CHAPTER 10

Der freylekhster yid in Argentine: The Life and Death of Jevl Katz, Popular Artist of the 1930s

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When Jevl Katz died in the Hospital Israelita of Buenos Aires on 8 March 1940, he had only lived in Argentina for ten years. However, his untimely demise—the result of a sudden systemic sepsis after a tonsillectomy—set off the largest funeral in Jewish-Argentine history. During his decade-long career in the country, the Lithuanian-born cabaret artist had become a local ethnic star, a constant and welcome presence in the lives of most Yiddish-speaking immigrants and their children.

According to Di Prese, one of the two main Yiddish-language daily newspapers of Argentina, about twenty thousand people paid their respects preceding the funeral; then a similar number gathered on at the offices of the Society of Jewish Writers and Artists for a solemn ceremony before the funeral procession began its slow march towards the Jewish cemetery in the suburb of Liniers. There waited another crowd several thousand strong, who ended up unwittingly impeding movement of the hearse and forcing the police to intervene to make sure the burial could take place and the mourners (family, friends, and other important participants) could enter the grounds.1

After his death, Jevl Katz’s legacy went on for years. Friends and acquaintances in show business organized yearly memorial fundraising concerts to help his widow and small children, events that received substantial publicity in the Yiddish newspapers and airwaves. His most famous songs persisted on the Jewish stage, performed by his successors in the genre of comical singers, such as Max Zalkind and Max Perlman.

Why did Katz’s death awaken a massive, public expression of collective grief by the Jewish-Argentine2 public? How did a cabaret (kleynkunst, in Yiddish) performer achieve such a large and devoted following? Katz’s popularity, as shown by his artistic career but even more so by the popular grieving that his

1 Di Prese, 10 March 1940.
2 This essay prefers the term “Jewish-Argentine” to the more common “Argentine Jewish,” because the latter implies a supremacy or priority of the ethnic dimension over the national one. Following recent scholarship, I conceive the “Jewish” to be inseparable from
death generated, is evidence of his close connection with his audience. For many Jewish-Argentines, he was more than a mere entertainer.

Through his comical and musical talents, as well as his reliance on the burgeoning Yiddish language of Buenos Aires and his personal transition from a recently arrived *gringo* (in Spanish) or *griner* (in Yiddish) to a seasoned dweller of the capital, Katz managed to construct a tight bond with his audience. His songs and parodies expressed the anxieties surrounding immigrant life in the Americas, the difficulties of adapting to a new sociocultural setting and the satisfaction of overcoming those obstacles, the contrasting feelings of a new at-homeness and the bittersweet nostalgia for the old country.

Katz portrayed himself as invested with the mission of maintaining the invisible cultural ties binding together the Yiddish-speaking Jews of Argentina. His almost yearly tours through the country went beyond the largest (and most profitable) agricultural colonies of Entre Ríos and Santa Fe, to far-away provinces where a mere handful of Jewish-Argentines resided. He brought these tiny communities—often without the hint of profit for himself—songs and joy in a language that reminded them of a larger ethnic sense of belonging. Back in Buenos Aires, he composed new songs for his urban followers that celebrated these “Jewish gauchos,” comedic twists on the central trope that reinforced their claims to legitimate Argentineness.

Because of his strong connection with his audience, studying Katz allows us to understand the relationship between a Jewish-Argentine cultural space and popular constructions of identity. This essay explores Katz’s short yet successful decade in Buenos Aires, his relationship with his fans, and the themes and language of his oeuvre. I analyze Jewish-Argentine representations of the immigrant experience and the social importance of these representations in the construction of collective ethnic identity. Among these cultural artifacts, the Jewish agricultural colonies held a prominent place in the narrative legitimizing the presence of Jews in the country. We shall also see how the deployment of an ethnic language establishes a semi-hermetic ethnic space of belonging. The first section highlights key aspects of Katz’s career; the second focuses on the lyrics of his songs; a third part examines the unique role of rural Jews and settlements in the artist’s imaginary; and the last one goes over his particular use of the Yiddish of the Río de la Plata.

the “Argentine,” and the ethnic and the national to be equally important. The hyphenated “Jewish-Argentine” thus puts both dimensions on equal footing and shines light on the relationship between the two. See Jeffrey Lesser and Raanan Rein, “New Approaches to Ethnicity and Diaspora in Twentieth-Century Latin America,” in *Rethinking Jewish-Latin Americans*, eds. Lesser and Rein (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2008), pp. 23–40.