INTRODUCTION

While most historians would agree on the importance of sports in general and of *fútbol* in particular in Latin American societies, very little has been written about ethnicity and sports in immigrant societies such as Argentina and Brazil.[1] This is noteworthy since the role that *fútbol* ("soccer" in the United States) plays in society, as well as in the construction and reshaping of national, ethnic, class, and gender identities, has already been firmly established. At the same time, just as sports historians of Latin America do not pay enough attention to the ethnic aspect of sports, unless it has to do with players of African descent, social histories of Jews in Latin America, produced primarily for internal community consumption, tend to neglect many aspects of the rich culture of everyday life in Buenos Aires created by Jewish immigrants and their descendants, especially by Jews unaffiliated with community institutions. Too much of the historiography of Jews in Latin America has concentrated on anti-Semitism. There is an urgent need to recreate something of the world and the active part played by Jewish Latin Americans in shaping the local culture for their own purposes. Accordingly, recent years have seen the blossoming of a different historiography of Jewish Argentines, one that explores the thoughts and achievements of Jews more than the hate expressed against them. In this new perspective, Jews are not passive participants or victims, but take an active role in determining their relations with the non-Jewish Argentine majority.[2]

This book focuses on the history of the Club Atlético Atlanta (CAA), a football club located in the Buenos Aires neighborhood of Villa Crespo, and on soccer as a privileged avenue in Argentina for negotiating ethnic and national identities. Although populated by many ethnic groups, Villa Crespo, together with Once, has long been considered, by Jews and non-Jews alike, as a Jewish neighborhood, to the point that one of its nicknames is "Villa Kreplaj"

(*kreplach*, an Ashkenazi dumpling similar to Italian ravioli or Chinese wonton). During the second half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first, Jews have constituted a substantial proportion of the fans, administrators, and presidents of Atlanta, so much so that the fans of rival teams often chant anti-Semitic slogans during matches. Other football clubs in Buenos Aires, such as River Plate, might have a greater number of Jewish fans—especially the more affluent clubs in recent decades—but Atlanta has always been the main attraction for football-mad Jews in Buenos Aires and the only professional football club to be considered "Jewish."

In the absence of any previous academic monographs devoted to this soccer club, this book will review the history of Atlanta and its fans as a means of exploring the social integration of Jewish immigrants and their Argentine-born offspring into urban life in what came to be known as "*la Gran Aldea*." I believe that for the first generation of these immigrants, belonging to the club was a way of becoming Argentines. Ultimately, sports are not just a marker of the social identity one has already established but also a means of creating a new social identity.[3]

For the second, native-born, generation, which was ready to integrate Argentine national identity into its own cultural mosaic and in search of upward mobility, club membership was also a way of maintaining an ethnic Jewish identity, while for the third generation it became primarily a family tradition. (See Figure I.1.) This is additional proof of the argument that "historically, football has offered an arena where ethnic or other social groups can affirm identity, but where they can also integrate themselves—and not just on the elite's terms—into the nation."[4] *Fútbol, Jews, and the Making of Argentina* looks at how Jewish Argentines negotiated their national and ethnic identities inside and outside the football stadium, and traces the way these identities evolved over the years.

This study further posits that Atlanta has constituted one of the few spaces for interaction between Jews and non-Jews, affiliated Jews and unaffiliated Jews, Zionists and non-Zionists, and Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jews. In this way, like many other football clubs, Atlanta has provided its *socios* (members) with an intergenerational, subcultural marker of identity.[5]

This book is based on a wide range of primary and secondary sources, including the minutes of Atlanta's board of directors (*Actas de las Comisiones Directivas*), the club's annual reports (*Memorias y Balances*), and data from a questionnaire answered by more than fifty Atlanta fans. My research

FIGURE I.1 The Fryds: Third generation of Atlanta fans; relatives of the author.
Source: Photo by Beny Fryd.

contributes to a better understanding of issues related to ethnicity, social integration, hybrid identities, and generational conflict within the context of modern Argentina. It also offers an additional perspective on competing notions of *argentinidad* (Argentine collective identity) on and off the field. At the same time, it is part of a recent effort by various researchers to analyze sports associations, reflecting a recognition that such clubs—with their culture and internal political activity, their relations with other community organizations, and their histories and traditions—might be a political arena worth studying. However, up to now researchers have focused solely on the "big five" football clubs: River Plate, Boca Juniors, Racing, Independiente, and San Lorenzo. Even these internationally renowned clubs, however, have never been the subject of thorough historical study.

