A world in motion: Ashkenazi immigration in the first decades of the twentieth century

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The shtetl, the Jewish village of Eastern Europe, only exists today as found in the novels of Isaac Bashevis Singer, in films like Yentl, or in memoirs written by those who once lived there, most of them already passed on, like David Limonchik:

Quote from Limonchik

Although the shtetl is often the object of a romanticized community nostalgia, as if held in suspension in a timeless past, like the rabbis and violinists of Marc Chagall, the truth is, as David Limonchik observes, that daily life there was rather difficult. The traditional vision of strong ties with family, friends and neighbors should not obscure the fact that the Jewish village in Eastern Europe was a place where people suffered from hunger and the cold, and where the little people, like Velvel, the water-carrier, often were not even able to adequately celebrate shabat.

The idealized vision of the shtetlach is due, at least in part, to the fact that, together with their populations, they were literally wiped off the map during the Nazi advance in search of what Nazi theoreticians considered to be Lebensraum (German space to live), Eastern Europe. Today, the region is practically Judenrein, that is, Jews are absent, except for a few large cities, and even there, in reduced numbers. Nevertheless, even before the coming of Nazism, in the nineteenth century, the shtetlach were experiencing an accelerated process of demographic emptying, in the Hapsburg Empire, and perhaps above all in the Russian Empire, where David Limonchik's birthplace of Bessarabia was located.

Between the end of the eighteenth century and 1815, when the Treaty of Vienna was signed, re-establishing dynastic order in post-Napoleonic Europe, the Russian Empire had been progressively incorporating extensive areas of Eastern Europe, with large Jewish populations, including parts of Poland (which the Russian Empire divided with Austria-Hungary and Prussia), and Bessarabia. For about a century, until the Russian Revolution in 1917, millions of Jews (about 5.3 million in 1897) lived under the autocracy of the Romanovs, lords of Holy Imperial Russia, where the Orthodox faith, the Russian Slavic nation and the Czar formed a sort of trinity. As a consequence of this, the Jews of the Empire came to be subjected to growing restrictions in the areas of residence, travel and education, a situationwhich worsened after 1881, when the attempt on the life of Czar Alexander II was blamed on them. From then on, pogroms became frequent in the Western parts of the Empire – particularly the great pogrom in Kishinev in 1903 – even making the news in Brazil:

"New unrest directed against the Jews has broken out in Russia, in the city of Starodoub, Tebernigow province. The unrest began with gatherings which grew to such an extent that the police was unable to disperse them. Suddenly the rumor began to spread that a

Jew had attacked an (Orthodox) Russian; and then the multitude began to invade and loot the houses of Jews,who managed to escape by fleeing immediately; all their possessions were stolen, and their warehouses, offices and shops looted. A fire which lasted for hours destroyed the bazaar, the slaughterhouse and ten houses, and for the entire time the Russian inhabitants devoted themselves to orgies and plunder, which lasted until the following morning".

The publication of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, which described a false Jewish conspiracy to dominate the world, and which for a long time, incited anti-Semitic sentiments and actions in various countries, including Brazil, where Gustavo Barroso was one of those responsible for its dissemination , belongs to this context.

But the Russian Empire did not only represent repeated outbreak of an increasingly institutionalized anti-Semitism for the Jews. The processes of modernization and urbanization which the Empire was experiencing led to an ongoing demographic and economic emptying-out of the shtetl. Oppressed by poverty and an absence of hope for the future, hundreds of Jewish men and women like Rifka Gutnik left the native villages, Britchon in Gutnik's case, to go to live in industrial cities such as Czernovitz, where this migrant went to work in a factory making stockings. Through this process of population transfer, some large cities in the Empire came to have important Jewish populations: Warsaw had only 3,532 Jews in 1781 – or 4.5 % of its total population – but in 1914 the number of Jews who lived there was already 337,074 – 38% of the population; in Odessa, there were 246 Jews in 1795, but by 1897 this number had already risen to almost 140 thousand, about 35% of the population.

In these cities, however, life for the Jews would continue to be marked by severe political, economic, social, religious and cultural restrictions. Disconnected from their original communities, separated from networks of family and religious solidarity, subjected to a labor economy which often limited them to low-paying employment and inflicted open anti-Semitic discrimination, the Jews in Czarist Russia were to develop new political responses to the state of things, many of them unconnected with their religious and communitarian traditions. Thus, they made contact with Marxism and the political parties of the revolutionary left, the social democrats and the Algemeiner Idisher Arbeter Bund, with attempts at assimilating into Russian society, with different currents of nascent Zionism – particularly its socialist versions – or they simply felt a growing desire to emigrate to lands where anti-Semitism and pogroms were not present, and where livingconditions seemed more promising.

