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Interpreting Jewish identity in Central Entre Ríos, Argentina: Perseverance, Precarity, and Resilience in the Local Museum

Local museums aspire to represent a history that might be considered both particular and authentic. In common with other institutions in the cultural sector they have come under pressure to portray more inclusive narratives about the past and to facilitate dialogue among multiple communities, particularly in local environments that have diversified considerably since the foundation of these institutions. In this context, museum spaces and narratives have become increasingly contested: tensions between the particular and the universal are displayed, differences are negotiated, and a common future is imagined. This chapter aims to contribute to the discussions of the current role of local community-run museums as expressions of local identity by highlighting the achievements and limitations of the Regional Museum and Archive of the Jewish Settlements of Central Entre Ríos (MJS) in the commemoration of the local past.

This small museum located in the municipality of Villa Dominguez, in Entre Ríos, is far from the cutting edge of the cultural sector in terms of technology, foot-fall, or curation. Such a tiny museum, founded in order to represent the heritage of a long-dispersed and vulnerable minority population in rural Argentina, allows us to ask questions that are just as significant as those we might pose in bigger institutions. What potential do community museums have to represent a history that responds to the needs of contemporary life? How should a museum respond to a drastic reduction of a population that was centrally important to the foundation of the settlements whose heritage it portrays and protects? Can museums help re-establish bonds between estranged members of communities?

Colonization and Jewish Identity in Argentina

The Jewish-Argentine community¹ is one of the largest worldwide, and approximately 0.5% of total Argentine population. Nevertheless, it has been steadily de-

1 Although hyphenated identities are not common in Argentina, they are used here to denote the constructed nature of the term following Raanan Rein, *Argentine Jews Or Jewish Argentines?: Essays on Ethnicity, Identity, and Diaspora* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2010), 3–4.

creasing: from 310,000 in 1960 to just over 180,000 by 2009, with current estimates suggesting a further reduction due, in part, to increased emigration during the following decade.² Jewish-Argentines live in the city of Buenos Aires and its metropolitan area where 75% of the population is concentrated.³ Within the national context, the Jewish communities are one of the minorities most prominently represented in museum spaces, including: two central museums in the district capital, dozens of exhibition spaces in the provinces, and 12 regional tourist trails.⁴ It has also been the only minority targeted by large-scale attacks in the last 30 years. In 1992 the Embassy of Israel in Buenos Aires was destroyed in a bombing and just two years later the AMIA (Israelite Mutual Help Association of Argentina) suffered the same fate. Cases of antisemitism represented only 1.6% of the total cases of discrimination reported in the last decade.⁵ However the number of cases informed to Jewish institutions has been increasing overall during the period, particularly driven by aggressions in virtual spaces including news outlets and social media.⁶ A report on Jewish perception estimates that roughly 60% of surveyed Argentines view Jews as: sectarian; more loyal to Israel than Argentina; and having too much power in the world of business and in international finances; while 8% consider that they have a detrimental effect on Argentina and should emigrate to Israel.⁷ History of the Jewish presence in the region can be traced back to the Spanish colonization, however, the first sizable community was not established until the late nineteenth century. These early immigrant groups mostly settled in the rural landscape of Santa Fe, Buenos Aires, and Entre Ríos where the MJS is located.

The province of Entre Ríos is in central Argentina, bordering Uruguay. Its territory was historically that of the Charrúa, Chaná, and Guaraní: the semi-nomadic

2 In Argentina questions of religious and cultural self-identification have not been included in the national census since 1960, making it difficult to estimate Jewish-Argentine population. For a full discussion on figures and methodologies used for these estimates see Sergio Della Pergola, “¿Cuántos somos hoy? Investigación y narrativa sobre población judía en América Latina,” in *Pertenencia y Alteridad. Judíos en de América Latina: cuarenta años de cambio*, ed. Haim Avni et al. (Frankfurt: Vervuert Verlagsgesellschaft, 2011), 305–40.

3 Adrián Jmelnizky and Ezequiel Erdei, *La población judía de Buenos Aires. Estudio sociodemográfico* (Buenos Aires: AMIA, 2005), 19.

4 Elio Kapszuk, *Shalom Argentina: Huellas de la Colonización Judía (Tracing Jewish Settlement)* (Buenos Aires, Argentina: Ministerio de Turismo, Cultura y Deporte, 2001).

5 Instituto Nacional contra la Discriminación, la Xenofobia y el Racismo, *Denuncias recibidas por el INADI: un informe histórico del periodo 2008–2019* (Buenos Aires: INADI, 2020), 10.

6 Marisa Braylan, ed., *Informe sobre antisemitismo en la Argentina 2019–2020* (Buenos Aires: CES; DAIA, 2021), 18.

7 Néstor Cohen, “Representaciones sociales acerca de los judíos en la Argentina 2019,” in *Informe sobre antisemitism en la Argentina 2018*, comp. Marisa Braylan (Buenos Aires: CES; DAIA, 2019), 100–102, 105.

indigenous populations slowly displaced and eventually decimated by European colonialism. Spaniards first settled in the region in the late sixteenth century but it took almost 200 years for most of its prominent cities to be established. During the following century, Entre Ríos became a center of politics and power that rivaled that of Buenos Aires.⁸ Legislation passed during the 1850s prompted the start of European immigrations and colonization of rural Entre Ríos, including national incentives for Swiss immigrants from the Valais Canton in 1857 and, two years later, for settlers of German-Russian origin from the Volga region who established large colonies in central Entre Ríos (Figure 1).⁹ More pertinently for our purposes, several large settlements were created in the area by the Jewish Colonization Association (JCA) in Argentina from 1892 onwards.¹⁰ The MJS is devoted to the history of the rural settlements in the center of the province and to the wider history of a small town with a population shy of 2,000, Villa Domínguez, which was one of the main economic and cultural centers of that Jewish community.¹¹

Jewish settlements of central Entre Ríos included three distinct colonies with their respective urban centers. Two of them, Lucienville and Clara, were created as part of a late nineteenth century initiative of JCA founded by Baron Moritz (Maurice) de Hirsch to relocate Jewish families that were being persecuted in Tsarist Russia while the third one, Avigdor, was established in 1935 to receive German settlers escaping the rise of Nazism. The most prominent difference between these enterprises and other regional colonization experiences that started in the previous decades was their programmatic and centralized nature.¹² Unlike similar projects,

8 As a result of five years of civil war the city of Paraná in Entre Ríos became the capital of the Argentine Confederation after the promulgation of the Argentine Constitution of 1853 in which the secession of the Province of Buenos Aires was effectively established.

9 For example see Celia Glády López, *La fuerza del ideal. Historia del cooperativismo agrario entrerriano y su proyección nacional 1900–1970* (Paraná: Programa Identidad Entrerriana, Ministerio de Cultura y Educación, GER, 2008), 51–52.

10 For the history of the Jewish Colonization Association in Argentina see Haim Avni, *Argentina and the Jews: A History of Jewish Immigration* (Tuscaloosa and London: University of Alabama Press, 1991); and also Theodore Norman, *An Outstretched Arm: A History of the Jewish Colonization Association* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985).

11 The last national census in 2010 indicates the population of Villa Domínguez was 1,858. Dirección General de Estadísticas y Censos. Ministerio de Economía, Hacienda y Finanzas, “Indicadores sociales. Provincia de Entre Ríos según área de gobierno local, población por sexo,” *Indicadores Sociales* (Paraná: Gobierno de la Provincia de Entre Ríos, 2010), <https://www.entrerios.gov.ar/dgec/censo2010/>.

