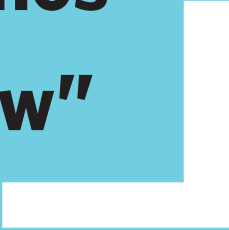




Izabella Main

**“The Memory
of Generations —
a reconstruction of
stories of Polish
Jews from Buenos
Aires in Warsaw”**



Residency No. 9

FLORENCIA LEVY

8-28 June 2015

POLIN
MUSEUM OF THE HISTORY
OF POLISH JEWS



The objective of Florencia Levy’s project carried out during the artist’s residency at POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews is to create a link between memories and traditions cherished by families of Jewish immigrants in Buenos Aires and contemporary Warsaw. Read aloud in Spanish, Yiddish and Polish, their stories are going to be illustrated with films and photographs of different places in Warsaw **(a)**. In relation to this project I wish to reflect upon the Jewish community in Buenos Aires, narrations about the past, memory, the role of language in the process of handing down tradition and creating space for relations to be established by consecutive generations.

JEWISH MIGRATION TO ARGENTINA

With its approximately 240,000 members, the Jewish community in Argentina, and chiefly in Buenos Aires, is the largest to be found in Latin America today. This Diaspora can be traced back to the late 19th century migration from Eastern Europe that followed persecution of Jews in Russia, increasing after the assassination of Tsar Alexander II and including — also in Warsaw — accusations of ritual killings, anti-Jewish regulations and robberies. The then Argentine government supported mass immigration wishing to people the southern part of the country. The next waves of Jewish migrants came in the first half of the 20th century, although some restrictions were introduced in the 1920s. Already in this early period there were Jewish communities, associations and theatres in Buenos Aires, Jewish newspapers were published **(b)**. Argentine Jews came from big cities and small

(a) As I write this text, I do not know the final result of Florencia Levy’s project, which is going to be ready several months after our meeting at POLIN Museum on 25th June 2015.

(b) M. Szkwerek, *W drodze do Erec Izrael. Przystanek: Ameryka Łacińska*, “Ameryka Łacińska” no. 3-4 (41-42) 2003, pp. 124-128.

shtetls; they represented different backgrounds — ranging from orthodox to assimilative ones, and formed an equally variegated populace in the new land. One of the photographs found by Florencia Levy depicts a group of Jewish settlers wearing gauchos' clothing, establishing an Argentine kibbutz.

- Descriptions of the journey to Argentina occupy an important place in Jewish migrants' memories. The trip was often accompanied by feelings of insecurity, fear and trauma resulting from growing threat in Europe as well as the Holocaust. Some people had to hide their Jewish identity to gain the right to settle in Argentina. Others abandoned favourable conditions and good position to start a new life in an unknown place. There was a man for whom the date of his arrival to Argentina constituted an opportunity to celebrate; every year he gave a detailed account of his arrival in Buenos Aires by ship to his children and grandchildren. Salomon and Ester, a married couple of immigrants from Russia, related the story of their coming to Chaco, an unwelcoming, poor and extremely hot province where about ten European families came to settle at the same time. Trying to find their way around another culture and cope with different natural conditions was difficult, and sometimes Jewish communities also had to face local anti-Semitism.
- Contemporary Jewish community in Buenos Aires is variegated as well; there are various groups, associations and cultural institutions to be found in the city. Post war events, and chiefly the 1994 bomb attack in front of the building of the Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina resulting in the death of 85 people, have encouraged involvement in political and social movements as well as the questioning and renegotiation of Jewish-Argentine identity (c).

(c) N. Zaretsky, *Singing for Social Change. Nostalgic Memory and Struggle for Belonging in a Buenos Aires Yiddish Chorus*, in J. Lesser, R. Rein (eds.), *Rethinking Jewish-Latin Americans* (University of New Mexico Press: Albuquerque 2008), p. 233.

This process involves referring back to memories handed down by elderly people who are getting fewer. Consecutive generations of migrant families determine, negotiate and transform the place of Polish, Eastern European, Jewish or other identities in their lives. The migration of Eastern European Jews to Argentina was mostly definite as their connections with the homeland were broken off, members of their families lost their lives or emigrated and contact was lost for decades. It was in Argentina that part of Jewish culture could survive — in a rather complicated sphere between Yiddish and Hebrew, a culture of old communities and political sympathies and positions, for instance in relation to the state of Israel — and even develop in circles preserving old tradition and language **(d)**.