Emigration was the option for a large portion of the Jews living in such conditions: between 1880 and 1914, about 2 million Jews emigrated from Imperial Russia to the United States, 60 thousand to Great Britain, and largely for ideological reasons, about 60 thousand Zionists to Palestine. From the Austro-Hungarian Empire, a region which included both the rich andcosmpolitan Vienna and Budapest as well as the impoverished areas of Galicia and Bukovina, today located respectively in Poland and Romania, filled with shtetlach, more than one million Jews emigrated to the United States between 1867 and 1914. The United States (Die Goldene Medina, The Golden Land) represented, for the Jews and for millions of other Europeans, a dream of freedom, including religious

freedom, and the chance to escape from poverty, which seemed to be something denied to them in Europe. Between 1881 and 1915, about 20 million Europeans, the majority from the South and East, Catholics and Jews, entered the United States, a country which took in 85%of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe between 1881 and 1914.

In the United States, the Jews were to experience an unheard-of incorporation not only in to society but into the state itself. Even at the beginning of the twentieth century, they came to direct important parts of the press, such as the New York Times and the New York Post, and Walter Lippmann became one of the most widely read and respected political columnists. They founded great publishing houses, such as Viking Press, Simon & Schuster, Random House and Alfred Knopf, great film studios in Hollywood, stores such as Bloomingdale's. Sidney Hillman was one of the greatest examples of another important area of Jewish participation in American society, the union labor movement. From Samuel Gompers, president of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) between 1896 and 1924, to David Dubinsky, of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, to Rose Schneiderman, of the Women's Trade Union League, and the strong Jewish section of the Socialist Party, Jewish labor activists participated strongly in the American labor movement, whether in its more conservative manifestations, linked to the AFL, or its more radical or reformist versions, such as the Industrial Workers of the World, or the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). By 1916 Louis D. Brandeis had already become notable as the first Jew to sit on the Supreme Court of the United States, to be followed in 1932 by Benjamin Cardozo, of Sephardic origin, and in 1939, by Felix Frankfurter, who had not even been born in the United States, but in Vienna. In the government of Franklin D. Roosevelt, about 15% of the important posts, including in the Cabinet – as for example Henry Morgenthau – were held by Jews, and some of these such as Samuel Rosenman and Sidney Hillman became chief advisers to the president. In the year in which the Second World War began (1939), New York was the largest Jewish city in the world, and about 4.8 million Jews were living in the United States, becoming faithful and often decisive voters for Roosevelt and the Democratic Party. In large American cities, let it be said in passing, Jews such as Meyer Lansky and Benjamin Siegel also became part of organized crime, a phenomenon immortalized on film by Sergio Leone in *Once Upon a Time in America*.

But such stories of incorporation had another side, that of uprooting and incomprehension, and the assimilation of the immigrants also met profound resistance from American society. The United States always maintained an uneasy relationship with the immigrants, sometimes presenting itself as a country welcoming them – a plaque on the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty celebrates verses from the the poem "The New Colossus" by Sephardic poet Emma Lazarus (1849-1887): "Give me your tired, your poor,/ Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free." , sometimes rejecting them. And even a man like Benjamin Franklin (1706-1890) complained of the stupidity of German immigrants, who represented the possibility of social disorder. Throughout the nineteenth century, immigrants, particularly the Irish, were often depicted as irremediably brutish simians, a fate shared by the external enemies of the United States, such as the Spanish in the war of 1898, and the Germans in the First World War.

Anti-immigrant feeling in America intensified at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, when foreign workers were accused of bringing anti-American organizational practices and ideologies, such as the mafia, socialism, and anarchism, and of being responsible for criminality and above all for the labor agitation which were typical of the day. The processes of Americanization of immigrants then in force – whether private, such as those of the Sociological Department of the Ford Motor Company, or public, many of them marked by symbolic violence against immigrants, such as the Dry Law of 1920 – were replaced, in 1918-1919, by the expulsion of more than 600 aliens, often without formal charges being lodged, as for example the Jewish anarchist Emma Goldman, expelled because of her connections, proven or not, with workers' movements and parties of the left. With the Great War over, Henry Ford, then considered to be an example of a progressive American businessman, the great entrepreneur who sought to instill puritan values of hard work in his Catholic workers, financed the distribution of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion in the United States, and not by chance, was awared the Great Cross of the Supreme Order of the German Eagle in 1938. In this environment, the New Deal was often accused of being the Jew Deal, and the President of being actually named Rosenfeld.

