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Danes in Argentina: The Emigration Story of the Ambrosius Family

by
Inge Ambrosius

I have had a box of newspaper clippings, letters, pictures, books, and other materials about Danish immigrants in Argentina for many years. Many of my relatives live in Argentina, and the material was assembled by my grandmother and my father. When I retired from teaching high school history and geography, I finally had the time to look at the material. Among other things, the box contained the memoirs of my great-grandfather’s younger brother, Niels Jensen Ambrosius, “Memories of my life and whereabouts in Argentina.” They were written in 1951 when Niels was eighty-four years old. Reading them made me curious, and his memoirs, along with the other materials, inspired me to try to find answers to the following questions: Why was Argentina and not the United States the target of emigration in our family? How did the emigrants do? Do their Danish roots have any significance today?

A Small Prologue

Today, most members of the Ambrosius family are Argentinians. They are descendants of Niels Ambrosius, his younger brother Laust Jensen Ambrosius, six of their nephews, and a niece, who immigrated to Argentina at the end of around the turn of the twentieth century. As first-generation immigrants, they maintained close contact with the family in Denmark through letters, trips, and visits to and from Denmark. When my great-grandfather, Jens Jensen Ambrosius, age seventy-two, applied for a tourist visa to Argentina in 1935, he was required to state his intention, which was: “I intend to visit my two brothers and four of my sons living there.” My great-grandmother was paralyzed for the last years of her life, and my great-grandfather looked after her at home, so it was only after her death that he was able to make his first trip to Argentina. At that time, it was not easy to
get a visa. The application had to be sent to the consulate along with a clean criminal record and various medical certificates.

Jens Jensen Ambrosius’s medical certificate for travel to Argentina. Unless otherwise noted, all images are from the author’s private collection.

Jens travelled by ship to Argentina, leaving in the middle of the Danish winter. My father always said that travelling in the winter-time, along with the fact that Jens started importing and drinking Argentinian red wine, were the reasons he lived to be ninety-one. On the occasion of his ninetieth birthday, Jens Ambrosius stated in an interview that it was perhaps his dependence on chewing tobac-
co, smoking a daily cigar, and drinking maté that kept him going and alive.\textsuperscript{3}

From my great-grandfather’s passport, it appears that Jens made three journeys of six months’ duration each to Argentina in 1935/36, 1938/39 and in 1945/46. He had probably planned more but was prevented by the German occupation of Denmark from 1940-45. Jens Ambrosius was eighty-three when he made the last voyage from December 1945 to May 1946, where he attended his younger brother Niels Ambrosius’s eightieth birthday. Jens’s Danish family thought he had become too old to travel by himself, so it was decided that my father should accompany him, but that plan was foiled by the Danish military, which prolonged his military service by appointing him sergeant. Instead, my great-grandfather was accompanied by his niece, Niels Ambrosius’s daughter, who was married and lived in Denmark. However, my father later visited Argentina, when my parents travelled there in 1988 in connection with the celebration of the one-hundredth anniversary of Niels and Laust Ambrosius’s arrival in the country.

A great deal has been written about Danish immigrants to the USA in the period 1850-1920, but much less is known about the not insignificant exodus of Danes to other countries, including Argentina. Over the years some fifteen thousand Danes immigrated to Argentina, far from the three hundred thousand that immigrated to the USA but still quite a few. As mentioned above, apart from Niels and Laust Jensen Ambrosius, a further six of their nephews and a niece emigrated, among them four of my great-grandfather’s six sons. Only two of them stayed in Denmark: my grandfather Thorvald Ambrosius, who became a merchant in Balling on the island of Salling, and Ole Ambrosius, who became owner of a hardware store in Morke in Djursland. Some also went the other way, as was the case with Niels’s daughter Edeele
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(called Tita) Brüel, who met her Danish husband during one of the family’s visits to Denmark and moved to Hasseris near Aalborg in Jutland.

As a result, most of the members of the Ambrosius family today are Argentinians, but there is still some contact between the family in Denmark and the family in Argentina. The contact was, of course, significantly closer in the past, both within the family but also in general between Denmark and Danish Argentinians. The Danish immigrants lived near each other and cultivated close ties for many years, helping to maintain contact with Denmark. They held annual gatherings in Denmark, called “asado celebrations” (similar to the Rebild celebrations on the Fourth of July for Danish Americans), where people with ties to Argentina met and ate grilled lamb (asado).

My great-grandfather was one of the initiators of these gatherings, and he was later appointed honorary member of the Asado Society. These gatherings were held up into the 1960s, and my grandmother and grandfather attended regularly, especially when they had a visit from Argentina.

Danes seem to find their countrymen’s Argentinian connections fascinating. In 1996, the Danish newspaper Politiken ran a large article titled “A Jutlander in Argentina,” about the eighty-eight-year-old Hans Jensen and his wife Elda. In November 1929, Hans Jensen immigrated from Slagelse to Necochea, five hundred kilometers south of Buenos Aires. His wife, Elda—the “Jutlander in Argentina”—was born in
Argentina after her parents emigrated from the Viborg region, but even though she had spent her entire life in Argentina, she spoks better Danish (with a distinct Viborg accent) than Spanish. Her husband still thought of himself as Danish, despite having lived almost seventy years in Argentina: "I have never been an Argentine, because I feel Danish, and it has been almost being like in Denmark to live here, because everyone around us was Danish," he explains. People in Denmark often talk about ghettos and parallel societies when immigrants maintain their native languages, but the Danish descendants of my great-grandfather’s brothers and sons are fully integrated. Although most are proud of their Danish roots, only few understand let alone speak Danish, but it has taken several generations!

Article in *Skive Folkeblad*, July 9, 1946, about an *asado* festival for Danish Argentines.
Push and Pull Factors of Emigration

When it comes to migration, one can divide the factors that make people move into two main categories: push factors and pull factors. The push factors are the conditions that make people move (pushing them away from the home region); the pull factors are the conditions that determine where they move to (pulling them toward a new place). The push factors in Denmark at the end of the nineteenth century included the lack of land, poverty, and unemployment, as well as a predominantly young population. (The older you are, the less likely you are to leave the home area unless there is a war or natural disaster.) The pull factors centered on the desire for a better life elsewhere. Although most people initially headed for Danish cities, there was not enough work for everyone, so many people, especially young men, began looking farther away for this better life. At that time it was possible for most migrants to find such a place, unlike today when many young poor people, especially from Africa, dream of a better life in Europe, but these economic migrants are unwanted today.

In the nineteenth century, the USA was known as the land of freedom and opportunity to every child in Denmark. Christian Winther wrote a very popular book for children, called Flugten til Amerika (The Flight to America). The book is a poem about a boy named Peter, who gets angry at his mother and decides to flee to America with his slightly doubting little brother, whom Peter persuades by describing America as a fairytale country where raisins grow on trees and it rains lemonade. It was first published in 1835 as part of the collection Nogle Digte (Some poems). It was released with Alfred Schmidt’s famous illustrations in 1900 has been reprinted countless times, and it is still read to Danish children. In the late nineteenth century, it was relatively easy to get to the USA. On a steamship, the journey took about a week; beginning in 1880 Danish emigrants were able to travel with a Danish ship all the way from Copenhagen to New York, when the shipping company Thingvalla opened a direct route.

Moreover, the high level of emigration to the USA from all over Europe meant that there was a great deal of competition among companies, which meant lower fares. There was also competition among American states for immigrants; several recruiting agents waited in Nyhavn, Copenhagen, where people could walk up and
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buy a ticket as far as the railway went. The agents also praised the living conditions in the USA. For example, the shipping company Allen Lines’ agent in Copenhagen distributed small books about the Dakotas titled *The New Gold Country in the West* in connection with the opening of South Dakota for cultivation in 1879. The pull factors to the USA are evident, and in total, about three hundred thousand Danes immigrated to the USA in the period 1850-1920. Many did well and sent letters home, which in turn caused others to migrate. Of course, some never wrote back home, probably because the dream did not come true, but the bad stories drowned in the good ones. But why did some emigrants choose other destinations? Why, for example, did the brothers Ambrosius from the small town of Bystrup in Himmerland not go to the Midwest, but to Tandil and the Pampas in Argentina?

