



## **Between Cholent and Feijoada: Food-ways of the Jewish mother in Brazil**

Entre o cholent e a feijoada: modos alimentares da mãe judia no Brasil

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**Abstract:** At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, Jewish people immigrated en masse from Eastern Europe to the 'New World'. Jews left the traditional 'Shtetl' in an attempt to improve their and their family's lives. Brazil was one of the immigration destinations. The nature of Jewish immigration, according to which the father immigrated first and then was followed by the wife and children, changed the structure of the Jewish family beyond recognition, positioning the Jewish mother as the pillar of the family. When Jewish mothers arrived in Brazil, they continued to face poverty similar to what they had endured back in Europe. As they were used to feeding their families in conditions of poverty, they began to cook Brazilian 'poor people's food' just as they had done in their countries of origin, such as stews with potatoes and beets. But they also had to give up certain ingredients due to observance of kosher laws, and to adopt new ingredients that are not common in Eastern Europe, such as cassava flour. The figure of the 'YiddisheMame' also symbolizes the economic establishment and the socio-cultural transformation that the Jews went through in Brazil, where the Jewish mother gave her place in the kitchen to the housekeeper and went to study and work. Jewish food's place became special and festive, food that is cooked in the mother's or grandmother's kitchen as a significant expression of Judaism for the Jewish-Brazilian diaspora. This article presents the food-ways of the Jewish mother in Brazil over the years, and through it outlines the formation of the Jewish-Brazilian Diaspora.<sup>1</sup>

**Keywords:** Jewish immigration. Food-ways. Jewish food.

**Resumo:** Na virada dos séculos XIX e XX, os judeus migraram em massa da Europa Oriental para o Novo Mundo. Os judeus deixaram o tradicional 'Shtetl' na tentativa de melhorar a vida deles e de suas famílias. O Brasil foi um dos destinos da imigração. A natureza da imigração judaica, segundo a qual o pai imigrou primeiro e depois foi seguido pela esposa e filhos, mudou a estrutura da família judia de forma irreconhecível, posicionando a mãe judia como o pilar da família. Quando as mães

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judias chegaram ao Brasil, elas continuaram a enfrentar uma pobreza semelhante à que haviam enfrentado na Europa. Acostumados a alimentar suas famílias em condições de pobreza, começaram a cozinhar a 'comida de pobre' brasileira, tal como faziam em seus países de origem, como ensopados com batata e beterraba. Mas eles também tiveram que renunciar a certos ingredientes devido à observância das leis kosher e adotar novos ingredientes que não são comuns na Europa Oriental, como a farinha de mandioca. A figura do 'YiddisheMame' também simboliza a fixação econômica e a transformação sociocultural pela qual os judeus passaram no Brasil, onde a mãe judia cedeu seu lugar na cozinha para a empregada e passou a estudar e trabalhar. O lugar da comida judaica tornou-se especial e festivo, comida que é preparada na cozinha da mãe ou da avó como expressão significativa do judaísmo para a diáspora judaico-brasileira. Este artigo apresenta os modos de alimentação da mãe judia no Brasil ao longo dos anos, e através dele delinea a formação da diáspora judaico-brasileira.

**Palavras-chave:** Imigração judaica. Alimentos-formas. Comida judaica.

## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 Jewish immigration to Brazil as part of the great Jewish immigration

Immigration is a phenomenon that characterizes the Jewish people in general and the Modern Era in particular. From the end of the 19th century to the middle of the 20th century, more than 2.7 million Jews immigrated from Europe to countries across the ocean. This period is referred to by historians as the period of the great migration. It is the departure of people who hoped to free themselves from the poverty, hunger, and persecution they experienced in the countries of origin, and to create a new life in countries overseas. This migration, of millions of men, women, and children, changed beyond recognition the structure of the Jewish people, and shaped it as we know it today.<sup>2</sup>

The great Jewish migration from Eastern Europe, mainly towards the 'New World', happened due to processes of industrialization, modernization, pogroms, and civil difficulties that brought many Jews to a state of abject poverty. Therefore, the Jews, both as individuals and with the help of aid organizations and benefactors, began to find solutions to improve their living conditions and secure the future of their children. Because, unlike the United States of America, Canada and Argentina, the immigration policy in Brazil between the two world wars was relatively liberal; it was during this period that it became a significant immigration destination, when Jewish immigration to Brazil reached its peak. For comparison, between the years

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<sup>2</sup> ALROEY, 2001, p. 1-4.