American rejection of immigrants would be institutionalized by laws restricting immigration passed in the 1920's, intending above all to prevent Jews and Catholics from Southern and Eastern Europe from continuing to enter the Anglo-Saxon and Protestant United States. As a result, between 1925 and 1930 the annual average number of immigrants entering the United States fell from approximately one million per year, to 293 thousand, and between 1931 and 1934, to 46 thousand, with only 4,134 Jews entering the country in 1934. By the 1930's the verses by Emma Lazarus sounded empty, and between 1931 and 1936, largely as a result of the Great Depression, 103,142 more people left the country than entered (immigration of 256,438 versus emigration of 359,680).

Even though the United States was no longer receiving them relatively freely, hundreds of thousands of Europeans, among them Jews from Eastern Europe, even after the collapse of Imperial Russia, with the Revolution of 1917, continued to seek to emigrate as a form of improving their profoundly adverse circumstances. As Isaac Deutscher, Marxist historian and biographer of Leon Trotsky, born in Chzranow, Poland related: "I survived three massacres [of Jews] during the first weeks of the newly independent Poland. This was how we were greeted by the sunrise of Polish independence." On the other hand, at the end of the 1920s, London's policy for its mandate in the Middle East, intending to pacify the Arab discontentment resulting from Jewish immigration, would place restrictions on the entry of Zionists into Palestine. Finally, since the end of the 1910s, Argentina had been trying, though without results, to regulate and diminish the influx of new immigrants, increasingly viewed as a threat to social order. Among these immigrants, the "Russians", that is, the Jews, were particularly viewed as revolutionaries. Given this environment, Brazil, just as it had been for Japanese beginning in 1908, became an alternative for a growing number of Jews. As a result, between 1926 and 1942, almost fifty thousand Jews entered Brazil, the majority coming from Eastern Europe, among them Rifka Gutnik who, coming from Britchon via Czernovitz to Rio de Janeiro, was part of the migratory flow which would form the basis of the Brazilian Ashkenazi community.

Not that there had not already been Ashkenazi present in Brazil in the nineteenth century. In 1840, a Polish doctor named Piotr Czeriewicz disembarked in the capital, wrote popular works on medicine, such as the Formulary or Brazilian Medical Guide, and the Popular Dictionary of Medicine and Related Sciences, Brazilianized his name to Pedro Luiz Napoleão Chernoviz and, in 1855, returned to Europe, establishing himself in Paris. In the first decades of the nineteenth century, English and French Jews had also established themselves in the capital as merchants, like Bernard Wallerstein, proprietor of an establishment dealing in women's clothing, cigars, jewels, footwear, and wines. At the end of the nineteenth century, the community grew with the arrival of Jews from Alsace-Lorraine, probably as a result of the Franco-Prussian War. Faced with the news from Russia, widely publicized in the *Jornal do Commercio*, these Jews carried out fund-raising campaigns, together with Catholic families, to finance the immigration of Jews from Eastern Europe to Brazil.

Nevertheless, at this time, the first project for the emigration of Russian Jews to Brazil would be planned by the Deutsches Zentral Komitee für dei Russischen Juden (Central German Committee for the Russian Jews). In the nineteenth century, the affluent and assimilated German Jews – although frequently anxious from the existential point of view - , apprehensive that their impoverished brothers in the faith from Eastern Europe, with their long beards and peyot, and speaking their unmistakable Yiddish, might decide to settle among them, created the committee and sent the Viennese journalist Oswald Boxer to Brazil with the objective of studying the viability of settling Russian Jews in agrarian communities in southern Brazil. However, the political crises of the beginning of the Republic in Brazil complicated the initiative tremendously, and it was buried definitively along with Boxer himself, who was a victim of yellow fever in Rio de Janeiro in 1892. The failure of this experiment did not prevent a second attempt at establishing Jewish agricultural colonies in Brazil. Beginning in 1902, within the same picture connecting the emancipation and assimilation of Jews in Central and Western Europe, and the worsening of the economic, social and political situation of the Jews in Eastern Europe, the Jewish Colonization Association (Yidish Kolonizatsye Gezelshaft), founded by Baron Maurice de Hirsch, in 1891, financed the emigration of Russian Jews to Argentina and southern Brazil, founding the colonies of Philipsohn and Quatro Irmãos in the state of Rio Grande do Sul. Philipsohn and Quatro Irmãos fit in to the context of a social re-engineering which tried to provide Russian Jews, through agricultural work, a way to physical and moral regeneration. This vision of agricultural work would be one of the pillars of Socialist Zionism, a revaluing of the connection of the Jew with the imagined ancestral homeland of the nation through the cultivation of the earth. In Brazil, however, such re-engineering lacked the ideological appeal of Zionism, and the number of Jews who were attracted to the colonies of Philipsohn and Quatro Irmãos was quite small. In 1904, Philipsohn had 100 families, and Quatro Irmãos, by the end of 1915, only 73. After only a short time, facing the difficulties of working in the fields, of the division of the colonies into family lots, which resulted in low productivity, and due to the unstable political situation in Rio Grande in the 1920s, the colonists moved to the cities, particularly Porto Alegre, where they established themselves in the neighborhood of Bom Fim, transforming it into a little shtetl in the middle of the state capital. It was there, possibly, that the first Yiddish periodical in Brazil, Di Mentscheit (Humanity), anarchist in its orientation, published in 1916 by an ex-colonist from Quatro Irmãos.

