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## *Eastern Europe in Argentina*

Yiddish Travelogues and the Exploration of Jewish Diaspora

TAMAR LEWINSKY

For a long time, travel has been a way for European Jewry to have both real and imaginary encounters with distant members of its religious community. The medieval Jewish traveler Benjamin of Tudela first described at length the conditions of Jewish communal, cultural, and economic life in the Mediterranean world and the Middle East. His famous *Sefer ha-Masa'ot* (Book of Travels) was widely read.<sup>1</sup> In the mid-nineteenth century, the Romanian lumber dealer Joseph Israel Benjamin adopted the pen name Benjamin II. Then he set off on a journey that in the following eight years would lead him to Constantinople, the Mediterranean, the Middle East, India, and Northern Africa. His search for the remnants of the ten lost tribes of Israel found approval from scholars such as Alexander von Humboldt and Carl Ritter.<sup>2</sup> The travels of these two Benjamins resonate in Mendele Moykher Sforim's quixotic *Kitser masoes Binyomin hashlishi* (The Brief Travels of Benjamin the Third) from 1878, in which a rather unheroic Benjamin III tries to leave his shtetl in search of the legendary Red Jews.<sup>3</sup>

While these travelogues originated in different times and speak of different outcomes—thus, the literary persona Benjamin III eventually finds himself not on the other side of the mystic Sambation river, but in the very heart of his native Tuneyadevke—they share a fundamental interest: the search for distant members of the Jewish diaspora. Therefore, a sense of unity and belonging can be seen as a driving force for both the real and

fictional journeys. In addition, as narratives of travel, they are replete with ethnographic descriptions of peoples and local customs.<sup>4</sup>

In the twentieth century, the three Benjamins' travels find continuation in the prolific genre of Yiddish travel writing.<sup>5</sup> Although this genre includes descriptions of non-Jewish communities, it pays special attention to Jewish life in distant regions of the globe—from the United States to South Africa, from Palestine to the Soviet Union and, after the cataclysm of World War II, back to the remnants of Jewish life in Eastern Europe. In the majority of these later texts, as in their predecessors, the notions of dispersion and unity remain a crucial motif at the journey's outset. Yet by the twentieth century, because of the processes of emancipation, secularization, and politicization, and the mass migration that fundamentally changed Eastern European Jewry, the notion of diaspora had undergone a significant transformation. Diaspora was no longer a purely religious, but also a cultural and, especially, a national concept. As a result, Jewish diaspora refers both to the *Galut*, the Israelites' dispersion after the Temple's destruction in Jerusalem, and to the modern transnational communities that stemmed from migration. During the era of Jewish mass migration that began in the late nineteenth century, the transnational communities not only reached special importance, but also led to the emergence of Eastern Europe as the new (and/or additional) homeland from which the migrants considered themselves exiled. As twentieth-century travel writers explored the Jewish world, they found their attention drawn to the communities developing among Jewish migrants from Eastern Europe. Traveling Yiddish writers encountered Yiddish-speaking Jews even in the world's most distant regions and depicted that diaspora's exotic corners for their readers in the *alte heym*, the Eastern Europe homeland, as well as in the modern Yiddish culture's newly emerging and geographically expanding centers. Like travel writers in earlier centuries, these writers began with the assumption that the Jewish community they were to explore was, in one way or another, linked to their own history, while at the same time acknowledging that it could be markedly different. However, when describing immigrants' lives, the dichotomy between the observer and the observed—both belonging to the same transnational group—becomes less clear.

## TRAVELERS AS LAY-ETHNOGRAPHERS

Taking into account the ever changing character of the Eastern European Jewish diaspora—the changes due to factors within the Jewish communities and geopolitical developments—this chapter traces the ethnographic impulse that can be discerned in Yiddish travel writing. Although not purposely composed as ethnographic texts, these travelogues, like travel writing in general, combine personal narrative and formal description. Modern ethnography—which until recently distanced itself from earlier, less scientific genres such as travel books, memoirs, and journalism—also uses this configuration. Even so, in modern ethnography, narrative is subordinate to the descriptive discourse, confined to personal narrative introductions or to other books that do not claim scientific accuracy.<sup>6</sup> As Mary Louise Pratt argues, “The authority of the ethnographer over the ‘mere traveler’ rests chiefly on the idea that the traveler just passes through, whereas the ethnographer lives with the group under study.”<sup>7</sup> According to this distinction, the traveler gains comparatively superficial knowledge of the places he or she visits. Even though Yiddish travel writers live only temporarily with the groups they write about, they know intimately many aspects of their culture, language, and traditions. Arguably, then, they can enter these groups more quickly and deeply than the “mere traveler.” Illustrating the encounter between the travel writers and the community groups, which, by and large, are Eastern European Jewish immigrant communities, this chapter explores how perceptions of differences and similarities are negotiated, and whether a specific methodology can be discerned.