12 For an analysis of the national precedents see Fernando Devoto and Roberto Benencia, *Historia de la inmigración en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 2003), particularly 228–30.



Fig. 1: Map of the town of Villa Domínguez c. 1940 (Image courtesy of the Museum and Archive of the Jewish Settlements of Central Entre Ríos)

the main aim of the JCA was not to increase profitability among settlers but was rather guided by the utopian idea of creating a mass of farmers that would set a firm base for receiving a stable immigration that would gradually recreate a Jewish European community in Argentina. (Figures 2 and 3)¹³ From the moment of its creation, then, Villa Domínguez has been a peripheral node in a global phenomenon: the settler colonialism of Jewish communities which has had such a remarkable impact in Palestine, Brazil, and elsewhere.

¹³ Eduardo Sartelli, "Filantropía y Capital. Las Contradicciones del Desarrollo Agrario de las Colonias Judías (Argentina, 1900–1920)," *Projeto História*, no. 38 (June 2009): 43.



Fig. 2: Synagogue of the Carmel Colony, Department of Villaguay, Entre Ríos Cemetery, Carmel Colony, Department of Villaguay, Entre Ríos (Image courtesy of author).

The Local Communities

JCA semi-urban settlements in Central Entre Ríos, unlike the ones in the province of Santa Fe, were characterized by having a majority of non-Jewish residents, therefore establishing a dynamic of close collaboration among different communities.¹⁴ This was partially the result of JCA policies but also reflected the fact that colonies like Clara were located on territories previously occupied by large cattle ranches. These ranches employed multiple workers, many of whom were based in the area. Recollections of local residents state that people living in the ranches before the arrival of the JCA often had no property title and were thus displaced or

¹⁴ Leonardo Senkman, Preface to *La Desconocida Colonización Urbana de la JCA en Argentina 1900–1930* by Teodoro Bar Shalom (Jerusalem: Ediciones Zur Ott, 2014), vi.



Fig. 3: Cemetery, Carmel Colony, Department of Villaguay, Entre Ríos Cemetery, Carmel Colony, Department of Villaguay, Entre Ríos (Image courtesy of author).

“sold” with the land.¹⁵ They lost position and status as a result and often became workers in the new farms. Even in this difficult situation, a fluid collaboration developed between local communities – Creoles, Minuanes-Charruas, and Afro descendants – and Jewish settlers. This collaboration was particularly significant in overcoming the hardships of life in the rural settlements and facilitated the newcomers’ adaptation, though it was not free from conflict.¹⁶ Immigrant population in many rural settlements were divided by country of origin and sometimes also by religious affiliation, yet testimonies of descendants suggest that these divisions did not prevent their participation in local institutions, like the cooperative

¹⁵ Judith Freidenberg, *The Invention of the Jewish Gaucho: Villa Clara and the Construction of Argentine Identity* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009), 68–70; and *Memorias de Villa Clara* (Buenos Aires: Antropofagia, 2005), 16–17.

¹⁶ See for example Susana Chiarmonte et al., *Tierra de promesas II: Las colonias judías del siglo XX* (Paraná: Dirección Editorial de Entre Ríos, 2011), 342, 343; and Freidenberg, *Memorias de Villa Clara*, 16–17.

or even Yiddish schools owned by the JCA.¹⁷ An Afro-descendent whose family emigrated from Brazil to escape slavery, for example, remembers that her sisters learned to read and write in the local Yiddish school.¹⁸ Even as the coexistence of different communities in the settlements seem to have been generally cordial, during the 1940s the colonies witnessed a rise of antisemitism including: police brutality and corruption; unjust incarceration; closure of cultural institutions including libraries and Yiddish schools; forbidding of the Shechita; and the dismissal of 100 teachers from regional schools.¹⁹ A report from the Israelite Association of Villa Clara dated September 1944 states: “[o]ne lives in a climate of violence and uncertainty that has been created by arbitrary and arrogant officials. The sacred unity of the Argentine family is undermined at every step with persecutions, abuses and discrimination.”²⁰ A contemporary attempt to erase any commemoration of the local Jewish immigrant past further disenfranchised the local population. The Jewish presence in the area was being progressively diminished and erased.

Decline of the Settlements

The decline of the JCA settlements began almost as soon as the project started. Although causes are hard to pinpoint, histories of the settlements often cite the unreasonable terms imposed by the association as the root of the problem – including restrictions imposed to land ownership, plot extension, and hiring of employees to work the land.²¹ Towns offered an attractive opportunity for rural settlers in this context, many of whom sold their fields and relocated to JCA

¹⁷ Freidenberg, *Memorias de Villa Clara*, 31, 52.

¹⁸ Susana Chiarmente et al., *Tierra de promesas: 100 años de colonización judía en Entre Ríos Colonia Clara, San Antonio y Lucienville* (Ediciones Nuestra Memoria, 1995), 116–17; and for example see Norberto Brodsky and Roberto Schopflocher, interview by Ana Weinstein and Daniel Bargman, Transcript no. 86 (1997), 31, Mark Turkow Centre, AMIA, Buenos Aires.

¹⁹ For example see Dr. Moisés Goldman to Dr. Israel Yagupsky, “Síntesis de las actividades del período,” April 18, 1945, *El nazismo en Entre Ríos 1943–1944–1945*, MJS.

²⁰ “Se Vive en Esta un Clima de Violencia e Inseguridad Creado Por Funcionarios Arbitrarios y Prepotentes. La Sagrada Unidad de la Familia Argentina se Desvirtúa a Cada Paso con Persecuciones, Atropellos y Discriminaciones.” Asociación Israelita de Villa Clara, “Datos Concretos Sobre Irregularidades Registradas en ésta,” September 14, 1944, 7, *El nazismo en Entre Ríos*.

²¹ See Haim Avni, “La agricultura judía en la Argentina. ¿Éxito o fracaso?”, *Desarrollo Económico* 22, no. 88 (March 1983): 543–46; Patricia Flier, “Volver a Colonia Clara. Historia y Memoria de La Colonización Judía Agraria en Argentina, 1892–1950,” *Cuadernos Judaicos*, December 2012, 56; and also see Iván Cherjovsky, “La Faz Ideológica del Conflicto Colonos/JCA: El Discurso del Ideal Agrario en Las Memorias de Colonia Mauricio,” in *Marginados y Consagrados: Nuevos Estudios Sobre la Vida Judía en la Argentina*, ed. Emmanuel Kahan et al. (Buenos Aires: Lumiere, 2011), 59–61.

towns to develop their trade. In turn the colonies were also affected by national patterns of internal migration towards major cities, particularly Buenos Aires. As the national light industries started to develop in the 1940s many settlers, who had already paid off their debts to the JCA, chose to rent or sell their land.²² But even throughout these changes collective institutions like the farming cooperative would provide a strong sense of social cohesion among those that remained during the following 50 years. By the late twentieth century traditional crops were increasingly replaced by soybean. In the territories of the former colonies by 2018 this crop accounted for nearly half of all the cultivated land.²³ When produced by larger agri-business soybean requires only a few seasonal workers and promotes land concentration.²⁴ Jewish farmer families settled in the rural landscape have become rarer since, and in Domínguez current estimates place them at a couple dozen at best.²⁵ Changes to agricultural production, together with the interruption of train services in the nineties and bankruptcy of the local cooperative in the early 2000s, deepened the local socio-economic crisis and emigration tendencies. As community institutions crumbled, many local spaces where community relationships had been forged subsequently disappeared or lost their community function. The creation of the MJS was guided by the willingness to strengthen these community bonds debilitated through crises and migration waves.