The high point of Jewish immigration to Brazil took place, thus, in the twenties and thirties, coinciding with a moment during which the country was undergoing profound political and social transformations. Resulting from the urbanization and increasing complexity of Brazilian society, these transformations found their most perfect reflection in 1922 in the Week of Modern Art, the founding of the Communist Party of Brazil (PCB), and, in Rio de Janeiro, the first uprising by the movimento tenentista (political activity by young military officers), which would have its culmination in the Coluna Prestes. The year 1922 would also see the deepening of dissension on the part of the oligarchy with the axis of power represented by Minas Gerais and São Paulo which was characteristic of the Old Republic. It was thus that the oligarchy came to coalesce around the presidential candidacy of Nilo Peçanha, with the launching of the Reação Republicana (Republican Reaction), whose electoral defeat would have an important effect on the outbreak of the movimento tenentista, demonstrating that there was already a political connection between civilians and the military at the time.

In this context, the affirmation by Berl Fuchs, an immigrant from a Polish shtetl who arrived in Brazil in 1929, that all he knew about Brazil was that it had countless revolutions every year, does not sound at all odd. Fuchs' statement suggests that Brazil represented a great unknown for Jews from Eastern Europe at the time, even for those who were immigrating to Brazil. And in fact, the preferred destination for Jews who, being prevented from entering the United States, headed for South America, continued to be Argentina, with its temperate and cosmopolitan capital, Buenos Aires, where Fuchs himself had originally intended to go. But Fuchs was certainly not the only Jew who, in his migration, planning to settle in one country, ended up by settling in another. Matus Limoncik, David Limonchik's brother, began his migration by leaving his native shtetl to go to live in the Romanian capital, Bucurest, where, for seven years, he worked as a pastry chef in the most important café in the city, the Maison Grégoire Capsa. Once he had decided to emigrate from Romania, in 1927, Matus Limoncik was intending to settle in the United States but, faced with the impossibility of embarking for America, he resolved to establish himself in Montevideo, Uruguay, where a compatriot was already living. However, when he stepped off the ship in Praça Mauá, Rio de Janeiro, he happened to meet another fellow countryman and, as he had no links of family or friends in either of the cities, and no promise of employment or somewhere to live, he decided to remain in Brasil. Thus, the migratory process was often marked by uncertainties and hesitations, and often an arrival in Brazil represented only a stage in a long transfer of residence from decomposing empires, countries in crisis, and continents in convulsions. The Alaïtz family, originally from Kishinev, the site of the great pogrom of 1903, was living in Odessa in 1905, where pogroms took place at the end of the 1905 revolution. The family then decided to emigrate from Imperial Russia and settle in the Ottoman Empire, establishing itself in Constantinople, the administrative, military and cultural center of a multi-ethnic and multi-religious empire, in which "little Turkish houses were found next to European palaces, niches for the Virgin were found under Arab arches, and mosques, synagogues, Greek, Catholic and Armenian churches were built one atop of another". And it was in this cosmopolitan city, with its important Jewish community of Sephardic origin, resulting from the expulsion of the Jews from Spain, in 1492, that the Alaïtz family sought refuge from the Slav-Orthodox tempests of the Czarist Empire. With the outbreak of the First World War, and the clear British interest in dislodging the