1881-1920, 18,889 Jews entered Brazil, while between the years 1920-1929, more than 30,000 Jews immigrated to it. This meant it was a significant destination for European Jewry; in 1934, 13% of Jewish immigrants from Europe immigrated to Brazil. And in the 1950s, after the Suez Canal crisis and the rise of Arab nationalism, another 10,000 Jews immigrated to Brazil from Islamic countries - Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, and Turkey. After this wave, Jewish immigration to Brazil slowed and the country experienced negative migration.<sup>3</sup>

The great waves of immigration to Brazil began between the 19th and 20th centuries and continued until the 1950s. The origin of the immigrants was mainly Eastern and Central Europe and a minority of them came from the Middle East and Islamic countries.<sup>4</sup> They first arrived as part of the Baron Hirsch Colonies Project with the ICA (Jewish Colonization Association), coming to settle and work the lands of the border areas of Brazil. However, Jewish agricultural work did not last long, and as a result, most of these Jews migrated to the big cities. First, they arrived at poor immigrant neighborhoods, and later, as they began to establish themselves financially, most managed to migrate to more stable parts of the cities.<sup>5</sup>

In the years and generations after immigration, the Jews succeeded to integrate into Brazilian society while shaping a Brazilian and Jewish ethnic identity. At first, their occupation was small-scale peddling characterized by selling goods door-to-door on credit, an occupation referred to in Yiddish-Portuguese as 'clientchik'. These 'clientchik' Jews were exposed to average Brazilian citizens and were able to form personal relationships. Later, they began to open small businesses. From the second generation to immigration, Jews gained education and engaged mainly in white collar professions such as law and medicine.<sup>6</sup> As is the way of immigrants, some of them became fully absorbed and assimilated into Brazilian society, while others kept life patterns that they brought with them from the old world, while making adaptations to their new reality.<sup>7</sup>

The methodological approach of the research this article is based on is a systematic reading of primary sources such as literature, archives, newspapers, and personal interviews of Brazilian women who immigrated to Israel. The goal was to focus on the individual as an analytical unit through which we can analyze Jewish-Brazilian

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<sup>3</sup> GARTNER, 1982, p. 383-343.

<sup>4</sup> LESSER, 2001, p. 65-72.

<sup>5</sup> AVNI, 1982, p.121-158; FALBEL, 2001; LESSER, 2001, p. 65-72; LEVINE, 1995, p. 227-237.

<sup>6</sup> CHAZAN, 2015, p. 129-166; Lewin, 2001, p. 80-96.

<sup>7</sup> LESSER, 2001, p. 65-72.



ethnic affiliation and trans-national characteristics, all through the perspective of culinary habits.

## **2 Food and migration**

In times of scarcity due to natural disasters, wars or economic crises, a factor that can often encourage people to migrate is food. Particularly, finding a destination where food will be found in abundance. Travels, in the form of migration, have historically created encounters with new food, and allowed immigrants to construct new identities. Therefore, throughout history food-ways have driven people's transitions between cities, countries, and continents, shaping their identity while rooting and uprooting them.<sup>8</sup>

Food has a routine, a daily and cyclical role in social construction and identity design. Food systems strengthen relationships between members of one group and create boundaries for interaction with outsiders. Food is associated with meetings and ceremonies; it is at the center of symbolic events, where each event has specific food rituals that symbolize it. The distribution of food distinguishes between different groups in the community, according to age, gender, and class.<sup>9</sup>

Among immigrants, food products symbolize the intercultural transition between different social structures. Food is a cultural element in the process of migration which helps to preserve one's culture of origin while adapting to the culture of one's country of destination.<sup>10</sup>

There is vast and varied research about Jewish food in relation to Jewish immigration. One of the pioneering studies on the subject is a study by the historian Hasia Diner about the mass immigration to the United States of America in the late 19th and 20th centuries and within it the Jewish immigration. She used the term *Food Ways*, to illustrate the role of food in the migration process and the integration of immigrants in their destination.