Academic scholarship on *fútbol* in Argentina has remained surprisingly thin until recently. Notable exceptions have been the works of anthropologist Eduardo Archetti, who pioneered the discussion of gender and national identity in football; sociologist Pablo Alabarces, who analyzed the ways journalists

elaborated myths about the uniqueness of *criollo* (native) *fútbol*, as opposed to European football; and historian Julio Frydenberg, who published the first social history of football in Buenos Aires during its amateur phase—that is, from the late nineteenth century to the early 1930s.[6]

I found the following sentence on an Internet site: "Atlanta is not Villa Crespo, but Villa Crespo would not be Villa Crespo without Atlanta. The neighborhood and the club are joined in many ways."[7] This premise, though very probably tinged with the typical hyperbole of football fans, has some basis. Football in Villa Crespo played a central role in the development of neighborhood loyalties, and the neighborhood's history has been closely tied to football. In the mid-1930s Villa Crespo boasted no fewer than fifteen clubs dedicated to this sport, more than all other neighborhoods. The names of at least three major clubs (Argentinos Juniors, Chacarita Juniors, and Atlanta) have been connected with Villa Crespo at some point in their histories. However, since the mid-1940s Atlanta has reigned alone in Villa Crespo, and accordingly it has channeled the identities and loyalties of many of the local inhabitants. It would be utterly impossible to write a history of the neighborhood—one of the neighborhoods that can be considered to represent the best of Buenos Aires, including tango and football—without taking into account the history of Club Atlético Atlanta. Cayetano Francavilla, a historian of Villa Crespo, has expressed this idea clearly: "To talk about Atlanta is to follow the progress of our barrio together with our football fan neighbor."[8]

Atlanta's centrality in the life of Villa Crespo and in the collective identity of its residents was clearly demonstrated in March 2009 by the great festivities that marked the reopening, after a three-year hiatus, of the stadium named after Atlanta's legendary president, León Kolbowski.[9] Two years later, Villa Crespo once again dressed up in blue and yellow to celebrate Atlanta's winning the championship in the third division, Primera B Metropolitana (one of the two leagues in the third level of the Argentine football league), and rising to the second division, the Primera B Nacional. Atlanta fans, who were dressed in the team jerseys and caps, flooded the main streets of the neighborhood and gathered in bars and cafés on the outskirts of the football field. That day they waved flags and yelled on the street corners, "Go champs! Go champs!"[10] (See Figure I.2.) Atlanta returned to the B Nacional and the veterans of the club reminisced about times past and the classic rivalry with Chacarita, or the time that River Plate and Atlanta had played each other in the same division. Although the football team may not have racked up any

FIGURE 1.2 Atlanta fans celebrating the team's promotion to the B Nacional Division, May 2011.

Source: Photo by Daniel Rosin. "Al gran pueblo bohemio ¡Salud!," 9 May 2011; http://www.planetabohemio.com.ar/2011/paginas/torneo2011/danielcam.htm.

significant or momentous achievements since the 1980s, it is still a primary focus of identity for neighborhood residents.

At the same time, as I contend in this book, it is certainly arguable that the history of the Jewish experience in Argentina cannot be written without paying special attention to Atlanta. Accordingly, we might venture to ask a provocative question: If we cannot write the history of Argentine Jews without including the history of the Jews of Buenos Aires, and if we cannot write the history of Buenos Aires Jews without including the history of the Jews of Villa Crespo, can we write the history of Argentine Jews without mentioning the Atlanta football club? After all, this sports club, established on October 12, 1904, has been an integral part of the daily life of this ostensibly Jewish neighborhood for more than a century.