From Bystrup to Tandil

The brothers Niels and Laust Ambrosius were born in Bystrup at Gedsted, where the family had a small farm. Like most Danish families at this time, they had originally been tenants, but in connection with the major rural reforms at the end of the eighteenth century, they became landowners. Here we even know exactly when it happened, as it is documented in the *Rinds Herreds Skøde- og Pantebog, 1737-1800:* “Auctioned to Ambrosius Pedersen in Giørup one of the peasant farms located in Giørup, … formerly a part of Taarupgaard. Ørregaard, the 20th of October 1789.” The Ambrosius Pedersen in question was the brothers’ grandfather, and in the same unpublished material there is a record of the deed from Rinds Herred, with a very detailed settlement upon the death of Ambrosius Pedersen in 1827. Ambrosius Pedersen left behind his widow, who was his second wife, nine children, a modestly equipped farm, two horses, two steers, four cows, three calves, twenty-three sheep and seven lambs, but no cash. The widow was entitled to live on the farm, paying rent to the children, while the adult sons of her husband’s first marriage were made guardians of the children. (Women were not permitted to be named guardians in 1827). There were many children, so the legacy was modest. Jens Ambrosius, Niels and Laust Jensen Ambrosius’ father, was the youngest son of his father’s first marriage; he inherited just 36 rigsdaler (although the farm and house were valued at approximately 635 rigsdaler).
Jens Ambrosius was born in 1800 but did not marry until 1852. According to his son Niels, he had originally been a wool collector, and although he had been wealthy in his youth, he had lost eight hundred rigsdaler, more than the value of his mother’s farm! The exact cause of this loss is not known, but he had to abandon the commercial life and became a peasant on a small farm after his marriage. His wife, Maren Kirstine Pedersdatter, was born in Bystrup in 1828, and together they had nine children, eight of whom reached adulthood. Niels and Laust were born in 1866 and 1868 as the third- and second-youngest of the flock; they were just twelve and ten years old when their father died in 1878, leaving his widow with three unconfirmed children. It was a very poor home they grew up in. Niels Jensen Ambrosius recorded his memories in 1951, describing his childhood as follows:

My parents’ property was 1 Td. 1 Sk. 1 3/4 Album. The deed was signed on May 30, 1851, and the property was paid for and signed by the seller and buyer and the witnesses. That document I have framed and hanging on the wall; it is the only writing we have from our father. Father had big chests of clothes, richly adorned with silver buckles and buttons, cloaks, trousers, and shoes. The German merchants got the silver buckles and buttons. The clothes never wore out but were altered for the boys.6

It is thus clear that their father had known better days and that their home was poor.

Niels goes on to describe how he and his brothers went out to work at the age of five or six:

I started at 6 years old, but only in spring, summer, and autumn—in the winters I was at home. When I was 9, I went to Taalstrup and rarely saw my home or any of the family. I went to school twice a week but was otherwise on the heath with my sheep. When I was 11 years of age, my father died, and I was given my first suit for his funeral.

Life in the countryside was hard in the nineteenth century. Niels had to work hard, whether at home or in service: “When I was 14 years old, the widow I was working for died. The property was sold. I was set free, and my brother Jens wanted to leave home, since he couldn’t
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earn a living there. Jens had taken an older brother’s place in our home—now I replaced Jens.”

In May 1881, Jens began to work at a farm, which is documented in his employment record book (Skudsmålsbog), which has been preserved.

Jens Ambrosius Jensen’s employment record book.
In his memoirs, Niels describes how hard the work was on the family’s small farm and how modest the rewards. They could no longer afford horses or steers to do the field work, only calves, but “they were switched out every year to get money for the taxes.” Niels’s older siblings had left home as soon as they could, so there was now only Niels, his mother, and a little sister left, as well as Laust, who was in service. Once Niels left, there was only Laust to take over the farm, but at this point he was just thirteen years old. In the end, their mother, who was in her early fifties, sold the property and moved into a house in Ulbjerg, where her oldest son, Ambrosius Jensen Ambrosius, was a merchant.

As far as I know, no pictures of the property in Bystrup or of the family from this period exist. In 1902, an “ancestor gallery” was created: a large picture with portraits of the whole family, both the Argentinian and the Danish sides. In the middle was a portrait of the brothers’ mother, Maren Kirstine. She died in September 1901, but had evidently been photographed earlier, probably around 1890, so she must have looked something like this when she left the small estate and moved into Ulbjerg.

Niels was pleased when his mother sold the farm, recalling, “Then I was free again.” He still had to work hard for his food, first at a grocery store in Viborg and later at his brother’s in Ulbjerg. He also worked on the moors but could not make a living at that. In fact, he was relieved when he came to the military recruitment and was accepted into the army in 1886: “Those were the best days I had lived.” The diet must have been somewhat better than he was used to, for he grew four inches (ten centimeters) during that year, according to his own records. When he finished his
military service, he was almost twenty-one years old, and he and his younger brother Laust wanted to leave Denmark:

My brother Laust and I had inquired about the opportunities in North America, but we were warned and advised to try Argentina, where the city of Tandil had 16,000 Danish inhabitants, though 300 is closer to what there actually was. I sought travel authorization and a recommendation from the 29th Company. Captain Scherling, I think it was, scolded me very much for the fact that I wanted to go abroad—“You don’t know anything about Argentina—it’s quite unhealthy there.” The Captain was a good man and wanted the best for me.

Niels and Laust were advised to go to Argentina, which they chose because they had been “warned” against North America. I have no records or letters from Laust or others in the family about this, only Niels’s memories, and he doesn’t elaborate on the comment. It is unclear who had warned them against America and exactly against what, and why they had recommended Argentina. It appears from Niels’s memoirs that the number of Danes they had been told lived in the country and in Tandil in particular was greatly exaggerated, but aside from that, he only wrote that Laust had been in contact with the Argentine consul in Kolding, where they got passports, a recommendation in Spanish, and advice about the journey from the consul’s wife.

It is commonly known that there was competition for young Danish emigrants. As mentioned, the brochures distributed by agencies in Copenhagen representing the large companies that sailed to the USA painted a rosy picture of the possibilities. Jens had been in Copenhagen in the autumn of 1883, according to his employment book, but nothing suggests that Niels or Laust had ever set foot in Copenhagen, so they must have heard about the USA and Argentina from other channels. Some people traveled around Denmark advertising for emigration; the Mormons are a known early example of this. The Mormons sent missionaries to Europe from the 1830s onward; after 1850, they made a special effort in Denmark, on the recommendation of two Danish brothers who had befriended the Mormon leader Brigham Young; one of them, Peter Olsen Hansen, translated the *The Book of Mormon* into
Danish in 1851. The Mormon missionaries built up a dense contact network throughout Denmark, where they baptized converts and arranged mass transports to Utah. They were so effective that over twelve thousand Danes immigrated to Utah between 1850 and 1900, an exceptionally large percentage of the population compared to those from other European countries.

Precisely what caused the brothers to choose Argentina cannot be reconstructed, but since Laust took the initiative to choose Argentina, he presumably knew or had heard of someone who had travelled there. What he heard must have been so positive that he contacted the consulate in Kolding, who then helped with the practicalities. It is clear from Niels’s memoirs that recruitment lectures on Argentina by earlier emigrants were given around Denmark in the 1890s. Niels reports, “One day when we were plowing, we got a visit from Sofus Knudsen, my former boss, and Pastor Dahl from Tandil. On this visit many topics were raised that became part of Pastor Dahl’s later lectures in various parts of Denmark.”

In any case, Argentina became their target, and they were determined. They wanted to go, even though they had no money. They paid for their tickets with a loan of 400 kroner, which they got from their reluctant mother. Their journey was by ship from Hamburg, and it took a good five weeks to get there. They arrived in Tandil on December 11, 1888. Niels wrote in his memoirs that he could not remember what the boat was called, only that they sailed from Hamburg to Buenos Aires, and that the trip took twenty-eight days. I have searched in both the Danish and the German databases of emigrants, but without results, so I have not been able to identify which boat they actually journeyed on. The German database has only registered emigrants traveling by boats with more than twenty-five passengers, but it was common for cargo ships to take passengers to some extent. If Niels and Laust traveled on one of these, it may explain why I cannot find them in the register. Later, Niels travelled repeatedly from Argentina visiting Denmark, e.g., with the steamship *Magdalena*.

It’s not surprising, however, that other family members who followed them also chose Argentina; this was a common pattern. One of their Danish friends in Argentina recalled, “In the year 1884 I made my first trip home to Denmark because I had promised my mother
in five years to come back and tell her how it went out here. Now the journey went a second time (to Argentina), but this time I was not alone. After a year, my brother Kristian traveled to join me and the year after my sister, Anna, whereas my youngest sister Martine did not think about leaving Mother, but then she was also going to inherit everything from Mother." Niels and Laust inspired many others to emigrate. An article titled “Fifty Years Ago—1900” in the Viborg Folkeblad on December 13, 1950, which my great-grandfather cut out and saved, explains: “A relatively large exodus has taken place here from the region to Argentina. Eight young men from Troestrup, Skals and surrounding towns have been accommodated by two families in Argentina, one as a blacksmith and seven as farmers.” I wonder if the two families in Argentina were Niels’s and Laust’s since my great-grandfather cut out the article?

