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## EDITOR'S NOTE



**F**OR SEVERAL MONTHS NOW, I have been editing the papers of 24 women working in different fields and in different places throughout the world. These women also come from very different parts of the Jewish community and work in a variety of settings: some are academics; some are writers; some are social workers. All originally presented papers in 1997 and 1998 at the Hadassah Research Institute on Jewish Women located at Brandeis University. Reading their work, thinking about their ideas, and sometimes struggling to translate them into English has been an unexpectedly absorbing experience for me and I've wondered what it is, exactly, that I find so rewarding. I've concluded that spending time in the company of an international, interdisciplinary group of Jewish women begins to fill a most basic and persistent need in me: the need of human beings to see themselves sympathetically represented and reflected in their culture.

As a Jewish woman growing up in post-war America, I rarely saw any semblance of my reflection in the mainstream culture. Although I grew up in the middle of New York City where almost everybody in my immediate world was Jewish, representations of Jews were absent from the museums I visited, the movies I saw, or the books I read in school. Except for *The Diary of Anne Frank*, which I consider problematic reading for a young Jewish girl, there was no Jewish heroine in the books of my childhood. I identified with active, adventurous girls like Jo March, Nancy Drew or Cherry Ames and liked reading about the dramatic lives of European and English queens. I didn't then notice that none of the women I was reading about were Jewish, or that Archie and Veronica seemed to have no Jewish friends; that there were no Jewish Mouseketeers; or that there were no Jewish girls in *American Girl* or *Seventeen*.

I was in my forties and listening to West Indian writer Jamaica Kincaid speaking at the Isabella Gardner Museum in Boston, when I suddenly perceived their absence (like Pnina Motzafi-Haller in her essay about *mizrahi* women in Israel, I applied the insight of an African-American woman to my own life). Jamaica Kincaid had done a brilliant and audacious thing: invited to choose her favorite painting at the museum and speak to a large audience about the reasons for her choice, she had beamed an old snapshot of her mother on the museum's large screen and talked about it.



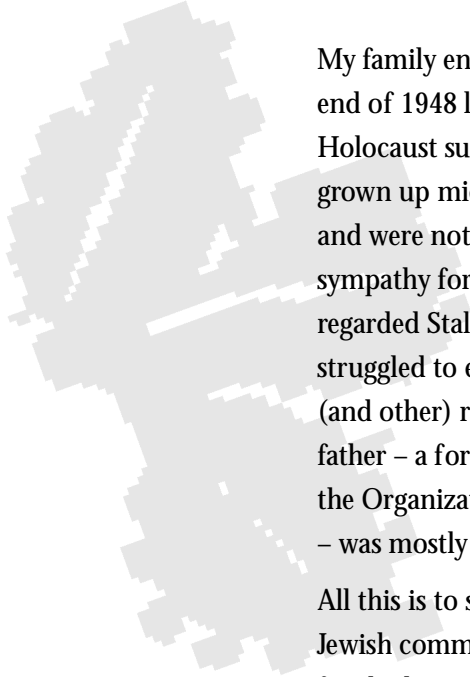
All of us in the audience, of course, had been accustomed to viewing the parade of art history on such a screen – from the Greeks to the Renaissance masters to the Impressionists and Abstract Expressionists. We were accustomed to oil portraits and elaborately framed photographs. The effect of Kinkaid's snapshot was shocking and made the author's point more forcefully than her words: Had we ever seen the image of an ordinary West Indian woman on the walls of a museum? Had we ever contemplated her face? Her body? Her surroundings? Her life? How did we ascribe value to this snapshot when it was viewed in a private photo album, in a newspaper, or here, in the context of other portraits in the museum? We had all read or at least heard of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, but what about the invisible woman? In this case, what about an entire sub-culture usually hidden by the majority African-American minority culture?

I viewed many of these working papers as such snapshots that raised some of these and many other questions.

In addition to experiencing a kind of invisibility as a Jewish girl in America, I also felt an invisibility in the Jewish community as the daughter of Czech Jews (of *ashkenazi* descent on my mother's side; *sephardi* on my father's). We lived on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, where there were many Jewish refugees from Central Europe but where the definition of Jewish culture was determined by people who, like the majority of American Jews, were of Russian and Polish descent.

This particular group, I later learned, had jettisoned their working-class, Yiddish-speaking parents (as well as their working-class culture) in the Bronx, or Brooklyn, or Queens, or the Lower East Side. They were West Siders now, middle-class, highly educated, new Jews, who frequented the American – not Yiddish-language – theater and Lincoln Center, collected art, read the cultural sections of the *Times* and the *New Yorker*. The men worked as professionals; the women were delighted to be full-time homemakers in the image of Betty Crocker. Most were political liberals who had flirted with Communism or Socialism in college; they had friends or acquaintances who were blacklisted and were deeply affected by McCarthyism. They had also been deeply affected by the events of the second world war and were in every way invested in a prototypically 1950s American mainstream lifestyle.

