

# English Transcript of Diego Perelmutter

## Testimonial

**Interviewee:** Diego Perelmutter

**Interviewed by:** Dr. Giovanna Urdangarain and Dr. Rona Kaufman

**Interview conducted at Hogar Israelita Nursing Home in Montevideo, Uruguay in January of 2019.**

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Giovanna: Hello, Diego. How are you?

Diego: Hi. Good afternoon.

Giovanna: Thank you for meeting with us and talking for a bit. Can you tell us your full name?

Diego: My name is Diego Perelmutter. I am 33 years old. I live in Montevideo, I'm from Montevideo. I studied psychology. I am trained in psychology. I have experience in patient care. I always liked it.

Giovanna: How long have you been working here at the home and what is your role?

Diego: I have worked here since May 2017. This May 2019, it will have been two years. My role and our role... My role is to coordinate the resident care area. The area is called resident care which is similar to customer service.

Giovanna: How many people work in that area?

Diego: Three in total. Three in total and four that Franco... Franco comes on the weekends. But on the weekend Franco and one of us is here, so there are two. But more or less, Franco is with the medical area and with us. So we are three and four people. And my role is to kind of coordinate that area. We are together with Rachel, Andrea, and Franco. The care goes from 8 o'clock in the morning until 10 o'clock at night. Well, what we do is... At times we're kind of like the advocates for the elderly residents.

Giovanna: In what context? With their families? Everyone else?

Diego: In the face of everything that can happen. My function and my objective and my role and my job is that the resident is well-treated and cared for well, tidy, clean, everything that can be

provided. And I look for resources to make that happen. All of it. And well, we are the advocates for the resident, and for their family, the resident's family.

Giovanna: There are a hundred residents or so?

Diego: Around a hundred residents.

Giovanna: And you all are responsible for and in contact with all of them every day?

Diego: Yes. It changes a bit from day to day. But yes, we are responsible for everyone, yes. I say that it's kind of like we're responsible for everything and nothing at the same time. Why? Because our area is a little bit like that. What we do is to distribute the information. Information is sent to us and we distribute it to maintenance, to the kitchen, to the medical area... So, we can be responsible, or not. So, that is what we are working on.

Giovanna: Why did you choose to work here?

Diego: Why did I choose to work here? For many years I had been working on very, very raw things, relating more to mental illness, and to situations on the streets. Vulnerable people living on the street. And I wanted to move from the neurotic to the more healthy, a little bit healthier. I also wanted to... For many years I had been distant from the Jewish community. I wanted to start to get back in touch with the Jewish community. That just happened. It wasn't like "Oh, I'm going to choose this home" or "I'm going to this home because I want to." But the opportunity arrived and it was great, it was like what I was looking for.

Giovanna: Had you worked at other Jewish organizations before?

Diego: Ah, I don't believe so. If I did, it was many years ago. No, no.

Giovanna: But you have always worked with social issues.

Diego: Yes.

Giovanna: Where does that vocation come from?

Diego: Where does it come from? What do you mean?

Giovanna: A vocation to work for others or for people in vulnerable situations.

Diego: From my mother. In that sense, it comes from her. In my house there was always a spirit of helping others with what we had, and what we had left over. It was always about helping others. I went to Israel in 2008 or 2009 and when I came back I said, "I want to help in some way" and I started donating some of my things.

Giovanna: To the home?

Diego: No, no, no. Organizations. And from there I started to connect with organizations like "Un techo para mi país" (A roof for my country). I taught there, in the settlements. In the settlements with the children. I worked there for three years. And we were connecting with the psychiatric clinic.

Giovanna: The psychiatric clinic of?

Diego: The public-private psychiatric clinic.

Giovanna: Why do you think the trip to Israel was like a catalyst for that? What happened on the trip to Israel that made you...? If I may ask you that.

Diego: No, no, nothing. It didn't have much to do with Israel itself. But I came back from the trip and I had to be productive and set goals, I had to say, "Well, what do I want from life? What do I want to do with my life?" "What do I enjoy doing? What do I want to do? I want to help." Well, there it is. So I decided I wanted to help, and then I started to do exactly that.

Giovanna: Do you have a personal connection with the home? Family, personal, religious?

Diego: With the home itself, not really. I mean I don't have... I haven't had relatives live here. No. I do with the Jewish community. And yes, with what you start getting to see and what you start provoking, what they provoke in you.