Discovering Argentina

Argentina was not the country flowing with milk and honey Niels and Laust had imagined, nor were there anywhere near the sixteen thousand Danes in the country they had been told about back in Denmark, but they arrived in the summer and were immediately hired by a Danish farmer to help with the harvest. But what was the country like? Geographically it was very different from Himmerland. They left in November in the dark Danish autumn and arrived in Tandil in December, where it was high summer. Tandil is five hundred kilometers south of Buenos Aires, so the average temperature is a little lower, but generally it has hot summers and mild winters, with a risk of frost and heavy rainfalls, especially in the summer. The landscape is dominated by large pastures, the pampas, where there were traditionally cattle in large flocks as on the American prairie. The earth was suitable for cultivating maize and wheat, and the area was sparsely populated. It is largely flat, apart from Tandil Mountains, which reach up to 450 meters high. The city has a large recreation area today, with a statue of the first Danish immigrant to the area: Hans Fugl from Lolland.

Argentina was part of the Spanish colonies in America. The Spanish had more difficulty in gaining a foothold on the east coast than on the west coast of South America, but in the second half of the sixteenth century they managed it; in 1580, Buenos Aires was founded. The area
was colonized, but it was far away from the viceroy of Lima, so in 1776 the Spanish created the viceroy of La Plata, which included present-day Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay and Bolivia. The area continued to deviate from the colonies west of the Andes, however, as La Plata became a refuge for liberals fleeing Spain, and there was extensive trade with other countries. The central and southern parts of the area remained largely untouched by colonization.

During the eighteenth century there had been increased pressure and unrest in all the American colonies, as the ideas of the French and American revolutions spread. Unlike the colonists in North America, South American colonists recognized the indigenous population as human beings; even though they were not treated equally, a certain degree of population mixing had occurred, so the population fighting for liberation from Spain was more unified. The liberation struggle was more individualistic than in the USA, where national sentiment and the struggle for independence were built on the foundation of democratic institutions and ideas, as expressed in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, while in South America it was based more on the actions of individuals.

In 1811, the Argentine hero José de San Martin, who had originally made a career in the Spanish army, returned to Argentina and built an army that fought against the Spanish in the south while the troops of Simón Bolivár fought in the north. The new state of Argentina was one of the first when it abolished slavery in 1813. The following years were characterized by constitutional strife and power struggles, however, and for some years the country was divided into two states: Argentina and Buenos Aires; a constitution wasn’t adopted until 1853. In 1859, Buenos Aires was forced to join the federal state of Argentina, and the city became the capital of the republic in 1860. After the adoption of the constitution and foundation of the republic, serious immigration into the country began. In 1800, around 400,000 people lived in the area, rising to 8 million by 1914. From 1857 to 1938, approximately 3.5 million people immigrated from Europe, of which eighty percent came from Spain, France and Italy; sixteen percent from Eastern Europe and the Balkans, and four percent from other areas, including Scandinavia. In the 1880s, emigration from Denmark to Argentina rose. According
to the country’s statistics, some 1,500 Danes arrived in the country in the decade 1882-91, including Niels and Laust Ambrosius.

Hans Fugl and the First Danish Immigrants in Argentina

Scandinavian immigration to Argentina was modest compared to immigration from southern Europe, which can be explained primarily by a historical, linguistic, and cultural community with Latin America. This relationship did not exist for other immigrants, and competition with the USA as an immigrant country was, as already described, overwhelming. Still, the fact that some Danes chose to go to South America was largely because of Hans Fugl.

Hans Fugl was in many ways the typical emigrant from nineteenth-century Denmark: an adventurous, poor, and single young man. He was born on January 24, 1811 in Horslunde on Lolland, one of the poorest regions in Denmark, where his father was a cobbler and had a small farm. The family’s many children, including Hans, went into service early in life. He was fortunate enough to get work as a coachman and servant of the Bishop of Maribo, the father of the poet Poul Martin Møller. The Bishop discovered that Hans was intelligent and arranged for his education; in 1837 Hans earned his teaching license. Hans Fugl held a couple of positions as a tutor for upper-class families and later as a teacher at the public school in Stege, but the farmer’s son didn’t think he fit in or that he was socially accepted by the bourgeoisie. His diaries show that he often thought of emigrating.

As with Niels and Laust it was somewhat by chance that Hans went to Argentina. In the early emigration period, most northern Europeans immigrated to the USA, but Hans Fugl had apparently read some articles in *Berlingske Tidende* highlighting the opportunities for agriculture in the area south of Buenos Aires. Convinced the opportunities were better in South America, he decided to immigrate to Argentina, together with a local physician. The small emigration group consisted of Hans Fugl, the doctor with his wife and two children, and another young man. They arrived in Buenos Aires on November 11, 1844, after an eleven-week journey. They were not the first Danes in Argentina, but Hans Fugl became the most famous. There had been a minor Danish presence in Buenos Aires for several years, and the emigrants met a Danish doctor who helped them.
At first, Hans Fugl worked primarily in the dairy industry in the area around the capital, but without great success, so in 1848 he headed south to Tandil, a small fortress where he could get free land. After a few years he had acquired a large farm and a mill, and it was a wealthy man who returned to visit Stege and his home island of Lolland in 1858. Hans Fugl remained in Denmark for over a year, and when he started the trip back to Tandil in September 1859, he had married the somewhat younger Anna Dorthea; in addition, he was accompanied by nineteen other emigrants from the local area. Mrs. Fugl contracted smallpox on the first part of the journey, so the couple stayed behind in Plymouth and did not arrive in Tandil until November 1859, long after the others from their company had arrived.

In the following years, more Danes came to the area, especially from Møn and Lolland-Falster. Fifteen years after Fugl had returned to Tandil, the number of Danish immigrants had risen to around two hundred. The main obstacle to development was the lack of transportation due to the very bad roads. Passenger transport was done on horseback, while cargo was transported by cart. From the 1860s, a
stagecoach route was established between Tandil and Buenos Aires. Hans Fugl saw the possibility of increasing local cereal production by increasing flour production, since flour was easier to transport than unprocessed grain, so he built a water mill on his own land. He became the local leader of the Danish colony due to his education, language skills, and competence. He also served on the local city council and as a kind of lay priest, taking care of emergency baptisms, burials, and civil marriages.

The Danish immigrants were Protestants, but there was no Protestant priest in the area. The nearest Protestant congregation was in Buenos Aires. Hans Fugl became the co-founder and leader of La Sociedad Religiosa de Protestanto en el Tandil (The Protestant Society of Tandil), established in 1870. After 1867 German and English Protestant priests came to the area, where they held worship services, baptized infants, and performed church marriage. From 1870 on, a section of the city cemetery was reserved for Protestants. In 1877, the first Danish church in Argentina was established in Tandil.

Hans Fugl and his wife had great social and economic success, but they experienced major personal sorrows. Out of their eight children, six died. In 1875, Hans Fugl sold his properties and returned to Denmark, where he lived in Frederiksberg until his death in January 1900. However, his son Juan and daughter Valgerda returned to Argentina. A statue has been erected in memory of him in Tandil, where he is known by his Spanish first name, Juan.

He was remembered in an obituary published on March 8, 1900 in the local Danish-language newspaper Tandil Tidende, whose editor wrote: “Fugl helped to sustain and bring together the Danish community here. It is due to him that social activities among the Danes were maintained from the beginning. At the same time as Fugl worked for the well-being of others, he also worked to significantly improve this city in different ways.”

### Arrival in Argentina

Although the number of Danes was considerably lower than Niels and Laust had been told to expect, they had an easier time acclimatizing to the country than Hans Fugl and his companions had. They arrived at a colony that already had several Danish institutions
and Danish traditions. Danish immigrants were surrounded by other Danes, who helped each other. As mentioned above, the brothers immediately found work with a fellow Dane, although his generosity did not extend to their salaries. They quickly found out that they were being underpaid and left the following year. Niels recalled:

Peter Larsen was actually very nice, but his foolish son, who was the manager, caused us to leave because of salary concerns the next year, on December 31, 1889. Most of the amount owed us was held back, possibly because of a lack of money, for a year or more, until we demanded our money because of illness. We got the money, but it was a former employee who advanced it to us.\(^{10}\)

The following year, the two brothers, both together and separately, worked at several different places, not only for Danes. Niels mentioned in particular a couple of Basque immigrants who had rented land but had no agricultural experience and hired Niels and Laust to plow: “We were well treated by the Basques and also learned some Spanish.”\(^{11}\) Danish immigrants like Niels and Laust typically worked for a few years as peons in primarily Danish “chacareros” or “estancieros” (tenants/owners of a small agricultural property, known as a chacра, or owners of a larger property, called an estancia).\(^{12}\) The salary was modest, a few pesos (about three crowns) as well as food and lodging, but it was significantly higher than a farm worker earned in Denmark at this time.

