

LUXEMBOURG IMMIGRANTS AND THEIR DESCENDANTS IN ARGENTINA 1880 - 1940

This paper was first published in *AEMI Journal*, Volume 2, 2004.

The “*Centre de Documentation sur les Migrations Humaines*” of Dudelange/Luxembourg has been leading a research project which focuses on Luxembourg emigration to Argentina during the 19th and the 20th centuries¹. Even if this research programme is not yet finished, we would like to describe and analyse some of the social features and trends related to the Luxembourg migration to Argentina which might contribute to a better understanding of the adaptation and adjustment process of first and second generation immigrants belonging to small national communities.

Adaptation and adjustment processes of immigrants can only be understood in the general context of national migration waves. Therefore, we would like to start with a general description of the Luxembourg immigration to Argentina during the last decades of the 19th century².

1. INTRODUCTION. LUXEMBOURG IMMIGRANTS IN ARGENTINA: A SURVEY

From 1888 to 1890, the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg was literally overwhelmed by a transatlantic migration wave, the so-called *Argentinienfieber* - an expression which could be translated into English by Argentine fever. In less than two years, more than one thousand Luxembourgers - representing 0.5 per cent of the entire population - decided to emigrate to Argentina.

Several historic explanations may serve for a better understanding of the Luxembourg mass migration to the Pampas. From the 1870s on, the Argentine economy entered the top ten world ranking ones. Its annual agricultural production constantly occupied the third rank worldwide. So especially young peasants as well as young rural families - who refused the emerging industrial world - decided to remake their lives in a country where farming was likely to be the social-economic key for a decent social existence.

Two structural forms of migration characterised the Luxembourg emigration to Argentina. Besides the classic emigration form, which continued to be a village- and family outward process based on individual or family decisions and often linked to a pre-established network of migration destinations, the Luxembourg emigration to Argentina was also based on a migration project focused on building an exclusively Luxembourg rural community.

In fact, half a thousand Luxembourg immigrants to Argentina were to settle down in a village located inside a huge estancia which belonged to a powerful family of the Argentine oligarchy. But the Luxembourg community of San Antonio de Iraola in the Southern Pampas of the “*Provincia de Buenos Aires*” was to last just three years. The main causes of its failure are well known. First of all, the World economic crisis of the 1880s reached the Pampas where farmers repeatedly confronted bad harvests. Secondly, after the foundation of the rural community the financial relationship between the *estanciero* and the Luxembourg *colonos* worsened and at the end the *estanciero* agreed to liberate the Luxembourg settlers from their tenure and hiring contracts. Probably 50 per cent of the Luxembourg *colonos* tried to settle down in less hostile Argentine regions than the *campo* of San Antonio de Iraola had been.

Up to a very recent period, the social-economic trajectory of immigrants belonging to the first and second generation of Luxembourgers in Argentina was partly unknown³. Luxembourg scholars often limited the history of Luxembourg migration to Argentina strictly to the phenomenon of emigration. For that reason, one of our scientific priorities during the last year has consisted in the analysis of the social-economic adaptation and adjustment of Luxembourg immigrants in Argentina from 1880 to 1940, and the study of an eventual building of a Luxembourg community network precisely in this part of the new world.

2. ANALYSING INTER-GENERATIONAL ELEMENTS OF A SMALL IMMIGRATION COMMUNITY IN ARGENTINA: METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

Due to the demographic smallness of the Luxembourg migration wave to Argentina, the analysis of the first and second generations of Luxembourgers in the Pampas requires specific methodological considerations as well as the search for the most adequate source material. Historical projects on huge national immigration waves to Argentina during the 19th century are partly based on published censuses and on manuscript census returns of 1855, 1869 and 1895⁴.

As the Luxembourg migration to the Pampas took place only during the late eighties of the 19th century, we initially considered using the censuses of 1895 and 1914 as well as the “*Censo Agropecuario*” of 1937. Beyond the fact that the census returns of 1914 are lost, and that the quality of the data concerning the census of 1895 are quite inferior to previous censuses⁵, we must confess that the search for a few hundred Luxembourgers in huge data compounds is far from being an easy task and is often quite unsuccessful.

