

## Spreading Roots: The Origins of Jewish Libraries in Argentina

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### Abstract:

*The libraries of various communities that migrated from around the world to Latin American countries hold an important part of their immigrant history. Among these new communities, Jews, a minority, are culturally significant. Their arrival in a number of Latin American countries, beginning in the late 19th century generated a network of social, religious, cultural and educational institutions that had an impact beyond their own communal borders.*

*While much research about immigration to Argentina exists, very few studies focus on the intersection between immigrants and libraries, and even less if we consider only the Jewish community.*

*This presentation addresses the history of Jewish libraries created by different waves of immigrants who emigrated from Europe to Argentina. It explores the socio-cultural context in which these libraries were created, their foundational objectives, how they operated and their importance for their communities.*

*The first Jewish immigrants, originally from Russia, Ukraine and Poland escaping from the pogroms of czarist Russia, settled in Jewish agricultural settlements in Argentina, starting in 1889. The presentation will analyze their libraries, which functioned as a place of cultural dissemination; a space to maintain their language as a valuable and irreplaceable tool in the construction of their ethnic identity. It continues with the flow of workers, artisans and craftsmen fleeing Eastern Europe who established several labor libraries, which disseminated their political beliefs and ideals. Finally, it examines the fourth wave of immigrants from Central European German-speaking countries, fleeing from Nazi Europe, who established libraries in organizations they created to assist recent immigrants and lending libraries hosted in bookstores.*

*Each of these libraries, both rural and urban, had a huge impact in their communities and society in general. Only recently, their heirs are starting to collect and preserve the memories and histories of these immigrants by creating museums and rescuing from oblivion their stories and belongings.*

**Keywords:** Jewish libraries – Argentina, Libraries in the Jewish Argentinean colonies, Argentinean Jewish labor affiliated libraries, Argentinean Jewish community libraries

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## Introduction

During the late nineteenth century Argentina allocated significant financial resources to encourage European immigration. The development of agriculture transformed the country and increased the demand for agricultural workers. Though Jews were not targeted as highly desirable immigrant stock, this is when 815 Jews, fleeing persecution and intolerance from czarist Russia, arrived on board the SS Wesser in August 1889 laying the foundations of the first agricultural Jewish settlement, known as Moisesville, in the province of Santa Fé<sup>i</sup>. These immigrants, as well as all those who followed them, settled in different provinces, and in spite of countless hardships to earn a living were able to survive and thrive in the midst of a cultural and geographic environment that was alien to them. Located far from big cities these communities built a robust and rich educational and cultural system which flourished and gave the country some of its most remarkable professionals, politicians, writers and artists.

A number of these immigrants brought with them religious or political books to strengthen their beliefs. Few of them were illiterate; they knew Yiddish and at least some other language (Russian, German, Hungarian, Polish).

The world economic crisis that began in 1929, and continued well into the 1930s and beyond, affected the agricultural products Argentina exported to Europe. This led the government to promote a policy of import substitution and accordingly, the development of local industries in order to replace foreign products. Faced with dire conditions in farming communities, many Jews left the settlements for nearby cities and eventually reached Buenos Aires. There they met with Jews who escaped from Eastern Europe after the 1905 revolution, and who were active members of several workers' movements (Socialist, Bundist and/or Anarchist).

In January 1919, a pogrom took place in Argentina after a clash between workers and the police during a strike that paralyzed the country. The Radical party (in spite of its name, a centrist party), then in power, saw these immigrants, who were demanding a six day work week and better salaries, as a foreign force which needed to be destroyed in order to save the country and its institutions. This pogrom, which lasted a week, is known as La Semana Trágica (The Tragic Week)<sup>ii</sup>. The capital city's Jewish community was severely hit and its property destroyed. Libraries and newspapers among them.

Argentina kept its open door policy until the 1930s, but from 1938 onwards, as Hitler's power was rising, it almost closed its doors just when Jews from Central Europe were in need of seeking a refuge. Once a safe haven was found, these new refugees, or émigrés, built organizations and libraries to preserve their heritage as they also had to learn how to survive in an unknown milieu.

