

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

Normal Jews?

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This essay reviews the following works:

Migrations: Poem, 1976–2020. By Gloria Gervitz. Translated from the Spanish by Mark Schafer. New York: New York Review Books, 2021. Pp. 304. \$20.00 paperback. ISBN: 9781681375700.

Polacos in Argentina: Polish Jews, Interwar Migration, and the Emergence of Transatlantic Jewish Culture. By Mariusz Kałczewiak. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2020. Pp. viii + 320. \$49.95 hardcover. ISBN: 9780817320393.

The Other/Argentina: Jews, Gender, and Sexuality in the Making of a Modern Nation. By Amy K. Kaminsky. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2021. Pp. xviii + 262. \$95.00 hardcover. ISBN: 9781438483290.

Competing Germanies: Nazi, Antifascist, and Jewish Theater in German Argentina, 1933–1965. By Robert Kelz. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020. Pp. 372. \$25.95 paperback. ISBN: 9781501739866.

Nuestra América: My Family in the Vertigo of Translation. By Claudio Lomnitz. New York: Other Press, 2021. Pp. 464. \$27.99 hardcover. ISBN: 9781635420708.

Nuestra América: Utopía y persistencia de una familia judía. By Claudio Lomnitz. Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2018. Pp. 336. \$14.00 paperback. ISBN: 9786071660084.

Revolutionary Visions: Jewish Life and Politics in Latin American Film. By Stephanie M. Pridgeon. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020. Pp. ix + 208. \$50.00 hardcover. ISBN: 9781487508142.

Armed Jews in the Americas. Edited by Raanan Rein and David M. K. Sheinin. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2021. Pp. 264. \$142.00 hardcover. ISBN: 9789004462533.

Family Papers: A Sephardic Journey through the Twentieth Century. By Sarah Abrevaya Stein. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019. Pp. vi + 336. \$28.00 hardcover. ISBN: 9780374185428.

La vocación desmesurada: Una biografía de Alberto Gerchunoff. By Mónica Szurmuk. Buenos Aires: Sudamericana Editorial, 2018. Pp. 431. \$23.54 paperback. ISBN: 9789500761482.

Portrayals of Jews in Contemporary Argentine Cinema: Rethinking *Argentinidad*. By Mirna Vohnsen. Suffolk: Tamesis Books, 2019. Pp. 205. \$99.00 hardcover. ISBN: 9781855663374.

The almost one dozen books under review are proof of the massive growth of interest in the experience of Jews in Latin America. One is a book-length poetic exploration in free verse, composed over a period of forty-four years (i.e., a lifetime), that delves into Greek, Jewish, and Mexican symbols. Another is a biography of Alberto Gerchunoff, arguably the most influential Jewish thinker in Argentina in the first half of the twentieth century, and, as it happens, a friend of Borges. Next is a family memoir by an anthropologist, with maps, endnotes, and genealogical trees, tracing the routes of individuals from Ukraine to South America, Israel, Mexico, and the United States. Another one is a chronicle by a historian that follows a Sephardic family from Salonica, when it was part of the Ottoman Empire, through the Holocaust and beyond, to a number of global destinations. There is also a collection of academic essays on Jewish self-defense and a study on Nazi theater in Argentina in the thirties that inevitably brings to mind Roberto Bolaño's phantasmagoric *Nazi Literature in the Americas* (1996).

I will start with an aside. Not long ago, by sheer serendipity (I was looking to be distracted after a busy day), I watched *La misma sangre* (2019), an Argentine film directed by Miguel Cohan, built as a detective story around the death of a Jewish woman whose husband is marred in financial debt. The cast includes a shrewd doctor, his distraught wife, their complacent son, and other formulaic characters. The plot is labyrinthine and the cinematography average. Everything seems to be unexceptional in the movie, except for one thing: it portrays Argentine Jews as without special traits distinguishing them from the rest of society. They aren't freaks of any kind, say, stunningly intelligent, or the owners of a portentous memory. Nor are they historical "artifacts," say, immigrants caught in a fog of nostalgia, incapable of forgetting their old country, or spies betraying their loyalty to the new country, or, even more extreme, members of some sort of satanic cult. Plus, there aren't any anti-Semites around waiting to reveal their "true" identity. They are just average.

It has taken a long time for Latin American Jews to get to this point, that is, to be unexceptional. For a long time, whenever they have been referred to, there is a point to be made about their singular nature. This, obviously, isn't only the case in the Spanish-speaking world. The journey toward normalcy¹ started for the Jews in the eighteenth century with the contested project we have come to call the Enlightenment: *la civilización ilustrada* welcoming minorities into the civic texture and allowing them to assimilate, apparently without reservations. Centuries later, the health of democracy is now measured by the status of minorities, including Jews: how vulnerable they are, how seamlessly they integrate, or not, into the mainstream. Their success, the message goes, and that of society as a whole, doesn't depend on their disappearance; on the contrary, it lies in their capacity to remain singular, distinct, even separate, at least in metaphorical terms, yet also be part of the whole.