To some degree, presumably, many Yiddish travel writers were familiar with and possibly influenced by a specific ethnographic (and also historiographic) tradition that had evolved in early twentieth-century Eastern Europe, in the context of modern Jewish, and especially Yiddish, culture and politics. Central to this national Jewish ethnography, which can be considered a form of autoethnography or native ethnography, were three aspects: a broad perspective regarding topicality and materiality; the collection of ethnographic information by *zamlers* (lay-ethnographers); and a focus on Ashkenazi Yiddish-speaking Eastern European Jewry.<sup>8</sup> The

YIVO ethnographic section outlined this type of Yiddish ethnography in its 1929 field manual *Vos iz azoyns yidishe etnografye?* (What is Jewish ethnography?; see Appendix 1). The manual emphasizes the importance of researching all segments of Jewish society, and it specifies a typology of material culture and folklore, as well as guidelines for the fieldwork itself. Moreover, this central text defines the field's dimensions as "the territory of the Yiddish language." Defining the territory linguistically is explained: "This in itself is a difficult enough task because of the dispersion of the Yiddish-speaking masses around the world, among foreign people and different ethnographic communities, which have without any doubt a strong influence on Jews."<sup>9</sup> While in *Vos iz azoyns yidishe etnografye?* the YIVO ethnographic section specified that all Eastern European and Yiddish-speaking emigration had to be understood as part of the field of research, studies were predominantly confined to Eastern Europe.<sup>10</sup>

Although only partly ethnographic in their intent, the travel writers, as mentioned above, followed the Jewish masses that had left Eastern Europe. Thus, if we consider the travel writers as lay-ethnographers of a Yiddish nation, they explored not only the folk culture of Jews in Eastern Europe, but also their transnational diaspora and ensuing transculturation processes. In doing so, travel writers realigned the field of research along the expanding and changing coordinates of Yiddish. They paid particular interest, however, to issues of migration and diaspora, both of which have entered the ethnographic field only in recent decades, thus enriching its methodology. Indeed, following migrational trajectories, the travel writers unknowingly touched upon issues that were to become key aspects of today's ethnography. The passage, the immigration process, the transfer to the final destination, and the process of integration and network-building are all part of the travelogues' stories. Or, to use James Clifford's well-known metaphor, they depicted culture being at once *rooted* and *routed*.

#### YIDDISH TRAVEL WRITERS IN ARGENTINA

Argentina, one of many destinations for Eastern European Jewish immigrants, appears regularly on the map of Yiddish travel writing. Four reports, created between 1914 and 1960, serve here as examples for exploring the Jewish diaspora through Yiddish travelogues: reports by Perets Hirsh-

beyn, Hersh-Dovid Nomberg, Mark Turkow, and Chaim Shoshkes, each originating from quite different historical and socioeconomic circumstances. Over the course of almost half a century, the Argentinean Jewish community not only increased substantially, but it transformed from an immigrant population into an integral part of urban Argentinean society.

When Perets Hirshbeyn (1880–1948), arguably the most prolific Yiddish travel writer, set out on his journey to Argentina on the eve of the Great War, the Eastern European Jewish community in Argentina numbered between 100,000 and 115,600. Significant immigration—initially with a high percentage of return migration—had begun in the late 1880s and peaked in 1906 and 1912, with roughly 13,500 new immigrants per year. At that time, the rural settlements of the Jewish Colonization Association (JCA) still absorbed a large number of newcomers, yet the most visible presence of Jewish life was in Buenos Aires.<sup>11</sup> Met with much interest, Hirshbeyn's travel images appeared in installments in the New York Yiddish daily *Der tog* (Day) and later in his travel accounts *Fun vayte lender* (From Distant Countries).<sup>12</sup> In the following decades, Hirshbeyn, the restless playwright, director, journalist, novelist, and traveler who had spent the first half of his life in Eastern Europe, published widely on his extensive journeys. In *Arum der velt: Rayze-ayndrukn (1920–1922)* (Around the World: Travel Impressions [1920–1922]),<sup>13</sup> for example, he gave an account of a two-year journey to Australia, New Zealand, Tahiti, and South Africa, which he undertook with his wife, Yiddish poet Ester Shumiatsher. Their five-year journey to South America, Japan, China, India, Palestine, and Europe, which also included a ten-month exploration of the Jewish agrarian settlements in Crimea, is documented in *Indye—fun mayn rayze in Indye* (India—From My Travel in India), *Shvartsbrukh*, and *Erets-Yisroel* (Land of Israel).<sup>14</sup>

In 1922 and 1923, at a time of renewed Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe to Argentina, Hersh-Dovid Nomberg (1876–1927), journalist, writer, activist, and longtime chairman of the Jewish Writers' Union in Warsaw, serialized his travel notes on a journey from Europe via Brazil, to Buenos Aires and the JCA colonies, for readers in the Warsaw Yiddish daily *Moment*. These accounts were later included as *Argentinishe rayze* (Argentinean Journey) in a collection of his feuilleton writings.<sup>15</sup> At the Czernowitz Yiddish language conference in 1908, Nomberg had proposed

declaring Yiddish a national Jewish language; he was a founder of the autonomist Folkspartey in Poland, and a leading promoter of secular Jewish education and modern Yiddish culture. So it comes as no surprise that he was especially sympathetic to the lot of Yiddish activists among the Jewish Argentinean immigrants. Throughout Nomberg's journey, he stayed in close touch with the Jewish writers who had arrived from Europe, even encouraging them to organize. This effort was honored by their choice to name the Argentinean Yiddish writers' union after him: *Literatn un zhurnalistsn farband H. D. Nomberg*.<sup>16</sup> Further travels took him to Palestine, the United States, and the Soviet Union.<sup>17</sup>