The following anecdote may serve to illustrate some of the points I will be making in the various chapters of this book about Atlanta's importance for

the barrio and its Jewish inhabitants. Esther Rollansky, the daughter of an intellectual and a cultural "entrepreneur" who was one of the most renowned Yiddish scholars in Argentina, worked as a teacher of the Yiddish language in the 1950s. Every Monday she confronted the problem that the children in her class wanted to talk about their Sunday experiences instead of studying. Many of those experiences related to the most recent game played by the neighborhood football team, the team of the club to which many of the boys belonged. Rollansky had an idea: they would talk about the match, but on condition that they did so in Yiddish. The trick worked well, as Esther told me with a smile years later; between free throws, penalties, and goals scored, she took the opportunity to correct their Yiddish and at the same time teach them declensions, verb conjugations, and vocabulary.[11] The neighborhood in question was Villa Crespo and the club was, of course, the Atlanta Athletic Club.

Sport as culture is a relatively new field of study in Jewish history; it has been a challenge to get past the stereotype of Jews as the People of the Book who have supposedly always emphasized intellectual enterprises over physical ones. Although physical activities of all sorts have been integral to the lives of millions of Jews in the modern era, Jewish scholars and intellectuals have tended to belittle their importance. This is true for both North and South America, as well as Europe.[12] It is even true for Palestine/Israel, although Zionism used to cultivate the myth of the "new" Jew, who, unlike his brothers in the Diaspora, was a strong, healthy person fit for the physical and intellectual challenges involved in establishing a sovereign state in the Land of Israel.[13]

Despite the stereotype of the frail, intellectual Jew and Jews' status as the People of the Book, many of the new Jewish immigrants to Argentina were not highly educated and had no deep attachment to Jewish religious orthodoxy. Sports played an important part in their lives both in the urban, modernized setting of Buenos Aires and elsewhere, as it did for other ethnic groups in Argentina. Most Jews eagerly embraced the opportunities open to them in their new homeland and did their best to become Argentines. For many, this included a love of sports in general and football in particular.

Jews in Buenos Aires participated in various sports and also joined the throngs of spectators at ball games during a time when organized sports were gradually becoming an important social institution and a major part of leisure consumer culture in Argentina. Football topped the list as the single most popular sport in the country. As a result, for immigrants, and especially for their children, sports became a critical space where majority and minority

groups intersected. Jews and other minorities could eradicate their foreignness by embracing the national sport. At the same time, as personal testimonies show, it was also a meeting point for immigrant parents (the mothers as well as the fathers in some cases) and their children. The various demands of the workplace, life in the crowded *conventillos* (tenements) and later in small apartments, and the occasionally intolerant social atmosphere all tended to limit opportunities and choices for Jews. Sports, by contrast, as a leisure activity that they chose themselves, became one component of their lives over which they were able to exert control. This was especially true for Jews born in Argentina, who enjoyed life in a society far freer and more open than anything their immigrant parents had ever experienced in either Eastern or Central Europe or the Mediterranean basin.

Thus, for parents, young adults, and children, participating in sports in one way or another could counteract feelings of helplessness and alienation and strengthen their identities as Jews and as Argentines. Furthermore, in Argentina as in the United States, participating in a common national experience helped Jews, consciously or not, to dispel all kinds of stereotypes and beliefs about Jews being aliens who could not or would not assimilate. As Peter Levine says about Jews and sports in the United States, "The experience of participating as the majority in an American game also carried special meaning for participants and spectators alike, especially for second-generation youth who found in the game opportunities of freedom, mobility, and choice not always available to their fathers and mothers."[14]

Exclusion from certain athletic activities and especially elite sports led some Jewish Argentines to create their own institutions, such as the Hebrew Maccabi Organization in 1928 and the Club Náutico Hacoaj in 1935, but many more of them actively participated in non-Jewish sports clubs. They practiced boxing, basketball, weightlifting, and, above all, football. Unlike Jews in the United States, however, not many Jews became sports champions in Argentina, unless, perhaps, you count chess.[15] Relatively few Jews made it into the major leagues and were able to serve as symbols of Jewish integration into Argentine society. There was no Hank Greenberg, Red Auerbach, Moe Berg, or Mark Spitz in Argentina, although this does not mean that no Jews made names for themselves in Argentine sports. Prominent Jewish footballers have included, among others, Leopoldo Bard, the first team captain and president of River Plate; Ezra Sued, a striker on both the Racing and national teams; Aaron Werfiker, stopper on the River and national teams (his

