

ARGENTINE JEWISH FARMERS ON THE SCREEN

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ABSTRACT

Taking a historical approach, this article explores a series of films depicting life in Jewish agricultural colonies established in Argentina between 1889 and 1936. Most of these works were documentaries, although some fictions did make it to the screen. For Jewish citizens of Argentina, the past and present existence of the farming settlements turned out to be an efficient vehicle for presenting themselves to the State and civil society as authentic Argentines. As a result, the Jewish gauchos (the farming settlements' dwellers) were present as protagonists in mass culture productions. The philological exploration on films and documentaries gives back a rich, composite depiction of the overall production on the Jewish colonies and shows the shift from initial hostility to present support by sectors of society and governmental organs.

INTRODUCTION¹

Agricultural settlements on the pampas played a major role in the process of economic transformation undergone by Argentina between the second half of the nineteenth century and the first third of the twentieth. The modernization pursued by the governing liberal party was kick-started by the 1876 Law of Immigration and Colonization, which opened the doors to millions of foreigners, mostly European.² Thanks to this broad development of

agricultural colonies, within three decades the country went from being a net importer of grain and flour to figuring as one of the major worldwide exporters of those goods (Djenderedjian 129).

Agricultural settlements possessed great importance not only for the Argentine economy and society in general, but also for the self-image of those born and bred in the colonies. Nonetheless, the saga of the European immigrant farmers has almost never been brought to the screen. Films about rural life have focused on distinctly social and political themes. These include: conflicts among farmers, railroad companies, and great exporting concerns (*Kilómetro 111*, dir. Mario Soffici, 1938); the exploitation of day laborers who harvest *mate* in the province of Misiones (*Prisioneros de la tierra*, dir. Soffici, 1939; *Dark River [Las aguas bajan turbias]*, dir. Hugo del Carril, 1952); the difficulty of achieving land ownership (*La tierra será nuestra*, dir. Ignacio Tankel, 1949); and the struggles of cotton pickers in the El Chaco region (*Esta tierra es mía*, dir. del Carril, 1961). If we consider the importance of the Western genre in the U.S., the near-neglect of the immigrant farmer theme is doubly curious, since from the outset Argentine cinema has sought at once to imitate and differentiate itself from Hollywood, creating a kind of alternative modernism (Karush 69-73). The agricultural colonies planted in indigenously populated areas could well have been transformed into a local version of the Far West.

There are a few exceptions to this rule. Two were the lavishly produced films, with top-notch casting. The 1949 Argentine-Chilean co-production *Esperanza* (dir. Francisco Mugica and Eduardo Boneo) depicted the difficult beginnings of a group of Swiss, French, and Italian families who settled in the Esperanza Colony, founded in 1856 in Santa Fe province.³ Maybe the commercial failure of this undertaking discouraged other directors of the time from approaching the agricultural-colony theme. Nonetheless, two and a half decades later, a second adventurer, Juan José Jusid, invested great time and money in a picture called *Jewish Gauchos* ([*Los gauchos judíos*], 1975). This was a musical based on the homonymous volume of tales from 1910, devoted to the specifically Jewish agricultural settlements established in Argentina; the book's author, Alberto Gerschunoff, became quite celebrated and the text a classic of Argentine literature.

For Jewish citizens of Argentina, the past and present existence of the agricultural colonies turned out to be a perfect vehicle for presenting themselves to the State and civil society as authentic Argentines. The hard work and high productivity of the agriculturalists proved Jews could cast off money lending and trade and embody two key elements of Argentine identity: the figure of the gaucho (Argentine natives of mixed Spanish and indigenous extraction celebrated as an ideal at the very time the real roaming cowmen were being displaced) and the self-image of the country as the "breadbasket of the world" (though its role as grain exporter was already in decline by the 1930s).⁴

Jews had begun arriving in the Argentine countryside at the end of the nineteenth century, mostly to populate settlements created by the Jewish Colonization Association, often referred to by its acronym JCA, a philanthropic enterprise established in 1891 by the Jewish Franco-Belgian railroad magnate Baron Maurice de Hirsch. Due to this immigration, between 1920 and 1940, the rural Jewish population

in Argentina reached its highest point, numbering around 35,000 and representing more than 10% of Argentine Jewry.

JEWISH COLONIES IN FICTION FILM

By the time *Jewish Gauchos* debuted, there existed several Argentine mass-distribution films with significant Jewish characters. They had forerunners in *sainetes*, a popular theatrical genre that often included immigrants of diverse background. The films, of course, included negative stereotypes, but Jews were mostly presented as benign creatures integrating into Argentine society at large. One example: the characters played by Adolfo Stray in three films—*Fúlmine* (the film's name is that of its protagonist; dir. Luis Bayón Herrera, 1949), *Ésta es mi vida* (dir. Román Viñoly Barreto, 1952), and *La niña del gato* (dir. Barreto, 1953)—are immigrants, obviously Jewish because of their Yiddish accent. They earn their living in commerce and finance but not in an archetypally exploitative way. Moreover, the directors chose an actor both well known to the Jewish community and recognized as a Jew by Argentine movies audiences in general.