22 Senkman, Preface to *La desconocida colonización urbana*, v.

23 Clara Colony was located in Villaguay Department where soybean production accounts for 86,309 of 183,393 hectares of cultivated land; Lucienville was located between the departments of Uruguay and Gualleguaychú where soybean production accounts for 84,061 of 180,965 hectares of cultivated land and 97,403 of 205,804 cultivated hectares respectively; and in La Paz Department, site of the Avigdor Colony, soybean crops account for 65,579 of 154,148 hectares of cultivated land. Source: Dirección General de Estadísticas y Censos, *Censo nacional Agropecuario 2018. Resultados definitivos* (Buenos Aires: INDEC, 2018), <https://consultascna2018.indec.gob.ar>.

24 For example see Walter A. Pengue, "Transgenic Crops in Argentina: The Ecological and Social Debt," *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society* 25, no. 4 (August 1, 2005): 318–19.

25 See for example "Los últimos Gauchos Judíos Resisten en el Monte Entrerriano," *La Nación*, February 14, 2000, sec. Sociedad, <https://www.lanacion.com.ar/sociedad/los-ultimos-gauchos-judios-resisten-en-el-monte-entrerriano-nid5306/>; Hernan Dobry "Los Gaucho Judíos, Sin Herederos en las Colonias de Entre Ríos," *Perfil*, February 27, 2009, sec. EL Observador, <http://hernandobry.com/los-gauchos-judios-sin-herederos-en-las-colonias-de-entre-rios/>; and also see Ramy Wurgaft, "Las Colonias Judías de Entre Ríos, un Mundo Que Desaparece," *El mundo*, July 22, 2011, sec. América, <https://www.elmundo.es/america/2011/07/22/argentina/1311363620.html>.

Inclusion/exclusion Narratives at the MJS

The roots of the MJS can be traced back to October 9, 1985 when a temporary exhibition was inaugurated in the town of Domínguez in preparation for its upcoming centenaries.²⁶ Just a few years later the museum became a permanent community endeavor. It is devoted to preserving documents and objects belonging to local institutions – most of them created in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century – and depicting local everyday life. More recently the museum has also extended this preservationist impulse towards rural landmarks of the Jewish colonization. Since its foundation the MJS has consistently worked towards lessening inequalities in the area which is socioeconomically deprived, as figures in the last national census show. There it is estimated that less than 20 % of the local population have completed their secondary education and 40 % of households do not own a refrigerator.²⁷ Outreach programs of the MJS include activities developed with the local school and hospital, which aim to reduce these inequalities.²⁸ Additionally, in 1989 the museum created, in collaboration with other community institutions of the region, a historical trail in order to establish a local tourism industry that would encourage local economic development. Since then, the MJS has strived for balance between developing a sense of belonging common to multiple local communities and creating a distinctiveness that allows the museum to position itself within the emerging tourist industry.

Landscapes of a Common Past

A core element deployed at the MJS for telling a common history of diverse communities is the local landscape. The work of the museum has transformed the territory of the colonies into a common heritage. This was achieved through

26 Villa Dominguez celebrated two centenaries in the following years: first the anniversary of the inauguration of the train station that took place in September 1890 and then, just two years later, the arrival of the first Jewish settlers in March 1892.

27 Ministerio de obras Públicas, “Gobierno Local de Villa Domínguez,” *Unidades territoriales* (Buenos Aires: Ministerios de Obras Públicas, 2022), <https://unidades-territoriales.obraspublicas.gob.ar/Municipalities/Details/b865a8ef-c026-4c36-8cb0-f7d5aa390f1a>.

28 For example see “Domínguez: Museo y Archivo de la Colonia,” *El Heraldo*, December 16, 1987, Comunicaciones 1985–88, MJS, Villa Domínguez, Entre Ríos; “De Villa Domínguez,” *El Pueblo*, April 14, 1996, Comunicaciones 1990–98, MJS; and also see “Museo y Archivo de la Colonia Judía. Una Obra Joven Que se Consolida,” *La Calle*, March 2, 1987, 6, Colonias Agrícolas: Villa Domínguez, Marc Turkow Centre, AMIA, Buenos Aires.

the physical preservation of the old buildings including: Sonnenfeld Synagogue,²⁹ “Immigrants’ Hotel,” and the old pharmacy building named after the town’s “miraculous” physician, Dr. Yarcho. (Figure 8)³⁰ But more meaningfully it channelled a continuous flow of visitors that come into contact with locals and local heritage (Figure 6), generating renewed interactions and interpretations of it. Value is placed on heritage by the viewer rather than being an intrinsic element of heritage itself.³¹ Two of these buildings are now the museum’s exhibition spaces. The Immigrants’ Hotel (Figure 4, 5), that housed newcomers and was the site of the first social club and library, now holds an exhibition on early twentieth century rural equipment, including carts, ploughs, and some furniture, and is used for museum functions. Meanwhile the pharmacy holds the archive and the main exhibition, which is divided thematically. Here historical interpretations of the territory have two focuses: rural and town life in Central Entre Ríos.

The rural landscape of the colonies is mainly articulated in the first room of the main exhibition, in the sections devoted to “The First Harvest.” (Figure 7) It centers on the role of the JCA by displaying early contracts adjudicating land to settlers, portraits of the Baron Moritz (Maurice) de Hirsch and Baroness Clara Bischoffsheim Hirsch, and antique farming tools. A framed photograph documenting bands of locusts in neighboring fields is contrasted here with a quote from the autobiographical text by Alberto Gerchunoff, a prominent writer and journalist who immigrated at the age of seven to the Clara Colony. This contrast creates an idealistic and almost sacred image of the work in the fields. The quote states:

In the morning, the clear, warm and sweet mornings, biblical mornings of the Argentine countryside, the Israelites with wide beards bent over the intact soil, with their round shovels, with their rakes and there was something ritual, mystical, in the gravity with which they performed their simple task...³²

29 For example see Poder Ejecutivo de Entre Ríos, Declárese de patrimonio arquitectónico e histórico el edificio de la sinagoga Sonnenfeld, Departamento de Villaguay, Province decree 5570, 2010, MJS.

30 Noé Yarcho (1864–1912) was a physician hired by the JCA during a typhus epidemic in the early years of the settlements. He later became a prominent leader of the local cooperative movement. Today the hospital and one of the streets of Villa Domínguez are named after him.

31 Brian Graham and Peter Howard, “Heritage and Identity,” in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Heritage and Identity* (Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing, 2012), 2.

32 “A la mañana, las claras mañanas, calurosas y dulces, bíblicas mañanas del campo argentino, los israelitas de ancha barba, se inclinaban sobre el suelo intacto con sus palas redondas con sus rastrillos y había algo de ritual, de místico, en la gravedad con que desempeñaban su sencilla tarea...” Alberto Gerchunoff, *Entre Ríos, mi país* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Plus Ultra, 1973), 16 (translation by the MJS).



Fig. 4: Immigrants' Hotel (now MJS) and monument commemorating the arrival of the first Jewish immigrants to Villa Domínguez (Image courtesy of the author)

Through this vignette the landscape of Entre Ríos is assigned a dual function: an idealized space of natural virginity with potential to create a new community as well as the symbol of hardship and a shared hurdle that will be overcome through solidarity.

