*. Also, Friedman was one of the founders of the Hebrew Union Cemetery in a town next to Rosario, at that time called Paganini Town and currently named Granadero Baigorria (Resta and Borga 2010), a cemetery established by *temeim*—Jewish people engaged in sex work who were expelled from other Jewish cemeteries (Scarsi 2018).

Following my previous hypothesis about the importance of hiding certain immoral records when the political context turns conservative, his reappearance in 1937 seems particularly significant. After seven years of documentary silence, Friedman requested a certificate of good conduct for himself, arguing that he had become a rabbi and presenting witnesses of his new role. During that seven-year period, as previously mentioned, Rosario adopted rules and enacted laws to regulate sex work, which caused the activity to move to the outskirts of the city (e.g., Paganini Town). In the national context, the Zwi Migdal affair increased the vigilance and regulation of Jewish people engaged in sex work by both the police and the Jewish community itself. Additionally, the military dictatorship led by José Félix Uriburu developed a system for persecuting anarchists and “immoral” people, and it reinforced nationalist conservative ideology in schools, hospitals, and government offices (Moore 2019). In this context, Friedman's letter requesting the police to review his old police record and consider his new role looks like a clear attempt to rehabilitate his reputation and appear honorable. One report describes Friedman's new life as a “priest-rabbi” and leader of an “Israelista” [*sic*] congregation based in his apartment. Friedman also left a record that he received financial support from the Israelita Society, one of the oldest Jewish *kehilot* in Rosario. Although many questions remain unanswered at the moment, some clues make it

possible to reconstruct Friedman's life and his strategy for attempting to clean up his *legajo*.

CONCLUSIONS

Tristan Platt (2012, 21) says that “Filing systems and archives are linked to the management of everyday social events: they select them, group them by date and purpose, reducing them through classification to regularities, to membership of a series, confirming the persistence of social routines.” Sometimes these routines can be disrupted: “The interruption of archival practice may accompany the collapse of a state or the fall of an empire, but also any brusque interruption of procedural continuity: some archives have fed bonfires to keep troops warm at night; others have been deliberately destroyed to get rid of incriminating evidence.” According to Platt, it is in the folds between routines and ruptures that it is possible to find the clues that bring us closer to historical knowledge.

I consider the notion of the routine practices of the archive and their interruptions under some complex political and cultural contexts particularly useful for understanding the tensions between the two main branches that I am trying to reconnect in this text, their gaps, and apparent distance. In the Rosario Police Archive, it is possible to observe how police officers operated with strict routines to record crimes construed as dangerous. They filled out forms and wrote reports according to the instructions and habits specific to their institution. Yet, on certain occasions, particular events or individuals disrupted these routines, provoking small archival scandals. In the same way, our sometimes strict disciplinary routines conserve unaltered and isolated topics and fields that are pushed to touch each other.

This paper focuses on those scandals and interruptions in the routines of archival practices because they offer insight into the connections among Jewish, trans, and queer communities and their shared strategies for surviving and evading the violence embedded in routine. Between routines and ruptures, there are not

many answers. There are gaps that, for now, I can only fill with hypotheses based on limited evidence. But these voids are not accidental; they are the result of archival practices designed to impose order on ruptures and to reject anything that does not align with the State's discourse on proper behavior.

Much of the success in constructing national identity has relied on these gaps and the absence of information about what is considered dangerous, immoral, or subversive. The archive is not innocent, not neutral, and not random. Labels, categories, subdivisions, and folds are strategies used to separate, and keep separate, the unruly information about social practices. Keeping Jewish people, trans people, queer people, and other marginalized groups in different folders is a way to obscure the complex and systematic violence carried out by the armed

forces, the police, and nationalist Catholic sectors. But what today appears separate in the archives was once united in the past.

Reconnecting queer, trans, and Jewish *legajos* in Argentina requires acknowledging the full history of the actions, decisions, and risks taken by these individuals. Argentina must repair a significant part of its history, one that has been interrupted by military regimes, economic crises, and political violence. A broad, intersectional perspective on the roots of this violence is urgently needed. One of the most courageous acts we can undertake is to place everything on the same page and discuss it without political correctness, ideological bias, or the prejudices of the present. Only then can we truly reconnect our shared roots and branches by speaking openly about the complex histories inscribed under the police pen.

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