Native-born children of immigrants appear a bit later on the screen. *Ellos nos hicieron así* (dir. Soffici, 1952), *Quinto año nacional* (dir. Rodolfo Blasco, 1961), *Dar la cara* (dir. José Martínez Suárez, 1962), and *The Terrace* ([*La terraza*], dir. Leopoldo Torre Nilsson, 1963) present positive Jewish characters and portray conflicts in the Argentine educational system. The presence of Jews among the students serves to denounce anti-Semitism in universities. Perhaps the sole movie with an ambiguous treatment of Jews was *Ragged Football* ([*Pelota de trapo*], dir. Leopoldo Torres Ríos, 1948), which portrays a shady Jewish trader. His unwillingness to integrate into society is shown by his refusal to let his native-born son join neighborhood boys in a game of soccer—the Argentine national passion.⁵

Probably the first reference to Argentine-Jewish farming in a fiction film occurs in *Con gusto a rabia* (dir. Fernando Ayala, 1965). In that work, anti-Semitic nationalists set off a noise bomb in a theater during a show celebrating the seventy-fifth anniversary of Jewish agricultural settlements in the country. They detonate the device, shower the theater with pamphlets, and call for Jewish traitors to leave the country. However, once initial fear has subsided in the theater, a young woman returns to the stage to continue singing “Hava Nagila,” (a traditional Israeli folk song of joy) while the audience claps along. This short sequence, in a film denouncing nationalist groups, shows Jews not only as peaceful citizens celebrating the anniversary of their belonging to the Argentine landscape but also as resilient people capable of overcoming great adversity.⁶

JEWISH GAUCHOS, BROADWAY STYLE

The already-mentioned *Jewish Gauchos* was the first Argentine film totally devoted to Jewish life in the country. As noted, it was an expensive, star-studded production. In a personal interview by the author of this article, director Juan José Jusid recounted how he came upon the idea of making the movie. He wished to foreground the contribution of immigrants to the modernization of Argentina, since the official version of history taught by schools in the 1970s was centered on the 1810 revolution against Spain, the independence achieved in 1816, and the great deeds of 19th-century national heroes (Cherjovsky 257). To finance the project, Jusid teamed up in 1974 with director Leo-

poldo Torre Nilsson and with Emilio, Mario, and Norberto Kaminsky, family owners of an important national record label: Microfón Argentina. The fact that a key filmmaker in Argentine cinema, such as Torre Nilsson, was interested in coproducing a version of the well-known collection of stories *Los gauchos judíos* was perhaps dictated by ideological factors, and not just artistic and financial concerns, since Torre Nilsson’s convictions were decidedly liberal (Ciria 47-48). Likewise, *La terraza*, a movie by Torre Nilsson mentioned before, denounced anti-Semitism rampant among the far-right-wing youth of the Buenos Aires upper crust.⁷

Following a suggestion by the Kaminsky family, the production team decided to turn the picture into a musical along the lines of *Fiddler on the Roof* (dir. Norman Jewison, USA, 1971), the Oscar-winning film of the Broadway version of stories by classic Yiddish writer Sholem Aleichem. In this way, the Argentine audience would associate the film with a blockbuster that had also portrayed Eastern European Jews fleeing persecution. It was hoped that the Broadwayification of *Jewish Gauchos* would help recoup the large sum—a half-million dollars—that the film cost, by boosting the box-office receipts with sales of a long



A Jewish wedding. *Jewish Gauchos* (1975), directed by Juan José Jusid.

play record produced by the Kaminskys. Indeed, the revenue at cinemas was slim, given that the then price of a ticket was the equivalent of about forty U.S. cents. Jusid lamented that the film lost money, despite the large audience it had attracted.

