

## **What's new in Argentina? New scholarship on Argentinian Jewish diaspora**

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**Abstract:**

The authors of *The New Jewish Argentina. Facets of Jewish Experiences in the Southern Cone* offer readers an interesting and well-researched book on Jewish past and current-day experience in Argentina. Their contributions on Argentinean Jewish literature, cinema, history, and society constitute an excellent mixture, allowing us to track the most recent developments in the Latin American Jewish studies. Especially interesting is the focus on minority discourses formerly largely neglected by the scholarship.

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Adriana Brodsky and Raanan Rein (eds.): *The New Jewish Argentina. Facets of Jewish Experiences in the Southern Cone*. Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2013. 402 S., 146,00 Euro. ISBN: 9789004233461

*New Jewish Argentina. Facets of Jewish Experiences in the Southern Cone*, edited by Adriana Brodsky and Raanan Rein, is valuable especially for those who are already somewhat familiar with Latin American Jewish history. It is a clear invitation for scholars to explore new areas of Latin American Jewish life and to rethink existing scholarship by adding new layers and interpretations. Gathering Argentinean, Israeli, and North-American authors, the editors of the volume offer us inspiring and diverse possibilities for approaching history, sociology, art, and literature of Jewish Argentineans.

Authors of the book seem to question the dominating focus area of Latin American Jewish studies of recent decades. It is absolutely true that Jewish agricultural settlements, history, and the politics of Jewish institutions or Argentinean anti-Semitism have attracted most of the scholarly attention. Certain areas of Latin American Jewish life were largely neglected or overlooked. Political and institutional history was overshadowing the experience of individuals, traceable rather by the tools and methods of anthropology and social history. Authors of the volume move the emphasis onto the ones who were not affiliated with the country's Jewish institutions, but whose lives constitute an important layer of Argentinean Jewish experience.

The great value of this volume is the research devoted to marginal and minority discourses among Argentinean Jews. Analyzing beauty contests among Sephardi minority, Adriana Brodsky explores previously marginalized Sephardi narrative and seemingly insignificant connections between beauty and Zionism. Mollie Lewis Nouwen, basing her findings on police chronicles published in *La Prensa*, discovers new layers of Jewish life in the Buenos Aires of the 20s and 30s. Analyzing criminality, she draws a fascinating picture of Jewish and non-Jewish interactions in the Argentinean capital. Other essays included in the volume also encompass the principle of presenting what was earlier marginalized, allowing us to reconstruct various aspects of Argentinean Jewish history.

Especially thought-provoking, I find, is the essay of Alejandro Dujovne, who analyses the importance of Jewish libraries and bookstores in Buenos Aires. He traces formation and development of a Jewish book market in Buenos Aires, embedding it in the broader context of Jewish

Argentinean culture. His research allows us to reflect on transnational circulation of thought in a pre-digital era, as well as to reconstruct an important, but largely forgotten, fragment of Jewish immigrant history in Argentina. Dujovne argues that the type and language of books bought and read by Jewish Argentines was a form of negotiating changing Jewish identities that allows us to trace the sociological changes among the Jews of Buenos Aires. For instance, Jewish libraries of interwar Buenos Aires were filled with Yiddish volumes, printed mostly in European Jewish cultural centers such as Warsaw or Vilnius, whereas since 1945 Buenos Aires has developed its own literary and print market, fulfilling the needs of assimilating Jews, who preferred to read Jewish-themed books in Spanish. His valuable text is based on rigorous field work in Buenos Aires and fills in important gaps in the urban social history of Buenos Aires.

Tzvi Tal presents an important overview of Jewish themes in contemporary Argentinean cinema. His article serves as a good introduction to the subject of Jewish presence in Argentinean cinematography: it is not aimed at in-depth analysis of specific films or contributions of specific directors. Conversely, it offers a broader perspective on developments of Argentinean cinema. Tal argues that prior to 1996 Argentinean directors only rarely incorporated Jewish themes, and when they did, Jews were rather exoticized as poor immigrants or objects of persecution. One of the main arguments presented in this essay is the turn of the Jewish experience from margins to the center of interest of Argentinean cinema. Tal underlines that in post-Menem Argentina (after 1999) Jewish characters function as an allegory for Argentinean identity, that is, as he writes: "beleaguered by the pressure of globalization". I find his argument slightly problematic and would be rather cautious while linking the development of a neo-liberal system and more prominent representations of Jews in the cinema. Tal seems to attribute over-proportional impact to neo-liberal reforms of the 90s. His picture of social changes among Argentinean Jews lacks deeper analysis of other, possibly influential events: fall of dictatorial regime, AMIA bombing, and transnational influences of other centers of Jewish diaspora.

Ariel Svarch explores another earlier, almost untouched field of Latin American Jewish studies. Examining interwar issues of the Argentinean daily *Crítica*, he studies visual representations of Jewishness and immigration in its comic strip "Don Jacobo en la Argentina". Svarch argues that positive depiction of the strip's main character, don Jacobo, aimed to confirm successful integration of Eastern European immigrants, as well as to destabilize anti-Semitic and anti-immigrant right wing imaginary of a Jew. *Crítica* not only has challenged negative stereotypes about the Jews, but has also used the figure of don Jacobo as a tool to embrace certain aspects of modernity promoted more broadly by the daily. For instance, in one of the strips we see Jacobo adapting to the needs of modern fashion – buying a fancy coat or confronting the new phenomenon of female drivers. Svarch claims that don Jacobo not only embraces the modernity but also Argentina's cultural mores (one strip depicts him chanting Argentinean tango *Niño bien*, another shows him visiting a cabaret with his nephew). The essay of Ariel Svarch is an important contribution that allows us to reconstruct the representations of Jewish immigration in Argentinean popular culture and mass media. Svarch uses formerly neglected

sources: comic strips were earlier rarely perceived as a source of sociological or historical knowledge. He proves that scholars should not marginalize seemingly 'unserious' sources.

New Jewish Argentina. Facets of Jewish Experiences in the Southern Cone is an important contribution to the field of Latin American Jewish studies, but for sure it would also be interesting for ones who do not deal with Jewish subjects. Authors of the volume problematize issues that constitute an integral part of Argentinean history: immigration, industrialization, or nationalism and anti-Semitism. This volume innovatively sets out new directions in Latin American Jewish studies, encompassing sources and interpretations that were formerly largely neglected. One of the strengths of this book is the prominent representation of emerging scholars (Svarch, Gurwitz, Yarfitz) who, while benefiting from existing studies, do not hesitate to explore new fields of research. Seamless combination of the experience of older scholars and youthful fascination is what makes the volume edited by Brodsky and Rein not only academically valuable, but also just plain fascinating.