Given its half-hearted, at times turbulent embrace of modernity, as well as its uneven vision of equality, Latin America hasn't been an easy place for Jews. Already in the colonial period, when other European countries were abandoning feudal ideas and allowing the burgeoning bourgeoisie to embrace free enterprise, Spain remained stuck in an anti-Reformation mode, in which the Sephardic Jews were perceived as suspects. The Inquisition went after them—more precisely, after the New Christians, Marranos, and Crypto-Jews—as enmeshed in falsifying the truth. Then, in the last third of the nineteenth

¹ In this case I prefer the word *normalcy*, defined as conformity to the standard, rather than *normality*, which I take to refer, in popular parlance, to one's mental state.

century, as Ashkenazim arrived from the Pale of Settlement—the area in Eastern Europe (parts of modern-day Belarus, Lithuania, Moldova, Ukraine, Poland, Latvia, and Western Russia), where they were allowed to settle by the Russian czar from 1721 to 1917—and Levantine Jews arrived from Syria, Lebanon, Greece, and elsewhere in the crumbling Ottoman Empire, Jewish immigrants were seen as Communist agents or simply as bodies bringing illness to these shores and taking away jobs. Jews have been targeted by dictatorial regimes on both ends of the ideological spectrum, from the military junta during the Dirty War to Hugo Chávez's Bolivarian Revolution. The reasons are diverse. In Argentina, the large number of Jewish *desaparecidos* is, in part, the result of Nazi affinities among members of the army. In Venezuela, the Jewish community in Caracas was a scapegoat of Chávez's animosity toward Israel's own hostility toward the Palestinians, which he aligned with Iran's foreign policy.

Still, for Jews, as for countless other outsiders, Latin America has been a safe haven, even a utopia. After the Jews' expulsion from Spain in 1492, the Holy Office was less pernicious in the Americas than in the matrix across the Atlantic. Yiddish speakers sought Latin America, and so did philanthropic individuals and organizations like the Alliance israélite universelle, acquiring land in the Pampas where masses of poor, uneducated people, suffering from pogroms and other anti-Semitic outbursts, could relocate. Democracy seems to hold steady these days in most of the region, and Jews—around 400 million, depending on the demographic source one tackles—appear to be leading, at last, regular lives. I say this somewhat facetiously. I don't see normalcy as a trophy. On the contrary, my impression—against the current, perhaps—is that Jews have gone too far and too fast in sacrificing their uniqueness. Singularity is power. By no means has this been the exclusive result of the European Enlightenment. The "Jewish Enlightenment," known as *Haskala* in Hebrew, endorsed, for the most part, renunciation of religious behavior rather than recalibration. Was the drive too frantic? Hasidism was also a response to modernity, albeit one moving in the opposite direction.

Whereas anti-Semitism, in the Trump era and beyond, has risen substantially in the United States, generating a deep sense of discomfort among American Jews who aren't used to it, in Latin America, according to surveys by the Anti-Defamation League, anti-Jewish sentiment has remained constant, and maybe below previous levels. This isn't to say, obviously, that it is absent; in effect, it was, is, and will always be a feature of the landscape. Jews have been seen for centuries—in the Roman Empire and by the Christian Church, Socialist theorists, and genocidal tyrants like Hitler and Stalin—as a "question" or a "problem" to be solved. Toward the end of his life, Jean-Paul Sartre controversially argued in *La question juive* (1946), translated into English as *Anti-Semite and Jew*, that Jews need anti-Semites just as much as anti-Semites need Jews. In the face of this rhetoric, normalcy is simply a counter-question.

Being like everyone else was the dream of the various isms in Europe that acquired gravitas after the Napoleonic Wars along with the Fourierists, Owenites, and Saint-Simonians, in which Jews played an outsized role: Socialism, Communism, Anarchism, Zionism, and so forth. Regarding Zionism, the aspiration was to create a nation like all other nations, with its own government, its own flag, national anthem, postal service, central bank, and police force. And with its own army. God knows the degree to which this vision has been achieved. I'm not nostalgic for shtetl life, although the period does appear to generate inordinate allure in the present, as if life in these fragile villages was somehow bucolic. Eva Hoffman once described these semirural settlement units as "so exactly defined as to be infinitely replicable—as the structure of a honeycomb is replicable throughout the beehive." Truth is, Jews couldn't wait to escape. And the same goes for the penurious living conditions of Ottoman Jews.

Nor am I advocating a rejection of Israel, which, in spite of its faults, is an astonishing reality. Returning to a Promised Land has been ingrained in Jewish DNA since biblical

times. Yet it is appealing to imagine a counter-history. What would have happened had Palestine not been selected as the ultimate Zionist location? In other words, what if Latin America, for nineteenth-century Jews, had been ingrained in the nationalist vision? Theodor Herzl, the architect of secular Zionism, in his manifesto *Der Judenstaat* (1896), at one point proposed Argentina as an option. In between the lines, he acknowledges the colonialist enterprise that he, a self-proclaimed prophet, wants his people to embark on. Here is a crucial section in Sylvie d'Avigdor's English translation (revised by Jacob M. Alkow):

Shall we choose Palestine or Argentine? We shall take what is given us, and what is selected by Jewish public opinion. The Society will determine both these points.

Argentine is one of the most fertile countries in the world, extends over a vast area, has a sparse population and a mild climate. The Argentine Republic would derive considerable profit from the cession of a portion of its territory to us. The present infiltration of Jews has certainly produced some discontent, and it would be necessary to enlighten the Republic on the intrinsic difference of our new movement.

Palestine is our ever-memorable historic home. The very name of Palestine would attract our people with a force of marvelous potency.

History, inexorably, is a splashing tale of opposing forces. It is not what could have happened but what we interpret as having happened.

Expectedly, Latin American Jews today are a fragile, heterogeneous bunch—like everyone else: more or less ideologically engaged, more or less social climbers, more or less religious, and more or less Zionist. What they have is a “fragmented” minority mentality. This has always struck me as fascinating. In my travels through the continent, I've never encountered a universalist consciousness among Latin American Jews, meaning that Argentine, Colombian, Cuban, Mexican, Peruvian, and Venezuelan Jews, for instance, are in the same boat.² No metonymic sentiment here, in which a small unit perceives itself to be part of a whole. In fact, for the most part they know next to nothing about the rest of Latin American Jews. Instead, they display a metabolism similar to other global elites: if they feel close to anyone, it isn't to their fellow countrymen, say, Mexican Jews to indigent Mexicans. Instead, they identify with American Jews, and maybe with Israeli Jews, although they see the latter through a more complex lens.

