

SOUTHERN JEWISH HISTORY

Journal of the Southern Jewish Historical Society

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2024
Volume 27



Southern Jewish History

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Articles appearing in *Southern Jewish History* are abstracted and/or indexed in *Historical Abstracts*; *America: History and Life*; *Index to Jewish Periodicals*; *Journal of American History*; *Journal of Southern History*; *RAMBI-National Library of Israel*; *Immigration and Ethnic History Society Newsletter*; and the *Berman Jewish Policy Archive* (www.bjpa.org).

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Film Reviews

People of the Crossing: The Jews of El Paso. Produced and directed by Isaac Artenstein. Cinewest Productions, 2023. 56 minutes.

An indelible moment in *People of the Crossing* perfectly situates a story in place and time. Jewish residents of El Paso and Juárez, its sister city across the Rio Grande, gather at a spot where a gap in the border fence allows the two groups to stand within a few feet of each other. Mexican Jews cluster on their side, American Jews on theirs, but they are close enough to sing and pray together. A light breeze spreads the flags of the United States, Mexico, and Israel. The terrain is dry and scrubby, the sky clear, low mountains rise behind them. The fence—a monstrous twenty-foot-high rust-colored series of tightly spaced vertical steel beams—looms over them, snaking across the hills into the distance and casting striped shadows over the ad hoc congregation. “There’s no rabbi in Juárez,” says Stephen Leon, rabbi emeritus of El Paso’s B’nai Zion Synagogue. “This idea of meeting at a place where the border is accessible, without having to worry about immigration policemen and things like that, we decided to come together.” Leon continues, “To sound the shofar as one community—two countries, one community—of Jewish people. To show our unity. And maybe if we sound the shofar loud enough, maybe we can break down those walls instead of building them.”

Indeed, for most of the history of the border region, the Rio Grande provided a channel for communication, commerce, travel, and trade; El Paso literally means *the passage*. The very idea of imposing there a rigorously patrolled and impassable boundary is new and largely anathema to

the region, its topography, and the people who have long inhabited both sides. As several of the film's subjects remember, until recently the cities of El Paso and Juárez were a single unit, connected by the world's only international streetcar line. "When I grew up," Cliff Eisenberg remembers, "Juárez and El Paso were almost like one. You could go back and forth, you didn't need passports." Dining, drinking, and night clubs flourished in Juárez, and El Pasoans, who lived in a dry county, crossed regularly to enjoy the nightlife. "We went to school with kids who lived in Juárez and who walked across or drove across or took the bus across," says Lee Schwartz. "It was a free trade zone, and people just came and went. They lived on one side and worked on the other." Jewish residents of Juárez attended synagogue and received medical care on the Texas side.

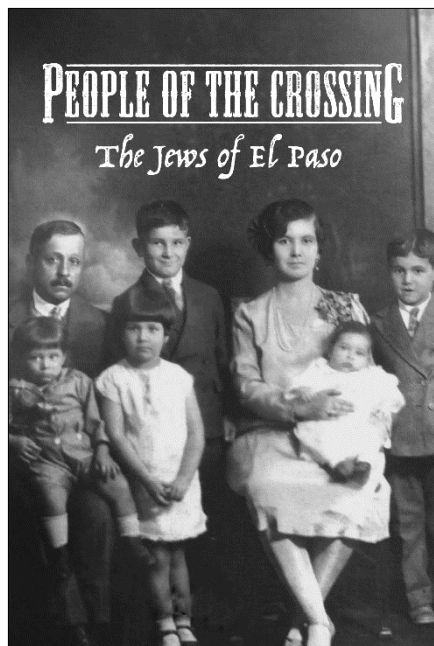
The development of a Jewish community in the region followed a familiar pattern common throughout the United States. Early arriving pioneers, often immigrants, shaped the outlines of Jewish institutional life. They became nearly universally involved in retail and commercial business and committed themselves to civic activism and public leadership. Those familiar characteristics, however, were inflected in El Paso to its distinctive setting. In the nineteenth century, El Paso was a boomtown (larger, as one interviewee notes, than San Antonio, Austin, or Phoenix), and the opportunities Jewish entrepreneurs always sought were highlighted there. It was also, in every respect, the Wild West. "El Paso wasn't known as the safest and gentlest city to find oneself in," observes Rabbi Ben Zeidman of Temple Mt. Sinai. "It took guts to find yourself in this city, in this region, trying to succeed." Gunfights typified a settlement where law and order was hard to maintain, and one of the city's leading Jews, Ernst Kohlberg, was shot dead in 1910 over a business dispute. During the Mexican Revolution, residents viewed the fighting in Juárez from their rooftops.