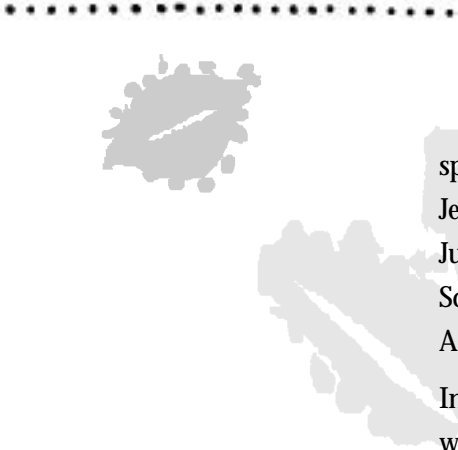
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My family entered this Upper West Side Jewish milieu towards the end of 1948 like creatures from another planet. My parents were *both* Holocaust survivors and political exiles from Communism. They had grown up middle-class, did not speak Yiddish, had never seen a bagel, and were not especially interested in Israel. Although they had no sympathy for McCarthyism, they were staunch anti-Communists who regarded Stalin as another version of Hitler. During the 1950s, they struggled to earn money and to adjust to America. Like many Jewish (and other) refugee women, my mother supported the family. My father – a former Olympic water polo player and sometimes officer of the Organization of Czech Sportsmen in-Exile-in-the Western World – was mostly unemployed until I was ten years old.

All this is to say that, as I was growing up, I felt as invisible in the Jewish community as I did in the American one. And when I had finished growing up, although I was counted as an American Jew, I still did not feel like American Jewish culture included me. G.B. could have been describing the Epsteins when she writes “Iranian Jews do not easily mesh with the majority Jewish culture. Those who live in North America feel marginalized: their experience has been that American Jews know nothing about them... The Iranian Jewish diaspora is triggering a re-examination of hegemonic notions of American Jewish identity. Iranian Jews with their own ethnic and cultural tradition are challenging the American Jewish culture that was brought from Eastern Europe and that is presumed to apply to all arriving Jews regardless of their background. This ashkenazi standard for Jews is similar to the WASP standard for assimilation to North American society.”

The issue of cultural hegemony is addressed in an even more dramatic way by South African Sally Frankental. “It is a truism to note that all Jewish communities, in all times and places, reflect the context in which they are located,” she writes. “In the South African case, the segregationist policies of the colonial authorities, the Boer republics, and the Union, followed by the apartheid system of the past fifty years, form the inescapable frame for all who live in South Africa... the disproportionate numbers who arrived from one region, Lithuania, gave the community an unusual degree of homogeneity relative to other diaspora communities. This was reflected in the virtual absence of Hasidism (until the 1970s), in the particular form of Yiddish



spoken, and in a variety of foods and customs particular to Lithuanian Jewry. In addition, the east Europeans' lack of exposure to Reform Judaism meant that Reform or Progressive Judaism was established in South Africa only in 1933, far later than in most diaspora communities." All this, of course, shaped the lives of South African Jewish women.

In reading these papers, I was struck by how many kinds of Jewish women there are, how profoundly we are influenced by our country of origin and the continuity or discontinuity of Jewish life within its borders, and by our experience of such factors as entitlement, dislocation, prejudice and outsider status. History, particularly this century's history, has not treated all Jewish women equally. In writing their papers, some authors – like Katalin Talyigas of Hungary – was reconnecting to and reconstructing the history of Jews in their country for the first time. Others, like Micaela Procaccia, who lives in Rome, is steeped in her history and writes with the surety of long immersion in the past: "In the year 1537, a Roman Jewish working class girl named Lariccia cried for days because of an unwanted match," begins her paper. "The day before the *qiddushin*, or betrothal, a washerwoman named Clemenza heard Lariccia saying to her father: "I do not like this man, nor do I desire him. I refuse him and reject him, nor do I want him." She declared herself to be "the unhappiest of all women," and on the next Shabbat, she told her father that she would not agree to let "the *qiddushin* become *nissu'in*.' Her father then hit her with the butt of a knife."

The biographical section of this volume itself makes for fascinating reading – as much for the wide geographical spectrum represented as for the facts each woman deemed important to include. As different as each woman is, I find much in common with her. It was easy for me to enter into her world.

