

Jewish *polacos*, Argentina, and the Yiddishland: Negotiating Transnational Identities, 1914-1939

Abstract

My dissertation examines the social and cultural repercussions of Jewish emigration from Poland to Argentina in the 1920s and 1930s. I look at the processes of imagining and perceiving Argentina in prewar Poland, as well as analyze how Polish Jews redefined and negotiated their relations with the new and former homeland after relocating to Argentina. By examining Jewish press reports, Yiddish travelogues, intellectual discourses, immigrant literature and archives of ethnic institutions, I reconstruct the multifaceted and complex meanings of Poland for Jewish immigrants who lived in Argentina, but preserved their social, cultural and discursive ties with Poland. My dissertation brings together the impact of Yiddish-centered ethno-national revival, the entanglements of diasporism and civic promises offered by Argentina in order to find ways of understanding the complex experiences of Jews migrating from Poland to Argentina. My dissertation suggests a multi-directional and global reading of Jewish migration, and underlines the transnational cultural links between Eastern Europe and Latin America fostered by migrating Jews.

Between 1918 and 1939, around 60,000 Polish Jews established a new home in Argentina. Joining a group of Jewish-Polish immigrants who arrived in Argentina prior to the re-establishment of an independent Poland in 1918, they formed a strong ethnic community that quickly became very Argentine, but at the same time voiced their unique Jewish-Polish character. In the interwar period, concepts of Jewish ethnonational revival centered around the Yiddish language were also transferred by migrants to Argentina. At the time, Poland was the main center of Jewish political, social and cultural life, and Argentine Jews of Polish origin saw themselves in a constant relationship and dialogue with Jewish Poland, imagined as the heartland of Yiddish civilization. As ethnic leaders put it, they perceived themselves as a “continuation,” a “colony” or “a new branch” of a global Yiddishland. I believe it is appropriate to use the term “re-yiddishization” to define a temporary comeback of Yiddish culture in post-1918 Argentina, including on the part of the earlier argentinized generation. The political, national and cultural unrest that Polish Jews brought to Argentina co-shaped the character of

the community, converting it into an aspiring actor on the map of the Yiddishland. My dissertation examines the development of this process, inquiring about its origins, stages and consequences.

My study shows that the development of networks within the Yiddishland was performed in complementarity with formative Jewish-Argentine identities that were shaped under the influence of the unifying powers of Argentine nationalism. The Argentine nation-state, its melting pot policies and its efforts at nationalizing immigrants challenged the diasporic framework by offering Jewish immigrants the promise of secular universal citizenship and national inclusion. In early twentieth century Argentina, the local national discourse questioned the ethno-national identification with Jews in other parts of the world. Jews were supposed to (and many wanted to) be foremost Argentine, hence diasporic Jewish-national alternatives were approached with ambiguity by nationalist politicians and those Jews who grew up with these assumptions. Despite the discrepancies between Argentine national belonging and diasporic Jewish identifications, both phenomena proved to be compatible and amenable to cross-pollination in early twentieth century Argentina.

My dissertation approaches Jewish migration to Argentina as a continuous process that took place on both sides of the Atlantic. I treat it as a socio-cultural dialogue on Jewish ethnicity, modernity and diasporism. Jewish-Polish immigration to Argentina and the founding of the Jewish-Polish community in the Southern Cone led to the development of a sense of transnational Jewish-Polish self-understanding. For a number of immigrants, the fact of living outside of Jewish Poland did not mean weakening or repressing their Polish Jewishness. Conversely, in Argentina, their distinct Jewish-Polish experience and identity was brought to a new, manifold expression. Jewish emigration from Poland to Argentina serves as a case study of how ethnicity evolved and was transformed among migrants and their children, and the dynamics that emerged between putting down roots in a new country and commitments to the Old Country. I focus on a generation of migrants, Polish Jews, who relocated to Argentina and represent a transitory stage within the evolution of individual and collective ethnic identities.

