WATCHING THE DETECTIVES: Four Views of Immigrant Life in Latin America

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HOTEL CUBA: A HISTORICAL DIARY OF THE PRE-CASTRO JEWISH EXPERIENCE. Produced and directed by Mark Szuchman and Robert Levine. Distributed by the University of Illinois Film Center, Champagne, Ill.[1] (United States, 1984. English, color, 40 minutes.)

THE YIDISHE GAUCHOS. Directed by Mark Freeman. Produced by Mark Freeman and Alison Brysk. Distributed by Filmakers' Library.[2] (Argentina-United States, 1989. Spanish and English, color, 28 minutes.)

JUDEUS EM SÃO PAULO: O ENCONTRO DE DIFERENTES TRAJETORIAS. Produced by Eva A. Blay for Rádio e Televisão Cultura/São Paulo. No distribution in the United States. (Brazil, 1984. Portuguese, color, 23 minutes.)

A COMUNIDADE JUDAICA NO MUNICIPIO DE EREXIM. Produced and directed by Ademir Peretti. No distribution in the United States. (Brazil, 1987. Portuguese, color, 49 minutes.)

During the past two decades, those studying Latin America have widened the scope of their investigations. Under the general rubric of "social history" have come examinations of gender, ethnicity, criminality, and varied aspects of the quotidian. Yet this expansion of research has led scholars into two problematic areas: where and how to find pertinent information, and how to present it. Finding information, although difficult, has not been impossible. Ground-breaking studies in Spanish, Portuguese, and English have convincingly demonstrated that the masses lack neither history nor historians to study them. More problematically, however, many studies of "the people" have limited accessibility to wide audiences, including college and university students, because of the prices of scholarly publications and the stylistic demands of an exclusive academy.

One means by which social historians may be able to reach wider

1. University of Illinois Film Center, 1325 South Oak Street, Champagne, Ill. 61820.
2. Filmakers' Library, 124 East 40th Street, Suite 901, New York, N.Y. 10016.

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audiences is via documentary film.[3] The goal of documentaries, as their name suggests, is to document. Yet no documentary (or for that matter, no document) is divorced from the individual or individuals who have produced it. The documentary film, then, does not present an objective record of some exact past. Rather, the documentary represents the subjective "Truth" of a filmmaker or producer. As Robert Rosenstone has perceptively noted, "The word 'documentary' is itself a misnomer, at least if the implication is that the camera can somehow document a passive past."[4] Documentaries are thus simultaneously teaching aids, like textbooks and other documents, and part of a historical discourse that is seemingly abstracted from the documentary's own original production.

Recognition of filmic scholarship has only recently been forthcoming. The *American Historical Review* now reviews films, and the Latin American Studies Association has made a film series a regular component of its conferences. Moreover, the number of monographs dealing with the study of film and Latin American film is growing.[5] Research suggests, and classroom experience validates, that documentaries are of great value in helping nonprofessional scholars understand the physical and human side of history that is often missing from the printed page. Furthermore, because documentaries are often available for sale or rental on video, they can easily be shown to large groups.

Film clearly broadens the audience available to scholars, yet in doing so it modifies both research and teaching goals. Within a research context that demands citations and carefully presented arguments, the making of documentary films inevitably leads to problems of space and time. Documentaries are rarely more than an hour long, often closer to a half hour. This relatively short span of time demands brief narrative scripts, although one picture (or frame) is not always worth a thousand words. All filmmakers face this problem, but clearly, academic filmmakers in particular struggle with the issue. Evaluations of films, however, cannot be based on the same criteria by which scholars rate written monographs. Rather, the inclusive nature of film must be accepted as a starting point for evaluations of how well any particular production reaches its goal of conveying the most sophisticated information to the widest audience.

3. The terms *film, documentary,* and *documentary film* will be used interchangeably in this essay.

4. Robert Rosenstone, "Introduction to Film Reviews," *American Historical Review* 94, no. 4 (Oct. 1989):1031.

5. See, for example, E. Bradford Burns, *Latin American Cinema: Film and History* (Los Angeles: University of California, 1975); *Brazilian Cinema,* edited by Randal Johnson and Robert Stam (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1988); *Cinema and Social Change in Latin America: Conversations with Filmmakers,* edited by Julianne Burton (Austin: University of Texas, 1986); Liz Kotz, "Unofficial Stories: Documentaries by Latinas and Latin American Women," *The Independent, Film and Video Monthly* 12, no. 4 (May 1989):21–27.