Besides this quantitative aspect, abroad Luxembourgers of the 19th and early 20th centuries sometimes did not declare their mostly unknown citizenship and for practical and for political reasons they are quite often tempted to introduce themselves as Belgian or German citizens. Moreover, census-based research proceedings concerning persons whose Christian and Family names are known is quite hazardous. Juan Schmit, Jorge Weber, Matías Hansen may be immigrants of Luxembourg origin as well as of Danish, Swiss or of German-Russian origin. The *Ukraine-Deutschen* or especially the *Wolga-Deutschen* settled

down in the Pampas at the same time and in the same geographic area as the Luxembourg immigrants did⁶.

To our relief, Blanca Zeberio⁷, professor at the “*Universidad Nacional del Centro de la Provincia de Buenos Aires*” informed us about the existence of an exceptional and quite unique source entitled “*Relevamiento de Estancias y Chacras de Nuestra Tierra. Publicación gráfica y descriptiva de los establecimientos agrícolas de la Provincia de Buenos Aires*”. Published in 1930 and 1931, the two volumes of the *relevamiento* offer an inventory of all rural enterprises in the *partidos* of Tres Arroyos and Necochea, which are situated in the Southern part of the “*Provincia de Buenos Aires*”⁸.

The nature of the publication⁹ makes it possible to know the location and size of the rural enterprise, the name of its holder as well as his professional status - whether he be a landowner or a tenant. Beyond these fundamental data, a detailed description of the inventoried enterprises often includes demographic and social-economic data, which allows us to examine the relationship between variables such as ethnicity or nationality, professional status, family structure, gender, age and, what is most important for our research, the place of birth !

Of course, this source is limited to a single geographical part of the Southern region of the “*Provincia de Buenos Aires*”. For the study of the main ethnic and national communities in Argentina , it could only be used on a micro-historical level¹⁰. But in the particular study case of the small Luxembourg community in the Pampas, this local inventory focusing on a rural area so close to the initial target of the Luxembourg migration to Argentina is of outstanding importance.

The statistical results of the inventory reveal the presence of nearly two hundred Luxembourgers and descendants of Luxembourgers. In other words, forty years after the Luxembourg *Argentinienfieber* and the ephemeral foundation of the Luxembourg village of San Antonio de Iraola, we find quite a significant Luxembourg community in the Southern part of the “*Provincia de Buenos Aires*”. In this regard, the “*Relevamiento de Estancias y Chacras de Nuestra Tierra*” form a type of micro-historical source whose information on individuals allows us to carry out a truly representative social study of Luxembourgers and their descendants living in the Pampas at a time when the rural expansion of the Argentinean economy reached its climax¹¹.

We truly hope that this extensive description of the archival material may help towards a better analytical understanding of the adaptation and adjustment of Luxembourgers and their descendants in Argentina; an analysis which we would like to present briefly in its major features.

3. LUXEMBOURG SETTLEMENTS IN THE PAMPAS (1930-1931)

Systematic and precise references concerning the location of the rural enterprises in both volumes of the *relevamiento* allow us to determine the geographical concentration of the so-called Luxembourg community in the *partidos* of Tres Arroyos and Necochea in the

Southern part of the "*Provincia de Buenos Aires*". In a dozen of *ejidos* inside the two *partidos*, we can find sociological hints concerning the presence of Luxembourgers:

Claraz, Juan N. Fernández, La Dulce, Defferrari, San Cayetano, San Mayol, Vásquez, Tres Arroyos, Copetonas, Orense, Cristiano Muerto, Necochea.

In 26 cases out of 43, the rural enterprises exploited by Luxembourgers or by descendants of Luxembourgers are located in a small area whose length is inferior to 50 kilometres. Inside this area, the *ejidos* of La Dulce and Juan N. Fernández count 20 rural enterprises whose sociological structure is characterized by the presence of members of the Luxembourg community.

In other words, the majority of some two hundred Luxembourgers and their descendants is concentrated in a tiny geographical area located some 80 kilometres southwards from San Antonio de Iraola, the former starting point of the Luxembourg settlements in the Southern Pampas of the province of Buenos Aires. This geographical concentration is interrelated to several other sociological elements, such as the family structure and the social economic status which contribute to regulating the adaptation and the adjustment of Luxembourg immigrants and their descendants in the regional society¹².

4. FAMILY AND FARMING: THE FIRST GENERATIONS OF LUXEMBOURGERS IN ARGENTINA AND THE AIM OF CONSTRUCTING A CONTINUUM

Even if our project is not finished, it seems that at least two social-economic elements determine the biographic trajectory of the members of the Luxembourg community belonging to the first and second generation. Both elements of outstanding importance for Luxembourg immigrants to Argentina could be summarized by the simple formula "Family and Farming".