It was not easy to be an immigrant. They were used to working hard in the old country, but they still had to work hard in the new one, no matter where they came from and no matter where they arrived. Ole Ђоннічсен writes of Danish immigrants in the USA: “Most Danes did neither particularly well nor particularly badly. Often their first destination was not the final one, because it took a few tries before the Danes found their place and their role in America.”\(^{13}\) It was no different in Argentina, and it is clear from Niels Ambrosius’s memoirs that the first years were hard. He wrote his memoirs when he was eighty-four and could look back on a successful life. This has of course colored his writing, and he may have exaggerated the tribulations he experienced at the beginning, but he was writing for himself, and his account agrees with other sources. Success did not come by itself, and
some people simply gave up and traveled home or disappeared, so the family never heard from them again.

It appears from the memoirs that Niels was about ready to give up and go home, but his younger brother Laust was more persistent and convinced him to stay, just as Laust had been the driving force in their choice of Argentina. Niels writes that, after the first months working for Peter Larsen at Tandil, the brothers went their separate ways, and Niels got into trouble but got help from his brother:

After harvesting I was set to build a barn, made of grass blended with a mixture of soil and hung over a steel wire. … Two of us did the work, as agreed…. When I finished the building, I rode south, where Laust was working. I borrowed a horse from a Danish farmer, visited Laust, and rode back again. The following day, he got a message that I was seriously ill. We came by train to Tres Arroyes, found a hotel, and a doctor was called—it was typhus - high fever. I have never doubted that it was due to Laust that I survived this illness, which lasted 26 days. I had a trouble paying for it; it cost an average of $14.00 a day for the hotel, the doctor, and the medicine. We had credit [at Peter Larsen’s]… but only got it paid out after I had recovered. Laust went back to his place, where he too spent a little time ill… but Laust had joined a Spanish insurance group, so he overcame it, … and we started all over again.14

Despite everything, they soldiered on, despite sickness and lack of funds (Niels at least did not even have enough to pay for a ticket home, since his whole salary from the first harvest went to pay the bill for his illness). In the following years they worked both together and separately, and after the 1892/93 harvest they were so prosperous that they could work for themselves for the first time:

After the harvest we rented 100 hectares of land, which the Basques weren’t using—it was too much work. Laust was still working on the harvest, so I started building a house and digging a well…. The walls were made of sod, the roof of straw, … kitchen and bedroom, two small windows (4 panes), and in the kitchen one window as well as entrance
door, and finally an open chimney, which also has its history, since whatever could catch on fire did.15

They had rented the land, so when their contract was up a few years later, they had to move, this time to Necochea, where Niels built a new sod house. It was here, in 1896, that he married Ane Kirstine Jensen, the sister of one of his friends, Søren Nielsen, who had gone back to Denmark in 1895 and brought his sister back with him to Argentina. (The Danes really stuck together!)

Niels and Laust Ambrosius, around 1900.

By the 1890s, the brothers were really making progress. Niels describes how he and Ane moved back to the Tres Arroyos region in 1897 to take care of Laust’s chacra while he was in Europe. That indicates that Laust was now so well-established he could afford to travel home. Niels and Ane had their first child, and, in 1898, they moved again. In Niels’s own words: “Once again, I built a primitive new house where the water seeped from the wall when the family moved in. . . . These sod houses, which aren’t around anymore—with friendship and companionship—we were young, without any wealth—we were all waiting for opportunities.”16 Laust had returned to Argentina and married “a girl from Lolland, Kragenæs” (Rasmine Jensen). The
wedding and constant moving around made Niels reflect: “For the women, life was rather dreary. It is an unfortunate system to change your residence all the time, to build and to dig wells and erect fences.” Finally, in 1899, the constant relocation ended for Niels and Ane as well, when they became landowners and built a real farmhouse: “About 1900, I finished building the property at Irene—a farmhouse with a roof, windows and doors done by professionals. A house for the servants, a forge, and more.”

The Second Wave

The brothers had a rough start in Argentina, but by the turn of the century both had started families and were well-established, which meant that they could afford to visit the family in the “Old Country.” As mentioned earlier, according to Niels’s memoirs, Laust already visited Europe in 1897. Niels later wrote:

(We) moved to Irene. The property we left behind I turned over to my brother-in-law, Rasmus Nielsen—there was two years left on the contract. In May 1901, we traveled to Denmark, my wife and I and the two children. The journey was cheap and we needed a rest. My mother did not know any of my family, and it was my wife who came to care for my mother, who died a few months after our arrival.

In Denmark for the first time since his emigration, Niels’s wife and children met the Danish side of the family while living with and caring for his mother for a long time. Surely the brothers had now paid back the 400 kroner they had borrowed for the tickets in 1888? The “Register of Danish Emigrants to Argentina” shows that Laust was also in Denmark in the early 1900s; he is recorded as arriving in Argentina from Denmark with his wife and child on August 31, 1908. On the whole, the name Ambrosius appears quite frequently in the register. The brothers had set a new wave of emigration in motion. Although it is unclear why Niels and Laust happened to choose Argentina when they first emigrated, there is no doubt about the motive of their successors: their uncles’ success was the inspiration.

Denmark was a small, insignificant country around 1900. Of its overseas colonies, only the West Indian and North Atlantic islands
were left, while one-third of Jutland had been lost to Germany in the war in 1864. The country was a distinctly agricultural country where industrialization and urbanization had started late: around the turn of the century some sixty-two percent of the population lived in the countryside, while twenty percent lived in the provincial towns and the rest, barely five hundred thousand, in Copenhagen. The population was increasing due to the sharply decreasing mortality, especially among children. This was due to better housing conditions, better hygiene and, not least, better nutrition. Although wages and working conditions were still poor, especially for small farmers and farm workers in the countryside, it was now rare for anyone to live constantly on or below the poverty line. The country had economic prosperity, but the wealth was not evenly distributed. There were deep social divisions between landlords, farmers, smallholders, and farm workers. Approximately two thousand estates controlled fifteen percent of the land, while about seventy thousand farms managed about seventy-five percent of the land, while the roughly two hundred thousand smallholders only worked ten percent of the land, to say nothing of the large number of landless day laborers. In the cities, industries developed, but could not yet provide jobs to all those who wished to leave agriculture. Even when a worker was recruited, it was on precarious terms, although conditions had improved after the adoption of the September settlement (the basis of the “Danish Model”) in 1899. There was no social security in case of unemployment and disease, and many people still emigrated, especially young men from the countryside.

Several young men from the Ambrosius family emigrated, but not everyone in the second wave stayed in Argentina; at least one nephew returned to Denmark, for example, Thorvald Ambrosius, son of Niels and Laust’s oldest brother, Ambrosius Jensen (A.J.) Ambrosius, who had a grocery store in Skals. According to the “Register of Danish emigrants to Argentina,” Thorvald Ambrosius moved to Buenos Aires in August 1905, at the age of sixteen. He is referred to as a “farmer” in the register. But according to Nelly Ambrosius’s “Familia Ambrosius. Dinamarca y Argentina” from 1985, he belongs to the Danish branch of the family. In October 1905, Thorvald’s cousin, the eighteen-year-old Kristian Ambrosius, a son of my great-grandfather Jens Jensen Ambrosius, traveled to Argentina; two years later, his younger brother,
Jens, followed. Kristian and Jens remained in Argentina; they were later joined by two of their younger brothers, Aage and Otto Ambrosius, who also emigrated permanently to Argentina. Otto, the youngest brother, emigrated in 1920, at age twenty-one, after working for a few years as a bicycle salesman in his hometown of Møldrup. In Argentina, all of the brothers became farmers. According to Nelly Ambrosius, a niece and two other nephews also immigrated: Karen Christiansen (born 1881), Jens Ambrosius Christiansen (born 1883), and Jørgen Ambrosius Christiansen (born 1888). All three were children of Niels’s and Laust’s eldest sister Ane and her husband Mads Christiansen. I haven’t been able to find them in the emigrant registers, but if they traveled on a freighter from Hamburg, they wouldn’t be listed in either the German or Danish registers. I have not found a description from the family of the long journey to Argentina at the beginning of the twentieth century, but this description from Mads Fuglsang probably resembles their experience:

Norddeutscher Lloyds, or Lloyd North Alemania, as it was called on their offices and warehouse buildings in all the South American ports we visited, a 16,000-ton passenger ship plowed its way through the Atlantic waves day in and day out, in all manner of weather. ... Concerts, balls, and celebrations were organized, as well as bingo games and various other entertainments, not least of course the “line baptism,” a solemn moment that occurred when the bow broke “the string” [the Equator]. The telegraph machine was put on “Slow Ahead,” ... one of the large lifeboats was lowered, and a storm ladder thrown over the side. All the passengers were assembled on the deck, as King Neptune himself with his queen and his entire escort of barber, judge and executioners ... climbed over the rails to pass judgment on the presumptuous ones who had dared to cross his “line.”

