



The *Yiddisher Kultur Farband* in Argentina: Progressive and Communist Jews (1917–1956)

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ABSTRACT: Progressive and Communist Jewish identity in Argentina flourished between the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the Cold War. In 1937, during the Popular Front period, Jewish Communist intellectuals organized an International Congress of Yiddish Culture in Paris. Twenty-three countries were represented, and the Congress formed the *Yiddisher Kultur Farband* (YKUF). In 1941, this Congress was replicated in Argentina, where the YKUF sponsored an important network of schools, clubs, theaters, socio-cultural centers, and libraries created by Yiddish-speaking Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe. The Ykufist or Progressive Jewish identity reflects a particular construction that is as ethnic as it is political. As “Jewish,” it aimed to transmit the secular heritage of the *Yiddishkeit* devastated in Europe during World War II, but as “progressive,” “radical” or “Communist,” it postulated its yearning for integration into a universal socialism led by the Soviet model. Progressive Jewish identity was shaped in the antifascist culture and by permanent tensions between Jewish ethnicity and the guidelines of the Communist Party. Above all, it was framed by a fervent aspiration of the immigrants and their children to integrate into their Argentine society.

KEYWORDS: *Yiddisher Kultur Farband* (YKUF); Argentinean Jewish immigrants; progressive Jews; Argentinean Communist Party; antifascist culture

* This work is product of extensive research for my doctoral thesis (FFyL, *Universidad de Buenos Aires*, 2009), later published as *Argentinos, judíos y camaradas tras la utopía socialista* (2015). Several contents summarized here can be extended by consulting this book and other related articles. I would like to thank Prof. Paul C. Mishler for the rich exchange on the subject matter and introducing me to the North American bibliography. Also, thanks to Yiddish student Sonia Bloom for her friendly collaboration.

... to be a Communist was to think in a certain way: for peace, for solidarity, for equal treatment, or to read *Undzer Lebn* (Our Life).¹

Introduction and Some Conceptualizations

THIS ARTICLE EXAMINES the ways in which progressive and Communist Jews built a particular identity in Argentina between the years of the Russian Revolution and the Cold War. This identity was shaped into an institutional network of schools, theaters, clubs, libraries, and fellow citizens' centers, and was led by the *Yiddisher Kultur Farband* (YKUF), founded in Paris in September 1937.²

Like several organizations born in the era of the People's Front, the YKUF was led by Jews who were Communists, but composed of a broader public. Even today, the relationship between the Communist Party of Argentina (PCA) and these institutions still generates historical and political debate. While for some the YKUF was a non-Zionist Jewish institutional network of left-wingers, for others it was a Communist Party initiative within the Jewish community. Our intention is to shed light on these characterizations and prove why both interpretations coexisted and should not be regarded as mutually exclusive.

Like the Jewish People's Fraternal Order (JPFO) in the USA and the United Jewish People's Order (UJPO) in Canada, the YKUF in Argentina was a mass organization led by Communists as part of the more general anti-fascist movement. As an international federation, the YKUF was also created in North America, but was especially dedicated to Yiddish-language publications and arts. The magazine *Yiddishe Kultur*, published by the YKUF in New York, is quite similar to the Argentinian edition published in Buenos Aires (1940–1953). In Argentina and Uruguay, however, the YKUF functioned as a federation that grouped together many educational and cultural institutions, a mission that in the USA and Canada was carried out by

1 Interview with Nora Blutrach (Buenos Aires, 2007), teacher of the I. L. Peretz kindergarten in Villa Lynch, daughter of an outstanding YKUF leader.

2 The YKUF was born in the atmosphere of the anti-fascist mobilization, during the "First Congress of the Yiddish Culture" held in France, September 17–21, 1937, with the participation of Yiddish writers from 23 countries. In April 1941, the South Americans replicated this congress in Buenos Aires and gave birth to the *Idisher Kultur Farband* (ICUF), with the presence of 57 entities from Argentina, Uruguay, Brazil and Chile. In order not to confuse the reader, I will retain the acronym YKUF instead of ICUF.

the fraternal organizations: *International Workers' Order* (IWO), JPFO and UJPO.

There is extensive research on the history of “radical Jews” in the United States, perhaps because of the significance of the Eastern European Jewish immigrants and their children and grandchildren involved in the left (Buhle, 1980; Keeran, 1995). Less research on this subject is available in South America. Studies on communism have not delved much into ethnicity, and studies on Judaism have disregarded this topic because of their secularism and political militancy. Nevertheless, activists in the YKUF in South America called themselves “*Di progressive*” (in Yiddish) or “*Judíos progresistas*” (in Spanish) to identify themselves and differentiate them from Zionist and religious Jewish groups, and also were very active in the left (Bilsky, 1989; Camarero, 2007; Kersfeld, 2012; Visacovsky, 2015; Senkman, 2017).

In Argentina there is widespread identification of the concept “progressive Jews” with YKUF members. Many of these were also PCA members; however, naming them only as Communists is misleading, because the YKUF movement included a vast world of people who did not formally belong to the PCA. Some of them just sympathized with the Soviet Union and the Yiddish secular culture. During the Popular Front era some Socialists, Zionists and liberals with left leanings also participated in the YKUF network.

To understand this identity, it is necessary to distinguish between those who were “Communists of Jewish origin” and those who were “progressive and Communist Jews.” Establishing this difference is complicated, because the boundaries between both profiles were blurred, but broadly speaking the first were those who focused their activity exclusively on the Argentine Communist Party (PCA) or its youth organization, the Communist Youth Federation (known as “*Fede*”), and complied with its guidelines in a disciplined manner. In contrast, Jews with communist leanings, although they generally supported Communist policies, built and were active in YKUF institutions open to the broad public. Some of them were committed Communists, especially the YKUF leaders; others were “fellow travelers.” However, it is important to consider that, in Argentina, radical parties and their members were persecuted and censored since 1930, so it was very dangerous to join and to become a card-carrying member. This not only risked expulsion and imprisonment, but also prevented PCA members from finding work. Furthermore, integration into Argentine

society was a priority objective for these Jewish immigrants. For this reason, although many were loyal to the PCA, they could not enroll in the Party.³ It could be said that the PCA and the YKUF walked in the same direction but along different paths.