The majority of this research about Jewish food-ways is focused on American Jewry and the state of Israel and tends to deal with comparison to other minorities or ethnic groups, including gender aspects.<sup>11</sup>

However, outside of the North American diaspora, the scope of research on culinary habits as a cultural practice among Jewish diasporas is limited, and particularly so among Latin American Jewry. There are a few studies about the Jewry of Mexico,

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<sup>8</sup> DINER, 2001, p. 1-20.

<sup>9</sup> DINER, 2001, p. 1-20.

<sup>10</sup> AMON; MENASCHE, 2008, p. 13-21; BERNSTEIN, 2010, p. 95.

<sup>11</sup> For further reading: HELMAN (ed.). *Jews and Their Foodways*, 2016; DINER, *Hungering for America*, 2001.



Argentina and Brazil, mainly related to gender.<sup>12</sup> In the context of culinary issues among Brazilian Jewry, there is an article by researchers Amon and Menasche that traces the recipes of two Turkish-Jewish families that immigrated to Brazil in the 1950s and includes processes of building their identity over the generations.<sup>13</sup>

Apart from that, I have not found a comprehensive study that deals with the issues of culinary practices, identity, and belonging among Brazilian Jewry.

### **3 The place of the Jewish mother and her food as an agent of culture and identity**

The character of the Jewish mother symbolizes Jewish culture on the axes of time and space. In Jewish folklore, the 'YiddisheMame' represents the home as distinct from the outside world, intergenerational connection, and the being of Jewish culture. This character expresses herself in front of her children, her partner, her family and her surroundings through the kitchen and her food.<sup>14</sup>

The phenomenon of Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe to the 'New World' changed beyond recognition the structure of the Jewish family. The system of Jewish immigration was gradual due to economic considerations, which directly affected the traditional family structure and power relations between the genders within the family. Usually, the man first traveled to their new destination, and only when he managed to earn enough money would he send travel tickets to his wife and children. During the years the wife was waiting, she had to sustain herself and her children. After that, if she managed to reach their destination country, she, her children, and the rest of her family would have to deal with emotions similar to what her now veteran immigrant husband had dealt with years prior. The husband, now more acclimated to Brazilian life, thus stood in contrast to the rest of the family, who, straight from the shtetel, had difficulties adapting to the new and foreign Brazilian customs and daily life practices.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, the figure of the Jewish mother underwent a social and cultural evolution, and her place in the family unit became very central. And amidst these difficult changes, her food became her tool of caring for, loving, and uniting her family.<sup>16</sup> In the various expressions of the Jewish-Brazilian diaspora, the mother, equipped with her worries, her cooking, and her food, appears as an agent of the Jewish identity.

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<sup>12</sup> ZAN-BAR TSUR, 2015, p. 115-141; LAZNOW, 2019, p. 185-215; SCHUSTER KERSHENOVICH, 2016, p. 58-79.

<sup>13</sup> AMON; MENASCHE, 2008, p. 13-21.

<sup>14</sup> BENTOV, 2009, p. 385-397.

<sup>15</sup> HERTZBERG, 1994, p. 170-186.

<sup>16</sup> BENTOV, 2009, p. 385-397.



After reviewing the research literature, I have not found studies that deal systematically and in-depth with foodways of the Jewish-Brazilian diaspora through the point of view of the Jewish mother. The primary sources that I have encountered while conducting research for this article are fine literature, memoirs, journalism, and oral documentation.

Beginning with the first years of immigration to Brazil at the beginning of the 20th century, there is Jewish literature describing the experience of immigration, foreignness, and immigrant adaptation difficulties.<sup>17</sup> This literature helps to understand the reality of daily life and the struggles of Jewish immigrants, which other official and institutional sources fail to see and reflect.<sup>18</sup> Accordingly, in their novels, Brazilian-Jewish writers authentically describe the daily life of immigrants, in all their difficulties and also simplicity. And in dozens of these sources, the Jewish mother is a central character in the physical and spiritual process of immigration and absorption in Brazil.