Although this first HRIJW collection of writing by Jewish women around the world is inevitably uneven and incomplete, it is a respectable beginning. The authors represented here are, in some countries, part of a larger scholarly and cultural project of researching and writing about women's lives; in others, they are pioneers – the first of their kind. In some countries, they have been able to draw on a large body of data and literature; in others, they are themselves creating that data and literature. Ana Lebl from Split (now in Croatia) lives in an aging and relatively poor community of only 100 Jews





with scarce resources; Americans Riv- Ellen Prell and Pamela Nadell enjoy the support of Jewish Studies as well as Women's Studies departments at major American universities. Our Israeli and Latin American contributors bring both these realities into yet another perspective.

Some of the authors chose to spend time reworking their original presentations; others were content to have published what they originally presented. Many have struggled to express themselves in English – their second or third or fourth language. As a writer who has often had to communicate in foreign languages, I admire their pluck; as editor, I hope they forgive my journalistic bias, my many questions, and my inadvertent mistakes. Parts of all their work – even where it represents a starting point – moved and inspired me. I hope it will move and inspire you.

**Helen Epstein**

*October, 1999*

# LATIN AMERICAN JEWS

by Judith Laikin Elkin

One cannot discuss Latin American Jews without first noting that Catholicism, as interpreted by the Spanish and Portuguese and exported to their New World empires in the sixteenth century, was and is the most potent force shaping their lives. Having accomplished the spiritual conquest of the southern Americas, the Catholic Church served for the next three centuries as their chief instrument of governance, until national governments emerged in the nineteenth century. Even then, the Church maintained its position of ideological dominance, and remained politically and culturally intertwined with respective governments. Among the most conservative Catholic clergy worldwide, Latin church hierarchs maintain an ultramontane stance that rejects modernized teachings, including those that relate to the Jews.



Efforts to revise the historic teaching of contempt for the Jews, as formulated at Vatican II in the 1950s and reinforced in 1965 by *Nostra Aetate*, the Vatican statement on Jewish-Catholic relations, are not uniformly acknowledged by Latin American church hierarchies. Though gradations in practice exist between countries, CELAM (the Latin American bishops' conference) has never adopted these teachings. In fact, the conference has been stepping backward in its quadrennial pronouncements. In its most recent report, relations with Jews are subsumed under the heading "evangelism." Though ecumenical efforts are underway in Chile and Brazil, prejudicial preaching against Jews remains strong in the Argentine church, and is omnipresent albeit quiescent in the Andean countries, Central America, and Mexico.

The teachings of the Church with respect to gender roles continue to prescribe socially and ecclesiastically enforced domination of women by men. These teachings are construed as central to the maintenance of a just society, with rebellion in the family equated with rebellion against the *patria*.<sup>1</sup> Patriarchal culture in its coarsest mode translates as *machismo* – men's aggravated aggressiveness toward other men, combined with paternalistic protection/dominance of women. *Marianismo*, according to which women find their true nature in obedience, is the other side of *machismo*: women are socialized to experience their true nature through passivity and self-sacrifice. The dominant position of the male may have its roots in the long history of sexual exploitation of Native and African American women during the conquest and colonial periods.

This reciprocal pattern, though widespread, varies greatly in intensity. In Brazil and Mexico it is still in the ascendant, as described by any number of ethnographic studies. In Argentina and Chile, with fewer black women and "tame Indians" to exploit, *machismo* appears to be on the defensive. Even where it is seen as out of date, *machismo* continues to condition sexual relations, as we can attest in the United States.

Another element for contextualizing the lives of Latin American women is the widespread perception of the national polity as a larger edition of the family. The usual destiny of a Catholic *Latina* is as submissive wife and mother of many children. Historically, she could transcend this role only by taking a vow of sexual abstinence and seeking shelter in a convent, a view that fortunately has itself been transcended.

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<sup>1</sup> "Patriarchy is a hierarchical, militaristic social organization in which resources, property, status and privileges are allocated to persons in accordance with culturally defined gender roles." Gerda Lerner, *Why History Matters*.

Traditionally, women – at least, women of good families – did not go out “into the street” to work or socialize. Women who entered politics or professions such as medicine, teaching, sciences, or government, were accepted in a limited sense as “social housekeepers,” their public activities seen as an extension of their role in private life. In the performance of their duties, women office holders and professionals are almost always subordinated when it comes to decision-making. Because of such major differences in cultural context, feminism in Latin America differs from feminism in the United States and will continue to do so. Latin Americans generally view women and men as biologically assigned to different spheres and therefore to different roles. Equality, for Latina feminists, does not equate to sameness but to concern for women’s needs commensurate with the traditional concern for the interests of men. Rather than demand the same treatment as men, Latin American women defend the proposition that differences between women and men are rooted in biology and that these differences, which are at the root of our lives, are a source of joy and wonder. They demand that these differences be taken into account in legislation, particularly with respect to women’s natural role as the bearers and caretakers of children. Until recently, Latin American women have not been attracted to the notion of gender as an historically constructed artifact.