Studying the Jewish militants who acted exclusively in the PCA would involve covering detailed biographies. These cases abound in the history of the left; suffice it to recall Karl Marx, Leon Trotsky, or Rosa Luxemburg. In Argentina there were also outstanding figures of Jewish origin who stood out in the Party (Tarcus, 2007), but this group does not constitute our object of study. Instead, the YKUF activists primarily identified with their ethnic, Jewish, background, defining themselves as *di progressive* and prioritizing contents related to their Jewish origin. That is, certainly, those who participated in the YKUF identified themselves as “Jews,” while we could not say the same about those who acted only in the PCA. Of course, this becomes more complex when we analyze the role that the Yiddish-speaking language section, the *Yeusektsiya*⁴ (later called the “Israelite⁵ Commission of the CP”), played in the YKUF environment. In this regard, we could say that the members who were militants in the PCA and activated in the YKUF walked “on both paths,” bringing the collectivity closer to the Party, and sensitizing the Party to the “Jewish question.”⁶

Given, then, that this “Progressive Jewish” movement existed in several countries (Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay), the families and institutions of the South American YKUF network felt “ideologically” twinned with other Yiddish and Communist groups in the world.

- 3 It is important to note that the levels of repression facing the left in Argentina, and throughout Latin America, should be considered in order to understand the context in which left-wing activity developed.
- 4 This *Yiddishe Sektzie des Komunistishes Partei* took form when a significant portion of international Marxist-Leninists, opposed to war and to nationalism, separated from the Bund in 1918 and joined the Yiddish-speaking section of the Comintern in 1921. Although this group had belonged to the Bund after the Russian Revolution, convinced of the universalism of class struggle, its members joined the Bolshevik movement. In Buenos Aires, the *Yeusektsiya* spurred on important organizing work in textile and woodworker unions and the opening of cultural and educational centers.
- 5 Until the middle of the 20th century, the use of the term “Jew” had a negative connotation, both for the protagonists and for public opinion. That is why they called their institutions and organizations “*Israelitas*.” Although this is no longer the case today, several old names are still in use.
- 6 Some occupied leading positions (Wolf Raizman, Joel Linkovsky, Samuel Kogan and Samson Drucaroff, among others), others only led ideological and press work (Iosl Freidkes, Ruben Sinay or Mina Fridman Ruetter, among others), and still others were intellectual references and “fellow travelers” with occasional collaborations.

However, as with all social and political identities, they underwent transformations over time. In large part, this was linked to the consequences of World War II, the evolution of the Soviet Union and the State of Israel, but it was also due to the nature of generational turnover. Children born in the new land fulfilled their parents' mandate, to integrate as full citizens to plural spaces, which implied abandoning or at least redefining what was particular about Jewish culture.

To explain this identity, then, at least two sets of literature must be combined: the studies on the Communist Party, and those on Yiddish-speaking immigration. In South America, the result of this intersection appears to be linked mainly to the YKUF network; in the USA and Canada with the IWO, JPFO and UJPO; and beyond the American borders with groups that were (or, albeit small, still are) ideologically similar. While we do not have updated data, during the 1960s they were recorded in the above-mentioned countries, as well as in France, England, Poland, South Africa, Australia, Israel, and the USSR, etc. (Mendes, 2014).

What allows us to affirm that this identity has been transnational lies in its origins, discourses, links, and common conflicts (Senkman, 2017; Visacovsky, 2019) — above all, those produced by the most significant world events of the 20th century, both for the Communist Party and for the Jewish community. Therefore, to understand the Argentine case, it will be necessary to analyze it on a double scale, national and international.

We will focus on two periods. The first extends from 1917 to 1935, that is, between the Russian Revolution and the beginning of the Popular Front. That time coincides with the first Communist experiences of the Jews in this country. The second, between the 7th Congress of the Comintern in 1935 and the 20th Congress of the CPSU in 1956, coincides with the strong impact generated by the *Shoah*, the creation of the State of Israel, and a greater degree of cultural, social and economic integration in Argentina.

This transnational identity was born of the Popular Front, and developed further during the Second World War. While loyalty to the Soviet Union was a common feature of this movement, it was generally characterized more by cultural expressions, especially the preservation of Yiddish and in viewing *Yiddishkeit* as a source of Jewish identity. As in the North American case, the Communist Party criticized the YKUF schools for focusing more on Yiddish culture than on major

political and economic struggles (Keeran, 1995, 28) and, at the same time, YKUF was accused by other Jewish groups of only heeding Party directives. However, this was a conjunction between the Communist world and the Yiddish world, as explained by Paul Buhle: *Yiddishkeit* “moved toward Communism with one valid perception. Either *Yiddishkeit* would find space within the revolutionary left, in America and abroad, or their culture faced extinction” (1980, 17).

This identity was constructed in Argentina in the tensions between ethnicity, communist ideology, and collective aspiration to national integration of immigrants. For the Argentinian case, we will call this identity “Ykufist.”

*Leftist Jewish Immigrants in Argentina:
YKUF's Origins (1917–1935)*

Since the end of the 19th century, Argentina emerged as an agricultural export country. But, to become an important supplier of raw materials and food in the world, it needed abundant labor. In this vast territory, where the native peoples had been annihilated, the political elites sought to build a modern nation. The ruling class, inspired by the “order and progress” model, encouraged the arrival of European immigrants. The National Constitution of 1853, the Immigration and Colonization Law of 1876, and the Education Law of 1884 promoting free and obligatory secular education, established the legal framework for the reception and incorporation of immigrants from different cultures and creeds.

Like the large communities of Italians and Spaniards that arrived in Argentina, Jews sought opportunities for progress through education, commerce, and industry, and therefore, most of them settled in urban areas. Although there was an important rural experience in *La Pampa* and *El Litoral*, which was promoted by the *Jewish Colonization Association*⁷ and characterized in Alberto Gerchunoff's memorable book *Los gauchos judíos* (1910), by the middle of the 20th century the Jewish community resided in the cities, especially Buenos Aires (Avni, 1983; Devoto, 2004). The Argentine census of 1947 registered

7 The JCA was created in London in 1891. Its purpose was to help the Jews of Russia escape from the harassment of the Tsarist regime. The JCA's settlement contracts covered approximately 6,000 km² in Argentina and smaller areas in southern Brazil, in Rio Grande do Sul (Feierstein, 1999; Avni, 2018).

the presence of 273,000 Jews in a total of 16 million inhabitants, thus forming the largest Jewish community in Latin America (Della Pergola y Schmeltz, 1986; Jmelnizky y Erdei, 2005).