I don’t know whether Niels and Jens’ nephews and niece were also baptized by King Neptune as they passed the equator, but since Mads Fuglsang went to Argentina to work and seek happiness in the same period as them, they would have been traveling under similar conditions.
Although Denmark was neutral during World War I, the war still affected the living conditions of large sections of the population due to trade problems and lack of imports. At the same time, the war made it possible to find niches, where large sums of money could be quickly earned. “Goulash barons,” these newly rich were called, because some earned their money by selling canned meat of dubious quality to the German army. It was, however, on the stock exchange that the really big money was earned (and lost) during the war, where the number of small speculators increased explosively. The Ambrosius family also had a “goulash baron.” In 1914, Jens Ambrosius had sold his small farm at Vammen and moved to Møldrup, where he ran a small farm in the town’s old dairy. Jens Ambrosius had apparently inherited a certain talent for business from his father, for during the war he made a business of acquiring and selling revling (a wild plant from the heath). Due to the war, it wasn’t possible to import the usual materials for making brooms, but revling from the heath could be used as a substitute. A local man in Møldrup drew cartoons of the locals collecting revling; since Jens Ambrosius controlled the trade, his property was nicknamed the “Stock Exchange.” His success was brief, and after the war things returned to normal, which meant a relatively poor country with few opportunities for social mobility. Jens Ambrosius combined his farm with a small car business, and his youngest son, Otto, started out as a bicycle dealer, but it didn’t work out for him, as noted above.

Argentina was never as popular an immigration destination as the United States for young Danish emigrants, but a sizeable group of Danes still settled in that country. According to Lars Bækhøj, the Danish Consulate in Buenos Aires counted the number of Danes in Argentina on two occasions. In 1902, they counted 2,034, of whom 253 were living in Buenos Aires, 462 around Tandil, 681 around Tres Arroyos, and 132 around Necochea, with the rest scattered throughout the country. In 1923, they counted again, this time including both Danish immigrants and their descendants. Questionnaires were only sent out to the regions where Danes were thought to be living, so they could hardly have reached everyone. By comparing the responses to the country’s own immigration statistics, the consulate figured there were around ten thousand Danes and their descendants in the country, of whom approximately four thousand lived in the province of Buenos
Aires and six thousand in the triangle around Tandil, Tres Arroyos, and Necochea. Of the first-generation immigrants, more than half were younger men, two-thirds of whom were unmarried. Women and children each accounted for approximately one-fourth, but only one-third of the women were single. The women who immigrated were thus
typically part of a family, and we know that many of those who were single had immigrated to marry a Danish man who had immigrated previously. It was a kind of family reunification.

The census of 1923 also indicated occupations and the size of the farms the Danes owned. Bækhøj explains that although Danish immigrants and their descendants only accounted for approximately 1.3 percent of the population in Argentina, they cultivated about 7 percent of the land.22 This is not so strange, however, as Danish emigrants in the peak period of emigration (1880–1914) wanted, as a general rule, to become farmers. This was also the case in the USA, whereas immigrants from other countries such as Italy often gravitated toward cities to become industrial workers. What seriously distinguished the Danish immigrants to Argentina from the Danes, who immigrated to North America, was the way they maintained their connection with Denmark.

The newest immigrants from the Ambrosius family went to the areas around Tres Arroyos and Necochea, where their uncles were already established. They had come to work as farmers, and although it was now harder to acquire land than when their uncles arrived, they managed to become self-employed farmers, focusing primarily on extensive wheat cultivation and cattle. The uncles’ success was clearly an inspirational example. In 1912, Laust Ambrosius bought a property of twelve hundred hectares and built a large farmhouse—“La Constancia”—he moved into with wife and their now seven children. Despite problems with product exports during World War I, Niels built seven (!) farms on his own land in the period 1916–21. All the farms were enclosed by newly planted trees, both fruit trees and ornamental trees. The enclosures alone amounted to nine hectares. Niels writes with pride that between three and four million bricks were used for these farms. One of the farms was “La Jutlandia,” where the family moved in place of the old sod house.23 Designed by his wife, it was something of a palace and was frequently mentioned in descriptions of Niels Ambrosius, such as an article in a Danish newspaper on the occasion of his eightieth birthday in 1946, which declares “From day laborer to pesos-millionaire.”
Parallel Societies

Hans Fugl came as a pioneer to an area where none of his countrymen lived, but those who followed him had an easier time of it. Other Danes could help them, especially given the language barrier. Spanish is a difficult language for Danes, which was a major reason the Danish immigrants banded together. As early as 1870, they worked to establish a Danish school and a Danish church in Tandil. In 1875, Hans Fugl contracted with a Danish theological candidate, Oscar Meulengracht,
to work as a priest and schoolteacher. His ordination and paperwork took a long time, so the priest and his family didn’t arrive in Tandil until 1876, after Hans Fugl had returned to Denmark. The school and church were initially held in the priest’s home, but by the following year, the congregation of more than one hundred adults had built a church that was inaugurated on April 28, 1877.24

Ongoing immigration from Denmark into Necochea and Tres Arroyos region supported the creation of an increasing number of Danish institutions in the area instead of integration with local communities. Beginning in the 1890s, the Danish priest in Tandil traveled regularly to other Danish settlements and held worship services there once a month. In 1900, two Danish priests were hired, one of whom was assigned permanently to Tres Arroyos, lodging initially with Niels Ambrosius’s family, who lived in Oriente at the time. In 1918, a Danish church was inaugurated in Necochea.25 Danish-language schools expanded in tandem with the churches. The private school in Tandil offered student lodgings, but since parents had to pay the fees themselves, many students only stayed there for a year or two. In 1916, a Danish language school for young people was established, which was expanded into a primary school in 1919. In 1926, a school was built in Lumb, which lies between Tandil, Necochea, and Tres Arroyos, and by 1930 there was one in Necochea as well. In addition, many children (including those in the Ambrosius families) were taught Danish at home.26

As early as 1869, the Danes in Tandil organized annual gatherings, with shooting parties, dining, and dancing. Beginning in 1900, the Danish immigrants in Tres Arroyos and Necochea also held summer meetings in November and December. In the first year, the meeting was held outdoors, later on Niels Ambrosius’s estate or on estancia owner Peter Haugaard’s land. Attendees heard lecturers, sang Danish songs, dined, and talked, but also undertook initiatives to enhance the Danish community. For example, it was decided in 1906 to build a Danish hospital in Buenos Aires, for which a collection was started to fund it. The community never collected enough money, however, and so the hospital project was abandoned, but in the same year they decided to start a consumer co-op (brugsforening).
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The early twentieth century was a very active period for the Danish immigrants in Argentina. In addition to the languages schools, churches and co-op, they founded a folk high school (højskole) in Cascallares in 1917. In 1909, a health insurance fund and a reading association were founded. The reading association also served as a lending library; when the Danish priest went around to visit the families, he brought books to exchange. In addition to these institutions, the community developed other, more informal ways of maintaining Danish language and culture. In 1889, the first Danish...
weekly *Tandil Tidende* was founded; the paper’s first editor opened a bookshop with Danish books in 1896. Other publications to promote Danish and Nordic culture included *Dansk Skoleforening in Argentina* (Society for Danish schools in Argentina) and the magazine *Norden* (The North), published in Bahía Blanca. Many of the institutions functioned as social associations. People may have gone to church for religious reasons, but also for social ones. They lived on far-flung farms, but they met in the church. The same was true of the summer meetings, the high school association, and the reading association. These activities obviously had a cultural and informative purpose and content, but they were also social glue, along with such entertainments as amateur theater, gymnastics, dining, and dancing. Danish newspapers were still being published in Argentina in 1949, although some of the ads now were in Spanish, as these excerpts from *Syd og Nord* illustrate.

**Contact with Denmark**

Large-scale emigration from Denmark stopped with the outbreak of World War I, and never really started again, either to Argentina or other destinations. Otto Ambrosius was the last family member to emigrate, in 1920. The postwar period was characterized by continued integration in Argentina, but the immigrants maintained stable contact with their family in Denmark through letters and visits, while some re-immigrated to Denmark. My great-grandfather visited his sons and brothers four times. His brother Niels tried in the 1930s to get Jens to settle down permanently in Argentina, and even offered him a house, but Jens refused. In an interview on the occasion of his ninetieth birthday, Jens mentioned his relatives in Argentina of whom he was very fond. After World War II, he met up with two others from the region, who also had spent time in Argentina, and they made the so-called “asados,” which have been held privately around Viborg from the late 1930s, into an annual event for everyone with a connection to Argentina. At the *asados* they grilled meat in Argentine tradition, drank red wine, coffee and maté. It seemed very exotic to local journalists. It was a long time before barbequing became a passion in Denmark; they were not familiar with maté, and red wine
was not part of the daily diet in Denmark, especially not when some of the men drank directly from a “vutta pararino” (horse-skin bag).