This attitude began to change in the seventies, a period of extreme abuse of human rights. At first, a biological view of sex roles was a source of strength in organizing human rights actions: mothers and wives took to the streets to demonstrate for the release of imprisoned husbands and sons. The legitimacy of pressure by women such as the *Madres de la Plaza de Mayo* in Argentina issued from woman’s role as protector of the family, and society’s respect for that role. These women were not trying to change patriarchy, but to make their claim within it. The military broke the patriarchal bargain when, instead of giving female demonstrators the respect their role demanded, they arrested and abused them (the record was most egregious in Argentina, El Salvador, and throughout Central America).

Women who took to the street were treated like street women; female demonstrators who were arrested were routinely molested sexually. Loss of the male members of their families, compounded by abuse at the hands of the patriarchal state, aroused a more militant feminism and fomented a change in sexual relations. By going out on the street in public actions, women transformed traditional feminine consciousness. In Central America’s wars, the women who formed grassroots organizations to demand release of their relatives continued on to campaign for basic survival needs of their families, such as access to clean water, adequate food, and medical care. In doing so, they challenged the assumption that “women’s concerns” could be divorced from issues of violence by the male-dominated state.

The consciousness raising that resulted from militaristic abuse also catapulted many women into radical activities. Once integrated into radical groupings, including guerrilla bands, women found they had to oppose not only the repressive machinery of the state but the *machismo* of their comrades. Consequently, the ideological terrain changed dramatically.

### ***The Jewish Population of Latin America***

Some 430,400 persons who were identifiably Jewish were living in the Latin American republics in 1994. The largest number, 208,000 Jews, were in Argentina; 100,000 were living in Brazil; 40,800 were living in Mexico, and 23,600 in Uruguay.<sup>2</sup> A secularized population of European origin was to be found in modern urban settings in each of these countries by the time of World War I, the period when a large number of European Jews were looking for new homes. In each of these countries, economies were being transformed from agrarian to industrial modes of production. Each of these republics had accomplished the formal separation of church and state, and each exhibited a nascent middle class, at least in a limited statistical sense of the term.

Other countries, such as Venezuela and Colombia, did not for the most part encourage immigration during the period of heaviest Jewish demand; nor did they separate church and state until much later. But in the mid-twentieth century, the process of industrialization attracted modernizing elements from abroad, and the size of Venezuela's Jewish community rose to 20,000 in the 1980s. Colombia's Jewry increased to 14,000 with that country's prosperity, but diminished to less than half as the drug wars intensified. In Chile, early industrialization and religious toleration brought into being a thriving community estimated in 1960 at 35,000; but this number dwindled to 15,000 as the nation was whipsawed by powerful competing forces of Left and Right. By 1995, the community had rebuilt its numbers to over 20,000.

Republics that today are the home of tiny Jewish communities are those that either failed to encourage, or actively discouraged, heterogeneous immigration. Nor have they for the most part committed themselves as yet to economic and social modernization. In this group are countries with large indigenous or black populations, high rates of illiteracy, and grave polarization between the elite and the mass: Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador, Paraguay, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and the Central American republics.

### ***Latin American Jewish Women***

Far less research has been carried out on Latin American Jewish populations than on the Jews of the United States. Those studies that have been undertaken vary in methodology and in quality from country to country: a surge of excellent research in the sixties was not duplicated until the nineties. Not all researchers break out data by gender, so information may need to be extrapolated from research on Jewish populations in their entirety. An additional complication is that, in the hispanic context, profound differences exist between *askenazitas*, *sefaraditas*, and women of the *mizrahi* (Arabic-speaking) community. A more traditional view of the role of women appears to prevail within the latter two communities than among *Ashkenazim*. Yet those Jews have been even less studied.

If one dates the dawn of women's modern age from the availability of birth control, then Jewish and non-Jewish women are living in different time periods. Data on the demographic characteristics of Latin American Jewish women display an internal consistency that marks them as more modernized than non-Jewish women. The most profound difference appears in contrasting birth rates. In whatever country

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<sup>1</sup> If Latin American Jewish demography is no longer the black hole it once was, yet the data we must rely on are extremely varied as to methodology, provenance, and recency. Some of the best work dates from a generation ago. A summary of available data will be found in Chapter 8 of my *The Jews of Latin America*, from which the figures in this paper are drawn. Principal researchers cited are Sergio Della Pergola (for Argentina, Mexico, and all-Latin America), and Henrique Rattner and Anita Brumer for Brazil.

we examine, the Jewish birth rate is half that of the matrix population, even in Argentina, the most modernized of the republics. Mexico is the exception here, with a Jewish birth rate rivaling that of the nation as a whole. But that rate is dependent upon traditional patterns of childbearing among Arabic-speaking Jews, and a survey of their younger sisters shows that *mizrachi* women also are beginning to control the number of their pregnancies.