NARRATIONS AND MEMORY

Interviews conducted by Florencia Levy tended to focus on daily experience before the trip and memories of it in next generations. The obtained picture is vivid, rich in details of the life of Warsaw intelligentsia, the poor in cities and the countryside, communist and Zionist activists. Stories recounted by Argentine Jews contain ordinary things such as meetings, meals, sounds and smells — being a member of a choir, preparing *cholent*, fishing or family feasts. Retrospections are triggered by objects/souvenirs — photographs, books, postcards — peculiar “stimulators of memory” **(e)**. Stimuli are provided not only by particular items, but also by conversation in which memories, often repressed into oblivion, could be revived.

• The description of the artist’s project found at the website of POLIN Museum is illustrated with one of the photographs she

(d) N. Zaretsky, p. 252.

(e) A. Rzepkowska, *Sybiracy: wspólnota — pamięć — narracja. Studium antropologiczne*, “Łódzkie Studia Etnograficzne” 48, 2009, p. 16.

has collected. We see an archival picture depicting her Argentine interlocutor Salomon as a child; it is held by his granddaughter Jazmin. There are two dimensions in which the photograph may be analyzed — its relation to reality and memory. Photographs become a tool of evoking stories, finding oneself in a situation, recalling sentiment and remembering what has been forgotten or remains untold. In Salomon's memories there was a school, a synagogue and everyday life of the Jewish community in Pruzana that were discontinued — “it was like a broken life”. Jazmin, Salomon's granddaughter, continues his story as it turns too difficult to him to do this, retelling stories she heard on numerous occasions in her childhood.

› In the process of recalling, events are subject to constant changes, creation and deformation. “What is characteristic of these memories is that the boundaries of »truth« are crossed and fiction is entered. Nobody is capable of saying what it was really like” **(f)**. It is, however, not the knowledge of events that matters; it is the memory of them. Analyzing anthropological categories of memory, Katarzyna Kaniowska claims that the narration of a person who remembers becomes the basis on which their identity is formed **(g)**. The memory of a person is what we have to know in order to learn about their identity and mentality. The identity of consecutive generations of Argentine Jews is shaped in a liminal space, between the “Argentinity” and “Eastern Europeanity/Polish Jewishness”, where every story is different and plays a different role in people's lives.

(f) “Konteksty. Polska sztuka ludowa” 3-4, 2014, p. 74.

(g) K. Kaniowska, *Antropologia i problem pamięci*, “Konteksty. Polska Sztuka Ludowa” 3-4, 2003, p. 61.

LANGUAGE, RECONSTRUCTION AND SYSTEM OF PATHS

The slogan “translate, repeat, retrace” is used by Florencia Levy to describe the process of artistic reconstruction of memory. Translation takes place between three generations and cultures in which Yiddish, Spanish and Polish is used. Memories of the oldest Jewish interlocutors are mostly in Yiddish, next generations tend to use Spanish. The knowledge of Yiddish was maintained in some families, others took courses or learned it singing in a Jewish choir. Speaking Yiddish can also be seen as a gesture against forgetting — “a gesture against oblivion in, and of, the homeland” **(h)**. Fragments of stories collected by the artist are going to be translated into Polish. In this way, a dialogue — or even a “trilogue” will be entered into, between the past and the present.

Since 2008, Florencia Levy has been working on a project entitled *System of Paths*, constructing a system of portraits of people moving within a city, descriptions of spaces and interactions between people and space. Run at POLIN Museum, the project presents Argentine narrations of Jewish past illustrated with images of public and private spaces in Warsaw. The story the artist elaborated on in Warsaw was rooted in her conversations with Polish Jews and their descendants in Argentina. Florencia Levy reached and filmed the places they recalled and used them as film sets. As she walked around Warsaw, she also talked to members of the local Jewish community. Routes were determined by her interlocutors but they were to include daily trips, e.g. to and from work, or be related to special memories of the city. The final work will comprise the effects of interviews conducted in Poland and Latin America with images of places in Warsaw.

(h) A. M. Fortier, *Migrants Belongings. Memory, Space and Identity*
(Berg: Oxford, 2000), p. 70.

Florencia Levy's multifaceted artistic and biographical project has allowed Argentines to see where their predecessors and Jewish communities used to live, and Poles — to learn about the vicissitudes of refugees and next generations, who preserved the memory, customs and language which have been almost completely lost in Poland. For a great number of Eastern European Jews in Argentina, who have no contact with their old world, Poland remains the vastest Jewish cemetery in Europe. In the last decades, the link that had been broken was reestablished by the third and fourth generation undertaking trips to the homeland of their ancestors to see particular places, look for traces and know the taste of "pasta with sour cream and sugar". Florencia Levy's work makes it possible for Polish and Argentine communities to come closer — in reality as well as virtually — and to create a space for cooperation in search of memory and identity, as well as for reflection on the role of memory, language and place in constructing identity.

