

A Fragile Inheritance:
The Fate of Yiddish in Argentina (1930-1970)

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This dissertation by Amy K. Kerner is accepted in its present form by the Department of History as satisfying the dissertation requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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INTRODUCTION

Over a century after the age of mass migrations from Europe, immigrants' lives in the Americas continue to be assessed in terms of their political identities. Were they loyal to the empires they came from, or did they promote nationalist visions of new states? Did they naturalize, and demonstrate civic pride in their new home countries? Did they read and write across transnational networks, constituting alternative imagined communities? Did they stay, or leave once again for greener pastures, even returning "home"? In short, which allegiances changed, which remained?

The following pages will argue that careful analysis of the relations between immigrant populations and the languages they speak is a necessary approach to this set of questions. This will be done by attending to four aspects of linguistic experience among Jewish immigrants and their children in twentieth-century Argentina: Spanish language nationalism, Yiddish language nationalism, multilingualism, and cultural diplomacy. Relying on sources in Spanish and in Yiddish, a widely shared vernacular that coexisted with other languages spoken predominantly by Jews living in Eastern Europe, this

dissertation will show how Jewish Argentines understood and responded to the European ethnic identification of Jewishness with the Yiddish language, as well as how Jewish Argentines responded to Argentinian formulations of language as an aspect of national culture, at times defined explicitly in opposition to Jewishness. How did immigrants move between languages, and to what effect on their sense of place and belonging? Naturally, not all individuals treated here thought about linguistic boundaries in these terms. But reconstructing the historical interplay between imagined racial boundaries and languages provides a new way of looking at Argentinian exceptionalism, rooted not in a mythical notion of “whiteness” derived from mass immigration, but in the performance of language – embodied, discursive, spectacular – that continues to feature prominently in Argentinian popular culture, in the perceptions of outsiders, and in the experiences of non-“white” Argentines.¹

I adopt an approach to language in this dissertation that differs from an imagined one-to-one correspondence between speakers and their vernacular, for three reasons. First, the multilingual subjects of this study – people who moved between and among empires and nation-states – acquired languages that served different social and political purposes along the way. Such subjects cannot easily be categorized by language. Second, a simplistic definition of language risks reproducing, rather than historicizing, the logic of

¹ For a recent rethinking of the “racial outlier” and “melting pot” narratives in Argentinian history, see Paulina Alberto and Eduardo Elena, eds., *Rethinking Race in Modern Argentina* (Cambridge University Press, 2016); Asian Argentines, for example, continue to be viewed with suspicion or disbelief as native speakers of Argentinian Spanish; see Chisu Teresa Ko, “From Whiteness to Diversity: Crossing the Racial Threshold in Bicentennial Argentina,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 37, no. 14 (2013): 2529–46. Comedian Diego Capusotto satirizes all kinds of “typically” Argentinian linguistic performances. For a discussion of Jewish speech in popular culture inspired in part by Capusotto’s sketch about a non-Jewish man who cannot help being mistaken as a Jew because of his speech habits (“No soy judío”), see Ariel Svach, “Four Jews, Five Identities: Representation, Popular Culture, and Language Politics in the Making of Jewish-Argentines (Buenos Aires, 1930-1945)” (Emory University, 2016).

nineteenth and twentieth century European nationalism, which held that a single people should share a single language. And third, such an approach would restrict a language-oriented analysis to a body of sources in and of a language, rather than accommodating an archive of perceptions of – and interactions with – that language, including by people who do not speak it.

For these reasons, I make use of the linguistic concept of the performative, elaborated in 1955 by philosopher J. L. Austin. Words, Austin proposed, do more than *mean*, or literally signify – they also *do things*, intervening in social relationships through verbal art.² Historians and anthropologists “see” performativity at work when census-takers elicit a single language from the bilingual in order to record their nationality; when speakers of multiple languages consistently or intermittently write, correspond, or speak in a particular language with an attached political meaning; when listeners discriminate or make determinations about race based on the language they hear spoken; when a diaspora group that no longer speaks the language of the home country re-adopts that language as an ethnic emblem; or when staged performances of any kind take place in a particular language, rather than another that might have been chosen instead.³ A performative approach to language gets beyond the nationalist projects that confine language to signifying national belonging. It brings into view alternative ways of imagining

² J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words: The William James Lectures, Delivered at Harvard University in 1955*, ed. Marina Sbisa and J. O. Urmson, 2. ed. [repr.] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

³ Pieter M Judson, *Guardians of the Nation: Activists on the Language Frontiers of Imperial Austria* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006); Tara Zahra, *Kidnapped Souls: National Indifference and the Battle for Children in the Bohemian Lands* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011); Timothy Snyder, *The Reconstruction of Nations: Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, 1569-1999* (Yale University Press, 2003); Patrick Eisenlohr, *Little India: Diaspora, Time, and Ethnolinguistic Belonging in Hindu Mauritius* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Ien Ang, *On Not Speaking Chinese: Living Between Asia and the West* (Routledge, 2012).

individuals' relations to political communities – whether national, transnational, urban, provincial, or other.

Following this method, the first chapter considers linguistic performance in relation both to transnational (“Yiddishland”-) and urban (Buenos Aires) communities, and the conflict between them. It examines the contradiction between the European ideal of Yiddish-language nationalism and the competing notions that Jewish migrants to Argentina held about their present and future relations to national languages. While Yiddish speakers learned Spanish by necessity, and the first Argentinian-born generation spoke it fluently, by the time of the 1910 centennial, rifts had emerged between the Buenos Aires intelligentsia and the urban working classes and provincial colonists. This divergence, along with the development of popular and legal anti-immigrant attitudes bound up with language, held Yiddish and Spanish apart from each other as languages of immigrant backwardness and upward mobility, respectively. And in the 1930s, anti-immigrant attitudes would sharpen even more, as Argentinian Catholic fascism and nationalist *ligas* propagated charges of Judeo-Bolshevism and an urgent need to defend Argentina from foreign influence. The chapter stresses the parallels between Jewish and other immigrants' complex relationships to languages in Buenos Aires, and the presence of non-Spanish languages as a factor in contemporary expressions of Argentinian cultural nationalism.

After the First World War, Minority Treaties codified certain groups as ethno-national minorities in new Eastern European states, granting them rights to minor-language cultural institutions. In many cases, Jewish rights to Yiddish-language institutions were not enforced, as pretensions of democracy yielded to open anti-

Semitism. A considerable number of Jews – mainly Polish and Yiddish bilinguals – left Poland for Argentina, leading language activists to travel there too. In the 1920s and ‘30s, they brought with them the “spirit of Vilna,” a European idea of Yiddish as both ancient and modern, traditional and cosmopolitan. Like educators and activists of Spanish, Italian, German, or other national tongues, Yiddishists offered an idealized version of the mother tongue, or “mame loshn,” one that drew from an immensely diverse, transnational population of speakers to project unity through language. On the basis of these visits, tours, and public appearances in the name of Yiddish among Argentinian and other European intellectuals in 1930s Buenos Aires, the chapter shows how the “spirit of Vilna” traveled to Buenos Aires, as well as its initial unpopularity among immigrants who recognized the high stakes of performing a non-Spanish language in the fascist decade.

The second chapter moves to the literal performance of Yiddish on stage. Amateur Yiddish theater first traveled to Argentina with immigration to agricultural colonies in the late 19th century. But starting in the 1930s, and for over a decade after the Holocaust, fascination with Yiddish stage performance in Buenos Aires crossed the vernacular line between Yiddish and Spanish. Why did speakers of German, Italian, and Spanish – including non-Jews – attend, review, even direct Yiddish plays? The answer cannot be reduced to nostalgia or curiosity, but requires an understanding of national ethnic politics and their ramifications for linguistic performance. The “foreign” languages of immigrants regained some prestige in the framework of creole nationalism, promoted by populist president Juan Perón, who himself adopted working-class speech styles in Spanish, appealing to new urban migrants. In response, theaters and audiences deployed

Yiddish on stage as a way of constructing and crossing an ethnic boundary, directly or vicariously. The meanings of Yiddish on stage ranged from rendering a stable racial boundary (for those who wished such boundaries would remain stable), to anti-fascism, to a way of making space for Jewish culture in the new hierarchy of Argentinian creoles.

The third chapter moves from the public spectacle of stage performance to the linguistic biographies of immigrants and refugees, many of whom arrived in Buenos Aires after spending the genocidal years of the Second World War in the Soviet Union. As in interwar Eastern Europe, in Buenos Aires and other European diaspora- and immigrant communities the choice of language again became a political statement, this time aligning Yiddish with the documentation and commemoration of the destruction of Jewish life in Europe. The chapter contrasts the pre-war lives and linguistic histories of Jewish immigrants and refugees who settled in Buenos Aires – founders of the city’s principal Jewish cultural institutions and archives – to the post-war canonization of Yiddish as a primary language of commemoration. It does this to give a picture of the way multilingual life histories are lost to memory, flattened into accounts of single-language associations determined by ethnicity or national categories. The postwar history of a vernacular already endangered in Europe by the 1920s and ‘30s provides a case study of Jewish multilingualism selectively forgotten, and offers a non-European account of the idealization of Yiddish.

The fourth chapter is concerned not with displacement, but with stable state structures that propagate myths of national belonging according to language. It analyses the uses of Spanish, Hebrew, and Yiddish within the realm of cultural diplomacy, which gave writers and diplomats a space and a platform in which to perform official language

politics. Surprisingly, cultural diplomats made substantial informal use of Yiddish as a language of state. This chapter traces Israeli diplomatic engagement with Yiddish, a way of performing Jewishness, and initially a practical way for diplomats – also native speakers – to connect with Jewish Argentina. The chapter also traces the interest of Spanish-speaking intellectuals like Jorge Luis Borges in the rise of an Israeli state whose consolidation spelled a rejection of Argentinian Jewishness as tied to the performance of Yiddish. Leveraging his iconicity as a leading figure of the Argentinian intelligentsia, Borges’s fame and warm relations with Israel offered young Spanish-speaking Jews a sense of inclusion in world literature, and unseated Yiddish as the sole authoritative connotation of Jewishness in Argentinian Spanish.

In the course of my research, I was repeatedly reminded of the potential for language to capture, alternately, a sense of power and powerlessness, in particular for multilingual speakers whose languages place them at an intersection of “minority” and “majority” groups. A “minority language” is a strange concept, since every language is major to the individual – so-called because it is viewed on a transnational scale as either smaller than, or otherwise not fitting into, the nation-state and post-colonial language regions whose wars, conquests, and forms of governance shape the economic and social lives of individuals. In Rhode Island, immigrant “minority” language speakers elude census language categories, which include Spanish, but not (Mexican) Zapotec or (Guatemalan) K’iche. In Providence, one man, an immigrant from East Africa – a Lyft driver also employed by a multinational investment bank – told me he regretted opting out of French lessons as a child, since it left him unqualified for certain international agency jobs. In a border region where families from Rwanda, a former Belgian colony,

were comfortable with French from a young age, he elected English to avoid embarrassment. “I’m not someone who likes to be made fun of,” he said.

So strong are the stigmas and auras we build around languages that it can be difficult to recover the histories that generated them. Yiddish is currently subject to strong idealization,⁴ partly rooted in nostalgia and an age-appropriate interest in the lives of grandparents, but also, I suspect, in the desire of young, educated Americans, Israelis, and others, critical of their nation-states’ politics, to look for a language-based escape hatch: an intellectual and social community, vernacular or not, that gives access to alternative, supra-national identities. This is why expensive summer programs proliferate in New York, Vilna, and Tel Aviv for a small, international community in Yiddish language study. No such globally marketed summer program exists in Buenos Aires, probably a function of funding landscapes.⁵

Argentina lies at the center of a constellation of imperial and national histories which have, by now, conspired to conceal the fascinating encounter of European Jews with Spanish, and of Jewish and non-Jewish Argentinians with Yiddish. These include the history of the Russian Revolution, which ended the empire where modern Yiddish print culture began;⁶ the avant-garde internationalism of interwar Europe, where Yiddish

⁴ Such idealization can lead to serious historical misinterpretation. See: Ewa Geller, “The Perils of Idealizing Yiddish,” in *Yiddish After the Holocaust*, ed. Joseph Sherman (Oxford: Boulevard Books, 2004), 179–97.

⁵ Currently, Jewish cultural institutions in Argentina face financial constraints in pursuing their own local agendas, much less building, promoting, and running programs for international guests. The promises of President Macri to stabilize the economy and reduce unemployment have failed to materialize.

⁶ Sarah Abrevaya Stein, *Making Jews Modern: The Yiddish and Ladino Press in the Russian and Ottoman Empires* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007).

speakers met in cafes in Berlin, Moscow, and Paris;⁷ and the shifting immigration politics of states to which Jews departed from Europe. In 1921, the United States extended its national-racial immigration restrictions to all immigrants, effectively ending Jewish immigration from Europe. For at least another decade, legal Jewish immigration to Argentina continued, ending with new immigration restrictions imposed after 1933. By the end of the Second World War, the Jewish population of Argentina was roughly 300,000, and immigration began again, mainly through illegal, and therefore only partially documented, channels.⁸ The men and women who immigrated from Europe to Argentina, bringing Yiddish with them, included subjects of the Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires, and after the First World War, citizens of Poland, Lithuania, Germany, and other central and eastern European states. Many came following family, sometimes with vague notions of what life in Argentina might be like, little knowledge of Spanish, and little luggage in tow. They became farmers, peddlers, shopkeepers, factory workers, students, and professionals. During the lifetimes of thousands of Argentinian Yiddish-speakers, in Israel, a movement to revive the Hebrew language gained political legitimacy with the war of 1948 and pronouncement of statehood. In May of 1949, adjusting procedures to new diplomatic realities, Argentina's Minister of Foreign Relations sent a telegram to the Argentinian Embassy in Washington, DC, to ask

⁷ By 1924, nearly 25% of Yiddish books worldwide were being published in Berlin. Rachel Seelig, *Strangers in Berlin: Modern Jewish Literature between East and West, 1919-1933* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016).

⁸ Haim Avni, *Argentina & the Jews: A History of Jewish Immigration* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1991).

what would be the official language of the new Jewish state. The telegram sent in reply stated that the “idioma oficial” [official language] was “*el idish*.”⁹

That Yiddish was the official Israeli language was of course a strange error in 1949, with the pro-Hebrew language politics of Zionism long established. The error may have originated in the overlapping meanings for Argentinian non-Jews in the 1940s of *judío* [Jew], *hebreo* [Hebrew – the person or the language], *israelita* [an Israelite, meaning a Jew], and *ídish* [the most widely recognized Jewish immigrant language of Buenos Aires]. Yiddish was a well-known language in a city of immigrants, where at the start of the 20th century more than one-third of the population had been born elsewhere. Jewish immigrants from southern Russian settled on agricultural colonies outside Buenos Aires starting in the 1880s, but conditions on these farms were difficult, and after the First World War immigration was diverted to the more economically vibrant growing capital city. Ethnic enclaves formed in Buenos Aires,¹⁰ and the appearance, as Jewish immigration peaked a second time in the 1920s, of a Jewish neighborhood in the heart of the city, Once, increased Jewish visibility. Immigrant speech styles became the stuff of everyday comedy, and Yiddish appeared alongside Italian and Spanish in representations of modern urban life. Tomás Simari included a Jewish (Yiddish) accent and the word *geven*,¹¹ spoken by a *ruso* or Jewish immigrant, in his 1928 radio sketch about traveling

⁹ Elio Kapszuk, ed., *1949/1999 Israel-Argentina: Encuentro Entre 2 Naciones* (Buenos Aires: Embajada de Israel, 1999), 20–21.

¹⁰ On spatial distribution and ethnicity see Jose C Moya, *Cousins and Strangers: Spanish Immigrants in Buenos Aires, 1850-1930* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/heb.31623>.

¹¹ Past participle of “to be,” and therefore a high frequency word used in any past-tense narration.

on city buses, less than a decade after omnibuses were introduced in Buenos Aires.¹²

Depictions of Jewish speech with a Yiddish accent were common in interwar Argentina. Attention to “strange” speech accompanied the social and political transformation of the state, from an agrarian economy to an urban industrial one based in a multiethnic city, touched by the ethnonational movements of all its immigrant communities, from Russian revolutionary movements to German Nazism, Italian fascism, and the emergence of Argentinian populism, a post-war blending of fascist political strategies and social democracy.

The centrality of mass immigration in modern Argentinian history, alongside recent discussions of multiculturalism and pluralism in contemporary Argentina, has spurred new scholarship on the intersection of race, nationality, and *argentinidad*.¹³ Going beyond the myth of Argentina as a “white” nation, historians have begun to disentangle what was exceptional about Argentina – the scale and particular demographics of immigration – from the narrative legacies of that epoch inscribed in local understandings and performances of *raza*, or race.¹⁴ By 1930, language and *raza* were already connected concepts;¹⁵ but the interplay of race and language, and the

¹² Ehrikh has made a sound file available as supplementary material; Yiddish is not recorded on the transcript, which reflects the Jewish speech as “Russian” and “unintelligible.” Christine Ehrick, “Comedy and Aural Modernity in Argentina: Tomas Simari’s ‘Un Viaje En Omnibus,’” *Hispanic American Historical Review* 96, no. 2 (2016): 217–23.

¹³ A good overview of the subject is: Fernando Devoto, *Historia de La Inmigracion En La Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 2003) See Chapter 1 for more on immigrants and non-Spanish languages in comparative perspective.

¹⁴ Alberto and Elena, *Rethinking Race in Modern Argentina*.

¹⁵ Lilia Ana Bertoní argued that by 1910, an exclusive, defensive concept of the nation influenced by the ethno-linguistic nationalism of the German unifiers had come to dominate over a “cosmopolitan” notion based on the value of cultural difference -- including linguistic diversity -- and of voluntaristic affiliation

ubiquitous coding of racial boundaries through linguistic performance, did not end in 1930, or when immigrants became bilingual, or when they gained citizenship. The fate of Yiddish in Argentina provides a vehicle for analyzing this boundary, a way to “monitor whatever link there may be to language as an aspect of presumed ethnicity.”¹⁶

Lastly, in this project I have tried to avoid the nostalgia for and idealization of Yiddish that the protracted experience of its eventual loss produced. Jewish Argentines did not always see Yiddish as precious and worthy of salvage, just as non-Jews did not always condemn Yiddish as a mark of suspicion or bolshevism. By tracing the changing position of Yiddish among immigrants and Argentines over several decades, I have tried to account for how it was possible for immigrants in Argentina to feel that while “In other countries Yiddish dies of its own accord, here it is being killed slowly.”¹⁷

with the nation. Lilia Ana Bertoni, *Patriotas, Cosmopolitas y Nacionalistas. La Construcción de La Nacionalidad Argentina a Fines Del Siglo XIX*, n.d.

¹⁶ Joshua Fishman, *Language and Ethnicity in Minority Sociolinguistic Perspective*, Multilingual Matters 45 (Avon, England: Clevedon, 1989), 11.

¹⁷ Eliahu Toker, Testimonio de Simja Sneh, n.d., Centro Marc Turkow, Buenos Aires.

CHAPTER 1: LANGUAGE ACTIVISTS IN THE FASCIST DECADE

By the 1930s, Jewish Argentinians were increasingly bilingual. And yet the emblematic power of Yiddish to mark Jewish ethnicity in Buenos Aires increased during that decade. Like fascism and hispanism – nationalist ideologies used by early 20th century Argentinian nationalists to define the nation in terms of violence, the sacred, or a Spanish heritage – Yiddishism arose in Europe and traveled to Buenos Aires through transatlantic contacts and visits.¹⁸ But the demands of Jewish intellectuals for Jewish devotion to the Yiddish language and literature posed problems for bilingual immigrants, who recognized the strong stigmas surrounding non-Spanish languages – in particular after the coup of 1930 – and the obligatory place of the Spanish language in accessing education, high culture, and respectable circles of intellectual influence.

This chapter begins by considering the position of Yiddish in the landscape of immigrant languages in centennial Argentina. The Jewish vernacular was not unique in being stigmatized as a non-Spanish vernacular spoken by thousands of *porteños*. Nor were Jewish Argentinians unique in their eagerness to acquire Spanish, in order to work, read, socialize, and take part in urban life. For both these reasons, Jewish Argentinians were ambivalent about the “spirit of Vilna,” which I use to describe a European

¹⁸ For a discussion of hispanidad and Spanish fascism, including their roots in Argentinian liberalism, see Federico Finchelstein, *Transatlantic Fascism: Ideology, Violence, and the Sacred in Argentina and Italy, 1919-1945* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 144–51.

movement to modernize and standardize the Yiddish language as a Jewish national language of world literature. While a small number of Jewish intellectuals in Argentina – predominantly immigrants from Poland – looked for ways to institutionalize and promote Yiddishism locally, most Jewish Argentines preferred to limit their performances of Yiddish to private spaces, newspaper habits, visits to the theater, and the occasional popular reception of visiting “stars” of Yiddish letters.

Jewish Argentines deployed their knowledge of – or curiosity about – the Jewish ethnic language in particular times and places, frustrating Yiddish language activists in the 1930s, and the institutional development of Argentinian Yiddishism would not accelerate until after the Second World War.

i. Civilization or Babel?

“...we shall build, if we have not already built, a Tower of Babel in America, its workmen speaking all tongues, not blending them together in the task of construction but each persisting in his own, and thus unable to understand the other...”¹⁹ – Domingo Faustino Sarmiento

In 1919, at the height of Argentina’s “Red Scare” and shortly after protests at a Buenos Aires metal factory escalated into a week of violent clashes with police, Arturo Cancela wrote a fictionalized account based on the episode that came to be known *La semana trágica*, the Tragic Week. Cancela’s story, “Una semana de holgorio” [A week of revelry], satirized the scale of police repression, using foreign-language phobia to caricature the surge of anti-immigrant fear.²⁰ The narrator, a gambling, dandified member of the upper class, creole oligarchy named Julio Narciso Dillon, has comically little grasp of working class grievances. He demands a striking cab driver give him a ride; when the driver yells at him in Italian, Dillon is unsympathetic: “Look gringo,” he threatens the driver, “if in twenty minutes you don’t deliver me to the door of the hippodrome, I’ll have you taken prisoner as a maximalist.”²¹ Later in the day, with the city in total chaos and transit impossible, Dillon stumbles into a proletariat-led attack on a police station, only to be left behind when the rest make a run for it, and taken prisoner on suspicion of

¹⁹ Sarmiento, in *El Nacional*, quoted by Romero, *Argentinian Political Thought*, 177.

²⁰ Arturo Cancela, “Una Semana de Holgorio,” in *Tres Relatos Portenos y Tres Cuentos de La Ciudad* (Buenos Aires: Espasa-Calpe argentina, 1944).

²¹ “Gringo” was a term commonly applied to Italian immigrants in Argentina. “Maximalista” referred to a range of leftist political views popular among working class immigrants, including anarchism, bolshevism, and communism. Cancela, 66.

bolshevism. At first, under interrogation, he assures the officer he is not an immigrant, but a citizen, and a creole of noble lineage. But when he falls asleep, and relives his conversation with the Italian driver in a dream, Dilon repeats the immigrant's angry curse. He wakes to find himself speaking the words *in Italian*. Under the circumstances, this "foreign" speech becomes in itself an incriminating act.

In the aftermath of the Tragic Week, protesters were rounded up and jailed, and Argentinian immigration policy began to tighten, restricting immigrants not by nationality, but by class and criminal background, to "desirable" immigrants with useful skills and without ties to proletariat and revolutionary working-class movements.²² Jewish immigrants – typically called "rusos," since many of them came from what was then the Russian empire – were especially affected by the violent backlash against the strikes, which unleashed pogroms in the neighborhoods most heavily populated by Jews. This fact also went noticed by Cancela's narrator, who described the violence as springing from hatred of foreign sounds: "Why do they have such hatred of consonants? Can vowels alone ever constitute a language?"²³

The use of linguistic boundaries to demarcate the Argentinian nation is a phenomenon that emerged and re-emerged between the peak of mass migration and the last "wave" of migration from Europe in the 1920s. Just as liberal thought balanced clear pro-immigration policies ("to govern is to populate") with deep anxieties about the effects of immigrant cultures on the "body" of Argentina, so did politicians and writers

²² Avni, *Argentina & the Jews*, 123.

²³ Cancela, "Una Semana de Holgorio," 91.

consistently turn to linguistic evidence within their discourses on how to maintain racial and national purity, or avoid contamination.

Buenos Aires was recognized as a “babel” of immigrant tongues in connection with the mass immigration that peaked several decades before the events of the Tragic Week on which Cancela’s story was based. Makers of Argentina’s liberal immigration policies were also early advocates of stricter policies to prevent the perpetuation of immigrant languages. As thousands of immigrants from Italy, Spain, and the Russian empires arrived in Argentina, many of them speakers of subnational dialects, the presence of immigrant languages appeared more frequently in the writings of cultural nationalists who saw non-Spanish languages as audible proof of a failure to culturally assimilate. In the 1880s, D. F. Sarmiento led a campaign against immigrant schools. Immigrant-founded institutions took notice of Sarmiento’s and other critics’ charges of “national danger,”²⁴ in some cases responding directly with new policies aimed at demonstrating active acquisition of Spanish.²⁵

²⁴ L. Favero, “Las Escuelas de Las Sociedades Italianas En Argentina (1860-1914),” in *La Inmigración Italiana En La Argentina*, ed. Fernando Devoto and Gianfausto Rosoli (Buenos Aires: Editorial Biblos, 1985), 178.

²⁵ Italian schools publicized their new Spanish-Italian bilingual policy at the 1881 Primer Congreso Pedagógico Italiano. See Favero, p178.



Figure 1: Cover of the Yiddish-language edition of *La Revista Argentina* [The Argentinian Magazine], ca 1920s. The contents introduced Argentina to readers as “the land of the future,” a cultured, liberal, European outpost in South America.²⁶

The early 20th Century in Argentina was characterized both by an expansion of state power and infrastructure, parts of which directly encouraged language shift among immigrant communities, for example by mandating state education.²⁷ Historians of immigrant communities in Argentina have demonstrated the pace of language shift by the time of the 1910 centennial: many immigrants spoke Spanish and another non-Spanish language. Language marked ethnic identity.²⁸ Immigrants participated widely in Spanish-

²⁶ YIVO, New York, microfilm 66 Y 755, *Argentinianr Zshurnal Buenos Aires*.

²⁷ Buenos Aires province approved the Ley de Educacion Comun in 1884. Favero, “Las Escuelas de Las Sociedades Italianas En Argentina (1860-1914),” 172.

²⁸ In his recent study of Germans in Buenos Aires, Benjamin Bryce points out that the term “German” or “Deutsch” was used in Argentina between 1880 and 1930 to refer to people born in “Germany, Austria-

language print culture, and to some extent occupied high positions in professional and academic circles.²⁹ Often bilingual, Jews and other immigrants who spoke Spanish well also recognized the linguistic boundaries and imperatives of upward mobility and high society (Spanish), as opposed to the working-class world of fraternal societies, stores, hospitals, and other immigrant aid institutions that continued to operate, fueling nationalists' fears of cultural barbarism and linguistic corruption.³⁰ An interest in

Hungary, Russia, Switzerland, Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay" and that "every German speaker in Buenos Aires was to some extent also a Spanish speaker." Benjamin Bryce, *To Belong in Buenos Aires: Germans, Argentinians, and the Rise of a Pluralist Society* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2018), 7; Writing about "Jewish Argentinians" between 1880 and 1930, Molly Nouwen characterizes Yiddish in Argentina as the shared language of the Jewish "ethnic past" -- one among a number of ethnic identity "markers" -- a way of addressing the persistent coding of Yiddish as Jewish even as a majority of immigrants adopted Spanish, with varying degrees of success depending on age and education. She also argues that Jews in Argentina were not unique in having language attach to them as "ethnic identity markers." Mollie Lewis Nouwen, *Oy, My Buenos Aires: Jewish Immigrants and the Creation of Argentinian National Identity* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2013), 6; Between the 1881 decision to incorporate Spanish into Italian school curricula, and the outbreak of the Second World War, Fernando Devoto has shown a move to abandon Italian between 1917 and 1941. Fernando Devoto, "Participacion y Conflictos En Las Sociedades Italianas de Socorros Mutuos," in *La Inmigracion Italiana En La Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Biblos, 2000), 164; As Brodsky and Rein point out in the introduction to *The New Jewish Argentina*, ethnic institutions and their memberships constituted a small fraction of immigrant communities and their histories are not representative. Given the documented participation of immigrants in popular and urban culture in Buenos Aires, institutions' abandonment of immigrant languages, as in the Italian case (1917-1941) may be a lagging indicator of proficiency or fluency in Spanish. Adriana Brodsky and Raanan Rein, eds., *The New Jewish Argentina: Facets of Jewish Experience in the Southern Cone*, Jewish Latin America, Volume 2 (Buenos Aires, 2012).

²⁹ Until about 1910 -- following a chronology proposed by Ricardo Feierstein and substantiated in works by Edna Aizenberg, Saul Sosnowski, and Naomi Lindstrom -- the "integrative project" predominated, with Alberto Gerchunoff emblematic in his dedication to a language "limpio y castizo" [clean and pure]. Jewish immigrants were pulled toward Spanish as a linguistic performance of civilization and high culture. This phase was followed by disillusionment, in the fascist 1930s, and a "negation of the previous idyll." Ricardo Feierstein, *Historia de los judíos argentinos* (Buenos Aires: Planeta, 1993), 332-33; As recounted to Monica Szurmuk for her biography of Gerchunoff, in the 1930s, the author of *Los Gauchos Judios*--celebrated ca. 1910 for his depiction of Jewish pastoral life in the agricultural colonies -- visited young Jewish Argentinians associated with the "assimilationist" Hebraica and encouraged them not to lose contact with the Yiddish language. Monica Szurmuk, *La Vocacion Desmesurada: Una Biografia de Alberto Gerchunoff* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 2018).

³⁰ As Molly Nouwen points out, Jewish immigrants who arrived to Argentina before the First World War found few institutions to assist them in their own language and most quickly learned Spanish. She provides portraits of individuals she considers representative of this group, including Enrique Dickmann and Alberto Gerchunoff, in CH7, "Individual Lives." Nouwen, *Oy, My Buenos Aires*; Mariusz Kalczewiak, "Jewish Polacos, Argentina, and the Yiddishland: Negotiating Transnational Identities, 1914-1939" (Tel Aviv University, 2017); Svarch, "Four Jews, Five Identities: Representation, Popular Culture, and Language Politics in the Making of Jewish-Argentinians (Buenos Aires, 1930-1945)."

maintaining Jewish social and intellectual networks while also shifting the performance of Jewish ethnicity away from Yiddish to Spanish gave the impetus to a number of interwar literary and cultural projects, many of them still in existence.³¹ But the appearance of this Spanish-language Jewish cultural landscape should not obscure the continuing presence of Yiddish as a vernacular and language of urban entertainment in the 1920s and '30s. As Argentina entered the fascist 1930s, the presence of a large number of immigrants in the growing urban landscape of Buenos Aires increased – rather than decreased – widespread preoccupation with linguistic performance as a way of deciphering national loyalties, cultural affinities, class profiles, and intellectual commitments. For all immigrant groups – not only Jews – language remained an important marker of ethnic difference not in spite of, but because of the parallel processes of language shift to Spanish, and because of the rising discourse (most extreme among the nationalist *ligas*) of cultural protectionism.

The shift to Spanish among immigrant enclaves was accompanied by the persistent use of non-Spanish languages in public spaces in the city, and by immigrants' adoption of emerging middle class styles of dress and forms of urban entertainment. Radios became common household items in the 1920s and '30s, and non-Spanish language broadcasting was still common in the 1930s.³² Applied as a prescription to

³¹ The Spanish-language Jewish newspaper *Mundo Israelit* was established in 1923, the *Sociedad Hebraica* in 1926, the Sephardic newspaper *La Luz* in 1931, and *Judaica* in 1933. Feierstein, *Historia de los judíos argentinos*, "Cronologia," pp410-418; Other ethnic "colectividades" likewise carried on ethnic print culture in Spanish. Arab-speakers from Ottoman Syria could read the Spanish-language *Gaceta Árabe*. On Arabic-speakers see Lily Pearl Balloffet, "From The Pampa to the Mashriq: Arab-Argentinian Philanthropy Networks," *Mashriq & Mahjar* No. 1 (2017): 4–28; Steven Hyland, *More Argentinian Than You: Arabic-Speaking Immigrants in Argentina* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2017).

³² Svarch puts "ethnic and minority radio shows" in the 1930s at "over a dozen" in Argentina, including shows in (or partly in-) German, Italian, and Yiddish. Svarch, "Four Jews, Five Identities: Representation, Popular Culture, and Language Politics in the Making of Jewish-Argentines (Buenos Aires, 1930-1945),"

purify the language of Argentinian radio – both of non-Spanish languages and of selective terms from lunfardo, the city’s Italian-inflected working class slang – an instructional manual for radio stations issued under President Edelmiro Farrell (1944-46) echoed earlier centennial complaints of linguistic danger.³³ Ricardo Rojas included examples heard and seen among his evidence, in *Restauración Nacionalista*, of the “mass-induced corruption of the language” and “dialectal barbarity of immigration.”³⁴ “High” Spanish in Argentina had not ever been “pure,” of course – it would be more accurate to characterize centennial language protectionism as occupying a pivot between the francophilia of late 19th Century intellectuals and the new linguistic landscape brought by the decades of mass migration.³⁵ Among Spanish-speakers, too, debate continued in the 1930s and ‘40s about the status of official Spanish in Argentina, its formal relationship to peninsular Spanish, and the place of regionalisms, slangs, and local dialect in the future of the national language.³⁶ This peculiar preoccupation with language

48; Balloffet likewise alludes to bilingual radio programs (Arabic/Spanish) Balloffet, “From The Pampa to the Mashriq: Arab-Argentinian Philanthropy Networks.”

³³ Enrique Fraga, *La Prohibición Del Lunfardo En La Radiodifusión Argentina, 1933-1953* (Buenos Aires: Grafica Sur Editora S.R.L., 2006).

³⁴ Rojas cited verb suffix changes, immigrants’ adoptions of different prepositional phrasing (eg. “Voy de mi tia” instead of “Voy a mi tia”), and non-standard Spanish on shop signs, like “Cajones e Coronas” [instead of Cajones y Coronas]; “Por cada paquete de cigarrillos se dea una caja de fosforos.” Ricardo Rojas, *La Restauración Nacionalista* (Buenos Aires, 1909), 86–87.

³⁵ J. P. Daughton cites Lucio A. Lopez, “La gran aldea,” of 1882, on Argentinian high culture and the performance of French in aristocratic circles: “It was not chic to speak Spanish in high society; it was necessary to sprinkle conversation with some words in English and many French ones, trying to pronounce them with the utmost care in order to demonstrate gentility by birth [raza de gentilhomme].” p115 J. P. Daughton, “When Argentina Was ‘French’: Rethinking Cultural Politics and European Imperialism in Bell-Epoque Buenos Aires,” *The Journal of Modern History* 80, no. No. 4: A Special Issue on Metropole and Colony (December 2008): 831–64.

³⁶ For a summary of the range of views on the subject of “high” and “low” and peninsular vs. local varieties of Spanish in Buenos Aires ca. 1938, see Maria Alejandra Vitale, “En Torno a La Lengua En La Radio Argentina. La Encuesta de La Comisión Parlamentaria de 1938,” in *La Regulación Política de Las*

boundaries was one branch of what Sandra McGee Deutsch has called a variety of nationalism – in comparison to other nation-state in the region, like Chile -- “largely cultural in character.”³⁷



Figure 2: Cancela’s story connects anti-immigrant fears to a hatred for consonants, associated with non-Spanish immigrant languages, which could be both heard and seen in the streets of interwar Buenos Aires. “OSE – society for the protection of the health of the Jewish population,” containers labeled in Yiddish, Russian, and German. Argentina, un-dated (interwar).³⁸

The presence of a large number of bilingual, or partly bilingual, first- and second-generation immigrants contributed to the coding of immigrant languages as dangerous in

Practicas Linguisticas [Political Regulation of Linguistic Practices], ed. Elvira Arnoux and Roberto Bein (Buenos Aires: Eudeba, 2010), 73–100.

³⁷ Sandra McGee Deutsch, *Las Derechas: The Extreme Right in Argentina, Brazil, and Chile, 1890-1939* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1999).

³⁸ RG 9, Vilna Photo Archive, Argentina, Box 1, YIVO Archives, New York.

a legal context that identified immigrants with antinationalism. A series of laws passed in the first decades of the 20th Century rendered non-citizens vulnerable to swift deportation, if identified by police as a political threat.³⁹ As a large fraction of foreign-born Argentines did not pursue naturalization,⁴⁰ historians of immigrants have sometimes adopted a broadened definition of “citizenship” to include participation in shared porteño urban culture.⁴¹ Non-citizens could indeed perform cultural citizenship through language, by reading in, practicing, and speaking Spanish, or “Argentinian.” In 1931, a Polish-Jewish woman described Buenos Aires as the center of civilization, and immigrant towns like the mainly Yiddish-speaking Montefiore, the Jewish agricultural colony in Santa Fe province where she lived, as benighted. “To write in Argentinian! ah, how I wish to! but how to do it for now if the luggage of my vocabulary is so small..”⁴²

³⁹ They included the 1902 Ley de Residencia, which “identified immigrants with antinationalism,” and 1910 Ley de Defensa Social, aimed at repressing labor activism and preventing the entry of “foreign radicals” into Argentina. Deutsch, *Las Derechas: The Extreme Right in Argentina, Brazil, and Chile, 1890-1939*, 29, 31; To some degree anti-immigrant policies also involved an international dimension. For example, in 1895 Italian police agreed to notify Argentina when suspected anarchists were departing from Naples, Livorno, and Geneva. Maria Rosaria Ostuni, “Inmigración Política Italiana y Movimiento Obrero Argentino,” in *La Inmigración Italiana En La Argentina* (Editorial Biblos, 2000), 118.

⁴⁰ Fewer than 2% of immigrants in Argentina had become naturalized citizens in 1914. Moya, *Cousins and Strangers*, 489.

⁴¹ This use of “citizenship” is discussed in the introduction to Benjamin Bryce and David Sheinin, eds., *Making Citizens in Argentina* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2017); Ethnic/immigrant histories in the mass immigration decades that end in 1930 share a tendency to emphasize immigrant creativity and participation in local practices, successful cultural integration or, as Bryce writes in *To Belong in Buenos Aires*, “negotiating the terms of citizenship and the nature of cultural pluralism” (1). Nouwen, *Oy, My Buenos Aires*; Benjamin Bryce, “Citizenship and Ethnicity: Social Welfare and Paternalism in Buenos Aires, 1880-1930,” in *Making Citizens in Argentina*, ed. Benjamin Bryce and David M. K. Sheinin (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2017); Bryce, *To Belong in Buenos Aires: Germans, Argentinians, and the Rise of a Pluralist Society*.

⁴² “Escribir en argentino! ah, como lo quisiera! pero como hacerlo por momento si el equipaje de mi vocabulario es tan pequeño..” Martha Shtuker to Cesar Tiempo, Montefiore 17 de Noviembre de 1931. BNA-ARCH-CEN-CT, Caja 4: CT1999.

After 1930 – also the year of the military coup that ushered in the so-called “infamous decade” – Buenos Aires police recognized translation as a key technology for urban surveillance. Speakers of a range of languages were recruited to provide Spanish-language translations of materials police found both unreadable and suspicious.⁴³ Speaking before Senate in 1936, Matías Sanchez Sorondo presented Jewish school books and magazines – translated for him from Yiddish – as evidence of subversive political activity and “judeo-bolshevism” warranting changes to the Código Penal, and inspired by anti-anarchist legislation passed by the United States Congress, including the Espionage Act of 1917 and subsequent amendments that allowed the deportation of individuals suspected of anarchism, communism, or “disloyalty” to the US government.⁴⁴ Sorondo’s campaign represents an extreme: attacks on non-Spanish languages coexisted with more lenient and even ethnographically interested perspectives on the respectability or value of language diversity in Argentina through the 1930s and ‘40s. Still, official definitions of “foreign languages” drew clear hierarchies and lines. In the early 1950s, publications of the Ministerio de Educación defined “foreign languages” as French, English, and

⁴³ The Special Order section of Buenos Aires police hired translators for French, Italian, Yiddish, Turkish, and Arabic. Laura Kalmanowiecki demonstrated the jump in articles translated on the basis of police memoirs and Memoirs of the Investigative Division between 1931 and 1945. Laura Deborah Kalmanowiecki, “Military Power and Policing in Argentina, 1900-1955” (New School for Social Research, 1997), 131, 181, 184–86, 214n102.

⁴⁴ The project received support in the Senate in 1936, owing to heightened fears about communist influence spurred by the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, Russian support to the Spanish Republic, and formation of popular fronts. Sorondo’s law project was not approved by the Congress. Under his supervision, several Yiddishist schools were closed between 1930 and 1932 (though many of them reopened later under other names). Materials seized by the police in the closures, including textbooks, magazines, and fliers, formed the basis of Sorondo’s “evidence” of political subversion in non-Spanish-language education. Nerina Visacovsky, “Matias Sanchez Sorondo y Las Escuelas Obreras Judias, Dos Mundos En Conflicto,” *Anuario IEHS* 25 (2010): 77–99.

Italian;⁴⁵ throughout the same period (1930s-1950s), instruction in immigrant languages – including German, Yiddish, and Japanese – was given semi-official sanction through the visits of state school inspectors, and in the bureaucratic accreditation process for teachers of “foreign languages.”⁴⁶ Practices such as a bureaucratic tendency to distinguish between locally accredited teachers of Spanish and Argentinian civics, on the one hand, and to endorse as private teachers immigrants who held accreditations from their “countries of origin,” on the other, reinforced the position of a singular national language continuous with citizenship even without a formal constitutional language clause. Though as Veronica Zaccari has shown, in 1931 a proposed citizenship decree – never turned into law – did express desires for plainer language nationalism, articulating citizenship explicitly in linguistic terms.⁴⁷ The years 1900-1930 represented an apogee in the working-class radicalism of Jewish immigrants, and by proxy, an association between Yiddish (along with other “maximalist” tongues like Russian and Italian) and bolshevism.

⁴⁵ Sylvia Nogueira, “La Regulacion de La Lectura En Los Programas de Estudio de 1953 Para La Educacion Secundaria Argentina,” in *La Regulacion Politica de Las Practicas Linguisticas*, ed. Elvira Arnoux and Roberto Bein (Buenos Aires: Eudeba, 2010).

⁴⁶ For example: In 1938, the Ministerio de Educación inspected and approved La Escuela Japonesa, at calle Patagonia 840. The reports noted that the school’s director was “argentina” [presumably, naturalized or a citizen by birth], and that the language instructors, Sra. Teruko Kitabatake de Suzuki and Sr. Iwo Ito, held degrees from their “country of origin” and were “authorized by Exp. 3534-I-1938” to teach privately “with the exception of Castellano, Historia and Geografia argentinas e Instruccion Civica.” In other words, Argentinian bureaucracy clearly drew a line between Argentinian state approval/accreditation and teaching qualifications, outsourcing linguistic credentials in non-Spanish languages to immigrants’ countries of origin. AR.AGN.DAI\CNE, Caja 13, 1937, Asociación Japonesa.

⁴⁷ Citation needed



Istá qui soy jodio; istá qui vendo balienitas para coiyo; istá qui hoy vivo comiendo simillas de mirasol... pero quien ti dice qui mañana no llega a Prsidente de la Arquintina. ¿No foy Enriques, Diputados?

Figure 3 An anti-Semitic periodical, *Clarínada*, represents Jewish speech with a Yiddish accent in 1941, in much the same way that pro-integration liberal cartoons with a positive view of Jewish immigrants did during the 1930s. The text says “Sure I’m a Jew; sure I go around selling collar stays; sure today I live eating sunflower seeds... but who is to say that tomorrow I won’t make it to becoming President of Argentina [...]”⁴⁸

In 1925, the Argentinian branch of the Communist Party created a Jewish section, and published its propaganda materials in Yiddish. Such activities lay behind the language-based, anti-immigrant anxieties of lawmakers and elites. In the face of major repression, changes to immigration policy, and the parliamentary projects of the “infamous decade,”

⁴⁸ YIVO, New York, Microfilm collection, *Clarínada*, April 30, 1941.

the Jewish workers' unions lost their power.⁴⁹ Yiddish continued to have a substantial presence (in schools, theaters, the Jewish press, and Jewish social and institutional life), but the high stakes of speaking a “foreign” language in public – to mark oneself as an outsider and potentially disloyal to the nation – made when and where one chose to perform a language a serious matter.

To what extent was the performance of non-Spanish languages *visible*, or *audible*, in the Buenos Aires of the 1930s? Within immigrant communities, speakers themselves might be astonished at the scale of language communities they found upon arrival in the country. Moyshe Katz recorded his memory of hearing Yiddish in Buenos Aires in 1937: “the pretty, idiomatic *yidish-loshen* [Jewish-language] ... dazzled me and rang in my ears like a wonderful forgotten music.”⁵⁰ Outside community social circuits, non-Spanish language communities were largely unfamiliar, if not unnoticed, their presence most apparent at times of heightened tension as sources of “stranger danger.” Roberto Arlt’s descriptions of the city’s “simulacrum of the [Jewish] ‘Ghetto’” presented Yiddish – or “*idisch*,” as it was written and pronounced by Spanish-speakers – as a “*dolorosa jerga*” [a lachrymose jargon], and as a feature of a particular urban zone.⁵¹ In March of 1940, when twenty thousand people turned out for the funeral of Jevl Katz, a Lithuanian Jewish performer famous for his song-parodies of Argentinian Yiddish, Katz remained “almost

⁴⁹ Edgardo Bilsky, “Ethnicite et Classe Ouvrière: Les Travailleurs Juifs a Buenos Aires (1900-1930),” *Le Mouvement Social* 159 (June 1992): 52–54.

⁵⁰ Katz came from Kazimierz, Poland, but by 1937 had living outside Poland for some two decades. Pinie Katz and Salomon Suskovitsh, eds., *Antologye Fun Der Yidisher Literatur in Argentinian* [*Anthology of Yiddish Literature in Argentina*] (Buenos Aires: Aroysgegebn fun a gezelschaftlekhn komitet lekhoved dem 25-yorikn yubilee fun der teglekher tsaytung “di prese” [published by a social committee in honor of the 25th anniversary of the newspaper “Di Presse”], 1944), 847.