At the end of the 1920s, the Luxembourg community in the area of Tres Arroyos and Necochea is socially involved in 43 rural enterprises. In 26 cases out of 43, the enterprise is held by a family or a couple where either the husband or the wife have Luxembourg origins. In 15 out of 26 families, both wife and husband descend from Luxembourg parents. In 10 cases out of 43, the holder of the enterprise is a single person of the first or second generation of Luxembourgers, whether a single male or a widow.

The severe limitation of the statistic data at our disposal concerning Luxembourg families in the Pampas invites extreme caution when we attempt to present any sociological interpretations. But it seems that the matrimonial practice of endogamy was widely spread among Luxembourg immigrants and their descendants belonging to the second generation. Moreover, the social strategy of endogamy was quite generalized within the most ancient and wealthiest Luxembourg families in the Pampas. The Erpelding family for instance, whose members of the second generation hold four rural enterprises during the 1920s, are married exclusively to persons of Luxembourg origins, as were their parents. The Erpeldings are related to the Steffens, whose origins in the Pampas go back to the 1880s. And the

Steffen family is closely related to the wealthy Arens, who also took part in the immigration experience of San Antonio de Iraola from 1889 to 1892¹³.

Family building as well as the construction of intra-community family ties seem to be one of the main existential interests of Luxembourg immigrants and their descendants during the first decades of the 20th century. This social aim seems to be closely related to the overwhelming social-economic importance attributed to farming. For Luxembourg immigrants to Argentina, farming represents the “*condicio sine qua non*” of human existence. Leaving their home country for the sake of farming, Luxembourg immigrants to Argentina focused their existence on the quest for rural enterprises¹⁴. This search was forced upon them by the collapse of the first rural settlement of Luxembourgers at San Antonio de Iraola¹⁵. From that experience on, Luxembourg immigrants and their descendants were really obsessed by farming.

At the beginning of the 1930s, 23 Luxembourg holders out of 38 are exploiting rural enterprises whose territorial extensions cover 250 to 1000 hectares. And 13 members of the Luxembourg community in the Pampas hold more modest enterprises inferior to 250 hectares.

Four decades after the massive Luxembourg immigration to Argentina, despite the collapse of the rural disaster of San Antonio de Iraola, an important part of the Luxembourgers of the first and second generation in the Pampas succeed in farming by exploiting rural enterprises of small- or medium-sized dimensions. In this regard, members of the Luxembourg community belonging to the first and second generation manage to construct a social continuum which was partially guaranteed by the consolidation of family structures based on the practice of matrimonial endogamy.

However, important as this social-historical statement may be, it has to take into consideration some sociological clarifications. The social-historical analysis of these primitive variables is far more complicated than the simplicity of their statistic value may suggest at a first reading.

5. THE ADAPTATION AND ADJUSTMENT OF LUXEMBOURG IMMIGRANTS AND THEIR DESCENDANTS IN ARGENTINA THROUGH THE QUEST FOR LANDOWNERSHIP

The historical fact that from the 1890s to the 1930s Luxembourgers and their descendants succeed in creating a social continuum in the Pampas by farming cannot in itself be considered a definitely relevant social-economic success. Continuing in farming might have been one of the important aims of many Luxembourg immigrants to Argentina, but their very private dream was to become wealthy landowners in the Pampas¹⁶.

The “*Relevamiento de Estancias y Chacras de Nuestra Tierra*” give us some useful information about the professional and the economic status of Luxembourg farmers in the Southern Pampas of the “*Provincia de Buenos Aires*”. At the beginning of the 1930s, 13 Luxembourg holders out of 43, are landowners and are qualified as *estancieros*. In other

words, less than 30 per cent of Luxembourg farmers of the first and second generation had realized the fulfilment of the initial dream carried by Luxembourg peasants who decided to immigrate to Argentina four decades earlier. And not more than 5 families of Luxembourg origin can be qualified as *middle-class estancieros* owning more than 500 hectares of land in the Pampas.

