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Chile's 'Jewish' soccer star

Rodrigo Goldberg isn't Jewish, but he helped Maccabi TA to two titles before joining Santiago Morning. Now a sports commentator who's studying engineering and looking forward to showing his children around Isra someday.

By Gerald Eskenazi

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SANTIAGO, Chile - Rather proudly, I told the manager at my hotel that I was going to meet Rodrigo Goldberg for lunch.

"Ah, the great Jewish soccer player," he said with a broad smile.

Yes, I admit, I have an obsession: Wherever I travel in the world, I look for things Jewish. And so, before embarking on a cruise from the United States to Chile (during which I'd be lecturing), I had made arrangements to meet with Senor Goldberg.

A very youthful, fit, dark-haired fellow stood up to say hello.

"Rodrigo," he said. The waiters looked at him and whispered to one another. He is a television soccer analyst and also writes a weekly newspaper column. But back in the 1990s, he was one of Chile's biggest stars in collegiate soccer. He then opted to travel and play in Israel. He became a stalwart on Maccabi Tel Aviv, a versatile striker who helped them capture back-to-back Israel Premier League titles in 2002-2003.

In Chile, a country of only 20,000 Jews, it is almost impossible to think of Rodrigo Goldberg without the Israeli side of his story. In Santiago, where half of Chile's Jews live, he remains an icon.

I asked him what it was like for him to return to the ancient homeland.

"I'm not Jewish," he said suddenly. "The only Hebrew word I knew was 'shalom.' My grandparents were German and Polish Jews; they converted because in this country, it was easier to be Catholic. My mother's name was Mierzejewski."

Yet for Chileans, he remains their famous Jewish star, who also played in Israel. He was there for two stints - in 1997, and then for five seasons starting in 2000.

"The first thing my Israeli teammates did was invite me to Shabbat. I said, 'What's that?' They said, 'You mean you don't know Hebrew?' I told them, 'I'm not Jewish.'

"They were stunned: 'Goldberg - not Jewish?'"

But Rodrigo quickly became a darling of Israelis, for he learned how to speak Hebrew and within three months was conversing ("When no one is speaking Spanish, you have to learn how to speak Hebrew"). And the fact that he was a key contributor to Maccabi Tel Aviv's championships enhanced his image.

At first, though, he felt like an intruder, he admits. He had to get used to the way Israelis reacted to new players: "I walked in and said, 'hi,' and that was it. No reaction. In Chile, players would have come over and talked and welcomed me."

He was intrigued by the way Israelis spoke, and acted. They had none of the Chilean reserve he had grown up with. Israelis speak not only with their mouths, but with their body language.

"Funny, they all talked loud and I thought they were fighting, but once you understand that, it's very smooth. They're having simple discussion and you think, 'What are they fighting about?'"

He concedes that, like many foreigners, his perception of Israel was of a country constantly locked in war mode.

"You have an idea before going to Israel that you'll see tanks, and rubble. But now when friends ask me about Israel, they say dangerous and I say, 'What are you talking about? It was the best time of my life.'"

He learned to love Israeli food ("Hummus, tahine, shawarma - not falafel, though"). When an injury cut short his career, he was to remain in Israel. His second child was born there. "He's an Israeli citizen," said Rodrigo, with obvious pride. But his wife wanted return to Chile.

They did, and he went back to the playing field, starring for the highly regarded Santiago Morning. Chileans still talk about an during a game in Santiago in 2006. The opponent was a team known as Palestino. It was formed almost 100 years ago by immigrants from Palestine. He was subjected to catcalls and anti-Semitic slurs from the stands.

"I am not ready to suffer these things at a soccer stadium," he said at the time. "People in Chile don't like the fact that I support Israel whenever the opportunity arises, but I don't care. I already said they called me a Jew on many occasions, although I am but it is not insulting. To the contrary, for me it's a compliment."

Rodrigo formally complained to Chile's ruling soccer body, demanding that fans who made ethnic slurs be barred. But he was just a few years ahead of his time. Nothing was done. Today, though, players are routinely fined or suspended, and fans are ejected if they shout slurs based on ethnicity.

His outspokenness was hardly a surprise to those who know Rodrigo. In Israel, he created a stir when he criticized the actions of Maccabi's star player, Avi Nimni. In Chile, the clash with some of the fans only enhanced his image. He found a new career in news media.

Since we were now colleagues, I asked his opinion of American soccer. I had been The New York Times' soccer writer, among other assignments. I even wrote a book about soccer and have watched its ebb and flow in the States over time.

"I have some friends who played in America," he said, "and the country took some big stars. But Americans have to play more and employ more strategy. In soccer, every second you have to make a decision. In Chile, we call it - how do you say in American street smarts, that's it."

Certainly, our meeting had once again enhanced my travel experience, especially in my wanderings to find Jews. Luckily, I had found Rodrigo through a custom travel company called Brown +Hudson (brownandhudson.com). I had told them, "I'm looking for a Jewish experience. Find me some in Chile." And this was decidedly a Jewish experience.

We spoke about Rodrigo's future. After returning to Chile, he got divorced. "I had dedicated my life to football, and now I'm studying engineering," the 40-year-old said.

He still thinks often about Israel, and has a plan: "In a few years, I want to take my children there and show them the home place where they were born and grew up."

Our conversation may have marked the first time Goldberg spoke so expansively about himself and his ancestral religion.

"I'm not Jewish," he concluded, "but I have a lot of Jewishness."

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