Jewish immigrants felt and were perceived as 'different' by the rest of Argentine society, be that in the cities or in the agricultural colonies. As throughout centuries and in a myriad of locations, in order to survive, they recreated their own universe. They built libraries as social institutions and as a space to hand down ancestral values and social beliefs; a place to share ideas, read out loud to others books and/or the news which brought them information from back home, or just to socialize.

According to Osvaldo Quiroga, in charge of the Museum of the Colonies in Villa Domínguez: "the light radiated by a candle, a small lantern or a kerosene lamp, indicated that in the semi wild surrounding area to the train station 'Gobernador Domínguez', the mind was cultivated, since the settlers after a long day of hard work in the fields nourished not only on Jewish history but began to read and understand Argentinean history, geography, customs and literature"<sup>iii</sup>.

In 1908, the reinstatement of Law No. 419, "Protection of public libraries," had an enormous impact on the libraries at the colonies<sup>iv</sup> and on labor parties and unions since they were able to request funds to improve them<sup>v</sup>. The government required libraries to operate under certain parameters which, in the

case of the Socialist libraries, meant to give up the spaces in which they operated inside party locales. But the law also provided a way to start integrating immigrants with their new neighbours since they started to buy books in Spanish, a language their children started to feel more comfortable with.

In addition to collecting and borrowing books, these libraries became a space that promoted cultural events: conferences, workshops, and political debates, as well as spaces for recreation: ball dances and theatrical plays, among other activities.

### **Libraries in the Jewish Colonies:**

The creation of the Jewish Colonization Association (JCA)<sup>vi</sup> by Baron Maurice Hirsch, in 1891, facilitated mass emigration of Jews from Russia where they had been deprived of the necessary means to live respectably.

In most cases the immigrants who arrived to Argentina had no previous agricultural experience. They accepted the terms offered to them, they did not have any other choice. While in Europe, and particularly in Czarist Russia at the time under consideration, they were often marginalized, ostracized, persecuted and restricted in what professions and trades they could engage in. When faced with the possibility of leaving, they sold their possessions to afford the voyage. They were convinced that, once they arrived, they would be given title to the land as they paid huge amounts of money to the Argentinean consulate for what they thought was a bona fide purchase. But those lands were sold to other people, and by the time they arrived they had no place to stay.<sup>vii</sup>

These colonists created a number of new settlements in the provinces of Buenos Aires, Entre Ríos, Santa Fe, Santiago del Estero, Chaco, La Pampa and Neuquén<sup>viii</sup>. The settlements reached their peak in 1930, but life wasn't easy. Hunger, diseases and overcrowding were some of the reasons why one of the first things these immigrants built was the cemetery.

In addition to learning a new language and new customs, as drinking mate<sup>ix</sup>, they had to face the difficulties other farmers had to contend with, such as the distance of the farms from the railroad stations and from the markets; locusts and drought.

Alongside the economic activities that took place in the colonies there were prolific political, social and cultural events where most of the settlers participated in one way or another. The creation of schools, libraries, periodicals/newspapers, theater groups, choral groups, agricultural co-operatives, hospitals and political parties are just a sample of how these immigrants met their needs. In the libraries they organized activities around reading books or commenting on literary masterpieces in Yiddish or Spanish.<sup>x</sup>

Promoting literacy offered the possibility of a better future and attracted those who were craving cultural improvement. It was clear to the settlers the influence that literacy, reading and access to education and a library had on their future success. The JCA built coeducational primary schools for every one hundred rural families that were staffed by teachers trained by the Alliance Israélite Universelle. But these schools were far away and not easily accessible. After the JCA handed the schools to the local government, 1919-1923, the children were able to interact with the local population (criollos) and with immigrants from other communities since at that point the instruction was held in Spanish. JCA teachers instructed Jewish content in Yiddish, which was the language spoken at most homes. The schools consisted, at first, of a room which also served as a home for the teachers. There the poorest children received the only meal of the day, a breakfast which consisted of a glass of milk and some cookies. In short order, the settlers added the library to the room, or built an adjacent room where they stored the Yiddish, Hebrew and Spanish books. The library subscribed to some Jewish Russian newspapers such as *Haamelitz* and *Hatzefira*, which kept the colonists informed of events in their homeland.

