

Latin American Jewish Studies at The University of Texas at Austin

by NAOMI LINDSTROM

I

IN RECENT YEARS, The University of Texas at Austin has emerged as a hub of activity for researchers, students, and lecture-goers interested in Jewish Latin America. Yet the study of Latin American Jewish cultures and com-

munities at UT dates back to the early 1980s. Seth L. Wolitz, the L.D., Marie and Edwin Gale Chair Emeritus of Judaic Studies, had just arrived to direct the Jewish studies program, and encouraged faculty to conduct and supervise research, offer courses, and organize events on modern Diasporic topics, including the lesser studied Jewish communities. The new director's mantra was "Let a thousand Jewish flowers bloom." At his urging, I began teaching a course on Latin American Jewish creative intellectuals.

It was during these early enthusiastic, though still lean, years that Jacobo Sefamí and Rodrigo Cánovas, who would become prominent scholars of Latin American Jewish literature, earned their doctorates in the Hispanic Literatures program at UT, though for their dissertations they chose non-Jewish topics. In the mid-1990s, UT became host for the house listserv of the Latin American Jewish Studies Association (LAJSA), lajsa-list, which serves as a central online source for new publications, calls for papers, research queries, and other announcements useful to those in the field. In 1999, Lydia M. Gil became the first UT student to complete a dissertation entirely on a Latin American Jewish topic.

These activities could find a home at UT in great part thanks to the presence of the Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection. The Benson holds such treasures as a set of issues of the Buenos Aires-based magazine *Judaica*, edited by Salomón Resnik, a mainstay of Jewish-Argentine intellectual life during the 1930s and 1940s.

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While the Benson Collection attracts numerous visitors eager to view the Sor Juana archive and the draft manuscript of Julio Cortázar's novel *Rayuela*, only a few specialists know that it also houses a significant collection of Yiddish manuscripts. The Benson librarians—in particular, successive acquisitions librarians Donald Gibbs and David Block—go out of their way to be in contact with faculty, including those in Jewish studies, and to keep up to date on their research needs. While librarian Margo Gutierrez covers Mexican American and U.S. Latina/o studies, she has gener-

ously supplied me over the years with many valuable bibliographic leads in Latin American Jewish studies.

The Schusterman Center for Jewish Studies

Though the groundwork for Latin American Jewish studies at UT was laid in the late twentieth century, the rapid growth of this area has been made possible by the founding, in September 2007, of the Schusterman Center for Jewish Studies (SCJS). A large matching grant from the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation brought unprecedented support for Jewish studies at UT and created



Liana Strasberg (Argentina); mixed on paper.

a physical office for the program, which had not had its own space. As founding director of the SCJS, Robert H. Abzug—the Audre and Bernard Rapoport Regents Chair of Jewish Studies who has been the center’s indefatigable fundraiser—has from the beginning placed a special emphasis on the study of Jewish life in the Americas, including Latin America, the United States, and Canada.

In its early years, the center made substantial moves toward integrating Latin American Jewish studies further. The SCJS was involved in the faculty recruitment of historian Miriam Bodian, whose scholarship has shed important light on the Inquisition in both the Iberian Peninsula and the New World, as well as post-1492 Sephardic communities. It began hosting such visiting speakers as Cuban-U.S. anthropologist Ruth Behar, Latin Americanist historian Leo Spitzer, who is known for his conceptualization of collective memory, and Argentine visual artist Mirta Kupferminc, with her Kabbalistic themes. Alan Astro, the expert on Yiddish in Latin America, has been not only a speaker at the SCJS but also our friend and neighbor, since he teaches at Trinity University in San Antonio.

In 2011, the SCJS made its largest commitment yet to this emerging field of study by successfully bidding to host the 16th

International Research Conference of LAJSA. This event, which took place June 9–11, 2013, attracted over 100 people from Latin America, the United States, Israel, and Europe. One participant, Professor Stephen A. Sadow of Northeastern University, subsequently donated to the Schusterman Center a one-of-a-kind collection of artists’ books containing the work of fourteen Latin American Jewish artists whom Sadow had persuaded to create original artwork in dialogue with fourteen texts of Latin American Jewish poetry. The resulting artworks are housed in the SCJS, which Sadow considers “the perfect home” for them, since they are made available to researchers and displayed on a rotating basis. (Some of the images from the collection illustrate this article, while the entire collection may be viewed online at iris.lib.neu.edu/books/2/ or in person at the SCJS.)