Infant mortality is at a very high level throughout Latin America, but Jewish women are free of the repeated trauma of bearing and burying *angelitos* – infants who die in the first year of life. In Argentina, Mexico, and Brazil, recently calculated rates of infant mortality are 36 per 1000, 50 per 1000, and 70 per thousand respectively. In these countries, the rate of infant deaths within the Jewish communities is close to zero. In the 10,000 member Jewish community of Porto Alegre, Brazil, for example, search of cemetery records located one newborn death in the period 1991-93.

The global phenomenon of low infant mortality among Jews can be accounted for by a combination of reasons that are also persuasive within the Latin American setting: more intense urbanization among Jews over the past century and a half, when cities had better preventive facilities than the countryside; earlier adoption of birth control among Jews, with the side effect of enabling mothers to bestow better care upon each child; the low rate of illegitimacy; the comparatively high number of physicians among Jews; existence of Jewish religious observances that are supportive of good health. The Jewish demographic pattern extends to Latin America, where infant mortality rates resemble those of Jews on other continents rather than the rates that prevail among their sister Latins. The contrast between high rates of infant mortality throughout Latin America and the low rate within Jewish communities throws into relief the modernized character of Jewish life as compared with the traditional pattern of human wastage that continues to prevail in society at large.

In all the countries examined, *ashkenazi* families are smaller than *sephardi* or *mizrachi* families. Modernization was a distinctively European phenomenon that Jews originating in Arabic or Balkan lands did not participate in as directly as did Jews of central, western, or even eastern Europe. Greater traditionalism implies higher fertility rates and larger families. There is a consistent difference in family size between *ashkenazi* and *sephardi* families in all communities for which data exist. Nevertheless, even when *ashkenazi* and *sephardi* families are averaged together, Jewish families are generally smaller than families in the population as a whole.

The result of these trends is a Jewish median age in the mid-thirties, in contrast to a median age in the mid-twenties for non-Jews. Most deaths of Jews occur after age 65. A longer life span ensures that mothers are able to nurture their children to maturity. On a continent where throwaway children roam the streets in a battle for survival, within the Jewish community motherless children are rare. Survival into the sixties, in addition to being its own reward, frees women to pursue autonomous goals not oriented toward child rearing. The blighting of promising careers through early death is far less frequent among Jews than in the general population.

The history of the Jews of Latin America is one of consolidation into metropolitan centers, and this has been an immense boon to women, who, judging from the memoirs of colonists, suffered great deprivation in the countryside. Jews now live in the cities, a majority in the great cities, and the largest number in the national capitals. When there is just one major urban center in a country, as is true in Mexico, Costa Rica,

El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Peru, and Uruguay, nearly the entire Jewish population of the country lives there. Where a secondary city exists, as in Bolivia, Panama, and Venezuela, the second largest Jewish community is located there. In nations characterized by many urban centers such as Argentina, Brazil, and Colombia, Jews are found in all major cities and many minor ones.

The concentration of Jews in Latin American metropolitan centers derives from three historic roots: urbanization of Jews in their countries of origin; the massive urbanization that has taken place all over Latin America in the past decades; and the need of immigrants to integrate themselves into the economy. There are jobs in the cities, while agriculture has long been a losing proposition for small landholders worldwide.

### ***Occupations of Latin American Jewish Women***

Jewish women are impacted differentially by the non-Jewish milieu in which they live. Situated outside the moral or religious authority of the Catholic Church, neither have they been subordinated to rabbinical dictates concerning their proper role and behavior, although religious authority remains stronger among *Sephardim* than among *Ashkenazim*. Judaism as practiced in Latin America has been until very recently an extremely weak force, one that did not raise barriers to the participation of women in Jewish or general life. Furthermore, *Ashkenazim* inherit Central and Eastern European customs, which exhibit a substantial measure of equality between women and men. Jewish women engaged in a range of occupations since the early years of immigration to the continent, when they were farmers, factory workers, peddlers, and labor activists – groups that have been less studied than those unfortunates who were forced into prostitution. Even in the agricultural colonies, with their primitive social settings, some outstanding Jewish women became teachers, librarians, founders of schools, clubs, and charities.<sup>3</sup>

By 1960, the Argentine national census found that 50 percent of Jewish males and 20 percent of Jewish females over age 14 were in the work force (a smaller percent than the national average, as more members of this age group were in school). Three occupational groups each claimed 20 percent of Jewish women workers: secretaries, salesclerks, and free professions. These were all higher percentages than for non-Jewish women. A 1994 survey of the Jews of Porto Alegre, Brazil found that 22 percent of Jewish female heads of households are housewives, 13 percent are in commerce, 18 percent are teachers. Single-digit percentages of these women are physicians, engineers, architects, psychologists, and entrepreneurs.