Why so many libraries in the settlements? In 1907, the JCA decided to financially support the existence of these libraries if they were administered by the settlement co-operative, or some other organization, under the supervision of the settlement administrator. The JCA subsidized the purchase of books equal to the amount the settlers were investing, up to \$500 pesos. JCA's goal was for the settlers to purchase material concerning agriculture and learn how to improve their skills and ability to work the land.<sup>xi</sup>

In 1892, a small library was established in Colonia Mauricio. In Colonia Clara, which eventually had 17 libraries, some of them at private homes, a school teacher organized a lending library to facilitate access to those who lived far away, and in Colonia Moises Ville another library was created which lent books for a monthly fee<sup>xii</sup>. Some settlers brought with them religious books, political texts and world literature, storing the books in their homes or donating them to the libraries. In both cases the books were lent to the community members.

The co-operatives helped build libraries and arranged lecture series. In 1908, during a board meeting of the Fondo Comunal co-operative approval was given to build a library in Dominguez and throughout the colony. By 1906, the Primera Sociedad Agrícola Israelita de Lucienville co-operative, had over 100 members, and by 1914 the Centro Juventud Israelita Argentino co-operative at the Baron Hirsch colony had 182 members<sup>xiii</sup>. In Colonia Clara, Fondo Comunal co-operative and in Colonia Moises Ville, La Mutua Agrícola de Moisés Ville co-operative brought together the books that were scattered throughout the community in order to organize central libraries. Most of the settlers later drifted to the town and today only some of these libraries exist, mostly as museums.

### **Jewish Labor Affiliated Libraries**

Social justice and freedom<sup>xiv</sup> are concepts embedded in Jewish culture and tradition. This may be one of the reasons so many Jews joined leftist parties. Many of these Yiddish-speaking Jews persecuted in czarist Russia because of their political beliefs, participated in proletarian struggles and joined the incipient labor movement in Argentina. They arrived with their revolutionary and progressive ideas and zeal to a very conservative and deeply rooted Catholic country.

These leftists groups, Anarchists, Bundists, and later on also Communists, kept during the first years their language and culture, as did leftist immigrants from Italy or Spain. The Argentinean Socialist Party tried to discourage immigrant groups that didn't try to culturally assimilate to the country<sup>xv</sup>.

These workers, which also included the unskilled, were carpenters, tailors, metal workers, bakers, and *gorreros*. A number of immigrants were single and lived in very poor conditions. In 1898 the Jewish workers organized the Asociación del Obrero Judío, which tried to find newcomers employment in factories or in other businesses. This organization started a library and found ways to help workers get to know their new surroundings. They also needed spaces for recreation, such as public libraries or social halls where a library could hold journals, newspapers and political material.

At the beginning, different political groups joined forces, but slowly the Anarchists and Socialists started to fight over control of the immigrant and Jewish population; with the Communists' arrival on the scene the division and rivalry became wider.

1. *Socialists: Asociación de Recreos y Bibliotecas infantiles* (Association of Recreation and Children Libraries)<sup>xvi</sup>

Fenia Chertkoff, born in 1869 in Odessa, Russia, where she obtained her teaching degree, was one of the pioneers of the Argentine Socialist party. The Chertkoff family first settled in Colonia Clara where Fenia founded a library and spread her Socialist ideals among the young; she later moved to Buenos Aires. The three Chertkoff sisters married prominent future Socialist party leaders<sup>xvii</sup>: She fought for women's and children's rights; tried to enact the divorce law which failed because of the Church's

strong opposition; she protected Russian émigrés who fled Russia after the failed 1905 revolution. One of her biggest concerns was the workers' children who were all day alone in their homes or on the streets while their parents were working.

To address this situation in 1913 she founded the Asociación de Recreos y Bibliotecas Infantiles to take these children off the street, secure for them a safe place and help them in their studies. These libraries started to function in Socialist party locales. Children between the ages of 2 and 12 received instruction, health assistance, and food. By 1914, three recreational centers functioned in Buenos Aires, and by 1929 nine centers had opened elsewhere in the country.

