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**CEREMONIAL ART OF GERMAN JEWISH REFUGEES
OF NAZISM IN ARGENTINA
AS OBJECTS OF MEMORY**

DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the ceremonial art brought to Argentina by German Jewish refugees fleeing Nazism between 1933 and 1945, analyzing these objects as material witnesses to migration, cultural continuity, and collective memory. Focusing on ritual artifacts commonly categorized as *Judaica*, such as Torah ornaments, Shabbat lamps, Kiddush cups, textiles, and prayer books, the study investigates how these objects function simultaneously as works of ceremonial art, historical sources, and carriers of diasporic memory.

The research centers on several key communal repositories of German-Jewish material culture in Argentina, including the congregations Benei Tikva and NCI–Emanu El in Buenos Aires and the rural colony of Avigdor in Entre Ríos, as well as selected institutional collections such as the Buenos Aires Holocaust Museum, the IWO archives, and the Rabbinical Seminary Library. Through object-based analysis, archival research, and fieldwork conducted in active synagogues and communal institutions, the dissertation reconstructs the trajectories, meanings, and uses of ceremonial objects preserved within these environments.

Methodologically, the study integrates art historical analysis with provenance research, memory studies, and Latin American Jewish history. It approaches ritual artifacts not only through their formal and stylistic characteristics but also through their material biographies, inscriptions, patterns of transmission, and the communal narratives that surround them. Particular attention is given to the challenges of *Judaica* provenance research in South America, where documentation is often fragmentary and many objects were either carried by immigrants or redistributed after the Second World War by the Jewish Cultural Reconstruction, Inc.

By foregrounding Jewish ceremonial objects as historical evidence, this dissertation expands the geographic scope of Jewish art history and contributes to the field of *Judaica* provenance research. It argues that ritual artifacts preserved in Argentina operate as living archives that embody the rupture of Jewish life in Europe and the reconstruction of Jewish communal identity in diaspora. In doing so, the study highlights the central role of material culture in transmitting memory, negotiating identity, and sustaining Jewish traditions across generations.

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List of Abbreviations

AFI	Asociación Filantrópica Israelita [Jewish Philanthropic Association]
AMIA	Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina [Argentine Israelite Mutual Association]
CEANA	Comisión para el Esclarecimiento de las Actividades Nazis en la Argentina [Commission for the Clarification of Nazi Activities in Argentina]
CEMLA	Centro de Estudios Migratorios Latinoamericano [Center for Latin American Migration Studies]
DAIA	Delegación de Asociaciones Israelitas Argentinas [Delegation of Argentine Jewish Association]
FMH	Fundación Memoria del Holocausto [Holocaust Memorial Foundation]
IWO	Yidisher Visnshaftlekher Institut [Institute of Jewish Research]
JCA	Jewish Colonization Assocation (also known as ICA or Ievich)
JCR	Jewish Cultural Reconstruction, Inc.
JRSO	Jewish Restitution Successor Organization
NCI	Nueva Comunidad Israelita
NBI	Nederlandse Beheersinstituut

Chapter 1

Introduction

If this time the path crosses the seas and if none of us can say what will become of it if the future is more uncertain than it was then - one thing is certain: wherever we are, we have received proof over the past 20 years that at all ends of the world, we know people who think and feel with us and who will help each other as far as it is in their power.¹

Hermann Berlak to Fritz L. Steinthal, Berlin, Dec. 12, 1938

In December 1938, Rabbi Fritz Leopold Steinthal (Berlin, 1889 - Buenos Aires, 1969) was forced to leave his congregation in the city of Munich, Germany. Along with his family, they embarked on a journey to an unknown and distant destination, crossing seas and oceans. Following the destruction of the city's Jewish community during the *Kristallnacht* pogrom, forced out by the Nazis, Steinthal's departure marked a poignant moment as he relocated to Buenos Aires, leaving behind the charred remains of the Klosterstrasse Synagogue and the shattered remnants of his once-thriving congregation.²

Rabbi Hanns Harf (Mönchengladbach, 1914 - Buenos Aires, 2004) was a student at the Conservative Rabbinical Seminary in Berlin on the eve of World War II. During the *Novemberpogrom* of 1938, he was captured and sent to a concentration camp. Upon his liberation from the camp, with the support of his fiancée, the librarian Suse Hallenstein, Rabbi Hanns Harf married and was ordained as a rabbi. Fearing imminent arrest by the Gestapo, in 1939, Hanns Harf and Suse Hallenstein fled to Buenos Aires, where he began a journey as a community leader, founding several Jewish institutions.³

Carmen Rosenblatt's grandparents were among the first ten families to settle in the farming colony Avigdor, in the province of Entre Ríos, Argentina. When her grandparents decided to leave Germany, they left behind their parents, who did not want to go. They said,

¹ Published in German and translated to Spanish in Abraham Skorka, *70 aniversario de Benei Tikva: una gesta por la fe*. (Comunidad Benei Tikva, 2009), 21. Translated to English by Tamara Kohn.

² Skorka, *70 aniversario de Benei Tikva: una gesta por la fe*, 13–21. The terms “Kristallnacht” and “Novemberpogrom” are used interchangeably in this dissertation according to the way the survivors and communities of German Jewish descent used them to refer to the pogrom of November 9th, 1938.

³ Hanns Harf, ‘Interview 14983’, interview by Alberto Raul Sznajderberg, 15 May 1996, Video recording, USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive, <https://vha.usc.edu/testimony/14983>; Martha Wolff, ed., *Nueva Comunidad Israelita. 50º Aniversario*. (Buenos Aires, 1988), 45.

“An old tree cannot be transplanted.” They wanted to die in their homeland if they could not go to Palestine. They were Germans above all, first, Germans, then Jews. It was 1936 when the Rosenblatt family left their country. Carmen’s great-grandparents stayed. They were murdered in the Holocaust.⁴ The Rosenblatt arrived in Argentina and settled in Avigdor, the last colony to be founded by the Jewish Colonization Association (JCA).⁵ Originally, it was intended for the children of older colonizers, but given the emergency in Germany, it became the home for Jewish refugees fleeing from nazi persecution.⁶

The experiences of Rabbi Steintal, Rabbi Harf, and Carmen Rosenblatt’s grandparents serve as poignant examples of the shared journey of Jewish German exile in Argentina. The present study is dedicated to exploring the visual and material legacies that these immigrants carried with them upon their arrival and the continuation and disruption of certain traditions. It aims to study Jewish religious traditions passed from one generation to the next through their material culture. It compares and analyses the historical, affective, and symbolic value of these artifacts for the Argentine Jewish communities according to their provenance and current owners, and location. This includes Jewish ceremonial art that arrived from Central Europe, mainly Germany, during the twentieth century, before and after the Holocaust.

Furthermore, this study delves into the significance of material culture as historical and memorial artifacts, encapsulating a wealth of information concerning migratory experiences. These artifacts serve as tangible records detailing the trauma and subsequent reconstruction of Jewish communities in Argentina. By examining these cultural remnants, this research aims to unveil narratives of resilience, adaptation, and the multifaceted processes inherent in the rebuilding of identity and community in the wake of displacement and upheaval.

In contrast to the migration patterns of Eastern European and Ottoman Jews to Argentina, at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, the influx of Jewish immigrants from Central Europe, particularly Germany, was primarily a response to the

⁴ Carmen Rosenblatt, interview by Tamara Kohn, 27 January 2022, Telephone interview.

⁵ The Jewish Colonization Association (JCA) was a philanthropic organization founded in 1891 by Baron Maurice de Hirsch to promote the organized migration and agricultural settlement of Jews facing persecution, particularly in Eastern Europe. In Argentina, the JCA acquired large tracts of land and established agricultural colonies, playing a central role in the development of rural Jewish life. See, for example, *Jewish Colonization Association. Reseña de su obra y de sus finalidades. 70 años de labor humanitaria, 24 de agosto 1891-24 de agosto 1961* (The Jewish Colonization Association, 1961).

⁶Rosenblatt, Telephone interview.

deteriorating conditions under Nazi rule. It even contrasts more with Jewish immigration patterns to Argentina from Germany and Western Europe before the 1930s.⁷ Between 1933 and 1939, a significant number of refugee immigrants arrived, compelled to leave behind their accumulated savings due to restrictions. Nevertheless, in most cases, they managed to transport objects, furniture and books. Through these possessions, they carried forward visual and material traditions from their places of origin to their new home across the Atlantic Ocean. Notably, their arrival was characterized more as an exile from their homelands, setting their connections to their native country and new surroundings apart from the experiences of other immigrant groups. This divergence in circumstances significantly influenced their integration into the new communities they encountered.

Among the German Jewish refugees who arrived in Argentina during the 1930s and 1940s, several communities established congregations that became central to the preservation of ceremonial objects and cultural memory. These include Asociación Religiosa Concordia Israelita or Ajdut Israel, an orthodox Jewish German congregation in the 1930s, Nueva Comunidad Israelita (NCI), founded in 1939 by Rabbi Hanns Harf, and Culto Israelita de Belgrano, led by Rabbi Fritz Leopold Steinthal and affiliated with the liberal German tradition, all three in the Belgrano neighborhood. Lamroth Hakol was established in 1944, as a branch of NCI, in the nearby district of Florida, another branch of NCI was created in Villa Ballester, and the rural farming colony of Avigdor in Entre Ríos province, founded in 1936 by German Jews fleeing Nazi persecution.⁸ These communities not only sustained religious practice but also collected and preserved the material objects brought from Europe — objects that served as links to both prewar Jewish life and the trauma of displacement.

Each of these institutions followed its own historical trajectory, shaped by the theological orientation of its founders, local social dynamics, and shifting communal

⁷On the contrast between earlier Jewish migration to Argentina from Eastern Europe and the later arrival of Central European, particularly German, refugees fleeing Nazism after 1933, see Malena Chinski, 'Memorias olvidadas: los judíos y la recordación de la Shoá en Buenos Aires, 1942–1956' (PhD dissertation, Universidad Nacional de General Sarmiento – Instituto de Desarrollo Económico y Social (UNGS–IDES), 2017)., drawing on the classic analysis of Haim Avni, *Argentina y las migraciones judías: de la inquisición al holocausto y después*, Colección ensayos (Ed. Milà, 2005).

⁸Other German Jews established in other farming colonies, however they did not fund new institutions that distinctively followed the German rite, otherwise they integrated into pre-existing communities. The same is true to the already existing Jewish institutions in Buenos Aires as early as 1862. See Wolff, *Nueva Comunidad Israelita. 50º Aniversario.*, 44–48.

identities. While many ritual objects remained in use, others were institutionalized as memory artifacts, modelling communal narratives around persecution, migration, and continuity.⁹

Many of the ritual objects and books they carried remained within the family and private sphere of the home. They were passed down across generations as emotionally valuable reminders of the world they had left behind. Others were brought to the synagogues only later, when families felt it was time for them to be placed there, often in connection with the aging or passing of the immigrant generation. This process unfolded over decades, from the time of arrival to the present day, and is deeply embedded in the history of each object. Taken together, these personal trajectories reveal recurring patterns that weave a broader tapestry of history. At the same time, the synagogues and communities gradually assumed a dual role: as spaces of prayer and contemporary communal life, and also as custodians of memory. It is precisely this memorial dimension that this dissertation aims to explore.

While a significant portion of German Judaica remained within the new communities established by exiles, other objects followed different paths, entering institutional collections across Argentina through postwar redistribution processes. These movements, which involved international Jewish organizations and local communal bodies, profoundly shaped the meanings attributed to these objects in their new contexts. The provenance, circulation, and memorial re-signification of such Judaica constitute a central focus of this dissertation and are examined in detail in later chapters.

Through conducting provenance research on the Jewish Cultural Reconstructions Inc. collections sent from Europe to Argentina in the early 1950s, and the identification of specific German Judaica among the items received by non-German Jewish institutions in Argentina, this study seeks to explore the multifaceted memorial and historical significances embedded within Jewish material culture.

What objects are common to all the institutions? What are the German elements that characterize each reservoir of Judaica? What stories do we learn from these objects? How and who used - or still uses - them in Argentina? What is the historical value given to them by the community? What attitudes do local communities, museums, and collectors have regarding German Judaica? What is their symbolic and affective value for individuals who inherited them from their immigrant parents and grandparents? What is their religious

⁹ A detailed institutional history of the congregations of Benei Tikva, NCI, and Avigdor — including their foundation stories, rabbinic leadership, and ceremonial collections — is provided in Chapter 2, where their development is examined alongside the material artifacts they preserved and interpreted.

significance for the descendants of these immigrants? What traditions were continued through the generations, and what do they teach us about the values and beliefs of individuals and communities? What is the difference between German Judaica found in synagogues, museums, or private homes?

By exploring these questions regarding German Judaica dispersed across Argentine institutions, this study uncovers the intricate historical, cultural, and religious tapestry within the Argentine Jewish community. It sheds light on the enduring legacy of migration, resilience, and identity preservation, offering profound insights into the diverse meanings and significance of these objects within the German Jewish diaspora in Argentina.¹⁰

Judaica has historically been an established and little-questioned field within Jewish Art History, but there is a lack of study of Jewish ceremonial art in South America. This dissertation aims to bridge this gap through the historical, religious, and cultural analysis of the case of German Judaica. This research seeks to contribute to the academic community in the following fields of study: the history of Jewish German immigration and experience in Argentina from the point of view of religious material culture; Jewish Studies and Jewish Culture as a specific and legitimate scholarship within art history and visual and material culture; Jewish material culture and Jewish art within Latin American Jewish Studies; Judaica Provenance Research as a significant and most relevant methodology for the study of Jewish heritage; and Holocaust Studies, understanding survivors' and looted Judaica items as significant material witnesses of history.

In the last decades, Holocaust memory has gone through a universalization process that resulted in the institutionalization of collections around the world.¹¹ In this sense, I argue that survivors' Judaica provides tangible links to the past, preserving the history and memory of the Holocaust. German Judaica serves, then, as a powerful reminder of the atrocities and the resilience of the Jewish people during and after the Holocaust. Its institutionalization, and therefore, transformation, results in the understanding of material culture, particularly Jewish ritual objects, as an educational tool to teach about Holocaust memory, providing concrete examples of Jewish life, culture, and traditions before, during, and after the Holocaust.

¹⁰ A definition of Judaica is provided later on in this dissertation. See Appendix I "Standardized Terminology of Judaica Objects (with Spanish and Hebrew Equivalents)" for terms related to Judaica objects that will appear throughout the dissertation.

¹¹ Yossi Goldstein, 'El discurso judío de la memoria: Pensamiento público y memoria de la Shoá en la Argentina en la era de la globalización', *Judaica Latinoamericana* 7 (2013): 257–82; Norman J. W. Goda and Edward Kissi, eds, *Outside Looking in: The World Universalizes the Holocaust* (Berghahn Books, 2026).

By studying the stories behind Jewish material culture in Argentina, we can promote tolerance and respect for different cultures, even diversity within Jewish communities. This contributes to the broader goal of preventing such atrocities in the future, fostering a more inclusive society, and empowering future generations to stand against prejudice, discrimination, and hate. It instills the values of tolerance, understanding, and the importance of preserving historical memory.¹²

The aim, then, of this dissertation is not only to make an inventory of German Judaica in Argentina, but also to establish a platform from which a broader conclusory on the meaning of material and visual traditions in the construction of memory can be made. As mentioned above, the topic has present-day significance for the fields of memory studies and Latin American Jewish studies, but it is also urgent because of the limits of oral history when Holocaust survivors are passing away. It shows how material culture receives more awareness as a historical primary source, especially in a context where particular attention is given to questions of provenance, restitution, and migration, which are also relevant for the global context, not only for the Holocaust and Jewish history.

This dissertation is structured in five chapters. This first chapter introduces the theoretical framework and the existing literature, along with key concepts that contextualize this dissertation. Chapter 2 introduces the main categories of material culture brought by German Jewish refugees to Argentina—ceremonial art (Judaica), items of cultural pride, and Holocaust-related documents—and examines how these are distributed across key synagogue and community collections. It provides the institutional and historical context for each collection and sets the foundation for object analysis. Chapter 3 explores each object individually and in context: it includes formal art historical analysis of ritual objects, and selected case studies to demonstrate how individual items function as historical sources through their material characteristics, inscriptions, and community memory. Chapter 4 focuses on provenance research and the politics of postwar distribution, particularly the role of Jewish Cultural Reconstruction, Inc. (JCR) and how German Judaica came to be housed in mainstream institutions in Argentina. Finally, the conclusions in chapter 5, take a broader

¹² The research and writing of this doctoral thesis were conducted between January 2023 and January 2026. While initially grounded in the study of the past and memory, its relevance was reshaped by the October 7 attacks and the subsequent global rise in antisemitism, including increasing attacks on Jewish institutions. These developments have also affected the public use and interpretation of terms such as “Holocaust,” “genocide,” and “Zionism” across media and political discourse. As this work was written alongside these unfolding events, some arguments reflect a specific historical moment and may require further revision over time.

analytical perspective on how Jewish ceremonial objects become carriers of memory, diasporic identity, and historical narrative. Drawing on the frameworks developed in earlier chapters, it considers how these objects are mobilized to tell stories, transmit intergenerational memory, and function as historical primary sources. The final chapter draws together the findings and reflects on the broader implications for studying Jewish material culture, provenance research, and memory practices in Latin America.

1.1 Literature Review

This dissertation is situated at the intersection of art history, provenance research, memory studies, and Latin American studies, grounded through the broader framework of Jewish studies. It responds to a persistent imbalance in the scholarship: while Judaica has been extensively studied in Europe, Israel, and the United States, the histories of Jewish ceremonial objects in South America—particularly within congregational and community settings—remain comparatively underexamined. By focusing on the specific theme of German Judaica in Argentina, this study contributes to these fields by examining ritual artifacts as both aesthetic forms and historical sources within a diasporic and post-Holocaust context.

1.1.1 Jewish art history and the place of ceremonial objects

Scholarship on Jewish art developed unevenly within the discipline of art history, shaped by the same nineteenth-century German intellectual milieu that produced modern Jewish studies through the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, a movement that applied critical historical and philological methods to Jewish texts, history, and culture. As several scholars have noted, Jewish art history emerged within a disciplinary framework structured around national schools, autonomous works of fine art, and canonical traditions—criteria that posed structural challenges to the inclusion of Jewish visual culture. As a result, Jewish art was long positioned as marginal, derivative, or anomalous within art-historical narratives, despite the sustained production of material culture in Jewish contexts.¹³

Early scholarly attempts to define and document Jewish art emerged within the intellectual framework of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*. Nineteenth- and early twentieth-

¹³ Margaret Olin, *The Nation without Art: Examining Modern Discourses on Jewish Art* (Univ. of Nebraska Press, 2007); Larry Silver and Samantha Baskind, 'Looking Jewish: The State of Research on Modern Jewish Art', *Jewish Quarterly Review* 101, no. 4 (2011): 631–52, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jqr.2011.0035>; Elisheva Ravel-Neher, 'With Wisdom and Knowledge of Workmanship: Jewish Art without a Question Mark', in *Complex Identities: Jewish Consciousness and Modern Art*, ed. Matthew Baigell and Milly Heyd (Rutgers University Press, 2001).

century scholars such as David Kaufmann, Karl Schwartz and Ernst Cohn-Wiener, sought to establish Jewish visual culture as a legitimate subject of study through historical, philological, and comparative methods. Their work focused particularly on manuscripts, synagogue architecture, and ritual objects, often engaging directly with the question of whether Judaism permitted or produced visual expression. Franz Landsberger, Rachel Wischnitzer, and Mordechai Narkiss further expanded the field in the interwar and early postwar periods by developing systematic approaches to Jewish art history, museum collecting, and the preservation of Jewish cultural heritage. After the Second World War, scholars such as Cecil Roth, Joseph Gutmann, and Bezalel Narkiss contributed to the institutionalization of Jewish art history as an academic discipline through major surveys, catalogues, and documentation projects.

As Margaret Olin has shown, the first generation of Jewish art scholarship operated within a paradoxical framework: while striving to recover evidence of Jewish artistic production by the afore mentioned scholars, it also internalized and reproduced the notion of Jews as a “nation without art,” shaped by nineteenth-century nationalist definitions of art and by persistent readings of the Second Commandment as prohibitive. Olin characterizes this moment as foundational yet constrained, arguing that early practitioners of what she terms the *(Kunst) Wissenschaft des Judentums* simultaneously laid the groundwork for Jewish art history and circumscribed its critical horizons by framing Jewish visual culture as exceptional, defensive, or derivative within dominant art-historical narratives.¹⁴

One enduring debate within art history concerns whether Jewish visual culture was historically constrained by the biblical prohibition on “graven images,” and how this notion was mobilized in modern scholarship to characterize Jews as “non-artistic.” Margaret Olin has demonstrated that such claims are not neutral theological observations but modern discursive constructions, shaped by nationalist and exclusionary narratives that defined art as a marker of cultural belonging from which Jews were systematically excluded.¹⁵ Rather than reflecting an inherent absence of visual production, the trope of Jewish aniconism functioned as an ideological framework that shaped both the reception and the historiography of Jewish art. This critical reassessment has been central to the gradual legitimation of Jewish visual culture as a field of scholarly inquiry.

In response to these historiographic constraints, and particularly from the late

¹⁴ Olin, *The Nation without Art*, 105–30.

¹⁵ Olin, *The Nation without Art*, 105–30.

twentieth century onward, the study of Jewish art, especially in the modern period, has expanded significantly. As Larry Silver and Samantha Baskind observe in their state-of-the-art review, early scholarship in the field often appeared sporadically and was frequently confined to museum exhibition catalogues or specialized publications, while Jewish art history continued to struggle for recognition within mainstream art-historical discourse.¹⁶ At the same time, foundational definitional questions regarding the existence or nature of “Jewish art” have increasingly been reframed or abandoned. Scholars such as Matthew Baigell and Milly Heyd have emphasized instead the complexity of Jewish artistic identities, shifting attention toward historical context, cultural negotiation, and the conditions under which Jewishness becomes visible or meaningful in visual culture.¹⁷

Within this historiographic shift, ceremonial objects have assumed growing importance. Judaica, understood within the context of Jewish art, as Jewish ritual art, was long approached primarily as ethnographic material, folklore, or religious residue, rather than as a subject of sustained art-historical analysis. Recent scholarship, however, has argued for the necessity of treating Jewish ceremonial objects as visual and material culture, attentive to form, craftsmanship, iconography, and modes of use and transmission. As Silver and Baskind note, museum practice played a decisive role in this transformation: Jewish museums and their exhibition catalogues often established typologies and interpretive frameworks for Judaica before such objects were fully integrated into art historical scholarship. This process contributed both to the advancement of the field and to its continued ambivalence, as ceremonial objects remained positioned between the categories of art, religion, and ethnography.¹⁸

The consolidation of Judaica as a legitimate field of art-historical inquiry is inseparable from the work of scholars who established rigorous object-based methodologies for the study of Jewish ceremonial and traditional art. Vivian B. Mann has been particularly foundational in this regard, both through her academic research and her curatorial practice, articulating a model in which Jewish ritual objects are analyzed with full art-historical rigor while remaining

¹⁶ Silver and Baskind, ‘Looking Jewish’, 631-32

¹⁷ Matthew Baigell and Milly Heyd, eds, *Complex Identities: Jewish Consciousness and Modern Art* (Rutgers University Press, 2001).

¹⁸ See Silver and Baskind, ‘Looking Jewish’, 631-52.

grounded in their religious, textual, and communal contexts.¹⁹ Mann has also reflected explicitly on the achievements and maturation of Jewish art history, underscoring the extent to which the study of Judaica has moved beyond earlier defensive frameworks toward confident, methodologically stable approaches. Alongside her work, scholars such as Felicitas Heimann-Jelinek have played a decisive role in advancing Judaica studies through exhibition catalogues and collection-based research, emphasizing typology, materiality, and object biography as central tools of analysis.²⁰ The field has further been shaped by comprehensive studies of Jewish ritual art and material culture by scholars including Cissy Grossman, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, and Shalom Sabar, whose work on ceremonial objects, textiles, and synagogue art established foundational comparative frameworks.²¹ Together, this body of scholarship firmly situates Judaica and traditional Jewish art as established and methodologically robust domains within art history.

The work of Richard I. Cohen has been particularly influential in illuminating the role of display, exhibition, and visual framing in the construction of Jewish historical narratives. Through his analysis of museums, monuments, and visual symbols, Cohen has demonstrated how Jewish objects acquire new meanings when recontextualized within modern exhibitionary settings, where ritual function, historical memory, and cultural representation

¹⁹ Vivian B. Mann, ed., *Jewish Texts on the Visual Arts* (Cambridge University Press, 2000); Vivian B. Mann, *Art and Ceremony in Jewish Life: Essays in the History of Jewish Art* (Pindar Press, 2005); Mann, Vivian B., 'Jewish Art and Visual Culture: A Century of Academic Achievement', *Studia Rosenthaliana* 45, no. 0 (2014): 9–16, <https://doi.org/10.2143/SR.45.0.3021378>; Richard I. Cohen, 'Vivian Mann as Curator and Scholar of Jewish Art', *IMAGES* 3, no. 1 (2009): 1–8, <https://doi.org/10.1163/187180010X500153>.

²⁰ Heimann-Jelinek, Felicitas, *Was übrig blieb: Das Museum Jüdischer Altertümer in Frankfurt 1922–1938* (Jüdisches Museum der Stadt Frankfurt am Main, 1988); Felicitas Heimann-Jelinek, 'Judaica: An Interface between Jewish and Non-Jewish Culture in Central Europe', *Studia Rosenthaliana* (BE), no. 0 (2004): 147–62, <https://doi.org/10.2143/SR.37.0.583406>; Julie-Marthe Cohen and Felicitas Heimann-Jelinek, *Neglected Witnesses: The Fate of Jewish Ceremonial Objects during the Second World War and After* (Joods Historisch Museum, 2011); Julie-Marthe Cohen et al., *Handbook on Judaica Provenance Research: Ceremonial Objects*. (2019).

²¹ Cissy Grossman et al., eds, *A Temple Treasury: The Judaica Collection of Congregation Emanu-El of the City of New York*, 1. ed (Hudson Hills Press in association with Congregation Emanu-El of the City of New York distributed...by Rizzoli International Publications, 1989); Cissy Grossman, *The Collector's Room: Selections from the Michael and Judy Steinhardt Collection* (Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion. Skirball Museum, 1993); Shalom Sabar et al., eds, *Windows on Jewish Worlds: Essays in Honor of William Gross, Collector of Judaica on the Occasion of His Eightieth Birthday* (Walburg Pers, 2019); Shalom Sabar and Israel Museum, eds, *Mazal Tov: Illuminated Jewish Marriage Contracts from the Israel Museum Collection* (Jerusalem, 1993); Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Fabric of Jewish Life: Textiles from the Jewish Museum Collection* (The Jewish Museum; New York, 1977).

intersect.²² His scholarship underscores the extent to which Jewish visual culture—including ceremonial art—is shaped not only by production and use, but also by curatorial mediation and modes of historical presentation and collection.

Methodological developments within art history have further supported the integration of Judaica into broader scholarly discourse. The emergence of visual culture as a paradigm challenged the discipline's traditional emphasis on autonomous masterpieces and instead foregrounded the social construction of visual experience, materiality, and use. As Chris Homer has argued, this shift redirected scholarly attention toward objects previously excluded from canonical art history, opening space for the serious study of ritual and material forms.²³ Approached through this expanded lens, Jewish ceremonial objects can be understood not as marginal survivals, but as dynamic visual forms whose meanings emerge through practice, transmission, and historical displacement.

Despite these advances, the geographic orientation of Jewish art history remains largely centered on Europe, Israel, and North America. As Silver and Baskind themselves acknowledge, the field continues to exhibit significant regional imbalances, with limited engagement with Jewish visual and material culture in other diasporic contexts.²⁴ Jewish ceremonial objects preserved in Latin America—particularly those embedded in living congregational settings—have therefore received comparatively little scholarly attention. This dissertation seeks to address this imbalance by examining German Judaica in Argentina, asking how the study of ceremonial objects is reshaped when conducted in contexts marked by sustained ritual use, fragmentary provenance, and strong communal memory. In doing so, it aims not only to expand the geographic scope of Jewish art history, but also to contribute methodologically to ongoing debates about the status, interpretation, and afterlives of Judaica as both art and historical witness.

1.1.2 Provenance Research and Judaica

Provenance research has traditionally been understood as the systematic reconstruction of an object's ownership history, with particular emphasis on legal title, transfer, and restitution. In

²² Richard I. Cohen, 'Exhibiting History or History in a Showcase', *Jewish History* 12, no. 2 (1998): 97–112, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02335502>; Richard I. Cohen, ed., *Jewish Icons: Art and Society in Modern Europe* (University of California Press, 1998).

²³ William Innes Homer, 'Visual Culture: A New Paradigm', *American Art* 12, no. 1 (1998): 6–9, <https://doi.org/10.1086/424309>.

²⁴ Silver and Baskind, 'Looking Jewish'.

art history and museum studies, its contemporary consolidation emerged primarily in response to the identification and restitution of artworks looted during the Nazi period, resulting in the development of standardized methodologies, ethical frameworks, and international guidelines. While this body of scholarship has focused largely on fine art, archives, and private collections, the application of provenance research to Jewish ceremonial objects presents distinct methodological and conceptual challenges that remain comparatively underdeveloped.²⁵

Jewish ceremonial objects differ fundamentally from market-oriented artworks in both function and circulation. Produced mostly for ritual use rather than aesthetic autonomy, Judaica often circulated within families, congregations, and communal institutions, where documentation was informal, fragmentary, or transmitted orally.²⁶ The destruction of Jewish communities during the Holocaust, the murder or displacement of owners, and the dissolution of congregational structures resulted in significant gaps in documentation. Consequently, provenance research in the field of Judaica must contend not only with material loss but also with ruptured systems of record-keeping and transmission, complicating efforts to establish continuous ownership histories.²⁷

A decisive moment in the history of Judaica provenance occurred in the postwar period with the activities of the Jewish Cultural Reconstruction and related restitution bodies. Tasked with identifying, cataloguing, and redistributing heirless Jewish cultural property recovered in Europe, the JCR developed mechanisms for allocating ceremonial objects, books, and ritual artifacts to Jewish institutions worldwide.²⁸ While the history of JCR has been extensively examined in relation to Europe, Israel, and the United States, its activities in South America have received limited scholarly attention. In Argentina, JCR-distributed objects entered synagogues, libraries, and cultural institutions whose communal histories, ritual practices, and memorial frameworks differed markedly from those of their original contexts, producing

²⁵ Arthur Tompkins, ed., *Provenance Research Today: Principles, Practice, Problems* (Lund Humphries in association with IFAR, 2020).

²⁶ Although Judaica has also been collected within museum, institutional, and private collecting traditions, particularly in Europe and North America, the objects analyzed in this dissertation largely derive from congregational and familial contexts rather than art-market or collector networks. This distinction is especially relevant in Argentina, where German Judaica is more commonly preserved through continued communal use and inheritance than through formal collecting practices.

²⁷ See discussion in Chapter 4 on disrupted documentation and ritual transmission.

²⁸ See Jewish Cultural Reconstruction, Inc., distribution records and reports, discussed in Chapter 4.

complex and enduring questions regarding ownership, custodianship, and meaning.²⁹

Recent methodological reflections have emphasized the need to adapt provenance research models when addressing Judaica and other forms of ritual material culture. In the field of Judaica provenance research, some of the most groundbreaking contributions have taken the form of descriptive and analytical catalogues rather than theoretical monographs. The *Descriptive Catalogue of Looted Judaica* and the Claims Conference–supported *Handbook on Judaica Provenance Research: Ceremonial Objects*, established foundational standards for identifying, describing, and contextualizing ritual objects whose ownership histories were disrupted by Nazi persecution and postwar displacement. These catalogues not only systematized dispersed knowledge but also articulated a shared methodological language for addressing inscriptions, ritual wear, communal markings, and gaps in documentation: elements that are central to Judaica but often marginal in fine-art provenance research.³⁰

Julie-Marthe Cohen, Felicitas Heimann-Jelinek, and Ruth J. Weinberger further advanced this methodological shift through the concept of “*quovadience* research,” which redirects analytical attention from reconstructing prewar ownership alone to establishing present location and custodial histories, particularly in cases where ownership is known but subsequent trajectories remain unclear. This approach is especially relevant in congregational settings, where objects often retain ritual use and symbolic value irrespective of unresolved legal provenance.³¹

Within Jewish studies, the relevance of provenance research also intersects with longer traditions of communal documentation. Jewish communities historically maintained inventories of ceremonial objects, textiles, and ritual implements, reflecting an internal awareness of material heritage long before the emergence of modern provenance research. As Vivian B. Mann has demonstrated, such practices attest to an embedded culture of material accountability that can inform contemporary provenance methodologies concerned with Judaica.³²

²⁹ Especially important in this area are Dana Herman, ‘Hashavat Avedah: A History of Jewish Cultural Reconstruction, Inc’ (Doctoral Thesis, Department of History McGill University, 2008); Cohen and Heimann-Jelinek, *Neglected Witnesses*.

³⁰ Cohen et al., *Handbook on Judaica Provenance Research: Ceremonial Objects*; *Descriptive Catalogue of Looted Judaica* (Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany (Claims Conference) and World Jewish Restitution Organization (WJRO), 2016).

³¹ Cohen et al., *Handbook on Judaica Provenance Research: Ceremonial Objects*.

³² Mann, *Jewish Texts on the Visual Arts*.

In the Argentine context, provenance research has largely focused on pre-Columbian heritage and colonial material culture.³³ The circulation of European artworks during and after the Second World War has only recently attracted scholarly attention. According to Daniel Schávelzon, Argentina has functioned as a space in which the origins of displaced artworks were often obscured through institutional acquisition and limited regulation.³⁴ Judaica, despite its direct connection to forced migration, persecution, and postwar redistribution, has rarely been addressed within these debates, remaining largely absent from national discussions on cultural heritage and restitution.

A second body of scholarship shaping this dissertation understands provenance research not only as a technical practice of ownership reconstruction but as a historical and ethical framework that gained urgency through Nazi-era looting and postwar restitution politics. Standard works in the field emphasize that provenance research sits at the intersection of documentation, law, ethics, and interpretation—and that provenance gaps are themselves historically meaningful, particularly in contexts where destruction and displacement produced archival rupture.³⁵ In recent years, new guidelines have been developed especially from the area of Judaica librarianship. Contemporary best-practice guidance stresses the importance of attending to inscriptions, ritual wear, donation records, and communal custodianship patterns, while acknowledging the limits of documentary survival.³⁶

This dissertation's engagement with the JCR and the postwar distribution of heirless Jewish cultural property aligns with scholarship that frames redistribution not simply as a logistical process but as a political and moral project that shaped where Jewish cultural objects were relocated, how they were reclassified, and how their meanings were reframed in receiving communities.³⁷ The Argentine case studies examined here extend this discussion by tracing the afterlives of German-origin objects within institutions that were not German-speaking congregations, revealing layered identities in which ritual use, rescue narratives, Holocaust memory, and institutional heritage intersect.

³³ This will be discussed in detail in chapter 4.

³⁴ Daniel Schávelzon, *El Silencio Es Oro: Tráfico de Arte Durante El Nazismo En La Argentina*, 1a edición (Olmo Ediciones, 2017).

³⁵ Tompkins, *Provenance Research Today*.

³⁶ Yoel Finkelman and Michelle Margolis, *Cultivating Best Practices in Judaica Provenance* (The National Library of Israel and Association of Jewish Libraries, 2024), <https://jewishlibraries.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/white-paper-on-provenance-may-2024.pdf>.

³⁷ Claims Conference and JCR scholarship discussed in Chapter 4.

1.1.3 Memory studies, postmemory, and objects as carriers of transmission

Because so many objects under study bear incomplete provenance—or circulate in family and community narratives that exceed archival certainty—memory studies are not secondary here; they are structurally necessary. Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi’s distinction between history and Jewish memory offers a key conceptual vocabulary for thinking about how communities authorize the past when continuity has been violently interrupted.³⁸ The dissertation also draws on broader memory studies that examine how modern societies negotiate “present pasts” through media, institutions, and public culture—frameworks that are especially productive for museum settings and commemorative practices.³⁹

Within Holocaust memory discourse, the concept of “postmemory,” as theorized by Marianne Hirsch, is particularly useful for understanding how descendants relate to inherited objects as affective bridges to a past they did not live, often mediated through stories, images, and ritual gestures rather than direct experience.⁴⁰ In parallel, scholarship on memorial forms underscores that objects embedded in daily religious life differ from monumental commemoration: they sustain memory through repetition, handling, and continued function rather than through static memorialization.⁴¹ This dissertation’s core concern with continuity and rupture—synagogues as sites of worship and custodianship, museums as sites of institutionalized trauma-memory—fits directly within this scholarly conversation.

1.1.4 Latin American Jewish studies and Argentine memory landscapes

A fourth body of literature comes from Latin American Jewish studies and Argentine historiography, which provides the essential historical scaffolding for this object-based inquiry. Susana Bianchi’s work on religious minorities offers key context for understanding Jewish institutional life within the Argentine national field.⁴² More specifically, scholarship

³⁸ Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, The Samuel and Althea Stroum Lectures in Jewish Studies (University of Washington Press, 1996).

³⁹ Andreas Huyssen, ‘Present Pasts: Media, Politics, Amnesia’, in *Globalization*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Duke University Press, 2001), <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822383215-004>.

⁴⁰ Marianne Hirsch, ‘The Generation of Postmemory’, *Poetics Today* 29, no. 1 (2008): 103–28, <https://doi.org/10.1215/03335372-2007-019>.

⁴¹ James Edward Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning*, Nachdr. (Yale Univ. Press, 2000); James E. Young, *At Memory’s Edge: After-Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture* (Yale Univ. Press, 2012).

⁴² Susana Bianchi, *Historia de Las Religiones En La Argentina: Las Minorías Religiosas*, Colección Historia Argentina (Editorial Sudamericana, 2004).

by Malena Chinsky on Holocaust memory culture and commemorative landscapes demonstrates how Argentine Jewish memory has been materially and spatially organized, offering an analytic bridge between ritual objects and broader politics of commemoration.⁴³ Emmanuel Kahan's, Yossi Goldstein's and Wanda Wechsler's research is likewise crucial for situating Jewish institutional histories within Argentine political and cultural frameworks, particularly where questions of representation, public life, and collective memory shape what is preserved, exhibited, and narrated.⁴⁴

Latin American Jewish studies has developed a robust body of scholarship centered on questions of migration, integration, identity, and cultural negotiation, providing an essential framework for understanding Jewish life in Argentina. These discussions are informed by broader debates on diaspora and Jewish peoplehood, which have traced the transformation of diaspora from a theological condition of exile (*galut*) to a historically contingent and multilocal form of belonging. Scholarship in Jewish studies and diaspora studies has emphasized that Jewish peoplehood is articulated not only through political sovereignty or national frameworks, but through institutions, cultural practices, and shared repertoires of memory.⁴⁵ Within Latin American Jewish studies, this perspective has been further developed through research attentive to how Jewish identities in Latin America were negotiated across communal life, migration histories, and local political contexts, underscoring the relevance of diaspora as a lived and dynamic condition rather than a fixed category.⁴⁶

Scholarship on Jewish immigration to Argentina constitutes one of the most established fields within Latin American Jewish studies. Foundational works by Haim Avni, Víctor Mirelman, Judith Laikin Elkin, Boleslao Lewin, Margalit Bejarano, and Ricardo Feierstein have examined immigration patterns, institutional development, political contexts, and processes of integration, situating Jewish migration within broader narratives of nation-

⁴³ Chinski, 'Memorias olvidadas: los judíos y la recordación de la Shoá en Buenos Aires, 1942–1956'.

⁴⁴ Chinski, 'Memorias olvidadas: los judíos y la recordación de la Shoá en Buenos Aires, 1942–1956'; Goldstein, 'El discurso judío de la memoria: Pensamiento público y memoria de la Shoá en la Argentina en la era de la globalización'.

⁴⁵ Mordecai M. Kaplan, ed., *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life*, Pbk. ed (Jewish Publication Society, 2010); Daniel Boyarin and Jonathan Boyarin, 'Diaspora: Generation and the Ground of Jewish Identity', *Critical Inquiry* 19, no. 4 (1993): 693–725, <https://doi.org/10.1086/448694>; Noam Pianko author, *Jewish Peoplehood: An American Innovation*, Key Words in Jewish Studies ; VI (Rutgers University Press, 2015).

⁴⁶ Juan Manuel Férrez, *Diasporicidad y pertenencia: conexiones y desconexiones diaspóricas hacia homeland(s). El caso de los judíos sefardíes chilenos*, Doctoral Thesis in Sociology, Universidad Alberto Hurtado, Santiago de Chile, October 2024.

building and minority formation.⁴⁷ Within this historiography, German-Jewish immigration occupies a distinct position, frequently analyzed through the lenses of exile, cultural capital, and professional and intellectual life. German Jews are often described as refugees arriving from a “second homeland,” shaped by Enlightenment ideals, cultural assimilation, and liberal religious traditions, whose displacement was driven not by religious exile but by racial persecution. This body of scholarship has provided a detailed and nuanced understanding of German-Jewish communal organization, educational models, and cultural adaptation in Argentina, forming an indispensable foundation for the present study.⁴⁸

A second generation of scholarship has moved beyond general immigration history to focus on specific dimensions of the German-Jewish experience in Argentina. It has examined German-language press and publishing initiatives, the circulation of books and libraries, and practices of librarianship, as explored by Irene Münster, as well as theological and philosophical debates within liberal Judaism and German-Jewish thought, addressed by scholars such as Bursztein and Liliana Feierstein.⁴⁹ Other studies have approached German-Jewish cultural life through musicological perspectives, notably in the work of Silvia Glocer on musicians and musical institutions formed in exile.⁵⁰

However, Jewish ceremonial objects and ritual material culture have remained marginal to these analyses, rarely examined as primary historical evidence or through art-historical and material methodologies. This dissertation addresses that gap by foregrounding Judaica as a material archive of migration, identity, and memory, proposing ritual objects as historically active artifacts through which German-Jewish exile, continuity, and post-

⁴⁷ Avni, *Argentina y las migraciones judías*; Ricardo Feierstein, *Historia de los judíos argentinos*, Espejo de la Argentina (Ed. Planeta, 1993); Boleslao Lewin, *Cómo Fue La Inmigración Judía En La Argentina* (Editorial Plus Ultra, 1983).

⁴⁸ Alfredo J. Schwarcz, *Ya pesar de todo: los judíos de habla alemana en la Argentina*, 1. ed, Colección Estudios políticos y sociales (Grupo Ed. Latinoamericano, 1991); Carlota Jackisch, *El nazismo y los refugiados alemanes en la Argentina*, 2. ed (Editorial de Belgrano, 1997); Elena Levin, *Historias de una emigración (1933-1939): alemanes judíos en la Argentina*, 4. Aufl (Lumiere, 2010).

⁴⁹ Irene Münster, ‘Historia de La Biblioteca Del Seminario Rabínico Latinoamericano’, unpublished manuscript, n.d.; Liliana Ruth Feierstein, ‘In the Land of Vitzliputzli: German-Speaking Jews in Latin America’, in *The New Ethnic Studies in Latin America*, ed. Raanan Rein et al. (BRILL, 2017), https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004342309_011; Ari Bursztein, ‘The Stones Cast by the Oppressors Became the Keystone: Emil Fackenheim, the 614th Commandment and Kristallnacht’, Institutional website, *The Schechter Institutes*, 13 November 2009, <https://schechter.edu/the-stones-cast-by-the-oppressors-became-the-keystone-emil-fackenheim-the-614th-commandment-and-kristallnacht/>.

⁵⁰ Silvia Glocer, *Melodías del destierro: músicos judíos exiliados en la Argentina durante el nazismo (1933-1945)*, 1a edición (Gourmet Musical ediciones, 2016).

Holocaust reconstruction in Argentina can be materially traced.

Recent developments further underscore the emerging place of art history and museum studies within Latin American Jewish scholarship. In 2025, for the first time, the Latin American Jewish Studies Association (LAJSA) included a full panel dedicated to Jewish museums, alongside a panel on Latin American Jewish avant-garde women artists and cultural agents. While Judaica and religious art have traditionally remained outside the primary scope of Latin American Jewish studies—which has focused largely on social, cultural, and political dimensions of modern and contemporary Jewish life—these initiatives signal a gradual expansion of the field. They point to the growing recognition of art history and museum scholarship as significant frameworks for examining Jewish experience in the region, even as the study of ritual and traditional material culture remains largely underdeveloped.

Across these fields, Jewish studies provides the connective tissue that enables ritual objects to be read within the conceptual worlds of *halakhah*, *minhag*, liturgy, and communal authority, while also allowing for critical engagement with modern Jewish history, diaspora formations, and Holocaust memory. The dissertation's contribution emerges from this integration: it employs art-historical methods to analyze objects as visual and material forms; provenance research to reconstruct trajectories and interpret gaps; memory studies to understand objects as carriers of transmission; and Latin American Jewish history to locate these processes within Argentina's specific institutional and cultural landscape.

1.2 Theoretical Framework

Building on this integrated approach, this section establishes the dissertation's theoretical framework.

The research is situated primarily at the intersection of Art History and Jewish Studies. While Memory Studies and migration theories provide valuable perspectives for understanding these contexts, it is the art-historical approach that anchors the analysis of ceremonial objects, attending to both their material qualities and visual languages. These artifacts should not be understood solely as tokens of memory or expressions of religious identity; rather, they are carefully crafted works that embody aesthetic traditions, cultural adaptations, and ritual functions.

By recognizing Jewish ceremonial art as a legitimate domain of visual and material analysis, this study aligns itself with an expanding body of scholarship that seeks to redefine

the boundaries between these disciplines⁵¹. The sections that follow outline this primary theoretical lens while also engaging additional conceptual frameworks that intersect with and support this inquiry.