I argue that ethno-cultural Yiddishism served as a platform that allowed diasporic communities to gather around shared ethnic goals and helped to shape modern Jewish cultural and ethno-national identities. The Yiddish language was a tool that allowed the transmission not only of cultural, but also of political and social contents across the borders. Yiddish became the *lingua franca* of most Polish Jews around the world, and thus a tool that allowed the circulation of cultural contents and ideas, which afterwards began to also sprout in Argentina. Above all, cultural Yiddishism started to play an increasing role and some Argentine Jews

considered their new homeland as a part of something bigger – a transnational Yiddishland. New bonds of intellectual, cultural and discursive exchange and dialogue made the connection between both diasporas even stronger. This change was visible in the heated intellectual discussions about the place of Jews in Argentina and their relations with the Old World. Interbellum Argentina experienced both the development of Yiddish print culture and schooling, while witnessing the growing inclusion of Jews into the nation. Argentine Jews sought ways of combining Jewishness with Argentineness.

My research is rooted both in Latin American Jewish studies and in Polish Jewish studies, and bridges these two often separated sub-disciplines. Using the paradigm of a global Yiddishland, I discuss the parallel development of the Jewish ethnonational movement in Poland and in Argentina, while observing the transfer of cultural, social and political contents from Eastern Europe to Argentina. My study allows to see more effectively the hierarchies and dynamics within the globalizing Jewish world of the interbellum. It sheds light on the often forgotten or marginalized aspects of Jewish migration. For instance, I re-read the activities coordinated by the *landsmen* movement and picture these ethnic associations as a path, rather than a “holding on to the past” obstacle for becoming Argentine. Looking at the daily lives of Polish landmen, at their picnics and family parties, I trace the ways in which underlining Jewish-Polish sub-ethnicity helped them to build a sense of Argentineness. The *landsmanshaftn* were a space where Jewish and Argentine merged relatively smoothly: time proved that in Buenos Aires Yiddish songs could be sung to the melody of a tango.

The first part, “Conceptualizing Argentina: The Jews of Poland and the Land of Silver,” engages with debates on Argentina in Poland and covers the ways in which various actors imagined the emigration. I use the Argentine case to portray the ruptures within Polish Jewry and to present the Argentine debates as a lens for looking at the transformation it was undergoing. My dissertation analyzes the emergence of “Argentine discourse” in the Jewish Poland of the interbellum. I investigate Jewish press reports about the possibilities and dangers of immigration to Argentina, as well as the so-called “emigration guidebooks,” which were brochures and books that helped the emigrants to navigate their relocation to South America. The impact of pre-emigration imaginaries of Argentina in Poland played a role in the formulation of transnational Jewish identities. By looking at Jewish-Polish discourse on Argentina, we can better understand future cultural and social developments among immigrants in Latin America. How Jews in Argentina defined their identities was partly conditioned and nurtured by Old World conceptualizations of Argentina. I argue that a specific discourse on

Argentina developed in interwar Poland that combined hope, danger and exoticization. This understanding was strengthened by popular visions of Argentina in the Yiddish theater and literature in Poland. My dissertation is innovative in situating Argentina in a context of modern Polish history, especially in regard to Jewish expectations and confusion with the re-emergence of an independent Polish state in 1918. The way that Jews in Argentina defined their identities was partly conditioned and nurtured by Old World conceptualizations of Argentina.

In the Polish-Jewish imaginary, Argentina was not a real country, but an imagined space, a mix of gossip, newspaper news and emigration guidebooks. At the very beginning of the 20th century, Polish Jews had little knowledge about Argentina and could hardly tell the difference between the USA – the “classic America” – and other countries located south of it. Throughout the interbellum, however, this imagined entity was becoming increasingly Jewish and familiar. In the 1920s and 1930s, the images of Argentina became much more nuanced. Argentina was seen not only as a potential emigration destination, but was popularly identified as a hotbed of international Jewish prostitution. In articles published in Poland's Yiddish dailies, we find hope and great expectations regarding immigration to Argentina, but also a clear articulation of anxiety and fear. This ambiguity defined the portrayal of Argentina in Jewish Poland.

