

**Mariusz Kalczewiak. *Polacos in Argentina: Polish Jews, Interwar migration, and the Emergence of Transatlantic Jewish Culture.* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2020). 320 pp., ISBN: 9780817320393.**

There is no need to reassert in this journal the importance of the East European migrations in the emergence of a twentieth century Canadian Jewish historical narrative. For the most part, Jews from the former Russian empire formed the vast majority of immigrants who landed on our shores in many successive waves, before World War I, during the interwar years and after the Holocaust. What was unique in this major process of displacement and readaptation was the fact that Canada had almost no Jewish population late in the nineteenth century and, for the most part, no well-established Jewish community. For this reason, Russian and Polish newcomers did not have to necessarily conform to the models provided by earlier settlers, namely Jews of Central European origins. In this country, East European conditions occupied centre stage right from the beginning and did not have to compete with notions developed in other parts of the Jewish Old World; a situation vastly different from that of the United States where German Jews were well entrenched in American culture when their Russian co-religionists began to arrive in large numbers. Too often, we compare Canadian Jewry historically with the Republic immediately to the South of our border and neglect to take into account the fate of other Jewish communities, which found a fertile ground for their development in the Latin American sphere, mostly in Argentina, Brazil and Mexico. In many ways, the Jewish migrations that reached the Spanish-speaking republics of the New World produced socio-economic phenomena that resemble very much those which characterize our country and should be explored more carefully in a comparative vein that has remained largely ignored to this day.

To begin with, Canada, like Argentina, Brazil and Mexico, was often a country of second choice for the Eastern European Jewish immigrants and was never in a position to compete economically and strategically with the United States in terms of attraction power. When immigrants reached these less significant destinations, North or South of the American Republic, they often found communities that were less organized, less significant locally and essentially made up of recently displaced people. In these new environments, Yiddish culture could thrive because it did not have to confront strong assimilationist pressures on the part of an older cohort of Jews, and could benefit from the many technological advances now available in the dissemination of ideas, such as movie houses, large theatres and cross Atlantic communications. Of particular interest in this context was the enormous potential of the Yiddish language press, which flourished almost overnight in the Americas and gave birth in many places to highly original literary movements, new art forms and modern discussion forums.

For this reason, students of Canadian Jewry should find much to stimulate their thinking in the newly published essay by Mariusz Kalczewiak on the Polish immigration to Argentina in the interwar period. While Canada attracted 3% of the total Jewish immigration from Europe between 1921 and 1939, Argentina managed to welcome in the same period and from the same sources 9% of the flow, which places it in third place as a destination after the United States (43%) and Palestine (26.5%). In absolute numbers, close to 87,250 Jewish migrants entered Argentina between 1920 and 1935, the vast majority of which were Polish citizens, overall, a demographic movement that is relatively comparable to the one that reached Canada during the same years and from the same provenance. The difference between Argentina and Canada in this respect is that immigration officials in Ottawa moved in the same direction after the mid-twenties as the American government in terms of limiting the intake of migrants, while Argentina kept a relatively more open policy until the mid-thirties. In global terms, though, European Jews entering Canada and Argentina after World War I were of a similar background and part of the same overall process of general Jewish migration out of non-Soviet Eastern Europe. While Polish Jews boarded ocean liners sailing toward such vastly different cities as Buenos Aires and Montreal, they shared a common culture of Jewish nationalism and Yiddish literary aspirations, recreating in their new surroundings on two separate continents institutions and cultural movements that had a great deal in common.

Quite logically, Kalczewiak's hypothesis is that one must take into account the political conditions and Jewish ideological underpinnings found in the country of origins, Poland, to fully appreciate how the new Argentinian context was approached by the immigrants and the direction in which the Jewish institutional structure developed in Buenos Aires. Given that the newcomers to Argentina had the same overall background as those who landed in Montreal or Toronto, and both experienced the same impulse to reinvent themselves on a new continent; one must assume that to a certain extent they proposed similar solutions to issues that they faced upon arriving in countries largely devoid of earlier Jewish populations. In broad strokes, this is the "transplantation" hypothesis as opposed to an approach that focuses for the most part on what the country of destination, in this case Argentina and Canada, offered to the immigrants as viable options. In Kalczewiak's view, the great migration of the interwar period was not just a movement of readily available manpower destined to fulfill the need of newly emerging countries but involved as well the "immaterial" reality of people having dreams, wishing to fully realize their cultural potential, and bringing great instruments of empowerment such as the Yiddish language, the Jewish press and political ideologies destined to emancipate them from their recent past. This notion is captured quite eloquently in this citation from the introduction: "I suggest a broader concept of Jewish diaspora, one that goes beyond Zionist longings and recenters Eastern Europe at the center of an imagined Yiddish nation"

Without a doubt, this transnationality, beyond the uniquely Argentinian circumstances described in the book and the slightly different adaptation process that Buenos Aires Jews were subjected to in a Spanish speaking, largely Catholic and politically conservative environment, functions quite well in Canadian terms given the simultaneous nature of the transitions taking place in the two countries during the interwar period. In fact, the model advanced by Kalczewiak in this very good study applies particularly well to Montreal, where the majority of the population spoke a Romance language, was under the influence of a strongly organized Catholic clergy and tended to vote for authoritarian political parties at the provincial level. Montreal, like Buenos Aires, also produced a buoyant Yiddish press in the form of *Der Keneder Adler*, a counterpart to *Di Prese* in the Argentinian model. In both cities, for a period of perhaps half a century, a great Yiddish daily represented the hopes invested in East European Diaspora nationalism and carried to its ultimate conclusion the notion that Yiddish culture should be preserved as long as adaptation to the country of destination remained incomplete. The only drawback of Kalczewiak's book is that no content analysis was done by the author of *Di Prese* and of the many Yiddish literary achievements in interwar Argentina, which would have gone a long way to flesh out the emotional strain and the cultural complexities experienced by Polish Jews as they were adjusting to the New World. As Canadians we have hardly done any better with our own Yiddish archives and press in the same historical context, and perhaps we too should consider moving forward in that direction to uncover an immigrant narrative conceived of and written in an immigrant language.

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