The interview subjects in *People of the Crossing* recall how their families arrived in El Paso, in stories resembling those from across the United States. Their ancestors were ambitious young people from large U.S. cities or from Europe seeking economic opportunity. Some were refugees or Holocaust survivors. But their accounts reveal a surprising variety of backgrounds, points of origins, and immigration experiences. El Paso Jews originated in Germany, Hungary, Poland, and Russia, but also came from Syria, Israel, Mexico, and Nicaragua. Some entered the U.S. at New York

and made their way through Chicago or Galveston to West Texas, whereas others landed at Vera Cruz and traveled northward. Many arrived in the city after a sojourn in Mexico or other parts of Latin America, especially after the immigrant quota acts of the 1920s stifled direct European immigration to the United States. Mayor Pro Tem Peter Svarzbein speaks of his father, a physician from Argentina, attracted to El Paso as a place where being bilingual “would be a blessing, not a hindrance.” In the border city he found “the best of both worlds. He could have the economic life of the United States here, with the cultural life and vitality of Latino America.”

Nothing, of course, is more familiar than Jews finding their niche in commerce and retail, and El Paso provides no shortage of examples, each demonstrating the economic and cultural impact of the locale. The Popular Store, for example, founded in 1902 by Hungarian immigrants Adolph and Maurice Schwartz, operated for more than ninety years, growing into the largest department store between Los Angeles and Fort Worth. It was a “beautiful store,” says descendant Stuart Schwartz, “a favorite of all El Pasoans as well as so many Mexicans who were a very important part of the clientele.” Edi Brannon, the Popular’s former president, recalled the devaluation of the peso in the 1980s and its devastating effect on borderland economies. Many American retailers stopped accepting pesos in payment, but “we never did,” she says. “That kind of exemplifies how we felt and how we honored our Mexico customers.” Jews often opened a business first in Juárez (as had the Schwartzes) before relocating north across the river.

People of the Crossing provides synopses of several additional prominent El Paso Jewish businesses. Kahn’s Sweet Shop, a bakery that supplied the usual fare for the local clientele, also specialized in bagels, rye, challah, and “Jewish



cookies." The hardware store Krakauer, Zork & Moye "sold everything from needles to engines" – including weapons to partisans in the Mexican Revolution. And Max Feinberg & Co., which originated as a scrap metal business, grew into one of the state's largest pipe distributorships, an essential item in the oil fields. This survey effectively demonstrates a significant Jewish presence in El Paso as well as the degree to which Jewish businesspeople were essential to the economy of the city and region.

As in communities elsewhere, El Paso Jews leveraged their commercial status into civic leadership, and several of the film's interview subjects talk of their families' hope to give back to a community that had welcomed them. Sam Schutze, an early German immigrant, was "the first municipal leader of El Paso" and helped forge an effective city government. In the city Olga Kohlberg established the first free kindergarten in Texas. In the 1920s, Joseph Roth, rabbi at B'nai Zion Synagogue, also chaired the departments of psychology and philosophy at the college that eventually became the University of Texas at El Paso. Furthermore, Jews actively worked on behalf of fellow Jews. Rabbi Martin Zielonka, who served Reform congregation Temple Mt. Sinai for decades, advocated for Jewish immigrants in the 1920s who were trapped in Mexico by the new immigration restrictions. He helped some cross successfully into the U.S. while assisting others to establish permanent communities in Mexican cities. And in the 1930s, Fanny Zlabovsky, working with the local National Council of Jewish Women's Committee for the Foreign Born, helped direct European refugees to safety in El Paso. One of the film's most affecting examples of how the region's distinctive character fomented a passion for social justice is immigration attorney Carlos Spector's assessment of his choice of career: "I grew up with the racism against Mexicans, people who were having trouble crossing, even though they were only going back to their old homes" in Texas. "I went to law school to be an immigration lawyer," he says, "and that's what I'll do till I die, in my sense to live a Jewish life with Jewish values, which is justice for all, to make *tikkun olam*."