Giovanna: How do you identify? In terms of nationality, in terms of religion.

Diego: I say that I am more Jewish than Uruguayan.

Giovanna: And why is that?

Diego: Because it pulls me, it pulls me. Israel pulls me, it pulls me.

Giovanna: Does your family practice the religion?

Diego: Yes, yes. Like everything, some things are followed, some things aren't. You choose. We always did Shabbat on Fridays. My dad goes to synagogue on Saturdays.

Giovanna: Do you go too?

Diego: No, I don't. For the moment, I don't. We always celebrate the holidays. My parents light the Hanukkah candles. You do Pesach, you do Kubbutz, you do it all. It's done with a level of adherence. My dad did it not so long ago, he read the psalms when they were sung. It was his kind of practicing. For the moment, I do the minimum. I'm still looking for the meaning and to make sense of it, of what I do. "How much sense does it make? Why do I do it?" I'm kind of in that search. "What do I like? What do I feel? Is it the culture, is it the traditions? What is Jewishness to me?"

Giovanna: What is your family background?

Diego: I have both. I have the Ashkenazi and Sephardic, so the Turkish and Russian. So, there's always that fight between my dad and my grandfather, the Russians and the Turks. It's a back and forth, a good fight.

Giovanna: Which side is which? Your mom's side?

Diego: My mom's side is Turkish. And my dad's side is Russian. My mom's last name is Katan, Sephardic, it's Turkish. And my dad's last name is Perelmuter. It's much more Russian and Polish.

Giovanna: Were your parents born here?

Diego: Yes.

Giovanna: Was it your grandparents who came here? Or your great-grandparents?

Diego: Yes, my grandfather came from Poland.

Giovanna: Your grandfather came from Poland. Your paternal grandfather?

Diego: Yes. And my grandmother on my mother's side... Her sisters all died in the war. I think she came too, after the war. My grandfather is Uruguayan I think, but my grandmother came from there.

Giovanna: During your childhood, did they talk about your family history?

Diego: No, no, no...

Diego: Every time the families get together, it's like, "Well no, to me he's Ashkenazi." "No, to me he's Sephardic." "You're more this." "You're more that."

Giovanna: How common is it in the Jewish community in Uruguay to have both Jewish branches in the same family? Quite common? Or not?

Diego: I don't know.

Giovanna: It hasn't been in the conversations we've had, but your generation is much younger, so maybe that changes things.

Diego: How...?

Giovanna: How common is it for the same family to have...?

Diego: I do not know.

Giovanna: When you went to Israel, did you go looking for a certain identity?

Diego: No, no. I went with a different plan.

Giovanna: Did you already feel more Jewish than Uruguayan when you went to Israel?

Diego: Yes, if I think about it, yes. But I was there with a different plan, anyway. I wasn't like, "now I can be more aware." I had a different plan. Israel was always very special to me.

Giovanna: Had you gone before this trip you mentioned?

Diego: Yes, I had gone on a trip that was more for leisure, for about a month. This last trip in 2008 was more of a study trip. I was there for 8, 10 months.

Giovanna: Do you have siblings?

Diego: Yes.

Giovanna: Do they also identify as more Jewish than Uruguayan? Or do they think of their identity differently?

Diego: I don't know, I don't know. One lives in Israel. I have a brother who got married about three years ago, more or less. Maybe four years ago. And during the holidays, he always joked around a bit, at dinner for Pesach. "Well, come on, let's eat." He'd say this and that. He was always like that, either not following things so rigorously, or just not at all. And once he got married, now he takes his daughter to Saint Brendan's which is an English school and he doesn't take her to Integral, which is the Jewish school. But, he started doing Shabbat, lighting the Shabbat candles, making challah. He started putting on tefillin every morning.

Giovanna: He had never done it before?

Diego: No, no. And it made me stop and think. I thought, "look at this."

Giovanna: His wife is Jewish?

Diego: Yes. And I don't know, I don't know. But it seems that way, doesn't it? He's doing all of these things, so it seems that way.

Giovanna: But it's not something that you discuss at the family level.

Diego: No.

Giovanna: No. And neither did you parents?

Diego: No, not like that. Not about that, not like that. My dad is a bit like me in that way. Every time someone goes to Israel or it comes up, he loves it. He loves Israel. It's like he has a nostalgic feeling for it.

Giovanna: They never thought about going?