⁵¹ Calle Corrientes, Lavalle, Tacahuano, Cerrito, Libertad. Roberto Arlt, “Aguafuertes,” in *Roberto Arlt: Obra Completa Tomo 2* [*Complete Works Volume 2*] (Buenos Aires: Carlos Lohle, 1981), 191–93.

completely unknown” to non-Yiddish-speakers.⁵² Whether in positive (romanticized) or negative (stigmatized) guise, “Yiddish” as a monolingual figure crossed the cultural threshold between “Jewish” and “Argentinian” more readily than the figure of Yiddish as creolized and mixed with Spanish or other European languages. Projecting the success of Yiddish back to Poland in terms of speakers’ European ethnonational aspirations played a part in the cultivation of this idea. On a photo-postcard with a Polish-language inscription [dated?], a well-dressed young man sits reading the Yiddish daily, not in a shop doorway in the Jewish “ghetto” of Once, but on a public park bench, surrounded by a montage of urban landmarks.⁵³

⁵² See Chapter 1, “Javi Katz, Lithuanian-born Jewish-Argentinian Bard: Hybrid Popular Culture and the Intricacies of Belonging,” in Svach, “Four Jews, Five Identities: Representation, Popular Culture, and Language Politics in the Making of Jewish-Argentines (Buenos Aires, 1930-1945),” pp57-104.

⁵³ Un-sent postcard, ca. 1928, E-Bay, August 17, 2014. Offered at \$57, Seller’s title: “Jewish type Jew from Argentina reading Yiddish newspaper.”



Figure 4. Un-sent postcard, ca. 1928
 E-Bay, August 17, 2014. Offered at \$57
 Seller's title: "Jewish type Jew from Argentina reading Yiddish newspaper."

In this way, by the 1930s, a number of competing ideas and social realities came together in the performance of urban Argentinian Yiddish. For immigrants who arrived before World War 1 (and some who came after) -- colonists among them -- Spanish, not Yiddish, was the language of civilization. Legal projects, policing, emerging middle class culture, state-run education, all pointed in that direction, and immigrant speech was noticeably stigmatized. The same stigma could also be a source of pride, in particular among working class immigrants, for whom language and politics often were indistinguishable as categories of identification.⁵⁴ To this set of views must be added a third: the arrival of thousands of Polish-Jewish immigrants in the 1920s – this time not to

⁵⁴ N Visacovsky, *Argentinos, judíos y camaradas: tras la utopía socialista*, 2015.

the colonies, but directly to the city – delivered an additional population of native speakers to the city whose presence permitted the question of the public performance of Yiddish to be reopened.

In the remainder of this chapter, I present the 1936 PEN conference as a case study of the public place of Yiddish among Jews and non-Jews, to show the ambivalence and competing ways the language was seen by speakers and non-speakers in the fascist decade. A form of language activism, the Yiddish PEN presence in Buenos Aires heightened awareness among Yiddishists of the difficult odds a language nationalism project for Yiddish faced in Argentina. I argue that Yiddishists also borrowed – not from criollismo and hugely popular Argentinian Yiddish projects (like Jevl Katz), but from local models of language protectionism in Argentina. Thus while attempts to project YIVO-style language activism in Argentina were relatively unsuccessful in the 1920s and ‘30s, the language activism that traveled to Argentina in the 1930s would accelerate in the 1940s, becoming the predominant form – institutionally and rhetorically – for representing Jewish high culture in Argentina.

ii. The Spirit of Vilna in Buenos Aires

In 1932, the Yiddish Scientific Institute in Vilna issued a call to Jews in Buenos Aires to collect artifacts of its own history and ship them to Europe for safekeeping. It came from Shimon Dubnow, whose life work effectively sought to historicize and

theorize the Jewish diaspora and to argue for its coherence as a nation.⁵⁵ In the Yiddish dailies of Buenos Aires, Dubnow's message read:

To the Jewish [yidisher] public in South America [...] from the Argentinian newspapers I have learned about the exceptionally warm reception among you of the visit of our friend Zalmen Reizen, the representative of the Yiddish Scientific Institute. [...] our young colonies in distant lands feel themselves tightly bound like family with the Jewish [yidisher] cultural metropolis in eastern Europe and with its young center the YIVO in Vilne.⁵⁶

Dubnow's letter, and the visits, tours, and lectures of Yiddishists associated with the YIVO that went along with it, illuminate the global geography of Yiddish language activism in the interwar years. This project of diaspora nationalists who aimed to make the Yiddish language the centerpiece of their contribution to Diaspora Nationalism found a center in the city of Vilna, also known as Wilno (Polish) and Vilnius (Lithuanian). A borderland city of the Russian empire, after THE FIRST WORLD WAR the city was annexed to the new Polish state, while also being claimed as a center of the Lithuanian and Bielorussian national movements. The Jewish claim to Vilna lay in the city's large Jewish population -- still nearly one-third in 1922⁵⁷ -- its history as a center of Torah study, and in the intense cultural activity of Yiddish-speaking Jewish socialists,

⁵⁵ In Berlin, he lived in "relative seclusion," [cit/YIVO encycl] in a city that had swelled with emigres since the vast disturbances of the First World War. In 1933, Dubnow fled Hitler's Germany for Riga, where he would perish in the Riga Ghetto.

⁵⁶ "Argentina Un Uruguay Far Dem Jiwo: Barikht Fun Der Aktsie Far Dem Yidishn Visnshaftlekhn Institut [Argentina and Uruguay for the YIVO: Report on the Campaign for the Yiddish Scientific Institute]. Serja 'Organizacja Nauki Zydowskiej' Nr. 13 [Series, 'Jewish Scientific Institute' Nr. 13]" (Yidisher visnshaftlekher institut, Wilno, Poland, 1934), 3–4, Archivo Institucional IWO, Box 3, Peretz Yor 1945 1946, IWO, Buenos Aires.

⁵⁷ Theodore R. Weeks, "Jews and Others in Vilna-Wilno-Vilnius: Invisible Neighbors, 1831-1948," in *Shatterzones of Empires: Coexistence and Violence in the German, Habsburg, Russian, and Ottoman Borderlands*, ed. Omer Bartov and Eric D. Weitz, n.d., 83.

educators, actors, and writers.⁵⁸ Originally conceived of as a scientific research center for scholarship on and in the Yiddish language to be based in Berlin or Vienna, the Yiddish Scientific Institute (YIVO) was provisionally established in Vilna in 1925 and until its activities were overtaken by the war, YIVO operated as a library, research center, university, and language institute, supporting scholarship on and in Yiddish. In her study of YIVO, Cecile Kuznitz writes:

To those who did not share the assumptions of Diaspora Nationalism YIVO was a modest institution in a provincial Polish city, perpetually on the verge of bankruptcy and serving a narrow circle of scholars, students, and intellectuals. For its activists and supporters YIVO represented the pinnacle of modern Jewish culture, an organization that gave dignity to the lives of 11 million Yiddish-speaking Jews throughout the world.⁵⁹

Though YIVO set up a building and research center in Vilna, its promotion of Yiddish language activism was global (in large part because of the Institute's continuous need for funding), reflecting the dispersed geography of Yiddish-speaking immigrants in the early 20th Century. There was nothing provincial about the intellectual origins of the Institute – rather, though it found a home in a city “provincial” to the Polish state, its main activists were educated and multilingual, members of the Europeanized generation of early 20th Century Jews in search of a national basis for an eastern European Jewish identity. They shared an interest in the role Yiddish could play as a basis for this group identity, bridging popular and high culture, widespread yet endangered among the

⁵⁸ Susanne Marten-Finnis, *Vilna as a Centre of the Modern Jewish Press, 1840-1928: Aspirations, Challenges, and Progress* (Peter Lang, 2004); Gennady Estraiikh, “Vilna on the Spree: Yiddish in Weimar Berlin,” *Aschkenas: Zeitschrift Fur Geschichte Und Kultur Der Juden* 16, no. H. 1 (2006): 103–27.

⁵⁹ Cecile Esther Kuznitz, *YIVO and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture: Scholarship for the Yiddish Nation* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), 190.

youngest generation of Polish Jewry,⁶⁰ and in need of standardization and modernization in order to live up to the “tasks of Yiddish philology,”⁶¹ to borrow the title of an important essay in YIVO’s history.

The founders of the Institute were German- and Russian-speaking and educated men who drew on the “mystique” of Vilna to promote the YIVO’s fusion of ancient and modern aspects of Jewish life in Europe. Among the many cultural and political projects that adopted Yiddish as their major language in interwar Vilna – including the Jewish socialist Bund, Polish socialism in the Yiddish language, and Yiddish-language education, theater, and literature – YIVO was the most purely language-based, dominated by its philological section under the direction of Max Weinreich. An institutional contemporary of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, the YIVO was its ideological opposite, standing for a diasporic concept of Jewish nationhood in Yiddish, as opposed to Hebrew. The extent to which Yiddishism traveled beyond Vilna with YIVO’s activists in the 1920s and ‘30s is a litmus test both for the linguistic geography of Eastern European Jews and for their interest in a national movement potentially at odds with local ideas of cultural nationalism. Did Argentinian Jews view YIVO’s project as “modest” and “provincial”? or as the “pinnacle of modern Jewish culture” and a source of “dignity”?

The records of items and memorabilia collected in the Entre Rios colonies and in Buenos Aires in response to the YIVO’s 1932 campaign suggest that Jewish immigrants

⁶⁰ On the rapid adoption of the Polish language among Jewish youth in interwar Poland, see Chone Shmeruk, “Hebrew-Yiddish-Polish: A Trilingual Jewish Culture,” in *The Jews of Poland between Two World Wars*, ed. Yisrael Gutman et al. (Hannover & London: University Press of New England, 1989), 285–311.

⁶¹ A 1913 essay by Marxist Zionist writer Ber Borochov which became a cornerstone of Yiddish-language-based nationalism.

were indeed moved by the dignifying existence of a modern Jewish institution for Yiddish research. Colonists and city-dwellers donated a considerable piece of their personal collectibles for export to Vilna. The YIVO published a report on the success of Zalman Reizen's campaign, writing up lists of donations. They reflect a number of things about "Argentinian Jews" at that moment: the multiple languages of the men and women participating; the interest in theater and urban spectacle; and the divergence between a poorer, working class group interested in socialism, anarchism, and labor movements versus the more upwardly-mobile Jews taking advantage of Argentinian liberalism to become more educated and win local recognition and prestige.

"A. Aires, Resistencia: photograph of a banquet for Berta Singerman in the city."

"Genendl Barski = Barshuk, Tucuman: manuscript of her memories about arriving to the colony of Mauricio."

"Yosef Bulov-theater- posters and programs from his performances in Buenos Aires."

"P. Bizberg, colony near Basabilbaso: collection of photographs of different Jewish colonies in Argentina, as well as the book "Argentinisches Jahrbuch" by Justo Diana in German 1928"

"Dr. Gregorio Berman, titled professor of Cordoba University—a collection of his works on medicine and psychology."

"Dovid Groysman, Buenos Aires: photos and materials from Einstein's visit in Argentina."

These excerpts appear in the list of donated items, published by Vilna, and kept today at the Argentinian branch of the archive.⁶² After a decade of false starts, an Argentinian branch of YIVO, known by the modified acronym of "IWO,"⁶³ would be established and

⁶² "Argentina Un Urugwaj Far Dem Jiwo: Barikht Fun Der Aktsie Far Dem Yidishn Visnshaftlekhn Institut [Argentina and Uruguay for the YIVO: Report on the Campaign for the Yiddish Scientific Institute]. Serja 'Organizacja Nauki Zydowskiej' Nr. 13 [Series, 'Jewish Scientific Institute' Nr. 13]."

⁶³ The first letter of the acronym differs because of the Spanish-Yiddish variation on yidisher: idischer.

eventually become a chief repository of Argentinian Jewish historical documentation. At the time of Reizen's visit, in 1932, that "archive" was in its infancy.

The report shows a map of Jewish space in and around the city, from the colonies to the theaters, social gatherings and universities, excluding mainly the impoverished Jewish zones of the city (tenements, crowded textile merchant area of Barrio Once). They show a popular historical consciousness, an interest in memoir-writing, and a sense that Jewish life was undergoing rapid change among the immigrant population. Berta Singerman, a popular Jewish performer famous for her dramatic recitations,⁶⁴ had moved from the Yiddish-speaking into the major-language milieu, becoming a much-imitated phenomenon. The list also shows the vector of name changes – in the university setting, Dr. Gregorio Berman's name does not betray his interest in donating his work to a Yiddishist group. And they show a crossover of interest from the Yiddish-speaking population to the cultural world of Central European Jewry, both in Mr. Bizberg's possession of a German-language work on Argentina as well as in popular interest among Yiddish speakers in Einstein's 1925 visit to Buenos Aires. This collection is in keeping with Alejandro Dujovne's assessment of 1925 as a point at which Jewish life in Argentina saw a bright horizon for "the most optimistic version of liberal integrationism."⁶⁵ Even more importantly, it shows that the directors of the Yiddishist YIVO still acknowledged that openness in their report, with no narrow requirements that material collected reflect a single language, lifestyle, or political worldview. The

⁶⁴ Granach was born Jessaja Gronach in the Galician town of Werbowitz, and began a successful theater and film career in German in Berlin before the Second World War.

⁶⁵ Alejandro Dujovne, "Einstein y La Comunidad Judia Argentina," in *Visitas Culturales En La Argentina (1898-1936)* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Biblos, 2014), 212.

composite languages and aspirations of Argentinian Jewry were not at odds with Dubnow's invitation to an alliance with YIVO's project to record Jewish life in the diaspora.

But Zalman Reizen himself did have differences with this liberal integrationism. His mission was a specifically linguistic one, and he brought that message, over the course of his trip, to both Jewish and non-Jewish audiences. On his visit, Reizen held an audience with a small group of Argentinian PEN members (of the society Poets, Essayists, Novelists), admirers of European – and especially French – letters. He spoke about some of Argentinian letters' biggest names, including Manuel Galvez, Horacio Quiroga (an adoptive Argentinian born in Uruguay), Ricardo Güiraldes, Benito Lynch, Florencia Sanchez, and Hugo Wast (he would go on to write one of Argentina's most famously anti-Semitic works, *Oro* [Gold] in 1935). Yiddish writers could make these Argentinian writers famous, Reizen told the PEN group, for the "Jewish world,"⁶⁶ by translating them into Yiddish. And they could likewise translate works of Yiddish literature not only for Argentina, but "for the whole Spanish world."⁶⁷ If these writers were under the impression that Jewish languages had mainly to do with Hebrew and the Bible, Reizen told them, they were wrong: "Now that saying can be modified," he told them, adding, "the territory of the Jewish people is their Jewish language [*zayn yidishe shprakh*]."⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Zalmen Reizen, "Di rede vegn der yidisher literatur in Argentinianr p.e.n.-klub," in *Idishe Literatur un Idishe Shprach*, Musterverk fun der idisher literatur 24 (Buenos Aires: Ateneo Literario en el IWO, 1965).

⁶⁷ Reizen.

⁶⁸ Reizen.

Integrating Jewish people through the Yiddish language became Reizen's theme on his Argentinian tour. His mission was to convene Jews around one goal, Jewishness, glossed as Yiddishkayt, or speaking and writing in the Yiddish language only. This goal was an extension of the process to which Reizen had subjected his own linguistic consciousness, like other Russian and Polish Yiddishists of his generation, following in the footsteps of Shimon Dubnow, ideologue of diaspora nationalism.

Born in Minsk Governorate (Koydenev, now Dzyarzhynsk), Reizen was known by the time of his appearance in Argentina in 1932 as the human equivalent of his one-man Yiddish encyclopedia. Reizen's turn to Yiddish deepened in the aftermath of the Great War that unsettled Jewish towns across Western Russia. He moved to Vilnius, capital of the newly-created state of Lithuania, where he became involved with a small movement to found a Yiddish branch of the international writers' association known as P.E.N.. The young, mainly European, national societies of P.E.N. accepted the Yiddishists among their ranks in 1928, Reizen recounted in an essay on its origins, accepting the Yiddish writers' premise of the "unified character of Yiddish literature -- its territorial splintering aside -- seen through a survey of its course of development in the last 150-160 years."⁶⁹

By the founding of the Yiddish PEN section he enjoyed a reputation among Yiddishists in Warsaw and Vilna for his zeal. "Collector Reizen," one author punned in 1931 (the Yiddish phrase was "Zalmen Reizen – Zamlen Reizen": "Zalmen Reizen –

⁶⁹ Zalmen Reizen, "Der Yiddisher Pen-Klub in Vilne," in *Vilner Almanakh*, ed. A. I. Grodzenski (Vilna: Ovnt Kurier, 1939), 99 aynhaytlikhn kharakter fun der yidisher literatur, nit kukndik oyf ir teritorialer tsheshplitertkayt, durkh an iberblik vegn ir antviklungs-gang far di letste 150-160 yor."

Collector Reizen).⁷⁰ In Vilna, he put his other languages to rest, publicly, restricting himself to Yiddish.⁷¹ This single-mindedness could, depending on the context, give Reizen the halo of cultural defender, or cast him in the harsh light of his peers' ridicule. In 1931, the writer R. Granovski already expected such a stalwart defender of Yiddish to have reached a ripe old age -- perhaps the seventy-some years of a Dubnow -- but Reizen was then only in his mid-forties. One might think, Granovski wrote, that Reizen would turn out in person to be a "society-mentsh"⁷² in a suit and tie, running into meetings at every chance to yell himself hoarse over the tragedy of Yiddish. But in fact he was a different type altogether, Granovski went on, not at all like the "old generation"⁷³ confined to religious study after the model of the Haskalah (Jewish Enlightenment). Here was something new.

Over the course of several months, a small committee of Argentinian Jewish writers and journalists housed, fed, and accompanied Reizen on his trips to the dusty colonies of Entre Rios, the Argentinian agrarian legacy of Baron de Hirsch, one of the previous generation of Zionists not yet singly settled on a Jewish future in Palestine. It was during these outings that Reizen's entourage collected all the materials that would be

⁷⁰ R. Granovski, "Zalmen Reizen -- Zamlen Reizen [Zalmen Reizen -- Collector Reizen]," in *Yidishe Literatur Und Yidishe Shprakh*, Musterverk Fun Der Idisher Literatur 24 (Buenos Aires: Literatur-gezelshaft baym yivo in Argentinian, 1965), 279–81.

⁷¹ Hirsh Abramovitsh, "Zalmen Reizen -- Der Riter Fun Yidish [Zalmen Reizen -- the Yiddish Knight]," in *Yidishe Literatur Un Yidishe Shprakh*, Musterverk Fun Der Idisher Literatur 24 (Buenos Aires: Literatur-gezelshaft baym yivo in Argentinian, n.d.), 282–86 Reizen spoke "Yiddish and only Yiddish" in Vilna, "None of another language."

⁷² Granovski, "Zalmen Reizen -- Zamlen Reizen [Zalmen Reizen -- Collector Reizen]."

⁷³ Granovski.

shipped back to Vilna, along with the money that paid for a roof to complete the YIVO
Vilna.



Figure 5 Zalmen Reizen [center] in Resistencia, 1932. YIVO New York, RG 9 Vilna Photo Archive, Argentina (one box)

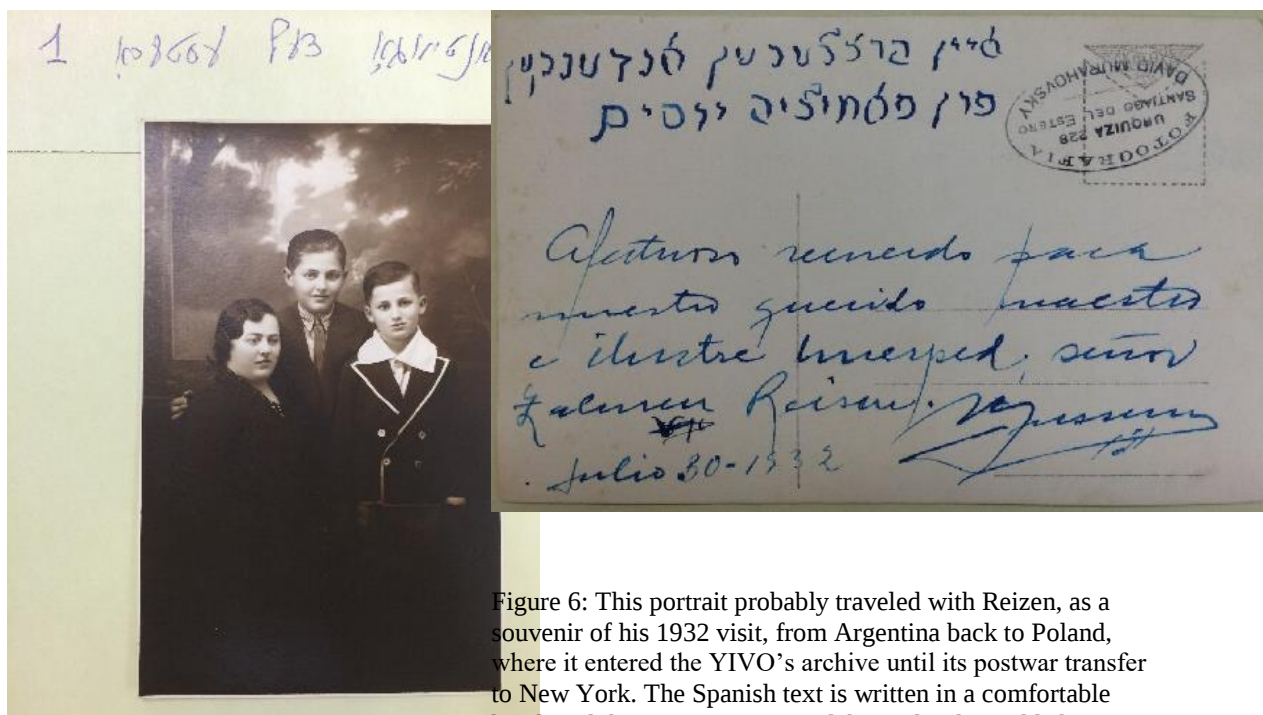


Figure 6: This portrait probably traveled with Reizen, as a souvenir of his 1932 visit, from Argentina back to Poland, where it entered the YIVO's archive until its postwar transfer to New York. The Spanish text is written in a comfortable hand, and the sentiment is put elaborately; the Yiddish text is brief, added to the margin in a shaky hand. Photo postcard. Back, top: "Eyn [...] andenk fun familie Eysim[sp?]" bottom: "Afectuoso recuerdo para nuestro querido maestro e ilustre huesped señor Zalmen Reizen. [signed?] Julio 30-1932" [Affectionate souvenir for our beloved teacher and illustrious guest mister Zalmen Reizen." RG9 Vilna Photo Archive, Box 1, Folder 1 "Santiago del Estero," YIVO Archives, New York.

According to the YIVO report, ordinary people, but also actors and entertainers, including other visitors like the American Jewish star Molly Picon and actor Joseph Buloff, lent caché to the tour. In Buenos Aires, Reizen met educated Jews who spoke a range of European languages, with variable levels of interest in his Yiddishist mission. And he would likewise find many working class Jews in the provinces happy to contribute to the project, though the Spanish language was now a part of their world nearly as much as Yiddish was.

This linguistic distance from Yiddish among Jewish Argentinians was a sore point for committed language activists in the city, intent on establishing a local branch of the Yiddish Scientific Institute. Appointed to the “Archive commission”⁷⁴ was Samuel Rollansky, himself a Jewish immigrant from Poland in the early 1920s, a budding member of the Warsaw Jewish intelligentsia swayed by the surging interest in Yiddish of interwar Europe, and, in Argentina, a conveyor of the “spirit of Vilna.” Several decades on, in the 1940s, and after the Shoah, Rollansky would be among the most active Yiddish language activists, using journalism, theater criticism, pedagogy, and formal institutional events to advance the cause of protecting and canonizing the language as the primary vehicle for the continuation of Jewish cultural life (see CH3). But in the 1920s, less than a decade after his arrival, Rollansky viewed Jewish Argentinians with some contempt for their linguistic versatility, easily inflamed passions for visiting international stars, and willingness to turn out in large crowds to see Yiddish writers, despite a day-to-day disinterest in the tasks of cultivating and propagating Yiddish language and literature. Rollansky saw this 1930s habit of slipping from individual apathy to mass enthusiasm as a complex. He called it “embassy psychosis.”⁷⁵

Rollansky’s spirited defense of Yiddish grew out of a multilingual lay education, in close proximity to the movement to modernize and standardize Yiddish in interwar Warsaw, and to the early activities of the YIVO in Vilna.

⁷⁴ “Argentina Un Uruguay Far Dem Jiwo: Barikht Fun Der Aktsie Far Dem Yidishn Visnshaftlekhn Institut [Argentina and Uruguay for the YIVO: Report on the Campaign for the Yiddish Scientific Institute]. Serja ‘Organizacja Nauki Zydowskiej’ Nr. 13 [Series, ‘Jewish Scientific Institute’ Nr. 13]” Positions on the committee for Reizen’s campaign are given in the YIVO report.

⁷⁵ “Unzer Virklekhkeyt in Shpigl Fun a Ideal,” *Dos Fraye Vort*, November 1936, RG 315, Box 53, Folder un-numbered, labeled “tsaytungs oysshniten 1936,” YIVO, New York.

Born in Warsaw in 1902, Rollansky's family home was a stone's throw from the offices of *Der Moment*, a major Yiddish daily. From his window, the young Rollansky could see the great Yiddish writers – paragons of Eastern Jewish modernity – walking to the paper's offices. Before leaving home for Argentina in 1922, Rollansky spent summers in Vilna with his grandparents. He soon became fascinated with the Jewish folk culture, artifacts, and Yiddish literature at the center of the YIVO institute in Vilna. Sensitized the possibility of future work writing and researching the language and way of life changing so quickly around him, Rollansky turned his attention to the evidence available to him on the streets of Warsaw. There, where he attended a Polish gymnasium (Kowalski's Gimnasium) with a 3% Jewish quota,⁷⁶ he took to browsing the wares at Jewish-owned bookstalls after school hours on Marszałkowska Street. In these piles of books, Rollansky had his first contact with the writings of Martin Buber and other German Jewish writers.⁷⁷ He forged an affective alliance with the paupers of Jewish Warsaw, who appeared to beg alongside the well-dressed students reading at the stalls. On Marshal Street, he saw poor Jews looking for cheap secondhand volumes: people “with “big eyes,” who had no money for buying, but since they had no money, they were drawn to used wares, “like a drunkard to the bottle... like flies to honey they all stuck together and I was among the flies...”⁷⁸ Though he had composed Polish-language poetry with his classmates, Rollansky changed his mind, along with his few Jewish classmates, turning his back on

⁷⁶ Esther Rollansky, Interview no. 958, interview by Sandra McGee Deutsch, November 3, 2000, 958, Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso.

⁷⁷ Shmuel [Samuel] Roshansky [Rollansky], *Iberlebungen [Vivencias]*, vol. 1 (Buenos Aires: Ateneo Literario en el IWO, 1982), 38–39.

⁷⁸ Roshansky [Rollansky], 1:38.

Polish “Weltschmerz” and instead translating Yiddish poetry. To his father, Rollansky confessed his ambition to become a writer, and to write only in Yiddish.⁷⁹ In 1922, Rollansky made the voyage to Buenos Aires, where he would develop a reputation as one of the most influential Yiddish language activists of the post-war decades.⁸⁰

Alongside Rollansky on the YIVO campaign committee that welcomed Zalman Reizen were Argentina’s leading Yiddish journalists of the day, including Jacob Botoshansky, M. Regalski, A. L. Shusheim, Y. Goroditski, G. Kaplanski, Dr. Dukhovne, and others. Not only the Yiddishist circles received thanks from YIVO after the visit, but also the liberal intelligentsia of Argentinian Jewish life, including, especially, one learned economist and historian of literature, and General Secretary of the Buenos Aires University, Prof. Mauricio Nirnshteyn.⁸¹

Mauricio Nirenstein (as it was spelled in Spanish) was of special interest to Reizen. He belonged to the liberal Jewish society in Buenos Aires in the early 1930s, having embraced the belief in the open, democratic possibilities of the republic. As Reizen discovered, Nirenstein had attended the university, which kept no numerus clausus, as universities in Poland did, but admitted Jews. He had worked his way up into the baroque academic circles of the Argentinian *cátedras*, or university chairs.

⁷⁹ Roshansky [Rollansky], 1:198–203.

⁸⁰ Assembling a young Yiddish literary group called Zeglen, he modeled it on European Yiddish modernism. The project was short-lived, and he was soon more securely ensconced within the local Yiddish press, writing for *Di Idishe Tsaytung* and rising to co-editor of the paper by the early 1950s. Rollansky was also active as a teacher and activist at the Sholem Aleichem school, the IWO, and the Kultur Kongres.

⁸¹ “Argentina Un Urugwaj Far Dem Jiwo: Barikht Fun Der Aktsie Far Dem Yidishn Visnshaftlekhn Institut [Argentina and Uruguay for the YIVO: Report on the Campaign for the Yiddish Scientific Institute]. Serja ‘Organizacja Nauki Zydowskiej’ Nr. 13 [Series, ‘Jewish Scientific Institute’ Nr. 13],” 8.

Nirenstein's profession demanded a command of Spanish. Whereas Yiddish was the Jewish language of the street, the "community standard,"⁸² Spanish was the language of culture and civilization within the terms of the Argentinian state. This divide – between Yiddish and Spanish – separated the world of Yiddish theaters, writers' societies, the Yiddish daily newspapers, magazines, and colony periodicals, from the world of law, medicine, and the university. The men who entered this latter world often grew up speaking Spanish as the children of Jewish immigrants to the colonies. They included those who, like Nirenstein, Alberto Gerchunoff, Leon Dujovne, and Samuel Glusberg, were close to the pro-Spanish language and assimilationist "Sociedad Hebraica Argentina."⁸³ Many of them aimed to raise the esteem of things Jewish in the eyes of their non-Jewish Argentinian colleagues, in Spanish.

Reizen explored both sides of this divide. He mixed with the Argentinian Jewish people during the day, including farmers and fans who could afford to donate only one peso, and reserved his evenings for European comforts. Some such evenings he spent in the home of another member of the local committee organized by YIVO to run the campaign, M. Regalski. A firm believer in Reizen's mission, Regalsky was also a pillar of the Yiddish language popular sphere in the city. He edited *Di Idishe Tsaytung*. Any writer of Yiddish knew the paper, and hoped to see his name appear in its columns. At the Regalski home, Reizen wrote, he sometimes took midday meals that were not only

⁸² Jeffrey Lesser, "When the Local Trumps the Global: The Jewish World of Sao Paulo, Brazil, 1924-1940," in *1929: Mapping The Jewish World*, ed. Hasia R. Diner and Gennady Estraiakh, n.d.

⁸³ Dujovne, "Einstein y La Comunidad Judia Argentina"; Leonardo Senkman, "Ser Judio En Argentina: Las Transformaciones de La Identidad Nacional," in *Identidades Judias, Modernidad y Globalizacion*, ed. Paul Mendes-Flohr, Yom Tov Assis, and Leonardo Senkman, trans. Florinda F. Goldberg, Raquel Sperber, and Orna Stoliar (Centro Internacional para la Ensenanza Universitaria de la Cultura Judia (Universidad Hebrea de Jerusalem) y Ediciones Lilmod, 2007), 403–54.

“not Argentinian, but truly European.”⁸⁴ It was at one of these meals that Regalski introduced Reizen to the local doctor and professor, Mauricio Nirenstein.

Nirenstein intrigued Reizen. As an educated, European, and therefore at the same time Argentinian educated elite, the man was both like and unlike his other liberal integrationist Jewish colleagues. Born ca. 1877, Nirenstein had arrived in Buenos Aires with his parents from Egypt, and completed a law degree in Argentina ca. 1906. German may have been his first language (though quite possibly not his only first language). Nirenstein had acted as escort for Einstein upon the latter’s visit in 1925.⁸⁵

When Reizen met him over a meal with Regalsky, some seven years later, Nirenstein continued his professorial career as a German language teacher (along with philosophy, medicine, etc.), but he had taken up a new hobby as well, and this was what interested Reizen the most. “He even began to learn Yiddish,” Reizen reported with excitement in his Vilna articles on the trip, and “became a regular visitor of the Yiddish theater, which he thinks the world of, considering Yiddish theater much better than the Spanish.”⁸⁶

Here was a cosmopolitan Jew, born into the Egyptian diaspora, a native speaker of cultivated European languages, admired by the Jewish genius par excellence,

⁸⁴ Zalmen Reizen, “Di Yidishe Inteligents Farn Groysn Nisoyen [The Jewish Inteligentsia before the Great Temptation/Test],” in *Yidishe Literatur Un Yidishe Shprakh*, Musterverk Fun Der Idisher Literatur 24 (Buenos Aires: Literatur-gezelshaft baym yivo in Argentinian, 1965), 267–68.

⁸⁵ A. Gangui and E. L. Ortiz, “Un Discurso Que Einstein Jamas Pronuncio En Buenos Aires” [A Speech Never Delivered By Einstein In Buenos Aires,” ISSN (En Linea): 1850-1158. [accessed 3/4/19]

⁸⁶ Reizen, “Di Yidishe Inteligents Farn Groysn Nisoyen [The Jewish Inteligentsia before the Great Temptation/Test],” 269.

distinguished professor of a liberal Argentinian university, with a developing taste for Yiddish and the discipline to learn its rules of usage.

It was a powerful fantasy. There was evidence that in the 1930s, Nirenstein's open interest in Yiddish was unusual. So, for example, Reizen found that unlike Nirenstein, the prominent author Alberto Gerchunoff had established himself in Spanish-language circles as a liberal Jewish journalist and writer, and Reizen didn't hesitate to upbraid him for turning his back on Yiddish. Most incriminating, for Reizen, Gerchunoff spoke Yiddish. He had frequented the Bar Internacional, where the city's Jews often had tea in the evenings or gathered after Yiddish theater performances to discuss the plays. Reizen complained bitterly about Gerchunoff, whose fame was consolidated by his stories of the Jewish colonies, "El Gaucho Judio," which dressed up Yiddish life on the Entre Rios farms in the kitschy pastels of Bible sketches, an association Reizen had rejected in his speech to the Argentinian authors. "It's alright with Gerchunoff," he complained, "even coming from a folksy [*folkstimlekher*] Jewish family, growing up on a Jewish colony, all his years speaking an entirely idiomatic Yiddish, not to have any interest in so much as learning to read a Yiddish word."⁸⁷ For Reizen, Gerchunoff's lack of interest was inexcusable. It also resembled the phenomenon of Yiddish-speakers "passing" in other languages that Reizen knew firsthand.

In Europe, Jewish intellectuals and writers often passed easily, in the correct circles and circumstances, as not Jewish, if they chose. And the choice was most easily enabled by fluency in another language. Reizen had learned that lesson himself, and it was likely a great motivation for him in his own strictness with Yiddish and refusal to

⁸⁷ Reizen, 272.

speaking Russian in Vilne. Reizen couldn't easily brook the slippage between languages that made Jewishness inaudible, and therefore invisible. At a literary meeting of PEN writers in Vienna, in 1929, where Reizen was seated next to a famous Hungarian author, according to an anecdote by Melekh Ravitch at Reizen's expense, a *boyar* with great mustaches. Ignoring the cake, Reizen spent his time preaching to the *boyar* the value of Yiddish literature, until finally the man had enough, turned to Reizen, and said, "*mikh hot ir ibergetseygt. Ikh bin aleyk a yid. Bamit zikh beser tsu ibertseygn andere...*"⁸⁸ ["you've convinced me. I'm a Jew. You'd better try convincing someone else..."]

Reizen's writings on Buenos Aires that he imagined a return to Yiddish in Buenos Aires, that was a fading possibility for Jewish intellectuals in Europe. The return of European or assimilated Jews to Yiddish culture through the language, was a fantasy that Reizen entertained, but it was a misplaced one, as he sensed. "Do we have the space in our poor, deserted life for the Doeblins, for the Reinhardts, for the Alfred Kers, even if they manage to overcome themselves and teach themselves Yiddish, which is after all not that difficult for them, which would represent the possibilities of realization of their wills, to attach themselves to the Yiddish cultural sphere, which the century-long assimilation in Germany dug out of them, leaving them hollow and naked?"

Though it enjoyed a brief moment in the sun with German and Austrian Jewish interest in Yiddish culture in the twenties, this transitory phenomenon had quickly given way to Zionist interests in Palestine as the only likely Jewish national home. Although he continued speaking about German Jews – and Nirenstein had mastery of German, along

⁸⁸ Zalmen Reizen, "In Cafe 'Internacional,'" in *Yidishe Literatur Un Yidishe Sphrakh*, Musterverk Fun Der Idisher Literatur 24 (Buenos Aires: Literatur-gezelshaft baym yivo in Argentinian, 1965), 264.

with Spanish, French, and perhaps other languages – it was the presence of Yiddish in Argentina that seduced Reizen’s imagination about an alternate path for Europe. After all, it wasn’t Argentina Reizen privately hoped to save for Jewish culture, but Vilna.

iii. “Wooden bells”

The 1936 PEN Conference offered a chance for Yiddishists to test idealized notions of a branch of vigorous literary public reception of Yiddish literature in Argentina. The Yiddish poet Leivick Halperin (known as H. Leivick) arrived to considerable local fanfare from New York to address audiences who he hoped would rally to the defense of Yiddish language and literature in response to the deteriorating situation of Polish Jewry. But by the end of the conference, Leivick himself and Jewish Argentinian Yiddishists looked with pessimism on the future of Yiddish as a world literature, disappointed by its reception at the conference and by the dramatic disunity and diverse performances of Jewishness visible among Jewish Argentinians. For Rollansky – despite the masses who turned out to see Leivick -- the poet’s meetings with Jewish audiences only confirmed the limited commitments of Jewish Argentinians who preferred spectacles to literary seriousness, and Leivick’s bid at PEN for a European Yiddish literature was a failure. "Let us here free people from the illusion that Leivick was ‘victorious’ at the PEN congress,” Rollansky would write after Leivick’s ship sailed. “Leivick’s words rang like the poor man’s complaints, or as the goys say: they ring like wooden bells.”⁸⁹

⁸⁹ “Unzer Virklekhkeyt in Shpigl Fun a Ideal.”

PEN [Poets, Essayists, Novelists] was a Europe-based literary society, with pretensions to being apolitical since its founding in 1921, a respected, elite institution of world letters. The concept of world literature espoused by PEN remained Eurocentric in 1936, and the international conference in Buenos Aires was to be its first such conference held outside the North Atlantic.⁹⁰ Bringing together delegates from 41 nations, at a pivotal moment of debate over fascism, communism, and the fate of the Spanish Republic, pretensions to an insulation of literature from politics were immediately cast aside as largely immigrant crowds gather in the streets to see the writers and in the hotel lobby to get autographs, and elbowed their way to the upstairs galleries in the meeting hall. Members complained of crowds, hoots and whistles. As representative of the Yiddish branch of PEN, with its seat in Vilna, H. Leivick waited tensely for his opportunity to address the crowded hall.

The poet Leivick Halpern, or H. Leivick, as he became known, came from Belorussian Chervyen, where he was swept up at a young age in Russian revolutionary moment of 1905. Leivick joined the Bund, the Jewish socialist movement popular among Russian Jews, and began his Yiddish literary career while in Russian prisons in St. Petersburg, Moscow, and Minsk. Marched to Siberia in 1912, he was assigned a lifetime of Siberian exile in the Tsar's pre-gulag prisons. Rescued from Siberia by American revolutionaries in 1913, Leivick was brought to New York, where he continued to write, mainly dramas, while making a living as a paper hanger.

Megan Doherty, "PEN International and Its Republic of Letters, 1921--1970" (Ph.D., Columbia University, 2011).

⁹⁰ Monica Szurmuk and Fernando Degiovanni, "World Literatures, Cosmopolitan Publics: Welcoming the PEN Club to Buenos Aires in 1936 [Forthcoming in *Journal of World Literature*]," n.d.

Leivick was a model citizen of a transnational Yiddishland. That word was coined, according to sociolinguist Cyril Aslanov, in the same year that Leivick settled in North America, by another Russian Jewish emigre, Chaim Zhitlovsky. In 1913, on the eve of Europe's Great War, Zhitlovsky used "Yiddishland" to refer to that imagined territory, rooted in what we now call "Eastern Europe" but dispersed around the globe and existing anywhere Jews spoke Yiddish. The fact that Zhitlovsky coined the term in America, Aslanov writes, "reflects the difficulty of conceptualizing that territory other than in linguistic categories."⁹¹ It also, interestingly, suggests the difficulty of conceptualizing that linguistic space until one has physically moved far away from it.

Though removed both from Leivick's native Chervyen and his new home in New York – he would arrive by boat – Leivick, like Dubnow, Reizen, and other Yiddishist of his time, saw Buenos Aires as a precinct of Yiddishland. It formed part of the Yiddish-speaking constellation Leivick envisioned for his audience in the PEN speech, and he wrote about his experiences during the trip for readers, in New York and internationally, of the Yiddish paper *Der Tog*.

The fifth and penultimate session of the PEN congress began at six in the evening. Now attention was directed not to fanfare – the orchestral sound of the Argentinian hymn, the international costumes and sounds of the languages, besides the official ones (English, French, Spanish) spoken by delegates – but to a suppressed item from the previous day's agenda. The delegate from Yiddishland would finally speak.

⁹¹ Cyril Aslanov, *Sociolingüística Histórica de Las Lenguas Judías [Sociolinguistic History of the Jewish Languages]*, ed. Emmanuel Taub (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Lilmud, 2011), 119.

The new conference halls of the City Hotel accommodated delegates from Egypt, Bulgaria and Yugoslavia, India, Germany, Poland, France – 41 countries were represented.⁹² For Leivick, the stakes of the congress were high. They hinged on the choice he saw facing Argentinian President Juan B. Justo at the opening ceremony, flanked by the Italian Futurist poet F. T. Marinetti on one side and the French novelist Jules Romain on the other. Fascism and democracy. Which of the two spirits, Leivick wondered for his readers at *Der Tog*, would enter Justo's body?⁹³

And then he spoke, in English.⁹⁴

It was the expected protest Leivick had prepared and warned the Argentinian press about:

You do not know – and it is shameful – the names and the works of those who build up and produce our modern literature in Yiddish; the names of those who personify the searching and anguish of our tragic but intense spiritual world, in this age of the breaking down and alteration of the world; the names of those who are intimately linked as much to the grand, historical, and martyrological history of our suffering popular masses, as to the struggle they carry on, together with all the oppressed and persecuted of the world, in favor of a better and more just order.⁹⁵

⁹² Yakov Botoshanski, "H. Leivick in Argentinian," *Literarische Bleter*, October 9, 1936, No. 41 edition, RG 315, Box 53, Folder un-numbered, labeled "tsaytungs oysshniten 1936," YIVO, New York.

⁹³ H. Leivick, "'Tsvishen shrayber fun gor der velt' [Among writers from around the world] [Clipping]," *Tog*, January 23, 1937, RG 315, Box 13, Folder 42, YIVO, New York.

⁹⁴ "'Der Shturm Arum Leivick's Rede Oyf Dem 'PEN-Kongress'" [The Storm around Leivick's Speech at the PEN Congress], September 1936, RG 315, Box 13, Folder 47b, YIVO, New York.

⁹⁵ H. Leivick, "Por la dignidad de la literatura (Discurso pronunciado en el Congreso de los Pen-Clubs)," *Judaica* 38 (August 1936): 75.

A few who whistled were escorted out of the hall.⁹⁶ Otherwise, according to Botoshansky, who reported on the congress for the Vilna-based Literarische Bleter, Leivick was met with ovations.⁹⁷ The Yiddish delegate himself attributed any spirited responses in the audience to the young men, most of them Jewish, who filled the hall.⁹⁸

Leivick's movements around the city during the course of the conference had confined him to interaction with the wealthier Jewish-Argentinian urban strata. In a green leather album, he collected photos and caricatures of himself taken or published in 1936. In one black-and-white card-sized photo, he sits, dressed in a suit, on an iron bench, maybe in the botanical garden.⁹⁹ The same file contains a pamphlet advertising the luxury of the City Hotel, where delegates were lodged, with an aerial view of the building, and the invitation all delegates received to a banquet at the Hipodromo Argentino, the city's Jockey Club, part of its British pedigree, from President Justo.

Outside of the conference, Leivick interacted with the Argentinian "yishuv," visiting a Jewish school in the city, attending the theater, and speaking publicly to a large crowd at a banquet in his honor. Describing the gathering, the Yiddish press reported that when hundreds more turned out to see Leivick than anticipated, police had to "drive away the crowd" when the banquet hall overflowed. Leivick found himself speaking to a mixed audience of Yiddish and Spanish speakers: "Intellectuals also came to the banquet,

⁹⁶ "Nazis shteren Leivick's rede oyf PEN-kongress in Buenos Aires [Nazis disturb Leivick's speech at the PEN congress in Buenos Aires] [Clipping]," *Tog*, September 11, 1936, RG 315, Leivick Papers, Box 13, Folder 47b "fun kongres in Buenos Aires," YIVO, New York; Botoshanski, "H. Leivick in Argentinian."

⁹⁷ Botoshanski, "H. Leivick in Argentinian."

⁹⁸ Leivick, "'Tsvishen shrayber fun gor der velt' [Among writers from around the world] [Clipping]."

⁹⁹ "Photo of Leivick," September 1936, RG 315, Box 35, Folder 48-9, YIVO, New York.

people who were already distant from Jewish life and hardly understand Yiddish.”

Fiercely disappointed, Leivick drilled the crowd about the importance of defending the language. "He didn't speak sweetly, to us, the poet," wrote one journalist, "but rather he spoke bitter, galling words, words of punishment and warning."¹⁰⁰

Scalabrini Ortiz, writing in a bulletin for the FORJA (Fuerza de Orientación Radical de la Joven Argentina, or Force for the Radical Orientation of Argentinian Youth) denounced the 1936 PEN meeting as evidence of all that was wrong with the ruling classes of the country: their insistence on looking for foreign (European) cultural models, a cover-up of a lack of Argentinian cultural or intellectual independence in a place whose history was dominated by imperial powers. To Ortiz, PEN was just one more symptom of the “incurable social climbing of our oligarchy.”¹⁰¹ The targets of this critique included liberal, anti-fascist delegates like Victoria Ocampo, founder of the literary magazine *Sur*, close friend to Borges, also in attendance. Like most, in at least one session she clashed with Marinetti, too.¹⁰²

Faced with this challenge to the alliance of liberalism and imperialism in a Buenos Aires in political crisis, the Yiddish writers hung their hopes on PEN. The symbolic world of the conference depended on an alliance of liberalism, under strain by

¹⁰⁰ Botoshanski, “H. Leivick in Argentinian.”