On the other hand, representations of the urban landscape point to other dimensions of the history of the settlements, mainly European immigration as a civilizing agent of modernization.³³ It is presented particularly through the sections devoted to the history of Domínguez: “Life in Domínguez” and “Culture.” Local theatre production posters, musical instruments, a movie projector, and architectural plans for local art deco buildings, including the pharmacy, and neighboring bank, are showcased here to portray the town as a modern thriving cultural center of Clara Colony. Framed and prominently displayed in the archive room, the map of Villa Domínguez (Figure 1) is possibly the most emblematic symbol of its modernity. The small blueprint illustrates a centralized design with eight avenues ra-

³³ Oscar Terán, “La Generación del 37: Sarmiento y Alberdi,” in *Historia de las ideas en la Argentina. Diez lecciones iniciales, 1810–1890* (Buenos Aires: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 2012), 65–71, 105–7, and also Devoto and Benencia, *Historia de la inmigración en la Argentina*, 30–31.



Fig. 5: School benches from the Sonnenfeld Yiddish School, exhibition at the Immigrants' Hotel, MJS] (Image courtesy of the author)



Fig. 6: Jaime Jruz, director of the Israelite Association of Villa Domínguez in the town's synagogue (Image courtesy of the author)

diating from a central circular square.³⁴ The shape of the urban plan was inspired by Haussmann's renovation of Paris and contrasts with the omnipresent orthogonal grid characteristic of Spaniard and creole settlements throughout the country.³⁵ Using this layout Domínguez, as well as few other towns in Argentina, differentiated themselves from the traditional past and showed their aspiration to become symbols of European modernity carved into the landscape.

³⁴ In 1897 the JCA commissioned the urban plan of Domínguez to Aristides Sol (1846–1922), a French surveyor who lived in the neighboring town of San Marcial. Georges-Eugène Haussmann's project for Paris (1852–1870) was very influential in Argentina. Its morphology inspired the redesign of downtown Buenos Aires (1894–1910) but also towns created *ex novo* like the city of La Plata (plan from 1882) and Villa Domínguez among others.

³⁵ See Adrian Gorelik, *La Grilla y el Parque: Espacio Público y Cultura Urbana en Buenos Aires, 1887–1936* (Buenos Aires: Universidad Nacional de Quilmes, 2001), 101–24; and also see Gustavo Vallejo, “Ideales de la Ilustración en la Génesis de Una “Nueva Capital” Latinoamericana: La Plata (Argentina), 1882,” *Anais: Encontros nacionais de ANPUR* 9 (2001): 652–53.



Fig. 7: Vignette from 'First Harvest' section, permanent exhibition, MJS (Image courtesy of the author)



Fig. 8: Dr. Yarcho pharmacy now MJS main building (Image courtesy of the author)

Even as the role of immigrants as civilizing agents is tacitly omnipresent through these sections, the MJS has managed to present the urban landscape as the endeavor of the multiple cultures that participated in the town's life. This was achieved mainly through the organization of the exhibition. Unlike other small institutions in the region, like the Regional Historic Museum located in the neighboring Villa Clara, the MJS has not structured its narrative dividing communities according to their origins. Instead it chose to present a cosmopolitan view of the towns that attempted to interpret the local culture as a whole. There, urban landscape can be interpreted alongside the rural landscape as the result of the collaboration between different communities that came together to overcome hardship and share knowledge.

Uniqueness: the Birthplace of the Jewish Gaucho

Although the landscape is used as a democratizing element of local representation, in the MJS the settlements are also presented as the birthplace of the "Jewish gaucho," a slogan used intermittently by the museum. This points to an ambivalent relationship between the representation of multiple cultural collaborations and a differentiating essence of the local. Towards 1999, the project Shalom Argentina, which was framed in the program "Argentina Mosaic of Identities," consolidated the touristic trail organized by the MJS, giving the museum greater visibility and a wider audience, as it attracted national and international visitors. Participating in the program required a stronger definition of the museum's identity and an easily recognizable characterization of the local history and culture in accordance to the prevailing conceptualization of diversity as multiculturalism – which derived from UNESCO policies from the nineties.³⁶ Thereafter the museum needed an institutional identity that would put forward the uniqueness of the story it represents. Coined by Alberto Gerchunoff, the term Jewish gaucho became a key symbol of this distinction, one that was deployed for well over a decade in Entre Ríos, as well as other provinces, to transform the Jewish settlements into a touristic destination.

The term first appeared in a series of stories published in the national newspaper *La Nación*, which were edited as a book in 1910. The book, titled *The Jewish Gauchos*, was firmly inscribed in a literary movement with nationalistic overtones

³⁶ UNESCO, "Our Creative Diversity" (UNESCO, July 1994), 15; and for an overview of multiculturalism see Jan Nederveen Pieterse, "The Case of Multiculturalism: Kaleidoscopic and Long-Term Views," *Social Identities* 7, no. 3 (September 2001): 401–4.

called *criollismo*, which was influential in Argentina towards the centenary of the May Revolution.³⁷ There, Gerchunoff constructed a perspective of the Jewish rural communities framed by a romantic historicism, which understood popular traditions to emerge from a spiritual relationship between immigrants and landscape.³⁸ Throughout these stories, the Jewish gaucho is presented as the result of a transformative exchange between creoles and immigrants facilitated by a shared love for the land. However, the overall positive tone is criss-crossed by plots that position the gaucho as the source of violence, suggesting – in contrast to most works of *criollismo* from that period – an essence of savagery that roots him in the past and prevents him from being assimilated within progress.³⁹ Meanwhile, immigrants of Jewish descent are vindicated in their ability to learn from the creoles and adapt to life in the new country. The syncretism between a Hispanic Tellurism (pastoral hispanism) and European modernity can be seen here, as a response to the contemporary rise of the xenophobic discourse that blamed immigrants for dissolving a unifying Hispanic tradition.⁴⁰ Since then the Jewish Gaucho has become a pervasive part of the ethos of Jewish rural communities.⁴¹ Used as a synthesis of layered hybrids emerging from the rural landscape through the contact among cultures, this construct became a symbol of the essence of the local community at the MJS. It was deployed with a lack of depth and historicity characteristic of the post-modern cultural norm, in order to represent it to tourists and encourage them to travel to Domínguez. And more troublesomely, it was done in a place that no longer had a significant population descending from the archetype.

Solidarity, a Common Quest

The museum archive largely preserves documents belonging to the local associationist movement including: the farming-cooperative; the school cooperative; and mutual health association. The work of these institutions became a third key aspect

37 For example see Adolfo Prieto, *El Discurso Criollista en la Formación de la Argentina Moderna* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1988), 20–21.

38 Leonardo Senkman, *La Identidad Judía en la Literatura Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Pades, 1983), 17–18.

39 Jesús Peris Llorca, “Los Gauchos Judíos, de Alberto Gerchunoff: El Gaucho Como Herencia Simbólica Nacionalizadora en la Argentina del Centenario,” *Artifara*, no. 14 (December 2014): 134.

40 For example see Carlos Altamirano and Beatriz Sarlo, “La Argentina del Centenario: Campo Intelectual, Vida Literaria y Temas Ideológicos,” *Hispanérica* 9, no. 25/26 (August 1980): 51–53.

