

## DOCUMENTARY FILM REVIEW ESSAY

# Here We Are to Build a Nation: Recent Jewish Latin American Documentaries

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This essay reviews the following works:

**Hacer patria/To Build a Homeland.** Dir. David Blaustein, Prod. Zafra Difusión S.A. and Tornasol Films S.A. Argentina, 2007, 127'. DVD.

**Estamos aqui (Danken Got)/Here We Are.** Dir. Cintia Chamecki and Andrea Lerner. Prod. Chamecki Productions, 2013, Brazil, 79'. Film is available on Vimeo.

**El barrio de los judíos/The Jewish Neighborhood.** Dir. Gonzalo Rodríguez Fábregas. Prod. El Apapacho. Uruguay, 2011, 70'. Film is available on YouTube.

Latin America—and the Southern Cone region in particular—experienced a significant influx of Jewish immigration in the early twentieth century. For the most part, these immigrants were fleeing pogroms and persecution in Russia and Eastern Europe. Once they arrived in their new home countries, many Jews began to participate actively in the political sphere, so that they not only found shelter but also took on active roles in the communities in which they had established themselves. In a 1947 essay titled “Être juif,” Emmanuel Levinas puts forth that “to be Jewish is not only to seek a refuge in the world but to feel for oneself a place within the economy of being.”<sup>1</sup> Film is an important medium for considering the relationship between Latin America’s Jewish populations and the political sphere, yet this topic has received relatively little attention within existing film criticism.

Indeed, we may trace stories of feeling such a place for oneself within the recent Latin American documentaries: Brazilian Cintia Chamecki’s *Estamos aqui (Danken Got)* (2013), Argentine David Blaustein’s *Hacer patria* (2007), and Uruguayan Gonzalo Rodríguez Fábregas’s *El barrio de los judíos* (2011). These documentary productions focus on the history of Jewish immigration in their respective countries and chronicle stories of Jews’ forming significant roles in the political spheres of their countries of refuge. The documentaries focus on early twentieth-century Jewish community organizations, political participation (even becoming elected officials in Chamecki’s film), and the establishment of businesses. In this sense, we discern a trend in recent Jewish Latin American documentary that focuses on identity and belonging to uncover the way in which Jewish immigrants have formed a significant part of the national project through economic, political, and social activities. In addition to being fundamental cultural productions for considering the place of Jews in Latin America, the documentaries contribute to current critical understandings of the connections between politics, collective memory, and documentary production.

An emphasis on family and communities pervades each of the three films, and it unifies them as a chronicle of Jewish life. An important distinction among the three, however, is that Blaustein’s *Hacer patria* centers on one family, the director’s own, while *El barrio de los judíos* and *Estamos aqui (Danken Got)* tell the respective stories of Montevideo’s erstwhile Jewish neighborhood of Barrio Reus and the Jewish community of Curitiba, Brazil. Despite the fact that the latter two are not focused on one family in particular, both repeatedly refer to the tight-knit communities of Jews within Barrio Reus and Curitiba as *de facto* families. The films’ emphasis on family are crucial to their figuring of individual and collective political affinities and national identities, for family ties are shown to have the paradoxical function of both facilitating and, at other times, going against communities of political affiliations.

<sup>1</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, “Being Jewish,” trans. Mary Beth Mader, *Continental Philosophy Review* 40 (2007): 205–210.

A common concern with the patterns of political participation that characterized Jewish life in Russian and Eastern Europe before immigration to South America unifies these three documentaries. In the first decades of the twentieth century and before emigrating from Russia and Eastern Europe, workers' unions and socialist organizations were a common part of Jewish political activism, while Zionist groups would gain more prevalence in later decades. The Russian Revolution in particular is shown to have had a lasting effect on Jewish immigrants to Latin America. An interviewee in Blaustein's *Hacer patria* affirms that the Russian Revolution awoke Jews' political spirit, while a Polish Jewish woman interviewed in Curitiba (though not in Chamecki's documentary) affirms: "I was born at almost the same time as the October Revolution."<sup>2</sup> Thus, in a sense, Jewish Latin Americans' political affiliations and activities can be linked to beliefs stemming from their countries of origin.

