CHAPTER 3

Factory, Workshop, and Homework: A Spatial Dimension of Labor Flexibility among Jewish Migrants in the Early Stages of Industrialization in Buenos Aires

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The spread of ready-to-wear clothing in Argentina during the first decades of the twentieth century—later than in most other Western countries—offered a labor market to newly-arrived Jewish immigrants. The expertise required in the garment industry, as well as membership in ethnic migration networks, allowed them to join in what rapidly became one of the major economic niches of the Jewish community of Buenos Aires. Although the growth of the garment industry meant jobs and the possibility of social and economic mobility, working conditions in this market were characterized by precariousness, piecework, and endless hours of toil, among other features of this production system. Thus, although factories, workshops, and homework became spaces of precarious labor and social stigmatization, at the same time, they facilitated economic mobility and ethnic support.

In addition, the garment industry acted as a basis for the subsequent political, economic, social, and cultural organization of the Jewish community. Unionization and the creation of parties and cooperatives, as well as cultural and community life through the establishment of clubs, libraries, schools and arts centers, and even residential patterns, resulted largely from, and accompanied, the development of this economic niche. Likewise, the fashion industry spread spatially because of its flexibility, inherent in the necessity of the production of seasonal garments. The industry thus created new workplaces for Jewish migrants based on a contracting and subcontracting system. The

1 Until around 1890 clothes were largely imported or made in private households. From then, the first workshops-factories emerged. Fernando Rocchi, Chimneys in the Desert: Industrialization in Argentina during the Export Boom Years, 1870–1930 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 58.

2 In this paper, the garment industry refers to the dressmaking, leatherwork, and textile industries, as well as all types of work resulting from these industries, such as sales.
combination of new spaces of labor—factory, workshop, and home—also produced new labor patterns. At the same time, new key figures in this type of production were influenced by the cultural, religious, and ethnic character of Jewishness.

Thus, the ready-to-wear industry in Argentina involved Jewish migrant participation which, through daily work, made an impact on the establishment of new spaces of labor, on labor organization, and on the emergence of new actors. These, in turn, influenced the cultural, social, and economic history of Argentina. Starting from the broader question regarding the integration of the Jewish community in Argentina and how the establishment of an economic niche such as the garment industry facilitated this process, this chapter seeks to analyze the emergence of spaces of labor and informal networks among Jewish migrants at the beginning of the twentieth century. Based on an analysis of oral interviews and secondary bibliography, it delves into how the study of a migrant group with a strong ethnic identity can shed new light on a more conventional, established historiography on migration and labor. Therefore, I first provide the context for the arrival of Jewish immigrants, their social composition, and their integration into the labor market in Argentina. Second, I examine the role of ethnic networks in the garment world and the creation of new spaces of labor, as well as resulting new forms of production within this industry. Finally, I will present some concluding reflections.

**Migration and Diversity**

Jewish immigrants settled in Argentina from the mid-nineteenth century onward. However, it was only in the first decade of the twentieth century—due to the persecutions in the Russian Empire—that Jewish migration rose dramatically. This increase continued during World War One and the interwar years, making these decades the period of the greatest expansion and growth for this community. While by 1908 the Jewish population numbered approximately 40,000, by 1932 it was estimated at 191,000. According to the 1947 official

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