MARJORIE AGOSÍN

Introduction

I grew up in Valparaíso, Chile, the port city to which most of my family emigrated from eastern Europe and Russia and where my family has lived for four generations; they married, had children, and helped build the first Jewish community there, beginning with a school and a burial society. But most of all, they created a sense of home and permanence in this very impermanent world, especially for Jews.

It was in my earliest years that I developed a passion to tell stories and to listen to others weave their tales. We used to gather at the table, and the after-dinner conversation would revolve around magnificent and fantastic journeys, some historically accurate and others wildly imaginative. The delicate balance between truth and imagination was rarely maintained, but what really mattered were the stories and the gatherings at which they were heard.

It started first in the 1920s with a benevolent patriarch, Joseph Halpern, who fell in love with a cabaret dancer in Vienna. This dangerous alliance, according to my great-grandmother Helena, allowed Joseph to undertake perhaps the most important and adventurous journey of his life, which would lead him to the safety of Chile. After looking at an old map, Joseph decided to disembark at the end of the world—Valparaíso, Chile.

My maternal great-grandmother, Helena, and her handsome son, Mauricio, arrived in Chile from Vienna in 1939. Mauricio grew up to be a magnate and married into the Chilean aristocracy, the Montecinos, converts who continue to hide their Jewish roots. My paternal grandparents came from Odessa, walked to Istanbul, and set sail from Marseilles to the port of Valparaíso. My great-grandmother Sonia truly understood the meaning of impermanence and uncertain journeys. But all of my grand-

parents used to have suitcases packed and ready, and when news came, they would ask themselves if this was good or bad for the Jews. I have come to believe that some things are good and some are bad for the Jews as well as for everyone else.

These stories, told around the dinner table throughout my childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, became symbolic of our identity. The genealogies of our voyages and the passion to tell them in a way made all of us sophisticated storytellers who told stories to save our memories and to reaffirm the power of our shared humanity through words.

Judaism meant not only belonging to a religion but also to an intense culture of vibrant voices, despite the countless times these voices were silenced, sometimes forever, because they were Jewish. At home, many people visited us: Russian Jews who taught us how to make borscht; elegant eastern Europeans who made blue cabbage, which they told me was a magical food. I was taught the culture of the Sephardim, from their *burrekas*, songs brought from ancient Sepharad, modern-day Spain, that spoke of nostalgic love and a fervent longing to return.

I remember whistling the song “Adio Kerida” on my way to school. It is a melodic and nostalgic song about unrequited love and loss. I have come to realize that this song also evokes the loss of a country and the pain of displacement, like Ruth Behar’s film on Cuban Jewry that is discussed in this collection. Her film bears the same name as the nostalgic song that I used to whistle. In making this film, Behar returns to an almost imagined land, the land of childhood, and reclaims the losses that are also journeys symbolic of those who died in the Diaspora.

This volume bears the passion of storytelling from the diverse Jewish communities of the Americas. It presents both the collective history of Jewish life in the Americas and stories of personal voyages of immigration and fortitude. It speaks about how a daughter of Holocaust survivors overheard in Buenos Aires that the Holocaust never took place and about a film by a Cuban American anthropologist-poet-filmmaker that records the memories of others living in Cuba and at the same time allows the filmmaker to take ownership of her own memories.

There are essays on Jewish humor in Latin America and how this humor has amalgamated histories of the past and present. And there are serious concerns as well: the presence of the Nazis in southern Chile, the persecution of Jews during the military dictatorships in Argentina, and the divided Jewish community in Chile over the controversial figure of the Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet. Many Jews left the country during the presidency of Salvador Allende and returned during the dictatorship of

Pinochet because they felt safe under his government. And yet another wave of migrations and immigrations took place when Pinochet came to power, when members of the Jewish community feared persecution under fascist rule.

