

CONFLICTS IN NARCISSE LEVEN – A VIEW FROM WITHIN

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Abstract

La Colonia Narcisse Leven fue fundada en el año 1909 en la Pampa Central. Las características del suelo y las condiciones climáticas dificultaron el desarrollo agrícola. A fines de la década del 1920 la situación en la colonia era precaria. En 1928, después de que las dos primeras cooperativas sucumbieron, se fundó la tercera, la cooperativa El Progreso.

La vida en la colonia fue moldeada en gran parte por interacciones y conflictos entre varios protagonistas. Dos de ellos, vinculados a la cooperativa, mantuvieron una extensa correspondencia entre 1930 y 1941. El estudio y análisis de esa correspondencia nos permiten una mejor percepción y comprensión de lo que ocurría “detrás del telón” de acontecimientos importantes en la colonia, quiénes eran los principales actores y cuáles eran sus motivaciones.

Palabras clave: JCA, Narcisse Leven, cooperativas, conflictos.

Introduction

The Jewish Colonization Association, JCA, was founded by Baron Maurice de Hirsch in mid-1891. The enormous capital provided by de Hirsch was intended to fund a huge migration and settlement enterprise, through which hundreds of thousands of Eastern European Jews were to be relocated from their original countries to the vast prairies of Argentina,

settled on land acquired for them by the JCA, and transformed into farmers who live from their labor.

By July of 1891 the first immigrants landed in Buenos Aires. Shortly after their arrival, several groups were sent to the site on which the first JCA colony, Mauricio, was to be established. In the four and a half years which passed from that time until the death of Baron de Hirsch in April 1896, JCA Argentina went through a period of turmoil. The difficulties accompanying the creation of a settlement enterprise of this magnitude were aggravated by the apparent absence of understanding by all parties involved – including Baron de Hirsch, JCA managers and the immigrants themselves – what the act of settling in Argentina entailed.

Following de Hirsch's death, management was assigned to the JCA council. In the beginning of the 20th century, after a period of reassessment and stabilization, it seemed that the enterprise began to recover from the crisis.

Narcisse Leven, the JCA's 11th colony in Argentina, was established in 1909 on a section of land purchased in 1908 on the desert border in La Pampa Territory.

The colony comprised 46,466 hectares.¹The economic center of the colony developed around the Bernasconi train station, at the northeastern edge of the colony.²

Soil and climate conditions in the area made the development of agriculture extremely challenging. The land was generally flat, gently undulating. A considerable percentage of the colony's soil was of very low quality. Groundwater was at depths of up to 100 meters, some of it saline and unfit for drinking. The area suffered from scant precipitation, poorly spread over the year, frequent and lengthy droughts, hail and frost at germination times.³

1 It is comprised of five square lots of 10x10 km.

2 Train services operated from 1890 until final closure in 1977.

3 Jesekiel Schoijet, *Apuntes para la historia de la colonia Narciso Leven*, IWO Buenos Aires, 1953, pp. 21-25 (original in Yiddish, my translation). Shojjet criticizes JCA for purchasing lands unsuitable for agriculture (p. 13 and p. 24). Bursuk and Krichmar, *La Colonia Narcisse Leven*, published by El Progreso cooperative, Buenos Aires,

Lack of water meant lack of pastures for cattle as well as for work horses. There are descriptions of a high rate of animal deaths. Without horses, the settlers were unable to prepare the soil for the coming agricultural year, hampering the colony's prospects.⁴

In 1927 the JCA established a dairy in an effort to stabilize the colony, but the 1929 drought was devastating. Milk production dropped, and the dairy was forced to halt production. The harvest of 1929-1930 ended in failure as well.⁵

The following quote summarizes soil and climate conditions in the colony:

La suerte les juega atira y afloja, les favorece un año como para infiltrar nuevo ánimo en la colonia para que sigan con la ardua lucha contra los caprichos de la naturaleza en La Pampa, y el otro año el atasco viene de tal manera que aniquila los efectos del año bueno, y lo peor es que los años desfavorables pasan a los años favorables.⁶

1964, pp. 20-22. Yehuda Lewin claims that the JCA was unable to purchase high-quality lands for reasonable prices, "Labor and Land at the Start of Jewish Settlement in Argentina," *Jewish History* (2007) 21: 341-359, quote in 347-348. On the harsh climatic conditions in the area in the JCA special reports by Louis Oungre (1928), *Notre Colonisation dans la Republique Argentine*," pp. 302-303; and Georges Aronstein (1935), *Rapport sur L'ouvre de la Jewish Colonization Association en Argentine*, p. 473-474.

4 On considerable mortality of milk cows due to severe drought in 1929-1930 in Aronstein (see note 3), p. 421. On horses' death by starvation in Schoijet (see note 3), pp. 54-55, pp. 72-73.

5 JCA report for 1929, p. 26, Central Archive of the Jewish People (CAJP), JCA-LON-2522. On lack of harvest in 1930, in JCA report for 1930, p. 26. The colony's situation was extensively discussed in the Federación Agrícola Israelita, predecessor of the Fraternidad Agraria. Meetings protocols of the Federación Council between April 1925 and October 1928, Kibrick Archive, A.FA.A01.

6 Excerpt from the report of an inspection held in the cooperative by the Fraternidad in December of 1938. Inspections of the cooperatives were performed regularly. A partial collection of reports are in Isaac Kaplan's archive, the Central Zionist Archive (CZA), A305-36/1/2. Aronstein (see note 3), pp. 49-53. The situation worsened with currency devaluation between 1914-1935. Crop prices did not cover production costs. To prevent damage to agriculture due to low global prices, the government established in 1933 a cereal regulation commission which influenced exchange rates.

Experts estimated that the colony had to implement mixed agriculture and sowing cycles in order to sustain itself, a step that required farms of at least 300 hectares.⁷The JCA refused to increase farm size. They justified their refusal mainly with two arguments: the need to reserve lands for future immigrants— even when Jewish immigration to Argentina was meager, and without suitable candidates for agricultural settlement—and the JCA’s concern, justified or not, that a few settlers could become owners of vast tracks of land.⁸

Around 1928, when settlers desperately needed grazing lots, the JCA refused to lease lands to them. At the same time 15,000 hectares were leased to fatten thousands of heads of cattle and sheep belonging to outsiders. Similarly, in Baron Hirsch Colony, the JCA leased vast tracts of land to non-Jewish land owners who resided nearby.⁹

The colony was the arena on which a number of interests interacted. Among them were the colony’s cooperative, which in practice ran all activities in the colony; the JCA, represented by the administrator; *Fraternidad Agraria* (and its predecessors, the *Confederación* and the *Federación*), an institution that unified Jewish agricultural cooperatives in Argentina; the governmental bank (*Banco de la Nación*), the mortgage bank, province and central governments, and private tradehouses.

