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Mission to South America

In the European and American imagination at this time, the countries of South America were lands of great, unsettled spaces, in need of new people and development. They were ripe for refugee resettlement. The opportunities this presented to the refugees from Nazi Germany had not yet been fully explored but there was nevertheless much hope invested in the idea of Jewish colonization there. Indeed, the Jewish Colonization Association had already purchased swathes of land in Brazil and Argentina for future settlement, and it advocated its colonization plans as part of the solution to the refugee problem in Europe. It was especially convinced that Argentina, which had an established Jewish community of about 500,000, would welcome more Jews. It also undertook to put up the funds for their resettlement once the migration formalities were agreed. There were many reasons for caution, however. Both Brazil and Argentina had declined invitations to join the High Commission's Governing Body, and they remained aloof from European politics. Even though Jacques Helbronner insisted that the High Commission must continue to seek out overseas emigration opportunities, he acknowledged reports from the French embassies in South America that were not at all optimistic about the proposed plans. Argentina, he was informed, for example, offered no immigration possibilities because of its economic problems and its own national socialist and anti-Semitic propaganda. Reports from Uruguay and Brazil were also unfavourable, but the advice from the French embassies in Venezuela, Colombia, Nicaragua, Ecuador and Paraguay were more encouraging.¹

Over the winter of 1934 and 1935, McDonald began planning a tour of South and Central American countries to investigate what actual opportunities for refugee placement there were. His initial inquiries were not altogether promising, but there was sufficient encouragement to make a genuine effort to open negotiations, particularly with the governments of the larger South American countries.

While in Washington in December 1934, he sought the advice of the ambassadors of Chile, Peru, Argentina, Uruguay, Honduras, Ecuador and Brazil on conditions in their countries, the attitudes of their governments to the idea of refugee settlement and the responses that he might receive to his approaches for concessions to their immigration restrictions. The Uruguayan Ambassador was 'almost hostile' to the plans for refugee settlement, McDonald noted, surprisingly so as the Uruguayan Alberto Guani had served as the deputy chair of the High Commission's Governing Body from its first session, and he had been present, but silent, during its most recent discussions on refugee resettlement in South America. The Uruguayan Ambassador was also critical of the work of the Jewish Colonization Association in Argentina and Brazil, and he promised no cooperation from his government. The Honduran Ambassador was not hostile but he was nevertheless 'completely discouraging' about the settlement of academic and intellectual refugees. Indications from the ambassadors of Brazil and Argentina were more positive, however, despite suggestions to the contrary. Brazil was particularly keen to learn of settlement plans, citing a need for some '20,000 to 30,000 workers in the coffee area alone'. More surprisingly, McDonald found no hint of what he had been told was Argentina's antipathy to Jewish immigration.²

McDonald also recognized the importance of gaining the support of the Catholic Church for the settlement of Jews in South and Central America. He therefore visited Cardinal Pacelli in Rome again, now emphasizing the new urgency in finding places to resettle Catholic refugees from Germany, as their numbers were expected to rise considerably after the restitution of the Saarland to Germany. If the Catholic countries in Latin America helped take care of Catholic refugees, McDonald ventured, it would be a great demonstration that the refugee problem was not uniquely a Jewish problem; this would help leverage support for the Jewish refugees as well. McDonald also suggested to Pacelli a strategy discussed among American Jews. If the Vatican would lend its support to opening up Latin America to Jewish emigration, the American Jewish organizations would give its support to the Vatican against the intolerance of Catholics in Mexico.³ As with his earlier interviews with Pacelli at the Vatican, McDonald came away with no firm undertakings but nevertheless satisfied that he made convincing points.⁴

McDonald arrived in Rio de Janeiro on 8 March 1935 with his wife and his long-serving secretary, Olive Sawyer. He brought with him Samuel Guy Inman, a specialist in Latin American politics and secretary of the American Committee on Cooperation in Latin America. Inman had been recommended to McDonald by Walter Kotschnig, the High Commission's advisor on academic

and intellectual refugees, because of his knowledge of Latin American affairs and his personal contacts. He was able to provide McDonald with invaluable access to the heads of government that he might not be able to have secured on his own.⁵ Recognized as an 'ardent defender of Latin American rights,' Inman was indispensable on this mission, with his ability to interpret in both Spanish and Portuguese, his advice on Latin American history and politics, and for his friendship with many of the leading politicians in these many countries.⁶