Diego: My dad did during the crisis, the crisis here in Uruguay. But my mom never got on board. She also had her parents here, so that was an issue. It's also difficult to leave the country where you were born, that's another issue. Beyond that, no.

Giovanna: How important is it for you, Diego, to work in a Jewish institution like this?

Diego: Yes. Yes, it's... Yes. It's not quite clear to me because I don't think I'm conscious of what I'm doing, and of what I'm a part of. I don't know how conscious I am. But I love it. I love what I do. But I don't know how conscious I am of what I'm a part of. But yeah, it's important to me, it's important. It's also important for what I was searching for in the Jewish community and what I

wanted to do within it, to see who I am. When I came here, it was meant to be. It was something for myself.

Giovanna: Does the fact that you identify as Jewish play an important role in your relationships with the residents?

Diego: I would say it matters more to them.

Giovanna: Do they ask you?

Diego: Yes, yes.

Giovanna: And does it change anything when they learn that you are Jewish?

Diego: I'm sure it does, I'm sure it does.

Giovanna: It establishes trust? Or something like that?

Diego: I don't really know because...

Giovanna: Because they don't say it?

Diego: Because I don't have the other experience.

Giovanna: Of course. Are the three people who work in the resident care area Jewish?

Diego: No, no. One of them, for example, is not Jewish, and there is a slight difference. It's about being part of it. One of the big things is to be a part of it. Yeah. It's like there's an "us." It's kind of like that. It's not discrimination.

Giovanna: Yes, of course. It's like a feeling of brotherhood that just goes a bit deeper.

Diego: Yes, exactly.

Giovanna: In your role, do you have contact with other Jewish organizations that also help elderly members of the community?

Diego: Yes, yes. We are in contact with la Kehila, with la B'rith. La B'rith works with our medical staff because they deal with health and medications, those types of things. La Kehila has departments of all kinds. We also work with... There's a lot.

With the ORT Group. We work with Carlitos, with [unknown name], with Jaime. Those are three. That's the disability area of la Kehila. So, it's not much, but we work with the Tzedaká foundation as well. We have all the basics covered, in terms of operations. Our development department also works with a school, with Integral, with the Yavne.

Giovanna: Do members of other groups come to visit the home?

Diego: Yes.

Giovanna: Schools for example?

Diego: Many schools. That's something we've wanted to do for a long time and now it's happening, the intergenerational piece.

Giovanna: They come to meet the residents?

Diego: Children come and spend the afternoon or they spend the morning with the residents, and it's great. Both Jewish and non-Jewish schools have come.

Giovanna: Do many of the residents that live here have no family?

Diego: Yes.

Giovanna: I remember seeing the campaign... Yoni sent me a video on WhatsApp with the grandchildren and great-grandchildren. It was last year I think, the fundraising campaign.

Diego: Yes.

Giovanna: And we saw many who have grandchildren and great-grandchildren, but are there many residents who have no family?

Diego: Yes, yes, yes. I can't tell you how many or the exact percentage, but yes. There are, yes. There are several who do not have a family, or who do have a family...

Giovanna: But they don't visit them.

Diego: But they don't come much. Exactly. And some live abroad too.

Giovanna: Working in a profession like this that is so involved with emotions and socializing,



has the unfortunate aspect of residents passing away or becoming very ill, correct? How do you take care of yourselves in that regard?

Diego: What a job, what a thing. I'm still working on it and I'm going to keep working on it. You know, it's something that, until not too long ago, I felt physically. "Something is happening to me here and I have to work through it."

Giovanna: But you see up close what everybody else only sees with their own families.

Diego: Yes, yes. You grow very fond of them. You have fun, you have a lot of fun. You spend a lot of time, a lot of your day with them. And yeah, one day they just go. It seems unfair to me that we don't know why, you know?

I wake up in the morning and find out that someone has died, I say "what an injustice." You don't know why they've passed but these are the things you feel. I just don't know. These are things that I'm still working on. They're unresolved. Someone once told me that the way someone bonds with others translates to how they grieve. I also think that it could be, that I am mourning my grandfather as well. It's also a way of being able to channel those things. But yeah, I think that it's something that moves me, that makes me shed a tear to think about some of them.

Giovanna: Some in particular. We have talked to a lot of residents who have children in Israel, or their grandchildren moved to Israel, or were born in Israel. Rona is wondering about that connection. As an Uruguayan Jew and a member of this community, how do you see the Israel-Uruguay-Jewish community connection? Why do so many young people decide to leave or come back? What does that Israel connection look like?