## 2. *Biblioteca Rusa – Russian Library*: Bundist/ Anarchist

A meeting in 1897 by Russian Jewish socialist worker parties in Vilnius led to the creation of the BUND<sup>xviii</sup> party, which became an independent branch of the International Socialist Party. In 1905, in the city of Buenos Aires, a group of Socialists and Bundists founded the Grupo Socialista Russo and a year later they opened the Biblioteca Rusa, with its first library. Located in La Paz 43 street, it became a meeting point for the Jewish Russian immigrants where intensive activity by different political groups took place. It became a space for cultural, artistic interaction and exchanges in both Yiddish and Russian. According to Edgardo Bilsky, some Jewish worker newspapers were published there, such as *Socialist Zionist*, *Najrijten* and *Dos Yddische Lebn* in 1906; *Broit un Ehre*, a periodical of the Borochovist Poale-Zion party in 1910. In addition, beginning in 1907, Biblioteca Rusa hosted two competing trends of the Jewish Social Democratic movement. In 1908, one Bundist group published *Der Avangard* while a second, dissident ideological fraction of "Iskrovzes" (supporters of Lenin's newspaper, "Iskra"), published *Di Shtime fun Avangard*. Biblioteca Rusa also hosted the Anarchists Jewish workers who published *Arbeiter Lebn* and *Lebn un Fraihait* during the same time<sup>xx</sup>. In 1907 it came under the supervision of a group known as Avangard, which were mostly Bundists. A political internal confrontation between factions brought the Biblioteca Rusa to the center of a dispute; eventually it was decided to share the leadership of the library. On May 14, 1910, a state of siege was declared in the country, after the murder of the Chief of Police at the hands of an Anarchist, which resulted in nationalist groups attacking the anarchist newspaper *La Protesta*<sup>xx</sup>, the Socialist newspaper *La Vanguardia* and the destruction of the Biblioteca Rusa, among other institutions. The vandals took hold of the library's books and, with many other publications, burned them at the Plaza Congreso. In October, thirteen days after the state of siege was lifted, the Avangard Bundist group reopened a library renamed "Avangard" with the remains of the Biblioteca Rusa and the help of the community. In November, the library was combined with the one of the Union Obrera de Trabajadores Israelitas de Ayuda Mutua, and named "Progreso" - Progress. But in 1924, after the Communist group "Idsekszie" moved the Bundists and Anarchists out of the unions, the library that had changed its name to "Folks Bibliotek" was merged with another worker's library known as "Biblioteca Obrera de Villa Crespo" and renamed "Biblioteca Central Obrera". This Communist group supported the Jewish workers by creating schools and libraries and by expanding the Jewish proletarian culture through political and literary publications such as the Yiddish magazine *Di Fraihait Shtime*. Meanwhile the Bundists tried to retain power over the "Biblioteca Central Obrera" by organizing cultural events, such as the successful Jewish worker theater<sup>xxi</sup>.

During the 1919 Semana Trágica, when Jews were attacked as a reaction against foreign agitators in the workers' movement, the Poalei Zion site was attacked by a nationalist mob and its locale burnt. The books from the Moses Hess library and the archives from all institutions that were stored there disappeared<sup>xxii</sup>.

## 3. *Fraie Bibliotek* - Free Library: Anarchists

In 1915, the Anarchists created the Idishe Ratsionalistishe Ligue<sup>xxiii</sup> (Liga Racionalista judía – Jewish Rationalist League) to promote their ideology within the Jewish community. They published for several decades the Yiddish newspaper *Dos fraie vort* (La palabra libre – The Free Word). That same

year they founded the Fraie Bibliotek, later known as Biblioteca Gabriel Edelshtat. In 1920, they joined the newly created Communist party.

### **Immigrant Libraries in Buenos Aires:**

The need of the new immigrants to retain some sort of cultural activity was channeled by creating libraries which responded to their desires and backgrounds.

#### **1. YIVO (Yidisher Visnshaftlekher Institut = Yiddish Scientific Institute)**

An international organization dedicated to collect and preserve material on Jewish history and culture, with an emphasis on Eastern Europe, was created in 1925 in Vilna, Lithuania.

