

Deutsch, Sandra McGee. *Crossing Borders, Claiming a Nation: A History of Argentine Jewish Women, 1880-1955*. Duke University, 2010. 377pp, bibl. Index; ISBN 9780822346494

Growing up with a Jewish heritage in a region not known for its population of Jews (Greensboro, North Carolina) I was constantly asked the following questions: 1) Was I practicing Judaism and 2) from where did my family come and for what reasons did they come to America. My knowledge primarily confined to US history classes, I assumed that all Jews in the modern era had migrated to the US or Israel for the reasons my family had: to avoid pogroms, the Nazis, in the aftermath of the Holocaust, or to seek economic prosperity. Reading Sandra McGee Deutsch's book, then, was both a corrective and an eye-opener, since it documented the migration of Jews into Argentina and situates it in a larger immigration history for Jews.

Deutsch's book is focused on Jewish women, who she claims are "doubly situated on the margins, as Jewish and female," and how they "helped build the larger imagined community of Argentina" (1). She traces both the women's inclusion in and exclusion from both the small and large aspects of community life, how they constituted both insiders and outsiders, and how they formed identities. In doing so, she separates Jewish women into smaller groups—Ashkenazi, Mediterranean and Damascene—and displays how diverse the Jewish experience was, even when the Jews faced many of the same challenges (i.e., settling into Argentina from 1880 through the periods of Juan Perón's presidency).

The book is divided into chapters, each of which leads organically into the next, and is arranged thematically rather than chronologically. The first two chapters explore the connection between women's lives in the countryside and Buenos Aires and broader, socio-political themes. Chapter three looks at how Jewish women experienced professions ranging from schoolteachers, to doctors, to entertainers, while chapter four examines those women who entered into prostitution as a means of making a living. Interestingly, this particular chapter is the least extensive, as she claims that if prior work has focused on Argentinean Jewish women, then it has focused on their work in the sex trade. Deutsch, however, tries to dispel the idea that Jewish prostitution was extensive by working to show all the ways in which it was checked or prevented.

Chapter five discusses marriage and sexuality for Jewish women and the final chapters examine Jewish women's participation in political communities, including the anarchists, socialists, communists, anti-fascists, and Zionists. What is notably missing from the book is a specific discussion of religion and answers to such questions as: how, in the face of a predominately Catholic country, the Jews managed to (or didn't manage to) maintain their religious beliefs and observations? Deutsch's treatment of religion implies that religion itself, actual theological beliefs, was of secondary importance to both her own interests and to those of the Jewish women discussed. If this was actually the case—that maintaining one's religion became less important than being able to help shape the boundaries of one's country (and if these two do not overlap), -- then a more fully-developed discussion of this would be useful.

Deutsch examines how Jewish women created identities for themselves, but also how identities were thrust upon them.. Whereas in the US Jews were considered as non-white, "in Brazil, with its large population of African descent, Jews were seen as both

nonwhite and nonblack, threatening and privileged at the same time” (7). In 1932, the Jewish woman Ana Rovner was chosen as Mrs. Brazil and while the press mentioned her immigrant status, they did not mention that she was a Jew, although by her last name this would have been fairly obvious. This suggests that while Jews were deemed sensual and attractive, it was not permissible to pick them as representatives of the country. Jewish entertainers had a similar experience: they would obtain roles because they were perceived as sensual and attractive, but these roles would be stock-typed (for instance, a common role was the femme-fatale). Thus, she demonstrates how Jewish women’s racial status both helped and hindered them, but further discussion about how Jewish women perceived of themselves in the racial hierarchy and how they viewed others—notably those who were obviously non-white—would have been useful.

Schools provided points of assimilation because classes were taught in Spanish, on the basis of Catholic curricula, so “schools fostered a sense of argentinidad” (23). Education also provided “social capital” to women who used this social capital to escape Anti-Semitism in the professional arena as well as to help shape democratic practices and democratic projects. In this sense, then, education was a way of crossing boundaries; but could there not also be some anxiety associated with this assimilation? And could Jewish schools (only briefly mentioned) help redefine boundaries? I feel that the role of education, while expounded on extensively, remains murky. Perhaps this is not Deutsch’s oversight but rather an *insight*—that education plays a push-and-pull role in matters of assimilation or group consolidation. If this is so, then a prolonged and explicit discussion of how this may have worked would have been fascinating.

One of the ways women crossed boundaries was in their political participation, primarily in Zionism where Jewish women of different backgrounds were brought together. Some Jewish women fought for the inclusion of women into the political government and in doing so claimed spaces in the nation for women and sought to make Argentina more democratic. These political activities, however, also left women on the fringe of society—on another boundary—as they rebelled against the status quo. While she details the involvement of women in these groups in Argentina, she does little to place their involvement in a larger historical context. Was participation by Jewish women in the political sphere in Argentina greater than in other countries (I got the impression it was) and if so, what was it about Argentina and Argentinean Jews that accounts for this?

Finally, I was especially interested in Deutsch’s treatment of Anti-Semitism. While she gives many examples of Anti-Semitism from examples such as the typecasting of women actors, to a more blatant example where a hospital flyer read “Kill Jewish women: the Mother’s Club asks you to do so,” she concludes overall that such discrimination arose from gender, political and class issues more than from religious intolerance. Interestingly, she claims that the feeling “that inclusion demanded muting one’s Jewishness” was more common than anti-Semitism (43). My question is, how is this *not* Anti-Semitism? If Jewish women did not feel comfortable being Jewish than their religious and cultural heritage *was* being discriminated against. she seems to dodge this question by only giving Anti-Semitism a tongue-and-cheek treatment: it existed, but other forms of intolerance and discrimination were more severe. I wonder if she had not been so intent on seeing other forms of discrimination (whose existence I am not arguing against) if she would have seen a greater presence of Anti-Semitism.

Deutsche searched primarily in existing archives, uncovered new archives and conducted about eighty interviews. This exhaustive research and the fruits of it, the stories, anecdotes and quotes that fill the pages of the book, are its strongest points. Equally strong is the organization of these materials to form an overall story and historiography. Nonetheless, some conclusions seem to stop at, or only slightly below, surface level, and Deutsche sometimes accepts testimonies uncritically. The result is that in a book that is so based in paradoxes and shifting positions—Jewish women were both white and non-white, both insiders and outsiders—some of the conclusions seem impossibly straightforward. Still, the book is overall a success if only because the reader, in this case a Jewish female reader, is left with a desire to know more and a sense of having gained much. Even if Deutsch is unable to fully deal with the complexities of history, she has made it clear that they exist. Jews are not a static monolithic group but a people of diverse origins, cultures, challenges and triumphs.

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