The Gale Collaborative for the Study of Jewish Life in the Americas

Since the LAJSA conference, the SCJS has continued to develop its Latin Americanist activities. The plan of studying Jews throughout the Americas has recently been formalized as the Edwin Gale



Adrián Levy Memún (Argentina); acrylic and pencil on paper.

Collaborative for the Study of Jewish Life in the Americas. “The collaborative represents a powerful step in fulfilling our founding vision of becoming a crossroads for the study of Jews in the Western Hemisphere,” Abzug notes. This initiative has brought to UT such speakers as Achy Obejas, the Cuban-U.S. writer, LGBT activist, and

descendant of Caribbean crypto-Jews. A new annual competition, patterned on the Benson’s travel grants for Mexican and Central American scholars, funds a Latin American researcher pursuing Latin American Jewish topics to spend a short period in residence at UT, utilizing the Benson Collection and other resources. The 2014–2015

visiting scholar was historian Bruno Feitler of the Universidade Federal de São Paulo (see sidebar); in 2015–2016, the SCJS will host a recognized literary scholar, Lyslei Nascimento of the Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais.

Moreover, preparations are currently under way for the first major event of the newly



established Gale Collaborative, the Symposium on Jewish Life in the Americas, scheduled for November 1–2, 2015. This two-day event, which will be free and open to the public, will be an interdisciplinary gathering of scholars of Jewish communities and cultural production in Latin America, the United States, and Canada. Rather than

read papers, the participants are taking a comparative look at the regions by discussing a set of questions, with the exchange of ideas beginning well before the dates of the conference. The concept is not just to stage a one-time event but rather to link together a network of scholars who will remain in contact and continue the dialogue begun in the lead-up to the symposium.

Teaching and Research of UT Scholars

In addition to these collective efforts, Latin American Jewish studies at The University of Texas also includes the teaching and research of individual faculty members and graduate students. The recently retired Seth L. Wolitz consistently took care to include a Brazilian or Spanish American component in his wide-ranging teaching and research on Jewish topics. Currently, several faculty offer courses in the field in addition to my own, among them SCJS lecturer Amelia Rosenberg Weinreb; Professor Miriam Bodian; and such visiting lecturers as the current Israel Postdoctoral Fellow, Sebastián Klor, a researcher of Latin American immigration to Israel. Courses offered in recent semesters have included Introduction to Jewish Latin America, Latin American Jewish Writers, Jewish Cuba, and Jewish Diaspora: The Americas and Palestine.

In any given year, several Jewish studies faculty members and students are engaged in Latin Americanist research. Miriam Bodian's current work deals with a seventeenth-century Inquisition case that is transatlantic, that of a French-born *converso* whose family settled in Amsterdam, from where he traveled to Dutch Brazil. He was later detained in Portuguese Brazil and sent to Lisbon for trial. Bodian notes: "The case is of interest because the prisoner combined ideas from his French Jesuit education, his Jewish knowledge, and his exposure to radical ideas in France and the Netherlands to argue his case on the grounds of freedom of conscience."

