

The Invention of the Jewish Gaucho
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The invention of the Jewish gaucho: Villa Clara and the construction of Argentine identity (Jewish history of life and culture)

The European settlement of Argentina was a one-time event in world history. In the mid-19th century Argentina had a population of only about 4 million. These were predominantly their descendents of the 16th century Spanish settlers/conquerors and the indigenous peoples. Those of Spanish blood were generally rich, huge landholders, military men and politicians. The remainder were largely gauchos or criollos, nomads who took their meat from the endless herds of cattle roaming the equally endless and unfenced pampas. The elite looked at these gauchos as an uncivilized embarrassment, and threw the country open to European agriculturalists to settle and civilize the place. Within two generations they had quadrupled the population.

Spain and Italy contributed the majority of the immigrants who answered this call, about 1.5 million each. However, in the province of Entre Rios, the subject of this monograph, the immigrants also included tens of thousands of Swiss, Belgians, French, Germans, Volga Germans, Russian Germans, Portuguese, and Jews from many nations, especially in Eastern Europe. These people arrived, somewhat similarly situated, looking for farmland to support themselves and their posterity. They adapted to common hardships: unpredictable weather, plagues of pests, economic booms and busts and political uncertainty.

These peoples had not had extended contact with one another in Europe, and to the extent that they did, one supposes would have often considered one another enemies. However, in this new land they all became Argentinians and they learned to support one another, appreciating the skills that each group had brought from the old country. This monograph focuses primarily on the Jews' experience in Argentina in the early 20th century, captured largely as oral histories from the rapidly dwindling population of the children of immigrants. It will prove to be an essential link between the much better documented histories of the Jews in Eastern Europe and successful Judaism in the modern world.

Freidenberg says no more than that the Eastern European Jews were refugees from pogroms in czarist Russia, and were the only immigrants whose decision was final; having left, they had no opportunity to return. The history leading up to the pogroms warrants a book, but in a couple of paragraphs it amounts to this. The Jews had historically been middlemen in Eastern Europe, the tax farmers for the elites, the overseers hired by absentee landlords, the moneylenders and store owners. They maintained a rigorous separation, making themselves visibly different and never intermarrying with the local people. Their population grew substantially in the 18th and 19th centuries, leading the czars to banish them "beyond the pale," away from Moscow into Ukraine, Poland, and other western reaches of the Empire. Their identity as a resolutely unassimilated and economically successful people, as visibly different as Turks, Tatars and other traditional enemies, bred fear and resentment, resulting in pogroms (massacres) to

which the government turned a blind eye. With the invention of the steam ship it became increasingly easy to emigrate. Thousands left from ports such as Odessa to countries which would take them, among them the United States, Canada, and Argentina.

This is where the Argentine story starts. The Jewish emigrants were supported by the Jewish Colonial Association, or JCA, which underwrote their passage to Argentina and provided the Jews with a homestead once they arrived. The story Freidenberg writes is not as warm as the story told by the museums she mentions in Argentina. In this telling the JCA was rather heavy-handed, unsympathetic and unaccommodating to the Jews once they arrived. However, arrive they did, in substantial numbers.

The Europeans in general, and the Jews in particular depended a great deal on the criollos mentioned in my first paragraph above to help get established. The criollos were master horseman and had the agricultural skills - sowing, harvesting, building things - that the Jews needed in order to set themselves up on the land. The Europeans, however, had a history of proprietorship and stewardship, and of hard work. In short order to criollos were working as hired hands. There was some resentment, but there was also a lot of mutual respect, as suggested by the book's title.

The European settlers stayed on the land a generation or two, the Jews less than others. Though it turns out that many were good at it, farming was further from their experience. Large numbers either lost their farms to foreclosure or sold out to pursue a life in the town more similar to their experience in the old country.

This book emphasizes the cooperatives which the Europeans, and especially the Jews, developed to improve their bargaining position both selling their crops and buying their necessities. The photographs in the museums cited here show a great many group pictures of Jews in front of cooperatives, newspapers, schools and social centers, but very few of Jews seated on tractors, and none showing Jews doing hand labor. Education has always been a key cultural value, and the book emphasizes the sacrifices that farm children made to get developing education.

The book scarcely mentions politics. However, many Eastern European Jews had been active in radical politics, assassinating czars and the like, which led to their leadership in the Bolshevik Revolution. The story not told here is that their activism continued in Argentina, unsettling the ruling triumvirate of landowners, Army, and Catholic Church and leading to decades of confrontation. Jews were overrepresented in the nasty leftist guerrilla movements of the 1970s, and are likewise overrepresented among the desaparecidos, victims of the military junta (Proceso de Reorganizacion Nacional) which took over in 1976. Their current political involvement was dramatized in 2011, when the opposing candidates for the mayoralty of Buenos Aires both came from the tiny Jewish minority.

The book describes the Jews' move from country to city in search of education and opportunity. It does not go into depth about what they found there. Their success in Argentina is typical of Jews elsewhere; they are vastly overrepresented in the professions, academia, journalism and politics. The sojourn in the pampas was only a single generation's interlude before they recovered their preferred position in

society. In contrast, the descendants of the poor criollos who greeted their great grandparents are still there and still poor, rather like a sun-baked Appalachia.

The Argentine identity itself is certainly only a passing phase; the permanent identity is with Judaism. Whereas the book cites a German descendent claiming that every fourth person in Entre Rios province carries German blood, implying extensive intermarriage and assimilation, there is no mention of Jewish intermarriage. People with any Jewish blood, in most instances, have 100% Jewish blood, just as their ancestors did in czarist Russia. Many have found their way from unstable Argentina to the United States, which offers more opportunity. Are they permanent, or once again mere sojourners? Freidenberg's book might help illuminate the discussion.

This book is valuable not only in that it is unique. It is also intelligent, balanced and easy to read. It should be useful to scholars for decades to come, and interesting reading to Jews whose ancestry can be traced through Argentina.