The fabric of relationships among the different players was shaped by the interests each represented. Nonetheless, personal motives and interests

7 In that area land was parceled into 300 hectare lots as a minimum, inspection report in the cooperative, December 1938, CZA (see note 6), A305-36/1. Also in a letter from Mizrach to Kaplan, January 8, 1939, CZA, A305-51. Ibid. letter dated December 30, 1929. At a meeting convened by La Pampa’s governor, basing mixed agriculture on lots of 300 hectares at least was recommended. Also in “*Colono Cooperador*,” 239, March 15, 1935, pp. 1-10.

8 Based on the same argument, the JCA prevented settlement of settlers’ sons and sons in law. Aronstein (see note 3), pp. 226-231, p. 365 and p. 455. Oungre (see note 3), pp. 45-50 and also Chapter V, pp. 358-368. The Baron de Hirsch colony faced similar vicissitudes in their dealings with the JCA, see Gregorio Verbitsky, *Rivera, Afán de Medio Siglo*, pp. 124-125, published by Comisión del Cincuentenario de Rivera y sus Colonias, 1955.

9 Bursuk and Krichmar (see note 3), p. 30-31. CAJP (see note 5), the JCA report for 1932, pp. 15-16. On increasing farm size also in Aronstein (see note 3), p. 525.

were not absent, and at times, relationships between them turned into power struggles.

The present paper examines how the development of Narcisse Leven was affected by the interaction between the different interests in the colony, especially after El Progreso cooperative was established in 1929, and to what extent Narcisse Leven constitutes a test case for other Jewish colonies regarding the said interactions and their impact.

Sources

Several archival sources enable the historical research on the Narcisse Leven colony; first and foremost among them is the JCA archive. This archive contains, along with other materials, the correspondence between the Argentinean JCA administration and the central administration in Europe, censuses of the colonies, administrative affairs, as well as the yearly reports submitted to the JCA council, and special reports (e.g., those of 1928 and 1935). These sources present an institutional view of the colonization. Personal archives, such as the Isaac Kaplan Archive, contribute valuable information about JCA colonization.

Periodicals published in the Jewish colonies provide information concerning agricultural endeavors, along with articles reflecting the settlers' opinions on various subjects. For example the "Colono Cooperador" was issued by *Fraternidad Agraria*, and "Der Aker" ("The plough," my translation) and later "Funken" ("Sparks," my translation) were published by Mizrach, manager of El Progreso cooperative in Narcisse Leven.¹⁰

Books published by institutions (cooperatives, DAIA (Delegación de Asociaciones Israelitas Argentinas), etc.) refrained from straying too far from the official view on Jewish colonization in Argentina, minimizing criticism of individuals or institutions. Memory books and novels provide

10 In the CAJP (see note 5) is the complete collection of "Sparks," AR-JCA 9397. In 1941 Mizrach moved to the Clara colony and continued publishing "Sparks" in his new home, *ibid.*, AR-JCA 9394. "Sparks" was published in Yiddish, my translation.

the authors' point of view, sometimes censorious, on life in the colonies.

The search for sources revealed extensive correspondence between two important persons: Isaac Kaplan, one of the leaders of the *Fraternidad Agraria*, and Isaac Mizrach, who acted as manager of *El Progreso* cooperative from the end of 1929 until 1941. This correspondence includes approximately 250 letters covering this period. The letters provide information on occurrences that took place in the Narcisse Leven colony, and also shed light on behind-the-scenes events. While they do represent individual voices and, as such, should be interpreted with caution, they are invaluable to the study and understanding of the colony's daily life as experienced from within.

The Human Factor

The first 122 families to settle in the Narcisse Leven colony were selected from among immigrants' families who had worked as agricultural laborers in Mauricio and other colonies. By 1912 Narcisse Leven was populated by 279 families, counting 1,374 souls. Most of them lacked basic agricultural skills.

Those first settlers were originally from various regions of Eastern Europe, and could not always understand one another. Shojjet refers to this as a "Babylonian Colonization"; the "togetherness" held little importance for many of the settlers.¹¹

Candidates for colonization were required to have at least two years of farming experience, sufficient funds to sustain themselves until the first harvest, and a large family, preferably with older boys who could lend a hand.¹²

11 Shojjet (see note 3), pp. 17-20. Bursuk and Krichmar (see note 3), pp. 159-160, claim that most of them were artisans and tradesmen. The handful of intellectuals established the social and cultural infrastructure in the colony. Dr. Leibow, who served as physician in the colony, wrote in 1916 a novel, "Isaac's Dream" (in Yiddish, my translation). The author criticizes both JCA personnel and colonists, except for a few naïve immigrants who got trapped in the turmoil.

12 Shojjet (see note 3), p. 15. Bursuk and Krichmar (see note 3), pp. 16, 21 and 38. Also Mendelson, *50 años de colonización Judía en la Argentina*, DAIA, 1939, pp. 196-197.

Due to the poor quality of soil, in 1919 the JCA relocated 44 families from Narcisse Leven to Baron Hirsch colony. This move did not bring a significant shift in the situation of Narcisse Leven.¹³

In 1928 there were 193 families in the colony.¹⁴ By 1939, there were only 160. Of these, only three owned their farms, and 154 held leasing contracts.¹⁵

The Cooperatives in the Colony

All aspects of social, economic and cultural life in Narcisse Leven were woven together. Two central institutions were at the social heart of the colony: the library, a focal point for youth and the basis for the development of its cultural life, and the cooperative, the center of economic and social life. Those involved in the cooperative were mostly adults and middle aged settlers.¹⁶

13 Morton Winsberg, *Colonia Baron Hirsch – a Jewish agricultural colony in Argentina*, University of Florida Press, 1964, p. 12. Also Verbitsky (see note 8), pp. 213-215. Later the JCA colonized six sons of settlers on farms that were left by families transferred to Baron Hirsch colony, CAJP (see note 5), JCA report for 1925, page 13. Shoijet (see note 3), p. 92, criticized the colonization of those six families that ended in total failure. On colonization on inferior soils for cattle rising, Oungre (see note 3), pp. 77-79. On the subject of land unsuitable for colonization, *ibid.*, pp. 368-391. Also Aronstein (see note 3), pp. 226-227