Jens Ambrosius naturally had a close relationship to Argentina, reinforced by his travels to the country, but his brothers also maintained contact and traveled to Denmark in their old age. In 1930, when both Niels and Laust were in Denmark, they met up with their five living siblings. Niels had become a widower in 1927, and it is evident from his memoirs that this affected his mood and energy. He withdrew increasingly from work on his farms:

My decision to gradually withdraw from active business is due to some extent to the increased use of machines that I do not manage as well as the self-binders, threshers, and horses that I was so familiar with. It is enough—I’m pulling back as much as possible. In the coldest months of the year, Nelly [his unmarried daughter] and I seek out milder regions, though winter is not very cold here. We visited other republics and the northern provinces of Argentina, one year in one direction, another in another.”

The visit in 1930 proved to be Niels’s last visit to Denmark. He did not return for his daughter Tita’s wedding in 1932, when she was married in Gentofte church. The priest had worked in Buenos Aires, and he had spoken at Niels’ wife’s funeral, so he knew the family.31

The Ambrosius siblings. From left: Laust, P. J. (Peder (J)), Ane Marie, Jens, A. J. (Ambrosius (J)), and Niels.
Together with her new husband, Tita moved to Hasseris, near Aalborg. It seemed so exotic to have an Argentinian Dane in the area that the newspaper *Aalborg Amtstidende* featured an extensive interview with her in the 1930s. After she discussed the differences between Argentinian and Danish agriculture, she was asked about the conditions for Argentinian women in society. She explained, “We count ourselves as Danish and live by European custom, but it is not yet common in Argentina for young women go out together on their own. Instead, they are usually escorted by a father or an aunt. You also never see women as, for example doctors, dentists, or lawyers, etc. But the mindset has become more liberal and towards greater freedom.” On the question of whether she missed Argentina, she replied, “I miss the sun a lot. We can also have cold winters over there, but there is so much sunshine in the winter. We don’t have short days like this. On the other hand, though, we don’t have bright, Nordic summer nights.”

Niels withdrew completely from public life in 1947 and divided his properties among his children. Heirs abroad were heavily taxed, so to resolve the situation, Tita took a trip to Argentina, “per aeroplane both ways – to confirm her rights,” as Niels explained. As a result of this inheritance, Tita and her husband and children later chose to move permanently to Argentina, as Niels explained in letter to Jens on his eighty-seventh birthday in 1949:

> 2 years ago already I divided all I owned into eightths. None of them [the children] need anything, so I could hardly get rid of my wealth. Even my cows have been sold, but I still have a few horses. … The family from Aalborg lives in Irene. … Nelly and I visited La Jutlandia on Good Friday, but when we arrived, they had to send for Palle [the son-in-law], who was sitting on his tractor. He’s absolutely the only person who could think of working on a Good Friday.

The preserved letters to the family in Denmark provide good insight into the daily life of the emigrants. The letters are often accompanied by pictures. The children also wrote in Danish to Denmark, as here where my father’s cousin Edith wrote a little greeting to her small cousins in Balling on the back of a family photo, in 1930.

At some point, Tita sent a birthday greeting to her uncle Jens, along with a picture of his brothers and their families. The picture
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was probably taken in September 1948 at the celebration of Laust’s eightieth birthday and his and Rasmine’s golden anniversary, which Jens was unable to attend.

In general, the women were the most eager writers, in particular Jens’s daughter-in-law Christa Skou, who was married to his youngest son Otto. They were childless, so she might just have had more time. The preserved letters focus heavily on Christmases and birth-

A 1930 letter from Edith to her cousins on the back of a photo of herself with her mother and siblings.

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days. They describe the family’s anniversaries, sorrows, and joys, as in a birthday letter from September 1956 to my grandparents (Esther and Thorvald Ambrosius, Balling) from their niece Ely (my grandfather’s oldest brother Kristian’s daughter), in which she reports that her son Jørgen/Jorge had been confirmed and that her cousin Verner and his wife had lost their eldest son. This was before Facebook and other social media and it was expensive to phone, so most information about the families’ well-being was exchanged by post. Ely had been to Denmark and visited my grandparents there, so she also asked after the neighbors and their daughter Ditte, and mentioned me, saying, “Give my love to everyone; I wonder if Inge is still the littlest one in the family? (As it turns out, I was not, as my cousin Lisbeth had been born in July!)

The families maintained the Danish language, giving their children mostly Danish names—or names that could sound both Spanish and Danish, such as Jorge, who was called Jørgen in the letters. They also primarily married other Danish Argentinians, although some “strangers” did come into the family. In 1949, when the youngest daughter of Jens Ambrosius (the second oldest son of my great-grandfather) and his wife Ana were married, Ana wrote to her father-in-law: “Elsa is married and lives in Orense. There we have bought
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a lovely house for her. Her husband is Argentinian and works in an office.” Another of my grandfather’s nieces, Emmy (Laust’s youngest daughter), wrote to her uncle about the same wedding, reporting “Jens’s daughter, Elsa, was married; the wedding was very quiet. She’s found a very nice young man.” In the same letter Emmy mentioned she had hired a Danish governess for the children to teach them to read and write Danish.

Integration in Argentina

Over the years, the immigrants maintained their Danish language and culture to some extent, but the direct connection with Denmark became weaker. Niels and Laust changed their first names to the more Spanish sounding Nicolaus and Blas. The latter name was actually a mistake, as Laust preferred Lorenzo, but the name stuck. Since they were the owners of large estancias, they became known as Don Nicolaus and Don Blas. At the end of his memoirs, Niels confesses, “My connection to Denmark has faded since 1930, when I was last at home. By now, I have lived in Argentina for 45 years, so it is pret-
ty reasonable that I have not been particularly concerned with life in Denmark.” Although the connection faded, it did not disappear. Niels was honored with the Order of the Dannebrog for his work to maintain Danish culture, and all through his life he stuck to the Danish habits he had from his youth, but in an Argentine manner. The Danish newspaper *Danmarksposten* published an obituary after his death in 1956:

> Despite the very significant prosperity Niels Ambrosius achieved, he remained a regular Danish peasant son. In the evening he often sat down with the farmhands and sang the old, Danish songs. In his last years Niels Ambrosius lived a quiet life in Tres Arroyos. He always rose early and made his first cup of maté. Afterwards, he often sat down in his living room with the Danish songbook and sang “I alle de riger og lande” and other Danish songs for himself.

Similarly, the Danish language faded, but did not disappear. The Danish immigrants and their descendants continued to live mainly in the Triangle area, and although hardly any new immigrants from Denmark came after 1930, their connection to the Danish institutions persisted. In the mid-1960s a new Danish school and kindergarten opened in Necochea, but the Danish connection gradually became memories, (somewhat old-fashioned) traditions, and to a certain extent culture but not nationality.

The first generation had direct family relations in Denmark, and they married other Danish Argentinians or Danes from Denmark, but these direct relationships died out, and “others” came into the families. It is clear from Nelly Ambrosius’ family register that when someone married an “Argentine,” the children were given Spanish names, often ones which are common both in Argentina and in Denmark, e.g., Maria Anna or Martin. Many used two versions of their names, the Spanish version in Argentina and the Danish when they wrote to Denmark (or were together with other Danish Argentinians). The use of the Danish language of course faded out as more and more spoke Spanish at home, but in Argentina it did not mean that the association with Denmark disappeared. It has been a source of amazement among Danish journalists and many articles have been written about “Danes in Argentina,” as a headline in the Danish newspaper *Weekendavisen* declared in 1995. Such articles commonly exhibit a sense of wonder.
and admiration for these Argentinians who invite Danes on lecture tours, know Denmark’s history, admire the royal family, dance Danish traditional dances, and sing along with the Danish national anthem “Der er et yndigt land.”

But with time has come integration. The descendants of Danish immigrants to Argentina still cherish Danish institutions, but their language is Spanish. In 1995 the Danish newspaper *Politiken* noted:

Although the oldest immigrants and their children mostly speak Danish, their grandchildren and great-grandchildren are increasingly integrated into the Argentine society and they no longer teach only in Danish in the Danish schools. It has been the same in the Swedish, German, Finnish and Italian immigrant communities, and together the descendants of immigrants may find a common identity in the young country to which their ancestors came as pioneers.36

The One Hundredth Anniversary

In December 1988, large parts of the Ambrosius family gathered to celebrate the one hundredth anniversary of Niels and Laust Ambrosius’s arrival in Tandil. For many years, my father had had a dream of visiting the country and seeing his many cousins, some of whom he had met on visits in Denmark. He had not been able to accompany his grandfather in 1945-46, so he was determined to go this time. On November 28, 1988, he traveled to Argentina with my mother and his cousin Karen Margrethe Dalsgaard (the granddaughter of Niels and Laust’s younger sister Ane Marie). She was an experienced Argentina traveler, as it was her fifth visit to the country. The trip was long for my parents. They had never previously traveled further than Mallorca on charter holidays, but after twenty-one hours, they arrived in Buenos Aires on November 29, where they were picked up by two family members. One, Stella Marie Buus (the daughter of my father’s cousin), was their interpreter and guide in Buenos Aires, and she later drove them the five hundred kilometers south to Tres Arroyos. The tour mainly consisted of family visits and guided tours on the family properties. The properties were no longer as large as in the days of Niels and Laust, because inherited properties in Argentina are equally
divided. However, they were still large by Danish standards. My impressed father wrote in his notes:

December the 5th on Jutlandia, “The White Castle” that Niels Ambrosius built. Now it is father’s (Thorvald Ambrosius’s) cousin Hugo Ambrosius who owns it. It is now a “small” farm of 1,223 hectares after being divided among 8 siblings. We were watching the harvest and there were houses all over that were used for workers during the harvest in the old days. The main house is very large, with 30 closed rooms on the second floor. The family is now living in Tres Arroyos, so it is only used for accommodation.37

They visited other family farms, which mainly focused on cattle production, as on his cousin Edith’s (called Søster) estancia. It was a good four thousand hectares, with the emphasis on breeding bulls. They had about twenty-five hundred cattle and sold five hundred bulls per year.
The tour was first and foremost a family reunion, but it also offered insight into the everyday life of Danish Argentinians. And for this generation it is probably most accurate to call them Danish Argentinians. They were born in Argentina, and spoke of course Spanish, but they were all bilingual and fluent in Danish and kept Danish traditions, including Christmas traditions. The food and wine were Argentinian, but the Christmas decorations were unmistakably Danish, complete with a star and homemade Christmas hearts in red and white on the Christmas tree; the only difference was the climate. It was thirty degrees Celsius.

The highlight of the trip came on December 10: the feast to celebrate the one hundred-year anniversary of Niels and Laust Ambrosius’ arrival in Tandil. The day started with a service in the Danish Lutheran Chapel in Tres Arroyos. The service was no longer held in Danish, but they sang a Danish hymn, in this case B. S. Ingemann’s “Dejlig er jorden” (this tradition still exists in the Danish churches). After the service, there was procession to the graveyard, where flowers were laid on the graves of the immigrants. My father laid flowers on his uncle’s grave. In the evening, there was a party at “Club Danese,” which was attended by some 280 members of the Ambrosius family.

My parents were very happy about the trip and spoke about the unity in the large family, marveling that even some members of the fourth generation spoke Danish, a fluent but rather old-fashioned Danish that led to some curious formulations. For example, a hairbrush was called a “scrub.” My parents also emphasized that people were very interested in Danish society and in general took great pride in their Danish roots. This pride was not seen as something negative, neither in Denmark nor in Argentina, nobody talked about parallel societies or thought of the family as less Argentinian because they tried to hold onto their Danish roots. Spanish was of course their daily language, and Argentina their home country. The descendants of the immigrants had become Argentinians of Danish descent.

Present and Future

The first- and second-generation immigrants from Denmark in Argentina stuck together and spoke almost only Danish among themselves, read Danish-language newspapers, went to Danish institu-
tions, sent their children to Danish schools, and married within their community. For some people, especially the women on the farms, this meant that they did not learn to speak Spanish, since it was not necessary, as Mirna Ambrosius explains:

The well-functioning Danish society in Tandil meant that for the first many years the Danes did not need to speak Spanish at all. Among other things, there was a good dialogue between the Danes, they helped each other with the language. The paradox was that women did not need to get involved in the society at all. They were all full-time mothers on the farms and met, among other things, each other’s social needs through common social and cultural activities.38

As I have described, however, this was in the past. The descendants of the immigrants have become Argentinians with Danish roots.

The Danish churches in Tandil, Tres Arroyos, and Necochea still stand to this day and testify of a Danish past south of the capital of Argentina, and of a time when descendants of Danes still had a feeling of belonging to a Protestant church. Just as the churches symbolize that here are the Danish-minded, several Danish school buildings are still standing and testifying [of] a Danish history. One of the buildings is still used as a school, “Colegio Argentino Danés District Alta Mira,” but apart from the name, there is no longer much Danish here, as all teaching is in Spanish. The Danish descendants still meet in the Danish clubs, although the language now mostly is Spanish.39

Even though the use of the Danish language has died out, parts of the culture endures. I expect that this will disappear too; why should these young people maintain any relationship to Denmark? In her report, “Danske stemmer” (Danish voices) from 2016, Nadia Hansen explains:

The Danish congregations are still active, but just as it is difficult to pass the Danish language on to the young generation, it is also difficult to bring this generation to church. Here, as formulated by one of the informants for “Danish
Voices”: “Those who become [involved in the congregation] are the elderly, the youth don’t want to, yet they must have their children baptized, but then they will not come any more afterwards.” Many informants say that young people are not interested in paying to keep it all going: “That was what happened to the school, unfortunately. And this happens with the clubs.” Three informants say they are still active in the Danish club in Tres Arroyos, where there are card evenings and women’s clubs, where women meet on the first Thursday of the month. The men meet to play the Spanish card game Truco. In addition, there are joint card-game evenings for both sexes every other Thursday in the Danish club, where they play “Hjerter fri.” The Danish Christmas traditions are still being followed, yet in many places the food traditions, which in the past consisted of duck or goose, potatoes, sauce, red cabbage and “risalamande,” have been changed. The three informants mentioned above tell us that last Christmas they did not light the candles on the tree at all because it was too hot. There are still Christmas trees, gifts, gnomes, and “risalamande” with a mandelgave.40

The explanation that the Danish will just die out is not so simple, though, as several young people still feel an emotional attachment to Denmark. This became very clear when Queen Margrethe and Crown Prince Frederik made an official visit to Argentina in March 2019, and in this context also visited the Triangle area. Seen from Denmark, it seemed like everyone with Danish roots went completely crazy! Before and during the visit, Danish journalists were in Argentina to find out how strong the attachment to Denmark was and to explain why it is still stronger there than, for example, in the United States. In this context, the difficult Spanish language and the settlement pattern were highlighted as a major difference from other Danish settlements abroad.41 The Danish journalists were very impressed by the fact that they found young people who spoke Danish. The Queen also expressed her joy about coming back to an area where she felt very welcome.

The Danish royal family’s social media accounts reported:
There was a party in the Argentine town of Tandil, when H.M. the Queen and HRH the crown prince came to visit today. Many of the city’s citizens are descendants of Danish emigrants who in the 19th and 20th centuries came to this area to build a new life. Today, several thousand Argentinians have Danish roots, and many have maintained a connection with Denmark through language, culture, religion, and family ties. As a young heir, the Queen visited Tandil during a long journey to Latin America back in 1966. Today the Queen revisited many of the same places.42

The aim of the visit was first and foremost to raise awareness on Danish products to increase Danish exports to Argentina, so it is impossible to assess exactly how widespread the interest for the visit and for Denmark really was. There was clearly still a little bit of Danish out in the community, as a menu advertising Danish dishes, such as æblekage (apple cake), citronfromage (lemon fromage), and trifli (trifle).43
Today, the largest Danish Argentine society exists in Copotonas, sixty kilometers outside Buenos Aires, where there is a Danish Argentinian school, but, as with the churches, the language is no longer Danish but Spanish. Thus there are still Danish institutions and some who try to maintain Danish culture more than 150 years after the first Danish immigrants came to Argentina (and 130 years after the brothers Ambrosius), but if Denmark and Argentina were to meet in a soccer match, I would believe that they would all cheer on Argentina (they have generally had the best team, although the Danish national soccer team just now is above Argentina’s on the FIFA’s ranking list!)

Where the difficult Spanish language was an obstacle to the integration of Danish immigrants and a contributing factor to their solidarity, the language barrier now works in the opposite direction. Danish is a difficult and small language that cannot be used for much globally, so it requires effort and a heartfelt desire to learn the language. One can use other methods to maintain an emotional attachment to Denmark, however, which is an area where digital media offer assistance. It is easy to use the internet, and although Google Translate is not perfect, it helps bridge the language gap. Social media like Facebook create opportunities for long-distance contact that didn’t
exist in the past. Flights have become much cheaper, and although harmful for the environment, they offer more opportunities to travel long distances. Argentina has thus become the destination of several Danish travel companies, mostly to Buenos Aires and to the Andes provinces, but also to the Triangle area.

Conclusion

The members of the Ambrosius family who immigrated to Argentina were part of the larger wave of emigrants from Europe that culminated in the period 1880-1914. Industrialization and urbanization meant economic growth and technological progress. This resulted in better hygiene, a safer food supply, and better medical science, as well as leading to a decline in infant mortality. As the birth rate remained high, population growth increased exponentially. Population growth caused a large population surplus in the countryside, and a lack of land and poor living conditions in general, meant that many migrated to the cities. Despite industrialization, however, there was not work for everyone, and many looked to the “New World,” and especially among Scandinavians, there was also a pronounced desire among emigrants to own their own land. The midwestern United States was an obvious option, but Canada, Australia, and, as described here, Argentina, were also targets for emigrants.