The mission's aim, in McDonald's words, was to 'ascertain the possibilities of immigration,' and to negotiate a way around 'the political obstacles to the admission of refugees.' To this end, he insisted in not presenting himself as an agent for refugee resettlement programmes, and on not appearing as a salesman for any particular plan. He asked instead for assistance in addressing a grave humanitarian problem. He therefore sought the agreement of these countries to admit a limited number of refugees and that their immigration restrictions be lifted in order to make this possible.⁷

He was struck immediately by the overwhelming possibilities in South America, especially Brazil, where the lands seemed to be waiting for people to settle and develop them. However, a genuine fascist movement inspired by German National Socialism, and a strong autarkic nationalism, which had taken hold of the government, disturbed its politics. Nationalism was an even stronger force in Argentina, he found, but Argentina was also more suitable than Brazil for large-scale refugee settlement. It had a large, established Jewish community that included refugees recently arrived from Europe through the aid of the Jewish Colonization Association, which could only help with the integration of new refugees. Land was also cheap and there was great potential for new agricultural developments. The main barriers to successful settlement in both countries, however, were the legislative restrictions on new immigrants.

True to his pledge to Cardinal Pacelli, McDonald spoke in support of Catholic interests in Brazil and Argentina. The mention of his meetings at the Vatican, Pacelli's interest in the refugee problem and Catholic belief in the 'universal appeal to the sympathy and charity of mankind,' won the immediate support of the Brazilian foreign minister, who gave his 'unqualified' support for McDonald's mission.⁸ The Archbishop of Rio de Janeiro, the most senior Catholic in South America, similarly expressed his sympathy for McDonald's work and offered his help as far as he could.⁹ The Archbishop of Buenos Aires acknowledged the humanitarian crisis and gave his support to the admission of Jewish refugees.¹⁰

A potential rise in the number of Catholic refugees fleeing Germany was of most concern to McDonald's ministerial contacts. One official the Argentine

Agriculture Ministry was truly horrified to learn that 'men should be penalized for loyalty to their faith', and volunteered to intercede with the minister and the president on his behalf.¹¹ While Catholic support and intercession on behalf of Catholic refugees helped McDonald make some headway, his negotiations nevertheless rested on the concessions that both the Brazilian and Argentine governments were prepared to make to their immigration restrictions. This proved to be an insurmountable barrier.

Immigration restrictions were written into the new Brazilian constitution of 16 July 1934, in order to guarantee the 'ethnic integration and the physical and civil capacity of the immigrant'. Annual immigration quotas were applied at 2 per cent of the total number of foreign nationals who had permanently settled in Brazil over the past fifty years. The quota for German immigrants was fixed at 3,090 each year, and of this only 10 per cent could be Jews or refugees. The quota was low because Brazilians of German origin, although about one million in number in 1934, had settled by and large more than fifty years previously. The constitution, furthermore, restricted the liberal professions to native-born Brazilians, and naturalized Brazilians who had performed military service. Foreign qualifications were recognized only when held by native-born Brazilians. Future immigrants would therefore have to settle on the land. Under these conditions, expectations were very low, 'nothing beyond 309 agriculturalists a year' within the German quota, McDonald was advised.¹² He therefore had to make a case to the Brazilian government for exceptional concessions to allow for a higher intake, and the colonization plans that would back the new immigration would need to be detailed and financially sound.

Louis Oungre of the Jewish Colonization Association joined McDonald in Rio de Janeiro and prepared a memorandum on the financial details. They were estimated to be around one million dollars for each 100 refugee families. McDonald also prepared a memorandum, which was more general than Oungre's and appealed to the humanitarian sympathies. The Brazilian Foreign Ministry, however, was not satisfied with them, and asked that both be revised to make them more suitable for presentation to the government. One major point of contention was the Brazilian insistence that a settlement plan should concern only stateless refugees. The Jewish refugees would fall under the German quota and proceed through the normal migration channels; they would therefore be heavily restricted. Oungre's colonization plan was for Jewish resettlement and colonization, financed by European and American Jewish communities; it would succeed only if the refugees could resettle in sufficiently large numbers

to make the scheme viable. He would not compromise, since he would have to abandon key elements of his organization's plans and investments. He therefore withdrew his memorandum and returned to Europe. McDonald stayed on to work through the obstacles, keen to see his negotiations through to the end. He telegraphed his office in London to obtain the latest figures on stateless refugees, and while waiting its reply, he and Inman sailed to Buenos Aires.