In the late 1930s, the readers of *Moment* were again presented with a series of travel reports on South America. Mark Turkow (1904–1983) took his readers to Uruguay and the Jewish farmlands of Argentina. Upon returning from South America, Turkow toured Poland and the free city of Danzig, giving lectures on the problems of emigration and colonization in South America. As the press reported, the success of his public presentations lay not only in the knowledgeable insights of a brilliant orator, but also in their topicality.<sup>18</sup> In the postscript to the published reports on Argentina,<sup>19</sup> titled *Oyf yidische felder* (On Jewish Fields), the author stressed that his book's main purpose was to provide an objective description of Jewish life in the agrarian settlements—not least for the future emigrants among his readers.<sup>20</sup> Turkow himself left Europe for good in 1939 and settled in Buenos Aires, where he continued to serve as a communal activist. He was appointed director of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) in South America, and became the Argentinean deputy of the World Jewish Congress. Furthermore, he headed the Polish Jewish *landsmanshaftn* association and was an editor of the Yiddish book series *Dos poylishhe yidntum* (Polish Jewry; Buenos Aires, 1946–1966), which delineated a topography of remembrance of the life and destruction of Polish Jewry.<sup>21</sup>

Travels to South America are but one aspect of Chaim Shoshkes's (1891–1964) *Mit yidn tsvishn indyaner, neger un araber* (With Jews Among American Indians, Blacks, and Arabs), published in Israel in 1960.<sup>22</sup> Shoshkes, an immigrant to the United States in 1940, was in no way inferior to Hirshbeyn in his wanderlust. His journeys—first, a visit to the Wembley British Empire Exhibition in 1924, and last, back to the Soviet

Union and the once-thriving Jewish communities in Russia and Poland in the 1960s—took him to five continents over the course of forty years.<sup>23</sup> He visited Argentina frequently, and this might explain why he chose to write about very specific aspects of Jewish life in Buenos Aires, instead of giving a more general description.<sup>24</sup> As in many of his post-World War II travelogues, Shoshkes delves into the Jewish community's centennial history in Buenos Aires. In fact, we learn very little about the Jewish community's plight in an atmosphere of growing public antisemitism, because Shoshkes focuses mainly on the community's historic struggle against the Jewish underworld.

From these four travelogues' range of subjects, I examine three recurring themes that lend themselves to an investigation of the ethnographic motives, the narrative and descriptive discourses, and the methodology operative in these texts: first, the urban immigrant generation; second, the Jewish settlers in the Argentinean agricultural colonies established from the late 1880s; and third, the mysterious world of the *teme'im*, the "ritually unclean," as the Jewish community of Buenos Aires termed the Jewish madams, prostitutes, and pimps of Buenos Aires.<sup>25</sup> All three topics seem especially appropriate for a discussion of the relationship between rooted and routed ethnography, since the writers are here concerned with immigrants' trajectories, the emergence and development of a new diasporic community, and generational changes challenging the notion of double rootedness on two continents. Moreover, the first and the third topics relate to the specific interest of Jewish ethnography in Eastern Europe in the urban spaces and the lower strata of society, including criminals and prostitutes.<sup>26</sup>

### *The Urban Immigrants*

In his *Fun vayte lender*, Hirshbeyn sets out on a journey "to our far-away goles-land,"<sup>27</sup> the distant Jewish exile and its capital, Buenos Aires, his main purpose being "to travel and see how our Jews live in faraway countries."<sup>28</sup> Upon arriving in Buenos Aires, Hirshbeyn plans initially to spend at least a week exploring the city and its topography before looking for fellow Jews. However, feeling lost in the metropolis with only a few words of Spanish at his command (among them, of course, *judío*—



Jew),<sup>29</sup> he feels a strong urge to get in touch with the immigrant Jewish community. Following Yiddish theater advertisements, he finds his way into the heart of Jewish Buenos Aires and is soon surrounded by young Jews, who greet him “respectfully at the beginning and later with a simple open-heartedness . . . in short, Jews seized a Jew: a Jew found Jews.”<sup>30</sup> This encounter between the locals and the visitor was facilitated through the guest’s intimate knowledge of their language and culture, their linguistic and cultural codes. “In short, I am at home,” the Yiddish cosmopolitan declares. “Vilna, Warsaw, New York, Chicago—or even Bobruisk—there is no difference. At home I am!”<sup>31</sup>

Hirshbeyn explores the immigrant community, a distant corner of the Jewish diaspora that had expanded through migration. Paradoxically, the Jewish world seems to have grown closer and become more familiar; the author muses,

Who knows, maybe it is the fault of the Jewish people that the world has shrunk before my eyes? The Jewish people have dispersed around the wide world; wherever you go, you meet your friends from the *kheyder*, children of your *shtetl*. . . . Sometimes you start to think that the journey is not that long at all; that the captain has simply lost the way, turning around all the time in one single place.<sup>32</sup>

Throughout his account, Hirshbeyn paraphrases conversations and interviews with members of the immigrant community. He directs readers’ attention to specific differences, linguistic and cultural, that have emerged as a result of migration and cross-cultural influences. But he also emphasizes the strong emotional connection the emigrants still feel with their old home, for example when describing the European-born owner of a Yiddish bookshop with whom he became acquainted. The immigrant tells her little son to greet a “Yiddish writer who comes from where mother’s and father’s home is.”<sup>33</sup> Here and elsewhere, Hirshbeyn focuses clearly on differences between the first and second generation of immigrants—those from Europe and their descendants born in South America—and the gradual transition of Jews from immigrants to locals, from a mobile to a rooted community.

