



Address to the American Jewish Committee

Given by Mark B. Rosenberg

on December 3, 2011



This speech was presented to South Florida's Hispanic and Latin American leaders, as well as participating delegations at the Fifth Strategic Forum for Leaders of Latin American and Spanish Jewish communities on December 3, 2011.

Good evening! It is a pleasure to be here with you this evening celebrating the Jewish communities of Latin America and Spain and the connections between us.

FIU is proud of the work of our faculty and students in advancing scholarship of Latin America and the Jewish communities of Latin America, through our School of International and Public Affairs, our Judaic Studies Program, and our Latin American and Caribbean Center, also known as LACC, the premier research center on issues related to Latin America and the Caribbean. The work we do at FIU complements the work of the AJC. In its overall mission, LACC seeks to represent the diversity of Latin America. To that end, we also seek to represent the diversity of the Latin American Jewish experience. We are proud to host, through LACC and our Judaic Studies Program, the Latin American Jewry Series, which includes lectures and other events that touch on important themes.

One of our most successful events was a panel discussion on the Cuban Jews of Pedro Pan, where one of our professors, Marcos Kerbel, joined other members of our community to share their memories of an emotional time in the shared history of Cuba and South Florida, a trauma that had particular resonance in the Jewish community.

As part of the Latin American Jewry Series, we also have hosted prominent Latin American Jewish scholars from throughout the region, including Brazil, Argentina, the Caribbean and the United States. FIU also helped put together a seminar for K-12 teachers from around the country, presenting ideas that the teachers could build on to make the Latin American Jewish experience part of their lesson plans.

We are at the forefront of research on the Latin American Jewish Community. Let me share with you a little bit about how one of our graduates is using the tools of her FIU education to shed new light on the Latin American Jewish experience. Her name is Valeria Schindler. Valeria was born in Argentina, where she was raised as part of the country's minority Jewish community. Her personal experience sparked an interest in religious studies, a discipline in which she planned to pursue a degree until her father

asked her “And what are you going to do with that?” So Valeria studied hospitality management instead, eventually completing a bachelor’s degree at FIU. Valeria worked her way up the ranks at the Hyatt Regency in downtown Miami and later left to raise a family. A few years later, she decided to return to school. This time she was certain religious studies was her calling, and she entered FIU’s master’s program, where she excelled. Her research took her back to Latin America, where she went on a multi-country tour to study conservative rabinas – the handful of women who had been ordained as conservative rabbis in Latin America. This was a cultural phenomenon that no one had written about and Valeria received a prestigious Tinker Field Research Grant to complete her research. Valeria’s research is what FIU is all about. She challenged conventional perceptions of women, family, Latin American Jews and Latin American machismo culture and shed light on a segment of our culture that few people knew about. And although she graduated, Valeria continues her education mission. She has presented her research at an international conference, is proposing a book on the subject and will be teaching at FIU next spring. Valeria’s research is just one example.

FIU is uniquely positioned to pioneer this kind of research. With our expertise in international studies and Latin America, as well as professors and students, like Valeria, whose unique personal experiences enrich our research, FIU is in a position to become a leader in the study of the Latin American Jewish experience.

FIU is the most strategically-situated site for academic exchange and community engagement on this topic and we are positioned to serve as THE point of intersection in the hemisphere for dialogue among scholars, students and community members working on and interested in Latin American Jewry.

Why is that important? Because in doing so our university becomes a resource for our growing Latin American Jewish community, particularly the young people who come to South Florida and are looking for a place where they can gather and connect. We are doing our part to create a welcoming, nurturing environment where students can explore their Jewish identity and, ultimately, benefit our region and even their home countries by using the skills they learn at FIU to compete in today’s global marketplace. To be successful, we need your help. I encourage you to support Judaic studies at FIU and Jewish student life at FIU. Together, we can make a difference!