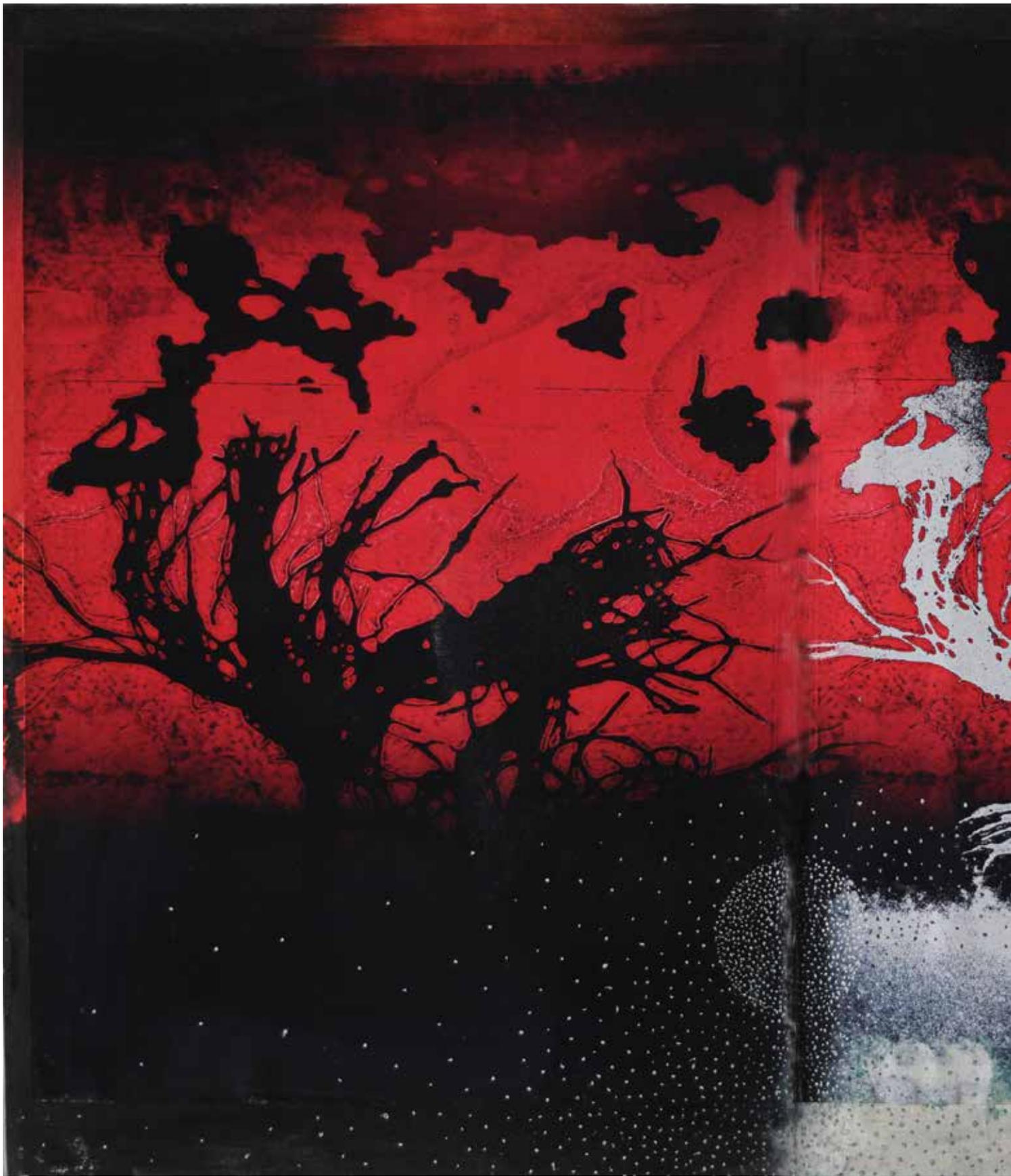
Amelia Weinreb carries out research on Jewish communities in both Cuba and Israel. One of her current research interests involves considering Jewish Cuba, which attracts numerous international visitors, as a contact zone. As she sets forth the concept: "I study how Jewish Cuba no longer constitutes a single cultural object of analysis, but

rather is best understood as a transnational 'contact zone,' characterized by the tensions and connections of collective affect, a gift economy, and shifting senses of Jewish peoplehood occurring through encounter." She is also seeking to discover trends in the immigration of Cuban Jews to Israel. Weinreb must rely on personal stories for this research because, as she explains, "Since the early 1990s, a non-disclosure agreement shared between the Israeli government and Cuban authorities, and respected by the Jewish Agency, ensures that no party publicizes cases of Cuban aliyah [immigration to Israel]."

While the SCJS does not have a graduate program of its own, graduate students from various programs are associated with it, including some Latin Americanists. Raelene Wyse, a doctoral student in the Program in Comparative Literature, has been pursuing research on Jewish writers and filmmakers in Chile, Argentina, and Brazil. She has studied issues of identity in Jewish-Argentine film and the career of the entertainer "Blackie" (Paloma Efron), who made her name singing "black jazz," yet also sang with a Yiddish choir group. Her master's report focused on the Jewish allusions in Chilean poet David Rosenmann-Taub's 1949 collection of poems, *Cortejo y epinicio*. In his work, Rosenmann-Taub (born 1927) incorporates Jewishness as well as pagan, Christian, Catholic, and other mystical elements in heterodoxical forms. Through these forms, his speakers raise questions about the existence of God and the role of prayer.