The life of the urban immigrants is also a pivotal aspect of Nomberg’s *Argentinische rayze*, and, as with Hirshbeyn, interviews are his main source

of information, and interviewees are described and quoted at length. Nomberg also differentiates among various groups who arrived on the Rio de la Plata's shores over time: "You can still discern the specific waves of immigration: those of Baron Hirsch from the late eighties, the waves of 1905 and the last years before the war. It is as if you dig into the soil and, instead of a single compound, you see layers put on top of each other, not at all interspersed."<sup>34</sup> He is especially interested in the immigrant community's variety of subgroups or ethnographic groups that are defined by their members' provenance and social status: "To be a Polish Jew in Argentina is a little bit of hardship. *Litvakes* and even Bessarabian Jews treat the Polish Jew with contempt."<sup>35</sup> Moreover, Nomberg describes communal organizations, cultural life, libraries, schools, the press, and professional organizations established by immigrant Jews, but also their love of professional gambling, its impact on family structures and family life, and the social status of women in general.<sup>36</sup>

Nomberg stresses that manifold reasons stood behind individual plans to settle in Argentina, and that in many instances settling there was a matter of default rather than a real choice. One of his interlocutors, a Jew from Warsaw who had immigrated to Buenos Aires fifteen years previously, never managed to establish a connection with his new environment and still longed for the Vistula River. Only after World War I's disastrous events and the destruction of Jewish infrastructure in Eastern Europe did he understand that return migration was no longer an option; finally, he took in Jeremiah's words to the exiles to build houses and plant gardens.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, the trope of soil and rootedness—in contrast to uprootedness as a diasporic condition in traditional religious and Zionist discourses—is frequently invoked in the travelogues to describe the immigrants' process of establishing communities. Yet this organic trope has a special twist, in that a coexistent double-rootedness in the old and the new homeland is possible:

And yet it is a Jewish settlement. And yet it is a branch, which grew out of an old trunk. The branch headed off too far from the trunk. Every rush of air bends it, every rush of air breaks it. And yet it is a Jewish settlement. A Jewish street. The Jewish language. . . . And yet it is a Jewish settlement. Groaning, they grow roots. Longing, they dig deep roots in the Argentinean soil.<sup>38</sup>

*The Agricultural Settlements*

The idea of Jews returning to farm their own land had been propagated by the JCA as a solution to the deteriorating conditions of Jews in tsarist Russia since the 1890s.<sup>39</sup> Initially, the JCA envisioned a large-scale project to resettle Russian Jews. Although these plans did not materialize, the agricultural colonies established on the JCA-owned territories absorbed thousands of Jewish immigrants. Especially during the formative first years, conditions were harsh, and many settlers left the colonies. A year before the outbreak of World War I, however, the population had risen to 18,900. It peaked in the mid-1920s, when 20,382 persons farmed their land in the Argentinean provinces of Santa Fé, Entre Ríos, La Pampa, Buenos Aires, and Chaco.<sup>40</sup>

Jewish agricultural settlements were a main destination for the travel writers, who appear to have been well informed about the history of the JCA, its colonies, and the settlement schemes; they were also familiar with the enterprise's failures and successes. The settlements' diversity in outlook, population, size, and economic prosperity over time are highlighted in the travelogues, where religious and secular institutions, schools, libraries, party life, and ideologies are depicted in great detail. While the latter aspects refer to a world that seems—at least in its general contours—familiar to the travel writers, the writers also collected stories on topics utterly foreign to them, such as the organizational structures of agricultural cooperatives; stories about the settlements' early stages, when year after year plagues of locusts destroyed the crops; the success of planting alfalfa and breeding cattle.<sup>41</sup> The travel accounts strongly emphasize description of the rural settlements. However, the personal narrative of the writer, negotiating differences and similarities, predominates over the informative aspects that might be directed at prospective immigrants.<sup>42</sup>

The landscapes, exotic to the Eastern European traveler's eye, are a perfect foil for the account of this foreign environment: "Facing the wilderness of nature, one easily understands what hard work the colonists have to endure, until they succeed in turning wild woods or empty, desert-like steppe into fertile soil."<sup>43</sup> The long, tiring journeys to both smaller and larger settlements are depicted in great detail. Hirshbeyn's journey to Moisesville is exhausting. Heavy rains block some of the roads, and

swarms of locusts cloud the skies. In a somber mood, he arrives in the oldest agricultural colony and is soon surrounded by silent village Jews marked by years of hard work, but also by young, self-confident men. Unlike in the urban environment of Buenos Aires, Hirshbeyn does not immediately feel at ease with these Jewish settlers. Before long, however, he is reminded of his paternal relatives who dwelled in a small town in the Grodno region, and is reassured.<sup>44</sup> Almost a quarter of a century later, Turkow wrote a similar description of the people in Moisesville. The older generation receives visitors hospitably, especially those, writes Turkow, who bring back memories of the homeland: "When you meet the Jews of Moisesville, you get the impression that you are not in the wide open steppes of Argentina, but in a homey Lithuanian shtetl."<sup>45</sup> Memories can even create illusions. Nomberg recalls, "And tall trees . . . on the city square (plaza) [of Moisesville] . . . around the Lithuanian synagogue gave me the illusion of the long-forgotten sudden arrival of spring the way it used to be in my hometown before Passover."<sup>46</sup> The image of the shtetl, evoked as an expression of provincial backwardness and also as the bearer of an original yet vanishing culture, seems to draw the foreign closer.<sup>47</sup> In fact, the geographically remote region is confined to the realm of bygone times and is thus distanced in a temporal sense. This emotional search for the "authentic" Eastern European Jewish folk-culture in rural Argentina may also explain Turkow's disenchantment with some aspects of Jewish life in the colonies, particularly with the growing number of gentile settlers and the loss of traditional Jewish life. The settlers are well aware of these fundamental changes, and one of Turkow's interlocutors points out that the vernacular Jewish culture attracted earlier visitors like Nomberg and Hirshbeyn, who "were delighted by Moisesville. They found here a continuation of the Jewish folk-life we had brought over here from the old homeland. Today, everything is changing at a fast pace."<sup>48</sup>