14 Oungre (see note 3), p. 305.

15 CAJP (see note 5), AR-JCA 9454 A+B, JCA's census. Bursuk and Krichmar (see note 3), pp. 36-38.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 165, report of inspection in the cooperative, 1912. In 1917-1918 the youngsters established a society intended to build a communal settlement in (the Land of) Israel. At the beginning of the 1920s they founded the "Centro Agrario" and began directing their energies towards communal agricultural settlement in Argentina, and actually settled in Chaco province. Letter by Naum Krichmar, of the "Centro" in Narcisse Leven, to Isaac Grossman, of the "Centro" in Lapin, Baron Hirsch colony, about their intention to settle in Chaco and about a delegation to examine lands there, CAJP (see note 5), AR-JCA 9396, January 31, 1923. Also "Colono Cooperador" (see note 7), 239, March 13, 1935, p. 15, and articles by Meir Bursuk, *ibid.*, 180, 181, 183, 198, 199, 200 (March 1931 to February 1932).

The first cooperative, Unión Cooperativa Agrícola de Bernasconi, was officially established in July 1910, shortly after the founding of the colony. The foundation statutes indicate a broad view of the cooperative's roles in the economic, social and cultural aspects of life in the colony.¹⁷

The Unión lasted until 1926. In retrospect, it is apparent that the collapse began in its first year of existence.

The first settlers and cooperative managers lacked basic commercial skills, causing heavy losses.¹⁸ In 1914, settlers owed the cooperative \$160,000, a fortune in those days. It was common to many cooperatives in the Jewish colonies not to collect debts from members, as cooperative leaders wanted to support their members.¹⁹ Moreover, the debts left by settlers who abandoned the colony were imposed on the cooperative by the JCA.²⁰

Settlers' and cooperatives' debts grew mainly in years of successful crops and abundance of funds, as settlers did not know how best to use the wealth they earned in order to strengthen the colony and ensure their future viability. The cooperative managers seemed completely unaware of the significance of money and provided credits carelessly.²¹

17 Shojjet (see note 3), pp. 36-39. Bursuk and Krichmar (see note 3), pp. 161-162 and pp. 169-176. Starkmeth, one of the JCA's managers, claimed in 1914-15 that the cooperative deals with too many subjects, Yehuda Lewin, "From crisis to growth, Jewish colonization in Argentina established by the JCA, 1896-1914," Doctoral Thesis, University of Tel Aviv, 1999, p. 232.

18 Shojjet (see note 3), pp. 42-44 and pp. 47-49. Also Bursuk and Krichmar (see note 3), pp. 189-190.

19 Ibid., pp. 198 and 200. Some claim the debt originated in a loan of \$100,000 transferred by JCA as aid to the settlers, while others claim that bad management was the reason for the debt. Shojjet (see note 3), pp. 55-57. A similar situation developed also in Baron Hirsch, Verbitsky (see note 8), p. 100. Bad management caused the Charata (Chaco) cooperative's fall, letter from Naum Krichmar to Kaplan, CZA (see note 6), A304/47, April 30, 1928.

20 Shojjet (see note 3), pp. 57-58 and 69-70.

21 Accumulating debts in good agricultural years was common to many colonies. In "Colono Cooperador" (see note 7), 205, May 30, 1932, an article titled "It isn't wise to keep silent." Kaplan warns Mizrach to be very careful with money, as "all the cooperatives suffer now, and suffer a lot, because of those good years that deceived and seduced them," CAJP (see note 5), AR-JCA 9438, letter dated November 21, 1932.

Verbitsky claims that the Baron Hirsch cooperative acted as a bumper that sustained the blows inflicted on the settlers. It appears that there wasn't a substantial difference between the two colonies in this respect.²²

In a letter to Kaplan around the time the first cooperative collapsed, David Levitt comments about difficult social and economic situations in Narcisse Leven. The bank refused to issue loans to settlers without the JCA's refund guarantee. The JCA's policy was to issue these guarantees to individuals and not to the cooperatives, so many of the weaker settlers were left without financial means.²³

Under these impossible conditions, there was an attempt to establish a second cooperative, the Sociedad Agrícola Israelita, on the ruins of the previous one, but it survived only a few months. Levitt claims in his letter that the new cooperative's efforts were mostly devoted to paying the debts left by the first cooperative.²⁴

The third cooperative of the Narcisse Leven colony, El Progreso, was founded in November 1928.

Simcha Banchik, a leader of Lucienville cooperative, shares Kaplan's concerns and asks to warn Mizrach, CZA (see note 6), A305-43, letter dated November 8, 1932. Also Aronstein (see note 3), p. 275. Shojjet (see note 3), in pp. 59-65, criticizes the settlers not only for being impractical, but also for being lazy.

- 22 Verbitsky (see note 8), p. 179. In Bursuk and Krichmar (see note 3), pp. 16-17, the authors claim that the Narcisse Leven cooperative collapsed as it was confiscated at the demand of JCA managers. David Levitt, one of the founders of the Unión, claims that there was no real reason to close it, *Ibid.* p. 184. Other references contradict this opinion, *ibid.* p. 189. Shojjet claims that between 1922 -1926 bad management deepened the cooperative debts, Shojjet (see note 3), pp. 90-92. Oungre (see note 3), pp. 141-142, writes about "disastrous operations" made by the cooperative managers.
- 23 Levitt's letter is dated 6.12.1926, CZA (see note 6), A305-41. JCA's principles for issuing guarantees are described in Aronstein (see note 3), pp. 190-193. Oungre is skeptic about the prospect of founding a new cooperative in the colony, as "in this center (referring to Narcisse Leven), the personal interest is the vital motivation for any collective action", Oungre (see note 3), pp. 141-142.
- 24 On closing down the first cooperative and founding the second, in CAJP (see note 5), the JCA's report for 1926, p. 27. The collapse of the second cooperative is reported in the JCA's report for 1927. Shojjet (see note 3), p. 95, claims that the second cooperative collapsed because of bad management.