Wyse spoke highly of the resources available to her at UT, noting that the Benson's Yiddish collection has expanded her research interests. "As a student at The University of Texas at Austin, I am grateful to walk to the library and find up-to-date scholarship on these areas as well as works by the authors within them, from biographies about Paloma Efron to Daniel Burman's films to a first edition of Rosenmann-Taub's *Cortejo y epinicio*," Wyse said. "This year, I also learned about the library's collection of works in Yiddish from Latin America. I began studying Yiddish to trace the connections between Jewish cultures in Europe and Latin America. As part of this research, I look forward to reading through this collection in the future."

Source: iris.lib.neu.edu/books/2/





Other doctoral students whose research includes some element of Latin American Jewish studies include Jonathan Fleck (Comparative Literature) and Stephanie Malak (Spanish and Portuguese); the latter's dissertation-in-progress covers two Catholic and two Jewish writers. Malak summarizes her research: "I am examining the revelation and concealment of Jewish identity in two Latin American Jewish writers from the mid-twentieth century, particularly in relation to their literary treatment of death and mysticism. In the case of Russian-born Jacobo Fijman, I analyze the act of conversion from Judaism to Catholicism and the effects it has on the Jewishness expressed in his poetry. In the seminal work of Jewish Brazilian author Clarice Lispector, *A paixão segundo G.H.*, I examine the process of self-realization in the protagonist to reveal which Jewish allusions engender a mystical reading of this text."

My Involvement

Over the decades that I have been involved in this area of study, my outlook and approach have changed. Like many scholars in the field, I began as a Latin Americanist, in my particular case by earning a doctorate in Spanish American literature, and only later began to add Jewish topics to my work. My 1989 book, *Jewish Issues in Argentine Literature: From Gerchunoff to Szichman* (University of Missouri Press), was written from this perspective. In addition, this early work reveals the influence of the sociological thought that I had absorbed as the offspring of a sociologist. The book shows, through analyses of prose narratives and poetry, how Jewish Argentine intellectuals slowly moved from an insecure new-arrival position, characterized by an anxious desire not to offend the "host" nation, to a more self-assured stance that allowed for critical questioning.

Since this early project, my intellectual center has been shifting further into Jewish studies, as I came to participate more often in Jewish studies conferences, sought to strengthen my general Jewish knowledge, and became better acquainted with the most salient issues and the thought of influential scholars in the field. This is why, after Director Abzug had the Schusterman Center up and running, I was so happy to accept his invitation to serve as associate director. It is still highly unusual for a Latin Americanist to play a central role in a Jewish studies program, though with the rapid growth of Latin American Jewish studies I hope that it will become less exceptional.

As a researcher, I wanted to develop a project that would require me to link my own work to Jewish thought, texts, and scholarship. The result has been my current project on the transformations of prophetic and apocalyptic discourse in the work of certain Latin American Jewish writers and filmmakers. These creative intellectuals, seeking an expression for their visionary tendencies, tend to adapt to the modern age the harangues, invective, threats of punishment, and promises of redemption found in the books of the prophets. In addition, some of them create their own versions of the psychedelic imagery found in apocalyptic literature, which, although it is today most commonly associated with the Book of Revelation that closes the New Testament, originated as, and may still be argued to constitute, a fundamentally Jewish genre.

Leonor Coifman (Argentina); mixed on paper.

While prophetic expression remains recognizable down through the centuries, the content has changed greatly; none of the creators whose work I have examined are concerned over the polytheism, idolatry in the literal sense, and sexual transgressions that enraged the canonical prophets. Some writers decry the new sins that industrialized society is committing against the Earth. Though they are all Jewish creators, a number of them are uninhibited about linking their works to the New Testament, especially the fierier passages of the gospels and Revelation. Some appear most attracted to the ethical aspect of prophecy, while others are clearly most fascinated by the splendid and grotesque images revealed to visionaries. So far, I have published or have forthcoming analyses of work by the Argentines Jacobo Fijman, César Tiempo, Luisa Futoransky, and Mario Satz; the Brazilians Moacyr Scliar, Samuel Rawet, and Clarice Lispector; the Cuban-American José Kozer; and the Chilean-French Alejandro Jodorowsky.