It is my hope that *Memory, Oblivion, and Jewish Culture in Latin America* will enable an engagement with this Jewish Latin American culture—that it will bring understanding of its roots, its shortcomings, and its accomplishments and occasion an examination of this dual sense of belonging to the People of the Book and to society at large. But most of all, I would like to establish the understanding that from the past of this suffering people a future was and continues to be forged.

The past was a tortuous path for the Jewish communities since Christopher Columbus's arrival at Santo Domingo, and the path continues to be so in contemporary times. The contributors to this volume address the ways in which governments and individual citizens have responded to the presence of Jews in their own countries and in their own spirits. For the past decade, the Jewish presence has received attention in academic circles and has been incorporated into official historiographies. I believe this recognition, although a very tardy one, has been of extraordinary significance to the field of Latin American studies. I also believe that this book moves further in demonstrating that the Jewish experience is not isolated but encompasses the history of Jewish Spain, the expulsion and the voyage of Columbus, as well as the histories of world migrations after the first and second world wars. This is an ambitious collection that encompasses generations of people and their tenacious pursuit of survival as well as their taking roots in landscapes, languages, and religions. This undertaking has made the Jewish presence in Latin America fascinating both in its power to survive despite an often hostile Catholic church and in its ability to acculturate without losing its traditions.

This is why this collection begins with Sepharad, a place of promise, of hope, as well as the central metaphor for exile and displacement of the Jewish community since their expulsion from Spain in 1492. Though Jewish communities have existed practically throughout the world, historians consider the Spanish Diaspora one of the most fundamental and destructive moments in Jewish history. The Jews of Sepharad became the Jews of Latin America who preserved the Judeo-Spanish in many variations; they felt at home with Spanish and wrote in it. Many poets, from Rilke to Milozh, have said that the only true homeland is language. And all those who escaped persecution and landed in the New World infused Spanish with traces of Ladino; some, in Argentina, for example, continued to speak

Yiddish and created newspapers and plays in this language so that it would not disappear.

While I write these comments, on the shores of Valparaíso the lights seem to grow in the dancing hills where Joseph Halpern arrived, then Helena, then my grandmother from Buenos Aires who crossed the Andes on a mule. All these generations later, I am still listening to the after-dinner stories, now retelling my own stories for my children and taking them to the recently erected one-room Jewish museum in Valparaíso where photographs of my great-grandparents grace the entrance. These photographs inspire and accord recognition to Jewish life in Latin America, which implies always being from somewhere else or always being in transit. Theirs is a life that is even more vibrant, eloquent, and complex because it has survived. Today there are half a million Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking Jews.

The complex and multifaceted history of the Jewish people of Latin America leaves many questions to be asked, ranging from the most basic details of the Jews' first arrival in America to the ways in which they established themselves in their new societies. The synagogues of the first Jewish settlers in the Caribbean are still in use. The synagogue in Curaçao still has sand floors, representative of the times when Jews had to keep very silent when praying so as not to be discovered by the Inquisition. Today the synagogue in Recife is being reconstructed; it is a symbol of the promise and revival of Jewish life in the Americas.

Despite the very small size of most of the Jewish communities in the region, there is a resurgence of Jewish life and expression through literature, movies, food, and music. These contributions have not yet captured the liveliness of Jewish life, however, in communities where the Jewish presence is quite large, such as in Buenos Aires and Rio de Janeiro. Jewish culture and the Jewish people continue to be seen as the other, as a foreign minority, as a marginalized group exemplified by its differences from other communities of immigrants. The past few decades have witnessed an increase in discrimination against them, such as the anti-Semitism manifested during the Argentine dictatorship. This anti-Semitism survives today in laws prohibiting Jews from becoming president or from serving in the armed forces; these rights are reserved only for Catholics. The poignant testimony of the distinguished Argentine journalist Jacobo Timerman in his book *Prisoner Without a Name, Cell Without a Number*, which describes his imprisonment and mistreatment, exemplifies the conditions of the Jews, especially during the 1970s, and the impossibility of living as both Jew and Argentine. These conditions culminated in ter-

rorist attacks on the Jewish community, the deaths of thousands, and the destruction of books, classrooms, and the heart of the communities.