41 Cf. José C. Moya, “The Jewish Experience in Argentina in a Diasporic Comparative Perspective,” in *The new Jewish Argentina*, ed. Adriana Brodsky and Raanan Rein (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 9.

used by the MJS to portray the local culture and frame the construction of the rural and urban landscape. It was also used to assign local Jewish institutions a significance that transcends their role within that community and highlights the national legacy of the colonies as both modern and inclusive. Historian Celia Gladys López, who was one of the driving forces behind the creation of the museum and its first director, was instrumental in legitimizing the farming-cooperative movement within the national history of immigrant associationism. Her research places the experiments of the German and Jewish communities of Entre Ríos as the firm beginning of a solidarity movement whose influence can still be seen today, and that currently offers – according to the author – an exemplary agricultural model to face contemporary economic challenges.⁴² In a similar vein, the overall message of the museum seeks to instil local pride in the community. It encourages democratic participation and collective work in the process of creating the town's history. The use of these institutions in the creation of a local history has been essential in encouraging local engagement and appreciation of the history of the settlements, particularly as the Jewish presence diminished locally.

Thereafter, the process of creating the museum can be seen in itself as a performative enunciation of a particular sense of identity, much in the same way as national and regional intuitions.⁴³ Here, a sense of identity based on the values of solidarity, democracy, and collective work is the unifying common thread that the museum projects on tangible and intangible heritage. Moreover, these aspects of local history are deployed particularly in the local context through outreach programs: including the internships developed with the local secondary school which involves students in cataloguing the museum archival backlog, as well as a pilot experience of theatrical guided tours developed by local tourism students. Later in 2019 the whole community was involved in a project that allowed history to exit the museums walls through reenactments that took place in the streets of Domínguez. All together these point to ways in which the museum seeks to create a cohesive sense of community. By contrast, the Jewish gaucho in its double function – modern and rural – is a key element in establishing a sense of difference and uniqueness. It places strong constraints on the inclusion/exclusion dynamic of the local community, assigning other cultures a secondary role and creating a fragmented representation of the local history, where the past becomes disassociated from the present and a rigid boundary between Jewish and non-Jewish cultures is constructed.

⁴² Celia Gladys López, *La fuerza del ideal. Historia del cooperativismo*, 369.

⁴³ See Sharon Macdonald, "Museums, National, Postnational and Transcultural Identities," *Museum and Society* 1, no. 1 (March 2003): 3.

Visitors at the MJS

The preservation of any heritage, including museum objects, is often less about the preservation of material things and more about the effect those objects might have upon individuals who come in contact with them to generate imaginative responses.⁴⁴ Among local and community museums, like the MJS, their ability to establish relationships between history and territory can be a fundamental way in which communities portray their collective identities and become involved in “co-constructing the heritage meaning.”⁴⁵ But it is through a continuous relationship between visitors and museums that these institutionalized narratives may continue to be effective representations of those communities, which inevitably change and are transformed with time. In this context, comments spontaneously recorded in visitors’ books remain one of the most accessible sources of information on their subjective experiences, despite their limitations.⁴⁶

An analysis of the museum’s visitors’ book allows a glimpse at the various levels and meanings of visitor engagement at the site in the 37 years since its foundation. Is there a gap between the conception of identity that the museum attempts to articulate and that perceived by those who visited it?⁴⁷ Visitors’ self-positioning is considered here alongside their perception of the role of the museum, and their understanding of the history represented there. All these provide some insight into the way they articulate their selves with the museum narrative and unveil everyday life practices that offer varying degrees of resistance⁴⁸ to the power held by the museum.

44 For example see Anders Gustafsson and Håkan Karlsson, ““Changing of the Guards”. The Ethics of Public Interpretation at Cultural Heritage Sites,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Public Archaeology*, ed. Robin Skeates, Carol McDavid, and John Carman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 478–95; and also see Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, “Interpretative Communities, Strategies and Repertoires,” in *Museums and Their Communities*, ed. Sheila Watson (London; New York: Routledge, 2007), 89.

45 For example see Stephanie K. Hawke, “Heritage and Sense of Place: Amplifying Local Voices and Co-Constructing Meaning,” in *Making Sense of Place: Multidisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Ian Convery, Gerard Corsane, and Peter Davis, *Heritage Matters* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2014), 242–43.

46 See: Sharon Macdonald, “Accessing Audiences: Visiting Visitor Books,” *Museum & Society* 3, no. 3 (November 2005): 122–24.

47 This question was raised by Sharon Macdonald, “Museums, National, Postnational and Trans-cultural Identities,” *Museum and Society* 1, no. 1 (March 2003): 10.

48 See Michel de Certeau, “General Introduction to the Practice of Everydaylife (1980),” in *The Everyday Life Reader*, ed. Ben Highmore (London; New York: Routledge, 2001), particularly 68–71.



Fig. 9: Vignette from 'Everyday life' section, permanent exhibition, MJS (Image courtesy of the author)

Personal Connections

A review of the MJS visitors' book shows that over half of the comments included some reference to emotions, expressing feelings of joy or nostalgia, and stressing the ability of the museum experience to move those who visit it, often to tears.⁴⁹ Almost with equal regularity, comments included mentions to a particular family member or specific periods of the visitor's life.⁵⁰ In line with this, most of these visitors then identified the main function of the MJS as keeping the memory of their family or childhood; and stressed its ability to teach them about their own roots. These memories, which the museum is responsible for preserving, go beyond what might be described as the local community history to establish more personal links that record the relationships between each writer and the colonies.

Such perceptions may partially be a consequence of visitors using the museum archive as a source for genealogical research. Although the museum does not provide a service for family history researchers it has in its archive birth records, local land registers, memoirs, school records, testaments, cemetery records, and has even digitized some of them—including manifests of nineteenth and early twentieth century ships traveling from European ports to Buenos Aires. A few of the comments written in the visitors' book explicitly indicated that the visit to the site was prompted by the desire to learn more about their own family history, and many of those comments also shared the discoveries made.⁵¹ These included finding the name of family members in documents or recognizing their images in some of the photographs of the MJS collections.⁵² What is more, occasionally writers also chose to relate stories about finding people that knew their family and encountering old friends or even lost relatives.⁵³

⁴⁹ See comment of April 8, 2005, Visitors' Book 2005–2017, MJS, 4; comment of September 1, 2019, Visitors' Book 2017–2022, MJS, 65.

⁵⁰ For example, see comments of September 20, 1989, September 21, 1990, Visitors' Book 1985–2003, MJS, 119, 142; comments of February 20, 2008, February 13, 2010, Visitors' Book 2005–2017, 110, 171.

⁵¹ For example, see comments of April 19, 1987, November 8, 1988, Visitors' Book 1985–2003, 51, 93–94; comments of April 8, 2005, ca. May 15, 2007, ca. September 8, 2007, July 25, 2016, Visitors' Book 2005–2017, 4, 80, 92, 340; comments of October 22, 2018, Visitors' Book 2017–2022, 67.

⁵² For example, see comments of October 3, 2010, April 4, 2012, September 14, 2016, Visitors' Book 2005–2017, 192, 232, 345; comments of May 15, 2004, Visitors' Book 2003–2005, MJS. Please note that there are no page numbers in this volume.

⁵³ For example, see comments of May 28, 2010, November 28, 2011, April 4, 2012, September 20, 2015, Visitors' Book 2005–2017, 181, 227, 232, 318; comments of June 30, 2019, Visitors' Book 2017–2022, 53.