Until the second, postwar, period, Jews were linked according to their nationalities or cities of origin. While there were pioneering groups of Jews from Germany, France, and others from the Ottoman Empire and of Sephardic origin, about 70% were of Ashkenazi origin, coming from Eastern Europe and speaking Yiddish. Before 1914 there was a very small population that had escaped from the Czarist Empire, and after the First World War immigrants from Poland or Lithuania with higher levels of education and politicization.⁸ They all fled from misery and anti-Semitism, seeking new opportunities in the Americas. They were families with a high level of secularization; like other ethnic groups, they organized social and cultural centers, mutual aid associations and cooperatives.

The most radicalized brought experiences from the European left, questioned their religious or traditionalist Zionist compatriots and adhered to internationalist working-class demands. Because of the difficulty of speaking Spanish and their attachment to their Yiddishist customs, they were involved in militancy and socialization in their own ethnic circuits (Bilsky, 1989). They also had to beware of Law 4144, which allowed the Argentine government to expel “undesirable” foreigners who disturbed “the social order.”⁹ This was also a strong reason why many preferred to express their political ideology on the “Jewish street” rather than in workplaces, where they could be “booked” and blacklisted by police and employers.

Even so, the presence of radicalized Marxist Jews was very visible in the workers’ protests because of their ability to organize and mobilize in the factories. In the 1930s, the Yiddishists were prominent in the clothing, wood, textile, and leather unions (Camarero, 2007). It should be clarified, however, that the predominant activity of this

8 This new phase of urban Jewish immigrants was closely related to the closing of borders in the United States under the quota laws in 1921 and 1924. Many ships were diverted to South America, or directly, immigrants sought that destination which provided better entry conditions than Ellis Island.

9 Until the 1960s, this law, passed in 1902, allowed the authorities to expel “undesirable foreigners” from the country. It also articulated with the Residence Law of 1910, mainly as a result of the Simon Radowitzky anarchist attack in 1909 avenging Red Week police killings. Many left-wing workers were expelled from the country because of this law.

group was commercial, successfully mobilized through the *cuenteniks* (peddlers).

This visibility contributed to the creation of negative stereotypes by the conservative nationalist and Catholic elites, who believed them to be leading a “Jewish–Bolshevik conspiracy.” However, despite the fact that in those years there were significant anti-Semitic attacks such as the “Tragic Week” pogrom in January 1919,¹⁰ those demonstrations could not thrive in a highly cosmopolitan society such as Argentina’s (Buchrucker, 1987; Devoto, 2002).

During the 1920s, in line with the transnational movements of the Jewish left, three institutional networks were consolidated, especially in Buenos Aires, and their main expression was in the press, schools and libraries. First, the *Bund* Jewish Workers’ Party,¹¹ which founded the *Di Avangard* group in 1908, defended Yiddish culture and opposed Zionist territorialism and what under adverse circumstances evolved into Lenin’s one-party system. Although their ideology coincided with that of the Argentine Socialist Party, until World War II they responded to the directives of the *Bund* in Poland and always preserved their autonomy (Laubstein, 1997). In second place, the *Linke Poale Zion*,¹² the left-wing sector of the Zion Workers, which supported the ideas of Dov Ber Borokhov, who proposed the need to bring the Jewish people together in one territory as a preliminary step toward the proletarian revolution. Some were socialists and others communists, but all were Zionists. After World War II they joined other transnational Zionist youth movements, and were active in promoting migration

10 In January 1919, an important strike of the metallurgical workers of the Vasena Factories took place in Buenos Aires. That triggered an intense police repression, known as the “Tragic Week” that left an uncertain balance of 1,500 workers dead and hundreds of wounded. The government blamed the Jews for the workers’ uprising, so police and civilian forces perpetrated violent anti-Semitic attacks in Jewish neighborhoods in the city. These facts were conceived by outstanding historians such as Tulio Halperin Donghi (2003) as a truly Jewish *pogrom* in Buenos Aires. The ruling elites feared a possible “contagion effect” of the Russian Revolution among the workers, and saw Jews and anarchists as the main danger. In a very confusing scenario, Pinie Wald, leader of the *Bund*, was tortured. Authorities believed he was the “Argentinian Soviet president” and leader of the Bolshevik Jewish conspiracy (Lvovich, 2003). To contribute to “the defense of national interests,” the Argentine Patriotic League was born in those years, a civilian paramilitary organization that helped the police to suppress striking workers. In his book *Koshmar*, Pinie Wald (1929) describes those terrible days.

11 The *Bund*, abbreviation of *Algemeyner Yidisher Arbeter Bund fun Rusland, Poyln un Lite*, was founded in Vilnius in 1897, and its role was fundamental in the constitution of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party in 1898.

12 In 1921 *Poale Zion* split into the right (*Rejtn*) and the left (*Linke*), following the refusal or the acceptance of the 21 conditions approved by the Comintern.

to Israel (*Aliyah*) and the creation of *kibbutzim*. The third group was led by Marxist–Leninist Jews and emerged when an internationalist and pro-Bolshevik sector split from the *Bund* in 1918. Like other language sections promoted by the Comintern since 1919, the Jewish section, the *Yevsektziya*, was formed in several cities (Kersffeld, 2012) but particularly in Buenos Aires, where the Jewish community was very numerous.

As news of the success of the Russian Revolution and equal rights for minorities in the USSR spread, more Jews became sympathetic to the Bolsheviks (Camarero, 2007; Visacovsky, 2017). Awaiting the arrival of a world without exploiters and exploited people, the Party’s “ideological” supporters multiplied, but few affiliated themselves. Even so, the leadership of the PCA, founded in 1918, claimed to be recruiting more members from its foreign sections, especially the Italian and Jewish ones. In 1927, for example, it was estimated that 14% of its members in Buenos Aires were Jewish, while the Yiddish-language press organ, *Roiter Shtern* (Red Star) had 2,000 subscribers and published 3,500 copies, constituting the largest circulation after *La Internacional* in Spanish. At the same time, the Yiddish section was the only one that managed to establish a network of Marxist–Leninist schools or *arbeter shuln*, which functioned between 1922 and 1932. Between 1924 and World War II, several participated in the project of Jewish colonization in Soviet Russia (later called Birobidzhan) and known as PROCOR,¹³ which operated in many locations throughout the country and in Montevideo, Uruguay (Camarero, 2007; Visacovsky, 2015).