In the last few decades, there has been a genuine explosion of interest in Latin American Jews and their own conditions. Novels, historical accounts, autobiographies, poems, plays, films, operas, telenovelas, TV miniseries, podcasts—all sorts of items by and about them circulate within and beyond national borders. This output might be seen as the natural evolution of a minority that is no longer peripheral. Jews are politicians, teachers, scientists, actors, entrepreneurs, and so on. Their dreams and anxieties are shared with everyone. It goes without saying that, given their status as a minority—out of over 450 million people in the Hispanic world, they represent a microscopic fraction—they

² My book *The Seventh Heaven: Travels through Jewish Latin America* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2019) chronicles a five-year trek to places like Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Cuba, Mexico, Peru, and Uruguay, as well as Israel and various parts of the United States where Hispanic Jewish life has thrived. And in *The Return of Carvajal: A Mystery* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2018), I look at the reemergence of what has been called “the first Jewish autobiography written in the New World,” that of Luis de Carvajal the Younger, called *El Iluminado*, as an opportunity to investigate Crypto-Jewish culture in the sixteenth century and in ours. A broad-eyed review essay on Sephardim in Latin America is Luis Roniger, “The Western Sephardic Diaspora: Ancestral Birthplaces and Displacement, Diaspora Formation and Multiple Homelands,” *Latin American Research Review* 54, no. 4 (2019): 1031–1038, doi:10.25222/larr.600.

are far from enjoying a status like that of Jews in the United States, or in France, where Jewish themes are ubiquitous in national culture. Still, their advance is considerable, especially when one looks at the ostracism of previous generations, including immigrants whose languages of communication were Yiddish and Ladino, not Spanish and Portuguese. That, in and of itself, explained their exclusion.

This productivity is echoed in the way researchers in American, European, and Israeli universities are studying countless aspects of Jewish life in Latin America. It feels like a wealth of perspectives. The spike of interest might have to do with the exhaustion, in Jewish circles, with topics like Zionism and the Holocaust, and in Latin American circles, with rejecting views of the region as monolithic in its structure, and agreement that, just as the color line, according to W. E. B. Du Bois, was the theme of the last century, the topic of immigration, in all its complexities, is becoming a leitmotif of ours. Whatever the case, this interest is expanding in tangible terms. Thirty years ago, scholarly books about Latin American Jews were both rare and narrow in approach. Their function was, mostly, a yoo-hoo: Any interest in this bizarre topic? These days, the focus is ample, nuanced, and polysemic, even though fads are predictable (Jews and sexuality, Jews and ethnicity, etc.), and even though, also predictably, certain countries are receiving more attention than others.

Argentina, with the largest Jewish population (around 240,000), has been the strongest magnet. So are Brazil (120,000), Mexico (40,000), and Cuba (1,500), for different reasons. Researchers on the colonial period concentrate on the principal outposts of the Inquisition. The effort isn't to look at normalcy per se. But they don't do so quite as Borges, for instance, did. In stories and essays such as "Death and the Compass," "The Aleph," "The Argentine Writer and Tradition," and "Emma Zunz," as well as in poems, he portrayed Jewish characters and motifs as exceptional. He believed life in the diaspora, including Latin America, allowed them to be simultaneously insiders and outsiders. He visited Israel on a couple of occasions, meeting David Ben-Gurion, Shmuel Yosef Agnon, and Gershom Scholem and receiving on one of those occasions the prestigious Jerusalem Prize.³ But Borges trusted that what Israel was affording its citizens should not be achieved at the expense of the diaspora. For, at their core, what made Jews unique, according to him, was their mastery of double consciousness, to be Jewish *and* Argentine, not Jewish *or* Argentine.

Nowadays Borges's view seems like an anachronism, and maybe it was when he expounded it. If it subsists, it is in subterranean fashion, for it makes people afraid of uttering in public that Jews ought *not* to integrate in full. More than seventy-five years after the end of the Second World War, the Jewish diaspora is ethereal again, yet stating so not only attracts anti-Semitic fervor but questions Israel's existence. It should be said that, since 1948, a substantial number of Latin American Jews have made aliyah, meaning they have "ascended" to the promised land, even if those doing it are laical, that is, nonreligious. In countries such as Uruguay, more than half of the total Jewish population has moved to Israel. Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico have also seen this type of emigration, to the point that, in Jerusalem, Tel-Aviv, and other Israeli metropolitan centers and in kibbutzim, important artistic and scholarly contributions by and about Israeli Jews of Latin American descent, in Hebrew and other languages, are multiplying dramatically. There are novels, theater, music, newspaper columns, TV shows, and other manifestations with a distinct, inescapable "Latin" flavor.

My key point here is that normalcy is never static; it changes according to the circumstances. Hence, an appropriate place to start seems to be with Gerchunoff (1883–1950),

³ For a larger examination of this trend, see my book *Borges, the Jew* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016), in which I look at Borges's intellectual quest and his philo-Semitism in the context of the Second World War, Peronism, and the military dictatorship, as well as global trends.