Systematic reading of various primary sources revealed that a main theme concerns the food-ways of Brazilian Jewry, among which the figure of the Jewish-Brazilian mother stands above all. To assess whether these sources reflect the lived reality of immigrant populations, the methodological approach of this research is thus an examination of the individual's point of view about their experience as Jews in Brazil; This is to understand the ethnic uniqueness of this diaspora, alongside its similarities both to Brazilian society and to other Jewish diasporas.

#### **4 Jewish food, Brazilian food, and everything in between**

In Eastern Europe, Jews were used to eating foods based on potatoes, beets, onions, and chicken or goose meat. In other words, most of their diet was based on basic, satisfying ingredients, most of which can be preserved, and so available for a long time. From these raw products they prepared a large and creative variety of foods, such as beetroot soup, or borscht, which is considered a simple soup of the poor, along with kneidlech, which is made of *matzah*, and which was kept at home for months after the celebration of Passover. Schmaltz – chicken or goose fat – was added to the food and was common in Jewish cuisine for two reasons. First, due to the rules of kashrut, where in Eastern Europe schmaltz could substitute butter or lard. And second, it was a way to utilize all parts of the chicken or goose, including its fat, which has high caloric value.<sup>19</sup>

The Brazilian cuisine that the Jews encountered upon their arrival is a diverse and complex cuisine. It reflects Brazilian history, nature, and the various ethnic groups

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<sup>17</sup> VIEIRA, 1995, p. 1-18.

<sup>18</sup> ALROEY, 2008, p. 37-59.

<sup>19</sup> DINER, 2001, p.146-178; GROSS, 2020, p. 189-211.



that make up the country. First, there are native local foods that were consumed by the Native-Indians, such as tropical fruits that are found in the popular Guarana fruit drink, as well as the use of the cassava root to create flour and other goods. Next, there are the foods that were brought to Brazil by various cultures. Portuguese colonialists brought previously foreign items like olive oil and wheat flour bread. African slaves brought with them their native foods, spices, and different cooking practices, along with a set of rules and prohibitions on eating them during slavery. And later, with the various waves of immigration to Brazil, ethnic foods from Germany, Japan, the Middle East arrived.

As such, typical 'Brazilian cuisine' consists of a combination of raw materials and cooking techniques from these various origins. One dish that has a cross-regional, class, and ethnic consensus in Brazil that is considered the typical Brazilian dish is black beans with rice (Feijão com Arroz), which is eaten with fried cassava flour (Farofa). This dish was originally considered a meal for slaves and soldiers due to its high nutritional value compared to its cheap price and ease of cultivation. Originally, the black beans were eaten with native cassava flour, and later rice was added to the plate. Already at the beginning of the 20th century, there is evidence that this dish was considered a typical dish in every household in Brazil. However, the exact origin of black beans is unclear, because different varieties were found in the Americas alongside varieties that the Europeans brought with them. Yet from the 20th century until today, it is customary to eat black beans with rice for at least one meal a day, either as a main dish or alongside meat and salad.<sup>20</sup>

### **5 Immigration, poverty and culture shock in the kitchen of the Jewish mother in Brazil**

Understanding everyday reality through the examination of cooking and eating practices is critical to understanding the formation of ethnic identity among immigrants. This understanding, here represented primarily through the immigrant woman, brings an essence of personal experience from which Jewish diaspora is structured. The initial adjustment required of the immigrant Jewish mother in Brazil was twofold: on the one hand, to feed her family with limited resources; And on the other hand, to grapple with the culture shock that manifested in front of her on grocery store shelves, where the number of ingredients she knew and could use were few. First, because expensive ingredients like meat and chocolate were financially beyond her reach. Second, because the supply of kosher food, was initially scarce. Thirdly, because the variety of Brazilian ingredients she had no familiarity with was large.

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<sup>20</sup> MACIEL, 2004, p. 30-34.



Many descriptions in Brazilian literature about the Jews - written mostly by Jewish writers - describe the mothers' efforts to feed her family with few supplies. And she would do so while using culinary techniques of her origin, such as utilizing goose 'schmaltz' in borscht soup or finding multiple uses for basic products such as onions, noodles, and potatoes: in soup, kugel pie, or in knish pastries. This all coincided with the common practice amongst Jewish immigrants of the time: observing kosher laws.