The Comintern policy allowed them to act in Yiddish and be part of a transnational workers’ organization; that is also why many “bundist” and anarchist Jews joined the *Yevsektziya*. In addition, Jewish sympathies towards Lenin grew because the leader had fulfilled his promise to eliminate the “Black Hundreds,” responsible for the bloody pogroms, and the Red Army had the mission to condemn anti-Semitic acts. The USSR was seen as a new nation where Jews could integrate as first-class citizens, have free access to education, culture, and politics, and have a Yiddish-speaking *Oblast* in the land where

13 See the complete list of members in *Der Idisher Poier*, “Cinco años de PROCOR, 1924–1929,” Organización Obrera Pro-Ayuda a los Colonos Israelitas en la Rusia Soviética, Buenos Aires, Comité Central del PROCOR, Boletín No. 2, 1929.

they had endured countless penuries during the time of the Czarist Empire. In this way, it was not strange that the adhesion to this current was expanding in the Argentine Jewish community.

It should also be noted that the PCA had had few electoral victories. In 1926 its leadership claimed that it had 2,500 members, of whom 90% were workers, but in 1928 it had already had three internal divisions: the “verbalists” of *La Chispa* (*Iskra*); the workers’ sector led by José Penelón; and the section that would eventually become the official Communist Party, led by Victorio Codovilla and Rodolfo Ghioldi (Campione, 2005; Camarero, 2007). But in addition to this, at least until the 1950s, and like other immigrant groups, most Jews were not naturalized and therefore were not allowed to vote in government elections. This circumstance contributed to forge a more cultural than partisan electoral militancy.

In September 1930, under the negative effects of the Wall Street crisis and the echoes of European fascism on the rise, the Armed Forces, the Catholic Church, and the conservative elites staged the first *coup d'état* in Argentina.¹⁴ Hundreds of workers were repressed, imprisoned, or expelled from the country. Despite a return to democratic forms between 1932 and 1943, the elites remained in power thanks to strategies of fraud and the outlawing of contentious political parties (Devoto, 2002; Halperin Donghi, 2003). Within this framework, in 1930 (and until 1945) the Communist Party and its related organizations were outlawed. The workers’ schools were raided and locked down by the police in 1932 and, although they were able to reopen in 1935, they were again locked down in 1937, along with a provision prohibiting the use of Yiddish, conceived by the authorities as a “dissolving code” that endangered the nation (Zadoff, 1994; Visacovsky, 2015).

In summary, between the 1930 coup and the 1946 election that gave victory to Juan Domingo Perón, the governments alternated between dictatorships and pseudo-democracies, but all agreed on the need to eradicate the “communist disease.” For many, that “disease” was due to the presence of Jewish immigrants, referred to at the time as “the Russians.” This scenario forced the Jewish communists to be more careful: supporting workers’ causes but attending to the integration and welfare of their children in the

14 The *coups d'état* in Argentina were in 1930, 1943, 1955, 1962, 1966, and 1976.

new land. In short, the experiences linked to the *Yevsektziya* during the 1920s and 1930s, in a political context adverse to communism, laid the national and transnational bases for the subsequent expansion of the institutional network led by the YKUF, a popular front organization.

*From the Popular Front to the Cold War (1935–1956):
The YKUF Federation*¹⁵

In 1935, during its 7th Congress, the Comintern called for a Popular Front to fight fascism; several initiatives emerged worldwide. Especially significant was the “First Congress of Writers for the Defense of Culture,” held in June 1935 in Paris. There, 230 delegates from 38 countries participated.¹⁶ At the end of that meeting, the Russian writer Ilya Ehrenburg and other Jewish intellectuals decided that it was imperative to hold a similar event, but exclusively with Yiddish-speaking writers. In that context, the Jewish communists tried to build alliances with the *Bund*, the *Linke Poale Zion* and the “progressive” bourgeoisie. However, this mission was particularly difficult after the Communists’ attacks on Socialists and Zionists during the rigid “class against class” line of the Third Period (1928–1935). Nevertheless, the times marked the urgency of unity in stopping Nazism in Europe, supporting anti-fascist republican forces and confronting Jewish “assimilation” in America and Western Europe, where the use of Yiddish was being increasingly discouraged.¹⁷

Then, from 1936, the leading European and American Jewish intellectuals organized the “First International Congress of Yiddish Culture” to discuss these problems. The Congress was held from September 17 to 21, 1937 in Paris, and 104 delegates from 23 countries

15 The YKUF’s political arguments that appear in this section are drawn from internal documents and the press; mainly *Revista ICUF*; *Tribuna*; *Di Idische Froi*; *Aporte*; and *Revista Tiempo*. The questions related to internal conflicts arise from an extensive work of interviews carried out by the author since 2004 until today.

16 The French anti-fascist intelligentsia headed by Romain Rolland, André Guide, Andre Malraux and Henri Barbusse, among others, received figures such as Sinclair Lewis, Upton Sinclair, Heinrich and Thomas Mann, Bertolt Brecht, Bernard Shaw, Selma Lagerlof, Ilya Ehrenburg and Maxim Gorki. Among the Latin Americans, the communist poets Raúl González Tuñón for Argentina and Pablo Neruda for Chile. About Communist culture in Argentina, see Pasolini, 2013; Petra, 2017.

17 YKUF, Central Committee (1937) *Primer Congreso Universal de la Cultura Judía (Ershter Al-vetlekhher Ydisher Kultur Kongres)*, Paris, 17 al 21 de septiembre de 1937.

participated.¹⁸ Latin America was present with delegates from Mexico, Cuba, Brazil, Argentina, and Uruguay. The intellectual and journalist Pinie Katz (born in Odessa, 1881; died in Buenos Aires, 1959) represented 22 Argentinean institutions and five Uruguayan ones.

The conferences were successful and established the *Yiddisher Kultur Farband* (YKUF), a transnational federation to defend and expand secular Yiddish culture. They declared their support for the Soviet Union, the only country that recognized the value of “progressive Jewish culture,” which meant secular and left-wing values. However, the Russian delegation was absent from that Congress, and this provoked negative reactions. Some *Bundists* spoke of a wave of censorship and purges in the USSR, in which several Jewish leaders were being arrested, deported, and killed. By contrast, the Communists were convinced that these were lies to discredit Stalin, or that their duty was to keep silent (Buhle, 1980, 25; Brossat and Klingberg, 2016, 65; Zaagsma, 2017, 35). The YKUF resolved to centralize international financial contributions in Paris to develop the progressive press, literature, schools, and theaters in each country. Two secretaries were established, in New York and Warsaw. The national sections were to respond to this hierarchical structure, but World War II tragically changed the plans, and then the South American groups gained autonomy (Kinoshita, 2000).

