

# From gauchos to ostrich farmers

An exquisite new look at Jewish diversity takes the reader on a journey around the globe to document extraordinary communities in exotic locales

• SETH J. FRANTZMAN

The concept of Jewish Diaspora is so well known it seems almost banal. Of course there are Jews in South Africa, India, South America. What we take for granted is the familiar.

Finally, a beautifully presented book on Jewish diversity around the world brings to the forefront what we might have thought was well known, and breaks down not only stereotypes, but opens windows into lives from the hills of Portugal to the plains of Africa.

"This volume records a moment in the long history of the Jews when many of the communities from Morocco to Argentina or Azerbaijan are on the point of extinction," writes Prof. Tudor Parfitt in the foreword to *Scattered Among the Nations: Photographs and Stories of the World's Most Isolated Jewish Communities*.

From 1999 to 2015, Bryan Schwartz, Jay Sand and Sandy Carter set off to travel to the most isolated Jewish communities in the world. What they sought to do was document small communities that were still on the margins, "off the grid," as it were, before they are infiltrated entirely by globalization or declining demographics.

"Our hope is that through these pages you will realize that no racial, ethnic or socioeconomic stereotype defines all Jewish people, but that many values and traditions do," writes Schwartz in his introduction.

Presented as a coffee-table book, with large glossy pages full of beautiful photos, this book is both history, art and ethnography. The book takes the reader on a journey from South America to Africa, Asia and Europe. Some of these stories may be more well known than others. The Bene Israel community in the area of Mumbai has been in India for 2,000 years. In the 18th century, many Jews from Baghdad arrived in the area and this isolated community reconnected with more modern traditions. After 1948, many immigrated to Israel, but some remained behind, maintaining synagogues in and around Mumbai.

Further east, on the India-Burma border, many in the 7,000-strong Bnei Menashe community have been converting to Orthodox Judaism and have been immigrating to Israel in recent years. Schwartz tells of one man's decision to undergo circumcision as an adult. "I watched us become blood brothers, Asian and Ashkenazi, in a crowded mud and bamboo hut on stilts," he writes. The authors don't discuss the recent aliya as much, but focus on the traditions and looks of the locals.

In South Africa, the book takes us on a tour of the "Jewish ostrich barons," a



small community of Lithuanian Jews who live in Oudtshoorn, a town 480 km. east of Cape Town. The first Jews came in the 1880s and got wealthy collecting ostrich feathers by wandering around the plains. By 1900, some 1,500 Jews lived in the town and ranches, and 1.25 million ostriches had been purchased. This relative wealth is a far cry from the Jews of Ghana. In the 1970s a local leader of the Sefwi people experienced visions, according to the authors, that led him to "appreciate the connection between the Sefwi people and the Jews." The people are poor. Coca-Cola and Fanta substitute for wine on Shabbat and people get water from a local well.

"Most members of the Jewish community live without private transportation," the text notes.

But if Ghana's Jewish population is growing and South Africa's is barely maintaining, the Moroccan story the authors tell is more alarming.

Hananiyah Elfassie is the last Jew in the Ourika Valley.

"He remained behind to guard the tomb of a Jewish saint, or *tzadik*, Rabbi

Shlomo Ben Hensh. In the days before mass immigration to Israel in the 1960s, this community had 300 families, and Hananiyah used to work the olive presses and trade crafts. His wife, Yamna Elfassie, died in 2000 and now he lives all alone, the remnant of an ancient Jewish connection to rural Morocco."

As the authors move on to Ukraine and Portugal, they find the "last" shtetl Jews who have survived Cossacks, Soviets and Nazis, and Marranos, or "Jews in hiding" in Portugal, who are returning to their roots. In South America they document Jewish cowboys who mix religion with large quantities of beef and mate, a local drink. If you haven't had enough diversity, the book takes you up a river deep into the Amazon to find Jews who migrated from Morocco to live in 45° heat, hours from the nearest city.

By providing a rich and nonjudgmental look at Jews around the world, this book has done a great service in documenting communities that may not survive another generation, as well as communities on the move, re-discovering their Jewishness or connecting to the Jewish people. ■

SPINNING HANUKKA dreidels in Ghana. (Bryan Schwartz)

## SCATTERED AMONG THE NATIONS

By Bryan Schwartz with Jay Sand and Sandy Carter  
Weldon Owen  
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