In Chile in 2002, the government allowed a meeting of the Nazi Congress (it drew fewer than ten participants). The recent dictatorships of the Southern Cone have contributed to the increase in anti-Semitism manifested in the conspiracy theory propaganda linking the Jewish presence in Latin America to Zionism and the oppression of the Palestinian people.

This collection should be seen as a rehearsal and an exploration of the history of Jews in the Americas and as an introspective meditation about what it has meant to be Jewish in a Catholic society. We analyze the politics of identity and how they are forged, negotiated, and integrated. We explore history's subjectivity, its subtleties and hues. One of the key questions that the authors in this collection explore is how the immigrant's previous culture intersects with his or her immigration experience. All minority groups analyze the clues to their own identities. They must delve deeply into the gestures of absence and presence, inventing survival strategies, but at the same time, they must be able to express their own histories with their own uncertain travels, ambiguous integrations, and promising futures. Each author in this collection has a vision of Jewish culture in Latin America from a personal and collective experience, allowing both their experiences as Jewish individuals and the fact that they were Jews in history to speak.

When I began to assemble this collection, I wanted to bring forth in particular the vibrancy, passion, and multifaceted perspectives found in Jewish life in the Americas. I wanted to showcase how this ancient culture allows for the possibility of change and innovation and how we can work from a tradition that has achieved plurality and has embraced a sense of community in spite of its diverseness.

A handful of anthologies published in the past decade have explored the Jewish presence in Latin America. Many of them focus on specific Jewish communities. The Argentine community has probably received the most attention. Edna Aizenberg's *Books and Bombs in Buenos Aires*, for example, explores the history of Argentina through a meditation on Jewish writing from Gerchunoff to Borges.

The uniqueness of *Memory, Oblivion, and Jewish Culture in Latin America* resides in its communal and cohesive vision of the Jewish world as the center of a diasporic and fragmented existence that is able to transcend persecution and displacement in order to re-create a new sense of being and existing in the world. Thus, these essays must be read as if we were immersed in a passionate voyage whose inner journey begins with

Sepharad and the expulsion of the Jews in 1492. The essays by Reyes Coll-Tellechea and Angelina Muñiz Huberman are reflections on exile, language, and loss, but also on the reconstruction of what is vanished and comes alive. I believe that the Jewish Diaspora is a new phenomenon in Latin American history unlike any other, especially from the point of view of language and the preservation of Ladino and Spanish cultures through all these journeys.

The Jewish presence in Latin America must be seen as an evolutionary process that encompasses the historical, political, and cultural. By the end of the twentieth century, it emerged with its own autonomous and original voice. In the 1990s, when Spain established relations with Israel that had been abruptly halted during the Franco regime and when the first few synagogues in Madrid and Barcelona reopened, writers such as Carmen Reiría and Angelina Muñiz Huberman began to write about Jewish characters. Muñiz Huberman, in particular, is a Spanish-Mexican Jew who writes about the marvelous and mysterious Merchant of Tudela as well as the life of the Spanish conversos living in Mexico. Thus, history and memory are reconciled.

The nexus for this history and the essays in this volume is Spain. We assume that memory, politics, and the way in which politics have arbitrarily tried to silence certain parts of national histories are inseparable. There has been a continuous and systematic history of oppression, punishment, and secrecy. I say “secrecy” because it is not until recently that we have begun to discuss more openly the complex relationship between the Spanish Jews and the Spanish government, as well as the fact that Spain did not recognize the state of Israel until 1986.

These challenging essays ask overall what the Jewish identity in Latin America is, how it changes through time, how Jews exist or do not exist in the hyphens. And they leave a lingering question: Does being Jewish speak to a transitory history or a more permanent one in the Americas?