¹⁰¹ Norberto Galasso, *Dos argentinas: Arturo Jauretche, Victoria Ocampo : correspondencia inédita : sus vidas, sus ideas* (Buenos Aires: Fondo Nacional de las Artes, 2006).

¹⁰² At the first sitting, on September 8th, Marinetti bickered with Ocampo, countering that the writer must not descend to the level of the common man, who does not understand art. Ocampo bristled at what she felt was a misrepresentation of her stance, according to Botoshansky's report on the session. She meant not that writers should write for common people, but that they should “express their dreams”. “The crowd applauded Miss Ocampo and whistled at Marinetti,” wrote Botoshansky. Yakov Botoshanski, “Der 14-Ter Pen-Kongres in Buenos Aires [The 14th PEN Congress in Buenos Aires],” *Literarishe Bleter [Literary Pages]*, October 16, 1936, No. 42 edition.

fascism, with national heritage. It was a contest. Which force, liberalism or fascism, could do better at laying claim to cultural authority?

Leivick's message was crafted for a particular audience – the European writers with the prestige to decide whether an intervention of the intelligentsia could change the course of high diplomacy. That was the message – about the universality of Yiddish literature, the language as the embodiment of the people's inner lives, the need to protect and cultivate the language through its literature – that deeply impressed Yiddish Argentinian writers like Rollansky, and others, even as they determined that Leivick's PEN presentation had been a failure.

The message Leivick delivered in reaction to the escalating violence in Poland about the deeper meaning of Yiddish literature was not a new one. It had been formulated and re-stated over and over for several decades by 1936. Since around the turn of the century, a group of self-appointed Russian-, German-, and Polish-Jewish Yiddishists coalesced around a common set of linguistic and ethnographic ideas, translated from the developing disciplines of the major-language cultures in which they were educated, and applied to the rapidly changing world of Jewish folk culture. Their arguments depended on certain often-repeated premises: Yiddish as a very old language, Yiddish as one language shared by Jews, and Yiddish as the truest medium of native Jewish experience. Yiddishists appeared at all, explained one author in a popular little book meant to illuminate the phenomenon in 1920, “because earlier, before them, there were anti-Yiddishists, ‘assimilationists’ and ‘Hebraists.’”¹⁰³ The author, Shtif, is referring for his readers, who are probably oblivious to the longstanding disputes of educated Jewish

¹⁰³ Naḥum Shtif, *Yiden un Yidish [Jews and Yiddish]* (Varshe: Nayer ferlag, 1920), 8.

circles, to the German and Russian- Jewish *maskilim* and liberals in favor of Jewish culture as possible within other national European cultures, or different according to European standards, by affiliation with the respected – because ancient and Biblical – Hebrew language.

Yiddishists appeared in, roughly speaking, two generational groups: one born ca. 1860, as was Shimon Dubnow, into Yiddish-speaking, religious families, whose adult experience demonstrated the limits of assimilation to Russian culture; and a second, born closer to 1880, somewhat more radical, committed even earlier in life to the future of Yiddish, its cultivation and defense. (Both Reizen and Leivick belonged to this group; Jacob Ben-Ami was some ten years younger than both, a likely help to his acting career.)

To defend Yiddish, by the 1920s and '30s, Yiddishists needed to concentrate on the shtetl, the always half-mythical cradle of Jewish folk life in the crescent of territory reaching from the Baltic through the Polish lands to Romania and Galicia in former Austro-Hungary. In a thoroughly planned expedition, the Russian-Jewish ethnographer An-sky had set out with a team to chart the Jewish towns of these regions, the “Jewish dark continent.”¹⁰⁴ The comparison to colonial exploratory expeditions by Europeans in Africa is in some ways remarkably accurate. An-sky romanticized the poor, superstitious Jews he visited, collecting their answers to his questionnaires like treasures to be born back to St. Petersburg. The comparison is also provocative. It poses the question of how much Jews like An-sky, who grew up speaking Yiddish in a small Russian town but left it to join educated Russian life, really had in common with his study subjects. The same

¹⁰⁴ Nathaniel Deutsch and S An-Ski, *The Jewish Dark Continent: Life and Death in the Russian Pale of Settlement* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011).

question applies to Leivick, in relation to the masses of working-class Jews in Buenos Aires.

Like An-sky, Leivick believed in the plight and authenticity of the poor Jew. But as his itinerary in Buenos Aires shows, Leivick did not seek out or come into much contact there with Jewish poverty (or if he did, it was not his main subject). What he wanted to see was not the European Jewish folk life that interested An-sky, Dubnow, and many of the YIVO ethnographers in their own part of the world, but evidence that Jewish life could renew itself and cultivate a high Yiddish literature and worldly or “universal” taste, in Yiddish. This idea drew on early Yiddishism, especially in its affinity with Shtif’s call for Jews to work against not only the prohibitions on speaking Yiddish, but more directly, the prohibition against *thinking* in Yiddish.¹⁰⁵

But the trip’s disappointments began for Leivick, not with his presentation to a Spanish-speaking Jewish audience, or with his encounter with a despondent Stephan Zweig, or even with Marinetti’s antics and the disinterest of world-renowned writers in the hall of the PEN conference, but on board the Southern Cross, en route to Buenos Aires from New York. Before even arriving in South America, the French writer Jules Romain gave Leivick a taste of the disinterest he was to find among his co-delegates in Argentina, and which would shape his manner in addressing the Yiddish-speaker Jewish urbanites who attended PEN events in the city. Leivick waited with eager earnestness for an opportunity to approach Romain. On the fourth day, the two men found they could communicate with Romain’s secretary, Mademoiselle Dreyfus, translating Leivick’s

¹⁰⁵ Shtif, *Yiden un Yidish [Jews and Yiddish]*, 23.

effort to convey, in “half German, half Yiddish,”¹⁰⁶ his esteem and interest. In Leivick’s report for *Der Tog*, Romain asks Leivick polite, sophisticated, and demeaning questions about the language of his people. Romain, Leivick writes, does not know there are Yiddish writers in America. He does not know the names of the European fathers of Yiddish literature. He is curious as to whether something like a grammar book has been written for Yiddish. Leivick’s tone turns black. Only Soviet Russia, he writes, has figured out how to do away with this painful ignorance of Yiddish, “the harmful and un-cultured star-syndrome of the ruling language.” The European writers like Romain, he says, are “calm and satisfied with their riches and accomplishments, and that’s it. They play the title roles. All other peoples and literatures are nothing more than statistics to them.”¹⁰⁷

In his effort to digest the disappointing reception of Leivick in Buenos Aires in 1936, Samuel Rollansky wrote some punishing words, with linguistic assimilation in Argentina as the focus. He explained what he had described as Leivick’s “wooden bells” – his attempted censure of the abandonment of Yiddish literature by European writers – by pointing to an insufficient love of Yiddish among Argentina’s Jews:

Precisely those who show up suddenly as admirers of Leivick, if they don’t love the Yiddish language, literature and culture every day of the whole year like blood, [then] they favor Leivick, and other guests, only because he is great, famous, popular, applauded. Call upon them for weekly culture-work in our *mame-loshn*, and they’re not at home – quite the opposite, in that case they show contempt, disdain, look down their noses, and pass on to others the same contempt.”¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ H. Leivick, “[Clipping] Mit a Vize fun Idishland: rayze-ayndruken, gedanken, shtimungen [With a Visa from Yiddishland: travel impressions, thoughts, opinions],” *Der Tog*, September 1936, YIVO, New York, RG 315 (Papers of H. Leivick), Box 13, Folder 42.

¹⁰⁷ Leivick.

¹⁰⁸ “Unzer Virklekhkeyt in Shpigl Fun a Ideal.”

Since the days when Nomberg had visited the country, a division had set in. Rollansky saw among the assimilated a false piety for Jewishness, which for him lacked the “blood” of love for language, or a love of language as blood. As long as Jews might heed the call to come back to Yiddish, as Reizen had hoped in 1932, the blood was calling. But with the turn to liberalism, Argentinian Jewishness became, according to Rollansky, “cheap snobism.”¹⁰⁹

Paradoxically, the alternative was no better. The Jews Nomberg had once admired in the Argentinian colonies he had characterized as strong, thick-boned farmers. With the move to the city, in his observations of the time,¹¹⁰ they became anemic. On the strength of Nomberg’s reports, the colonies gained fame worldwide, at least among Zionists and other Jewish hopefuls of the 1920s. However, now, as Rollansky noted, little was known about real Jewish life in Buenos Aires as it had developed after the definitive decline of the farming colonies. Provincial Jews who entered city life brought their shtetl sensibilities with them. Rollansky wrote derisively of their love of cheap entertainment, and especially international guests, the eagerness with which they would seize the opportunity to get up early and greet a ship coming to harbor, some famous guest on board, or attend a banquet in his honor, or go to the train station “*ontsukuen menshen*”¹¹¹ [to people watch], or see another ship off, waving a hanky. All of it was a pleasure of spectacle, especially international or worldly spectacle, enlivened by contact with urban

¹⁰⁹ “Unzer Virklekhkeyt in Shpigl Fun a Ideal.”

¹¹⁰ H. D. Nomberg, “Literarische prufen in Argentinian [Literary efforts in Argentina],” *Der Moment*, November 7, 1924.[check citation]

¹¹¹ “Shoyn Nokh Ale Gest – Un Bay Vos Bleyben Mir [Clipping],” n.d., RG315, Box 13, Folder 48, “fotografies un tsaytungs-oysshnitten vegn Leivik’s argentinischer nesie,” YIVO, New York.

greatness, but dirtied, in Rollansky's view, by the persistent legacy of shtetl provincialism. This was the illness he called "embassy psychosis."¹¹²

iv. Conclusion: Civilizing in castellano

Jewish Argentinian intellectuals envisioned two paths in the 1930s: either civilize in Spanish, and gain access to the higher circles of elite and intellectual national life, or join in a transnational movement to modernize and standardize Yiddish, thereby avoiding the trap of nationalist stigma that painted immigrant languages as backwards, uneducated, and barbaric.

Both of these paths were responses to the messiness of immigrant immigration and acculturation, which as in interwar European cities, unsettled nationalist expectations of imposing control over urban landscapes. Visitors from "Yiddishland" who traveled to Buenos Aires in the 1930s having romanticized the Argentinian Jewish "diaspora" from afar, encountered a diverse, often bilingual population rapidly adapting to porteno urban culture. These visitors were themselves educated, multilingual, cosmopolitan city-dwells, hoping to engage with or to inspire loyalty to Jewish national culture and to reinvigorate the movement to modernize and unify Yiddish-speakers. Their porteño audiences were by turns star-struck, curious, and sometimes as distant from "Yiddish" literature as were acculturated young Jews in Odessa, Warsaw, or Vilna itself.

Those immigrants who imagined a place for the "spirit of Vilna" in Buenos Aires in the 1930s were, like Samuel Rollansky, multilingual immigrants with youthful romantic ties to the emergence of interwar Yiddish modernism. Not in the majority, and

¹¹² "Unzer Virklekhkeyt in Shpigl Fun a Ideal."

perceived by some as elitist literati, these writers found little popular enthusiasm for researching and archiving Yiddish in Argentina until a decade later, after the Shoah. Early attempts to create an Argentinian branch of the YIVO were met with disinterest, and the institution, though it collected a trove of local archival materials, remained subordinated to Vilna. In the 1930s, IWO operated as a philanthropic outpost, and locally collected materials were shipped back to Vilna.¹¹³

In turning from a Europe in political and economic crisis to “diaspora” populations in Argentina, purveyors of the “spirit of Vilna” were not unlike their German or Italian nationalist contemporaries. The response of the Argentinian state to nationalist cultural campaigns was to seek to control flare-ups of transatlantic ethno-nationalist movements, tamping down on ethnic schools and non-Spanish languages, and asserting the place of Argentinian national culture as a distinct and non-European cultural commodity. In part because non-Spanish languages remained outside the idealized boundaries of Argentinian national culture in the 1940s, still inflected by hispanismo, the performance of Yiddish was relegated largely to unofficial and private spaces, to schools and other communal institutions, and to the theaters, where the new ethnic politics of Argentina after the end of the Second World War would enable a significant cross-section of Argentinian society to hear it.

¹¹³ Shmuel Rollansky, “Di pozitsiyes fun YIVO in Argentinian” (Not dated), Samuel Rollansky Collection, Box 1, IWO, Buenos Aires.

CHAPTER 2: STAGING YIDDISH

Surprisingly, Yiddish became more, rather than less, audible to *porteños* in the 1940s and '50s -- both through popular staged performances and through Spanish-language press reviews of Yiddish plays. This chapter situates this phenomenon of vernacular crossing in the Yiddish theater in the context of President Juan Perón's unprecedented recognition of immigrant communities, including Jews. I look specifically at Jewish and non-Jewish interest in and attendance at Yiddish theaters in Buenos Aires in the 1940s and '50s,¹¹⁴ ending with a consideration of the constraints – ramifications of Soviet Jewish politics, and their local fall-out – that brought this temporary revitalization of Yiddish theater to an end.

Juan Perón presided over enormous social and economic changes that swept Argentina in the years of his first elected government (1946-55). These included building economic prosperity, dignifying the working class, and opening up the racial definition of “Argentinian” to a wider phenotype range than allowed within earlier paradigms of a narrowly “white” and European Argentinian nation. After immigration to Argentina was

¹¹⁴ The presence of a minor Yiddish theater center in Buenos Aires is well known, but research is still scant. Nahma Sandrow, *Vagabond Stars: A World History of Yiddish Theater* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977); Joel Berkowitz, ed., *Yiddish Theatre: New Approaches* (Oxford; Portland, Or.: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2003); Susana Skura and Leonor Slavsky, “El Teatro Idish Como Patrimonio Cultural Judío Argentino,” in *Encuentro: Recreando La Cultura Judeoargentina. Literatura y Artes Plásticas*, ed. Ricardo Feierstein and Stephen Sadow, vol. 2 (Buenos Aires: Editorial Mila, 2003), 41–50; Susana Skura, “From Shiln to Shpiln in Max Perlman’s Songs: Linguistic and Socio-Cultural Change among Ashkenazi Jews in Argentina,” *Journal of Jewish Languages* 4 (2016): 231–51; Silvia Hansman et al., *Oysfarkoyft, localidades agotadas: afiches del teatro idish en la Argentina = Sold out : Yiddish theater posters in Argentina* (Buenos Aires, Argentina: Del Nuevo Extremo : Fundación IWO, 2006).

legally closed off in the 1930s, mass immigration from Europe was replaced by mass migration from the provinces to the cities, and especially to greater Buenos Aires. The city saw new forms of political spectacles during these years, ones that borrowed the scale and aesthetics of fascist-style mass politics and blended them with particular cults of personality – Perón had his own following and, until her death in 1952, so did his wife Eva. This political theater took place in a rapidly growing urban landscape. Temporarily recovered from the 1930 depression, workers enjoyed new possibilities for consumption, and a middle class began to emerge.¹¹⁵

There seemed to be a revolutionary newness to this democratically elected president from a humble, provincial background who spoke in the common style, peppering his sentences with *porteño* words. Political divisions over the working-class politics of “peronism,” as Perón’s political style and objectives would come to be known, have remained deeply ingrained in the political geography and ideological landscape of modern Argentina. But there were also a number of underlying continuities between the fascist *nacionalismo* of 1930s Buenos Aires and the years of the first Perón government (which lasted for two terms, with growing friction between Perón and his greatest challenger for popular authority, the Catholic Church hierarchy). These continuities included the existence of a hierarchical and militarized police force, restructured in the

¹¹⁵ On the meaning of Peronism for working-class culture, see Eduardo Elena, *Dignifying Argentina: Peronism, Citizenship, and Mass Consumption* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011); For the origins of the myth of a “white” Argentina and recent historical evaluations, see the volume Alberto and Elena, *Rethinking Race in Modern Argentina*; For a view of fascism as a traveling ideology with both European and Argentinian roots, see Finchelstein, *Transatlantic Fascism*; For a discussion of Peron’s projection of ideology through rituals, symbols, and textbooks, and his clashes with the Church hierarchy, see Mariano Ben Plotkin, *Mañana Es San Perón: A Cultural History of Peron’s Argentina* (Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 2002); On the “late” appearance of consumer culture in Argentina, see Natalia Milanesio, *Workers Go Shopping in Argentina the Rise of Popular Consumer Culture* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 2013), <http://public.eblib.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=1109158>.

1940s, and charged with protecting public order, as well as a range of ideas and projects circulating among educated elites about the acceptable limits of Argentinian national culture. Under Perón, this police force was brought further under centralized state control, and ordered to protect Perón's base, the *descamisados* – the poor, literally the “shirtless.”¹¹⁶ For Jewish Argentinians, whose “whiteness” had never been secure or stable according to liberal Argentinian criteria,¹¹⁷ the stretching of demographic, racial and cultural boundaries for inclusion under Perón suggested the possibility of new license for Yiddish culture. It was in the space between Perón's novelty – his support for a different and broader demographic, his use of language and symbols, his political theater – and his need to maintain political control and legitimacy as he redefined Argentinian national culture, that new opportunities for Argentinian Yiddish cultural production unexpectedly and temporarily flourished.

Post-war economic prosperity meant that Jewish organizations and societies could construct dedicated buildings, rent halls, and buy theater tickets as a matter of habit. As a form, Yiddish theater was exceptionally good at rendering Jewishness visible. In the 1950s, it could be seen as an imported, national cultural form for a people without a state, or, alternatively, as an expression of local, Argentinian-Jewish popular culture. Either one or both of these interpretations could be celebrated or disparaged, for multiple reasons. Looking at the conversations and politics around Yiddish theater under Perón is therefore

¹¹⁶ See “La policia de los descamisados,” pp 59-69 Maria Eugenia Marengo, *Lo Aparente Como Real: Un Analisis Del Sujeto “Comunista” En La Creacion y Consolidacion Del Servicio de Inteligencia de La Policia de La Provincia de Buenos Aires, 1930-1962*, Coleccion Entre Los Libros de La Buena Memoria 2 (La Plata, Argentina: Universidad Nacional de la Plata, 2015).

¹¹⁷ Sandra McGee Deutsch, “Insecure Whiteness: Jews Between Civilization and Barbarism, 1880s-1940s,” in *Rethinking Race in Modern Argentina* (Cambridge University Press, 2016), 25–52.

a window into the larger question of how Argentines viewed Jewishness in Buenos Aires during a decade of rapid social and economic change.

Provocatively turning on the Church, Perón made explicit statements regarding freedom of religion and encouraged Jewish and other immigrant groups to enjoy their own non-Spanish-language events. The official exuberance for popularizing folk culture Perón supported drew on a pre-1940s intellectual current of interest among Argentinian scholars and collectors in *criollo* folk culture – the songs, dances, and popular culture of mixed Spanish-indigenous people in rural Argentina. The possibility that Argentinian national culture might draw on a pantheon of popular folk figures and ways de-stabilized the narrower national self-definition of *nacionalistas*, whose range of ideal types included the *criollo*, but clearly excluded the foreign, in particular the Jewish, at times synonymous with communism.

Roughly contemporary with other Latin American states devising a “third way” between capitalism and communism, Perón’s doctrine of “*justicialismo*” also relaxed the generalized ban on socialist and Soviet-inspired persecution, a strategy that had been followed under Generals Urriburu and Justo. In the 1930s and early ‘40s, the state viewed Yiddish-language activities and educational materials as suspicious and aligned with communism, and hired Yiddish speakers as Spanish translators in an effort to learn about the enemy, understood as comprising Jewish- as well as other immigrant or ethnic culture associated with anarchism, socialism, or communism.¹¹⁸ This strand of xenophobic paranoia did not disappear, and in Argentinian reviewers’ descriptions of Yiddish theater

¹¹⁸ “Military Power and Policing in Argentina, 1900-1955,” 214 n102 Laura Kalmanowiecki showed a jump in the numbers of articles translated from several languages into Spanish, using memoirs of the Police Investigative Division, 1931-45. See p185.

as “race” theater, and regret over the linguistic medium of otherwise valuable art theater, the preferences and imagined ethnic boundaries of the reviewers are clear. But Perón’s attempt to legally incorporate the Jewish community just as he did the unions in effect extended the space of political legitimacy to the Yiddish theaters, something not thinkable under previous governments. Like the nation, the Jewish community also divided over Perón’s presidency – most Jewish Argentines did not vote for Perón, and Jewish participation in Perón’s union-like Argentinian Israelite Organization (OIA) were reviled as “bootlickers”¹¹⁹ after 1955.¹²⁰ In the fate of Argentinian Yiddish, though, the momentum given to Yiddish theater in the 1950s is relatively independent of the question of whether or not most Jewish Argentines liked or disliked Perón. The presence and visibility of Jewishness projected through 1950s Yiddish theater deepened both sympathies and antipathies toward Yiddish, and reinforced the idea – not always true – that Jewishness was rooted in the language and its performance.

¹¹⁹ The word comes from Israeli Ambassador Yaakov Tsur’s memoir. Raanan Rein, “A Pact of Oblivion: The De-Peronization of the Jewish Community,” in *Argentinian Jews or Jewish Argentines? Essays on Ethnicity, Identity, and Diaspora*, ed. Eliezer Ben-Rafael, Yosef Gorny, and Judit Bokser Liwerant, vol. 12, Jewish Identities in a Changing World (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2010), 145.

¹²⁰ {Citation}

i. *Idisch* theater as race and folklore

Perón's sweeping victory in the 1946 election rested on several developments: the appearance of new masses of criollo Argentinian immigrants from the countryside in Buenos Aires; the new prosperity that made rapid industrialization possible; and the rise of populist leaders who selectively drew from and adapted fascist politics to suit a new, post-war world.

Europe's nationalist 1930s found echo in Argentina; likewise, the end of empires and carving out of new nation states were accompanied throughout Latin America, as in other parts of the decolonizing world, by popular movements and new claims to local agency and economic development. Three major effects of these conditions stood out in the Peronist style of governance as it developed from 1946: an outspoken dignifying of the worker; a specific appeal to "creole" culture as the new standard for Argentinian national culture; and a new openness to immigrant groups based on an acceptance of their dual sense of belonging to both Argentina and a distant maternal homeland.

Perón's interest in recognizing ethnic groups as corporate entities was visible in his individual meetings with ethnic leaders, audiences with immigrant associations, and in the Jewish case, creation of the Organización Israelita Argentina (OIA) as an entity through which he hoped to transmit his word to the Jewish community through its leaders. In fact, this plan was deeply flawed, in part because only a small fraction of Jews belonged formally to the community, many distrusted Perón and recognized quasi-fascist

qualities in his leadership style, and the leaders of the OIA never succeeded in displacing established Jewish communal institutions.¹²¹

In the realm of theater, as in cultural production more broadly, Perón's control and interference was substantial, in unofficial partnership until about 1950 with the Catholic Church.¹²² The growing power of the church was an important factor in drawing the lines of acceptable, or "moral," and unacceptable, or "immoral," theatrical performances. By the mid-1940s, the Catholic Church had established a pervasive presence in the neighborhoods of Buenos Aires, with a broad membership that competed with or displaced the social clubs and societies of the 1920s and '30s.¹²³ Sometimes subtle, sometimes explicit, the rapid extension of Catholic influence and organization in Buenos Aires by the 1940s was closely tied to the renegotiating of national (read: Argentinian, moral) and ethnic (read: permitted, but by definition marginal) performance spaces. In 1936, arguably at the peak of the crisis between liberalism and fascism and coinciding with the International PEN conference (Chapter 1), municipal plans to stage Richard Strauss' opera *Salome* at the Teatro Colón were stymied by the protest of Liga de Damas Católicas [Catholic Women's League]. Berta Singerman, a Jewish performer beloved for her dramatic recitations, had been eagerly awaiting her chance to perform the voluptuous *baile de los siete velos* [dance of the seven candles] on stage in the city's most elaborate and highly regarded opera house. Shortly before the scheduled show, the

¹²¹ Cit: Jeffrey Lesser

¹²² See Plotkin on the gradual breakdown of Peron's reliance on Church participation in public spectacles and celebrations Plotkin, *Mañana Es San Perón*.

¹²³ Leandro H. Gutierrez and Luis Alberto Romero, "Sociedades Barriales, Bibliotecas Populares y Cultura de Los Sectores Populares: Buenos Aires, 1920-1945," *Desarrollo Economico* 113 (June 1989): 33-62.

Damas' letter of protest crossed the editor's desk at *El Pueblo*, demanding it be cancelled: "one cannot but sincerely protest, nor accept that the theater of Buenos Aires [the Teatro Colón] be lowered to the level of a vulgar Casino [the city's review theater]." ¹²⁴ The Damas' protest that the Colón remain a bastion of morality – and of the boundaries between high and low art on the national stage – was successful in 1936, even though the Intendente Municipal of Buenos Aires had done the translation of Salome himself. Ten years later, the Colón, and Argentina's insertion into global circuits of high and low culture, would again surface as a contentious matter of national policy.

The social function of the Teatro Colón – it was Argentina's claim to a place in the circulation of high culture, an elite space – was changed by Perón. The world of cultural consumption, like other forms of consumption, was to be democratized and made accessible to the new cultural heroes, the men and women of the working class. The realignment of class and culture was accomplished in part by fiat. All dancers who had spent over twenty years with the Colón's national ballet were forced to retire. ¹²⁵ Free events made it possible for wage laborers to experience the interiors of the Colón and Teatro de la Comedia for the first time. ¹²⁶ In official parlance, these kinds of changes were integrated into the broader philosophy of peronism, whose protagonists were the working poor. The effect would be, as it was put in the Five Year Plan, the "cultural elevation of the people [pueblo]." ¹²⁷

¹²⁴ Berta Singerman, *Mis dos vidas* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Tres Tiempos, 1981).

¹²⁵ Laura Mogliani, "El Teatro En La Política Cultural Del Primer y Segundo Gobierno Peronista" (n.d.), 174, accessed November 4, 2015.

¹²⁶ Mogliani, 177.

¹²⁷ Mogliani, 174.

Perón's government at times interfered directly in performance plans. In 1950, for example, the Teatro Cómico scheduled its Argentinian debut of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* only after opening with an Argentinian piece. Pedro Lopez Lagar, who decided he would direct and star in the play after first seeing it performed in Yiddish by the visiting New York Yiddish actor Josef Bulof, explained to Miller's agent that "it is obligatory to begin the season with a national piece."¹²⁸ In this way, foreign influence on national audiences was supposedly tempered. But the government picked battles in the realm of culture that had to do less with canon control, and more with "distribution and circulation."¹²⁹ Audiences wanted to see foreign works, in particular because their prestige was established. The government therefore pursued a dual strategy of promoting both "national" and "universal" culture.

The plainest support and promotion, and broader public and popular endorsement, was given by the peronist state to *criollo* – an Argentinian term for *mestizo*, or mixed Spanish and indigenous -- folk culture.¹³⁰ The promotion of folk culture in the 1950s was part of a post-war effort to redefine Argentinian national identity in visible terms, and to coopt the popular, a mass culture form that sprang from among the people, to be molded and re-sold from above. The state would win the loyalty of the working classes through populism. This meant dignifying the dances, songs, styles of speech, of the Argentinian

¹²⁸ "Pedro Lopez Lagar to D. Lawrence Smith," August 29, 1949, Joseph Buloff Jewish Theater Archive: Papers, Collection 1, BG6., Harvard Judaica.

¹²⁹ Mogliani, "El Teatro En La Politica Cultural Del Primer y Segundo Gobierno Peronista."

¹³⁰ This paragraph draws from Oscar Chamosa, *The Argentinian Folklore Movement: Sugar Elites, Criollo Workers, and the Politics of Cultural Nationalism, 1900-1955* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2010).

Northwest – the provinces of Salta and Jujuy, Santiago del Estero, Formosa, Catamarca, Tucuman. Private collectors and musicologists traveled to these regions in the 1940s to record zambas and other criollo genres, and over the next two decades they would be incorporated into school curricula in Buenos Aires. The dissemination of folkloric music and dances in state-sponsored performances, on the radio, and in local dance clubs called “peñas” reached its apogee under Perón. This new canon of criollo folklore culture took off in popularity – with both private and public support – as Buenos Aires again boomed with new rural migration from provinces to city. What Oscar Chamosa calls a shift in the “symbolic cartography”¹³¹ of the country to the provinces was the Argentinian version of a shift across Latin America toward a new mestizo national imagining.

For Jews, this new ethnic politics was accompanied by an explicit message that “dual loyalty” was acceptable. Often appearing at times of increased tension, as after the 1960 arrest of Adolf Eichmann, the “dual loyalty” accusation was used against Jews periodically to suggest that Jewish ethnic particularity and Argentinian nationalism were incompatible. Under Perón this was not to be the case. For the first Latin American state to recognize Israel and open an Israeli legate, Argentina’s diplomatic friendliness to Israel spoke volumes.¹³² Specifically, Perón’s government was openly anti-liberal, and rejected previous liberal lawmakers’ ideals of using immigrants from Europe to “whiten” Argentina. Instead, Perón celebrated the immigrant origins of the population – including

¹³¹ Chamosa, 5.

¹³² Raanan Rein, *Argentina, Israel, and the Jews: Perón, the Eichmann Capture and After* (Bethesda, Md.: University Press of Maryland, 2002).

his own Italian descent¹³³ – and encouraged immigrants’ loyalties to their motherlands. The specific contents of “Jewish culture” were less important, within Perón’s attempts at outreach to Argentinian Jews, than were his ability to include Jews in the “organized community,” a Peronist political concept that steered his government’s relations with the major unions and immigrant societies.¹³⁴ While Perón did at times negotiate with Jewish institutions over matters of relevance within Yiddishist circles,¹³⁵ his primary public relations were with Jewish institutions of majority support for Zionism and Israel, as well as with Israeli diplomats. Therefore, an explicit embrace of Yiddish was not part of Perón’s public relations with Jewish Argentinians. Nevertheless, in a context of heightened acceptance of ethnic difference, state support for folklore research and its dissemination, and incorporation of immigrant communities into organized political life,

¹³³ In a 1954 speech to the Argentinian Association of Friends of Italy, Peron introduced himself as an “Argentinian citizen of Italian descent.” Raanan Rein, “Peronist Nationalism and the Hispanic Heritage in Argentina,” in *Community, Identity and the State: Comparing Africa, Eurasia, Latin America and the Middle East*, ed. Moshe Gammer (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 84–85.

¹³⁴ Union membership expanded massively during Peron’s government, rising from 520,000 to 2,334,000 between 1946 and 1951. Worker loyalties previously directed to the socialists, communists and radicals were for the most part redirected to allegiance for Peron, so that the influence of those parties was relatively insignificant by 1955. Alongside his negotiations with labor leaders, Peron met with heads of the immigrant communities, effectively treating them like corporate units. In the case of the Jews, he fashioned a new organization (the Organizacion Israelita Argentina, or OIA) to serve this purpose, but it never replaced the pre-Peronist federation of the Jewish institutions, the Delegacion de Asociaciones Israelitas Argentinas, or DAIA. Daniel James, *Resistance and Integration: Peronism and the Argentinian Working Class, 1946-1976* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Raanan Rein, “‘Más Allá Del Crisol de Razas: Los Judíos Argentinos, El Peronismo y La Lucha Por Un Hogar Multicultural.’ [Beyond the Melting Pot: Argentinian Jews, Peronism and the Struggle for a Multicultural Home.],” *Revista Mexicana de Ciencias Políticas Y Sociales* LIX, no. 222 (September 2014): 141–60; Lawrence D. Bell, “The Jews and Peron: Communal Politics and National Identity in Peronist Argentina, 1946–1955” (Ph.D., The Ohio State University, 2002).

¹³⁵ On Peron’s concession of visas for Yiddish writers to immigrate from Paris, in answer to a request from the Yiddish writers’ association, see Malena Chinski, “Yiddish Culture After the Shoah: Refugee Writers and Artists as ‘Fresh Creative Energies’ for Buenos Aires,” in *Splendor, Decline, and Rediscovery of Yiddish in Latin America*, vol. 10, *Jewish Latin America: Issues and Methods* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2018), 42–68; A news clipping pasted into a commemorative album in honor of the Yiddish actor Jacob Ben Ami includes Ben Ami among the guests to perform at a “Festival de los peronistas extranjeros.” I have not yet found evidence that the festival took place. Pedro Goldsztern, *Buenos Aires 1955. Jacob Ben Ami: Comentarios y Criticas, Temporada 1955*, n.d., Commemorative album, n.d., RG 755, Box 10 [with Folders 102-106], YIVO, New York.

Yiddish theaters at times drew explicitly on legitimizing language of folklore to justify its continuing existence. Yiddish theater drew audiences from non-Yiddish speaking Jewish circles, including from among German-speaking Jews whose Jewish difference was, despite the German-Yiddish vernacular gap, represented on stage. And in this context of legitimizing and seeking out popular representations of corporate ethnic difference – whether for praise or censure – in the 1950s, Yiddish plays received visits and reviews from non-Jewish, non-Yiddish speakers as well.

At the center of the Perón-era transformation in Jewish theater, with implications for Yiddish, was the appropriation by Jewish theater artists, directors, and audiences in a national pride in Yiddish theater that incorporated new, Peronist interpretations of national “folk culture” as the most respectable form of ethnic culture.



Figure 7 This photo-postcard from Villa Alba, a colony in Argentinian provinces of Entre Rios, traveled back to Vilna and was filed in the YIVO photo archive, until its transfer to New York in the 1940s. Probably taken in the 1920s, it shows a curtain with blown-up local advertisements for PULOIL and Noblesse cigarettes; Jewish immigrant names (Erujimovich, Melman) are also visible. By 1930s, the

Spanish-Jewish hybridity – including mixing of Yiddish and Spanish –that appeared in some songs and dramas of the 1920s would be redefined to preserve clearer ethnic boundaries, with Jewish actors presenting plays in Yiddish, whether the content was specifically “Jewish” or not.¹³⁶

This formulation of Yiddish culture as “folk culture” appeared most succinctly in Spanish-language translations of Yiddish promotional material for productions, and grew out of a sense of crisis for Yiddish theater. Stages where Yiddish actors performed appeared to audiences to preserve what was rapidly being “lost” elsewhere in the city. Paradoxically, the arrival of prosperity, the beginning of mass immigration from the Argentinian provinces to Buenos Aires, and a new Argentinian middle class – in which Argentinian Jews also figured – intensified both the sense of crisis around Yiddish theater and its last wave of prosperity in the 1950s. It was at this social and economic juncture, that Yiddish inspired interest and political repression because it exemplified an immigrant folk culture at odds with the nationalizing goals of the state.

During the 1950s, three theaters – the Excelsior, Soleil, and Mitre – regularly put on Yiddish-language performances.¹³⁷ The Jewish Popular Theater IFT bought land and built a theater in 1951, making it the fourth Jewish theater space and the only one to have a dedicated building.¹³⁸ All were located in the city center, in or near the Jewish neighborhood of Once. Compared to the 1920s, the number of theaters had decreased. But the centrality and visibility of Yiddish shows had increased, an effect Susana Skura

¹³⁶ YIVO, New York, RG 9, Vilna Photo Archive, Argentina, Box 1 of 1.

¹³⁷ Skura and Slavsky, “El Teatro Idish Como Patrimonio Cultural Judio Argentino.”

¹³⁸ Lucía Rud, “Persistencias Del Ídish En La Escena Porteña,” *Diversidad*, no. #4 (June 2012).

has called a "triumphant access to the center" of the city.¹³⁹ Spectators commuted to downtown shows from central barrios and outlying neighborhoods, seeking each other's company, the familiar sounds of Yiddish, and a brush with a Jewish celebrity.

Argentinian Jews were attending the Yiddish theater in smaller numbers, but these Yiddish-speaking groups stood out more than before. By the late 1940s, the urban landscape was visually defined less by European immigrants. Multi-family home construction boomed in Buenos Aires in the 1940s, and the possibilities for leisure consumption expanded. One Jewish commentator explained the challenge to Yiddish theater in terms of the "general crisis of theater in the capitalist world,"¹⁴⁰ with the demise of an art of socialist principles and rise of "empty entertainment." Natalia Milanesio characterizes the 1940s as the moment when a "middle class" – really a consumer class, with leisure time and money for shopping – first emerged in Buenos Aires.¹⁴¹ In the 1940s and '50s, Argentinians discovered film stars, TV, and tango music on a new scale. Jewish residential patterns changed, as families became relatively more well off and moved out of tenements and crowded apartments in what had been Jewish districts and into other neighborhoods of greater Buenos Aires.¹⁴² Changes to theater attendance were part of the postwar prosperity – for which Perón took credit where he could – and a broader Argentinian shift in patterns of income and spending.

¹³⁹ Skura and Slavsky, "El Teatro Idish Como Patrimonio Cultural Judio Argentino," 44.

¹⁴⁰ Z. Marsel, "Di Tsukunft Fun Yidishn Teater in Argentinian," *Nai Teater*, March 1955, IWO, Buenos Aires.

¹⁴¹ Milanesio, *Workers Go Shopping in Argentina the Rise of Popular Consumer Culture*.

¹⁴² Cite Jose Moya, *Cousins and Strangers*



Figure 8: Joseph Buloff in a scene from *Der Togbukh fun Ana Frank* [The Diary of Anne Frank], performed in Yiddish at Teatro Soleil, 1957. Harvard Judaica, Argentina Jewish Theater Collection.



Figure 9 Joseph Buloff, 2nd from right, at the reception after a performance of *Der togbukh fun Ana Frank*, a Yiddish version of Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett's *Diary of Anne Frank*, Buenos Aires. Harvard Judaica, Joseph Buloff Jewish Theater Archive : Photographs Collection: Box 5: Envelope 78: Item 40.

These changes made the persistence of Yiddish theater more striking to contemporaries. International visitors recognized the loss of vernacular Yiddish, but glorified the theater as an impressive showpiece for Yiddish in Argentina. American

stage Yiddish, said Ben Ami, had long lost its authenticity and become a hodgepodge of Yiddish and English, a New York phenomenon without the purity of Argentina's immigrant speech.¹⁴³ He performed Arnold Perl's trilogy for stage *The World of Sholem Aleichem*, based on three stories by Rabinovich (pseud. Sholem Aleichem) in Yiddish while in Argentina in 1955. The play, in which Mendeleyev the bookseller wanders through Chelm, a town of fools, and Bontshe Schweig endures poverty in silence, finally wishing before the angels only for a recompense of hot buttered bread, was warmly received in Buenos Aires by critics. But in New York, Ben Ami told his Argentinian hosts at an event in his honor, he had performed the play in English. Manhattan Yiddish theater lacked the seriousness and popularity enjoyed in Argentinian Yiddish theater by the early 1940s, according to N. Chanin, who wrote in wonder about the Argentinian willingness to buy tickets, whereas New Yorkers got them at benefits. He noted, too, the pleasure Argentinian Jews took in the language, and related a conversation with a Jewish lawyer whose "good Yiddish"¹⁴⁴ had been learned through regular attendance. Successful actors, like Josef Buloff, noted the warmth and enthusiasm of Argentinian viewers – some of whom turned out more than once for the same show. In a letter to his agent, Buloff guessed at a "Yiddish speaking community" and potential theater public, in 1949, of about 15,000 people.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴³ 24 May, *Diario Israelita*, Goldsztern album, YIVO, NY.

¹⁴⁴ N. Chanin, "Yiddish Teater," in *A Rayze Iber Tsentral Un Dorem Amerike* (New York: Farlag Arbeiter Ring of the Educational Committee of the Workmen's Circle, 1942), 182.

¹⁴⁵ "Joseph Buloff to Miss Ruth Gordon, M.C.A. Management," July 25, 1949, Joseph Buloff Jewish Theater Archive: Papers, Collection 1, BG6., Harvard Judaica.

Compared to other cities, Yiddish theater in Argentina stood out for its vitality. Warsaw's great Yiddish theaters were ruined, with artists like Ida Kaminska relocating to struggle on. DP camp theater took place in provisional conditions that everyone hoped would end with relocation or immigration. In Tel Aviv, restrictions on performances and the pervasive stigma against speaking Yiddish in public made it difficult to earn a livelihood as a Yiddish actor. It was in the early 1950s that Dzighan and Shumakher left Israel to visit and perform in Buenos Aires. Theater in Argentina was popular enough to win the attention of Israeli diplomatic personnel there, despite the official Israeli position on language.¹⁴⁶

Despite praise from outsiders, for local actors, writers, and some audience members the theater was in crisis. Critics noted smaller, more acculturated audiences. "Today a different public sits in the theater," wrote Samuel Rollansky in *Di Presse*, thinking back to the early 1930s. Then, audiences had typically known Russian as well as Yiddish, and spectators were familiar with and responsive to Russian characters featuring in stage adaptations from Dostoyevsky or Chekhov. By the 1950s that sense of connection to the world of the 'better' plays performed in Yiddish – namely, the Russian ones -- was tenuous. It was the language, and not the plot substance that was familiar. "People complain," wrote Z. Marcel, another theater lover in 1955, "that 'the crowds don't come to good pieces.'" Unsurprisingly, audiences were divided by taste, not only between 'good theater' and musical reviews, but by actor, according to one oral history. "Someone who went to see Ben-Ami didn't go to see [Maurice] Schwartz; someone who

¹⁴⁶ I will discuss this subject further in CH4.

saw Schwartz didn't see Bulow. Each had his favorite. That's how our public was."¹⁴⁷ By 'good pieces,' critics meant substantive social drama, as opposed to lighter fare, like the singing and whistling act of Pesakh Burstin and Lillian Lux,¹⁴⁸ or Dina Halpern's "musical hits in 12 scenes."¹⁴⁹ Marcel agreed that the Yiddish commercial theater (as opposed to the category of "independent" theater, to which IFT belonged) was already "beyond crisis."¹⁵⁰

This new sense of urgency to address the crisis of Yiddish theater developed gradually as the optimism of the 1940s faded. Cultural projects and plans proliferated as the war came to an end. "According to statistics about 30 thousand people tend to visit the Yiddish theater,"¹⁵¹ one porteño author announced in the Yiddish press in 1944 (considerably surpassing Buloff's estimate of 15,000). He proposed a campaign to raise 25 pesos per theatergoer, to build two new Yiddish theaters.¹⁵² In 1945, a gathering at the Hebraica sport club did lead to such a "folkskampeyn" [people's campaign], and in 1951 a roof-setting ceremony was held for the new building of the IFT theater on Boulogne-

¹⁴⁷ *Integracion y Marginalidad: Historias de Vidas de Inmigrantes Judios En La Argentina* (New York: Editorial Pardes, 1985), 18.

¹⁴⁸ See *Di Presse*, 8 April 1947, for an ad about their show "1.000 vayber" [1,000 broads] at Teatro Soleil.

¹⁴⁹ *Di Presse*, 8 April 1947, ad for show at Teatro Mitre contracted by V. Goldstein and M. Lerer.

¹⁵⁰ Marsel, "Di Tsukunft Fun Yidishn Teater in Argentinian."

¹⁵¹ "Tsvey Idishe Teaters Kenen Oyfgeboyt Vern: A Plan Forgetrogn Tsu Vern Der Farvaltung Fun Di Idishe Aktyorn [Two Yiddish Theaters Can Be Built: A Plan Put Forward to Become the Administration by the Yiddish Actors; Clipping]," *Di Presse*, Autumn 1944, Asociacion de Actores Israelitas Argentinas, Box 1, IWO, Buenos Aires.

¹⁵² "Tsvey Idishe Teaters Kenen Oyfgeboyt Vern: A Plan Forgetrogn Tsu Vern Der Farvaltung Fun Di Idishe Aktyorn [Two Yiddish Theaters Can Be Built: A Plan Put Forward to Become the Administration by the Yiddish Actors; Clipping]."

sur-mer in Once.¹⁵³ This event was hailed as a tremendous success by the IFT and its public, impeded by the municipal authorities (see discussion below), and observed quietly by anti-Soviet and Zionist Argentinian Jews displeased with the progressive, socialist reputation of IFT as a worker's theater. In building its own theater, IFT achieved a degree of visibility in the 1950s that stood in contrast to the general state of crisis and loss at the center of Jewish conversations about theater.

¹⁵³ "'Vikhtige Dates in Der Geshikhte Fun IFT' [Important Dates in the History of IFT]," *Nai Teater*, July 1953, No. 32 edition.