Although the majority of Jewish immigrants entered the Latin American economies by way of petty commerce, there has been increased professionalization for both sexes, based on family savings and the accessibility of higher education. Jewish women entered professions such as teaching and medicine early in the migration period; as university education spread, their participation in the professions rose. No evidence exists of a Latin gender gap in science or mathematics, and Jewish women have become professionally engaged in a range of scientific fields. Many combine marriage with careers, a life pattern that is facilitated by the availability of cheap household help. Despite their professional success, their ascent to positions of authority is often blocked by male prejudice against women in decision-making positions and by social prejudice against Jews.

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<sup>1</sup> A review and discussion of Jewish women's occupations is to be found in an article by Sandra McGee Deutsch, "Women: The Forgotten Half of Argentine Jewish History." *Shofar* 15:2 (Spring 1997).

Latin American Jewry is generally middle class, but there exists a wide range of incomes and status. Brazilian Jews have established a position among the three percent of the population who constitute the national elite. Argentine Jewry, by contrast, exhibits a complete range of income from great wealth to poverty, including a majority who are working class or in two-career middle class families; but none can be counted among the elite because of intense social prejudice against Jews. In Mexico and the Andean republics, Jews are middle or upper class. In these countries, there appear to be no Jewish poor because those who cannot make it into the middle class find it impossible to adapt to the living standard of the indigenous poor. In distress, they either make *aliya* or call upon international organizations such as HIAS or JDC to relocate them.

### ***Education***

With the notable exception of Argentina, most Latin American governments have ignored or mismanaged the duty of providing a basic education to the mass of their citizens. At the same time, for the benefit of those who can afford private schooling, university admissions have historically been open and subsidized by the state. As Jewish communities came into existence, they founded their own schools to fill the educational vacuum, both in order to ensure the continuity of the Jewish heritage and to equip their children to participate in the larger society. As nations shifted from traditional to modernizing attitudes, Jewish schools shifted their emphasis from Jewish studies to career-oriented curricula. Girls as well as boys were thus able to take advantage of the availability of higher education.

Among the immigrants themselves, university education was a rarity, though some women and men were actually able to earn medical degrees in the early years of this century. It was the children of the immigrants who benefited most from open university admissions policies. The younger the age group, the more Jewish university students are found within it. The 1960 Argentine national census showed that 40 percent of Jewish men and 21 percent of women aged twenty to twenty-four were either attending college or already had their degree in hand, proportions that have almost certainly increased since that date. In São Paulo in 1968, when 66 percent of Jews of college age were enrolled in institutions of higher learning, this figure included more than half of Jewish women aged twenty to twenty-four. In addition, 12 percent of women aged twenty-five to twenty-nine were studying at universities or technical institutions, as were 3.8 percent of women aged thirty and over. Women comprised two-fifths of Jewish students in the sixties. These figures contrasted spectacularly with the 3.3 percent of the general population of the city who were receiving higher education at that date. In the more recent Porto Alegre study, 33 percent of heads of families (both men and women) 55 years of age and older had completed university; that figure rose to 77 percent for those under age forty-one.

The Brazilian data confirm a trend that appeared in earlier Argentine studies, which showed that in that country, 31 percent of Jewish students were women, as compared with 24 percent of women among university students generally (including the Jewish component). The outcome of university education has been social mobility for women as well as for men. A survey of 125 Buenos Aires women engaged in stereotypically masculine professions found that a majority of the sample were daughters of immigrants; one-third of that cohort were Jews or daughters of Jews.

The entry of Jews into the free professions in numbers far exceeding their proportion to the population conforms both to the patterns of Jewish history and to the developmental needs of their societies. That the latter are becoming more persuasive than the former is shown by the accelerating tendency to enter professions that relate to modernization, such as engineering, business administration, public relations, marketing, accounting, and architecture. Jews still become doctors, but there is more deployment throughout the economy. Among the wealthiest Jewish families, there is now a shift from communal schools at the elementary and secondary levels to prestigious secular schools in the private sector. The Jewish school, no matter how good academically – and some are very good indeed – cannot provide what is most desired by the present generation: entry into general society and upward mobility within it. A correlation between higher education, intermarriage, and assimilation emerges from the data as well as from anecdotal material.