Ottomans from the Middle East, the Ottoman Empire came to ally itself with Germany, and the family decided to emigrate once more, this time heading for Salonika, the capital for Sephardic Jews in the eastern European Mediterranean, which had been under Greek control since 1912. With the end of the world conflict, and the Turkish government under the control of the Allied forces, the Alaïtz family decided to return to Constantinople. However, the Ottoman defeat in the war represented the decisive force leading to the breaking out of Turkish nationalism. In 1942, the year in which the sultanate was replaced by the modern Turkish republic led by Kemal Ataturk, the Jews lost their status as a religious minority legally protected by the Muslim Sultan, and saw that they would soon be obliged to become citizens of the new Turkey, an idea which does not seem to have been very attractive to most of them. Loyal to the Sultan, the Jews were not generally looked on favorably by the other minorities in the new republic. In 1923, Berco Alaïtz, the head of the family, decided to emigrate from Turkey, heading to the United States, and his family never heard from him again. In 1925, as Russian citizens, the remaining members of the Alaïtz family in Turkey – the matriarch Eva, and her children Pinhas, Bluma and Samuel – decied to emigrate to Buenos Aires, a city where some of their cousins were already living. Between 1926 and 1929 the Alaïtz family went back and forth between Brazil and Argentia, finally opting for the former.

The dismembering of families would not be something uncommon during the process of migration, with fates depending on the vicissitudes of the immigration policies of the various countries, and on the ideological positions of the migrants. Thus, while Matus Limoncik opted to emigrate from Romania to South America, finally establishing himself in Rio de Janeiro, his brother, David Limonchi, a socialist Zionist, migrated to Palestine, putting down roots in Haifa. Rahil Limonci, née Grinberg, from Marculesti, Bessarabia, arrived at the Ilha das Flores, Rio de Janeiro, in 1926, becoming separated from her brother Aaron, who, having decided to emigrate in 1920, easily managed to get a visa for the United States for the laws restricting immigration, entering the country at Ellis Island, New York. In some rare cases, but not exceptional ones for Jews, the final point of arrival in the process of migration could be the point of departure. Itzhak Grinberg, a profoundly religious man who disembarked in Rio de Janeiro to come meet his daughter Rahil, came to feel that the tropical capital was too treyfe, and decided to return to Marculesti in the thirties. Marculesti, however, would soon no longer be kosher. In the thirties Romania saw the advances of fascist and anti-Semitic movements and, by the end of the decade, the Iron Guard had taken power, with the country becoming an ally of Nazi Germany. In 1941, alongside Germany, Romania declared war on the Soviet Union, and Bessarabia became a battlefield for Romanian, German and Soviet troops. On July 9, 1941, the massacre of the Jews of Marculesti began, and the village became a transit camp for Jews from Bessarabia and Bukovina who were deported to Transnistria, in the Ukraine. The Marculesti camp was closed on December 16, 1941, after having become the tomb for several thousands of Jews, among them Itzhak Grinberg.

Even though the migrating Jews who headed for South America may have preferred, by and large, to settle in Argentina, the arrival of some Ashkenazim in cities like Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo established a serial flow of immigration, with one family member bringing the next. The first members of the Dorfman family to settle in Brazil, the brothers Francisco and Moysés, originally from the shtetl of Kislev-Salieva in

Bessarabia,arrived in Rio de Janeiro in 1914, coming to join a brother-in-law who was already established in the city. With the outbreak of the First World War, Francisco, the only one of the brothers who was married, lost contact with his wife and his daughter, Sofia and Sonia, who remained in Secureni, also in Bessarabia. In 1917, with the fall of the Czarist empire, according to Sonia Dorfman, the populace was overjoyed, and burned portraits of "Dear Father", the Czar. With the conflict over, and contact reestablished, Francisco not only sent money to pay for the emigration of his wife and daughter: he brought his sister, her boyfriend, a cousin, and the cousin's wife. After 1925, about two-thirds of the Jewish immigrants arriving in Brazil did so with their passage pre-paid by their family members who were already settled in the country.

A strange, hot country (Marculesti was isolated from the rest of the world during the long winter months, as all the roads were covered with snow), populated by people who were polite, many of them black, and where anti-Jewish prejudice seemed to be absent. These were the most striking initial impressions of many of the Jewish immigrants who disembarked in Brazil. The first Brazilian to approach Berl Fuchs in the street was in fact a black man, who probably feeling sorry for him – with his suitcase in his hand, his pockets empty, and unable to speak Portuguese – gave him the money needed for his trip to Praça Onze, the Jewish center of Rio de Janeiro at the time.