fellow players had trouble pronouncing his name, so they called him "Pérez"); Miguel Reznik, who played for Huracán; and, more recently, Juan Pablo Sorín, midfielder for River as well as a Spanish team. All these examples challenge the myth of there being no Jews in Argentine football. At any rate, simply buying a ticket to a game, learning the names of all the members of a team, following the sport in the media, or rooting for your favorite team or player was enough to make you an active participant in Argentine popular culture.

Most books about Argentine football tend to claim that religious and ethnic differences have not been issues in Argentina's national sports. This claim is not confined to sports history. The fact is that many intellectuals in Latin America reject ethnicity as a significant analytical category (unless they are discussing the indigenous population or people of African descent), even if they themselves are part of an ethnic minority. Thus, football is presented as a channel of social mobility based on talent alone and as the sport that best represents some of the most cherished Argentine values and character traits, irrespective of the players' ethnic origins. Not surprisingly, several fans I approached refused to be interviewed for this book, insisting that ethnicity had nothing to do with Argentine football and/or with the Atlanta club.

Since the 1920s the notion of a *criollo* style of football has developed and spread. This was reflected in the pages of the popular sports weekly *El Gráfico* as well as in the sports sections of the daily newspapers. The Argentine style of football was supposedly epitomized by the art of dribbling, which showcased the individual player's ability and creativity, and this style was presented as a contrast to the allegedly rigid, robotic style of British players. Matthew Karush quotes several articles from the popular daily *Crítica* that mentioned the "*picardía y astucia*" (craftiness and cunning) of Argentine players in the 1928 Olympics in Amsterdam. These articles generally referred to Argentina's football players as *criollos* (Argentine natives), regardless of their ethnicity.[16]

Nevertheless, one of my contentions in this book is that in sports, as in other social activities, Jewish Argentines struggled to strike a meaningful balance (which differed from one individual to the next) between ethnic values and tradition and the hopes they wanted to fulfill in the Promised Land of the Río de la Plata. Sports were an additional way for them both to shape their own collective and individual identities and to contribute to the shaping of Argentine national culture,[17] since in the realm of sports Jews were part of the interaction between generations of their fellow Jews as well as between ethnic minority and majority cultures. In a sense, then, they simultaneously adapted

their traditional practices to new local realities and ethnicized their Argentine experiences. The Club Atlético Atlanta is an illustrative microcosm of these processes, since for many Jews participating in this club both confirmed a meaningful Jewish identity and helped them gain social integration and acceptance. Football clubs and their stadiums speak to many people across generations and give them a focus for imagining their collective past and future.[18] Like other stadiums, Atlanta's stadium, named some ten years ago in honor of the club's legendary president León Kolbowski, has provided many Villa Crespo Jews with a public space that has shaped their collective social and ethnic memories.

Abraham "Tío" (Uncle) Petacóvsky, the main character in a short story by Enrique Espinosa (the nom de plume of Samuel Glusberg) entitled "Mate Amargo" (1924), never learned to speak Spanish well. However, in the story his successful adaptation to life in Buenos Aires was reflected by his clothing, especially his rope-soled sandals, and by the quantities of *mate* that he drank.[19] In my book, Mario Fryd and José Bichman, Polish Jews who settled in Villa Crespo a few years after the establishment of the CAA and who never quite managed to get rid of their Yiddish accents, adapted to life in their new country in part by becoming fans of the local football team. Their Argentine-born children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren have continued the family loyalty to the Atlanta team jersey—even after moving to other parts of the city. Football was the most popular sport in Argentina in the twentieth century; in their soccer dictionary, Tomás Sánz and Roberto Fontanarrosa describe the country as a place whose inhabitants, prior to 1958, were certain they had invented football.[20] The Fryds and the Bichmans adopted the sport enthusiastically as a way of becoming Argentines.