The common denominator of these experiences is a sense of discovery and personal connection with their history, an access to the past mediated by local people – often members of the Jewish community associations and most commonly museum staff, people that are then seen as keepers of that knowledge and memories. The combination of storytelling and the museum setting seems to conjure a kind of direct relationship with the past. Here, histories and stories (both meanings of the Spanish word *historia*) allowed visitors to “feel connected” with that past and construct it as their own, as a visitor stated: “I am very moved being here today, encountering part of my history, stories that resonate with similar ones, which I heard during my childhood.”⁵⁴

Most of these visitors described the history in the museum as representing “our roots,” “our people,” “the history that shaped my life,” or even “my family and personal history.”⁵⁵ By including in their comments the names of their parents, grandparents, or great-grandparents, and sometimes a combination of these, some visitors created something akin to a family tree which furthers this conceptualization. Moreover, these were sometimes accompanied with the year of immigration, the name of the settlement, and the occupation or economic activity they developed there, placing their own family in the local historical narrative represented in the museum. As the visitors’ book is certified by a notary and has been used by the museum to register meetings with stakeholders and some donations, it is possible that visitors’ inscriptions of their family history aimed to formalize that knowledge. Using the book as a register, inscriptions become a way of articulating those stories of self and family in the frame of commemoration that the museum offers, simultaneously conferring them a worth that exceeds the personal memory realm. This practice may be understood as a particular alternative to the donation of objects that, when presented in the MJS exhibition, include the name of the donor family in their labels (Figure 9), or even as an attempt to overwrite the power wielded by the museum in the selection and exhibition of those objects. If so, the museum visitors’ book effectively functions as a way of incorporating the family name and the writer’s own – through a kinship relationship – in the museum’s historical narrative, a practice of resistance aimed to subvert the power of the museum.

54 “Me siento muy emocionada de estar hoy aquí, encontrándome con parte de mi historia, con relatos que me resuenan similares a los que escuché en mi infancia,” comments of July 13, 2005, Visitors’ Book 2005–2017, 11–12.

55 For example, see comments of July 28, September 13, 1997, July 15, 2002, Visitors’ Book 1985–2003, 266, 282, 386; comments of March 25, 2005, October 30, 2017, Visitors’ Book 2005–2017, 2, 390; comment of March 31, 2018, Visitors’ Book 2017–2022, 9.

Establishing and Erasing Differences

Although comments written by visitors who do not identify their family past with that of the settlements of Central Entre Ríos are harder to pinpoint, a few explicitly indicated a different self-positioning. Among these there are three distinct types. Some visitors identified themselves as non-Jewish family members of Jewish descendants from Entre Ríos settlers, generally by marriage.⁵⁶ Others identified as descendants of communities from other settlements, often including a statement of interest in Jewish culture.⁵⁷ A third group identified themselves as members of the Jewish community while also indicating a qualifying difference often related to the period of immigration of their ancestor, or their ascription to the Sephardic culture.⁵⁸ In most cases, these writers chose to combine the categories through which they express a sense of difference, with qualifying factors that mitigate – and in rare occasions even negate – such differences.

In the world of MJS this mixture of familial connection and nostalgia is bolted to a version of the Jewish colonies as representative of a successful epic story of immigration. Recurring references to “struggle,” “toil,” and “sacrifice” appear in the visitors’ characterization of the life of the settlers. One visitor called them “heroic” while others summarized the colonization enterprise as the “immigration epic” or the “unforgettable quest of our forefathers,”⁵⁹ all of which echoed in some sense MJS interpretation of the local landscape as a collective endeavor achieved through shared knowledge. Among these, some also foregrounded the Jewish contribution to the national Argentine history, and to the history of the global or national Jewish community. Additionally, a few comments availed themselves of regional references to the history of the province to highlight the relevance of the settlements and their influence, although these tend to be scarce, as are cases interpreting the Jewish immigration alongside others, all presented as collective contributions that “make the motherland great” and helped “build” the country.⁶⁰

None of these wider historical narratives found a place for the Jewish gauchos, nor did they appear prominently among the multiple categories of self-inscription presented in the visitors’ book or role assigned to the museum. References to the

⁵⁶ For example, see comment of December 1, 1986, Visitors’ Book 1985–2003, 45.

⁵⁷ For example, see comments of ca. September 25, 2009, October 31, 2009, February 9, 2013, Visitors’ Book 2005–2017, 159, 163, 261.

⁵⁸ For example, see comments of September 20, 2003, Visitors’ Book 2003–2005.

⁵⁹ See comments of ca. March 15, 2006, Visitors’ Book 2005–2017, 41; comments of August 14, 1995, February 15, 1998, Visitors’ Book 1985–2003, 248, 289.

⁶⁰ For example, see comments of ca. March 12, 2006, February 13, 2010, ca. January 26, 2014, Visitors’ Book 2005–2017, 41, 171, 287; comments of April 14, 1995, Visitors’ Book 1985–2003, 243.

Jewish gaucho are altogether very scarce throughout the volumes. Despite the prominence held in the self-fashioning of the MJS identity for many years, only a handful of entries identified the settlers as Jewish gauchos, and just one visitor identified himself as their descendant.⁶¹ This suggests that genealogical links, multiple self-identification categories, and wider framing of the MJS narrative all function as subtle forms of resistance to the museum's portrayal of a cohesive and differentiated local Jewish identity based on that hybrid. That is to say, visitors do not fully endorse the MJS narrative but instead make something more intensely personal from their experience.

Invisible Antisemitism

The MJS displays an uncomfortable ambivalence in relation to the long and troubled history of antisemitism locally, nationally, and globally. In part this is an inevitable result of the impulse to display local accomplishments that instill a sense of pride in Jewish settlers' achievements in Central Entre Ríos. Such an epic story, however, runs the risk of eliding the prejudice that those settlers encountered since relocating to Argentina. Moreover, given that antisemitism is such a pervasive part of the Jewish-Argentine experience, it is remarkable that only one, among the hundreds of the comments in the visitors' book, alluded to it. This comment highlighted that the exhibition does not deal with either "the pogrom that took place in Buenos Aires in 1919" nor does it mention the decree used to "forbid ... the entrance of Jews from Poland" during the 1930s.⁶²

⁶¹ The term appeared in comments of February 29, 2000, November 6, 2002, Visitors Book 1985–2003, 334, 394; comments of September 27, 2008, Visitors' Book 2005–2017, 127; comments of September 29, 2019, November 11, 2019, May 5, 2022, Visitors' Book 2017–2022, 73, 99, 109.

⁶² "Este museo es una obra meritoria porque retiene datos históricos muy impresionantes. Con respecto a la Argentina, no se menciona el pogromo que hubo en Buenos Aires en 1919 con la presidencia de [Hipólito] Yrigoyen. Según los radicales lo hicieron gente "extraña". Otra evidencia es la anulación del decreto de prohibición que existía desde 1929 de no dejar ingresar judíos polacos, por [Néstor] Kirchner. Era una orden "secreta" a las embajadas argentinas en el exterior. Importante esta información a historiadores serios." Comment of a settler who emigrated to the colonies in 1929 from Poland and later emigrated to Israel in 1976, ca. November 4, 2012, Visitors' Book 2005–2017, 254.

Antisemitism and its Representation in Argentina

Antisemitism has a long and complex history in Argentina, one tied to internal and external political and ideological configurations. During most of the twentieth century it was often part of the political discourse of nationalism of the extreme right. It has had multiple manifestations from popularized prejudice to institutionalized ideology sometimes with access or control over state resources and institutions.⁶³ These antisemitic ideologies reached their highest institutionalization with the state terrorism that emerged during the last dictatorships between 1976 and 1983, just prior to the foundation of the museum.⁶⁴ The return of democracy marked a turning point in these political tendencies, although conspiracy theories survived for the next decade in specific sectors of the media, often catholic-antisemitic publications, and small neo-Nazi parties.⁶⁵ In the nineties the bombing of the Israel Embassy and the AMIA brought forward a sense of solidarity among the population, in spite of that in reporting the events the discourse often slipped into divisions that constructed differences between Argentines and Jews, which partially recreated the common places of political antisemitic discourse.⁶⁶ In 2009, surviving parties overtly based on Nazi ideology were definitely dissolved, through a ruling of the Supreme Court of Justice, which found them unconstitutional for promoting hatred based on race.⁶⁷ Politicians linked to these small parties remain a part of the national political landscape although explicit references to Nazism have mostly gone underground since.