On the other hand, more than 70 per cent of the Luxembourg holders of rural enterprises are qualified as *chacareros* who exploit the land by a land tenure system called *arrendamiento*¹⁷. In other words, their *chacras*, which in 19 cases out of 25 are inferior to 500 hectares are the ownership of very wealthy *estancieros*. These landowners hire farmers - the so called *chacareros* by renewable tenure contracts which normally are limited from three to six years maximum¹⁸. This economic situation based on social dependance was shared by more than two thirds of Luxembourg farmers belonging to the first and mostly to the second generation of Luxembourg immigrants. The latter group counts 23 cases out of 43, which means that more than 50 per cent of the *chacareros* belonging to the Luxembourg community in the Southern Pampas are descendants of immigrants.

The professional aim of these *chacareros* of Luxembourg origin is to become landowners themselves by investing lifelong savings sometimes. Becoming an *estanciero* was perceived by the *chacareros* as the ultimate stage of definitive adaptation and adjustment in the regional society of the Pampas¹⁹. But unfortunately, for most of the farmers of Luxembourg origin - especially those of the second generation - a hypothetic late access to landownership was limited to an accessory dimension which means that, despite moderate landownership the farmer and probably his children were to continue as *chacareros*. For the Luxembourg *chacarero* adaptation and adjustment in the rural society remain quite a fragile social process.

6. CONCLUSION. THE ARGENTINIAN PAMPAS DURING THE ECONOMIC EXPANSION FROM 1880 TO 1940: AN "ELDORADO" FOR LUXEMBOURG PEASANTS AND THEIR DESCENDANTS ?

This above sociological interpretation of Luxembourg leads us to the brief conclusion of the present paper. At the end of the 1920s, members of the Luxembourg community living in the Pampas remain farmers. In this regard Luxembourg immigrants and their descendants are able to keep going on a multi-centennial family trajectory which consists in being and staying farmers²⁰. However, one of the main causes for leaving small rural farms in Luxembourg - the quest for landownership on somewhat larger scale - remains wishful thinking for at least two thirds of Luxembourgers and especially for the members of the Luxembourg community belonging to the second generation.

Was this private dream to be fulfilled in future times by Luxembourg descendants of a more mature second generation or by a more enterprising third generation? The present study privileges the description and the analysis of the social-economic statement of the Luxembourg immigrants and their descendants at the end of the 1920s; a historical period which might be defined as the golden age of the Argentinean rural economy²¹.

The World economic crisis at the beginning of the 1930s was to affect both rural economy and rural society in Argentina durably. Despite the temporary expansion of the economy of the Pampas during the 1940s and the 1950s, in spite of the *pro-chacarero* landowning policy initiated by the 1943 military regime and its heir Perón²², the social adjustment of the *chacareros* in general as well as for *chacareros* of Luxembourg origins in the Pampas was to remain a fragile one.

From the third generation on, Luxembourg descendants of *chacareros*, were to have the choice, either to remain *chacareros* or to migrate to urban centers like Buenos Aires. For the minority of *estancieros* of Luxembourg origin, the choice between a rural existence or an urban career seems to be influenced less by economic trends than by individual decision. Even nowadays, in the area of Necochea *estancias* can be found, exploited by descendants of Luxembourgers who are preserving what remains of a one hundred and fifteen-year-old small Luxembourg community in the Southern part of the *pampa bonaerense*!

Claude Wey, CDMH/Dudelange/Luxembourg

Notes

¹ For Luxembourg emigration to Argentina, see Claude Wey (2002), “L’émigration luxembourgeoise vers l’Argentine. De l’émigration à caractère limité à l’éphémère flux migratoire de masse”, in: *Migrance* 20, (premier trimestre 2002), pp. 28-49; Claude Wey (2003), “Luxembourgers in Latin America and the Permanent Threat of Failure. Return Migration in the social context of a European micro-society”, in: *AEMI Journal*, volume 1 2003, pp. 94-105.

² See Claude Wey (2003), “Luxembourgers in Latin America and the Permanent Threat of Failure”, pp. 99-100.

³ For the social trajectory of Luxembourg immigrants and their descendants in Argentina, see (Jean-) Nicolas Schwebag (1909), *Ansiedelung unserer Luxemburger in Argentinien*, Ettelbrück, pp. 5-8 and pp. 26-33; Nicolas Kerschen (1953), *San Antonio. Ein Luxemburger Dorf in der Pampa. Erinnerungen von N. Kerschen*, Separatdruck des “Lëtzeburger Journal”, Grevenmacher, pp. 24-25.