Jewish Art at the Intersection of Art History and Jewish Studies

Jewish Art has historically held a complex and often marginalized position within the realm of Art History. Especially *Judaica*, commonly categorized as either ethnographic or religious artifacts, which encompasses a wide range of Jewish ceremonial objects, has frequently been excluded from the mainstream canon of visual arts.⁵² Major art historical narratives, largely anchored in Western European aesthetics and Christian iconographic traditions, have often sidelined Jewish ritual objects, perceiving them as either peripheral to “fine art” or more suitably located within religious studies or anthropology. This classification has typically overlooked *Judaica*'s aesthetic value, cultural complexity, and multifaceted religious roles.⁵³

Judaica is defined as art objects created for use in Jewish religious ceremonies, including Torah ornaments, *hanukkah* lamps, *kiddush* cups, and other artifacts that hold significance in Jewish worship and culture. These objects not only fulfill functional roles but also carry rich histories linked to Jewish identity, tradition, and memory.⁵⁴ As secularization delineated the boundaries within art historical discourse, Jewish art struggled to find its place due to its intrinsic religious functions. However, *Judaica* frequently defies straightforward classification; many of these objects articulate themes of cultural identity, exile, loss, and creative adaptation.

In recent decades, significant shifts have taken place. On one hand, the field of Art History has broadened to include visual and material culture, moving beyond its narrow focus

⁵¹ Ori Z. Soltes, ‘Exhibitions of Jewish Art and Culture’, in Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion, by Ori Z. Soltes (Oxford University Press, 2025), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.1149>; Maya Balakirsky Katz, ‘Jewish Art, Modern and Contemporary’, in *Art History*, by Maya Balakirsky Katz (Oxford University Press, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.1093/obo/9780199920105-0064>.

⁵² Julie-Marthe Cohen, Felicitas Heimann-Jelinek and Ruth Weinberger, Handbook on *Judaica* Provenance Research: Ceremonial Objects (Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany (Claims Conference) and the World Jewish Restitution Organization (WJRO): 2018), p. 77. <http://art.claimscon.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Judaica-Handbook-2.20.2018.pdf>

⁵³ For historiography of Jewish art see: Ravel-Neher, ‘With Wisdom and Knowledge of Workmanship: Jewish Art without a Question Mark’.; and Olin, *The Nation without Art..*

⁵⁴ Mann, *Art and Ceremony in Jewish Life*.

on painting and sculpture.⁵⁵ On the other hand, Jewish Art has gained legitimacy as a distinct area of inquiry within the discipline. This institutional recognition is evident in the creation of Jewish Art departments and research centers—first at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and later at Bar Ilan University—as well as in major museum exhibitions where ceremonial objects and modern or contemporary artworks are presented in parallel, as part of a broader curatorial program.⁵⁶

Notable institutions such as the Israel Museum in Jerusalem and the Jewish Museum in New York have been instrumental in redefining the field by exhibiting modern and contemporary art alongside ritual objects, effectively blurring the lines between Fine Art and Material Culture. Concurrently, Judaica has increasingly found its place in the permanent collections of eminent encyclopedic institutions, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston.⁵⁷

This evolving discourse is further complicated, as the legitimation of the field has created increased challenges between the art historical approach and the ethnographic display of Jewish culture. The juxtaposition of these two methodologies often leads to dialogues surrounding authenticity, representation, and the interpretation of Jewish artifacts within museum contexts.⁵⁸ The challenge lies in balancing the aesthetic and cultural significance of these objects with their ethnographic origins.

Jewish ceremonial art also sits within the broader field of Jewish Studies, where it has gained increasing legitimacy as an area of scholarly inquiry. While the discipline traditionally focused on textual analysis, scholars like Vivian B. Mann have emphasized that Jewish visual culture must be understood in dialogue with halakhic, exegetical, and philosophical texts that historically shaped Jewish attitudes toward images.⁵⁹ In her work *Jewish Texts on the Visual Arts*, Mann demonstrates how rabbinic responsa, mystical writings, and ethical treatises across centuries provide crucial insight into the functions and meanings of visual expression in

⁵⁵ Michael Yonan, 'Toward a Fusion of Art History and Material Culture Studies', *West 86th: A Journal of Decorative Arts, Design History, and Material Culture* 18, no. 2 (2011): 232–48, <https://doi.org/10.1086/662520>; Homer, 'Visual Culture'.

⁵⁶ Silver and Baskind, 'Looking Jewish'.

⁵⁷ Shir Kochavi, 'Jewish Museums in the United States: Foundations and Changes in the Twentieth Century', *Ars Judaica* 18, no. 1 (2022): 145–56, <https://doi.org/10.3828/arsjudaica.2022.18.7>.

⁵⁸ Eitan Dor-Shav, 'The Israel Museum and the Loss of Jewish Memory', *Azure*, 1998, Autumn 5759/1998 (n.d.): 77–91.

⁵⁹ Mann, *Jewish Texts on the Visual Arts*.

Jewish life.

This is not to suggest that Jewish art was absent from Jewish scholarly inquiry prior to this more integrated approach. The very category of "Jewish art" has been debated since antiquity and was already addressed by the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, by early modern and modern scholars such as David Kaufmann and the subsequent generations of scholars.⁶⁰ The question of whether Judaism, as a text-centered tradition, allowed for or produced a distinctive visual culture has long occupied scholars of Jewish history and thought. However, this dissertation aligns with a more recent scholarly tendency that treats Jewish art as a subfield of Jewish Studies—one that actively applies the methods of Art History while requiring a strong foundation in classical Jewish texts and traditions, as well as modern thinkers. To interpret ceremonial art as integral to Jewish communal life and memory, it is essential to engage with foundational Jewish sources—biblical, rabbinic, philosophical, and liturgical—that inform the creation and contemporary understanding of these artifacts. Simultaneously, such analysis must adhere to interdisciplinary methodologies, incorporating visual analysis, material culture studies, and provenance research. Together, these frameworks enable a more robust understanding of ritual artifacts as both artistic expressions and historical witnesses situated at the intersection of religious tradition, aesthetic practice, migration, and memory.

Therefore, this dissertation contributes to the contemporary reconsideration of the field. It joins the contemporary scholarly turn that foregrounds ritual objects, such as *shabboslampes*, Torah ornaments, *kiddush* cups, etc., as legitimate subjects of art historical inquiry. Rather than seeing them solely as liturgical tools or markers of religious continuity, This thesis examines them as visual artifacts embedded in aesthetic, historical, and diasporic material traditions. Their presence in active synagogue repositories allows for a dynamic approach attentive to both form and function.

Like the contemporary study of Jewish art, which has increasingly turned toward questions of identity, diaspora, and trauma, this research explores how visual and material traditions reflect the Jewish experience in Argentina. It does not seek to define a uniquely "Jewish Argentine style," but instead examines ceremonial objects as visual artifacts shaped by migration, dislocation, and cultural reinvention. Scholars such as Matthew Baigell and Milly Heyd have framed Jewish art as expressing some aspect of the Jewish experience—religious, cultural, social, or personal. This experience, rather than a fixed iconography or

⁶⁰ See Olin, *The Nation without Art*. Also find more detailed description of such generations in the Lit. Review section.

aesthetic, becomes the guiding criterion. In this context, the art historical study of Judaica in diasporic settings becomes an inquiry not into religious observance alone but into memory, transmission, rupture, and adaptation.⁶¹

This project intersects with current scholarly interest in postcolonial critique and Global South perspectives. While such frameworks may enrich the relevance and reception of this study, its approach is not driven by academic trends but grounded in disciplinary rigor. Anchored in Art History, Jewish Studies, and Latin American Jewish Studies, this dissertation contributes to expanding the geographic and conceptual boundaries of Jewish art scholarship. It does not dismiss the interpretive value of postcolonial or decolonial readings—indeed, it invites future scholarship along those lines—but its methodological foundations remain firmly rooted in the core debates and practices of the disciplines it engages.

Provenance Research as a Historical and Ethical Framework

Provenance is also a crucial aspect of Jewish art, reflecting the historical experiences of persecution, migration, exile, and displacement faced by Jewish communities over the centuries. The movement of these communities led to the movement of their artifacts alongside customs, rituals, and traditions. In the case of German Judaica brought to Argentina by Jews fleeing Nazi Germany, these questions of provenance naturally arise. The extensive looting during the Holocaust, combined with the murder of owners and the destruction of entire communities, makes the investigation of Nazi-era looted cultural assets particularly pertinent to this research.

An essential component of this project is provenance research, understood here not only as a technical practice but as a historical and ethical framework. Emerging initially from efforts to trace ownership and restitution paths of art looted during the Nazi era, provenance research has since expanded to include Judaica—particularly ceremonial objects stripped from destroyed Jewish communities and later redistributed by organizations such as the JCR. In this context, provenance is not merely a question of legality or heritage, but a means of reconstructing cultural memory, loss, and historical justice.⁶²

In the Argentine context, provenance research reveals structural challenges that shape how Jewish ceremonial objects are understood today. Many artifacts brought by Jewish

⁶¹ Baigell and Heyd, “Introduction,” *Complex Identities*, xiii-xvii

⁶² Tompkins, *Provenance Research Today*, 10–11.

refugees or sent through postwar redistribution initiatives were never systematically documented. Gaps in records, limited institutional inventories, and a longstanding lack of awareness of Judaica as a field of scholarly inquiry have resulted in fragmented object histories. Moreover, South American collections are rarely integrated into global discussions of provenance and restitution.⁶³ This dissertation positions Argentine Judaica within that broader conversation, emphasizing the interpretive significance of incomplete provenance as a historical condition rather than merely a methodological obstacle.

This dual framework—art history and provenance—allows Jewish ceremonial objects to be approached simultaneously as artworks and as historical witnesses. Their material qualities, aesthetic forms, and traces of use provide insight not only into the communities that created and preserved them, but also into the broader processes of displacement, survival, and memory-making that define Jewish life in diaspora.

The objects explored in this dissertation have two things in common: first, the connection to the Holocaust, and second, there are many gaps in their provenance. It could be problematic for the traditional historian in search of historical accuracy or specific looted Jewish cultural assests. However, studying such gaps reveals how different generations have shaped their identities based on legends and stories surrounding the artifacts. Therefore, this study does not aim to point to contradictions or the lack of historical accuracy of these legends, but to understand how and where they originate from. In general terms, the provenance study suggested in this dissertation can add historical value to the memorial symbolism they carry today. In addition to trying to fill these gaps with additional information about these objects with academic and professional methods, the use of provenance research aims, therefore, to raise questions about conducting Judaica provenance research in contexts other than Nazi-looted Judaica or Jewish communal ownership (congregational or institutional ownership).

Borrowing from Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi's distinction between history and memory, this dissertation puts to the test the position of the provenance researcher, much like Yerushalmi's historian, within the relationship of Jews to their own past.⁶⁴ In terms of memory, these objects represent both the rupture of Jewish life in Europe and its continuation in Argentina. Yet this perspective raises two fundamental questions: first, what can be

⁶³ Tamara Kohn and Shir Kochavi, 'The Challenges and Complexities of Judaica Provenance Research Today', paper presented at Looted/Berfood, 10 September 2024.

⁶⁴ Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*; Robert Chazan, 'From "Jewish Memory" to Jewish History: Two Perspectives', *The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 25, no. 2 (2017): 279–304, <https://doi.org/10.1163/1477285X-12341288>.

reconstructed about the ownership history of each object; and second, why is it that today we often know less about their precise historical trajectories and more about their memorial value, precisely because of their blurred or fragmented provenance?

Following Yerushalmi, this study does not seek to correct or discredit communal narratives that lack archival certainty, but rather to understand how memory operates when historical continuity has been violently interrupted. In this sense, provenance gaps become sites of meaning, revealing how postwar generations have negotiated loss, survival, and identity through material culture. Therefore, provenance functions as a significant theoretical framework for the research.

German Judaica in Argentina: Memory, Diasporicity, and Jewish Peoplehood

Building on the foundations of Jewish art history and provenance research, this section turns to a second set of conceptual frameworks central to the dissertation: memory, diasporicity, and Jewish peoplehood. These intersecting perspectives illuminate how ceremonial objects function not merely as aesthetic or historical artifacts but as active participants in shaping communal identity, intergenerational transmission, and the reconstruction of diasporic Jewish life in Argentina.

The study of German Judaica in Argentina demands an interdisciplinary approach that situates ceremonial objects at the intersection of memory, diasporicity, and Jewish peoplehood. These objects, brought by refugees, preserved in community institutions, and imbued with personal and collective meaning, operate not only as liturgical instruments or historical remnants, but as active participants in memory-making processes and identity formation across generations. It is necessary to engage with the theoretical frameworks of memory studies, Latin American Jewish studies, and contemporary debates on Jewish diasporicity and peoplehood in order to understand their function in this context, beyond formal analysis or religious classification. Only through this intersection can we begin to grasp how these objects participate in the reconstruction of Jewish life in diaspora, how they activate forms of postmemory, and how they inscribe local experience within global Jewish narratives.

From the perspective of memory studies, scholars such as Marianne Hirsch, and James E. Young offer conceptual tools to understand how individuals and communities engage with the past in ways that are mediated through objects, narratives, and social practices. Hirsch's concept of postmemory is particularly relevant for understanding the role of ceremonial

objects in communities where the original owners or creators are no longer present.⁶⁵ In the Argentine context, many descendants of German Jewish refugees relate to inherited objects as touchstones of a traumatic past, often learning their significance through stories, photographs, and rituals rather than direct experience. These objects thereby function as bridges between generations, activating postmemorial engagement and linking personal memory to collective identity.

James E. Young's theorization of counter-monuments and embodied memory allows us to see how ritual objects differ from traditional memorial forms. Rather than monumentalizing trauma in static or state-sanctioned terms, Jewish ceremonial objects embedded in communal life foster continuity through ongoing use and reinterpretation. They do not close off memory but sustain it, functioning as living archives within the community, in many cases as "after-images of the Holocaust".⁶⁶

The concept of diasporicity, as theorized by Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin, is central to understanding how German Judaica in Argentina articulates multi-local belonging, sustaining both Jewish and German cultural continuity while adapting to a new national and social environment.⁶⁷ Diaspora is not merely dispersion; it is a generative condition that sustains connections between past and present, here and elsewhere. Ritual objects brought from Germany and reused in Buenos Aires synagogues and homes bear the imprint of this layered identity. They resist assimilation into a singular national narrative and instead reflect the complex interplay of cultural memory, religious tradition, and transnational Jewish continuity. Moreover, in many cases we will find local iconography in these artifacts.

While this dissertation remains rooted in Jewish Studies and Art History, it intersects with this broader theoretical field in recognizing diaspora not as a static condition of exile but as an evolving framework for cultural continuity and identity formation.

However, the German-Jewish diaspora in Argentina cannot be understood solely within timeless or universal models of diasporic Jewish identity. In exile, these refugees gradually forged a "third space" of belonging—neither fully European nor Zionist-Israeli, but distinctly diasporic—where German-Jewish identity persisted and transformed across

⁶⁵ Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer, 'Testimonial Objects: Memory, Gender, and Transmission', *Poetics Today* 27, no. 2 (2006): 353–83, <https://doi.org/10.1215/03335372-2005-008>; Hirsch, 'The Generation of Postmemory'.

⁶⁶ James E. Young, *At Memory's Edge*.

⁶⁷ Boyarin and Boyarin, 'Diaspora' <https://doi.org/10.1086/448694>.

generations through communal institutions, ritual objects, and cultural memory.

In this context, ceremonial objects brought from Germany acquired new meanings. Once integrated into local religious life, they served not only as links to a lost homeland but as tools for constructing a Jewish Argentine identity rooted in ritual continuity and selective memory. This tension between rupture and reconstruction, between exile and elected diaspora frames the specificity of the German-Jewish experience in Argentina and invites a rethinking of how diaspora is embodied in material culture.

The concept of “Jewish peoplehood” introduces an additional layer to this dissertation’s theoretical framework, drawing primarily from Mordecai Kaplan’s foundational notion of Judaism as a civilization, and expanded upon in contemporary discourse by Noam Pianko and Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin.⁶⁸ Within this perspective, ceremonial objects are not only significant as markers of local or familial heritage, but also as tangible expressions of belonging to a broader, transhistorical Jewish collective. The preservation and continuous use of these ritual artifacts underscore participation in a global Jewish narrative characterized by resilience, adaptation, and shared cultural memory.

These theoretical frameworks offer a way of thinking about the objects at the heart of this study, not only in terms of what they are or where they came from, but how they continue to carry meaning across time, place, and community. They help illuminate how ritual artifacts shape and are shaped by the histories they have lived through, and the people who have cared for them.

1.3 Methodology

Similarly to the theoretical framework, this dissertation is methodologically grounded in art historical research, understood in its expanded sense as the study of visual and material culture. It combines formal and stylistic analysis with historical contextualization, iconographic interpretation, and close attention to materiality and functionality. This approach allows Jewish ceremonial objects to be examined not only as ritual implements but as visual artifacts shaped by specific cultural traditions, aesthetic choices, and historical circumstances. Rather than isolating objects from their lived environments, the study analyzes them within the spaces, practices, and communities that have sustained them over time.

⁶⁸ Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization*; Noam Pianko author, *Jewish Peoplehood*; Jonathan Boyarin and Daniel Boyarin, *Powers of Diaspora: Two Essays on the Relevance of Jewish Culture*, NED-New edition (University of Minnesota Press, 2002), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctts6pc>.

Research on ceremonial art in active congregations differs significantly from museum-based object study. In this context, the starting point of the research process is not a preexisting inventory or a delimited collection, but with the identification and recollection of objects dispersed across synagogues, archives, and communal spaces. This initial phase is followed by formal inventory and technical cataloging, the selection of relevant objects, and only then by focused analysis, including provenance research, stylistic comparison, and object biography. This sequence reflects the realities of working with living religious communities, where ritual objects remain embedded in ongoing use rather than stabilized as collectibles.⁶⁹

The analysis of German Judaica in Argentina therefore requires a methodological framework that accounts simultaneously for ritual function and symbolic meaning over time. The objects examined in this study embody memories of Jewish life in Germany, experiences of forced migration and exile, and the continuity of traditions that have shaped identity, within a new national context during almost 8 decades. Their meanings are not fixed but layered, molded by use, displacement, reinterpretation, and communal transmission across generations. Methods used throughout the research of these objects reflects also the layered meaning of the artifacts.

Therefore, provenance research constitutes a core methodological component of this dissertation. The reconstruction of object ownership histories draws on a combination of archival research, institutional records, donation files, inventories, inscriptions, silver marks, and comparative material analysis. Given the fragmentary documentation that characterizes much of German Judaica in Argentina—particularly for objects brought by refugees or redistributed locally by the DAIA in the postwar period—provenance research often requires methodological flexibility. Rather than relying on a single source type, this study employs triangulation between material evidence, archival traces, and contextual information to establish plausible object biographies and patterns of circulation.

Due to the destruction of Jewish communities in Europe, the dislocation of owners, and the conditions of forced migration, many ceremonial objects examined in this dissertation are characterized by significant gaps in their provenance. These absences are further compounded by the contexts in which the objects were preserved after their arrival in Argentina. Many of the communities that safeguarded these artifacts functioned for decades as living religious institutions rather than as archival, museological, or collecting bodies, and systematic documentation practices were largely absent until the late twentieth century, when

⁶⁹ See images “Fieldwork Documentation” in Appendix III

some congregations began to develop formal collections.

In the case of archives and institutionalized collections, provenance information was often lost, deprioritized, or never recorded, not necessarily through negligence, but because such data was not central to the original mission, methodologies, or classificatory systems of the institutions that created and managed these holdings. In many instances, Jewish ceremonial objects were valued primarily for their ritual or documentary function rather than as artworks, and therefore were not subjected to the forms of cataloging, attribution, or historical reconstruction commonly associated with art collections. Rather than attempting to impose artificial completeness on fragmentary histories, this study treats absence, uncertainty, and discontinuity as integral components of the objects' biographies. In this sense, incomplete provenance is approached not as a methodological shortcoming but as a historically meaningful condition that reflects the combined effects of persecution, exile, resettlement, and the evolving frameworks through which Jewish material culture has been preserved and understood.

Oral history and community-based knowledge form an additional methodological layer in this research. Interviews and informal conversations with community members, rabbis, archivists, and descendants of donors provide insight into how ceremonial objects are remembered, interpreted, and valued in the present. These narratives are not treated as substitutes for documentary evidence, but as complementary sources that illuminate the social lives of objects, particularly in cases where archival documentation is limited or absent. Oral testimony is critically assessed and cross-referenced with material and archival evidence, with careful attention to ethical considerations and the limits of memory-based sources.

Working with these sources required a flexible methodological approach, particularly when conducting research within active synagogues and communal institutions. In the case studies examined in this dissertation, ritual objects, books, and documents were not encountered as part of preexisting, delimited collections, but as materials dispersed across spaces of worship, storage areas, offices, and communal rooms. Research in active synagogues typically began with the *Aron Hakodesh* (Torah Ark) and its immediate surroundings, followed by adjacent storage spaces, secondary ritual areas, and other locations where ceremonial objects were kept or remained in use.

Based on surveys and inventories conducted across different institutions, the findings were organized into specific categories that reflected the character and history of each Judaica repository. While certain types of objects recur across sites, the modes of preservation, documentation, and use differ significantly. These distinctions stem from the particular

histories of each community and institution and are central to understanding how ritual objects acquire meaning over time. Rather than treating these differences as methodological inconsistencies, this study considers them integral to the analysis, revealing how varied practices of preservation, use, and transmission shape the memory narratives attached to Jewish ceremonial art.

Finally, the methodological framework of this dissertation is shaped not only by analytical choices but also by the practical conditions of access and feasibility inherent to working with living communities and non-museological collections. Research was conducted through sustained fieldwork in congregational and institutional settings where inventories, documentation, and interviews were possible, while restricted access or the absence of formal records limited the inclusion of other relevant sites. These constraints are understood as part of the research context itself, influencing both the scope of the corpus and the kinds of questions that can be asked. By acknowledging these limitations explicitly, the methodology remains transparent and grounded in the realities of studying ritual objects that continue to circulate within active communal life.

This research approaches the immigration experience through the lens of material selection and transmission, focusing on what was preserved and valued as religious and cultural heritage. While the original significance of many objects is rooted in the moment of their arrival, the present analysis is necessarily shaped by the current state of the artifacts as they exist today in synagogues, schools, and cultural associations—institutions that function not only as spaces of worship and education, but also as informal repositories of collective memory.

1.3.1 Scope and limitations of the study

In this study, the selection of the Judaica repositories examined is limited to institutionalized Jewish experiences, whether within congregations or other types of institutions, and does not include individual or family-based collections.

Although this dissertation focuses on three communal reservoirs—Benei Tikva, NCI–Emanu El, and Colonia Avigdor—and on selected institutional collections such as IWO, the Rabbinical Seminary Library, and the Buenos Aires Holocaust Museum, the landscape of German-Jewish material culture in Argentina is significantly broader. Numerous additional congregations, archives, and family holdings preserve ritual objects and domestic Judaica linked to the migration of Jews from German-speaking lands. Their absence from the core

analysis does not reflect a lack of relevance but rather the methodological, practical, and temporal boundaries necessary to sustain a coherent research corpus focused on provenance, continuity of traditions, and the transformation of German-Jewish ceremonial art in diaspora.

Among the most important communities not fully examined here is Congregación Ajdut Israel, known as “Templo de Moldes,” founded in 1929 and profoundly shaped by the arrival of German Orthodox immigrants in the late 1930s. The synagogue preserves Torah scrolls, wimpels, a large Hanukkah lamp, and domestic objects that strongly reflect German ritual and architectural traditions. Although preliminary visits were made and interviews held with the rabbi, restricted access prevented the execution of a full inventory or systematic provenance study. Similar limitations applied to Lamroth Hakol (originally an NCI branch), to Tarbut School and Club Bar Kochva, and to the Hogar Hirsch elderly home administered by AFI in San Miguel—all institutions with roots in the post-1933 German-Jewish milieu whose material culture remains understudied.

Beyond institutional frameworks, a wider field of domestic and family-based artifacts also lies outside the scope of this dissertation. Many German-Jewish families who settled in Buenos Aires or later moved there from agricultural colonies preserved ritual objects, silverware, textiles, books and documents that never entered communal custody. Likewise, other JCA colonies—such as Moisesville, Villa Domínguez, and Rivera—also absorbed smaller groups of German Jews who maintained selected traditions within the predominantly Eastern European landscape of rural Jewish Argentina. These cases offer fertile ground for future research, particularly regarding how German-Jewish ritual practices were maintained, transformed, or blended with local Ashkenazi culture.⁷⁰

The decision to delimit the study to Benei Tikva, NCI–Emanu El, Avigdor, and selected institutional collections reflects both feasibility and methodological coherence. These were the communities where complete inventories, sustained fieldwork, oral history interviews, and archival triangulation were achievable, enabling a detailed comparative analysis of provenance, ritual continuity, and the evolving status of objects as markers of German-Jewish identity in Argentina. The exclusion of additional congregations and family holdings should therefore be understood not as an omission of relevance, but as a necessary

⁷⁰ In the Argentine context, Jewish communities were historically categorized according to national origin rather than strictly by the Ashkenazi–Sephardic distinction. Eastern European Jews were commonly referred to as “Russians” due to their passports from the Russian Empire, while Sephardic and Middle Eastern Jews arriving from the Ottoman Empire were broadly identified as “Turks” (turcos). Consequently, “Ashkenazi” in Argentina has generally been associated with Eastern European Jewry rather than specifically with Central European German-Jewish traditions.

framing that allows this dissertation to maintain analytical depth while acknowledging a much larger constellation of German-Jewish material culture awaiting future scholarly attention.

Books are addressed selectively in this dissertation according to their function, context, and mode of circulation. While books constitute an important component of Jewish material culture and played a significant role in both refugee migration and postwar redistribution by the JCR, this study deliberately limits its core corpus to ceremonial art and ritual objects. Liturgical books that operate as portable ritual objects—such as Passover *haggadot* and miniature *siddurim*—are therefore analyzed alongside other ceremonial artifacts, through a material culture approach that emphasizes use, scale, mobility, and ritual practice. By contrast, books that entered Argentina through postwar redistribution initiatives, particularly via the JCR, are examined in Chapter 4 as part of the provenance and restitution framework, where their significance lies primarily in questions of ownership, displacement, institutional custody, and memorial re-signification. A comprehensive study of Jewish book culture, libraries, or print history lies beyond the scope of the present research and would require distinct methodological and disciplinary frameworks.

1.4 Chapter outline

This dissertation is structured in five chapters: The present chapter establishes the conceptual, methodological, and historiographical framework of the study. It introduces the research questions, defines the scope and limitations of the corpus, and situates the dissertation within the intersecting fields of Jewish art history, provenance research, memory studies, and Latin American Jewish studies. It articulates the theoretical lenses through which German-Jewish ceremonial art in Argentina is analyzed, emphasizing the study of ritual objects as visual and material culture, and outlines the methodological approach, including object-based research, provenance reconstruction, oral history, and archival triangulation.

The second chapter, “Historical Contexts and Institutional Reservoirs,” traces the migration of German Jewish refugees during the 1930s and 1940s and examines the formation of communal and institutional “reservoirs” in which ceremonial objects were preserved, used, and transmitted. Focusing on synagogues and communities such as NCI–Emanu El, Benei Tikva, and Colonia Avigdor, alongside selected institutional collections, the chapter analyzes how different custodial contexts shaped the accumulation, use, and meaning of ritual artifacts. Rather than treating these holdings as formal museum collections, the chapter introduces the concept of reservoirs to describe living, community-embedded assemblages of Judaica shaped by ritual continuity, donation, inheritance, and memory.

Chapter 3 shifts the focus from institutions to objects, examining selected artifacts individually and comparatively. Drawing on art historical and material culture analysis, the chapter explores how ritual objects functioned as active participants in religious practice while acquiring new layers of meaning through migration, use, and display in Argentina. Case studies include metal and textile ceremonial objects, as well as selected liturgical books—such as Passover *haggadot* and miniature siddurim—approached as portable ritual objects embedded in domestic and communal life. Through close analysis of material features, inscriptions, scale, and signs of use, the chapter demonstrates how individual objects operate as historical sources that illuminate continuity, rupture, and memory within the German-Jewish diaspora.

The following chapter, addresses questions of provenance, displacement, and postwar redistribution, focusing on German Judaica in Argentina as objects of memory shaped by fragmented histories. Opening from communal narratives of rescue and survival, the chapter examines the gaps, legends, and uncertainties that characterize the provenance of many ceremonial objects preserved in synagogues and institutions. It then turns to the postwar redistribution of heirless Jewish property, particularly through the JCR, analyzing how ceremonial objects and books reached Argentina and entered institutional custody. By comparing objects brought by refugees with those redistributed after the Holocaust, the chapter explores the politics of temporary custody, the transformation of ritual artifacts into memorial objects, and the ethical and methodological challenges of conducting Judaica provenance research in the Argentine context.

Finally, chapter 5 brings the findings of the study together, reflecting on how German-Jewish ceremonial objects in Argentina function as carriers of memory, diasporic identity, and historical narrative of the German Jewish diaspora in Argentina. Drawing on the analyses developed in previous chapters, the conclusion considers the implications of studying ritual artifacts as both artworks and historical witnesses, and reflects on the role of provenance gaps, communal care, and ongoing ritual use in shaping Jewish memory after the Holocaust. The chapter points to future avenues for research on Jewish material culture in Latin America.

Chapter 2

Historical Contexts and Institutional Reservoirs

2.1 German Jewish immigration to Argentina

Before the 1930s, the presence of Jews from German-speaking lands in Argentina was relatively small in number but institutionally and culturally influential. Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, German Jews settled primarily in Buenos Aires, where they were among the founders of some of the earliest Jewish communal, religious, and philanthropic institutions in the country. Their migration was largely voluntary and motivated by economic opportunity, professional mobility, and the search for civic integration, rather than by persecution. This group tended to embrace a modern, acculturated form of Judaism and maintained strong connections with European cultural models.⁷¹

By the early twentieth century, these long-established German Jewish families had become part of Argentina's Jewish elite, occupying visible roles within communal leadership and broader society. Their experience of migration, marked by relative stability and integration, stood in sharp contrast to the conditions that would define German Jewish immigration after 1933.⁷²

Against this earlier pattern of limited and largely voluntary settlement, Jewish German immigration to Argentina in the 1930s marked a profound rupture. Similarly to the experiences in the United States, Great Britain, and the Land of Israel. South America became a destination for German Jews escaping the degradation of Jewish life under Nazi rule and persecution in Germany. It is estimated that before 1930, 400 German Jewish families lived in Argentina. Between 1933 and 1945, around 45,000 Jewish refugees arrived on Argentine shores, either legally or clandestinely.⁷³ The demographic transformation of the local German Jewish community during the years of Nazi persecution, together with the specific conditions of

⁷¹ Feierstein, *Historia de los judíos argentinos*; Avni, *Argentina y las migraciones judías*; Marion Kaplan, 'Did German Jews Remain German Jews Once They Left Their Homeland?', in *The Oxford Handbook of the Jewish Diaspora*, ed. Hasia R. Diner, Oxford Handbooks (Oxford University Press, 2021).

⁷² Feierstein, *Historia de los judíos argentinos*, 111.

⁷³ Schwarcz, *Y a pesar de todo*, 51. Different sources estimate the number between 40 and 45 thousand Jewish German refugees in that period. Schwarcz explains that the former, registered by the A.F.I. (Asociación Filantrópica Israelita or *Hilfsverein deutschsprechender Juden*) is probably the most accurate because it contemplates the number of German Jews who arrived directly and indirectly (through the borders), legally and illegally. I would like to thank Marcia Ras for calling my attention that many times they entered legally but irregularly, in terms of immigration laws. Which means that they were not clandestine immigrants in the strict sense of the word. They would regularize their situation many years after their arrival.

emigration, led to a self-distinction between two groups: those who arrived before 1933, who often referred to themselves as *Alteingesessenen* (old residents), and *die Emigranten* (emigrants), who fled Nazism in large numbers.⁷⁴

Long before the arrival of German Jewish refugees in the 1930s, Argentina had developed significant experience in absorbing displaced Jewish populations through a dense network of philanthropic and communal organizations. One such institution was the Jewish Colonization Association, founded by Baron Maurice de Hirsch (Moritz Freiherr von Hirsch auf Gereuth, 1831–1896) and his wife Clara Bischoffsheim (1833–1899) in 1891, after their only son, Lucien, died at the age of thirty. The JCA acquired land to sell at low prices to Jews fleeing Eastern Europe, promoting a utopian return to agricultural life. The JCA provided plots of land, tools, and transportation to colonies mostly established in Entre Ríos, Santa Fe, and Buenos Aires. Immigrants were given time to repay the JCA and develop their farms and cooperatives. As Liliana Feierstein notes, Baron Hirsch expressed: “I have lost my son but not my heir; humanity is my heir.” Hirsch financed the entire enterprise, and Feierstein considers this initiative part of a “German-Jewish legacy.”⁷⁵

Unlike all other Jewish rural colonies of the JCA in Argentina, where Yiddish was commonly spoken, Avigdor emerged as a predominantly German-speaking settlement in 1936. It is estimated that around 180 families arrived in Avigdor between 1936 and 1939, with others settling in Alcaraz, Rivera, Palacios, and Moisesville, in the provinces of Entre Ríos, Santa Fe, and Buenos Aires. German was spoken in everyday life and transmitted within the community, including to the local population. The immigrants built a synagogue in 1937, which remains active to this day.⁷⁶ Owing to their shared origins, the German Jews of Avigdor maintained close ties with relatives in Buenos Aires.⁷⁷ Children were often sent to spend extended periods in the colony—during summers or early childhood—while their parents

⁷⁴Schwarcz, *Y a pesar de todo*, 62.

⁷⁵ Feierstein, ‘In the Land of Vitzliputzli’, 168.

⁷⁶ Carmen Rosenblatt explains that explains that, in addition to the synagogue built in the town, three additional synagogues were established for groups living in the surrounding countryside, as families did not travel on Shabbat or Jewish holidays and the distance made it impossible to attend services in the central synagogue. As she notes: “una sinagoga en el pueblo y tres más para los grupos en el campo, ya que no viajaban en Shabat y Festividades Judías y les quedaba demasiado lejos venir a ésta. Carmen Rosenblatt, *Historia de Colonia Avigdor*, 2018, 3.

⁷⁷ Juan Stern and ‘Tito’ Levy Wolff, ‘Interview 3’, interview by Tamara Kohn, 17 July 2024, Digital Video, NCI-Emanu El.

remained in the city for work, sustaining strong familial and cultural links between rural and urban settings.⁷⁸

In contrast to the rural settlements promoted by the JCA, Buenos Aires became the primary urban destination for German Jews arriving in Argentina during the 1930s. One of the key institutions that emerged in response to this migratory context was the *Hilfsverein deutschsprechender Juden*, later known as the Asociación Filantrópica Israelita (AFI), founded in 1933 by long-established German Jews. Created specifically to assist refugees fleeing Nazi persecution, the organization provided support upon arrival and facilitated access to housing, employment, and language instruction, becoming a central component of the urban infrastructure that sustained German Jewish life in exile.⁷⁹

Between 1939 and 1944, four new synagogues were established in Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area—three in the Belgrano neighborhood and one in Florida. All were founded by Jews exiled from Germany after the rise of Nazism. These congregations began as independent minyanim meeting in temporary apartments before constructing their synagogues.

Contemporary testimonies highlight the internal diversity of these early prayer groups. Rabbi Hanns Harf later recalled that the first minyan organized for the High Holidays in 1939 brought together German Jewish refugees from different cities, each accustomed to distinct local liturgical traditions. Initial services, held in rented rooms in Buenos Aires, soon revealed tensions between those who wished to pray according to the customs of Hamburg, Munich, Berlin, and other places of origin—differences that ultimately shaped both the fragmentation and the institutional development of German Jewish congregational life in the city.⁸⁰

Both Orthodox and Liberal German Jews went on to build spaces of worship that continued the liturgical traditions of their places of origin. Many immigrants were able to bring ritual objects and books with them, contributing to the migration of ideas, visual culture, and material traditions. Some items remained in private homes, while others were given to newly founded synagogues.

The continuity of centuries-old traditions is still evident in the ceremonial art and material culture preserved by many of these institutions, particularly in practices rooted in

⁷⁸ Feierstein, 'In the Land of Vitzliputzli', fn 28..

⁷⁹ For the institutional history of the Hilfsverein deutschsprechender Juden (Asociación Filantrópica Argentina), see Pedro N. Sadler, 'Asociación Filantrópica Israelita', *Cuadernos del Archivo* 5/6 (2019): 186–98.

⁸⁰ Wolff, *Nueva Comunidad Israelita. 50º Aniversario.*, 48.

German Jewish religious culture. In both Buenos Aires and Avigdor, synagogues functioned as key spaces for the continuation of Jewish life in Argentina. In addition to integrating into local society and cultural life, German Jews maintained connections to German culture through religious and secular institutions. Schools, synagogues, social clubs, and German-language newspapers enabled contact with other German immigrants—Jewish and non-Jewish alike—and kept the community informed about local and international events in a familiar language.⁸¹

Today, items brought from Germany are preserved by families and institutions as “objects of memory.” As physical artifacts, these items establish a tangible connection to the world left behind, anchoring individual and collective remembrance in material form. Personal objects were often donated to synagogues, archives, or communal repositories, resulting in collections that combine objects of German origin with others produced in Argentina, North America, or Israel. The study of these assemblages reveals how material culture has become a central medium through which narratives of persecution, survival, migration, and continuity are constructed and transmitted across generations.

However, the history of German Judaica in Argentina is not limited to the objects that arrived with refugees. In the aftermath of the Holocaust, a new and significant chapter began: the distribution of heirless Jewish property through the efforts of the JCR, an initiative coordinated by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee and Jewish scholars and leaders in Allied-occupied Europe.⁸²

Between 1949 and 1952, Argentina received an estimated 150 ceremonial objects and more than 5,000 books through the JCR. These materials, originally looted by the Nazis and later recovered by the Allies, were considered part of the cultural heritage of destroyed Jewish communities. The redistribution process aimed to place these items in functioning Jewish institutions that could ensure their continued use or preservation. In Argentina, however, they were not primarily delivered to the newly founded German-speaking congregations, which might be considered the natural heirs of the German Jewish communities from where many items were looted. Instead, they were entrusted to long-established institutions—such as the Instituto Judío de Investigaciones (IWO)—that had the organizational infrastructure to receive, catalogue, and care for them. Without any specific categorization, by community of

⁸¹ For a full description and map of all the network of institutions related to the German Jewry in Buenos Aires see Schwarcz, *Ya pesar de todo*, 129–63.

⁸² See Herman, ‘Hashavat Avedah’.

origin, the looted Judaica sent by the JCR was seen as a whole group of ceremonial art and books that had belonged to the destroyed communities of Europe. This helps explain why there was no intent to locally distribute the objects according to specific places of origin, even though a large part of the items had most likely belonged to German Jewish communities.⁸³

2.2 Reservoirs of German Judaica in Argentina

This layered history complicates the notion of “German Judaica” in Argentina. Some objects associated with German Jewish traditions were brought directly by refugees; others arrived through institutional redistribution; still others entered collections through donation or inheritance. Their origins may lie in Germany, Bohemia, Alsace, or even Poland, yet they now coexist in local Argentine contexts, shaping narratives of continuity, rupture, and remembrance. One particularly revealing case is that of the IWO. After the AMIA bombing in 1994, which destroyed much of the institution’s archive and museum holdings, recovered ceremonial objects—now categorized internally as “rescued twice”—were imbued with an additional layer of symbolic significance.⁸⁴

Yet even today, these materials do not always constitute formal collections. In many cases, they remain in active use or are informally stored, preserved not through institutional cataloging but through their continued presence in daily ritual life. The term *reservoirs*, in this context, acknowledges this in-between status: living, community-embedded assemblages of Judaica rather than systematically curated museum holdings.⁸⁵ These reservoirs include objects brought by immigrants, others made locally to preserve ritual continuity, and still others acquired later through donation. Unlike formal collections, which are typically governed by professional museological standards, reservoirs operate according to a different logic—often pragmatic and ad hoc—shaped by the need to safeguard Jewish material culture within communal life.

⁸³ See JCR, Inc., *World Distribution of Books, 1 July 1949–31 January 1952* (July 1952), Geneva IV/32/1B, JDC Archives, Jerusalem. The document notes that a portion of the 5,053 books sent to Argentina (marked with footnote “r”) included volumes originating from the library of the Jewish Community of Berlin.

⁸⁴ Silvia Hansman, ‘Consulta’, personal communication, 4 August 2021; Clarin Editorial, ‘Rescate de 60 Mil Libros Históricos de Los Escombros de La AMIA’, *Clarín* (Buenos Aires, Argentina), 15 July 2019, https://www.clarin.com/cultura/rescate-60-mil-libros-historicos-escombros-amia_0_G0R84IUC7.html.

⁸⁵ The term *reservoir* is used here in its metaphorical sense to describe an accumulated source of memory, meaning, or cultural value. Rather than implying a formal or curated collection, *reservoir* conveys the idea of a living, community-embedded assemblage of ritual objects and books that preserve and transmit Jewish German heritage in Argentina through ongoing use, donation, and remembrance.

Carol Duncan has described the “ritual structure” of the museum as a space in which meaning is produced through repeated gestures, embodied knowledge, and symbolic framing, rather than through classification alone.⁸⁶ It is precisely within such ritual structures—whether formal or informal—that the accumulation of objects has the potential to transform into an institutional collection, or, as proposed here, to function as a living reservoir of meaning prior to (or outside of) museological formalization.

As the communities founded by German Jewish refugees settled and developed, the objects they brought with them, alongside those crafted locally to maintain ritual and cultural continuity, gradually accumulated within communal institutions. These collections were shaped over several decades and across generations through donation, inheritance, and continued ritual use. The collections that have survived reflect a long process of preservation, reinterpretation, and memorialization.

Many of the ritual objects and books that arrived in Argentina through both refugee migration and postwar redistribution ultimately found a home within the custody of the Jewish community. Over time, these objects came to be safeguarded not only by synagogues and congregations, but also by cultural, educational, and archival institutions that were created to preserve Jewish heritage and, later, to study, commemorate, and teach about the Holocaust. As a result, practices of preservation and custodianship assumed different institutional forms, giving rise to a range of reservoirs and collections through which Jewish material culture has been conserved and interpreted.

This diversity of custodial contexts is central to the present study. The objects examined here did not enter collections simultaneously, nor under the same historical circumstances or intentions. Some were preserved as part of lived ritual continuity; others were incorporated into institutional holdings as fragments of a destroyed European Jewish world; still others became pedagogical tools within emerging frameworks of Holocaust memory. Understanding how each of these collections came into being, and how objects moved into the situations in which they are encountered today, is therefore essential to interpreting the symbolic meanings that these ritual artifacts have acquired over time. It is precisely through these layered processes of use, preservation, and reinterpretation that German Judaica in Argentina has come to function as a powerful medium of memory, shaped by varied histories of displacement, loss, and communal care.

⁸⁶ Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums*, n.d., 7–14.

This section presents the three main communal reservoirs of German Judaica studied in this dissertation: NCI-Emanu El, Benei Tikva, and Colonia Avigdor; alongside three institutional collections: IWO, the Library of the Rabbinical Seminary in Buenos Aires, and the Buenos Aires Holocaust Museum. Each represents a distinct trajectory in the preservation, transformation, and memorialization of German Jewish ceremonial objects in Argentina.

2.2.1 Leo Baeck Synagogue, Benei Tikva congregation

The origins

Culto Israelita de Belgrano was founded by Rabbi Fritz Leopold Steinthal (Berlin, 1889-Buenos Aires, 1969) in the neighborhood of Belgrano, in the City of Buenos Aires in 1939. Steinthal was born in Berlin and ordained as a Rabbi at the *Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums* in that city. During his training, he became the disciple and close friend of Rabbi Leo Baeck. In World War I he was a chaplain on the French front and was awarded an Iron Cross. After the War, he assisted Rabbi Philipp Bloch, in Posen, until the city passed into the hands of Poland. Steinthal had to abandon it forcibly.⁸⁷ Back in Germany, Steinthal settled in Münster, where he officiated as the rabbi of Münster's Jewish community and developed an important teaching and spiritual role. However, this community was destroyed during the Nazi era. The synagogue located in Klosterstraße was burnt on the night of the pogrom of Kristallnacht, on November 9th, 1938. Steinthal was finally expelled from Germany. He left for Buenos Aires on December 8th, 1938.⁸⁸

A few months after his arrival, a group of Jews from Germany who lived in Buenos Aires, expressed to Steinthal the need for a new liberal congregation, as an alternative to the orthodox congregation of Ajdut Israel, located in Belgrano.⁸⁹ After the approval of the World Union of Progressive Judaism from London, and a special speech by Leo Baeck in July 1939, the congregation was founded as Culto Israelita de Belgrano. Its synagogue, named after Rabbi Leo Baeck, was finally built in Vidal st. in 1944.

The community grew. First joined German families that continued to arrive in Argentina during the war years and afterward. According to one old synagogue member, Juan

⁸⁷ Skorka, *70 aniversario de Benei Tikva: una gesta por la fe.*, 18–19.

⁸⁸ Letter from Herman Berlak to F. L. Steinthal, Dec. 8th, 1938, reproduced and translated in Skorka, *70 aniversario de Benei Tikva: una gesta por la fe.*, 21.

⁸⁹ Juan Caro, “Testigo de la historia” in Skorka, *70 aniversario de Benei Tikva: una gesta por la fe.*, 28.