The second part, “‘The Discoverers’: Travel Writing, Narrating Argentina and Expanding the Yiddishland,” focuses on Yiddish travel literature on Argentina. *Fun vayte lender* by Peretz Hirschbein (1916) and *Di argentinishe rayze* by Hersh Dovid Nomberg (1924) serve as sources for observing the geographic expansion of the Yiddishland to Latin America. My work approaches Yiddish travelogues written by Jewish-Polish writers, who visited Argentina at the beginning of the twentieth century, as a space that allows us to hear the polyphonic Argentine-Jewish and Jewish-Polish voices. Yiddish travel writing and traveling to Argentina became a space that both fostered and reflected a cultural, social and national interconnectedness between Jewish Poland and Argentina. Exploring the narratives of Peretz Hirschbein and Hersh Dovid Nomberg allows me to look at both the process of becoming Argentine and redefining the relationship to Poland. The visits of the travel writers in Argentina strengthened the cultural links within a framework of transnational Yiddishland and for the first time included Argentina as a legitimate center of Jewish life. Jewish Argentina claimed for itself a place within the Jewish world via the travel texts by Eastern European authors and challenged earlier marginalizing visions that linked Argentina exclusively with Jewish female trafficking.

Yiddish travel writing appeared as an important mechanism that helped to construct individual and collective imageries of Argentina. Peretz Hirschbein and Hersh Dovid Nomberg adopted the role of cultural mediators that explained Argentina to their Jewish-Polish readers, who either sought accurate information on emigration or had a desire for sheer entertainment in the form of a good travel book. Peretz Hirschbein and Hersh Dovid Nomberg emerged as powerful figures who, benefitting from the new Jewish diasporism, played an important role in its development. Their Argentine travelogues responded to the needs of Eastern European Jews, who searched for first-hand accounts about Jewish life in the new centers of Ashkenazi diaspora, but at the same time nurtured the very development of these needs. The fact that *Fun vayte lender* and *Argentinishe rayze* were read and known both in Poland and Argentina (as well as other Jewish centers) defined travel writing as a new and important transnational platform that allowed dispersed Polish Jews to reconnect and join a discussion.

The third part, titled “*Israelita Argentino or Argentinier Yid? Cultural Choices, National Belonging and the Weight of European Baggage,*” engages with Jewish-Argentine discussions on Argentineness, Jewishness and the place of Jews in Argentina. The chapter is based on my research on Argentine policies and debates concerning the Jews, Argentine Jewish essay-writing and immigrant literature. I argue here that the postwar Jewish-Polish immigration wave challenged and complicated the ongoing processes of cultural integration. The influx of Jews who experienced the Yiddish socio-cultural renaissance in Poland helped to once again anchor Yiddish culture in Argentina and temporarily *re-yiddishize* it. This part portrays the process of becoming Argentine and playing the diasporic Yiddish agenda as parts of the same process of negotiating Jewish *argentinidad*.

The development of networks within the Yiddishland was performed in complementarity with constructing Jewish-Argentine identities under the influence of the unifying power of Argentine nationalism. For a number of immigrants, the fact of living outside of Jewish Poland did not mean weakening or repressing their Polish Jewishness. Conversely, in Argentina, their distinct Jewish-Polish experience and identity found a new, manifold expression. I start by introducing the immigration ideologies that developed in Argentina since the mid-nineteenth century, underscoring how Argentine leaders imagined the place of Jews within the national project. I move on to portray the circles of *israelitas argentinos*, the argentinized generation of children of the first agricultural colonists. Analyzing the cultural circle of *Sociedad Hebraica Argentina* with its charismatic leader Salomón Resnick, I portray them as agents of hybridization that managed to merge the Argentine and the Yiddish.