At the same time, however, these documentaries of Jewish life in Latin America also show that the Latin American political climate presented unique challenges to Jewish communities, as we see that Jewish Latin American life was permeated with political preoccupations that ranged from the global to the local. In this way, Jewish immigrants to Latin America became central figures in the politics of their cities and nations, and Latin America as a whole. While much cultural production and critical analysis focus on Jews' cultural practices and religious identities, we must also take into account the ways in which political participation is depicted in stories of Jewish life. These recent films show that Jews participated in myriad ways in the political sphere, both on the right and on the left, resisting any broad categorization of Jewish political allegiances.

### ***Hacer patria***

Released in 2007, David Blaustein's *Hacer patria* consists primarily of interviews of the director's family members who emigrated from Poland to Argentina in the 1920s. The film opens with Blaustein's visit to the national museum of immigration in Buenos Aires and recounts his family's history from their origins in Poland and Russia at the turn of the twentieth century through the beginning of the twenty-first century. As the director's brother tells us near the film's end, the country to which their ancestors immigrated, "It was a very seductive country. It was a country under construction." He goes on to assert that many immigrants assimilated and forgot not only that they were Russian or Polish but also that they were Jewish. Perhaps this forgetting is the impetus of the film, to remind its viewers—whether they are Jewish Argentines or not—of this community's origins and history.<sup>3</sup>

David Blaustein is well known in Argentina and more broadly among film scholars as an award-winning director of political documentaries such as *Cazadores de utopías/Hunters of Utopia* (1996), focused on Argentina's Montoneros, an urban guerrilla group that formed in 1970 in opposition to imperialist and authoritarian forces, and *Botín de guerra/Spoils of War* (2000), a film about the children of Argentina's *desaparecidos*. Blaustein emerged as an important voice in the late 1990s and early 2000s within filmmaking and political culture. For many, he inaugurated a new generation of political filmmaking. In *Hacer patria*, he incorporates a more intimate focus on his own family members. Moving beyond the cliché "the personal is political," the story of his family's settlement in Argentina posits Jews as integral citizens of the Argentine nation.

The film's DVD release includes the caption on its cover and on the disc's title screen, "Dare to get to know your past," suggesting that the story contained in the film is not only the Blausteins' family history but also the history of Jewish Argentina and, perhaps, that of non-Jewish Argentina as well. To this point, a review of the film in *La Nación* (a mainstream Argentine daily newspaper) adapts the axiom "Paint a picture of your town and you will paint a picture of the world" to posit: "Paint a picture of your immigrant family and you will paint a picture of Argentina's evolution over much of the twentieth century."<sup>4</sup> Blaustein's retrospective focus on his family's journey throughout the twentieth century does not depict the margins of society but rather focuses on the marginalized Jewish immigrants in such a way that places them at the center of the history of Argentina's twentieth century.

What immediately differentiates *Hacer patria* from Blaustein's other films is the low-tech, homemade quality of its footage. Akin to his other documentaries, *Hacer patria* incorporates a great deal of historical footage, which is of varying quality, but the technical aspects of the scenes in which he interviews people

<sup>2</sup> As quoted in Sergio Alberto Feldman, "Os judeus vermelhos," *Revista de História Regional* 6, no. 1 (2001): 139.

<sup>3</sup> The question of the film's target audience, which could only be speculative at best, is nonetheless important to take into account and recalls Carolina Rocha's consideration of Jewish cinematic self-representation in which she explores the intricacies of film produced by Jews versus Jews depicted by non-Jews in film, as well as films produced for Jewish versus non-Jewish audiences. Carolina Rocha, "Jewish Cinematic Self-Representations in Contemporary Argentine and Brazilian Films," *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 9, no. 1 (2010): 37–48.

<sup>4</sup> "La patria, en primera persona," *La Nación*, August 9, 2007.

or goes to archives and museums have a much less sophisticated feel to them than the interviews included in his other documentaries. The lighting and angles used in the interviews of Blaustein's family members give the documentary a less artistic, cerebral feel than *Cazadores de utopías* and emphasize the film's personal aspects.

