CHAPTER TWO

FROM TEXTILE THIEVES TO “SUPPOSED SEAMSTRESSES”: JEWISH, CRIME, AND URBAN IDENTITIES IN BUENOS AIRES, 1905–1930

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Samuel Susman, Nisen Gerovich, and Menach Aisemberg did not expect to get caught by the police when they went to a café on November 18, 1914.¹ They had just carried out three successful robberies in downtown Buenos Aires, and had an appointment to try and sell some of their stolen textiles. The three men headed to a café in the heart of the Once neighborhood. Perhaps they drank tea or glanced at the newspaper, but the main reason they were there was to meet peddler Kiba Bochin. Bochin may not have known that the textiles were stolen, but he probably suspected that the deal was not entirely legitimate, when he found out the fabrics were in the men’s rooms a few blocks away. In the end, the meeting was a mistake. Cafés on busy Corrientes Street were not very private, and before they could finish, the police interrupted the transaction and carted the thieves off to jail.

Susman, Gerovich, and Aisemberg were part of the process of urban identity creation, even if they did not realize it themselves. The face-to-face interactions of people from a variety of origins helped in the creation of the urban strain of the Argentine national identity, which included a variety of cultures and traditions both immigrant and native, and a focus on making Buenos Aires a modern city. Through crime, residents of the city who might have had little in common came to recognize each other through their roles as victims, perpetrators and bystanders. Porteño identity was forged in these (often) chance encounters between people of different cultures and origins. Following the Jews who were involved in these networks of crime and disorder shows that these events occurred throughout the city with an array of both Jews and non-Jews, not just in the neighborhoods that porteños identified as Jewish.

¹ “Noticias de policía” La Prensa (Buenos Aires), 20 Nov 1914, p. 10.
The three thieves are part of the larger history of crime and criminality in Latin America. Much of it has focused on the ways the state asserted control over those they identified as criminals, showing different conceptions of what constitutes social order. At the same time, these studies engage with those committing the various acts of crime and disorder. As Pablo Piccato writes for his work on Mexico City, “The goal is not to narrate the famous cases that captured the imagination of the press, but to reconstruct the texture of crime as experienced in everyday life by those who formed the majority of offenders and victims.” This article looks at the role of the state and the police only tangentially, focusing instead on the “texture of crime” identified by Piccato—the networks created by the events of crime and disorder reported in the police news.

Jewish criminals stand at the intersection of histories of crime and ethnic histories, yet are often overlooked by both. Susman, Gerovich, and Aisemberg are not the typical protagonists of an ethnic history. The men were probably not upstanding members of communal organizations, and it also seems unlikely that they contributed to the flourishing Yiddish cultural life of early twentieth-century Buenos Aires, both markers of membership in Jewish Argentine life that have been central to scholarly work on the subject. Yet they were still part of the panorama of Jewish immigrant life. Their stories were important even though they were acting outside of accepted social norms by stealing and hoping to make money from their thefts. Susman, Gerovich, and Aisemberg highlighted their Jewish

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3 Piccato, 3.

4 A notable exception is Jenna Weissman Joselit, Our Gang: Jewish Crime and the New York Jewish Community, 1900–1940 (Bloomington, IN, 1983).