Niels and Laust Ambrosius had been “warned” against the United States and encouraged to consider Argentina, where thousands of Danes were said to live. They had only attended school for a short time, and they spoke only jysk (a Danish dialect from Jutland), so the information about the many Danes, who were primarily farmers, must have been a major factor. The fact that the number turned out to be false, as Niels Ambrosius mentions in his memoirs, became irrelevant, for by then they had arrived and could not return home. They had borrowed the money for the tickets from their mother, and they did not have a dime. Although there were not many Danes in the area, they did get help as they were immediately employed by a Danish farmer. The first years were tough, but for the brothers the dream came true, and after more than ten years they began to make family visits to Denmark, where they were living billboards for the emigration dream.
Niels and Laust’s success led to the second wave of emigrants from the Ambrosius family. When they emigrated from 1900 to 1920, Denmark was still a poor country. Industrialization and urbanization were underway, but the process had started late, and the main industry continued to be agriculture, and wages and working conditions were miserable for tenants and land workers. Although the country’s neutrality and the limited import opportunities during World War I gave new trading opportunities to people like Jens Ambrosius, the country generally was poor and the economic and social inequality great. Denmark was a class-based community with low social mobility. Changes were slow, but in 1933 the foundation stone of the Danish welfare state was laid with the political agreement known as “Kanslergadeforliget.” It was only after World War II (and especially from the mid-1950s) that the Danish welfare state and ideals of equality began to be implemented. The push factors for Niels and Laust’s successors were the same as for Niels and Laust: a desire for land and generally better opportunities.

The pull factor was the success of the uncles. When the descendants arrived in Argentina in the beginning of the twentieth century the region was significantly more developed than when the uncles arrived, so there was much greater competition for resources. At the same time, however, they came to a Danish colony, which served as a parallel Denmark with churches, schools, insurance, a consumers co-op (brugsforening) and a folk high school (højskole). They managed fine speaking “jysk,” so it was almost only the seasons that were different from “home.” Ambrosius family immigrants generally performed well, although not all of them became as rich and influential as Niels and Laust, and not everything was rosy in Argentina, as this letter from Niels to his brother Jens in Denmark reveals: “About your boys I don’t know anything, only [one of them] has visited me, but they are probably well. [One is them is] living here in the city, which seems stupid, but the wife says it is to avoid not working.” Niels sounds a little bitter in the letter; he had gotten old and broken his hip, so he had trouble walking and was perhaps lonely despite his large family. Perhaps he also felt that his nephews should visit him more because he had previously helped some members of the family financially.

Close contact with Denmark lasted as long as there were direct family ties, but over time the contact faded. After World War II, immi-
igration from Denmark completely died out and the Danish colonies were “mixed” with others, so Spanish became the main language – also for the Ambrosius family, but even today they support a number of Danish institutions and traditions and seek out their Danish roots through social media, for example. I have experienced this myself, as many people from Argentina have read my blog posts, even though I do not speak or write Spanish, so they must have read the Danish or English versions. Their Danish roots therefore remain important, not in the sense that they are Danes who happen to be living in Argentina, but as Argentinians, for whom Danish culture and traditions have been part of their background and have contributed to shaping their identity.

Map of the Triangle Area. The highlighted areas are the places where Danish immigrants primarily settled. In addition to the Triangle area in the southern part of the province of Buenos Aires, there were smaller Danish colonies in the provinces Misiones and Rio Negro, as well as several who lived in the capital Buenos Aires.
Appendix: The Ambrosius Family

First generation: Jens Jensen Ambrosius (December 2, 1800-May 18, 1878) and Maren Kirstine Pedersdatter (April 3, 1828-September 9, 1901)

Second generation:
- Ambrosius (April 12, 1852-October 24, 1931), married to Marie Skov Christiansen, three children
- Ane (April 12, 1854-October 9, 1856), married to Mads Christiansen, four children
- Kirstine (September 23, 1858-July 5, 1899), married to J. Porskrog, three children
- Peder (October 15, 1860-August 12, 1937), married to Mette Rasmussen, three children
- Jens (May 9, 1863-September 24, 1954), married to Sørine Nørskov, six children
- Niels (February 26, 1866-May 21, 1956), married to Annekristine Nielsen, eight children
- Laust (September 30, 1868-January 13, 1953), married to Rasmine Jensen, seven children
- AneMarie (December 1, 1872-October 19, 1968), married to Anton Dalsgaard, three children.

Twelve of Niels’ and Laust’s children married other immigrants, primarily of Danish descent. One married a Dane and moved to Denmark but ultimately moved back to Argentina, one remained unmarried, and one died as a child.

Third generation emigrants: seven children of Niels and Laust’ siblings:
- Three of Ane and Mads Christiansen’s four children: Karen (Oct. 10, 1881-April 21, 1956); Jens (February 28, 1883-September 13, 1941); and Jørgen (June 10, 1888-October 28, 1938)
- Four of Jens and Sørine Ambrosius’ six children: Kristian (November 9, 1887-January 30, 1967); Jens (December 8, 1889-March 13, 1985); Aage (December 10, 1893-February 12, 1955); and Otto (August 12, 1899-August 27, 1960)

These immigrants married Danish Argentinians and had a total of twenty-nine children, all of whom stayed in Argentina.
Endnotes

1 I would like to thank the many people who have helped with materials, inspiration and ideas. Thanks for the many positive comments on my blog posts along the way, which has made the work fun and meaningful. I have now worked extensively with the brothers Ambrosius for about a year and feel that I have come to know them, not at least Niels, personally, even though I have never met them. I am going to miss them, and I was delighted to get the chance to visit Argentina in January 2020, meet my cousin, and see the places my relatives lived.

2 “Asado-festernes æresmedlem fylder 90 år i morgen” [The honorary member of the Asado party turns 90 in the Morning], Viborg Stiftsgården Folkeblad, May 8, 1953.

3 Maté is made of the crushed leaves of the yerba plant (a kind of hawthorn). The leaves are placed in a mug (matéen) and drenched with cold water, so that the leaves are bled up. The cold water is sucked up with the tube (the Bombilla), which is usually made of silver. Afterwards, the leaves are soaked with hot (not boiling) water. Hot water can be poured over them several times, and it is said that the later pourings are the best. It’s VERY bitter. I personally would rather believe in red wine and summer heat as a means of getting a long life!


7 Lars Bækhøj, Danske i Argentina (Copenhagen: Det danske forlag, 1948), 11-12.


9 Quoted in Hesselholt, Fugl i Argentina, 298.

10 Ambrosius, 3.

11 Ambrosius, 4.

12 Bækhøj, 92. A peon should not be confused with a gaucho, who was a cattle herder on horseback. The gauchos played a particular role in 18th and 19th century before agriculture and fencing of cattle became widespread; they were often mestizos who typically wore wide-brimmed hats and ponchos and used lassos and bolas. The gauchos took part in the independence struggle against Spain and have become a symbol of freedom, individualism and originality today, but in the nineteenth century, they often came into bloody conflict with the peasants about rights to the land.

13 Ole Sønnichsen, Rejsen til Amerika (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 2016), 40.
Danes in Argentina: The Emigration Story of the Ambrosius Family | Ambrosius

14 Ambrosius, 4.
15 Ambrosius, 5.
16 Ambrosius, 8.
17 Ambrosius, 9.
18 “Ambrosius, 10.
19 Register over danske udvandrere til Argentina (Aalborg: Det danske udvandrerarkiv), 130.
21 Bækhøj, 132-33.
22 Bækhøj, 133-34.
23 Ambrosius, 14.
24 Bækhøj, 135.
25 Bækhøj, 150.
26 Bækhøj, 162.
27 Ambrosius, 9-12.
28 Bækhøj, 179.
29 Viborg Stiftsgården Folkeblad, May 1953.
30 Ambrosius, 20.
31 Ambrosius, 20.
32 “Hvor høsten overstråler juletravlheden” [Where the harvest bustle overshadows the Christmas rush], Aalborg Amtstidende, n.d.
33 Ambrosius, 21.
34 Ambrosius, 20.
36 Sørensen, “En jyde.”
39 Hansen, 22.
40 Hansen, 28.
42 Det danske kongehus, Facebook, March 2019, https://www.facebook.com/detdanskekongehus/posts/879115812427001?comment_id=880195518985697&comment_tracking=%7B%22tn%22%3A%22R%22%7D.


“Kanslergadeforliget” means “Chancellor Street agreement.” Until 1933, the receipt of public help meant the loss of civil rights, but it was possible to obtain assistance from municipal auxiliary funds without any loss of rights. In January 1933, the government of Thorvald Stauning (a social democrat) reached a landmark economic settlement with Venstre (the liberal party), in the prime minister’s apartment in Kanslergade. The compromise involved social reforms such that the receipt of aid did not entail any loss of rights. Politikens Danmarkshistorie Bd. 13, 89.

Letter from Niels Ambrosius to Jens Ambrosius on April 29, 1949. I have omitted the names of the nephews for their privacy.