whom I have read and thought about for decades. Yet, whenever I come across his work, the feeling I get it is that of stumbling upon a fossil. His tastes feel stilted, old-fashioned, and foreign, all adjectives that become clear as one delves into his fiction and essays, where the style is as archaic as the original Reina-Valera translation of the Bible (frankly, *Don Quixote* is fresher). He also appears to have fallen through the cracks, less a living entity with a sophisticated oeuvre (which he had) and more a passing reference in a dusty encyclopedia of Argentine Jewish writers—like the leading playwright Samuel Eichelbaum, author of *Rostro perdido* (1952), or Bernardo Verbitsky, a journalist and promoter of the “bastard” Italian-Spanish dialect Lunfardo, who became famous for his book *Villa Miseria también es América* (1957), which inaugurated the concept of “shantytown.” In fact, he was a major intellectual whose affinities helped move the needle in stylistic, ideological, and cultural terms. I thus welcome enthusiastically Mónica Szurmuk’s commendable biography *La vocación desmesurada*, which, although dithyrambic in style, is nevertheless meticulously researched. Its publication, in 2018, has at the very least encouraged a small cadre of readers to look at Argentine Jewish intellectual life with more depth and vigor. I am told Szurmuk has embarked on a multivolume edition of Gerchunoff’s work. This is welcome news, not only given his strategic place in the shaping of an Argentine-Jewish consciousness but because it is evidence of a climate of rediscovery of Latin American Jews in general.

Gerchunoff arrived to Buenos Aires without speaking a word of Spanish. Within a relatively brief period of time, he became a journalist. His articles in *La Nación* are a roadmap to understand his intellectual affinities. For better or worse, Gerchunoff is best known for his collection of vignettes *Los gauchos judíos* (1910), published on the occasion of the one hundredth anniversary of Argentina’s independence. He meant it as a gift. In his view, Argentina was “*el país de advenimiento*,” a land of plenty where Jews would finally live without the threat of pogroms and other anti-Semitic outbursts. The nation’s immigration policy was generous. Italians, German, Russians, Poles, Jews, and others were being invited in. It was part of a policy, dating back to the presidency of Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, to “whiten” the population, that is, to make Argentina more civilized by Europeanizing it through those newcomers who sooner or later could become an integral part of the Argentine mosaic.

Gerchunoff had come of age in one of the agricultural colonies sponsored by Baron Maurice de Hirsch, where poor Ashkenazic Jews were invited to relocate. In one of the vignettes in his book he describes a gaucho killing his father. It could have been an accident. Or it might have been perceived as an omen. After the release of the book, things turned sour rather quickly. In 1919, in what is called the *Semana Trágica*, a violent anti-immigrant outburst in Buenos Aires targeted Jews and their businesses. Gerchunoff was deeply shocked, wrestling inside himself with the atrocities. From that time on, he progressively changed his loyalties, thinking that the creation of a specifically Jewish state, like all other states but in the Middle East, should be the collective task. Szurmuk follows her protagonist through a number of family, political, and intellectual upheavals. She studies his various works, from *La jofaina maravillosa* (1922), *Los amores de Baruj Spinoza* (1932), and *La clínica del doctor Mefistófeles* (1937) to *Entre Ríos, mi país* (1950) and *Retorno a Don Quijote* (1951)—Gerchunoff was an inveterate admirer of Cervantes’s novel—as decisive stops on a fateful journey of self-discovery. Along with what they say, Szurmuk ventures disquisitions on how they changed the readership that embraced them. That is, Gerchunoff is seen as a force whose views helped Argentine Jews navigate their own loyalties toward nationalism, orthodoxy, Zionism, and secularism.

In the end, when Gerchunoff died (Szurmuk’s description of his final moments is quite vivid), Israel was in its infancy. The generation of Jewish immigrants that had settled in the agricultural colonies had moved to Buenos Aires and other urban centers, rapidly going through the door of professionalization. The *Semana Trágica* was an event of the past. Equidistant in the future was the terrorist attack against the AMIA, the Jewish community

center in Buenos Aires, in 1994. The former, which occurred while Hipólito Yrigoyen, of the Radical Civic Union, was in power (he was twice president, 1916–1922 and 1928–1930), was a manifestation of anti-immigrant fervor. The latter tragedy, in which eighty-five people died and hundreds were injured, handled almost without doubt by Iranian operatives, made Argentine Jews—and, by synecdoche, all Latin American Jews—part and parcel of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which by then had ceased to be localized in the Middle East and had become global through insidious attacks of soft targets by both sides. Gerchunoff's Zionism, by then, had become an anachronism.

Szurmuk's volume looks at the ways he wrestled with the tension between belonging to Argentina and feeling like a pariah. She turns Gerchunoff into a herald of integration, though one marked by ambivalence. Other Argentine intellectuals would take different routes: Shmuel Rozhansky, editor of the multivolume Yiddish anthology *Musterverk* (1964–1982), some twenty years Gerchunoff's junior, chose to remain in touch with the European past; Jacobo Timerman, the journalist and author of the memoir *Preso sin nombre, celda sin número* (1981), was imprisoned because of his work with in the newspaper *La Opinión* and left for Israel, where he became persona non grata, then came back to Argentina. Yet the ambiguity experienced by Gerchunoff, maybe until recently, would color almost everything after him. That ambiguity, Argentine Jews would come to realize, was less their own feature than an essential quality of their country.

Seen cumulatively, the ins and outs of Jewish immigration to Latin America form the principal theme of most of the books I'm considering. Mariusz Kalczewiak's *Polacos in Argentina* concentrates on one country, Poland, rather than looking at Ashkenazic Jews coming from the Pale. Kalczewiak is Polish; he received his doctorate from Tel Aviv University and teaches at the University of Potsdam. His interest is bidirectional: he looks at how Polish Jews changed Argentina and also the image of Argentina that developed in Poland. This is part of what has come to be known as "the global Yiddishland," the amorphous (i.e., transnational) space that Yiddish speakers inhabited before the Second World War. The narrowing of the research by nationality is in itself another sign of the vigor of the discipline.

