

Alberto Gerchunoff (1883-1950)

Born in Russia, Gerchunoff immigrated with his family to Moisesville, one of Baron Moise Hirsch's agricultural communities, when he was eight years old. His father was killed by a drunken gaucho a year later and his widowed mother moved the family to Buenos Aires when he was twelve. To help provide for his family, the young Gerchunoff worked as a street vendor and factory worker by day while studying by night. As a university student he met the wealthy Enrique Dickman, who was so impressed with his ability and promise that he introduced him to prominent literary figures such as Leopoldo Lugones, Manuel Gálvez and Roberto J. Payró. The latter helped him join the staff of *La Nación*, Argentina's most widely-read newspaper.

In 1910, when Lugones organized cultural activities for the hundred-year anniversary of Argentine independence, he asked Gerchunoff, who had already published anecdotes on the Jewish immigration and colonial experience in *La Nación*, to write a novel on the topic. By collecting and adding to his articles, Gerchunoff produced *Los Gauchos Judíos* (*The Jewish Gauchos*), a novel with twenty-six vignette-like chapters idealizing the immigrants' experiences and stressing their appreciation for their adopted land. Gerchunoff described the colonists' hopes, despairs, challenges and problems of adaptation so lyrically that even stories of plague and death are narrated with the sensitivity and embellishment of the modernist period in which they were written. Nevertheless, Gerchunoff's writing is undeniably original and this novel, idealistic and romantic though it may be, depicts a unique aspect and period of Argentine and Jewish social history. As the first such work written in Spanish rather than Yiddish, *Los Gauchos Judíos*, considered the cornerstone of Jewish Argentine literature, has earned Gerchunoff an enduring place in Argentine letters.

The first Jewish author to gain entree to Argentina's elite literary circles, Gerchunoff at first encouraged accommodation to mainstream culture but later became active in the Jewish community. He helped found the Sociedad Hebráica Argentina (Argentine Hebrew Society) in 1926 and used his influence to bring prominent writers,

philosophers, and cultural leaders to the SHA, making it a center of intellectual life in Buenos Aires. In his honor, the SHA named its 40,000 volume Jewish library the Biblioteca Alberto Gerchunoff (The Alberto Gerchunoff Library). Gerchunoff's published books include *Entre Ríos mi país* (*Entre Ríos, My Land*, 1950), a biographic collection of essays, *Cuentos de ayer* (*Stories From Yesterday*, 1919) and several other collections of stories, essays and biographies.

The Silver Candelabra

by Alberto Gerchunoff

The ranch was enveloped in that intense brightness, that placid brightness the sun has on autumn mornings. Through the open window in the thick, rough adobe wall, one could see the countryside extending off into the distance, beyond that, the hill where yellowing thistles waved their nervous branches at the lonely sky. Not so far off, the cow with a length of rope around her neck, licked the rump of her calf. It was the Sabbath. The colony was quiet and now and then one could hear a neighbor's voice singing softly.

When his wife came in, Guedali had already donned the white tunic and, absorbed in his opening prayers, scarcely noticed her presence. He gestured to her, pursing his mouth and moving his head back, so that she wouldn't interrupt him. The woman looked in from the doorway and left without a sound. Guedali heard what she said to her daughter on the other side of the door: "I can't ask him now because he's started his prayers."

Guedali was very religious. He wasn't considered among the most learned in the colony, nor did he speak out during the arguments they always started at meetings in the synagogue about difficult commentaries and obscure points of the texts. He was a good humored man with a deep, sad voice. A sweet timid look burned like a weak flame in his deep eyes, darkened by ashy, bushy brows. With his face turned toward the east, his tall thin body seemed elongated beneath the tunic, which fell in even folds to the ground.

Suddenly, he felt that someone was creeping around near the window. Without ceasing to pray, he turned his head slowly to see what was there, thinking it must be the neighbor who had served in the military and always made fun of his devotion. It wasn't the neighbor,

but a stranger who slid his hand in to reach for the silver candelabra, the silver candelabra, the noble family heirloom that in his rustic immigrant's home made plain his origins; it rose majestically and shiningly, with its seven arched arms, in whose clear rosettes the light shone as if the wicks of large ritual candles were burning.

Guedali didn't interrupt his prayers: he looked severely at the stranger and broke the sacred words with this warning, "No...it's the Sabbath, it's the Sabbath..." That was as much as he could say without blasphemy. The stranger took the candelabra and Guedali continued praying, his breast moving with the rhythmic phrases of the verses. He recited the blessings, murmuring in a melancholy tone until he concluded the last prayer. Then he breathed deeply. The clear light bathed his emaciated face, his wrinkled forehead, his long, thin, graying beard.