Although they saw Argentina as their physical and spiritual homeland, with Spanish as the language of choice in the public sphere, argentinized Jews did not relinquish their commitment to Eastern Europe. Simultaneously, the Yiddish cultural sphere in Argentina was not an insular space, but an arena of hybridization where the diasporic and the local mixed. A key Argentine Yiddishist, Pinie Katz demanded that Yiddish culture must acquire a specific Argentine character and include local themes and motives. The lines between Yiddish and Jewish-Argentine cultural spheres were blurred and the division hardly had a clear-cut character. Similar patterns appeared concerning immigrant literature.

The fourth part, “Being a ‘Good Polish Jew’ in Buenos Aires: *Landsmanshaftn*, Ethnicity and Transnational Solidarity,” is a re-reading of Argentine landsman history. *Landsmanshaftn*, associations that united Jews coming from the same town or region, were often marginalized in the historiography and portrayed as nostalgic, backward-looking gatherings. This part challenges these simplifications and offers a panoramic and complex picture that underscores the role of *landsmanshaftn* in ethnic empowerment. Many Jewish-Argentines shared a conviction about their ethno-national co-responsibility for the wellbeing of their “brothers in Poland.” This was perfectly visible in fundraising campaigns organized in Argentina. *Poylisher Farband*, a central organization representing Polish Jews in the country, was a key institution that stood behind organized help offered to coreligionists in Poland. The help campaigns were a part of a transnational solidarity network that marked the constitution of a new diasporic Polish Jewishness. The fundraising efforts for the Jewish cause in Poland were rooted in the Argentine-Jewish desire to be perceived as an active and respected part of an imagined Yiddishland. Involvement on behalf of the “Old Country” allowed Argentine Jews to imagine themselves as meaningful and involved. It was around this point that a discourse was developed about “a national obligation” towards fellows Jews in Eastern Europe. The issue of a Jewish-Argentine ethnic image and respectability entered a transnational dimension. Ethnic engagement was used for building ethnic empowerment, which was supposed to stabilize the position of Jewish immigrants in Argentina.

At the same time, the campaigns emphasized the Argentine success of the donors and were labeled as “Argentine help.” The transnational engagement with Poland was used by Jewish-Polish immigrants to argue in favor of their belonging to Argentina. Solidarity and commitment to Poland, imagined as the Jewish center in Eastern Europe, both moved Argentine Jews out of the periphery of the Jewish world and placed them at the center of a burgeoning multiethnic Buenos Aires society. The leaders of the *Poylisher Farband* argued

that Argentine Jewry was mature and developed sufficiently enough to become an active global actor, rather than a peripheral, still “green” *yishev*. By organizing campaigns to help the Jews in Poland and by protesting against Poland’s anti-Semitism, the Argentine *landslayt* presented themselves as meaningful, powerful branches of a Jewish-Polish diaspora. The claims of the *landslayt* were increasingly acknowledged, as Jewish institutions in Poland were in true need of Argentine money and international support.

Taken as a whole, my dissertation sheds light on the heterogeneous and complex issue of immigrant commitments, belongings and expectations. Jewish-Argentine identities were formed in relation to diasporic visions of Jewish peoplehood and Yiddishist ethno-cultural nationalism. Jewish-Polish immigrants not only responded and interacted with the Argentine reality that defined their everyday lives, but also faced a need to rethink and manifest their relation towards their homeland in Eastern Europe. My research shows how Polish Jews re-conceptualized who they were after immigration, how they narrated their ethnic history and what consequences this had for the Jewish-Polish community in Argentina and Poland. My dissertation approaches Eastern European history, and Polish history specifically, in a global context, proving that a transnational approach can be productively applied in the context of historical migrations. I see it is a contribution to the study of ethnicity, migration and Jewish history.