This anthology begins at an essential historical moment—the exile of the Jewish community from Sepharad to the New World. Reyes Coll-Tellechea’s essay provides the framework for the volume. It is a meditation on the historical silence of Spain regarding the Jewish expulsion five hundred years ago, a historical expulsion that is beginning to be studied with great interest. Coll-Tellechea wonders whether the expulsion was exclusively anti-Jewish or a way to seek political unity and poses necessary questions: Why the silence? Why the delay in recognizing the Israeli state? Why the tenacity of the Sepharad Jews and the new Sephardic Jews who

write in Spanish and try to keep alive their musical traditions so they can always belong to the Sepharad? She also leads us to reflect on the ways in which society deals with and understands the past and how other Spanish writers are reclaiming it through fictional stories that reach into the historical past.

A possible answer to the various questions raised by Coll-Tellechea can be found in the essay by the Mexican writer Angelina Muñiz Huberman, whose ancestry is Spanish and whose family became part of the history of the conversos. She picks up where Coll-Tellechea leaves off with regard to the situation of converted Jews. She questions how it was possible to eradicate a powerful and vigorous Sephardic community in Spain that had lasted for more than fourteen centuries and which was silenced by the Inquisition and the collective humiliation of the autos-da-fe. She postulates a fundamental idea that appears throughout these essays: the tenacious desire to keep the Sephardic tongue alive. For Muñiz Huberman, the perseverance of the Sephardic language—from the Middle Ages to the writings of Maimonides to the texts of de Leon, Baruch Spinoza, and Elias Canetti—is tied to a legacy that goes beyond language; it assumes an identity, a way of life that accepts faith and the surrounding world. According to Muñiz Huberman, Sephardic also found refuge in colonial Mexico as a living language that explores the Jewish feelings of the Diaspora through modern-day literature, including her own work. She suggests that although the Jews were expelled from Spain, the Sephardic language has had continuous rebirths and has found living legacies.

Because the Diaspora and constant voyages to uncertain territories are part of Jewish history, one must consider the points of arrival, entry ports, which were often difficult and unsafe to enter, as well as the points of departure. These stories of arrival represent a living history of people in perpetual search of a home. The essays by David Brailovsky and Murray Baumgarten conjure a serene aspect that speaks of an origin that is then reconstructed and transformed into presence. Their arrivals conjure up two different ports, Valparaíso and Colón, and two different points of departure, Shanghai and Berlin. What is important is that the arrivals are points of contact between a somber past that annihilates the possibility of human life and the present—a constant stream of changing memories. Baumgarten's essay can be seen as an inconclusive geography of moments in the past, of uncertain presents where memory reigns, where the Caribbean Sea is confused with Europe and Israel. For both Brailovsky and Baumgarten, the promised land is Latin America, which offers refuge but, more important, allows them to recover their memories.

The historian Sandra McGee Deutsch takes us on a personal journey regarding what motivated her to think and write about the Judeo-Latin American culture. Her experience of a complex and powerful anti-Semitism led her to reevaluate how Argentina's prejudice against all things Jewish is still part of the national culture and legacy.

One of the great migratory waves to Latin America took place in the years before and after the Holocaust, 1938, 1939, and 1945. Jewish immigrants had to take refuge in any country that would accept them, since new visas were being denied in the United States and Canada. That "other America," the Southern one, became a possible place for refuge and shelter, but there was a paradox: Nazis also sought refuge and shelter there. Perhaps the most well-known examples are Adolf Eichmann in Argentina, Joseph Mengele in Bolivia, and Walter Rauff in Chile. Gustavo Farias's *La ruta de los Nazis* (*The Path of the Nazis*) is the most thorough examination of this important and often overlooked area of Latin American historiography.