Caro, “At that time it was of great help, for the Jews who had emigrated from Central Europe, that religious services were held in Hebrew and German since we spoke German better than Spanish.”⁹⁰ In the following decades, the congregation divided and then merged back to one community. They renovated the synagogue building, changed its name to Benei Tikva in 1981, and affiliated with the conservative movement. This congregation continues to be an active community in Belgrano.⁹¹ Certain German visual and material traditions that were transmitted from one generation to the next can be found in the Leo Baeck synagogue today. Also, the documentation kept from different periods supports the significance given to the German origin of the congregation and Holocaust memory.

The Leo Baeck synagogue preserves a heterogeneous body of Judaica that entered the congregation through multiple channels: objects brought by immigrants from Europe, later donations by members, and items acquired in the postwar decades both locally and abroad. These materials include Torah scrolls, metal ornaments, textiles, and books, some of which remain in active ritual use while others are stored within the synagogue complex. Documentation related to these objects is uneven and fragmentary, consisting of commemorative publications, internal records, inscriptions, and oral testimony. Together, they form a living communal reservoir rather than a formally constituted collection.

The Judaica reservoir

The Leo Baeck synagogue preserves a diverse reservoir of Jewish ceremonial objects, books, and documents accumulated over several decades through migration, donation, inheritance, and continued ritual use. These materials include Torah scrolls and their ornaments, ritual textiles such as mantles and binders, liturgical objects used in daily and festive worship, as well as books, archival documents, and photographs related to the history of the congregation. Some objects were brought to Argentina by the immigrants, while others were produced locally or acquired in later periods, reflecting both continuity and adaptation in ritual practice.

Although these materials form part of a shared environment, they can be broadly understood as encompassing several overlapping groups: Torah scrolls and their ornaments in active use, ritual textiles and domestic ceremonial objects, and books and archival materials that document the intellectual and institutional life of the community. Unlike the more

⁹⁰ Juan Caro, “Testigo de la historia,” p. 28.

⁹¹ “Hijos de la Esperanza” in Skorka, *70 aniversario de Benei Tikva: una gesta por la fe.*, 13..

differentiated structure that will be observed in NCI, these categories are not spatially or institutionally separated, but coexist within the same functional spaces of the synagogue.

As in other congregations founded by German Jews, many of these objects remain in active use and were not originally intended to form a formal collection. Their preservation has been shaped by the rhythms of communal life rather than by museological frameworks, resulting in a reservoir that combines ritual continuity with accumulated layers of historical meaning.

Within this reservoir, the Torah Ark constitutes a central point of concentration for ceremonial objects. Multiple Torah scrolls are accompanied by finials, shields, pointers, mantles, and wimpels, which are used interchangeably in the course of ritual practice. Broken or incomplete elements are preserved rather than discarded, often stored beneath the Ark in accordance with halakhic norms, contributing to the accumulation of both functional and fragmentary material over time.

The question of provenance further reveals the heterogeneous nature of this corpus. While communal memory frequently associates many objects with their German origins, closer examination shows that nineteenth-century European pieces coexist with objects crafted in Argentina, as well as items acquired in later decades from Israel and the United States. This layered composition reflects not only the migration of objects, but also ongoing processes of acquisition, replacement, and adaptation necessary for the continuation of ritual life, while altogether embodying a communal memory of displacement.

Certain object groups articulate particularly strong continuities with German-Jewish traditions. Torah binders (wimpels), whether brought from Europe or produced locally for children born in Buenos Aires, extend a specifically German lifecycle practice into the diasporic context. At the same time, the incorporation of domestic ritual forms into the synagogue, such as the transformation of a *shabboslamp* into the Eternal Light, demonstrates processes of reinterpretation through which German-Jewish material culture is embedded into the communal space. From the metal pieces, especially a number of Torah shields and pointers, are clearly from Germany and have some parallel examples in museum collections around the world, as it will be discussed further in the next chapter.

Alongside ritual objects, the presence of books, documents, and photographs introduces an additional archival dimension, linking ceremonial practice to the intellectual background of the German-speaking community and to the institutional history of the congregation. Their coexistence with liturgical objects reinforces the hybrid character of the reservoir, situated between ritual use, documentation, and memory.

In early 2024, the community joined a project organized by the National Library of Israel and the Central Archive for the History of the Jewish People, that seeks to preserve the archive of the community, protecting its historical documents and institutional history. This is not the case of a community creating a museum properly, but in fact the beginning of cultural heritage preservation.

Unlike other cases that will be discussed in this chapter, Benei Tikva has not developed a formal exhibition space or a clearly defined institutional collection. Although there were earlier intentions to establish a museum within the congregation, these were not fully realized, and the objects remain embedded within the everyday life of the synagogue.

2.2.2 Nueva Comunidad Israelita (NCI), Chaim Weizmann Synagogue.

The Origins

Nueva Comunidad Israelita, or NCI, was founded almost simultaneously with Culto Israelita de Belgrano, in the same neighborhood and only about ten blocks away from each other. Its emergence immediately generated public criticism from sectors of the established Jewish leadership, who viewed the creation of a separate German-speaking congregation as unnecessary and divisive.⁹² However, by its founders it was seen as the continuation of a project that began in Germany and has two foundational narratives, both strongly shaped by Holocaust memory, which are relevant for understanding the later creation of Argentina's first and only Jewish-German museum.⁹³

The origin of this congregation is linked to the large wave of Jewish emigration from Germany as a result of the degradation of Jewish life after the rise of nazism. The idea of creating a new community outside Germany emerged around 1935 in Berlin, even before Buenos Aires was considered a suitable destination. It was a project developed by the members of a Jewish youth movement called "The Ring" that organized a collective migration project to establish a communal home where young Jews could preserve their values and adapt

⁹² 'De semana en semana', *Mundo Israelita* (Buenos Aires), 28 September 1940, Library of the Jewish Museum of Buenos Aires..

⁹³ This is how the exhibition was described from the outset: as "a museum." I do not engage here with the definition of museums as discussed in museum studies; rather, what matters in this context is how the community itself perceived and understood this collection.

to a new context.⁹⁴ This group, later known in Argentina as the Grupo Riegner, was led by Günter Friedländer and Kurt Julius Riegner, both active in Jewish institutions in Berlin. The movement included young men and women, and aimed to form a temporary home abroad—neither in Palestine, due to British immigration restrictions, nor in rural colonies, which did not suit their urban, cultural orientation.⁹⁵

The migration process was difficult and emotionally charged. Parents often resisted allowing their children to emigrate alone, and many never saw their families again, and applicants had to demonstrate professional training. After initial failed migration attempts to Brazil, due to tightening immigration restrictions, Argentina was chosen as their final destination. Three contingents successfully made the journey. The first left Germany in September 1937, and arrived in Buenos Aires in January 1938. The second departed in October 1938, stopping in Rio de Janeiro on November 10—when the group learned about the Kristallnacht pogrom—before continuing to Argentina. The third, and last group, arrived in April 1939. The latter included the arrival of the group leader Rabbi Günter Friedländer and Rabbi Hanns Harf with his wife Suse Hallenstein, among others.

This first group established a shared household in Buenos Aires, bringing with them personal items such as bedding, kitchen utensils, and dishes.⁹⁶ Although ritual objects are not specifically mentioned in the surviving documentation, it is likely that some were brought over in these early contingents. One of the members of this first group was Enrique Hamburger, whose personal objects and documents appear both among the material identified in the NCI collection and in the holdings of the Buenos Aires Holocaust Museum, which preserves his entire personal archive.

The Riegner group, now named after Kurt Julius Riegner, conducted different cultural and religious activities in their communal residency. The group's first formal religious service was held on October 27, 1939, in a hall belonging to the Sociedad Española de Socorros

⁹⁴ Kurt Julius Riegner, 'Un Proyecto Migratorio Judeo-Alemán Cincuenta Años Después: El "Grupo Riegner" En La Argentina (1938/88)', Original typed manuscript, Buenos Aires, 1988, 1. Find the original manuscript in: Buenos Aires Holocaust Museum.

⁹⁵The Ring was affiliated with the Bund deutsch-jüdischer Jugend (BDJJ), a federation of Jewish youth groups founded in 1933, which itself was supported by the Central-Verein deutscher Staatsbürger jüdischen Glaubens (CV). Although the BDJJ had a non-Zionist orientation, the Ring attempted to distance itself in 1936 because of its more positive attitude toward Palestine. As persecution intensified, the group operated clandestinely until 1939, when Friedländer emigrated to Argentina with the final cohort. See Riegner, 'Un Proyecto Migratorio Judeo-Alemán Cincuenta Años Después: El "Grupo Riegner" En La Argentina (1938/88)'.

⁹⁶Riegner, 'Un Proyecto Migratorio Judeo-Alemán Cincuenta Años Después: El "Grupo Riegner" En La Argentina (1938/88)', 9–10.

Mutuos: they were tasked with organizing High Holiday services for the growing refugee population in Belgrano. At this instance, the services were held together with Rabbi Steinthal, who had the support of the Asociación Filantrópica Israelita or *Hilfsverein deutschsprechender Juden*.

Inspired by their communal ethos, Harf and Friedländer initiated the foundation of what would become the Nueva Comunidad Israelita (NCI). Thus, two German-Jewish communities emerged nearly simultaneously in Belgrano, each reflecting different but complementary aspects of the exile experience. According to the 50th anniversary publication of NCI, it was formed with the promise that for every destroyed community, a new one would be built. Shortly thereafter, they rented a former yerba mate warehouse on Loreto 2161, transforming it into their community headquarters. Rabbi Harf and his family lived on the upper floor, while the ground floor hosted religious services and communal gatherings.

Rabbi Hanns Harf was born in Mönchengladbach in 1914. He studied Law in Berlin and was a student at the Conservative Rabbinical Seminary on the eve of World War II. During the Novemberpogrom of 1938, he was arrested and sent to a concentration camp while searching for a fellow student who had been detained that night. This experience marked a turning point in his life. Together with his rabbinical colleagues, Harf committed to founding a Jewish institution for each murdered Jew if they survived.⁹⁷

After his release, and aided by his fiancée Suse Hallenstein, Harf married, was ordained as a rabbi, and fled Germany with his wife after being warned of an imminent Gestapo summons. He arrived in Buenos Aires in 1939 with few belongings but went on to fulfill his vow by founding several Jewish institutions, beginning with NCI in Belgrano.

On August 19, 1940, the “Comité Pro Templo” adopted the name Nueva Comunidad Israelita, a designation that initially caused confusion among established Jewish communities but articulated a powerful vision: to rebuild Jewish communal life from the ruins of destruction.⁹⁸

⁹⁷ Harf, ‘Interview 14983’.

⁹⁸ In the beginning a lot of criticism of the name of this community because it had a name of the “New Community”, which sparked a lot of controversy with older Jewish community members in Buenos Aires and their central institutions. Even within the German Jews of Belgrano because Steinthal had already created a new congregation in the neighborhood with similar characteristics. See fn. 86

As Rabbi Harf later explained, NCI was created with “the dual aim of creating links with the past and ensuring the Jewish future of its members.”⁹⁹ The very idea of forming Jewish German congregations in the diaspora was born of a solemn vow.¹⁰⁰ A communal legend even holds that Harf brought symbolic stones from a destroyed synagogue in Berlin to Argentina, intending to lay them as a moral foundation for the new synagogue. While this symbolic act remains unconfirmed, it encapsulates the community’s ethos of resilience.¹⁰¹

NCI’s early identity was shaped by a culturally German-Jewish, middle-class background. Its members—many of whom were professionals, intellectuals, and liberal Jews—were committed to Jewish communal life. From the outset, education was central: from its first year, the community provided classes in Hebrew, Jewish history, and traditions to children, while many were also enrolled at the Colegio Pestalozzi, a progressive German school in Buenos Aires, that shared the community’s values, especially the opposition to Nazi ideology. It provided a safe place for the newly arrived Jews who wanted to educate their children in a German secular school in Buenos Aires.¹⁰²

Similarly to Culto Israelita de Belgrano, religious services in NCI were initially held in German. Rabbi Harf’s sermons in the early years were delivered in German too, later transitioning to Spanish as new generations emerged. As Ambassador Dr. Herbert Limmer noted in 1988, he admired how the German Jews of Argentina had maintained their cultural ties while also distinguishing between the Germany of their upbringing and the Nazi regime that drove them into exile.¹⁰³

By 1950, the community had acquired a plot of land on Arcos Street in Belgrano. In 1955, it inaugurated the Chaim Weizmann Synagogue, designed by Austrian architect Dr.

⁹⁹ Hanns Harf, ‘Del Pasado y Del Presente de NCI’, in *Nueva Comunidad Israelita. 50º Aniversario.*, ed. Martha Wolff (Buenos Aires, 1988).

¹⁰⁰ Bursztein, ‘The Stones Cast by the Oppressors Became the Keystone’.

¹⁰¹ On August 16, 2024, a group gathered to remove the stones located beneath the Torah Ark. I was present during the opening; instead of stones, a time capsule was discovered. This finding will be discussed later in the dissertation. See Malena Nazareth Martos, ‘El increíble hallazgo de una cápsula del tiempo de casi 70 años en una sinagoga porteña’, Sociedad, *Clarín* (Buenos Aires), 19 April 2025, https://www.clarin.com/sociedad/increible-hallazgo-capsula-tiempo-70-anos-sinagoga-portena_0_EK11E8msxj.html.

¹⁰² Laura Schenquer and Liliana Judith Mayer, ‘Europe Outside Europe: Developing a German Jewish Citizenship in Argentina. The Case of the Pestalozzi Schule’, in *Pragmatics of Social and Cultural Capital*, Wydanie 1, ed. Hubert Kotarski (Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Rzeszowskiego, 2015).

¹⁰³ Werner Finkelstein, ‘Ejemplo de La Fuerza y El Coraje Vital de Una Comunidad.’, in *Nueva Comunidad Israelita. 50º Aniversario.*, ed. Martha Wolff (Buenos Aires, 1988).

Jonas Mond (Vienna, 1906-Buenos Aires, 1963). The synagogue, named after the recently founded State of Israel's first president, quickly became a symbolic anchor of the community. Just two years later, in 1957, a time capsule was buried beneath the Torah Ark, containing community documents in Spanish and German, Argentine coins, fourteen Israeli, and one Argentine postage stamps.

A vivid image of this spirit was articulated by Rabbi Harf himself: "We are proud that the community gave room to fathers, sons, and grandchildren who did not just want to survive, but to live Jewishly because they felt, and still feel, decisively: 'Y belong to Judaism,' and put it into practice in a community that embodies that vision."¹⁰⁴

In 1944, a new branch was opened in Florida, Vicente López, under the direction of Rabbi Friedländer. Originally part of NCI, it eventually became an independent community in 1956, named Lamroth Hakol. In parallel, another group of 45 immigrants established a branch in Villa Ballester in 1940, which formally joined NCI in 1946. Both branches demonstrate the rapid expansion and reach of the original NCI vision.

In 2000, NCI merged with Congregación Emanu El, a smaller liberal synagogue founded in 1965 by Shoah survivor Thomas Blumengrund and others. Under the leadership of Rabbi Sergio Bergman, the combined community established the Arlene Fern School in the 1990s and eventually relocated to a new campus—Centro Comunitario Judaica Belgrano—in 2020. This new campus houses the new synagogue, school, and a permanent exhibition dedicated to the history and legacy of German-speaking Jewish immigration to Argentina.

From reservoir to museum

Naturally, NCI had a number of Torah scrolls with ornaments and other Judaica items in the synagogue, in addition to documents, books and papers related to the community's history. Similarly to Benei Tikva, there are documents and oral testimonies that account the presence of different items brought from Germany, including a small Torah Scroll rescued by Rabbi Hanns Harf, during the night of the Kristallnacht pogrom in 1938. Yet, also similarly to the other case of study, the material remains in the present do not always match the stories told by the congregation's oldest members.

In 1993 the Nueva Comunidad Israelita created what they called a "Museum for the Preservation of German-Jewish Heritage," under the initiative of Rabbi Angel Kreiman, who

¹⁰⁴ Harf, 'Del Pasado y Del Presente de NCI', 14.

found support from the community members and funding from the Embassy of the Federal Republic of Germany in Buenos Aires.¹⁰⁵

An article by Marion Kaufmann, a member of the congregation, described, that year, how the project emerged from Kreiman's initiative and the collaborative work of NCI members who were asked to contribute objects inherited from parents and grandparents, as well as items they had brought with them when emigrating to Argentina.¹⁰⁶ The museum was installed in what had previously been a corridor and opened with seven showcases, carpeting, curtains, and a small but carefully assembled collection.

The objects exhibited at the time, represented both the history of German-speaking Jews and the ritual life. Kaufmann listed prayer books in German and Hebrew, Kiddush cups, Shabbat and Purim objects, menorahs, Hanukkah lamps (including travel-size pieces), domestic and synagogue ritual items, maps, photographs, Torah ornaments, and even travel-sized Torah scrolls. Some objects were brought by members; others were donated or lent. A particularly striking group consisted of items rescued from synagogues and cemeteries destroyed during the Shoah, including the Torah scroll saved by Rabbi Hanns Harf.¹⁰⁷

Another vitrine was dedicated to the early history of the Nueva Comunidad Israelita, including a letter from Vera Waitzman, the wife of Israel's first president, thanking the community for naming the synagogue after her husband; and a document from 1879 granting the title of Judge to a Jewish lawyer under Emperor Wilhelm. The museum also included a section with testimonies and artifacts from concentration camps.¹⁰⁸

Kaufmann noted that, over time, visits from local schoolchildren revealed the museum's pedagogical value. Many of these students—Argentine-born and often unfamiliar with the European histories of their own families—reacted emotionally to specific objects, which sometimes triggered memories, family stories, or previously abstract notions of Jewish life before the Holocaust.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁵ Marion Kaufmann, 'Um Ein Ewiges Zeugnis Abzulegen: "Museum Zur Erhaltung Des Deutsch-Jüdischen Kulturgutes" in Buenos Aires Eröffnet', *Allgemeine Jüdische Wochenzeitung* (Düsseldorf), 13 May 1993, 5, Archivo de la Nueva Comunidad Israelita (NCI), Buenos Aires.

¹⁰⁶ Marion Kaufmann, 'La Historia Del Museo Más Pequeño Del Mundo', *Revisa Aniversario NCI*, 1994, 20–21.

¹⁰⁷ Kaufmann, 'La Historia Del Museo Más Pequeño Del Mundo', 20–21.

¹⁰⁸ Kaufmann, 'La Historia Del Museo Más Pequeño Del Mundo', 20–21.

¹⁰⁹ Kaufmann, 'La Historia Del Museo Más Pequeño Del Mundo', 20–21.

As seen in the case of Benei Tikva, written testimonies from decades ago, do not always match the on-site reality in the present. Researching and documenting changing reservoirs of artifacts within living communities—through inventories, spatial mapping, or archival methodologies—is not the primary aim of these congregations.

What is clear is that from the beginning there was an intention of preserving a memory, and using ceremonial art and other kind of documents, not only found today, but already mentioned in Kaufmann's article cited above, more related to German identity, Jewish experience and even to the Holocaust, rather than to the religious practices continued to the present.

This early attempt to formalize what had long been an informal reservoir of communal objects, the 1993 initiative was also a conscious and carefully planned effort to shape a collective collection: the museum's organizers issued a deliberate call for members to donate or lend objects with family histories, transforming personal belongings into shared artifacts of German-Jewish memory and heritage. Yet, as in Benei Tikva, the testimonies recorded in the 1990s do not always correspond to what survives today. In NCI, even with the explicit intention to create a museum rooted in German-Jewish memory and supported by external funding, the primary aim was not the implementation of professional museological standards but the creation of a space that served the community—particularly a second generation of Argentine-born youth seeking a bridge to the past.

The synagogue, new permanent exhibition

The 1993 project reflects a clear desire to preserve and transmit memory. The objects gathered—ritual implements, domestic Judaica, documents, and personal artifacts—expressed the community's understanding of its German-Jewish origins, its migration experience, and the impact of the Holocaust. Over time, these materials became not only remnants of a destroyed European world but curated objets de mémoire that embodied resilience and continuity in diaspora.

Today, the ensemble has changed considerably, shaped by the passage of time, evolving communal needs, and the move to the new complex at Judaica Belgrano.¹¹⁰ Understanding this evolution raises central questions for this study: Which objects remained or were returned to families? What was added or lost? How do artifacts now preserved as

¹¹⁰ See images "Fieldwork Documentation" in Appendix III

memorial pieces relate to those still in active ritual use? And to what extent do these materials—and the narratives built around them—continue to reflect the German-Jewish traditions that originally defined the congregation?

The NCI collection today can be divided into two overarching groups: the objects exhibited in the former synagogue on Arcos Street and the ritual objects still in use. According to the general belief of the congregation, many Torah scrolls were brought from Germany, while others were written in Argentina. Opening the new Ark reveals multiple Torah scrolls covered with contemporary mantles, flanked by shields and pointers, with a Torah crown and two pairs of finials displayed on a side table. Below the Ark, broken or incomplete ornaments are stored together with textiles, preserving them in accordance with halakhic norms. Their ornaments—finials, shields, pointers, crowns, and mantles—are central to the Judaica reservoir. However, unlike Benei Tikva, most of NCI's metalwork is not of German origin. Many pieces were acquired in the postwar decades, brought from Israel or the United States. One Torah crown, for instance, bears an inscription indicating that it was donated by the Lamroth Hakol community to NCI on the occasion of its 50th anniversary. Of the two pairs of finials, one in particular, was certainly crafted in Argentina by a German-Jewish silversmith, himself a refugee, whose story is recorded in the community's 50th-anniversary publication.¹¹¹ Although the pieces do not follow German prototypes, their commission from a German silversmith carried symbolic meaning for the community and marked the inauguration of the Chaim Weizmann synagogue.¹¹² These ornaments thus reflect both local craftsmanship and the community's desire to embed German-Jewish identity into its ritual objects.

The second group of artifacts consists of the objects exhibited in the former Arcos Street museum. These were carefully packed for transport and include German prayer books, newspapers, documents and certificates, an Iron Cross, kiddush cups, a seder plate, a challah plate with its knife and cover, a Frankfurt printed Passover cloth, a "10 Kronen" note from Theresienstadt concentration camp, a fork on loan from the Auschwitz Museum, a Hanukkah menorah, and other personal items. Some remained unchanged since 1993; others were added later, while several early items—likely lent for the original museum—were no longer present

¹¹¹ Ruben Hirsch, 'Un Orfebre o Platero Cuenta Sobre Su Profesión', in *Nueva Comunidad Israelita. 50o Aniversario.*, ed. Martha Wolff (Buenos Aires, 1988), 69–70.

¹¹² A 1957 photo album preserved in the synagogue archives documents the inauguration of the Chaim Weizmann Synagogue. In one photograph, the silversmith is shown holding the newly crafted Torah finials and presenting them to members of the community seated around a festive table, underscoring the ceremonial significance of the commission. Archivo de la Nueva Comunidad Israelita (NCI), Buenos Aires.

by 2020. Although Kaufmann originally documented seven vitrines, only three remained by the time the Arcos building was vacated, already indicating a gradual reshaping of the ensemble long before the final relocation.

Alongside these objects, the community holds nineteen boxes of books from Rabbi Hanns Harf's library. Donated by his family, they include religious and secular works in German, Spanish, Hebrew, and English. While the bookshelves remained behind, the volumes were transferred to the new site and now constitute a significant component of the congregation's intellectual heritage.

Although the former museum focused primarily on domestic Judaica, the synagogue proper holds additional ritual objects not considered part of the formal "collection" but crucial to the congregation's memory landscape. These include older Torah mantles, parokhot, wedding canopies, and Ark curtains—mostly produced in Argentina during the second half of the twentieth century.

Throughout this research, further objects emerged during visits to the old Arcos Street synagogue. During 2023, before the building changed owners, community members retrieved previously overlooked artifacts—among them a *shiviti* plaque from the former Emanu El synagogue (incorporated into NCI after the merger), a carved wooden yad inscribed "NCI" and "Shabbat Shalom," and a group of twelve Torah binders whose existence had been forgotten. A final visit in August 2024 led to the discovery of the 1957 time capsule beneath the Ark, containing documents in Spanish and German, coins, and stamps. Name plaques that were attached to the original seats from the upper gallery were also removed to be preserved. These objects now form part of the living collection at Judaica Belgrano Community Center.

Among the most meaningful artifacts in the present collection is a porcelain Shabbat plate inscribed "*Gut Shabbos*," a green velvet challah cover embroidered with silver thread, and a silver challah knife decorated with a Sabbath table complete with braided bread, Kiddush cup, and a hanging Shabboslamp. Although unmarked, the iconography confirms its German origin.¹¹³ A second personal item—a Kiddush cup presented to "Rabbiner Dr. Andorn" in Berlin in 1932—demonstrates another direct link to prewar German synagogal life. The collection also includes a Frankfurt Passover cloth traditionally hung in German-

¹¹³ A knife with a similar handle decoration with a braided pattern. See The Bezalel Narkiss Index of Jewish Art at The Center for Jewish Art, Jerusalem. Link: <https://cja.huji.ac.il/browser.php?mode=set&id=17457>

Jewish homes, and a bench-type Hanukkah lamp resembling late-nineteenth-century models produced by Württembergisches Metallwarenfabrik.

The corpus of wimpels at NCI differs markedly from that of Benei Tikva. Most of NCI's binders date from after 1939, and the names inscribed on them correspond to those found on the synagogue's memorial plaques or on the seating labels of the former Arcos Street building. This indicates that the wimpels were crafted in Buenos Aires for the newborn children of the German-Jewish immigrants—the first generation raised within the congregation—rather than brought from Germany. What was certainly imported from Germany, however, was the deeply rooted Jewish lifecycle tradition associated with the wimpel itself, which continued in Argentina even as the objects were newly made for each birth. Selected examples will be examined in the following chapter.

Taken together, the Judaica items preserved by NCI reflect both the German origins of the congregation and the memory of the Holocaust as a foundational collective experience. Although not all objects are of German manufacture, their association with the refugee generation enabled them to enter a collection that has been shaped and reshaped across decades of communal life. At the same time, the material landscape of NCI reveals a community that did not rely solely on what was brought from Europe: whatever was missing for the continuation of Jewish ritual practice was acquired, commissioned, or produced locally. The resulting ensemble—German artifacts, Argentine-made Torah ornaments, post-migration wimpels, and contemporary ritual textiles—embodies a hybrid identity rooted in the traditions of German Jewry yet firmly anchored in the lived reality of Buenos Aires.

The recent search, identification, and documentation of objects dispersed across the community—including the discoveries at Arcos Street—also played a key role in prompting NCI to renew its permanent exhibition, inaugurated in April 2025. This updated exhibition now incorporates additional chapters of the congregation's history, extending beyond the scope of this section. These broader developments will be discussed later in the thesis. Selected artifacts from the NCI collection will be examined individually and in greater depth in the following chapter.

2.2.3 Colonia Avigdor

While the reservoirs preserved by NCI and Benei Tikva emerged within urban congregational settings in Buenos Aires, German Judaica in Argentina was also shaped by experiences of settlement beyond the city. In rural colonies founded by Jewish immigrants, ritual objects, books, and ceremonial practices were preserved under markedly different material and social

conditions. These contexts produced distinct forms of continuity, loss, and adaptation, expanding the geography of German-Jewish material culture in Argentina beyond the synagogue-centered model. The following section turns to Colonia Avigdor, where German Judaica intersected with rural life, agricultural labor, and communal structures shaped by the JCA.

A parallel and equally revealing chapter unfolded in the agricultural settlements of Entre Ríos, where refugees rebuilt their lives within the framework of the JCA. Founded by Baron Moritz von Hirsch, the JCA supported the immigration of Jewish refugees from Germany during the 1930s. German Jews settled in several already established colonies, leaving material traces that are still visible today—most notably in the presence of Torah binders preserved in synagogues, many of which are now held by local museums. Examples can be found in Moisesville, Villa Domínguez, and Colonia Rivera.

Unlike the urban congregations of NCI and Benei Tikva, German Jews in these rural settings integrated into largely Ashkenazi, usually Yiddish-speaking communities of Eastern European origin. In 1936, however, the JCA created its final colony in Argentina: Colonia Avigdor. Among all rural settlements, Avigdor stands out as a singular case, conceived specifically as an emergency response to the escalating persecution of German Jews under Nazism.¹¹⁴

Colonia Avigdor is a farming settlement located in northern Entre Ríos province, near Bovril, the town that connected the area by rail to the rest of the country until the early 1950s. Initial plans envisioned Avigdor as a colony for the children of early twentieth-century settlers, but the rapidly deteriorating situation in Germany profoundly shifted the priorities of the JCA. Beginning in 1935–36, the JCA reassigned significant parcels of land to Jewish refugees arriving from Württemberg, Baden, Berlin, Hamburg, and other regions of Germany.

As emigration became a matter of daily urgency in Germany, the Jewish press closely followed the shrinking possibilities for refuge worldwide. During the 1930s, in response to the international refugee crisis, many countries closed their borders or imposed severe immigration restrictions, prompting Jewish organizations to seek alternative solutions to enable Jews to leave Germany whenever possible. Jewish newspapers also functioned as key

¹¹⁴ Carmen Rosenblatt, 'Inmigración de judíos perseguidos en Alemania, colonizados en los campos de colonia Avigdor (entre ríos)', *JSapiens La Revista Académica del Seminario Rabínico Latinoamericano* 1, no. 1 (2017), <https://jsapiens.org/index.php/?revistas/ver/123>.

channels of communication between those who remained in Europe and relatives or friends who had already emigrated.

The earliest announcements regarding Avigdor reflected both urgency and cautious optimism. A January 1936 report in the *Jüdische Rundschau* informed its readers that the JCA was preparing new agricultural settlements in Argentina and that “a group of Germany’s younger, agriculturally inclined Jews could soon be established there,” explicitly framed as a response to the tightening anti-Jewish restrictions in the Reich.¹¹⁵ A later article emphasized that the colony was created specifically *für deutsch-jüdische Siedler*, as an emergency measure in the face of escalating persecution and violence in Nazi Germany.¹¹⁶

One early report described the arrival of “zwanzig Familien aus Deutschland,” already designated for settlement in Argentina. The JCA committed to providing not only land but also agricultural equipment and training.¹¹⁷ The tone of these reports emphasized the dual mission of rescue and regeneration: transforming persecuted urban Jews into productive farmers in a land of safety. A 1937 issue of the *Jüdisches Gemeindeblatt für Württemberg* presented Avigdor as a concrete and promising destination for German Jews unable to secure visas elsewhere. It described the colony as part of a broader “agricultural program” that offered stability, communal support, and “the chance to rebuild one’s life with dignity.”¹¹⁸ Similar enthusiasm appears in *Der Schild* on 3 December 1937, published by the *Reichsbund Jüdischer Frontsoldaten*, which underscored the importance of Avigdor for war veterans whose social status was rapidly eroded under Nazi racial laws.¹¹⁹ Migration intensified in 1938–39. The JCA’s own organs in Buenos Aires repeatedly referenced the steady arrival of German Jews. In an edition of *Mitteilungsblatt* and in several issues of *Filantropía*—the monthly publication of the AFI, the humanitarian framework of the colonization effort is explicit.¹²⁰ One *Filantropía* report from late 1939 notes that despite wartime difficulties,

¹¹⁵ ‘20 Familien für Argentinien. Ansiedlung durch die Ica’, *Jüdische Rundschau* (Berlin), 10 January 1936, 2.

¹¹⁶ ‘Jüdische Pioniere in Argentinischen Kolonien’, *Jüdisches Gemeindeblatt Für Die Israelitischen Gemeinden in Württemberg* (Stuttgart), 16 October 1937, 1.

¹¹⁷ ‘Ansiedlung deutscher Juden durch ICA’, *Die Stimme. Jüdische Zeitung* (Vienna), 28 July 1936.

¹¹⁸ *Jüdisches Gemeindeblatt Für Die Israelitischen Gemeinden in Württemberg*, ‘Jüdische Pioniere in Argentinischen Kolonien’.

¹¹⁹ Bernh Plaut, ‘Kameraden Aus Südamerika’, *Der Schild. Organ Des Reichsbundes Jüdischer Frontsoldaten* (Berlin), 12 March 1937.

¹²⁰ Hilfsverein deutschsprechender Juden, ‘Monat Der Trauer’, *Mitteilungsblatt Des Hilfsvereins Deutschsprechender Juden* (Buenos Aires) 5, no. 56 (1938). *Mitteilungsblatt* (November 1938)

“immigration into Argentina has not come to a standstill” and that many German Jews were able to reach the country thanks to networks of relatives and communal assistance.¹²¹

These local reports confirm that Avigdor was not an accidental settlement: it was a planned humanitarian project of agricultural reconstruction intended to provide German Jews with long-term security, productive occupation, and communal belonging.

Between approximately 1936 and 1941, around 70 to 80 German-Jewish families settled in Avigdor.¹²² They arrived in successive waves: early settlers in 1936–37 who had anticipated expulsion; families who managed to leave Germany after the Nuremberg Laws; refugees who escaped in the wake of the Kristallnacht pogrom; and a final group that reached Argentina once the war had begun, often through complex and costly travel arrangements.

The 1939 *Filantropía* reports the difficulties German Jews faced during this period: the disruption of shipping routes, prohibitive ticket prices, and limitations on the transfer of funds. Yet the articles stress that those who could still leave Germany “took all hardships willingly,” seeing Argentina as one of the few viable refuges.¹²³ The colony thus emerged during an unprecedented historical juncture: just as German Jewry was being violently dismantled, the JCA created a space in which its members could begin again.

By 1937, the colony was already functioning, though still in precarious circumstances. In a letter published in *Der Schild*, dated October 1937, Bernh. Plaut—one of the settlers—offered a rare first-person account of daily life in Avigdor. Writing as “a Jew with religious mentality,” he noted that although the colony had a significant Jewish majority, religious life was surprisingly limited: “only very few families keep kosher or observe Shabbat.” Plaut also stressed the colony’s lack of a Jewish teacher, despite promises from JCA leadership. A school building had already been completed and was being used for religious services since Rosh Hashannah, but no regular religious instruction or organized communal life had developed.¹²⁴

Unlike other colonies, whose archival repositories contain extensive photographic traces of their synagogues, no early images of the Avigdor synagogue have been located. Most of Avigdor’s photographs document daily life in the fields, the dairy industry, and the

¹²¹ Hilfsverein deutschsprechender Juden, ‘Monat Der Trauer’, no. 56.

¹²²The exact number varies across sources; local oral history recalls as many as 100 families.

¹²³Asociación Filantrópica Israelita, ‘Vierteljahresbericht Juli Bis September 1939’, *Filantropía: Órgano de La Asociación Filantrópica Israelita* (Buenos Aires) 6, no. 68 (1939).

¹²⁴ Bernh. Plaut, ‘Kameraden Aus Südamerika’, *Der Schild. Organ Des Reichsbundes Jüdischer Frontsoldaten* (Berlin), 12 March 1937.

cooperative—but not religious spaces.¹²⁵ This absence is historically meaningful: it reflects both the practical demands of agricultural life and the disrupted documentary habits of refugee communities uprooted in crisis. Nonetheless, the communal memory preserved through oral histories identifies certain objects—such as the Torah scrolls and the brass Hanukkah lamp—as survivors brought from Europe or rescued during the November 1938 pogrom. These ritual items form a crucial part of Avigdor’s material narrative and will be examined in detail in subsequent subsections.

It is important to note that unlike the communities from Buenos Aires where their history develops around the synagogal building and the creation of a community, the history of Avigdor is more related to everyday secular rural life and the challenges of such radical change in the life of German Jews who had hardly ever seen a real cow before their arrival in Argentina, and now had make that their means of existence. So the history of the community is not told around the synagogal building, but the whole town and its activities and buildings, being the synagogue or the Jewish school one more institutiona in the rural landscape settled by this community.

As in the cases from Buenos Aires, where the synagogue and its artifacts constitute the primary lens through which communal identity was first observed,—the clearest material traces of German-Jewish continuity in Avigdor also emerge from its prayer space.

Additional press items (German and Argentine Jewish newspapers) noted that Avigdor celebrated holidays such as Simhat Torah and Purim, yet these accounts provide no visual descriptions of the synagogue, Torah ornaments, the arrival of scrolls, or the construction of the prayer space. The absence of such documentation significantly distinguishes Avigdor from urban congregations, where the synagogue and materiality serving Jewish rituals received more attention.

At the same time, oral testimonies reveal a pattern of mobility and exchange between Avigdor and the communities of Buenos Aires. Many families in the capital, particularly those connected to the liberal congregations such as NCI, Lamroth Hakol and Benei Tikva, sent their children to spend the summer months in Avigdor, where they lived with relatives or with other German immigrants while their parents worked in the city. Conversely, several families in Avigdor reported that their adult children later migrated to Buenos Aires in search of

¹²⁵ Extensive archival research in the Archive of the Jewish Museum of Buenos Aires, the Centro Marc Turkow (AMIA), and the Fundación IWO, as well as inquiries with local residents and descendants of Avigdor settlers, yielded no historical photographs of the synagogue.

education or employment, leaving the upbringing of the second generation—grandchildren of the founders—in the hands of the grandparents who remained in the colony. This circular movement created enduring social ties between the urban and rural German-Jewish communities. The lifelong friendship between interviewees Tito Levy Wolff and Juan Stern—one born in Avigdor and the other arriving as an infant from Buenos Aires—illustrates how the colony operated not only as an agricultural settlement but also as a summer refuge, a care network, and a cultural bridge within the broader ecosystem of German-Jewish life in Argentina. A brief article in *Filantropía* confirms this dynamic: a 1939 report describes recreational and educational summer programs in Avigdor, encouraging the participation of children from outside the colony.

Ritual Objects and the Material Culture of Refugees in the colony

Despite its predominantly agricultural and largely secular environment, Avigdor's oral histories and surviving artifacts attest to the preservation of specific German-Jewish ritual traditions. Local narratives consistently affirm that the Torah scrolls used in the colony were brought from Germany.¹²⁶ Although no early photographs of the synagogue or its ritual furnishings have been identified, settlers repeatedly emphasized the symbolic importance of these scrolls as material links to endangered Jewish communities in Germany. Even amid the limited religious observance described by Bernhard Plaut in 1937, the Torah scrolls functioned as anchors of communal identity. In Avigdor, as in other JCA settlements, they were not preserved as heritage objects but sustained through continued ritual use.¹²⁷

As the Jewish population of Avigdor gradually declined, the community synagogue—Centro Unión Israelita—remained one of the best-preserved communal buildings in the settlement and continues to be maintained by the descendants of its founders. Although regular daily services ceased decades ago, the synagogue is still opened for Shabbat, holidays, and visiting groups, functioning as a curated space of memory rather than as a formal museum. The ritual objects preserved within it—particularly the group of *wimpels* still used to bind the Torah scrolls, the *Shabboslamp* hanging at the entrance, and the brass Hanukkah menorah

¹²⁶ Fabio Pfeipfer, son of Manfredo Pfeipfer (born in Germany in 1935), recounted that his grandparents brought a Torah scroll with them from Germany to the colony in 1937. This likely includes the binder bearing Manfredo's name, used to wrap the Torah scroll they carried.

¹²⁷ Bernh Plaut, 'Kameraden Aus Südamerika', *Der Schild. Organ Des Reichsbundes Jüdischer Frontsoldaten* (Berlin), 12 March 1937; Rosenblatt, Telephone interview; Stern and Wolff, 'Interview 3'; Manfredo Pfeipfer, 'Interview with Mandredo Pfeipfer', interview by Tammy Kohn, (Colonia Avigdor), 31 March 2024, in person.

positioned at the center of the prayer hall—constitute the strongest material evidence that, despite the colony's modest ritual life in its early years, German-Jewish traditions were consciously maintained in their most characteristic forms. Together, these artifacts establish a direct and tangible link to the refugees' origins and articulate the religious and cultural identity they sought to safeguard within a rural Argentine environment.

These objects and testimonies underscore that, unlike NCI—where Judaica gradually developed into a curated collection—Avigdor never established a museum or formal inventory. Its ritual objects functioned, and continue to function, as a living reservoir integrated into the practical and religious life of the synagogue. This reservoir preserves a distinctly German constellation of ritual forms, whose continuity allows us to examine not only what refugees brought with them, but also what they actively chose to preserve under radically transformed circumstances.

Alongside communal ritual objects, interviews with descendants reveal the existence of a significant private reservoir of domestic Judaica and German-Jewish memory objects. Unlike Benei Tikva and NCI, where families actively donated personal items to form shared memorial collections, in Avigdor most objects remained within private homes and rarely entered communal custody. Carmen Rosenblatt described safeguarding children's books in German, domestic ritual objects, and documentation related to her great-grandfather's service in the First World War, including his Iron Cross.¹²⁸ While these items parallel those found in urban congregations—Passover textiles, Shabbat tableware, and German-Hebrew prayer books—in Avigdor they functioned primarily as individual and familial memory rather than as components of a communal collection.

The material dimension of this private preservation is further illustrated by a photograph once preserved in the Centro Marc Turkow Archive of AMIA—originally held by the Jewish Museum of Buenos Aires and now lost—which depicted the Kahn family standing beside the shipping container that transported their belongings to Avigdor.¹²⁹ The image underscored how domestic objects and personal possessions were inseparable in the migration experience in the colony.

Similar dynamics emerge in the testimony of Manfredo Pfeiffer, who recalled sets of silverware and tableware brought from Germany—everyday objects that acquired heightened

¹²⁸Rosenblatt, Telephone interview.

¹²⁹ Centro Marc Turkow Archive (AMIA), Photograph of the Kahn family beside the shipping container transporting their belongings to Colonia Avigdor, 1936, archival reference AMIA-CMT 334.

symbolic value when transplanted into a rural environment. An especially evocative example appears in *The Train of Memory*, a documentary by Martha Wolff, in which she recounts how her husband, Billy Wolff—who arrived in Avigdor as a child—kept throughout his life the small engine of a toy train given to him in Aurich by his aunt Berta, later deported and murdered in Auschwitz. The object accompanied the family’s flight from Germany and their emigration to Argentina, becoming a multigenerational relic whose survival stood in stark contrast to the destruction endured by those left behind.¹³⁰

Together, these domestic artifacts and intergenerational narratives demonstrate that although Avigdor never developed a formal collection or institutional framework for preservation, its families maintained a rich constellation of material culture—books, documents, utensils, toys, and personal mementos—that anchored identity within the broader context of agricultural resettlement. This private sphere mirrors the types of objects preserved in urban communities while revealing a distinct emotions and memories shaped by rural life.

Today, approximately twelve Jewish families remain in Avigdor. They maintain the synagogue, preserve parts of the remaining farmland, and act as custodians of the settlement’s memory. Former residents and their descendants, now primarily based in Buenos Aires, return periodically to support the synagogue and provide assistance to the local population. These ongoing connections underscore the enduring relationship between Avigdor and the German-Jewish communities of Buenos Aires, extending the historical networks of exchange into the present.

Taken together, Avigdor preserves clear traces of German-Jewish material traditions—Torah scrolls believed to have arrived from Germany, a Hanukkah lamp associated with the November 1938 pogrom, locally produced *wimpels*, and domestic Judaica retained in family homes—without ever transforming these objects into a museum collection. This stands in contrast to Benei Tikva and NCI, where postwar memory work fostered efforts to preserve and exhibit Judaica as markers of German-Jewish heritage. Precisely because Avigdor lacks a formal collection, it reveals an alternative mode of continuity: Jewish life sustained through everyday care. This contrast provides a natural transition to the following section, which examines the fate of German Judaica within institutional collections—libraries, archives, and museums—where objects were preserved, recontextualized, and endowed with new meanings beyond their original communities.

¹³⁰ Martha Wolff, *El tren de la memoria*, directed by Martha Wolff, edited and uploaded by Daniel Saltzman (YouTube video, 8:30), 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xcxi60RAPd4>.

2.3 Institutional collections of German Judaica

Having examined German Judaica as it was preserved and transmitted within congregational settings, this section shifts focus beyond the synagogue and communal life to institutional contexts whose primary aim is the preservation of Jewish heritage. In these settings, objects entered deliberately constituted collections, assembled through curatorial, archival, and educational frameworks rather than through ongoing ritual use.

Unlike the reservoirs discussed in the previous sections—where ritual objects remained embedded in lived practice and communal memory—institutional collections tend to detach artifacts from their original religious environments. Objects are reclassified as historical evidence, pedagogical tools, artworks, or Holocaust-related testimonies, and their meanings are reframed through scholarly interpretation and exhibition narratives rather than through liturgical continuity or familial transmission.

The formation of Judaica collections in Argentina must also be understood within a local collecting landscape shaped by immigration, institutional fragility, and historical rupture. Unlike in Europe or North America, where Judaica collecting often developed through early museums, private collectors, and academic frameworks, in Argentina, the preservation of ritual objects was largely driven by communal, educational, and memorial imperatives. Collecting emerged less as an antiquarian or art-historical pursuit and more as a response to displacement, loss, and the need to safeguard material traces of Jewish life brought by immigrants and refugees. This context deeply influenced which objects were preserved, how they were categorized, and the meanings they later acquired within institutional settings.

Within these institutions, German-related Judaica and documents arrived primarily through donation, postwar collecting initiatives, rescue operations, or archival consolidation. Their incorporation responded to broader institutional agendas: documenting Jewish history, preserving traces of destroyed European communities, and transmitting knowledge about the Holocaust and German-Jewish culture to new audiences. As a result, the objects' functions shifted from ritual use to representational and didactic roles, often emphasizing provenance, historical rupture, and memory over continuity of practice.

This section examines three such repositories: the Judaica holdings of the former library of the Seminario Rabínico Latinoamericano, the Holocaust-era ceremonial objects preserved at IWO, and the German ritual artifacts housed at the Buenos Aires Holocaust Museum. Each case illustrates a distinct mode of institutionalization, revealing how German

Judaica was selected, recontextualized, and endowed with new meanings once removed from the communities that had originally used and preserved it.