In his autobiographical novel, Marcos Iolovitch described the experience of hunger, intercultural differences, and the difficulty of living in one of the ICA colonies during his first years after immigrating:

[...] we suffered extreme shortages. Our food supplies were reduced to yucca flour and sweet potatoes. Left to us as a last resort was hunting. But that is prohibited by the Jewish faith that only allows the consumption of meat under the rigorous observance of the rituals prescribed by its laws.<sup>21</sup>

Amidst the challenging adaptation to a new and foreign environment, the Jewish calendar was an anchor of security for immigrants, bringing them back to a homey ritual with familiar flavors. The customs of Shabbat and the Jewish holidays revolve around food, as well as provide a sense of belonging. In the novel 'The Centaur in the Garden' author Moacyr Scliar describes the Shabbat meal of an immigrant family. On Shabbat and holiday evenings they gathered around the Shabbat table set with serving utensils from Eastern Europe:

Weekdays are full of hard work... On Friday nights, everyone dresses up in their best clothes. We gather around the table, where the crystal goblets brought from Europe sparkle upon the white tablecloth. My mother lights the candles, my father blesses the wine, and thus we celebrate the arrival of the Sabbath.<sup>22</sup>

This custom of family gatherings in line with the Jewish calendar and around the dining table continued to accompany the following generations, who were mostly well established and integrated into Brazilian society.

Along with preparing food from ingredients that were familiar in Eastern Europe, Jewish mothers learned to adapt to more 'exotic' foods and ingredients they were unfamiliar with, such as cassava flour and sweet potato; And they encountered,

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<sup>21</sup> IOLOVITCH, p. 16-17.

<sup>22</sup> SCLIAR, 1980, p. 31.





rarely if at all, seasonal foods that would have been picked out of trees in Eastern Europe, such as walnuts and berries.<sup>23</sup>

A visual expression of the balance between familiar goods from the old country and the new possibilities of these exotic ingredients is found in Scliar's book, 'The War in Bom Fim'. Scliar describes a morning scene in a Jewish immigrant neighborhood in the city of Porto Alegre:

[...] the streets of Bom Fim filled with people, women wrapped in shawls, haggling with the vegetable vendors, and telling the women of the neighborhood the latest news.... The market stalls exhibited boxes of potatoes and colorful ads for Guarana.<sup>24</sup>

However, the difference between foods commonly found in stores and those used in kitchens between Eastern Europe and Brazil represented an economic opportunity – for those who grabbed it. The new way of life in Brazil allowed women to be partners in their family's socio-economic mobility. This can be explained both due to the characteristics of Jewish immigration, in which women whose spouses immigrated were forced to support their family; and due to the characteristics of the liberal Brazilian economy and the Jews' adaptation to it. All this formed fertile ground for the growth of family businesses.

This is how we can learn from the story behind the chocolate company 'Kopenhagen', founded in Sao Paulo in 1928 by a Latvian Jewish immigrant couple, David and Ana Kopenhagen. David was a medical student in Latvia, and when he arrived in Brazil, he tried to join the work of the maritime port without success. So, the couple changed course: Ana started making marzipan sweets at home, an almond candy that was unknown in Brazil, and David sold the sweets door to door using the aforementioned 'clientelchik' method. They were successful, and expanded the business, opening a small candy and chocolate factory. Later the factory became a well-known commercial company with branches all over Brazil. And in 1996, the company was sold to a major Brazilian chocolate corporation.<sup>25</sup>

It seems that the initial spark was due to the resourcefulness of the Jewish mother: to produce new sweets for the local Brazilian culture using less common raw materials; and to distribute these sweets with the help of her spouse, creating personal connections as he visited his clients door-by-door. Such cases were repeated in the field of textiles, as well as in a variety of other professional fields. It was this

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<sup>23</sup> RAWET, 1998, p. 27.

<sup>24</sup> SCLIAR, 190, p. 5.