Yet the travel writers also had an eye (and ear) for difference. They elaborated that, although aspects of regional distinctiveness and local traditions from the countries of origin were retained to some degree,<sup>49</sup> the new environment and influences produced a new type of Jewish farmer, the *Jewish Gaucho*, in the Jewish-Argentinean writer Alberto Gerchunoff's term. The transculturation processes behind this new type are described foremost as a generational change: while immigrant parents are depicted

as still forming part of regionally distinct Eastern European communities, the native generation is described as rooted in the Argentinean pampas. Time and again, the differences in immigrant groups' temper, social status, trades, and organizational qualities resound in the descriptions of the agricultural settlements. Nomberg draws special attention to the children, with their wild appearance and Jewish names, who marvel at the rare event of snowfall in the pampas and from an early age ride horseback with ease.<sup>50</sup> Hirshbeyn closely examines the JCA colonies' trilingual, bicultural school system, in which heroic tales of San Martín infuse the children with patriotic feelings in Spanish, while the Hebrew-Yiddish instruction follows the traditional method of word-by-word translation of the Bible. The children encounter the latter with much less enthusiasm.<sup>51</sup>

Nomberg provides information about transferring local customs—like the settlers using the *bombilla*, from which the gauchos drink mate tea—and about linguistic influences from Spanish. Although the settlers still converse in Yiddish, they use Spanish expressions like *pampero* (strong wind), *chaco* (woodlands), *plaza* (square), or *criollo* (native) (with the typical Argentinean rendition of the *ll* as /ʒ/ and /j/).<sup>52</sup> In the late 1930s, the Spanish influence on the settlers' spoken Yiddish becomes even more strongly felt. Turkow identifies the settlers' language as Lithuanian Yiddish. However, he criticizes the younger generation for degrading “the sounds of the juicy Lithuanian Yiddish language . . . by blending in Spanish words and even entire phrases.”<sup>53</sup> Thus, while Nomberg was interested in linguistic change, Turkow followed a somewhat purist, normative agenda, worried by the notion that the second generation was taking roots in Argentina (to which he did not object) and would eventually become detached from the transnational Yiddish nation.

### *The World of the Teme'im*

The travel writers also visit cemeteries, which Hirshbeyn defines as a marker of belonging. As he details in his description of Moisesville, where he is informed that 128 children died within a month's time, it is not the farming of their own land that connects immigrants to the Argentinean soil, but “the number of victims each family had to mourn created the bond between the weak Russian Jew and the young wild Argentinean

nature.” In other words, according to Hirshbeyn, it is not the number of trees they plant, but the cemeteries in which the farmers bury their children that make them stay.<sup>54</sup>

Yet one cemetery is not described in terms of a symbolic connection, but as an object of ethnographic research: both Nomberg and Shoshkes visit the cemetery of the *teme'im*, the Jewish pimps, madams, and prostitutes in Buenos Aires.<sup>55</sup> The cemetery visibly marks the communal structures established by the *teme'im*, who had been organized in mutual aid and burial associations since 1889.<sup>56</sup> Through these on-site visits, the writers look more closely at the Jewish underworld, but what they see and how they tackle the issue of Jewish involvement in human trafficking, which was then called “white slavery,” are very much determined by the timing of their respective visits. Nomberg visited in 1922, during violent struggles by the official Buenos Aires Jewish community against organized crime. He reports critically on the luxurious cemetery being open only to the “bourgeoisie” of pimps and madams, while poor women are buried in the public cemetery’s nameless graves, or their bodies are transferred to the university medical department.<sup>57</sup>

In Buenos Aires, “white slavery” and its Jewish involvement was a sensitive issue that tarnished the Jewish community’s image. For Nomberg, the topic was present in press and literature, as for example Sholem Asch’s famous and critically received play *Got fun nekome* (God of Vengeance) about a Jewish-owned brothel in the Warsaw region, yet, according to him, “dramatic scenes, stronger even than those Sholem Asch depicted . . . happened on the scene of real life in Buenos Aires.”<sup>58</sup> Nomberg informs the reader about the human trade’s “channels of distribution”: “Each market procures its ‘goods’ from a different place. The market of Buenos Aires brought its ‘goods’ from Warsaw, Lodz, Kraków, Lemberg, and Odessa.”<sup>59</sup> In addition to the transnational dimensions of this shady business, Nomberg amply describes the measures taken by the Buenos Aires Jewish community and provides a critical evaluation of the official actions and laws implemented to fight this phenomenon.<sup>60</sup>

Nomberg discusses the topic’s perseverance in Jewish folklore: “Of Buenos Aires also the Jewish folksong has something to tell. When I collected folksongs many years ago, I often came across the word ‘*boyne*’ and didn’t understand its meaning.”<sup>61</sup> *Boyne* (probably stemming from the Span-

ish *bueno*) was the expression the *teme'im* used for Buenos Aires. Driven by ethnographic interest, Nomberg explores the streets of Buenos Aires, collects stories about the world of prostitution, and discusses the specific “jargon” spoken in these circles.<sup>62</sup> However, he admits that he could not satisfy his curiosity with first-hand information. Making fun of himself, he confesses that his naïve initial intention for this urban ethnography was to find “the red Indians, the old inhabitants of Argentina and *khevre-layt*, the white-slavers; I thought that the streets abounded with them, that you could see them everywhere. I didn’t find, though, any sign of them—not of the Indians and not of the white-slavers.”<sup>63</sup> Beyond the jocular aspect of this observation, the comparison between the indigenous/rooted and the mobile/diasporic inhabitants suggests that the writer identifies both as ethnographic groups in their own right.

