

they arrived, the fool went over to the tree and quietly, after the quiet events, he stood and faced him, holding his tongue and standing at the trunk, and then he knelt down, with his face to the ground, and lay before him, still and long. Knelt and stooped, so long and before his tree-filled earth, until he stood up before him and his property, and went over to the demon and looked in his eyes, and then he tersely said to him:

"The fool is grateful to you."

"For what?"

"For all these long and many years, for my being here and my having been. . . ."

And waiting for nothing, no speech and no words, he turned around and he turned away, from the demon and from serving the demon, and left his place and his tree forever.

TRANSLATED BY JOACHIM NEUGROSCHER

## Alberto Gerchunoff

(Russia-Argentina, 1884–1950)



Alberto Gerchunoff was born in Russia and spoke both Russian and Yiddish as a child. In 1891 his father traveled to the Argentine pampas, and the family followed him soon after. They settled in *yishuvs*, immigrant settlements like Rajil and Moisés Ville, funded by Baron Maurice de Hirsch. Gerchunoff's father was killed by a drunken gaucho, and the memory was deeply etched in his mind. He began working as a journalist and soon became a leading figure at the daily *La Nación* of Buenos Aires. His switch to Spanish is said to have inaugurated Jewish-Latin American literature. In 1910, to celebrate Argentina's hundred years of autonomy, Gerchunoff wrote his famous collection of vignettes, *The Jewish Gauchos of the Pampas*. Numerous novels and stories and essays followed, most of them pertaining to biblical and diasporic figures such as Baruch Spinoza and Heinrich Heine. His books include *El hombre que habló en la Sorbona* (The Man Who Spoke at the Sorbonne, 1926), *La clínica del Doctor Mefistófeles* (Doctor Mephistopheles' Clinic, 1937), and his autobiography *Entre Ríos, mi país* (Entre Ríos, My Country). As he grew older, Gerchunoff became disillusioned with Argentina as a democratic land where Jews could adapt and flourish. He befriended Marcel Proust, Waldo Frank, and the Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío. After an initial hesitation over Zionism, he actively fought on its behalf, and after the creation of Israel in 1948, he traveled the globe lecturing about its relevance to Jewish life. "Camacho's Wedding Feast" is part of *The Jewish Gauchos*.

### Camacho's Wedding Feast

For two weeks now, the people of the entire district had been expectantly waiting for Pascual Liske's wedding day. Pascual was the *rich* Liske's son. The family lived in Espíndola and, naturally enough, the respectable people of the colonies were looking forward to the ceremony and feast. To judge by the early signs, the feast was to be exceptional. It was well known in Rajil that the groom's family had purchased eight demijohns of wine, a barrel of beer, and numerous bottles of soft drinks. Kelner's wife had discovered this when she happened to come on the

Liskes' cart, stopped near the breakwater. The reins had broken, and the Liskes' hired man was working frantically to replace them.

"The soft drinks were *rose* colored," she told the neighbors. "Yes!" she said, looking directly at the doubting Shochet's wife. "Yes, they were rose colored, and each bottle had a waxen seal on it."

Everyone agreed old man Liske's fortune could stand that kind of spending. In addition to the original land and oxen that he'd gotten from the Administration, Liske had many cows and horses. Last year's harvest alone had brought him thousands of pesos, and he could well afford to marry off his son in style without touching his principal.

Everyone further agreed that the bride deserved this kind of a wedding. Raquel was one of the most beautiful girls in the district, if not in the whole world. She was tall, with straw-blond hair so fine and full it suggested mist; her eyes were so blue they made one's breath catch. She was tall and lithe, but her simple print dresses showed the full curving loveliness of a beautiful body. An air of shyness and a certain peevishness became her because they seemed to protect her loveliness.

Many of the colonists had tried to win her—the haughty young clerk of the Administration as well as all the young men in Villaguay and thereabouts—but none had achieved a sympathetic response. Pascual Liske had been the most persistent of these suitors, but certainly not the most favored, at first. In spite of his perseverance and his gifts, Raquel did not like him. She felt depressed and bored because Pascual never spoke of anything but seedings, livestock and harvests. The only young man she had seemed to favor was a young admirer from the San Gregorio colony, Gabriel Camacho. She had gone out dancing with him during the many times he used to come to visit.

Her family had insisted she accept Pascual and the marriage had been arranged.

On the day of the feast, the invited families had gathered at the breakwater before Espíndola. A long line of carts, crowded with men and women, was pointed toward the colony. It was a spring afternoon, and the flowering country looked beautiful in the lowering rays of the sun. Young men rode up and down the line on their spirited ponies, calling and signaling to the girls when the mothers were looking elsewhere. In their efforts to catch a girl's eye, they set their ponies to capering in true Gaucho style. In their eagerness, some even proposed races and other contests.