The 1853 Constitution of Argentina set the basis for a national myth based on equality and the elimination of all prejudice towards the residents of the territory, on which most representations of immigration are still framed today. There, not

⁶³ For example see Haim Avni, "Antisemitismo en la Argentina: Las Dimensiones del Peligro," in *El Legado Del Antisemitismo*, ed. Leonardo Senkman and Mario Sznajder (Buenos Aires: Grupo Editor Latinoamericano, 1995), 197.

⁶⁴ For example see Martina Libertad Weisz, "Argentina Durante la Dictadura de 1976–1983: Antisemitismo, Autoritarismo y Política Internacional," *Índice. Revista de ciencias sociales* 37, no. 24 (May 2007): 11–24; and also see Raanan Rein, *Argentine Jews Or Jewish Argentines?: Essays on Ethnicity, Identity, and Diaspora* (Leiden and Boston: BRILL, 2010), 194–200.

⁶⁵ For example see Jorge Saborido, "El Antisemitismo en la Historia Argentina Reciente: La Revista Cabildo y la Conspiración Judía," *Revista computense de historia de América* 30 (2004): 209–23.

⁶⁶ Daniel Lvovich, *Nacionalismo y Antisemitismo en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Javier Vergara, Grupo Z, 2003), 18.

⁶⁷ See Raúl Kollmann, "El Führer Local Tendrá Que Esperar," *Página 12*, May 10, 2004, sec. El país, <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/elpais/135144-2004-05-10.html>; and also see Raúl Kollmann, "Los Neonazis san Maquillaje," *Página 12*, December 24, 2003, sec. El país, <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/elpais/129682-2003-12-24.html>.

only slavery and nobility were definitely abolished but also article 14 of the fifth chapter guaranteed that “all inhabitants of the nation had the right to work and exercise their industry ... petition the authorities; enter, stay, transit and leave of the Argentine territory” while also guaranteeing their freedom of the press, religious freedom and freedom to teach and learn.⁶⁸ Still legislative and administrative measures adopted to regulate the immigration process were often in tension or even contradicted those principles.⁶⁹ These included both incentives to certain European groups and discriminatory regulations that imposed ethnic, cultural and religious limitations to others. Since the 1920s administrative regulations aimed to dissuade “beggars, subversives and [the] sick” from immigrating were implemented through the use of exclusion categories based on religious, social and medical rationales.⁷⁰ These were to be implemented entirely at the discretion of the migration directorate. Moreover, during the following decades, when refugees of the Spanish Civil War and the Second World War were perceived as a subversive menace by governing conservative elites, the national government tightened the measures to insure that “undesirable elements” would not infiltrate the country.⁷¹

During the nineties and early 2000s Argentina started to come to terms with this troublesome part of its past, firstly, through the creation of the Commission of Enquiry into the Activities of Nazism in Argentina (CEANA) and later with a series of public presidential apologies for Argentina’s refusal to receive Jewish immigrants during the Holocaust as well as harboring Nazi war criminals after the end of the war. However even today most museums in Argentina avoid memorializing these and other aspects of the past that portray a contradictory history of immigration and the difficulties faced by Jewish-Argentine communities. Commemoration

68 “Todos los habitantes de la Nación gozan de los siguientes derechos conforme a las leyes que reglamenten su ejercicio; a saber: de trabajar y ejercer toda industria lícita; de navegar y comerciar; de peticionar a las autoridades; de entrar, permanecer, transitar y salir del territorio argentino; de publicar sus ideas por la prensa sin censura previa; de usar y disponer de su propiedad; de asociarse con fines útiles; de profesar libremente su culto; de enseñar y aprender.” Corte Suprema de Justicia de la Nación, ed., *Constitución de la Nación Argentina. Publicación del bicentenario* (Buenos Aires: CSJN; Biblioteca del Congreso de la Nación; Biblioteca Nacional, 2010), 32–33.

69 Fernando Devoto, “Las políticas migratorias argentinas (1930–1955), continuidades tensiones y rupturas,” in *Informe final de la comisión de esclarecimiento de las actividades del nazismo en la República Argentina*, ed. CEANA (Buenos Aires: Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores y Culto, 1999), 22–75, <http://desclasificacion.cancilleria.gov.ar/abril>.

70 Ibid., 38.

71 Dora Schwarstein, “Actores Sociales y Política Inmigratoria en la Argentina. La llegada de los Republicanos Españoles,” *Estudios Migratorios Latinoamericanos*, no. 37 (1997): 446; and also see Uki Goñi, *The Real Odessa: Smuggling the Nazis to Perón’s Argentina* (London; New York: Granta Books, 2002), 31–32.

of negative aspects of the national history of immigration are still by and large relegated to a few private institutions, most of which only emerged in the last decades, among them the Holocaust Museum inaugurated in 2000, the Ana Frank House Centre that opened in Buenos Aires in 2009, and Jewish Museum of Entre Ríos created in 2007 in the city of Concordia by Shoah survivor, Victor Oppel, all of which have actively commemorated the history of the Holocaust, though establishing varying degrees of reference to the national context. Museums narratives widely inform visitors' understanding of what a museum is supposed to do and what the past is.⁷² Invisibility of antisemitism in the national context has consequently meant that positive myths about immigration and coexistence of different communities prevailed in the national ethos and became "the past." Thereafter its absence from museum spaces seems to have gone mostly unnoticed, as the role of museums themselves has been equated to showcasing the most positive aspects of the past.

Antisemitism in the Local Context

The MJS archive preserves a collection of documents with accounts of discrimination and harassment towards the local Jewish population, and testimonies of local de-commemoration of the Jewish immigrant past that took place during the 1940s. These include, for example, testimonies on the events surrounding the day of mourning on March 14, 1945 when the Jewish community observed a journey of fastening and prayer in most of the country to commemorate the victims of the Holocaust. The events had to be cancelled in the town of Basavilbaso as local police forbade residents from closing their shops and only authorized a gathering at the synagogue on the condition that participants would "not speak ill of enemy countries."⁷³ They also register changes in the names of streets and institutions, and the removal of symbols associated with Judaism from public spaces. One such document, dated early 1944, describes how local police forcefully changed the name of the library and social club of Villa Clara from Max Nordau to Pancho Ramírez, in honor of the local separatist leader Francisco Ramírez who created the independent state of Entre Ríos in the early nineteenth century, removed the Magen

⁷² See Susan A. Crane, "Memory, Distortion, and History in the Museum," *History & Theory* 36, no. 4 (December 1997): 45.

⁷³ "[N]o se Hablará Mal de los Países Enemigos," Presidente de la Asociación Israelita de Basavilbaso to Presidente de la DAIA Buenos Aires, "Evento "Luto por las Víctimas de Guerra" Suspendido," letter (March 16, 1945), *El nazismo en Entre Ríos*.