<sup>25</sup> SZPILMAN, 2012, p. 426; VARGAS, 2013, p. 37.



economic pattern that constituted the basis for the next generation of immigrants to acquire an education and continue to climb up the Brazilian socio-economic ladder.<sup>26</sup>

However, there are Jews who failed financially, and remained in the same neighborhoods where their ancestors had arrived as immigrants. Due to both financial hardship and social distance from organized Jewish life, many of them do not belong to official Jewish institutions.<sup>27</sup> And for these Jews, one of the only ways to express their Jewish identity, whether consciously or through force of habit, is through the food of the immigrant mother or grandmother in the realm of the home. Nowadays, family gatherings and the eating of foods that have transformed from everyday poor-immigrant foods into traditional ethnic foods largely characterizes this form of Brazilian Jewish identity.

In Cynthia Moskovich's short story "Cats love fish, but hate to get their feet wet", a poor Jewish family takes center stage Mother Berta, a veteran immigrant, and her 48-year-old son Saulzinho [Little Saul], who never succeeded in leaving their poor immigrant neighborhood. The story is full of descriptions of Jewish food, Yiddish words, and Jewish humor, while there is no description of any other Jewish practice in day-to-day life, or any belonging to Jewish institutions. The protagonist, Saulzinho, seems to become acquainted with the Jewish world solely through food, as a private experience through which he relates with his mother. Despite the Jewish significance of the food, it is not kosher; chicken with a side of buttered potatoes appears casually as part of their meal. This is how Saulzinho's enters their home at the end of his workday:

[...] Gefilte fish. And it wasn't a holiday or anything. Gefilte fish, the round, perfect fish patties, a piece of heaven... Mrs. Berta served the table gefilte fish, hrayin, golden potatoes in butter, stuffed tomatoes, chicken in sauce and white Rice [...].<sup>28</sup>

Similar to Moskovich's story, Monica B. described her family in the interview, a part of her family that did not succeed financially, and was not part of the Jewish community in Rio de Janeiro. Her father's family lived in an economically established and stable neighborhood in the south of Rio de Janeiro; And her mother's family were less financially established, remaining in a poor neighborhood in the suburbs of the city that was an old Jewish immigrant neighborhood:

[In the house of the grandparents from her mother's side] we would enter the house through the living room and not through

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<sup>26</sup> LEWIN, 2001, p. 80-96.

<sup>27</sup> CHAZAN, 2015, p. 229-166; DECOL, 2009; DELLAPERGOLA, 2018; LESSER, 2004; LEWIN, 2001, p. 80-96.

<sup>28</sup> MOSCOVICH, p. 15-16, (my translation).



the kitchen, [and] they would take out the crystal vessels and all sit around the table. Everything there was always very meticulous... My grandfather on my father's side, who were rich, were close to the Jewish community, [and] their sons attended Jewish schools. My grandmother on my mother's side distanced herself from the community over the years, and so did her children and grandchildren. They did not attend Jewish schools and did not keep kosher. Only Grandma would sometimes prepare Jewish food.<sup>29</sup>

Although the Jewish community in Brazil, as well as in other diasporas, is situated in the upper-middle class, these examples illustrate that the Jewish experience in Brazil is diverse and layered. And it is these diverse layers that help us understand some missed aspects of Brazilian Jewry. One criticism surrounding research on Latin American Jewry, including Brazilian Jewry, is that it is difficult to find accurate information about Jews who are not affiliated with official community institutions, and therefore that part of the Jewish-Brazilian story is missing.<sup>30</sup> Due to these Jews distancing themselves from official Jewish institutions, and due to the distancing of time from the immigrant generation, these Jews will probably continue to not express their Judaism in a public and institutional way. Looking at the food-ways of the Jewish mother offers us a window into their world.

## **6 Socio-economic transformations in Jewish-Brazilian Diaspora reflected through food**

In large part due to an accepting Brazilian culture and liberal economic government policies, many second-generation Jewish immigrants were able to become financially established and socially absorbed into upper-middle class in Brazil, managing to integrate into all areas of life and employment in Brazil.<sup>31</sup> At the same time, processes of feminization and modernization led Jewish women to acquire academic educations, and to engage in a variety of professions and careers.<sup>32</sup>

One characteristic of the Brazilian upper-middle class is the employment of a housekeeper for routine household maintenance, including cleaning, laundry, grocery shopping, cooking, and sometimes looking after the children.<sup>33</sup> In this way,

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<sup>29</sup> MONICA B., personal interview, my translation, October 18, 2021.