Russian and Jewish songs were being sung in all parts of the caravan, the voices fresh and happy. At other points, the songs of this, their new country, could be heard being sung in a language that few understood.

At last, the caravan moved into the village. The long line of heavy carts, being gently pulled by the oxen, had the look of a primitive procession. The carts stopped at different houses, and the visitors went inside to finish

their preparations. Then, at the appointed time, all the invited guests came out together and began to make their way to the groom's house.

Arriving at Liske's, they found that rumors of the fabulous preparations had not been exaggerated. A wide pavilion stood facing the house with decorative lanterns hanging inside on high poles, masked by flowered branches. Under the canvas roof were long tables covered with white cloths and countless covered dishes and bowls that the flies buzzed about hopelessly. Old Liske wore his black velvet frock coat—a relic of his prosperous years in Bessarabia—as well as a newly added silk scarf of yellow, streaked with blue. With hands in his pockets, he moved from group to group, being consciously pleasant to everyone and speaking quite freely of the ostentation and unusual luxury of the feast. To minimize the importance of it all, he would mention the price, in a lowered voice, and then, as if to explain his part in this madness, would shrug his shoulders, saying, "After all, he's my only son."

The Hebrew words, *ben yachid*, only son, express this sentiment very well, and they were heard frequently as many guests expressed their praises of the fat Pascual. Even his bumpkin qualities were cited as assets in the extraordinary rash of praise.

His mother was dressed in a showy frock with winged sleeves, and wore a green kerchief spread over her full shoulders. Moving quickly, in spite of her ample roundness, she went from place to place, talking and nodding to everyone in the growing crowd that was soon becoming as big and fantastic as the fiesta.

Under the side eave of the house, a huge caldron filled with chickens simmered over a fire, while at the side, in the deeper shadow, hung a row of dripping roasted geese. In front of these were trays with the traditional stuffed fish stacked for cooling. What the guests admired more than the chicken-filled caldron, the roast geese, stuffed fish, and the calf's ribs that the cooks were preparing were the demijohns of wine, the huge cask of beer and, above all else, the bottles of soft drinks whose roseate color the sun played on. Yes, it was so. Just as they'd heard in Rajíl, there were the bottles of rose-colored soft drinks with red seals on the bottles.

The music was supplied by an accordion and guitar, and the two musicians were already essaying some popular Jewish pieces. Voices in the crowd were tentatively humming along with them.

The bride was preparing for the ceremony in the house next to Liske's. Friends were dressing her, and her crown of sugar was already well smudged from constant rearrangement. Raquel was very sad. No matter how much the other girls reminded her of her wonderful luck—to marry a man like Pascual wasn't something that happened every day—she remained depressed. She was silent most of the time, and answered with sighs or short nods. She was a normally shy girl, but today she seemed truly sad.

Those eyes that were usually so wide and clear now seemed as clouded as her forehead.

In talking about the guests, someone told Raquel that Gabriel had come with other people from San Gregorio. She grew more depressed at hearing his name and, as she put on the bridal veil, two big tears ran down her cheeks and fell on her satin blouse.

Everyone knew the cause of her weeping. Raquel and Gabriel had come to an understanding months ago, and Jacobo—that wily little know-it-all—had claimed he saw them kissing in the shadow of a paradise tree on the eve of the Day of Atonement. . . .

Pascual's mother finally arrived at the bride's house and, in accordance with custom, congratulated the bride and kissed her noisily. Her voice screeched as she called to let the ceremony begin.

Raquel said nothing. She shrugged in despair and stood hopelessly while the group of friends gathered at her back and picked up her lace-bordered train. The future father-in-law arrived with the Rabbi and the procession started.

Outside Liske's house, the guests were gathered about the tables, while inside the house Pascual, who was dressed in black, waited with friends and the father of the bride. When they heard the handclapping outside, they went out to the grounds and the ceremony began.

Pascual walked over to the canopy held up by couples of young men and women, and stood under it. He was joined immediately by his betrothed, who came escorted by the two sponsors. Rabbi Nisen began the blessings, and offered the ritual cup to the bride and groom. Then the bride began her seven turns around the man, accompanied by the sponsors. As she finished, an old lady called out that there had only been six, and another turn was made. The Rabbi read the marriage contract, that conformed entirely with the sacred laws of Israel. He sang the nuptial prayers again. The ceremony ended with the symbolic breaking of the cup. An old man placed it on the ground, and Pascual stepped on it with force enough to break a rock.

The crowd pressed in to congratulate the couple. Her friends gathered around the bride, embracing and kissing her, but Raquel was still depressed. She accepted the congratulations and good wishes in silence. Other guests gathered around the long table and began to toast and drink.

