CHAPTER 7


Claudia Stern

Pedro, an Arab-Chilean, whose father arrived in Chile in 1910 from Bethlehem, Palestine, followed in his father’s footsteps and became a merchant in a typical immigrant neighborhood in Santiago. He recalled the conversation with the owner of his first store when he was just starting out:

“I have nothing, nothing, nothing, just the will to work.” “So how can you pay me?” “Very easily,” I said. “Fine,” he said. “Here are the keys, we’ll sign the contract some other day.” So I went to see the little store; you know, there was room for a storeroom in the back, and . . . a dining room, bathroom, kitchen and bedroom. Good for getting started . . .

Pedro’s first experience as a storekeeper in Recoleta entailed many sacrifices; for him life was a continuous struggle. Pedro was a hard worker and a risk-taker who invested hard work and personal sacrifice for the sake of his future descendants. Like many members of the Chilean middle sectors of that time, Pedro was driven by the desire for social mobility, if not for himself then for future generations.

This chapter examines the linkage between immigrant groups and the Chilean middle sectors in the years 1930 to 1960. Jews and Arabs could gain access to the middle sectors, which were widely dispersed and, as they expanded and prospered, became more heterogeneous while developing a class sensibility. However, this growth did not lead to a consolidated social class identity; cultural, political, and social tensions remained over the three

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2 Interview with Pedro by the author, 29 November 2011.
decades in question. Sectored identities were fluid, powerful, and desirable, thus enabling the integration of Jews and Arabs into those echelons. The two groups did so by carving out distinct, but overlapping niches, while actually shaping the evolution of the middle sectors. At the same time, ‘chileanization’ of the immigrants as social equals among the Chilean middle sectors gradually increased their level of integration. This meant that many members of the middle sectors admired Arab-Chileans and Jewish-Chileans for their admirable drive, which they saw as similar to their own, with its view of their current socio-economic status as a transit point to something better. Integration into Chilean society also came about as a consequence of the social and cultural strategies of the immigrants themselves. Such strategies emerged in both communities, whereby a middle sphere was created which combined practices from the public sphere with those from the private one—what this chapter will describe as a collective sphere. Here, in the observance and performance of celebrations and important events, Arab-Chileans and Jewish-Chileans asserted their ethnic identity. For example, at the Arab Olympics and at the annual Jewish community’s New Year’s Eve ball, they integrated and assembled new components of their Chilean identities while retaining their ethnic ones.

Local Perceptions towards Chilean Immigrants

In the section titled “The Queuing People,” the 1944 satirical magazine *Chilean Family* shows how immigrants were perceived during the integration process. This is best illustrated by the dialogue between a snobbish banker who grants loans, and Mr. Armijo, a lower class Chilean from Parral, a rural district south of Santiago:

- I am Mr. Armijo . . . , excuse me, excuse me . . . If you would allow me . . .
- How can I help you?
- Ah! You don't remember? . . . I've been here seventeen times to talk to you . . . Two years ago I applied for a loan to continue some housing construction that my father began . . .
- That's true! I'm aware of that. It turns out that the bank does not provide money for construction . . . Indeed, we are out of loans at the moment. You know that yesterday was the holy day of Don Agamemnon's Aunt, and we had to make a loan to this gentleman to buy a fur coat for his aunt . . . You understand that it couldn't be postponed . . .
- No doubt . . . It's just that I need some money to build affordable housing, which could prove very useful . . .