The European scenario of the 1930s, polarized between fascisms and liberal democracies, was replicated in Argentina. In the atmosphere of the Popular Front, inspired by the French model, numerous associations of intellectuals, politicians, artists, journalists, and immigrants were formed. They worked on two fronts: on the national level, denouncing fascism and local repression; and on the international level, supporting the cause in Spain and then the Allies in World War II. The communist militancy, despite its illegal and clandestine condition, had a prominent role in these multiparty anti-fascist organizations (Pasolini, 2013), and the YKUF was one of them. It is also worth mentioning that a significant number of Jews had marched into combat with the International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War

18 The countries were Argentina, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Czechoslovakia, Cuba, Denmark, France, Germany, Great Britain, Holland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Mexico, Palestine, Poland, Romania, South Africa, Switzerland, USA and Uruguay. The American delegation, which had been led by the writer Jaim Zhitlovsky, who was unable to travel because of illness, was the strongest and most numerous with 11 delegates representing 442 organizations (YKUF, 1937).

(Zaagsma, 2017), and an anonymous majority worked tirelessly in the aid collections, which later continued for the Red Army.

In this atmosphere of collaborative and solidarity actions, there were attempts to unite the three groups of the Jewish left. However, the political confrontation, later reinforced in 1939 by the rejection of the German–Soviet pact, made it difficult to carry out joint actions. Even so, the Jewish communists, under the leadership of Pinie Katz, Lazaro Zhitnitzky, Sznaier Waserman and Gregorio Lerner, among others, organized the First Congress of Jewish Culture in Buenos Aires, on April 10 and 11, 1941. They replicated the 1937 event in Paris and formed the *Idisher Cultur Farband* (ICUF). Fifty-seven institutions participated, representing 8,900 members from Argentina, Uruguay, Brazil and Chile. When, shortly after, Germany invaded the Soviet Union, in June 1941, sympathies for the YKUF increased in the “Jewish street” and this process reached its apex during the battle of Stalingrad in 1942–1943. During this time, marked by the collaboration of the Allied countries, many Jewish people who had left in 1939 once again supported the USSR, the Party and the YKUF.

In 1945, with the end of the War and survivors’ testimonies, the world began to realize the horror of the Jewish genocide. The YKUF leaders emphasized the decisive role of the USSR and the Red Army in defeating Nazism (Linkovsky, 1980). Then, still under the influence of the Popular Front, the impact of the tragedy and the need to preserve the destroyed culture in Europe, the communist-oriented Jews built a remarkable network of modern schools, summer camps, clubs and theaters in the provinces of Buenos Aires, Santa Fe, Córdoba, Mendoza and Tucumán, which affiliated with the YKUF. In 1955, in Argentina this network consisted of some 30 institutions with 20,000 members (Visacovsky, 2015).¹⁹

The women’s organization (*Organización Femenina del ICUF*, OFI) and the youth federation (*Federación de Instituciones Juveniles Israelitas Argentinas*, FIJIA) emerged in the YKUF during the postwar period and acted together with other similar organizations, guided by the PCA. They followed the *Agenda* of the Women’s International Democratic Federation and the World Federation of Democratic Youth, transnational organizations led by the socialist countries. This process was

19 A detailed list of institutions in this network, with associated geographic information and numbers, is available on request from the author.

accompanied by prolific progressive publishing work.²⁰ It was estimated that in the 1950s the Argentine network represented nearly 40% of the institutionalized Jewish community (Visacovsky, 2015, 23).

For the immigrant generation, the Yiddish language was the key to their transnational potential, and connections with their peers in other latitudes were generated through the exchange of publications. Materials from the USA and the USSR were prominent, but shipments also arrived from France, Poland, Israel and Canada. Sometimes with the help of the Party, and sometimes through their own money collections, the Ykufists traveled to International Peace, Youth and Women's Congresses in the countries of the east. Through participation in these events, the YKUF carried the voice of *Di progressive*, who were faithful to the Soviet bloc and enemies of Zionism. However, most of these trips, including the prominent visits in Buenos Aires and Montevideo, took place between the 1950s and 1980s. Contacts with the USSR were especially encouraged. In this sense, from the 1960s onwards, they established close links with the editorial staff of *Sovietish Heimland* and the USSR's Anti-Zionist Committee.²¹ Finally, the geographical proximity to Brazil, but even more so to Uruguay, made it possible (and still does today) to carry out joint activities.

Conflicts Between the YKUF and the PCA

There were no formal links between the YKUF and the PCA. Rather, it was an ideological and financial correspondence carried out through the actions of the people. In general, the line of the PCA for the Jewish community was decided by the Israelite Commission of the Communist Party (the continuation of the *Yevsektziya*). On certain occasions, its members held leading positions, and in others, they acted in the press area. Then, each adhering institution had its own authorities, who could accept, reject or question the "line" of the PCA.

20 The publishing house "ICUF" was founded in Buenos Aires in 1946 and published more than 100 books and translations (Spanish-Yiddish). The publishing house "Heimland," in parallel, was dedicated exclusively to translating from Russian to Yiddish and publishing literature coming from Moscow on the heroism of the Red Army and the Soviet people.

21 Between 1957 and 1958 dozens of books by the murdered poets were translated from Russian to Yiddish and published in Moscow and, in 1961 *Sovietish Heimland* (a Soviet journal, in Yiddish) under the editorship of Aaron Vergelis. With a print run of 25,000 copies, it was distributed in the USA, Canada, Argentina, Uruguay, France and Israel. It was published monthly until 1990, with emphatic notes on Birobidzhan that YKUF translated into Spanish (Visacovsky, 2015, 115).

That is why it was fundamental to hold the YKUF Congresses every two or three years and to have majority agreement on their resolutions or “theses” to be adopted. Finally, the Ykufist identity also included intellectuals, directors, teachers and parents of the schools, where there was a generalized sympathy for the PCA, but few were card-carrying members. In this dynamic, discussions arose, sometimes very fierce, which produced breakdowns in interpersonal relations, often with sad results. So, throughout this period, while an ideological correspondence between the YKUF and the PCA predominated, there were also tensions, indicating that progressive Jews were not always comfortable with PCA positions. I will provide some significant examples.