In the post-Peronist era, the late 1950s, Shoshkes visited the cemetery and reported that the last funeral had taken place five years earlier.<sup>64</sup> The ethnographic impulse is strongly felt in Shoshkes’s descriptions. Jewish involvement in prostitution had declined in the 1930s. Thus, the moral standards by which this chapter in the history of Jewish migration was judged, as well as its political implications, had changed, and Shoshkes was eager to collect evidence and record information, especially since he had been informed that the municipality of Buenos Aires planned to close the place.<sup>65</sup> Like Nomberg, Shoshkes describes a luxurious cemetery that reminds him of graveyards in Italy. Helped by local informants and the non-Jewish gatekeeper, Shoshkes explores the individual life stories of those buried there, gathers information about specific rituals and commemoration practices conducted in the small adjacent prayer house, reads the Spanish and Hebrew inscriptions on the tombstones, and describes the portrait photographs found on the many richly worked monuments: “It was like skimming through a forbidden, juicy book that tells about an era which should be forgotten,” he writes, but the luxurious tombstones demand that he record and analyze their story.<sup>66</sup> He also takes photographs—some of which are included in his travel report.

He does not oppose the closure of this “monument of shame,” yet

First, we have to preserve somewhere in a community archive the photographs and inscriptions; it is material that after the passing of time will be

an object of study, carried out with more detachment than now—since the living generation still remembers the fights they fought with the *teme'im* and the disgrace that Jews suffered because of them.<sup>67</sup>

Thus, Shoshkes focuses on collecting stories and material evidence. The Eastern European Jewish tradition of *zamlen* seems to resonate in his chronicles. His interest in the Argentinean Jewish underworld confirms the YIVO ethnographers' requirements defined in the interwar period: that all the ethnographic and social groups of the Yiddish-speaking diaspora of Eastern European Jews be researched, including all social strata, and all respectable and dubious trades.<sup>68</sup> Yet Shoshkes was also influenced by more contemporary ideas of ethnography and travel writing. Writing after the Holocaust and the founding of the State of Israel, he could not help but be conscious that he was collecting traces of material culture from a world that was no more.

#### CONCLUSION

The four travelogues presented here served various goals: they were produced for a broad audience and published in installments before they were eventually reprinted as individual volumes. The writers sought to entertain, to pique their readers' curiosity, but also—at least before the Holocaust—to inform Jews about a possible emigration destination. All four travelogues are knowledgeable and contain descriptive passages on the history of Jewish migration, on the Argentinean political situation, and on details of the colonies' development. As lay-ethnographers, the travel writers were interested in the mores, traditions, stories, material culture, and language of the Jews in Argentina. Although their descriptions of Jewish life in Buenos Aires and the Yiddish-speaking agricultural settlements differ in content and method, narrative elements outweigh descriptive passages. Moreover, the writers do not claim scientific objectivity, and, in most instances, they identify themselves as travelers with specific interests and preferences.<sup>69</sup>

The writers' use of tropes and images underscores their notion of a transnational East European Jewish diaspora connected through language, cultural traditions, and memories. While the linguistically as-



simulated Jews no longer form part of their field of interest, the writers do pay particular attention to issues of migration and diaspora. In traveling far west, their undertaking is, paradoxically, to document and preserve in writing distinctive aspects of Eastern European Jewish life. While doing so, they are well aware of the fluid and transitory qualities of the group, with its roots and routes.

Given that the globalized diaspora of Eastern European Jewry is a relatively recent phenomenon, highlighting the moment of its formation is highly significant. The diaspora of Eastern European Jewry is not at all given or fixed. Neither is the self-conception of the inhabitants of these transnational social spaces. Ethnologist Martin Sökefeld argues, “sentiments of belonging, attachment to a home and ideas of a place of origin do not constitute the ‘substance’ from which diasporas—like other identity groups—are made but the codes in terms of which ‘a’ diaspora is imagined.” He suggests “defining diasporas as *imagined transnational communities*, as imaginations of community that unite segments of people that live in territorially separated locations.”<sup>70</sup> Drawing on Benedict Anderson’s concept of nations as *imagined communities*, this definition is especially meaningful for discussing the emergence of a diaspora of Eastern European Jewry in modern times. By describing specific émigré groups, twentieth-century Yiddish travel writers form part of the imaginative process that leads to the emergence of imagined transnational communities. At the foundation of this imaginative process stands Yiddish as an ideological, linguistic, and cultural link.

## NOTES

1. See, for example, the critical English edition by Marcus Nathan Adler, *The Itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela: Critical Text, Translation and Commentary* (London: Oxford University Press, 1907).

2. Written in Hebrew, the travelogue was published in French translation in 1856 (*Cinq années en Orient, 1846–1851*). An enlarged German edition was published two years later: J. J. Benjamin, *Acht Jahre in Asien und Afrika. Von 1846 bis 1955. Zweite Auflage* (Hannover: Der Verfasser, 1858).

3. Mendele Moykher Sforim, *Kitser masoes Binyomin hashlishi* (Vilna: Rom, 1878).

4. For a discussion of travel literature in Yiddish fiction and the creation of Jewish spaces, see Leah Garrett, *Journeys beyond the Pale: Yiddish Travel Writing in the Modern World* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003); on travel writing and ethnography, see Joan Pau Rubiés, “Travel Writing and Ethnography,” in *The Cambridge Compan-*

ion to *Travel Writing*, ed. Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 242–260.