The Letters

Isaac Kaplan, a leader of the Jewish agricultural cooperative movement in Argentina, served for many years on the board of the *Fraternidad Agraria* (and institutions that preceded it, the *Confederación* and the *Federación*). Kaplan held extensive correspondence with individuals from the colonies, especially those involved with the cooperatives.

Isaac Mizrach, at the age of 25, was appointed manager (*gerente*) of the third cooperative in the colony, *El Progreso*. Through research in several archives, I was able to gather a collection of over 250 letters exchanged between them from 1929 to 1943. About 100 letters were sent by Mizrach to Kaplan and over 150 letters were addressed by Kaplan to Mizrach. This correspondence sheds light on what took place behind the scenes of events related to the cooperative and their impact on the colony. The letters present the personal perspectives of these two individuals, but the information they provide complements what was reflected from formal documents, such as reports published by the JCA and the *Fraternidad*.²⁵

Referring to their correspondence, Kaplan stated in a letter to Mizrach dated June 12, 1937: "...for obvious reasons, on many occasions the personal correspondence is more useful than the formal one."

El Progreso

The agricultural year of 1926-1927 was the last in a string of four years yielding good harvests.²⁶ Settlers did not enjoy the good harvests and the reasonable market prices because the JCA collected old debts on top of the yearly dues payments. Furthermore, in the absence of a cooperative,

25 Letters from Mizrach to Kaplan are held in CZA (see note 6), A305-51. Letters from Kaplan to Mizrach are held in CAJP (see note 5), AR-JCA 9438. Not all the correspondence was preserved. In 1929 Kaplan was 53. All the letters are in Yiddish, my translation.

26 Shojjet (see note 3), pp. 90 and 98. The JCA's reports for 1926 and 1927, CAJP (see note 5), describe extensive damage to crops due to bad weather.

settlers purchased agricultural equipment from trade houses and fell into heavy debts. The two following years were very bad for agriculture, a preface to the impending global crisis. In 1927, 70% of the settlers were forced to purchase seeds as nothing remained of their harvest. Many were behind in their payments to the JCA, a legal justification to cancel their contracts.²⁷

In September 1927, the JCA founded a cheese factory in the colony, Quesería Cooperativa Narcisse Leven (will be referred to as the “dairy”), numbering 174 members. The dairy was expected to begin operations early in 1928. The JCA provided an advance payment for the installation.

An unprecedented drought hit the colony in 1929-1930. The dairy suspended its work between May 1929 and February 1931, when it resumed operations. Aronstein’s report (1935) dedicated a special chapter to the milk industry.²⁸

El Progreso was the site of dynamic interactions among several factors: the cooperative management board and the inevitable opposition, the cooperative members, the clerks, and the manager (Mizrach). Nearby we find the administrator, who also acted as the cooperative’s comptroller. Various forces operated in the periphery: JCA Argentina, JCA Paris, Fraternidad Agraria (represented by Isaac Kaplan), the central bank, the bank’s local branch, and the central and provincial governments, with all their authorities. External trade houses also had an influence on the colony.

27 In a letter dated January 5, 1928, CZA (see note 6), Levitt asks Kaplan “what will be the end with our colony?” S. Eizenberg, a former settler in Leven, raises an almost identical question following a visit to the colony in an article published in “Colono Cooperador” (see note 7), 205, May 30, 1932, pp. 7-8.

28 The process of founding the dairy is described in the JCA reports: 1926, p. 27, 1927, p. 24, and 1928, pp. 55-56. Oungre (see note 3) reports about the rescue of Narcisse Leven settlers, as crops failed, pp. 306 and 309. He fears that struggles between settlers and activities against the JCA could harm the dairy. Mizrach details the difficulties around the dairy, CZA (see note 6), A305-51, letters dated March 12, 1933, March 25, 1934 and June 18, 1935. Aronstein (see note 3), chapter 10, pp. 238-273. The JCA devoted efforts to develop the milk industry. During the world crisis milk products’ prices dropped and many settlers abandoned this branch.

In this reality it is imperative to present the complex picture in which all the interested parties operated simultaneously.

Several examples will illustrate how the correspondence between Kaplan and Mizrach provides an additional dimension that illuminates the motivations and drives operating behind the events taking place in the colony.

The Seed Allocation Affair

Settlers kept seeds from the harvest in order to sow them in the next agricultural year. In the southern colonies, Narcisse Leven and Baron Hirsch, failed harvests were not rare events. In such cases the settlers had to acquire seeds from outside sources. Since this situation was shared by all agricultural settlements in the area, and not just by the Jewish colonies, it was addressed on a national level. Following is a brief description of the occurrences concerning the JCA granting of guarantees for seeds in 1936.

In the early months of 1936 it was clear that most settlers in the area had no seeds left for sowing. The government published a decree in the national press setting guidelines for allocation of seeds on loan. The matter was assigned to the central seeds commission (several institutions participated in it, the *Fraternidad Agraria* among them). The commission elaborated the decree into a set of practical guidelines for the way seeds would be allocated and how the loans were to be returned by the settlers.

The JCA granted the settlers individual guarantees for the loan (“priorities”). The local bank branch which was supposed to provide the loan, however, received instructions from the bank’s central management in Buenos Aires. These instructions were based on seeding statistics from previous years. The settlers, for their part, were interested in getting as many seeds as possible. This was just the starting point.

Nine official letters sent by the JCA Buenos Aires to the JCA Paris between January 6, 1936 and February 2, 1937 deal with the seed allocation affair. A brief description of these letters is presented below.²⁹

29 CAJP (see note 5), AR-JCA 8541.

- January 6, 1936 (2922). David Sevi (inspector on behalf of the JCA) reports a terrible situation in the colony. The most urgent issue is the lack of seeds. There is a need for \$12,000 for oat seeds. He describes the activity of the cooperative with the bank in an effort to receive credit for seeds.
- February 14, 1936 (2929). Paris agreed to provide a sum of \$12,000 for the acquisition of oat seeds.
- March 12, 1936 (2935). The JCA began to supply oat seeds. The JCA reached an agreement with the bank regarding the reimbursement ("priorities").
- March 21, 1936 (2936). The minister of agriculture refuses to increase the amount of (wheat) seeds beyond the allocation. According to this letter, the JCA acceded to seeding 100 hectares, of which not more than 50 hectares were to be of wheat. It is mentioned that the down payments were given to the settlers directly, against a bond of security co-signed by the cooperative.
- March 28, 1936 (2937). The government has decided to provide the settlers with wheat seeds. Local commissions were established to handle the distribution in accordance with the central bank. The administrator headed the commission. The matter of barley remained undetermined, with the expectation that it shall be provided by the brewery.
- April 27, 1936 (2941). Credit was provided for forage.
- May 19, 1936 (2947). The government has provided wheat through the central bank. A certain number of settlers received barley from the brewery. The cooperative supplied seeds from the seeds fund.³⁰
- July 30, 1936 (2962). Still hopes for a normal harvest.
- February 2, 1937 (3003). The letter addresses an inspection conducted in the colony by Weill. It appears to be the first time JCA Buenos Aires reports that the settlers seeded far more wheat than the amount approved by the JCA, and Weill is unwilling to accept this. According to the report,