Between 1933 and 1943 the “Popular Organization Against Fascism and Anti-Semitism” was in existence, led by Pinie Katz, Simon Gordon and Mina Fridman Ruetter.²² This organization continually denounced the growing power of Nazism, and for that reason the German–Soviet Nonaggression Pact of 1939 caused great bewilderment. The Israelite Commission of the PCA was confused and did not know how to explain what was happening, and could not justify a directive that it was no longer appropriate to denounce Nazism. Very soon, arguments about a Stalin maneuver to protect the USSR, gain time for military rearmament, and save half of Poland’s Jews, proved sufficient for the YKUF to support “the new line” ordered by the Comintern. However, this deeply affected the popular-front mood of the Jewish left. The tension would be resolved by June 1941, when German troops invaded Soviet territory.

On the national level, other tensions took place with respect to Peronism. When in February 1946 Juan Perón won the elections and became president, the leftist parties that had supported a coalition with liberals and conservatives called the “Democratic Union” looked on with bewilderment as the workers they were supposed to represent turned massively to Peronism. The Communists made this self-criticism at their XIth Congress in 1946. One of the main reasons that the PCA evaluated as the cause of its low influence among the workers was the presence of foreigners in leadership positions. So, in those years, directives were issued to “*acriollar el Partido*” (make the Party Creole); Jewish militants were removed from the unions and directed to get involved

²² This organization published the magazine *Af der waj*, in Yiddish, and *En guardia*, in Spanish. In 1935 they published two books in Yiddish, *El plan de Hitler* and *El libro pardo del fascismo*.

in the YKUF. In addition, by this time, many of the immigrants had become “the progressive Jewish bourgeoisie,” and the PCA saw the YKUF as a good fundraising environment. For example, in the Villa Lynch neighborhood, several economically successful Jewish textile manufacturers maintained their communist ideology and contributed with large donations. This was a special and outstanding case, but it is true that in the 1940s the productive demand reached them all and in the 1960s, many Ykufists, who had been humble workers, were part of the middle sectors and contributed material and human resources to sustain the institutions of the YKUF and collaborate with the PCA (Visacovsky, 2015).

During Peronism, a new working class emerged, made up of families who came from northern Argentina in search of opportunities in the city. This is when immigrants become employers (Di Tella, 1964). But not all of them. For a long period bosses and workers (all Jews) lived together in the factories and stores. This brought about some conflicts in the communist environment. Although this coexistence was good in the YKUF cultural institutions, it generated tensions in the labor milieu.

Various anecdotes about the “red millionaires” were circulating at that time. One told of a very strict Jewish boss to whom a worker asked one day, “Excuse me, Mr. Rozemberg, why do you exploit us like this, if you say you are a Communist?” To which the factory owner replied, “Well, so that you can learn how badly people live under capitalism” (Visacovsky, 2015, 207). This joke shows the contradictions that were generated. The PCA needed the economic collaboration of these “capitalist” Jews, but at the same time it denounced their growing “petty-bourgeois deviations.”

At the aforementioned 1946 Congress, the leader of the PCA, Victorio Codovilla, had proposed that the cells be integrated into the Peronist unions to “create political awareness from within.” Likewise, he recognized the “heterogeneity” of Peronism, made up of “democratic and progressive” sectors but also “fascists and reactionaries.” For that reason, the PCA decided to maintain an “independent line,” supporting the good measures and criticizing the bad ones (Arévalo, 1983, 75–76).

However, the Ykufists, at least until the 1960s, did not cease to denounce Perón as a “reactionary” and “Nazi–fascist” leader. This position had roots in Perón’s membership in the Group of United Officers (GOU), responsible for the 1943 *coup d’état*, which had dissolved the political parties, decreed Catholic education in the public

schools, sympathized with the Axis countries and had anti-Semitic officials in the government. In addition, since 1946, the entry of Nazi criminals into Argentina and the political concessions that Perón had given to xenophobic nationalists and the Catholic Church in the field of education had made inflexible the negative view that the Ykufists had of Perón. Therefore, unlike the initial “neutrality” of the PCA, the YKUF was emphatically opposed. During Perón’s second government, which began in 1952 in a climate of growing political and economic instability, the Communists were persecuted and then the PCA strongly opposed the government. At this stage the Ykufists suffered police arrests, censorship and frequent controls.

Perón’s relationship with the Jewish community was full of nuances. There were Jewish sectors in favor of Perón, such as the *Organización Israelita Argentina* (OIA); others that maintained ambiguous policies, led by the *Delegación Asociaciones Israelitas Argentinas* (DAIA); and others that were radical opponents, like the Ykufists. While some Zionists welcomed Perón’s pro-Israel speeches and good diplomatic relations with the Jewish nation during his second government, the Ykufists denounced the president’s military past, demagogic style and manipulation of the masses. However, thanks to the postwar economic boom, during the Peronist decade (1946–1955) the entire community expanded its institutions. The anti-Peronist position of the Ykufists coincided with that of the liberal middle classes and university students, rather than with the changing lines of the PCA. In fact, there were Communist Party leaders who, early on, saw the Peronist policies for the working class as very good ones and joined the government (Torre, 2002; Altamirano, 2001b; Rein, 2015).

Other significant tensions between the YKUF and the PCA arose over the language issue and the incorporation of young people. Since the self-criticism in 1946, and in accordance with the objective of capturing the working masses, the use of Yiddish was an obstacle, and some leaders of the PCA interpreted the firm defense of that language as “European sectarianism.” At the end of the 1950s, the Israelite Commission of the PCA began to press for the passage into Spanish and recalled what was said by Lenin, and also by the American Jewish communist writer and *Morgn Freyhey*t founder Moissaye Olgin: “For the proletariat, languages should not be monuments or divinities to kneel before, but instruments of humanity to build a better world” (Sinay, 1957). In short, they argued that language was a “means and not an

end” in ideological transmission. In this tension, where some Ykufists vehemently defended the continuity of Yiddish, heated discussions were generated. But these were linked not only to the language, but to news about alleged anti-Semitism in the USSR, and the need to integrate young people who did not speak Yiddish.