Diego: It's not that many young people. Of the people we're in contact with, there aren't that many young people.

Giovanna: Your trip, for example... Do you think it's representative of other Jewish youths in Uruguay? Is the objective to travel to Israel at least once?

Diego: I don't know, I don't know. People do go to Israel. But, I'm not entirely sure. Maybe the children of the people you're referring to aren't young.

Giovanna: Yes, that's true.

Diego: And they are twice as old as me.

Giovanna: Yes. Does your generation consider moving to Israel to live there?

Diego: Yes, I think so. Or they have already gone, many have already gone. Maybe a few years ago. When they were around 20 or 30. Now, it's the leftovers. At 30 and 40, we're the leftovers who have stayed.

Giovanna: Do you think there's an idea among your generation and the ones immediately before and after yours of "I have to go to Israel. I'm Jewish, I live in Uruguay, but I have to go to Israel at some point"? Like as a commitment?

Diego: I don't know.

Giovanna: There's no agenda behind the question. She was just curious. I think it's like that in the United States to a certain extent.

Diego: Well, yes. A feeling of having to go, yes.

Giovanna: Well, we're going to take these taped conversations and we're going to share them with people at the university. There's a conference that is held every year on the subject of the Holocaust. Rona, in fact, traveled thanks to a scholarship that came from two Jewish donors contributing to the university. And I'm fairly certain that at least at my university, nothing is really known about the Uruguayan Jewish community. Some general things about Latin America are known, though. So, if you had to tell people who have no idea what the Jewish community in Uruguay is like, what would you say? I know it is a lot of responsibility. But what would you tell them? Because you were in Israel too, you met Jews from other places, right?

Diego: Yes, but I lived outside of the community for many years.

Giovanna: What values of Judaism do you feel are worth continuing to practice? Because, I don't know...

Diego: I like it very much, I like it very much.

Giovanna: This home is an example of solidarity in the community, right?

Diego: Yes, yes.

Giovanna: It's amazing that there's a place where a member of the Jewish community knows that they can come and that they're going to be welcomed when they are older.

Diego: Yes, that is true. It can happen with the home or it can happen in the community itself.

Giovanna: In general.

Diego: It can happen out there. It can happen anywhere in the world.

Giovanna: Yes. So in that case it seems like it's much more efficient, right? Because there's already a place and a structure that people can call.

Diego: Yes, yes, yes. An institution or something that channels it, yes. In fact, when Enrique's situation occurred, the people at the U.S. embassy said, "This is the way it was handled. It happened this way because we have you here. Otherwise..."

Giovanna: ...no one would have known how to connect, or how to do any of it.

Diego: Much more difficult, much more complicated. And yeah, it worked out well.

Giovanna: It's not that I want to keep forcing you to say why you feel more Jewish than Uruguayan, but...

Diego: Maybe I'm just not sure, maybe I don't know.

Giovanna: What is it that makes you feel more Jewish than Uruguayan? What parts of the Jewish identity make you feel more Jewish than Uruguayan?

Diego: I don't know if this will answer the question, but belonging to the group. I'm grateful that there were people, some of my ancestors, who fought for me to be here today. And that to me.... Well, anyways. That's how I feel about it. But could you repeat the question?

Giovanna: Well, what is it about the Jewish identity that makes you feel more connected to it than to the Uruguayan identity? Diego: I don't know, I don't know, I think...

Giovanna: But that's how you feel, correct?

Diego: Yes, yes. I think it's being a part of something. To be part of a people, to be a part of an identity, to be a part of something. And I think that's thousands of years old. It's something that is transmitted and passed on. You're born with that. I don't know... I don't know. It's just like that, I think it's like that.

Giovanna: How do you handle a situation when, for example, you don't know anything about the person when they arrive? If someone arrives like that, alone, homeless, without family, without anything...

Diego: Well, every situation is different, but somehow the information arrives, somehow it always arrives. Through an institution or...

Giovanna: Is it important for the institution to follow up? They have to locate family members, for example, I would imagine.

Diego: Some connection, yes, always. No matter if it's a social worker, a distant relative, a friend, a cousin, there will always be a connection. One is always needed.

Giovanna: And you connect with other institutions, you call, you find everything out, you go through that search process, correct?