Throughout the film, family memory and history are presented in relation to recent national history. In one scene, a cousin of Blaustein's recounts his mother's journey to Argentina and tells us, "I am repeating my mother's version of the story. I wasn't present." In this sense, the film reminds us of the importance of oral histories and the transmission of memory within this family and for Jewish communities writ large. Blaustein's mother, aunt, and cousins emphasize the importance of their family's political principles and participation in groups. While his maternal grandparents were highly involved in political groups in Poland, we learn through his paternal cousin, Bubi, that his Russian grandfather on his father's side was displeased when his children became active in socialist organizations in Argentina. One of his cousins describes his parents' political formation as "not exactly a socialist formation but something similar." He goes on to explain that his mother was one of the first members of Hashomer Hatzair, a Socialist-Zionist youth group for Jews that was established in Eastern Europe in 1913 and gained popularity throughout Latin America. These explicit mentions of the family's involvement as foundational members of political groups in the country further establish Jewish immigrants as protagonists of twentieth-century politics and citizenship. As is to be expected of a documentary focused on twentieth-century Argentina, references to Juan Domingo Perón abound in the film. The family story is rife with the political struggles and controversies that characterized twentieth-century Argentina.<sup>5</sup>

Not only does the film chronicle Jewish Argentines' process of helping to build a nation; it also reminds us that filmmaking itself is an important way of articulating nationhood. To this point, Daniela Goldfine concludes her analysis of *Hacer patria*: "Blaustein allows himself and allows us to question our role as citizens and protagonists of our story and of history. The space that the director offers should be taken up as a point of departure and not only a static document. After all, a significant way to build a nation is through telling the stories that made it."<sup>6</sup> The documentary thus brings politics to the fore of conversations about Jewish life in Argentina at the same time that it posits Jews at the center of national politics.

### ***Estamos aqui (Danken Got)***

Like *Hacer patria*, Brazilian director Cintia Chamecki's *Estamos aqui (Danken Got)* also focuses on Jewish immigrants' roles in the political sphere. Chamecki's focus on her hometown of Curitiba in the Southern Brazilian state of Paraná facilitates an exploration of the unique history of Curitiba's Jewish community. In the 1950s, the city saw the founding of the Jewish political organization Sociedade Cultural Israelita Brasileira (SOCIB) and in 1971 elected a Jewish mayor, Jaime Lerner (Lerner would go on to be governor of the state of Paraná). The film follows Chamecki, currently living in New York, as she travels back to Curitiba to interview her family and community members. Chamecki's film focuses on the history of Jewish immigration and everyday life in this city.

Shown in film festivals worldwide and now available online through the *Vimeo* platform, the film's bilingual title *Estamos aqui (Danken Got)* immediately garners attention. The use of both Yiddish and Portuguese underscores the hybridity of Latin American Jewish existence—and, in this vein, the film's description's first line refers to Chamecki's "searching for her own identity as a cosmopolitan (Jew)." Rather than translate the Yiddish expression "Danken Got" ("Thank God!"), the film's Portuguese title is "Estamos aqui" and its English title is "Here We Are!" Through these changes in the title in its translations from Yiddish into Portuguese and English, the film's subject matter is suggested to be less religious. At the same time, however, the Portuguese and English versions of the title seem to evoke the Hebrew "Heneni," "Here I am," that Abraham utters to God in Exodus to indicate that he is ready to be called upon. "Estamos aqui" and "here we are" underscore the film's focus on both Jewish culture and the immigrant experience in twentieth-century Brazil. The Portuguese and English translations of the film's title also emphasize the film's subjects' immigrant status; as a way of defining who they are, they proclaim where they are. Likewise, the film begins with a black screen on which the definition of the verb "to immigrate" appears: "To establish oneself in a foreign country."