These two forces—the Holocaust and Latin American dictatorships—epitomize the loss and pain of displacement. For example, Argentina's Juan Perón, a notorious anti-Semite, used to say: "Be a Patriot, Kill a Jew." The Canadian historian Graeme Mount's essay clearly documents the historical relationship between Nazism and fascism that is only now beginning to be revealed. He presents an in-depth analysis of the Nazi presence in Chile from its beginning during World War II and its relationship with the Allies. He also explores the complex relationship between Chile and the United States: the former's desire to remain independent from the latter while harboring a deep-rooted connection with the German immigrations to southern Chile and the later immigration of Nazis to the same region. This essay is of particular relevance since Pinochet's government had strong connections with the Nazi enclave. Evidence of the relationship between General Pinochet and the Nazi legacy becomes clear as more and more information is unveiled concerning Colonia Dignidad, a Nazi enclave in southern Chile where many political prisoners were held and subjected to torture.

Two essays present intimate portraits of the Jewish community in Mexico today. Diana Anhalt examines and reflects on the history of the Beth Israel community, which was founded in 1953. Although there was controversy initially, it continues to exist, albeit in a weakened state due to leadership problems. Anhalt explains the weakening of this community as in part related to the disintegration of minority communities throughout Latin America. The essay by Adina Cimet, written from a sociological

perspective, deals with the Mexican Jewish community from its inception in 1958 through its decline as a result of factions vying for leadership and finally its fragmentation and dislocation. Cimet observes how the democratic spirit of a community begins to erode and how it then becomes a community dominated by an authoritarian force rather than by an inspired leadership. Cimet's insightful analysis demonstrates how a power struggle arising from different visions can occur among a religious and cultural minority.

These essays are a clear affirmation of the Jewish community in Latin America in all of its cultural manifestations as well as its migratory projects. Each essay explores the particular experience of Jews in particular countries as well as the different cultural manifestations through which the Jewish culture has incorporated its history, traditions, and legacy. Both the past and the future, ancient myths and fables, are gathered here to draw a portrait of the migration experience and the search for an identity through the unique vision of new cultures in a new world. One of the key aspects that developed in the past decades in the field of Jewish studies is the vindication of Jewish figures in the cultural life of their respective countries. The literary section discusses new writers whose contributions to Jewish literature in Latin America have been of extraordinary importance.

Naomi Lindstrom focuses on the Mexican writer Margo Glantz, whose book *Genealogies* is a pathbreaking combination of autobiography and memoirs and began an important autobiographical tradition that many female writers in Latin America followed: Sabina Berman in *La Bobe*, Marjorie Agosín in *A Cross and a Star*, and Teresa Porzecansky in *Perfumes of Carthage*. Glantz exhibits a marked sense of humor mixed with the traditional Jewish humor that can be found in eastern European writers such as Shalom Aleichem, but she also exhibits a unique post-modernity that allows her to explore ethnic and religious identity from an audacious perspective, and she accepts her history with its fatalities and dreams.

Rhonda Dahl Buchanan's essay on Perla Suez's *Letargo* presents, with delicacy and kindness, the complex life of a Jewish girl in the province of Entre Ríos who is subjected to a history of secrets and silences. The secret life of the main character in *Letargo* has many parallels to the collective history of the Jewish people and their particular historical coordinates due to the Holocaust.

Stephen A. Sadow's essay begins the section on culture history, and representation. Sadow explores the ramifications for the Argentine Jewish community of the bombing of the headquarters of the Asociación Mutual

Israelita Argentina (AMIA). His reflections point to the peculiar and difficult relationship between Jews and non-Jews. The evident complicity and silence of the Argentine community and especially of its government with regard to investigating this terrorist attack has not been resolved. Despite the damage to the moral fiber of this community and the destruction of important documents, books, and plans for future projects, an astonishing number of literary works were produced by members of that Jewish community. These works included books of poetry by the victims' relatives as well as novels and stories about the experience at the AMIA. Sadow's essay evidences the vitality of this community. However, as Edna Aizenberg suggests, the bombing of the AMIA headquarters, which left broken bodies amid the rubble, also left a powerful gap in the Argentine imagination.