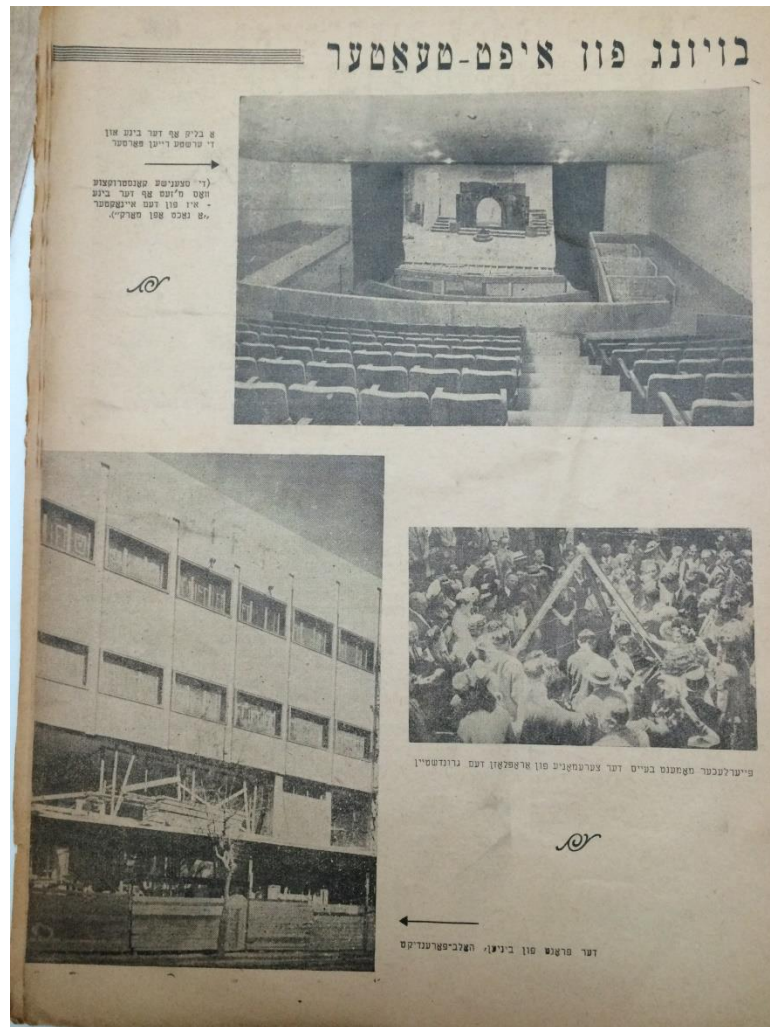


Figure 10 Stages in the construction of the Jewish Popular Theater IFT on Boulogne-sur-mer. Bottom: the view from the street, mid-construction; Right: a crowd gathered for the laying of the first stone; Top: a view of the completed theater inside, with the stage set for "A Nakh Afn Altin Markt."¹⁵⁴

"A theater is no news article," wrote one discouraged IFT-supporter, in an effort to define the purpose and future of Yiddish theater in Argentina. "[It is] no propaganda brochure [...] no political tract [...] Theater should artistically reflect life, it should bring

¹⁵⁴ Nai Teater, 25th Anniversary publication, Number 34, Buenos Aires, 1957. YIVO, NY.

out its problems, and deep tendencies. But which 'national' truths can the Yiddish theater bring out?"¹⁵⁵

For Jewish and non-Jewish Argentinians, the answer to this question during the years from 1946 to 1955 was that Yiddish theater was exceptionally good at making Jewishness visible. Whether a play belonged to the Jewish canon (Sholem Aleichem, I. L. Peretz) or drew from “universal” works of literature (Berthold Brecht, Dostoyevsky), the fact that it was done in Yiddish gave a definitively Jewish character of the show. For Rollansky, who preferred an audience of Russian-Jewish intelligentsia, this was too low a bar. But undeniably, it was a shared bar. Jews – Yiddish-speakers or not – and non-Jews also, recognized Yiddish plays as Jewish theater, using the language to mark the boundaries of Jewishness on stage, just as the language had been used, only a couple decades before, to mark Jewishness in urban public spaces, in the streets and on the omnibuses. No Sephardi or German-Jewish theaters achieved the degree of consolidation and visibility that the Yiddish theaters did, and Yiddish theaters tapped into an international network, albeit a fragile one, to sustain their postwar reputation. Most audience members at Yiddish plays identified – formally or informally – as members of the Jewish collective, and they came to see and be seen, and to hear and be heard.

The most concerned Yiddish-speakers – immigrant parents, journalists and writers – ascribed powers of language- and cultural transmission to Yiddish theater. Some adults actually learned Yiddish this way. In 1952, IFT offered Yiddish language classes “for all those who do not have command of the Yiddish language.”¹⁵⁶ Young people were the

¹⁵⁵ Marsel, “Di Tsukunft Fun Yidishn Teater in Argentinian.”

¹⁵⁶ “IFT-Khronik,” *Nai Teater*, May 1952.

focus of concern, since they attended Argentinian national schools and any attachment to Yiddish would have to be actively cultivated. Following the theater's example, several years later, IWO offered its first language courses (in March, 1958), intended for secondary-school-aged graduates of the AMIA seminary.¹⁵⁷

The contacts between young people and Yiddish theater, in particular, exceeded the formal spaces of the four Jewish theaters. Judging from promotional material and photographs, Ben Ami's performances in 1955 included appearances at children's primary and secondary schools.¹⁵⁸ It was typical for international Jewish guests to pay visits to Jewish schools.¹⁵⁹ In the 1950s, community leaders and actors looked for ways to bring children closer to the didactic medium of Yiddish theater. "The majority of our children are, very unfortunately, torn away from the whole near (and far) past of ours,"¹⁶⁰ wrote one parent, and he urged other parents to take children to the Yiddish theater for exposure. The Kehile patronized shows by the Yiddish puppet theater Hakl Bakl, in order to reach schoolchildren.¹⁶¹ Between about 1957 and 1960, Samuel Rollansky initiated a

¹⁵⁷ "Iniciaran Un Curso de Idish [A Yiddish Course Will Be Starting]," *Amanecer*, November 6, 1957, Rozhansky collection, Box 2, IWO, Buenos Aires.

¹⁵⁸ Programs, YIVO RG755, Box 8, F 79. [AK: Also see photographs from trip, Israel Goor archive Ben Ami collection].

¹⁵⁹ Conversation with Esther Rollansky, Tel Aviv, Nov. 2017. Rollansky remembers what could be construed as the comedy of Yiddish-language loss to Spanish in the classroom. She told students they would be visited by Yiddish writer Opatoshu, and when she asked if anyone could recall this name, an eager student, said "Yes!" and when asked for it, said "Patotu!"

¹⁶⁰ "Di merheyt fun unzere kinder zenen tsum groys badoyeren opgerisen fun dem gantsen nohenten (un veytern) over unzeren, vayl unzer literatur iz far zey farshlosen unter ziben shleser mit dem vos zey hoben farloyren unzer shprakh -- di idische shprakh." Yoel Zinger, "'Unzer noenter over un Ben-Ami's forshlung' [Our recent past and Ben-Ami's show]" (? , by contents 1955), RG 755, Box 8, Folder 79, YIVO, New York.

¹⁶¹ "[Clipping] 'Al Margen Del Nuevo Estreno: "Hakl Bakl,""' n.d., Papers of Simja Sneh, courtesy of Perla Sneh.

theater group for students called TES. Participants were young Yiddish speakers and did not exclude members of Zionist youth circles (where Yiddish was generally avoided and disparaged) like Yosef Kaplan. With TES, he played in Yiddish productions of Shloyme Etinger's "Serkele," I. L. Peretz's "Die Goldene Keit" [The Golden Chain], and Shmerke Katcherginsky's "Zwishn falndike vent" [Between Falling Walls].¹⁶² Rollansky was also famous for his insistence that students learn Yiddish texts by heart in order to recite them aloud.¹⁶³

Though large theaters were few, the spaces in which Yiddish was performed (sometimes in translation) in the 1950s spilled over into the Jewish schools, the AMIA, and any small space a community group could rent. New community and youth theaters were formed, including Artea, Yung Yidish [Young Yiddish], and Kunst-bine.¹⁶⁴ Not all new theater groups performed only in Yiddish. IKUF, which sponsored a recurring Festival of Jewish Theater in the mid-1950s, invited audiences to plays in Yiddish and Spanish.¹⁶⁵ Max Berliner, of Artea, rented the Teatro Cristal to put on works by I. L. Peretz and other "gems of Yiddish and Hebrew theater"¹⁶⁶ in Spanish.

¹⁶² Email exchange with Yosef Kaplan, June 6, 2016.

¹⁶³ Thanks to Israel Lotersztain who shared his memories of Rollansky as a Yiddish teacher at the LAJSA Conference, Mexico City, July 2017.

¹⁶⁴ Marsel, "Di Tsukunft Fun Yidishn Teater in Argentinian."

¹⁶⁵ Leonidas Barletta, "El Teatro Judío Independiente En Buenos Aires," *Nai Teater*, July 1953, No. 32 edition, YIVO, New York.

¹⁶⁶ "Theater program: "Teatro Judío en Castellano / Dirección Luis Karduner - Max Berliner / Representará en lengua castellana las joyas del teatro idish y hebreo / viernes 21 de octubre, a las 21,30 / función de gala / con el estreno: 'Tres Ofrendas' ('Drey Matones') / Versión fiel y no tergiversada del relato y el texto de I. L. Peretz," 1949.

Choosing to visit Yiddish theater meant choosing the most explicit and visible form of identification with the city's paradigmatic Jewish community. The persistence of spaces where Yiddish was performed on stage interested nostalgic immigrants. But perhaps more importantly, these Yiddish spaces interested Jews who did not speak the language, as well as non-Jewish Argentinians for whom theaters were an acceptable way – a cultural excuse – for attending a spectacle of ethnic particularity. The importance of Jewish performance spaces, specifically – in contrast to Jewish books, newspapers, foods, or ritual practices – lies in its public face and accessibility, at the very least to curious critics and theatergoers.

Yiddish was famously looked down on by German-speaking Jews as a matter of acquired national habit, especially among the educated. This was also true among German-speaking immigrants to Argentina, as Alfredo Jose Schwarz notes in his study of that immigrant group. His intuition that the German Jewish difficulty with Yiddish in Argentina resulted largely from “psychological resistance”¹⁶⁷ – as opposed to a linguistic difficulty – is supported by evidence that German Jews were attending the Yiddish theaters in the 1950s. Reviews of Yiddish plays appeared in German-language Jewish periodicals, along with explicit directives to readers not to be put off by the language. “For our readers,” wrote one reviewer in 1949, “we also want to add that the plot and the language are easy and can be followed without difficulty even by those who do not have command of the Yiddish language. All actors speak loud and clear, all speak a simple

¹⁶⁷ Alfredo Jose Schwarcz, *Y A Pesar de Todo --- : Los Judios de Habla Alemana En La Argentina [And In Spite of Everything --- : German-Speaking Jews in Argentina]* (Buenos Aires: Grupo Editor Latinoamericano, Coleccion Estudios Politico y Sociales, 1991).

Yiddish.”¹⁶⁸ When the same actor – Joseph Buloff -- put on Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* in Yiddish that season, Spanish-speakers received similar reassurance in the Jewish Spanish-language press. The debut was called “a major event of the current theatrical season” by the critic, “the limitation imposed by the language notwithstanding.”¹⁶⁹

Buloff was pleased with the success of *Death of a Salesman* in Argentina, and wrote to his agent at M.C.A. that it “created such an interest among the Spanish speaking actors and writers that I found it necessary to give two special performances for them.”¹⁷⁰ Among his admirers was the actor Pedro Lopez Lagar, who later wrote to Miller’s agent directly asking for the rights. Lagar’s is one example of an Argentinian actor introducing a play only after it first premiered in Buenos Aires in Yiddish. He would both direct it and act in the lead role, he wrote, “in Spanish, of course.”¹⁷¹

It is difficult to separate the dimensions of Yiddish theater that non-Jewish audiences and actor-directors liked: the quality of the plays themselves, and the strangeness of the Jewish language, never officially recognized as a “foreign” language in Argentina (see CH 1). When IFT invited Italian director Alberto D’Aversa to direct the production of Berthold Brecht’s *Mother Courage*,¹⁷² he balked at his own lack of organic

¹⁶⁸ “Der Saenger seiner Trauer [The Singer of His Sorrow] [Clipping],” *Juedische Wochenschau*, August 26, 1949, No. 717 edition, Joseph Buloff Jewish Theater Archive: Programs, Collection 4, Folder 3: Argentina, Harvard Judaica.

¹⁶⁹ Bernardo Verbitsky, “Temporada Teatral: Joseph Buloff, ‘El Puente’ [Theater Season: Joseph Buloff, ‘The Bridge’] [Clipping],” *Davar*, 1949, 104.

¹⁷⁰ “Joseph Buloff to Miss Ruth Gordon, M.C.A. Management.”

¹⁷¹ “Pedro Lopez Lagar to D. Lawrence Smith.”

¹⁷² Need year

connection to the language of the production. “It seemed to me an absurd enterprise: I, an Italian, residing in Argentina, had to put on a German work translated into Yiddish.”¹⁷³ He placed himself in a lineage of prestigious directors working in languages they did not know for the sake of audiences: Max Reinhardt, directing “A Midsummer Night’s Dream in Italian; Copeau doing “El Savanarella” in Florence; the Russian Catholic Wachtengow directing Habima in Hebrew.¹⁷⁴ The comparison gave D’Aversa a sense of relief. The language’s indexicality – the immediate meanings of words -- could in fact be ignored without damaging the quality of the art form.

¹⁷³ Alberto D’Aversa, “IFT, Brecht y Yo,” *Nai Teater*, July 1953, No. 32 edition.

¹⁷⁴ Yevgeny Vakhtangov, Armenian-Russian director and student of Stanislavsky who trained the Habima troupe in Moscow during its experimental, Soviet phase, directing Habima until his death in 1922.

ii. Police and protest at the Jewish Popular Theater (IFT)

In January 1953, Dr. Pablo Manguel summoned IFT leadership to his office to issue an advance warning about the repercussions of the Prague and Moscow trials for Jewish organizations in Argentina. Manguel, who directed the pro-Peronist OIA [Organizacion Israelita Argentina], said that OIA would shortly declare itself against Soviet crimes, and that any Jewish organization that remained openly pro-Soviet or failed to follow OIA's suit would suffer political persecution.¹⁷⁵ In November of 1954, IFT received notice from city authorities that it could not legally perform for the public within the boundaries of the city. The ban drew widespread criticism in and beyond Argentina. It represented the climax of a more general policing of Yiddish that had begun when Perón first took power and which seemed to have disappeared or turned benign after a brief period of protest.

The closing of IFT stirred memories of the 1946 ban on public use of Yiddish. One Yiddish speaker who had left Argentina that year for New York wrote in IFT's magazine: "The readers will remember the time when the Perón-regime came to power in Argentina, at the time, one morning, the Yiddish press was banned, and all Yiddish newspapers were

¹⁷⁵ Israel Lotersztain, "La Historia de un Fracaso: La Religion Judeo Comunista en los Tiempos de la URSS (La prensa del ICUF en Argentina entre 1946 y 1957) [The History of a Disaster: The Judeo Communist Religion in the Time of the USSR (The press of the ICUF in Argentina between 1946 and 1957)]" (Universidad de General Sarmiento, 2014), 194 According to Israel Lotersztain's study of ICUF, relations between the Jewish collective and IFT were amicable until 1952. This is consistent with oral histories claiming that politics did not prevent anyone from attending IFT's shows, which were generally recognized as the finest of local Yiddish theater. After 1952, with the climax of antisemitic violence in the Soviet Union, new divisions appeared within the Argentinian community, at least at the level of communal leadership. After 1954, when IFT was closed, audiences had reason to be fearful about attending any Yiddish theater, not only the IFT. Lotersztain calls 1956 the year of "crisis" for ICUF, when the murders of Jewish writers in the Soviet Union were confirmed (p102).

shut down.”¹⁷⁶ Though the North American response (including intervention from the US President) had been swift, the moment was memorable. A policeman appeared at Mr. Goldberg’s send-off party, and instructed him to switch over to Spanish. For Goldberg, any political repression of the theater was a sign of things to come for Yiddish more broadly.¹⁷⁷

In Paris, Chaim Sloves led several hundred delegates in a protest against the Argentinian ban, and sent a memo of protest over to the Argentinian embassy in France asking for a reopening.¹⁷⁸ Sloves and Goldberg both interpreted any attack on the theater as a threat to an international network of cultural “positions.” Attacking any one was a threat to the rest.

The IFT, too, wrote a formal memorandum to Angel Borlenghi, Argentinian Minister of the Interior. In it, they described the success of the theater with the Argentinian public and critics, active support of the theater by writers and directors well-known in Argentina, including Armando Discepolo and others, and its presentation to the public of important international works.¹⁷⁹

Locally, the theater itself was careful to distinguish between the role of municipal police and federal authorities, especially Perón himself. In the memo to Borlenghi,

¹⁷⁶ Ts. Goldberg, “‘B. Ts. Goldberg Shraybt in ‘Tog-Morgn-Zshurnal’: Der Farbot Oyfn ‘IFT’-Teater’ [B. Ts. Goldberg Writes in ‘Tog-Morgn-Zshurnal’: The Ban on the IFT-Theater],” *Nai Teater*, March 1955, No. 33 edition.

¹⁷⁷ Goldberg.

¹⁷⁸ Chaim Sloves, “‘Kultur Konferents in Pariz Fodert Efenen Dem Ift’ [Culture Conference in Paris Requests Reopening of IFT],” *Nai Teater*, March 1955, No. 33 edition.

¹⁷⁹ “‘El IFT Se Dirige a Las Autoridades Nacionales’ [The IFT Addresses the National Authorities],” *Nai Teater*, March 1955, No. 33 edition.

Bujalter and Cwilich pointed to the Sección Orden Especial of the Federal Police as having created difficulties, in part by delegating orders to the Dirección de Espectáculos Públicos to intervene with the theater.¹⁸⁰ IFT appealed to Borlenghi to recognize the contributions of the theater to national cultural life and to their own mission of fostering “cultural development”¹⁸¹ among Argentinian Jews, so that Borlenghi might move to stop police actions and reopen the theater. IFT did eventually reopen in September of 1955,¹⁸² the month of the “Liberating Revolution” that led to Perón’s removal from power.

In the 1950s, Argentinian Yiddish art theater, which made the Yiddish language paramount in the stage performance of Jewishness, became a casualty of an anti-Communism shared by Perón’s government and the major Argentinian Jewish institutions. Intermittently shuttered between 1952 and 1955, by the time it reopened, new revelations of Soviet anti-Jewish crimes would finally make the Yiddishism of the Soviet fellow-traveling left in Argentina impossible. In a surprise policy change that thousands of Jewish affiliates found inexplicable, the federation of Jewish cultural institutions that had supported the Yiddish art theater announced in 1957 that it would switch its official language of activities from Yiddish to Spanish, and stop teaching Yiddish in affiliated schools.¹⁸³ This decision, which followed within a couple years of Perón’s departure, ended the Polish and Soviet transatlanticism of Yiddish theater in

¹⁸⁰ “‘El IFT Se Dirige a Las Autoridades Nacionales’ [The IFT Addresses the National Authorities].”

¹⁸¹ “‘El IFT Se Dirige a Las Autoridades Nacionales’ [The IFT Addresses the National Authorities].”

¹⁸² Lotersztain, “La Historia de un Fracaso: La Religion Judeo Comunista en los Tiempos de la URSS (La prensa del ICUF en Argentina entre 1946 y 1957) [The History of a Disaster: The Judeo Communist Religion in the Time of the USSR (The press of the ICUF in Argentina between 1946 and 1957)],” 194.

¹⁸³ Israel Lotersztain, “The Abandonment of Yiddish by the Jewish-Argentinian Communist ICUF,” in *Splendor, Decline, and Rediscovery of Yiddish in Latin America* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2014), 69–86.

Argentina, leaving space for predominantly North American and Israeli based troupes, along with local actors, to produce Yiddish plays, increasingly kitschy and nostalgic, into the 1960s, or for as long as a waning demand persisted.

The Jewish Popular Theater IFT, or Teatro IFT, belonged to a wider circle of pro-Soviet, Yiddishist organizations called ICUF (Idisher Cultur Farband) founded in Paris, in response to the Soviet directive to form anti-fascist popular fronts. An international federation, the Argentinian branch of ICUF brought together a uniquely large constituency of secular Yiddish speaking groups. Affiliates included Jewish schools, fraternal societies, “houses of culture,” the Teatro IFT, and Zumerland, a summer camp for Jewish children,¹⁸⁴ all of which shared a working class base and a commitment to the ICUF’s two-fold platform: support of Soviet Communism, and support for secular, Jewish culture in the Yiddish language.¹⁸⁵

Although the organization of the Jewish Popular Theater, IFT, predated the formal existence of the ICUF by several years, its working class profile was well established. The IFT’s predecessor, a Jewish theater group called “IDRAMST,” was formed in 1933 in a dining hall for immigrants on Cangallo street.¹⁸⁶ In the mid-1930s, the troupe performed to large audiences in the Teatro Excelsior and the Coliseo, with police at the door to contain the crowds.¹⁸⁷ Formally renamed Idisher Folks Teater IFT in 1940, the group’s socialist profile was also reflected in its repertoire, working class

¹⁸⁴ Lotersztain; Visacovsky, *Argentinos, judíos y camaradas*.

¹⁸⁵ Lotersztain, “The Abandonment of Yiddish by the Jewish-Argentinian Communist ICUF,” 85.

¹⁸⁶ Karina Wainschenker, “Antecedentes, Surgimiento y Desarrollo Del Teatro IFT” (November 6, 2013), 205.

¹⁸⁷ Wainschenker, 206.

membership, the contents of its magazine (called *Nai Teater*, or *New Theater*), and in its directorship. David Licht, a Polish Jewish immigrant and former member of the interwar avant-garde and Yiddishist Vilne troupe, began directing at IFT in 1938, with a performance of I. L. Peretz' "In polish af der keyt" [Chained in the synagogue's anteroom]. The range of the theater's repertoire included adaptations from Shakespeare, Steinbeck, Gorki, and O'Neill, and from works by Jewish (Yiddish) writers including Rabinovitsch (Sholem Aleichem) and Peretz, David Berguelson, Moshe Kulbak, and Chaim Sloves. Until the mid-1950s, when both Jewish community organizations and Perón's government turned more explicitly against Jewish communists, the theater was "full every night," according to Cipe Linkovsky, whose father co-founded the group. "There were never tickets to the YFT [sic], it was really a great theater, a great theater [...] it had great actors, who were carpinters, who were textile workers, tailors; but every night they were actors."¹⁸⁸ To raise the artistic level of the group, Licht was introduced to IFT as director by socialist and Yiddishist activist Pinie Katz, who had represented Argentinian Jewry at the founding meeting of the ICUF in Paris in 1937.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁸ Jewish Women in Argentina Oral History Project, Interview no. 946: Cipe Linkovsky. By Dr. Sandra McGee Deutsch, July 17, 1999, digitalcommons.utep.edu.

¹⁸⁹ Lotersztain, "La Historia de un Fracaso: La Religion Judeo Comunista en los Tiempos de la URSS (La prensa del ICUF en Argentina entre 1946 y 1957) [The History of a Disaster: The Judeo Communist Religion in the Time of the USSR (The press of the ICUF in Argentina between 1946 and 1957)]," 97; Pinie Katz, "David Lichts Tsveyter Ekzamen," *Nai Teater*, September 1938, Periodicals, YIVO, New York.



Figure 11: A view of the 20th anniversary celebration of IFT at the Hotel "Les Ambassadeurs," 1953. In Aniversario 1932/1962 Teatro IFT, YIVO, New York.

Following news of Soviet charges of espionage against prominent Jewish cultural figures in 1952, relations in Argentina between the ICUF and the Jewish community declined sharply, with repercussions for IFT.¹⁹⁰ Soviet anti-Semitism had generated tensions between fellow travelers and Zionists in Argentina since 1948, after the Soviet Yiddish press was shut down, the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee dissolved, and

¹⁹⁰ Lotersztain, "La Historia de un Fracaso: La Religion Judeo Comunista en los Tiempos de la URSS (La prensa del ICUF en Argentina entre 1946 y 1957) [The History of a Disaster: The Judeo Communist Religion in the Time of the USSR (The press of the ICUF in Argentina between 1946 and 1957)]," 165.

prominent Yiddish writers arrested. ICUF maintained a pro-Soviet line, and in July of 1952, when news came of twenty-five prominent Jewish cultural figures charged with crimes ranging from espionage to bourgeois nationalism and Zionist separatism, relations between the major institutions (DAIA and AMIA, both strongly Zionist and pro-Israel) and ICUF reached a breaking point. In December, after refusing to sign a letter of protest against Soviet anti-Semitism, the Communists were permanently expelled from the national federation of Jewish institutions, the DAIA (Delegación de Asociaciones Israelitas Argentinas).¹⁹¹

The expulsion roughly coincided with the intended opening of the IFT's new theater building on Boulogne Sur Mer, which was delayed by city police. Associates of the theater speculated that the "difficulties of a municipal character"¹⁹² – a municipal order against opening for the season – could be a direct or indirect effect of orders of President Perón. "It is a policing matter," wrote one IFT supporter, disturbed by the closing and hesitant, even in a Yiddish publication, to implicate Perón: "and not necessarily a decision made by Perón himself. It is not our business to involve ourselves in the internal issues of Argentina or in the politics of Perón. But a ban on IFT affects us here [...]"¹⁹³

¹⁹¹ Bell, "The Jews and Peron," 22.

¹⁹² "Represies kegn dem 'IFT,'" *Nai Teater*, March 1955, IWO, Buenos Aires.

¹⁹³ Goldberg, "'B. Ts. Goldberg Shraybt in 'Tog-Morgn-Zshurnal': Der Farbot Oyfn 'IFT'-Teater' [B. Ts. Goldberg Writes in 'Tog-Morgn-Zshurnal': The Ban on the IFT-Theater]."

Some accused AMIA and DAIA of “collaboration”¹⁹⁴ with Perón’s government. In January of 1953, the ICUF was excluded from two meetings held with all the major Jewish organizations – the first with Pablo Manguel, president of OIA (which operated as a Jewish branch of the Peronist party), the second with Perón, who in light of Soviet anti-Jewish crimes, confirmed his commitment to preventing anti-Semitism in Argentina, and his willingness to help Jewish Argentinians immigrate to Israel.¹⁹⁵

It is possible that the “schism” had broad repercussions not only for the IFT, but as one writer suggested in 1955, for Yiddish theater as a whole.¹⁹⁶ Namely, once the Yiddish theater ceased to be a space of collective culture shared across political divides, it also lost its general appeal. All Jewish theaters suffered from the backlash against the IFT, which had stood not only for the Jewish political left, but for a higher Jewish performance art that drew legitimacy from casting Yiddish as Jewish folk culture.

In IFT’s publications, the theater had been presented as the culmination of Argentinian Jewish cultural achievement. To its community of visitors, IFT represented the antithesis of earlier episodes of language policing.¹⁹⁷ In 1950, the year of the opening ceremony for the IFT’s own permanent theater building on Boulogne Sur Mer, the

¹⁹⁴ Malena Chinski, “Memorias Olvidadas: Los Judios y La Recordacion de la Shoa en Buenos Aires, 1942-1956 [Forgotten Memories: Jews and the Commemoration of the Shoah in Buenos Aires, 1942-1956]” (Universidad Nacional de General Sarmiento, 2017), 230–31.

¹⁹⁵ Israel Lotersztain, “La Historia de un Fracaso: La Religion Judeo Comunista en los Tiempos de la URSS (La prensa del ICUF en Argentina entre 1946 y 1957)” (Universidad Nacional de General Sarmiento, Instituto de Desarrollo Economico y Social, 2014), 192–93.

¹⁹⁶ Marsel, “Di Tsukunft Fun Yidishn Teater in Argentinian.”

¹⁹⁷ One man wrote in response to the ban, “‘How long ago is it, that one was not allowed to speak in Yiddish at a public gathering in Buenos Aires? At my own luncheon, before leaving on a trip, a policeman came in and suddenly forbid us from speaking any Yiddish, and I myself was forced to speak in something resembling Spanish.” Goldberg, “‘B. Ts. Goldberg Shraybt in “Tog-Morgn-Zshurnal”: Der Farbot Oyfn “IFT”-Teater’ [B. Ts. Goldberg Writes in ‘Tog-Morgn-Zshurnal’: The Ban on the IFT-Theater].”

theater's magazine "Nai Teater" invited the IFT community to partake in a "Festival of Jewish Culture," "Our Festival."¹⁹⁸ The sense of ownership IFT projected – both as a showcase for Jewish cultural achievement and as a "school for adults" or space where Jewishness could be passively enjoyed and actively learned – takes on new meaning in the context of the peronist cultural program, where each group competed to stake a claim to a cultural canon of its own. In October of the same year, as the government reached the zenith of its own pageantry, the "Primer Festival" of 17 October (celebrating Perón's release from prison in 1946) entailed a city-wide celebration monopolizing performance spaces for popular national and classical theater plays in large halls, public parks, and the university law faculty during a full week of celebration.¹⁹⁹ Against this proliferation of nationally planned shows, IFT presented itself as the measure of specifically Jewish form of what was valued in public spaces: "the theater is in and of itself the best mirror where our cultural reach is reflected."²⁰⁰

In the context of popular and folk culture promotion in Argentina, the mourning of a specific type of Jewish folk tradition took precedence in performance spaces over the commemoration of the Holocaust.²⁰¹ The relatively more private spaces of the yizkor books created in Argentina sometimes included fond memories of traveling Yiddish

¹⁹⁸ "Nuestra Fiesta [Our Celebration]," *Nai Teater*, May 1950, #26 edition, Periodicals, YIVO, New York.

¹⁹⁹ Mogliani, "El Teatro En La Politica Cultural Del Primer y Segundo Gobierno Peronista," 175.

²⁰⁰ "El Triunfo de Una Idea [The Triumph of an Idea]," *Nai Teater*, July 1953, No. 32 edition.

²⁰¹ Malena Chinski's recent dissertation uncovers the sites and spaces of response to the Holocaust in Argentina. These were, for example, organized by the DAIA (a date on which Jewish stores were asked to close for business, and the names of those who did not comply were published in the papers for all to see), or the annual gathering in commemoration of the Warsaw ghetto uprising. Theaters, however, the most public, visible, and open spaces (to non-Jews) prioritized entertainment and distraction, or excellent, artistic and modern evidence of popular cultural accomplishment, over mourning and commemoration.

theater troupes in Europe, presenting these as evidence of life prior to the crisis that forced immigration. Theater represented life, not destruction. In the actors' union magazine *Teater* ca. 1941, Nekhemias Zucker wrote that during the difficult years when Jewish life was under attack in Europe, Yiddish theater in Buenos Aires had been a refuge and a pleasant distraction. Jewish theaters welcomed and recruited actors who had left Europe – this was the case of David Licht, recruited by Pinie Katz to direct the IFT theater.

In 1952, the IFT publicly staked its claim to representing a Jewish version of the new *criollo* folk revival promoted under Perón. The main foyer featured a new mural, covering a wall with figures from myth, folk tales, and literature – both Jewish and *criollo* – and painted in uniform style by the Argentinian painter Castagnino. A collaboration directed by Castagnino, the mural was painted in the socialist realist style then being developed by muralists like Diego Rivera in a liberationist key. It was a pastoral scene of men and women gathered under a tree. The gathered figures included archetypal Argentinian national figures – the literary embodiment of the gaucho, Martin Fierro – alongside characters emblematic of the early 20th Century immigrant theaters of Buenos Aires. Castagnino and his collaborators painted “Pepino el 88,” a character made famous by the traveling Italian Podesta circus in the 1890s, along with Jose Hernandez – author of the iconic national romance *Martin Fierro* – Uruguayan playwright Florencio Sanchez, and a disparate Jewish figures -- traditional and assimilated, real and fictional – including Alberto Gerchunoff and Tevye the Dairyman.²⁰²

²⁰² Skura and Slavsky, “El Teatro Idish Como Patrimonio Cultural Judio Argentino,” 47 Skura’s essay includes an excerpt from the IFTs own description of the mural, which she found in the IFTs archive.



IMAGE 1: The text reads: “Tsvey fragmentn fun dem kinstlerishn vant-gemel in oybershtn ift-salon / kolektive arbet oysgefirt fun a grupe Argentinianr molers onter der onfirung fun kinstler kastagnino” [“Two fragments from the artistic wall painting in the uppermost IFT salon / collective work realized by a group of Argentinian painters under the direction of the artists Castagnino”] From Nai Teater, No. 31 May 1952, p21.

The painting was a realization of an earlier mandate for the IFT, as put by Pinie Katz in 1939: to disseminate “the magnificent literary and dramatic background for which our Yiddish language is the treasury”²⁰³ By 1952 a new visual language and a new form had been fused to represent that ambition – socialist realism and the mural. The gathering together of criollo icons and heroes of Yiddish literature and theater clearly

²⁰³ See Nai Teater, July 1949, p.47.

relied on audiences' will to compare the legitimacy of their own national canon to criollo figures, standing -- inside the hall of a Yiddish theater -- for the new, popular character of Argentinian nationalism. The description of the mural located by Susana Skura in the archives of the IFT makes a rather incredible comparison of the Jewish folk hero who appears in the mural -- "Tevye the Dairyman," or "Tobias el lechero" in Spanish -- to "Juan Pueblo," or Juan of the people. Tevie is "our Juan Pueblo," reads the explanation of the Jewish-Argentinian synthesis pictured in the painting.²⁰⁴ This comparison drew on the pervasive celebration of the common working people instrumentalized in propaganda to reinforce Perón's persona as a leader of humble background with an unprecedented ability to understand the needs of the people. Appearing in poster propaganda of Perón's day, Juan Pueblo was a dark-skinned worker with creole features, standing in for the urban migrant masses Perón courted as a political base.²⁰⁵ The IFT's explicit association of the Yiddish popular theatrical tradition with the contemporary vocabulary of peronist propaganda suggests a desire to fit Jewish difference into the categories offered by the ethnic politics of the 1950s, which included the folklore movement and promotion of a new creole national type. By associating Sholem Aleichem with a typical Argentinian creole, IFT was looking to derive legitimacy for Yiddish theater from the prevailing rhetoric and visual propaganda of the day.

Perhaps even more striking than the theater's choice of Castagnino's mural for the theater foyer in 1952 is the existence of a design for an artwork not chosen for display at the IFT. I have found no evidence that the proposed artwork by a German artist, Pablo

²⁰⁴ Skura and Slavsky, "El Teatro Idish Como Patrimonio Cultural Judío Argentino."

²⁰⁵ Ezequiel Adamovsky, "Race and Class through the Visual Culture of Peronism," in *Rethinking Race in Modern Argentina*, ed. Paulina Alberto and Eduardo Elena (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2016), 155–83.

Hanemann, was accepted by IFT, if Hanemann submitted the piece for consideration at all. Several years before, curious visitors to the IWO would have been able to see Pablo Hanemann's sculpture "Gaskammer" [Gas Chamber] on view, in a poured bronze edition bought and donated by the Kiceleffs, a pair of philanthropists among East European Jewish institutions in the city.²⁰⁶ When, in 1951, Hanneman drafted his own design for a wall relief to be realized for the IFT, his theme was entirely non-folkloric and instead drew on classical themes and motifs to represent the cycle of Jewish destruction and postwar rebirth through theater. At the center of the tryptic is the Actor, adonis-like, under a tree on the "stage of life." Scenes of life in one panel – a Bible, a student, love, industry – are juxtaposed with destruction in another – night, war, burning cities, refugees.

²⁰⁶ Pablo Hannemann, "Die Bedeutung Meiner Skulptur 'Gaskammer' [The Meaning of My Sculpture 'Gas Chamber']," *Juedisches Wochenblatt*, May 20, 1947, sec. LIteratur und Kunst [Literature and Art], RG 116, Box 1, Folder 10, YIVO, New York.

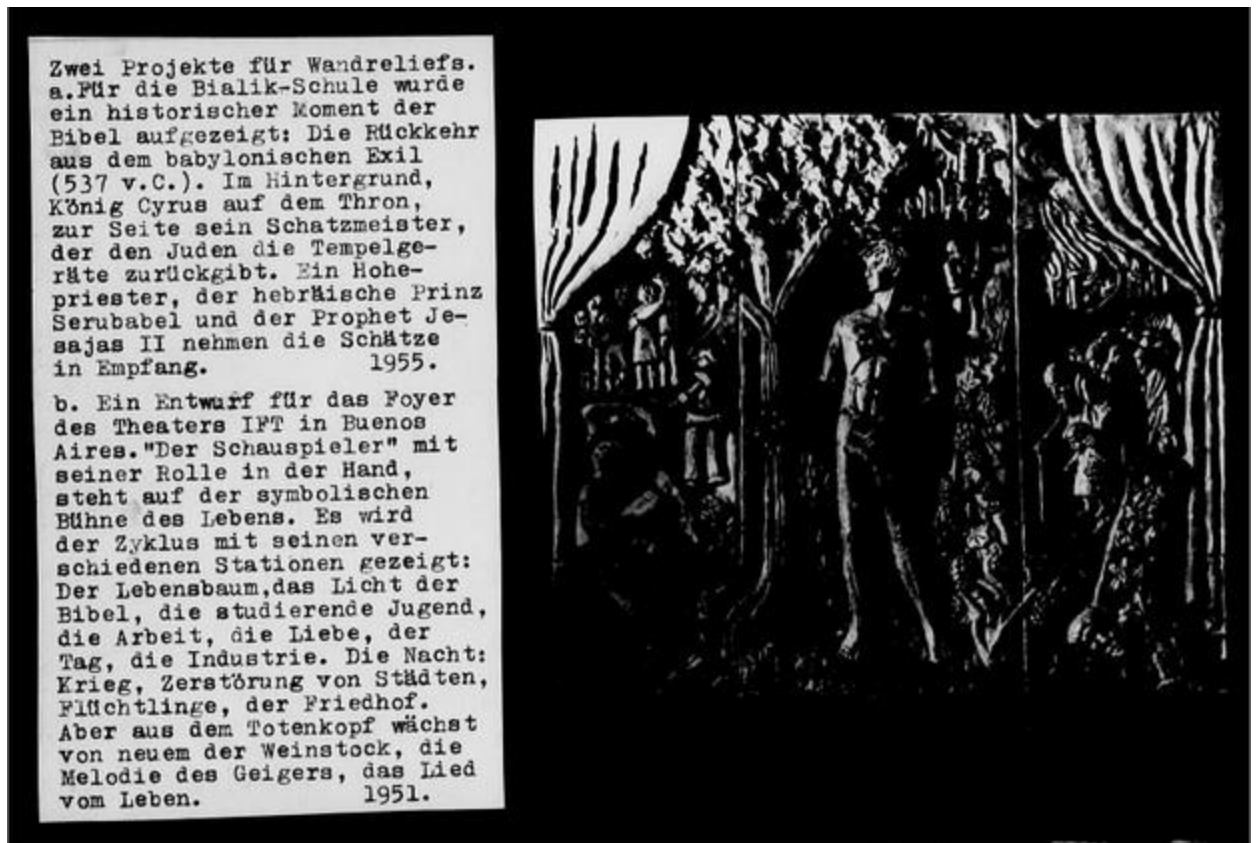


IMAGE 2: Pablo Hanneman, "Der Schauspieler," 1951, A plan for the foyer of the IFT theater in Buenos Aires, Pablo Hannemann Collection, Leo Baeck Institute, New York.

In a redemptive touch, the actor stands over a skull, from which a new grape vine has sprung, returning life to theater and theater to life.²⁰⁷ Castagnino's much contained no such grisly representation of mass destruction, escape, and rebirth. Instead, Jewish figures, real and fictional, were painted in the blocky, powerful style of the socialist muralists, of a kind with other immigrant and creole figures.

²⁰⁷ Pablo Hannemann, *Der Schauspieler*, 1951, 1951, Pablo Hannemann Collection, Leo Baeck Institute, New York.

The IFT's invitation to non-Jewish artists to participate by direction performances is a striking example of an appeal based not on specifically Jewish ethnic loyalty, but on loyalty to broader class-based interests (for which IFT, as a workers' theater, was famous). It is not the communist affiliation of the theater that most stands out in this context, though, but the interest non-Jews took in IFT's use of a Jewish language to access a national identity (despite IFT's insistence that nationalism was not central to its mission). When the Italian director D'aversa was asked to direct Berthold Brecht's *Mother Courage*, he was first baffled, then excited about the prospect in terms, not of working-class convergence, but of the Yiddish as a medium by which Jews seemed to have accessed a "land inside." He wrote not of the dissolution of national loyalties into a higher, universal, communist paradise, but to the contrary:

We all have, in our innermost being [fuero interno], an Athens to love, a Rome to believe in, an America to discover; arid deserts and green valleys that alternate, according to the seasons; one day, perhaps, we'll have the luck to discover our most enormous continents, and then the light will go on or else we will be condemned to wander eternally from city to city, foreigners to our own selves, without the consolation of feeling ourselves to be within the familiar walls of a house.²⁰⁸

In a Yiddish *Mother Courage*, D'Aversa wrote, he had found his "Palestine."

It became increasingly common for writers and translators advertising or reviewing Yiddish performances of the 1950s and '60s to adopt the category of "folklore" to describe them. Like Castagnino's mural, this pattern suggests a broader awareness of the prestige attaching to "folklore" under Perón as a term that could speak for nations. When the Kehile advertised the puppet theater *Hakl-Bakl*, they used this

²⁰⁸ D'Aversa, "IFT, Brecht y Yo."

language, not only in urging Jews to attend shows, but also non-Jews. By visiting, non-Jews might “get to know the Jewish folklore and traditions and get closer to our problems, and live the specifically Jewish- and at the same time human emotions by way of the enchanted world of puppets.”²⁰⁹ Mario Monachesi, an Argentinian-born musician who trained in Italy, associated briefly with the Futurists and returned to Argentina in the 1930s, embraced the language of folklore when he became director of the IFT’s I. L. Peretz youth chorus in the 1950s. Monachesi extolled the value of Jewish music, writing that it “possesses an enormous abundance of popular traditions and folklore.” Despite the fact that the theater no longer performed in Yiddish after 1957, the choir apparently did include Yiddish in its repertoire under Monachesi’s direction, performing “in the popular song tradition of all the pueblos, predominantly, naturally, in the Yiddish language.”²¹⁰

²⁰⁹ “[Clipping] ‘Al Margen Del Nuevo Estreno: “Hakl Bakl.””

²¹⁰ Mario Monachesi, “Sintesis Historica del Canto Coral [Historical Synthesis of the Choral Song],” *Nai Teater*, November 1957, 8, YIVO, New York.

iii. Jacob Ben Ami: from Jewish stage to national screen

The actor Ben Ami was a well-known figure among Argentinian Jews, having performed in Buenos Aires to great acclaim since the 1930s. In 1955, he spoke in important venues of the community about the crucial place of Yiddish theater in saving the Yiddish language. Whether ideological, pragmatic, or something else, his choice only a few years into Perón's first government to star in an epic national drama of Argentinian immigration (a story that omitted the Jewish colonies in favor of other European groups) reveals the at times paradoxical dynamics of language shift: still an advocate for saving the vernacular, and for doing it primarily through theatrical performance, Ben Ami opted at the same time to endear himself more widely in Argentina through a national screen debut. The film, called *Esperanza* after the Argentinian city nearest the first agricultural colonies, in fact capitalized on Ben Ami's willingness to act for non-Jewish audiences. While continuing to visit the Yiddish-speaking social circuit of Buenos Aires, a city he described to reporters as a second home, and to act in Yiddish plays, he used his "plastic" and "expressive" face in the service of an epic national drama intended to fortify audiences' faith in the prosperity and development of Argentina.

The case of the Jewish actor Jacob Ben Ami's relationship with Buenos Aires theater world in the mid-20th Century illustrates both the transformation of discourse around Yiddish theater and its instability in a dynamic national space. Ben-Ami, a well-known and popular actor in the Yiddish theater world, became attached to Buenos Aires, a counterpoint for him to the waning audiences for Yiddish art theater in New York. At the same time, if Yiddish theater was to survive in Buenos Aires, amidst the criollo-

centered national pageantry of the Peronist state, then Yiddish actors would have to be creative in adapting to changing audiences and opportunities for sponsorship and publicity. Ben Ami's decision to star in a state-funded, Spanish-language film production is highly suggestive of continuities in the audiences for his Yiddish- and Spanish-language performances, which as reviews of his plays since the 1930s show, were not strictly limited to Jewish Argentinians. Ben-Ami worked intensively to achieve performative mastery of Spanish for the film, in order to speak his part well, since *Esperanza* required both narrative and linguistic performances of an immigration history in which Jews were absent or marginal figures. Widely seen as an artist of the Yiddish spoken word on the Jewish stage, Ben-Ami traded both medium and context in his new role, projecting for his admirers a national story in the national language.

By the time Ben-Ami made his last substantial theater tour in Buenos Aires in 1955, he was a well-known figure in both the Jewish and non-Jewish worlds. Having visited Buenos Aires already in the 1930s, he knew and was known by first generation immigrants as well as Jewish colonists. Mordche Alpersohn, famous for his unromantic chronicles of Jewish gaucho life in the provinces, saw him in 1936. "I idolize him,"²¹¹ Alpersohn wrote in the Yiddish magazine *Der Shpigel*. Ben Ami's return to Yiddish – he had made his reputation on the English stage in London, and in both English and Yiddish in New York – was seen as redemptive, and as evidence of a true self he had not ended by denying.²¹²

²¹¹ Mordkhe Alpersohn, "A por verter vegn Yakov Ben-Amis Shpiln," *Der Shpigel*, 1936, RG 755, Box 7, F 76, YIVO, New York.

²¹² Y. L. Gruzman, "Vegn Yakov Ben-Ami, idish-teater un idishe kinstler," *Der Shpigel*, 1936, RG 755, Box 7, F 76, YIVO, New York.

In Buenos Aires, Ben Ami's appearances were not limited to theaters. He visited Jewish schools and institutions, made radio appearances, and spent time with friends. His trips were liberally photo-documented, as is obvious from the thick packets of miniatures and headshots in the archives.²¹³ One Polish-Jewish actor described Ben Ami in his memoir as the darling of Argentina's Jewish intellectuals: "For example, if one intellectual met another he said to him 'Good morning, have you seen Ben-Ami yet?'"²¹⁴ Another admirer, Koremblitt, inaugurated the Jewish publishing house "Editorial Stefan Zweig" in 1946 with a booklet devoted to Ben Ami's talent. His re-working of the long essay into a chapter for a volume on theater (with the title, "The Spirit of the Stage") suggests Koremblitt's investment in bringing out, in Spanish, the universally appreciable value of Jewish culture for Argentinian readers.

Attendees of Ben-Ami's plays connected the cultural work he was doing to the perceived crisis in other Jewish institutions – schools in particular – where Yiddish was present. In 1955, Ben Ami made the same connection himself when he appeared at a conference organized by the Kultur-kongres. There, he spoke "with a great deal of pessimism about the possibilities for Yiddish theater in New York," and shared his impressions "that here with us things aren't so great with Yiddish in general and with Yiddish theater especially." Nevertheless, he called on Argentinian Jews to defend the theater and admonished them, much as Yiddishists had on their visits to Argentina

²¹³Turning over the black-and-white portraits taken in Buenos Aires alone gives an impression of a well-developed circuit of available photography studios, including Foto Riba, at Alte Brown 934; Lydia Marquez, Charcas 4734, Buenos Aires; D. Kahan, Helguera 4156 Bs Aires; Leon Bocian, of Foto Venus, Canning 285, Bs Aires. Ben Ami was also photographed by Anatole Saderman, later known for his portrait photography and as a founding member of the avant gard photo studio Carpeta de los Diez. See Box III Folder 3 of the Ben Ami papers, Collection 24, Israel Goor Archive, Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

²¹⁴ *Integracion y Marginalidad: Historias de Vidas de Inmigrantes Judios En La Argentina*, 18.

decades before, “to protect those positions,” and in so doing to save Yiddish in Argentina.²¹⁵

Ben Ami’s popularity was not limited to Yiddish-speaking or even to Jewish audiences, a fact that placed him at a point of potential conflict for the meaning of modern Jewish culture in Argentina. On the one hand, Peronist regulation of popular culture tended to limit official recognition of Jewish culture to the ranks of the pro-Perón institution, the OIA, as well as to the new local influence, the pro-Hebrew Israeli delegation after 1949. Ben Ami’s negotiations with local powers – Jewish and non-Jewish – demonstrate the uneasy coexistence of the promotion and negation of Yiddish in the same circles, and sometimes, the same individuals.