30 The seeds fund was an initiative of Mizrach. Following good harvests, settlers contributed seeds to a special fund, and those were distributed in years of need.

for 30% of the settlers the harvest was terrible and the situation was dire. The crops were also damaged by frosts and hail.³¹

At the same time, a series of letters was exchanged between Mizrach and Kaplan describing intense activity behind the scenes.³²

In a confidential letter, Kaplan described conversations held with Weill in JCA Buenos Aires. According to Kaplan, in case the JCA grants credit for only 65 hectares of wheat, they (the JCA) are conducting negotiations with JCA Paris to give Mizrach barley seeds. Kaplan cautions Mizrach that this has to remain secret. He urges Mizrach that it is imperative to approach the brewery asking for barley seeds for the settlers, basing it on the fact that the JCA will give their approval. Mizrach must send a copy of the letter to JCA Buenos Aires, to keep them updated, and for them to use it for JCA Paris.³³

In the following letter, Kaplan relates details of a meeting he had in the central bank, concerning credit for (wheat) seeds exceeding the amount approved by the JCA (“without priority”). Kaplan writes that the issue is complicated, since the JCA’s rationale behind the decision to limit the area of wheat to be seeded in that region was the unprofitability of that action. Eventually it was settled that the central bank would allow the local branch manager to decide at his own discretion. A telegram in this spirit was sent to the branch manager, and Kaplan was convinced Mizrach would come to an understanding with him. Kaplan admits he had to use the best of his tact to succeed in his dealings with the JCA and the bank.

Following that, Kaplan expressed a more reasoned opinion, justifying

31 In this letter it is stated that seeding wheat in excess, on unsuitable soils, added to the failure of those crops. CAJP (see note 5), in JCA’s report for 1937 is stated that the harvest was very bad due to drought during 1936, pp. 31-32.

32 The first letter was sent by Kaplan on January 6, 1936, CAJP (see note 5), AR-JCA 9438, and later letters dated January 24, 1936, February 21, 1936, April 16, 1936, May 10, 1936 and June 7, 1936. Letters from Mizrach to Kaplan (some missing) dated February 22, 1936 and April 25, 1936, CZA (see note 6), A305-51. The calculation of the area to be seeded was performed according to reports issued by the directors of banks’ local branches.

33 Letter dated April 16, 1936, CAJP (see note 5), AR-JCA 9438.

the JCA's policy against sowing the entire lands of Narcisse Leven with wheat. In his opinion, although the local bank manager was empowered to give seeds for 80 hectares, the cooperative should examine each case individually, and advise the settler if it would be profitable to do so or not.³⁴

On April 25th, in the midst of the events, Mizrach wrote Kaplan a confidential letter. According to Mizrach the administrator received secret instructions from JCA Buenos Aires to warn the local bank manager that, should the bank provide a single kilogram of seeds beyond the amount approved by the JCA, it would revoke the priorities entirely. The manager answered that he is acting according to instructions issued by the central bank. In a private conversation, the manager asked Mizrach to try and come to an understanding with the JCA. Kaplan replied that Weill was upset about his involvement, which resulted in the allocation of more seeds than the JCA had wished for. Kaplan replied to Weill that he serves the cooperatives.³⁵

Kaplan's confidential letter from June 7th seems to be the finishing accord of the affair. He reports again that the JCA was unhappy that Narcisse Leven received more seeds than the JCA allocated, and admonishes Kaplan's involvement in the affair. Kaplan explains that the JCA planned to introduce mixed agriculture in the colony, investing for that a large sum. Now that the entire land area has been seeded, their plan could no longer be implemented.³⁶

The seeds affair continued to darken the atmosphere between the JCA, the Fraternidad and the cooperative. In a letter dated February 13, 1937, Mizrach reports upon a visit Weill made to the colony. The administrator told Mizrach that Weill is very angry with him, as he writes everything to Kaplan, "*and Kaplan keeps coming to annoy him.*" Weill expressed great

34 The letter dated April 21, 1936, CAJP (see note 5), AR-JCA 9438 reflects the broad view of Kaplan. This pragmatic approach is revealed in other occasions, for example in a letter dated October 17, 1938, about diversification of farming branches.

35 Letter by Mizrach dated April 25, 1936, CZA (see note 6), A305-51. Kaplan's response dated May 10, 1936, CAJP (see note 5), AR-JCA 9438. In a letter by Matzkin, then the cooperative president, CZA (see note 6), A305-41, 5.3.1936, Matzkin thanks Kaplan for his actions in the seeds affair, *ibid.*, April 22, 1936.

36 Letter dated June 7, 1936, CAJP (see note 5), AR-JCA 9438.

anger to Mizrach about the area seeded with wheat. He couldn't forgive himself, and blamed the cooperative and the Fraternidad for the failure.³⁷

In a conversation with Kaplan following that visit, Weill praised Mizrach and the cooperative. He was angry with Kaplan, who worked behind the scenes at the bank. Kaplan discerned gloom rather than anger in Weill's response. He suggested to Weill that the JCA should come up with a methodical program for agricultural diversification, and assured him that Mizrach will be a loyal supporter and assistant.³⁸

The JCA's official letters imply that JCA Buenos Aires was not aware, at least at that time, that the settlers in Narcisse Leven sowed wheat over larger areas than approved by them. The correspondence between Mizrach and Kaplan suggest that the JCA managers in Buenos Aires knew about Kaplan's intervention with the central bank and with the seeds commission, and even blamed him for that, already in April-May of 1936.

A possible explanation for this dissonance could be that the JCA managers in Buenos Aires waited to see the harvest results before informing Paris. This is insinuated in Kaplan's letter dated June 7, 1936. Kaplan wrote to Mizrach that the most important thing is to have a good crop and good prices. In that case, Kaplan writes, the JCA "will probably forgive" what had been done.