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All the documentaries under review here share a number of characteristics. Each was made on a small budget and takes a historical approach. None of them consciously attempt to contextualize their subjects other than to make a progressive historical argument. All employ a narrative format and combine still photos, some live action footage (historical and contemporary), and oral histories in which the interviewees are seen. In addition, the questioner (often the researcher), as differentiated from the narrator, is never seen and only rarely heard. Thus all four films share a pretension of objectivity that may lead the unknowing or unsophisticated viewer to presume that the past is being presented "factually" through the images and words of historical figures and events.

The four documentaries also share a similar topic, immigration to Latin America and specifically Jewish immigration to the region. This subject is of particular interest because historical monographs on the general and specific subject are limited, especially in English.[6] This lack of coverage may be a result of some nationally specific aspects of immigration that make it appear difficult to apply regionally to Latin America. Yet even in countries with massive foreign presences, immigrants and the immigration process are often treated as a subset of other issues.[7] Although immigration is less important statistically in some countries than in others, it is nevertheless a useful means by which to examine a society. While Jewish immigration accounts for only a small percentage of all movement to Latin America, it provides a societal entree, a periscope whose view helps scholars to understand better the Latin American experience.

These four documentaries also exhibit some critical differences.[8] Production levels vary, from Mark Freeman's professionally filmed and edited *The Yidishe Gauchos* to Ademir Peretti's home-video-like *A Comunidade Judaica no Município de Erexim*. More noticeably, as discourses on minority-majority cultural relations in Latin America, the four films seem at least partially defined by the nationalities of the filmmakers. Those from the United States (Freeman, Levine, and Szuchman) take a pluralistic

6. Magnus Mörner, *Adventurers and Proletarians: The Story of Migrants in Latin America* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1985); Thomas Holloway, *Immigrants on the Land: Coffee and Society in São Paulo, 1886–1934* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980); Judith L. Elkin, *Jews of the Latin American Republics* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980); and Hernán Asdrúbal Silva et al., *Bibliografía sobre el impacto del proceso inmigratorio masivo en el Cono Sur de América* (Mexico City: Instituto Panamericano de Geografía e Historia, 1984).

7. Warren Dean, *The Industrialization of São Paulo* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1969); Nicolás Sánchez-Albornoz, *The Population of Latin America* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1974); and James R. Scobie, *Buenos Aires: Plaza to Suburb, 1870–1910* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974).

8. Other documentaries on the Latin American Jewish experience are *Argentina's Jew: Days of Awe* (United States) and *Sosua* (United States). Both are available from Ergo Media Inc., P. O. Box 2037, Teaneck, New Jersey 07666.

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Illustration 1. Recent Jewish immigrants at the Immigrants' Hotel in Buenos Aires, circa 1900. Photograph used in The Yidishe Gauchos *and reproduced here courtesy of the Archivo General de la Nación in Buenos Aires.*

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stance arguing that while immigrant integration is good, assimilation is not. These three filmmakers stridently maintain that the loss of Jewish and East European cultural traits after migration is a tragedy and that the strength of any minority community lies in its ability to remain separate yet equal. Ademir Peretti, a Brazilian, takes a different stance. He clearly intends to demonstrate that minority groups must assimilate, even if they are permitted to maintain the small cultural differences in life-cycle events that he finds charming. The Brazil of *A Comunidade Judaica* is not a nation of minorities but a single people. This argument is not new and is challenged in Eva Blay's *Judeus em São Paulo.* This film proposes that immigrant and minority communities must remain different in order to survive, that the hyphen (as in Afro-Latin Americans and Syrian-Argentines) is critical. Yet Blay's aspirations for a pluralistic society differ fundamentally from those of the U.S. filmmakers. *Judeus em São Paulo* is filled with a sense of concern for the disappearance of a culture not only via self-assimilation but also as a result of popular nativism and government-sponsored assimilationist educational and social policies.