Jewish Gauchos combines four distinct storylines, taken from four chapters of the original book.⁸ The characters are Jewish immigrants, their children, and native-born Argentines (both of European extraction and of “mixed blood,” as were the gauchos). The setting is an agricultural colony in the Entre Ríos province toward the end of the nineteenth century. The action starts as the first Jews arrive and ends with the resolution of a conflict between the Jews and local property owners, politicians, and peasants who wish to run them off the land. The opponents to Jewish presence hatch a plot and co-opt the administrators of the colony, about whom it is not clear whether they are Jews or not, since they speak Spanish with an English rather than Yiddish accent. Moreover, they never mention the Jewish Colonization Association or its founder, Baron de Hirsch. The plotters try to expel the Jews by burning their crops and poisoning their wells. Ultimately, they are unmasked by the physician Noé Yarcho, a real-life figure whom the film turns into a kind of Sherlock Holmes, played by renowned actor Pepe Soriano. Such a conflict, completely absent from the original book, was probably invented to link together its practically standalone chapters, to create suspense, and end on a resounding note. In the most popular Argentine newspapers (such as *Clarín*, *La Nación*, and *La Prensa*), the freshly introduced detective element made it possible to advertise the film as a “mystery.” In *La Nación*, it was touted as “a magical world of music, passion, love, happiness, humor, valor, and mystery set in a picturesque Entre Ríos village at the end of the century” (4).⁹

What Gerchunoff had published in 1910 was a volume of contemporary tales taking place in the Jewish colonies founded barely two decades earlier. But in 1975, the

film had to portray events that occurred far enough in the past as to seem quite remote to its potential audience. Thus, the screenplay introduces yet another aspect not present in the book. Life in the colony is depicted as childhood remembrances of one of the protagonists. We hear his now adult voice—that of actor Sergio Renán—in the background at several key points. This is one of the first such voiceovers:

My father was the first of so many generations to push a plow. Thereupon emerged the Ragil colony, no longer on the map today. This is part of its short history: what I recall; what has remained etched in my memory; how a group of gringos—who had lived by making shoes or selling trinkets in filthy gloomy marketplaces—transformed themselves into expert gauchos, working their own soil. (10:13-44)

These words, which practically open the film, condense what is at stake ideologically: to show the willingness of Jewish immigrants to become productive elements (“working their own soil”) and integrate socially and culturally into Argentina (as “expert gauchos”). This attempt to legitimize Jewish presence, manifest in the idealistic tone that permeates the film, led many prominent Jewish intellectuals to criticize the lack of realism and historical accuracy. For example, on the pages of the daily *La Opinión*, journalist Daniel Muchnik and theater critic Kive Staiff, both descendants of Jewish farmers, disparaged scenes such the initial sequence wherein dwellers arriving in the colonies are radiant with joy, well dressed, greeted by an orchestra, and lodged in comfortable quarters. Nothing could be further removed from the harsh reality endured by the pioneers. Nonetheless, the same newspaper, owned by Jacobo Timerman (who would achieve international renown with his 1981 memoir of imprisonment by the Argentine dictatorship, *Prisoner Without a Name, Cell Without a Number* [*Preso sin nombre, celda sin*

número], featured an extremely positive assessment of the film by movie director and critic Agustín Mahieu.

Although, as we have seen, the picture was promoted in the prominent newspapers as the depiction of an enchanted world, some incidents at its premiere demonstrate the ire the subject provoked in some nationalist sectors. First of all, during production (from the end of 1974 to the beginning of 1975), a conflict emerged with members of a military regiment in Campo de Mayo, a site in Buenos Aires province where the set reproducing the rural atmosphere of the colonies had been constructed. One morning, when only the final scenes remained to be filmed, a group of presumably inebriated conscripts committed arson thereby burning part of the backdrop and the wardrobe, which resulted in serious financial loss, delay, and need for repairs.

The second event took place at the Ente de Calificación Cinematográfica, the bureau of censors, whose leadership had been assumed by the infamous Paulino Tato in August 1974.¹⁰ Even though Tato had approved the original screenplay, his viewing of the final product led to a change of heart. He threatened to block the film's release because of the title and scenes he considered improper. The title was held to be offensive to the fatherland, since it made the gaucho, one of the most revered manifestations of Argentine identity, into a "foreigner" (i.e., a Jew). But Tato's main objection concerned a sequence lasting about ten minutes, in which Jewish colonists watch a horse race involving gauchos. In one of the races, a young man loses against the son of gaucho Remigio Calamaco, a friend of Jews. When the loser accuses the winner of trickery, the quarrel turns into a duel with a *facón*—the knife used by gauchos. When Calamaco's son shows signs of cowardice, his father, shamed by this blot on the family's honor, approaches and kills his own son with a stab of the knife. Wishing to avenge the accusation that has resulted in his friend's death, a Jewish set-

tlar deals a ferocious blow to the opponent, making him confess that his rival had *not* used trickery. Tato ruled that the sequence had to be censored for two reasons; first of all, a gaucho would supposedly never kill his son; and secondly, it is physically impossible for a Jew to deal such a blow to a gaucho. The scene was removed, though now it may be viewed in the complete version offered on the DVD (Cherjovsky 260-62).