Divided into seven brief chapters, this book begins with the history of Jewish immigration to Argentina from the end of the nineteenth century until the mid-1900s. Although Central European, Middle Eastern, and Maghrebi Jews all emigrated to the Southern Cone, most of Argentina's Jewish community had traveled across the Atlantic from villages and small towns in Eastern Europe. In moving to this new land, they transformed their habits, clothing, and customs as they adapted to an unfamiliar climate, a foreign language, a political system different from their own, music and songs they had never heard before—in short, another culture. Like other non-Western minorities who settled in Argentina, such as the Japanese and the Syrio-Lebanese, the East European Jews had to overcome a greater sociocultural gap than that

faced by Spaniards and Italians, the two majority groups, who came from Catholic societies and spoke Latin languages.

In Buenos Aires, two neighborhoods became the main centers of Jewish life and business: first Once, and later Villa Crespo. The second chapter focuses on the history of Villa Crespo, a neighborhood established in the 1880s, which took the name of the mayor at the time, Antonio Crespo. This neighborhood housed a substantial number of immigrants, thereby gaining a cosmopolitan character; Jews began moving in after the First World War. As early as 1919 Alberto Vaccarezza titled one of his short plays about Villa Crespo *El barrio de los judíos* (The neighborhood of the Jews).[21] That same year, during the pogroms of the Semana Trágica (Tragic Week), the so-called *niños bien* ("upper-crust boys") of the Argentine Patriotic League headed toward both Once and Villa Crespo, to hunt "*rusos*" ("Russians"—in other words, Jews). In the following decades Manuel Gleizer's bookstore, the playwright Samuel Eichelbaum, the journalist Julio Jorge Nelson (Julio Rosofsky), and the writer César Tiempo (Israel Zeitlin) were all part of the cultural and intellectual life that turned Villa Crespo into a symbol of Buenos Aires. Unsurprisingly, football had a great many followers in this *porteño* neighborhood.

Fútbol has been played in Argentina since the 1860s. It was originally introduced by British sailors, merchants, and immigrants, and in 1884 Alexander Watson Hutton used it to instill good moral character and discipline in his students at the exclusive Buenos Aires English High School.[22] By the early twentieth century, however, football was no longer restricted to the colony of English immigrants. It had gained a massive following and formed an integral part of the social life of all sectors in Buenos Aires, as well as in the provinces of the interior. The city fathers supported the foundation of clubs, considering physical exercise and playing sports to be essential to a moral upbringing and personal hygiene.[23]

From its foundation in October 1904 up to its settlement in the neighborhood of Villa Crespo, the Club Atlético Atlanta was continually in search of a playing field to call its own. This search gave the club its nickname of "*bohemio*," or "gypsy," and at a later stage created the myth of the "wandering Jew" searching for a homeland and finally arriving at the promised land of Villa Crespo. This early period in the club's history is the focus of Chapter 3, which also covers the first years of Argentine professional football. During that time Atlanta had reached the verge of extinction when, in 1934, the Argentine Football Association (AFA) decided to merge it with the Argentinos

Juniors club. The failure of this merger led to a two-month official intervention from which Atlanta, like the phoenix, reemerged stronger than ever.

In the mid-1940s, Atlanta drove the Chacarita Juniors club out of Villa Crespo, and the rivalry between the two teams has shaped the identity of both clubs ever since. In those years both the neighborhood and the club assumed a Jewish identity even though Jews were a minority in the neighborhood and Atlanta had never formally been a Jewish institution. In this sense its "Jewish identity," imposed from outside, is comparable to that associated with the European clubs of Ajax in Amsterdam or Tottenham Hotspur in north London, both located in supposedly Jewish neighborhoods.[24] Emphasizing Atlanta's influence on Villa Crespo life in the 1940s and afterward, Chapter 4 also mentions other sports played in the club in addition to football (although football always came first), as well as social and cultural activities that it sponsored, from balls with tango orchestras (such as those of Feliciano Brunelli and Osvaldo Pugliese), to the establishment of a kindergarten and a cooperative in later years. The growing inclusion of women and children in the club's sports and sociocultural activities increased Atlanta's presence and influence in the neighborhood.