Competing Germanies, by Robert Kelz, is substantially more compelling to me because of my fascination with "ratline" (i.e., former Nazi) escapees in Paraguay, Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, and Brazil, such as Klaus Barbie, Adolf Eichmann, Josef Mengele, Hans-Ulrich Rudel, Dinko Šakić, and Gustav Wagner. While the style is serviceable (academics, with few exceptions, write as if readers were either dead or on their way to the morgue), the author knows how to tell stories in suspenseful fashion. One wishes he put this talent to use not only to make anecdotes compelling but to build an entire narrative in a way that might appeal to a larger audience. The volume unquestionably holds a treasure trove of extraordinary stories that are largely unknown outside the small habitat the author investigates: the making of plays with Nazi affinities in Argentina between the time Hitler came to power to about two decades after the end of the Second World War. I can see a beefier book being tailored from one or more of the characters, for instance Paul Walter Jacob (1905–1977) and Jacques Arndt (1914–2012), both actors and theater directors, the first German, the second Austrian, who reshaped their careers in Buenos Aires. Their escape from Nazism is full of intrigue. The book looks at the clash of German nationalists, anti-fascists (some of them Jewish), and Zionists brawling on different fronts. I said before that it reminded me of Bolaño's *Nazi Literature in the Americas*. Except that, unlike Bolaño's Borgesian catalog of nonexistent literary works, Kelz scans the archives to locate those that actually existed. It would be stimulating, if only as an intellectual exercise, to read them back to back. My guess is that, while reality would find ways to insinuate itself, both real and imaginary characters allow us to appreciate truth in equal fashion.

That's because there are infinite ways to tell the story. Take Gloria Gervitz. A patient, exacting poet born in Mexico in 1943 of Jewish immigrant parents from

Ukraine, Gervitz spent her life, starting in 1976, weaving together a single magisterial book—the same Whitmanian one, now called *Migrations*, though it changed names over the years. In its stunning poetic breadth, it reminds me of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz's *El Sueño* (1692), an epistemological quest to unravel, during one night, all the secrets of the universe. Just like Sor Juana, whose interests ranged from physics to Greek mythology, from music and cuisine to language and translation (she quoted profusely from Latin authors in the original and incorporated Nahuatl in her *Tocotines*), Gervitz's migrations take her across time and space. Mark Schafer's English-language rendition allows readers to wander with her from the Pale, and even before, from biblical and Talmudic times, through Greek and Mexican mythology. Reader are invited to appreciate not only how Jews wander but how they wonder, inquiring about their existence at every step through a series of perplexing questions designed to help them understand their mission in history. Gervitz was also a translator into Spanish of, among others, Samuel Beckett, Kenneth Rexroth, Rita Dove, and Susan Howe. Death brings things into focus. Now that Gervitz's physical migration on earth is over,⁴ her oeuvre feels consecrated, projecting a momentous light over Latin American Jewry.

Another eloquent exploration of migration is Sarah Abrevaya Stein's *Family Papers*, a luminous chronicle of a Sephardic family, the Levys from Salonica, that traces their genealogical tree across the Ottoman Empire and, as it crumbles, into a multitude of diasporas. Stein was inspired after working on the memoir of Sa'adi Besalel a-Levi (1820–1903), which, as she notes, was the first Ladino memoir of the nineteenth century.⁵ The narrative reminds me of the autobiography of businesswoman Glikl bas Judah Leib (known simply as Glikl), who between 1691 and 1719 in Hamburg, Germany, wrote an autobiography in Yiddish, which is a precious document about the life of devout Jewish women at the edge of the Haskala.⁶

A-Levi, a prominent journalist and publisher who was eventually excommunicated and is considered a centripetal figure in the emergence of Sephardic print culture, offered a picture of life in the major port of Salonica with all its lurid, fantastic components. In *Family Papers*, Stein attempts a Faulknerian (i.e., deliberately disjointed) approach that juxtaposes the “viewpoints”—though in the third person—of various family members and, on their shifting perimeter, enlivens the account with dozens of supporting characters. Her research took her to England, France, Spain, Brazil, Portugal, Canada, South Africa, and elsewhere. Most of the characters seem endowed with a well-rounded personality. There is a section about one of them, Vidal Hasson, a great-grandson of Sa'adi Besalel a-Levi, who became a war criminal, terrorizing the Salonika Jews. He was tried and ultimately executed. His story, of such vibrancy, almost overwhelms the rest of the tale. Yet Stein keeps it flowing, producing the kind of history—at its core, detective work—that is authentically global in tone.

The value of *Family Papers* is that, although Latin American Jews play a marginal role, they are part of a larger constellation, a network that makes them transcend their specific circumstances. When seen sub specie aeternitatis, normalcy for the Levy family is not to be found only in their transnational journey but also in the anchoring or rootedness that each individual might project toward their present-tense situation. That, too, is the lesson of Claudio Lomnitz's lucid memoir, *Nuestra América*.⁷ It is animated by the opening line

⁴ She died April 19, 2022.

⁵ *A Jewish Voice from Ottoman Salonica: The Ladino Memoir of Sa'adi Besalel a-Levi*, edited and with an introduction by Aron Rodrigue and Sarah Abrevaya Stein; translation, transliteration, and glossary by Isaac Jerusalemi (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012).

⁶ *Glikl: Memoirs 1691-1719*, annotated with an introduction by Chava Turniansky; English translation by Sara Friedman (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2019).

⁷ For a more concentrated reflection on this book, see my review “The Galaxies Within: Claudio Lomnitz's Family History,” *The Nation*, March 7/14, 2022, 32–35 (posted February 23, 2022), <https://www.thenation.com/article/society/neustra-america-claudio-lomnitz/>.

of L. P. Hartley's novel *The Go-Between* (1953), a late view of Victorian England: "The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there." The cast of extraordinary characters in Lomnitz's book—intellectuals, Communists, anti-fascists, Zionists, and other Jewish dreamers—traverse the globe in search of a promised land of their own, a place where their status as a minority will be not a straitjacket but a trampoline.

