

THE YIDDISHISTS

OUR SERIES DELVES INTO THE TREASURES OF THE WORLD'S BIGGEST YIDDISH ARCHIVE AT YIVO INSTITUTE FOR JEWISH RESEARCH



Left: Jewish colonists in Argentina pose with rifles and dogs, Moises Ville, 28 July 1906

The legendary gauchos, who worked the land and herded cattle for Argentina's landowners, had been the main inhabitants of the pampas. Now they extended help to the newcomers, teaching them how to till the land, herd cattle, break horses and even shoot guns. Over the generations both groups took on some of the cultural characteristics of the other, sharing food, music, dances and even language. Jews donned the traditional garb of the gauchos, and the gauchos learned Yiddish.

Jewel Katz, a Jewish entertainer who was born in Vilna and immigrated to Argentina in 1930, exemplified this blending of cultures in his nostalgic song 'Moises Ville':

*"A radio plays a tango for the people on a stroll.
The women spread their gossip about news
of the shtetl,
Who is getting engaged and who is having
a bris,
And which ones last Friday went and burnt
the knishes...
On the corner stands a man, the keeper of
an inn,
Wearing bombachas and zapatillas on his feet.
Through his dark black mustache, he whistles a
Spanish tune,
You can be certain, though, that this innkeeper
is a Jew."*

Sung in Yiddish but peppered with Spanish words, Katz's song speaks to the dual identity that came to exemplify life in the pampas. Here, and in other colonies in Argentina, Jewish immigrants established synagogues, schools, libraries, theatres and newspapers in Yiddish and Spanish.

At its height in the 1940s, the Jewish population of Moises Ville numbered around 7,000 – about 95 percent of the town's inhabitants. Today, only a few hundred Jews remain. Other Argentine Jewish colonies established by the JCA tell similar stories: their second- and third-generation populations eventually migrated to Buenos Aires and Israel.

Argentina still boasts the largest Jewish population in South America, and since 1928 it has maintained Fundación IWO, a sister organisation of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research. ■

Stefanie Halpern is acting director of the YIVO Archives. For more on Baron Maurice de Hirsch and the Jewish Colonisation Association see yivoarchives.org

THE JEWISH GAUCHOS OF THE PAMPAS

Herding cattle and hunting were part of life for the Jewish cowboys in Moises Ville, the first Argentine Jewish colony, says **Stefanie Halpern**

During the 1880s and early 1900s, a wave of anti-Jewish violence spread throughout the Russian empire, resulting in hundreds of casualties and the loss of millions of roubles worth of Jewish property. For French Jewish philanthropist Baron Maurice de Hirsch, emigration from Russia was the only hope for staunching the persecution of Jews, and he funded various efforts to help alleviate their plight.

His greatest endeavour was the creation of the Jewish Colonisation Association (JCA) in 1891, to which he endowed 50 million francs to purchase farmland in America, Canada, southern Brazil and Argentina. His intention was to relocate hundreds of thousands of Russian and Eastern European Jews to these parts and teach them how to work the land. After his untimely death in 1896, much of de Hirsch's wealth was transferred to the JCA, making it the richest Jewish philanthropic organisation in the world.

The largest land purchase de Hirsch made was 45,000 fertile acres of Argentinian pampas in provinces such as Buenos Aires and Entre Rios. The Argentine government had seized thousands of acres of land from the indigenous population in the hope of tempting Europeans to settle in Argentina. They promised inexpensive

land, low taxes and a generous immigration policy. Between its founding and World War II, the JCA resettled over 150,000 Russian and Eastern European Jews to this area.

On a dreary winter's day in August 1889, 130 Jewish families arrived at the port of Buenos Aires and made their way to Moises Ville – an area in Santa Fe, which was to become the first and largest Jewish colony in the pampas. Each family received 75 hectares of land and a set of tools and farming equipment. However, the laws in Russia had forbidden Jews from renting or purchasing farmland, so these families were ill-equipped for a life of agriculture.

Jewish-Argentinian writer Alberto Gerchunoff tells the story of life in these early colonies in his best-known work, *The Jewish Gauchos of the Pampas*. He describes the hardships of the immigrants' first years:

"The crops failed the day we saw the approach of a cloud so thick that it blocked out the sun. It was locusts, of course, and hours later the orchards and the seeded fields were covered with their plague...We fought courageously; roaring and shouting. But exhaustion and the locust cloud defeated us, and by the time the sweet, magnificent moon illuminated the colony, only farmers' sighs and the women's bitter laments could be heard in the huts."