Mark Freeman's *The Yidishe Gauchos,* an examination of immigrant life on Argentina's Jewish agricultural colonies, is perhaps the most sophisticated film of the four examined for this essay. A filmmaker from San Francisco, Freeman conceived and completed the project while accompanying his wife, political scientist Alison Brysk, on a year-long research trip to Argentina. *The Yidishe Gauchos* was clearly made by a professional artist. The sense of film and filmic techniques is always apparent in the constant interplay among live action, still photographs, historical footage, overlapping maps, and music. Actor Eli Wallach's narration makes this documentary a pleasure to listen to. *The Yidishe Gauchos* is extremely comfortable for academic viewers because the shifts from past to present are completed with ease. Freeman is also a good detective. He has collected photographs and films from colonists and their descendants, including an original film made by an agricultural engineer in Argentina. Freeman's own ability to speak Spanish meant that he was not forced to rely on English speakers for his oral histories. The subtitling is also excellent, with even Yiddish-language songs subtitled. *The Yidishe Gauchos* thus permits the audience to know individuals as well as their social surroundings in an aural and visual sense.

The Yidishe Gauchos begins with a short history of Jewish immigration to Argentina, including a map of South America with Argentina highlighted for those who know nothing of the region. The "Teacher's Discussion Guide" written to supplement the film is also useful in this regard. The documentary focuses on the Jewish agricultural colony of Moisesville, founded in 1889. In 1891 Moisesville became part of the Jewish Colonization Association (JCA), which was established by the Baron Maurice de Hirsch, according to the film, to create "a new way of

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life for Jews as farmers on the South American frontier." The actual goals of the JCA and de Hirsch were neither so noble nor so simple. A major motivation for sending Jewish colonists to Latin America was to keep Eastern European Jews from relocating in Western Europe, where they might damage the status of established Jewish communities.[9] For example, the original articles of association of the JCA explicitly state that Jews would be settled "in various parts of the world except in Europe."[10] Although these nonphilanthropic motives for the creation and work of the JCA have been well documented, *The Yidishe Gauchos* never mentions them. The documentary does contain a virtual advertisement for the work of the JCA in Israel today. This section seems entirely out of place, even though the credits indicate that the foundation linked to the JCA helped fund the production.

Like most documentaries, *The Yidishe Gauchos* starts at the beginning. An elderly resident of Moisesville describes a pogrom in Eastern Europe, thus establishing one important motive for emigration. Judith Laiken Elkin, a historian of the Latin American Jewish experience, briefly describes the JCA's decision to establish colonies in Argentina. Haim Avni, of Hebrew University's Institute of Contemporary Jewry, is also interviewed and by interspersing the comments of academics with those of elderly members of the community, Moisesville is soon brought to life on the screen. In 1925 the town had thirty-three thousand Jewish inhabitants, and this is the era that the *The Yidishe Gauchos* presents.

Freeman's film tries to give the viewer a sense of the difference between the Jewish immigrant farmers and their neighboring Gentile gauchos, described famously by Domingo Sarmiento as uneducated "with ill-understood facts of nature, and with superstitions and vulgar traditions."[11] The Jewish colonists, in contrast, were almost universally literate, and more Yiddish dailies were published in Argentina than in the state of New York. The colony's library of ten thousand volumes was undoubtedly an oddity on the pampas. Yiddish theater productions, with New York's biggest stars, usually made their first Argentine (and South American) stop in Moisesville. It is not surprising that Moisesville was referred to by its inhabitants as "Idischelohnd" ("Jewish country" or "the

9. See Elkin, *Jews of the Latin American Republics;* Haim Avni, *Argentina y la historia de la inmigración judía, 1810–1950* (Jerusalem: Editorial Universitaria Magnes, 1983); James Scobie, *Revolution on the Pampas* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964); S. Adler-Rudell, "Moritz Baron Hirsch," *Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook* 8 (New York: Leo Baeck Institute, 1963); and Jeff Lesser, "Pawns of the Powerful: Jewish Immigration to Brazil, 1904–1945," Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1989.

10. *Memorandum and Articles of Association of the Jewish Colonization Association of September 19, 1891* (London: Jewish Colonization Association, 1891).

11. Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, *Life in the Argentine Republic in the Days of the Tyrants; Or, Civilization and Barbarism* (New York: Hafner, 1970), 28.

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land of the Jews") and that Yiddish songs celebrated that "the Messiah has already come to a little corner of Argentina."

This strong sense of being Jewish, which eighty-five-year-old Taibe Trumper describes as "a totally Jewish way of life," has not continued. Freeman cleverly moves from past to present by interspersing comments and footage from "the Jerusalem of Argentina" with interviews of those who note not so sadly that their children today speak only a few words of Yiddish. One resident reminisces that "it was different then," fondly remembering that the first generation born in Argentina wore the same wide chaps and leather boots as the "real" gauchos even though "they spoke perfect Yiddish."