Together, these institutional collections illuminate a parallel trajectory in the afterlives of German Judaica in Argentina—one in which objects became vehicles of heritage, education, and memorialization, shaped less by ritual continuity than by curatorial intention and historical consciousness.

2.3.1 The missing collection at the Seminary's Old Library

The Latin American Rabbinical Seminary “Marshall T. Meyer” has long been one of the most important institutional bridges through which German-Jewish intellectual traditions entered and took root in Argentina. Its early history reveals how deeply the Seminary's identity was shaped by the trajectories of German Jewish refugees who became foundational figures of Argentine Conservative Judaism. When the Seminary settled into its headquarters on 11 de Septiembre Street in 1964, the establishment of a formal Jewish library was considered essential for the training of rabbis in the region. Under the leadership of Rabbi Marshall T. Meyer and Rabbi Mordejai Edery, what began as a modest room of books functioned simultaneously as a *beit midrash*, a classroom, and an intellectual center for students across Latin America.¹³¹

A decisive moment in the Seminary's intellectual development occurred with the appointment of Dr. Suse Hallenstein de Harf, who was among the last Jewish women to earn a Ph.D. at the University of Hamburg before the Nuremberg Laws.¹³² Trained at the *Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums* and professionally certified as a librarian in Uppsala, she subsequently worked at the *Hochschule* library before emigrating to Argentina in 1939. She arrived with her husband, Rabbi Hanns Harf, who was released from detention following his arrest during the November 1938 pogrom. The couple emigrated with the Riegner Group and became central to the creation of new German-rooted institutions in Buenos Aires—NCI, Lamroth Hakol, and later, the Seminary. Hallenstein's role in shaping the Seminary library transplanted the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* ethos into exile: a commitment to order, classification, bibliographic rigor, and the conviction that rabbinic

¹³¹ Münster, ‘Historia de La Biblioteca Del Seminario Rabínico Latinoamericano’.

¹³² Irene Münster, ‘Hüterinnen der Kultur: Jüdische Bibliotheken in Buenos Aires’, *Jüdische Geschichte & Kultur*, no. 5 (2021): 20.

formation must be grounded not only in texts but also in the material traditions of Jewish religious and scholarly culture.¹³³

The library expanded significantly from the 1960s through the 1990s, eventually relocating to the fourth floor of the new Seminary building, with its entrance on José Hernández 1750. What is now referred to as the “old library,” which also functioned for many years as a *beit midrash*, still preserves its *Aron ha-Kodesh*, flanked by two display cases. As Irene Münster has noted, the Seminary library’s early staff and intellectual milieu was largely German-speaking (*ieke*), making the presence of German ritual objects alongside the Torah Ark less an anomaly than a reflection of the Seminary’s academic and cultural milieu.¹³⁴ Research conducted in 2010 documented that the right-hand vitrine contained a small but significant group of ritual objects, including a filigree besamim container in the shape of a fish, two havdalah candleholders with integrated spice compartments, two kiddush cups, a pair of Hanukkah lamps, an Esther scroll (*megillah*), an etrog container, and a Torah pointer. Photographs from the same period further indicate that the Ark housed Torah shields and additional metalwork. Since that time, access to these components has become increasingly restricted, and the vitrines now remain largely empty.¹³⁵

This lack of documentation is methodologically significant. In contrast to synagogues such as NCI or Benei Tikva, where ritual objects remain embedded in communal life, the Seminary’s Judaica existed within an institutional environment oriented toward teaching and rabbinical formation. Yet no accession registers, catalogues, purchase records, or donor files are currently accessible. The institution has no active librarian and no centralized archival system for acquisitions. As a result, it is impossible to reconstruct the circumstances under which these objects entered the Seminary: whether they were donations from German-Jewish families connected to Hanns Harf and Suse Hallenstein, remnants of students’ family

¹³³Irene Münster, ‘Through Her Eyes: German Jewish Immigration to Argentina’, in *Migrations and Connections: Latin America and Europe in the Modern World* (2009), 33:160–62, <https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/bfup.2009.013/html>.

¹³⁴Münster, ‘Historia de La Biblioteca Del Seminario Rabínico Latinoamericano’.

¹³⁵ Between 2017 and 2020, the Buenos Aires Holocaust Museum temporarily relocated its headquarters to the first and second floors of the Seminary. During one of Buenos Aires’ La Noche de los Museos events held in this period, the objects from the Seminary’s former permanent library display were removed to be shown to visiting audiences. Following this intervention, the objects were not returned and remained unaccounted for until December 2025, when, due to the loan of the main building to the University of Buenos Aires and the relocation of the remaining offices back to the Seminary’s earliest building on 11 de Septiembre Street, only part of the material reappeared in its former location. The volumes originally displayed in the second showcase are still missing.

belongings, or objects intentionally selected to model exemplary ritual craftsmanship for rabbinical training. These questions remain unresolved.

Over time, the Seminary's Judaica collection became increasingly dispersed. None of the pieces originally visible in the vitrines can be found today. No trace of an internal inventory has been located, and staff changes over decades have fractured the chain of knowledge regarding the objects' origins and trajectories. Despite this loss, external inventories and photographic documentation from 2010 and 2016 allow for partial reconstruction of the Seminary's holdings. The materials identified through this record point to a collection that combined ritual objects likely brought by German Jews with items created later in Argentina or acquired by the institution during its consolidation. While many pieces cannot yet be linked to specific donors, family histories, or congregations, their presence within the Seminary's library demonstrates how ritual objects were incorporated into an educational environment—probably with a status situated between ritual objects in active synagogal use and fully musealized artifacts.

This interpretation is reinforced by a rare external reference to the Seminary's holdings found in the catalogue of the 1981 Judaica exhibition at Sociedad Hebraica Argentina, where objects from multiple institutions—including the Seminary—were displayed.¹³⁶ Although the catalogue includes only two photographs, one shows the fish-shaped besamim container formerly housed in the Seminary's vitrine, and the other depicts the German kiddush cups. The catalogue briefly mentions additional German ritual objects, but the limited documentation makes it impossible to determine which of these pieces originated from the Seminary's collection, as the provenance of each of the items exhibited at Hebraica is not referenced in the catalogue. In the absence of internal accession records, this catalogue functions as a rare external trace confirming both the presence and institutional visibility of the Seminary's Judaica.

Despite the fragmentary documentation, the significance of the Seminary lies in the intellectual and cultural lineage that shaped its environment. Through Dr. Hallenstein de Harf and the early German-trained rabbis, the Seminary served as a conduit through which the intellectual world of German Judaism—its libraries, bibliographic culture, aesthetic sensibilities, and ritual materiality—was transplanted into a Latin American setting.¹³⁷ Even

¹³⁶Departamento de Cultura, *Arte Ornamental y Artesanía Judía* (Sociedad Hebraica Argentina, 1981).

¹³⁷ Feierstein, 'In the Land of Vitzliputzli', 176–77.

in their partial survival, the objects once preserved in its library testify to this transmission. Their presence reflects an institutional aspiration to anchor rabbinic formation not only in books but also in the material traditions of Jewish life—an aspiration now challenged by the absence of institutional memory, yet essential for understanding the broader landscape of German Judaica in Argentina.¹³⁸

Although the Seminary's holdings differed from synagogal reservoirs in structure and scale, the institution operated within the same cultural and institutional ecosystem established by German-speaking Jewish refugees in Belgrano. Over time, this world was carried forward not only by those who had arrived from Germany, but also by a second generation of Argentine-born Jews who inherited the intellectual and ritual sensibilities of their parents' congregations and reshaped them within a conservative-liberal framework. In this sense, the Seminary belongs to the same broader network of memory, practice, and material culture, even as its Judaica developed along a distinct and ultimately fragmented trajectory. This layered history underscores the importance of provenance: the meaning of these objects—whether ritual, pedagogical, or memorial—depends not only on their form and function, but on the journeys, institutional contexts, and narratives through which they were transmitted and later dispersed.

Yet the Seminary's history also marks a threshold. Beyond the Judaica transported by refugees and preserved within congregations, a different category of German ceremonial objects reached Argentina—not through migration, but through postwar redistribution efforts aimed at salvaging the cultural remains of communities destroyed in Europe. The institution that received and preserved a significant portion of this material was the Instituto Judío de Investigaciones (IWO), whose German holdings represent a parallel narrative: one grounded not in lived continuity, but in recovery, documentation, and the reconstruction of cultural memory after rupture.

Whereas the Seminary's objects were embedded within a pedagogical environment shaped by German-speaking refugees and later Argentine-born Jews who inherited and reinterpreted that legacy, the German items now held at IWO entered Argentina under fundamentally different historical circumstances. They were not carried by families

¹³⁸ The Seminary has since transitioned to a fully online educational model, offering distance learning programs for rabbinical training and short courses in Jewish studies. As a result, the physical library and its material resources no longer play an active role in its academic life; the collection remains in a building now occupied by another institution, where it is currently closed to the public, with limited accessibility and outdated infrastructure.

safeguarding continuity, but were redistributed after the Holocaust as fragments of destroyed communal worlds. Studying their provenance is therefore essential—not only to restore context and ownership, but also to understand how these objects were transformed into archival evidence, symbols of loss, and instruments of cultural reconstruction. This shift marks the transition from lived ritual transmission to postwar heritage management, and it frames the role of IWO as a custodian of orphaned German Judaica.

2.3.2 The IWO as custodian of Nazi-Looted Judaica

Founded in 1928, the Instituto Judío de Investigaciones (IWO) became a key cultural and scholarly institution for Jewish life in Argentina, aligned with the prewar YIVO research institute that originated in Vilna. Conceived within a network of Ashkenazi scholarship, it preserved languages, folklore, and communal memory while consolidating its role as an archive and research center. After the Nazi destruction of YIVO's European infrastructure and the relocation of its headquarters to New York, the Buenos Aires IWO continued to develop as an independent institution, sustaining a distinctive continuity of the prewar research project in the South American context.¹³⁹

In the immediate postwar period, IWO's mission expanded from scholarship to the preservation of displaced cultural heritage. This role became particularly significant when the institution received part of the Judaica and library holdings redistributed by JCR. Archival distribution records indicate that Argentina was among the South American recipients—alongside Uruguay, Chile, Brazil, and Mexico—and that shipments included ceremonial objects, Torah ornaments, and thousands of books. The JCR-identified ritual objects preserved at IWO today attest to this provenance and situate the institution within the postwar infrastructure of cultural recovery and redistribution.¹⁴⁰ The presence of these materials positioned IWO not only as a cultural archive but also as a repository shaped by loss, rescue, and reconstruction—roles that would later acquire renewed urgency in Argentina after the 1994 AMIA bombing.

¹³⁹ 'Fundación IWO. Instituto Judío de Investigación', accessed 20 October 2025, <https://www.iwo.org.ar/quienes-historia.html>

¹⁴⁰ Wesley A. Fisher and Ruth J. Weinberger, *Holocaust-Era Looted Cultural Property: A Current Worldwide Overview* (Claims Conference and World Jewish Restitution Organization, 2024), 114, <https://art.claimscon.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/4-March-2024-Holocaust-Era-Looted-Cultural-Property-A-Current-Worldwide-Overview.pdf>.

Unlike the objects preserved within synagogues or the Seminary, connected to family migration, community formation, and the adaptation of German-Jewish ritual culture in Argentina, the Judaica held at IWO constitutes, at least conceptually, a different epistemic category. Their provenance often points not to identifiable owners or congregations, but to the collective fate of Jewish communities destroyed in Europe during the Holocaust. As objects stripped of context and redistributed after the war, they function less as evidence of a specific locality, tradition, or national narrative than as material fragments of a wider field of Jewish cultural loss. This marks a central distinction within the typology of German Judaica in Argentina: whereas earlier reservoirs embody continuity, IWO's holdings materialize rupture.¹⁴¹

Equally significant is the collection's temporal orientation. The objects at IWO symbolize the past; they do not participate in the ongoing ritual life of Argentine Jews. Their meanings therefore derive less from continuity of use than from absence, displacement, and the ethical imperative of preservation.

The symbolic resonance of IWO's custodianship acquired further layers after the 1994 AMIA bombing, in which the institution's building was destroyed. Its location within AMIA, the most visible and widely recognized representation of Jewish communal life in Argentina, reinforced the perception that IWO's holdings embodied not the specificity of any single German Jewish story, but the memory of a collective ashkenazi Jewish identity forged through both survival and catastrophe. The fact that the JCR collection entered this institution, rather than a particular congregational or regional archive, underscored its role as a custodian of a shared Jewish past, detached from any singular origin narrative. These questions, and the debates surrounding the meaning and stewardship of these collections, are examined in greater depth in Chapter 4.

Within this framework, the German ritual objects now preserved at IWO, particularly the wimpels, can be understood as both ceremonial artifacts and documentary evidence of displacement and cultural erasure.

The Maurycy Minkowski Museum at IWO preserves a small but significant group of wimpels and other Judaica recovered from the remains of the AMIA bombing in 1994. Several of these pieces were originally part of the postwar allocations made by the Jewish Restitution Successor Organization (JRSO) and JCR, marking them as heirless ritual objects originating

¹⁴¹ 'Fundación IWO. Instituto Judío de Investigación', accessed 7 November 2024, <https://www.iwo.org.ar/noticias-micromuestra-salvados.html>.

in destroyed German Jewish communities. Today the collection includes twelve wimpels, ranging in date from 1699 to 1932, of which only some carry JCR inventory labels confirming their provenance. Three later examples reflect the continuation of the wimpel tradition among German Jews in Argentina, demonstrating how ritual textiles were both preserved and adapted in the local context.

While detailed analysis of the iconography and inscriptions will be addressed in the next chapter, it is worth noting that the earliest example is particularly elaborate and stylistically comparable to wimpels preserved in European and Israeli museum collections. Other pieces in the group display embroidered or painted decoration, and at least one incorporates Spanish-language elements and local visual references, indicating the incorporation of Argentine cultural markers into an otherwise German ritual form.

References to the wimpel tradition in Argentina are scarce. One of the earliest is an article written in 1956 by Mordechai Bernstein, who documented the custom among German Jewish immigrants and recorded the presence of large numbers of wimpels in congregations such as Colonia Avigdor. Although he did not directly reference the IWO examples, Bernstein underscored their importance as objects that deserved study and museum preservation.

Institutionally, the wimpels entered a setting that reinforced their memorial dimension. After the 1994 bombing, when the surviving materials were inventoried and rehoused, the collection became strongly associated with German Jewry as a whole. Even the locally crafted examples were incorporated into the “rescued twice” collection. Unlike the ritual objects in synagogal settings, the IWO collection is not embedded in ongoing Jewish religious practice but remains anchored in the past as evidence of a shared, destroyed Jewish world. No full catalogue or exhibition of the collection has been produced to date, although selected pieces appeared in photographic form in a small exhibition in 1995 documenting the salvage process after the bombing.¹⁴² The implications of these classifications, and the provenance questions they raise, will be further explored in Chapter 4.

2.3.3 Buenos Aires Holocaust Museum

The Holocaust Museum in Buenos Aires emerged during a broader transformation of Holocaust memory practices in Argentina in the 1990s. As part of what scholars identify as a

¹⁴² This statement reflects the situation as of 2023. In 2024, the IWO inaugurated a permanent display in the institute’s reading room featuring objects from the “Rescued Twice” collection. In March 2026, two Torah binders (wimpels) from the collection were also included in a temporary exhibition at the Jewish Museum of Buenos Aires.

global memorial boom, the establishment of the museum reflected increasing public engagement with Holocaust education, survivor testimony, and memorialization.

This transformation must be understood within a broader shift in Jewish public memory in Argentina during the 1990s, when Holocaust remembrance moved from a primarily communal framework into the public sphere. As Yossi Goldstein has argued, this period marked the incorporation of Shoah memory into a globalized regime of remembrance, closely linked to human rights discourse and democratic values in post-dictatorship Argentina. Within this context, Holocaust memory was increasingly articulated through museums, commemorations, and educational initiatives, positioning the Shoah not only as a Jewish historical trauma but also as a moral and civic reference point. The emergence of the Buenos Aires Holocaust Museum thus reflects a wider process in which Holocaust remembrance became institutionalized as part of public culture, rather than solely a form of intra-communal commemoration.¹⁴³

According to Wanda Wechsler, Argentina's context, marked by a large Jewish population, the presence of survivors, and the legacy of impunity surrounding both Nazi fugitives and the dictatorship, created fertile ground for the institutionalization of Holocaust memory. Efforts toward founding the Museum began through the *Fundación Memoria del Holocausto* (FMH), which had already been collecting testimonies, documents, and objects from survivors since the mid-1990s. The institution received its building through a donation from the Argentine government, and after years of preparation, the museum opened in September 2000 with an inaugural exhibition dedicated to Anne Frank. The museum's establishment was thus not only a cultural and commemorative initiative but also a response to contemporary political events, including the 1992 bombing of the Israeli Embassy and the 1994 bombing of the AMIA—events that intensified calls for public remembrance, education, and vigilance against antisemitism.¹⁴⁴

From the beginning, the Museum's collection strategy centered on the preservation of survivor narratives and material traces of persecution. Testimonies and personal objects, ranging from uniforms, documents, and suitcases to railway tracks and forged identity papers,

¹⁴³ Goldstein, 'El discurso judío de la memoria: Pensamiento público y memoria de la Shoá en la Argentina en la era de la globalización', 262–64.

¹⁴⁴ Wanda Wechsler, 'La Construcción y Musealización de La Memoria Del Holocausto En La Argentina Reciente', *Aletheia* (Buenos Aires) 5, no. 10 (2015): 9–10, [https://www.academia.edu/144125504/La_construcci%C3%B3n_y_musealizaci%C3%B3n_de_la_memoria_d](https://www.academia.edu/144125504/La_construcci%C3%B3n_y_musealizaci%C3%B3n_de_la_memoria_del_Holocausto_en_la_Argentina_reciente?sm=b&rhid=37567766979)

became essential tools for conveying the embodied realities of genocide. By foregrounding materiality, the museum sought to produce what Wechsler describes as a “return to reality,” countering abstraction and anchoring the Shoah in tangible evidence.¹⁴⁵ The collections thus served not only archival purposes but also function as spaces of mourning and communal remembrance, exemplified by the “Sala de la Memoria,” (the memorial hall) where families honored the memory of relatives murdered during the Holocaust. Survivor experiences remained central to the museum’s mission, reflecting what Wechsler identified as the “era of the witness,” in which personal testimony has become a defining mode of Holocaust representation and pedagogy.¹⁴⁶

Until now, this study has examined Judaica collections preserved within synagogues and community institutions in Buenos Aires—spaces in which ritual objects often embody continuity, religious practice, and post-emigration communal identity. Even before the establishment of the Holocaust Museum, the musealization of German-Jewish memory was already visible in spaces such as the former NCI synagogue on Arcos Street, where material culture communicated survival, rebuilding, and ritual continuity. In contrast, when turning to the Holocaust Museum, similarly to the IWO, an institution conceived primarily as a site of testimony, documentation, and historical transmission rather than as a ritual repository, the landscape of artifacts shifts markedly. A preliminary survey of the museum’s holdings related to German Jewry, reveals the near absence of ritual objects comparable to those preserved in synagogue collections. Instead, the collection is dominated by photographs, personal papers, passports (many marked with the letter *J* or with imposed names such as *Israel* or *Sara*), immigration documents, diaries, yellow stars, recorded testimonies, and objects reflecting everyday life in Germany before, during, and after the Holocaust. Rather than foregrounding liturgical continuity, the museum’s narrative framework privileges secular history and the experience of persecution, positioning documents and testimonies as forms of symbolic resistance—acts of preservation and survival—rather than ritual observance. In this sense, the material record itself becomes a form of resilience: what endured and entered the museum’s archive are precisely the traces that perpetrators attempted to erase, namely the bureaucratic evidence of exclusion, displacement, and persistence.

¹⁴⁵Wechsler, ‘La Construcción y Musealización de La Memoria Del Holocausto En La Argentina Reciente’, 10–11.

¹⁴⁶ Wechsler, ‘La Construcción y Musealización de La Memoria Del Holocausto En La Argentina Reciente’, 13.

Yet, this apparent absence of ritual continuity does not reflect a total rupture. Instead, certain surnames, trajectories, and family histories encountered in synagogue collections reappear in the museum's holdings, revealing a dispersed constellation of memory across institutional spaces. The fragmentation is visible, for example, in the papers of Suse Hallenstein—Rabbi Hanns Harf's wife—whose dissertation and personal archive connect the museum to the history of NCI and to the Seminary library; in the manuscript narrating the history of the *Riegner Group*, which preserves the foundational narrative of the community that later became NCI; and in the papers of Enrique Hamburger and Ellen Kahn, whose family histories reflect earlier case studies of German-Jewish settlement and communal rebuilding after migration.

A small group of items donated around the year 2000 by the Benei Tikva congregation further illustrates how objects circulated among descendants before entering institutional care. This donation included German passports marked with a "J," letters of recommendation demonstrating professional training for immigration clearance, German-Hebrew prayer books, and a register listing German Jews who died during the First World War. The only ritual object among them—a *shechitá* knife—was mistakenly catalogued and displayed as a weapon of resistance. This misinterpretation that underscores how *tashmishei mitzvah* lose their halakhic and ritual meaning when removed from religious practice and relocated to a museum dedicated to memory, testimony, and the history of genocide. Meanwhile, objects classified as *tashmishei kedushah* in synagogues remain in active use, continuing communal life rather than entering the museum as evidence of rupture.

This contrast between ritual continuity and documentary preservation raises a central interpretive question: how do we understand the divergence between the ritual persistence visible in synagogue Judaica and the predominantly secular documentary record preserved at the Holocaust Museum? Instead of signaling an absence of ritual identity, the division reveals layered cultural stewardship. Ritual objects remained where rituals continued: in synagogues. Documents entered the museum as evidence of persecution, displacement, and survival. In this framework, the Holocaust Museum does not represent German-Jewish religious continuity, but rather the memory of trauma and uprooting. Its collections reflect a protective impulse: to safeguard evidence of injustice and preserve memory through documentation.

Importantly, this work has increasingly been carried forward not by those who fled Nazism, but by their Argentine-born descendants, who now act as curators, guardians, and interpreters of this legacy across institutional settings. Their decisions—about whether an

object belongs in a synagogue, archive, library, or museum—shape not only where memory resides, but how it is read, interpreted, and transmitted.

With this institutional, historical, and generational framework established, the following chapter turns to the objects themselves, examining them individually to understand how their materiality, provenance, and present location contribute to the broader landscape and evolving practices of German-Jewish memory in contemporary Argentina.

Chapter 3

Judaica: Material Culture, Function, and Meaning

With the historical and institutional contexts established in Chapter 2, and with an understanding of the landscape in which the studied artifacts are embedded, this chapter shifts the focus from collections as repositories of material culture to objects as case studies. It examines German-Jewish ceremonial art as active witnesses to history, memory, and religious practice, focusing on ritual implements preserved in Argentina and including selected liturgical books—such as Passover *haggadot* and miniature *siddurim*—that function as portable ritual objects within domestic and communal life. Carried across borders by Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi persecution and later recontextualized within Argentine institutions, these objects continued to participate in ritual life while simultaneously acquiring new layers of meaning. Rather than functioning as static relics, they emerge here as dynamic agents of memory, shaped by use, transmission, and reinterpretation over time.

In this chapter, the term “German Judaica” does not denote a uniform stylistic category or a coherent aesthetic school. Instead, it refers to corpus of material production shaped by ritual practice, and formed within German-speaking Jewish communities. This encompasses specific object types, materials, traditions, and modes of use that were historically embedded in German-Jewish life. Following forced migration, these traditions were reactivated in Argentina by refugees seeking continuity amid rupture. Objects originally created for practical ritual purposes, such as Torah ornaments and other domestic judaica, gradually assumed additional symbolic and memorial functions, without necessarily losing their ritual efficacy.

Approaching these artifacts through their materiality, this chapter analyzes how meaning is produced not only at the moment of an object’s creation but through its continued use, repair, reproduction, and even display and reinterpretation in new contexts. On the one hand, attention is given to the historical conditions of production, rituals, and afterlives of the objects. On the other, how material form, style, and aesthetics articulate continuity across displacement. Questions of ownership, loss, and restitution, which are essential to the history of ownership of these objects, are addressed separately in Chapter 4. The present chapter is concerned instead with how German Judaica has functioned as ritual instruments, carriers of memory, and mediators between a German-Jewish past and an Argentine Jewish present.

Unlike the previous chapter, organized by institutions in which the artifacts are housed, this chapter breaks that structure moves to conceptual categories for the comparison of similar items housed in different institutions, highlighting the individual features of each of them.

In order to approach such complexity, this chapter is structured around the traditional halakhic distinction between *tashmishei kedusha* (objects that serve sacred texts or contain inherent sanctity) and *tashmishei mitzvah* (objects used in the performance of commandments). These categories, articulated most clearly in medieval rabbinic literature and codified by Maimonides (Rambam), establish a hierarchy of sanctity that governs how ritual objects are used, preserved, repaired, stored, and, when no longer usable, disposed of.¹⁴⁷ While originally normative in intent, these distinctions offer a productive analytical lens for understanding the material lives of ritual objects beyond their immediate religious framework.

Maimonides explains that all the items which come into direct contact with the Torah have a higher level of holiness. These include silver and golden finials, Torah cases, and mantles, among others. They are all *tashmishei kedusha*.¹⁴⁸ This term originates in the Talmud, in a discussion in which the sages differentiate *tashmishei kedusha* from *tashmishei mitzvah*, the latter being the items used to perform the rituals, but have no level of sanctity and can be discarded after use. The former, however, must be buried. The discussion of the sages develops into the categorization of the different elements of the synagogue and how they can be reused in the case of remodeling, without affecting their sanctity level.¹⁴⁹

Applied descriptively rather than prescriptively, halakhic categories illuminate how ritual objects were used and valued within Jewish communities. Yet patterns of survival during migration do not follow halakhic hierarchies in any straightforward way. While communal objects were often constrained by their institutional setting and material scale, domestic objects and books, owned by individuals and families, were more easily carried across borders, shaping the material corpus that survives today.

Importantly, this chapter does not seek to evaluate these objects according to halakhic correctness, nor to reconstruct religious authority or legal practice per se. Instead, the distinction between different artifacts and documents is used as a classificatory framework and as a historically grounded analytical tool that clarify the relationship between ritual function, material form, and context, both in religious and in museological settings. By situating German Judaica within this framework, it becomes possible to trace how distinctions

¹⁴⁷Vivian B. Mann, 'Torah Ornaments Before 1600', in *Crowning Glory: Silver Torah Ornaments of the Jewish Museum, New York*, ed. Rafi Grafman and Jewish Museum (Godine, 1996), 1.

¹⁴⁸ Maimonides, *Mishne Torah*, Hilkhot Sefer Torah, 10:4

¹⁴⁹ Babylonian Talmud, Megillah, 26b,

between sacred and ritual use shaped practices of preservation, reuse, and memorialization, and how these practices continued or were reconfigured in the Argentine context.

Finally, the chapter acknowledges the presence of a third category of objects that emerges at the margins of the corpus under study: materials preserved in archives and libraries that are not directly related to ritual practice, yet are strongly connected to the German-Jewish experience of displacement and exile. In the context of German-Jewish refugees from Nazism who arrived in Argentina, these items, often associated with German cultural identity, personal memory, or the Holocaust, were frequently preserved or donated alongside ritual artifacts. Although they do not constitute the primary focus of this analysis, a limited number of such objects are briefly addressed toward the end of the chapter. Considered not as Judaica in a strict ritual sense, but as objects of memory, they form part of the broader material landscape through which German-Jewish refugee communities and their descendants have articulated loss, continuity and remembrance.

3.1 Torah Scrolls and Their Ornaments: *Tashmishei Kedusha*

The Torah scroll constitutes an object of inherent holiness (*kedusha*). Together with tefillin and mezuzot, it belongs to the limited category of sacred objects whose sanctity resides in the object itself rather than in its function alone. This status governs every aspect of the Torah scroll's production, handling, use, and preservation.

In the context of German-Jewish refugee communities in Argentina, Torah scrolls were indispensable for the continuation of religious life and simultaneously functioned as carriers of memory. Transported across borders under conditions of persecution and displacement, they survived the destruction of synagogues and the rupture of communal structures in Europe. Once reinstalled in Argentine synagogues, these scrolls were not withdrawn from ritual circulation or preserved as untouchable relics. Rather, their continued liturgical use reaffirmed their sacred status, allowing them to function both as ritual texts and as material witnesses to exile, survival, and continuity.

Across the German-Jewish refugee communities examined in this study, Torah scrolls remain central to religious life and are preserved in varying numbers within each synagogue. Their precise provenance is often difficult to reconstruct and, in many cases, rests on communal testimony rather than archival documentation. It is generally held within these communities that several of the scrolls currently in use were brought from Germany or other parts of Europe by Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi persecution, while others were acquired or

written in Argentina in the postwar period, attesting to the continuity of scribal practice in the local context.

From a material and ritual perspective, the scrolls conform to broader Ashkenazi traditions: they are mounted on *atzei chayim*, covered with soft textile mantles, and handled according to established liturgical conventions. A detailed analysis of scribal hands, parchment, or other physical characteristics falls beyond the scope of this dissertation. Notably, the corpus includes at least one Torah scroll transferred through the Czech Memorial Scrolls initiative, establishing a direct material link to the Holocaust. Yet this association does not necessarily suspend ritual use.¹⁵⁰ Rather, Holocaust memory and liturgical function coexist, reinforcing the role of the Torah scroll as both a sacred text and a bearer of historical experience within German-Jewish communities in Argentina.

The redefinition of Torah scrolls from sacred ritual instruments to memorial artifacts is not uniform across the institutions discussed here. A more radical transformation occurs in the Buenos Aires Holocaust Museum, where a Torah scroll associated with the Jewish community of Rhodes is exhibited outside any synagogue setting and framed explicitly as a Holocaust object, functioning exclusively as a material witness to destruction and loss, as well as friendship with the Muslim community of Rhodes that hid the Torah during the Holocaust.¹⁵¹ By contrast, the Torah scroll transferred to Benei Tikva through the Czech Memorial Scrolls initiative—although externally identifiable as a Holocaust-rescued object—remains fully integrated into the ritual life of the congregation. In this case, Holocaust memory does not replace ritual function but coexists with it, demonstrating that the same category of object may sustain markedly different roles depending on the institutional, communal, and curatorial contexts in which it is embedded.

Accordingly, this chapter shifts away from the Torah scroll itself and turns to the ritual artifacts that serve, accompany, and honor it. Classified in halakhic terms as *tashmishei kedusha*, these objects derive their sanctity from their physical and functional relationship to the Torah. While the scroll itself remains highly regulated by Jewish law, the objects that serve it

¹⁵⁰ Originating in Brno around the mid-nineteenth century, this Torah scroll belongs to the group of scrolls preserved in Prague during the Second World War and redistributed internationally after 1945. For a detailed discussion of the Czech Memorial Scrolls initiative, including the provenance history of this scroll and its transfer to Argentina, see Chapter 4.

¹⁵¹ See ‘Recordación y Evocación del Holocausto/Shoá de las comunidades judías de Rodas, Salónica y Cos’, Itón Gadol, 16 September 2016, <https://itongadol.com/noticias/99863-recordacion-y-evocacion-del-holocausto-shoa-de-las-comunidades-judias-de-rodas-salonica-y-cos>.; and also “800 Year-Old Torah of Rhodes” – Rhodes Jewish Museum, n.d., accessed 20 December 2025, <https://rhodesjewishmuseum.org/history/the-800-year-old-torah/>

allow greater variation in material, style, and iconography. It is within these ritual artifacts that regional traditions, local production, and processes of adaptation and remembrance become most materially legible.

By the early modern period, roughly around 1600, a relatively stable corpus of Torah ornaments had already taken shape. In addition to ritual textiles, this corpus included Torah covers, *tikim*, arks, finials, crowns, shields, and pointers.¹⁵² The surviving evidence—drawn from rabbinic literature, archaeological findings, and a limited number of extant objects—is fragmentary but sufficient to reconstruct the principal ways in which the Torah was protected and honored materially. Rabbinic sources primarily establish the functional and material boundaries governing objects associated with the Torah, while generally refraining from prescribing specific aesthetic forms. As a result, although the sanctity and proper treatment of Torah ornaments were carefully regulated, their visual appearance and decorative language remained comparatively open, allowing for regional variation and artistic expression.

3.1.1 “Born With Mazal Tov:” The continuation of Wimpel tradition in Argentina

Vivian Mann notes that “given the Torah’s exalted status within Judaism, its physical form has always been regarded as a sacred object to be protected and honored.” Drawing on Samuel Krauss’s *Synagogue Altertümer*, she further explains that rabbinic sources describe protecting the scroll by wrapping it in precious textiles, housing it in a *tik* (container), or placing it within a *tevah* (ark).¹⁵³

Rabbinic sources already address textiles associated with the Torah scroll, even though they do not yet describe the specific object later known as the wimpel. These discussions are important because they establish the legitimacy of textile coverings as ritual objects and clarify how they relate physically to the Torah.

A passage in Megillah 32a refers explicitly to the act of covering the Torah scroll and the correct way to do so:

אָמַר רַבִּי יַנַּאי בְּרִיָּה דְרַבִּי יַנַּאי סָבָא מִשְׁמִיָּה דְרַבִּי יַנַּאי רַבָּה: מוֹטֵב תִּיגָלֵל הַמִּטְפַּחַת וְאֵל יִגָּלֵל סֵפֶר תּוֹרָה.

Rabbi Yannai, son of Rabbi Yannai the Elder, said in the name of Rabbi Yannai the Great: It is preferable that the cloth cover be rolled around the Torah scroll, and not that the Torah scroll be rolled into the cloth.

¹⁵² Mann, ‘Torah Ornaments Before 1600’, 15.

¹⁵³ Mann, ‘Torah Ornaments Before 1600’, 2.

This passage emphasizes that the Torah itself should remain still, while the textile performs the action of wrapping and protection. Although no specific form or decoration is mentioned, the text confirms the central role of textiles in handling and safeguarding the scroll.

A rabbinic discussion in *Mishnah Kelim* 28:4 already addresses the ritual status of scroll coverings, referred to as *mitpachot*:

מִטְפָּחוֹת סְפָרִים, בֵּין מְצֻירוֹת בֵּין שְׂאִינָן מְצֻירוֹת, טְמֵאוֹת, כְּדַבְּרֵי בֵּית שְׁמַאי. בֵּית הֵלֵל אוֹמְרִים, מְצֻירוֹת, טְהוֹרוֹת,
וְשְׂאִינָם מְצֻירוֹת, טְמֵאוֹת. רַבֵּן גַּמְלִיאֵל אוֹמֵר, אֵלּוּ נֶאֱלָו טְהוֹרוֹת:

Covers of scrolls, whether they are decorated or not, are susceptible to uncleanness according to the view of Bet Shammai. Bet Hillel says: those that are decorated are pure, but those that are not decorated are susceptible. Rabban Gamaliel says: both the former and the latter are pure.

In this passage, the schools of Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel debate whether such coverings are susceptible to ritual impurity, explicitly distinguishing between decorated and undecorated examples. Samuel Krauss, in his survey of synagogue textiles, notes the variety of materials used for covering the Torah in rabbinic sources and employs the term *mappa*—the Hebrew designation later used for the Torah binder known as the wimpel.¹⁵⁴ This terminological and functional continuity is significant, as it traces the Torah binder back to rabbinic discussions of sacred textiles, including questions of decoration and figuration, thereby situating the wimpel within a long-standing textual and ritual tradition rather than as a purely early modern innovation.

From an art-historical perspective, the wimpel is best understood as a specific subtype of Torah binder that emerged within German-Jewish communities. As Gabriel M. Goldstein defines it, a Torah binder is “a strip of fabric which is used to bind together the two staves and parchment of a Torah scroll,” stabilizing the scroll and allowing it to be covered with a textile mantle and stored upright in the Ark.¹⁵⁵ While Torah binders are known in other Jewish communities more broadly, the systematic use of decorated linen wimpels bearing this

¹⁵⁴Samuel Krauss, *Synagogale Altertümer*, with Robarts - University of Toronto (Berlin B. Harz, 1922), <http://archive.org/details/synagogalealtert00krauuoft>.

¹⁵⁵ Gabriel M. Goldstein, ‘Moses, Little Red Riding Hood and the Furniture Store: Wimpels (Torah Binders) in the Yeshiva University Museum Collection’, *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*, 1998, 349–50.

standardized formula, combined with a stable visual program, constitutes a distinctly German Jewish tradition, present in various German diaspora communities.¹⁵⁶

The wimpel acquired an additional biographical and symbolic dimension through the widespread practice of producing the binder from the textile used during the circumcision and name-giving ceremony (*Brit Milah*) of a Jewish newborn boy. The linen was subsequently inscribed and decorated with a blessing formula derived from the circumcision ritual, recording the child's Hebrew name, his date of birth according to the Hebrew calendar, and the wish that he grow to Torah, *chuppah*, and *ma'asim tovim*. Through this practice, an object destined to serve the Torah became materially and symbolically linked to the moment in which the child entered the covenant and, by extension, the People of Israel.

Wimpels are documented from at least the sixteenth century, although their precise origins remain uncertain. Their ritual use extended across the male life cycle: the wimpel would accompany the child at his first visit to the synagogue, his Bar Mitzvah, and the Sabbath preceding his wedding (Shabbat Chatan).¹⁵⁷ Because the Wimpel comes into direct contact with the Torah scroll, it is considered an object of elevated sanctity and cannot be discarded. When no longer in use, it was preserved within the synagogue or buried, like other *tashmishei kdusha*. This ritual status contributed both to their survival and to their migration, as families carried them into exile and, in some cases, continued to produce them in Argentina for subsequent generations.

A visual representation of this tradition appears in Moritz Daniel Oppenheim's *The Presentation at the Synagogue* (*Das Schuletragen*, 1869), part of his cycle *Bilder aus dem altjüdischen Familienleben* (*Scenes from Traditional Jewish Family Life*). The painting depicts the ritual moment in which a young child is physically brought into contact with the Torah scroll, held by his father or another male member of the community, within the synagogue space. The child is lifted toward the scroll and encouraged to grasp the wooden staves (*atzei hayim*), while women are shown observing the scene from the upper gallery behind the latticework (*rejas*). The Torah scroll itself is covered with a textile mantle but

¹⁵⁶ Goldstein, 'Moses, Little Red Riding Hood and the Furniture Store: Wimpels (Torah Binders) in the Yeshiva University Museum Collection', 349.

¹⁵⁷ Goldstein notes that in many German-Jewish communities, a child was not brought to the synagogue until he was toilet trained. The *Schuletragen* ceremony marked the first ritual use of the wimpel, which was presented to the synagogue and employed to bind the Torah scroll, while the child was encouraged to hold the *atzei hayim*, enacting the biblical image of the Torah as a "tree of life" (Prov. 3:18). Goldstein, 'Moses, Little Red Riding Hood and the Furniture Store: Wimpels (Torah Binders) in the Yeshiva University Museum Collection', 349.

partially opened, allowing the viewer to see how the parchment is wrapped with a wimpel. A second binder appears rolled and placed on the railing of the bimah where the ritual develops.¹⁵⁸

Among the ritual objects preserved by German-Jewish communities in Argentina, the Torah binder occupies a distinctive position as both a functional ritual textile and a biographical document. Together with the *Shabboslamp*, it is one of the few ritual objects whose presence in Argentina can be directly associated with the transmission of specifically German-Jewish ritual traditions. Its use was largely unfamiliar to other Ashkenazi communities in the country, which were predominantly of Eastern European origin.

Within the scope of this research, wimpels were identified in the communities and collections studied, including the Leo Baeck Synagogue (Benei Tikva), the NCI-Emanu El community (today preserved within the Judaica Belgrano collection), the rural colony of Avigdor in Entre Ríos, and the Maurycy Minkowski Museum at the IWO.¹⁵⁹ In the IWO collection alone, twelve wimpels have been documented to date, some bearing JCR identification tags that confirm their origin in Germany and point into another question related to provenance and to Nazi-looted Judaica. These examples range in date from 1699 to 1932, alongside later wimpels that attest to the continuation of the tradition in Argentina.

Despite differences in date, place of production, and decorative richness, the wimpels preserved in Argentina display a remarkably stable internal structure, with small variations. The textual formula is largely fixed, while the visual program follows a consistent sequence: an open Torah scroll accompanying the word *Torah*; a representation of the wedding canopy (*chuppah*), sometimes integrated into the letterforms themselves and others developed as a full narrative scene; and, more rarely, a visual reference to *ma'asim tovim*.

A wimpel produced in Germany for Herbert Kahn (born 1914), today preserved at the Leo Baeck Synagogue, exemplifies this visual grammar.¹⁶⁰ Painted on linen, its Hebrew letters

¹⁵⁸ Moritz Daniel Oppenheim, *The Presentation at the Synagogue (Das Schuletragen)*, 1869, oil on canvas, from the series *Bilder aus dem altjüdischen Familienleben (Scenes from Traditional Jewish Family Life)*, The Jewish Museum, New York.

¹⁵⁹ An inventory of the wimpels identified in these communities and collections is provided in Appendix II. It includes wimpels documented in the communities and collections examined within the scope of the present research. Other locations in Argentina are known or expected to preserve wimpels associated with German Jewish communities, but they were not systematically explored as part of this study. When information about such objects was available through secondary sources, prior research, or institutional records, it was noted for the purposes of scientific data recording; however, these examples are not analyzed here.

¹⁶⁰ Inventory #LB.W.02

are ornamented with restrained geometric and vegetal motifs that enhance legibility rather than overwhelm it. After the word *Torah*, an open scroll appears, rendered frontally, with a biblical verse associated with the Torah reading ritual inscribed within it. The word *chuppah* is transformed into an architectural and vegetal structure: the Hebrew letter *het* becomes the canopy itself, supported visually by branching forms that simultaneously evoke plant life and architectural columns. Inside the canopy appears the verse recited during the wedding ceremony, creating a layered visual-textual reference in which inscription, image, and ritual action converge. The overall style is restrained and closely comparable to examples preserved in other Argentine collections and in German-Jewish contexts elsewhere.

An exceptional case in this synagogue is the wimpel made for Menachem Yehuda ben Hayim (born 1927), which includes a rare signed inscription identifying its maker as Myriam Haas, daughter of Raphael and Hannah.¹⁶¹ Beyond its unusual attribution, this wimpel is distinguished by an expanded iconographic program that includes a detailed wedding scene with multiple figures and a rare figurative representation of *ma'asim tovim* as an act of charity.¹⁶² The object demonstrates how individual creativity could operate within an almost fixed tradition.

The oldest and most elaborately decorated Wimpel considered in this study is preserved at the IWO and dated to 1699. Embroidered with silk thread on linen, it differs materially and stylistically from later painted examples. Its dense iconographic program illustrates a passage from *Pirkei Avot* (5:20) through animal symbolism: the leopard, eagle, gazelle, and lion appear as visual embodiments of moral virtues. The passage reads:

יְהוָה בְּרוּךְ אֱמֶת, הָיָה עִז כְּנֶמֶר, וְקַל כְּנֶשֶׁר, וְרֵץ כְּגִזְזִי, וְגִבּוֹר כְּאַרִּי, לַעֲשׂוֹת רְצוֹן אָבִיךָ שְׁבַשְׁמִים.

“Be strong as a leopard, and swift as an eagle, and fleet as a gazelle, and brave as a lion, to do the will of your Father who is in heaven.”

The presence of the double-headed eagle—associated both with imperial iconography and with rabbinic interpretation—situates the object within a broader Central European visual culture. A closely comparable wimpel of the same year is preserved in the Israel Museum in

¹⁶¹ Inventory #LB.W.05

¹⁶² See appendix IV “Selected Images of Judaica Objects”

Jerusalem. With similar style and the presence of the animals throughout the binder, both wimpels arrived to their current collections through the JRSO and were nazi-looted judaica.¹⁶³

Other wimpels in the IWO collection, dated between the late eighteenth century and the early twentieth century, display simpler modes of decoration, alternating between silk embroidery and painted watercolor or tempera on linen. Particularly revealing are later examples that incorporate Spanish names and local iconographic elements. In these cases, the wedding canopy may be adorned with light blue and white ribbon, and a laurel garland, referencing Argentine national colors from the national coat of arms, while the overall structure of the composition, such as the placement of the Torah scroll and the canonical blessing, remains unmistakably German. These objects demonstrate how local references were layered onto a stable visual template rather than replacing it. In both wimpels featuring this iconography, the male figures are depicted wearing top hats, while the rabbi officiating the ceremony appears in the black robe and white preaching tabs associated with German liberal rabbinical dress of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Comparable attire can be observed in photographs of Rabbi Hans Harf of the Nueva Congregación Israelita (NCI) and Rabbi Schlessinger of the Congregación Israelita de la República Argentina (CIRA), suggesting the persistence of visual and cultural traditions associated with German-Jewish religious life in Argentina.¹⁶⁴

The continuation of the wimpel tradition in Argentina is further evidenced by examples produced locally in the 1940s and 1950s for children born to immigrant families. These wimpels adhere closely to German models in format, inscription, and iconography, suggesting that the act of producing a wimpel functioned as a conscious reaffirmation of communal identity during and after the Holocaust.¹⁶⁵

Among the Argentine-produced wimpels examined in this study, three closely related examples allow for a comparative reading of continuity and variation within the tradition. Two of these wimpels are preserved in NCI-Emanu El and bear the names of the brothers Raúl

¹⁶³ Israel museum accession number: B50.02.1883;150/112; Wiesbaden collecting point number: T618

¹⁶⁴ For examples of this style of rabbinical dress in Argentina, see photographs of Rabbi Hans Harf preserved in the NCI Collection at Judaica Belgrano, Buenos Aires. The Jewish Museum of Buenos Aires also preserves German-style rabbinical robes associated with the Congregación Israelita de la República Argentina (CIRA) (inventory nos. 714 and 2021).