David from the door and “purged” the books of the library.⁷⁴ In Domínguez, where the library had undergone a similar de-commemoration process that year, an ordinance signed by the municipal commissioner on September 27, 1943 ordered the main street name be changed from Baron Maurice Hirsch to San Martín, also indicating that “all stars of David should be removed from the central square.”⁷⁵

Although the systematic discrimination portrayed by these documents is no longer common in the area, the prejudice against the Jewish culture is still evident in the region.⁷⁶ One of the most prominent cases recently involved General Campos, a municipality located not far from Domínguez, where in 2013 a property tax bill was printed with an antisemitic slogan which translates as “be patriotic, kill a Jew. General Campos on the road to the centenary,” accompanied by two additional words, an onomatopoeia of a gun being fired, and the surname of a local councilman towards whom the threat was directed.⁷⁷ This case gained notoriety for its crassness, although it has hardly been the only one. Vandalism in the synagogues and cemeteries, as well as overtly Nazi graffiti, seem to occur with some regularity. Additionally, a recent report on hate speech showed that over 36% of surveyed Argentines in the center region either agree, or strongly agree, with antisemitic conspiracy theories fuelled by the pandemic.⁷⁸ In this context, commemorating the local history of antisemitism is undoubtedly difficult but also necessary.

However here, as is the case with difference, the MJS has adopted an ambivalent position, preserving its collection on antisemitism but simultaneously restraining its visibility through its elision from its exhibition and other communication strategies. Even with its ambivalence, the museum has encouraged the

74 See Asociación Israelita de Villa Domínguez, “Hechos Ocurredos en Villa Domínguez,” September 13, 1944, *El Nazismo en Entre Ríos*; and also see Asociación Israelita de Villa Clara, “Datos Concretos Sobre Irregularidades Registradas en ésta,” September 14, 1944, *El nazismo en Entre Ríos*.
75 Municipalidad de Villa Domínguez, Ordenanza Municipal, September 27, 1943, *El Nazismo en Entre Ríos*.

76 For example see Marisa Braylan, ed., *Informe Sobre Antisemitismo en la Argentina 2019–2020* (Buenos Aires: CES; DAIA, 2021), 143, 207, 304; and also see Marisa Braylan, ed., *Informe sobre antisemitismo en la Argentina 2018*, 193, 204.

77 “Haga Patria, Mate un Judío. Gral. Campos Camino al Centenario Pum!!! Raff!” Jorge Riani, “En Entre Ríos Emiten Una Boleta Municipal Con un Mensaje Antisemita,” *La Nación*, March 19, 2013, <http://www.lanacion.com.ar/1564680-en-entre-rios-emiten-una-boleta-municipal-con-un-mensaje-antisemita>.

78 The national survey involved 3,140 participants along a wide socio-demographic range. Participants were asked to indicate – using the Likert scale – their level of agreement to the following statement: “Behind the Coronavirus pandemic there are figures like Soros and labs of Jewish businessmen that are trying to benefit economically.” See Ezequiel Ipar, dir., *Informe LEDA 3. El Antisemitismo en Argentina: Tramas e Interrogantes* (Buenos Aires: LEDA; GEDIC, 2021).

valorization of positive aspects of the rural Jewish immigration and, in that sense, its mere existence has been useful in dissolving the idea of a single bourgeois-entrepreneur class which has been used traditionally to explain the rise of antisemitism as a sub-product of class struggle.⁷⁹ Since its creation the MJS has been trying to leave behind any history of conflict. The book on the history of Domínguez, edited for the centenaries, affirms: “It was not the intention of the author, nor that of the Commission in general, to touch upon issues that cause controversy, [and] resentment ... [this book] has to be a collection of family anecdotes, as the celebration of the centenary will certainly be.”⁸⁰ Then the invisibility of antisemitism might be considered a conciliatory gesture. Nonetheless this collection of documents remains an untapped resource to further dislodge any rationalization of antisemitism available to those that seek it.

Conclusion

Overall, this chapter suggests that community museums have a strong potential to portray aspects of local identities and engage visitors and local communities in their construction. Nevertheless, it also points to the fact that the ability of these museums to portray local history is often constrained to show positive aspects of community relationships which inevitably provide a slanted representation of local identity. Through local museums, like the MJS, visitors meaningfully engage with locals and share their stories. These experiences allow visitors to establish explicit and personal links with the history represented in the museum, links that effectively construct a common history, even if many engagements show subtle forms of resistance to the power wielded by the museum. Among those personal links, renewed bonds between descendants and the area or local community offer some insight into what maybe one of the most successful contributions of the MJS, especially when considering that the regional population has been progressively affected by several migration cycles. Through its perspective on local landscape and the role of cooperative institutions, the museum has successfully reconciled the memory of different communities. Using the most positive events from the past it has encouraged local pride and showcased the value of col-

79 For a review of these perspectives see Lvovich, *Nacionalismo y antisemitismo en la Argentina*, 32–33.

80 “No era la intención del autor ni la de la comisión en general, tocar temas que originan polémicas, resquemores... [este libro] tiene que ser un anecdotario familiar como lo será, sin duda, el festejo del centenario.” Osvaldo Cesar Quiroga, *Villa Domínguez 100 Años de Historia* (Villa Domínguez: Comisión pro-festejo del centenario de Villa Domínguez Provincia de Entre Ríos, 1990), 10.

lective work while engaging locals and particularly the younger generations in the process of preserving the past. The participatory nature of these institutions points to the fact that local museums retain a meaningful role in contemporary representations of history, as they have a strong potential to present cultural and historical aspects that seldom find their way into mainstream narratives of history, as well as identities generally marginalized in historic national narratives.

However, local museums can also reinforce the limits of the identity they aim to portray. In the case of MJS particularly, the figure of the Jewish Gaucho was used intermittently as a synonym of local heritage, not only restricting the museum's ability to represent plural local communities but also its capacity to comprehensively portray the Jewish community of Central Entre Ríos itself. In the same vein, ambivalence towards antisemitism has generated a distorted version of the local history. Conflicts among communities are neither widely represented in mainstream institutions nor in traditional accounts of immigration, which forge our expectations on museums. Therefore, tackling these issues is challenging for most museums, but particularly for community institutions as they risk alienating their local public. Considering that antisemitic prejudice is still pervasive in Argentine culture, antisemitic testimonies are a valuable educational resource which has the potential to promote a reflection on the current context. This might be particularly true if testimonies are presented alongside other forms of prejudice or conflict among and within the communities of the region. Currently the museum is at a crossroads which provides a unique opportunity to do just that. On the one hand, a thorough renovation of the exhibition under advisory of professional curatorial staff is under way; on the other, the government of Entre Ríos is expected to launch a new tourism initiative created for the Jewish colonies later this year called *Nooks with history*.⁸¹ Both upcoming changes have the potential to assist the museum in portraying the multiple and complex relationships among local communities that give Villa Domínguez and the settlements their local identity. The scope of the changes to come will much depend on the ability of the MJS to seize these opportunities.

⁸¹ The program *Rincones con historia* (Nooks with history) includes a survey of the material heritage in the colonies and a public consultation on their conservation. The survey is opened to all inhabitants of the colonies that wish to express their opinion in the process of selection of heritage, touristic plan, or strategy. See Estudio Singerman and Makón, *Plan Rincones con Historia: Circuito de las Colonias Judías en Entre Ríos* (Buenos Aires: Singerman & Makón, 2022), <https://singerman-makon.com/plan-rincones-con-historia/>, and also Secretaría de comunicación. Gobierno de Entre Ríos, *Turismo: impulso al Circuito de las Colonias Judías* (Paraná: Gobierno de Entre Ríos, 2022), <https://noticias.entrerios.gov.ar/notas/turismo-impulso-al-circuito-de-las-colonias-judas.htm>.

