

Uruguay's head: Brother's keeper, and Israel is kin

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WASHINGTON

IN three months, Latin America's first Holocaust memorial will be dedicated on the shores of the Rio de la Plata in Uruguay.

The visionary behind the modest stone structure is Uruguay's president, Luis Alberto LaCalle.

In addition to initiating the memorial, LaCalle suggested the spot on the river banks both to symbolize "the opening of the Red Sea for the people to pass," and because "by sea the immigrants came to our country to find refuge."

"We want this memorial to be that — a memorial that prevents people from forgetting," he said of the \$200,000 project.

Each year LaCalle (pronounced la-KA-zhay) attends events marking Kristallnacht, Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Day and Israel's Independence Day in Montevideo, as well as Yom Kippur services.

LaCalle, 52, is also an outspoken supporter of Israel who was honored here last week by the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC).

That support, LaCalle said in an interview in his Washington hotel suite, stems "especially from my own Christian education."

"I was educated in the good old times when the Old Testament was the basis of my Christianity, and that allowed me to mesh very easily the values of Judaism as the foundation of my belief as a Christian. On my first visit to Israel, which was in 1985, I really felt very much all these things, and I've been very active reading on these subjects."

Dov Shmorak, director of the Israeli Foreign Ministry's Latin America desk who has known LaCalle for 25 years, said: "The man studied a lot. Not just the Bible, but Zionism. I don't think you could ask another Latin American

head of state who Max Nordau was. *He* knows."

LaCalle speaks proudly of his belief that he has ancient Sephardi connections.

"On the very personal, personal level, I belong to an old Spanish family that has Jewish roots. The Herrera family, my mother's family, is a very common Jewish name," he said.

LaCalle was influenced, too, by the example of his father-in-law. As a medical student in Berlin during World War II, Alejandro Pou helped a Jewish professor survive by surreptitiously passing along medicine and food.

Shmorak likes to tell of worshippers draping a *tallit* on the president at Yom Kippur services last year at a Montevideo synagogue. When the holiday ended, journalists photographed him in the *tallit* and published it.

"A local priest told him: 'Mr. President, you're exaggerating with this distant tradition.'"

LaCalle said he told the priest: "This tradition may be distant for you, but it's not distant for me."

NOT SURPRISINGLY, LaCalle is very close to the 28,000-strong Jewish community in his country of three million people. Compared with regional leaders, LaCalle stands out as the real thing.

"Other presidents in the area are opportunistic regarding Israel; they have surrounded themselves with Jewish supporters," said an Israeli expert on the region, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

"LaCalle has no considerations like this. He really knows the issue. For example, he's going to Saudi Arabia in a few weeks but there's no chance of him changing his position" on Israel.

When the US moved in 1991, with Uruguay as a cosponsor, to



Uruguayan President Luis Alberto Lacalle, who was recently

repeal the UN's infamous Zionism-racism resolution, LaCalle fought to secure additional Latin American backers for the measure.

For many years LaCalle "was very firm on the question of the PLO. We never had an office of the PLO, no [PLO] visitors even," said B'nai B'rith's regional director in Montevideo, Eduardo Kohn.

"He said as long as he's president there will never be what he

called a terrorist representative here.

He has not modified his position," Kohn said. "For a small country like this, it's hard. We got pressure from all over the world."

LaCalle, who went to Israel on a state visit in 1992, recalls two sites that were especially moving: Capernaum for its connection to Jesus, and Sde Boker.

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Argentinian President Luis Alberto Lacalle, who was recently honored by AIPAC in Washington, and his wife Marta.

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the landscape of the desert – the
same feeling I had in Antarctica,
of the smallness of the human be-
ing before the majesty of nature,"
he said.
Next month, he'll be off to Po-
land as the only head of state par-
ticipating in the biennial interna-
tional student event March of the
Living, in which students visit
Auschwitz and several other con-
centration camps.
During his brief stay in Wash-
ington, LaCalle took a quick tour

of the new US Holocaust Memori-
al Museum. If he had been able to
spend more time in the building,
LaCalle said, he would have read
"everything" throughout the ex-
hibits, and later meditated in the
eight-sided Hall of
Remembrance.
In that room, LaCalle said, he
would prefer to slightly alter the
inscribed passage on the wall to
add, "and I would be correcting
the Bible, to a very clear affirma-
tion: 'I am my brother's keeper.'"