Diego: Yes, yes. They will find someone somewhere. There will be some acquaintance, and then we will insist on another acquaintance that we want, because we need some kind of contact. We will call, we will insist, to see what happens. And we do have situations like that. There is one where a relative, a cousin, lives in Canada. Whatever it may be...

Giovanna: So you're even looking abroad?

Diego: Yes, yes, it has happened, it has happened. We call Canada for a nephew and say, "Hey, your aunt is here," or something like that. We'll make that connection. Yeah.

Giovanna: So when you do all of that here at the home, do you do it because it's important to the resident, or is it also equally as important to uncover their personal history? To reconstruct their life, their past...

Diego: Yes, yes, each situation is particular, but it has happened to us, where a resident is unstable or something like that, and we have to appeal to those advocates.

Giovanna: Rona is thinking that you also feel the responsibility to let family members know that the resident is here even if they are family members who don't.

Diego: Even if they are relatives who don't?

Giovanna: Relatives that aren't in contact with the resident, that haven't seen them in a long time.

Diego: Our job is always to inform the relatives about everything. If there is an explicit request, like "I don't want to receive any more calls" or "I'm not interested in that person."

Giovanna: Then you respect that request.

Diego: Of course, yes.

Giovanna: Thank you so much, Diego.

Diego: I hope you've found something interesting. I hope it helped you in some way.

Giovanna: I was intrigued by everything that had to do with identity... It was so interesting to talk with you and Mariana about that question, because you are more or less of the same generation.

Diego: Yes, ten years or so.

Giovanna: Yes, but you're still close. You didn't say "I feel Jewish and not Uruguayan." You said "I feel more Jewish than Uruguayan." It has more to do with nationality. But I am not the only one.

Giovanna: No, I can't imagine you are.

Diego: There's a Jewish Argentinian poet who...

Giovanna: Do you remember their name?

Diego: (Eliahu) Toker. T-O-K-E-R. And the poem is "Homenaje a la condición judía" ("Homage to the Jewish condition").

Giovanna: I didn't ask you about language, Diego. Did you ever speak Yiddish in your house?

Diego: No, not in my house.

Giovanna: And when you went to Israel, did you speak Hebrew? Did you learn Hebrew?

Diego: I know Hebrew because I went to Jewish school.

Giovanna: Thinking out loud, Rona is asking if you think the fact that you or others feel more Jewish than Uruguayan is related to the rise of facism in the world today?

Diego: No, no.

Giovanna: No.

Diego: No, no. It has nothing to do with that. It's totally separate. It's part of me. I mean, it's part of the person.

Giovanna: This is the way he feels about it.

Diego: But look... Where did I hear this? Not long ago, I heard someone on TV... I do not remember who. They were Argentinean, or maybe someone just talking about Argentineans. They were saying that this, that we feel more Jewish than Uruguayan, does not happen in Argentina. Because the Argentinean...

Giovanna: And it was an Argentinean who said it?

Diego: I can't remember.

Giovanna: So they don't feel more Jewish than Argentinean?

Diego: Because the Argentinean as an Argentinean IS Argentinean.

Giovanna: Argentinean nationalism, of course. Argentinean nationalism is incredibly strong.

Diego: So look, the poem I always identify with is called "Saga Judía" ("Jewish Saga"). It's a conversation between a father and a son. I think it's a conversation at Pesach. There's a part where the son says "But why live our lives in an Israel of the future?" The son asks him: "Don't you love this country by chance?" He's referring to Argentina. And the father answers: "It's something my gut would have to explain to you. Here I am, a Jew who yearns for his land and in Israel I will become an Argentine sick with nostalgia awaiting what occurs in Buenos Aires. Argentina and Israel are two loves between which I am split. Of course there is a lot to do here, as an Argentinean, there is the language, the streets, the people, the friends, but there is a living Israel that calls me and a Jerusalem with which I've had an appointment set for centuries..." That's just one of the questions, it has three or four questions before that which are just like that. It asks a couple of things. Read it, and there's another one that's great. The other is "Homenaje a la condición judía" (Homage to the Jewish Condition). Read that one too.

Giovanna: I didn't know it, thank you very much.

Diego: I've known about him for a few years, he's terrific.

Diego: But, thank you always.

Giovanna: Yes, of course. Thank you very much.

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Thank you to Diego Perelmuter and Hogar  
Israelita