5. There is no full bibliography of this specific genre. Some titles are listed in Mikhail Kizilov, “Hebrew and Yiddish Travel Writing,” in *A Bibliography of East European Travel Writing on Europe (East Looks West, vol. 3)*, ed. Wendy Bracewell and Alex Drace-Francis (Budapest: CEU, 2008), 229–241. In a random keyword search, Jack Kugelmass has found 139 digitized reprints of books dealing with travel (Jack Kugelmass, “A Yiddish Traveler in Peru,” <http://iij.s.columbia.edu/files/Kugelmass%20Paper%202.pdf>).

6. Mary Louise Pratt, “Fieldwork in Common Places,” in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, ed. James Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 27 and 34–35. On the phenomenon of the ethnographers’ two books: Vincent Debaene, *Far Afield: French Anthropology between Science and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

7. Pratt, “Fieldwork in Common Places,” 38. See also Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992).

8. Itzik Gottesman, *Defining the Yiddish Nation: The Jewish Folklorists of Poland* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2003); Kalman Weiser, *Jewish People, Yiddish Nation: Noah Prylucki and the Folkists in Poland* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011). On the problems of defining the scope of Russian Jewry in Late Imperial Russia, see Jeffrey Veidlinger, “The Historical and Ethnographic Construction of Russian Jewry,” *Ab Imperio* 4 (2003): 165–184.

9. *Vos iz azoyns yidishe etnografye*, ed. Żydowski Instytut Naukowy (Vilna: YIVO, 1929), 8. I wish to thank Anna Lipphardt for reminding me of this text.

10. An exception is the folklorist Yehuda Leyb Cahan, who collected folksongs among immigrant Jews in London and New York. See Gottesman, xx.

11. Haim Avni, *Argentina and the Jews: A History of Jewish Immigration* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1991), 21–92; “Argentina,” in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd ed., ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik (Detroit: Macmillan, 2007), 427–431. On Buenos Aires, see Victor A. Mirelman, *Jewish Buenos Aires, 1890–1930: In Search of an Identity* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1990).

12. “Hirshbeyn, Perets,” in *Leksikon fun der nayer yidisher literatur*, vol. III (New York: Alveltlekher Yidisher Kultur-Kongres, 1956), 152; Perets Hirshbeyn, *Fun vayte lender: Argentine, Brazil, yuni, november 1914* (New York: [s.n.], 1916). The book also includes depictions of his journey to Brazil during the early weeks of World War I, his dramatic passage to North America aboard a British liner that was sunk by a German war vessel, and his arrest and eventual arrival in New York aboard a freighter.

13. Perets Hirshbeyn, *Arum der velt: rayze-ayndrukn (1920–1922)* (New York: Literatur, 1927).

14. Perets Hirshbeyn, *Indye—fun mayn rayze in Indye* (Vilna: Kletskin, 1929); Hirshbeyn, *Erets-Yisroel* (Vilna: Kletskin, 1929); Hirshbeyn, *Shvartsbrukh* (Vilna: Kletskin, 1930).

15. “Nomberg, Hersh-Dovid,” in *Leksikon fun der nayer yidisher literatur*, vol. VI (New York: Alveltlekher Yidisher Kultur-Kongres, 1956), 160–168; Hersh-Dovid Nomberg, “Argentinishe-rayze,” in *Dos bukh felyetonen* (Warsaw: Rekord, 1924), 7–100; the accounts of Nomberg’s travel to Argentina were again reprinted in his collected work (Nomberg, *Amerike: ayndrukn un bilder fun Tsofn- un Dorem-Amerike* [gezamlte verk, vol. 6] [Warsaw: Kultur-lige, 1928]), 36–84 of part three) and in his *Oysgeklibene shriftn*, published in the

Buenos Aires *Musterverk*-series: Hirshe-Dovid Nomberg, *Oysgeklibene shriftn: noveln, lider, eseyen* (Buenos Aires: Ateneo literario en el IWO, 1966). All citations are taken from the 1924 edition.

16. Yosef Mendelson, "Hersh-Dovid Nomberg in Buenos Aires," in *Zamlbukh*, ed. Yosef Mendelson, Avrom Zak, and Nekhemya Tsuker (Buenos Aires: Shrayber-fareyn H. D. Nomberg, 1962), 153.

17. Hersh-Dovid Nomberg, *Erets-Yisroel: ayndrukn un bilder* (Warsaw: Yakobson and Goldberg, 1925); Nomberg, *Mayn rayze iber Rusland* (gezamlte verk, vol. 5) (Warsaw: Kultur-lige, 1928); Nomberg, *Amerike*.

18. "A lebediker grus fun yidn in Argentine!" *Haynt*, February 8, 1938.

19. However, a planned second volume on his journeys to South America ("Oyf di shlyakhn fun di yidishe vanderungen"), advertised in Mark Turkow, *Oyfyidische felder: a nesiye iber di yidishe kolonyes in Argentine* (Warsaw: [s.n.], 1939), was never published.

20. Turkow, *Oyfyidische felder*, 193.

21. "Turkow, Mark," in *Leksikon fun der nayer yidisher literatur*, vol. IV (New York: Al-veltlekher Yidisher Kultur-Kongres, 1956), 61–62.