The foreign embassies in Argentina gave him little confidence. The British Ambassador told McDonald quite bluntly that the Argentine government was set in its exclusionist policies and would not welcome foreign pressure.¹³ Argentine nationalism extolled the country's independence in finance and commerce by throwing off the dominance of British capital, and resisted foreign meddling in its political affairs. Immigration restrictions reflected the influence of extreme nationalism, but McDonald was assured that there were ways around the restrictions, if he could reach an informal agreement with the government. He was invited to present his case but was told that if he insisted on a definite decision the answer would be negative. His talks were therefore informal, with a view to reaching what both sides agreed would be a 'gentleman's agreement'.¹⁴

He was not asking the Argentine government to remove its restrictions on refugee immigration but, just as he had appealed to the Brazilian government, he sought its help in addressing a humanitarian problem. He put forward plans limited in their ambition but with guarantees that no burden would fall on Argentina itself. They would nevertheless require two important concessions, the lifting of restrictions that prevented the settlement of the poor, and the lifting of the obligation that new immigrants settle on the land. It would be impossible for the regulations to be changed 'formally', McDonald was told, but it would be possible to change the 'spirit' of their interpretation to make it easier to admit refugees.¹⁵ He was not able to persuade one senior governmental official, however, who was convinced that the resettlement of refugees from Europe would lead to an unemployment problem, and that 'undesirable' refugees would be 'dumped' on the country.¹⁶

This was as much as McDonald could achieve in Buenos Aires. There were no undertakings or guarantees, yet making the best of a poor outcome, he was pleased that he had made his case in such a way as to avoid a definite rejection.¹⁷ There might have been some room to manoeuvre with the Argentine government at a later time, he thought, but there was no further headway to be made with the Brazilian government. His memorandum on resettlement and colonization was further delayed in the Foreign Ministry by more objections, and as

he had engagements ahead in New York, he left, leaving negotiations in Brazil to a former local representative of the Jewish Colonization Association.¹⁸

Because of the delays in Rio de Janeiro, McDonald and Inman parted in Buenos Aires and went their separate ways. While McDonald remained to see his negotiations through, Inman travelled on to Chile and then went north. In all, Inman visited eleven countries in forty-four days.¹⁹ His reports, which were not available to McDonald until after both had returned to New York, were more positive about the prospects for refugee resettlement in Latin America than McDonald's. Inman noted the value that these countries placed on technical experts and academics to assist in the reform of their industries, economies and their educational sectors. Only Argentina rejected professional and academic refugees, while other countries advised Inman of particular professions which were in demand. Some presented highly specific requirements that would have next to no impact on the overall refugee numbers. Paraguay, for example, sought specifically six experts in agriculture, one in geology, two in accounting, one in finance and two in international trade. Other countries indicated a more general need for intellectuals and academics, but were not certain about which specialities. Colombia had just commenced reforming its education sector and could potentially have a demand for academic refugees in a variety of fields. Opportunities for professionals – lawyers, doctors, engineers – were by comparison non-existent, as the Latin American universities produced too many of their own, and foreign lawyers and doctors in particular could not obtain permission to practice.²⁰

In Inman's view, there was greater hope of settling refugees in the smaller countries than in the larger ones. There were fewer immigration barriers to overcome and Jewish refugees were not discouraged; there was also a general desire to attract new settlers to work on the land. Paraguay expressed a preference for young, unmarried men, to settle permanently, marry locally and become a permanent part of its society. The Peruvian president told Inman that Peru could take all the remaining refugees, if only they would colonize the land.

