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[Home](#) > From The Firehouse To The Soccer Pitch

## From The Firehouse To The Soccer Pitch



"Bomba Israel," Santiago's Jewish firehouse, above. Top, the author and his wife with Jeanette Lewandowski.

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Gerald Eskenazi

Special To The Jewish Week

I have found Jewish outcroppings and history in Shanghai, Mumbai, and Johannesburg. But when I recently headed for South America, speaking on a cruise, I didn't know what to look for when I got off the ship in Chile.

You see, I've got this obsession to find Jewishness in places you really don't expect. What I didn't anticipate was, in a country with only 20,000 Jews, I'd have some memorable, offbeat Jewish experiences.

I found a remarkable agency named Brown+Hudson ([brownandhudson.com](http://brownandhudson.com)), specializing in custom tours, and told the folks there, "I want to see Jewish stuff, meet interesting people."

I didn't expect a Jewish firehouse, a star soccer player named Goldberg, and a synagogue in a

converted high school gymnasium.



In Chile, firefighters are volunteers. Many of the firehouses in the capital, Santiago, are, in a manner that harkens back to colonial times, composed of cultural and ethnic groups: Germans, British, Spanish and French.

Back in the 1950s, there was an “Arab brigade.” Emboldened by the recent creation of Israel, its many Jewish members broke away and formed their own firehouse.

So in the Nunoa neighborhood, our Brown+Hudson handler, whose name was Maggie, found us “Bomba Israel” — the Jewish firehouse. There we were greeted by Tomas Wexman, who was polishing the fire engine-red fire truck, which was festooned with the flags of Chile — and Israel. In Chile, firefighters are called “bomberos”— based on the Spanish name for a water pump, “bomba.” Is there any other fire truck in the world, outside of Israel, that flies an Israeli flag? Or a firehouse with a picture of Golda Meier hanging on a wall?

At Bomba Israel there are about 80 volunteers, virtually all of them Jewish. Tomas took us upstairs, where the guys hang out. There are tables for food and drink, a refrigerator. (“The food isn’t kosher,” said Tomas, “but we do have a few Orthodox and they bring their own.”

From the firehouse, we drove to the Las Condes area, and the Jewish Community Center — where Jeanette Lewandowski, the JCCs events coordinator, was waiting to show us around.

The 350-family congregation, part of a complex that includes a nursery school, playground and playing field), has been in place only since last year. Economics forced it from its previous home, which was Chile’s first synagogue with a woman president. Now it meets in a former high school gymnasium, where congregants sit in arena-style seats and face the ark and podium. Where crowds once came to watch basketball games, they now participate in a solemn service.

With the 350 families, “we have about 1,000 members,” said Lewandowski, whose family came from Germany and Yugoslavia. “We have both Sephardim and Ashkenazi, and the services would be considered Conservative.”

The JCCs 1,000 members represent about 10 percent of the Jews in the capital (Chile has a total Jewish population of about 20,000). About 150 worshipers turn out Friday nights, and 60 or 70 more come on Saturday mornings. While men and women sit together, the bima retains the ancient men-only tradition.

On a wall outside the sanctuary is a chilling reminder of what drove Jews here and everywhere: A copy of the Edict of Jan. 2, 1492 — expulsion from Aragon and Castile.

As there are at so many synagogues in the States, there are a women's circles for social events as well as the study of Torah. In March, there will be 28 bar and bat mitzvahs, including "conversos."

And what about food? I was getting hungry. "There are stores in nearby neighborhoods," Ms. Lewandowski told us. "They sell bagels, challah and gefilte fish!"

The next day, Brown+Hudson arranged for us to meet a local hero — Rodrigo Goldberg. Now a television fixture, he made an impact on Chilean soccer in the 1990s as a star collegian who went on to play in Israel.

When I told the manager at our hotel I was going to meet Rodrigo Goldberg, he smiled and said, "Ah, the great Jewish player!"

I sat down with Rodrigo over lunch, and as we were speaking, he said, suddenly, "I'm not Jewish. My grandparents were German and Polish Jews, and they converted because in this country it was easier to be Catholic."

Yet, to Chileans, even today, he is their famous Jewish star. Why, he played with Israel's famed Maccabi Tel Aviv!

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

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

But Rodrigo quickly became a darling of Israelis after learning to speak Hebrew within three months. And the fact he helped Maccabi Tel Aviv to win still more titles enhanced his image. He quickly adapted to Israeli culture.

"I don't think I could say anything more than 'Shalom' when I first went over," he said. "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 it's dangerous and I say, 'What are you talking about? It was the best time of my life.'"

He played in Israel for five years, learned to love Israeli food and culture. When an injury cut short his career, he wanted to remain in Israel. His second child was born there. But his wife — whom he subsequently divorced — wanted to return to Chile.

"In a few years, I want to take my children to Israel and show them the home and they place where they were born and grew up."

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

Well, I thought: I am Jewish, and yet I continue to search for Jewishness. I was not disappointed in Chile.

Gerald Eskenazi is a former New York Times sportswriter.

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