¹⁶⁵ I want to thank the staff of the Buenos Aires Holocaust Museum, especially museum directors Mrs. Fabiana Mindlin and Mr. Jonathan Karszenbaum, and collection manager and conservator Dr. Serafina Perri for letting me access to the collections database and always supporting my research.

Guillermo Rosenfeld (born 1942) and Tomás Santiago Rosenfeld (born 1948).¹⁶⁶ A third, nearly identical example is preserved at the Leo Baeck Synagogue (Benei Tikva) and was made for Miguel Alfredo Weil, son of Shimon bar Mordechai, born on 8 September 1947.¹⁶⁷ All three wimpels were produced in Argentina during the 1940s and share a common visual and textual structure, including patterned Hebrew letterforms, a standardized blessing formula, and figurative motifs associated with birth, Torah, and marriage. Although the families from the different communities are not known to be directly related, the close chronological proximity and striking stylistic affinities among these illustrations suggest the use of shared models or templates circulating within German-Jewish communal networks in Buenos Aires.

A closer comparison of these three wimpels reveals both consistency and subtle differentiation. The decorative treatment of the Hebrew letters is remarkably similar across all examples, employing patterned infill that enhances legibility while maintaining visual rhythm. The depiction of the *chuppah* likewise follows a stable iconographic scheme, appearing in all three wimpels with only minor variations in ornamentation. Differences emerge, however, in the representation of the Torah motif and in inscriptional practice. In the earlier Rosenfeld wimpel (1942), the Torah is rendered in a simplified visual form, whereas in the later Rosenfeld example (1948) and in the Weil wimpel, this motif appears as a more elaborate architectural structure resembling a Torah Ark or synagogue façade. At the same time, the inclusion of the child's name in both Hebrew and Spanish, as well as the explicit notation of the Hebrew year using the thousands digit rather than the traditional *le-prat katan* formulation, signals a process of cultural adaptation. These variations do not undermine the continuity of the tradition but instead point to its active transmission in a new context, in which established forms were maintained while inscriptional conventions and visual details were adjusted to reflect changing linguistic, educational, and cultural conditions in postwar Argentina.

In Avigdor, the wimpel tradition has remained embedded in everyday ritual practice to this day. Today, all four Torah scrolls preserved in the synagogue are bound with wimpels, while additional binders are stored beneath the Ark together with other ritual textiles, such as white Torah mantles used for the High Holidays. Evidence shows that all wimpels were crafted locally. During a visit to the synagogue in 2024, Carmen Rosenblatt, was still able to recognize the Hebrew names on the wimpels. The examined examples included those she

¹⁶⁶ Inventory #NCI.W.02 and #NCI.W.03

¹⁶⁷ Inventory #LB.W.07

crafted for her own children in the 1960s. The consistent style of these wimpels, most of which date from the 1940s onward, underscores the continuity of the tradition within a rural community, where the wimpel continued to function primarily as a ritual object rather than as a commemorative artifact.

Taken together, these examples indicate that while the wimpel preserves a composition and iconographic structure that is German in essence, its realization in Argentine-produced examples reflects a process of adaptation to local visual and linguistic contexts. The ritual object retains its internal logic, rooted in a fixed Hebrew textual formula and a stable sequence of symbolic motifs, yet its pictorial language and inscriptions absorb elements that resonate with Argentine visual culture of the mid-twentieth century. In some cases, this adaptation is expressed primarily through style, as in the incorporation of locally familiar decorative motifs such as light blue and white ribbons;¹⁶⁸ in others, it is articulated through language, when German names or German-language inscriptions present in earlier examples are replaced by Spanish names or Spanish usage.

The precise reasons for these shifts depend on case-by case analysis and cannot be generalized, but they are all grounded in integration into a new culture. It is possible that the illustrators or artisans responsible for producing wimpels in Argentina worked within a local graphic and linguistic vocabulary familiar from other contexts, rather than drawing directly on European models. Alternatively, these choices may reflect the intentions of the families who sought to situate the child's biography within an Argentine environment while maintaining a ritual tradition inherited from Germany. In this sense, the wimpel emerges as a German Jewish tradition centered on Hebrew text and ritual structure, but its continuity in Argentina was sustained not through strict visual replication, but through the selective incorporation of local stylistic and linguistic elements.

The case of the IWO collection, is very interesting in terms of object categorization and to the purposes of the present research. Following the AMIA bombing in 1994, when salvaged objects were catalogued and stored, the IWO automatically associated wimpels with Germany. As a result, even locally produced examples were incorporated into the category of objects "rescued twice." This classificatory gesture resonates closely with the interpretive framework articulated decades earlier by Mordechai Bernstein in his 1956 essay on Torah binders. Writing shortly after his arrival in Argentina, Bernstein framed the wimpel as a specifically German Jewish tradition, largely unknown to Eastern European Ashkenazi

¹⁶⁸ See for example Inventory #IWO.W.06 and #IWO.W.07

communities, and approached it primarily from a memorial perspective shaped by loss and destruction. He described encountering hundreds of wimpels in the synagogues of Avigdor and argued that such objects should be treated as museum artifacts worthy of scholarly study.¹⁶⁹

Bernstein's emphasis on rupture and commemoration, 70 years ago, contrasts with the continued ritual life of wimpels documented in synagogue contexts such as Benei Tikva, NCI-Emanu El, and even in Avigdor between 2023 and 2025, where wimpels were not only preserved but also produced and used in Argentina well into the postwar period. The tension between these perspectives underscores the dual status of wimpels as both carriers of memory and instruments of religious continuity. Their visual and material persistence demonstrates how German Jewish ritual traditions were not merely remembered in exile, but actively continued through objects that circulated between family biographies and communal ritual spaces.

It is important to distinguish that Bernstein wrote in Yiddish, for a different audience. Although he described the wimpels in the Gottinger museum, the author makes a clear statement that these communities were destroyed, that it was a particularly Jewish German tradition, very little known to other Ashkenazi communities, particularly Eastern European Jews, usually IWO's main audience. Bernstein is writing from a memorial perspective, giving to this tradition memorial value, which was discontinued after he left for the United States a decade later. It is interesting then, to see the contrast with the rest of the wimpels in synagogues, which are more closely related to German Judaica from personal living experiences of German Jews, and not from Holocaust survivors' and scholars' perspective of destruction.

Although wimpels were crafted in connection with a specific individual and often bear biographical inscriptions, their function is not personal but ritual: they serve to bind the Torah scroll and therefore belong, in practice, to the life of the synagogue. While the systematic use and preservation of wimpels is characteristic of German-Jewish communities, isolated examples have also been identified in other regions of Argentina, including Córdoba and Moisesville, as well as in the collection of the Museum of the Jewish Colonies of Entre Ríos. In these cases, the presence of wimpels reflects the integration of Jews of German origin

¹⁶⁹Mordecai Bernstein, 'Die Gottinger Torah Wimpeln', in *Nisht Derbrannte Scheitn* (IWO, 1956), esp. 128.

within predominantly Eastern European Jewish communities, rather than the existence of distinct German-Jewish communal frameworks.

Questions concerning ownership, status, and the tension between individual dedication and communal use—particularly in cases where these binders were carried into exile—are addressed in the following chapter on provenance. For the purposes of this chapter, it is sufficient to note that the use of wimpels within the synagogue followed internal communal logics: in contexts where multiple wimpels were preserved, their selection for use on particular occasions may have been guided by memory, honor, or family association, without implying fixed rules. Similar dynamics recur in the donation and use of silver Torah ornaments and other Judaica, which likewise mediate between individual commemoration and communal ritual life.

3.1.2 Silver Torah Ornaments

If the wimpel occupies a liminal position between the individual sphere and the communal, linking biography to community identity, metal Torah ornaments operate more explicitly within the public and visual sphere of the synagogue. As noted earlier, by the early modern period, a stable corpus of such ornaments had emerged, including finials, crowns, shields, and pointers, each articulating the sanctity of the Torah through durable materials and conspicuous display.

These objects, classified as *tashmishei kedusha*, derive their holiness from direct physical contact with the Torah scroll, like the case of the textiles. Their relative durability, frequent inscriptions, and prominent placement make them especially revealing for tracing patterns of continuity, adaptation, and memory within German-Jewish communities in Argentina. Their presence belongs to a shared Jewish ritual framework; what distinguishes the objects examined here lies not in their use, which is broadly common in almost every synagogue, but in their artistic articulation: materials, craftsmanship, iconography, composition, and most of its afterlife following the moment of its creation and its perception by the community.

As ornaments, these objects function differently from the textiles described above: rather than enclosing the Torah, they frame it visually and symbolically. Like jewels, they confer honor, visibility, and distinction through their placement, materiality, and form. Typically made of silver or other shiny metals, often fitted with bells and bearing dedicatory inscriptions to individuals or families, Torah ornaments introduce sound, brightness and majesty into the moments surrounding the Torah reading.

The aesthetic elaboration of ritual objects associated with the Torah is grounded in the rabbinic principle of *hiddur mitzvah*, the obligation to beautify the performance of commandments. Interpreting the verse “This is my God and I will glorify Him” (Exod. 15:2), rabbinic literature understands glorification not as an abstract gesture but as a concrete practice enacted through material choices. As articulated in the Talmud this principle calls for the preparation of beautiful ritual objects as a means of honoring God through the performance of *mitzvot*.¹⁷⁰ In this framework, beauty is not auxiliary to ritual practice but integral to it: the commandment is fulfilled not only through correct performance, but through aesthetic intention.

Rabbinic discussions of *hiddur mitzvah* also acknowledge the tangible cost of beautification. In *Bava Kama* 9b, Rabbi Zera teaches that one should be willing to expend up to an additional third of an object’s value in order to enhance a mitzvah.¹⁷¹ This principle establishes material investment as a legitimate expression of religious devotion embedded within halakhic reasoning. At the same time, rabbinic sources draw distinctions between objects of inherent sanctity and those that merely serve them. As Vivian Mann has noted, while a Torah scroll itself could not be sold, its ornaments could be alienated in order to acquire sacred texts, underscoring that the function of these objects was understood as aesthetic rather than textual.¹⁷² This distinction clarifies the status of Torah ornaments as *tashmishei kedusha*: objects whose role is to honor and frame the Torah visually, without sharing its intrinsic sanctity.

Building on this rabbinic framework, Vivian Mann has demonstrated that a relatively stable corpus of Torah ornaments was already in place by the late medieval and early modern periods.¹⁷³ Drawing on Hebrew illuminated manuscripts, written descriptions, and early material evidence, she traces the emergence of finials and crowns well before 1500, while identifying Torah shields (*tas*) and pointers (*yad*) as later additions, appearing primarily in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Mann notes that one of the earliest documented references to Torah shields appears in a convert’s account of Jewish worship published in Augsburg in 1530, which describes silver plates suspended by chains over Torah mantles and

¹⁷⁰ Babylonian Talmud, *Shabbat* 133b.

¹⁷¹ Babylonian Talmud, *Bava Kama* 9b.

¹⁷² Mann, ‘Torah Ornaments Before 1600’, 14.

¹⁷³ Mann, ‘Torah Ornaments Before 1600’, 15.

inscribed with phrases such as *Keter Torah* or *Kodesh la-Shem*. Similarly, the development of Torah pointers is linked to the prohibition against touching the parchment directly, with early examples—often terminating in a sculpted human hand—emerging in Italy before spreading to other regions.¹⁷⁴ Within this framework, Torah ornaments are understood not as secondary embellishments but as integral components of ritual practice, even as their specific forms remained open to regional variation and historical change.

In the three synagogues examined in this study, the number of Torah ornaments preserved is relatively large. A complete inventory would therefore add little beyond an accumulation of individual cases. Instead, this section adopts a selective strategy, focusing on representative objects in order to trace German-Jewish visual traditions in Buenos Aires and to examine the (dis)connection between collective memory surrounding these artifacts and the material realities they present. This approach allows ritual continuity, local adaptation, and moments of rupture to emerge through specific objects rather than exhaustive enumeration.

At NCI–Emanu El, this dynamic is particularly evident in the production of silver Torah ornaments by a German-trained silversmith who was himself a member of the community. These objects were not imported from Germany but produced in Argentina, drawing on technical training, aesthetic conventions, and ritual knowledge acquired in the German context prior to exile. Created for the inauguration of the Chaim Weizmann Synagogue, the ornaments do not represent the transfer of German Judaica as finished objects, but rather the continuation of German-Jewish craftsmanship in a new homeland. As such, they function simultaneously as ritual implements, material memories, and tangible evidence of the transmission of artisanal knowledge under conditions of displacement and resettlement.¹⁷⁵

Today, Torah ornaments preserved at the Leo Baeck Synagogue include finials (rimmonim), shields (tas), pointers (yad), Torah dresses, and binders. While the identification of specific Torah scrolls donated by Rabbi Fritz Leopold Steinthal has not been possible, the origins of several Torah ornaments can be reconstructed with greater precision through silver marks, dedicatory inscriptions, and stylistic comparison with documented examples from other collections.

¹⁷⁴Mann, 'Torah Ornaments Before 1600', 16.

¹⁷⁵ Wolff, *Nueva Comunidad Israelita. 50º Aniversario*.

All metal ornaments are made of silver. According to communal memory, Torah ornaments are generally believed to have been brought by immigrants from Europe.¹⁷⁶ Material evidence, however, reveals a more complex picture. While several nineteenth-century pieces originate in Germany, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and Western Europe, a significant proportion of the ornaments were produced in the mid-twentieth century in Argentina, Israel, or the United States. Most of these objects remain in active ritual use, even when bearing signs of repair or partial loss. Only a small number of items—such as one incomplete pair of finials and several shields or pointers with broken chains—are no longer used. In accordance with halakhic norms that prohibit the disposal of sacred objects, damaged ornaments are stored beneath the Ark. Shields, finials, and pointers are used interchangeably, without preference for age, provenance, or stylistic distinction, reinforcing that they are approached here not as museum artifacts but as elements of a living ritual environment.

Rimmonim, the Hebrew term for Torah finials, crown the upper ends of the Torah staves (*atzei chayim*). Originally conceived as fixed decorative elements, they developed into removable ornaments that could also function independently within synagogue space. Medieval sources attest to their presence as early as the eleventh century. Although purely decorative in function, finials are classified as *tashmishei kedusha* and therefore subject to the same rules of care and preservation as other objects associated with the Torah.¹⁷⁷

Eight pairs of finials were registered at the Leo Baeck Synagogue in 2022. Photographic documentation from a Bar Mitzvah ceremony in 1961 confirms that at least three of these pairs were already in use by that time. One finial visible in the photograph is today missing its pair; it bears a Spanish dedicatory inscription stating that it was donated by Mr. and Mrs. Strauss on the occasion of their son's Bar Mitzvah in July 1961. The use of Spanish suggests local production or acquisition abroad in the postwar period, rather than direct transfer from Germany. This finial forms part of a set together with a Torah shield bearing the same inscription.

Another pair visible in the photograph and still preserved today appears to be of local craftsmanship. Its modern design—composed of three rounded, fruit-like spheres stacked vertically—does not conform to established European typologies such as tower-shaped

¹⁷⁶ Abraham Skorka, 'Telephone interview', 17 January 2023.

¹⁷⁷ Mann, 'Torah Ornaments Before 1600'; Cohen et al., *Handbook on Judaica Provenance Research: Ceremonial Objects*.

Ashkenazi finials or fruit-shaped Sephardic examples. An almost identical pair is preserved at the Sociedad Unión Israelita Tucumana, suggesting production in Buenos Aires.¹⁷⁸

Only one pair of finials, blurred in the 1961 photograph, corresponds stylistically to a filigree pair currently preserved in the Ark.¹⁷⁹ On the basis of congregational tradition and donation records, these finials are most likely those mentioned in Rabbi Fritz Leopold Steinthal's donation. Material and stylistic evidence, however, indicates that they were not produced in Germany. The finials were made in London in 1892 by the Polish-Jewish silversmith Aron Katz.¹⁸⁰ Featuring a wide base and a vertically articulated body topped by a crown surmounted by an eagle holding a bell, with additional smaller eagles arranged around the upper register, the finials originally incorporated multiple bells, many of which are now missing. Traces of repeated repair attest to their sustained ritual use over time. Even though they are not German in place of manufacture, these finials exemplify a Central European Ashkenazi ornamental language that was preserved and mobilized in exile, complicating simplified narratives of origin while underscoring the continuity of German-Jewish ritual aesthetics in Argentina.

Additional finials include two nearly identical pairs produced in New York by the Eastern Sterling Company, most likely acquired in the postwar years, as well as plain twentieth-century examples lacking marks or inscriptions.¹⁸¹ Only one further pair has been securely identified as originating in Vienna in 1860, based on its silver marks. Taken together, the material evidence suggests that only two pairs of finials were likely brought to Argentina by German Jewish immigrants, thereby challenging prevailing communal assumptions that

¹⁷⁸ The finials in Sociedad Union Isralita Tucumana are topped by a bell instead of a the Star of David that tops the finials from Benei Tikva. They were mistakenly assumed to be made in Europe in the early twentieth century, Tamara Kohn, "Hidden Treasures of Argentine Jews" (unpublished essay, The Jewish Theological Seminary New York, 2011), 21.

¹⁷⁹ Inventory number: LB.F.3

¹⁸⁰ Maker's mark "AK" is most plausibly attributable to the Polish-Jewish silversmith Aron Katz, active in London in the late nineteenth century. A closely comparable pair of filigree Torah finials by the same maker was sold at Bonhams, *Fine Judaica*, 2010, lot 210. A silver spice box bearing the same mark and dated 1892 was also offered at Goldberg Coins and Collectibles, Sale 88, lot 395. Bonhams, *Fine Judaica*, 2010, lot 210, <https://www.bonhams.com/auctions/17834/lot/210/>; Goldberg Coins and Collectibles, Sale 88, lot 395, http://images.goldbergauctions.com/php/lot_auc.php?site=1&sale=88&lot=395&lang=1.

¹⁸¹ Leo Baeck Synagogue, inventory nos. LB.F.04–LB.F.05. Both pairs bear the maker's mark *ESCO Sterling*, attributed to the Eastern Sterling Company (New York). Dating and attribution are based on silver marks and stylistic comparison. See "Eastern Sterling Company," *Online Encyclopedia of Silver Marks, Hallmarks and Maker's Marks*, <https://www.925-1000.com/>.

the synagogue's Torah ornaments as a whole arrived with the founding generation from Germany.¹⁸²

Returning to observations made earlier in this dissertation regarding the distance between memory and history, the analysis of Torah finials at the Leo Baeck Synagogue reveals a comparable tension between material evidence and congregational remembrance. Here, the gap emerges not between past and present narratives, but between what the objects themselves attest through marks, inscriptions, and stylistic analysis, and how they are remembered within the community. This distance should not be understood as a failure of memory or as an error to be corrected, but as a key analytical space through which meaning is produced.

Within this framework, the category of "German" Judaica does not function as a strictly historical or art-historical designation, but as a memorial one. Objects come to be understood as "German" not solely because they were produced in Germany or acquired there before emigration, but because they are perceived as having accompanied German-Jewish founders into exile and as having enabled the continuation of European Jewish ritual traditions in Argentina. The present analysis thus casts light on a particular definition of German Judaica operative in this context: one grounded in communal memory, ritual continuity, and the symbolic attribution of pre-Holocaust origins, rather than in place of manufacture alone.

Torah shields (*tas*) occupy the frontal plane of the Torah scroll and are among the most visually prominent ritual ornaments. Suspended from the *atzei hayim* and centered when the Ark is opened, they function simultaneously as ornamental, identificatory, and commemorative elements. Earlier examples of Torah shields date to the sixteenth century, when they developed as a means of indicating the specific reading or holiday for which a scroll was designated, often by means of an interchangeable plaque naming the occasion or weekly portion.¹⁸³

At the Leo Baeck Synagogue, four Torah shields remain in active ritual use, while a fifth survives with a broken chain. Inventory numbers LB.TS.1, LB.TS.2, and LB.TS.5 bear dedicatory inscriptions in Spanish and date to the mid-twentieth century, whereas two shields can be securely identified as originating in Germany. As with the finials discussed above, inscriptions, dates, and silver marks constitute crucial sources for reconstructing the histories

¹⁸² Leo Baeck Synagogue, inventory no. LB.F.08. Silver marks include maker's mark *JE*, city mark Vienna, and Austro-Hungarian Empire mark dated 1860, confirming production in Vienna in the mid-nineteenth century.

¹⁸³ Mann, 'Torah Ornaments Before 1600', 14; Cohen et al., *Handbook on Judaica Provenance Research: Ceremonial Objects.*, 96.

of these objects and for distinguishing between inherited assumptions of origin and material evidence.

One particularly revealing example is the Torah shield donated by Hilda and Carlos Schloss. Stylistic and hallmark analysis indicates that the shield was produced in New York in the early twentieth century, rather than in Germany. The inscription lacks a date, and the object preserves traces of a missing upper element once attached to its crown. At its center, the Tablets of the Law are framed by a floral border and surmounted by a crown symbolizing *Keter Torah*.¹⁸⁴ The Tablets are flanked by two columns, and beneath them appears the recessed space intended for a removable plaque indicating the Torah portion. An oval dedicatory cartouche occupies the lower register.

The shield's hallmark confirms that it is not a German-made object brought directly by refugees fleeing Nazi Germany, similarly to the finials bearing the same New York maker's mark. Nevertheless, the synagogal context raises questions that extend beyond place of production: did the Schloss family acquire Judaica in New York for donation to their Argentine congregation? Were the finials and shield conceived as a set? Who were Hilda and Carlos Schloss within the communal network of German Jewish migration?

Archival research provides partial answers. According to records from CEMLA (Centro de Estudios Migratorios Latinoamericanos), Helena Hilda and Carlos Schloss entered Buenos Aires on 28 July 1958 aboard the *Río Jáchal*, arriving from New York. Both held German nationality.¹⁸⁵ Carlos Schloss appears in the AMIA burial registry with a date of death of 29 December 1981, while Hilda Schloss (née Lowenstein) is recorded as having died on 6 August 1973.¹⁸⁶ Their absence from the synagogue's memorial plaques suggests a biography shaped by multiple migrations rather than long-term institutional leadership. The shield thus becomes a material trace of a German Jewish family whose journey passed from Germany to the United States and only later to Argentina, illustrating how Torah ornaments can encode complex migratory routes that challenge simplified narratives of direct transfer.

Two additional Torah shields with Spanish inscriptions further illuminate the communal history of Benei Tikva. One was donated by the Strauss family and forms part of a

¹⁸⁴ Pirkei Avot, 4:13.

¹⁸⁵ This information was obtained in through an online search, however an in person research of the originals material is required. CEMLA online database search for "Schloss" surname.

¹⁸⁶ "Grave search" in AMIA's website, <https://amia.org.ar/sepelioscomunitarios/busqueda-de-sepulturas/>

set together with a pair of finials discussed earlier; the other commemorates the twenty-fifth wedding anniversary of Juan C. Caro and his wife. Both shields share an identical compositional scheme: the Tablets of the Law are flanked by winged lions, surmounted by a crown topped with a Star of David, and completed by a dedicatory inscription in the lower register. While the donors' biographies are not the focus here, these objects attest to the role of Torah ornaments as markers of life-cycle events and milestones within the congregation.

Juan C. Caro's name appears both on the synagogue's memorial plaques and in the Jewish cemetery registry. In his written testimony on the foundation of *Culto Israelita de Belgrano*, published in the seventieth-anniversary volume of *Benei Tikva*, Caro recounts celebrating his Bar Mitzvah in a synagogue in Berlin and having known Rabbi Leo Baeck personally.¹⁸⁷ His shield thus operates at the intersection of personal memory, German Jewish biography, and Argentine communal life. Juan Caro's son, Andrés, and his wife, are still active members of Benei Tikva congregation.

Among the shields preserved at Leo Baeck, two can be securely identified as German in origin. The earliest example was identified as originating from Augsburg, designed by master silversmith Friedrich Anton Gutwein in 1801, and dedicated to a synagogue in 1803/4.¹⁸⁸ Its design is very similar to other shields created by the same master: in the center a menorah stands on top of the Tablets of the Law, framed by two columns topped by rampant lions flanking a three-dimensional crown.¹⁸⁹ Below the Tablets of the Law, there is a rectangular space for the missing plaque that indicates the reading section for that Scroll. Finally, in the lower area, the names and the date of donation, appear in a Hebrew inscription.

The second German shield produced in Berlin in the first half of the 19th century.¹⁹⁰ Similar motifs repeat in this example: in the center, we find the Tablets of the Law with two rampant lions (one is missing), and a crown tops it. On the sides, two columns hold floral arrangements. It has no inscriptions.

In addition to finials and shields, the Leo Baeck Synagogue preserves several Torah pointers (*yad*), whose proportions and stylistic features align closely with Ashkenazi models

¹⁸⁷Juan Caro, "Testigo de la historia," 28–29.

¹⁸⁸ Silvermarks indicate it was produced in Augsburg 1801 by F. Anton Gutwein (AG). A Hebrew inscription enclosed in a wreath indicates the names of the donors and the Hebrew year 5564.

¹⁸⁹ Inventory number: LB.TS.3. See discussion on Torah shields from Augsburg in Rafi Grafman et al., eds, *Crowning Glory: Silver Torah Ornaments of the Jewish Museum*, New York (Godine, 1996), 35.

¹⁹⁰ Inventory number: LB.TS.4. City mark of Berlin with a Bear and letter K. The maker was not identified. Further research of silver mark will be carried in the future.

of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Four early pointers follow a consistent typology: a spherical knop at the upper end, a twisted shaft articulated by a secondary knop, and a terminal sculpted hand emerging from a sleeve with the index finger extended.¹⁹¹ Their restrained ornamentation, balanced proportions, and emphasis on function correspond to Central European conventions documented in other museum collections. Smaller and more mobile than other Torah ornaments, pointers often display visible traces of wear, repair, and adaptation, rendering them particularly eloquent witnesses to embodied ritual continuity.

Taken together, the silver Torah ornaments of the Leo Baeck Synagogue reveal a significant gap between communal memory and material evidence. While some objects were indeed produced in Europe and likely arrived in Argentina with German Jewish immigrants, many others were acquired later, either locally or through transnational networks linking Germany, the United States, and Argentina. Yet within the ritual life of the synagogue, distinctions of origin recede. Through sustained use, repair, and incorporation into communal practice, these ornaments have come to signify “German” not in a narrow sense of place of manufacture, but as objects perceived to belong to a pre-Holocaust European religious world and to have been integrated into Argentine Jewish life by the founding generation.

This observation helps clarify how “German Judaica” is understood within the community itself, beyond museological classifications or strictly academic definitions. In this context, “German” operates as a mnemonic and symbolic category rather than a purely historical or geographical one. It designates objects associated with continuity, legitimacy, and ancestral authority—artifacts imagined as having crossed the Atlantic together with the founders, regardless of their precise provenance. The meaning of these objects is thus shaped less by documentary certainty than by ritual use, collective memory, and the narratives through which the community has articulated its origins.

This dynamic—where memory, use, and meaning outweigh strict historical provenance—will recur in the following case studies of other ritual artifacts, particularly those classified as *tashmishei mitzvah*. In the next chapter, the provenance study of additional objects will further complicate these definitions, revealing even more polemical tensions between archival evidence, institutional taxonomies, and the ways in which communities continue to construct and negotiate their material heritage.

3.2 *Tashmishei Mitzvah*: Jewish ritual art made in Germany

¹⁹¹ For a full discussion on this type see Rafi Grafman, Grafman et al., *Crowning Glory*, 67–69.

Rabbinic literature defines *tashmishei mitzvah* as objects employed in the performance of specific commandments and ritual acts. Unlike objects whose sanctity derives from direct association with sacred texts, *tashmishei mitzvah* acquire religious significance through use rather than through inherent holiness. Classical sources—including the Mishnah and the Babylonian Talmud—emphasize that once the ritual action has been fulfilled, such objects do not retain permanent sanctity and may, under certain conditions, be repurposed, transferred, or disposed of. Their religious status is thus functional, contingent, and embedded in practice rather than in material essence.¹⁹²

Within this halakhic framework, *tashmishei mitzvah* encompass a wide range of Jewish ritual artifacts used in domestic, communal, and festive contexts: Shabbat lamps, Kiddush cups, Havdalah implements, Passover objects, prayer books, and other items that structure the rhythm of Jewish life through weekly, annual, and lifecycle rituals. While rabbinic sources define these objects primarily by their role in fulfilling commandments, this study approaches them as an analytical category that allows for the examination of ritual practice, memory, and material continuity in situations of displacement and exile.

In the context of German-Jewish refugee communities in Argentina, *tashmishei mitzvah* occupy a particularly revealing position. Originally embedded in the domestic sphere and tied to individual or family practice, many of these objects were carried into exile, preserved across generations, and later transferred into communal, institutional, or museological settings. As a result, objects that halakhically remain outside the category of intrinsically sacred items came to assume new roles as carriers of memory, heritage, and identity. Their movement from private homes to synagogues, museums, and archives reflects a broader process in which personal ritual practice is transformed into collective memorialization.

This section therefore brings together a heterogeneous group of ritual artifacts that share neither a single function nor a unified typology, but are linked by their use in the performance of *mitzvot* and by their capacity to mediate between lived religious practice and historical memory. These objects appear across all institutions examined in this study—synagogues, museums, and archival collections—demonstrating how domestic ritual culture was transferred to new institutional settings that fulfill a role of central repository for the preservation of German-Jewish identity in Argentina, often as Holocaust-related narratives.

¹⁹² Mishnah, *Megillah* 3:3; Babylonian Talmud, *Megillah* 26b; Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Hilkhos Tefillin, Mezuzah ve-Sefer Torah 10:6–7; *Shulchan Aruch*, Orach Chayim 21:1.

The discussion begins with the *Shabboslamp*, a paradigmatic example of a domestic ritual object whose form, use, and later recontextualization render it a powerful marker of German-Jewish tradition. It then turns to Shabbat-related implements such as challah sets, Kiddush cups, and Havdalah candleholders preserved in the collections of NCI–Emanu El and the Latin American Rabbinical Seminary. Passover objects—including textiles and illustrated Haggadot—are examined as vehicles of narrative transmission and intergenerational memory through visual types that became popular in Central Europe, followed by Hanukkah lamps, whose synagogue and domestic forms raise distinct questions of provenance and Holocaust-related memory that are addressed more fully in the following chapter.

The section concludes with small-format prayer books (*mini-siddurim*) and with objects that stretch the boundaries of art-historical classification, such as butcher knives associated with shechita in the Benei Tikva collection and archival materials preserved in the Buenos Aires Holocaust Museum. These cases mark a transition toward the final part of the chapter, which addresses personal documents and artifacts that function less as ritual objects than as components of a Jewish archival imaginary of German-Jewish identity, pride, and self-representation.

Judaica for weekly domestic Jewish rituals

Among the most characteristic expressions of German-Jewish domestic ritual culture are shabboslamps, also known as *Judenstern* lamps. These star-shaped hanging oil lamps were traditionally used in private homes for the lighting of Sabbath and festival candles. Rabbinic sources regulate the type of oil and wick to be used for Sabbath lights but do not prescribe the form of the lamp itself.¹⁹³ As a result, Ashkenazi Jews adopted star-shaped hanging lamps common in medieval Central European households, which over time became closely associated with Jewish ritual practice and were preserved within Jewish homes long after they had fallen out of use among the general population.¹⁹⁴

In the Argentine context, shabboslamps brought by German-Jewish refugees were not only retained as domestic ritual objects but were also recontextualized within communal and

¹⁹³ Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 23b; Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 263

¹⁹⁴ Esto aparece en el libro de 5 centuries of hanukkah lamps creo!!! Vivian B. Mann, ““New” Examples of Jewish Ceremonial Art from Medieval Ashkenaz”, *Artibus et Historiae* 9, no. 17 (1988): 16, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1483313>.

institutional settings.¹⁹⁵ Their presence in the three synagogues examined in this study reflects both continuity of tradition and a transformation of function, moving from the private sphere of the home to public spaces of worship, memory, and display.

In the Leo Baeck Synagogue of Benei Tikva, the shabboslamp occupies a particularly prominent position. During the synagogue's renovation in 1981, the traditional Eternal Light (*ner tamid*) above the Torah Ark was replaced with an electrically modified shabboslamp. While the Eternal Light represents divine presence in every synagogue, its form often follows regional and period styles that resemble church lamps and can be difficult to identify as Jewish without inscriptions.¹⁹⁶ By contrast, the star-shaped lamp functions as an immediately recognizable sign of German-Jewish ritual culture, requiring no textual marker to establish its Jewish identity.

From a halakhic perspective, ritual objects may be repurposed when their new function entails a higher level of sanctity.¹⁹⁷ In this case, the transformation of a domestic Sabbath lamp into the synagogue's Eternal Light constitutes an elevation rather than a diminishment of ritual status. Shabboslamps are well known in the private homes of German immigrants, where they were often preserved as treasured family objects passed down through generations. The decision of the Benei Tikva congregation to elevate such an object to the central focal point of the synagogue, directly above the Ark, represents a conscious statement of German-Jewish identity in material form.

In Colonia Avigdor, the shabboslamp underwent a different but equally meaningful transition. Following the renovation of the synagogue by the Preisler–Schreiner family in 2001, a Sabbath lamp that had previously belonged to the family was donated to the synagogue.¹⁹⁸ While it does not function as the Eternal Light, its presence within the sacred space introduces a domestic object into the communal environment, where it operates as a

¹⁹⁵ Shabboslamps were not exclusive to German-Jewish communities and are documented more broadly within Ashkenazi domestic ritual culture in Central and Western Europe. Their association with German Jewry, however, derives from the particularly strong preservation and continued use of this lamp type within German-Jewish households into the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the Argentine context, this association acquires specific interpretive weight: Jewish immigration from regions where other Ashkenazi domestic lighting traditions predominated was comparatively limited, while German-speaking refugees constituted a significant and self-conscious cultural group. As a result, the presence of Shabboslamps in Argentine synagogues and collections functions less as a marker of universal Ashkenazi practice than as a historically situated indicator of German-Jewish ritual heritage.

¹⁹⁶ Cohen et al., *Handbook on Judaica Provenance Research: Ceremonial Objects*, 96.

¹⁹⁷ Babylonian Talmud, *Megillah* 26b

¹⁹⁸ Rosenblatt, Telephone interview.

visual marker of the German-Jewish origins of the colony's founders. Here, the lamp functions less as a liturgical instrument than as an emblem of identity, bridging private family memory and collective religious space.

At NCI–Emanu El, two Shabboslamps are preserved within the community's permanent exhibition. Removed from ritual use and placed within a museological framework, these lamps are presented as historical artifacts narrating the German-Jewish past of the congregation. Although they bear no inscriptions or identifying marks, their form, material, and typology unmistakably reflect German ritual design.

One of these lamps originates from Mainz and was brought to Argentina by Max and Grete Frank. Preserved within the family until its donation by their grandson, Mario Ruschin, the lamp was explicitly transferred from domestic ritual use into institutional memory. As Ruschin recalled, "My mother Margot always wanted the lamp to be in the NCI–Emanu El Museum," articulating a clear intention to transform a lived ritual object into a public vehicle of remembrance.¹⁹⁹

The lamp entered the museum collection during a renovation in 2024. Shortly after the exhibition opened, a second shabboslamp was donated by another community member, inspired by the presence of the first. This subsequent donation illustrates how the exhibition itself became a catalyst for the reactivation and transmission of German-Jewish material memory within the congregation.

The first lamp is displayed against an enlarged reproduction of Moritz Daniel Oppenheim's *Sabbath Anfang* (The Start of Shabbat, 1865) and arranged alongside objects that also appear in the painted scene, including a *mizrah*, a Kiddush cup, metal-bound prayer books, and a challah plate.²⁰⁰ This visual correspondence produces a strong mnemonic effect, evoking an idealized image of German-Jewish domestic life and reinforcing the lamp's role as an object of memory rather than an active ritual instrument.

Across these three cases, the shabboslamp exemplifies a broader trajectory in the material culture of German-Jewish refugees in Argentina: from domestic ritual object, to communal symbol, to museum artifact. Even in the absence of detailed provenance or inscriptions, its recognizable star-shaped form and association with lived ritual practice evoke

¹⁹⁹ Mario Ruschin, WhatsApp message exchange with the author regarding the provenance of the Shabboslamp donated to NCI–Emanu El, April 1, 2025.

²⁰⁰ Moritz Daniel Oppenheim's *Sabbath Anfang* (The Start of Shabbat, 1865) published in *Deckblatt zu Moritz Daniel Oppenheims "Bilder aus dem altjüdischen Familienleben"*, Frankfurt am Main, 1882.

powerful memories of pre-war Jewish life in Germany. Whether suspended above the Ark as an Eternal Light, hanging in a synagogue space, or displayed in a museum case, the shabboslamp continues to articulate German-Jewish identity through material continuity, emotional resonance, and the transformation of domestic tradition into collective memory.

The centrality of the Shabboslamp as a visual and emotional marker of German-Jewish tradition is further reinforced by the analysis of another domestic ensemble preserved in the NCI–Emanu El collection: a Shabbat set consisting of a challah plate, a textile cover, and a ritual knife. Like the Shabboslamp, this set belongs to the domestic sphere and structures the weekly ritual around the family table, highlighting the home as a privileged site of religious continuity within German-Jewish culture. Unlike the lamp, however—whose identity is communicated primarily through form—this set articulates its meaning through a combination of inscription and iconography.

The most significant element of the ensemble is the Shabbat knife, whose handle bears a detailed depiction of the Sabbath table: braided bread, a Kiddush cup, and, suspended above the scene, a star-shaped hanging lamp. This miniature ritual tableau transforms a utilitarian object into a condensed visual narrative of domestic Sabbath practice, integrating multiple ritual elements into a single image. The explicit inclusion of the hanging lamp within the scene reinforces its role as a symbolic anchor of the ritual and establishes a direct visual dialogue between the two objects. Although the knife bears no visible silversmith's marks, its iconography—together with the German inscription "Gut Shabbat" on the challah plate—clearly situates the set within a German-Jewish visual tradition. In its current museological context, the Shabbat set no longer functions primarily as a household object but as a carrier of memory, evoking family practices, affective bonds, and forms of everyday religiosity associated with the German-Jewish world prior to the Shoah.²⁰¹

The trajectory outlined by the Shabboslamp and the Shabbat set finds a parallel in other domestic ritual objects preserved today in institutional collections, particularly Kiddush cups and Havdalah implements. In contrast to synagogue-centered ritual artifacts, these objects articulate the sanctification of time within the home, marking the transition between sacred and profane temporal frameworks through repeated domestic practice. Their later

²⁰¹ For detailed discussion on challah knives see Hannah-Lea Wasserfuhr, *For the Love of Bread and Barches – The Very German-Jewish Challah Knife*, 15 February 2024, text/html, <https://doi.org/10.58079/12PZP>.

incorporation into synagogal and museum repositories reflects a shift from lived ritual use to educational, memorial, and heritage-oriented functions.

The collection of the Latin American Rabbinical Seminary formerly included two silver Kiddush cups attributed to German production, one dated to 1737/8 and another to the late nineteenth century. Since 2021, both objects have been reported missing, and their analysis relies on photographic documentation and descriptive records produced in 2016.²⁰² As a result, it has not been possible to examine the silver marks directly or to confirm workshop attribution with greater precision. Nevertheless, the available visual and textual evidence allows for a stylistic and typological assessment within the broader corpus of German Jewish ceremonial art.

The earlier of the two Kiddush cups is dated by inscription to the year 5498 (1737/8). Octagonal in form and standing on a circular foot, the cup is decorated on each facet with interlaced geometric and floral patterns set within cartouches. Engraved across its eight sides are the words of two biblical commandments concerning the Sabbath: “Observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy” (Deut. 5:12) and “Remember the Sabbath day to sanctify it” (Exod. 20:7), followed by the Hebrew date. The inscription unfolds sequentially around the vessel, using each facet to carry a single word, a format characteristic of eighteenth-century German Kiddush cups. The deliberate pairing of both verses is particularly significant, as it visually articulates the dual obligation of *shamor* (observance) and *zachor* (remembrance), central concepts in Jewish Sabbath theology.²⁰³

Comparable octagonal Kiddush cups bearing the same combination of verses are preserved in major collections, including the Hebrew Union College Skirball Museum in Los Angeles and the Stieglitz Collection at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, situating the Seminary cup firmly within a recognized German Ashkenazi tradition of the early eighteenth century.

Together with the Kiddush cups, the Seminary collection included two identical silver Havdalah candleholders with integrated spice containers, produced in Nuremberg and dated to the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century.²⁰⁴ These objects combine the candleholder used for the Havdalah flame with a small cabinet designed to hold the *besamim* (spices),

²⁰² Tamara Kohn, The judaica collection at the Latin American Rabbinical Seminary (Report), Buenos Aires, Argentina, 2016.

²⁰³ NY/MJS 10, See Cissy Grossman, *The Collector's Room: Selections from the Michael and Judy Steinhardt Collection*. no. 56.

²⁰⁴ Tamara Kohn, The judaica collection at the Latin American Rabbinical Seminary (Report), Buenos Aires, Argentina, 2016.

uniting multiple sensory elements—light and fragrance—within a single ritual item. Metal marks recorded on both examples confirm their place of production as Nuremberg, a major center of Jewish silverwork in the period.

An almost identical Havdalah set, dated to around 1770, was sold at Sotheby's in December 2010, while a more elaborate version featuring human figures is preserved in the collection of the Jewish Museum in New York. These parallels confirm both the circulation of this typology within German-speaking lands and its enduring appeal across generations.²⁰⁵

Despite their date, craftsmanship, and clear stylistic identification as German Judaica, the Kiddush cups and Havdalah candleholders in the Seminary's collection remain largely detached from personal or communal memory. Unlike objects preserved within synagogues or family contexts, these pieces lack documented donor histories, migration narratives, or ritual biographies. As a result, they function primarily as representative examples of German Jewish ceremonial art rather than as carriers of specific memorial meaning.

This contrast is instructive. Displayed within an educational institution, and largely severed from individual provenance, these objects are perceived as "German Judaica" in an art-historical and typological sense. Their memorial dimension emerges only faintly, mediated through date, craftsmanship, and institutional framing rather than through lived ritual continuity. The comparison underscores a central argument of this dissertation: that ritual objects acquire their strongest memorial force not through origin or antiquity alone, but through contextualization, use, and narrative attachment. Where such contexts are absent, even eighteenth-century objects of exceptional quality are historically legible yet affectively muted.

Turning back to the synagogue's Judaica reservoirs, Benei Tikva offers the clearest example of objects preserved insofar as they continue to serve a practical ritual function in the present. With the creation of the Buenos Aires Holocaust Museum in the early 2000s, Rabbi Abraham Skorka donated materials that were no longer in use to that institution for museological preservation. On that occasion, most of the donated items consisted of documents and books, but the group also included three *shechita* (butcher) knives originating from Germany.²⁰⁶

As *tashmishei mitzvah*, these knives belong to a category of ritual objects defined by function rather than by visual or symbolic qualities. According to Jewish law, the knife used

²⁰⁵ Sotheby's New York. *Important Judaica* (December 15, 2010)

²⁰⁶ call with r. abraham skorka, donation records Buenos Aires Holocaust museum.

for shechita (sakin or chalaf) must be perfectly smooth, extremely sharp, and free of any nicks or imperfections, since even the smallest defect renders the act of ritual slaughterer invalid. Rabbinic sources further require that the blade be carefully inspected before use and that the cut be performed in a continuous, uninterrupted motion in order to avoid tearing the trachea or esophagus. These technical requirements, codified in the *Talmud* and later in Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah* and the *Shulchan Aruch*, emphasize the strictly functional and halakhic nature of the object.²⁰⁷ Unlike ceremonial Judaica intended to embody *hiddur mitzvah* through visual refinement, the religious significance of the shechita knife with its strict *halachik* requirements derived mainly from use, as an indispensable tool that enabled the observance of *kashrut* and sustained everyday Jewish life within the community.

Comparable butcher knives are preserved today in the Jewish Museum of Buenos Aires and in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., where they appear within different narrative frameworks.²⁰⁸ In Holocaust museum contexts, such knives tend to function primarily as material witnesses to Jewish life before the Shoah, emphasizing rupture, loss, and the destruction of religious communities. In Jewish museum settings, by contrast, they may also be presented as part of a broader history of Jewish ritual practice, professional life, and communal organization.

Beyond institutional collections, shechita knives have also been preserved within families as inherited tools associated with religious and occupational identity. Rabbi Salomon Nusbaum of Tucumán, who also serves both as a *mohel* and a ritual slaughterer, preserves his grandfather's German butcher knives alongside other ritual objects, including a hanging bronze Shabboslamp. In this private context, the knives retain their connection to professional continuity, family memory, and domestic ritual life, demonstrating how such tools could remain meaningful even after their practical use had ceased.²⁰⁹

The historical significance of shechita as a religious practice is further underscored by its prohibition under the Nazi regime. In April 1933, shortly after the Nazis came to power, German authorities enacted legislation regulating animal slaughter that effectively banned unstunned ritual slaughter, thereby restricting Jewish dietary observance. Framed publicly as

²⁰⁷ Mishnah, Hullin 1:2–3; Babylonian Talmud, Hullin 17b–18a; Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Hilkhos Shechita 1:9–12; *Shulchan Aruch*, Yoreh De'ah 18:1–2.

²⁰⁸ USHMM Accession Number: 1992.8.33 a-b; MJBA no. 627-1

²⁰⁹ Tamara Kohn, "Hidden Treasures of Argentine Jews" (unpublished essay, The Jewish Theological Seminary New York, 2011).

an animal welfare measure, the law functioned as a discriminatory intervention into Jewish religious life and contributed to the erosion of communal autonomy in Germany.²¹⁰ Against this backdrop, the preservation and transport of shechita knives by Jewish migrants to Argentina can be understood not only as a matter of practical necessity but also as a form of religious continuity in a new homeland.