22. Khayim Shoshkes, *Mit yidn tsvishn indyaner, neger un araber* (Tel Aviv: Y.L. Perets, 1960).

23. Khayim Shoshkes, *Lender un shtet* (Vilna: Kletskin, 1930), 9–29; Shoshkes, *Tsvishn yidn in vayte lender* (Tel Aviv: Hamenoyre, 1964). His travel writings include *Ekzotische rayzes* (Warsaw: Yidishe univerzal-bibliotek, 1938); *Poyln—1946* (Buenos Aires: Farband fun poylishe yidn in Argentine, 1947); *Mayn rayze in der velt* (Buenos Aires: Undzer bukh, 1951); *Durkh umbakante lender* (Rio de Janeiro: Monte Scopus, 1954); *Masoes reb Khayim* (Rio de Janeiro: Tsiko, 1957); and *Fun Moskve biz eyver-ha-Yordn* (Tel Aviv: Y.L. Perets, 1961).

24. Shoshkes, *Mit yidn*, 51. For an earlier account from the Peronist era, see Shoshkes, *Durkh umbakante lender*, 360–366.

25. On this terminology, see Haim Avni, "Teme'im," *Sahar be-nashim be-Argentinah u-ve-Yisra'el* (Tel Aviv: Yedioth Aharonot, 2009).

26. See, for example, Almi's "A Strange Experience," translated by Gabriella Safran in Appendix C of this volume.

27. Hirshbeyn, *Fun vayte lender*, 34.

28. *Ibid.*, 40.

29. *Ibid.*, 40–41.

30. *Ibid.*, 48.

31. *Ibid.*, 42–43.

32. *Ibid.*, 13.

33. *Ibid.*, 47.

34. Nomberg, "Argentinishe rayze," 60.

35. *Ibid.* Specific traits of the individual ethnographic groups are given in the following passages.

36. *Ibid.*, 61–64.

37. *Ibid.*, 62.

38. Hirshbeyn, *Fun vayte lender*, 60.

39. The philanthropic JCA, founded in 1891 by Baron Maurice de Hirsch, was central in facilitating emigration from Eastern Europe. It established emigration committees and founded agricultural cooperatives not only in Argentina, but also in Eastern Europe, the

United States, Palestine, and several other countries. See Ann Ussishkin, "Jewish Colonization Association," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol. 11, 285–288.

40. Avni, *Argentina and the Jews*, 61; "Argentina," 429.

41. E.g., Nomberg, "Argentinische rayze," 84–85; Turkow, *Oyf yidische felder*, 10–11 and 87.

42. This becomes especially manifest when the travel writing is compared to informative articles in migrants' newspapers, which are heavily loaded with accurate data. E.g., "Di yidische kolonye in Argentine (fun a rayze-barikht)," *Der yudisher emigrant*, October 1, 1912.

43. Turkow, *Oyf yidische felder*, 17.

44. Hirshbeyn, *Fun vayte lender*, 86–87.

45. Turkow, *Oyf yidische felder*, 179.

46. Nomberg, "Argentinische rayze," 80–81.

47. See Jeffrey Shandler, *Shtetl: A Postvernacular Intellectual History* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2014).

48. Turkow, *Oyf yidische felder*, 187–188.

49. *Ibid.*, 179.

50. Nomberg, "Argentinische rayze," 70–71.

51. Hirshbeyn, *Fun vayte lender*, 93–96.

52. *Ibid.*, 72, 74, 80, and 75–76.

53. Turkow, *Oyf yidische felder*, 179.

54. Hirshbeyn, *Fun vayte lender*, 70.

55. Hirshbeyn only briefly touches on the subject by mentioning the abduction of Jewish daughters as a recurrent theme: "Buenos Aires. The capital of Argentina. . . . Uncanny things are told about the city of Buenos Aires. And the stories about Jewish daughters who have been abducted by unknown people and led away from their parents' home . . ." (Hirshbeyn, *Fun vayte lender*, 35). This is remarkable, since Hirshbeyn's *Barg arop* (Downhill), a play about a seduced woman who ends up in a brothel, was staged in Buenos Aires in 1909. The local Po'ale Zion party organized the performance. When it was discovered that a large number of *teme'im* attended the play, the most dramatic commotion happened in the auditorium. See Shoshkes, *Arum der velt*, 75–76.

56. On the history of the cemetery and religious aspects among pimps, see Mir Yarfitz, *Polacos, White Slaves, and Stille Chuppahs: Organized Prostitution and the Jews of Buenos Aires, 1890–1939* (PhD thesis, UCLA, 2012), 182–196. On Jewish involvement in trafficking in women and prostitution, see Donna J. Guy, *Sex and Danger in Buenos Aires: Prostitution, Family and Nation in Argentina* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991); Sandra McGee Deutsch, *Crossing Borders, Claiming a Nation: A History of Argentine Jewish Women, 1880–1955* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010), 105–122; Avni, *Teme'im*.

57. Nomberg, "Argentinische rayze," 51.

58. *Ibid.*, 49.

59. *Ibid.*, 44.

60. *Ibid.*, 50–58.

61. *Ibid.*, 44.

62. *Ibid.*, 45–50.

63. *Ibid.*, 46.

64. Shoshkes, *Mit yidn*, 57.

65. *Ibid.*, 64.

66. *Ibid.*, 59.

67. Ibid., 64.

68. *Vos iz azoyns yidishe etnografye?*, 10–11.

69. Turkow might be seen as an exception, insofar as he deliberately chose not to arrive as an official visitor or delegate but as a private traveler who did not want to attract too much attention: “My humble self,” Turkow explains, “found itself in Moisesville very privately, in order to see, but to be seen as little as possible” (Turkow, *Oyf yidishe felder*, 178).

70. Martin Sökefeld, “Mobilizing in Transnational Space: A Social Movement Approach for the Formation of Diaspora,” *Global Networks* 6, no. 3 (2006): 267.