In the film, Ben Ami played Carlos Joliot, a Swiss immigrant among the founders of the agricultural colony Esperanza. The drama used a small cast along with hundreds of extras to tell the story of Esperanza over the course of three generations, as the colonists battle draughts and frosts, locusts, and raids by “indios” in their struggle to survive off the land. Ben Ami, it was written, had spent five months preparing for the film, living in the town of Villa Elisa outside La Plata, to improve his spoken Spanish and to “familiarize himself with the practices and customs of the Argentinian countryside.”²¹⁶

The style and contents of the film reflected the political values and aesthetics of peronismo in a number of ways. Perhaps most immediately striking is the plot focus on immigrant colonists. The story of the Swiss farmers provided a neutral avenue to the

²¹⁵ 24 May, *Diario Israelita*, Goldsztern album.

²¹⁶ *Poster/Flier for the Film “Esperanza,”* n.d., n.d., Collection 24, Box II, Folder IV, Israel Goor Theater Archive, Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

glorification of the immigrant. The choice of a Franco-Swiss character was, on the one hand, not representative of 19th century mass immigration to Argentina from Spain, Italy, and Russia. At the same time, *Esperanza* was a vehicle for a national founding narrative, or shared Argentinian myth of hard-working farmers building a nation. It reflected the new openness under Perón to recognizing dual loyalties among immigrants: that of a national homeland and an Argentinian homeland.²¹⁷ In [her] study of Argentinian film, Currie Thompson dates the shift toward representing immigrants on screen to roughly 1943, the year of the coup that would lead, eventually, to Perón's presidency.²¹⁸ Consistent with this representational shift, *Esperanza* glorified the immigrant figure in Joliot, and celebrated the immigrant contribution to the new state.

The fact that *Esperanza* was a joint South American production (Chilean-Argentinian) points to a second aspect of the film's viability in the political climate of the late 1940s. Namely, a tale of self-made economic prosperity despite the travails of the local climate (and indigenous population, villainized in scenes of raiding) fit with new economic policies in the region prioritizing nationalization and independence from norther imperial dominance. Under Perón, the British-owned Argentinian rail system was nationalized, the first five-year plan nationalized paper production, and a major trade agreement with Israel was motivated by a desire to find new, non-US or –British markets for the country's meat and other exports.²¹⁹ In its full-spread advertisement for the film, the peronist paper *Democracia* described to readers the importance of the colonization

²¹⁷ Raanan Rein, cit.

²¹⁸ Currie K. Thompson, *Picturing Argentina*, n.d.

²¹⁹ Rein, Argentina, Israel, and the Jews.

story in Esperanza as the basis for "our booming economic progress."²²⁰ On the Chilean side, the film was financed by the national development corporation called "*desarrollo hacia adentro* (inward-looking development)"²²¹ that sponsored major industrialization during the 1940s and '50s.²²² And in Argentina, the figure of the colonist was consistently given a prominent place in Perón's narratives of economic progress. In the words of another tabloid-style ad for the film, the men and women who colonized Argentina were "dignified guests of the hardworking "Esperanza", the city that today symbolizes the industriousness and the drive of men physically accustomed to agricultural work! One year ago, President Perón inaugurated in "Esperanza" a monument to the Colonist."²²³ Another poster called it "a profound song of love to the land and its fecundity."

²²⁰ "Esperanza [Clipping]," n.d., Collection 24, Box II, Folder IV, Israel Goor Theater Archive, Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

²²¹ Laura Tedesco and Jonathan R. Barton, *The State of Democracy in Latin America: Post-Transitional Conflicts in Argentina and Chile* (London and New York: Routledge, n.d.), 50.

²²² "It is a message from America to the world, realized with the broad and decisive economic support of the Corporacion de Fomento de la Produccion" [my translation]. See: *Promotional Material [Tabloid-Style Clipping] for the Film Esperanza*, n.d., n.d., Collection 24, Box II, Folder IV, Israel Goor Theater Archive, Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

²²³ *Promotional Material [Tabloid-Style Clipping] for the Film Esperanza*.



IMAGE 3: "From the depths of History an Argentinian voice arrives: Esperanza" 1949, Israel Goor Theater Archive, Collection 24: Jacob Ben-Ami; Box II, Folder IV.

The epic style of *Esperanza* complemented the scope of the story and symbol of the colonist-Joliot figure in similar Peronist fashion. Hundreds of extras were used on the set, and many scenes included large numbers of extras. This aesthetic of scale in human numbers matched peronist political aesthetics which had become clear by the year of the film's release in 1949 through the government's use of spectacle, marches, and rallies to political ends. As Plotkin shows in *Mañana es San Perón*, between 1948 and 1950, Perón gained confidence in his coopting of the socialist celebration of May Day, having

replaced socialist symbols with Argentinian flags, and no longer even felt the need to rely on the authority of Catholic clergy in the celebrations. Sporting events and the national celebration of the 17 October (originally a commemoration of the day Perón was released from a prison to accept his 1946 electoral win) also gathered large numbers of people, in semi-fascist-style gatherings that projected a sense of national unity. The directors clearly adopted this visual strategy to strengthen the sense of a shared national narrative in *Esperanza*.



IMAGE 4: Jacob Ben Ami on the set of *Esperanza*. Harvard Judaica Collection, Widener Library.

The press greeted Ben Ami's decision to take on the lead role of the epic Chilean-Argentinian production with great interest – a curiosity clearly motivated by the fact of his major background as a well-known actor on the Argentinian Yiddish stage. As lead, his face featured prominently on promotional material, wearing Joliot's thin mustache.

The film was called the “culmination of his artistic career”²²⁴ of an “extraordinary actor.”²²⁵ The same tabloid-style ad highlighted the failed efforts of Hollywood producers to lure Ben Ami into the world of cinema, and likewise celebrated the local victory over the northern imperialist in winning a great actor for their cause. Journalists interviewed Ben Ami and reported on the anticipated film. They introduced him as a familiar name. “The work of Ben Ami in the theater is well known by our public, who have been able to admire him in the interpretation of works by Ibsen, Dostoyevsky, Perutz, in various seasons of the last years.”²²⁶

Another article referred to Ben Ami’s place in the film as “symptomatic and expressive,”²²⁷ again referring to the cache of what the author called a “famous international actor”²²⁸ being contracted for a South American production. This language, which emphasized Ben-Ami’s North American credentials, his rejection of Hollywood, and his international or cosmopolitan status, contrasts with the explicit references to Yiddish in the national coverage of his theater art. In Buenos Aires, even reviewers admittedly not enthusiastic to see plays in Yiddish (and who could not understand them) raved about Ben Ami’s acting.

²²⁴ *Promotional Material [Tabloid-Style Clipping] for the Film Esperanza.*

²²⁵ *Promotional Material [Tabloid-Style Clipping] for the Film Esperanza.*

²²⁶ “Con ‘Esperanza’ Se Incorpora Al Cine Argentino Una Figura de La Escena Universal, Jacob Ben Ami [Clipping],” n.d., Collection 24, Box II, Folder IV, Israel Goor Theater Archive, Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

²²⁷ “‘Esperanza’ Refiere en La Fundacion y Vida De [...] [Clipping],” ca 1949, Ben Ami Papers, Collection 24, Box II, Folder IV, Israel Goor Theater Archive, Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

²²⁸ “‘Esperanza’ Refiere en La Fundacion y Vida De [...] [Clipping].”

In 1955 (six years after *Esperanza* was made, and coinciding with another Yiddish stage tour), the morning paper *Noticias Graficas* published notes on an interview with Ben Ami, writing that “in Buenos Aires his name is already long-since tied to true theater [...] he tells us that ‘the great race of actors never has to die’, because his is the voice of the poets that express the most profound spiritual ambition of men.”²²⁹

It is likely that in 1949, at the time of *Esperanza*’s debut, fewer non-Jewish critics knew Ben Ami. Over the next several years, in part through his move into film, he gained visibility. For the less enthusiastic, his acting ability could be made more palatable by separating it from his Jewishness. Those critics stressed the unfortunate fact of the language medium, and suggested simply ignoring it. “Although in Buenos Aires we listen to him in “hidisch” and the mass of his racial fellows goes to see his art,”²³⁰ wrote one such critic in 1955, “*it is not really a Jewish act* [my emphasis].”²³¹ By this, presumably, he meant that theatergoers not wishing to associate with Jewish culture specifically might ignore the Yiddish language as incidental and appreciate Ben Ami’s art as European, shorn of any specifically Jewish connotations. Other reviewers were more generous. “For this reporter, Ben Ami was practically unknown,”²³² wrote one, circa 1955.²³³ Reading reviews in “foreign magazines” had led her to imagine “the vigorous figure of a

²²⁹ 10 May 1955, *Noticias Graficas* [clipping, no author/title] Goldsztern, *Buenos Aires 1955. Jacob Ben Ami: Comentarios y Criticas, Temporada 1955*.

²³⁰ *Democracia*, 10 June 1955, "Otra Vez Jacobo Ben Ami" in Goldsztern.

²³¹ Ibid.

²³² “Jacob Ben Ami Es Un Actor: No Utiliza Sus Manos Para Subrayar, Sino Que Con Ellas Expresa Todo [Jacob Ben Ami Is an Actor: He Doesn’t Use His Hands for Emphasis, but to Express Everything] [Clipping],” *El Pais*, n.d., Collection 24, Box II, Folder IV, Israel Goor Theater Archive, Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

²³³ AK: check this date.

comedian.”²³⁴ She was quickly convinced, however, that Ben Ami’s skill transcended clowning, and that his skill on stage was worthy of recognition, “no matter what language he speaks.”²³⁵

By contrast with reviewers’ interest in Ben Ami’s movement over the boundary from Jewish theater to Argentinian film, the fliers and publicity materials surrounding Esperanza either ignored or concealed his Jewish background. It is noteworthy that the publicity for the film presents Ben Ami as well-known, “a notable figure of universal theater,”²³⁶ and as “one of the greatest assets (if not the greatest) of the contemporary stage.”²³⁷ The Spanish-language press routinely presented him as familiar, and great – with no mention of Yiddish. This omission is especially striking with respect to oblique descriptions of his language skills. One ad praised him for “Fluency in various languages [...]”²³⁸ She had attended a performance of Campos Verdes [Grine Felder] by Peretz Hirshbein, and focused her review on the power of Ben Ami’s gestures: “it is a subtle

²³⁴ “Jacob Ben Ami Es Un Actor: No Utiliza Sus Manos Para Subrayar, Sino Que Con Ellas Expresa Todo [Jacob Ben Ami Is an Actor: He Doesn’t Use His Hands for Emphasis, but to Express Everything] [Clipping].”

²³⁵ “Jacob Ben Ami Es Un Actor: No Utiliza Sus Manos Para Subrayar, Sino Que Con Ellas Expresa Todo [Jacob Ben Ami Is an Actor: He Doesn’t Use His Hands for Emphasis, but to Express Everything] [Clipping].”

²³⁶ “Con ‘Esperanza’ Se Incorpora Al Cine Argentino Una Figura de La Escena Universal, Jacob Ben Ami [Clipping].”

²³⁷ “‘Deseo de Todo Corazon Que “Esperanza” Allane El Camino Para El Cine Chileno En El Extranjero’ [Clipping],” *La Nacion*, n.d., Collection 24, Box II, Folder IV, Israel Goor Theater Archive, Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

²³⁸ “Jacob Ben Ami Es Un Actor: No Utiliza Sus Manos Para Subrayar, Sino Que Con Ellas Expresa Todo [Jacob Ben Ami Is an Actor: He Doesn’t Use His Hands for Emphasis, but to Express Everything] [Clipping].”

mode of expression, extraordinary, complex. Through it, the word acquires a suggestive potency, unequalled, it does not matter what language he speaks in.”²³⁹

Whether a matter of ignorance or discomfort, the omission of Yiddish recurred in Spanish-language promotional materials for *Esperanza*. Ben Ami’s birthplace and his Jewishness were not hidden – one might even say that the emphasis on his facial “flexibility and plasticity of expression”²⁴⁰ was a subtle way of complementing him for passing so easily from the Jewish stage to the non-Jewish world of the film. For an actor primarily known to Jewish audiences for Yiddish parts, and who had been an outspoken advocate of saving the Yiddish language through theater, there is a striking shift in descriptions of him as being “one of the most illustrious sons of Israel.”²⁴¹ Enrique Chaico, also a Yiddish-speaker, who played a smaller role alongside Ben Ami in the film, was similarly presented as a linguistically talented “polyglot.”²⁴² The poster elaborated Chaico’s “command of languages”²⁴³ as knowledge of “English, French, German, Russian, [flamenco], Spanish.”²⁴⁴ Ironically, while the Jewish performers multilingualism could be celebrated, the particular language in which they had established their reputations went unnamed. This pattern likewise captures the irony of the narrative sweep

²³⁹ “Jacobo Ben Ami Es Un Actor: No Utiliza Sus Manos Para Subrayar, Sino Que Con Ellas Expresa Todo [Jacobo Ben Ami Is an Actor: He Doesn’t Use His Hands for Emphasis, but to Express Everything] [Clipping].”

²⁴⁰ *Promotional Material [Tabloid-Style Clipping] for the Film Esperanza.*

²⁴¹ *Promotional Material [Tabloid-Style Clipping] for the Film Esperanza.*

²⁴² *Poster/Flier for the Film “Esperanza.”*

²⁴³ *Poster/Flier for the Film “Esperanza.”*

²⁴⁴ *Poster/Flier for the Film “Esperanza.”*

of the film, for Ben Ami's admirers: a national epic of immigration, starring a Yiddish actor, who plays a Swiss man with good Spanish.

iii. Conclusion: the limits of cosmopolitan Yiddish

The staging of Yiddish in Buenos Aires theaters gained in status during the 1940s and 1950s, making Jewishness more visible and audible in theaters as it became less so in the city's streets. Crowds of spectators spilled into the streets before and after late-night shows, retiring to nearby cafeterias to discuss the plays over tea. The cosmopolitanism of Yiddish theater in Argentina derived from the internationalism of the performers – New York stars alongside local troupes – and of the material, including adaptations of translated European and new American works alongside Jewish classics. German-speaking Jews and non-Jewish Argentinian reviewers and directors attended plays, drawn by the reputations of the actors and novelty of the dramatic material and its staging. “This notable actor, so appreciated in our environment,” went one review in *Clarín* of Ben Ami in 1955, “does not draw only spectators who understand “idisch,” but rather, as in previous performances, last night he was applauded by artists of all provenances.”²⁴⁵

Perón's government granted no specific protections or provisions to Yiddish theater. State support went to a national, creole canon of plays, along with “universal works” not including Yiddish classics. Jewish theaters responded by calling Sholem Aleichem “our Juan Pueblo” [our Juan of the people], adapting contemporary paradigms of cultural heritage to claim legitimacy for popular Jewish performances. If this self-styling verged on accepting a racial paradigm that qualified “Yiddish culture” as distinctly “un-Argentinian,” Jewish and non-Jewish reviewers sometimes echoed that

²⁴⁵ *Clarín*: 30 May 1955, section “Teatro Cine Artistas,” title “Curiosa Creacion de Ben Ami: ‘El Mundo de Scholom Aleijem’” Goldsztern, *Buenos Aires 1955. Jacob Ben Ami: Comentarios y Criticas, Temporada 1955*.

view. They referred to Jewish actors as interpreters of the theater of their “race,”²⁴⁶ called audience members the “racial fellows” of the actors, and praised the sounds of Yiddish for its power to engender “racial” solidarity among Jewish listeners.²⁴⁷ As in the 1930s, the spectacle and sounds of Yiddish provoked anxieties of racial otherness.

Surprisingly, it was not antagonism toward Yiddish on stage that curtailed post-war Yiddish theater in Argentina. The closing of the Jewish Popular Theater IFT – a highly symbolic affront to Yiddish speaking theater-goers – came about in response to the persecutions of prominent Jewish cultural figures and intellectuals in the Soviet Union. Buenos Aires Jewish institutions aligned with Perón in their anti-Communism, though for different reasons, shaking the security of the pro-Soviet theater and its audiences in what had since the early 1930s been a well-regarded and secure performance space for Yiddish. Unlike local troupes, international actors with North American reputations like Jacob Ben Ami enjoyed considerable flexibility in adapting to changing audiences and resources in Argentina, moving easily from stage to screen, endorsing the rise of film and adopting Spanish when necessary for the new medium. Yiddish theater continued in Buenos Aires after the official “acriollamiento” [shift to Spanish] of the IFT, in 1957, but never with the same pretension to carrying on the legacy of interwar Yiddish art theater. The vitality and importance of post-war Yiddish theater in Buenos Aires is attested to in part by the presence even of Israeli diplomats in the audience, a subject the next chapter takes up.

²⁴⁶ Bernardo Ezequiel Koremblit, *Ben-Ami: el actor abismal* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Stefan Zweig, 1946), 26–27.

²⁴⁷ De Frente, clipped review of Jacob Ben Ami, 27-6-55 Goldsztern, *Buenos Aires 1955. Jacob Ben Ami: Comentarios y Criticas, Temporada 1955*.

CHAPTER 3: OUT OF PLACE

“The Sherit Hapleitá are after all the remains and inheritance of our murdered people, and now some want to do away with this holy language [Yiddish], with which our millions of martyrs went into the ovens, or perished on the Siberian taiga. Where is your protest? Why are you silent?”²⁴⁸

--Anonymous member of Sherit Hapleitá, Buenos Aires

“We preserved Jewish treasures in the Argentinian iwo [...] Rescuing works of art and Jewish artifacts is no smaller deed than curing the sick.”²⁴⁹

--Samuel Rollansky *Iberlebungen* Vol. 1

Yiddish was used both to document and to commemorate the destruction of Jewish life in Europe, a use that often stood in tension with the multi-linguistic practices of Jewish survivors. In Argentina, this conflict between language use and the language politics of commemoration was decided over the first decade and a half after 1945 in favor of Yiddish through the production and performance of a monolingual Yiddish-language canon.

²⁴⁸ [Clipping] The author is given as “An eygener” [one of them] and the title is “A por verter vegn dem farband fun sheyres-hapleyte in Argentinian” [A few words about the Survivors’ Association] Undzer gedank, Num. 210 “Album ‘Di Diskusye Vegn Idish’ [The Discussion about Yiddish],” 1968, Box: “Recortes de periodicos (Educacion)” / “Desaparicion del idish en escuelas judios c. 1968,” IWO, Buenos Aires.

²⁴⁹ Roshansky [Rollansky], *Iberlebungen* [Vivencias], 1:41.

This process of linguistic investment in Yiddish was not a new post-war phenomenon, but drew on the interwar language activism that preceded, and even “anticipated”²⁵⁰ the emergence of a Holocaust discourse decades later (CH 1). It was based on a view of Yiddish as an authentic language of Old World experience, a process that gained momentum in Buenos Aires in the theaters as an effect of the ethnic politics of Perón (CH2), and was consolidated by a series of institutional campaigns.

This chapter takes Argentina as a case study of a broader phenomenon that followed the Second World War, the emergence of a “rhetoric of loss”²⁵¹ that used the Yiddish language to talk about the imagined past and future of Jewish national culture. I show how and by whom Yiddish was canonized in Argentina. I also juxtapose this institutional reliance on Yiddish to a detachment from Yiddish in two realms: as a vernacular among Jewish youth in Argentina, and among survivor-refugees, whose own multilingual experiences and language politics often went against this post-war investment in Yiddish.

In Argentina, the prominence of Yiddish in the landscape of commemorative cultural projects was not the work primarily of Jewish refugee-survivors – though some did take part. It was, instead, carried out through a vast network of immigrant societies and institutions that pre-dated the Holocaust. Argentina is paradigmatic of the way a Yiddish cultural infrastructure, built before the Second World War, sprang into action to canonize the Yiddish language and brand it locally as the face of Jewish culture. The way

²⁵⁰ Anita Norich, *Discovering Exile: Yiddish and Jewish American Culture during the Holocaust* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2007), 21.

²⁵¹ Norich, *Discovering Exile*.

this process worked – the funding, audience, range of participants, and detractors who would have used the language in different, less strictly commemorative ways – was also given shape by Argentinian and global politics. Revelations of Soviet anti-Semitism, along with Argentinian anti-Communism, closed down the cultural and translation projects of Soviet fellow-travelers and privileged a more elite, intellectual, and “strictly cultural” form of language activism.

This chapter explores this new investment in Yiddish through the expansion of Yiddishist institutions after 1945. I argue that these Jewish institutions, led by prewar immigrants, canonized Yiddish language and literature after the war in response both to the destruction in Europe and to local Jewish linguistic assimilation. A growing climate of anti-Communism in Argentina under President Frondizi gave additional stimulus to the framing of Yiddish as an intellectual pursuit that was “strictly cultural,” bolstering Argentina’s reputation as a post-war Yiddish center, and disconnecting it from the Soviet Union, a principle point of reference for Yiddish-speaking immigrants in Argentina since the early 20th Century. This post-war moment had a lasting effect on the Jewish institutional landscape of Argentina, where survivor association records, rare Jewish books and artifacts of all kinds, and materials in many Jewish languages are housed at the Yiddish Scientific Institute, IWO. More importantly, historicizing the post-war mythologizing of Yiddish as the chosen mother tongue in a context of Argentinian nationalism, and showing its connections to the interwar language activism of the 1930s, contributes to a phenomenology of how multilingualism is forgotten and negated, and how diasporic cultural movements are shaped and inflected by the nationalist movements around them.

i. *A Liga* for the mother tongue

In 1960, the Secretario de Cultura de la Municipalidad de Buenos Aires, Aldo Armando Cocca, presided over the renaming of a plaza at Lavalle and Córdoba after Sholem Aleichem, the pseudonym of Yiddish writer Solomon Rabinovich.²⁵²

This small official act recognizing Jewish Buenos Aires through Yiddish literature exemplified acts undertaken to canonize Yiddish through publicity and communal events after the Shoah. A Sholem Aleichem and I. L. Peretz celebration, Yiddish-language essay competitions, translations of Argentinian works into Yiddish – including the national epic *Martin Fierro* – formal rules for using Yiddish in Jewish institutional spaces, and two major Yiddish-language book series, for which Argentina is still known: all of this was carried out in the first decade and a half following the Second World War, mainly under the auspices of several Jewish institutions in Buenos Aires. Prominent language activists aimed to raise the prestige of Buenos Aires in a postwar network of Yiddish cultural centers by tying Yiddish language activism to commemoration. Also spurred by the apparent loss of Yiddish as a vernacular among the younger generation, these postwar initiatives defined the Yiddish language as the lost “mother tongue” of European Jews and, by proxy, connected the perpetuation of Yiddish to mourning and recognition of the destruction.

²⁵² Cocca served in this role under President Frondizi, from 1958-1961. In 1965, he began work for UNESCO. For his presence at the act, see Departamento de Cultura de la AMIA, ed., *Pinkas Fun Der Kehile: Cinco Anyos de Vida Comunitaria Judia En Buenos Aires 1958-1962* (Buenos Aires, 1963), 81.

Several institutions took on the role of Yiddish language guardians in Buenos Aires after 1945. They were the Argentinian branch of the Kultur-Kongres, a group formed in 1948 to bring various Jewish cultural organizations under one umbrella; the writers' and journalists society named after Yiddish writer H. D. Nomberg, in which the prominent editors and writers for the Argentinian Yiddish press were affiliated; the Yiddish Actors' Union, formed in the 1920s, when the power of the strike was used to defend struggling Yiddish actors against the power of theater tycoons and traveling guest stars; and the IWO, or Yiddish Scientific Institute, a branch of the Vilna-based center for Jewish research. The Central Union of Polish Jews was also constituted after 1945, bringing together many smaller fraternal societies, or *landsmanshaftn*, of Polish Jewish immigrants. Their president, Mark Turkow, launched a Yiddish book series that became familiar to readers of Yiddish around the world.

When writer and historian Jakob Shatzky visited Buenos Aires as a guest of the IWO in the 1940s and complimented the language nationalism of the Argentinian community,²⁵³ the IWO had begun to assemble new material resources. Having failed to win a popular following as an off-shoot of the central Vilna branch of YIVO in the 1930s, the IWO benefited from the post-war economic boom. Thanks to a new central location and better funding, IWO claimed a new position of authority, both locally and in relation to its institutional brothers. Increasingly, over the first decade of its existence in

²⁵³ "This generation [of Polish Jews, children of 1920s immigrants] born in Argentina, reads Yiddish newspapers, visits Yiddish lectures, goes to the Yiddish theater, although they speak Spanish among themselves. Despite little Jewish religious knowledge, these people are Jews of the national-secular type. In Argentina, Jewish clergy have generally not played the same role as they have in the United States. One does not find orthodox or reform rabbis among community leaders. Their Jewishness consists of . . . the Yiddish language and everything connected to it: theatre, books, lectures, etc. Because they are strongly secular they fully understand language nationalism." Quoted in: Jan Schwarz, "A Library of Hope and Destruction: The Yiddish Book Series *Dos Poylishe Yidntum*, 1946-66", *Polish Jewry*, 2007, 177.

the new downtown seat (IWO occupied space in the new building of the AMIA building), cultural activists described, explained, and justified the pursuit of Yiddish-language culture as a recuperative and restorative Jewish national project.²⁵⁴

The initiative to have a city square named after Scholem Aleichem was undertaken in 1960 by the DAIA,²⁵⁵ the national umbrella organization for the Jewish community that had, since its creation by Perón, formed a Jewish community liaison to the government. Children attending Jewish schools accompanied by their instructors gathered to listen to Cocca's speech. That DAIA initiative coincided with the larger one of a Scholem Aleichem year, a celebration of the author's life. In his honor, students performed scenes from Scholem Aleichem stories at Jewish schools in the city, and an image of Rabinovitch's bust topped the decorative entrance to the Kehile's Jewish book month, an event that recurred annually most years after 1947.

²⁵⁴ On the new floorplan for IWO in the Khevre Kedusha's building, from 1941, see eg.: "Yedies fun ivo, tsentraler bibliotek un arkhev [New from yivo, central library and archive]" (Buenos Aires, September 5, 1941), Samuel Rollansky Collection, Box 2, IWO, Buenos Aires.

²⁵⁵ "List of DAIA Initiatives, Undated, No Title," 1960, Restituciones URO, Rollo 14 1960, USHMM.



Figure 12 The Scholem-Aleichem-Celebration Day. A group from the Scholem-Aleichem-School in the performance "Motl Peysi dem Khozen".²⁵⁶

In addition to its promotion of a *Khoydesh fun yidish bukh*, the Kehile assumed the role of inviting prominent guests, most often Yiddish writers, to visit Buenos Aires on the occasion of the Jewish book month. Shlomo Bickel, Chaim Grade, Efrim Auerbakh, and I. B. Singer all visited Argentina as guests of the Kehile. These appearances, widely advertised to admirers of Yiddish literature, elicited surprise and praise from the guests, for whom the Argentinian Kehile appeared relatively more centralized, patterned after an Eastern European model, and visibly “Yiddish” compared to its counterparts in North America, where Jewish life was defined as a religion rather than a secular intellectual

²⁵⁶ Departamento de Cultura de la AMIA, *Pinkas Fun Der Kehile: Cinco Anyos de Vida Comunitaria Judia En Buenos Aires 1958-1962*, 159.

pursuit, and where it seemed most alive not in public displays, but behind the doors of suburban homes.²⁵⁷

The “culture-work” undertaken on behalf of Yiddish language promotion by the Kehile, as well as the H. D. Nomberg writers’ association, the Kultur-kongres, and the IWO, was both linguistic and commemorative. Students were encouraged to write Yiddish-language essays for the competition sponsored by the Kultur-kongres, answering questions on the history of Jewish suffering, or on the Yiddish writer they had most enjoyed at school.²⁵⁸ Children were often the focus of these campaigns, since linguistic assimilation was seen as a major threat to the persistence of Yiddish. But adults were encouraged to visit and contribute to the Yiddish Institute’s library and archive, and to visit exhibits, lectures, and plays.

²⁵⁷ See especially Efrim Oyerbakh’s “Farshiden zaynen di vegn,” Departamento de Cultura de la AMIA, 569–71.

²⁵⁸ “Driter Shiler-Konkurs Fun Kultur-Kongres in Argentinian [Booklet],” 1956, Series C: Latin America, “Arg non-eph,” Harvard Judaica; “8ter Shiler-Konkurs Fun Kultur-Kongres [Booklet],” n.d., Series C: Latin America, “Arg non-eph,” Harvard Judaica; “Sholem Aleichem Konkurs” (Kultur-kongres, 1967), Series C: Latin America, “Arg non-eph,” Harvard Judaica.



Figure 13 "Der dekorativer arayngang tsu der bikher-oyshtelung in Sholem-Aleichem-yor." / "The decorative entrance to the book exhibit during the Sholem-Aleichem year."²⁵⁹

Samuel Rollansky, who had discovered Yiddish literature as an object of ethnographic study and a Jewish communal resource in 1920s Warsaw and Vilne, led many of these efforts through his work as a teacher, critic, and journalist.

In 1950, Rollansky helped arrange a job for Shmerke Kaczerginski, partisan of the Vilne ghetto, at the kultur kongres, so that Kaczerginski could continue his work on Yiddish folk culture in Buenos Aires. Rollansky told Kaczerginski's first audience in Argentina that he hoped Kaczerginski would bring the "disquiet" of Europe to Argentina,

²⁵⁹ Departamento de Cultura de la AMIA, *Pinkas Fun Der Kehile: Cinco Anyos de Vida Comunitaria Judia En Buenos Aires 1958-1962*, 46.

over which a suffocating imperturbability and indifference about the language had settled.²⁶⁰

In 1947, the IWO-bleter – the monthly notes Rollansky edited himself – featured on its front page dueling images of the Vilne YIVO and the Argentinian IWO's new seat: the first a pile of rubble, the second a mid-century modern block of glass and cement. It was from this headquarters that Rollansky and the rest of the IWO staff would coordinate the library and exhibition space that would one day also take into its archives the survivors' collection of the Moskovits office.

²⁶⁰ Cit: Ershter Zshurnalisten-tsuzamentref mitn dikhter-partizan Sh. Katsherginski



Figure 14 Front page of the March 1947 IWO newsletter, photograph of the destroyed YIVO building in Vilne flanked by the North- and South- American branches. Harvard University Judaica Collection.

Public interest in writing on the destruction of Jewish life in Europe, or “*khurbn-literature*,” was a small fraction of interest in Yiddish-language poetry, novels, and general Jewish historical writing.²⁶¹ At exhibits, readings, and lectures, the *khurbn* was considered a fundamental reason for the necessity of linguistic custodianship. Both the Writers’ society -- through a direct request to Perón -- and the IWO, on behalf of Vilne

²⁶¹ The Kehile published numbers of Yiddish books sold at the Jewish book month by both language and category; see: Departamento de Cultura de la AMIA, *Pinkas Fun Der Kehile: Cinco Anyos de Vida Comunitaria Judia En Buenos Aires 1958-1962*, 84.

partisan-poet Szmerke Kacerginski, brought surviving Yiddish writers to Argentina, and publicized these arrivals as part of their local language campaigns.²⁶² Speaking at the Kultur-kongres welcoming event in Kacerginski's honor, Samuel Rollanski combined his praise of the ghetto poet with criticism of the level of language activism in Jewish Buenos Aires. "His arrival will be a blessing for us, because he will bring to us the disquiet of Europe, which we are missing here. We here are suffocating from the quiet, in spite of the feuds. What's needed is for there to be an inner-, a productive disquiet."²⁶³ Rollanski also organized exhibits to produce this disquiet at IWO, including one on the crimes of the Nazis, and a massive, solid relief sculpture of figures in agony by a local artists, called "Gas Chamber."²⁶⁴

The feuds to which Rollanksy alluded were the ejection of the "progressives" or Communists and pro-Soviet Jews from the community in 1952-3. Despite the sudden and unexpected abandonment of Yiddish as the official language of the IKUF (progressive Jewish association) in 1956, the popular progressive organization also continued to point to its Yiddish-language literary contributions to defend itself in an increasingly anti-Communist climate. In May of 1959, municipal police surprised the membership of IKUF by shackling closed the doors of the institution on Calle Paso. The reason, guessed at in a contemporary news article, was the recent anti-Communist decree issued by

²⁶² Chinski, "Yiddish Culture After the Shoah: Refugee Writers and Artists as 'Fresh Creative Energies' for Buenos Aires."

²⁶³ "[Clipping] Ershter Zshurnalisten-Tsuzamentref Mitn Dikhter-Partizan Sh. Katsberginski [First Meeting for Journalists with the Poet-Partisan Sh. Kacerginski]," *El Diario Israelita / Di Idishe Tsaytung*, June 7, 1950, Kacherguinsky Collection Box 2, IWO, Buenos Aires.

²⁶⁴ Pablo Hanneman, "Die Bedeutung Meiner Skulptur 'Gaskammer'" [The Meaning of My Sculpture 'Gaskammer'], *Judisches Wochenblatt*, May 20, 1947, sec. Literatur und Kunst [Literature and Art], RG 116, Box 1, Folder 10, Leo Baeck, New York.

President Frondizi. After labor unrest reached new heights that year, the President had declared a state of emergency, giving police greater freedom to intervene in neighborhood clubs and societies deemed politically suspicious. IKUF appealed the closure to a judge, citing its statutes' commitment to the Jewish language as evidence of its non-threatening cultural commitments, and its support of Yiddish-Spanish translations as a contribution to Argentinian democracy. "Our Institution has circulated the works of the great classics of Jewish literature, whether in the original language – in Yiddish – or in versions in the national language [castellano]. With respect to the latter, we may cite the publication of the complete works of Scholem Aleichem of which, begun in 1952, thirteen volumes are now in print and circulation and two more will soon appear."²⁶⁵ The appeal was denied, underscoring the point that state support for language patrimony would consistently prioritize anti-Communism over multiculturalism.

IKUF-affiliated writers were among the most prolific translators of Spanish-language works into Yiddish. As a literary contactzone, the translation of canonic Argentinian works into Yiddish it probably reached its peak during the 1950s, when writers in Argentina were both canonizing the Yiddish language and seeking ways to argue for Jewish cultural belonging after the "Liberating Revolution" curtailed the already-limited cultural pluralism of the Perón years.²⁶⁶ In 1960, the DAIA subsidized a translation of José Hernández' epic gauchesco poem, *Martin Fierro* (1872), into Yiddish.²⁶⁷ The author, Shneur Wasserman, was a member of the fraternal society of the

²⁶⁵ "Recurso de Amparo [Appeal]," 1959, Fondo Shmerkin F-A91, Caja 6, CEDINCI.

²⁶⁶ Citation needed: Mimi Pinzon, Pinie Katz,

²⁶⁷ "List of DAIA Initiatives, Undated, No Title."

Polish Jewish town of Chełm. Though Wasserman last saw Chełm in 1929, he wrote prolific poetry in response to news of its destruction and spoke with survivors – at least twenty-eight people from Chełm and its surroundings settled in Argentina after 1945 – to collect what documentation he could for the 1954 Chełm memorial book.²⁶⁸ In tandem, Wasserman rendered José Hernández’ rhyming stanzas into Yiddish verse. Another decade on, when Wasserman published an anthology in recognition of his life’s work, he paired his poems of grief with fragments from the Yiddish *Martin Fierro*.²⁶⁹

The IWO reached peak activity under Rollansky after 1945, at a time of pessimism that over the course of the 1950s became increasingly explicit among Yiddish writers, journalists, and language activists. One editorialist mused in 1955 about the breach between international reputation and local reality in Buenos Aires. “We count, in the Yiddish world, as a dear, sincere, warm, *yidishlekher yishuv* [Yiddish-friendly community of Jews] [...] Our *yishuv* is this way, and that way, and the other way,” he wrote, “but there are no theater-goers, no libraries around, people don’t come to Shmerke Kaczerguinski’s memorial evening [...] a warm *yishuv*, but don’t you think, dear friends, that a little cold wind is blowing?”²⁷⁰

In 1955, members from across Yiddishist organizations joined together to create a special committee called the “Liga farn hemshekh un kiem fun yidishn lebn un loshn,” the League for the persistence and survival of Yiddish life and language. The Liga

²⁶⁸ Meilech Bakalczuk-Felin, *Commemoration Book Chełm* (The Chelemer Landsmanschaft Society, Johannesburg, South Africa, 1954).

²⁶⁹ Shniur Vaserman, *Fun Mayn Leyb Un Lebn: Lider Un Poemes* (Buenos Aires: Bukh un yubl-komitet, patronizirt fun kultur-tsenter “Ringelblum-Varshe,” fun farband Khelem-Rayvets un omgegnt un “Zerubabel-tsenter,” 1972) Wasserman translated *Martin Fierro* in 1957.

²⁷⁰ [Clipping] Y. Fala, “Undzer varemer yishuv,” In Pintl, 1955. IWO, Kaczerguinsky Collection, Box 2.

formed an “Initiative Committee” to examine in detail what appeared to all involved to be a significant decline in the popular use of Yiddish by Argentinian Jews. The results of this initial investigation pointed to a difference in the public and private presence of the language. Demand continued for shows, songs, and other theatrical events in the language, while at home, Spanish had become the language in which most parents, even immigrant parents, addressed Jewish children. The Liga’s committee observed that Yiddish theater audiences were smaller, and “a big crowd comes only rarely for unusual events.”²⁷¹ Graver still was the finding that “In our homes, too, Yiddish is being pushed out [...] Jewish homes are being emptied – whether of the Yiddish word, the Yiddish sound, or Jewish content.”²⁷²

The methods and conclusions of the report show how Yiddishist institutions in Buenos Aires used early 20th Century tactics – teach Yiddish, agitate for Yiddish, create new materials in Yiddish – to respond to a post-war situation in which the same mass base of speakers did not exist as it had in the early days of Jewish mass migration to urban centers of Eastern Europe. The Liga suggested that groups be formed to explain to Jews why they should continue to use Yiddish with their children. They suggested making it a rule that correspondence by and among Yiddishist institutions be conducted in Yiddish.

After the initial inquest, the Liga issued a list of suggestions. These included new rules, like enforcing the use of Yiddish within the walls of Yiddishist institutions, where

²⁷¹ Report by the Initsiativ-komisye of the “Liga farn hemshekh un kiem fun yidishn lebn un loshn.” IWO, Samuel Rollansky collection Box 1.

²⁷² Report by the Initsiativ-komisye of the “Liga farn hemshekh un kiem fun yidishn lebn un loshn.” IWO, Samuel Rollansky collection Box 1.

employees were apparently no longer necessarily willing or able to reply in Yiddish to older clients who spoke it. Not all members of the affiliated institutions agreed that militancy would improve the situation of Yiddish. In an open letter to the writers' society, in 1969, Polish Jewish writer Simja Sneh noted that in the 1930s, the same institutions that now required Yiddish as the language of correspondence had sent letters to each other in Spanish. The reversal in language policy, and enforced use of Yiddish, he characterized as a "crazed enthusiasm to build monuments,"²⁷³ and entrenchment in the language politics of Czernowitz, referring to the 1908 conference held in that city where Yiddish was first officially pronounced a Jewish national language.

In time, writers like Sneh who preferred to work in more than one "Jewish language" devised new professional associations and built relationships with Argentinian writers, while Jewish institutional spaces made Yiddish a symbol of their local identities. "One can require that employees in our societal institutions should know Yiddish, and those whose job is to 'attend' clients should answer in Yiddish, if they are spoken to in our language, and that those who aren't able to should be given a certain deadline by which to learn our national language [*folks-loshen*]."²⁷⁴ In 1958, three of those Yiddishist groups – the Confederación pro Cultura Judía [Kultur Kongres], the IWO, and the writers' society -- came together to produce the first Yiddish language course for adults in Argentina.²⁷⁵

²⁷³ Simja Sneh, "[Clipping] Efttlekhe Derklerung Fun Simja Sneh" (Di Idische Tsaytung, 1969), Papers of Simja Sneh, courtesy of Perla Sneh.

²⁷⁴ Report by the Initsiativ-komisye of the "Liga farn hemshekh un kiem fun yidishn lebn un loshn." IWO, Samuel Rollansky collection Box 1.

²⁷⁵ "Inician Un Curso de Idish [A Yiddish Course Will Be Starting]."

ii. The “surviving remnant” and the “holy language”

In 1967, members of the Argentinian Jewish survivors’ association Sherit Hapleitá²⁷⁶ [Hebrew for the “surviving remnant”] gathered outside the Soviet Embassy in Buenos Aires to march on behalf of Israel, and in protest against the Soviet Union’s alignment with Arab states in the June 1967 Arab-Israeli war.²⁷⁷ The newly appointed president of the Sherit Hapleitá, Jose Moskovits, praised the Jewish protesters for having paid in blood for victory against Nazism, acknowledging those among them who had fled east and joined the Soviet Army.²⁷⁸ Moskovits, a Hungarian Jewish lawyer who had won the affections of refugees in Buenos Aires by assisting them with legal claims against Germany since the late 1950s, was accompanied by Jewish teacher and activist Jaime Finkelstein, who addressed the crowd in Yiddish. But this public use of the language by the association was inadequate in the view of one member, an anonymous author, who saw it as the survivors’ task to rail against the disappearance of Yiddish from Argentinian Jewish life. Though they spoke many languages – Moskovits himself spoke Hungarian, Spanish, Hebrew, German, and Yiddish – this last should be regarded as the province of the survivors, the anonymous author argued. “The Sherit Hapleitá are after all the remains and inheritance of our murdered people, and now some want to do away with

²⁷⁶ Hebrew for the “surviving remnant.” The Argentinian association was formed in 1952.

²⁷⁷ “[Clipping] Siete Dias Ilustradas,” June 13, 1967, Cajas Moskovits > 1964_1965_1966_1967_a > documentos sueltos, IWO, Buenos Aires.

²⁷⁸ “Farband fun Sharit-Hapleita in Argentina,” *Di Idische Tsaytung*, July 27, 1967, Cajas_Moskovits > 1964_1965_1966_1967_a > acto_de_protesta, IWO, Buenos Aires.

this holy language, with which our millions of martyrs went into the ovens, or perished on the Siberian taiga. Where is your protest? Why are you silent?”²⁷⁹

The linguistic demand to speak Yiddish and to speak on behalf of Yiddish preceded public discussion within Jewish circles of the destruction of Jewish life and homes in Europe, and it preceded a public discourse in Spanish about the Holocaust and Holocaust “survivors” in Argentina, which emerged during and after the dictatorship.²⁸⁰ Was survivor identity in 1950s Argentina a matter of linguistic affiliation?

The linguistic histories of human survivors are easily overshadowed by the post-war “survival” of the language within institutional discourses, a distinction this chapter seeks to clarify. In what follows, I provide an overview of the multilingual life histories of refugee-survivors who settled in Argentina after 1947. Using client case files kept by the Hungarian lawyer Jose Moskovits, who worked relentlessly from his Buenos Aires office on behalf of Jewish claimants seeking German reparations, I show how Yiddish both haunts and remains invisible in the case files. Claimants spoke enough Yiddish to have a need for a Yiddish-speaking lawyer, but many came from linguistically complex countries, regions, and towns, where Yiddish served highly specific and limited functions in their lives.

²⁷⁹ [Clipping] The author is given as “An eygener” [one of them] and the title is “A por verter vegn dem farband fun sheyres-hapleyte in Argentinian” [A few words about the Survivors’ Association] Undzer gedank, Num. 210 “Album ‘Di Diskusye Vegn Idish’ [The Discussion about Yiddish].”

²⁸⁰ Emmanuel Kahan and Daniel Lvovich, “Los Usos Del Holocausto En Argentina: Apuntes Sobre Las Apropiaciones y Resignificaciones de La Memoria Del Genocidio Nazi,” *Revista Mexicana de Ciencias Politicas y Sociales* LXI num. 228 (September 2016): 1–26; Emmanuel Kahan and Laura Schenquer, “The Use of the Past During the Last Military Dictatorship and Post-Dictatorship: The Holocaust as the Horizon of Identification, Alienation and Negotiation for the Jewish Community,” *Temas de Nuestra America* 32, no. 60 (July 2016): 131–48; Yossi Goldstein, “Entre La Memoria y La Historia: Sobrevivientes de La Shoah En La Argentina y Su Contribucion a La Conformacion de La Memoria Colectiva,” *Nuestra Memoria* 20, no. 38 (n.d.): 9–27.

Between 1939 and 1945, when Yiddish-speakers were uprooted on a vast scale, deported to the eastern zones of the German Reich or Soviet Union, confined to ghettos and camps, and murdered on a large scale, a word or phrase spoken in Yiddish was a shibboleth; it might induce feelings of safety, invite ridicule from occupying soldiers, seem to prove that Jewish culture remained intact.²⁸¹ Early efforts to document Jewish life under German occupation relied heavily on Yiddish, both for practical and ideological reasons, to reflect and to emphasize the language as the expression of a people.²⁸²

The survival of Yiddish as a language after the destruction in Europe was limited not only by the numbers of surviving speakers, but importantly, in its purity, literary quality, and monolingualism, since so many surviving speakers were bilinguals who could not or did not use Yiddish in scholarly and literary modes.²⁸³ At roughly the same time that Yiddish-language literature was being published in Hebrew translation in Israel,

²⁸¹ During the war, Polish and Soviet Jews found they shared an interest in Yiddish literature. The Yiddish periodical *Eynikayt*, published as a propaganda tool during the war by the Soviet Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, was read by a combined Polish-and Soviet Jewish readership eager for news from the front. See Natalie Belsky, “Fraught Friendships: Polish and Soviet Jews on the Soviet Home Front During the Second World War,” in *Shelter from the Holocaust: Rethinking Jewish Survival in the Soviet Union*, ed. Mark Edele, Sheila Fitzpatrick, and Atina Grossmann (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2017), 161–84.

²⁸² Jewish Historical Commissions collected testimonies from survivors in Yiddish in the Displaced Persons camps. Laura Jockusch, *Collect and Record!: Jewish Holocaust Documentation in Early Postwar Europe* (New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 2012); The extraordinary project to document Jewish life under Nazi occupation from within the Warsaw Ghetto, directed by Left Poalei Zion (LPZ) adherent Emmanuel Ringelblum, reflected the LPZ’s particular mix of Zionism, Marxism, and Yiddishism in interwar Poland. Samuel D Kassow, *Who Will Write Our History?: Emanuel Ringelblum, the Warsaw Ghetto, and the Oyneg Shabes Archive* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007).