The Peronization of Argentine sports, which will be analyzed in Chapter 5, had repercussions for the country's football activities and clubs, and Atlanta was no exception. Two of its members were elected national deputies for the Peronist faction, and from that moment on served as liaisons between the club and the authorities: Manuel García (Labor Party) and Manuel Álvarez Pereyra (Unión Cívica Radical–Junta Renovadora). Álvarez Pereyra held the office of club president from December 1, 1946, until he resigned at the end of the following October. Club Atlanta's reports from those years are filled with Peronist rhetoric about justicialism (the Peronist creed) and the "New Argentina," as well as accolades for the government and its policy of aiding sports organizations in general and Atlanta in particular. The club received loans for the purpose of building a new stadium, which was to be named after Eva Perón. Juan Perón himself was designated Honorary President of the Club, and his wife was given a lifetime membership. During the first months of the Liberating Revolution, after Perón's overthrow in September 1955, Atlanta would pay a high price for its support of justicialism.

Atlanta fans and Villa Crespo residents consider the 1960s as the club's glory years, coinciding with the administration of León Kolbowski. Chapter 6 is devoted to Kolbowski, his relations with the Argentine Communist Party,

the inauguration of the stadium in Humboldt Street that bears his name, and the reasons that Kolbowski left the club after presiding over it for more than a decade. During this period Atlanta's image as a progressive Jewish club became more pronounced. The installation of Kolbowski as president of the club represented the culmination of a process that had begun in 1922 with Osvaldo Simón Piackin, the first Jewish member of the Atlanta board of directors. In 1968, in what turned out to be the last year of León Kolbowski's presidency, Jewish Argentines became a majority among the board members for the first time: twelve out of twenty-two. From then on Jewishness became an integral part of the club's culture.

The last chapter centers on the fans and their habits and rituals, as well as the stadium as a space for the creation of collective identities and a social imaginary. After sketching the club's ups and downs from the 1970s on and the decline of the neighborhood clubs, the weakening of neighborhood loyalties, and the commercialization of football—all processes that contributed to Atlanta's deterioration after the military dictatorship and the reestablishment of democracy—I focus on the racism, xenophobia, and anti-Semitism that attend Argentine football. By analyzing the construction of collective identities in general and those of soccer fans in particular, we can cast some light on the processes by which the antagonistic tension between "us" and "them," the "others," was created, especially in material spaces such as football fields.

The perception of Atlanta as "the Jews' club" is to a large extent an identification imposed from outside, by rival fans. Among the anti-Semitic slogans chanted by the fans of rival teams in recent decades we might mention the infamous "Ahí viene Hitler por el callejón, matando judíos para hacer jabón" (Here comes Hitler down the street, killing Jews to make soap).[25] During the Gulf War in the early 1990s supporters of Atlanta's rival also shouted "Olé, olé, Saddam Hussein." In the mid-1990s, after the attacks on the Israeli embassy and the Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina (AMIA, a Jewish community organization) building, the fans of All Boys sang: " . . . les volamos la embajada, les volamos la mutual, les vamos a quemar la cancha, para que no jodan más . . . " (We blew up the embassy, we blew up the community center, we're going to burn up your field so you don't screw with anyone any more . . .). Atlanta fans provide their own share of racist taunts, especially in games against their arch rival, Chacarita Juniors.

This volume is, in its way, an invitation to historians of Latin American sports to extend their research to the hitherto barely examined ethnic

dimension of their subject, as exemplified by cases such as the Chilean football club of Deportivo Palestino, the Argentine Deportivo Armenio or the Sociedade Esportiva Palmeiras of São Paulo, Brazil, founded in 1914 as Palestra Italia.[26] Other examples might include Alianza Lima, representing the black community of La Victoria in Lima, and Vasco da Gama, representing the Portuguese community in Rio de Janeiro.[27] At the same time, it is also a call to the historians of the Jewish experience in South America to cover some of the less studied aspects of social and cultural history, particularly those concerning Jews unaffiliated with community institutions—in the case that concerns us in this book, those who turned the Atlanta soccer field into a temple where they expressed their Jewish Argentine identity.