<sup>30</sup> REIN; LESSER, 2015, p. 11-31.

<sup>31</sup> LESSER, 2001, p. 65-72.

<sup>32</sup> KOSMINSKY, 2004, p. 279-328.

<sup>33</sup> In this phenomenon there is a social and cultural memory of the period of slavery in Brazil, which lasted over 350 years, starting at the beginning of the 16th century and was abolished in 1888. The phenomenon of slavery and its consequences in



these housekeepers become a significant part of the family routine within the homes that they work. For example, they usually prepare lunch for the children after they return from school. And lunch in Brazil is considered the most significant and nutritious meal of the day; it is customary to eat cooked food, the basis of which is rice and black beans.<sup>34</sup>

In accordance with their class affiliation, many Jews in Brazil began to employ a housekeeper, who effectively took the place of the Jewish mother, who by the second generation spent her days out of the home, employed and at work. Across my research, each of the second-generation interviewees who immigrated to Israel describe their first years in Israel as a period of learning how to manage the house without a housekeeper, required for the first time in their lives to clean, wash and cook at home. This is how Andrea Z. described it:

Suddenly I had to clear the table for myself after the meal. There was no one to do it for me. It gives you beautiful proportions about life. In Brazil I knew that the Shikse<sup>35</sup> would come to clear, so I did not clear myself [...].<sup>36</sup>

With the arrival of the housekeeper, foods from wider Brazilian culture began to enter the Jewish-Brazilian home; with time, traditional Brazilian food transformed into everyday food, while Jewish food took on a festive, rare, and special tone. As such, for many Jewish families, the grandmother's cooking became the agent of preserving the family's Jewish identity. Interviewee Monica B. described the duality of routine food during the week versus gatherings at her grandmother's house on Saturdays:

Every day at my parents' house we ate normal Brazilian food - rice with beans and meat... maybe a tomato salad next to it. On Fridays, after Hebraica [the Jewish club], we would go to Grandma Rosa's house for dinner. She would make yoyich [chicken soup in Yiddish] with cabelinho de anjo ('hair of an angel' - from Portuguese it means thin noodles), chicken meatballs, and also a special cake with grapes that I don't remember the name of... After I got married, we would meet at

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Brazil shaped the Brazilian history and identity and continue to influence it to this day.

<sup>34</sup> BARBOSA, 2007, p. 87-116; VICENTE, 2012, p. 155-164; KRAIESKI, 2015, p. 41-54.

<sup>35</sup> Shikse literally means from Yiddish: gentile girl (WEINREICH, 1949, p. 406). In the early slang of Brazilian Jews, it meant the housekeeper.

<sup>36</sup> ANDREA Z., personal interview, my translation, October 18, 2021.



my mother-in-law's house every Shabbat and eat yoych and farflech, (a type of Jewish noodles) [...].<sup>37</sup>

Beginning from the second-generation immigrants, the theme of the Jewish grandmother as an identity agent of Judaism within her family, with food as her tool of action, is prominent. Hanna G., born in Rio de Janeiro, described her family's attempts to recreate the recipes of the grandmother, who passed away in 2020. Her grandmother, a Holocaust survivor who immigrated to Brazil in the late 1940s, used to cook Jewish food for her family each and every weekend: "Since my grandma passed away, we are all trying to cook her food. My mom especially tries very hard to find the recipe for her special cookies. I made Kugel (a type of cake in Yiddish) for the first time, and a honey cake [...]."<sup>38</sup>

But even in the first generation immigrant grandmother's house, the separation between 'Brazilian' and 'Jewish' cuisine is not absolute, as Brazilian culture integrated into her kitchen as well. This is the impression one receives from the scenes in CintiaMoscovich's short story 'The Roof and the Violin', which describes the final meal prepared by the grandmother before the Yom Kippur fast. Due to the granddaughter's insistence, for the first time the grandmother serves the meal without chicken. The story has many vibrant details of the dishes and food, mainly Jewish yet dipped in Brazilian rhythm:

At Yom Kippur dinner...we had baked potato bagels with a golden crust, airy ricotta knishes with a greasy texture...mango and melon salads swimming in thick, bittersweet cream. An eggplant and onion pie that glistened in the light of the silver candlesticks. The horseradish, with the colorful energy of the beets, accompanied the fish patties: we ate gefilte fish in sauce, with strips of carrot, peppers, and tomatoes. We were satisfied with the abundance, full of hope for the year that had begun, but still my brothers complained. It was the first Yom Kippur where there was no competition for the chicken thighs [...].<sup>39</sup>

As presented, these culinary practices cut across classes, and are passed down between generations as an unofficial custom, but with a significant emotional charge that is common amongst the Jewish-Brazilian diaspora. The figure of the Jewish mother who immigrated from Eastern Europe and underwent 'Brazilization' symbolizes a unique Jewish-Brazilian character. The diversity of the Jews in Brazil is

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<sup>37</sup> MONICA B., personal interview, my translation, October 18, 2021.

<sup>38</sup> HANNA G., personal interview, my translation, October 22, 2021.

<sup>39</sup> MOSCOVICH, 2012, (my translation).



vast, represented here by its different tastes through the cuisine of the Jewish mother and grandmother over the years.

## **7 Summary**

One of the prominent themes in the Jewish-Brazilian experience that emerges through the motif of food is the figure of the Jewish mother, the 'YidisheMame'. The character of the mother and her food allow a new observation into the Jewish diaspora in Brazil. From a 'bottom-up' point of view – that is, through the experience of individuals and their day-to-day culinary practices – we gain a more complete picture of the formation and existence of the diaspora in its nuances.

For the first generation of immigrants, daily culinary life for Jewish Brazilians was symbolized by typical Eastern European Jewish food cooked by the immigrant mother. This food was served for three reasons: first, the desire for the continuity of the realities of their countries of origin, behavior which is typical amongst immigrant populations. Second, poverty prevailed amongst immigrant Jews, which suited their traditional cuisines, characterized by cheap foods with high caloric values. Third, with these foods they were able to observe kosher laws.

Along with continuing to prepare Eastern-European Jewish food, Jewish mothers began to integrate new food items that were readily available in Brazil, such as cassava flour, tropical fruits and more. This process of accepting and rejecting new food items, and that it was the mothers who brought them into the home, symbolizes the social and cultural entry of Jews into Brazil.

Over the years, Jews climbed up the Brazilian socio-economic ladder, and today it can be said that, in general, Brazilian Jews belong to the upper-middle class. Accordingly, one sees the adoption of the life patterns associated with this socioeconomic status amongst Jewish mothers; that the more they became educated and went to work in white collar professions, the more they vacated their traditional place in the kitchen, with this position relegated to the housekeeper. And the entry of housekeepers into Jewish-Brazilian homes was what helped introduce Brazilian food, such as beans and rice for lunch, into daily Jewish life. In this way, Jewish food, previously considered the food of poor immigrants, became a special and festive food, eaten at family gatherings centered around the Jewish circle of life.

Although most Jews managed to escape poverty and leave their poor immigrant neighborhoods, some did not. Jews who still live in these neighborhoods typically are of the socio-economic lower class of Brazil. Those Jews are usually not affiliated to organized Jewish institutions, and therefore it is difficult to identify them in Jewish demographic research, and to trace them in Jewish historical, social, and cultural research. This gap can be bridged by examining culinary practices and the concept of



the mother within Jewish homes. These references arise most poignantly in 'soft' sources, such as fine literature and oral interviews.

Thus, the Jewish-Brazilian mother and her food symbolize immigration, initial intercultural transitions, and years of economic struggle that often, but not always, eventuates with leaving poor immigrant neighborhoods. Later, the mother represents the interplay between the day-to-day, often characterized by the cooking of a 'typical' Brazilian housekeeper, alongside the uniqueness of family gatherings and eating Jewish food at grandma's house. And even within 'Jewish' cuisine, Brazilian ethnic characteristics were added over the years, as the Jewish diaspora in Brazil formed a unique Brazilian-Jewish ethnic identity.

The figure of the Jewish mother, who immigrated, adapted, developed, and eventually became the Jewish-Brazilian mother, symbolizes through her food-ways the essence of Brazilian Jewish existence in its historical, geographical, economic, cultural, and social aspects.

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