

# Introduction I

ROBERT DIANTONIO

OVER THE PAST DECADES the literary marketplace has been greatly enriched by a new wave of Latin American fiction. Masterworks by Jorge Luis Borges, Mario Vargas Llosa, Jorge Amado, Manuel Puig, and Gabriel García Márquez attest to the validity of this statement. While these Latin American writers are familiar to most English-speaking readers, Jewish Latin American authors have also played an important role in this literary renaissance. They have been able to offer a distinctive socioliterary perspective, as Jews generally have occupied positions of marginality within the dominant Catholic nations of the Americas. This has given them an opportunity to analyze both their own experience and the greater reality of their respective countries.

Presently, Jewish writers like Brazil's Moacyr Scliar and Clarice Lispector, Peru's Isaac Goldemberg and Argentina's Gerardo Mario Goloboff are beginning to acquire an international readership with successful and well-received translations. Lispector has long been considered one of the world's premier fiction writers; however, few critics to date are aware of her Jewish heritage, and even fewer have considered the influence that that heritage has exercised on her writing. Jewish authors constitute an important part of the Latin American literary community as their works are widely read and discussed. Though not yet at a level of recognition as that of Scliar or Lispector, many other writers are beginning to receive intense international attention—authors like Costa Rica's Samuel Rovinski, Cuba's José Kozer, and Argentina's Marcos Aguinis. However, other fine Latin American Jewish authors are still unknown outside the Portuguese- and Spanish-speaking worlds. It is the intention of this book to correct this anomaly as the following studies turn the attention of the English-speaking reader to the state of Jewish thought

and letters in Latin America, highlighting a unique vision of Jewish culture and history.

An important aspect of this general analysis will be an effort to underscore the contributions of women authors to this field, writers like Sabina Berman, Angelina Muñiz, Margo Glanz, Esther Seligson, and Manuela Fingeret. Women in observant Jewish societies held a secondary role to that of men—especially with regard to scholarship—and the book intends to explore what effect the openness of the Latin American experience has had on this present generation of authors. The studies present the tension of the contemporary Latin American Jewish female as both incorporating and rejecting the images that have been impressed upon her for generations. These authors' writings question the traditionalism of the woman's place in modern society, exploring eternal existential questions within a contemporary sociohistorical system that has been, at best, indifferent to them. In essence, their works reflect upon the role of the contemporary woman within two male-dominated societies: the traditional Jewish world and the sociopolitical actuality of present day Latin America.

These authors have placed in sharp focus the conflict that arises between their Jewish heritage and their female identity. In the Western Hemisphere, estranged from the orthodoxies of a more formalized Judaism, these writers explore the varying ways that Judaic traditions both enhance and diminish the condition of being female. They analyze the role of the Latin American Jewish female and her feelings of dual marginality.

## I

These studies also explore Jewish life in communities that are little known in either the Jewish or non-Jewish world, communities unique within the Diaspora experience. The book places in sharp relief the diversity of these Jewish communities: the *gaúchos* of Rio Grande do Sul; the beachfront Copacabana communities of Rio de Janeiro; "Barrio Once," an Argentinian Hester Street; and the Caribbean atmosphere of the dwindling Jewish population of Havana. The history of Jewish immigration to Latin America has been marked by both violent anti-Semitic clashes like Argentina's "Semana trágica" and relatively unencumbered settlement in countries like Mexico and Chile.

The long Jewish historical presence in the Americas has been a fascinatingly complex experience. It comprises the exotic world of Marano

and Converso adventures; Jewish settlers, slave traders, and wealthy sugar barons drawn to the religious freedom of the Dutch colonies of Brazil's tropical Northeast; Sephardic colonies from North Africa and the Levant freely moving about the Caribbean basin; and the massive immigration that accompanied Baron de Hirsh's funding of agrarian communities on the Argentine and Brazilian pampa.

The variegated backdrop that forms the underpinnings of the following studies has been detailed by scholars like Jacob Beller, Judith Laikin Elkin, and Arnold Wiznitzer.<sup>1</sup> This history includes incidents like the ill-fated voyage of the *S. S. St. Louis*, the so-called "Voyage of the Damned," and, surprisingly, includes unlikely heroes like the Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo. Among the world's nations—including the United States and Canada—only Trujillo showed a willingness to offer refuge to 100,000 Jews trapped in Nazi Germany. While the rest of the world turned a deaf ear to the plight of East European Jewry, Rafael Trujillo planned to establish a Jewish settlement in the Sasua province of his country. This strange addendum to Holocaust historiography leaves one not quite sure if Trujillo's motives were purely humanitarian or if he, as Howard Sachar has suggested, wished to cull favor with what he perceived as the "Jewish-controlled press in the United States"<sup>2</sup> to help "sanitize"<sup>3</sup> his regime. After the Holocaust, survivors found their way to almost all of the Latin American nations, with the vast majority settling in Mexico, Argentina, and Brazil.

The establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 inspired many Latin American Jews to make *aliyah*, to immigrate to the Holy Land. During times of extreme political and financial turbulence, immigration to Israel and other lands such as France and the United States, created immigrant communities that produced a rich Latin American literature in exile.

Contemporary Middle Eastern politics also has had a strong effect on immigration. During the Sinai Campaign in 1956 thousands of Jews—mainly Sephardim—were placed in detention camps in Egypt. After establishing one of the oldest and most illustrious Jewish communities in the history of the Diaspora, Jews were ordered to leave the country and within a matter of weeks 15,000 were admitted to Brazil and 9,000 to

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1. See Jacob Beller, *Jews in Latin America* (New York: Jonathan David, 1969); Judith Laikin Elkin, *Jews of the Latin American Republics* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1980); and Arnold Wiznitzer, *Jews in Colonial Brazil* (Morningside Heights, NY: Columbia University Press, 1960).

2. Howard Sachar, *Diaspora: An Inquiry into the Contemporary Jewish World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), 238.

3. Sachar, 238.

Argentina. Some would eventually earn a living in areas like São Paulo's Bom Retiro alongside Syrian, Lebanese, and Palestinian immigrants. In Rio de Janeiro there even was formed an Arab-Jewish business association.

In general terms the large Jewish communities of Argentina and Brazil are predominately secular. Although newer communities of small sects of ultra-orthodox groups, Chabad, are making inroads, the vast majority of Jewish Latin Americans group together more for social than religious reasons, attending local sporting and social centers, the Hebraica, or the Macabi.

## II

The half-million Jews living in Latin America have passed through periods of difficulties as their position between marginal status and the mainstream has not been maintained without conflict. The concept of marginality entails a balance that a person must sustain between the culture and religion of one's ancestors and the desire to assimilate into a new, non-Jewish, way of life. Writer and critic Saúl Sosnowski observes that this literature is born "of the encounter between ancient Jewish culture and the New World."<sup>4</sup> He affirms that it is "also concerned with writing the living history of a recent past that has certain repercussions for the millennial history of the Jews. Latin American history—in its particular national configurations—and Jewish history intersect to celebrate their commonalities."<sup>5</sup>

Since there exists a strong interrelationship between the social history of a people and their literature, it must be kept in mind that Jewish assimilation in Latin America was not always easily accomplished and the resulting tension was often the cause of a dynamic surge of literary activity. The immigrant generation with its strong Yiddish storytelling background was generally bound to a realistic presentation of the difficulties of life in the "New World," while this present generation of Jewish writers parallels the more universal literary currents of our time.

The Jewish writer in Latin America is and always has been torn between conflicting loyalties. From this tension is born their dynamic and insightful literature, a literature that enriches the mainstream of modern Latin American fiction as it underscores the unique and multifaceted nature of Judaic literary history.

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4. Saúl Sosnowski, "Latin American Jewish Literature: On Ethnic and National Boundries," *Folio*, No 17, (September 1987), 1.

5. Sosnowski, 4.

Within the dominant non-Jewish cultures of Latin America, Jewish life has flourished in many aspects, but seems to have diminished with respect to the maintenance of religious fervor. In multi-ethnic cities like Rio de Janeiro, Buenos Aires, and São Paulo, there is a sense of alienation as many aspects of Jewish culture seem to be quickly eroding. Nachman Spiegel, commenting on Elkin and Merckx's *The Jewish Presence in Latin America*, concludes that, "Jews have been more of a tolerated intrusion than a welcome inclusion. . . . Very little, however, indicates any broad or lasting changes are in the offing. Irreconcilable differences are likely to survive between Jewish and National identities."<sup>6</sup> He goes on to state that, "Jews there seem far more prepared to flee from Judaism than leave the good life, however shaky, that generations of hard work and difficult adaption have earned."<sup>7</sup> This tension that results from being cut off from one's roots gives rise to themes that will be traced through the works of various authors.

### III

In very general terms, and excluding specific epochs, the present-day post-immigrant generations now seem to be comfortable within the confines of the larger culture. Within the broad canopy of Jewish literature, there exists a wide spectrum of writings. There are authors who may only make passing reference to their ethnic heritage and others—many of whom are non-observant—who create literary works that examine ethnocentrism: the resonance of their families' *Yiddishkeit* traditions or the shards of their Sephardic background.

In general most Jewish immigrants left worlds of poverty, oppression, and persecution, worlds where a strong sense of community and appreciation for scholarship were forged, for a New World where tensions existed, but not to the same degree. The insular world of the Jews in Latin America opened up and, often within a single generation, intermarriage, commercial interests, radicalism, and apathy left traditions and religion relegated only to the yearly observance of the High Holidays.

The passage from marginality to mainstream was achieved with only limited conflict, especially for a people whose history has been marred with long periods of repression and ghettoization, a people whose faith and unity have sustained them for centuries.