²⁸³ YIVO affiliate[?] and linguist Nakhman Blumenthal described his confusion listening to the Yiddish spoken by survivors in Poland just after the war. He could hardly understand them, and produced a lexicon based on his post-war field notes. Turkow was acquainted with Blumenthal’s work through the Polish Jewish Historical Commission. Nakhman Blumenthal, *Lexicon*, n.d.

Hebrew-language works were translated into Yiddish for publication in Argentina.²⁸⁴ The appearance of a preferred mother-tongue, in either context, required the promotion, through translation, of one language at the expense of the other.

Jewish refugees from Europe and the Soviet Union who came illegally to Buenos Aires in the 1940s and 50s spoke many languages, not only Yiddish. Over ten thousand Jewish immigrants came to Argentina between 1946 and 1951, possibly closer to twice that number taking into account those who came without visas,²⁸⁵ and more continued to arrive through the 1950s. A small number were prominent Yiddish writers and intellectuals, including the group of refugee Yiddish writers in Paris granted visas by special arrangement with President Perón in 1952.²⁸⁶ But most were relatively anonymous. While some were relieved to find Yiddish-speakers in Argentina, others learned the language there for the first time. Witnesses both to the destruction of the war and to the preceding decades of difficult ethnic coexistence, Jewish refugees were intimately familiar with the paradoxical coexistence of Jewish language assimilation and Jews' claims to minority language rights.

²⁸⁴ After visiting Tel Aviv in 1954, H. Leivick wrote that Bercovitch, the Hebrew translator of Scholem Aleichem, had stood at a literary meeting and screamed "Yiddish is dead!" An exasperated Leivick accused Bercovitch of hypocrisy for his dependence on the canonical status of a Yiddish writer. "Does comrade Bercovitch mean that Yiddish is already a corpse? If Yiddish is a corpse, then Scholem Aleichem is a corpse too. So how can a corpse create a corpse? So how is it Bercovitch has devoted years to bringing into Hebrew a corpse made by a corpse?" H. Leivick, "Yidish in medina-yisroel," *Naye Yidishe Tsaytung*, 7 1954, Number 178 edition, RG 315, Box 13, YIVO, New York; Simja Sneh undertook the massive project of translating the Hebrew-language book on the Palmakh into Yiddish. Zerubavel Gilead and Matti Megged, *Sefer Ha-Palmakh*, trans. Simja Sneh (Amherst: National Yiddish Book Center, 1999).

²⁸⁵ Chinski, "Memorias Olvidadas: Los Judios y La Recordacion de la Shoa en Buenos Aires, 1942-1956 [Forgotten Memories: Jews and the Commemoration of the Shoah in Buenos Aires, 1942-1956]," 299.

²⁸⁶ Chinski, "Yiddish Culture After the Shoah: Refugee Writers and Artists as 'Fresh Creative Energies' for Buenos Aires."

Multilingual Jewish survivors of the war and genocide in Europe were both drawn to Yiddish as a counterweight to the destruction they had witnessed and suspicious of it. Many (in particular those living in Israel) turned away from it altogether in their writing, both an ideological and a practical choice. In Buenos Aires, a strong institutional basis existed for the continued production of Yiddish-language materials after the end of the war. Commemorative projects like the Yiddish-language book series *Dos Poylishe Yidntum* [Polish Jewry] and the Yiddish literary and historical anthologies, *Musterverk fun der Yidisher Literatur*, became widely known outside Argentina.²⁸⁷ The Yiddish Scientific Institute, IWO, the H. D. Nomberg Writers' Society, the Jewish day schools, and the Kultur-Kongres, funded and published Yiddish memoirs and translations in Spanish, seeing their work on behalf of Yiddish as the necessary custodianship of Jewish culture.

Polish was probably the most widely-spoken Jewish language no longer recognized as a “Jewish language” after the Second World War, and in Argentina anecdotes of an affective turn against Polish are common. The post-war Argentinian book series *Dos Poylishe Yidntum* offers a concrete example of this post-war replacement of Polish by Yiddish, and therefore of a preference for Yiddish over Polish in the post-war canon of Jewish books. In this respect, Buenos Aires also exemplifies a shift also

²⁸⁷ Schwarz, “A Library of Hope and Destruction: The Yiddish Book Series *Dos Poylishe Yidntum*, 1946-66””; Malena Chinski and Lucas Fiszman, “‘A Biblyotek Vos Felt’ [A Library That Is Lacking]: Planning and Creating the Book Collection *Musterverk Fun Der Yidisher Literature* (Buenos Aires, 1957-1984),” *Journal of Jewish Identities*, no. 10, No. 2 (July 2017): 135–53.

happening elsewhere in the postwar world, to seeing Yiddish as the language most suited to Jewish mourning and national consolidation.²⁸⁸

Like Rollansky, and about the same age, Marek Turkow had published his journalism before the war in both Polish and Yiddish. He arrived over a decade later than Rollansky to Buenos Aires, in 1939. In Warsaw, Turkow had reported on the Polish Sejm for the Warsaw Yiddish daily *Der Moment*, and acted as the paper's special correspondent to the League of Nations. In Argentina he also sought positions of authority to represent and lobby for Polish Jews – he directed the South American Federation of Polish Jews, and the Buenos Aires Union *Israelita Polaca*; the most consequential for the canonical status of Yiddish was his editorship, in that position, of the book series *Dos Poylishe Yidntum*.

Between 1946 and 1966, a total of 175 volumes were published in the series, under the chief editorship of Turkow, and with somewhat less editorial freedom after Turkow accepted Claims Conference money to fund publications after 1955.²⁸⁹ Most authors were not living in Argentina, but negotiated contracts by letter with Turkow, whose series became known as a key post-war publisher of Yiddish-language memoirs, novels, and essays that would reflect the destroyed world of Polish Jewry.

²⁸⁸ Jan Schwarz sees it this way when he says of Turkow's series that Yiddish was the "primary language" of Polish Jewry, and that the series of Yiddish-language volumes would do the work of "restoring the Polish Jewish mentalité" (104). This was indeed the argument that Turkow's series made. However, the editorial choice regarding language should not be mistaken for an objective reconstruction of [multilingual] linguistic experience. Jan Schwarz, *Survivors and Exiles: Yiddish Culture after the Holocaust* (Wayne State University Press, 2015).

²⁸⁹ Schwarz, "A Library of Hope and Destruction: The Yiddish Book Series *Dos Poylishe Yidntum*, 1946-66"; Schwarz, *Survivors and Exiles*; Malena Chinski, "Un Catalogo En Memoria Del Judaismo Polaco. La Coleccion *Dos Poylishe Yidntum*," in *Marginados y Consagrados. Nuevos Estudios Sobre La Vida Judia En Argentina*, ed. Emmanuel Kahan et al. (Buenos Aires: Lumiere, 2011), 212–38.

In its dedication to Polish Jewry, specifically, the enterprise had close ties to the work of the Jewish Historical Commission in Poland: Mark Turkow's brother, Jonas Turkow, belonged to the Commission's advisory board as representative for the Union of Jewish Writers, Journalists, and Artists.²⁹⁰ Yiddish actor Diana Blumenfeld contributed translation work from Polish to Yiddish, and Jonas, also her husband, contributed to the series. The explicit and close connection between documentation and commemoration in the work of the Polish Jewish Historical Commission shaped *Dos Poylishe Yidntum*. However, Mark Turkow chose linguistic uniformity for the series, publishing all volumes in Yiddish.

While most books in the series were composed first in Yiddish, at least a dozen were translated into Yiddish.²⁹¹ Shloyme Lastik translated Joseph Kermish's Polish-language work on the Warsaw ghetto uprising into Yiddish, published by Turkow in 1948. Yohoshua Perle translated the 1922 Polish-language edition of the doctor and pedagogue Janusz Korczak's *Moški, Joski i Srule* as *Moyshелеkh, Yoselekh, Yisroyliklekh*; Pola Apenshlak's biography of Korczak was also translated for the series. The imagined audience for the volumes – which did in fact include readers in twenty-two countries –

²⁹⁰ The Commission was one of the earliest efforts, led by Jewish historians and survivors, to document the destruction by collecting survivor testimonies. Laura Jockusch, “‘Collect and Record. Help to Write the History of the Latest Destruction.’ Jewish Historical Commissions in Europe, 1943–1953” (Ph.D., New York University, 2007), 153–54.

²⁹¹ Schwarz lists as translated volumes: #3, #11, #30, #38, #63, #88, #99, #146, #154, #157-8, #167. Additional numbers have an ambiguous status, including #115, K. Tzetnik's *Dos hoyz fun di lyalkes*, which was published two years before in Hebrew but is not listed as a translation; and #124-5, Moyshe Kaganovitsh's *Di milkhome fun di yidishe partizaner in mizrekh eyrope*, also published first in Hebrew, but for which the language of composition is unclear. The first volume in the series presents yet another case, written in Yiddish but based on conversations, which could have taken place either in Yiddish or in Polish, see discussion below. Jan Schwarz, “Appendix 1. List of Publications: *Dos Poylishe Yidntum* (Polish Jewry, Buenos Aires, 1946-66),” in *Survivors and Exiles: Yiddish Culture after the Holocaust* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2015).

was a Yiddish-speaking one, and the series translated survival experiences of the war from Polish, including chronicles of life on the “Aryan” side of Warsaw.²⁹²

Editorial choices, in the case of *Dos Poylishe Yidntum*, therefore aligned it with post-war tendencies to set Yiddish-language boundaries around the concept of Polish-Jewishness. As a result, the geographic origin of the series –Argentina—would be conflated with Yiddish linguistic vitality in post-war Buenos Aires. One of the most interesting examples of Turkow’s intervention into the language of testimony is the first volume published in the series, *Malke Ovshyany dertseylt* (1946), the chronicle of a child survivor based on a series of conversations between Turkow and Ovshyany, celebrated in a public ceremony by DAIA as the first survivor to be permitted entry into Argentina.²⁹³ As Malena Chinski has noted, Turkow’s narration of Ovshyany’s experience aimed to capture a collective experience, and Ovshyany’s own voice is inserted as a “stylistic resource”²⁹⁴ and not a verbatim presence. With respect to language, the only available clues suggest that Turkow’s composition of the Yiddish text may also have been stylistic, if not translational. In a short afterword, he refers to the poems and other testimonial writings of Jewish survivors – a reference to the then ongoing work of the historical

²⁹² Volume 146, *Tsvishn Tseylem un Mezuzen* [Between Cross and Mezuzen, 1959] is the memoir of Helena Shereshevska, a Polish Jewish woman who passes as “Aryan” in a cloister, thanks to her “good appearance” and “the cleanness of her Polish accent,” according to the editor’s introduction. Helena Szereszewska, *Tsvishn Tseylem Un Mezuzen*, trans. Diana Blumenfeld, vol. 146, *Dos Poylishe Yidntum* (Buenos Aires: Union Central Israelita Polaca en la Argentina, 1959).

²⁹³ For discussion of Malka Owsiany’s arrival and reception in Argentina, see CH7, “La llegada de una “muchacha judia salvada” y su testimonio como volumen inaugural de la coleccion *Dos poylishe yidntum* (El judaismo polaco), in Chinski, “Memorias Olvidadas: Los Judios y La Recordacion de la Shoa en Buenos Aires, 1942-1956 [Forgotten Memories: Jews and the Commemoration of the Shoah in Buenos Aires, 1942-1956],” 253–92.

²⁹⁴ Chinski, 263.

commission – and to the “bad language”²⁹⁵ in which much of it was written. Ovshyany brought examples of these with her, “written in Polish and some in a bad German, more Jewish [yidishlekh] than German.” The only poem in Ovshyany’s possession she had written herself, and which she shared with Turkow, was in Polish.²⁹⁶ Turkow chose a different poem altogether, in Yiddish, to reproduce in the book.

Because linguistic circumscription of “Polish-Jewishness” to Yiddish (excluding Polish) was a common process outside of Poland through the 1950s,²⁹⁷ Turkow’s choices, and the larger project of tying commemoration to a Yiddish linguistic and literary inheritance, became a way of arguing for the relevance of Jewish Argentina alongside New York, Montreal, Melbourne, and other postwar Yiddish centers.

iii. The languages of Jewish refugee-survivors in the Archivo Moskovits

The appointment of Jose Moskovits as president of Sherit Hapleitá followed from his ability to recognize a linguistic need among the Jewish refugee population in Buenos Aires, in particular among so-called Ostjuden, or Eastern Jews, who shared a familiarity, active or passive, with a range of Yiddish dialects.

In a 1968 interview on Canal 7 [Channel 7], Moskovits estimated the number of survivors in Argentina at 25,000, of which he guessed some 6,000 were active in the

²⁹⁵ *Malke Ovshyany Dertseyt... Khronik Fun Undzer Tsayt* (Union Central Israelita Polaca en la Argentina, 1946), 168.

²⁹⁶ This fact suggests the possibility of Polish as a main linguistic medium between Turkow and Ovshyany during the conversations on which the book was based.

²⁹⁷ Katrin Steffen, “Das Eigene Durch Das Andere: Zur Konstruktion Judischer Polonitat 1918-1939,” *Simon Dubnow Institute Yearbook* 3 (2004): 111.

survivors' association.²⁹⁸ A fraction of this group became eligible for compensation after 1953, when West Germany, having regained sovereignty and entered negotiations with the state of Israel, passed a Federal Compensation Law, the Bundesentschädigungsgesetz, or BEG. By 1955, the United Restitution Organization, which helped to manage claims, set up an office in Buenos Aires. The provisions of the law were complex and shifting, and after a 1956-7 amendment, the population of eligible claimants expanded to include, one URO representative emphasized in a letter to the DAIA, those who had resided in Germany's former eastern provinces (East Prussia, Pomerania, Silesia) as well as "many German and Yiddish speaking refugees from Poland."²⁹⁹ DAIA was one of the institutions charged with helping claimants, and that struggled after 1956 in particular to meet the needs of a growing number of new clients, "mainly from East Germany and from the East European countries."³⁰⁰

The Moskovits office grew out of a need for legal assistance, but more pressingly, for a language in which to be assisted. It was in effect a giant translation project, churning out German-language documentation, and guiding claimants through the labyrinth of changing West German compensation law. In a recorded interview with him on this subject, Moskovits was asked about the origins of the office. He spoke first of the languages problem:

At that time there were also other people who worked on claims files, who are long dead now, all older men, almost all of whom came from the old German

²⁹⁸ Jose Moskovits, Entrevista televisada en canal 7 [Televised interview on Channel 7], Transcript, January 23, 1968, Cajas_Moskovits > 1968_a > entrevista_televisada_en_canal_7, IWO, Buenos Aires.

²⁹⁹ "Letter from E. J. Cohn to Delegacion de Asociaciones Israelitas Argentinas, Buenos Aires," December 20, 1961, RG-72.012M, Rollo 14 1960, USHMM.

³⁰⁰ "Letter from Dr. Leon Stein of DAIA," August 14, 1957, Restituciones URO, Roll 14 1957, USHMM.

Reich. Unfortunately they didn't have a good enough understanding of the mentality of the people from the East. Not that they were ill disposed toward them, but something significant was missing: a common language. The newly arrived couldn't speak Spanish, neither could the German lawyers, and the majority of the persecutees couldn't speak German. The only common language was Yiddish-German, and for that reason there were often big communication problems. I saw this problem right away.³⁰¹

In the same interview, Moskovits described the waiting room, where claimants came to check on their cases and learn of new correspondence from Germany, as a microcosm of East Central Europe, collapsed into a social space and reading room. "Fifty to one hundred people sat in the foyer on a given day, often just to read newspapers from all over the world, since foreign newspapers were a luxury for most people then, something they couldn't afford. In our office they were treated well, they also got coffee, sandwiches and pizza."³⁰² On Fridays, Moskovits, along with a group of claimants, and presumably other staff, would walk together over to the West German embassy to file and notarize paperwork.

Over time, Moskovits came to see himself as being at the center of the refugee-survivor community in Buenos Aires, both as director of the legal office and as president of Sherit Hapleítá.³⁰³ The meetings of the persecutees' organization were probably reinforced by the social space of the legal office. Among the twenty-four staff working there at its peak was one Mr. Najowitsch, who was charged solely with organizing

³⁰¹ R and E, Entwurf -- Auszug aus den Erinnerungen von Jose Moskovits [Draft -- Excerpt from the Memories of Jose Moskovits], ca 2005, digitized, IWO, Buenos Aires.

³⁰² [CSL STYLE ERROR: reference with no printed form.].

³⁰³ In a 1968 television interview he gave a very high estimate of the number of Sherit Hapleyta affiliates in Buenos Aires -- 6,000. It's hard to say whether that number reflected actual membership or his sense of the group's importance. Moskovits, Entrevista televisada en canal 7 [Televised interview on Channel 7].

meetings and activities for the “pleitim.” Moskovits estimated that around 3,000 BEG-related claims went through his office.³⁰⁴ When the office closed in the early 1990s, Moskovits agreed to deposit those files with the Yiddish Scientific Institute, IWO.³⁰⁵

Moskovits named the prevalence of Yiddish among persecutees as his reason for setting up his legal office. The claims process, unlike the social events, protests, and press coverage of Sherit Hapleitá, which regularly featured in the Yiddish dailies of *Di Idishe Tsaytung* and *Di Presse*, required that Yiddish be absent from the life histories and language questionnaires of the claimants. All materials were filed in German, sometimes translated from Spanish documents. Occasional letters from claimants in Polish or Hungarian also appear.

With his staff, Moskovits guided his clients through the barriers to compensation which sometimes included the requirement to prove that the claimant had belonged before the Second World War to the German cultural sphere, through personal statement and friends’ testimony. This is likely what members of the Dluganoga family from Lodz intended when they roundly testified in their Moskovits paperwork to German language roots. The Dluganogas had remained in Lodz until the return to office of Gomulka in 1957, then joined another wave of Jewish emigration from Poland, traveling to South America, where one son was already living. By the time the family settled in Buenos Aires, in 1958, they had missed the deadline to file for compensation under the 1956

³⁰⁴ Moskovits.

³⁰⁵ As Silvia Hansman, the curator of the Buenos Aires IWO explained to me, a digitization project was funded by the US Holocaust Museum in Washington, on the condition that the USHMM take a copy, which would facilitate access to the materials, especially for North American researchers. In Washington, two finding aids show an alphabetical listing of all claimants, divided by location, making it easy to split off the residents of Buenos Aires. But on location, only about half of those files were uploaded to the research station computer system. Archivists could not locate three of the five shipments from Argentina.

BEG. Several family members wrote in their files, likely under the Moskovits' guidance, that they were Germanized Jews who had fled Poland in part because of anti-German sentiment there. Jacob and Aaron described their closeness to the German language, culture, and Volk:

It was generally known, that German was spoken in our house and that we cultivated Germandom [dass wir Deutschum pflegten]. We were therefore seriously antagonized by the rest of the population and disadvantaged by our middle class lifestyle. To clear from our path all these unpleasanties there was no choice for us but to emigrate from Poland.³⁰⁶

On the form with the title “Feststellung der deutschen Volkszugehörigkeit,” or confirmation of belonging to the German Volk, Aaron Dluganoga answered the question of his “mother tongue” with German; and for languages that he knows, listed German, Spanish, Polish. His *Umgangsprache* is given as “German.”

Polish Jews often did know German, though the Dluganoga parents received no formal education in German. Both were illiterate, and Josef Dluganoga had left the village of Pshaytsh to work as a livestock handler in Lodz and raise his family there. The testimony filed by Aaron and Jakob goes beyond claims of German language knowledge that agree with the demography of Lodz, where the city center was settled mainly by ethnic Germans and Jews,³⁰⁷ to describe a total commitment to German language and culture.

With standards for belonging to a national culture set in reference to German cultural belonging, it is unsurprising that Polish-Jewish claimants described their

³⁰⁶ “EE of Jakob and Aaron Dluganoga,” 1972, USHMM.

³⁰⁷ [cit: Sh. Redlich]

immigration decisions on the forms in just those terms. This led, also, to bizarre descriptions of German-Jewish culture in Argentina as the main reason for emigrating, in spite of the small number of German speaking Jews in Buenos Aires relative to the majority group of first- or second-generation Yiddish speakers. Aaron's form went on:

We came then via Paraguay to Argentina, because we knew that there was a big German-speaking colony here, so that we could carry on our lives here in the spirit of Germandom. Here there are German newspapers, German hours on the radio, German schools and something that is very important to us: that the services in the synagogue are held in German, so that the congregation can follow along in their mother tongue.³⁰⁸

The fact that German bureaucrats paid close attention to the languages of claimants, evaluating them based on ability to prove their past belonging to the German "*Sprach- und Kultur-raum*" [linguistic and cultural space] was criticized even in German-language papers in Argentina.³⁰⁹

The Moskovits files provide evidence of diverse, linguistically assimilated and multilingual backgrounds. At the same time, Moskovits pointed to language barriers for Yiddish-speaking Jews as the primary reason for opening his office, and as the words of *An Eygener* and other contemporary materials suggest, by reputation a strong association emerged publicly connecting survivors to the Yiddish language.

Though in Buenos Aires Jose and Elena Moskovits became known in the survivor community for their sympathy with Yiddish-speaking immigrants, both (like the broader

³⁰⁸ "EE of Jakob and Aaron Dluganoga."

³⁰⁹ Moskovitz, who likely had a deep, personal understanding of the absurd use of language testing as a smokescreen for racism, clipped and kept some examples. See: Dr. W, "[Clipping] 'Nur Ein Weiteres Beispiel' [Just One More Example]," *Judisches Wochenschau*, September 27, 1963, Cajas Moskovits>1963, IWO, Buenos Aires.

survivor community) also came from mixed linguistics backgrounds. Halina Parys Feldberg was born in Radomsk, where Jews made up just under half the population at the time of its occupation by the Nazis.³¹⁰ She was reportedly rescued as a child, along with two other girls, from confinement in that town's Jewish ghetto by a Polish woman who lived nearby.³¹¹ Like other Jews passing during the occupation as "Aryans" on Nazi-controlled territory, a "clean" Polish accent would under those circumstances have become a crucial medium of Halina's survival. Choosing Polish as the language of her post-war poetry, she wrote these out by hand, and several examples, including at least one composed in the German Displaced Persons camp of Gauting, remain in the Moskovits archive.³¹² In Argentina, at least one of these poems – "Di 'Arienerin,'" which describes the author's pain of pretense on the Aryan side of Radomsk – was published in Yiddish translation.³¹³

Jose Moskovits was fluent in Hungarian and German, having grown up in the Hungarian-Jewish community of Mezöcsát where his family had lived for several generations. The place was not a city, Moskovits recalled in an interview, but "a large

³¹⁰ Stefania Heilbrunn and Miriam Chaszczewacki, *Children of Dust and Heaven: A Diary from Nazi Occupation through the Holocaust; a Collective Memoir* (Pacific Palisades, California: Remember Point, 2012).

³¹¹ Dvora Heifetz, "One Polish Woman Saves Three Jews," *Israel Today*, October 11, 1979, Coleccion Moskovits>Moskovits_libro>carpeta 2, IWO, Buenos Aires.

³¹² Handwritten Polish-language poems in the Moskovits archive: "Di 'Arienerin'" [Tr. from Polish to Yiddish]; "Matka" [Mother]; "Radomsko;" "Słonko" [Sun]. See IWO, Archivo Moskovits >Moskovits_libro>carpeta 1>poestia_elena.

³¹³ Ibid, clipping, translator/date unknown. This poem was also translated into Spanish by Perla Klein as "La Aria," see IWO, Moskovits, caja 2.

village with 6000 inhabitants, among them 900 Jews.³¹⁴ As a child he attended a state school, as well as a Jewish school, with instruction in Hungarian and Hebrew. During the war, he served in a Hungarian labor battalion before entering into contact with the Zionist resistance in Budapest and, after liberation by the Soviets, the Labor Zionist Youth Movement Dror Habonim. In 1953, Elena and Jose entered Paraguay and, shortly after the 1955 coup that ejected Juan Perón from power, according to José, the two decided to cross the border and settle in Buenos Aires. There, he set about re-establishing ways to continue work on behalf of Jewish survivors, whom he saw had difficulty getting assistance from German emigre lawyers for both linguistic and affective reasons. He opened the legal office on Uriburu Street in 1958, taking his operation to Israel when the couple moved there during the height of the Dirty War.

Through his work with survivor clients at the legal office, Jose Moskovits (hereafter Moskovits) became invested in the language-specific social and administrative needs of the Yiddish-speaking Jewish immigrants who arrived illegally in Buenos Aires in the late 1940s through the '50s. Over three thousand Jews immigrated illegally (the only way) to Argentina between 1945 and 1949.³¹⁵

The legal office became a meeting place for *Ostjuden* in Buenos Aires. At the same time, Jose Moskovits was known for his support of Zionism, as a veteran of the war of 1948, an organizer of raffles to send members of Sherit Hapleitá on tours of Israel, and for having the Yiddish heart of an *Ostjude* inside a tough exterior. “The name Moskovits

³¹⁴ Entwurf -- Auszug aus den Erinnerungen von Jose Moskovits [Draft -- Excerpt from the Memories of Jose Moskovits].

³¹⁵ Leonardo Senkman, “Attitudes of the Jewish Community in Buenos Aires Towards Holocaust Survivors, 1945-49,” in *Holocaust Survivors: Resettlement, Memories, Identities*, ed. Dalia Ofer, Françoise Ouzan, and Judy Tydor Baumel-Schwartz (Berghahn Books, 2012), 59.

has become a concept,” one admirer said of him in a prepared introduction, “the secret of his constant happiness is unknown, but we are of the opinion that it is made of the same components that form the spiritual world of the ‘sabras,’ even though he was born in Hungary.”³¹⁶

In the legal paperwork of the Moskovits office, claimants were “persecutees” of Nazism. This could mean they had spent time in a Nazi labor or death camp, sometimes many such camps, wartime life passing on the Aryan side, or passing – as Halina Moskovits did – as a Polish laborer in Germany. The locations of Nazi persecution – or Soviet forced labor, or military service – was in large part geographically determined. Moskovits handled claimants who lived in cities and small towns, in Central and Eastern Europe, who were already older adults, or barely adolescent. Persecution could mean flight to unoccupied Europe – as for Jutta Marion Burghardt, whose family took her from Nietleben in Germany to the Netherlands, then to the German Jewish refugee colony of Avigdor in Argentina, before she re-settled in Buenos Aires;³¹⁷ or it could mean flight to the Soviet zone – though this category was suspect under West German law and not technically eligible for compensation – or deportation deep into the Soviet Union, as for Idel Altmark, who fled Polish Wiskow and was deported by the Soviets to Siberia for forced labor in a coal mine.³¹⁸

Most of the survivors in the Moskovits file were Polish Jews, which was consistent with the central place of Polish Jews in the pre-war emigration to Argentina

³¹⁶ “Con marcos no se pueden curar heridas,” 1964, Cajas Moskovitz, Folder 1964, IWO, Buenos Aires.

³¹⁷ “Biografia de la Senora Jutta Marion Burghardt,” 1966, RG-72.006M, USHMM.

³¹⁸ “EE of Idel Altmark,” 1966, RG-72.006M, USHMM.

and with their prominence in post-war activism for Yiddish. They represented a group that by the 1930s was predominantly urban and bilingual (Polish, Yiddish), though not all resided in large cities when war broke out. In Argentina, Polish Jews had been members of the H. D. Nomberg writers' society and the Yiddish Scientific Institute, IWO. Jacob Shatzky, another Polish Jew re-settled in New York, described Polish Jews as defining the secular, Yiddishist national orientation of the Buenos Aires *yishuv*. Mark Turkow, a prominent Warsaw Jewish journalist (he reported on the interwar *Sejm*), credited Polish Jews in 1945 with being the first to react to the needs of the “*geratevete*” – the “rescued” Jews of Europe.³¹⁹ Because the *landsmanshaftn* or fraternal organizations of Polish Jews had been the most numerous in Argentina, after 1945, societies of individuals from particular towns were brought together into one organization, the Polish Jewish *landsmanshaft*. Turkow also used the name “Dos Poylishe Yidntum” for the series of Yiddish-language books he co-edited with Abraham Mitlberg, a tribute to the murdered world of Polish Jewry.³²⁰

Among the clientele of the Moskovits office at Uriburu 272 there were many Polish Jews, but also Jewish claimants from nearly every aspect of the linguistic spectrum of interwar Central and Eastern Europe. Ezra Mendelsohn has defined that region by referring to the respective territories of the former Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires,³²¹ and this is also a useful way of thinking about the imagined community of

³¹⁹ “El Judío Polaco: Edición Especial,” September 1945, Harvard, Widener Library Judaica Collection.

³²⁰ Schwarz, “A Library of Hope and Destruction: The Yiddish Book Series Dos Poylishe Yidntum, 1946-66.”

³²¹ Ezra Mendelsohn and Mazal Holocaust Collection, *The Jews of East Central Europe between the World Wars* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983).

claimants and survivors in Buenos Aires, whose prewar diversity was now squeezed into a new form, with Yiddish culture as its most visible and widely-recognized shared feature, symbolically if not always in fact.

Jose Moskovits had crossed the provincial/urban divide, moving as a young man from his birthplace in eastern Hungarian Mezöcsát to the capital, Budapest. Most Hungarian Jews spoke Hungarian, and Moskovits, whose library included editions of the Argentina Hungarian Jewish association's journal in that language, was doubtless a linguistic resource to other magyarized Jews. Oskar Koszeg, for example, attested in his legal paperwork to the Hungarian patriotism of his grandfather, who replaced his surname (Cohn) with the name of a Hungarian village (Koszeg) close to the battlefield where he lost a leg fighting the Austrians in 1848.³²² Other claimants likewise represented thoroughly linguistically assimilated interwar Jewish populations. Elisabeth Loewi spent her youth between Vienna and Prague, and fumed in elegant German for pages at the lawyers who "for years on end only threw stones before my feet"³²³ in her quest for compensation for damages to body and health. Other claimants moved between and among languages, as Moskovits had, but these did not necessarily include Yiddish. Elias Canetti's portrait of the small Bulgarian town of Rustschuk in his memoir *Die Gerettete Zunge* [The Tongue Set Free] is of an ethnically mixed place where Ladino, the author's first language, mingled in his daily life with Bulgarian, Turkish, Greek, Armenian, and Russian.³²⁴ Probably a relation, Valentina Jaimova Canetti left a file behind in the

³²² "EE of Oskar Koszeg," 1968, RG-72.006M, USHMM.

³²³ "File of Elisabeth Loewi, Born Sass," 1971, RG-72.006M, USHMM.

³²⁴ "Rustschuk, on the lower Donau, where I was born, was a wonderful city for a child, and to say it was in Bulgaria is to give it a poor introduction, because the inhabitants of Rustschuk came from the most

Moskovits papers with a birthplace of Rustschuk. She studied business and banking in Vienna, then returned to Sofia to work for the Packard auto company. Mina Margulies moved to Bucharest from Sorooca, in eastern Romania, and returned first to Sorooca upon liberation, to look for family. These movements reflect several things: the search of interwar Jewish families and individuals for economic security; an interest for the younger generation in securing educations and professions in the major languages of interwar nation states; and a degree of mutual familiarity across the stark divisions that existed throughout the region, separating poor, provincial, often Yiddish speaking *Ostjuden* from urban, cosmopolitan, linguistically assimilated Jews.

Claimants who were very young when the war broke out were most likely to be linguistically assimilated. This was true of children who had lived in Poland, where Yiddish culture had an interwar revival in theater, film and literature, but where lack of funding for Yiddish-language education had turned Polish into the major language of Jewish education. The Polish Jewish Długanoga family of Lodz is one example of the kind of urban migration that probably strengthened the Polish-language identities of children and private use of “kitchen Yiddish” with family. The Długanogas were reunited after the war and settled together in Buenos Aires, visiting Moskovits shortly after his office opened. The Długanoga children spoke Polish, and went to Polish-language schools in Lodz. Their parents, Josef and Riwka, were both illiterate; Josef came to Lodz as a livestock handler from the village of Przedpsz – “Pshaytsh,” in Yiddish – sometime

different backgrounds, on a single day you could hear seven or eight different languages. Besides Bulgarians, who often came from the countryside, there were also many Turks, who had their own quarter, and adjacent to it lay the Sephardic quarter, that was ours. There were Greeks, Albanians, Armenians, Romany. From the opposite side of the Donau came Romanians, my nurse, whom I don’t remember, was a Romanian. Here and there, there were also Russians.” Elias Canetti, *Die Gerettete Zunge: Geschichte Einer Jugend* (Frankfurt: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1992), 8.

between 1900 and 1927.³²⁵ In his file, Leib Długanoga wrote of his “spiritual suffering” when the war disrupted his dream of studying at the university. “I could not understand it” – he was eight in 1939 – “why we suddenly were not the same, when I was raised at home with the idea that all people on earth are equal.”³²⁶ Another Polish claimant, Rosa Borensztain, remembered standing in the Bialistock ghetto and hearing her father call to her “in Polish: ‘Go back, disappear.’”³²⁷ Some files suggest that a claimant’s Polish was unaccented, which would have been necessary to pass on the Aryan side of the city in wartime, as Felicija Balbaryski did – she was ten in 1939.³²⁸

In Buenos Aires, postwar Jewish immigrants struggled to learn the language of the land. Writer and journalist Lazaro Schallman recalled in a memoir of his wife, Pela Szechter, that “the majority of the ‘pleitim’ [refugees] [...] never learned to speak much less to write passably in Spanish.”³²⁹ (Szechter, by contrast, had been a trained singer in Vilne, where she also studied Latin, to which Schallman attributed her success with Spanish.) Another Moskovits claimant, Josef Libfeld, wrote at age fifty-four, in the mid-1960s, that he “never mastered the Spanish language.”³³⁰ For older adults the new language posed one of the greatest difficulties. “Here it was hard for me to find my

³²⁵ “EE of Josef Długanoga,” n.d., RG-72.006M, USHMM.

³²⁶ “EE of Leib Długanoga,” n.d., RG-72.006M, USHMM.

³²⁷ “EE of Rosa Borensztein,” n.d., RG-72.006M, USHMM.

³²⁸ “File of Felicija Balbaryski,” n.d., RG-72.006M, USHMM.

³²⁹ Lázaro Schallman, *Pela Szechter, la cantante que sobrevivió al Holocausto* (Buenos Aires: Pelagia, 1977), 46.

³³⁰ “File of Josef Libfeld,” 1964, RG-72.006M, USHMM.

footing,” wrote Baruch Moszko Stern of Bilgoraj in his file, “I was much too confused and ill to suddenly adjust to a foreign lifestyle and language.”³³¹

iv. Learning Yiddish after the Shoah

The responses of Jewish refugees who settled in Argentina to the institutional view of Yiddish as the Jewish mother tongue were necessarily affected by their pre-war experience of Jewish multilingualism and nationalism in Eastern Europe.

Particularly striking are the cases of assimilated Polish Jews whose knowledge of Yiddish before the war was minimal or nonexistent, and who made use of Yiddish in Argentina to transmit their own wartime experiences of survival – lived in other languages.

Lily Margules arrived in Argentina in June 1948 and lived there for almost ten years. As a child in a well-off Jewish family in Vilnius – Jewish Vilne – a seat of elite Yiddish culture, the Yiddish language fell beyond – or below – her cultural horizons. She spoke fluent Polish, as well as Russian, Belorussian, and “a very good German,” against which, as a result of the Nazi occupation, she developed “a mental block.”³³² Margules’ childhood and her family’s social circles removed her from Yiddish-language Jewish society. She studied ballet and piano, attended the opera, and went to a Polish-language school. Her world was refined, detached from socialist Jews of Yiddish-speaking Vilne. This changed after the Germans arrived, in the new linguistic contact zone of the Vilne ghetto: “When I was brought into ghetto, I met there people that if I would live in Vilna a

³³¹ “EE of Baruch Moszko Stern,” 1966, RG-72.006M, USHMM.

³³² USHMM transcript of interview with Lily Margules [cite/date].

hundred years, I would never meet those kind of people. I grew up in a very sheltered and restricted little society. My peers spoke Polish, only Polish. But when I came to the ghetto, I met all kinds of people; I started to mingle and I learned Yiddish.” In the ghetto, Margules learned Yiddish songs that she still knew by heart decades later when interviewed as a Holocaust survivor for the interview archives of the US Memorial Holocaust Museum.

Shortly after Margules’ arrival, the “partisan-troubador” of the Vilna ghetto, Shmerke Kaczerginski, announced to an audience assembled in his honor that he intended to see Buenos Aires take over the mantle of Vilna to become the new Jerusalem of South America.[check!] In the little time he spent in Argentina until his death in a plane crash in Mendoza in 1954,³³³ Kaczerguinski transformed himself by necessity from Soviet partisan into herald of Yiddish cultural survival. He impressed Argentinian audiences with his devotion to Yiddish, and encouraged assimilated survivors he met in Buenos Aires to re-familiarize themselves with – or learn – the language in order to give testimony to Jewish wartime experience. Lena Faigenblat, who came to Buenos Aires via Paraguay, learned Yiddish in Argentina, and took a job at the Yiddishist Kultur-kongres, where she used it, in line with the organization’s language politics, rather than her native Polish. She remembered Kaczerguinsky’s invitation to produce testimony, in Yiddish, of her experiences in the Warsaw ghetto, for broadcast over Radio Colonia.³³⁴

³³³ Bret Werb, “Shmerke Kaczerginski: The Partisan-Troubadour,” in *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry*, ed. Gabriel N. Finder et al., vol. Volume Twenty: Making Holocaust Memory, n.d., 392–412.

³³⁴ Faigenblatt notes that at the time, Peron had banned Yiddish-language radio programming in Buenos Aires, so stations broadcast instead from Uruguay. Lena Faigenblat, *Mis Ayeres [My Yesterdays]* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Dunken, 2003), 74.

It was a choice that represented the desire, shared by Rollansky and local Yiddishists as well as by some survivors, that all Jewish survivors, if not all Jews in Buenos Aires, might identify – or learn to identify – with Yiddish, transforming it from a stigmatized language of Jewish poverty or marginal current of elitist modernism into the only real language of collective Jewish experience. Faigenblat, like Margules, was raised in a Polonized Jewish household. The family’s source for precious stamps in Warsaw – they were collectors – had been a Jew who, Faigenblat noted in her memoir, spoke a beautifully accent-free Polish. Faigenblat’s post-war involvement with the Yiddishist Kultur-Kongres in 1950s Buenos Aires came out of an encounter with one of its staunchest activists: Samuel Rollansky. “Overlooking her minimal knowledge of Yiddish,”³³⁵ Rollansky offered her the job of managing the Kultur-Kongres as secretary, and she accepted. It was through her work there, Faigenblat explained, that she became proficient in Yiddish. Pela Szechter, another Polish-Jewish survivor to settle in Buenos Aires, also did not know Yiddish in pre-war Poland, but learned it in Argentina well enough to earn money performing Yiddish songs.³³⁶ Privately, Szechter continued to speak Polish, while publicly, she toured the Argentinian provinces singing popular songs in Yiddish, having learned the language at the suggestion of Kaczerguinsky, whom she had met in Paris.³³⁷

The material and cultural infrastructure that Jewish survivors found intact for Yiddish in Argentina appear miraculous after witnessing the destruction of Jewish life

³³⁵ Deutsch, *Crossing Borders*, 55

³³⁶ Deutsch, *Crossing Borders*, 55

³³⁷ Schallman, *Pela Szechter, la cantante que sobrevivió al Holocausto*.

firsthand in Europe. Simja Itzjok Rozenblat belonged to a generation of multilingual Polish Jews that had witnessed the crisis of Polish Jewish life in 1930s Warsaw and, subsequently, the ravages of war and deportation. He arrived in Buenos Aires in 1947, having fled occupied Poland for the Soviet Union and joined the Jewish Brigades in Palestine, where he changed his name to Simja Sneh.³³⁸

Not long after he arrived, in 1947, Sneh wrote back to London about some of the astonishing things he was seeing in his new home. At the Sholem Aleichem Shul – named in honor of Yiddish writer Solomon Rabinovich using his better-known pseudonym – Sneh was amazed to see a Jewish school with its own building, toys in the kindergarten, a dedicated theater and lecture hall, classrooms for Yiddish instruction, with desks.³³⁹ He detailed it all in Yiddish for the London daily *Tsayt*, assuming readers in London would hardly believe his account.³⁴⁰ Sneh quickly became an ethnographer of Jewish Buenos Aires, interviewing Yiddish speakers on street corners and in cafes for the daily *Di Presse*, where he worked from 1949 to 1951. In his first years in Argentina, though he worked at learning *castellano* – reading *Martin Fierro* closely with the help of a dictionary of *gauchesco* expressions – Sneh’s main concern and medium was Yiddish. He found himself in a place where the cultural infrastructure for Yiddish language publishing, education, and theater remained intact, and not destroyed as it was in Europe.

³³⁸ AK-give account of name change, and meaning [see oral history] Sneh as the name Moses gives to the burning bush.

³³⁹ Simja Sneh, “[Clipping] In Der Sholem Aleichem Shul in B. Aires” (*Di Tsayt*, London; pasted in under masthead of “Shul-Bleter” of the Organizacion de Escuelas Laicas Israelitas, Buenos Aires, Serrano 341, ca 1947), Papers of Simja Sneh, courtesy of Perla Sneh.

³⁴⁰ Simja Sneh, “[Clipping] Idish Un Idishe Shrayber in London,” August 19, 1947, Papers of Simja Sneh, courtesy of Perla Sneh.

This meeting of minds in a sense forced a continuing and even intensified engagement with Yiddish. “I was the symbol of the uprooted Jew,” Sneh said in a 1995 interview for the Shoah Foundation archive. “I left a country where I had my language – my two languages – Yiddish and Polish. And suddenly I found myself in a country where everyone spoke Spanish, and I could only approach the Yiddish-speakers.”³⁴¹

But having seen up close the pressures in Poland to assimilate to the Polish language, and then, in wartime, the anti-Semitism of Soviet citizen-soldiers, and the zeal for Hebrew in Palestine, Sneh knew that the language of Eastern European Jews was a vehicle for Jewish culture perhaps best not relied on.³⁴² In 1954, he published a series of responses from Yiddish writers in *Undzer Vort*, in Buenos Aires, in an attempt to change the conversation about the place of Yiddish language protectionism among his contemporaries.

Sneh, sent copies, enclosing his questionnaire, to Yiddish writers around the world. The replies he received confirmed his pessimism. Unpopular in Buenos Aires, these answers did not reflect utopian interwar Yiddishism, but rather the contingent historical position of Yiddish as Sneh had known it in 1930s Warsaw: Yiddish as an unstable, elite language of Polish-Jewish belles-lettres, Yiddish as a private home language among family, Yiddish outdone by the relative social and political utility and

³⁴¹ Raul Kollmann, *Sobreviviente [Survivor]: Simjah Sneh*, June 10, 1995, Visual History Archive, USC Shoah Foundation.

³⁴² In 1939, Sneh fled Warsaw to join the Soviet war against Nazi Germany, was deported to the far east, made his way to Palestine where he joined the Jewish Brigades, an all-Jewish unit under British command. Sneh narrates this itinerary in his memoir, *Na-venad*, published serially in the Buenos Aires Yiddish paper *Di Presse* between 1947 and 1952. The psychoanalyst and poet Perla Sneh has written a recent, document-based portrait of her father: Perla Sneh, “Simja Sneh: A Language in Solitude,” in *Splendor, Decline, and Rediscovery of Yiddish in Latin America*, ed. Malena Chinski and Alan Astro, vol. 10, *Jewish Latin America: Issues and Methods* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2018), 153–75.

standing of other national languages, evident in the fluent Polish of Jewish school children. The more tenuous the future of Polish-Jewish coexistence felt, the riskier seemed the future of the language.³⁴³

As an intervention into local pursuits to preserve Yiddish, Sneh's survey results failed. As post-war antisemitism in the Soviet Union and Communist Eastern Europe altered the global geography of Jewish cultural life, Argentinian Jewish institutions continued to pursue pre-war projects organized around language survival. Sneh agreed with the premise – that Yiddish deserved study, in order to understand the destroyed world of European Jews – but he was increasingly alienated by the institutional reliance on Yiddish as a sole means of responding to cultural genocide.

The questionnaire represented a turn to doubt and despair, in 1954, over Argentinian Yiddish that contrasted with Sneh's initial euphoria over the state of the language in Buenos Aires. In the next decade, that despair grew, as revelations of Soviet anti-Jewish violence became plain in the Argentinian Yiddish press, and Ilya Ehrenburg's claims to the H. D. Nomberg Writers' association that Yiddish poets were well and had not become victims of Soviet anti-Jewish violence were revealed to have been lies.

In 1967-8, the anti-Jewish violence in Europe reached a new climax with the Polish anti-Semitic campaign. One Polish-Jewish survivor of the war composed a long,

³⁴³ Shimon Redlich recounts a memory, ca. 1938-9, that suggests how strongly his parents may have come to associate their son's future with his virtuosity in unaccented Polish. "What are my earliest memories? I remember growing up in Polish. Those around me must have spoken mostly Yiddish among themselves, but for some reason they insisted on speaking Polish to me. I distinctly recall a recurrent 'question' addressed to me, perhaps at the age of 2 or 3. 'What noise does an airplane make?' I was supposed to imitate it with a perfect 'Polish' rolling sound of 'rrrr.' Yiddish speakers usually pronounced it in a guttural manner, which was ridiculed by Poles. My 'Polish' pronunciation of the 'r' sound is perfect to this day." Shimon Redlich, *Together and Apart in Brzezany: Poles, Jews, and Ukrainians, 1919-1945* (Bloomington; Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2002), 35.

Yiddish letter to the Israeli embassy in which she explained how deeply she was affected by the events – only now, after living for over a decade in Argentina, did she renounce the state honors Poland had bestowed on her brother, out of disgust as with the Polish state’s anti-Jewish policies.³⁴⁴ Here, too, language was most likely a practice, rather than a political choice: the author, Nina Tenenboym-Beker, used Yiddish to address to the Israeli embassy, rather than Hebrew, using Polish only to quote the honors the Polish government had once bestowed on her brother for his service in the resistance against the Nazis.