Their point of departure, and Lomnitz's gravitational pull, is the region commonly known as the Pale of Settlement in Imperial Russia—at the intersection between Ukraine and Romania—as well as Cologne, Germany. Anti-Semitism, poverty, and the desire for full participation that came about with the European Enlightenment pushes a number of them across the ocean to Colombia, Peru, Venezuela, Chile, and Mexico. That's the other end where this book is anchored: the feast of modernity in Latin America, where Lomnitz's relatives will rethink the cultural links with their tradition, engaging in a kind of internationalist messianism. He approaches the material through the prism of historiography. The volume comes complete with maps, endnotes, and an abundance of photographs. Brazenly pragmatic, he looks at the labyrinthine paths taken by his ancestors from myriad perspectives: economic, political, and religious. The truth for Lomnitz is factual: he wants to know what happened, not what could have happened. Of course, every autobiography, visibly and otherwise, indulges in another type of truth: the truth of fiction, based on the belief that one's family narrative is a convenient story by its members to justify who they are. Borges fancied this opinion; he believed we are better suited in changing the past since the present is stubborn.

Claudio Lomnitz is the son of Cinna Lomnitz, a geophysicist marked by Nazism, who taught at Berkley and in Mexico's Instituto de Geofísica, among other places, and who became known for the so-called Lomnitz Law, which suggests succinctly that the creep of rocks under sustained stress increases logarithmically with time. His mother was the anthropologist Larissa Adler Lomnitz, who studied the way the marginalized classes survived. I recall, as an undergraduate in Mexico in the eighties, the admiration her book *Networks and Marginality: Life in a Mexican Shantytown* (1977) awakened in a generation still defined by one-party dictatorship; it was seen as far more reliable than Oscar Lewis's *The Children of Sanchez* (1961) and other popular ethnographical takes on Mexico's poor. The accidents that resulted in Lomnitz's parents finding each other are a thing to behold: imprisonment, displacement, assassinations, and death in the Shoah. In Lima, Lomnitz's maternal grandfather, Misha Adler, befriended José Carlos Mariátegui, the major left-wing activist and philosopher who wrote *Seven Interpretative Essays on Peruvian Reality* (1928). Adler and his wife, Noemí Milstein, collaborated as translators in Mariátegui's magazine *Amauta* and, inspired, created their own Jewish publication, *Repertorio Hebreo*. Misha corresponded with Sigmund Freud.

Lomnitz first wrote his autobiography in Spanish and published it in 2018. Reading that version and its English counterpart shows the degree to which the two are different. Aware that for the Spanish-language reader certain Jewish topics are alien, he makes sure to explain them at every step of the way. Conversely, the English version strives to offer context to readers who are versed in Jewish themes but less familiar with Latin American ones. The result is a subtle but fundamental difference. Even the covers stress those differences. The one published by Fondo de Cultura Económica highlights an Indigenous face. The image is reminiscent of the photography of Gabriel Figueroa. In contrast, the American edition, by Other Press, features a sepia-toned photograph of Claudio Lomnitz and his late brother Jorge, who died in 1993.

In English, Lomnitz's subtitle, *My Family in the Vertigo of Translation*, hints at one of his prime concerns: language. Palpitating in the space between words is the gamut of tongues employed by his clan: German, Polish, Ukrainian, Yiddish, Hebrew, Spanish, and English, among others. Two among them are important. Yiddish, long perceived as pedestrian, even unworthy, was the lingua franca of the Pale of Settlement; it enabled Jews from

different regions—say, Litvaks and Galitzianers, as Lithuanians and dwellers from what was known as the Kingdom of Galicia-Volhynia, a territory that today is between Ukraine and Poland, were called—to communicate among each other. On the other side is German, which Lomnitz’s paternal side used; they were *yekes*, Germanized Jews, who, as he puts it, embraced bourgeois values and distinguished themselves by their high level of education, a professed secularization, and an inexorable aloofness and rigidity of character that made them, in the eyes of the lumpen Yiddish speakers, unbearably pretentious. While Lomnitz portrays his father as resisting the “*yeque* pride,” he points to the reverberations between these tense poles of Ashkenazi life.

Indeed, the linguistic dimension is at the heart of *Nuestra América*, manifesting itself in thrilling ways. (The title, by the way, cannot but draw the reader to José Martí’s famous essay of the same name, published in 1891, a bit over four years before his untimely death in the battlefield fighting against Spanish troops.) Lomnitz talks of his family’s *panglossia*, the surplus of tongues, as well as *diglossia*, bilingual strategies, such as between Hebraists and Yiddishists in the early days of the twentieth century, or between Spanish and English, when his family settles in California. However, the crux of his tale is actually about his exile from all languages. Lamenting that he does not have access to most of these languages and that that he is “linguistically insecure,” Lomnitz writes: “I have come to realize and accept that I am ‘alingual’ rather than bi- or multilingual.” This condition makes him feel as if he has been expelled from “the languages of paradise.” Tactically different from the English version, the original Spanish version, *Nuestra América: Utopía y persistencia de una familia judía*, reads more like a genealogical whodunit; the topic of language loyalty is downplayed.

Intriguingly, when looking in the mirror Lomnitz portrays himself as an anti-assimilationist. He feels proud to belong to a lineage that has been marked by rejection. He also doesn’t think of “Jewish nationality as a form of emancipation, because I never lived Judaism as an intensely communitarian experience.” Among the most salient attributes of his cosmopolitan memoir is its humility. Whenever possible, he apologizes for not being a specialist in Jewish history, Yiddish, anti-Semitism, and other crucial topics. Personally, I find this quality arresting. In chronicling who we are, there is no reason for us to become authorities in our ancestors’ choices. An honest glimpse at their fancifulness suffices. After all, people in the past do things differently.