While shechita knives reflect the practical and occupational dimensions of Jewish ritual life, Passover objects shift the focus to domestic practice and narrative transmission, centering on memory, storytelling, and the reenactment of collective history within the family setting. Whereas the knife testifies to the functional continuity of Jewish law in exile, Passover ritual objects illuminate how material culture shaped the lived experience of Jewish life through ritual performance, memory, and intergenerational transmission in German-Jewish immigrant communities.

More broadly, while Shabbat-related objects structure the weekly rhythm of domestic ritual life and shechita implements respond to the practical requirements of everyday observance, festival objects introduce a distinct temporal and symbolic dimension. Annual commemorations such as Hanukkah and Passover—both rooted in historical memory and narratives of liberation—mobilize material culture that emphasizes repetition, collective identity, and the transmission of meaning across generations.

Tashmishei mitzvah for the holidays

For this reason, the following discussion focuses on Hanukkah and Passover as case studies through which to examine how festival-related Judaica articulated memory, identity, and continuity in German-Jewish immigrant contexts.

In the case of Hanukkah, the menorah constitutes the central ritual artifact of the festival. Jewish law places relatively little emphasis on the aesthetic or formal characteristics of the object used to perform the commandment, allowing for considerable diversity in form and the development of distinct regional traditions over time. Among the Hanukkah lamps preserved in the collections and synagogues examined in this study, a fundamental distinction must be drawn between large, freestanding menorahs intended for communal or synagogue use and smaller lamps designed for domestic ritual practice.

²¹⁰ USHMM Holocaust Encyclopedia: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. “Anti-Jewish Legislation in Prewar Germany” Holocaust Encyclopedia. <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/anti-jewish-legislation-in-prewar-germany>. Accessed on Dec.19, 2025.

As with Torah scrolls, oral histories within the communities frequently attribute synagogue Hanukkah lamps to acts of rescue from German synagogues during the Kristallnacht pogrom. Similar narratives circulate in the synagogues of NCI and Avigdor, where communal memory frames these objects as survivors of destruction. By contrast, smaller domestic Hanukkah lamps are more often associated with individual community members and entered communal collections through personal donation rather than collective myth-making.

The large synagogue menorahs will be examined in detail in the following chapter, where questions of provenance and Holocaust-related narratives are addressed directly. At NCI–Emanu El, however, the permanent exhibition also includes a smaller silver bench-type Hanukkah lamp of German origin, representing the domestic tradition within a museological context. According to its exhibition tag from the old synagogue, it dates to the 17th century. It has no visible silver marks, and its *shamash* is missing. There is an identical example to this lamp in the collection of the Jewish Museum, New York, from c.1898, produced by the Judaica factory Württembergisches Metallwarenfabrik.²¹¹ From the comparison to the example at the Jewish Museum and considering that this pattern appears in the *Württembergisches Metallwarenfabrik* patterns book for the first time in 1898, it is most probable that it dates to the late 19th century or early twentieth century.

Passover is another example of a holiday that involves several ritual objects that developed visual traditions around its main event, the seder night, and the story of the Haggadah.

In NCI there is also a Passover printed cloth with different sections from the Haggadah, from 20th century Frankfurt.²¹² An accompanying exhibition tag from the former exhibit in the old synagogue indicates that this cloth was usually hung in German Jewish homes during the Passover seder. Another interesting aspect of the passover cloth, is the fact that the illustrations are the same printed in some of the *Haggadot* also preserved in the community. So we can see how the printing industry developed various products surrounding the seder night even if their function was not exactly to reproduce the whole Haggadah, but its highlights, through a selection of illustrations that show the main steps of the passover seder and the scenes from the story of the liberation of the Jews from Egypt.

²¹¹ For more information about the Württembergisches Metallwarenfabrik factory and this type of lamp see Jewish Museum, *Five Centuries of Hanukkah Lamps from the Jewish Museum: A Catalogue Raisonné*, ed. Susan L. Braunstein (Jewish Museum, 2004), p.83 cat. No. 28 and p. 241 cat. No. 178.

²¹² There is an identical item in the collection of the Israel Museum, Jerusalem. Accession number: B50.02.1807.

Not as a separate category but in the limits between ritual objects and books, stand the Haggadah, mostly illustrated, these are also found in the different collections, such as the one in the Buenos Aires Holocaust Museum, from the Benei Tikva community and a similar one at the NCI synagogue. These passover *haggadot* are even in several copies of the same edition.

The first significant point to emphasize is that as Jewish ritual artifacts, Jewish books and documents usually enter the scope of different disciplines, so they are studied separately. Nevertheless, they coexist in different moments such as the market circuit, when they were commercialized together, for instance, a Hanukkah lamp and a Passover Haggadah sold in the same kind of stores.²¹³ They were stored together in the homes of their owners in libraries showcasing their Judaica and were donated to museum and synagogue collections as a group of items belonging to a family, together with other kinds of personal documents, such as passports and correspondence. And they are exhibited today in many museums as memory objects to recreate the typical atmosphere and decoration of a Jewish home in pre-war Germany.

Unlike ceremonial art, which often takes center stage in aesthetic and art historical analyses, books are frequently relegated to the periphery, within the study of Judaica as Jewish material culture. However, their presence within synagogues and institutional collections, alongside other ritual objects, underscores the need to scrutinize them as integral components of the broader understanding of German Judaica as objects of memory. Moreover, Jewish books and ceremonial artifacts fit snugly within the expansive realm of "Jewish cultural assets" and also thrive in a harmonious relationship. Through an exploration of these books, we unravel the multifaceted nature of Jewish identity, migration, and cultural continuity among the German Jewish community in Argentina.

Among the valuable volumes that make up the rich collection of the Holocaust Museum in Buenos Aires, originating from the Benei Tikvá community, one singular gem stands out: the *Karlsruhe Haggadah* of 1796. The Passover Haggadah, recited in the family setting during the Passover Seder dinner, commemorating the liberation of the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt, not only narrates the transition from oppression to freedom but also incorporates passages and rituals designed to captivate the attention of the younger generation, stimulating their questions and thus fulfilling the mandate of intergenerational transmission

²¹³ See advertisement of the Judaica store of Jakob b. Brandeis, *Israelitisches Familienblatt* 32 (8 August 1918): 8; and advertisement of the Judaica store of Jakob b. Brandeis, *Israelitisches Familienblatt* 50 (15 December 1921): 16.

encapsulated in the expression '*vehigadta lebincha...*' – 'and you shall tell your son...'. Initially a piece rooted in the home, this example transcends into the communal realm in Benei Tikvá, culminating in its donation to a museum. Thus, the metamorphosis of its function emerges, becoming a museum artifact and, consequently, an object imbued with memory.

From a symbolic perspective, this Haggadah transcends as a tale of slavery and emancipation of a people who, millennia later, find themselves compelled to migrate once again. The 1796 edition of the Karlsruhe Haggadah, printed in that city, bears witness to the memory of exile and the quest for freedom, accompanying its custodians in their forced journeys and voyages undertaken to preserve their lives and the coherence of their people.

The presence of the Jewish community in Karlsruhe has its roots in the early 18th century, gradually advancing towards the acquisition of rights that would culminate in their emancipation in the second half of the 19th century. During the interwar period, this city hosted up to three synagogues, and one of its prominent rabbis, Rabbi Nethanel Weil, persuaded local printers to establish a department for Hebrew printing. This flourishing of the Hebrew printing industry resulted in the creation of over 90 diverse titles in Hebrew and their translations into German between 1755 and 1841. In the 1790s, multiple Haggadot were printed, including the copy that arrived in Buenos Aires with the diaspora of Nazi refugees.²¹⁴

Although we lack information about the journey of this Haggadah until it arrives in Buenos Aires, it is plausible to assume that it held profound value for the family that transported it, as it was preserved for approximately 150 years before being bequeathed to the museum as a historical piece. A more thorough investigation into its origin could unravel the story of the immigrant family and the routes that led them to Argentina. Indeed, similar copies exist in the collection of the Gross Family in Israel and the Bamberger Family in New York, with the latter offering a facsimile replica in 1997.²¹⁵

It is worth noting that on the title page, the Hebrew description declares it to be a new edition with attractive illustrations for children, designed to stimulate their participation in the Passover dinner. However, the copy lacks illustrations. In contrast, another Haggadah still preserved in the temple presents itself as a German edition of the Haggadah by Rabbi Dr.

²¹⁴ Paul P. Herzog, "The Karlsruhe Haggadah, 1796," *Tovia Preschel z"l*, August 13, 2014, accessed April 7, 2023, <https://www.toviapreschel.com/the-karlsruhe-haggadah-1796/>

²¹⁵ Herzog, "The Karlsruhe Haggadah, 1796."

Alexander Kisch of Prague. This copy, a first edition printed in Prague in 1889, stands out for its innovative illustrations by the young Cyril Kutlik.²¹⁶

Rabbi Alexander Kisch (1848-1917), originally from Prague, trained as a rabbi at the Rabbinical Seminary of Breslau, the first modern rabbinical seminary in Central Europe, an academic precursor to the Conservative movement. He also obtained his doctorate from the University of Tübingen, Germany. He served as a rabbi in various cities, and from 1886 until he died in 1917, he served at the Maisel Synagogue and as the municipal rabbi in Prague.²¹⁷

The Kisch Haggadah is considered the first to have the complete cycle of 12 illustrations by the artist Cyril Kutlik, a topic developed by Guido Kisch in an article about the illustrator where he once again gives credit to an artist he deems forgotten.²¹⁸

Finally, we find a third copy of the Haggadah, in this case, it is the Rodelheim Haggadah, with text in both German and Hebrew, in an edition from 1856, where the text appears in two columns, one for German and one for Hebrew, unlike earlier copies of the same Haggadah, as seen in a version from 1848.²¹⁹

Throughout the course of this research, a recurring material feature emerged across all the collections examined: the presence of extremely small, portable German prayer books. Their significance becomes particularly evident when contrasted with another group of books preserved at Benei Tikvá. Alongside the miniature prayer books, the synagogue library contains large Talmudic volumes printed in centers such as Warsaw and Vilnius during the second half of the nineteenth century. Many of these volumes bear the stamps of the “Beit Midrash Library of the Ashkenazi community of Moisés Ville” and were transferred to Benei Tikvá as part of later efforts to preserve and rescue Jewish heritage in Argentina.

In contrast to these large study volumes, many of the prayer books associated with German-Jewish refugees are remarkably small. These so-called *mini-siddurim* are miniature prayer books designed to be carried in a pocket while traveling. They typically contain the daily prayers together with additional texts for journeys by train, sea, or other means of

²¹⁶ Guido Kisch, “An Innovator of Haggadah Illustration – Cyril Kutlik,” in *Studies in Jewish Bibliography, History and Literature in Honor of I. Edward Kiev*, ed. Charles Berlin (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1971), 211–215.

²¹⁷ Kisch, “An Innovator of Haggadah Illustration,” 211–215.

²¹⁸ Guido Kisch, “Ein slovakischer Haggida-Illustrator,” *Judaica* 19–20 (November–December 1936): 7–9.

²¹⁹ “Yudlov 922 Haggadah Rodelheim 1848,” *Haggadah Collections*, accessed April 7, 2023, <http://www.haggadahcollections.com/portfolio/yudlov-922-haggadah-rodelheim-1848/>

transportation. Several examples measuring little more than ten centimeters are preserved in the collection of Benei Tikvá.

The popularity of such books increased during the second half of the nineteenth century in the context of growing mobility and migration. According to the National Library of Israel, "these books are considered very rare, as many of them wore out due to their owners' use during their travels and, in some cases, did not survive the journey at all."²²⁰

Among the small copies in Benei Tikvá, we find a sidur printed in Prague in 1910, whose cover says:

Mincha Ktana, Prayers of Israel for the whole year in addition to 'The Ethics of the Fathers (Pirke Avot),' translated by Dr. R. S. Furstenthal, expanded with the rules of preservation regarding Tefillin (Hilchot Tefilin), and prayers for journeys by railroad and sea. Latest complete edition.

Among the examples preserved at Benei Tikvá is a siddur printed in Prague in 1910. Its title page describes it as a compact edition containing the daily prayers, Pirkei Avot, regulations concerning tefillin, and prayers for travel by railroad and sea. This small volume reflects a long tradition of producing prayer books specifically adapted to the needs of travelers. More broadly, the contrast between the large Talmudic volumes associated with the earlier migrations from Eastern Europe and the portable prayer books brought by German-Jewish refugees reveals different experiences of mobility, displacement, and religious practice within the Jewish communities of Argentina.

Taken together, the *tashmishei mitzvah* examined in this section—shabboslamps, a challah set, kiddush cups, havdalah implements, Passover objects, Hanukkah lamps, miniature prayer books, and shechita knives—demonstrate how ritual artifacts whose religious significance is defined halakhically by use rather than inherent sanctity can nevertheless acquire profound memorial and identity-bearing meanings over time. In the context of German-Jewish migration to Argentina, these objects were not only instruments for the fulfillment of commandments but also carriers of lived religious practice transported into exile.

²²⁰ Roni Oranim, "Rare Books That Kept Prayer Alive During the Jewish Migrations of the 19th Century," *HaSafranim* (blog of the National Library of Israel), March 13, 2019, accessed April 5, 2023, https://blog.nli.org.il/en/mini_siddur/.

Across all the institutions studied, these objects reveal similar paths: from domestic ritual use, to preservation within families, and eventually to communal, institutional, or museological contexts. This movement marks a shift from individual memory to collective heritage-making, in which objects that remain halakhically “non-sacred” come to function as anchors of identity, continuity, and historical consciousness.

Importantly, the analysis also exposes a recurring tension between material evidence and communal memory. Objects identified today as “German Judaica,” as perceived by the community, are not always German in terms of place of manufacture, nor were they necessarily brought directly from Germany by refugees. Instead, “German” emerges here as a relational and memorial category: one that designates perceived belonging to a pre-Holocaust European religious world and to the cultural horizon of the founding generation, rather than a strictly art-historical or provenance-based classification.

This gap between historical documentation and mnemonic attribution does not weaken the significance of these artifacts; rather, it clarifies the mechanisms through which ritual objects acquire meaning in diasporic contexts. As long as these items remained embedded in lived practice—whether at the Sabbath table, during festival celebrations, or in everyday prayer—their material qualities, scale, language, and iconography sustained a sense of continuity that exceeded questions of origin or authorship.

The final cases examined in this section—miniature prayer books and shechita knives—push the boundaries of art-historical categorization of Judaica even further. They point toward a broader archival imaginary in which books, tools, documents, and personal effects function together as repositories of German-Jewish experience. This expansion of object biography, from ritual artifact to archival trace, leads directly to the final section of this chapter, which turns to materials that articulate German-Jewish identity not primarily through ritual use, but through documentation, self-representation, and claims of belonging within modern Jewish history.

3.3 Judaica expanded: archival records in synagogues and institutional collections

Beyond ritual and ceremonial objects, synagogues and Jewish institutions founded by German-Jewish refugees in Argentina also preserve materials that fall outside conventional art-historical categories of Judaica as ritual artifacts, yet play a central role in the construction of memory, identity, and historical narrative. These items, such as passports, medals, certificates, personal correspondence, and commemorative books, are neither *tashmishei kedusha* nor *tashmishei mitzvah*, but belong instead to the realm of archival artifacts. Their

significance lies not in ritual function or aesthetic elaboration, but in their capacity to articulate lived experience, civic belonging, persecution, and survival.

In the collection of NCI–Emanu El, one of the most striking examples of this expanded category is the juxtaposition of an Iron Cross and a German passport belonging to Hellen Hamburger, daughter of Gustav Kahn. According to her testimony, her father, who was imprisoned following the November 9–10 pogrom of 1938, was released thanks to documentation attesting to his military service and the Iron Cross he had received.²²¹ Displayed together, these objects encapsulate a deeply ambivalent dimension of German-Jewish identity: the simultaneous pride in civic participation and patriotic service to Germany, and the brutal rupture of that belonging under National Socialist persecution. The Iron Cross, a symbol of honor within German national memory, is here recontextualized as an instrument of survival, while the passport—marked by exclusionary policies—testifies to the bureaucratic mechanisms of antisemitic control. These documents exhibited next to traditional Judaica add supporting original sources that are closely connected to the origins of the community as a community of survivors.

A similar tension emerges in a letter preserved within the same institutional context, written by a Jewish judge in Germany who had been removed from office following the implementation of antisemitic legislation in the 1930s. Addressed to a Jewish communal or personal network, the letter documents the sudden loss of professional status, legal rights, and social standing experienced by assimilated German Jews who had previously occupied respected positions within the German state. Written in the language and tone of German legal culture, the document reflects a profound belief in the authority of law and civic order—even as that very framework had become the mechanism of exclusion. Preserved today not as a legal record but as an archival artifact, the letter bears witness to the collapse of emancipation from within, capturing the moment when German-Jewish identity grounded in professional merit and civic duty was rendered untenable.

A related dynamic is visible in materials preserved at the Buenos Aires Holocaust Museum that were donated or transferred by Rabbi Abraham Skorka from Benei Tikva. Among them is a commemorative book listing the names of Jewish soldiers who fell in World War I fighting for Germany. This volume, originally conceived to honor Jewish participation

²²¹ Hamburger, Elena. Interview 18219. Interview by Alberto Raul Sznajderberg. Visual History Archive, USC Shoah Foundation, August 05, 1996. Accessed January 30, 2026. <https://vha.usc.edu/testimony/18219>

and sacrifice within the German nation, acquired a radically transformed meaning after the Holocaust. In the museum context, it functions simultaneously as evidence of Jewish integration into German civic life and as a tragic prelude to the subsequent exclusion, persecution, and annihilation of German Jewry. Its presence alongside Holocaust-related documents underscores the collapse of the promise of emancipation and belonging that such publications once embodied.²²²

Together, these archival objects complicate any clear-cut distinction between “German pride” and “Holocaust memory.” Instead, they reveal how German-Jewish refugees carried with them not only ritual traditions and religious artifacts, but also documents and symbols that expressed loyalty, citizenship, professional identity, and participation in German public life—attachments that did not disappear with exile. Once incorporated into synagogue collections or museum archives, these materials ceased to function as personal records and became part of a collective narrative, one that holds together pride, loss, contradiction, and survival. And most of all, continuation of a free Jewish life in Argentina.

²²² Similar approach is found at the Jewish Museum of Berlin. The Jewish Museum Berlin’s exhibition “12 of 12,000: Fallen German-Jewish Soldiers in the First World War” presents biographical records of twelve German-Jewish servicemen documented in the museum’s archival holdings, drawn from the 1932 memorial book published by the Reichsbund Jüdischer Frontsoldaten. See also: Daniel Lipson, “The Jewish Soldiers of the Kaiser’s Army,” *The Librarians*, National Library of Israel, December 18, 2017, https://blog.nli.org.il/en/jewish_germany_army/

Chapter 4

Provenance of German Judaica in Argentina²²³

A 2001 Argentine tourism guide recounts the story of a Hanukkah lamp in Colony Avigdor that was said to have been rescued from a Berlin synagogue after the pogrom of November 9, 1938, and brought to Argentina by one of the colony's settlers.²²⁴ A similar logic appeared in the former Chaim Weizmann synagogue of the Nueva Comunidad Israelita (NCI), where showcases once displayed a Torah scroll described as "rescued from the Kristallnacht," as well as in the Leo Baeck synagogue, where several Torah scrolls donated by Rabbi Fritz Leopold Steinthal were likewise believed to have been saved from the *Novemberpogrom*.²²⁵ In each of these cases, ritual objects currently preserved and used in Argentine synagogues are framed through narratives of rescue, displacement, and survival, linking them symbolically to the destruction of Jewish life in Nazi Germany.

Comparable narratives also shape the interpretation of ceremonial objects held by the Maurycy Minkowski Museum of Fundación IWO in Buenos Aires. Following the terrorist attack on the AMIA building in 1994, religious artifacts recovered from the rubble were incorporated into a collection described as having been "rescued twice"—first from the Holocaust and later from the bombing.²²⁶ Across these diverse institutional contexts, the objects are united by two recurring features: a strong symbolic connection to the Holocaust and significant gaps in their documented provenance, always linking them to a historical attack to the Jewish community that marked an inflexion point in its history.

Rather than treating these gaps as shortcomings to be corrected or legends to be disproven, this chapter approaches them as historically meaningful. The persistence of rescue narratives reveals how different generations have constructed relationships to the past through

²²³Note: In several occasions I will refer to the pogrom of November 9th, 1938, solely as Kristallnacht following the terminology implemented by the members of the congregations in question. By no means, there is any intend to use it as an euphemism or to minimize the harm and terror of that pogrom in the history of the Holocaust.

²²⁴Elio Kapszuk, ed., *Shalom Argentina: Huellas de La Colonización Judía; Tracing Jewish Settlement* (Ministerio de Turismo, Cultura y Deporte, 2001), 197.

²²⁵The original text in the former exhibition tag, stil attached to the Torah scroll, reads: "Sefer Tora: Rollo de pergamino escrito a mano según las tradiciones judías, conteniendo los cinco libros de Moises y utilizado en la liturgia sinagogal. Alemania siglo XVIII. Rescatado de la Noche de Cristal, 09 de Noviembre de 1938." Translation: Sepher Torah: handwritten scroll of parchment according to the Jewish traditions, with the five books of Moses and used in the synagogal liturgy. Germany, 18th century. Rescued from the Kristallnacht, November 9th, 1938." Letter from F. L. Steinthal, August 27th, 1969, in Skorka, 70 aniversario de Benei Tikva: una gesta por la fe., 37.

²²⁶ Silvia Hansman, 'Consulta'.

ritual objects, using provenance stories to articulate continuity, loss, and identity. The provenance research undertaken here therefore does not aim to adjudicate the factual accuracy of these claims alone, but to examine how such narratives emerge, circulate, and acquire authority. By combining archival research with attention to memory, legend, and postwar redistribution practices, this chapter explores the possibilities and limits of Judaica provenance research in contexts shaped by displacement, communal custodianship, and historical rupture.

Borrowing Y. H. Yerushalmi's study of *History and Memory*, the question here is putting into test the place of the provenance researcher—like Yerushalmi's historian—within the relation of Jews to their own past.²²⁷ In terms of memory, these objects represent the interruption of Jewish life in Europe and its continuation in Argentina. Two central questions therefore emerge: first, what can be reconstructed about the ownership histories of these objects; and second, why do they often convey more memorial meaning than historical information?

Provenance research examines the history of ownership and transfer of artworks and cultural objects, employing multidisciplinary methods to reconstruct their trajectories over time.²²⁸ While early inventories of royal and ancient collections laid its foundations, the field gained particular urgency in the late twentieth century through efforts to identify and restitute Nazi-looted art, developing into a framework concerned not only with ownership but also with historical, ethical, and interpretive questions. In recent decades, provenance research has expanded beyond the fine arts to include material culture and books.²²⁹ Yet in contrast to the extensive documentation available for many looted artworks, the provenance of Jewish ceremonial objects, especially those in Argentina often remains fragmentary or unknown, posing distinct methodological challenges.

Provenance is therefore a crucial issue in the study of Jewish art, reflecting stories of persecution, migration, exile, and displacement that have shaped Jewish material culture over centuries. The movement of Jewish communities necessarily entailed the movement of their ritual objects, alongside customs, practices, and traditions. In the specific case of German Judaica brought to Argentina by Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi Germany, questions of ownership and transmission are inseparable from the extensive looting carried out during the

²²⁷Chazan, 'From "Jewish Memory" to Jewish History', 281.

²²⁸ It is usually expressed, in a few lines, separated by certain punctuation to point into the chain of ownership from its creation to the present. See Tompkins, *Provenance Research Today*, 9–10.

²²⁹Tompkins, *Provenance Research Today*, 10.

Holocaust, the murder of original owners, and the destruction of entire communities. These conditions render the investigation of Nazi-era looted cultural assets particularly pertinent to this research, while also highlighting the limits of conventional provenance reconstruction and ultimately, restitution.

In the case of Argentina, the provenance of these artifacts decisively influences their current location.²³⁰ While most of them originate in Central Europe, the experience with them during the Holocaust years is what determined their final home: objects brought from Germany by refugees and survivors typically ended up in synagogues of German exiles reflecting an imbalance in the power dynamics within the local community. The oldest and most central institutions in Buenos Aires received these items in contrast to the JCR's original intention to distribute them, not to the country of origin, but to their displaced Jews and smaller communities, mainly for ritual use.²³¹ The question of politics of distribution and, therefore, subsequent questions regarding custody of the Jewish cultural assets and their potential restitution in the years to come, requires special attention. It is as relevant to our subject as it was in the immediate postwar years for global Jewish organizations.²³²

While provenance research has developed into a unique area of study over the past three decades, it is also possible to identify Jewish traditions related to documenting and preserving communal property. Vivian Mann's *Jewish Texts on the Visual Arts* explores these early practices, including property rights and inventories of silver and precious textiles from the Synagogue of Old Cairo, as well as modern collecting practices.²³³ Synagogue inventories and rabbinical discussions on communal property are particularly relevant because, unlike

²³⁰ For more about the dynamics of provenance and art history as a discipline and the role of provenance in determining power, see Anne Higonnet, 'The Social Life of Provenance', in *Provenance: An Alternate History of Art*, ed. Gail Feigenbaum and Inge Jackson Reist, Issues & Debates (Getty Research Institute, 2012), 195–209.

²³¹ The debate regarding the restitution and distribution of Judaica (be it archives, books, or ceremonial objects) is reflected in the minutes of the JCR from 1947 to 1951. In the case of Argentina, the ceremonial objects and books were handed over to the Delegación de Asociaciones Israelitas Argentinas, and it seems that there was no further intervention of the JCR board members in the internal distribution among the communities of Argentina. This question will be addressed in detail in the next chapter about the books of the Library of the Jewish Community of Berlin and its distribution in Argentina. Jewish Cultural Reconstruction Minutes, 1947–1951, in: Berman Archive, <https://www.bjpa.org/bjpa/search-results?search=Jewish+cultural+reconstruction> (11 December 2023)

²³² The minutes from JCR especially reflect relevant debates regarding the distribution of Judaica that has belonged to no longer existing Jewish German institutions and its relocation into the Jewish German communities in North America, South America, and Great Britain. Jewish Cultural Reconstruction Minutes, 1947–1951, in: Berman Archive, <https://www.bjpa.org/bjpa/search-results?search=Jewish+cultural+reconstruction> (11 December 2023)

²³³ Mann, *Jewish Texts on the Visual Arts.*, see chapters 4, 5, and 7.

individual or institutional collections acquired through purchases or donations, the ceremonial objects in synagogues hold historical and memory value, shaped by the community's role in their use and preservation. Not only that, but the legends that developed and shaped the community's identity often materialize in such objects.

But most of all, from a religious perspective, beyond the sociological view of the use and dynamics of the community, there are certain halakhic considerations about the property of the objects. For example, in a Mishnah in *Megillah* there is a discussion regarding the property of a synagogue, and it is clearly stated that the selling the property of many to one individual lowers it from its sanctity:²³⁴

בני העיר שמכרו רחובָה של עיר, לוקחין בְּדָמֶיּוּ בֵּית הַכְּנֶסֶת. בֵּית הַכְּנֶסֶת, לוקחין תְּבָה. תְּבָה, לוקחין מִטְפָּחוֹת. מִטְפָּחוֹת, לוקחין סְפָרִים. סְפָרִים, לוקחין תּוֹרָה. אֲבָל אִם מָכְרוּ תּוֹרָה, לֹא יִקְחוּ סְפָרִים. סְפָרִים, לֹא יִקְחוּ מִטְפָּחוֹת. מִטְפָּחוֹת, לֹא יִקְחוּ תְּבָה. תְּבָה, לֹא יִקְחוּ בֵּית הַכְּנֶסֶת. בֵּית הַכְּנֶסֶת, לֹא יִקְחוּ אֶת הָרְחוּב. וְכֵן בְּמוֹתְרֵיהֶן. אִין מוֹכְרִין אֶת שֵׁל רַבִּים לְיַחִיד, מִפְּנֵי שְׁמוּרֵי דִין אוֹתוֹ מְקַדְּשׁוֹ, דְּבָרֵי רַבִּי יְהוּדָה. אָמְרוּ לוֹ, אִם כֵּן, אַף לֹא מַעִיר גְּדוּלָה לְעִיר קְטָנָה.

Residents of a town who sold the town square, [... may] purchase a synagogue with the proceeds [of the sale]. If they sold a synagogue, they may purchase an ark [... If they sold] an ark, they may purchase wrapping cloths [... If they sold] wrapping cloths, they may purchase scrolls [... If they sold] scrolls [...] they may purchase a Torah [scroll]. However, [the proceeds of a sale of a sacred item may not be used to purchase an item of a lesser degree of sanctity. Therefore,] if they sold a Torah [scroll], they may not [...] purchase scrolls [of the Prophets and the Writings. If they sold] scrolls [of the Prophets and Writings], they may not purchase wrapping cloths. [If they sold] wrapping cloths, they may not purchase an ark. [If they sold] an ark, they may not purchase a synagogue. [If they sold] a synagogue, they may not purchase a town square. And similarly, [the same limitation applies] to [any] surplus funds [from the sale of sacred items...] They may not sell [a sacred object] belonging to the community to an individual, [even if the object will still be used for the same purpose], due to [the fact] that [...] they downgrade its [...] sanctity [...]; this is the statement of Rabbi Yehuda. The Rabbis said to him: If so, [... it should] also not [be permitted to sell a sacred object] from a large town to a small town. [However, such a sale is certainly permitted, and therefore it must also be permitted to sell such an object to an individual].²³⁵

Later sources continue discussing the question of ownership of ceremonial art, especially in the case of Torah ornaments. David ibn Abi Zimra (Radbaz, Spain ca. 1480-1573 Safed) addresses the ownership of ceremonial objects in synagogues, categorizing them as either

²³⁴ Mishnah Megillah 3:1

²³⁵ Mishnah Megillah 3:1, English translation based on Sefaria and modified by the author, accessed March 20, 2026, https://www.sefaria.org/Mishnah_Megillah.3.1

donated to the synagogue or owned privately but lent for specific occasions. Radbaz also addresses different criteria for determining communal ownership, such as the presence of a recognized scholar, the availability of similar objects, and their aesthetic appeal. He emphasizes the significance of beauty, suggesting that beautiful objects can be shared among congregations based on a collective aesthetic standard.²³⁶

Radbaz deliberately rejects any ownership claims based on an item's connection to a particular Torah scroll or the academic standing of a congregation's members. He suggests a democratic method instead, in which any 10 men who have come together for religious reasons have a right to do so. He recommends that ceremonial objects be distributed based on their quantity and aesthetic value, reflecting a balance between practical considerations and communal fairness.²³⁷

International law and provenance research practices are essential to consider. Rabbinic debates on Judaica and Jewish communal property provide valuable insights into historical practices and guidance for modern challenges in managing and preserving these assets. The ownership and use of ceremonial objects, in particular, highlight enduring ethical and spiritual dilemmas.

The question of the property of persecuted Jews in Nazi Germany is also evident in modern collecting, as in Harry G. Friedman's letter to the Jewish Museum, New York, in December 1941, where he notes that his collection, primarily assembled in New York, reflects "the coming of Hitler and the flight of Jews from Germany and subsequently from other Nazi-dominated countries."²³⁸ This case underscores a distinction between private collections, such as Friedman's, and synagogue collections in Argentina, which are intended for ritual purposes. A study of the ownership history of these artifacts is thus required to discuss their perception and transformation into symbolic memory objects through time.

The previous chapter used an object-oriented approach. This chapter deals with ownership from a social and communal point of view, from the perspective of collecting, owning, and preserving such artifacts, as well as restitution. The purpose of this chapter is to

²³⁶ Mann, *Jewish Texts on the Visual Arts*, 80–81.

²³⁷ Mann, *Jewish Texts on the Visual Arts*, 82.

²³⁸ Mann, *Jewish Texts on the Visual Arts*, 165–66.

study the provenance of different pieces that have been preserved as “Holocaust memorials” and material witnesses to the destruction of European communities.

The provenance of Jewish ceremonial art discussed in this chapter will be divided into two different sections: (1) the provenance of artifacts donated to collections and synagogues by private owners and (2) those items that arrived at their current location through the Delegación de Asociaciones Israelitas Argentinas (DAIA), which traces back to JCR. The discussion of the JCR ritual objects collection will set the background for discussing the looting of the Library of the Jewish Community of Berlin (*Bibliothek der Jüdischen Gemeinde zu Berlin*) and the shipping of a portion of this library (over 5000 books) to Argentina. Finally, an analysis of the local distribution policy, as intended by international organizations in the immediate postwar period and as reflected in today’s possession of the JCR collections in Argentina.

4.1 Conducting Judaica Provenance Research in Argentina

Deepening on the current state of provenance research in Argentina is crucial before delving into the provenance of the specific ceremonial artifacts examined. This review is framed within the broader context of cultural artifact provenance research, including Nazi-looted art, and consider the unique challenges associated with tracing the provenance of Jewish ceremonial objects as opposed to other areas, such as fine art or looted libraries.²³⁹

Questions of restitution and legitimate ownership of a cultural asset have been addressed in Argentina in the context of Precolumbian and Patrimonial Studies. Therefore, from a very local scope, displacement and looting have been conducted within national or regional borders and in different colonial contexts.²⁴⁰ The local debate is primarily sets around questions of conservation and legitimacy of ownership of religious artifacts by ethnographic museums and land possessions by the indigenous communities. UNESCO’s *Courier* celebrated in 2020 that “Since 2004, Argentina has returned nearly 5,000 cultural objects seized on its territory to their countries of origin.”²⁴¹ Moreover, that year, Argentina was

²³⁹ Kohn and Kochavi, ‘The Challenges and Complexities of Judaica Provenance Research Today’.

²⁴⁰ María Gabriela Chaparro, ‘Presentación.: A Casi Treinta años De La Primera restitución En Argentina ¿cuál Es El Estado De La cuestión?’, *Anuario TAREA* 10, no. 10 (2023): 7–18.

²⁴¹ Irene Hartmann, ‘Argentina: At the Forefront of Restitution’, *UNESCO Courier*, no. October-December (2020): 28.

considered “At the forefront of restitution.” However, all the cases reported are related to artifacts and art pieces related to its pre-Columbian and colonization history.²⁴²

In a more skeptical study, archeologist Daniel Schavelzon explores the question of provenance of different fine and decorative art artifacts that circulated in Argentina during World War II—and in the immediate years after the war—mainly pointing at the gaps in the provenance of these collections and the failed role of the *Comisión para el Esclarecimiento de las Actividades Nazis en la Argentina (CEANA)* [Commission for the Clarification of Nazi Activities in Argentina (CEANA)] into looking further into detail beyond the collections of national art museums.²⁴³ Schavelzon stresses that his book is not about Nazi-looted art but about the Argentinean chapter in the provenance of “artworks whose original ownership and acquisition methods are unknown” and how “Argentina was used to launder the illicit origin that arrives and becomes legal through various operations, to come out clean and legal again.”²⁴⁴

A different perspective on the history of art looting in Argentina was recently approached by Imanol Subilea Salvo in *Golpe en el museo: la historia del robo de obras de arte más grande de la Argentina durante la última dictadura militar*, which recounts the robbery that took place at the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes on the night of December 26, 1980. The case remains unresolved, with the investigation involving torture and illegal detentions, but the most plausible theory suggests the robbery was part of an arms-for-art exchange in the context of the last military dictatorship (1976-1983).²⁴⁵

Few existing provenance studies in Argentina discuss the origin and restitution issues of cultural and fine art artifacts and even Nazi-looted art in Argentina, and there is a significant gap in the provenance of artifacts that fill the showcases of the various Jewish museums, synagogues, and other institutional collections of this country, which has the largest Jewish population in South America.²⁴⁶ There is an implicit assumption that they were all brought by immigrants from their hometowns, either escaping from the Holocaust or from the pogroms

²⁴² Hartmann, ‘Argentina: At the Forefront of Restitution’, 28..

²⁴³ Schávelzon, *El Silencio Es Oro*, 30.

²⁴⁴ Schávelzon, *El Silencio Es Oro*, 43–44.

²⁴⁵ Imanol Subiela Salvo, *Golpe En El Museo: La Historia Del Robo de Obras de Arte Más Grande de La Argentina, Durante La Última Dictadura Militar*, 1a edición (Planeta, 2024).

²⁴⁶ Tamara Kohn, ‘Museos judíos latinoamericanos’, *Masorti : the new journal of Conservative Judaism* 68, no. 1 (2024): 79–86.

in Eastern Europe and the Ottoman Empire.²⁴⁷ In other cases, there is a lack of interest in asking about provenance. There is, at best, a complete indifference to this matter from those who manage these collections today. Donations are still received without researching provenance first.²⁴⁸ For instance, in 2018, the Buenos Aires Holocaust Museum received a donation of a silver jewelry case that had a Nazi silvermark on the bottom. The donor acquired it from Banco Ciudad's pawn service as a gift for his wife. When she realized that it had the Nazi symbol engraved on its bottom, the couple decided to donate it to the Holocaust Museum. The museum accepted it and celebrated the new acquisition on their social media.²⁴⁹ Later, they tried to conduct provenance research, but it was too political and complicated to request information from the city's bank. In any case, they concluded that it was produced during the Nazi era, and that was the reason for its Nazi silvermark.²⁵⁰ There was no further research on how it reached Argentina and to whom it belonged before being sold to the pawn shop. It is well known that Argentina has been the home for many high-ranking Nazis since World War II, and it is, at least, worth asking who was the previous owner of that jewelry box and how it ended up in a bank's pawnshop division.²⁵¹ While this case is not a Judaica case, there is a Holocaust museum involved. In other words, perhaps it is expected that Holocaust and Jewish museums in Argentina would be the first ones to consider provenance research of Nazi-era art and material culture as a highly relevant field, even in Argentina, which was a country where the Holocaust did not take place.

²⁴⁷The Jewish Museum in Buenos Aires, has registry books, where only the donor is mentioned. No additional information is provided about the provenance of the objects in the collection. In the case of the Buenos Aires Holocaust Museum, in most cases there is a reference to the donor and in some cases to the next direct previous owners. As these are usually personal items and from the Holocaust-Era, the provenance information is more complete. However, cases exist in which the donor is an institution and there is no reference to the provenance, beyond the donor at the time of acquisition.

²⁴⁸For example, The Jewish Museum of Buenos Aires and the Buenos Aires Holocaust Museum have both registered the donors of the items in their collections. No further provenance information is available nor required before acquisition. In some cases donors are requested to share a story related to the artifact, but in most cases they are accepted without further research, if the artifact is valuable enough to the scope of their collection.

²⁴⁹ Museo del Holocausto de Buenos Aires, 'El Museo del Holocausto agradece la donación de un alhajero...', Facebook post, Facebook, 30 May 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1FDsyyKdhs/>.

²⁵⁰There are other questionable issues, such as the acquisition (through donation or purchase) of Nazi-related artifacts, which is beyond the scope of study of this research. These examples show that provenance information of an artifact is not among the top priorities, even for the Buenos Aires Holocaust Museum.

²⁵¹ Serafina Perri, 'va la nota', personal communication, 27 June 2018.

Another example is Fundación IWO, which received a donation of 20 paintings by the Jewish Polish artist Maurycy Minkowski in late 2023.²⁵² These recently acquired paintings are exhibited at the institution's first floor without provenance information.²⁵³

As reflected in the works cited earlier, the question of restitution in Argentina appears mainly in patrimonial studies, strongly influencing disciplines such as architecture and archeology. The focus for the local museums and academic community is primarily not on possible Nazi-looted art in public or private collections for geopolitical reasons.²⁵⁴ Furthermore, the government's facilitation of entry for undercover Nazis and war criminals seeking sanctuary in the country, epitomized by the notorious case of Adolf Eichmann, has also played a pivotal role in this complex intertwining of historical and contemporary forces.²⁵⁵

Nonetheless, Argentina is one of the few countries where the Holocaust has not taken place that has participated and signed international conventions and treaties and even created a special commission responsible for the identification of Nazi activities in the country.²⁵⁶ A review of these conventions and the place of Argentina within that context is essential to understanding the current status of Judaica provenance research and its relationship to German Jews, particularly for this doctoral thesis.

4.2 Argentina's Participation in International Conventions and Agreements

The international conference held in 1995 at Bard College in New York signaled a resurgence of interest in the cultural losses brought about by the actions of the Nazi regime's policies. The event, which brought together representatives from World War II participating countries, art historians, experts, and claimants, attracted attention to the importance of provenance

²⁵²According to the IWO's website Family Smolarz donated 20 paintings by the Polish Jewish Artist Maurycy Minkowski in 2022. Fundación IWO, 'Museo Minkowski en IWO', Institutional website, Fundación IWO, accessed 3 July 2024, <https://www.iwo.org.ar/biblioteca-historico.html>.

²⁵³ Yasmin Kleiner and Silvia Hansman, 'Reflexiones sobre conceptos de "Procedencia" desde la práctica profesional en el Archivo, Biblioteca y Museo de la Fundación IWO', paper presented at First Seminar for Jewish Museums and Art Professionals in Latin America, 21 November 2024.

²⁵⁴ Schávelzon, *El Silencio Es Oro*, 43–44.

²⁵⁵ Schávelzon, *El Silencio Es Oro*, 147–48.

²⁵⁶ Moreover, Argentina has been the only Latin American country member of the The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) since 2002 and it serves its presidency in 2026.

studies.²⁵⁷ In 1998, the Washington Conference established 11 non-binding principles to guide provenance research on Nazi-era artifacts misappropriated because of state-sponsored persecution. These principles framed the legal and moral context for provenance research. It encouraged governments to declassify and allow public access to archival records. However, an “egregious imbalance” between public and private archival repositories hinders provenance research.²⁵⁸ Principle 3 requires public archives to make available records from 1933 to 1945 to identify confiscated art not subsequently restituted, but state-run archives often restrict access for various reasons.²⁵⁹ Argentina has signed the Washington Principles, which is the frame by which the CEANA was established.²⁶⁰

However, because the redistribution of looted cultural property continued well beyond 1945, this limited chronological scope may overlook the long-term consequences of Nazi-era looting. The activities of the JCR, for example, demonstrate that in the 1950s stolen objects were still being restituted to rightful heirs, while heirless property continued to be distributed throughout the Jewish world. Considering the complexities of postwar art circulation and the extended legacy of Nazi-era looting, a more comprehensive approach to provenance research is needed.

Argentina was one of the few, if not the only, South American countries to participate in the Washington Principles on Nazi-Confiscated Art and sign the Terezin Declaration on Holocaust Era Assets and Related Issues in 2009. These initiatives marked significant international efforts to address the restitution of Nazi-era looted art, compensation for Holocaust victims, and the recovery of their property. These agreements catalyzed investigations and transparency in many countries, but Argentina’s progress was modest. Although studies of Nazi criminals and related history advanced to some extent, research on looted art and provenance was limited. Yet, Argentina was acknowledged in the Terezín Declaration as a country making some effort regarding Judaica provenance research, placing

²⁵⁷ Marc Masurovsky, ‘The Current State of Nazi-Era Provenance Research, and Access to Nazi-Era Research Resources and Archives’, in *The Nazi Era Provenance of Museum Collections: A Research Guide*, ed. Jacques Schuhmacher (UCL Press, 2024), 136.

²⁵⁸ Marc Masurovsky, ‘The Current State of Nazi-Era Provenance Research, and Access to Nazi-Era Research Resources and Archives’, 138.

²⁵⁹ Marc Masurovsky, ‘The Current State of Nazi-Era Provenance Research, and Access to Nazi-Era Research Resources and Archives’, 138–40.

²⁶⁰ Schávelzon, *El Silencio Es Oro*, 147–48.

it above those making no contributions but highlighting its relatively minor role in the global effort.²⁶¹

The *Handbook on Judaica Provenance Research* from 2019 differentiates between “countries that have been quite active in their research on looted Judaica,” “countries that have marginally researched their Judaica collections,” and “Judaica collections (including vanished collections) in countries that thus far have not conducted any (or insufficient) research.”²⁶² Argentina and Peru, the only two countries that received Judaica from the JCR in South America, appear in the third group.²⁶³

Finally, the recently published Claims Conference’s report *Holocaust-Era Looted Cultural Property: A Current Worldwide Overview* included Argentina as one of the few countries outside of Europe where the Holocaust did not take place on its soil and participated in and signed international conventions aimed at addressing these crimes. It shows an increasing interest in provenance research for the JCR collections in Argentina. However, aside from this current dissertation and ongoing efforts by the IWO to identify the JCR books in its collections, there is no published material or program focusing on this theme.²⁶⁴

The challenges of Judaica provenance research are distinct from those in fine arts due to the nature of these objects and the historical context in which they were displaced. Unlike artworks, Judaica items were often part of more extensive collections and lacked detailed documentation. The *Handbook on Judaica Provenance Research* highlights that “the looting of Jewish cultural property was not orchestrated by a central institution, rather it was carried out by a number of Nazi organizations.”²⁶⁵ Consequently, researchers face difficulties such as scarce object descriptions and the lack of systematic records. There is a need for a creative and meticulous approach to reconstructing the migration routes of these artifacts, which

²⁶¹ Schávelzon, *El Silencio Es Oro*, 150–53.

²⁶² Cohen et al., *Handbook on Judaica Provenance Research: Ceremonial Objects.*, 28.

²⁶³ In fact the South American countries are not even mentioned in this study, as the focus is primarily in European and North American countries.

²⁶⁴ Wesley A. Fisher and Ruth J. Weinberger, *Holocaust-Era Looted Cultural Property: A Current Worldwide Overview* (Claims Conference and World Jewish Restitution Organization, 2024), 114, <https://art.claimscon.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/4-March-2024-Holocaust-Era-Looted-Cultural-Property-A-Current-Worldwide-Overview.pdf>.