Several speakers note how that shared sense of social engagement brought together a tremendously diverse community. The film describes a wide range of Jewish religious practices and provides a good balance of Reform, Conservative, Chabad, Ashkenazic, and Sephardic perspectives. Rabbi Zeidman describes "the concept of feeling *la familia* in El Paso, that we are all family. That cuts across religious lines and it cuts across ethnic

lines as well. There was and has always been this sense that we're in it together." Gorgeous aerial shots of the city's synagogues, perched among the mountains and beautifully designed to their surroundings, seem to illustrate that harmony among the city's Jews and between them and their non-Jewish neighbors.

Those aerial views, along with lovely interior views of the synagogues, are one of the great strengths of *People of the Crossing*, adding immediacy and liveliness that prevent it from being overladen with still photos. In addition, the filmmakers have selected and interviewed their subjects extremely well, a group of well-spoken, self-aware, and informative subjects. If anything is missing from the film, it is perhaps a sense of where Jews fit within the larger community, how their experience may be like or unlike that of other El Pasoans or, indeed, other Texans. Viewers will learn a great deal about this Jewish community but will not get a strong sense of how typical or unusual its experiences may be.

Without such broader context, it is easy to conclude that El Paso Jews are in some ways unique. Indeed, without saying so explicitly, *People of the Crossing* strongly implies a special Jewish responsibility, particularly on the fraught subject of immigration. Of everyone living in the shadow of the border fence, Jews are perhaps the most aware of how their lives were saved and their survival assured by their families' immigration into the United States, a point made by several of the interviewees. Like their Mexican-descended neighbors, El Paso Jews understand and insist that migrants from various backgrounds improve the places that are wise enough to welcome them. As the U.S.-Mexico border becomes ever more politicized and divisive, more rigid and militarized, as it is robbed of the permeability that was always its essence, as it becomes harder to tell the difference between policy and bigotry—the Jews in places like El Paso have a special part to play. "We understand that the border's a blessing," says Peter Svarzbein. "We understand that the border is something that enriches both people and enriches both places. That is a story that each of us have to carry here, and it's a story that needs to be understood more." Someone has to blow the shofar until the walls come down.

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The Nita & Zita Project. Directed and Produced by Marci Darling. Bearcat Tango Productions. 1 hour, 19 minutes.

Marci Darling's new documentary, *The Nita & Zita Project*, makes a strong case for the significance of the dancing Hungarian-Jewish Gellert sisters, who led a successful, globe-trotting career through the late 1920s into the postwar period after their immigration to the United States. Their later, mysteriously shrouded reclusive years in New Orleans possess a kind of *Grey Gardens* affect; the two sisters never marrying or bearing children, living out latter decades of their lives as aging performers, glamorously dressed for grocery outings, while quietly spending their days in a meticulously hand-painted house on New Orleans's Dauphine Street. In 1992, after both sisters had died, their incredible, hand-stitched flapperesque costume collection began to appear in a local New Orleans antique shop, piquing sudden interest in the then-forgotten story of the two sisters. Ultimately, the film demonstrates the sisters' roles as creative or "chosen ancestors" to numerous twenty-first-century burlesque dancers (including the famous Dita Von Teese), who see their own work as somehow bringing forth the artistic legacy the sisters helped forge.

The film does well to document and explore their lives and impact while navigating key informational lacunae. Many scenes are filled with imagined reflections expressed in two different performance pieces inspired by the sisters. In this way, the film mirrors the crafty, make-do nature of the sisters' famous costumes: using what's available and on-hand while imaginatively constructing missing details with care. As such, the project presents a novel approach to documenting Jewish performance across the complexities of the twentieth century, contending with the absences and unknowns that remain lost to the past. This project will likely interest audiences working on twentieth-century Jewish migration (and the transnational touring circuit), as well as southern Jewish historians exploring the role the French Quarter has played, as the documentary states, in providing community and belonging to those "living an alternative lifestyle," as it intersects in this case with the performance of postwar Jewish identity.