The picture of Jews that Gervitz, Stein, and Lomnitz offer is one of guests in other people’s houses, as if they were the owners of a ghostlike quality: they stay in a place as long as possible and then, when the going gets tough, they depart. It is a partial, incomplete depiction. Jews often reinvest their entire, chameleonlike (or, to use a more ad hoc image, axolotl-like) being where they are. Sandwiched between the bookends of the *Semana Trágica* and the AMIA attack are years of upheaval featuring Juan Domingo Perón’s splintering politics, activism and guerrilla warfare by groups like the Montoneros, repression, and exile. Other Latin American countries also witnessed the participation of Jews in rebellions. In Uruguay under military dictatorship, between 1973 and 1985, Jews were targeted disproportionately for subversive activities. A few ended up in prison, such as the playwright Mauricio Rosencof, author of *Memorias del calabozo* (1989) and *Las cartas que no llegaron* (2000), the latter an outstanding record of Jewish captivity.

Raanan Rein and David Sheinin’s *Armed Jews in the Americas* gathers almost a dozen academic articles on Jewish self-defense. The bulk of them are not about Latin America alone. There are pieces on Prohibition-era American gangsters, Canadian Jews in the Spanish Civil War, crime in Toronto streets in 1977, volunteers during Israel’s War of Independence, and other topics. One of the articles looks at the autobiography *Mika, mi guerra de España* (1976), by Micaela (Mika) Feldman de Etchebéhère, an Argentine Jew born in the agricultural colony of Moisés Ville, who fought and achieved the rank of captain during the Spanish Civil War. Another is on the involvement of Jews in guerrilla

movements, from the Ejército Guerrillero del Pueblo in 1963 to a couple of Zionist Jews in Argentina, David Laniado and Raúl Milberg, who died in the armed struggle as members of the Liga Comunista Revolucionaria and Montoneros, respectively.

The concept of armed minorities, in this case Jews, is in and of itself polemical. Yet self-defense groups have been present in various chapters of Jewish history, from Roman occupation to the self-defense legions led by Vladimir Jabotinsky and others in Russia. I want to narrow my attention to a single piece in this volume, written by Raanan Rein himself, who has been an irreplaceable force in the consolidation of Jewish Latin American studies. He has achieved this in part through his prolific career as a researcher of diverse topics such as Peronism (he started his career focusing on Franco's Spain), sports, and Jewish youth groups. His books include *Argentina, Israel, and the Jews: Perón, the Eichmann Capture, and After* (2002) and *Fútbol, Jews, and the Making of Argentina* (2015). He is also the editor of a series published by Brill devoted to Jewish Latin America.

Titled “‘We Had Our Own Problems and So We Had Our Own Bitachon’: Jewish Self-Defense in Uruguay, 1960–1987,” Rein’s contribution to *Armed Jews in the Americas* is an example of the direction in which research on Latin American Jews is moving. As a repercussion of the kidnapping of Adolf Eichmann by the Mossad, the Israeli Secret Service, in a suburb of Buenos Aires in 1960, Argentines felt their sovereignty had been invaded by a foreign country. The government was unhappy, and so was the larger population. Not surprisingly, the nation’s Jews were left hanging without support from the police or other security force. They then organized a self-defense organization that would protect the community from attacks. Obviously, connections were made to Israel, which offered a helpful—if controversial—hand.

Years later, in Mexico, when President José López Portillo (one of the last figureheads of the ruling Partido Revolucionario Institucional, in power between 1976 and 1982), facing a mammoth economic crisis, nationalized the bank industry, the Jews again became a target. Their vulnerability was similar to that experienced by the Argentine Jews. A chapter of Bitachon, the Jewish self-defense battalions, was established in Mexico. As a young man, I was a member.⁸ At the time, I remember thinking of it not only as dangerous but also as an illicit endeavor. My views have become more nuanced over time, expressly after the four years of Donald Trump’s presidency in the United States. In an atmosphere of violence, physical as well as verbal, minorities should have the right to defend themselves, knowing the police not only won’t defend them but often act as a dubious, if not oppressive, law-and-order force. It is, unquestionably, a slippery slope, one where the line between security and chaos is easily breached. Yet, with the Holocaust as a reminder of the extremes of state-run terrorism, activating legions to face physical challenges strikes me as crucial. I learned fundamental lessons about civility as a member of Bitachon.⁹ I wouldn’t be the person that I am now without them.

Using interviews with actors and witnesses, Rein applies his discerning eye as a historian to place the Uruguayan section of Bitachon. The result, although dry, is fascinating. It pushes the question of civility to a new level. The role of minorities in democracy is intensely analyzed these days. Their health is a thermometer of the overall status of civil rights. Should Jews and other groups organize self-defense efforts? At the core of the effort is Jabotinsky. A Zionist intellectual, theorist of war, and soldier, he cofounded, with Joseph Trumpeldor, the Jewish Legion of the British Army, and, in Palestine, organizations such as Betar, Hatzohar, and the Irgun, some with decidedly right-wing views.

⁸ I detail my activities in Bitachon in *On Borrowed Words: A Memoir of Language* (New York: Viking, 2001) and return to them in *The Seventh Heaven*.

⁹ *Bitachon* in Hebrew signifies “trust.” It can also mean faith and is sometimes interchangeable with *emunah*. We spelled it in Spanish *Bitajón*.