²⁶⁵ Cohen et al., *Handbook on Judaica Provenance Research: Ceremonial Objects.*, 16.

requires imagination and attention to detail, frequently utilizing little archival evidence and assembling contradictory historical narratives.²⁶⁶

Each of the cases presented below illustrates the step-by-step process used to uncover the history and origins of these artifacts. It highlights how technology has helped overcome the unique challenges encountered in these investigations.

Provenance research is still underdeveloped in Argentina, and there is limited documentation about the origins of Jewish collections. This chapter focuses on the provenance of German Judaica and how it has shaped these objects' role as powerful symbols of Holocaust memory. The process of collecting these artifacts and the efforts to trace their origins reveal their significance in preserving not just Jewish heritage but also the collective memory of the Holocaust. This memory has evolved through the efforts of survivors, institutions, and communities.

4.3 German Judaica Before “The Globalization of Memory”

Memory is a central value of Jewish tradition from the individual and the communal perspective. Many rituals and traditions are designed “to remember” events from the past.²⁶⁷ The dynamics of memory and history in the Jewish world sought a rupture and change at the beginning of the modern era.²⁶⁸ The Holocaust introduced a profound rupture in Jewish collective memory, creating an urgent need for new forms of commemoration that could both honor the victims and preserve Jewish continuity.²⁶⁹ Finally, the process of globalization of the Holocaust that began in the 1990s led to its memory transcending national and cultural boundaries, becoming a universal symbol for human rights, trauma, and the fight against injustice.²⁷⁰

²⁶⁶ Cohen et al., *Handbook on Judaica Provenance Research: Ceremonial Objects*, 115–16.

²⁶⁷ Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 5–26. For further discussion of the interplay between individual and communal memory, see Elisheva Carlebach and Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, eds, *Jewish History and Jewish Memory: Essays in Honor of Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi*, The Tauber Institute for the Study of European Jewry Series 29 (Brandeis Univ. Press., publ. by University Press of New England, 1998), particularly the essays on ritual and collective remembrance.

²⁶⁸ Chazan, ‘From “Jewish Memory” to Jewish History’, 282.

²⁶⁹ Yerushalmi discusses the rupture in memory caused by the Holocaust and its implications for Jewish continuity. See Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 94–102.

²⁷⁰ Huyssen, ‘Present Pasts’, 14–15.

Understanding the changing forms of Holocaust remembrance, both locally and globally, is crucial for understanding the provenance and afterlife of German Judaica. As the symbolic memorial value of these objects evolved, the question of their provenance gained increasing importance. In Argentina, particularly concerning the AMIA 1994 bombing attack, Holocaust memory has undergone significant shifts. Exploring this evolution is essential to understanding how Jewish ritual objects, over time, have accumulated layered meanings and come to represent historical events and the ongoing process of commemoration and identity preservation.

The memory of the Holocaust in Argentina has developed significantly since the 1940s, reflecting a complex interplay of historical, cultural, and social factors. Initially, Holocaust remembrance was primarily confined to the various Jewish communities, with limited public acknowledgment. Over the decades, however, how this memory has been commemorated and represented has transformed considerably. A pivotal moment occurred in the late 1990s with the establishment of a Foundation for the creation of a Holocaust museum in Buenos Aires (Fundación Memoria del Holocausto), which played a crucial role in publicizing and expanding the discourse surrounding Holocaust memory in Argentina and integrating Argentina into the broader phenomenon of Holocaust globalization.²⁷¹

The 1990s, with the "globalization of the Holocaust," coincided with the establishment of international agreements emphasizing the importance of provenance research for collections. This period marked a turning point in the recognition of the need to trace the origins of cultural and ritual artifacts, particularly those displaced during the Holocaust. A key psychological dimension in this process was the search for looted objects as a means of reclaiming the remnants of communities and families destroyed in Europe.²⁷²

According to Malena Chinski, early Holocaust remembrance in Argentina was shaped by the Jewish community's efforts to preserve and honor their history, with commemorations such as those organized by survivors and cultural productions inspired by the Warsaw Ghetto

²⁷¹ Wanda Wechsler, 'La historia de la memoria del Holocausto en Argentina', *Cuadernos Judaicos*, no. 35 (December 2018): 261–80, <https://doi.org/10.5354/0718-8749.2018.52026>.

²⁷² Inez Schelfhout and Annelieke Drogendijk, 'Echoes of War: Exploring the Long-Lasting Psychosocial Impact of the Shoah in Light of Restitution Processes.', paper presented at Looted/Berfood, 9 September 2024.

Uprising serving as crucial acts of memory.²⁷³ Wanda Wechsler's historicization of the memorialization of the Holocaust in Argentina towards the creation of the Buenos Aires Holocaust Museum in early 2000 shows different institutionalized forms of commemoration, yet there is no analysis of the collection's provenance.²⁷⁴ Another missing question in existing Holocaust memory historicization in Argentina is that even before the Buenos Aires Holocaust Museum was established, NCI created the *Museum zur Erhaltung des Deutsch-jüdischen Kulturgutes* in 1993. This museum exhibited artifacts related both to Jewish life in Germany before the rise of Nazism and to the fleeing experiences of the congregation members.²⁷⁵

Today, NCI's collection has been reinterpreted through a new curatorial script that links ritual objects, archival materials, and the recently discovered time capsule to the history of the congregation. In this context, the collection serves as a material expression of the community's memory, reflecting its identity as a German-Jewish diaspora community that developed in Argentina in the aftermath of Nazi persecution and the Holocaust.²⁷⁶

Holocaust memory through objects is evident not only in NCI but also in the Leo Baeck Synagogue, which holds Holocaust-related artifacts in its collections. In the early stages, these objects, including those donated by Elena Herszfeld de Meyer in 1945, were simply items representing Jewish heritage, specifically German Jewish heritage. Elena Herszfeld's donation letter lists ritual objects such as candlesticks, Hanukkah lamps, Passover dinnerware, and *Havdalah* sets for Culto Israelita de Belgrano's (Benei Tikva congregation) future museum²⁷⁷. The letter does not explicitly mention the Holocaust, but it highlights these objects as representations of Jewish traditions. Elena Herszfeld links them to life in Germany before the Holocaust and mentions her husband's active participation in Berlin, in "Rabbi Dr.

²⁷³ Chinski notes, however, that the AMIA, as the responsible entity for the Jewish cemeteries, was responsible for creating the first Monument to the Unknown Martyrs of the Holocaust, completed in 1947. See Malena Chinski, 'La AMIA y El Monumento al "Mártir Desconocido" En El Cementerio Israelita de La Tablada', in *Identidades, Memorias y Poder Cultural En La Argentina* (Siglos XIX al XXI), ed. María Bjerg and Iván Cherjovsky (Universidad Nacional de Quilmes, 2018).

²⁷⁴ Wechsler, 'La historia de la memoria del Holocausto en Argentina', 261–80.

²⁷⁵ Kaufmann, 'La Historia Del Museo Más Pequeño Del Mundo'; Kaufmann, 'Um Ein Ewiges Zeugnis Abzulegen: "Museum Zur Erhaltung Des Deutsch-Jüdischen Kulturgutes" in *Buenos Aires Eröffnet*'.

²⁷⁶ Tamara Kohn, 'Exposición permanente sobre la historia de la NCI-Emanu El y la inmigración judeo alemana a la Argentina', 14 November 2024. The exhibition was completed during summer 2025 and opened to the public in April 2025.

²⁷⁷ Originally in Spanish: "En el caso de que posteriormente se realice la idea la congregación Culto Israelita de Belgranode crear como parte de su institución un museo de arte judío los mencionados objetos deberán incorporarse como piedra angular y aporte básico a este museo." Skorka, 70 aniversario de Benei Tikva: una gesta por la fe., 36.

Leo Baeck's community." In 1945, when the items were donated, they were not yet imbued with a memorial dimension. Instead, they were seen as elements of Jewish cultural and religious practice brought to Argentina. Yet the reproduction of the letter on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the congregation is preceded by a subtitle that refers to it as a donation letter of "Torah ornaments from German synagogues from the 18th and 19th centuries."²⁷⁸

A similar donation from Rabbi Fritz Leopold Steintal includes Torah scrolls and their ornaments, which, according to congregation members, he brought with him from Germany when fleeing to Argentina.²⁷⁹ Steintal did not mention their provenance, but the general assumption is that these objects, like many others, were carried from German synagogues to continue Jewish life in the new country. The Torah scrolls in the Leo Baeck Synagogue today, according to Rabbi Abraham Skorka, were also brought by European immigrants, further strengthening the connection to pre-Holocaust Jewish life in Germany and their "survival symbolism."²⁸⁰

However, the transformation of these objects into symbols of Holocaust memory occurs later, notably when various items from the Benei Tikva congregation were donated to the Buenos Aires Holocaust Museum around the year 2000.

In this new context, these Jewish religious objects acquire the weight of historical significance beyond their intended ritual use. A *shechitah* knife, brought initially to Argentina to maintain the Jewish dietary laws (*kashrut*), now serves as an object tied to survival and the memory of the Jewish diaspora fleeing the Nazis. Its recontextualization as part of the Holocaust Museum collection shifts its role from a functional ritual tool to a symbol of the displaced Jewish experience.

The examples above show that collection practices are standard in both communities. Initially, these objects serve as a link between Jewish life in Germany and its continuation in Argentina. But later, in the 1990s, the artifacts acquire a Holocaust-related symbolism. In most cases, as discussed in previous chapters, the attitude toward these items reflects their status as memory objects, which were no longer used for ritual purposes in the synagogue. Yet, two synagogal items are significantly linked to the Kristallnacht pogrom in communal memory:

²⁷⁸In Spanish: "Texto que acompañó una importante donación de adornos para las distintas Torot, provenientes de sinagogas de Alemania de los siglos XVIII y XIX." in "Los rollos de la Torá," Skorka, 36.

²⁷⁹In fact the donation letter does not state that these were from Germany. It only states that these were given on loan and now, at his 80th birthday, were being donated to the community.

²⁸⁰ Skorka, 'Telephone interview'.

Torah Scrolls and Hanukkah Synagogue Menorahs. These artifacts not only hold ritual significance but also carry profound historical and memorial weight, symbolizing the destruction of Jewish life in Germany and the resilience of the Jewish community in the aftermath. Their provenance and the memories they embody serve as powerful reminders of the events of Kristallnacht and the broader experience of Jewish displacement during the Holocaust. Still, they are also closely tied to Jewish history and commemoration practices. Additionally, the Torah and the Menorah are two Jewish objects that symbolize Jewish exile, resilience, and national identity through history.²⁸¹

Most of the items donated to the Buenos Aires Holocaust Museum by these communities are not directly connected to the Holocaust, as would be the case with a yellow star or a prisoner's card. Yet, they represent Jewish life in Germany before the Holocaust and how it was continued in Argentina by Jews fleeing Nazi Germany.²⁸² The natural connection made between the artifacts and Holocaust survival emerges from their status as remnants of a past that survived the destruction. The story behind a ritual object (or any other artifact) gives it its memorial value. It is reflected in the artifacts still in the synagogue (such as Torah scrolls and their ornaments) and the items donated to museums and institutional exhibitions.

The same is true in the case of Colony Avigdor, where the Hanukkah lamp that was believed to have been rescued from a synagogue in Berlin is the central element between the *Bimah* and the sitting area, even if it is an object used only during one week a year.²⁸³

The ownership stories behind the objects are persecution, migration, and construction in a new country. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the stories are vague and were transferred from one generation to the following through oral memory and sometimes written testimonies. However, marks and documentation related to the artifacts and legends reflect the specific stories of individuals with whom the whole community (and visitors) can learn and emphasize. In a world where testimonies disappear due to the advanced age of survivors, solving provenance gaps and documenting the origin of the various collections,

²⁸¹Janet Jacobs discusses the ritual objects, especially the Torah Scroll, as a symbol of the sacred in memorials of the November Pogrom all around Germany. This is further discussed in other chapters of the present thesis in connection to Jewish tradition. Janet Jacobs, 'Memorializing the Sacred: Kristallnacht in German National Memory', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 47, no. 3 (2008): 485–98, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5906.2008.00422.x>.

²⁸²This is discussed in previous chapters when explaining the particularities of German Jews in relation to their self identification and external definitions as Holocaust survivors.

²⁸³As described in previous chapters, the menorah stands prominently on a pedestal at the center of the synagogue, positioned directly in front of the bimah and Torah ark, drawing the congregation's focus as they enter and as they pray.

when possible, allows the continuity of the testimony from the past to make history more tangible and less of an abstract thing. Thus, artifacts are essential in these contexts not as static objects but as dynamic tools that tell stories, foster empathy with victims, and deepen historical awareness that shapes the collective identity. At the same time, they highlight humanity's capacity for resilience, the fight against antisemitism, and the promotion of values such as respect, democracy, and justice, which form the core mission of any Jewish and Holocaust museum in the region.²⁸⁴

The case of Nazi-looted items that arrived in Argentina through the JCR, presents a more complex panorama, which will be explored in greater detail after showing selected cases from the synagogues. However, it is essential to highlight the significance of these objects in two distinct periods: their provenance history before the looting, and their shipping to Argentina in the postwar years. It is precisely the fact that they were re-distributed by the JCR that imbues them with memorial value. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, the Holocaust's impact and memory were different from what they are today in an immediate postwar society in a completely different world. Thus, significant questions remain: What memory was constructed based on the provenance of 150 heirless Jewish ceremonial art pieces? Who bore the responsibility of preserving that memory alongside those artifacts? As a group, these pieces were rescued from looted synagogues, Jewish homes, and other institutions, forming the foundation of their memorial value. Yet, what are the stories behind each item's way to Argentina? Have they lost their original ritual meaning? In terms of memory, is a looted Torah Binder from Germany identical to a looted Hanukkah lamp created in Poland?

The questions of heirless Jewish ceremonial art distributed by the JCR—questions about the individual stories of these artifacts, their ritual meaning, and their symbolic role in memory—set the stage for deeper exploration through specific case studies. Examining the artifacts one by one allows us to move beyond their collective identity as Holocaust-related objects and instead uncover the nuanced distinctions between looted and non-looted Judaica.²⁸⁵ Provenance information, when available, is historically significant. In the case of the non-looted Judaica preserved in German-Jewish synagogues in Argentina, these artifacts help bridge the gap between broader collective memory and the personal histories that shaped

²⁸⁴ Kohn, 'Museos judíos latinoamericanos', 79–86.

²⁸⁵ The reference to looted and non-looted judaica is used to distinguish between Judaica in the synagogues and JCR collections. Evidence show that in some cases also was distributed to synagogues, such as in the case of a Hanukkah Lamp found in the ashkenazi synagogue of Resistencia, Chaco.

the establishment of these communities. By contrast, the stories of looted Judaica are rooted in destruction. These artifacts carry the weight of loss while also reflecting the resilience of the Jewish people, who assumed responsibility for the sacred objects of destroyed communities.

Above all, these objects convey a sense of preservation and continuity through the materialization of the past within new communal contexts. They embody an approach to Jewish life that recognizes the Holocaust as a decisive chapter in Jewish history, but not its conclusion. Their continued use, preservation, and reinterpretation in Argentina represent a form of continuity unique to a European, and particularly German-Jewish, diaspora community. As such, they remain powerful symbols of memory—not only of a way of life that was lost, but also of the physical destruction that brought many of those communities to an end.

4.4 Provenance Research: Case Studies of Jewish Ceremonial Artifacts

This section explores specific case studies to illustrate how investigating the provenance of Jewish ceremonial objects challenges legends and illuminates the layered historical legacies. Filling in the gaps of an artifact's provenance reveals forgotten or untold individual and communal stories. Decades after the Holocaust's globalization in the 1990s and early 2000s provoked widespread acknowledgment of its impact, descendants of survivors have increasingly sought to preserve these histories through objects. Yet, the founding myths and narratives passed down through generations often blur these histories, creating some distance between history and memory.²⁸⁶

²⁸⁶A clear example of it is the case of the NCI-Emanu El synagogue in Buenos Aires and the legend of its "time capsule." According to community tradition, stones given to Rabbi Hanns Harf by Rabbi Leo Baeck upon Harf's release from the Sachsenhausen concentration camp were buried beneath the Torah Ark of the synagogue built by the NCI community in 1957. (see: 'הציווי של - ארי בורשטיין "אבנים זרקו הצוררים נהיו לראש פינה" - ליל הבדולח', December 28, 2023. <https://schechter.ac.il/article/crystal-night/>.) This act was said to honor a commitment made by Rabbi Harf and three other rabbis to establish Jewish congregations in memory of the communities destroyed during Kristallnacht. However, when the building was dismantled in 2024, a bronze pipe containing a time capsule was uncovered instead. Inside were scrolls in German and Spanish, coins, and stamps marking the era, but no stones or reference to Kristallnacht. The scrolls instead celebrated the resilience of the community, portraying the synagogue as a symbol of Jewish vitality after exile from Central Europe. This narrative exemplifies how founding myths evolve and diverge from historical records over time.

This research sharpens the focus on specific community and individual experiences by uncovering more accurate provenance details and a more humanized and alternative understanding of collective and particular stories.

4.4.1 The Andorn Kiddush Cup

The first case is a Kiddush cup in the NCI-Emanu El collection. As explained above, the items in this collection were initially donated or loaned to the synagogue for exhibition in a small museum founded in 1993. The spontaneous giving of artifacts from various members and the lack of an original inventory or any other list of objects exhibited between 1993 and 2020 leaves a big provenance vacuum, where the sole information we have are the labels that have survived the moving to the new building in 2020, indicating some names of people related to the objects. In some cases, the names in the remaining labels can be identified as families that once belonged to the community- or still do - and identifiable through searches in the congregation's members database, memorial marbles or marriage and conversion records.²⁸⁷ Other artifacts seemed impossible to trace due to the lack of archival material and documentation. The availability of information online and international collaboration has enabled the reconstruction of the provenance of this cup, now exhibited in the new permanent exhibition of NCI-Emanu El and studied in the context of this dissertation.²⁸⁸

The silver Kiddush cup was dedicated to Rabbi Dr. Hans Andorn, as indicated by the inscription, "in [occasion of his] farewell from the Liberal Synagogue of Berlin" on March 12, 1932.²⁸⁹ Who was Rabbi H. Andorn? How did the cup reach Buenos Aires? Was he a friend of Rabbi Hanns Harf, who was also from the Liberal Congregation in Berlin?

²⁸⁷I want to thank the staff of NCI-Emanu El, who has allowed me to access their records. This archive has been digitized by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, who holds a digital copy of these records. Yet, it is only accessible from the Museum and with authorization of Congregation NCI-Emanu El. The community in Buenos Aires is expected to receive a new digital copy of these records in February 2025, as the original digital files were lost with the moving in 2020. The present research has been conducted using the originals in the community files.

²⁸⁸The artefacts related to Germany were first approached in the context of this doctoral research, which led to the creation of the permanent exhibition that tells a story beyond the immigration and the artifacts from Germany. In both cases, provenance information was important in terms of art historical analysis, and for exhibition purposes.

²⁸⁹The original inscription in German reads *Herrn Rabbiner Dr. Andorn zu seinen Abschied gewidmet von der Liberalen Synagoge Berlin, 13.3.1932.*

The meticulous research led to the following findings: the gift was given to him when he moved to Karlsruhe after marrying Charlotte Mayer that year.²⁹⁰ In 1934, after the birth of their daughter Susanna, they relocated to Nuremberg, where Andorn served as a rabbi until 1938. The Andorn family fled to the Netherlands due to Nazi persecution.²⁹¹

Rabbi Dr Hans Andorn continued his work with the Liberal Jewish Community in The Hague until the Nazi occupation in 1940, after which they moved to Zwolle, where he could no longer serve as a rabbi.²⁹² In 1943, the family was deported to the Westerbork transit camp and then to Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in January 1944. Andorn perished from disease on February 26, 1945, in that camp.²⁹³ His wife, Lotte, and their daughter, Susanna, survived and emigrated to Argentina in 1947, where the Asociación Filantrópica Israelita (AFI) received the cup from Lotte and loaned it to the NCI-Emanu El for its permanent exhibition.²⁹⁴

While most of the provenance information is complete, there is still a gap in the family's deportation years. What happened to the Kiddush cup and other family belongings between 1943 and 1945?

Documents from the Nederlandse Beheersinstituut (NBI) confirm that Lotte Andorn spent two years after the war exchanging letters with the owners of a company located next to her last residence in Zwolle before deportation. In these letters, she requested the return of her belongings, which she had entrusted to them when deportation became imminent.²⁹⁵ While the cup is not explicitly mentioned, its significance becomes clear: it represents the survival

²⁹⁰ The marriage of Rabbiner Dr. Hans Andorn with Lotte Andorn geb. Meyer was announced in the family announcements section of the *Israelitisches Familienblatt* of 17 of March, 1932. The same edition in page 4, announces that Rabbi Hans Andorn would assume as a Rabbi in Karlsruhe on April 1st of the same year. 'Familien Anzeigen', *Israelitisches Familienblatt* (Berlin), 17 March 1932.

²⁹¹ 'Rundschau', *Israelitisches Familienblatt* (Berlin), 19 April 1934, 14. For full biography see Thomas Weiß, 'Stolperstein Rabbi Hans Andorn', *Stadtarchivar Stadtarchiv Hattingen*, 2006, https://www.hattingen.de/stadt_hattingen/Bildung%20und%20Kultur/Stadtarchiv/Stadtgeschichte/Stolpersteine/stolperst_andorn-h.pdf.

²⁹² Marianne L. van Praag, 'Between Renewal and Tradition. Liberal Jewish Liturgy in the Netherlands.' (Thesis for ordination in the Rabbinate, the Levisson Institute for the Training of Rabbis and Leadership for the Dutch Jewish Community, 2008), 8.

²⁹³ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 'Person View: Andorn, Hans', Database, Holocaust Survivors and Victims Database, n.d., accessed 15 July 2024, https://www.ushmm.org/online/hsv/person_view.php?PersonId=5085696.

²⁹⁴ According to the information provided by the Buenos Aires Holocaust Museum, Lotte (Charlotte) Andorn (née Mayer) and her daughter, Susanne Andorn-Meyerstein, arrived in Argentina on a KLM flight in 1947. Museo del Holocausto de Buenos Aires, 'Proyecto Historias de Sobrevivientes En La Argentina', Database, 5 May 2024.

²⁹⁵ Rien van Oort 'Location of Kiddush Cup during the War', to Tamara Kohn, 5 May 2024.

of a wife and daughter and the memory of a husband and father who was murdered during the Holocaust.

Andorn's Kiddush Cup demonstrates how a single object in a collection can reveal a story. Understanding the story behind the object confirms its legitimate ownership today and contributes to the community's memory. The cup serves exhibition, publication, and education purposes while personalizing the narratives of German Jewish refugees and their communities' origins in Argentina.

In traditional provenance research or formal art studies, the cup's history reveals little more than its legitimate origin in a synagogue collection and its Berlin roots. Yet, fully documented provenance enables future professionals and scholars to work with the artifact and make museological decisions. Should the cup be displayed to reflect traditional Kiddush rituals? Should it tell the story of persecuted German Jews? Or is its relevance tied to the story of the NCI-Emanu El community and its connection to the World Union of Progressive Judaism?

Provenance research has also fostered connections with Jewish communities worldwide, sharing material and building a more complete biography that fills gaps in their histories.

The Andorn Kiddush cup exemplifies the complexities of contemporary, third-generation perspectives shaped by collective memory. While *Kristallnacht* often plays a central role, its narrative resists simple binaries of objects being looted or saved by fleeing Jews. Meticulous provenance research is vital on many levels, including the memorial dimension, which has shaped the community's identity over the past few decades.

4.4.2 The Hanukkah Lamp from Avigdor

The brass Hanukkah lamp in Colony Avigdor's synagogue, prominently displayed at the center of the synagogue, is said to have been saved from a Berlin synagogue during the 1938 *Kristallnacht*.²⁹⁶ However, further investigation into its provenance tells a different story. While the lamp's centrality in the synagogue underscores its symbolic importance, primarily as a relic of the Holocaust, its story traces back to the Hermann family from Bretten, who brought it to Argentina in the late 1930s as they fled Nazi persecution. This lamp, therefore, embodies not only the tragic history of the *Kristallnacht* pogrom, a turning point in Holocaust

²⁹⁶ Kapszuk, Shalom Argentina, 197.

history, but also the broader narrative of Jewish migration and the survival of one family that settled in a Jewish-German farming colony in the late 1930s.²⁹⁷

The formal analysis of this Hanukkah lamp as a synagogue piece has been addressed in previous chapters. This section focuses instead on tracing how this German brass lamp, intended initially for synagogue use, made its way to Avigdor, Argentina. As mentioned above, oral testimony suggests a different version of events: the lamp was brought to Argentina by members of the Hermann family, who emigrated from Bretten, Germany.

A merchant and owner of a goods store at Wilhelmstrasse 10 named Julius Hermann, is prominently mentioned in the historical records of Bretten's Jewish community.²⁹⁸ An entry for "Julius Hermann" also appears in the immigration records of the Centro de Estudios Migratorios Latinoamericanos (CEMLA), arriving in Buenos Aires on March 2, 1938, with Henriette Hermann and an eight-year-old girl called HenneLore, probably his family.²⁹⁹ However, Carmen Rosenblatt, from Avigdor, recalls that Julius Hermann was Walter Hermann's father, who was born around 1919. By 1941, Julius Hermann was registered in Avigdor as the owner of a land parcel in the JCA records for Colony Avigdor.³⁰⁰

Despite these records, no direct evidence links Julius Hermann to the synagogue or the Hanukkah lamp exists. Moreover, it is not even certain that the person named Julius Hermann in the immigration records is the same person who arrived in Avigdor.³⁰¹ Notably, the former arrived in Argentina several months before November 9, 1938. Assuming that we are referring to the same person, there are two possible hypotheses about the lamp's origin: (1) that it was brought by other relatives who arrived later and indeed saved it during the pogrom in Bretten, or (2) that the story of Julius Hermann bringing the Hanukkah lamp evolved into an oral legend that framed it as a relic rescued from *Kristallnacht*.

²⁹⁷According to the USHMM Holocaust Encyclopedia, "The events of Kristallnacht represented one of the most important turning points in National Socialist antisemitic policy." See United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 'Kristallnacht: A Turning Point.', in Holocaust Encyclopedia, accessed 2 December 2024, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/kristallnacht#a-turning-point-11>.

²⁹⁸'Die Synagoge in Bretten (Kreis Karlsruhe)', *Alemannia Judaica*, accessed 3 February 2023, https://www.alemannia-judaica.de/bretten_synagoge.htm.

²⁹⁹Centro de Estudios Migratorios Latinoamericanos, 'Hermann', Database, n.d., accessed 3 February 2023, <https://cemla.com/buscador/>.

³⁰⁰Carmen Rosenblatt 'Lists of contracts of the JCA in Colony Avigdor', to Tamara Kohn, 2 December 2024.

³⁰¹According to the Asociación Filantrópica Israelita's (AFI) records, Julius Hermann, born in 1899, arrived in March 1938 with one daughter. Laura Milner 'Consulta', to Tamara Kohn, 16 December 2024.

None of these hypotheses can be proven, as no additional sources have been found. Passenger records from CEMLA indicate that Adele Sara Hermann (64) and Hugo Israel Hermann (59) arrived on May 2, 1939.³⁰² The inclusion of "Sara" and "Israel" as middle names—a requirement under Nazi laws to identify Jewish citizens—confirms their Jewish origin. Suppose we assume the story about Julius Hermann's relatives bringing the lamp with them is true. In that case, the story about the lamp rescued from a German synagogue—likely Bretten's synagogue—might be true. Nonetheless, records from November 9 and 10, 1938, in Bretten describe the synagogue as wholly burned, with all ritual objects fully destroyed.³⁰³ Surviving photographs of the Bretten synagogue from that period do not depict a Hanukkah lamp resembling the one now in Avigdor.³⁰⁴ The lamp's design, however, aligns with German synagogue artifacts, making it suitable for a community founded by German refugees.

The exact origin of the lamp remains unclear. It could have been rescued, brought from a synagogue, or even purchased before leaving Germany as a contribution to the new synagogue in Argentina. The stories surrounding this Hanukkah lamp reflect how communal memory shaped it into a symbol of survival, tied to the narrative of the Kristallnacht pogrom and the broader experience of Jewish resilience. We could see the Hanukkah lamp in the center of the synagogue as material evidence for a story that passed from one generation to the next.

4.4.3 The Torah Scrolls

Among the objects that require special attention in the three synagogues studied are their Torah scrolls. Because of their central ritual status and the sanctity attributed to them, Torah scrolls were often prioritized for preservation or transfer during moments of persecution and displacement. This prioritization has direct consequences for provenance research: while scrolls frequently survived when other ritual objects did not, their movement across borders and between communities was rarely documented in detail, resulting in collections shaped as much by necessity and continuity as by archival silence.

The Torah scrolls preserved in the Leo Baeck Synagogue (Benei Tikva congregation) illustrate the layered provenance typical of German-Jewish

³⁰² CEMLA, 'Hermann'.

³⁰³ Alem. Jud., 'Die Synagoge in Bretten (Kreis Karlsruhe)'.

³⁰⁴ Find pre-war photographs from Bretten's synagogue in Alem. Jud., 'Die Synagoge in Bretten (Kreis Karlsruhe)'.

congregations in Argentina. The Ark currently houses eleven scrolls of different origins and dates: two completed in Buenos Aires (2001 and 2024), one received on loan from the Czech Memorial Scrolls Trust in 2017, and several brought to Argentina by European immigrants together with their ornaments.³⁰⁵ Congregational testimonies attribute some of these scrolls to Rabbi Fritz Leopold Steinthal, who fled Germany in December 1938, although no direct documentation confirms the transport of specific scrolls.³⁰⁶ What can be established with certainty is that on the occasion of his eightieth birthday, Steinthal formally donated multiple Torah scrolls and ritual textiles to the congregation, anchoring these objects within the community's institutional record even as their earlier ownership histories remain partially undocumented.³⁰⁷

The inclusion of a Torah scroll on loan from the Czech Memorial Scrolls Trust in 2017 introduces a distinct provenance category into the Leo Baeck Synagogue's collection. Unlike scrolls transmitted through migration or private donation, this scroll entered the congregation through an international memorial framework explicitly designed to commemorate destroyed European communities. Its presence reflects a form of mediated provenance, in which ownership, custodianship, and meaning are shaped by postwar restitution and memorial initiatives rather than by local communal history. The decision to integrate this memorial scroll into ritual use, rather than to isolate it as an exhibition object, highlights how provenance narratives can be reactivated through practice while remaining institutionally traceable.

The Torah scrolls of the NCI–Emanu El congregation similarly reveal the challenges of reconstructing provenance in the absence of systematic documentation. According to congregational testimonies, several scrolls were brought from Germany by refugees, reflecting patterns of transfer shaped by flight and resettlement. One scroll, exhibited since the establishment of NCI's first museum in 1993, bears the label

³⁰⁵“The Sefer Torah was formerly from Brno in Moravia and written c.1850. It is one of the 1564 Torah and other scrolls that survived the Shoah in Prague and were brought to London in 1964 (...) The scroll was catalogued in Prague as #9313 and in London given the scroll number MST#317. (...) I brought the scroll to Buenos Aires personally and attended the Hajnasat 24th March 2017.” Jeffrey Ohrenstein ‘Re: MST#317 Benei Tikva - Synagoga Leo Baeck, Buenos Aires’, to Tamara Kohn, 17 January 2023.

³⁰⁶Skorka, ‘Telephone interview’.

³⁰⁷Letter from F. L. Steinthal, in Skorka, 70 aniversario de Benei Tikva: una gesta por la fe., 37.

“Rescued from the Kristallnacht, November 9th, 1938.”³⁰⁸ While this designation rests primarily on oral tradition rather than archival evidence, its presence illustrates how provenance labels function as authoritative markers within institutional settings, stabilizing uncertain histories through inscription and display.

Additional provenance complications arise from the internal movement of Torah scrolls within NCI over time. Testimonies suggest that Rabbi Hanns Harf brought a Torah scroll when fleeing Germany, described as a “small Torah scroll,” which may not correspond to the large scroll currently exhibited.³⁰⁹ The merge with the congregation Emanu El in 2000, and the closure of NCI Villaballester resulted in the relocation of ritual objects between buildings, often without updated inventories, further obscuring ownership histories.³¹⁰

Architectural responses to past destruction are also evident in relationship with the Torah Scrolls. The Chaim Weitzmann synagogue had fireproof doors in the Ar, which reflects an institutional strategy of safeguarding sacred property shaped by historical experience, even as the documentary record of individual objects remained incomplete.³¹¹

Finally, in Avigdor, it is believed that the Torah scrolls were all brought from Germany by the first settlers of the colony. Manfredo Pfipfer, who is the last living first generation colonizer in Avigdor, recalls that one of the Torah scrolls was brought by his family from Germany for the establishment of a new community in Argentina. In this case the scroll is not associated directly to the pogrom.

³⁰⁸The original text in the former exhibition tag, still attached to the Torah scroll, reads: “*Sefer Tora: Rollo de pergamino escrito a mano según las tradiciones judías, conteniendo los cinco libros de Moises y utilizado en la liturgia sinagoga. Alemania siglo XVIII. Rescatado de la Noche de Cristal, 09 de Noviembre de 1938.*” Translation: *Sepher Torah: handwritten scroll of parchment according to the Jewish traditions, with the five books of Moses and used in the synagogal liturgy. Germany, 18th century. Rescued from the Kristallnacht, November 9th, 1938.*”

³⁰⁹ The scroll’s height is over 80 cm, and including *Hatzei Chaim*, its height is 130 cm.

³¹⁰Stern and Wolff, ‘Interview 3’; Alberto ‘Palito’ Hammerschlag, ‘Interview 5’, interview by Tamara Kohn, 19 July 2024, Digital Video, NCI-Emanu El. Rabbi Adrian Fada is currently working on collecting information about the provenance of each Torah scroll and he plans to match that provenance information to each scroll in the upcoming year. Rabbi Adrian Fada, telephone conversation with Tamara Kohn, December 19, 2024.

³¹¹As will be discussed in the final chapter, Torah scrolls and menorahs hold unparalleled symbolic power in Jewish memory. Their association with heroic stories of rescuing sacred objects from burning synagogues reinforces their layered meanings as both ritual items and emblems of heroic survival and continuity.

Taken together, the Torah scrolls preserved in these congregations reflect multiple provenance trajectories: some arrived through refugee migration, others through postwar memorial and restitution initiatives, and many through donations whose earlier histories can only be partially reconstructed. Their preservation demonstrates that provenance is not only a matter of tracing ownership but also of understanding how sacred objects acquire new meanings as they move between communities. In Argentina, these scrolls continue to function simultaneously as ritual objects, historical witnesses, and repositories of collective memory.

4.5 In search of lost collections: Provenance research and Quovadience

So far, we have addressed the fundamental provenance question of “How did the object arrive at its current location?” or, more specifically, the history of ownership of Judaica items in the studied synagogues. In some cases, provenance can be reconstructed through available documents, as seen with the Andorn cup, while in others, there are partial but plausible hypotheses, such as those surrounding the Avigdor Hanukkah lamp or the Torah scrolls and ornaments donated by Rabbi Steinthal.³¹² However, another aspect emerges from the reviewed documents: the donation of Elena Herszfeld de Meyer, who gave to the community a selection of items to establish a Jewish museum next to the synagogue modeled in the best European pre-war style. This collection is now lost.³¹³

Although the objects themselves have not been located, this case highlights a recurring challenge in Judaica provenance research: the search for missing collections, many of which disappeared during the Holocaust and its aftermath. Elena Herszfeld de Meyer’s 1945 letter records the donated objects in considerable detail, noting their materials, places of origin, and dates. The document reflects both a desire to preserve Jewish heritage and a profound commitment to memory.

Julie-Marthe Cohen, Felicitas Heimann-Jelinek, and Ruth J. Weinberger, in the *Handbook on Judaica Provenance Research: Ceremonial Objects*, suggest a different methodology to determine the current location or ownership of lost objects, especially in the context of looted Judaica, called *quovadience research*. In their words, “While the aim of provenance research is - in our case - to establish pre-war ownership, *quovadience research* presupposes that ownership is known and aims to establish present location.”³¹⁴

The case of the JCR collections in Argentina illustrates the relevance of this approach while introducing a distinct but related problem: the fate of looted Judaica after the Holocaust. Research into these collections began with the JCR distribution lists, which document the allocation of ritual objects to Jewish communities throughout the world, including Argentina. References to these lists in archival records and published sources have made it possible to

³¹²The objects donated by Rabbi F. L. Steinthal are thoroughly examined in Chapter 2, where a formal study is presented. No further provenance research has been conducted, as a donation letter is available, and there is no doubt that the items were donated by the Rabbi. However, it has not been possible to uncover additional information regarding how and when the Rabbi acquired the items listed in his donation letter.

³¹³ Unfortunately the names of Elena and Samuel do not appear in any of the databases searched so far, and it was not possible to find their story nor the objects.

³¹⁴ Cohen et al., *Handbook on Judaica Provenance Research: Ceremonial Objects*, 8.

trace the paths of some of these redistributed objects and to reconstruct their significance within the Argentine context. At the same time, the identification of several surviving examples of German-Jewish Judaica has opened broader questions concerning the memorial narratives attached to these objects, the meanings attributed to their provenance, and the relationship between their origins and their current custodians.

4.6 The Jewish Cultural Reconstruction Inc. and Nazi-Looted Judaica in Argentina

As noted in the *Handbook on Looted Judaica Provenance Research*, the creation of the Jewish Cultural Reconstruction (JCR) was a historical and political milestone in the context of the new geopolitical reality after World War II ended. The centers of Jewish life, after the Holocaust, had moved to the newly founded State of Israel and the United States, and those were the main destinations of heirless Jewish cultural and religious objects distributed by the organization.³¹⁵

The activities of the JCR have been the subject of various studies, as discussed in the literature review in Chapter 1.³¹⁶ However, these studies often treat South America as a monolithic region, offering little detail about the specific trajectories and uses of JCR-distributed items in individual countries. This lack of differentiation leaves a significant gap in understanding the localized impact of these cultural and religious objects in the region. The present research focuses on the journey and reception of heirless Jewish artifacts within the Argentine context and the provenance research conducted on specific items to uncover their pre-looting history, which is in most cases untraceable.

According to the information recorded in the JCR archives, 150 objects were rescued from museums and synagogues, and 5,053 books were sent to Argentina.³¹⁷ Part of these objects and books were received by Fundación IWO.³¹⁸ The material was catalogued as the

³¹⁵ Cohen et al., *Handbook on Judaica Provenance Research: Ceremonial Objects.*, 43–60.

³¹⁶The history of the JCR is addressed in previous chapter, especially in Chapter 1, in the literature review section. For more exhaustive and global studies of the JCR's activities see Herman, 'Hashavat Avedah'.; and Shir Kochavi, 'Salvage to Restitution: „Heirless“ Jewish Cultural Property in Post-World War II' (Doctoral Thesis, The University of Leeds, School of Fine Art, History of Art and Cultural Studies, 2017).

³¹⁷ JCR, Inc., *World Distribution of Ceremonial Objects and Torah Scrolls*, July 1, 1949 to January 31, 1952, S35/88, CZA, Jerusalem; and JCR, Inc., *World Distribution of Books* 1 July 1949-31 January 1952, July 1952, Geneva IV/32/1B, JDC Archives, Jerusalem.

³¹⁸ Fundación IWO is a branch of Vilna's YIVO, the Yiddish Scientific Institute, founded in 1925 in Wilno (Vilna) and Berlin. It established its branch in Buenos Aires in 1928. Since World War II, the IWO branch in Argentina started to work independently, while the successor institution of the YIVO from Vilna was established in New York, NY since 1940.

“Jewish Cultural Reconstruction Collection.” The objects are identified with a metal circular tag with a Star of David and the initials of the JCR. Part of the collection was kept along with other objects brought from Europe by Holocaust survivors who immigrated to Argentina. In 1994, the objects were rescued from the rubble of the AMIA building after the terrorist attack in July of that year. During the salvage, the youths began informally calling these pieces “rescued twice.”³¹⁹ This was the most widely accepted version of the story of how the looted Judaica arrived in Argentina and was partially lost in 1994.

One of the central arguments of this dissertation is the emphasis on how different Jewish German communities in Argentina treated Judaica as objects with symbolic memorial value. These items serve as focal points for narratives of memory, where provenance in the general form of “these objects were brought by our parents and grandparents from Germany while fleeing from Nazi persecution” becomes a critical factor in shaping their identity.

In this context, the provenance of ceremonial art distributed by the JCR, through the JRSO and handed to the Delegación de Asociaciones Israelitas Argentinas (DAIA) in the early 1950s for custody and local redistribution, provides a significant case study. Unlike Judaica in synagogue reservoirs, often carried by émigrés and associated with personal or communal stories, the JCR collections were managed by a chain of centralized organizations, both locally and globally.³²⁰ A distinct historical and memorial context was created compared to the narratives of German Jewish refugees who fled Nazi Germany in the 1930s.

In that sense, there were two departure points to this part of the research, separated by approximately 70 years: (1) The record of the shipment of 150 Judaica objects and 5,053 books to Argentina under the JCR initiative, and (2) the current presence of some of these objects in the collections of Fundación IWO.

Additionally, there exists a powerful narrative asserting that IWO preserves the few Judaica objects rescued from its collection after the AMIA bombing on July 18, 1994. These items, rescued in an operation that had involved around 800 volunteers salvaging the institution’s artifacts from the rubble, were considered the only JCR surviving ceremonial

³¹⁹ Silvia Hansman, ‘Consulta’; and also Clarín Editorial, ‘Rescate de 60 Mil Libros Históricos de Los Escombros de La AMIA’.

³²⁰The DAIA is the political representation of the affiliated Jews in Argentina. The JCR consisted of nine organizations: the World Jewish Congress, the American Jewish Committee, the American Jewish Conference, the Commission for European Jewish Cultural Reconstruction, the Council for the Protection of the Rights and Interests of German Jews, the University Hebrew, the Council of Synagogues of America, the American Joint Distribution Committee, and the Jewish Agency for Palestine. The latter two provided their operating funds. Cohen et al., *Handbook on Judaica Provenance Research: Ceremonial Objects*, 47.

objects in Argentina. However, a deeper investigation of the IWO's collection reveals a more complex reality.

Not all objects associated with the “rescued twice” narrative are directly connected to the Holocaust or the JCR project. While IWO preserves the largest surviving group of JCR artifacts in Argentina, the collection was originally distributed to multiple locations. At least three of the 150 objects sent to Argentina are currently housed in the Jewish community of Resistencia, Chaco, and evidence suggests that additional items may survive in Santa Fe. As a result, different memory narratives have developed around these objects depending on their institutional and communal contexts.

The wimpels provide a particularly revealing example. Several Torah binders associated with the JCR have undergone detailed provenance research, allowing aspects of their prewar histories to be reconstructed. Others, however, were produced in Argentina and therefore have no direct connection to the Holocaust or postwar restitution efforts. These cases demonstrate how collective memory narratives, while meaningful, do not always correspond to the documented histories of individual objects and may obscure the diversity of their provenance trajectories.

Finally, there is a commemorative dimension that, at times, overshadows provenance itself. These objects have become embedded within a collective narrative shaped by both the Holocaust and the trauma of the AMIA bombing in 1994. Within this framework, questions of origin and former ownership often become secondary to narratives of survival—first from the destruction of European Jewish communities and later from the rubble of the AMIA building.

These findings demonstrate how commemorative narratives evolve over time, particularly within institutions such as IWO, where the legacy of the 1994 terrorist attack remains deeply significant. This symbolic layer has become a central component of institutional identity, shaping the ways in which objects are interpreted, preserved, and remembered.

Provenance research on these collections is challenging but essential. Moreover, it is not a one-time activity but an ongoing process that evolves as new technologies and information become available globally. The continuous digitization and publishing of archives, combined with the globalization and democratization of access to information, are key to advancing this field. International collaboration and the inclusion of Argentina and other South American countries in global projects remain crucial to ensuring that provenance

research not only addresses JCR collections but also extends to other Judaica collections and other fields in general.³²¹

Nonetheless, it must be acknowledged that many cases will remain unresolved due to a lack of information. While these Jewish ceremonial objects have often been viewed as a symbolic corpus representing the Holocaust, they should also be understood as individual artifacts with unique histories. This approach allows us to address questions such as: What historical information can be uncovered through these artifacts? What role did Argentina play in JCR's global activities? What are the implications of knowing the provenance of Nazi-looted Judaica for restitution efforts? How has the local distribution and memorial discourse surrounding these collections evolved?

As mentioned above, the sources from the JCR archives refer to 150 ceremonial objects and over 5,000 books shipped to Argentina. From JCR archival records, we know that the books were directly shipped from Germany, while the ceremonial art went through the previous classification in the New York depot at the Jewish Museum, New York.

Both books and Jewish ceremonial objects were received in Argentina by the Delegación de Asociaciones Israelitas Argentinas (DAIA).³²² At the time, the DAIA and the IWO had their headquarters in the same building as the AMIA, located in Pasteur, 633, in Buenos Aires. While all three institutions kept separate boards of directors and minute books, in practice, the IWO, which had a museum since 1940, fulfilled its role as the exhibition venue within the building. Accordingly, between 1951 and 1954, the DAIA exhibited in the IWO Jewish books and ritual objects “rescued from the Nazi destruction” several times. The event was announced in DAIA’s bulletin each time, and the next steps were even mentioned, which

³²¹ As noted earlier, provenance research is still a very underdeveloped field in Argentina. This is compounded by technological barriers that have only recently begun to improve. The digitization and publication of archives, along with the increasing accessibility of global information, offer significant potential for progress. An example of international collaboration is the participation of representatives of the IWO and the Uruguay Jewish Archive in the “International Forum on Judaica Provenance convened by the National Library of Israel and the Association of Jewish Libraries,” that resulted in the development of a White Paper on Provenance. Finkelman and Margolis, *Cultivating Best Practices in Judaica Provenance*.