The celebratory tone of *The Yidishe Gauchos* begins to diminish in the second half of the film. Discussions of crop failure due to weather, locusts, and the economic policies of the JCA are presented at length. Natalio Guiger, the eighty-two-year-old former manager of Moisesville's agricultural cooperative, complains that the Jewish colonists "were like slaves to commercial interests." Freeman points out, however, that while Jews in Moisesville might have been afraid of losing their land, the 1919 Semana Trágica showed that those in Buenos Aires "were in danger of losing their lives." Nevertheless, by the 1940s, more Jews were leaving the colony than arriving; and by the end of World War II, the Jewish colonial experience had virtually ended.

Ultimately, *The Yidishe Gauchos* is about people, and one of the most valuable aspects of this documentary is the frequent personalizing of the colony's history. An interview with eighty-two-year-old Professor Máximo Yagupsky is interspersed with footage from town weddings, and one almost feels as if social history should never be written, only viewed. An interview on preparing wedding food with Doicha Winer, for whom "food always comes first," led one viewer of *The Yidishe Gauchos* to consider bringing Winer to the United States to bake the strudel for her daughter's bat mitzvah. In these scenes, the strength of the documentary comes through, and viewers of *The Yidishe Gauchos,* especially students, will better understand Latin America and the history of its immigrant groups after seeing it.

Robert Levine and Mark Szuchman's *Hotel Cuba* examines the history of some twenty-five thousand Jewish immigrants who entered Cuba in the first half of the twentieth century. Unlike Freeman, who spent time in Moisesville filming *The Yidishe Gauchos,* Levine and Szuchman did not have the luxury of making their film from within Cuba's Jewish community because most of its members now live in the United States. The filmmakers are thus forced to rely on the recollections of new immigrants to the United States who talk about earlier immigrant experiences in Cuba. This approach is problematic for Levine and Szuchman because they are never really in a position to give viewers a physical sense of many key aspects of the Cuban immigrant experience.

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Illustration 2. Synagogue Chevet-Ahim, Old City Havana, in 1978. The interior featured portraits of Fidel Castro, Zionist leaders Theodor Herzl and Chaim Weizmann, and a neon Star of David. Photo by Bill Aron, used in the film Hotel Cuba *and reproduced here with his permission.*

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Levine and Szuchman seem torn between making an entertaining film and creating a visual historical monograph. Freeman appears to have done his interviews first, then collected his photographs, and finally written a text to go with the images. In contrast, Levine and Szuchman appear to have written a scholarly text based on research and then tried to find visual means by which to convey it. This sequence leads at times to inconsistencies. Careful oral histories are conducted with Cuban Jews, yet those portrayed on film are identified only in the credits. This lack of idenfication may lead the viewer to question the claim that the narrative is "told in the words of typical members of the Cuban Jewish community." In addition, the film at times shifts from careful academic narration to debatable generalizations that seem written to fit the visual text. The tension between "art" and "scholarship," however, is usually resolved towards the latter. *Hotel Cuba* has little of the smoothness of *The Yidishe Gauchos* but is far more complex intellectually.

Hotel Cuba begins with a discussion of Sephardic and Ashkenazic Jews and their sociolinguistic situations prior to migration. This background gives the viewer a strong sense of the Jewish historical context of the Cuban experience. The distinction is an important one. Sephardic Jews, many of whom entered Cuba before World War I, often spoke Ladino, a form of Spanish written in Hebrew letters. This background made "adaptation to Cuban Spanish . . . easier because their language was derived from mostly classical Spanish." Ashkenazic Jews tended to speak Yiddish or the majority languages of their nations of emigration or both. Yet this group came to dominate Cuban Jewish life after World War I and eventually made up about three-quarters of the Jewish population, despite having to learn a more unfamiliar language in Cuba. This kind of careful historical contextualization is apparent throughout the film and leaves the viewer with a sense of the complexity of immigrant life in Cuba. The filmmakers' historical emphasis is also apparent in the choice of subjects covered. Freeman concentrates on education, the arts, and life-cycle events. Levine and Szuchman, in contrast, examine such scholarly topics as the immigration process, economic establishment within the Cuban economy, and anti-Semitism, including the episode of the *St. Louis,* a ship filled with European refugees who were denied permission to disembark in Havana in 1939 even though they had Cuban visas.[12]

These topical choices, however, place limits on the visual portions of the text of *Hotel Cuba.* The documentary contains little footage and the photographs used tend to be of individuals rather than events, suggesting that the materials available to the filmmakers were extremely limited.