The known narrative of the Gellert sisters, Piroska and Flora, began with their departure in 1922 from their home in Nagybánya, Hungary (on



its brink of becoming Baia Mare, Romania). The sisters, nine years apart in age with dancing careers at home, transformed during their two-week ship voyage to emerge in the New World as the dancing twins, Nita & Zita. Referring to themselves and their act in myriad ways—from the Gellert twins to Romanian De Luxe dancers—this performed ambiguity seems intentional, escaping, perhaps, the turbulence of their Jewish past in the

war-pocked and changing landscape of postimperial Europe. The twins simultaneously capitalized on the *en-vogue* orientalism of the moment, exoticizing themselves while making space for artistic exploration and immense creativity, embodied in all aspects of their dance and contortionist acts, from their costumes to their marketing.

One of the most compelling aspects of the story pertains to Nita & Zita's amazing hand-stitched costumes, many of which have now been collected and preserved. The documentary showcases many pieces as collectors and archivists discuss the significance of the handmade works, the thousands of stitches that went into them, and their idiosyncratic, tailored-to-the-body materiality. This discussion also points to how the costumes operate as what performance studies scholar Diana Taylor terms the "repertoire." Thus, in their handcrafted way, the costumes encapsulate an embodied memory that is otherwise lost or absent from normative documentary material, such as photographs or travel visas. As one interlocutor states, the costumes present as "intimate doorways" to who Nita & Zita were. Their tactile, if fragile, nature extends the memory of the dancing sisters, much as they extend their messaging into a larger conversation amongst burlesque dancers, who similarly discuss their practice of costume creation, with costuming as "a silent dance partner." Many who know of the sisters, know of them explicitly through contact with their costumes.

Furthermore, as artist Katie Pearl reflects, in maintaining the bodily form of the sisters, the costumes enable others to feel physically connected to their creative ancestors in recognizing themselves in comparable shape. Pearl notes how fitting one of the costumes perfectly evoked for her a sense of shared heritage to both the sisters and an archetypal identity of eastern European feminine form. Similarly, the film gestures to the ways in which Nita & Zita's process of costume creation further links to and extends legacies of Jewish female tailoring and handiwork, most possibly having absorbed their skillset from witnessing their mother and grandmothers' craft in Hungary. (Hungarian handicraft also emerged in the sisters' decoration of the inside and outside of their house in a style that evokes Hungarian folk floral interior décor from the Kalocsa region.)

Less clear, however, are the ways the documentary somewhat haphazardly incorporates aspects of a performance piece, also titled *The Nita & Zita Project*, as well as another, unnamed performance, through images, video, and voiceover discussion without contextualizing those separate projects (including when and where they were performed), or their relationships to the sisters' actual lives. At one point, an interviewee clarifies that some of the historical narrative stemming from these productions was purely imagined, albeit with care, although the introduction of those production elements often remains under-contextualized. This aspect of the film could use further clarification so as not to confuse audiences or sow seeds of doubt as to the veracity of information spelled out earlier on in the documentary. Most problematic of the numerous elements spelled out through clips from a filmed version of the *The Nita & Zita Project* theatre piece was only revealing through theatrical footage the earlier death of Flora in 1985, leaving Piroška alone until her death in 1991. Granted, the documentary's narrative begins in the form of a tinkling fairytale, featuring delicate but crafty collage-style elements to open the mysterious yarn to come, thereby perhaps implying that aspects of the story would be fabricated. Including title cards and production information for the performances that undergird the historical narrative would nonetheless have provided a helpful addition for audiences unfamiliar with the earlier performance pieces, or the sisters' story.

The film showcases numerous documentary images of the sisters, while using additional historical documents for contextualization, many of which help to visually enhance and support the narrative. Not all the

images and film clips, however, are well cited, and, particularly in moments in which the voiceover discusses Nita & Zita, some of the images shown that display other female artists who are not identified results in a slippage between them and other female performers of note (although, this almost suggests another nod to their ambiguously performed identities).

These more opaque elements aside, *The Nita & Zita Project* vividly illustrates the remarkable lives of these performing sisters deserving of remembrance. It also underscores the impressive notoriety and influence they have had within at least part of the contemporary burlesque community, particularly within the New Orleans circuit.

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