For the Future

In fall 2015, Abzug and I will team-teach a new interdisciplinary honors course, *Jewish Identities in the Americas*, which will provide a comparative look at Jewish arts, culture, and identity throughout the Americas. Students in the course will benefit from the aforementioned symposium on *Jewish Life in the Americas*. Also scheduled for fall 2015 is the visit to UT of David Unger, the New York-based Jewish writer who was recently awarded the Miguel Ángel Asturias National Prize in Literature in his native Guatemala.

Other projects still in the works include a plan to stream on the SCJS website the documentary *Tango: una historia con judíos*, written by radio announcer and Jewish tango expert José Judkovski and directed by Gabriel Pomeranec. The eventual plan is to host a collection of documentary films on Latin American Jewish topics.

A more general long-range plan is to forge closer links between Jewish studies at UT and the Latin American studies and resources centered at LLILAS Benson. A step in this direction was the panel discussion “Nisman’s Death,” jointly sponsored and coordinated by the SCJS, the LLILAS Argentine Studies Program, and the Latin American Initiative of the UT School of Law.

In all, Latin American Jewish studies has begun to come out of the shadows nationally and internationally. As Robert Abzug has said, “we at the center are extremely proud to be a leading light in this awakening of interest, especially within the comparative context of all the Americas.” ✨

Naomi Lindstrom is Gale Family Foundation professor in Jewish Arts and Culture, professor of Spanish and Portuguese, and associate director of the Schusterman Center for Jewish Studies at UT Austin. Her recent books are Early Spanish American Narrative (2004) and The Social Conscience of Latin American Writing (1998). She is the coordinator of the website and listserv of the Latin American Jewish Studies Association (LAJSA).

More About the Latin American Jewish Studies Association

The LAJSA website, hosted on the College of Liberal Arts server at UT (www.utexas.edu/cola/orgs/lajsa), includes a registry of theses and dissertations in Latin American Jewish studies, a filmography of movies with Latin American Jewish content, and an archive of relevant images, including art and photography.

BRAZILIAN HISTORIAN BRUNO FEITLER, RECIPIENT OF FIRST SCJS RESEARCH TRAVEL AWARD



In October 2014, the Schusterman Center for Jewish Studies welcomed Brazilian historian Bruno Feitler as the first recipient of its annual research travel award for a scholar based in Latin America. The award enables a visiting scholar to conduct research on Latin American Jewish topics at The University of Texas at Austin for a period of one to two weeks. Feitler teaches history at the Federal University of São Paulo (UNIFESP).

At a talk in the center’s conference room, Feitler discussed his research on Jews and Judaism in Dutch Brazil. The Dutch controlled much of Northeast Brazil from 1624 to 1625, and 1630 to 1654; the synagogue in Recife, state of Pernambuco, was the first in the Americas. When the descendants of forcibly baptized Jews in Spain and Portugal began fleeing the Inquisition in the early modern period, Amsterdam and Recife were among the few places where they could establish openly Jewish communities.

Feitler digs deep into the historical records of two continents to explore the complex results and repercussions of forced conversion and the actions of the Inquisition. Many Iberian Peninsula Jews converted to Christianity under duress, and some of these *conversos*, also known as crypto-Jews or *marranos*, gave the appearance of practicing Christianity while secretly continuing Jewish religious observance. Feitler and UT historian Miriam Bodian are intimately familiar with the stories of these early Jews of the Americas and their descendants, stories that still reverberate today among Sephardic Jews as well as among some Latin Americans and U.S. Latinas/os who wonder whether their ancestors might have been crypto-Jews. (The question of why this can be problematic and why Jewish roots are often impossible to substantiate came up after Feitler’s talk, as did a debunking of the notion that certain common Spanish and Portuguese names are indicators of Jewish ancestry.)

Feitler spent much of his time on campus at the Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection, where he consulted numerous publications that are not easily accessible in Brazil. “The Benson gathers an invaluable collection of works regarding Judaism in Latin America,” says Feitler. “My time spent there, thanks to the Schusterman Center, was useful as a way of updating my bibliography on the marrano question in Brazil, one of my subjects of study.”

—Susanna Sharpe