### ***Marriage, Intermarriage, and Assimilation***

A study conducted among São Paulo Jews in the 1980s suggested that the frequency of intermarriage tends to be highest among native-born university graduates. In 69 of 80 mixed marriages, the Jewish partner had attended university, a higher educational level than prevailed among Jews who married endogamously. The 1994 study of Porto Alegre provided a longer time-line for intermarriage. Among respondents over 69 years of age, one in 440 heads of family and one in 25 of their spouses (mostly, but not entirely women), descended from one or two parents who were not Jews. Among Jews between the age of 21 and 30, the corresponding figures were one of 9 and one of two. Meanwhile, there is a growing surplus of Jewish women over Jewish men, starting at age 20, for which the most apparent explanation is the greater number of men than of women who marry out of the community.

Israeli demographers have charted the diminution of the Argentine Jewish community since 1960. They find that more males than females cease to identify themselves as Jews; that more men than women are intermarrying, and that children of mixed marriages are not likely to be raised as Jews. The high and rising rate of intermarriage among Argentine Jews, unless the trend should be reversed, will lead to the assimilation of Argentine Jews into the general population.

Mexico provides an interesting variation on this picture. Intermarriage was found to be non-existent (or unreported) among Arabic-speaking Jews living in that country. The rate of intermarriage among members of the *ashkenazi* Conservative congregation, 21.7 percent, was doubled by intermarriage rates among the non-affiliated, who incidentally also had the highest rate of postgraduate degrees. Obviously, other factors intervened as well, but still the data are suggestive.

It seems appropriate here to mention the phenomenon of consensual unions in Latin America. Again, customs diverge widely, but for poor families, the cost of a church wedding is often prohibitively high; weddings are confined to those who can afford them and the majority of unions among the poor, particularly in rural areas, are consensual. Among Jews, marriage has been the norm. Because of its association with the middle and upper classes, marriage itself has become a statement of a class position, aligning Jews with the elite rather than mass. However, where there is no legal provision for divorce (Argentina until 1994), the number of consensual unions increases among Jews as well.

The impact of *machismo* on Jewish populations has been inadequately studied. *Machismo*, which licenses multiple unions for men but mandates women's fidelity to one man, has its obvious appeal for men.



Abundant opportunity exists for the untrammled exercise of the male prerogative in countries such as Brazil or Venezuela where large numbers of poor and racially differentiated women are available for sexual exploitation. *Marianismo*, however, is not an attractive option for Jewish women, expressed in one sociologist's facetious query – "Can Judaism survive in a land of *mulatas*?" The encounter between Jewish lifestyles the immigrants brought with them, and the customs they encounter in the Latin context, sets the stage for intense personal dramas.

Intermarriage and assimilation to the majority culture are regarded as the primary threat to Jewish survival on the continent by Latin American Jewish leaders, who refer to the phenomenon as "the white pogrom." The rapid and increasing rate of assimilation is deplored and perceived by them as the most urgent item on the communal agenda, eclipsing in importance the problem of antisemitism which, as they correctly point out, exists all over the world.

In seeking to gain acceptance, many Jews opt to forego their Jewish identity. This is a phenomenon common in the Western world since emancipation, but it appears to be more pronounced in Latin America, where conservatives reject cultural pluralism as a valid ideal and liberals accept a Jewish presence only on the Enlightenment premise that Jews will abandon their Jewishness. Abandonment of Judaism occurs most frequently during the university years; an anomaly of the situation is that so many Jewish students are studying under intellectuals of Jewish origin. The entry of increasing numbers of Jewish youth into university life has been coupled with a noticeable rise in the rate of intermarriage. The assimilationist course, which conforms to societal expectations, deprives Jewish communities of intellectual leadership at a time when their full acceptance as citizens is by no means assured. Jews at both ends of the spectrum – those who intermarry and ignore their Jewish heritage and those who emigrate in order to lead fuller lives as Jews – contribute to the cultural homogeneity of the Latin American peoples, who are as yet undecided whether to accept cultural pluralism as a valid ideal.

### ***Religious Observance***

Until the 1970s, nearly all Latin Jewish congregations were Orthodox. There was no public female religious presence (and not a whole lot of male presence). The feeble presence of Orthodoxy, combined with the ease of dis-affiliation and assimilation, meant that the problem of the *agunah* rarely surfaced.