While Inman offered a generally optimistic outlook, he concluded on a sombre note. The greatest barrier to resettlement in these countries, he observed, was that the refugees themselves had no desire to migrate there. The history of Latin American lands, he added, carried lessons that even the most ardent advocate of large-scale settlement must heed: it was 'strewn with the wreckage of colonization schemes'. Most of the refugees were not farmers and did not want to be farmers, but even if they were enticed to join a rural settlement, there was a real danger that the 'history of so many of the broken European colonies'

would be repeated. The refugees would find, after a few months, that they were 'disgusted with the difficulties of the jungle or desert, with the lack of communications with the outside world, the lack of markets, the difficulties of educating their children and the isolation and absence of cultural advantages which they enjoyed in their former homes'.²¹

The mission to South and Central America is the most documented of McDonald's activities as High Commissioner. Away from the constant pressures of national and Jewish politics in America, Britain and Europe, he was dedicated to this single purpose for three months. His and Inman's reports are extensive, as are McDonald's diaries at this time. Both men were open to possibilities and they went into their discussions with purpose and optimism. They were also critical of the obfuscation of government ministers and bureaucrats. There was much of this, but McDonald was prepared to work closely with these officials and tried to satisfy their demands in order to achieve a good outcome. The mission to South and Central America, therefore, is an example of the difficulties that McDonald faced throughout his commission. For his time and efforts, the returns were small in the extreme. He could therefore report to his Governing Body when it next met in July 1935 that the best economic possibilities were in Argentina and Brazil but that little could be expected from either country. Their immigration regulations only provided opportunities for immigrants to work in agriculture, and while restrictions were less severe in other Latin American countries, opportunities for work were fewer.²²

Inman's more positive assessment about the prospects in Latin American received a favourable press. It was reported that there were openings for intellectual and academic refugees in all of the countries Inman had visited, since they were coming slowly out of their economic slumps. Here then were opportunities so greatly lacking elsewhere. Moreover, the possibility that Ecuador might be prepared to admit 50,000 Jewish refugees over the longer term suggested the kind of breakthrough the world had been looking for. However, expectations were quelled by the realization that there were no opportunities for professionals to practice, and large-scale plans of refugee settlement were unwise given the prevalence of nationalism.²³

The mission to South America therefore brought an end to the illusion that the problem of the refugees in Europe could be solved by their resettlement in overseas countries, either through negotiated, favourable, immigration arrangements, or by organized and costly colonization schemes. Many plans had been hatched but none were viable. The hopes invested in these plans, however, had distracted attention from the true cause of the refugee problem,

that those countries to which the refugees had fled had no permanent place for them. Political decisions on the status and welfare of the refugees were made on the assumption that they would have to look elsewhere to re-establish their lives. The endless drives for finance, the promotion of the High Commission and its work, the agendas of refugee aid organizations as well as the humanitarian concerns about the future of the refugees, kept coming back to the solution of overseas resettlement and colonization. The end of the illusion brought the European powers and refugee aid organizations back to the central problem: that the refugees were assuredly an international problem for which an international solution was required, but a genuine solution lay in the willingness of nations to grant the right to refuge in their territories. Only national governments could confer entry, residence and work entitlements that would allow the refugees to resume their lives. Without this recognition, there could be no solution.

During his three months away from the reactionary politics of Europe, McDonald had many moments for reflection on his work and his future. At every turn he had met obstacles and failed to have a genuine impact. He was firm in his resolve to wind down the work of the High Commission by the end of the year and resign his post. In a moment of candour, he wrote to Cecil three days after his arrival in Buenos Aires to confirm that he had made the right decision: 'I have no intention whatsoever of continuing in refugee work beyond the earliest date at which the High Commission can be liquidated'. His desire now, he confessed, was to return to the United States to be closer to his family and to remove himself from the nihilism of European politics. He now looked forward to playing a 'part in the stirring developments' in the United States.²⁴ Cecil sympathized, 'I have not forgotten your wish', he replied, 'but I am glad to have it stated so specifically and definitely by yourself. I am not surprised that you want to get back to your own country and to your own job, nor that you want to be free from the entanglements of refugees. I am afraid you have found it rather a heart-breaking enterprise.'²⁵

His mood was not one of defeat, however. He carried on with these lengthy and sometimes tortured negotiations with government officials in South America, interspersed with much idle time as he awaited a reply, another meeting or a suggestion of progress. His negotiating partners in Argentina and Brazil would neither accept nor reject his propositions, yet there is no hint in his private words that his partners in these negotiations had worn him down. But this was his last effort at finding a place for the refugees.