The third manifestation of the wrath provoked among nationalists concerned terrorist incidents at the film's release. On 11 May 1975, a prescreening at the Cineclub Núcleo, in the city of Buenos Aires, was suspended following a bomb threat. A few days later, at the official debut at the Broadway movie house in the Argentine capital, students from the Universidad del Salvador threw firecrackers into the theater, broke windows, and painted swastikas on the posters. Still, the screening took place (Jusid 5). The pamphlets thrown by the attackers give a clear indication of their ideas about Jews:

These are the Jewish gauchos: Bronner, Gelbard, Todres, Nattin, Mizragi, Madanes, Timermann, Borenstein, Kestelboim, Stivel, Sadovsky, Asher, Rapaport, Tiferberg, Bunge and Born, Berenstein... Dreyfus, Hirsch, Gerchunoff...

Gold was their seeds,
Usury, their plow,
Man, their beast of burden,
Their fruit, Argentine blood.
For a National-Justicialista Argentina,
without Jews or victims!
Let us fight stateless Judaism! (*qtd. in*
"Hechos y resonancias" 8)¹¹

After the film's premiere, the nationalist media published not only negative critiques but also inaccurate synopses. One example: according to the magazine *Semana Política*, the film portrays the arrival of Jews planning to "create an Israelite state in our Mesopotamia provinces" (*qtd. in* "Hechos y resonancias" 8). The producers of the film

reported the discrimination and acts of violence to the Delegación de Asociaciones Israelitas Argentinas (the Argentine anti-Semitism watchdog organization, often referred to by its acronym DAIA). They received no response, which was all the more surprising as the organization had been recently very active in denouncing anti-Semitic publications by the far-right group known as the Triple A and other radical Peronist formations. Likewise, the DAIA had denounced other manifestations of anti-Semitism: the prohibition, by the governor of Córdoba province, of a commemoration of the Warsaw ghetto uprising; the airing on the TV channel "Once" of a program corroborating the myth of a conspiracy—the so-called Andinia Plan—to establish a Jewish state in parts of Argentina and Chile (the program was presumably financed by Arab countries in an attempt to weaken support for Israel) ("El titular de la DAIA" 10).¹² According to Jusid, DAIA's inattentiveness to anti-Semitism surrounding his film could be attributed to the pursuit of the Zionist ideals by the organization, whose leadership was unsympathetic to Gerchunoff's adherence to the melting-pot attempt to integrate Jews into Argentina (Cherjovsky 263).¹³ Indeed, if DAIA had a positive opinion of the film, it could have taken advantage of the opportunity afforded by the fact that its release coincided with the twenty-fifth anniversary of Gerchunoff's death on 2 March 1950. The date was commemorated by various Jewish institutions, and Aguilar, a major publishing-house, launched a new illustrated edition of *Los gauchos judíos*, which had been out of print for some time ("Homenaje a Gerchunoff" 6; "Los gauchos judíos" 7).

There were countervailing forces to the conscripts who set the filming location ablaze, Paulino Tato who exercised censorship, and right-wing Peronists who attacked the debut. Sectors of Argentine society were quite favorable to the film. Several large-circulation newspapers praised it and bewailed the anti-Semitic outbreaks. The daily *Clarín* published an enthusiastic review titled "Entre Ríos, la Tierra Pro-

metida," that translates "Entre Ríos, The Promised Land." *La Nación* newspaper, in a somewhat more measured praise, called the film "a suitable adaptation of Gerchunoff" ("Gerchunoff" 10). *La Opinión*, despite publishing the damning critique by Muchnik, devoted two entire pages to the film, including a text box decrying the absurd censorship to which it had been subjected ("La escena" 19). But perhaps the clearest sign of the widespread appreciation of Jusid's film was the sizeable audience it drew. In the first week of its release, it garnered 250,000 attendees, practically the size of the entire Jewish population of the country. The ultimate number speaks for itself: 1.4 million tickets sold ("Las películas").¹⁴ Beyond the cinematic and musical quality of the film, and the star-filled cast, Jusid attributed its success to three factors: a certain morbid curiosity provoked by news of the attacks at its premiere; the desire of some moviegoers to discover the world of Jewish culture, something quite unknown to a considerable portion of the Argentine public; and identification with the Jewish story on the part of descendants of other immigrant groups who felt that their own pasts had been silenced in the official history (Cherjovsky 264).

Although far less spectacularly, the Jewish colonies have appeared in other fictional pictures that garnered film festival prizes and were successful at the box office. Some films feature interpreters with a close tie to the colonies, such as *Autumn Sun* (*Sol de otoño*) dir. Eduardo Mignona, 1966), whose protagonist Clara Goldstein was born in Carlos Casares, a provincial city near the Mauricio Jewish colony. In *Nine Queens* (*[Nueve reinas]*, dir. Fabián Bielinsky, 2000), a film distributed to many countries, including the United States, the two protagonists swindle an old lady born in a colony by palming themselves off as descendants of Jewish settlers.¹⁵ Films that took place on the settlements, but drawing far smaller audiences than the last two mentioned, are *Un amor en Moisés Ville* (dir. Antonio Ottone, 2000), which describes the intergenerational

conflicts between the settlers and their children wishing to move to the cities; and *The Camera Obscura* ([*La cámara oscura*] dir. María Victoria Menis, 2008), which showed a shy, plain-looking woman in an early twentieth-century colony, who fell in love with a traveling photographer.

