Polacos in Argentina: Polish Jews, Interwar Migration, and the Emergence of Transatlantic Jewish Culture by Mariusz Kałczewiak (review)

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The establishment of the Second Polish Republic in 1918 was a turning point for Jewish immigrants in Argentina and a climactic moment in Mariusz Kalczewiak’s new monograph, Polacos in Argentina: Polish Jews, Interwar Migration, and the Emergence of Transatlantic Jewish Culture. This book belongs to a growing body of scholarship on interwar Polish-Jewish cultural contacts with Argentina. Based on research in Yiddish, Spanish, and Polish, and particularly on transnational Yiddish-language press reports and travelogues, the book argues that interwar migration gave rise to a category of “subethnic” Polish-Jewish belonging—the world of the Polacos—which depended on the existence of transnational ties between Jews in Poland and Argentina.

The Polisher Farband, a Jewish immigrant homeland association formed in Buenos Aires in 1916, exemplifies the allegiance to and identification with Poland among Jewish immigrants in Argentina captured by the book’s title. The Farband aspired to represent all Polish Jews in Argentina. Its members cultivated an image of Jewish Argentine middle-class respectability, spearheaded communication with Poland’s ambassador to Argentina, and protested antisemitism in Poland. To be a “Good Polish Jew” meant participating in its social and philanthropic projects. The author argues that the Farband was also an “ethnic training room” for immigrants to learn about Argentine cultural practices, such as picnicking in popular middle-class destinations like the forests of the Olivos neighborhood (143). Its members were influential and active in other Jewish Argentine institutions, especially ones that aimed to reinvigorate Yiddish-language culture in Argentina, including the Yiddish Scientific Institute, the secular Yiddish school network, and the post-WWII publishing project Dos Poylishe Yidntum [Polish Jewry], which contributed to the legacy of “Polish Jewry” as an entity.

The concept of “subethnic identity” would benefit from a clear definition (10). While the framing of the book emphasizes Poland as a center of global Yiddish culture, not all characters in the book were Polish-speaking, had lived in Poland, or self-identified as “Polish Jews.” As the author argues, Polacos were united not by Poland only, but by a constellation of concerns: “the independence of Poland, there-centered Zionism [Bundism], and Yiddish-centered nationalism” (11). This definition of shared concerns is at once broader and less nationally-determined than the proposition that a “Polish Jewish subethnicity” emerged in Argentina (14). Pinie Wald, for example, was a committed interna-
nationalist who came to Argentina in 1906 and never joined the Farband (146). For Katz, Buenos Aires existed in relation to at least three other Yiddish centers: New York, Moscow, and Warsaw. Jacobo Botoshansky was a “citizen of the Yiddishland” who placed activism for the Yiddish language above Polish-Jewishness (83). While the fate of Poland and of the Jews living there mattered deeply to many Jewish immigrants in Argentina, the author may overstate the importance of Poland’s political boundaries to the self-conceptions of Polish Jews beyond the Farband, especially considering the relatively more expansive global geographies of Yiddishism and Jewish diaspora nationalism in the 1920s and 1930s. 

Polacos also encompasses the cultural choices that awaited new immigrants who “made America” to Argentina. The “new Polish immigrants” or “argentiner yidn [Argentine Jews]” of the 1920s and 1930s saw themselves as Jews and Yiddish speakers foremost, and their “Argentineness was a specific cultural idiosyncrasy of their Jewishness” (111). They composed essays, stories, and poems in Yiddish depicting urban life in Buenos Aires, idealism and disillusionment, tango music and mate, a traditional Argentine drink, and poverty in the conventillos (tenements). They lived alongside “israelitas argentinos” [Jewish Argentines] who, having arrived decades earlier or been born in Argentina, expressed their Jewishness in Spanish, joined ethnic Jewish clubs like the Sociedad Hebraica, or the Liga Israelita pro-Argentina (a Jewish group that opposed immigration), participated in parliamentary politics, and translated Yiddish literature into Spanish.

An original and important contribution to the history of one of the lesser-known Yiddish centers, Polacos provides a wealth of material for those who are interested in the Argentine “branch” of interwar Polish-Jewish culture.

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Considering the mid-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, the period of peak US expansion and national consolidation, Koffman sets out to understand encounters between Jews and Native Americans.