He carefully folded his tunic and put it away in a drawer of the dresser. When his wife entered, Guedali announced tranquilly: "They've stolen the candelabra..." He took a piece of bread from the table and started to eat, as he usually did after praying. His wife let out a shout of indignation: "Weren't you here, you piece of...?" Calmly, as if he hoped to persuade her that he'd done his duty, he answered: "I told him that it was the Sabbath..."

The Divorce

by Alberto Gerchunoff

"Let Rabbi Jonas speak to the case..."

"I cede to Rabbi Abraham, who, as *matarife*,¹ understands justice and the laws."

The *matarife* counseled: "It would be better to let the elders speak their words first."

The scene took place in Israel Kelner's home. The oldest neighbors had met there to intervene as judges in the matter of a divorce, which, because it was doubtless the first in the colony, had aroused quite a bit of curiosity. None of the venerable greybeards was absent, and near the window the angular figure of don Moisés de Abinoim, the Moroccan Jew, stood out amongst them. He happened to be in the village visiting his son, a teacher in their colonial school, and therefore, as a man learned in sacred scripture, he was invited to take part in their deliberations. He spoke classic Hebrew and a kind of old-fashioned language in which he expressed himself slowly.

Rabbi Israel bowed toward him and said: "Let our guest express his opinion." And don Moisés Urquijo de Abinoim, fingering his heavy beard, asked to be informed about the situation. Then they seated themselves around the table whose cracked wood was covered with the tablecloth of the Sabbath, and the explanation began while the servant served *mate*,² and the woman of the house received elegiac praises for her tea and pastries.

"We have here the representatives of each spouse," said Kelner. "They are Rabbi Malaquías, on behalf of the husband, and Rabbi Joel, on behalf of the wife. The couple, married for three years, lives near San Antonio and are honorable people."

¹matarife: the ritual slaughterer

²mate: a popular herbal green tea in Argentina

Rabbi Malaquías spoke up: "Rabbi Simon is not asking for divorce."

Rabbi Joel intervened: "Let us follow the law in writing down the statements to be made by the *matarife*. We and the witnesses will sign it later." Then he added, "The woman insists on getting a divorce."

Don Moisés Urquijo de Abinoim, a man who adhered to the minute details of the holy books, asked permission to question the representatives, and having obtained it after a profound bow, asked: "Tell us very honestly, Rabbi Malaquías, if in the name of Rabbi Simon, you accuse this woman of anything before the judges."

"I do not," he responded.

"And you, Rabbi Joel, do you accuse the husband of anything, in her name?"

"I do not."

Don Moisés arose, and delivered this speech: "We see, respected gentlemen (and for that we would do well to thank God), that sin is not the reason for this process. Let us praise the Highest for His great goodness for not bringing us Hebrews, His good children to ruin. This, wise gentlemen, is a case which requires meditation. I hope that Rabbi Abraham will enlighten us in that respect and tell us what the law says. Those who are getting divorced are honorable. Therefore, it is not because of adultery, which the holy book condemns. It is because of what the Hillel (blessed be its memory) calls in its first sentences, 'small details of everyday life.' And I say that we should not separate them."

Rabbi Israel Kelner spoke up: "I won't give my vote."

"I will not sign the declarations," the *matarife* added.

"Let's not grant the separation," several exclaimed.

Then don Moisés, assuming a solemn demeanor, invited the representatives to express their thoughts. Rabbi Joel, a man versed in theology, leaned back in his chair, and after the usual drink of water, expressed himself slowly: "The woman is virtuous. She knows how to respect her husband and tend to her home. But she doesn't like her husband. She married, one might say, in obedience to her parents, and now finds, in a case such as the sacred books foresaw, that such a problem is serious and makes married life difficult. Not to like one's husband is to live condemned to profound suffering without having any pleasure at all. Remember, therefore, the precepts of the treatise

on matrimony in the Talmud, whose counsels are admired by the wisest Rabbis. The Talmud says in the book of Nuschim, 'If the woman, for whatever cause, ceases to love her husband, she should separate from him and not receive his caresses, for the child who would be born of them will suffer the consequences of a loveless union.' Gentlemen judges who hear me, in name of the Holy Law, I beg you to grant the divorce."

"Rabbi Joel," don Moisés said, "we have heard you with satisfaction. You are eloquent, but let us permit Rabbi Malaquías to speak."

"I have nothing to say," the latter said. "Rabbi Simon loves his wife and considers her exemplary. Nevertheless, he is disposed to consent to the divorce, for the poor man knows that she can't stand him. He doesn't wish to afflict her further. Moreover, his life is upset by endless disillusionment. How can he live under the same roof with a woman who does not respect him? Understanding this, I join Rabbi Joel in requesting the divorce. Be just."