The Settlers, the Cooperative and the JCA's Administrator

In 1928, when El Progreso was established, the settlers were in a state of desperation.³⁹ In an early letter to Kaplan, Mizrach writes of his hopes

37 CZA (see note 6), A305-51. According to Mizrach, Weill ordered the setting up of a special commission in the colony to discuss agricultural improvements intended to prevent any influence of the cooperative and Fraternidad on the colony.

38 Letter dated February 22, 1937, CAJP (see note 5), AR-JCA 9438. In JCA yearly and special reports, El Progreso cooperative and its manager are regularly praised.

39 The Federación congress dealt with the situation in mid-1928, Kibrick Archive (see note 5), A.FA.A01, protocol 36, May 22, 1928, pp. 156-159; (also "Colono Cooperador" [see note 7], 115, June, 1928). A report on the situation in the colony was prepared for Oungre, *ibid.*, 119, September 15, 1928. Following an inspection

to improve the atmosphere and fight the desperation and the indifference he found in the colony.⁴⁰ He also found a deep misconception among the settlers concerning the basics of financial conduct and the role of the cooperative in the colony. Mizrach wrote of men who perceive the cooperative as nothing more than an institution for “taking”; they asked for flour, not caring to acquire the tools which could enable them to produce that same flour themselves.⁴¹

As seen above, the poor situation of settlers in the colony as well as the settlers’ attitude towards the cooperative were discussed openly in contemporary publications and reports. Mizrach’s letter sheds light on the mindset that took root in the colony before his arrival. He describes factionalism, tumultuous assemblies, and harsh struggles between those who supported the current board and those who supported the opposition.⁴²

visit of Fraternidad leaders in early November, 1928, it was decided to establish a new cooperative, Bursuk and Krichmar (see note 3), pp. 221-230 and 237. A letter published in “Colono Cooperador” (see note 7), 202, March 31, 1932, p. 9, states that El Progreso was founded by Fraternidad. In the JCA report for 1929, p. 25, the demoralization and desperation among the settlers is mentioned (CAJP [see note 5]). In 1929 there were 166 members in El Progreso (in comparison to 100 founding members in 1928, p. 56 in the JCA report for 1928).

40 CZA (see note 6), A305-51, undated letter.

41 Ibid., undated, probably October, 1930. This same attitude of members towards the cooperative was common to many colonies, and was severely criticized in an article published in “Colono Cooperador,” 205, May 30, 1932, pp. 1-2, under the heading “Double Crisis” (Yiddish, my translation). The article refers to the economic and moral crises.

42 CZA (see note 6), A305-51, the same letter. Mizrach refers to “constantly unsatisfied” settlers, who were induced to attack the current board for its intention to pay debts (“we are starving and they give out our money”). On the same subject also letter dated September 26, 1931. In his reply Kaplan refers to those settlers as “grown men with tiny souls,” CAJP (see note 5), AR-JCA 9438, letters to Mizrach dated October 16, 1931 and November 15, 1931. Kaplan writes that he had to cope with similar situations himself. Leibow (see note 11) wrote in his novel about factionalism in his imaginary colony. Several years later this situation prevailed, as can be seen from a joke published in “Sparks” (see note 10), 6, December 19, 1937, “between settlers”: “Jacob: tell me Moses, what is the meaning of a good crop? Moses: when by me it yields 10 sacks (of seeds) and my neighbor gets 8 sacks per hectare” (Yiddish, my translation).

Struggles between the board and the opposition were not unique to Narcisse Leven. An editorial titled “Opposition” was published in “Colono Cooperador.” Though the author regards opposition as vital to ensure a healthy social life in the colonies, he warns opposition members against instigation of the uneducated and easily-manipulated masses for the advancement of personal ambitions that have little to do with the colonies’ wellbeing.⁴³

The letters reflect Mizrach’s reaction, as cooperative manager, to the conflicts around El Progreso and to the impact of those conflicts on the colony and on its development.

The extent of the JCA’s administrators’ involvement in the cooperative is a recurrent theme throughout the correspondence. There was a constant tension between Mizrach and the administrators, who also acted as cooperative comptrollers and de-facto managed the dairy.⁴⁴

A partial explanation for this tension can be found in a letter that Mizrach wrote in December 1940, following the visit of the JCA’s manager, Weill, to the colony. In a private conversation, Weill wished to learn why Mizrach had quarreled with the administrators. Mizrach replied that he expects from the administrators to discuss disagreements, instead of them taking personal offence. He explained that “*there is a problem that straight away administrators want to have the right to be the managers of the cooperative,*” while he himself doesn’t wish to be an administrator...⁴⁵

From the correspondence it seems that Mizrach’s perception was that the administrators represented interests contradicting those of the cooperative. Moreover, it appears from the letters that the administrator allegedly interfered in the cooperative’s management. Several examples are presented below. It is not clear whether the administrator acted in these cases on behalf of the JCA, on behalf of himself, or a combination of both:

43 “Colono Cooperador” (see note 7), 200, February 15, 1932, pp. 1-2. The “opposition” is mentioned repeatedly in the correspondence between Kaplan and Mizrach.

44 Eli Saltiel was the JCA’s administrator and cooperative comptroller between 1929 and 1935. Camille Sroulevich replaced him and served until 1941, Bursuk and Krichmar (see note 3), Spanish, pp. 78-82.

45 Mizrach’s letter is undated, however its date was estimated from Kaplan’s answer. Mizrach to Kaplan, CZA (see note 6), A305-51. Kaplan to Mizrach, CAJP (see note 5), AR-JCA 9438, December 22, 1940.