12. A short newsreel, *Bound for Nowhere: The St. Louis Episode,* was produced by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee in 1939. It is available from the National Center for Jewish Film, Brandeis University, Lown 102, Waltham, Mass. 02254.

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Perhaps for similar reasons, all interviews were conducted in English, even when the respondent might have been more comfortable in Spanish or Yiddish. These technical problems, however, do not detract from the basic thesis of the film, that the Cuban Jewish experience is illustrative of both general and Jewish immigrant life in the Americas.

One of the unfortunate problems facing all academic filmmakers is how to portray complex situations, such as differential immigration statistics over time, without using charts or other teaching tools that seem out of place. Although the visual aspects of *Hotel Cuba* are often satisfying, some historical trends are expressed in such general terms as to be misleading. One example occurs in discussing choice of destination. It is argued that "postwar restriction limited their [Jewish] entry to the United States and Canada and thus many sought to enter one or another of the Latin American republics." Although the statement is not inaccurate, it suggests that postwar Jewish immigration to Latin America was equal or higher than their immigration to the United States. Between 1921 and 1942, however, the United States accepted (often unwillingly) more than twice as many Jewish immigrants as did all the Latin American nations combined (although both Argentina and Brazil accepted more Jews than Canada did). Furthermore, *Hotel Cuba* suggests that personal choice was generally an unimportant factor in immigrants' eventual selection of Latin America. This was not the case. Although immigration restrictions played a significant part in immigrant decision making, *Hotel Cuba* glosses over the fact that more than one hundred and fifteen thousand Jews lived in Argentina before World War I and that significant Jewish populations were present throughout most of Latin America, including Cuba, before restrictive immigration laws were put into place.[13]

The choice of Latin America, and Cuba specifically, by postwar immigrants was not exclusively based on restriction elsewhere. Chain-migration theory suggests that the combination of preexisting populations and a general strengthening of the postwar, pre-depression Latin American economies were important pull factors. Levine and Szuchman note that the (mainly Sephardic) Jewish population of Cuba before World War I numbered twenty-five hundred, certainly large enough to lead migrants to choose Cuba over other countries of potential relocation. Furthermore, as the filmmakers point out, most immigrants "stayed, losing their desire to ever immigrate again." This point is an important one because immigrants, those rare individuals who are willing to relocate to a new country, are also those most likely to remigrate if the situation proves to be unsatisfactory. The choice to remain thus reflects some level

13. Sergio Della Pergola, "Demographic Trends of Latin American Jewry," in *The Jewish Presence in Latin America*, edited by Judith L. Elkin and Gilbert W. Merkx (Boston, Mass.: Allen and Unwin, 1987), 92.

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of satisfaction in Cuba, even if only in comparison with the situation before migration. One unidentified interviewee articulates the point by noting that although initially "Cuba was used as a stepping point into the United States, . . . most of the people liked Cuba and stayed there."

These historical issues will certainly provoke debate among scholars of the Latin American immigration process. Yet *Hotel Cuba* does such a fine job of portraying much of the immigrant experience that the scholarly debates often seem unimportant in comparison. *Hotel Cuba* gives the viewer a sense of the disorientation afflicting immigrants after arriving in a new land. One interviewee mentions the feelings of alienation engendered when he did not understand questions in Spanish put to him by immigration officials. Another discusses his shock at seeing "women selling themselves openly, sitting behind windows," a point brought home with a photograph of a Cuban prostitute. Discussion of the Jewish white-slave trade and the interviewee's obvious embarrassment in mentioning it indicate that the underclass in Cuba consisted of both immigrants and natives. Another immigrant recalls how his desire to buy a cup of coffee was dashed by his lacking two cents. Peddling, a common occupation among Jewish immigrants, is illustrated with a sad description of how Jews sold Eskimo Pies, "carrying [them] in small boxes on the stomach, cold with ice, [while] the sun in the back was burning." Information like this makes *Hotel Cuba* and the documentary medium shine.