In her chapter in *Armed Jews*, Stephanie M. Pridgeon takes another path. She looks at two novels by Argentine authors, Marcelo Birmajer's *Tres mosqueteros* (2001) and Manuela Fingueret's *Hija del silencio* (1999), to ponder the performance of subversive Jews through the prism of fiction. The effect is less than thrilling, if only because it feels as if the stakes aren't equally high. Pridgeon develops these thoughts in *Revolutionary Visions: Jewish Life and Politics in Latin American Film*. There is a chapter on Jewish immigration to Latin America in the early twentieth century, another on the female body in the context of revolutionary movements, and one on family relations, specifically parent-child liaisons. Pridgeon looks at documentaries about memory and resistance during the Dirty War, such as *Cazadores de utopías* (dir. David Blaustein, Argentina, 1996), about the Montoneros. Rein, through his analysis, follows specific operations that ended in tragedy. This, it seems to me, is a topic worth delving into with substantially more energy. What have been the consequences of taking arms for Latin American Jews? To what extent was the operations under the full tutelage of Israel?

Much of that belligerence, one way or another, manifests itself in film, not only documentaries but fictional accounts. Since what drives the plot on screen is conflict, it seems as if the presence of Jews gives it a *raison d'être*. In *The Other/Argentina*, Amy Kaminsky is interested in how the nation's Jews insert themselves in, and are allowed to be part of, the collective narrative. Her slant is sexuality. The plays of Diana Raznovich, the novels of Alicia Steimberg and Ana María Shua, and those of men like José Pablo Feinmann and Edgardo Cozarinsky provoke a meditation on memory, individual and national. How is it articulated?

Mirna Vohnsen, in *Portrayals of Jews in Contemporary Argentine Cinema*, looks at many examples, as she puts it, to "rethink *Argentinidad*," which she does by quoting a prologue Borges wrote for Carlos Grünberg's now-forgotten poem *Mester de judería* (1940): "Far from being an impostor or an outsider in this republic, the Hebrew race is among the traditional here." Vohnsen looks at important foundational movies like Fernando Birri's *Tire dié* (1960), Ricardo Wullicher's *Quebracho* (1974), and Héctor Oliveira's *La noche de los lápices* (1986). These aren't Jewish films, but they serve as forerunners. She is more focused in her reflections on Juan José Jusid's mediocre film adaptation of *Los gauchos judíos* (1975).

The profusion of features produced since the turn of the millennium is bewildering. I counted close to fifty. These include an array by Daniel Burman, perhaps the most celebrated of Argentine-Jewish directors, whose movie *El abrazo partido* (2004) was a favorite of film festivals. With *Esperando al mesías* (2000), *Derecho de familia* (2006), and *El rey del Once* (2016), Burman offers a nuanced portrait of Argentine Jews in all their ordinariness. Vohnsen also includes analysis of Ariel Winograd's *Mi primera boda* (2011), Pedro Banchik's *De Bessarabia a Entre Ríos* (2005), and the multi-director documentary *18-J* (2004), about the AMIA attack.¹⁰ (*La misma sangre* was released too late for inclusion.) But don't count on Vohnsen for epiphanies that are likely to push one's train of thought in unforeseen directions. Unfortunately, she isn't an inspired critic.

I know I sound like a broken record. But this is my toughest critique. It is high time for scholars to be more eloquent. If the work of art is valued for its beauty, the same should be applied to the critical reactions it generates. Vohnsen's language is flat and her reflections rather mundane, frequently amounting to little more than affected summaries. The best item in the volume is perhaps the bibliography that appears on pages 165–167. It shows the richness of options. Too bad that richness isn't replicated in the analysis.

If history, Jewish and otherwise, offers any lessons, the current normalcy in Latin America—the comfort Jews might sense in their own environment—is nothing but a

¹⁰ The Argentine-Jewish film I like the most is Damián Szifron's anthology *Relatos salvajes* (2014), released in English as *Wild Tales* and executively produced by Pedro Almodóvar. All its segments are superb. The first and last ones satirize Jewish life with just the right dose of candor.

juncture, an ephemeral moment likely to vanish into thin air as soon as the usual antagonistic suspects pull themselves together again. I say this not because I'm a pessimist but rather because of the recognition that, sooner or later, anti-Semitism rears its ugly head. Deborah Lipstadt, who has written about the Eichmann capture and other related topics, calls it "the ubiquitous hatred." Ubiquitous is a reference to time as well as space: anti-Semitism was, is, and will always be a constant.

There is no assurance that half a century from now, even a decade, the chessboard won't change once again. It always does; change is the one constant of our universe. A few days into the tyrant Vladimir Putin's devastating invasion of Ukraine, which started February 24, 2022, a Russian missile appeared to strike the Holocaust memorial of Babi Yar, built on the ravine in the capital, Kyiv, where the Nazis, on September 29–30, 1941, killed over 33,000 Jews. In the end, Babi Yar was spared but other cenotaphs (monuments, statues, plaques, inscriptions) were hit. Putin's rationale was that Ukraine needed to be "de-Nazified." Ironically, Ukraine's president, Volodymyr Zelensky, is Jewish, part of a sizable community of about 200,000. Some have emigrated but Jews, including Israelis, have been an important component in the support of refugees. At any rate, history repeats itself, although here not only people but memory sites are targets. It might be difficult to think, in this time or any other time, of normalcy in connection with the Jews. Yet the knowledge that the abyss is always next door also pushes for a desire—urgent, inevitable—to see life through a hopeful prism. Anti-Semitism is the oldest hatred. It isn't going away. Periods of peace are to be cherished—without naïveté.

What, then, are the lessons to be had for Latin American Jews? I venture to think that under ripe conditions, normalcy was an opportunity to catch up, to reload, to let the narrative of arrival and departure unfold with its own rhythm, not only for an audience in the present tense but for those in future epochs. That distilled narrative has a unique sensibility, one that has come alive thanks to the nutrients of this particular environment. Being normal is a mirage.

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