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Falling in love with a Latin American Jewish community

Story and photos by **Linda Elovitz Marshall**
Advocate correspondent



Linda in Tiwanaku, Bolivia - according to some, one of the oldest civilizations on earth

COCHABAMBA, Bolivia – Some things, it is said in Yiddish, are bashert, meant to be. My discovery of the Jewish history of Bolivia may, indeed, have been bashert.

It happened by accident.

My daughter, her husband and (by default) their 6- and 11-year-old daughters were taking a "personal sabbatical year" in a foreign country in, of all places, Cochabamba, Bolivia. They'd chosen the city because it was Spanishspeaking, had an airport, good schools, and because neither my well-traveled daughter nor her well-traveled husband had been there

before.

But, still... Bolivia? And Cochabamba? The very name sounded like a dance taught on cruise ships. I was worried. And curious. And, like the mother rabbit in *The Runaway Bunny*, I knew I had to check on them. Besides, I'd never been to Bolivia before, either. Certainly not to Cochabamba.

Four months, three flights, two stopovers, and 23 travel hours later, my husband and I

Poll

During the current presidential campaign, little has been said publicly about candidate Bernie Sanders' Jewish heritage. Should it be a topic of discussion?:

- Yes. It would show how far Jews have advanced in this country.
- No. It would only harm his candidacy.

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arrived. All four of them greeted us at the airport. They brought us, first, to their lovely, spacious apartment (three bedrooms, four baths, a plant-filled terrace, beautiful views); then to the children's lovely, spacious school (beautiful grounds, English-speaking faculty, American curriculum). Everyone was doing fine. Phew!

As the children showed us their classrooms, they stopped to introduce us to a faculty member, Señora Beatriz.

My six-year-old granddaughter grinned. "Nonnie," she proclaimed, "Señora's Jewish!"

The Jewish connection, discovered entirely by accident, had taken place a few months earlier. On the playground, Señora Beatriz had overheard Leah tell classmates that Rosh Hashanah was coming. Delighted to have another Jewish family in town, Señora Beatriz invited Leah and family to spend part of the High Holidays with her. She also introduced them to other members of Cochabamba's rapidly diminishing Jewish community.



Lake Titicaca, Bolivia



A memorial plaque in the cemetery

Jews? In Cochabamba, Bolivia?

Who knew?

Bolivia, the poorest country in South America, is a nation of geophysical, social, political and economic contrasts. Geographically, it ranges from Lake Titicaca, the highest navigable lake in the world, to the lowlands of the Amazon Basin. It includes the 12,000-foot above sea level Salar de Uyuni salt flats, Andean mountaintops and lakes, and the ancient ruins of Tihaunacu – arguably, the remains

of the oldest civilization in the world.

Bolivia is a country where 38 languages are spoken, where indigenous people often wear traditional clothing, and where – recently – the union of child workers defended the right of 10-year-old children to labor in brickyards.

It is a country where coca, the plant source of cocaine, is a major cash crop and where the president, Evo Morales, is a cocalero – a coca plant farmer.

In Bolivia's political and economic capital, La Paz, sparkling new 10-seater cable car gondolas, called telefericos, transport riders thousands of feet up from the city's center in the valley, past breathtaking views of Illimani mountain and surroundings, to distant, elevated parts of the city and the neighboring El Alto.



Indigenous vendor at Tiwanuka

Yet most of the Bolivian population lacks potable drinking water. For some, any water is scarce.

It's well known Bolivia provided safe harbor for Ché Guevara, Butch Cassidy and the unspeakably heinous Klaus Barbie.

Less well known is that Bolivia also provided safe harbor for thousands of Jews fleeing Nazis.

Bolivia welcomed Jews when the U.S., Argentina, Brazil, Chile and other countries refused to allow – or made it near impossible – for Jews to enter. While the exact number of Jews who entered Bolivia from 1933, the year Hitler came to power, to 1940, when emigration from Europe virtually ceased, is difficult to ascertain, estimates range from 7,000 to 60,000.

Leo Spitzer, a Bolivian-born Jew and scholar whose book, "Hotel Bolivia," chronicles Jewish life there, estimates 20,000 Jews entered the country during that time. This number does not include children under 16, nor does it include people who sojourned only briefly while en route to Argentina, Brazil or Chile.

There were Jews in big cities like La Paz, Santa Cruz and Cochabamba; in mining towns; and on farms deep in the jungle of the Yungas. There were Jewish communities, synagogues and Maccabi teams throughout Bolivia; many of these communities were established and aided by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. While many Jews saw their Bolivian lives as a temporary stopping off place in what some referred to as "Hotel Bolivia," others sought to create a permanent

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The Bolivian Jewish experience was short lived, though. Thousands left when the State of Israel became a reality. Others gradually drifted away, reuniting with family in the United States, Europe or elsewhere in Latin America.

These days, few Jewish institutions, like synagogues or cultural centers, remain.

During the first Friday night of our visit, though, Señora Beatriz joined us for a fullfledged Shabbat dinner made by my daughter, replete with her delicious matzoh ball soup. On Saturday, another Jewish family came to visit. Later, at a school concert, we met a 13- year-old girl who might, possibly, be the last to celebrate her bat mitzvah in Cochabamba.

On our last full day in town, one of our new Jewish friends drove us to the Cochabamba marketplace – reportedly the largest in South America – a tax-free zone, where everything from artisanal goods to computers are sold. En route, we made a detour to the Jewish cemetery where, inside its walls, trees swayed in the warm, humid breeze of Cochabamba’s not-yet-rainy season. We were not far from the bustling city center, yet the cemetery felt peaceful, beautiful, quiet.

I walked the lanes, finding names both familiar, like Sussman, Simon and Cohen, and not-so-familiar, like Antaki. There were hundreds of headstones: the oldest, circa 1940; the newest, 2014.

Perhaps it was bashert that made my daughter and her family choose this year for their sabbatical in Cochabamba. As my visit drew to a close, it occurred to me that also drawing to a close was another chapter in our people’s long history: that of the Jewish community of Cochabamba, Bolivia.

Intrepid traveler, former sheep farmer, newspaper correspondent and author Linda Elovitz Marshall (www.lindamarshall.com) grew up in Newton.

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