And in fact, the Jews found in Brazil an environment marked by the absence of anti-Semitism, at least that anti-Semitism which could be characterized as a set of practices or discourses which affected the quality of life of Jews, and their interaction in society, or which negatively influenced their chances for social mobility. As Fuchs immediately noted, Brazil was not Poland, and for Leo Epstein, a German immigrant who arrived in Bahia in 1936, where he was welcomed by his brother, who was arm-in-arm with two black stevedores, even less was it Nazi Germany. Samuel Malamud, a Russian immigrant who, thanks to his militant Zionism, would become the first honorary consul for Israel in Rio de Janeiro, states: ”In Brazil there was neither discrimination nor persecution, and Brazilian anti-semitism, more evident in the interior, was due to the Church. I spent a month in Ouro Fino when I arrived, and the image they had of the Jew there was that of Satan, and my father was a man who was always elegant and well-dressed, and it made an impression on people. Anti-Semitism was very strongly linked to the Chruch. Even in the thirties, it was only with the rise of Integralism that there began to be anti-Semitism, but it was not a mass movement. It worried me a little, of course, but the masses, politically speaking, ignored Integralism. Nobody joined the Integralists, not the intellectuals, the majority of them, not the powerful classes, not the workers, not the masses. Fascism was not at all popular here”.

Although the existence (or not) of anti-Semitism in Brazil is a matter of debate for historians, and though demonstrations of anti-Semitism evidently took place on countless occasions, the fact is that daily experiences of most of the Jews who settled in the cities of Brazil were marked by a feeling of profound change, and relief, in relation to their experiences in life prior to their arrival. In Brazil there were no pogroms, nor was discrimination or personal humiliation through a word or gesture a day-to-day experience. This fact was an important difference between the experience of Jewish immigrants and the experience of other immigrating groups from Europe: Jews had not

left their countries of origin simply to escape poverty, although this was an element not to be discounted, but in order to escape anti-Semitism. Put another way, Jews who arrived in Brazil – and also in the United States and other countries – did not simply have as their objective "to go to America", to accumulate material wealth, and to return to the lands from which they had come. Unlike other migrations, where it was not uncommon for half of the immigrants to return to their countries of origin after having accumulated capital , the Jews by and large came to stay, to rebuild their lives in Brazil, and soon began to build institutions for mutual aid, and of a religious nature, as Rifka Gutnik explains:

”Today there are few Yiddish members of the working class – but in those days, especially in Rio de Janeiro, there were many tailors, clothes-pressers, workers in shops making purses and caps…. And life was really hard. Many had left families at home [in Europe] because they needed to support themselves; others needed to get some money together in order to bring their families to Brazil. And so, obviously, an environment had to be created in order to make life a little easier for these people, right?”.

And thus Rio de Janeiro saw the creation of the Grand Temple, whose first member was Francisco Dorfman, the Blue and White Club, the Hebrew Youth Club, Arbeter Kich (a popular restaurant), the Society of Street Peddlers, which brought together those working in one of the principal activities of Jewish immigrants, that of the clientelchikes, peddlers of fabric and other merchandise who would go from door to door selling their wares in the neighborhoods and suburbs of cities such as Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. Matus Limoncik entered this profession after having been badly burned as a pastrycook, and experienced one of its drawbacks: the failure of a client to pay what he owed. After Limonick had asked for payment countless times, always verbally, his debtor denounced him to the police, and accused him of having attacked him physically. With only rudimentary Portuguese, Matus came into contact, even if only briefly, with the national prison system. By 1920, the Hebrew Benevolent Society in Aid to Immigrants had been founded, the objective of which was to supply lodging, nourishment, and monetary assistance to newly-arrived immigrants. Less well-known were the organizations of the "polacas", the Jewish prostitutes who had been arriving in Brazil and Argentina since the late 19th century. Given the concern that prostitution would come to be associated with Judaism, the "polacas" became practically invisible to the community, but even so, they founded their own synagogues, benevolent associations, and cemeteries. And they enriched the Brazilian vocabulary with words such as "encrenca", which came from the Yiddish krank, "illness". "Encrenca" thus came first to mean venereal disease, and later, confusion.

Jews also began to reconstruct, in Brazil, the political and cultural traditions they had brought from Europe. In Rio de Janeiro, these traditions took the institutional form of countless organization with a Zionist orientation – the Zionist Youth Organization, today the Biblioteca Bialik; the Polei Zion, a socialist Zionist party; the Zionist religious movement Mizrachi; the Colégio Magen David, presently the Colégio Hebreu Brasileiro; the newspaper Iidische Folkszeitung, and on the left, the Morris Wintschevski Worker's Center (pro-Soviet, which conducted fund-raising to support Jewish colonization in Birobidzhan, Siberia); the newsapaper Iidesche Vochenblat, later renamed the Brazilianer Iidische Presse; the Poilischer Ferband [Polish Union], with a pro-Soviet orientation;

Brazcor [Jewish organization analogous to the Red Cross]; the Sholom Aleichem School, founded by Yiddishists, and opposed to Zionism, and the Scholem Aleichem Library (Bibsa), which was connected to the Brazilian Communist Party (PCB), and which held a rich collection of works in Yiddish, produced theatrical events, and organized political debates. There were, in short, countless possibilities for the Jews to participate in their new life in Rio de Janeiro, depending on the origin and politico-cultural orientation of the immigrant:

"The different political tendencies were not wild about each other, and there were also disputes between the Sephardim and the Ashkenazim. The Ashkenazim insisted on Yiddish, and the Sephardim were annoyed because they couldn't understand a word of it. The leftists were not a majority, but their various subdivisions were many. There was an enormous variety, various newspapers, leftist ones, literary ones…"

Among the Zionists themselves ideological differences started to appear. There were the ordinary Zionists, the reactionaries who were for Begin and Jabotinski, the more progressive socialists, and the Hashomer Hatzair, on the extreme left, and then the religious groups, who were also divided. Nevertheless, political disagreements were to be found principally between Zionists and progressives, as the founding of the I.L. Peretz School, in Madureira, attests. Originally created by the progressives, the entry of children whose parents were Zionists led to a conflict over the pedagogical orientation of the school, which degenerated into open conflict:

"As some couldn't abide others, they ended up calling for a general meeting –this was in the forties – in order to decide which of the two groups would have the school. The Zionists got a majority of the votes, but, suddenly, Moise Goldfarb stood up. Calmly, he said that they were mistaken if they thought they would be the ones to get what the progressives had built with so much sweat. This was the cue for the fracas to begin. It was a really ugly fight. They even had to call the chief of police….The outcome: the I.L.Peretz school in Madureira closed".

The political effervescence in the heart of the Jewish community took place at a moment when Brazil itself was passing through a time of great upheaval, with the climax being the state of affairs in 1929-1930. At that time, the dissident oligarchies, united around the presidential candidacy of Getúlio Vargas, tried once more to get in power by means of the ballot. Differently from what had transpired in 1922, however, the electoral defeat of the dissidents was followed by the consolidation of their alliance with the lieutenants, sparking the Revolution, and the end of the First Republic. But Brazil was not alone in experiencing moments of uncertainty. The Great Depression put in check the power of the American economy, which many, even in the U.S., considered to be irreversibly stagnated, and the rise of Hitler to power in 1933 presented the world with a political challenge to its civilization which could scarcely be fully understood at the time. As a consequence, the Vargas government was faced with a series of challenges: how to confront the economic crisis, which, having begun in the United States, had a dramatic effect on Brazil, whose wealth came from coffee exports? Should Brazil construct a strong and centralized government, so as to overcome the political fragmentation characteristic of the oligarchic Old Republic, as authoritarian intellectuals such as

Oliveira Viana demanded, or should it develop a new federal model? What to do with respect to the advances of political alternatives on the left and right, such as the Communists and the Integralists? Such challenges would lead to open conflicts, such as the Constitutionalist Revolution of 1932, the Communist plot of 1935, the Integralist plot of 1938, and would culminate with the coming of the Estado Novo, on November 10, 1938, a milestone in the processof political centralization taking place in Brazil.

With the Estado Novo, a regime that sought to construct a new ideal of the Brazilian man and the Brazilian nation, institutions with connections to foreign political currents, and which had their primary communication media in foreign languages, were strictly controlled by the political police. These included (though not exclusively) institution in the Jewish community. Bibsa (the Scholem Aleichem Library) begin to conduct its meetings exclusively in Portuguese, and the representative of the police whose task it was to verify that the mandate for the use of the national language was respected, Nicolau Zimmerman, was Jewish. In order to deal with this situation, Saádio Lozinsky, a religious man and a Zionist, became president of a lay leftist organization, lending it the respectability and freedom from attack due to his standing, which brought him numerous invitations to give testimony for Vargas' political police. With respect to the political repression of the activities of the Jewish leftists, the story goes that a group of leftists had been arrested in the North Zone of Rio de Janeiro, and that when the police sergeant asked what roiter (red) meant, one of them answered that it was simply a reference to the color of his hair. But the repression of Jewish leftists during the Vargas era is not simply interesting stories. Immediately after the Communist plot of 1935, a Jewish musser (informer), the same Zimmerman, reported the Arbeter Kich restaurant to the police authorities, claiming it was a den of Communists, and between thirty and forty people were arrested, among them Velvel Gutnik, the husband of Rifka Gutnik, then the mother an infant. Between 1935 and 1936, thus before the advent of the Estado Novo, and by reason of the state of siege decreed after the Communist plot of 1935, various immigrants suspected of association with foreign political parties were deported, many of them Jews, such as Jenny Gleizer, whose sister Berta would later marry the anthropologist Darcy Ribeiro, the father of the Gleizer sisters, Motl Gleizer, Moishe Lips, Velvel Gutnik himself, and at least one, Tobias Warszawski , was killed.