Establishment of the *Seminario Rabinico* in Buenos Aires in the 1960s led to growth in the number and popularity of Conservative/Reform congregations, often grouped together as Progressive. About fifty such congregations now exist across the continent. They enjoy a high rate of participation by families, especially children and teenagers, and involve mixed seating of women and men, female cantors, and even the occasional female rabbi. To the extent that Progressive synagogues are responsible for the contemporary resurgence of religious observance among Latin American Jews, the status of Jewish women can only be enhanced. At the same time, missionary outreach to secular Jews by Chabad emissaries has also contributed to an enhanced appreciation of Judaism; its impact on the future status of women is, however, problematic.

Abandonment of the Jewish heritage is almost always couched in secular terms: there are few conversions to Catholicism. Evidence to this effect can be found in the Mexican survey. Three percent of Jews contacted by the Mexican sample survey characterized themselves as non-affiliated. Within this group, eighteen

percent of marriage partners had been born Catholic, but fewer than one percent of these spouses reported themselves to be Catholic at present. Meanwhile, the 72 percent of responding spouses who reported themselves to have been born Jewish dwindled to 58 percent who consider themselves Jewish at present. The number reporting themselves to be of no religion at all went from eight percent at birth to 33 percent at present, confirming my belief that former Jews and their children tend to join the mass of the secular unchurched who populate Latin American urban centers. While Catholic spouses were leaving the Church, Jewish spouses were abandoning Judaism. Anticlerical attitudes characteristic of this sector of the population target both the Catholic and the Jewish establishments (as irreligious as the latter may be), producing Jews who are willing to identify themselves as having been born Jewish, but who do not associate with the Jewish community.

### ***Literary Perspectives***

A Latin American Jewish literary boom occurred in tandem with the wider and much better known Latin American literary boom, and Jewish women are part of it. Struggling to reconceptualize women's lives through literature are Jewish women authors such as, Esther Seligson, Sabina Berman, and Angelina Muniz-Huberman and Margo Glantz of Mexico; Teresa Porzecanski of Uruguay; Clarice Lispector of Brazil; Alicia Steimberg, Ana María Shua, and Alicia Freilich of Argentina, Marjorie Agosín of Chile as well as numerous others. Many of these authors, like their male counterparts, have left Latin America to live in the United States or Israel, whether to escape the contradictions imposed on them by Latin American societies or for purely personal reasons. Blending Jewish tradition with contemporary Latin literary styles such as magical realism, they are challenging the gender and ethnic roles to which they were socialized.

As writers, these women reveal personalities in transition, struggling to break free of patriarchy but not always able to visualize what it means to live an autonomous life. The position of women varies qualitatively among *ashkenazi*, *sephardi* and *mizrahi* families, but across the board, these writers portray the clash between the daughters' desire for personal fulfillment and parents' expectations of early marriage and the daughters' acceptance of the domestic role as primary. Patriarchy bears down on all Latin American women, though with decreasing weight due to its incompatibility with modern life. Beyond this burden, young Jewish women must deal with personality distortions brought on by the immigrant experience, the tug between immigrant and *criollo* culture, and the pressures of a *machista* society whose values run counter to Jewish tradition. All these are common themes in the work of Latin American Jewish women writers. What distinguishes their stories from similar immigrant literature issuing from the United States is the very special quality of *carino*, a loving kindness that derives from the Latin ambiance.

Beneath the idiosyncratic tales these authors tell lies a shared vision of lives hemmed in by society's uneasiness over Jews and Judaism. The milieu in which these writers grew up, be it Argentina or Chile, Bolivia or Venezuela, may not have been as threatening as that their parents fled, but neither did these societies offer the degree of acceptance that Jews found in the United States. Marginalization resulted in widespread confusion about what it means to be Jewish, and a need to tailor their Jewishness to suit Catholic style. True, the Catholic Church, as institution and as ideology, is much reduced from its formerly pre-eminent position. But it has yet to reject the anti-Jewish preachings that characterized earlier centuries. While some individual Jews have made it to the top of the economic or political heap, the thick substratum of antisemitism in which much of the population remains mired limits the social mobility of the Jews

generally. Jewish women writers, by recording their experience as outsiders, challenge the morality of cultures that demand total conformity as the price of admission.

At this stage of research on Latin American Jewish women, it seems impossible to provide a definitive answer to the question that animates women's studies: namely, whether women are more severely impacted by ethnicity or gender. Since patriarchy and the *machismo* it spawns have historically been templates for the authoritarian state and church; and since these institutions are the primary bulwark of the patriarchal society, it may be that our answer lies not in an either/or dichotomy, but in subtle analysis of the interaction among all these factors.