“YIVO was created to serve as a center for organized research into all aspects of Jewish history and culture; to train Jewish scholars; to gather library and archival source materials relevant to YIVO's scholarly objectives; and to develop a broad base of support for the Institute in Jewish communities around the world. The founders of YIVO viewed Yiddish as the Jewish national language and considered the development of secular Jewish scholarship in this language as the future instrument of cultural and spiritual betterment of the Jewish people.”<sup>xxiv</sup>

Branches of YIVO were created in several European and American cities to collect and preserve Yiddish history in the Diaspora. After the outbreak of World War II, several of its collections had been scattered even before the destruction of the Vilna headquarters; many of its researchers were able to escape Europe to New York, which became its new center. In 1928, a second branch was created in the Americas: IWO=Instituto Judío de Investigaciones, in Buenos Aires, which thus became one of the two most important post war centers for Yiddish language and culture.

The IWO library and archive were created in 1939; and a year later, in 1940, its museum. The library grew very fast with donations from immigrants and from materials shipped for safekeeping before, during, and after the war. As in Europe, many of the contributors were *zammlers* = volunteers who devoted time and effort to gather documents and significant materials. The library consisted of approximately 80,000 books, mostly in Yiddish and included many duplicates<sup>xxv</sup>. The archive gathered the documents of the Jewish agricultural colonization to Argentina, Jewish political and institutional life, documents of the worker unions (Bund, Socialist, Anarchist) and the Yiddish theater; it became the house of Maurycy Minkowski largest artwork collection,<sup>xxvi</sup> and one of the largest libraries in Latin America. Only a small portion of the library collection was cataloged/classified and readers had to rely on the librarian to find the materials housed there. In 1945, the institution moved to the third and fourth floor of the AMIA = Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina, where they organized numerous events, such as exhibitions and courses and conferences for Yiddish speakers. IWO became a Yiddish publisher at a time when most European Yiddish publishers were extinct thus transforming Argentina into a major Yiddish book producing center. At the head of the library was Shmuel Rollansky, a Polish Jew who devoted his whole life to culture and education. He was co-founder of the Asociación de Escuelas Laicas Israelitas, the first Jewish kindergarten in Buenos Aires, and the I.L. Peretz school. He headed the Kultur Kongress (Congreso judío por la cultura idish) which published Simon Dubnow's five-volume history of the Jews. He was the editor of the 100-volume series *Musterverk fun der yiddisher literatur*, an anthology of Yiddish writers mainly from Europe which also included some local authors, and of the *Argentiner Yivo Shriftn* (Yivo journal).

In 1994, when a car bomb leveled the AMIA building, IWO's treasures were once again threatened (in some cases one more time). The library became one more victim of intolerance. The front of the building disappeared after the explosion and with it the reference section, part of the archive, and most of the rare book collection. As of today, the collection is still stored in bags and boxes in different buildings around the city, unsearchable, unidentified, and inaccessible. Only one location is open where one can gain access to some material.

## 2. *Bibliothek der Lesefreunde* (Biblioteca Amigos de la Lectura/ Reading Friends Library)

In 1933, after the Nazi party strengthened its hold on Germany, a boycott of the Jews was declared. This led to the creation in 1935 of *Hilfsverein Deutschsprechender Juden*, an organization set up by German Jews already living in Argentina, to assist emigrants arriving from Central Europe.

The priority was to find both living quarters and work for the émigrés. The Hilfsverein understood it also had to look after the elderly and the children; they realized, moreover, that newcomers needed to learn a new language, a new culture and new customs.

In May 1935, the *Bibliothek der Lesefreunde* was created to provide cultural support for émigrés supported by the Hilfsverein<sup>xxvii</sup>. The idea behind its creation was to rescue and preserve the German values found in books the émigrés brought with them or that were already in Argentina; books that were burned on May 10, 1933, in Germany, for being considered ‘degenerate’ or anti-German.

The library started with donations of about 1,000 titles and it quickly grew in both holdings and users. Due to its success, and taking into consideration the needs of the newcomers, a circulating lending library was created. Thus the central library became a center for cultural events where writers, artists, and others who escaped Nazi Europe gave lectures.