Less than a year later, one survivor, in an anonymous appeal to the Sherit Hapleita, asked why Jewish survivors did not defend the Yiddish language, and publicly, just as they had come out, publicly, in protest of the Soviet Union. “An Eygener” [One of you] wrote, “The Sherit Hapleita are after all the remains and inheritance of our murdered people, and now some want to do away with this holy language [Yiddish], with which our millions of martyrs went into the ovens, or perished on the Siberian taiga. Where is your protest? Why are you silent?”³⁴⁵ The author assumed that survivors should be activists for Yiddish, and rather than leaving that task to institutions, should promote the language of the dead. In the case of Tenenboym-Beker and Sneh, however, only one language would not bear up to the work of literature, commemoration, and politics, an attitude conditioned by the multilingualism of interwar Jewish life in Europe. “The great happiness of having survived augmented the happiness of witnessing the survival of a

³⁴⁴ Nina Tenenboym-Beker, “Tsu Der Hoykhgetsetster Regirung Fun Poyln Durkh Zayn Ekstselents, Dem [Hshobn] Ambasadur H’ In Buenos Aires,” July 1967, ISA-mfa-IsraeliMissionARG-000h1d6.

³⁴⁵ [Clipping] The author is given as “An eygener” [one of them] and the title is “A por verter vegn dem farband fun sheyres-hapleyte in Argentinian” [A few words about the Survivors’ Association] Undzer gedank, Num. 210 “Album ‘Di Diskusye Vegn Idish’ [The Discussion about Yiddish].”

language, of Yiddish,” Sneh recalled in 1979, looking back on the euphoria of his arrival, and on the multilingual context that accounted for his enthusiasm over the Jewish vernacular after the war: “It [Yiddish] was, for me, a rather new language, even though it was the language of my childhood and my home. But in secondary school I studied Polish; my uncle had taught me Hebrew; my older sister, alumna of a Russian secondary school, used to sing in Russian and recite Russian poets. In the middle of all this linguistic conglomeration, Yiddish was my daily bread; but in Buenos Aires it was transformed into a festive resurrection. Every word signified life; every expression – a new resurrection; every phrase a beautiful blooming.”³⁴⁶

In Sneh’s view, the tactics of the Yiddish-language institutions in response to events in Eastern Europe – the grasping at Yiddish, despite a need for translation into Spanish, and to familiarize a new generation with the great works of Eastern European Jewish literature – were hollow, and ridiculous. He complained that although Yiddish was “gravely threatened,” rigid regulations that remained in place in 1969 had become farcical. It did little good, he wrote, to “storm against this or that institution just because it writes Spanish letters and not Yiddish ones,”³⁴⁷ when Spanish letters produced by Yiddish institutions were easily findable in their archives from the 1930s.

In 1969, he decided to withdraw from the writers’ group, already having begun his own Spanish-language projects (in the press, columns, books, Raices journal) to do this work of cultural translation. When he withdrew from the Yiddish writers’ group in

³⁴⁶ Simja Sneh, “[Clipping] Idish: La Hora de La Verdad [from the Column A Mi Manera de Ver]” (El Mundo Israelita, November 17, 1979), Papers of Simja Sneh, courtesy of Perla Sneh.

³⁴⁷ Papers of Simja Sneh [courtesy of Perla Sneh], [Clipping] “Efntlekhe derklerung fun Simja Sneh”, Friday 28 March, 1969, Di Idishe Tsaytung

1969, he publicized his objection to what he called a “fierce desire to make monuments, but not to build new living works.”³⁴⁸ Sneh was in this respect emblematic of a Jewish survivor group with a language politics that opposed monolingualism – one that did not choose necessarily to align Yiddish only, and its preservation as a strictly cultural good – with the response to destruction.

In 1980, decades after his earliest premonitions that even in Argentina, Yiddish could not last, Sneh received a letter from Poland. The author, the letter revealed, had recently learned that he was not an ethnic Pole, but a Polish Jew, one of the indeterminate number of cases of Jewish infants handed over to Poles during the war in hopes that they would survive the genocide. “I would like to learn at least a little Yiddish,”³⁴⁹ the man wrote, adding a request: “Is it possible for you to get and send to me a manual for learning Yiddish and/or Hebrew, with explanations in Polish or in English? I would be grateful if you could help me with this.” In 1980, this request brought Sneh to an impasse. He could not answer the letter, and wondered instead what purpose an incursion into a Yiddish- or Hebrew- language manual might serve. At the same time, the inquiry spurred memories of a snow-covered village in a Polish December, and of “the Polish language, and of Polish literature.” That soundscape of hushers and fricatives was as unlike Yiddish as a snowed-under Warsaw was from Buenos Aires in the heat of December. Having re-made himself as a writer of refined Yiddish prose among Yiddish readers, a slow, laborious transition undertaken over many years, and then repeated in his similarly laborious leap from Yiddish into Spanish, the slow ascent of which the letter

³⁴⁸ Sneh, “[Clipping] Efttlekhe Derklerung Fun Simja Sneh.”

³⁴⁹ Simja Sneh, “Las Cartas Del Pais de Mi Infancia [Letters from the Land of My Childhood],” *Mundo Israelita*, December 27, 1980, sec. A Mi Manera De Ver, Papers of Simja Sneh, courtesy of Perla Sneh.

made visible, cliff-like, all at once. “It was being erased in my consciousness until, thanks to chance,” Sneh wrote, memories of Polish “suddenly resurfaced, with unusual force.”³⁵⁰

v. Conclusion: Forgetting Multilingualism

This chapter has set out to broaden our view of the linguistic situation in which Jewish refugees re-encountered Yiddish after the Holocaust as a language of commemoration and remembrance. The pre-existing Yiddish cultural infrastructure of Buenos Aires was a crucial factor in the use of Yiddish to commemorate the Shoah in Argentina. Jan Schwarz, in his study of transnational Yiddish culture after the Holocaust, writes that “survivor writers [...] made the Yiddish language their lifeline to the six-hundred-year-old Ashkenazi civilization after the complete destruction of its material and social infrastructure.”³⁵¹ The war in Europe did not complete the destruction of the “material and social infrastructure” of Yiddish-speaking Jews, as the case of Argentina demonstrates. The choice for Yiddish, specifically, to become a kind of lifeline – or not, as the case may have been – took place not strictly in response to the destruction in Europe, but also as an extension of the interwar activities of institutions, societies, readers, and a cultural infrastructure in Argentina that survivors encountered upon arriving in Buenos Aires.

The files of the Moskovits office provide a window into the life- and language histories of the “anonymous survivors,” to borrow Malena Chinski’s phrase. Too impoverished and provincial to pursue Yiddish letters, or too young and acculturated to envision Yiddish as a language of their future in Europe, they were fluent in combinations

³⁵⁰ Sneh.

³⁵¹ Schwarz, *Survivors and Exiles*, 11.

of Polish, German, French, Hungarian, and Yiddish. The particular constellations are often mysterious, but the multilingualism of these people was so obvious to contemporaries that Moskovits described his enterprise as an attempt to cope with it.

The languages of survival – the language spoken by Polish Jews, and Jews from Hungary, Romania, German, Austria, who fled to the eastern parts of the German Reich or to the Soviet Union – were the languages of both victims and perpetrators, fluent or non-native attempts at these languages, in uncanny combinations, wielded under duress, to communicate, pass, or escape. Contingent wartime uses of language both undermined and reinscribed the national and ethnic lines drawn around languages by nationalists in their efforts to break up multilingual empires and borderlands into homogeneous nation-states.

The prominence of Yiddish, and negation of Jewish multilingualism, in the remembered and recounted experiences of the displaced was an effect, in part, of the traumas sustained by victims – their willing self-distancing from painful associations with national languages. In Argentina, it was likewise an effect of the on-going work of language activists beyond the geographic reach of destruction wrought by the First World War, where the “spirit of Vilna,” having travelled to Buenos Aires in the 1920s and ‘30s, remained at work even after the mass murder of European Jews. Refugee-survivors in Argentina used their shared language, Yiddish, to write about the past, and Yiddishists encouraged them to be symbols of the endangered “holy language.” Non-Yiddish speakers, too – whose acculturation had motivated the Yiddish intellectuals of Vilna to preserve the language – invested in Yiddish because of the prominent place and prestige that Jewish institutions projected for the language in Buenos Aires. As the paradigmatic

case of survivor-writer Simja Sneh shows, this process of encounter could be exhilarating, but it could also provoke despair, seeming to re-enact cultural genocide, this time in Argentina, through language loss.

CHAPTER 4: A STATELESS PRESENCE

The state-sponsored political life of Yiddish was short. From the promotion of Yiddish as a Jewish national language within the context of the 1917 Russian Revolution, a short Soviet period of state-funded Yiddish cultural and education projects in the 1920s gave way to the shunting of these hopes over to the territory of Birobidzhan, and the clear failure of that Jewish state project – where Yiddish was to be a national language – by the early 1930s, the decade from which the first chapter began.

This dissertation proposes that looking at linguistic performances opens a considerably broader horizon of analysis, and does this through a close study of the cultural institutions and language activism, stage performance, and individual linguistic biographies of Jewish Argentinians. This chapter will apply the same method to an analysis of cultural diplomacy, to show when and how the language policies of the two states most interested in Jewish Argentinians – Argentina and Israel – intersected with the linguistic performances of cultural diplomats. The term “cultural diplomacy” is used here to refer to a set of policies and practices “*both* in the national interest *and* [which] go beyond the national interest.”³⁵² Official language policies tend to be formulated to serve the national interest, whereas the demands and desires of the speakers that cultural diplomacy is meant to serve may lie beyond it.

³⁵² A useful discussion of the terminology appears in Ien Ang, “Cultural Diplomacy: Beyond the National Interest?,” *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 21, no. 4 (2015): 6.

Zionist language policy – the promotion of Hebrew as the privileged language of the Jewish state, which all Jewish immigrants would be expected to learn – was clearly defined by the 1930s in British Palestine and carried over into the founding of the state in 1948. Argentinian language policy developed quite differently, consisting of a series of debates and discussions over the distinctiveness of Argentinian Spanish from Castilian Spanish, and the emergence of a linguistic cultural nationalism out of intense interactions between Spanish and the non-Spanish languages of immigrants between the 1870s and 1920s (CH1). As Chapters 2 and 3 show, striking continuities bridge the 1930s and the 1950s in the use of ethnic language performance to mark Jewishness in Argentina. Stage performance of Yiddish had surprisingly broad appeal in the 1950s, stimulated by the new ethnic policies of Peronism (CH2). The language activism, “Yiddishism,” that had traveled to Argentina in the 1930s, foundering then on the anxieties of bilingual Jewish speakers, picked up steam after the Holocaust, elaborated mainly by multilingual Jewish immigrants.

This chapter begins in Argentina with the arrival of Jewish diplomats after Perón’s decision to recognize the state and exchange diplomats in 1949. It considers the question of how Israeli cultural diplomacy in support of state language politics – the promotion of Hebrew – collided with the local linguistic competencies and practices of Jewish Argentinians. Until at least the early 1960s, Israeli diplomats can be said to have used Yiddish as an informal language of state. Vernacular decline explains the direction, but not the timing, of its abandonment. As Argentina entered the 1960s, a decade of developmentalism and cultural globalization, immigrant languages without states were stigmatized as relics of a premodern time, rather than as strong cultural commodities for

the global marketplace. Cultural diplomacy between Argentina and Israel in the 1960s therefore shifted away from attention to Jewish Argentines and toward a non-Jewish model of Argentinian culture. The chapter ends in 1969 with the first event in downtown Buenos Aires to address a mass Jewish audience without incorporating Yiddish, a clear performative move to project the language policy of the Israeli state for Argentinian Jewish consumption. Despite Argentinian Jews' interest in the preceding decades in using Yiddish to promote Zionism and Israel, Ben-Gurion's Luna Park address operated on the imagined existence of a Hebrew-speaking diaspora that had never existed in Argentina.

i. Israeli cultural diplomats and Yiddish

In 1968, amidst controversy over the fate of Yiddish in Argentinian Jewish schools, Yiddish writer Avraham Zak would recall the still fresh memory of Golda Meir, addressing the Jews of Buenos Aires publicly at Luna Park Stadium in Yiddish. “Idn” – she had begun in 1951, a word preserved in its original Yiddish even in the Spanish-language memoir of ambassador Jacob Tsur. He described the audience, listening to “Golda” with tears in their eyes. “Without Yiddish,” Zak warned years later, “Golda Meir will not manage to bring 30,000 Jews to Luna Park [...]”³⁵³

The thousands who turned out in the early 1950s to hear Labor Minister Meir speak likely came not to hear her speak Yiddish, but to be present for a speech by an important Israeli official in the early years of the state. The declaration of an Israeli state in 1948 roused great emotion among Jews living in Buenos Aires in response to the presumed guarantee of political rights for Jews. As one Jewish butcher told a couple of journalists for the Yiddish press in 1948, it was difficult to imagine even pro-Soviet Jews not celebrating the new state: “A Jew is a Jew, whether he’s red or green...”³⁵⁴

Though the success of Meir’s appearance was broadly political, the fact that she spoke Yiddish did not go unnoticed. The event at Luna Park – a Zionist politician

³⁵³ Avraham Zak, “Di Misterieze Hant... (Tsum Nayem Atentat Af Idish in Undzerer Shuln) [The Mysterious Hand... (on the New Attempt on Yiddish in Our Schools)],” *Di Idische Tsaytung*, December 1, 1968, Recortes de periodicos: Educacion: Desaparicion del idish en escuelas judias c. 1968, IWO, Buenos Aires.

³⁵⁴ Itsikl Griner, “A Bagingendiker Shmues [A Conversation to Start with] [Clipping],” *Di Presse*, May 18, 1948, Papers of Simja Sneh, courtesy of Perla Sneh.

delivering a speech in Yiddish to Yiddish-speaking audience abroad -- fits within the figure of a “double valence”³⁵⁵ for Yiddish language inside and outside the state of Israel. “Double valence,” a phrase borrowed from Joseph Massad, refers to a two-sided language policy – both formal and informal – regarding Yiddish. After 1948, Zionist publications in non-Hebrew languages played a role in state-building efforts – including serials in Yiddish – while at the same time popular culture in Yiddish was closely regulated by the Israeli government. Only low-circulation, elite projects like Avraham Sutzkever’s literary journal *Di Goldene Keyt* received state funding.³⁵⁶ Informally and strategically, Israeli public figures tolerated or recognized Yiddish in order to awaken pro-state feeling among Jewish audiences.

This 1950s overlap between a Zionist policy of building Hebrew culture, on the one hand, and making contact through Yiddish language and cultural networks with Jewish communities outside Israel, on the other, is especially clear in interactions between Israeli visitors and Argentinian Jews. Israeli cultural diplomacy in Buenos Aires in the first decade or so of statehood developed alongside the new ethnic politics of Juan Perón, which openly praised popular culture, immigrant difference, and folklore, breathing new life, if briefly, into Yiddish culture. In Israel, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs under Moshe Sharett dispatched a first generation of diplomats abroad, on the whole more cosmopolitan and multilingual than their successors would be. In Buenos Aires, these diplomats, including Yakov Tsur and Arie Kubovy – both Yiddish-speakers

³⁵⁵ Joseph Massad, “Zionism’s Internal Others: Israel and the Oriental Jews,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 25, no. 4 (Summer 1996): p67, Note 60.

³⁵⁶ Rachel Rojanski, “The Status of Yiddish in Israel,” in *Yiddish After the Holocaust* (Oxford: Boulevard Books, 2004), 55.

– encountered a Jewish community whose leadership was still largely Eastern European and Yiddish speaking, and whose major press still consisted of Yiddish dailies. Through their engagement with these people and networks, it is possible to observe the gaps between state cultural policy in Israel and the day-to-day workings of cultural diplomacy in Argentina, and the space this gave to acknowledging the continuing presence and prestige of Yiddish.

In 1949, Jacob Tsur arrived to Buenos Aires and soon moved into a new embassy – a small, three-story mansion downtown. Inside, guests were greeted with the ceremonial Hebrew welcome, “barukh haba.” The city was host to a number of Jewish institutions, with established social networks, whose languages were not Hebrew, but primarily Spanish, and also, informally and sometimes formally, Yiddish. These included the Argentina Mutual Aid Society (AMIA) with its own Education Organization, the Vaad Hajinukh,³⁵⁷ and the Argentinian Israelite Organization, or OIA, which functioned as a Jewish branch of the Peronist party during the first government of Juan Perón (1946-55). The Jewish Agency also had an office in Buenos Aires, and its mandate in relation to that of the embassy was, especially in the early 1950s, not always clear.³⁵⁸

Ambassador Tsur faced the task of carving out a place for the embassy in Buenos Aires, and with meeting the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ objective of building relations with Jewish communities abroad.

³⁵⁷ Beatrice Dora Gurwitz, “From the New World to the Third World: Generation, Politics, and the Making of Argentinian Jewish Ethnicity (1955-1983)” (PhD dissertation, 2012), 41.

³⁵⁸ For discussion of this competition see Jorge (Iosi) Goldstein, “El Instituto Cultural Argentino-Israeli (I.C.A.I.): El Proyecto y Su Implementacion Como Nexo Entre Israel y El Judaismo Argentino 1949-1953,” in *Ensayos Sobre Judaismo Latinoamericano* (Buenos Aires, Argentina: Editorial Milá, 1990), 125–47.

The placement of an ambassador, or “minister,” by Israel in Buenos Aires, was part of the post-1948 process of state-building that entailed Israel’s assertion of power to speak on behalf of all Jews in the Diaspora. Moshe Shertok, who changed his name to Sharett, assumed a post as head of the new Ministry of Foreign Affairs, assembled out of the Jerusalem Office of the Jewish Agency.³⁵⁹ He created a diplomatic corps of men and women to represent Israel abroad, many of whom were born and educated outside Israel, and not deeply familiar with Israeli society, but who spoke the languages of the Jewish communities where they would serve. Some of them did not speak Hebrew, though Tsur spoke both Hebrew and Yiddish. He learned Spanish in Argentina.

The fanfare, publicity, political standing, and financial power of the Israeli embassy in Argentina changed the institutional landscape of Jewish Buenos Aires, without, however, immediately affecting the language landscape of communal organizations. In 1950, the Buenos Aires office of the Jewish Agency closed, with some personnel decamping to the Israeli legate. Sharett began to plan for a centralized approach to disseminating Jewish culture – as Israeli culture – abroad. By the 1960s, a new Israeli cultural diplomacy would emerge, one that privileged interaction with non-Jewish society over Israel-Diaspora relations. In the meantime, Israeli cultural diplomacy in Buenos Aires proceeded cautiously alongside an active Yiddish-language cultural network that, while fading, embraced Zionism and received Israeli guests warmly.

³⁵⁹ On the early years of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, see: Gabriel Sheffer, “Moshe Sharett, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Jewish Diaspora,” *Israel Studies* 15, no. No. 3, Special Issue: The Making of Israel Foreign Policy (Fall 2010): 27–46; Moshe Yegar, “Moshe Sharett and the Origins of Israel’s Diplomacy,” ed. Gabriel Sheffer and Natan Aridan, *Israel Studies* 15, no. No. 3, Special Issue: The Making of Israel Foreign Policy (Fall 2010): 1–26.

In this first decade, a rejection of Yiddish was not enacted in Israeli diplomatic policy. An obvious language of outreach, Yiddish was used in official materials to promote philanthropy in support of the state.



Figure 15 Spanish text: “Help in the construction of the State of Israel;” Yiddish text: “Hold up the flame of Jewish freedom. Help in the construction of the State of Israel.”³⁶⁰

Diplomatic personnel attended the Yiddish theater, perhaps out of personal interest, perhaps partly as a show of solidarity with the Jewish public, since Yiddish theater was

³⁶⁰ Unknown, *Ayude En La Construcción de Medinat Israel*. By Keren Hayesod (United Israel Appeal), Published in Argentina, Ca 1950, Ca 1950, Palestine Poster Project.

considered a staple of Jewish cultural life in the country and had been since the '20s. When Jacob Ben Ami played an elderly Jewish father in the Yiddish-language performance of *The Wooden Dish*, in 1955, Ambassador Arie Kubovy attended with his wife and a small corps of other diplomats, including the Haitian ambassador. A contemporary description of the play and audience notes that Kubovy's presence, and that of other consuls and ambassadors, "added a festive air to the performance,"³⁶¹ and that during the course of the action, in Yiddish, "The ambassador Kubovi and his wife explained the meaning of the action to the guests who sat near them."³⁶²

Kubovy, who served as Israeli ambassador to Argentina between 1953 and 1958, was born in Lithuania, but moved with his family before the age of ten and spent his coming-of-age years in Belgium.³⁶³ In Argentina, he emphasized his own fluid relationship to Jewish languages. Kubovy had developed an interest in Jewish culture in Brussels and "found his own way to zionism,"³⁶⁴ as he explained at a public appearance in 1953, in part by reading his father's collection of *Ost und West*, a German-Jewish periodical published in Berlin in the first decades of the 20th Century. He had developed his sense of Jewishness reading whatever language was on hand, he said, rooting through one rabbi's book collection donated to the Royal Library of Belgium, and had not learned to privilege one language over another. Speaking in Buenos Aires, he proposed that Jews

³⁶¹ "One of the Last Mohicans" (1955), RG 755, Box 7, F 76, YIVO, New York.

³⁶² "One of the Last Mohicans."

³⁶³ Arie Leon Kubovy, *Wortzlen Un Fliglen: Redes Un Referatn Fun a Yisroel-Ambasador 1953-1958* [*Roots and Wings: Speeches and Lectures by an Ambassador of Israel 1953-1958*] (Buenos Aires: Kiem, 1958), 16.

³⁶⁴ Kubovy, 16.

should not choose between Yiddish and Hebrew. "I never understood," Kubovy said, "the feud [makhloykes] between Yiddish and Hebrew."³⁶⁵

Kubovy's speech, delivered on the occasion of a celebration of the Argentinian Yiddish press and later published in Spanish translation, is emblematic of the white elephant Israeli visitors encountered in Argentina in the 1950s. They represented a state in favor of Hebrew culture, among men and women whose primary emotional ethnic language was Yiddish, and many of whom spoke little or no Hebrew at all. The number of guests and visitors from Israel increased during the 1950s, a direct effect of a cultural agreement signed by Ambassador Tsur with President Perón. These included, among others, the Yiddish poet and editor Abraham Sutzkever, in 1954, the writer and Vilna partisan Aba Kovner, and the Yiddish actor Jacob Ben-Ami.³⁶⁶ State representatives also attended community events of importance to survivors and relations of Holocaust victims, like the anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising.³⁶⁷

Many visitors from Israel, like the ambassadors, looked to Hebrew as the national Jewish language while, at the same time, using Yiddish to connect with communities they visited during their stay. Aba Kovner traveled to Argentina in 1955, and toured the Jewish communities of the Entre Rios provinces, focused on the future emigration of Jewish youth to Israel. As was common practice, before his departure he visited the offices of the Yiddish newspaper, *Di Idishe Tsaytung*, where he described his

³⁶⁵ Kubovy, 17.

³⁶⁶ Kapszuk, *1949/1999 Israel-Argentina: Encuentro Entre 2 Naciones*, 74 Others included in this volume's timeline include Moishe Oisher (26/4), Tzvi Tzeitlin (14/6), and Faivish Ziguelboim (10/12).

³⁶⁷ Chinski, "Memorias Olvidadas: Los Judios y La Recordacion de la Shoa en Buenos Aires, 1942-1956 [Forgotten Memories: Jews and the Commemoration of the Shoah in Buenos Aires, 1942-1956]," 224.

impressions of Argentina's Jews, the shtetl-like, rural provinces, and the city, where intermarriage and other marks of "assimilation" among the young people startled him. Argentinian Jewish youth, he told the journalists, were growing up "without cultural national-Jewish baggage [...]"³⁶⁸

Even as they promoted Hebrew culture and emigration to Israel, Israeli visitors noted the transition from Yiddish to Spanish among the younger generation. Defenders of Jewish national culture were not yet decided in the 1950s about whether "cultural national-Jewish baggage" could still include Yiddish, alongside Hebrew, with no contradiction. Until the early 1960s, the continuing presence of Yiddish among the parents' generation, their hopes that children would not turn away from it, and a pro-state openness to Hebrew education coexisted in Buenos Aires. Spanish was in no uncertain terms the major language, and Yiddish writers and journalists themselves discussed the obvious displacement of Yiddish by Spanish, including among adults. Perhaps because Spanish was the greater power, Hebrew seemed a welcome, and not a threatening, addition.

Some writers and educators agreed with Ambassador Kubovy's judgment that a rejection of Hebrew by Yiddish-speakers outside Israel constituted a kind of "blindness." He joked, "Since when is the Jewish head too thick to learn and to speak two languages or even more?"³⁶⁹ The Polish Jewish survivor and writer Simja Sneh promoted a similar idea among the circle of the H.D. Nomberg Yiddish Writer's Society, and argued most

³⁶⁸ "Erev Zayn Farlozn Argentinian, Gezegnt Zikh Aba Kovner Mit 'Di Idishe Tsaytung,'" *Idishe Tsaytung*, May 27, 1955, YIVO, New York.

³⁶⁹ Kubovy, *Wortzlen Un Fliglen: Redes Un Referatn Fun a Yisroel-Ambasador 1953-1958* [*Roots and Wings: Speeches and Lectures by an Ambassador of Israel 1953-1958*], 17.

forcibly on behalf of both languages when he left the group in the late 1960s. Instead of guarding Yiddish against Hebrew, he wrote in a Yiddish declaration, “certain journalists should take a course in Hebrew, so they can make direct contact with the Hebrew press. That is possible at any age, and that will help them to better understand the tasks of a journalist writing in Yiddish today.”³⁷⁰

One extraordinary example of Ambassador Kubovy’s private attitude to Yiddish has been preserved in a work of oral history recorded by a team of Argentinian Jewish scholars in the mid-1980s. It consists of the memories of a working-class Jew, a tailor, who was summoned to the Israeli embassy to serve Ambassador Kubovy for the duration of his stay. The man cut all the ambassador’s suits. During the interview, the tailor, Iosl, described his private talks with Ambassador Kubovy and Kubovy’s delight with the quality of the tailor’s Yiddish. “He had fallen in love with the *idish* that I speak,” Iosl said. “One time he asked me where I’m from, from what part of Lithuania, I tell him no, I’m from Poland. He says: --Then, how is it you speak *idish* like that? --Because I like to, I said, and because I want to purify the language.”³⁷¹ Apparently affected by the language nationalism of his day that considered a “pure” language its highest expression, Iosl described himself as a model speaker of Yiddish. He then remembered that Kubovy had fun with him by testing his Yiddish: “Then he wanted to challenge me, like giving me a

³⁷⁰ Sneh, “[Clipping] Eftlekhe Derklerung Fun Simja Sneh.”

³⁷¹ *Integracion y Marginalidad: Historias de Vidas de Inmigrantes Judios En La Argentina*, 219.

test, he was smiling and I asked him: --And so what, do I deserve a ten or a zero?—He [Kubovy] started laughing.”³⁷²

A private delight taken in Yiddish, alongside a public performance of Hebrew, was a recurring theme, in particular in the 1950s. During the visit of Zalman Shazar to Buenos Aires, to organize Jewish education on behalf of the Jewish Agency, Shazar and Ambassador Tsur would sometimes sit together late at night, alone, drinking tea, while Shazar read aloud from his own Yiddish poems “which I think,” Tsur wrote, “he never published in book form.”³⁷³

The interview with Iosl is extraordinary for the way that it captures a private scene, in Yiddish, between the ambassador and a common tailor. This kind of fleeting recognition of Yiddish as an authentic marker of Jewishness between Israeli state representatives and Argentinian Jews is revealing of the tensions created by the requisite performance of Israeli language politics (Hebrew) for Yiddish-speakers in Buenos Aires, and perhaps in any place where Yiddish was the shared vernacular. Another example appears in Ambassador Tsur’s memoir, when Yosef Sprintzak, the first guest of the new Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires and the President of the Knesset, spoke to Jewish journalists after his arrival. Sprintzak could speak Hebrew and Yiddish, but not Spanish. Piqued by one journalist’s critical question about Zionist politics, Sprintzak answered in

³⁷² He continues: ““When he talked at events for the community, in idish, and he didn’t attempt to speak a tsebrojener shpanish [broken Spanish], like the others did, who don’t even know how to pronounce the words, it was a pleasure to hear it. He spoke in idish, what prolixity he had. I’ve spoken with him many times, with Kubowi, the only one I went to try suits for personally to his home. When I went there he would put everything aside. There was someone to talk with and something to learn from it. The four years that Kubowi was here and I attended him, I’m talking about his suits.” *Integracion y Marginalidad: Historias de Vidas de Inmigrantes Judios En La Argentina*, 219.

³⁷³ Yaakov Tsur, *Cartas Credenciales No. 4*, trans. Etty de Hotter (Jerusalem: La Semana, 1983), 102.

Yiddish.³⁷⁴ Tsur describes this anecdote in his memoir with some admiration: “Sprintzak gave the man his characteristic look, half-closing his right eye, while saying, in Yiddish: ‘Look, look, a man so intelligent that he says so many foolish things.’”³⁷⁵ In the 1950s, Israeli state representatives understood and made use of the social capital of Yiddish speech among Jews, including, perhaps even especially, at moments of political disagreement.

A related, but somewhat different strategy among diplomats interested in winning the loyalty of Yiddish-speaking Zionists was to speak not about Yiddish, directly, but about yiddishkayt. In a decade (the mid-‘50s to mid-‘60s) when Argentinian Jews spoke Spanish, and Yiddish in limited circles, it became easier to rhetorically disconnect “yiddishkayt” from Yiddish. At times this meant avoiding any explicit discussion of mechanisms to support language transmission. But among Israeli diplomats it could be used to invoke a future transfer of existing networks from Yiddish into Hebrew, or Israeli, orientation. In 1953, Arie Kubovy gave a speech in honor of the fortieth anniversary of the working-class Yiddish daily *Di Presse*, explaining his presence at the event this way: “Israel could not have missed a celebration in honor of 40 years’ appearance of a Yiddish newspaper, since it is a celebration of saying yes to Yiddishkayt and to persistence, for which the state is the highest symbol in our time, and because a

³⁷⁴ 99 Tsur, *Cartas Credenciales No. 4*.

³⁷⁵ Tsur, 99.

day will come, I hope, when Israel will be coordinator of all the different successors the whole world over."³⁷⁶

The lack of an explicit, public rejection of Yiddish by the ambassadors in the 1950s, along with the discrediting of communism's Yiddish connection, made space for an overlapping pursuit of Yiddish and Hebrew as markers of Jewish national culture with its center in Israel.

Some Yiddish writers, teachers, and language activists, in other words, believed and hoped that the new presence of Israeli diplomats would not spell changes to the prominence of Yiddish as a Jewish national language and marker of local ethnicity. To the extent that this appeared to be happening in Buenos Aires, they were optimistic about the compensatory future of Yiddish in Israel. They considered both languages – Hebrew and Yiddish – to be Jewish national languages, and the ambassadors' non-confrontational attitude toward Yiddish in schools and in public made it easier for this belief to persist. Thus, in the late 1950s and early '60s, both Avraham Zak and Samuel Rollansky spoke warmly about the possibilities for continuing to write in Yiddish in Israel.³⁷⁷ The IWO, a principle defender of Yiddish, accumulated a library of Yiddish and Hebrew-language books from its founding, and in the 1950s sponsored events on the new Hebrew-language literature developing in Israel. The Vaad Hajinukh, or Jewish Education Counsel, included in its charter mention of "the two national languages," appearing to endorse the need for both Yiddish and Hebrew in Jewish education from the 1940s.[cit] Even in the

³⁷⁶ Kubovy, *Wortzlen Un Fliglen: Redes Un Referatn Fun a Yisroel-Ambasador 1953-1958 [Roots and Wings: Speeches and Lectures by an Ambassador of Israel 1953-1958]*, 182.

³⁷⁷ Samuel Rollansky, "In 1957" (n.d.), Samuel Rollansky Collection, Box 2, IWO, Buenos Aires.

late 1960s, public expressions (in Yiddish) of the education policies of Argentinian Zionists continued to emphasize the value of promoting both languages.³⁷⁸

As a sociolinguistic process, language assimilation was a complex and cumulative development among Jewish immigrants in Argentina with no singular start or endpoint. Within Jewish Argentinian homes in the 1950s and '60s, the status of the Yiddish vernacular changed in ways that crossed ideological lines. In very few homes were Yiddish-speaking parents so devoted to the language that they insisted on children answering in Yiddish, speaking in Yiddish, and pursuing studies in Yiddish.³⁷⁹ As a report by one committee formed to protect the language noted, "In our homes, too, Yiddish is being pushed out [...] Jewish homes are being emptied – whether of the Yiddish word, the Yiddish sound, or Jewish content."³⁸⁰ The majority of Jewish Argentinian children attended national schools, with state-sanctioned curricula inflected by the Argentinian nationalism of the 1960s, with its emphasis on standardizing Spanish and rooting out immigrant imperfections behind the language debates of the post-mass-immigration decades.

Partly in response to this obvious language shift, one of the most Yiddish-identified working-class movements changed its official language from Yiddish to Spanish toward the end of the 1950s. The policy marks an important point in the broader

³⁷⁸ They emphasized the need to instill in children an affection for the Jewish state, and a knowledge of modern Jewish literature in Yiddish and Hebrew. See, for example: "Khinukh [Education]," *Di Naye Tsayt*, December 20, 1968, IWO, Buenos Aires.

³⁷⁹ This was the case for Esther Rollansky, daughter of language activist Samuel Rollansky, and also for Yitshok Niborsky, whose grandchildren, today, have also received this kind of instruction in language loyalty from their parents.

³⁸⁰ Report by the Initsiativ-komisye of the "Liga farn hemshekh un kiem fun yidishn lebn un loshn." IWO, Samuel Rollansky collection Box 1.

social dislocation from Yiddish, since it meant the loss of a local political platform and abandonment of the language to non-party organizations.

The Jewish section of the Argentinian Communist Party branch (ICUF) had a large popular following and its own network of Jewish schools. The abrupt switch in language followed the news of Soviet crimes against Jews, including the murders of prominent Yiddish writers, in the Soviet Union. It was a point of inflection between the 1953 break between so-called “progressives,” or fellow-travelers of the USSR, and zionists, or supporters of Israel, on the way to a more all-encompassing shift in Jewish Argentinian support toward Israel following the Cold War realignments of 1967. Israel Lotersztain, who has written about the interdependency of the secular Jewish culture of ICUF and the Yiddish language of its activities since its founding in 1937, has hypothesized that the language directive from Argentina’s Communist Party in 1957 was intended to foreclose any painful comparison between the state of Yiddish culture in the Soviet Union and in Argentina, where Yiddish would in any case also disappear eventually.³⁸¹ “Let Mendele, Sholem Aleichem, and Peretz speak Spanish if Yiddish is not understood,”³⁸² wrote Luis Goldman, a central committee member of the Party.

³⁸¹ Lotersztain, “La Historia de un Fracaso: La Religión Judeo Comunista en los Tiempos de la URSS (La prensa del ICUF en Argentina entre 1946 y 1957) [The History of a Disaster: The Judeo Communist Religion in the Time of the USSR (The press of the ICUF in Argentina between 1946 and 1957)],” 277.

³⁸² Quoted in: Lotersztain, 282.

ii. Borges in Jerusalem

In 1960, the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires published a volume of essays by prominent Argentinian intellectuals, in celebration of the state of Israel. Included were Silvina Bullrich, Alberto Ginastera, Pedro Eugenio Aramburu, Alfredo Palacios, and others. The authors shared a sense of wonder at the apparent success of Israeli development – the modern buildings and infrastructure, the prosperity, the omnipresence of the state, the clear and present figure of a strong national type, the Sabra or New Jew. Almost none of them were Jewish. To underscore the importance of their recognition and praise, the volume was titled “Israel seen through Argentinian Eyes.”³⁸³

As Israeli diplomacy shifted attention from Yiddish speakers to non-Jewish Argentinian intellectuals, the use of Yiddish as an informal language of state lost currency. High-profile writers and public figures who visited Israel from Argentina couched their praise in an appeal to a shared set of Argentinian-Israeli historical and spiritual trajectories, from colonization and land settlement to the honoring of Christian holy sites and the idea of a religious state. Thus by the time that Jorge Luis Borges visited Jerusalem in 1969 to speak at the Hebrew University the notion of a non-Jewish writer from Argentina receiving Israeli accolades had already, in a sense, been prepared for.³⁸⁴

³⁸³ *Israel Visto Por Ojos Argentinos [Israel Seen Through Argentinian Eyes]* (Buenos Aires: Instituto Judío Argentino de Cultura e Información, 1960).

³⁸⁴ He returned in 1971 to receive the Jerusalem Prize, the state’s highest prize in literature.

And yet the implications of Borges' presence and interactions with audiences in Jerusalem differed from his predecessors'. An Argentinian writer with an almost obsessive interest Jewishness, the coordinates of Borges' known "Jewish" profile, his engagement with Jewish themes, was definitively detached from the historical and ethnographic Jewishness of Buenos Aires – namely, detached from Yiddish and yiddishkayt. Instead, what predominated in his fascination with Jewish culture was the mystical and the Hebraic, embedded in his childhood in Europe and an interest in Hebrew, German, and the Old Testament, as has been widely remarked in Borges scholarship.

Listening to him speak about the mysticism of the Kabbalah in the auditorium of the Hebrew University at Givat Ram in 1969, a student audience -- including many young Argentinian Israelis – found nothing that disagreed with their own rejection of Yiddish. "Hearing Borges that night in 1969 was a turning point in my intellectual development," Shalom Goldman – one of the students in the audience – remembered. In Argentina, Goldman had felt provincial and without any point of entry to world literature. But hearing Borges in Israel, an Argentinian star praising Jewish ancient texts, he felt worldly. "For the five years before coming to Israel in 1968 at the age of twenty-one, I had read widely in world literature, hungry for a wider view of culture after total immersion in the world of rabbinic texts. Reading and hearing Borges introduced me to the presence of the Hebraic in world literature, a presence I was barely aware of."³⁸⁵

³⁸⁵ Shalom Goldman, *Zeal for Zion: Christians, Jews, & the Idea of The Promised Land* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 216.

Since the publication of Borges translations out of Spanish in the 1960s and his subsequent fame, Borges had become a cardinal point in Latin American letters, alongside Ernesto Sábato. It is impossible to underestimate his influence as a point of reference for a generation of Latin American Jewish writers, who found in his longstanding interest in the Jewish Bible and Kabbalah a respectable validation of Jewish texts, effectively reproducing in late 20th century Latin America the references of the German-Jewish symbiosis Borges had absorbed in the 1920s. Edna Aizenberg went as far as to say that Borges gave Latin American critics and authors “a way to assert identity.”³⁸⁶

In Jerusalem, specifically, and through the global circulation of his work in the 1960s and after, more generally, this “way” was to supply a literary vocabulary – of ruins, Biblical mazes, allegories, doubles – which as Aizenberg writes has become inextricably connected with the theme of Jewishness in Argentinian literature. In addition to their shared interest in world literature, Biblical Hebraism, and Israeli claims to ancient lands, Borges and Jewish Argentinians like Shalom Goldman had in common a historical knowledge of the place of Yiddish in Buenos Aires.

By juxtaposing a text from Borges’ fictional archive with the historical experiences of young Jewish Argentinians who chose to immigrate to Israel in the 1960s, it is possible to see this shared performance of Hebraism in Jerusalem more clearly as an active negation of Argentinian Yiddish. Borges did not speak or write in Yiddish – though his Yiddish-speaking readers would undertake translations of select Borges

³⁸⁶ Edna Aizenberg, *Books and Bombs in Buenos Aires: Borges, Gerchunoff, and Argentinian-Jewish Writing* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 2002), 94.

stories³⁸⁷ – but he did have occasion to hear the language in Buenos Aires, as Roberto Arlt and other non-Jewish journalists and theater critics had before him. Jewish Argentinians who immigrated to Israel in the 1960s were likewise familiar with the language codes of Argentinian Jews, the plain decline of vernacular Yiddish, the arguments among diehards about its future, and the strict rejection of Yiddish in Israeli language policy. As an act of cultural diplomacy, Borges in Jerusalem performed the absence of Yiddish – prefigured in his fiction – that many young Argentinian Jewish emigres could identify with.

The text in which Borges formally prefigures the disappearance of Yiddish was first published in the literary magazine *Sur*, and later in the 1949 collection *El Aleph*. In “Emma Zunz,” a narrator describes two days in Emma’s life during which she plans and carries out the murder of her father’s former factory boss, whom she blames for her father’s death. The world of the text – Buenos Aires in 1922 – is defined in the story by the presence of immigrants and their involvement in working class labor disputes. Emma works at the Tarbuch and Loewenthal textile factory; the boss, Loewenthal, whom she will kill, represents the industrial bosses of the ‘20s, anxious for tips to forestall worker strikes. The spatial coordinates of the story correspond to the movements of immigrant families: Emma remembers a childhood home in the Entre Rios provinces, she lives in the Almagro neighborhood, her father has relocated to Brazil, and the letter that alerts her

³⁸⁷ In 1976, the IWO published a booklet of translations of Borges’ select poetry and fiction in Yiddish. Perhaps the most striking inclusion (in terms of its linguistic performance) was a Yiddish translation of *Deutsches Requiem*, the fictional last testament of a Nazi camp commandant, by Yitshok Niborski, who was born in Argentina in 1947, and who would remain deeply dedicated personally and professionally to Yiddish. According to Eliezer Nowodworski, whom I thank for directing my attention to this publication, Borges attended the IWO event in his honor when the translations were released. Nowodworski remembers as a child hearing his grandfather, Samuel Rollansky, introduce the event in Yiddish, and Borges comment in Spanish – perhaps a gambit to maintain authority in the face of incomprehension – to the effect that he didn’t mind being introduced in Yiddish and understood some Yiddish himself.

of his death arrives from that country. These cues, along with the names of Emma's friends (Elsa Urstein, the Kronfuss sisters), indicate that Emma is Jewish. It goes almost without saying that in 1922 such a person would have grown up in a Yiddish-speaking environment; in the 1940s, this would likely have been a familiar fact to Argentinian readers of Borges whether they were Jewish or not.

Formally, in "Emma Zunz," languages do not appear as discrete things, or named mediums in which a person speaks. Rather, the presence of multiple languages is implied. Languages appear as uncertainties, confounding influences that cause confusion or uncanny profusions of meaning. In what language is the letter written by which Emma learns that her father has died in Brazil from an overdose of Veronal, for example? This is not stated, though the author's name is "Fein or Fain" – a matter of legibility or transliteration.³⁸⁸ At the club de mujeres, where Emma goes to meet friends that day, she must pass through registration, another instance of audition-into-transcription: "she had to repeat and spell her name and surname," an unsurprising obligation for an Argentinian of Eastern European parentage. Emma then proceeds to the port, in anticipation of a ship, the *Nordstjärnen*. She seduces a foreign sailor of unknown nationality. He was "Swedish or Finnish," and in any case "did not speak Spanish." Just as the reader is given clues that suggest Emma's linguistic proficiencies, the sailor's language is a matter of conjecture, the choices established by the port of origin and the name of his ship.

³⁸⁸ One could go further and suggest that either the translation from writing to sound, or sound to writing could be the problem, and that it may originate at any number of narrative junctures: in Emma's reading, her reporting to the police, the narrator's reading or listening, etc.. The logical steps between Emma's firsthand experience and the literary event provide ample opportunities for miscommunication.

Only in the final murder scene, in which Emma confronts the factory boss Loewenthal at the textile factory, does “Yiddish” cease to be implicit and become a spectacle. It is Loewenthal who finally speaks to Emma in Yiddish. The speech act is a literary spectacle: the language is named. In a bizarre climax, in the boss’ office, Emma draws her gun, fires, and triggers a macabre outpouring from Loewenthal, a stream of bilingual speech:

The considerable body collapsed as though the gunshots and the smoke had broken it, the glass of water shattered, the face looked at her with surprise and anger, the mouth of the face insulted her in Spanish and in Yiddish. The bad words did not cease; Emma had to fire again.³⁸⁹

Emma’s moral crime – to avenge her father’s death – is upstaged by a profusion of languages. Her own carefully rehearsed line (“I have avenged my father and they cannot punish me...”) is cut off by Loewenthal’s insults. Issuing from his mouth – itself severed from his body -- the two languages are a double menace. It is the excess of language, the fact that “the bad words did not cease,” that forces her to fire again. After all that, Loewenthal’s insults kept him from understanding the cause of his own death – Emma’s vengeance: “She never knew if he understood it,” though whether the impasse was temporal or linguistic remains unclear.

The textual performance in Emma Zunz of non-Spanish languages as both omnipresent and strenuously avoided – as well as the particularly gratuitous effusion of Yiddish, specifically – captures something essential about the experience of young, self-declared Zionist Argentinians in the 1960s. The Cuban revolution and its repercussions throughout Latin America, the developmental authoritarianism of General Onganía’s

³⁸⁹ As in the case of “Fein or Fain,” one could ask how the narrator has learned that Loewenthal insulted Emma in both Spanish and Yiddish. Did Emma report this fact to the police? or did she provide it to the narrator directly?

Revolución Argentina following the 1966 coup, and, in Israel, the figure of the muscular New Jew, all presented young Jewish Argentinians with images of strength. By contrast, no similarly desirable political figurehead existed in the 1960s to associate with the linguistic and cultural baggage of the immigrant- or colonist generation, their Yiddish-speaking parents and grandparents.

In this context, Jewish Argentinians born in the 1940s and '50s experienced the post-war growth of institutional Yiddishism as children, and generally distanced themselves from Yiddish culture outside the home, whether or not they joined the relatively small-scale ranks of Zionist youth groups or studied Hebrew. Among the most committed Zionist “pioneer” youth, which Sebastian Klor estimates at about 7,000 in the early 1950s,³⁹⁰ it was common to have had contact with Yiddish at home, whether or not children attended schools where Yiddish was taught. Those who reportedly chanted “aliyah” in response to an older woman speaking in Yiddish at a Holocaust commemoration event could recognize the language, even if they did not speak it.³⁹¹ The fact that this group tended to publish subsequently in Hebrew (rather than Yiddish or Spanish) partly accounts for the obscuring of their language contacts earlier in life. Devorah (Dora) Schachner, for example, who prepared in 1950 to settle on Kibbutz Gazit, was the daughter of Osher Graukop, of Bialystok, an active member of the

³⁹⁰ This estimate comes from a database Klor compiled for his study of immigration to Israel, and includes members of Zionist youth groups preparing for “aliyah,” which he says made up Israeli bureaucrats’ main hope for beginning chain migration from Argentina. Sebastian Klor, *Between Exile and Exodus: Argentinian Jewish Immigration to Israel, 1948-1967*, trans. Lenn Schramm (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2017).