³²² The DAIA is the political representation of the Jewish Community of Argentina, founded in 1935. Its predecessors were the Comité contra las Persecuciones de Judíos en Alemania (Committee against the persecution of German Jews) created in 1933 and the Comité contra el Antisemitismo (Committee against antisemitism), of 1934. Both Committees joined in 1935 to form the DAIA, and other central institutions joined in the following years. Bianchi, *Historia de Las Religiones En La Argentina*.

would be the distribution of books and ritual objects to other institutions within the community.³²³

On March 10, 1951, the Delegation of Argentine Jewish Associations (DAIA) announced in its bulletin that it was actively continuing with

...the classification of the five thousand books sent to DAIA by the Jewish Cultural Reconstruction, Inc. [JCR], an organization founded in New York with the purpose of salvaging and determining the appropriate destination for several hundred thousand Jewish books and ritual objects gathered in Germany by the U.S. occupation forces. These items are part of the vast cultural treasures plundered by the Nazis in the European countries through which their accursed forces passed.³²⁴

In the following years, until 1954, DAIA continued publishing information in its bulletins about the arrival and distribution of Jewish books and ritual objects rescued from the Holocaust. These publications were echoed in other media, such as the magazine *Davar* and other local Jewish newspapers.³²⁵ However, over the following decades, the collections distributed for safekeeping among libraries, synagogues, and Jewish museums in Argentina gradually faded from institutional and public memory. The bombing of the AMIA building on July 18, 1994, carried out by the terrorist organization Hezbollah and organized by the Islamic regime of Iran, brought renewed attention to these collections. Through the recovery and preservation efforts that followed the attack, the objects became incorporated into a broader narrative of survival that linked the destruction of European Jewish communities during the Holocaust with the experience of antisemitic violence in Argentina in 1992 and 1994.³²⁶

These events were traumatizing for the South American Jewish communities, in particular, the Jewish institutions in Buenos Aires. Jewish life has changed since then. As mentioned above, these attacks occurred in the same context as the globalization of the Holocaust. A moment that Huyssen describes as “the emergence of the Holocaust as a

³²³ D.A.I.A., ‘Los Objetos Del Culto Salvados de La Destrucción Nazi’, *D.A.I.A. Boletín Informativo*, October 1954.

³²⁴ D.A.I.A., ‘Exposición de Libros y Objetos Culturales Israelitas Rescatados En Alemania’, *D.A.I.A. Boletín de Información*, October 1952.

³²⁵ Mordechai Bernstein, ‘Tizones Sacados de La Hoguera’, *Davar* 73 (1956): 90–93; ‘Una Muestra En El IWO’, *Nueva Sion* (Buenos Aires, Argentina), 16 July 1953.

³²⁶ Tamara Kohn, ‘Universalizing the Holocaust in Argentine Jewish Art’, in *Outside Looking in: The World Universalizes the Holocaust*, ed. Norman J. W. Goda and Edward Kissi (Berghahn Books, 2026), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781836953197-008>.

universal trope that allows Holocaust memory to latch on to specific local situations that are historically distant and politically distinct from the original event.”³²⁷

The double survival narrative of the JCR collection allowed a strong connection between past and present. The objects rescued from the rubbles of the AMIA were exhibited in the following years at Biblioteca Nacional Mariano Moreno.³²⁸

Considering the fate of the IWO collection in Argentina awakened the interest in the “rescued collection,” on the one hand, but with a change of focus on the other. In Argentina, no one asked to whom they belonged *before* being rescued from the Holocaust and becoming Jewish heirless property. Moreover, the AMIA and the IWO donated one book with a JCR ex-libris to the Treasury of the National Library. That book previously belonged to the Library of the Jewish Community of Berlin.³²⁹ Visible marks, such as stamps and inventory numbers, could assert so, but it did not prevent the Jewish institutions from donating, nor the National Library from receiving, a certainly Nazi-looted book with clear provenance information.

The AMIA bombing was indeed a traumatic event, especially for the AMIA and the IWO. Still, as time passed, new technologies and globalization have made accessible relevant sources to conduct more detailed provenance research. Argentina did not seem to be in the scope of international initiatives to finance the research or to encourage locals to do so. South America, and Argentina in particular, are known for their economic instability. In that context, self-finance research, in general, is rarely a priority for these institutions.

The IWO still had the objects in boxes by early 2023.³³⁰ The Minkowski Museum of the IWO continued its activities after 1994 through temporary exhibitions in external venues, but no catalog or basic inventory has been done until late 2023.³³¹ Nonetheless, various cardboard boxes with the “rescued twice” collection can be consulted in the institution. Some

³²⁷ Huyssen, ‘Present Pasts’.

³²⁸ Silvia Hansman, ‘Libros “Salvados Dos Veces” En La Biblioteca IWO’, paper presented at VI Encuentro Nacional de Instituciones con Fondos Antiguos y Raros (ENIFAR), 7 June 2023.

³²⁹ Mariana Monteagudo Tejedor and División Tesoro, Biblioteca Nacional ‘Consulta Biblioteca Nacional’, to Tamara Kohn, 10 May 2023.

³³⁰ See appendix III: “Fieldwork Documentation”

³³¹ The inventory of the paintings and graphic arts in the collection of the IWO was completed in 2023. There is still no inventory of the judaica and other everyday artifacts.

of the items had JCR aluminum tags that made it possible to identify the provenance of such pieces. Others had marks that revealed they had been crafted in Argentina or after 1945. The rest of the pieces, many of German origin but others from unknown European origin, are in a limbo category with no further information.

There were 12 wimples among the objects studied, but only four had the specific JCR identification that confirmed they were originally from Germany. The earliest example is from 1699, and the latest is from 1932. Three other Wimpels reflect the continuation of the Wimpel tradition in Argentina. As explained in previous chapters, Torah binders provide much information about the family that donated the textile to the community and the baby in honor of whom they were crafted.

The wimpel examined was dedicated to Itzhak Julius bar Reuben Schaefer and included tags from the JCR and a handwritten inventory number.³³² Using records from the National Archives, the wimpel's movement was traced from the Offenbach Archival Depot to the Wiesbaden Collecting Point before its distribution by the JCR.³³³ Further research through digitized JCR inventories identified Julius Schaefer, born in Würzburg, Germany, in 1903, as the baby linked to the wimpel was created. Additional information from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and the Arolsen Archives corroborated Schaefer's presence in Würzburg and provided context about his fate during the Holocaust.³³⁴

³³²Original text in Hebrew: "יצחק המכונה יוליון בר ראובן שאפער נולד במ"ט יום ד סיון תרסג לפ"ק..." Translation to English: "Itzhak known as Julius son of Reuben Schaffer, born on the 4th of [the Hebrew month of] Sivan, [5]663 [May 30, 1903]..."

³³³Receipt for Jewish Cultural Properties: 1949 [Jewish Cultural Reconstruction: 1-11, 1-18]. 1945-1952. Cultural Object Movement and Control Records, M1947, National Archives and Records Administration, 2008. Fold3, <https://www.fold3.com/image/232019085/receipt-for-jewish-cultural-properties-1949-jewish-cultural-reconstruction-1-11-18-page-49-eu-ardel>.

³³⁴Directories on Jews of the Gestapo Field Office in Würzburg with Information on Emigrations Between 1933 and 1942 (Excerpts from Gestapo Files)." Arolsen Archives, Reference Code 8801380. 307 documents. Nazi Headquarters Unterfranken, received through Mr. Lu Chatelet, Senior Tracing Officer at Würzburg, via U.S.Z. Bureau. Former inventory numbers: 8227500, 8227600. Accessed through <https://collections.arolsen-archives.org/en/search/person/11195343?s=Julius%20Schafer&t=19412&p=0>; and United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "Julius Schafer," *USHMM Survivors and Victims Database*, accessed December 18, 2024, https://www.ushmm.org/online/hsv/source_view.php?SourceId=20661.

Genealogical research with the assistance of a specialist in the field followed.³³⁵ It revealed that Julius Schaefer married Meta Stern and had no children. Despite these advancements, determining the exact origin of the Wimpel's looting remained challenging. Many wimpels from Würzburg and other locations have been traced to collections in various institutions. The Israel Museum features a section on its website dedicated to JCR-provenance objects, including twelve Wimpels from Würzburg.³³⁶ This collection, along with Wimpels in the Paris Jewish Museum and the IWO, highlights the concentration of these textiles from Würzburg.³³⁷

The information collected about one single piece of Judaica looted from one of Würzburg synagogues raises questions related to provenance research practices and further steps in the investigation, as well as following-up actions to the research.

The Washington Principles already emphasize that efforts have to be made for the restitution of any identified looted artwork for which its pre-war owners or heirs are identified.³³⁸ Yet, the Washington Principles and most provenance research assume that there is a pre-war owner or the heirs as specific individuals or institutions to address (e.g., the grandchildren or surviving relatives of an art dealer or collector whose collection was confiscated). In the case of synagogal collections, a dimension of communal property must be considered together with Jewish law.

In the case of Julius Schaeffer's wimpel, firstly, provenance research reveals that the binder was crafted in honor of Julius Schaefer, and - assuming that the Schaefer family followed the Wimpel traditions as we know them - it was donated to a synagogue in Würzburg. Secondly, we know that Julius Schaefer fled to the United States in 1936 and married Meta Stern, so he survived Nazi persecution. The textile remained in Würzburg, the synagogue was

³³⁵I want to thank Karen Franklin for guiding me through the research in the Ancestry.com online database. It was a pleasant surprise to discover that she is a cousin of Meta Stern, Julius Schaefer's wife.

³³⁶The WWII Provenance Research site of the Israel Museum chronicles the Nazi regime's large-scale looting of art and cultural property from 1933 to 1945. Post-war, the Jewish Restitution Successor Organization (JRSO) and Jewish Cultural Reconstruction (JCR) redistributed many of these items, including ceremonial objects now under the Museum's custodianship. The site provides an updated inventory to support the restitution of these works to their rightful owners. <https://museum.imj.org.il/irso/index.php/en>

³³⁷ The Israel Museum holds twelve Torah binders from Würzburg. The IWO in Buenos Aires has at least two Torah binders from Würzburg, while the Musée d'Art et d'Histoire du Judaïsme in Paris has three examples with inventory numbers Inv. 2002.01.0560, Inv. 2002.01.0557, and Inv. 2002.01.0558.

³³⁸'Washington Conference Principles on Nazi-Confiscated Art', *United States Department of State*, n.d., accessed 23 December 2024, <https://www.state.gov/washington-conference-principles-on-nazi-confiscated-art/>.

looted, and the binder was later among orphaned Judaica, so ended in custody of the JCR. The JCR shipped it, together with other Judaica items, to Buenos Aires. The textile remained in the AMIA building until 1994; After the bombing, it has been part of the IWO collection.

If we follow the steps suggested by the Washington principles, the next question is, who was the last pre-war owner of the looted item? Being it a Torah ornament, then the last pre-war legitimate owner of the textile was the Jewish community of Würzburg, from where it was looted. That would also be according to Jewish law, which states that communal property cannot be passed into individuals as it can be desecrated, as explained earlier. Therefore, we should ask if there is a Jewish community in Würzburg today, and if so, are they the legitimate heirs of the Torah binders looted from the pre-war synagogues of the city? If so, it could be restituted to the Jewish community of Würzburg, and the case would be easily solved.

The case is a straightforward example of a Judaica communal piece that could be restituted. Nonetheless, this perspective sees the Jewish community (the pre-war owner of the looted item) as a static house of prayer and not as an institution formed by a group of individuals with a dynamic life that changes over time. A community is not a family with a clear lineage of descendants and legal heirs, but a group of people who changed, especially after the end of World War II.

What happened to the Würzburg community during the Holocaust? How many of the Jews who were able to emigrate survived? Did they establish new communities in their new hometowns?

Almost eighty years after the end of World War II, the world witnessed many subsequent changes in the distribution of the Jewish population. While in the immediate postwar years, there was a feeling that Jewish communities would not be re-established in Europe, the last few decades have shown a reemergence and growth of Jewish communities in Germany. Perhaps today, the Jewish community of Würzburg has reemerged and is a vibrant and large community. Is this renewed community the legitimate heirs of the looted Wimpel?

On the other hand, the first part of this chapter dealt with Jews that fled from Germany escaping Nazi persecution during the 1930s. Previous chapters have described Jewish ritual objects brought by these escaping Jews, including Torah scrolls, that, apart from being the most sacred object in the synagogue, cannot even be used for their ritual purpose if there is not a community for doing so, as a *minyan* is needed to be able to perform the Torah reading ritual.

We can assume that Jews who fled Germany took sacred ritual objects from the synagogues of communal ownership for two reasons: first, to save them in case of destruction, and second, for the creation of new communities in their new places of settlement. From a *halachic* point of view, ritual objects would have been taken from vanishing communities to new growing communities. While this is not the case of Schaefer's wimpel, which was certainly left in Würzburg and looted, there are *halachic* considerations to be taken in the case that the community of Würzburg would claim its restitution.

So far, we have two legal debates that could be developed around this single case: international restitution laws and Jewish laws concerning property. As it concerns the law, decisions, and actions could be considered legal antecedents that may affect other cases, both in Jewish and international law.

One striking finding about the Wimpels of Würzburg is that most of them, in all three collections today - Paris, Buenos Aires, and Jerusalem - bear the names of Jews that fled around 1936. They did not decide to take their binders with them, and they were left in Würzburg.

From this provenance research results, questions about the looting process also arise. Torah binders, such as Julius Schaefer's wimpel, are not of high material or aesthetic value, but their story and memory make it a symbolically meaningful artifact. Was there any additional value to be considered during the looting so that the decision to preserve such Wimpels was made? In that case, are the names of the people and the genealogical information that they provide relevant? These were Torah binders of surviving Jews who fled Germany. Their names, parents' names, and birth dates were painted on the textiles. Did the Nazis decide to keep them because of their genealogical, material, or their religious value? How was the looting of the Würzburg synagogues carried? How many Jews fled between 1933 and 1938/9? What can we learn about it from a single piece of Judaica?

The Schaefer wimpel case shows that sometimes, one single object and the study of its provenance can bring to light historical questions that exceed the individual case.

On the other hand, we have not forgotten the over seven decades since this textile arrived in Argentina. The artifact has an afterlife that is even longer in years and as complex as before crossing the ocean. Meaning it was given to the IWO by the DAIA as a ceremonial art piece for its museum. The Wimpel is part of a symbolic collection of "rescued twice" Jewish ritual objects. Symbolically, it does not represent the individual history of Julius Schaefer, who managed to survive, but it represents the destruction of European Jewry. It has

been exhibited permanently since July 2024 in a showcase in the IWO, with other JCR items rescued from the AMIA bombing, commemorating its 30th anniversary.³³⁹

As Higonnet argues, we clearly have a case in which “Ownership controls the condition according to which an object is seen; collection and display determine how we perceive art visually- in relation to other objects, in relation to institutional or personal space, and in relation to ourselves.”³⁴⁰

In this context, the Wimpel doesn’t even have a particular story. The focus is on its aluminum tag, like an exhibited book that is opened to show its ex libris, reflecting the JCR’s provenance.

As a Yiddishist institution, the IWO focuses on Eastern European Jews and the continuation of Yiddish production in Argentina. The story of the looted collection is represented, however, by German objects. The “rescued twice” collection includes other artifacts that could have been from different places, with no specific provenance information, such as Torah pointers or Torah shields and even *Kiddush* cups. According to its label, a book exhibited together came from the Jewish Community of Berlin Library. But the emphasis is not on how these items were looted and rescued from Europe, but on the fact that these were rescued from the AMIA bombing and how these are material witnesses to both horrors: the Holocaust in Europe and terrorism in Buenos Aires.³⁴¹

Consequently the collection is approached as a monolith and symbol of “the Holocaust” and the continuation of antisemitism in Buenos Aires in the 1990s, with a particular local story. Is there an intention to bring closer to Argentine society the Holocaust

³³⁹ Fundación IWO: Instituto Judío de Investigación’, accessed 7 November 2024, <https://www.iwo.org.ar/noticias-micromuestra-salvados.html>.

³⁴⁰ Higonnet, ‘The Social Life of Provenance’, 200.

³⁴¹It is important to consider the date of creation of this exhibition. July 18th, 2024, was the thirtieth anniversary of the terrorist attack on the AMIA in Buenos Aires. While historically, there have been 30 years of claiming for justice in this case and terrorist attacks of the 1990s (the bombing of the embassy of Israel in Buenos Aires in 1992 and the AMIA bombing in 1994), the fact that the exhibition was created after October 7th, 2023, in the middle of a war with Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Islamic Republic of Iran, who are believed to have been the responsible of this attack, also gives a universal and wider symbolic meaning to the collection. This recent historical event must be considered in future research on how Jewish Art and Culture exhibitions changed in the aftermath of October 7th, 2023.

experience through this association between the AMIA bombing and the Holocaust, not just theoretically but with *material* evidence?³⁴²

4.7 A disruptive memorial narrative: the JCR collections beyond the IWO

An unexpected discovery of Nazi-looted Judaica in Resistencia, Chaco, challenges the traditional narrative according to which the JCR Jewish ceremonial art in Argentina was either lost or rescued from the AMIA bombing and now in the IWO. Resistencia's Jewish community was established in the mid-19th century and expanded by Holocaust survivors after the war.

Resistencia's Ashkenazi synagogue went through renovation after a flood in 2020. They found a Hanukkah lamp, a Torah pointer, and a *hatarah* with JCR tags for each of the items. No one in the community remembers when and how the artifacts arrived in the synagogue. There is no mention of it in the minute books since 1950.³⁴³ The Hanukkah lamp is an Eastern European - probably a Polish- lamp, and there is not enough information to trace its pre-war ownership.³⁴⁴ We find a clear case of orphaned or heirless Judaica that cannot be solved. However, the fact that they were given to a community of Holocaust survivors in north Argentina contrasts the narrative about the IWO's collection. Before finding these three artifacts, it was believed that the few pieces rescued from the bombing were the only remnants of the 150 pieces sent by the JCR. Therefore, the double rescued collection made the Argentine story of the JCR a special one, especially after the 1990s. Now we know that this is only one part of the JCR story, and there is another aftermath to other objects, an invisibilized story by the events in the largest and most influential community of Buenos Aires represented by the AMIA.

³⁴²Another example of the materialization of the connection of the Holocaust and the AMIA bombing is the National Monument to the Victims of the Holocaust, located in the Shoah place in Buenos Aires, created in 2016. Made of carved stone blocks, with shapes of everyday artifacts from the Holocaust era, the monument not only symbolizes the lives lost in the Holocaust but also pays tribute to the victims of the terrorist attacks on the Israeli Embassy in Argentina in 1992, and on the AMIA in 1994, as it is built in two sections, one with 29 stone blocks and the other with 85, the number of victims in each terrorist attack. See Kohn, 'Universalizing the Holocaust in Argentine Jewish Art'.

³⁴³The Jewish community of Resistencia, Chaco, re-inaugurated their synagogue and community building on November 4th, 2022. Rabbi Natan Waingortin, 'The History of the Jewish Community of Resistencia', interview by Tamara Kohn, 14 March 2024.

³⁴⁴There is a similar lamp in the collection of the Jewish Museum, New York, originally from Krakow. Kohn and Kochavi, 'The Challenges and Complexities of Judaica Provenance Research Today'.

It also relates to another case: two Torah pointers in the Torah Ark of Santa Fe's synagogue. These are very similar in shape and size to the other three Torah pointers with JCR tags in the IWO collection, and they are also very similar to the ones recorded in the photographs of silver Judaica that were in the Offenbach Archival Depot and recorded in the JCR archives. While no exhaustive comparison has been made, these significant Torah pointers were perhaps from the same region. The rabbis of the Santa Fe synagogue do not know the provenance of such Torah pointers and no information on that regard was found in minute books and other community records. While again we are facing lots of questions, more questions than answers in fact, these are important to question the established hermetic narrative of the IWO, which, once we look at the case-by-case and individual objects one by one, the general and memorial narrative shows to have many gaps about the historical experience.

Chapter 5

Conclusions

Starting the conclusions after a chapter that ended with so many questions is challenging.

This thesis examined German Judaica in Argentina as material witnesses to migration, rupture, and continuity. Through the study of ritual objects, books, and archival traces preserved in synagogues, museums, and institutional collections, it demonstrated how German Jewish material culture carried across the Atlantic to a new and remote country, functioned not only as religious implements or historical artifacts, but as active agents in the construction of memory and identity in exile by the Jewish German diaspora communities. By bringing together art historical analysis, provenance research, memory studies, and Jewish legal and communal frameworks, this research proposed a model for understanding Judaica as objects situated at the intersection of ritual practice, historical trauma, and diasporic continuity.

This thesis contributes to the field in several ways: first, by conceptualizing Judaica as dynamic carriers of memory within diasporic contexts; second, within Jewish Studies, by integrating provenance research into the analysis of Jewish material culture; and third, by situating German-Jewish objects within the specific historical and institutional landscape of Argentina.

A central argument of this dissertation is that the afterlives of German Judaica in Argentina cannot be understood through a single narrative of rescue, looting, or survival. Instead, these objects reveal layered stories and experiences shaped by individual decisions, communal needs, postwar redistribution policies, and later memorial frameworks. Objects brought by refugees in the 1930s to sustain Jewish life in a new land coexist with heirless Judaica redistributed by international organizations after the Holocaust. While both categories are often absorbed into a shared memorial discourse, their provenance histories, meanings, and ethical implications differ substantially. Attending these distinctions allows for a more nuanced understanding of how Jewish communities in Argentina negotiated loss and continuity through material culture.

The trajectory of German-Jewish material culture in Argentina reveals not a single linear story, but a dispersed and layered landscape of meaning. The ritual objects preserved in synagogues and communal settings—whether in Buenos Aires or in smaller towns such as Colonia Avigdor in Entre Ríos—make visible a commitment to continuity across geography and circumstance. These objects were not merely carried across borders as belongings; they were selected, protected, repaired, and used. Their survival reflects deliberate decisions made

at moments of rupture: what was essential to safeguard, what was necessary for rebuilding ritual life, and what remained indispensable for sustaining communal identity. As material anchors of continuity, these ritual objects enabled the reestablishment of religious life in Argentina and sustained distinctly German-Jewish traditions. Over time, however, many of these practices shifted: objects once embedded in everyday ritual gradually moved into the sphere of memory, becoming markers of identity, heritage, and emotional lineage; they are no longer active ritual tools, but tangible embodiments of a past that later generations chose to preserve.

By contrast, the collections of the Buenos Aires Holocaust Museum demonstrate a distinct relationship between materiality and memory. Here, objects tend to document persecution rather than continuity, with emphasis placed on testimonies, documents, official decrees, personal papers, and photographs, the bureaucratic remnants of exclusion and displacement. The relative absence of Judaica in this context is not evidence of loss, but the result of an intentional museological framework designed to preserve the evidentiary record of genocide and migration. In this register, documents and testimonies become primary carriers of memory, resisting erasure by rendering injustice visible, tangible, and verifiable.

Taken together, these collections reveal a dispersed landscape of memory rather than a unified archive. Objects circulated across homes, synagogues, communal institutions, archives, and museums, and in each setting their meaning shifted. In many cases, processes of Nazi looting, the postwar rescue of heirless Judaica, and subsequent redistribution removed ritual objects from their original contexts of use, reclassifying them as memorial artifacts. The miscatalogued shechitá knife at the Holocaust Museum illustrates how ritual objects can lose their original referent when displaced from lived religious contexts. Conversely, materials such as the manuscript recounting the history of the Riegner Group, the archive of Suse Hallenstein, and the personal papers of Enrique Hamburger and Ellen Kahn demonstrate how documents accrue new layers of meaning as they move through communal and institutional custodianship. These items function not as static records but as connective threads linking family memory, communal identity, and Jewish history. Together, they form a composite field of memory in which each artifact carries its own trajectory while contributing to a larger, shared narrative.

Another important argument emerging from this dissertation is that the afterlives of German-Jewish objects in Argentina must be understood relationally. Ritual objects preserved in synagogues and rural communities embody continuity and the maintenance of Jewish religious life, while the Holocaust Museum safeguards the documentary record of rupture and

trauma. Neither sphere alone offers a complete narrative; taken together, they reflect the dual imperatives of memory after catastrophe: to continue and to remember.

The custodianship of these materials has also shifted over time. What began with the refugees is now carried forward by their Argentine-born descendants, who navigate questions of meaning, ownership, and institutional placement. Their choices, whether intentional, practical, emotional, or instinctive, shape how German-Jewish heritage is preserved, interpreted, and transmitted. The collections examined in this thesis are therefore not only repositories of the past, but dynamic sites in which memory, identity, and cultural inheritance continue to be negotiated across generations and geographies.

This study has shown that, in post-migration settings, the significance of Judaica frequently derives less from what an object *was* than from what it *came to represent* within a specific community. As a result, notions such as “German,” “rescued,” or “Holocaust-related” emerge not as fixed categories, but as interpretive constructs shaped by testimony, transmission, and remembrance practices over time.

Provenance research proved to be both indispensable and limited. In some cases, such as privately owned ritual objects, it was possible to reconstruct detailed ownership histories that re-humanize artifacts and reconnect them to individual lives disrupted by persecution. In other cases, gaps in documentation resist closure. Rather than treating these gaps as failures, this dissertation has argued that they are historically meaningful. The persistence of legends, blurred origins, and symbolic attributions reveals how communities construct memory through objects when historical certainty is unattainable. Provenance information, in this context, operates not only as a technical tool but as a site where history, memory, ethics, and identity intersect.

The case studies examined in this work further demonstrate that Judaica provenance research in Argentina poses specific challenges. The country’s position outside Europe, its reception of refugees, survivors, and redistributed cultural property, and its own history of political violence and antisemitic attacks shape how Holocaust-related objects are interpreted and preserved. The transformation of certain artifacts into symbols of “double survival,” particularly after the AMIA bombing of 1994, illustrates how local traumatic events reframe earlier histories and generate new memorial narratives. These processes underscore the need to situate provenance research within local historical and institutional contexts rather than applying models developed exclusively for European or North American collections.

Additionally, the study of the provenance of Holocaust-related Judaica in Argentina revealed complex histories that go beyond the formal analysis or the traditional ritual role of

the artifacts. By contrasting the legends and myths surrounding these collections with individual stories, this research explored the broader implications for Holocaust memory, restitution, and the local memorial discourse in Argentina. These efforts contribute to a more nuanced understanding of Judaica's cultural and historical significance within the global context of Jewish heritage preservation.

In exploring the provenance of German Judaica in Argentina, this dissertation illuminates the intricate connections between memory, identity, and historical narrative. The stories woven around these objects extend far beyond mere artifacts; they encapsulate the experiences of loss, survival, and resilience of Jewish communities during and after the Holocaust. Each item represents a tangible link to a traumatic past, reflecting an ongoing effort to preserve cultural heritage.

The gaps in provenance expose not only the challenges in tracing the journeys of these items, but also the obstacles that contemporary scholars and communities face when confronting their histories. While these stories often persist in collective memory, their limited documentation calls for a more nuanced approach to provenance research—one that acknowledges both the factual and emotional dimensions of these artifacts.

This dissertation contributes to the field of Jewish art history by foregrounding ceremonial art as a legitimate and necessary source for historical inquiry. By treating ritual objects not as static remnants but as dynamic carriers of meaning across time and space, it expands the methodological possibilities of art history in diasporic and post-catastrophic contexts. Judaica emerges not only as evidence of loss, but as testimony to adaptation, resilience, and the ongoing negotiation of Jewish life after destruction.

The close analysis of individual objects has demonstrated how artifacts function simultaneously as witnesses to persecution, anchors of ritual continuity, and active agents in the ongoing construction of German-Jewish memory in Argentina.

By expanding the scope of Judaica to include archival records and personal documents preserved within religious and cultural institutions, this dissertation demonstrates that memory in post-migration contexts is constructed not only through ritual continuity, but also through the preservation of bureaucratic and symbolic traces of a destroyed world. In this context, the meanings of objects emerge as unstable and contested, shaped as much by trauma and testimony as by origin, authorship, or original function.

Taken together, the objects examined demonstrate that German Judaica in Argentina cannot be understood solely through typology, style, or original function. Whether ritual objects, domestic artifacts, or archival records, these materials acquired meaning through use,

donation, reinterpretation, and institutional framing after migration. Across synagogue, museum, and archival contexts, objects were integrated into new narratives that often blurred distinctions between ritual continuity, personal memory, collective identity, and historical rupture.

After four years of research, a dissertation that began with two objects: an eternal lamp made from a former Shabbos lamp and a list of looted Judaica shipped to Argentine institutions, has unfolded into a broader reflection on memory, transmission, and responsibility. During this period, the world itself has changed, once again underscoring the urgency of historical study. In a contemporary landscape where Holocaust victims are increasingly universalized, and public commemorations often refer to “the victims” or “the horrors” without naming Jewish lives and experiences, recovering specific stories becomes ever more pressing. The study of objects, their trajectories, and their afterlives offers a way to resist erasure, to humanize history, and to address intergenerational trauma carried into the present. In this sense, provenance research, exhibitions, and scholarly inquiry are not only academic endeavors but ethical acts—tools for understanding the past in order to confront the challenges of the present and the future.

As we progress in this field, sustaining this inquiry, employing interdisciplinary methods, and fostering inclusive dialogue among historians, community members, and provenance researchers remains essential. Such an approach will deepen our understanding of Jewish cultural heritage and ensure that the narratives surrounding these objects are preserved and critically engaged. Ultimately, provenance research serves not only to enhance historical accuracy and clarify ownership histories, but also to promote recognition, responsibility, and the ongoing work of cultural and historical preservation.

Appendix I

Standardized Terminology of Judaica Objects (with Spanish and Hebrew Equivalents)

The following table presents the terminology of Judaica objects as used throughout this dissertation. English terms have been standardized for consistency, accompanied by their Spanish and Hebrew equivalents, reflecting both scholarly usage and the linguistic practices of the communities studied.

English or phonetics	Spanish or phonetics	Hebrew
atzei chayim	atzei jaim	עצי חיים
bimah	bimá	בימה
challah cover	mantel para jalá	כיסוי חלה
challah knife	cuchillo para jalá	סכין חלה
challah plate	plato para jalá	מגש חלה
eternal light	ner tamid	נר תמיד
Haggadah	Hagadá de pesaj	הגדה של פסח
Hanukkah lamp	janukiá	חנוכייה
havdalah set	set de havdalá	סט הבדלה
Hebrew Bible	Tanaj	תנ"ך
chuppah	jupá	חופה
Judaica	judaica	יודאיקה
kiddush cup	copa de kidush	כוס קידוש
mahzor	majzor	מחזור

mezuzah	mezuzá	מזוזה
mizrah	mizraj	מזרח
parokhet	parojet o cortina	פרוכת
Passover cloth	pañó de Pésaj	בד לפסח
seder plate	keará	קערת פסח
Shabboslamp	lámpara de Shabat	מנורת שבת
shechita knife	cuchillo para shejitá	סכין שחיטה
siddur	sidur	סידור
spice box	besamim o especiero	בשמים
tefillin	tefilín or filacterias	תפילין
Torah Ark	Aron Hakodesh o Arca sagrada	ארון קודש
Torah binder (wimpel)	binder o faja	מפה
Torah crown	keter Torá	כתר תורה
Torah finials (rimonim)	rimonim	רימונים
Torah mantle	vestido de Torá	מעיל תורה
Torah pointer (yad)	señalador o “manito”	יד
Torah scroll	Torá	ספר תורה
Torah shield	chapa para Torá	חושן

Appendix II

Inventory of Judaica in synagogues and institutional collections in Argentina

This inventory compiles the objects identified during the course of this research across selected synagogues and institutional collections in Argentina. The dataset remains partial, reflecting both the ongoing nature of provenance research and the fragmentary condition of archival and material records. Fields are included where information was available at the time of documentation.

ID	Name	Collection/ Reservoir	Origin	Date	Size	Inscriptions	Marks
LB.W.01	Wimpel	Leo Baeck Synagogue	Germany or Argentina	1937	17 x 341 cm	דוד בר יוסף נולד ביום ב' ח' אב תרצ"ז לפק ה' יגדלו לתורה ולחופה ולמעשים טובים אמן סלה: // קול ששון וקול שמחה קול חתן וקול כלה. מזל טוב. // לתורה. תורה צוה לנו משה מורשה קהלת יעקב. עץ חיים היא למחזיקים בה	
LB.W.02	Wimpel	Leo Baeck Synagogue	Germany	1914	20 x 358 cm	מתתיהו המכ"ר הערבערט ב בנימין הכהן נולד ביום ה' ז' סיון תרע"ד ה' יגדלו לתורה ולחופה ולמעשים טובים אמן סלה	
LB.W.03	Wimpel	Leo Baeck Synagogue	Argentina	1950	18 x 398.5	נדבה מאת הילד דניאל שמעון בן ר שמואל משה הרענשיק נולד למזל טוב יד מרחשון התשי"א ה' יגדלו לתורה ולחופה ולמעשים טובים א ס	
LB.W.04	Wimpel	Leo Baeck Synagogue	Germany	1922	18 x 343 cm	דוד בר שלמה שליט נולד במזל טוב יא במרחשון התרפ"ג לפק השם יגדלו לתורה ולחופה ולמעשים טובים אמן סלה	
LB.W.05	Wimpel	Leo Baeck Synagogue	Germany	1927	23 x 335.5	מעשה ידי מרים האז בת רפאל וחנה. // מנחם יהודה בן חיים נולד במז"ט יז אייר התרפ"ז לפ"ק השם יגדלו לתורה ולחופה ולמעשים טובים אמן סלה	
LB.W.06	Wimpel	Leo Baeck Synagogue	Argentina	1945	20.5 x 252 cm	אליעזר בן שמואל נולד בשלשה בניסן שנת תש"ה בקרית בא יגדלו לתורה ולחופה ולמעשים טובים Thomas Ludwig Frakenberg // א ס	
LB.W.07	Wimpel	Leo Baeck Synagogue	Argentina	1947	22 x 350 cm	שמעון בר מרדכי נולד במ"ט ביום כב אלול התש"ז לפק ה' יגדלו לתורה ולחופה ולמעשים טובים Miguel Alfredo Weil // אמן סלה	
LB.W.08	Wimpel	Leo Baeck Synagogue	Germany	1901	348 x 20	שמואל בר אהרון (זיבסריד דא הערברוך) נולד ביום ג כסלו תרס"ב לפק יגדלו לתורה ולחופה ולמעשים טובים אמן סלה	
LB.W.09	Wimpel	Leo Baeck Synagogue	Germany	1938	385 x 19	נדבה מאת הילד אברהם יעקוב בן יצחק אייזיק אהן נולד למזל טוב כט אייר תרצ"ח לפק ה' יגדלו לתורה ולחופה ולמעשים טובים א"ס	
LB.W.10	Wimpel	Leo Baeck Synagogue	Germany	1881	327 x 18.5	אברהם בר שמעון פאן עברשטאט ריינהיימער נולד במט יום ה באדר שני תרמ"א לפק השם יגדלו לתורה ולחופה ולמעשים טובים אס	
LB.W.11	Wimpel	Leo Baeck Synagogue	Argentina	1960	253 x 16	נולד למזל טוב ביום יד ניסן שנת תשכ"א לפק השם יזכה לגדלו לתורה ולחופה ולמעשים טובים אס	
LB.W.12	Wimpel	Leo Baeck Synagogue	Germany	1932	21 x 320	יעקוב נתן בן גרשון המכונה יוליוז גארבערט סאנדער שליטא נולד במט ביום כז מרחשון תרצ"ג לפק ה' יגדלו לתורה ולחופה ולמעשים טובים אמן סלה	
LB.W.13	Wimpel	Leo Baeck Synagogue	Argentina	1994	21,5 x 237	נתנם ע"י הורי הילד יהושע בן אריאל שכטר יזכו לגדלו לתורה ולחופה ולמעשים טובים כ"ו כסלו תשנ"ה לפק	
LB.W.14	Wimpel	Leo Baeck Synagogue	Argentina	1945	23.5 x 450	מאיר יוסף נולד במ"ט ביום חמישי פ דברים ב אב התש"ה יגדלו לתורה ולחופה ולמעשים טובים אמן סלה	
LB.W.15	Wimpel	Leo Baeck Synagogue	Germany	1841	294 x 16	ישראל בר אשר נולד במזל טוב יום ד' ז' ניסן תר"א לפק ה' יגדלו לתורה ולחופה ולמעשים טובים אמן סלה	
LB.F.01	Finials	Leo Baeck Synagogue	Argentina	1961		Donación de don Emilio Strauss y señora con motivo de bar mitzva de su hijo Andrés T. 29.7.1961	
LB.F.02	Finials	Leo Baeck Synagogue	Argentina		36 x 10 cm		Illegible silver mark

LB.F.03	Finials	Leo Baeck Synagogue	London	1892	41 x 14 cm		AK (Aron Katz ?)
LB.F.04	Finials	Leo Baeck Synagogue	New York	20th century	35 x 13 cm		ESCO Sterling
LB.F.05	Finials	Leo Baeck Synagogue	New York		35 x 13 cm		ESCO Sterling
LB.F.06	Finials	Leo Baeck Synagogue	Unknown	Early 20th Century (?)	27 x 11 cm		
LB.F.07	Finials	Leo Baeck Synagogue	Buenos Aires (?)	20th century (?)	35 x 11 cm		
LB.F.08	Finials	Leo Baeck Synagogue	Vienna	1860	30 x 13 (d) cm		Maker mark: JE. City Mark Vienna. Austro-Hungarian Empire Mark: 1860
LB.TS.01	Torah Shield	Leo Baeck Synagogue	New York		34.5 x 26 cm		ESCO Sterling
LB.TS.02	Torah Shield	Leo Baeck Synagogue	United States	1961	27.5 x 22 cm		
LB.TS.03	Torah Shield	Leo Baeck Synagogue	Germany	1801/1803	27 x 18.5	Hebrew inscription from 1803:	AG 1801
LB.TS.04	Torah Shield	Leo Baeck Synagogue	Berlin	19th cent.	37 x 25.5		
LB.TS.05	Torah Shield	Leo Baeck Synagogue	United States	1961			
LB.Y.01	Tora Pointer	Leo Baeck Synagogue	Germany	1868	31 x 2 cm	German inscription from 1868: Gewidmet von A. Bimmern Juni 1868	
LB.Y.02	Tora Pointer	Leo Baeck Synagogue	Germany		32 x 2 cm		
LB.Y.03	Tora Pointer	Leo Baeck Synagogue	Germany		33 x 3 cm	Hebrew inscription:	
LB.Y.04	Tora Pointer	Leo Baeck Synagogue	Germany		24.5 x 2.5 cm		
LB.Y.05	Tora Pointer	Leo Baeck Synagogue	Germany		26 x 6 cm		
LB.Y.06	Tora Pointer	Leo Baeck Synagogue	Germany		25 x 1.5 cm		
LB.Y.07	Tora Pointer	Leo Baeck Synagogue	Germany		22 x 1.5		
NCI.T.01	Wall Hanger	Nueva Comunidad Israelita	Frankfurt	1911	117 x 38		
NCI.HL.01	Hanukkah Lamp	Nueva Comunidad Israelita	Germany		18,5 x 16 cm (d: 8 cm)		
NCI.SP.02	Seder Plate	Nueva Comunidad Israelita	Germany	1904-05-01	35 cm diameter.	Hebrew Inscription: שלמה בר יצחק ועם אשתו שונה בת נחן שנת תרס"א לפ"ק	
NCI.KC.01	Kiddush Cup	Nueva Comunidad Israelita	Germany		16 cm x 9 cm diameter.		925
NCI.B.01	Siddur Shaar Shamaim	Nueva Comunidad Israelita	Wren	1887			
NCI.K.01	Challah Knife	Nueva Comunidad Israelita	Germany		30 x 4 cm		
NCI.CHP.01	Challah Plate	Nueva Comunidad Israelita	Germany		25 x 34	Hebrew Inscription: גוט שבת	4273
NCI.T.02	Challah Cover	Nueva Comunidad Israelita	Germany		42x53		

NCI.HL.02	Hanukkah Lamp	Nueva Comunidad Israelita	Germany		24,5 x 26,5 x 7 cm		n°6
NCI.KC.02	Kiddush Cup	Nueva Comunidad Israelita	Germany		19,1 x 12,5 (d)		
NCI.T.03	Kippah	Nueva Comunidad Israelita	Unknown		6,5 x 17 cm		
NCI.B.02	Hebrew Bible	Nueva Comunidad Israelita	Frankfurt	1913			
NCI.B.03	Mahzorim set	Nueva Comunidad Israelita	Germany	1832			
NCI.B.04	Passover Haggadah	Nueva Comunidad Israelita	Leipzig				
NCI.B.05	Passover Haggadah	Nueva Comunidad Israelita	Prague	1867			
NCI.SP.03	Seder Plate	Nueva Comunidad Israelita	Germany		36 cm (d)	Grete Weinmann	n°6
NCI.KC.03	Kiddush Cup	Nueva Comunidad Israelita	Germany	ca. 1932	20,5 x 10	Dedication to Rabbi Andorn, gift from the Liberal Synagogue of Berlin. 12.3.1932	
NCI.KC.04	Kiddush Cup	Nueva Comunidad Israelita	Israel		14,5 x 6		
IWO.W.01	Wimpel	IWO	Germany	11.1.1798	17 x 265	Hebrew inscription: משה בן כ משה זלמנץ נולד במ"ט יום ה' כז טבת תקנ"ח לפ"ק לתורה ולחופה ולמעשים טובים אמן סלה	JCR metal tag attached to the wimpel.
IWO.W.02	Wimpel	IWO	Germany	18.4.1914	16 x 275	"Kurt Rasenberg" + Hebrew inscription: יעקב בר אברהם נולד במט"ו יום אחרון של פסח ביום כב ניסן תרע"ד לפק השם יגדלו לתורה ולחופה ולמעשים טובים אמן סלה	There is a hole in the right upper corner but no tags attached.
NCI.W.01	Wimpel	NCI	Germany	7.12.1921	25 x 365	יוחנן בן ? נולד במזל טוב ביום ו' כסלו תרפ"ב לפק: השם יגדלו לתורה ולחופה ולמעשים טובים אמן סלה. Burghardt wurde geboren am Dezember 1921 Gott segne ihn wud laffe ihn freude seiner Avern	
NCI.W.02	Wimpel	NCI	Argentina	17.12.1948	25 x 340	יעקוב בר שנאיר נולד ביום טו כסלו התש"ט לפק: יגדלו לתורה ולחופה ולמעשים טובים אמן סלה. Tomas Santiago Rosenfeld	
NCI.W.03	Wimpel	NCI	Argentina	02.04.1942	25 x 340	יואל בר שנאיר נולד ביום טז ניסן התש"ב לפק: יגדלו לתורה ולחופה ולמעשים טובים אמן סלה. Raul Guillermo Rosenfeld	

Appendix III

Fieldwork Documentation

This appendix presents photographs taken during fieldwork in synagogues and institutional collections in Buenos Aires. The images document ritual objects and their display or storage contexts, complementing the analysis of material culture, provenance, and memory developed in the dissertation.



Wimpels from Leo Baeck Synagogue, Benei Tikva, found beneath the Torah Ark in 2023, and organized after field research and inventory making, for the community.



Part of the Judaica collection of the Maurycy Minkowski Museum at the IWO, Buenos Aires as found in 2023.



Wimpel from the JCR collection from IWO on loan to the Jewish Museum of Buenos Aires, March, 2026.



Former exhibition at the Chaim Weitzman synagogue, NCI-Emanu El, Buenos Aires, 2020.



Books and ritual objects were packed for the move from the old Chaim Weitzman Synagogue to the new Judaica Belgrano Community Center in 2020.



New Permanent exhibition at Judaica Belgrano Community Center, Buenos Aires, April 2025.

Appendix IV

Selected Images of Judaica Objects

This appendix presents selected images of Judaica objects analyzed in this dissertation. The images highlight material features, craftsmanship, and states of preservation, supporting the discussion of provenance, object biographies, and their role as carriers of memory and continuity.



Miriam Haas, Wimpel (Torah Binder), Germany, 1927. Painted linen. Menachem Y. ben Chayim, b. May, 5th, 1927. Leo Baeck Synagogue, Benei Tikva, Buenos Aires.



Wimpel (Torah Binder),
Argentina, 1947.
Collection of the Maurycy
Minkowski Museum, IWO,
Buenos Aires City, Argentina



Kiddush Cup, given to Rabbi Dr. Andorn,
by the Liberal Synagogue of Berlin on
March 12, 1932.
Collection NCI-EmanuEl, Buenos Aires.



Synagogue Hanukkah Lamp from Bretten,
Germany. Brass, early 20th century, Germany.
Centro Unión Israelita, Colonia Avigdor.



Challah set for Sabbath:
plate, silver knife, and
challah cover.
19th-20th century
Germany. NCI-EmanuEl,
Buenos Aires.



Torah Scrolls in the Torah Ark,
Leo Baeck Synagogue, Benei Tikva,
Buenos Aires, 2023.



Ner Tamid (Eternal Light) made of a repurposed Shabboslamp.
Leo Baeck Synagogue, Benei Tikva,
Buenos Aires, 2023.



Torah Shield, Berlin, early 19th century.
Silver, 37 x 25.5 cm.
Leo Baeck Synagogue, Benei Tikva,
Buenos Aires.



Torah Shield, Augsburg, 1801, F. Anton
Gutwein (AG). Silver, 27 x 18.5 cm.
Leo Baeck Synagogue, Benei Tikva,
Buenos Aires,

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Centro Unión Israelita, Córdoba.

Comunidad Benei Tikva, Buenos Aires.

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