Levine and Szuchman make a strong argument in *Hotel Cuba* that Cuba "represented the insecure façade of a hotel, a transitory place, a temporary lodging, a place not really open even to second and third generation immigrant families." It is interesting to observe that those interviewed always distinguish between "Jews" and "Cubans." For social historians concerned with issues like class, racism, and corruption, *Hotel Cuba* makes a fine illustrative text. Sadly, the story of Cuban Jewry does not end in Cuba but in Miami. By 1959, the Jewish population of Cuba was dropping, and by the mid-1960s, Jews were leaving along with much of Cuba's middle class. By 1984, only eight hundred Jews remained on the island, mainly in Havana. *Hotel Cuba* ends appropriately with a sad home movie of what is claimed to be Cuba's last seder.

Judeus em São Paulo: O Encontro de Diferentes Trajetórias and *A Comunidade Judaica no Município de Erexim,* two Brazilian-made documentaries, are unfortunately available only in Portuguese, limiting their use as tools for classroom teaching. Their similarities end here. *Judeus em São Paulo,* researched and produced by a group of sociologists under the direction of Eva Blay at the Universidade de São Paulo, is a carefully done and moving portrayal of Brazilian immigrant life after World War I, despite some historical inaccuracies. Ademir Peretti's *A Comunidade Judaica em Erexim* ostensibly deals with the descendants of Bessarabian-Jewish agricultural colonists who settled in this small interior city in Rio Grande do Sul.

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Virtually all its "facts" are inaccurate, however, and much of the narrative text is based on popular myth rather than reality. For example, a brief introductory discussion of Jewish life in Eastern Europe is illustrated with film clips from contemporary feature films portraying Eastern European Jewish life only as Hollywood can. The narration is extraordinarily simplistic, making such claims as "Jews were victims of pogroms only because they were Jews," and the accompanying music is almost always inappropriate and at times nonsensical. Most of the film, fortunately, is without narration. Instead, a video of the city of Erexim and its environs is shown with "Jewish" music providing a background.

What then is the value of *A Comunidade Judaica em Erexim*? It proves to be the film's function as social discourse, in this case of one common Brazilian elite view of minorities. The documentary is clearly a statement regarding assimilation, that "to be Brazilian" is to give up the past and with it all significant aspects of cultural heritage. For example, the text harps on the notion that "Jews integrated with Brazilians and adopted their customs," although this is not entirely the case. The not-so-subtle argument here is that all immigrant groups, Jews included, have or should become "Brazilians." Yet Peretti does not appear to accept his own claims entirely, as evidenced by another notion that Jews are really not Brazilians but only "participate together with *a gente gaúcha*" (the people of Rio Grande do Sul). Peretti's contradictory desire to believe that Jews are insiders, although he clearly views them as outsiders, becomes most apparent in the last half of the film. As Jews are hailed for their economic integration in Brazil, image after image shows the storefronts of Jewish-owned businesses, each time focusing on the "Jewish" name of the owner.

While *A Comunidade Judaica em Erexim* portrays some sort of mythic hope for the integration of non-Catholics in Brazil, *Judeus em São Paulo* attempts to show the permanency of Jewish cultural life in that country. Not surprisingly, this film was made and produced by a group of academics seeking to disprove the notion of Brazilian racial democracy and its corollary of religious homogeneity. That the majority of the researchers and writers of *Judeus em São Paulo* are Jewish is emphasized throughout the narration by use of the pronouns "we" and "us" (as in "we Jewish immigrants"). The idea that one can be Jewish *and* Brazilian is demonstrated in the opening credits, in both Portuguese and Yiddish, and in the first line of the film: "We were immigrants like all others, only we were Jews."

Judeus em São Paulo takes the same narrative tact as the other documentaries in beginning with Jewish life in the countries of origin. This introductory section is problematic in that it promotes some of the same popular myths found in *A Comunidade Judaica em Erexim*. The claim is made that most East European Jews who migrated to Brazil came from *shtetls*, small rural towns in Eastern Europe where Jews were legally segregated from gentiles. But the Jewish population of the shtetls had

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been shrinking since the mid-nineteenth century, and by the early 1920s, the period of greatest Jewish entry into Brazil, the majority of Jews were living in large cities. Another section is subtitled "From the ghetto to the free city (*à cidade livre*)," yet it is doubtful that any Jewish immigrant to Brazil had ever lived in a ghetto, a term applying specifically to the forced legal and physical separation of Jews within urban areas. These kinds of inaccuracies are common among those who examine diaspora experiences without adequate knowledge of the phase before migration. In Brazil one often hears similar popular myths in reference to Japanese life prior to migration, and as is the case with Jews, they clearly relate to each minority group's self-perception.