³⁹¹ When this happened in 1971, at the commemoration of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, the paper *Mundo Israelita* published an article referring to the enmity as the “guerilla linguistica.” Gurwitz, “From the New World to the Third World,” 127.

Yiddishist Left Po'alei Zion party.³⁹² Jorge Stobnic, who grew up in Buenos Aires and immigrated to Israel in the late 1960s, belonged to the Mordechai Anielewicz Brigade, affiliated with Hashomer Hatza'ir. He took no interest in speaking Yiddish when he was young, and says his parents spoke to him in Yiddish, and that he would respond in Spanish. He remembers his own adolescent discomfort when his father would spread open the broad pages of the Yiddish daily to read on the streetcar.³⁹³ The adoption of Spanish over Yiddish, and for those who studied Hebrew, a rejection of the parents' language in favor of an unknown, distant and future vernacular, took place in Argentina alongside dialogue with Yiddish-speakers. It depended on a reorientation of an established set of cultural networks, formed during the interwar apogee of Yiddish-language culture.

For young people, being Jewish and Argentinian could not be detached from a shared experience of dislocation from Yiddish. This relationship to the language is rarely analyzed precisely because the passage from one language into another defies the categories of language and ethnicity or nationality then in reformulation. From its commonplace definition of a language of the Jewish ethnic past, as it was understood into the 1950s, by the late 1960s, Yiddish in Argentina was a language young people of different political attitudes could agree to reject, especially as it carried no promise of state-based national pride.

The number of prominent Yiddishists among the younger generation in the 1960s is far smaller than the number of children who attended Jewish schools, sometimes only

³⁹² Klor, *Between Exile and Exodus: Argentinian Jewish Immigration to Israel, 1948-1967*, 163–64.

³⁹³ Interview with Jorge Stobnic at Beit Leivick, Tel Aviv, November 2017.

briefly. Many of these young people never mastered the language. Their childhood contact with Yiddish, either at school or at home, was contemporaneous with the rise of a broadly pro-Israel narrative of Jewish national culture. The writer German Rozenmacher³⁹⁴ and poet Alejandra Pizarnik both grew up in Yiddish-speaking homes and became known for their Spanish-language writings. In Rozenmacher's work the theme of immigration and of his Jewish upbringing is prominent. In 1964, with the debut of his play at the IFT theater, *Requiem para un viernes a la noche* [Requiem for a Friday Night], the young protagonist yells at his parents, "I'm tired of speaking half in Spanish and half in Yiddish! [...] I'm tired of living in the past, I'm tired of being a foreigner!"³⁹⁵ In Pizarnik's body of poetry, by contrast, references to Yiddish are strikingly absent. Only recently, in her private correspondence, has her sensitivity to Argentinian Yiddish speech been located.³⁹⁶ Pizarnik attended the Zalman Reizen school as a child, where she received instruction in Yiddish, but probably never spoke the language fluently.

Jewish Argentinians coming of age in the 1960s shared a collective experience of dislocation from Yiddish as a marker of ethnic identity. This rupture is made more visible by the small number of second- or third- generation immigrants who refused it, becoming prominent Yiddish teachers and philologists.³⁹⁷ For most, though, the work of preserving

³⁹⁴ I have not yet figured out which schools Rozenmacher attended, and whether he had Yiddish instruction there. His parents would have spoken it at home.

³⁹⁵ Citation needed – see Krupnik, in Buenos Aires idish, p36.

³⁹⁶ For an elaboration of Pizarnik's wordplay and humour in relation to Yiddish as it appears in her correspondence with poet and doctor Osias Stutman, see Evelyn Fishburn, "Different Aspects of Humour and Wordplay in the Work of Alejandra Pizarnik," in *Arbol de Alejandra: Pizarnik Reassessed*, ed. Fiona J. Mackintosh and Karl Posso (Wookbridge, UK: Tamesis, 2007), 36–59.

³⁹⁷ I am referring to teachers and Yiddishists like Isidoro Niborski and Esther Rollansky. Niborski directs the Medem Institute in Paris, which offers courses in Yiddish, and edited a highly respected Yiddish

Yiddish quickly lost relevance, taking a back seat to the more immediate question of what kind of education to get, where to work, and where, whether in a politically unstable Argentina, or abroad. Shalom Goldman's delight upon hearing Borges speak of Jewish themes in literature was at once an experience particular to someone who had "made aliyah," but also a commonplace experience of searching for an alternative form of cultural particularity, one that held the promise of intellectual currency in the next decade.

iii. Luna Park

The Estadio Luna Park was inaugurated in the emerging "downtown" of Buenos Aires in the early 1930s to host carnivals and boxing matches. In the same decade, draped in swastika flags, it became the site of fascist rallies. By the 1950s the stadium was also famous, or infamous, as the place where Perón and Evita had first met. As a stage of public address, Luna Park looms large in the national imagination, which is one reason why Avram Zak described Golde Meir's speech there – when she filled the stadium in 1951 -- as the epitome of success in convening Jewish Argentinians:

Without Yiddish there will be no readers of Yiddish books, no visitors of Yiddish theater, no Yiddish newspapers, no audiences at lectures. Without Yiddish, Golda Meir will not manage to bring 30,000 Jews to Luna Park.³⁹⁸

dictionary. Rollansky works in Tel Aviv where she teaches at the Naomi Prawer Kadar International Yiddish Summer Program.

³⁹⁸ Zak, "Di Misterieze Hant... (Tsum Nayem Atentat Af Idish in Undzerer Shuln) [The Mysterious Hand... (on the New Attempt on Yiddish in Our Schools)]."

At the end of the 1960s, Israeli cultural diplomacy had shifted its focus away from Yiddish-speakers and toward the promotion of Hebrew and ties to non-Jewish intellectuals (like Borges). Still, though, acts of Israeli cultural diplomacy in Buenos Aires overtly exclusive of Yiddish were not yet customary. On the heels of a friendlier decade, when the Israeli ambassador could be seen chuckling or teary-eyed in his seat at the Yiddish theater, the new Israeli reaction to Yiddish in public provoked dismay, in particular among the older generation of Yiddish writers and language activists. When Avrom Shlonski spoke only in Hebrew during his 1969 lecture tour, *Di Idische Tsaytung* poked fun at him, saying “He speaks Yiddish poorly, most of the public does not understand Hebrew,” and since he refused a translator, “no one knew when he left the country.”³⁹⁹ When a new Israeli ambassador in 1969 declined to answer a letter from the Yiddish writers’ society, the silence was read as unnecessary insult.⁴⁰⁰

While admittedly it had become possible during the 1960s “to be an enemy of Yiddish,”⁴⁰¹ it had also become possible to perform Zionism in Yiddish, one of the principle reasons why older immigrant- and Yiddish-speaking audiences thrilled at seeing Zionist leaders speak Yiddish and why the public spectacle of a Zionism empty of Yiddish remained a dismaying sight for Jewish Argentinians well into the 1960s.

³⁹⁹ Y. Horn, “A Tokh-Frage Vos Felt in Seder-Hoys: Fun Ershtn Dorem-Amerikaner Tsuzamenfor Far Idisher Deritsung [Sic],” *Di Idische Tsaytung*, October 15, 1969, Binder of clippings on Yiddish in schools, IWO, Buenos Aires.

⁴⁰⁰ Mordche Koyfman, “Aktuele Komentarn [Clipping],” *Di Presse*, November 2, 1969, Recortes de periodicos: Educacion: Desaparicion del idish en escuelas judias c. 1968, IWO, Buenos Aires.

⁴⁰¹ Tsvey Yudn, “Leyd-Artiklen,” October 26, 1969, Recortes de periodicos: Educacion: Desaparicion del idish en escuelas judias c. 1968, IWO, Buenos Aires.

Acts of Zionism in Yiddish appeared through the instrumental use of Yiddish by Zionist activists, but they likewise cropped up where support for Israel was experienced as inseparable from the language-based definition of the Jewish nation. To Yiddishists who defined the Jewish nation in terms of this shared cultural infrastructure, squaring Israeli antagonism to Yiddish with an affection for the state could be difficult, and produced stubborn statements of hope for Yiddish in the Jewish state. “However strange it may sound,” wrote Samuel Rollanski after his ten-country tour of 1957, which included the US, England, France, South Africa, and Israel, “I also found for Yiddish and Yiddish literature the strongest encouragement—in the state of Israel—there where Yiddish is shut out of the school curriculum and is simply cleverly exploited to win over the sentiments and [...] the pockets of the entire Jewish [yidishlekh] masses for the state...”⁴⁰² Zak, too, pointed to literary prizes and private initiatives to celebrate and honor Yiddish writers in Israel as evidence that the language would have a protected future in the state.⁴⁰³

Expressions of Yiddishist Zionism in Buenos Aires were based on a belief that the wellspring of Jewish national strength could not do without the cultural material of Yiddish-speaking people, and predominantly Eastern European Jews. In Jewish institutional activities, in Jewish popular music, and especially in publications and didactic materials intended for Jewish children, one frequently finds in the 1950s the use of Yiddish to convey support and enthusiasm for the existence and growth of the Jewish state. While for some pro-state activists and future immigrants to Israel this use of the

⁴⁰² Rollansky, “In 1957.”

⁴⁰³ Zak, “Di Misterieze Hant... (Tsum Nayem Atentat Af Idish in Undzerer Shuln) [The Mysterious Hand... (on the New Attempt on Yiddish in Our Schools)].”

language to perform Zionism was dated and irksome,⁴⁰⁴ Yiddishist Zionism served to adapt an established, ethnically coded vernacular to a new political reality, endorsing a new political order – Israel as the Jewish state – without inhabiting its linguistic demands.

Among survivors and refugees who settled in Argentina, a vernacular knowledge of Yiddish and a patriotism for the young Jewish state commonly went hand in hand. Curiosity and enthusiasm for Israeli independence and state-creation led to the production of new translations of materials which for both ideological and practical reasons were written in Hebrew for Israeli audiences.⁴⁰⁵ Hebrew-to-Yiddish translation also entered the theater circuits. Apparently anticipating the success of the production in Buenos Aires, in 1950 two theater troops entered a legal dispute over the rights to open a Yiddish version of Yigal Mosenzon's Israeli play "Bearvot Ha-Negev."⁴⁰⁶ A lack of Hebrew vernacular command did not prevent participation in Israel-based publishing related to the Holocaust. Argentina-based landsmanshaftn wrote up news of their fraternal societies' origins and activities for inclusion in memorial books, some of them published in Israel and which generally also included celebratory remarks on the birth of a Jewish state. Former residents of Bialystok maintained communal ties through a Yiddish-language

⁴⁰⁴ Intergenerational arguments -- carried out, ironically, in Yiddish -- make it clear that many young Zionist activists were frustrated by what they saw as a pointless recalcitrance among Argentinian Yiddishists. Yosef Kaplan, "Tsenter 'Shakhar' (Fun Talmidim Un Graduirt Lerers Baym Lerer-Seminar Fun Der Kehila): Farvos Davke Gevaldn!," n.d.

⁴⁰⁵ A good example is Simja Sneh's translation of the *Sefer-Ha-Palmakh* from Hebrew into Yiddish (abridged) with an introduction explaining his desire for a broader audience to enjoy the heroism of the elite fighting force of the Haganah. Gilead and Megged, *Sefer Ha-Palmakh*.

⁴⁰⁶ "Der Sikhsekh Tsvishn IFT Un Yankev Benami Vegn Di Rekht Oytsufirn 'In Di Vistenishn Fun Negev' [The Quarrel between IFT and Yankev Benami over the Right to Perform 'In the Wastes of the Negev']," *Nai Teater*, October 1950, No. 27 edition, Periodicals, YIVO, New York.

publication, and shifted their philanthropic efforts from the post-war rebuilding of Bialystok to support for Israel.⁴⁰⁷

Even what appeared to be a fairly narrow and specialized commitment to Yiddish culture might be understood by a survivor as fitting within the framework of a cultural contribution to state-building. Leon Vainer's 1950 collection of Yiddish songs, published in Buenos Aires, included simple melodies with rhyming Yiddish lyrics written out both in Yiddish and Roman characters, one for each letter of the [Yiddish] alphabet. Before the Second World War, Leon Wajner had been a prolific musical composer and performer in Poland and across Europe, and after the war, collaborated with Vilna ghetto survivor and partisan Schmerke Kaczerguinski to produce a ghetto song collection, *Unzer Gezang*. In Argentina, where he settled after 1949, he explained his other Yiddish songs for children as a continuation of his prewar work in children's musical education, and dedicated the songs to the memory of his daughter, Rina, who died in the Warsaw Ghetto. In the dedication of *Muzikalisher Alef-beys*, Vainer imagined the happiness of the children he had worked with in Poland, some of whom had, like his daughter, died in the war, many of the others, he wrote, "certainly at this moment" having become "fighters and builders of the state of Israel [...] the Jewish people will go on building and creating in song!"⁴⁰⁸

⁴⁰⁷ Rebecca Kobrin, *Jewish Bialystok and Its Diaspora* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2010), <http://public.eblib.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=535399>.

⁴⁰⁸ Leon Wainer and I. Kaminsky, *El Alfabeto Musical: Canciones Infantiles / Muzikalisher Alef-Beys: Kinder-Lider* (Buenos Aires: T. Graf. Cultura. Aroysgeber: Kieltser landslayt-fareyn un omgegnt in Argentinian, 1950).



Figure 16: "Geheylikt dem ondenk fun mayn tekhterl Rine, vos iz omgekimen in varshever geto."
 "Dedicated to the memory of my daughter Rine, who died in the Warsaw ghetto [...]"⁴⁰⁹

Children took on particular symbolic importance for Yiddish-speaking parents concerned about the continuation of their cultural world. And while the majority of Jewish Argentinian parenting stories of the 1940s and '50s involve children having limited or passive -- rather than fluent and active -- knowledge of Yiddish, Jewish school materials provide another clear index of the extent to which educators and parents blended Zionism with Yiddishism. Pablo Erlich's textbook *Yidish* for the fourth and fifth grade (1958)

⁴⁰⁹ Wainer and Kaminsky.

included passages from Theodore Herzl and Chaim Nahman Bialik,⁴¹⁰ and the “model Hebrew school” Natan Gesang published a bilingual newsletter for parents in Spanish and in Yiddish, explaining their reasons for including Hebrew language instruction in the school curriculum.

Even when the imagined linguistic direction was from Yiddish to Hebrew – as it was, for example, for students of Natan Gesang whose parents read in Yiddish – the use of Yiddish alongside invocations of pro-state Zionism was increasingly the norm. Thus the Kultur-kongress, generally associated with “progressive” Jewish culture and a commitment to Yiddishism in Argentina, awarded Gitele Patshinka of the Sholem-Aleichem school the first prize in the third annual Yiddish essay competition for her submission, “A letter to a friend in Israel”:

Teyere khaver Yekhiel:

Nekhtn hob ikh bakumen dayn blum. Kukndik af ir iz far mayne oygn oysgevaksn erets yisral du vayst, az mayn eyntsiker kholem iz amol tsu forn ahin un azoy vi du, un vi undzerer ale brider, dortn tsu boyen un tsu arbetn far undzer folk. Derfar, ven ikh hob zikh fartift baym onkukn dayn matone, hob ikh derzen undzer galil, (ikh zog dir undzer, vayl ikh fil zikh vi an emese tsvrh[?]) ful mit blumen un mit grins.

[...]

Kh'lern zikh yetst, un ikh greyt zikh tsu oyleh zayn ingikhn keyn erets yisral un dort vel ikh kenen zogn: "kh'leb shoyne ruik in mayn eygn land." Vartndik mit omgeduld dem gliklekh moment zog ikh dir: lehitraot" – Gitele⁴¹¹

Dear friend Yekhiel:

Yesterday I received your flower. Looking at it, the land of Israel sprang up before my eyes, you know that my only dream is sometime to go there, like you, and like all our brothers, to build there and work for our people. So, when I

⁴¹⁰ Pablo Erlich, *Yidish: Farn Fertn Un Finftn Lernyor* (Buenos Aires, 1958).

⁴¹¹ “Driter Shiler-Konkurs Fun Kultur-Kongres in Argentinian [Booklet].”

daydreamed while looking at your gift, I saw our Galilee, (I say our to you, because I feel like a true [...] full of flowers and greenery.

[...]

I'm studying now and preparing to make aliyah very soon to the land of Israel, and there I will be able to say, "I live peacefully now in my own land." Impatiently awaiting the happy moment, I say to you: lehitraot [goodbye]" – Gitele



Figure 17 Participants in the third Yiddish essay competition for schoolchildren, sponsored by the Kultur-kongress in 1956.⁴¹²

An initial friendliness toward Yiddish and proliferation of pro-state feeling among adult Yiddish speakers did little to prepare the way for an overt, public rejection of Yiddish as it would be staged in the Israeli cultural diplomacy of the 1960s. Israeli priorities shifted gradually away from winning the admiration of Yiddish speakers and

⁴¹² "Driter Shiler-Konkurs Fun Kultur-Kongres in Argentinian [Booklet]."

toward building the bureaucracy for organizing immigration to Israel and building cultural ties with non-Jewish Argentinian intellectuals. The Eichmann capture and subsequent hyperbole over the insecurity of a Jewish future in Argentina frustrated Argentinian Jewish institutional leaders. A small number of highly mediatized, violent anti-Jewish attacks fueled the Buenos Aires Aliyah Department's rhetoric of "doom and salvation,"⁴¹³ and immigration to Israel temporarily increased.⁴¹⁴ The institute had been the creation of Tsur, who fought for its funding, and who conceived of it as a space attached to the Israeli embassy, and modeled on other sites of national cultural exchange with building in Buenos Aires, like the Alliance Francaise, or Asociacion Dante Alighieri.⁴¹⁵ At the opening of the institute, held in the Israeli embassy, Tsur foreshadowed the diplomatic delegation's growing disinterest in Argentina's Yiddish milieu, "the State of Israel, emanation of the Jewish people, is being transformed more and more into the spiritual center of our artistic, literary, and cultural creation."⁴¹⁶ Deliberately set up outside of and around the margins of the Jewish school system, where Yiddish still had a place, the Institute was a focal point for the projection of a Hebrew national culture.

⁴¹³ Klor, *Between Exile and Exodus: Argentinian Jewish Immigration to Israel, 1948-1967*, 142.

⁴¹⁴ Israeli bureaucrats organizing immigration of Argentinians to Israel intensified after the anti-Semitic incidents and economic instability of the early 1960s, which saw a diplomatic crisis between Israel and Argentina after the Eichmann capture, the "Sirota Affair", and subsequent passage of a new government anti-discrimination measure. Israeli authorities reacted by increasing the urgency of their rhetoric around "aliyah," while even conservative Argentinian zionists disagreed that preparations for immigration to Israel required secrecy. For an account of the activities of the Aliyah Department of the Jewish Agency, whose agents Klor calls "prophets of doom and salvation," see: Klor, 122.

⁴¹⁵ Goldstein, "El Instituto Cultural Argentino-Israeli (I.C.A.I.): El Proyecto y Su Implementacion Como Nexo Entre Israel y El Judaismo Argentino 1949-1953," 135.

⁴¹⁶ Goldstein, 137.

It was at the ICAII that Ben-Gurion had been invited, in 1969, to speak, alongside Borges, as well as to inaugurate the Hebrew teacher's seminary. The visit became the occasion for another unveiling: a dramatic performance of the language politics of the Hebrew state, once again in the historic venue of Luna Park. Ben-Gurion's staging of the absence of Yiddish also stirred dismay among hundreds of Argentinian Yiddish speakers, for whom the emblematic use of Hebrew was both a practical and a symbolic barrier they would have preferred not to confront.

Ben-Gurion had made use of Yiddish for strategic reasons, despite his longstanding official regard for- and defense of- Hebrew as the language of a future Jewish state. Growing up a native Yiddish speaker in Russian Plonsk, David Grün co-founded the Ezra movement to promote the still-new idea of using Hebrew as a "living language."⁴¹⁷ In Warsaw, where Grün lived briefly during the 1905 Russian Revolution, Hebraism would remain the lesser movement for decades next to Yiddishism, which enjoyed an interwar boom in Warsaw's Yiddish popular culture, in coffee houses, theaters, cinemas, and the press.⁴¹⁸ Also a master of linguistic performance, in 1906 he had spoken in Hebrew on principle at the founding conference of the Poalei Zion in Jaffa, causing some non-Hebrew speakers to leave in frustration.⁴¹⁹ Yiddish was sometimes the necessary medium for Ben-Gurion's interwar promotion of the Jewish national movement. He spoke and wrote in Yiddish in the US, at the 1935 Zionist conference

⁴¹⁷ Anita Shapira, *Ben-Gurion: Father of Modern Israel*, trans. Anthony Berris (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 22.

⁴¹⁸ Scott Ury, *Barricades and Banners: The Revolution of 1905 and the Transformation of Warsaw Jewry* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2012).

⁴¹⁹ Shapira, *Ben-Gurion: Father of Modern Israel*, 73.

(where he knew more delegates would understand it); Yiddish was also the language of his marriage.⁴²⁰ After the massive destruction of Jewish life in the Second World War, he again used Yiddish to great emotional effect, taking the stage at in the German Displaced Persons camp of Zeilsheim to speak on the future of the Jewish colony in Palestine. To a packed auditorium of tearful on-lookers, Ben-Gurion began his address in Yiddish, “Dear Brothers and Sisters [...]”⁴²¹

Despite such performances, Hebraism was an early centerpiece and would remain a lasting feature of Ben-Gurion’s political career. While Ben-Gurion had made intermittent use of Yiddish to make broader nationalist appeals, it would have been naive to anticipate another strategic deployment of Yiddish by the former Prime Minister in Buenos Aires at the end of the 1960s. Ben-Gurion’s “zealotry”⁴²² for Hebrew long predated the existence of a Hebrew state, and his reputation in that respect preceded him. The 1967 war, in which Israel won a speedy victory and tripled its territory practically overnight, was a turning point in the “emergence of a more politicized, ideological Zionism”⁴²³ -- which in Argentina meant a powerful state figure to legitimize the symbolic dominance of Hebrew. An increasing number of Jewish Argentinians had family members who had immigrated to Israel, the position of Yiddish was

⁴²⁰ At first, if not generally. Paula Munweis spoke no Hebrew when Ben-Gurion first met her in New York. Shapira, 48, 99.

⁴²¹ Shapira, 141.

⁴²² Anita Shapira, “Weizmann and Ben-Gurion: Portraits in Contrast,” in *The Individual in History: Essays in Honor of Jehuda Reinharz*, ed. ChaeRan Freeze, Sylvia Fuks Fried, and Eugene Sheppard (Waltham, Mass: Brandeis University Press, 2015), 168.

⁴²³ Gurwitz, “From the New World to the Third World,” 136.

acknowledged even among Yiddishists as “tragic,”⁴²⁴ and negative attitudes toward Yiddish could more easily be voiced in public.⁴²⁵ What need was there to cast the speech in a politically expired language?

By the time of his visit to Argentina, Ben-Gurion was in his early eighties, and formally retired from politics, as he emphasized to journalists and audiences in Buenos Aires. As was customary with important visitors, the Yiddish press followed his movements and planned appearances: his arrival, visit to the Hebraica, a tearful address at a Jewish school, where he was moved to see students learning Hebrew and studying Jewish history. What language did Ben-Gurion speak at these meetings? The Yiddish press did not comment on the medium of address. But the subject of language was never far from the surface. At the Hebraica, introducing Ben-Gurion, Dr. Gregorio Topolovski reportedly attributed the persistence of the Jews as a people to the “golden chain of their

⁴²⁴ In 1968, this word -- and the sentiment behind it -- appeared most forcefully in Yiddish press reports on the situation of Yiddish in the Jewish schools, which was looked at as a cipher for the future loss of the language in Jewish Argentinian society. Y. Yanos, “B’kitsur [Briefly],” *Di Prese*, November 28, 1968, Recortes de periodicos: Educacion: Desaparicion del idish en escuelas judias c. 1968, IWO, Buenos Aires; See also: Y. Horn, “49 Shuln in Di Provintsn Un Bislekh Idish Vert Gelernt Bloyz in 17 [49 Schools in the Provinces and Little by Little Yiddish Is Taught in Only 17],” *Di Idishe Tsaytung*, December 22, 1968, Recortes de periodicos: Educacion: Desaparicion del idish en escuelas judias c. 1968, IWO, Buenos Aires; Y. Rivkes, “Afn Yidish-Front Iz Do Nayes... [News on the Yiddish Front],” *Undzer Gedank*, 1968, No 211 edition, Recortes de periodicos: Educacion: Desaparicion del idish en escuelas judias c. 1968, IWO, Buenos Aires; Zak, “Di Misterieze Hant... (Tsum Nayem Atentat Af Idish in Undzerer Shuln) [The Mysterious Hand... (on the New Attempt on Yiddish in Our Schools)]”; Niemoi, “Epes Vegn Der Tetikayt Fun Komitet Tsu Farteydikn Idish [On the Activities of the Committee for the Defense of Yiddish.] [Clipping],” *Di Idishe Tsaytung*, November 12, 1969, Recortes de periodicos: Educacion: Desaparicion del idish en escuelas judias c. 1968, IWO, Buenos Aires.

⁴²⁵ In 1971, Mundo Israelita referred to young people voicing their objections to the use of Yiddish at a community event as a “guerilla linguistica,” interestingly applying to the language question a word (guerilla) usually used in contexts of political insurgency. (De semana en semana, April 30, 1971, p2) Gurwitz, “From the New World to the Third World,” 127.

lived traditions,” which, if broken, even the spread of the Hebrew language to “all the Jews in the diaspora” could not have repaired.⁴²⁶

When the day of the main event at Luna Park arrived, however, the response was bitter. Like Golda Meir, Ben-Gurion drew thousands of spectators curious to see and hear the famous founding father of the Jewish state with their own eyes and ears. Many anticipated, as the Yiddish daily had reported, that they would hear the “direct word” of a historic figure. In other words, many anticipated hearing him speak Yiddish. Instead, of course, Ben-Gurion addressed the crowd in Hebrew, with a Spanish translator at his side.

“David Ben-Gurion was received with extraordinary ovations,” the leading article in *Di Presse* said, “but his speech in Hebrew had to be gotten through in a schematic translation to Spanish for the thousands of Jews who were expecting his direct words in Yiddish [...]”⁴²⁷ It did not go un-noted that previous addresses for Jewish Argentinians had always incorporated Yiddish.⁴²⁸ In light of such a precedent, the emotional impact of the speech was dramatic. Because of language choice, the Zionist enthusiasm of the crowd had not been fully tapped. “He should have known – or someone should have told him” wrote the author:

that in the case of our *yishev* the Yiddish language is the best way to get into the very hearts of the Jews. Ben-Gurion speaks a lovely Yiddish and he is in possession, so to speak, of the ‘instrument’ to communicate directly with out

⁴²⁶ “Der Entuziastisher Kaboles-Ponem [...] [The Enthusiastic Reception [...]] [Clipping],” *Di Presse*, June 4, 1969.

⁴²⁷ “‘Toyznter Yidn Hobn Zikh Farzamlit in Luna Park Un Manifestirt Dem Bund Fun Am-Yisroel Mit Medine-Yisroel’ [Thousands of Jews Gathered in Luna Park to Demonstrate the Bond between the People of Israel and the State of Israel],” *Di Presse*, June 3, 1969.

⁴²⁸ “‘Toyznter Yidn Hobn Zikh Farzamlit in Luna Park Un Manifestirt Dem Bund Fun Am-Yisroel Mit Medine-Yisroel’ [Thousands of Jews Gathered in Luna Park to Demonstrate the Bond between the People of Israel and the State of Israel].”

crowd. We are one hundred percent certain that if he had spoken Yiddish at the great mass event in Luna Park, the effect of his appearance would have been ten times stronger than it was. We personally heard how tens of Jews complained after the gathering in Luna Park about why the famous leader did not speak in Yiddish.⁴²⁹



Di Presse, 3 June 1969: “A view of the crowd that overflowed the stadium, to see and to hear the great historical figure David Ben-Gurion.”

The visit of Ben-Gurion contrasted with earlier visits and appearances by writers, diplomats, and teachers, on behalf of Israel and Zionism, but carried out in Yiddish, or in Spanish, with certain Hebrew-language greetings and formalities. This was the first time that an audience – eager to hear the “direct word” of the Zionist founding father and former Prime Minister – listened with little or no comprehension to the direct speech of an Israeli figurehead. The coverage suggests that the event was experienced by the older Yiddish-speakers who visibly made up most of the audience as a disappointment. This

⁴²⁹ Falik Lerner, “Nokhn Bazukh Fun David Ben-Gurion...,” *Di Presse*, June 6, 1969.

Luna Park appearance – which contrasted so starkly with that of Golda Meir two decades before – suggested that the sovereignty of the state had finally eclipsed Israeli esteem for Yiddish altogether for the first time since diplomats had arrived in Argentina.

iv. Conclusion: On language “death” and “revival”

The story of Hebrew revitalization and the language politics of Zionism in Israel have to some extent overshadowed the place of Yiddish in the cultural work of state-building. As this chapter shows, Israeli diplomats were not quick to create conflict around language matters, but in the 1950s preferred to balance official policy with informal friendliness to what they viewed as a diaspora language in decline.

By the start of the 1960s, Israeli diplomacy was de-investing in Yiddish cultural networks. In part, ambassadors drove this process, by creating new spaces and platforms for cultural exchange, building on the Israeli-Argentinian agreement signed between Tsur and Perón. In Argentina, in a national atmosphere of revolutionary political rhetoric and a global one that prized national independence, it became “possible,” especially among the youth,” to be an enemy of Yiddish,” which was not represented by any state. Not all Yiddish speakers, however, felt negatively about the language. The visit of Ben-Gurion to Argentina in 1969, and the reciprocal visit of Jorge Luis Borges to Israel that same year (and subsequent trip to receive the Israel Prize in 1971), marked a transitional moment in the public recognition, among Yiddish speakers, that the content of Jewish culture projected not only by the state, but also by figures of local (Argentinian) renown, would be ancient, mythical, and Biblical, and that secular Yiddish culture had little power

of transfer within Argentinian-Israeli relations. The fact that speakers of Yiddish in Argentina had been flexible in their ways of connecting ideology to language – blending Zionism and Yiddish, for example – made the performance of Zionism without Yiddish all the more important as an act of Israeli cultural diplomacy and Israeli language policies. Most Jewish Argentinians would never speak Hebrew. But when Ben-Gurion addressed them in Hebrew, he demonstrated the limits – from the Israeli perspective -- of the Yiddish language as the basis for a transnational identity.

The performance of Hebrew, which at the same time performed the absence of Yiddish, also belongs to the history of the “death” of the Yiddish language. Accounts of vernacular decline vary in their metrics and methods of pointing to critical moments of loss and decline, slip and shift from one language to another, and surely these exist. By the 1930s, a majority of Jewish Argentinians were probably bilingual; by 1968, few Jewish school remained that spent any substantial time on Yiddish instruction; and by the end of the 1980s, what the Yiddish-language newspapers that had once been read by thousands had “all but disappeared.”⁴³⁰ At the same time, as this study has demonstrated, any act of extrapolation from a single metric on language to the experience of a group is also an act of political interpretation. This is especially true when the death of a language is foretold.⁴³¹ Celebration of the revival of Hebrew was underway even while, in the 1960s, thousands of Israeli residents had yet to learn the language. Likewise, for at least

⁴³⁰ Avni, *Argentina & the Jews*, 208.

⁴³¹ Joseph Errington, “Getting Language Rights: The Rhetorics of Language Endangerment and Loss,” *American Anthropologist* Vol. 105, no. Special Issue: Language Politics and Practices (December 2003): 723–32.

half of the 20th century, multiple generations of Argentinian Yiddish speakers lived in the company of the idea that the death of Yiddish may be imminent.

CONCLUSION

One story often told about Yiddish is that the language, like millions of men and women who spoke it, was murdered in the camps and forests of German-occupied Eastern Europe.⁴³² A second is that the core remaining population of Yiddish speakers – living in interwar Poland and in immigration – were already abandoning the language before the Holocaust as they assimilated to urban life in new nation-states.⁴³³

I have tried in this dissertation not to answer the question of “when” Yiddish died, but instead to show the range of performative responses to the language adopted by Jewish Argentinians, a population that comprised several generations of immigrants and their children, former colonists, urban workers and liberal intellectuals, and those

⁴³² This view was expressed shortly after the Second World War, for example by the anonymous survivor-writer quoted in Chapter 3. “Album ‘Di Diskusye Vegn Idish’ [The Discussion about Yiddish]”; For a later echo of the same view of Yiddish as an “absent, assassinated language,” see Rachel Ertel, *Dans la langue de personne: poésie yiddish de l’anéantissement* ([Paris]: Éd. du Seuil, 1993).

⁴³³ Chone Shmeruk, a Warsaw-born Israeli scholar of Yiddish, made the case that Yiddish speakers in interwar Poland were familiar with the Polish language, and that the majority enrollment of Jewish children in Polish state schools by the 1930s clearly spelled the decline of the language before the Second World War. Shmeruk’s shift of a research focus from the history of the Yiddish-Hebrew symbiosis to the Polish-Yiddish-Hebrew “polysystem” --i.e., the multilingualism of interwar Jewish life in Poland -- was read by some as part of a turning-away from Israel and attempt at a Polish-Jewish rapprochement after the end of Polish Communism. Such a response to Shmeruk’s work demonstrates the persistence in the 1980s and 1990s of the anti-assimilationist language politics of the 1930s. Shmeruk, “Hebrew-Yiddish-Polish: A Trilingual Jewish Culture”; Ruth R Wisse, “Yiddish: Past, Present, Imperfect,” *Commentary* 104, no. 5 (November 1997): 32–39.

displaced by two world wars and the vertiginous politics of Soviet and Communist states. I am not as interested in disrupting a narrative of vernacular decline as I am in globalizing both narratives of Yiddish – its loss and its replacement – and in showing how the fate of Argentinian Yiddish involved both particular causes and generated particular legacies owing to a history of mass immigration, local experience of the global Cold War, and continuing preoccupation with the place of immigrant difference within the national culture. In doing so, I have tried to provide an analysis of language “loss” that can raise new questions about the relations between immigration politics and linguistic performance in sites of mass migration from Europe.

The performative approach to linguistic groups and boundaries adopted here allows forms of individual and collective engagement with language often treated separately to be treated within a single frame of analysis. These include: cultural production, vernacular competencies, willed attrition or neglect, language activism, stereotyping and stigmas, stage performance, and salvage work. Focusing on one or two of these at the exclusion of the others leads to exaggerated impressions of “decline” or “assassination,” “revival” and “flourishing,” not uncommonly reflecting the ideological preferences or wishes of an author.

Simja Sneh may have been right when he said that while “in other countries Yiddish dies of its own accord,” in Argentina it was “killed slowly.”⁴³⁴ While a “rise and fall” or decline narrative is largely correct for the period from roughly 1920 to 1980, neither abandonment (assimilation) nor loss (displacement and genocide) adequately explains the local – and transnational – cultural politics of the fate of Yiddish in

⁴³⁴ Toker, Testimonio de Simja Sneh.

Argentina. A strictly vernacular history of the language would miss the different imagined futures of speakers, including those who by the 1930s were imagining their return to Yiddish, after first having moved away from it in the context of centennial nationalist *hispanismo*. “To write in *argentino*, ah! How I wish to!”⁴³⁵ wrote Martha Shtuker in 1931, imagining a future literary career she was never to have. Born near Brest-Litovsk just after the Russian Revolution of 1917, in Montefiore Shtuker fantasized of leaving the dusty Jewish colony where “there are Jews from every country with different dialects”⁴³⁶ for the cosmopolitanism of *gran Buenos Aires*, where most Jewish immigrants now lived and where her idol, the Spanish-language Jewish writer Cesar Tiempo, had made a name for himself. At his request, she shared her Yiddish poetry with him by mail, but publishing these was “*un clop in tzu gueclapte tirn*”⁴³⁷ [a knock on closed doors]. Generally described as vibrant and active well into the 1950s, Yiddish publishing – like Spanish-language publishing – was a predominantly masculine realm. The children’s literature Shtuker published in Yiddish as an adult after the Second World War belongs to the history of post-war Yiddish publishing’s “boom,” but also conceals the road-not-taken of her romance with Spanish in the decade of anti-immigrant reaction and re-definition of Argentinian Spanish as a distinctive non-peninsular national variety.

Yiddish-language activism – a Jewish nationalism based in the Yiddish language – traveled to Buenos Aires from Europe and changed the direction of Jewish linguistic

⁴³⁵ BNA-ARCH-CEN-CT. Martha Shtuker to Cesar Tiempo, Montefiore 17 de Noviembre de 1931. Caja 4: CT1999.

⁴³⁶ IBID CT 2026, 1932.

⁴³⁷ IBID CT 2467.

imaginaries. The phenomenon of linguistic performance haunts the historical record when it comes to disentangling the pragmatic-vernacular from the ideological. “They pretend not to speak Polish,”⁴³⁸ fumed a Polish embassy official, also in the 1930s, describing the Jewish immigrants from Poland he encountered in Buenos Aires. The widespread perception that immigrants made use of their multilingualism – switching and passing, showing off or dissimulating in the city – distressed Jews and non-Jews concerned with maintaining control of ethno-national boundaries.

The centrality of mass immigration to modern Argentinian history – and the considerable impact of immigrant languages, especially Italian, on the cadence and vocabulary of Argentinian Spanish – have encouraged charged associations (both positive and negative) with non-Spanish languages. Successive governments, swinging between more or less inclusive or exclusive visions of the Argentinian nation, did not ignore the political implications of language difference. Whereas nationalists in the 1930s considered a constitutional amendment to make Spanish-language competence requisite for citizenship, non-Spanish languages were newly valorized when immigrant *colectividades* were recognized and celebrated under Juan Perón. This celebration of Argentinians descended from European – and now also Latin American – immigrant *colectividades* has not disappeared, and today is managed by a *Federación Argentina de Colectividades* [Argentinian Federation of Collectivities], created in 1976.⁴³⁹

⁴³⁸ Marta Kowalska, “Los judíos y el problema del movimiento migratorio de Polonia a la Argentina (1919-1939),” *Proceedings of the World Congress of Jewish Studies*, 1985, 213–20.

⁴³⁹ *Colectividades* is roughly translatable as “collectivities” or “groups” but has the specific connotation of an ethnic or national group defined by its migration history.

Contemporary festivals and dances showcasing the ethnic cultures of these *colectividades* have their precursors -- in the Jewish case, these are the spoken performance of Yiddish on the stage in the 1940s and '50s, when Jewish porteño theater was possible because of the transnational geography that established Jewish immigrant networks in Argentina in the 1920s. The stage performance of Yiddish also captures the tension between a cosmopolitan Yiddish and Yiddish as a local marker of race in Buenos Aires. While Jacob Ben Ami was praised as an “*actor de raza*,” Argentinian actors who accompanied him on stage were criticized in Spanish-language reviews for the grating sounds of their Jewish speech. The association between the local sounds of Jewishness and transnational “Yiddishland” – based after the Second World War mainly in New York City – was fragile, and subject to disruption, just as the license to perform was, as when municipal police shuttered the Jewish Popular Theater IFT, part of a state-led crackdown on political dissidents by Perón that happened to align with internal Jewish disagreements over Soviet Communism.

The fate of Yiddish in Argentina was bound to both local and transnational events, neither of which aligned consistently with promotion or destruction of the language. Language “survival” in Argentina as part of the local memory of Yiddish can also be traced to the responses of the displaced population that settled in Buenos Aires from the late 1940s on. Argentina reveals in microcosm the uses of a vernacular to re-inscribe community as a national boundary around a “people” displaced; Polish, Hungarian, Romanian, and German Jews made Yiddish their common ground in refugee circles, in some cases actively undertaking to learn the language in order to enter a world that might offer them not only a reconstitution or simulacrum of Jewish life in Eastern

Europe, but also something like a replacement for the other national cultures from which they had been expelled.

Throughout the decades over which these chapters unfolded, Jewish multilingualism followed the course of Yiddish like a shadow. When psychoanalyst, teacher, and poet Perla Sneh traveled to Poland for the first time as an adult, she experienced the uncanny sensation of recognizing a language she had never spoken or studied. “I realized it was because my father used to sing in Polish,” she said. Her father, Simja Sneh, who had sent her to both state- and Jewish schools in Buenos Aires, and passed on to her his deep affection for Yiddish, had not entirely excluded the sounds of Polish from their home.

Displaced survivors of the Holocaust, like Sneh, re-encountered the European language activism that had traveled to Argentina in the 1930s when they arrived after World War II, and took refuge in the Yiddish language. What public, publishable future could there be in the 1950s for an inner life of Polish-Yiddish linguistic coexistence? Or, as Martha Shtuker had asked in the 1930s of her combination of Spanish and Yiddish and pretensions to a literary career, “who am I anyway?” [*“y yo quién soy?”*]

Multilingualism is itself a particular subject position and the fragility of transnational Yiddish owes much to the fact that the performance of Yiddish relied on the militancy, nostalgia, or imperviousness to stigma of multilingual Yiddish speakers. Transnational Yiddishism could itself be called a form of (stateless) cultural diplomacy, another realm that operated either to promote or to marginalize Yiddish as a Jewish Argentinian language. The fact that Zionist politicians and diplomats of the 1940s and ‘50s had themselves been multilingual Jewish Europeans, led them to meet Argentinian

Jews half-way, interacting with Argentinian Yiddish even as they promoted a Hebrew state.

Much is lost when language histories are told in aggregate and the “fragility” of Yiddish in the title is meant to underscore the volatility of transnationalism that produces radically different local legacies. When Israeli ex-Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion addressed Jewish Argentinians in Hebrew at Luna Park, he marked a change in the global public recognition of Yiddish in official circles projected by Israel. But this research has convinced me that memories of a European, cosmopolitan, secular Yiddish world lie at least a decade closer to the surface in Argentina than they do in the United States, where performances of Yiddish shared space with German, to a greater degree, interwar immigration was ended sooner, and kitsch and slapstick encroached earlier on secular, leftist Yiddishism with its seriousness drawn from Russian and Polish models. In Buenos Aires, “Yiddish” and “Jewish” are more nearly synonymous – in Spanish – than they are in the United States today, and no large Orthodox community has, as in New York, appeared in Buenos Aires to reconfigure the meaning of Yiddish as a majority religious language.

My interest in how the racial-linguistic boundary operates in Argentinian history should not be mistaken as an assertion that Argentina or Latin America is uniquely conditioned to racialize language, but only that this process operates differently depending on place. Language is racialized in the United States, with different coordinates; examples include controversy around the status of Black English, discrimination against Spanish-speakers, and anti-Arabic-language Islamophobia.

By contrast, Argentina's national language, Spanish, retains the imprint of immigrant languages – a fact often mentioned by speakers – and of nationalist claims to a “special” status and quality tied to arguments of racial exceptionalism. “I can tell when someone's parents don't speak Spanish,” one man – a sociologist and son of a former Yiddish newspaperman – told me – not because their Spanish sounds limited, but to the contrary, because of the overcompensation and articulateness he detects in their speech. Countless Argentinian families – many of them products of multiple religious or ethnic intermarriages -- have boxes and folders of memorabilia that include yellowed books or school papers in the Yiddish language. Whereas the afterlife of a Yiddish accent in the US has been re-coded simply as a “New York accent,” in Argentina, a parody of Jewish-inflected speech would still sound much as it did in the 1930s. The emotion that the end of Yiddish evokes among some adults today may be less immediately related to a post-Holocaust trauma, and more directly a product of anxiety over the artificiality of the contemporary discourse on multiculturalism in an Argentina whose leadership has embraced neoliberalism, while unemployment and inflation remains high and urban *villas* [slums] expand.

This history – of a half-century of linguistic performances as a lens onto ethno-national boundaries in the making – raises questions about how and why language constellates with other markers of race and ethnicity in Latin America. Language difference is entangled with racial imaginaries throughout Latin America, and expressed through varieties of spoken Spanish more or less “fluent,” among non-Spanish speaking immigrants, and among Latin American immigrants, by Spanish more or less inflected by indigenous languages. Immigrants in Argentina today from other parts of Latin America

are “recognized” by their appearance, types of work, and styles of speech, as were European immigrants in the early twentieth century.⁴⁴⁰ How each of these axes of difference are constituted and stigmatized – or valorized – by in- and out- group members is neither inevitable nor static, but depends both on fluctuations in local and transnational politics as well as the performative choices of groups and individuals. For example, when asked by reporters from the anti-discrimination project “*ni bolitas ni boludos*”⁴⁴¹ if she had taken on the “Buenos Aires [*porteño*] accent” in the thirty-three years since coming to Buenos Aires from Potosí, Marina Rivero said “*No, gracias a Dios no. ¿Para qué? ¿Para qué se me va a pegar? Soy boliviana*” “No, thank God no. What for? Why would it stick to me? I’m Bolivian.”⁴⁴² The speech style figures in her answer as belonging to “*costumbre*” [custom], and leads her to other examples of custom like knowing how to eat traditional Bolivian foods, and lastly to another basis for the Bolivianness of her children: that they “have Bolivian blood.”⁴⁴³ A *porteño* accent and “Bolivian blood” would constitute for Rivero an unacceptable form of hybridity.

To the extent that Yiddish and other immigrant languages globalized the racialization of language – a process that surely began centuries earlier under colonial rule – the study of race and indigenous language performance may represent a future

⁴⁴⁰ In 2001, the year of Argentina’s economic crisis, 35% of intraregional immigrants to Argentina were Paraguayans, 25% were Bolivians, 23% Chileans, 13% Uruguayans, and 4% Brazilians. Cynthia Pizarro, *Bolivian Labor Immigrants’ Experiences in Argentina* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015), Introduction.

⁴⁴¹ The project name contests [“neither...nor...”] derogatory words used to describe Bolivians in Argentina.

⁴⁴² “Marina Rivero, una potosina dulce como miel de tawa tawas.” Facebook video post by Ni Bolitas Ni Boludos [<https://www.facebook.com/nibolitasniboludos/videos/795351273967757/?v=795351273967757>] Accessed 3/8/19.

⁴⁴³ Ibid.

direction for the history of how European and Latin American racial constructions relying on language emerged in the Americas.

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