In 1945 the library had some 5,000 volumes. These included Jewish authors and those of other forbidden (degenerate) authors whose books had been banned, along with books written by émigrés, mostly in German, where they evoked their emigration experience. As émigrés settled in the country and started to assimilate its culture and language, books in Spanish were acquired and several memoirs were written in Spanish<sup>xxviii</sup>. The library never developed to its highest possible potential, but it treasured some interesting material that the elderly produced while residing in the home where the library was later housed.

## Conclusion

The image Argentina projected during the last years of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, as a rich and welcoming country for European immigrants seeking peace and the possibility of starting a new life, wasn’t exactly what new arrivals encountered as they settled in the Colonias or the cities.

Still, as integral components of the new communities, libraries were built and, on the political side, leftist parties got organized. Publications, political or communal, started to proliferate and the new Argentines, in spite of significant hardships, were able to build and establish an educational and cultural life.

The history of books and libraries are intimately related to the country’s history, development, and cultural progress. The Jewish immigrant communities planted the seeds to cultivate culture wherever they settled, and they proved very successful in this endeavor.

The pogrom of 1919 with the destruction of organizations and libraries; and the destruction of the Jewish Community Center in 1994, which hosted two libraries,<sup>xxix</sup> unearthed an anti-Semitic aspect of the society that has been silenced and that not too many citizens are able to understand, and even less to cope with it.

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<sup>i</sup> Several researchers have studied the Argentinean Jewish immigration. Among them: Haim Avni, Robert Weisbrot, Ricardo Feierstein.

<sup>ii</sup> Pinie Wald a witness and victim of the pogrom wrote the novel “Koschmar” [Nightmares] (Buenos Aires, 1929) describing the event.

<sup>iii</sup> Email exchange with the author

<sup>iv</sup> In 1924 the Biblioteca Popular Domingo F. Sarmiento (Villa Domínguez) joined the Federación *de Bibliotecas Populares de Entre Ríos* (Popular Library Federation of Entre Ríos).

<sup>v</sup> Tripaldi, 1997

<sup>vi</sup> A philanthropic association created by Baron Maurice de Hirsch in 1891 to assist Jews in difficult economic situations or in countries of persecution to emigrate and settle in Argentina, Brazil, United States and Canada.

<sup>vii</sup> See Avni, Haim, 1983, pp.100-124; also Lewin, Boleslao, 1971, pp.105-157.

<sup>viii</sup> <http://coloniasjudiasarg.amia.org.ar/>

<sup>ix</sup> Herb tea

<sup>x</sup> Lewin, 1961

<sup>xi</sup> Levin, 2013

<sup>xii</sup> Levin, 2013

<sup>xiii</sup> Levin, 2013

<sup>xiv</sup> Social justice and freedom are found throughout the Bible, see for example the laws of slavery in Exodus 21 and Deuteronomy 15; Tithe and social justice in Deuteronomy chapter 14

<sup>xv</sup> Schers, 1992

<sup>xvi</sup> Tripaldi, 2002

<sup>xvii</sup> Nicolás Repetto, Juan B. Justo (future president) and Adolfo Dickman

<sup>xviii</sup> Alguemeiner Idisher Bund in Lite Polin un Rusland

<sup>xix</sup> Bilsky, 1989

<sup>xx</sup> A section was written in Yiddish in 1902 for the Jewish workers

<sup>xxi</sup> Laubstein, 1997

<sup>xxii</sup> Mirelman, 1975

<sup>xxiii</sup> Bilsky, 1989

<sup>xxiv</sup> <http://polishjews.yivoarchives.org/archive/?p=collections/controlcard&id=17392>

<sup>xxv</sup> Lewin, 1983

<sup>xxvi</sup> Polish Jewish painter who died in Buenos Aires in 1930 while visiting the country.

<sup>xxvii</sup> Asociación Filantrópica Israelita, 1943, pp152-153.

<sup>xxviii</sup> Münster 2011

<sup>xxix</sup> IWO and Mark Turkow library