The production quality of *Judeus em São Paulo* is excellent, as is the accompanying brochure of the same name. The research for the film is superb, representing the results of an oral history project in which ninety people over sixty years old were interviewed. The documentary is filled with remarkable photographs of immigrant life in Brazil from the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, and much of the narrative text is quoted directly from the oral histories. This source gives the viewer a sense of "typical" Jewish immigrant life that is often missing from the other films under review. Furthermore, the last portion of the film consists of actual interviews with the immigrant generation, giving a certain strength to the conundrum facing the filmmakers as well as the immigrants they interviewed: how do "we learn to eat rice with beans . . . and drink *pinga* . . . [without letting] our generation . . . be the last?" As one man says with a shrug, "Many have assimilated, but that's life."

Thus the question of assimilation is left unresolved in *Judeus em São Paulo*. On the one hand, the integration of Jews into Brazilian society is shown via photographs of Jews playing soccer, Jews doing the samba at Carnival, and (ironically) Jews participating in Brazilian social traditions in a city named Bom Jesus de Pirapora. On the other hand, other portions of the film emphasize Jewish religious and social life. The discussion of education illustrates the contradictory nature of wanting to maintain immigrant culture even while fitting into majority society: "We lived in two cultures, during the day we went to [public] school and afterward to Jewish schools." The film emphasizes Jewish participation in Zionist and socialist activity in the premigration experience but makes no connection to Brazilian political life, where "almost all Jews were progressives." This omission is surprising because the political participation of Jews did not always produce positive ramifications. Getúlio Vargas's Estado Novo severely restricted political activity by Jews and all other immigrants. Zionism was banned, speaking Yiddish became illegal, and anti-Semitism flourished, at times with state sponsorship. As is pointed out in *Judeus em São Paulo*, some Jewish immigrants were even deported to Germany, where they were murdered.

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Judeus em São Paulo is also particularly strong in examining ethnic and class tensions within the Jewish community. Sephardic and Ashkenazic Jews lived in different sections of São Paulo. Lázaro Setton, born in Lebanon in 1910, emphasizes this fact in commenting that "I know only our community, our community of Lebanese and Syrian [Jews]." Even the subtitle of the documentary, *"O Encontro de Diferentes Trajetórias,"* highlights differences among Jews, an obvious attempt to dispel notions that to be Jewish is to be a member of a single "race," a comment still heard regularly throughout Latin America. Yet the ultimate goal of *Judeus em São Paulo* is to ask the question, "With all these differences, what is our identity?" No single answer is given. Instead, some of those interviewed summarize their worldviews. Max Abranczyk, a Polish immigrant born in 1902, explains "I feel myself the same as a Brazilian," but his words highlight a desire rather than a reality. Fanny Rubinstein, born in Brazil in 1898, says, "I respect the principles of the [Jewish] religion, . . . [but] I am not a fanatic." Only one of those interviewed, a Rumanian, rejects the notion that he is Brazilian first: "I am happy to be a Jew, and I continued to be a Jew [even with] anti-Semitism and fascism. Being a Jew has cost me plenty."

What do documentaries on immigrant life, and specifically Jewish immigrant life, reveal about Latin America? Clearly, the films reviewed demonstrate differences in production values and research. More important is the fact that each one expresses a sense of the filmmaker's view of the place of minorities within Latin American society. These films, then, are useful not only as teaching tools, in which "factual" information is imparted, but also as a means of understanding the filmmaker and the culture of his or her subject. Each film is part of an intellectual discourse of which the filmmaker is an important component.[14] For those wishing to understand Latin American society from a new perspective and to gain critical insights into the social history of different populations in the region, these four films represent an invaluable start.

14. For example, The *Yidishe Gauchos* has been exhibited internationally and has won several awards, including the Latin American Studies Association's "Award of Merit." Also, Robert Levine has been researching the Jewish experience in Cuba for the past four years and has completed a manuscript entitled "Tropical Diaspora: Jewish Life in Cuba, 1902–1991."

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