- In 1931 Kaplan wrote to Mizrach that it had come to his attention that the JCA wished to meddle in the elections. Kaplan perceived this to be a bad move, as the elections were a means for the members to express their views and wishes. It was a matter of principle that “no other institution should violently meddle in the cooperative’s internal affairs.” Kaplan asked for Mizrach’s opinion.⁴⁶
- In a letter dated February 25, 1934, Mizrach criticized the administrator’s conduct concerning the dairy. He published his criticism in “The Plow.” He claimed that the dairy managers were Saltiel’s pawns. Saltiel, the administrator, asked Mizrach to focus on commercial business only. Mizrach blamed Saltiel of working against the colony’s interests and, indirectly, against the interests of the JCA. It should be remarked that the JCA had strong financial interests in the dairy.
- Several letters from the beginning of 1934 point to a strange affair concerning the process of transferring the farm of a settler named Yusem, due to debts. The affair led to struggles between the cooperative’s board and the opposition. According to Mizrach, the opposition attacked the board, Kaplan and the *Fraternidad* as well. He urged to end the affair as soon as possible to prevent additional damage to the cooperative and the *Fraternidad*. Mizrach accused Saltiel of instigating the opposition, and referred to him in derogatory terms. He asked for Kaplan’s assistance in clearing the matter up with JCA Buenos Aires. Echoes of the affair continued to reverberate, according to the letters, for almost all the year.

Mizrach’s description points to the dynamics within the colony: Yusem vociferates. Settlers ask Mizrach why nothing is being done in the matter. Saltiel joins in and accuses the *Fraternidad* of doing nothing. Mizrach claims that the affair became a weapon in the hands of the opposition. Instigated by Saltiel, the opposition sent a letter to the JCA requesting it to return everything to Yusem. Mizrach asks Kaplan to clarify to the

46 *Ibidem*, a letter dated November 25, 1931. It seems that this type of events was usual. Kaplan writes also about the JCA’s intention to collect settlers’ debts from cooperative’s expected profits. Mizrach writes about dishonest behavior of part of the candidates, undated letter, CZA (see note 6), A305-51.

JCA that Saltiel is meddling in the inner politics of the colony in a way he should not, as administrator. Kaplan advises Mizrach to stay calm and stick to the truth.⁴⁷

- Camille Sroulevich replaced Saltiel. His time as administrator had also periods of unrest. Mizrach blames Sroulevich for the tension between the managements of the dairy and of El Progreso, and for disrupting the lives of the settlers. Understandably, the administrator had to defend the JCA's interests in the dairy, but Mizrach claims that every time it seems that the dairy is beginning to show signs of viability, the administrator, who proclaimed himself as president of the dairy, deepens its debts to the JCA. Mizrach writes that once and for all an end must be put to the administrator's tyranny.⁴⁸

The examples presented in this paragraph may lead to conflicting conclusions. Mizrach can be seen as a righteous man who fights relentlessly for genuine ideals, or as a pious man who cries aloud at any objection to his doings, or more probably a combination of both extremes.

Based on supporting data, e.g., periodicals and other publications, including JCA reports, most of Mizrach's claims were sound and well founded. In my opinion, after analyzing his letters, Mizrach appears to perceive the world in black and white. He was extremely focused on doing his job as he understood it, without compromising. Kaplan, the experienced party, doesn't contradict Mizrach, but his approach is more balanced.⁴⁹

47 Letter from Mizrach to Kaplan dated February 24, 1934, CZA (see note 6), A305-51 (probably not the first on the subject), and also letters dated March 28, 1934, March 30, 1934, July 12, 1934, November 10, 1934 and December 22, 1934. Letters from Kaplan to Mizrach dated April 2, 1934, November 12, 1934, January 29, 1935 and April 27, 1935, CAJP (see note 6), AR-JCA 9438. There is also an undated letter. What makes this affair even stranger is the fact that in the list of JCA settlers' personal files appear only four similar names (YUSEM, YUSSEM and YUSIM), all of them in Clara colony. In a letter dated July 22, 1934 Kaplan informs Mizrach that the JCA wants to improve the relations between Saltiel and Mizrach.

48 Letter dated May 28, 1937, CZA (see note 6), A305-51. Often the dairy managers comprised the opposition to El Progreso board. By mid-1938 the dairy was affiliated as a department in El Progreso.

49 In a letter to Kaplan dated July 12, 1934, *ibid.*, Mizrach refers to a clash he had with

The “alfalfa affair,” presented below, can serve as a good example of the dynamics around the cooperative, and also to Mizrach’s perception of things.

A series of letters from mid-1932 reveal tense relations around the cooperative.⁵⁰ On June 21st Kaplan received a formal letter from Mizrach, describing an error he had innocently made concerning the sale of alfalfa through a neighboring Jewish farmer. The error caused financial losses to the cooperative. On June 23rd Kaplan asks to receive further details. Here ends the formal aspect of the correspondence.

In a personal letter dated July 9th Mizrach provides details of what happened, “...*I mean the behind the scenes of the matter, since you are acquainted with the matter itself.*” Mizrach admits he committed a foolish error, and describes the circumstances that led to it, without self-justification. Mizrach includes his personal feelings while relating the ongoing events, and his perception regarding others’ feelings towards him.

Mizrach immediately reported the matter to the president of the cooperative, who informed Saltiel, as cooperative comptroller. Saltiel, writes Mizrach, “*who hates me...acted decently at that moment.*” Following discussions by the board, it was decided that action should be taken against the farmer who was involved in the incident. At that board meeting, the president shared responsibility with Mizrach, but after the meeting he made sure to say personally to each board member that he had no knowledge of Mizrach’s actions, and that it was all his doing.

The story was quite different at the next board meeting. “*I have personal antagonists on the board,*” writes Mizrach, and elaborates:

“A.B. and J.L. (the vice president) are angry with me because when they need \$10 and there is no money in the account I do not give it to them.”

Saltiel. In an attempt to prevent the possible repercussion for the cooperative, he is ready to move to another cooperative, “*so it must be, pride (a proud man) has to have a wandering stick.*”

50 Letters from Kaplan to Mizrach dated June 23, 1932, July 11, 1932, July 15, 1932, CAJP (see note 5), AR-JCA 9438. Letters from Mizrach to Kaplan, July 9, 1932, July 12, 1932, CZA (see note 6), A305-51 (Mizrach’s first letter is missing).

“S.T. (the finance manager)... I threw his son out of his post as clerk...I caught him stealing.”

“S.C. who as a board member sells (the crop) and buys through another (instead of through the cooperative)...and I spoke to him about it.”

“A.K. (deputy comptroller) who sees me as a bone (in his throat)...I get in the way of him being the ‘spiritual’ leader of the cooperative.”

Mizrach writes that they found this to be a good opportunity to settle the score with him, and according to Mizrach, even Saltiel began to conduct “unclean politics.”