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6. Nachman Spiegel, "Tolerated in a Precarious Environment," a review of *The Jewish Experience in Latin America*, ed. Elkin and Merckx. In *The Jerusalem Post* 10 (February 1990); 16.

7. Spiegel, 16.

Within the umbrella themes of cultural identity and cultural persistence are explored the conflicts born of the immigrant experience, the subject of intermarriage, the specter of the Holocaust, the Inquisition as a reality and a metaphor for present-day oppression, Zionism and Israel reflected in literature, the "Goldene Medine," the expanded Diaspora (Latin American Jewish writers in exile again), the influence of Yiddishists and *Yiddishkeit* on Latin America fiction, and the Jewish woman's perspective.

While the theme of the immigrant experience seems to have run its course, the newer issues of the Holocaust and the literature of exile in Paris, Tel Aviv, and New York are presently being written. This writing revitalizes and broadens the scope of the Latin American literary perspective as individual writers attempt to define and analyze their Jewish identity, creating a literary expression that is linked to the history of all people.

#### IV

Literature is a highly personal and imaginative method for exploring the problems of Jewish cultural identity. Any analysis of this Jewish writing begins with the assumption that Jewish literature, like Jewish culture and religion itself, is marked by extreme diversity. In religious and academic circles the discussion long has persisted as to exactly what it is that defines Jewish writing. Judeo-Latin American writing is not an easily defined concept and is a term that is almost impossible to pin down. Mark Schechner points out in his essay "Jewish Writers," that "Neither 'Jewish writer' nor 'Jewish fiction' is an obvious or self-justifying subdivision of literature, any more than Jewishness itself is now a self-evident cultural identity. . . (However) it is not unreasonable to invoke 'the Jewish writer' as a convenient shorthand for a feature of the literary census that we want to examine but are not yet prepared to define."<sup>8</sup> Bearing in mind this cautionary note, a study of Jewish writing in Latin America merits consideration from a socioliterary perspective. An analysis of the role of minorities in any culture is a critical approach whose validity contributes to a broader understanding of existing literary forms.

This is a literature whose history dates back to the time of European "discovery," in fact, some say to Columbus's arrival.<sup>9</sup> Jews and crypto-Jews

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8. Mark Schechner, "Jewish Writers," *The Harvard Guide to Contemporary American Writing*, ed. Daniel Hoffman (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1979), 191.

9. See Salvador de Madariaga, *Christopher Columbus* (New York: Ungar, 1967).

have played a significant role in the development of Latin American literary history. Thus, this book begins with the simple recognition of the immensity of the topic to be undertaken. We have chosen relevant thematic, sociopolitical and aesthetic issues that will help define and narrow the vastness of this writing. In the space that this book affords us, we hope to shed new light on these issues, while suggesting directions for future studies.

To better understand the intense diversity of the Jewish historical consciousness in Latin America, we are studying the writing of a broad spectrum of authors. As Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico received the vast majority of immigrants, we have had to weight our studies to reflect this fact. It is also well to remember that each author's sense of "Jewishness" and his or her use of Judaism itself as a literary theme inevitably underlies that author's world view. All of these writers touch upon a sense of continuity with Judaic history; all are affected to a greater or lesser degree by a "Jewish presence" in their writing.

In their fiction these authors stress a sense of community with all women and men: the Judaic moral code of *mentschlekeit*. Many attempt directly to explain the Jewish situation, while others, like Clarice Lispector, create an aesthetically universal art. However, even Lispector's writing is forged by a strong undercurrent of traditional Judaic symbology.

## V

Latin Americans now consider this flourishing of Jewish writing an integral component of the contemporary narrative scene. It is both marginal writing that is closely drawn from the Diaspora experience itself and an expression that stems from contemporary Latin American life. Each collaborator, in stressing her or his particular critical approach in the field of literature, also emphasizes the sociopolitical dimension of this vibrant body of writing. With their varied backgrounds and differing approaches to literature, our contributors have presented and analyzed this writing for both the specialist and the general reader.

Again, the following studies are seeking to introduce an important group of writers to an English-speaking audience and to analyze their treatment of literary themes related to Jewish life in the Americas. We hope that our studies will go beyond the strictly literary and bring to light the unique nature of the Latin American Jewish experience. Contemporary Jewish writing is flourishing worldwide, and this book focuses attention on the Spanish and Portuguese component of this literary renaissance.

*Tradition and Innovation* is an attempt to illuminate the literature that the *Am ha-Sefer*, People of the Book, have written of diasporic life in the New World. It provides the reader with a series of critical articles on the major movements, concerns, and writers of this dynamic literature. Taken in its totality, the book serves as both a general introduction to the subject of Jewish writing in Latin America and a useful aid in disseminating and understanding these works and writers for students and scholars in the fields of Judaic, Spanish American, Brazilian, and comparative literature.