The Israeli Commission of the PCA postulated that the youth of the YKUF had to fight for the international causes of the Democratic Youth Agenda, because once socialism arrived, “the Jews would have everything they needed to enlarge their own institutions” and that, therefore, they should concentrate their efforts on the universal revolutionary struggle and not on promoting a Jewish “sectarianism.” However, the decline of Yiddish was a transnational phenomenon that exceeded communist directives; it was linked to the Nazi genocide, to the policy in favor of Hebrew in Israel, and to the fact that the new generations naturally spoke Spanish, Portuguese, or English on the American continent.

The international political crises of communism after the death of Stalin in 1953 and the CPSU Congress in 1956 are well known. We will only say that in the Ykufist environment they affected specifically the Zionist and Progressive polarization (discussed below) and not the relationship between YKUF and PCA.

The 1960s was a time of multiple transformations, especially for young people in Latin America: the Cuban Revolution, the sexual revolution, the integration of women into the labor market, and the massive incorporation into universities, among others. In this context, the PCA promoted the incorporation of young Jews into the *Federación Juvenil Comunista* or “Fede,” founded in 1921 (Gilbert, 2009). A good part of the Jewish student left joined the Fede at the end of the 1950s, in the context of an important mobilization in defense of state education against the confessional and private outpost of the Catholic Church; that 1958 event went down in history as the conflict of “Laica o Libre.”²³

23 Since the separation of church and state at the end of the 19th century, liberal political currents in Argentina promoted the development of a public education system. Until the 1960s all universities were autonomous and regulated by the national state. But when in 1955 President Perón was overthrown in a *coup d'état*, the ecclesiastical sectors began to press for new legislation that would allow the creation of private universities. The conflict, between the “secular” state education supporters (*laica*) and the “free” Catholic institutions (*libre*), reached its peak in 1958, during the government of President Arturo Frondizi, who, under pressure from the Church, supported a law that benefited the expansion of the private educational sector (Visacovsky, 2020).

Addressing that period exceeds the purposes of this paper, but it is interesting to note that the youth felt deeply involved in those days. Briefly, children born in Argentina were beginning to act in parties and organizations of the university left and were leaving the YKUF. Of course, several young people stood out in the areas of sports and education, but they were not the “political cadres” with a leading profile: “those were taken by the Fede.” But this migration was not only due to identification with the PCA, but to a collective desire to integrate plural spaces where “being Jewish” was not a differential mark. The lack of interest in Yiddish was also related to this.

Then, in the Ykufist debates the contradiction was appearing: They were educating their children to act within Argentine national life, but when that happened they lost them in the institutions. At that time, while some Ykufists accused the PCA of “accelerating” natural processes of integration, the PCA warned that if they continued educating in Yiddish and promoting their ethnic particularism, they would delay the integration of the youth into politics and the universal anti-imperialist struggle. In summary: The main criticisms by the PCA of the YKUF arose from its new status as a “bourgeois” middle class; the defense of Yiddish culture which promoted “ethnic sectarianism”; and finally, the problem of the youth, who had to choose between their communist militancy and their activism in YKUF institutions.

Conflicts Between the YKUF and the Zionist Organizations

The disputes between socialist Jews, Zionists and Communists came to Argentina along with the immigrants. But after the Second World War and the creation of Israel in 1948, when Zionism became hegemonic in the Jewish world, these tensions deepened within the framework of the Cold War.

Following the postwar national liberation movements, strongly supported by the USSR, the whole community accompanied and supported the creation of the new Jewish state (Sznajder, 2017). The YKUF celebrated its foundation and was in the front line of collaborators; however, it did not change its historical rejection of Zionist nationalism. The Ykufists had convictions about preserving secular Yiddishist culture, but did not agree with the concept of *Aliyah*. Also they wanted to avoid giving strength to Argentine nationalist concerns about a “double loyalty” of the Jewish people. They were opposed to

conceiving Israel as a new “homeland,” because that meant recognizing it as the “center” of Jewish life and Argentine Jews becoming a “diaspora.” They claimed, first of all, their condition as “Argentine citizens.”

On the other hand, the adoption of Hebrew and the abandonment of Yiddish, along with an emphatic Zionist call for migration to Israel, became the new leitmotiv of most Jewish institutions. The YKUF main leaders maintained its non-Zionist positions and opposed the warlike approach to resolving conflicts with the Palestinian people. That is why, since 1949, they refused to collaborate with the “United Campaign” collection led by *Keren Keyemet Leisrael* (KKL), which, they argued, “financed the purchase of arms.” Instead, they created the “People’s Campaign” and financed schools, homes and hospitals on several *kibbutzes*, but not weapons for war. In other words, they supported the existence and development of Israel as a democratic and peaceful country that respects United Nations agreements.

Despite these differences, while the Soviet Union collaborated with Israel, the waters were calm. However, as soon as the government of David Ben Gurion aligned itself with the United States, news of anti-Semitism spread in the USSR, and Stalin denied the migration of the large Soviet Jewish population, confrontations arose that caused the breaking-off of diplomatic relations between the USSR and Israel in 1952 (Sznajder, 2017). In this context, conflicts between Zionists and Progressives were intensely revived throughout the world. Beyond perceiving certain shortcomings, the YKUF unconditionally supported the USSR. This was for deep historical and also emotional reasons: the October Revolution, the development of Birobidzhan and, above all, the heroic Great Patriotic War that defeated Nazism. However, in the face of postwar certainties, during the Cold War news arrived that put the Soviet communist model in crisis.

To begin with, in 1948, in Minsk, the prestigious Yiddish theater director Solomon Mikhoels died in a strange car accident. Despite being buried with full honors, the version that it was a murder under Stalin’s orders soon circulated. Then, in 1952, news came of the Prague trials, where Rudolf Slánský and ten Czechoslovak Jewish leaders, and later 13 Jewish writers from the Anti-Fascist Committee, had been unjustly tried, accused of Zionist conspiracy, and murdered. This was followed by the so-called “Jewish doctors’ plot” of 1953, declared by Stalin before his death. The Zionists internationally denounced

“Soviet anti-Semitism,” but in Argentina this was fervently denied by the PCA, claiming that it was a campaign to discredit the USSR organized by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), in connivance with the Israeli government, the Empire’s new ally (Sinay, 1954; 1957; 1963). As a result of this confrontation, the YKUF was expelled from the *Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina* (AMIA) in December 1952.