The *matarife* asked them to deliberate on the topic. While the elders gravely, solemnly gathered in a Sanhedrin in the countryside of Entre Rios and discussed Talmudic clauses, the servant came and went with *mate* which they preferred to tea. Unfamiliar with the laws of Argentina, they applied the laws of the kingdom of Israel, and in this way the wisdom and jurisprudence of Hillel, of Gamaliel, and of Ghedalia, lived again in the colonies of Baron Hirsch. Nor was their lacking at the meeting a descendent of the Talmudists of the Spanish Golden Age. There he was, courteous and gentlemanly, don Moisés Urquijo de Abinoim, with his eloquence and his sensible reflections of mind that had matured in the praiseworthy work of the spirit. Pompous and subtle, he renewed, within the walls of that little mud-walled home, the medieval disquisitions of Toledo and of Córdoba, leading his audience with florid and profound Jewish thought which, under the laws of Castile, maintained the tradition of the sages of Jerusalem.

On the parchment brought by the *matarife*, shining and dense Hebrew characters had been drawn. Kelner invited don Moisés to pass his judgement.

"The law," he said, "obliges the judges to work towards the reconciliation of the spouses, to return peace to their home. I insist then on prudent judges and good representatives."

Rabbi Joel and Rabbi Malaquías repeated their arguments. The

Talmud and jurisprudence, the Bible and the best known dictates and most authoritative comments were brought forth in support of their theses.

Finally, the *matarife* advised granting the divorce and endorsed the papers.

"Such is the will of God," affirmed don Moisés. "We, by order of the law, have first denied the divorce; but seeing that the representatives discuss with clear reason in favor of the separation; seeing that the spouses cannot live together for there is no love between them, we declare that it is by force of the same law that we grant the divorce, so that there may be no Hebrew home where discord reigns, and so return to each his peace of heart. Thus we swear and sign, conceding the right to a new marriage to the divorced persons, who are honest and worthy of our respect."

And each of the judges put his signature in Hebrew on the parchment, using his paternal family name. Upon signing his name, don Moisés Urquijo de Abinoim congratulated himself that Jews can always find justice in their law which espouses men's happiness through liberty. And he concluded, moved by his importance as a high judge, with the phrase: "Let us celebrate with wine the sentence in which your discretion and wisdom shines, and let us praise the Lord for having inspired us in the duties of His justice."

"Let us praise the Lord!" all the elders exclaimed.

The wine was brought and glasses clinked. Outside, the sky grew pale and the stars looked out on the still light earth.

"It is prayer time, and there are enough of us to fill a synagogue," Rabbi Malaquías said.

"Let our illustrious guest take the dais," said the *matarife*.

"It is a great honor and I thank you."

"Let us pray, then."

And don Moisés Urquijo de Abinoim extended his arms toward the East and began praising God:

"*Baruj Atha Adonai...*"

Samuel Glusberg
(Enrique Espinosa, 1898-1988)

Samuel Glusberg was seven when he arrived in Argentina with his family from Russia. Like Gerchunoff, he labored, studied, and had the good fortune to make influential friends. The prominent author Horacio Quiroga became his mentor and helped him into the elite literary and intellectual circles of Buenos Aires.

Glusberg, who wrote under the pseudonym Enrique Espinosa, is best known for his work as a journalist and short story writer. His stories, many of which are either autobiographical or drawn from real life, are spare and unaffected. Unlike Gerchunoff, who idealized the immigrant experience and romanticized the colonists' struggles to retain their own customs while adapting to their new environment, Glusberg's descriptions are realistic. His protagonists are generally Jewish immigrants imbued with Jewish consciousness and presented in situations which are sometimes wryly humorous and at other times ironic, poignant, sad, or even tragic. In a simple, almost conversational style, sometimes pausing to address a brief aside directly to the reader, he describes the immigrants struggle to cope with the varying problems of adaptation, assimilation and acceptance that inevitably arose as they strove to adapt to their new life in the colonies or in Buenos Aires.

In addition to his work as a journalist and author, Glusberg edited *America* and several other literary journals, founded a literary journal titled *Babel* and later, his own editorial house, Biblioteca Argentina de Buenas Ediciones Literarias, (BABEL/Argentine Library of Fine Literary Editions), both of which published avant-garde works by most of the leading authors of the day. As an editor he was active in organizing literary contests to encourage the young writers of his time, and also helped organize the Argentine Writers Association, becoming its first secretary.

His best known collection of short stories are *La levita gris* (*The Gray Frock Coat*, 1924) and *Ruth and Noemi* (*Ruth and Naomi*, 1934). He has also written several collections of essays and a number of biographical works on figures as disparate as the South American hero José de San Martín, the German author, Heinrich Heine, and the Dutch philosopher, Baruch Spinoza.