DOCUMENTARY FILMS

The first documentary film I have found on Jewish farming colonies in Argentina, which was shown in movie houses, was produced in 1926 by Max Glücksmann's company, and does not have a title. Glücksmann was one of the great pioneers of the local film industry, the head of a vast empire made up of seventy theaters throughout Latin America. Mordechai David Glücksmann, better known as Max, had arrived as a teenage immigrant and achieved success as a "self-made man" and as a Buenos Aires Jewish community leader. Though the documentary genre already existed, the images taken in the colonies in 1926 do not coalesce into a work of that kind. It is perhaps more accurate to refer to them as a "record," since the film is linearly edited and presents no plot. Recording social practices, situations, and loci was a very common practice in the 1920s, in general and within the Jewish community of Buenos Aires. For example, in February 1925, the *Semanario Hebreo* reported that the Rapid Film company was successfully filming all the Jewish institutions of the city. Among others, the list of places included the Hospital Israelita; boys', girls' and senior citizens' homes; the Chevra Kadisha burial society; newsrooms; clubs; neighborhood associations; and the Buenos Aires offices of the Jewish Colonization Association. The film, which debuted in April of that year at a fundraising event for the hospital, was intended to show "the full advancement and progress achieved in recent years by all the societies and institutions of our community" ("Un film de las instituciones" 7).

Following this precedent, the film made by Glücksmann offered numerous images drawn from daily life in the colonies. We see farmers working the land, children leaving the Jewish school, a JCA administrator welcoming a settler into his office. The picture also showed the better housing for new arrivals in 1925 and technological advances in planting and harvesting. Actually, the JCA had commissioned the film from Glücksmann as "positive demonstration of the JCA's complex achievements in our country and unequivocal proof of Jewish settlers' progress and hard work" ("Un film de las colonias" 1). The film, which was shown for the first time on Sunday, 27 October 1926 to a group of journalists and members of the Sociedad de Protección a los Inmigrantes Israelitas, featured only shots taken in two Argentine provinces: Santa Fe and Santiago del Estero. Glücksmann was slated to supplement the film with images from the colonies in Entre Ríos, La Pampa and Buenos Aires provinces, but I have found no indication that the project was brought to conclusion.

Thirteen years later, organizers of the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the Moisés Ville colony contracted Glücksmann to film the ambitious festivities planned for October 1939; I have not found any footage of them, if indeed such had ever existed. However, the 1955 film *Medio siglo: Rivera 1905-1955* (dir. Justo Martínez and Enrique Dawidowicz) documented Jewish life in the Rivera colony in southwest Buenos Aires province, on the border of La Pampa province. With voiceover by Martínez, the film shows farming tasks, aged pioneers and institutional life in the colony, and most of all celebrations for its fiftieth anniversary. We see a large crowd welcoming Carlos Aloé, the Peronist governor of Buenos Aires province, who performs the ritual homage to the memory of Eva Perón. Likewise, there are images of a lecture given by Gregorio Verbitzky, author of *Rivera, afán de medio siglo*, a commemorative book published in 1955.

To mark the seventy-fifth anniversa-

ry of Jewish colonization in 1964, a group of former residents of the colonies, now residing in Buenos Aires, formed an ad hoc production company called Pioneros Films and launched a feature titled *Un viaje por las colonias judeo-argentinas* which translates as “A Journey through the Argentine-Jewish colonies.” Unlike the two precious pictures, *Un viaje* doesn’t simply record real scenes. It may be considered a documentary in the proper sense of the word. Utilizing footage combining images of the present with historical photographs and various maps, the first seven minutes feature the initial context: expulsive decrees in Czarist Russia, prejudices concerning the supposed inaptness of Jews for farming, the creation of the JCA, and the settlement of Jews in Argentina. Voiceover alternates with sometimes dramatic, sometimes hopeful music that tinges the beginning sequence with emotion. Thereupon, the narrator announces that the goal of the film is to recover an essential historical process, which has been unjustly forgotten by Argentine society. From that point on, the filmmakers themselves embark upon an adventurous tour of the colonies. They show us the first Jewish colonist born in Argentina and significant heads of agricultural cooperatives. We see the tombstones of historical figures of note who resided in the settlements: Dr. Noé Yarcho, mentioned here earlier, and Yiddish writer Boruj Bendersky. The voiceover celebrates the social and cultural life developing in these areas so far from urban centers. The creation of schools and institutions is touted as part of the march of civilization “that never stops” (10:40). Progress is exemplified by the grain elevator of the Villa Domínguez colony. We see how young generations born in the country deploy the latest technologies, introduce new crops, and experiment with beekeeping. The JCA’s work in rescuing Jews from the Nazis is recalled when the travelers arrive in Entre Ríos province at the Avigdor colony, created for refugees from Germany.