Certain aspects of Jewish culture in Latin America have not been studied in depth previously; these aspects of Jewish existence speak to the delicate balance that Jews must maintain in a predominantly non-Jewish society. The article by Raanan Rein deals precisely with this issue. On the one hand, he explores the laws postulated by the Catholic church wherein the Catholic religion is mandated by law to be taught in all state-funded schools, creating a very difficult situation for the Jewish communities. With the arrival of Pinochet's regime, according to Rein, these laws were relaxed, demonstrating more tolerance for the existence of democracy and religious plurality in Argentina. This essay presents a historical revision with regard to the issue of Jews and identity.

Darrell B. Lockhart's essay complements the one by Naomi Lindstrom. It inaugurates a new vision of popular Jewish culture in Argentina and the ways in which popular culture can be inserted into the search for identity. Lockhart explores the ways in which literature, film, and theater have helped to create the popular and everyday spaces vis-à-vis the mythical search for one's identity. For example, Lockhart points out that Alberto Gerchunoff's *Los gauchos judíos*, a utopian vision of a Jewish gaucho who adapts to Argentine reality, and later a movie dedicated to this topic, has managed to insert itself in a popular culture that is both Argentine and Jewish and both accepted and denied.

Two visual artists, Gabriel Valansi from Argentina and Ruth Behar from Cuba and the United States, propose an alternative vision of the issue of memory. David William Foster analyzes the work of Valansi, one of the most well known contemporary Argentine photographers whose work has strong symbolic associations with post-Holocaust European and Latin American culture. Valansi's photography presents an alternate way of speaking about the unimaginable, that which cannot be expressed, that

which is left unsaid, and creates certain parallels with postwar Europe and present-day Argentina. Both are looted, without a future, annihilated by economic corruption and the exploitation of minorities, in this case, the poorest.

If Valansi's work lacks human figures and shows absence as a possible continuity between the wars and the worlds, in Ruth Behar's cinematography memories exist through the presence of a voice, of human figures that she reconstitutes. In order for it to speak, the human voice is presence and memory, the past and the future united by the dimension of the present that the camera lovingly shields through nostalgia. The filmmaker is able to reconstruct the elements of memory slowly, because she is the initiator, the carrier of memories and remembrances. The audacious lens of the camera allows her to write, reconstruct, and reassemble her memories. Valansi understands that the Holocaust emptied out memories and that is why his landscapes are nighttime episodes and dark galleries that only leave traces. Behar takes these traces and weaves histories with them.

I wrote part of this introduction on the first night of Passover. The nostalgia we experience during all religious celebration allows us to re-think the landscape of our human geography that is, above all, a historical and emotional geography. Each of the essays collected here has a complex, ambiguous, yet victorious history—but, most important, a history that creates and re-creates itself. It is a history built of remnants, and it is constantly being formed in the same way that our ancestors found a way to leave Egypt. To a certain degree, this anthology coincides metaphorically with the public “debut” of Jewish Latin American culture.

I am writing these concluding words in Valparaíso, a port city that for me is a window onto the world, a privileged horizon to which immigrants, among them Jews, arrive. This is where my great-grandparents landed and where my grandparents found their faith and hope. Stories tell us that since there were no synagogues at the time, my grandparents were married in a church but still kept their traditions and history.

Let us begin our travels of imagination and hope. We start out in the land of Sepharad, a land of promise, and end in Latin America, the template Caribbean lands, the remote communities in the south of Chile and at the Panamanian border. During our travels, we will explore the mystery of those who share the collective memories of World War II survivors and their children as well as those who survived the AMIA. Past and present must coexist not only in one voice but also in a never-ending dialogue of voices and history.

I have assembled this collection as part of the constant pursuit of justice, truth, and hope that I found in Latin America. This collection affirms and evidences the life and cultural vibrancy of Latin American Jewry. It is a sign of the possibilities for a new world and the hope for one in Latin America, particularly, that, regardless of its traumas and difficulties, accepts the idea of coexisting and gives refuge to those histories and voices that today have become a reality. These essays converse with the past and illuminate our future.

Memory, Oblivion, and Jewish Culture in Latin America

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