⁴ Jose C. Moya (1998), *Cousins and Strangers. Spanish Immigrants in Buenos Aires, 1850-1930*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, pp. 409-413.

⁵ Jose C. Moya (1998), *Cousins and Strangers. Spanish Immigrants in Buenos Aires, 1850-1930*, p. 411.

⁶ Fernando Devoto (2003), *Historia de la Inmigración en la Argentina*, Editorial Sudamericana, p. 252; Guy Bourdè (1974), *Urbanisation et Immigration en Amérique latine: Buenos Aires (XIXe et XXe siècles)*, pp.168-172.

⁷ Blanca Zeberio (1994), *Entre deux mondes: les agriculteurs européens dans les “nouvelles terres” de l’Argentine. Exploitation agricole et reproduction sociale dans la “Pampa”, 1880-1930*, thèse de doctorat, EHESS, Paris.

⁸ *Relevamiento de Estancias y Chacras de Nuestra Tierra. Publicación gráfica y descriptiva de los establecimientos agrícolas de la Provincia de Buenos Aires, Tomos I y II, Partidos de Tres Arroyos y Necochea*, Imprenta Kraft, Buenos Aires, 1930 y 1931.

⁹ Blanca Zeberio (1994), *Entre deux mondes: les agriculteurs européens dans les “nouvelles terres” de l’Argentine*, pp. 27-28.

¹⁰ See María Bjerg, Blanca Zeberio (1999), “Mercados y entramados familiares en las Estancias del Sur de la provincia de Buenos Aires (Argentina) 1900-1930”, in: Jorge Gelman, Juan Carlos Garavaglia, Blanca Zeberio, (Compiladores) (1999), *Expansión capitalista y transformaciones regionales. Relaciones sociales y empresas agrarias en la Argentina del siglo XIX*, Editorial La Colmena y Universidad del Centro de la Provincia de Buenos Aires, pp. 287-306, especially pp. 287-288; Blanca Zeberio (1994), *Entre deux mondes: les agriculteurs européens dans les “nouvelles terres” de l’Argentine*, p. 27.

¹¹ See also María Bjerg, Blanca Zeberio (1999), “Mercados y entramados familiares en las Estancias del Sur de la provincia de Buenos Aires (Argentina) 1900-1930”, p. 295.

¹² For methodological issues concerning the adaptation and the adjustment processes of immigrants, see Samuel L. Baily (1999), *Immigrants in the Lands of Promise. Italians in Buenos Aires and New York City, 1870 to 1914*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, especially pp. 9-21.

¹³ For the study of the Erpelding family as well as of the Steffen and Arens families, see the *Relevamiento de Estancias y Chacras de Nuestra Tierra*, Tomo I (1930), Partido de Tres Arroyos: Erpelding family, p. 167; Tomo II (1931), Partido de Necochea: Steffen family, pp. 224-225 and Arens family, pp. 303-304.

¹⁴ Claude Wey (2002), “L’émigration luxembourgeoise vers l’Argentine”, pp. 34-35.

¹⁵ Claude Wey (2002), “L’émigration luxembourgeoise vers l’Argentine”, pp. 42-44.

¹⁶ Claude Wey (2002), “L’émigration luxembourgeoise vers l’Argentine”, p. 34 and p. 44.

¹⁷ See Blanca Zeberio (1994), *Entre deux mondes: les agriculteurs européens dans les “nouvelles terres” de l’Argentine*, pp. 115-117.

¹⁸ Blanca Zeberio (1994), *Entre deux mondes: les agriculteurs européens dans les “nouvelles terres” de l’Argentine*, p. 116.

¹⁹ Blanca Zeberio (1994), *Entre deux mondes: les agriculteurs européens dans les “nouvelles terres” de l’Argentine*, pp. 281-300.

²⁰ Claude Wey (2002), “L’émigration luxembourgeoise vers l’Argentine”, p. 35.

²¹ Osvaldo Barsky, Jorge Gelman (2001), *Historia del agro argentino. Desde la Conquista hasta fines del siglo XX*, pp. 221-245.

²² Osvaldo Barsky, Jorge Gelman (2001), *Historia del agro argentino*, pp. 317-325; Roy Hora, *The Landowners of the Argentine Pampas. A Social and Political History, 1860-1945*, Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 215 and p. 237.