As the picture proceeds, there appear

national symbols that reflect the Jews’ sense that they belong in Argentina. The May 25 national holiday is celebrated in the Rivera colony, as the flag is hoisted by a Jewish farming leader who is also a municipal employee. At times, the dramatic music played at the beginning is replaced with Argentine folk melodies deeply linked to the rural setting. Also emphasized is the solidarity between local gauchos and Jewish settlers.

Starting in the 1980s, full-length documentaries increase in number, though they were of uneven quality and rarely shown. Examples of these works are *75 aniversario de Rivera y sus colonias* (dir. Alberto Frenkel, 1980); *100 años: Colonia Mauricio* (dir. Edu Feller, 1991); *A mis antepasados riverenses* (dir. Pablo Milstein, 1992); *Esperanza: Basavilbaso crisol de razas* (dir. Isaac Wolfowicz, 1996); *Cien años de Las Palmeras* (dir. Mario Fritzler, 2004); *Rivera: Las raíces y los frutos* (dir. Alejandro Cantor, 2005); *Retorno judaico a Avigdor* (dir. Martha Wolff, 2010); and *Con los pies en la tierra* (dir. Wolff, 2014).

Numerous short subjects, in the movies and on TV, began to appear in the 1990s. These pieces present historical, cultural, and social aspects of Jewish agricultural settlements; once again, the quality is uneven. Most were due to initiatives taken by individuals, journalists, museums, or municipalities wishing to publicize historical and touristic attractions. Among these works, two stand out in terms of the documentation and testimony they offer: *Moisés Ville: La fuerza de la integración* (a thirteen-episode vehicle, directed by a team of young moviemakers from Santa Fe province in 2008); and *Viaje por el legado judío: Moisés Ville* (dir. Omri Rot, 2014). Some directors received state support. For example, Guillermo Meresman, of Entre Ríos province, received funding from the Instituto Nacional de Cine y Artes Visuales (usually referred to by its acronym INCAA) and the Fundación Antorchas, for the purpose of directing *De gauchos, colonos y vecinos* (1995) and *El último gaucho judío* (1997).

A particularly interesting case is *De Besarabia a Entre Ríos* (2006), a homemade documentary directed by Pedro Banchik, an Entre Ríos businessman. The film was conceived as a way to transmit to the director's relatives the story of their common ancestors settled in an Entre Ríos colony. The descendants, dispersed throughout the world, were invited to the colony for a kind of summit meeting, at which the film was shown. Banchik offered DVDs to all the families present. Upon their return home, they distributed the DVDs among TV channels, universities, and museums such as Beit Hatfutsot (The Museum of the Jewish Diaspora) in Tel Aviv; several institutions acquired copies for their catalogs (Banchik).¹⁶ The documentary was projected at various Jewish film festivals and officially hailed as a work of cultural interest by the government of Entre Ríos province and by the Argentine National Chamber of Deputies. A bill proposed and never approved by the Honorable Cámara de Diputados de la Nación demonstrates the State's recognition to the memory of minorities. The bill read:

The film implicitly expresses deep gratitude to the generous Argentine homeland, and simultaneously conveys a message of peace and significant values: solidarity, mutual comprehension, human rights, tolerance, and acceptance of the diversity of all our country's inhabitants. As such, it is a contribution to education and national culture. (File No. 4730-D-2007)

Among all the documentaries, the most notable might well be *Legado: Nunca me fui de mi pueblo* (trans. "Legacy: I have never left my town," dir. Vivian Imar and Marcelo Trotta, 2004). The film was made by professional directors; it debuted in commercial movie houses, achieved recognition

at film festivals, and was awarded the prize for best documentary screenplay by the Sociedad General de Autores de la Argentina (usually referred to by its acronym ARGENTORES). The project was masterminded by Baruj Tenenbaum, an educator from the Moisés Ville colony, who obtained financing from the International Raoul Wallen-



Baron Maurice de Hirsch, crossfading into an Argentine countryside landscape. *Legado* (2004), directed by Vivian Imar and Marcelo Trotta.

berg Foundation. Later, the film received a subsidy from the INCAA. The original plan was only to record and edit testimony by colonists' descendants. However, the film took on a more cinematographic conception after Tenenbaum met director Vivian Imar, who felt a personal connection to this reflection of his own family's story. Imar decided to imbue the film with emotion by including imaginary narrators who unveil the historical forces in play and bring together the various testimonies by real people. In order to provide both intimacy and realism, Imar, together with Trotta, decided that the words of the main character—a woman who arrived in 1889 with the pioneers of Moisés Ville—would be spoken in Yiddish by Shifra Lerer, an Argentine actress residing in the US. Relevantly, Lerer's own ancestors had come to Argentina on the

S.S. Weser, the legendary vessel that is the equivalent of the Mayflower for Argentine Jewry.