The board imposed heavy fines on the president, and mainly on Mizrach who asserted their decision to be illogical and illegal. He performed the action in his position as cooperative manager, and not as a private business. Since he doesn’t earn from the cooperative’s profits, he should not suffer from its losses. Mizrach was awaiting further deliberation by the board on the subject. He expected his work would act as advocate for him, so that he felt humiliated; no one had come to offer him support. According to Mizrach, the event was a good excuse for some in the colony to attack the president and board members. He thinks this might be his last letter as cooperative manager.

Kaplan’s reassuring response is immediate (July 11th). He quotes Sajarof, a leader of the Jewish cooperative movement in Argentina: “*Little men, little heads, little souls, and we have to work with them, to educate them and turn them into cooperators.*” Kaplan writes of opportunists, who exploit the communality for their own gains, “*it is all the same in all the cooperatives.*” He asks Mizrach to continue his constructive work for the benefit of “*the hundreds of tormented settlers.*”

Kaplan emerges as a guide and mentor to his young colleague. He advises Mizrach on how to handle the crisis, on how to overlook the present hardships. Kaplan admits that he himself is suffering spiritually and economically, but this strengthens him to work more resolutely for the cause.

Mizrach’s answer is swift as well. On July 12th he writes that Kaplan’s words were as a balm for his nerves, and adds “*the cooperative is too precious to me, already stamped into my heart.*” Mizrach condemns the

conduct of members who want to mold the cooperative to their desires. They shout loudly, and nothing can be accomplished so long as they are members. Mizrach advocates casting out some of those members from the cooperative.

Kaplan (July 15th) agrees with Mizrach that the cooperative should be cleared of its harmful elements, but if they do attempt to cleanse the cooperative, “*in the end there will be no one left to work with...*” Kaplan believes in education, in working patiently and wisely, responding with good will to their “childish insistences,” with candor to their “petty ambitions.”

Besides revealing Mizrach’s feelings, the alfalfa story enables us to learn about the dynamics in the colony, the personal affairs and puerile score settling which stood behind decision making processes. Furthermore, Kaplan’s letters suggest that other colonies were run by unsuitable leaders, who had no real affinity for communalism. So, this correspondence may point to a broader phenomenon that goes far beyond the alfalfa event in a poor colony at the heart of La Pampa.⁵¹

In a seemingly apologetic letter, Mizrach sends Kaplan an allegory about a fishing boat.⁵²

The Colony in 1939 – Closing a Circle

By 1939 Mizrach has worked as cooperative manager for nearly a decade. He feels he has failed.

According to Mizrach, the administrator incited against his authority in the cooperative, violating the principles of proper management. Mizrach

51 In a letter written two years later, Kaplan, besides explaining the need for an opposition, claims that “*cooperation was impelled in the colonies, and members were tagged as ‘cooperators’ without asking them if they understand the meaning of cooperation.*” CAJP (see note 5), AR-JCA 9438, letter dated July 16, 1934.

52 CZA (see note 6), A305-51, a letter dated September 24, 1932. In the allegory the cooperative is a big boat. The 170 fishermen do not know how to sail. After several wrecks they ask a big company (Fraternidad) to send them a captain (Mizrach) to help them. Everything goes well; the captain sails the ship through storms and high seas. At some point the fishermen gained confidence and decide to overrule the captain, without knowing how to do that properly. Kaplan’s answer in a letter dated September 27, 1932, CAJP (see note 5), AR-JCA 9438.

continues: "... (Colony's) phony leaders ... bred fear and terror motivated by concerns of personal gain; subjugation to the degree of slavery. The atmosphere sickens me to my very soul." He wants to leave.⁵³

On February 20, 1939 he writes: "I once believed that I would turn beggars in spirit and practice into worthy men. I failed." On March 25, 1939 he added:

...10 years with dreams and hopes, and at the end of the decade, when I see that the mindset of the people is just as I encountered it in 1929, it raises terrible thoughts in my mind.

This letter is a grave indictment against both the JCA and the settlers. In 1929 he found disorganized people, their morale low, and their eyes beseeching aid. They asked for a loan they promised to repay with the first funds, which, according to Mizrach, they did not, and he adds: "is the spirit of beggary indeed part of their being?".

Mizrach writes of the relationship of dependence fostered by the JCA, and accuses it of encouraging beggary, while neglecting successful settlers.

In a letter dated March 30, 1939, Kaplan tries to reassure him. Kaplan's letter is not only about Narcisse Leven, but about the entire Jewish colonization enterprise. Kaplan writes of himself as a youngster, in Fondo Comunal, where members not only were unwilling to pay their debts, but were ready to "tear away parts of the cooperative, when it was dying." Kaplan asserts that this is the way of the masses.

Summary and Evaluation

The correspondence between Mizrach and Kaplan has to be handled cautiously, as it reflects their personal perspectives and views. Its importance lies in the way the letters reveal forces and interests operating behind the events in the colony. The extended period covered by the letters enables a wide perspective on processes. The extent of this paper allowed the presentation of several events as an example for these processes.

53 There are several letters on the subject, some undated. Kaplan letters dated January 3, 1939, March 30, 1939, CAJP (see note 5), AR-JCA 9438. Mizrach letters dated January 8, 1939, February 20, 1939(?), March 25, 1939, CZA (see note 6), A305-51.

The letters also suggest that the JCA was not a monolithic body. It seems that there were differing opinions within JCA Argentina and between it and JCA Paris. It appears that Kaplan took advantage from this situation in his dealing with the JCA. It seems also that Fraternidad leaders worked closely with JCA inspectors, like Samuel Kaplan⁵⁴ and David Sevi, who were attentive to settlers' needs. The formal documents, and even the settlers' periodicals, could not reveal these paths.

The letters suggest also that the processes and vicissitudes experienced by Narcisse Leven were common to other JCA colonies in Argentina. Mizrach's struggle against lack of fraternity in the colony was similar to struggles taking place in other colonies, and to struggles between some cooperatives and the Fraternidad.

Mizrach expresses frustration and disappointment after 10 years in the colony. These feelings, beyond being personal, reflect on settlers' mentality and collective behavior as perceived by Mizrach. Kaplan's insights corroborate this view.

By 1940 the Jewish colonization enterprise in Argentina was in decline. The correspondence between Kaplan and Mizrach calls for questioning to what extent the behavior of all parties involved in the colonization contributed to that decline. This decline happened while allegedly the colonization was backed by the wealth and power of the JCA – a point worthy of reflection.

54 Samuel Kaplan was the brother of Isaac Kaplan.