<sup>5</sup> The Blausteins' vexed relationship with Peronism is a common one among Jewish Argentine families, as Perón was sometimes an ally of Argentina's Jewish communities, helping in the establishment of Jewish organizations and labor initiatives, while he also allowed Nazis to enter the country. See Raanan Rein, *Los muchachos peronistas judíos: Los argentinos judíos y el apoyo al Justicialismo* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 2015); and Uki Goñi, *The Real Odessa: How Perón Brought the Nazi War Criminals to Argentina* (London: Granta, 2002).

<sup>6</sup> Daniela Goldfine, "Hacer patria de David Blaustein: Reconstrucción colectiva e historia judeo-argentina reciente," *Mathal* 1, no. 1, art. 3 (n.p.).

Indeed, the act of *establishing* oneself is key throughout the stories included in Chamecki's film. In Curitiba, the immigrants and their descendants interviewed in the film emphasize the roots that they planted almost immediately after arriving.

Unlike Blaustein's film, the interviews included in Chamecki's film do not mention political affinities or workers' unions in Poland or Russia before immigrating to Brazil. Instead, mentions of Poland and Russia focus on the difficulty of life there in contrast with life in Brazil, described by one interviewee as "*um paraíso*." In comparison with the other documentaries discussed here, *Estamos aqui* dedicates a substantial amount of time and attention to Curitiba's Jewish community's response to the mounting Fascism in Europe in the 1930s and to the impending Holocaust. The film also focuses on Curitiba's Jewish inhabitants' experiences with distinctly local and Brazilian politics. Interviewees mention their experiences with Integralism, a quasi-Fascist movement in 1930s Brazil that favored nationalism and espoused anti-Semitic stances. One of the interviewees in the film, when asked about the Jewish community's reaction to Integralist demonstrations in the street, affirms that there was no community reaction, for the Jews were too scared to react publicly.

Moreover, the film highlights the establishment of the Sociedade Cultural Israelita Brasileira, which one interviewee describes as capturing an issue that was happening to every Jewish exile: the tension in the 1940s and 1950s between Communism and Zionism. Akin to her introduction of the definition of "to immigrate" at the film's beginning, Chamecki includes the word "*roite*," the Jewish reds, a designation that embodied a tension between what one interviewee describes as the Zionist, anti-Soviet position, and a more pro-Soviet position espoused by an interviewee who states that she believed that Russia was going to save them all.

The film ends with the inauguration of the Holocaust Museum in Curitiba, attended by then president Dilma Rousseff. But perhaps the film's conclusion comes in the form of one of its interviewees who informs us that, in response to being called a Jew, he counters, "No, I am a Brazilian of Jewish faith" As we learn throughout *Estamos aqui*, the story of Curitiba's Jewish community is comprised of Brazilians who, as another interview subject affirms toward the film's end, love Brazil, and whose roots and beliefs as Jews inform their self-understanding as Brazilians and as political subjects. As Jewish Brazilians, they have striven for inclusion and have also participated actively in the political life of the country where they have established communities.

### ***El barrio de los judíos***

Like the other two documentaries, *El barrio de los judíos* relies heavily on interviewees' childhood memories and people's recounting their parents' memories as immigrants to the neighborhood. Unlike the others, *El barrio de los judíos* focuses on just one neighborhood, Montevideo's Jewish neighborhood of Barrio Reus, established in the late nineteenth century and named after Emilio Reus, a Spanish banker who had immigrated to Montevideo in the 1880s. One interviewee describes the neighborhood as a sort of "Jerusalén." *El barrio de los judíos* emphasizes the importance of the transmission of memory across generations through its interviews of children of immigrants. Another interviewee repeatedly refers to his parents who "came to this country however they came"—unlike his generation of Uruguayans born in Montevideo—as a way of defining his parents as immigrants to the Reus neighborhood and to Uruguay. Almost a century later, most Jews have now moved out of this neighborhood, many of them to the Pocitos neighborhood on the beach in Montevideo. Barrio Reus's history—central to both the urban history of Montevideo and to Uruguay's Jewish populations—thus runs the risk of being relegated to oblivion, so that the documentary takes on a sense of urgency to transmit the neighborhood's history.