Legado combines footage, from the 1990s, shot in the previously mentioned colonies; sequences done by the Casa Glücksmann in 1926; and archival material related to the Argentine countryside. The most notable testimonies in the film are given by the daughter of Miguel Sajaroff, a leader of farming cooperatives; Máximo Yagupsky, a renowned Jewish educator and intellectual; and Robert Schopflocher, one of the last administrators of the JCA in Argentina. The directors did not rely solely on the meanderings of collective memory. They sought advice from experts in the area: Ana Weinstein, Leonardo Senkman, Samuel Rollansky, Mónica Salomón, and the just mentioned Yagupsky (Cherjovsky 267).¹⁷ Although the film generally received praiseful reviews, the Argentine-Israeli researcher Tzvi Tal has argued that “the conventional approach of *Legado* promotes empathy and integration with the Jews, commending their heroic conformism in the face of difficulties, without demanding a structural change in society” (“Negotiating” 150); moreover, the picture “supports integration by depoliticizing memory, focusing on the testimonies of elderly people who remember their childhood in the agricultural colonies” (151). Nonetheless, unlike other productions relating official memory the film does not ooze with optimism and apologetics. Rather, it adopts a subaltern perspective of empathy with settlers’ memories; it avoids grandiloquence and clearly shows problems in adapting to the new country. The pioneers do not arrive spruced up and smiling, as they do in Jusid’s film. The initial scene offers only waves glimpsed from the prow of a ship. Against a background of dramatic music and slow movement of the water, Lerer’s voiceover narrates the expulsions from Russia that uproot the immigrants. In the course of the film, elements of subterranean memory are brought to the surface; one example thereof is the uncompromising and detailed portrayal of the de-

cade-long conflict between Jewish settlers and the JCA.¹⁸

Finally, I would like to relate the experience I had as a film director. In 2013, I defended my doctoral dissertation on the memory of Jewish agricultural settlement in Argentina. It was published as a book in 2017. One of its chapters was devoted to the activities and management strategies that a group of present-day Moisés Ville residents have developed in order to preserve the local legacy and memory while attracting tourism. The accomplishments of these cultural entrepreneurs are manifold. They have created a museum and archive; they have succeeded in having the town officially declared a heritage site; they bring in tourists interested in the history of Jewish colonization by organizing events such as the Fiesta de Integración Cultural—an “invented tradition,” as per the term used by historians Eric Hobsbawm and Terence O. Ranger.

In 2014, I set out to film a documentary devoted to these initiatives and the relations between the remaining Jewish dwellers (veritable “last of the Mohicans”) and their neighbors, both Catholics and Jehovah’s Witnesses. I teamed up with a young director, Melina Serber, and secured a subsidy from the earlier-mentioned INCAA. The resulting product was a one-hour observational documentary titled *La Jerusalem argentina* (2017). So far, it has been shown at various film festivals and has garnered two international prizes: the Global Migration Film Festival prize in the category of emerging filmmakers in 2017 and Premios Latino, Marbella, for the best documentary in 2018.

Our film traces the period before, after and during Fiesta de Integración Cultural of 2014, timed for the 125th anniversary of the town’s founding. We focus on the ups and downs experienced by those attempting to keep specific memory and identity alive, now that the Jewish community has gone from numbering some 5,000 sixty years ago to hardly a few over one hundred individuals today. The question floating in

the air is what will happen to the colonists' legacy when there are no more Jews left in Moisés Ville. Sociological issues regarding multiculturalism and the memories of ethnic minorities come to the fore, and the film packs an emotional punch as the protagonists—most over seventy years of age—welcome relatives they seldom see. Visitors and dwellers attend concerts at the theater and get-togethers in local homes. Moisés Ville's Jewish golden age comes again to life, for the duration of a weekend.



An enlightened Star of David works as a metaphor for Jewish continuity. *La Jerusalem argentina* (2017), directed by Iván Cherjovsky and Melina Serber.