The Ykufists declared that the condemnation of the USSR was an excuse and the real purpose of Argentine Zionism was to weaken the YKUF schools, which by then were pedagogically very prestigious.²⁴ The YKUF press and others explained that the Zionists were waiting for an international conflict of this magnitude to kick the Progressives out of the powerful central organizations and take away their subsidies (Zadoff, 1994).

The Israeli Commission of the PCA perceived the discomfort of the Ykufist community and tried to prevent breakdowns in the movement. In the face of accusations of “Soviet anti-Semitism,” the YKUF raised the cause of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. The Jewish couple, accused of espionage and executed in the United States in 1953, were presented as the highest symbol of “capitalist anti-Semitism.” At the same time, the YKUF raised the question of Israel’s role as a U. S. military base in the Middle East, which was financed by the “bloody reparations” paid by Konrad Adenauer’s West German government. But in February 1956 the most shocking moment for the YKUF came with Nikita Khrushchev’s statements at the 20th Congress of the CPSU, which confirmed the veracity of all those news items. In spite of everything, several Ykufists remained loyal to the USSR. The processes known as the “thaw” and the “return to Lenin” renewed the belief that there was a “genuine socialism,” which just needed to be put back on track.

The Ykufist press made a great effort to preserve the impeccable image of the USSR. The Hungarian Revolution of October 1956 was interpreted as a “counter-revolutionary” uprising and Soviet repression was widely justified to save the socialist system. In the same vein,

24 By that time, YKUF’s schools had 1500 students and a very recognized pedagogical prestige. That expulsion process, called *jevem* (excommunication), originated with a proclamation established by central organizations DAIA and AMIA, calling for repudiation of the USSR and its anti-Semitic trials in Prague. In the assembly of December 18, 1952, the local leaders of the YKUF, Ioel Linkovsky and Mijl Raizman, refused to sign that document. In response to this, Zionists informed their associates and published in the press that “Jewish children should not be sent to schools identified with Soviet policy” (Zadoff, 1994, 412–414).

Israel's alliances with the "pro-imperialist powers" of Britain and France during the Suez Canal crisis were severely questioned. In general, the policies and actions of the Soviet Union were supported by the Ykufist leadership and many Communist members. There was a special concern about Israel, because the leadership of that country was "betraying the interests of its working and progressive people who sought peace with the Arab countries" (Sinay, 1967; Linkovsky, 1980, 96). The murder of the widely admired Soviet Yiddish writers was the main cause for some activists to turn away from YKUF, but not before holding "stormy assemblies" in the network's institutions.

However, very soon, the Cuban Revolution arrived and renewed the ideology of the Latin American left and, together with the transition to Spanish and emergence of a wide range of sports activities, new associates, not always Jewish, joined the YKUF entities. With the support of financial cooperatives, also linked to the PCA, and the contribution of families, the network of schools, childrens' clubs and summer camps was maintained. The committed work of activists was the key to this continuity. For this reason, beyond the crises caused by international events, the YKUF network continued to grow, at least until the 1970s. By then, its main support did not lie in the communist allegiance of its leaders, but in the inertia of its rich educational and cultural programs of the Jewish left (Visacovsky, 2015).

*Final Considerations: Not Only Jewish,
Not Only Communist, But Ykufists*

As we have seen, part of the Yiddishist immigrants and their descendants identified with Marxism–Leninism, then Stalinism, as happened in Brazil and Uruguay. At first, because, after the triumph of the October Revolution, the news about the equal rights of minorities in the USSR and the growth of the Birobidzhan project were experienced as historical reparations, after so much suffering in the "Pale of Settlement." Moreover, the Comintern allowed its members to use Yiddish and recognized them as part of a mass internationalist movement.

From 1935, within the framework of the Popular Front and while anti-Semitism was advancing in Europe, the communist Jews were gathered in the YKUF Federation. At the end of World War II, they created institutions to honor the people's memory and save their

devastated culture in Europe, but also to “enlighten the Jewish masses politically.” In this environment, the cultural and ideological dynamic of the popular front, centered on Ykufist institutions, became stronger and more frequent than direct affiliation to the Communist Party.

From the early 1950s, the Jewish Argentine community was on both sides of the “iron curtain.” As the Cold War intensified, institutional circuits became more irreconcilable. The Zionists recognized Israel as their new motherland, taught Hebrew and promoted *Aliyah*. The Progressives, unconditionally allied with Moscow, encouraged their youth to become involved in the anti-imperialist causes of Latin America. In that sense, when Cuba sealed its bond with the USSR, the small island began to be a model to follow, and many young people (including teenagers) joined the Fede. Later, some of them supported or acted in “armed struggle movements” aligned with different Peronist currents and inspired by the Argentine Ernesto “Che” Guevara (Altamirano, 2001a; 2001b). This scenario reduced youth participation in the Ykufist leadership.

In short, in the context of the Cold War, the logic of “friends and enemies” placed the Ykufists in a complex field of tensions. Zionism accused them of being “assimilationists” and dismissed their Jewishness, while the PCA sometimes accused them of promoting “ethnic sectarianism” or manifesting “bourgeois tendencies.” After the 1956 shock of the Khrushchev report, some disappointed activists walked away, and others did so in 1967, after the Six Day War. However, based on its social base and its progressive educational and cultural programs, the movement survived, and although reduced, it exists today.

Hence, this identity was built in within tensions between the central Jewish organizations dominated by Zionism, the Communist Party, and the aspiration of many Argentine Jews, especially the non-Yiddish-speaking second generation, for its full integration into the nation. As in other countries, decisive in its decline was the passage of time and the integration of new generations, who retained the ideological construction but lost the richness of *Yiddishkeit* (Mishler, 1999).

This identity was also transnational. In the world they were “*Di Progressive*,” and in South America also “the Ykufists.” It should not be understood as the Jewish sector of the PCA, nor as the Communist sector of the Jewish community. They built a special identity where the most significant thing for the immigrants and their children was

to become “true” citizens and to fight for the “progressive” causes of their entire society.

The history of the YKUF is offered as a lens through which we can observe Argentine history. But as this identity contains elements common to other capitalist countries in the continent, researchers should encourage comparative studies of “progressive,” “radical” or “communist” Jews in the Americas and continue the challenge of explaining their similarities and differences throughout the 20th century. We still have a long way to go.

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