Like Blaustein, Gonzalo Rodríguez Fábregas has directed documentaries focused on the revolutionary culture during the 1960s and 1970s that had a lasting effect on politics in Latin America. He recently produced *Liberarse*, a biographical documentary film about Líber Arce, a militant student executed in 1968 by Uruguay's military forces and widely considered to be a martyr for antidictatorial causes. The film is, in a sense, an expansion of the short *Líber Arce, liberarse* (dir. Mario Handler, Mario Jacob, and Marcos Banhero; prod. Cinemateca del Tercer Mundo, Uruguay, 1969, 10'), an important film for 1960s revolutionary Latin American and Uruguayan filmmaking. Rodríguez thus has a particular relation to political filmmaking of his country.

*El barrio de los judíos* emphasizes family and community throughout the history of Jews in Reus. The interviewees featured in *El barrio de los judíos* repeatedly emphasize the family-like bonds that characterized the entire Reus neighborhood during their childhood. They recall the smell of typical Jewish foods in the neighborhood and playing together in the streets. The film emphasizes the neighborhood's change over time through footage of adolescents on a field trip to the Barrio Reus during which the leader informs them that they are going to learn about their grandparents' neighborhood. In contrast to the sunny shots of older

adults standing on the sidewalk recalling their childhoods, the students' visit shows gray, rainy streets with storefronts closed. The *mise-en-scène* of the grandchildren's generation's visit to Barrio Reus constitutes a visual metaphor to remind its audience of the urgency of remembering and representing the history of Montevideo's Jewish communities.

More so than the other two documentaries, *El barrio de los judíos* pays particular attention to the neighborhood's responses to the creation of Israel. Before the creation of Israel, one man recalls, "We were not Jews, we were Russians" But with the establishment of Israel, he states, "Then we became Jews." The man describes the creation of Israel as a psychological change within the Jewish community, which inspired many to take pride in being Jewish and in defining themselves as such. Another interviewee reminds us that the founders of Israel were not right-wing political leaders but leftists, and that the Jews who left Russia for Uruguay were all "socialists, communists, or anarchists." These categorizations, however, are subverted by other interviewees' claims that there was indeed a significant amount of variety among the community when it came to ideological affinities and specifically when it concerned the state of Israel and Zionism. A woman interviewed affirms: "Some were Zionists, some were not. But we were all Jews." Another interviewee recalls his opposition to Luis Alberto de Herrera's nationalist presidential bids, reminding us again of the importance of local and national politics within Jewish communities. *El barrio de los judíos* thus depicts a high volume of political participation among Jews in the 1940s and 1950s but does not posit a homogenous or monolithic understanding of Jewish political affinities.

## Conclusion

Through these documentaries, we see an impulse and an urgency to articulate and maintain Jewish communities' identity through the intergenerational transmission of memory. These memories, we learn, are by no means limited to religious identity but rather to the polyvalent and sometimes contradictory stances that community members took regarding national and global political issues. Meanwhile, mentions of community reactions to Nazism and to the creation of the state of Israel remind us of the transnational aspects of Jewish identities and political affinities. At the same time, the diversity of stances espoused by members within a single Jewish community—or within a single family, in Blaustein's case—shows that there were many ways in which Latin American Jews in the early part of the twentieth century could be political. These films' sustained emphasis on Jews' actions within the political spheres of their respective countries move beyond narratives of belonging to depict Latin America's Jews as full-fledged citizens who do not exist on the margins of society but rather form an integral part of the public political spheres of the countries in which they settled. In this sense, these documentaries redefine their respective nations' recent histories, giving us a more complete understanding of what it means to be Latin American.

## Author Information

Stephanie Pridgeon teaches Spanish and Latin American Studies at Bates College in Lewiston, Maine. She has authored pieces on film and documentary, revolutionary culture, memory studies, race and ethnicity, and Jewish culture in Latin America in *Revista de Estudios Hispánicos*, *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies*, *Revista Canadiense de Estudios Hispánicos*, *Hispanic Studies Review*, and *alter/nativas: Latin American Cultural Studies Journal*. Currently she is completing a book manuscript on filmic depictions of Jewish participation in revolutionary politics in 1960s and 1970s Latin America.

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