The Zionists, also perceived to be activists in a foreign political movement, had their activities prohibited between 1937 and 1945, though they continued to have meetings which were tolerated by the regime. In 1945, after the end of the Estado Novo, the Unified Zionist Organization would be founded, bringing together the various strands which until then had not gotten along well: religious Zionists (Mizrahi), general Zionists (conservatives), and socialists (Poalei Sion).

If the thirties were marked by the process of political centralization and by the idea of constructing national unity and the Brazilian nation itself, immigration laws were also the subject of debates and changes. Intellectuals of a racialist tinge, such as Oliveira Vianna, defended the end of immigration for elements which in his view were not contributing to the proper Aryanization of the Brazilian population. Restrictions on immigration had begun to be in place since the beginning of the decade, with the establishment of quotas in the Constitution of 1934, and the adoption of cartas de chamada (letters of invitation) –

by which an immigrant had to have family members in Brazil willing to take responsibility for him - , and by the time of the Estado Novo, a secret decree (No. 1127 of the Ministry of Foreign Relations) prohibited the entry of persons of Semitic origin, which did not impede, thanks to the internal contradictions of the Estado Novo, the continued immigration of Jews to Brazil. Between 1933 and 1942, almost 25 thousand Jews arrived in Brazil, basically Poles and Germans fleeing Nazism, like Leo Epstein. It is also important to remember that, also thanks to the contradictions of the Vargas regime, Jews participated actively in the administration of the Estado Novo at various levels: Salo Brand was the director of the Department of Municipalities during the appointive governorship of Ernani do Amaral Peixoto of the state of Rio de Janeiro, and Horácio Lafer, from 1943 on, became member of the Technical Council on Economy and Finance of the Ministry of the Treasury. During the Estado Novo, due to the necessity of stanching the hemorrhage of foreign exchange credits due to paper imports, it was to Horácio Lafer and his partners, the Klabin brothers, that Vargas offered loans, foreign exchange credits, and a virtual monopoly on production of paper in Brazil. In 1951, Lafer became Minister of the Treasury in the second Vargas government, a position which he held until 1953.

The Jews who arrived in Brazil in the twenties, thirties and forties soon moved out of the neighborhoods of Bom Retiro (São Paulo), Bom Fim (Porto Alegre) and Praça Onze (Rio de Janeiro). Their upwards social mobility, beginning in the 1950s, took them to the elite neighborhoods of the cities, and in an interesting parallel, at the same time that the family of Rahil Limoncic moved from the Rio suburb of Engenho Novo to Copacabana, at the end of the fifties, the family of her brother, Aaron Greenberg, moved from Brooklyn to Levittown, Long Island, the paradigm for the new middle-class suburbs which sprang up after the Second World War. On the other hand, this social ascension, together with the political hegemony of Zionism in the Jewish community after the Nazi genocide and the creation of the state of Israel, came to obfuscate the enormous variety of ideas and political projects among the immigrant generation. Praça Onze, especially, the nest for all the utopias and hopes of that generation, as it was devoured by the self-cannibalizing growth of the city of Rio de Janeiro , like a shtetl in Eastern Europe, now exists only in the memoirs written by its former residents, most them now by passed on, like Abraham Josef Schneider:

”On Sundays the streets were bubbling with people. The noise of the conversations, in Yiddish, of course, was deafening. We talked about everything and everybody. About the new machine which Berl had just bought, Mordechai's good clients, the bad customer who made the life of Leizer, one of the many clientelchiks, miserable. There was still time left over to talk about the beautiful young woman who had just arrived from Lithuania, or Poland, or Bessarabia…Practically all the businesses in Praça Onze belonged to European Jews:the Yiddish vende, a modest shop belonging to Dona Sima; the butcher, who only sold kosher products; guesthouses like that of Dona Henale, which was always crowded; Herman's store selling stockings; Jacob Rosenberg's place selling supplies for tailors; and shops of carpenters, tailors, barbers. For us, Praça Onze was a little and beloved city”.

Marculesti, Kislev-Salieva, Lipcani, Ostrowiec, Secureni, Bom Fim, Bom Retiro, Praça Onze…this need to (re)construct, symbolically, lost community ties, which, in some way, provide place and meaning in a world of increasingly fragmented identities seems to be on-going. Perhaps this may be one of the elements of the crisis of modern Judaism, with Ashkenazim frequently ready to let go of "the way things were", and ready to embrace the values of modernity , though they are sincerely moved when they hear, on their modern sound systems, the unmistakable sounds of klezmer.