BY WAY OF CONCLUSION

This short survey charts how cinematographic depiction of Jewish agricultural settlement in Argentina has shifted in recent years to having the protagonists recount their own stories. Initially, Casa Glückmann's silent film included only statistical and other information. In the first talking documentaries, we hear the colonists speak solely off the screen, in voiceovers. But starting with *Legado*, there is movement toward ever more testimony and even a certain free performativity on the part of protagonists (especially in

La Jerusalem Argentina). Moreover, unlike what transpired upon the release of Jusid's *Jewish Gauchos* in the 1970s, the documentaries have not provoked anti-Semitic reactions. Showings in movie houses and film festivals have proceeded peacefully. The reasons for this difference in reception go beyond the slighter audience appeal of documentaries. In the last twenty years, Jews have achieved a heretofore unknown level of legitimacy within Argentine society, which has become much more accepting of religious and ethnic minorities. Not only does the State no longer seek to censor movies on Jewish immigrants; now it often awards subsidies and sometimes even prizes to those who make films on the subject.

NOTES

¹The author expresses his appreciation to Alan Astro for his help in translating this paper.

²This piece of legislation provided the following: maritime passage to families willing to settle in the agricultural colonies; land granted to them without cost or payable in

installments; free transportation from the port of entry to their final destinations; a year's supply of food, seeds, tools, and working animals. A public agency established later, the Oficina de Tierras y Colonias, took care of surveying and allotting territory (Fernández 56-57).

³The main role in *Esperanza* was given to Jacob Ben Ami, a Russian-born Jewish actor who had first immigrated to the U.S. before coming to Argentina; his accent, Yiddish-tinged though it was, apparently seemed appropriate for portraying a non-Jewish Western European.

⁴On Argentina's role as a grain exporter, see Devoto.

⁵For more debate on some of these films, see Lotersztein as well as Tal ("Migración y memoria").

⁶During the first half of the sixties, nationalist groups launched various attacks against the Jewish community, which they accused of having participated in the kidnapping of Nazi criminal Adolf Eichmann, captured in Argentina by an Israeli secret command in 1960, and executed two years later, after a famous trial held in Jerusalem.

⁷Fifteen years earlier, Torre Nilsson had directed *A Bravo of the 1900s* [*Un gaupo del 900*], a picture based on the homonymous play by a celebrated Jewish author, Samuel Eichelbaum, who co-wrote the screenplay.

⁸The screenplay of *Jewish Gauchos* was written collectively by Jusid, Oscar Viale, Jorge Goldenberg, and the writer's daughter, Ana María Gerchunoff, who held the rights to the book.

⁹All translations in quote are mine.

¹⁰Paulino Tato presided over the Ente de Calificación Cinematográfica (which translates Rating Entity for the Cinema) between 1974 and 1980 and is considered the strictest censor in the history of Argentine cinema.

¹¹According to Jewish weekly *Mundo Israelita*, the pamphlet showed the contradiction between, on the one hand, Juan and Evita Perón (who had said in 1948 that antisemitism was an "offspring of the oligarchy") and, on the other hand, the pseudo-Peronists who attempted to "cloak the mass movement with Hitlerite wretchedness" ("Hechos y resonancias" 8). Such comments read in the light of the fact that at the time the country was ruled by the Justicialista party, main component of the Peronist movement.

¹²The myth of a Jewish plot to take over the world was revamped in the 1970s with new evil designs on Argentina ("El titular de la DAIA" 10).

¹³In May 1975, Dr. Mario Gorenstein, an attorney who had been active in the

Labor Zionist movements Poalei Tzion and Avodah, assumed the presidency of the Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina (AMIA). In his inaugural address, Gorenstein urged the community to put its organization and programs in line with their "natural" ideology, Zionism, the national liberation movement of the Jewish people. For the debate regarding the role of Zionist ideals within Jewish organizations, see also "Asumieron las nuevas autoridades de AMIA" and "Anticipa el doctor Mario Gorenstein pautas de su futura gestión."

¹⁴The movie that drew the greatest audience at the time was *Nazareno Cruz y el lobo* [*Nazareno Cruz and the Wolf*] dir. Leonardo Fabio, 1975), followed by 2.6 million entries for *El Santo de la espada* [*The Knight of the Sword*] dir. Leopoldo Torre Nilsson, 1970); Juan Moreira (dir. Leonardo Fabio, 1973) with 2.5 million entries; and Martín Fierro (dir. Torre Nilsson, 1968), 2.4 million ("Las películas").

¹⁵Interestingly, the American film *Criminal* (dir. Gregory Jacobs, 2004) was based on *Nine Queens*.

¹⁶The event took place in August 2011 and was organized by the Seminario Rabínico Latinoamericano and the Centro de Estudios Migratorios Latinoamericanos (CEMLA).

¹⁷Regarding the memory of colonization, see Cherjovsky (53-54).

¹⁸Weinstein is the director of the Marc Turkow Research Center of the AMIA; Senkman and Salomon are historians; Rollansky was a major Argentine Yiddish intellectual and cultural entrepreneur. See also Blejman.

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