Old Liske proposed some dancing before they sat down to supper, and he himself began by moving into the first steps of the characteristic Jewish piece, "the happy dance," to the accompaniment of the accordion and guitar. At the head of the long table, the bride and groom stood together and watched the growing bustle without saying a word to each other. Facing them, standing very erect and pale, was Gabriel.

The guests called for the bride and groom to dance. Pascual frowned

anxiously and shook his head. He did not dance. The calls and applause receded, and everyone stood waiting in embarrassment. Gabriel stepped forward suddenly and offered his arm to the bride. The accordion and guitar began a popular Jewish polka.

Gabriel tried to outdo himself, and he was a superb dancer. At one point he said something to Raquel, and she looked at him in surprise and grew still paler. People were beginning to whisper and move away. Israel Kelner had taken the arm of the Shochet as they both stepped away from the watching circle.

"Gabriel shouldn't have done this," Kelner said. "Everybody knows that he's in love with Raquel, and that she's *not* in love with her husband."

The Shochet pulled at his beard and smiled. "I don't want to offend anyone," he said. "I'm a friend of Liske's and he's a religious man—but Pascual is a beast. Did you see how mixed up he got when he was repeating the *hare-iyad* pledge during the ceremony? Believe me, Rabbi Israel, I feel sorry for the girl. She's so beautiful and fine. . . ."

Little Jacobo took Rebecca aside and talked to her in Argentine *criollo*—he was the most gaucho of the Jews, as demonstrated now by his complete gaucho dress. "Listen, *Negruta*," he began. "Something's going to happen here."

"A fight?" Rebecca whispered with interest.

"Just what I'm telling you. I was in San Gregorio this morning. Met Gabriel there. He asked me if I was going to the wedding—this one, of course. I said yes, I was, and he asked me about doing something later. . . ."

"A race?" Rebecca interrupted. "You mean to say that you made a bet with Gabriel? Oh, you men! And they said that he was heartbroken!"

"Oh, well," Jacobo said. He shrugged his shoulders. "As they say: Men run to races."

As night began to fall, the paper lanterns were lit, and many guests walked off a distance to see the effect of the lights. It was a special privilege of the rich to have such lights, and the last time they'd been seen here was during the visit of Colonel Goldschmith, a representative of the European Jewish Committee.

The next item was dinner, a banquet that bears description. The guests were seated and the bride and groom served the "golden broth," the consecrative dish of the newlyweds. Then the platters of chicken, duck and fish began to circulate; and the wine was poured to a complete and unanimous chorus of praise directed to the hostess.

"I've never eaten such tasty stuffed fish."

"Where could you ever get such roast geese as this?" the Shochet asked.

Rabbi Moisés Ornstein delivered the eulogy and added: "I must say that no one cooks as well as Madam Liske. Whoever tastes her dishes knows that they are a superior person's."

Fritters of meat and rice, wrapped in vine leaves, were served next, while more beer and wine quickened the spirits of the guests.

The bride excused herself, saying that she had to change her dress. She left the party accompanied by her friends. Her mother-in-law had started to go with them, but Jacobo stopped her. "Madam Liske!" he said. "Sit down and listen to your praises. Sit down and hear what we think of this wonderful banquet. We'll be mad if you leave," he said, when she seemed reluctant to stop. "We're enjoying ourselves very much and we want to share this with you."

"Let me go, my boy," she said. "I have to help my daughter-in-law."

"Rebecca will help her. Sit down. Sit down. Rebecca!" Jacobo turned to shout. "Go and help the bride!"

The old lady sat down—everyone about had joined in the urging—and Jacobo brought her a glass of wine so that they could drink a toast.

"When one has a son like yours," the Shochet said to Madam Liske, "one should be glad."

The toasts were offered and drunk, and this clinking of glasses, lusty singing, and music could be heard over all the grounds. The sky was full of stars, the atmosphere lightly tinged with clover and the scent of hay. In the nearby pasture, the cows mooed and the light wind stirred the leaves.

Jacobo got up and excused himself. "I have to see about my pony," he explained. "I think he might need a blanket."

"I'll look after my mare," Gabriel said, as he stood up to go with him.

They moved away from the group, and Jacobo took Gabriel's arm: "Listen, the bay is saddled and waiting by the palisade," he said. "The *boyero's* kid is watching him and the gate is open. At the first turn there's a sulky all set. The Lame One is watching there. Tell me, have you got a gun?"

Gabriel did not seem to hear this last point. He patted Jacobo's arm and started to walk towards the palisade. After a few steps, he turned to look back. "And how will Raquel get away from the girls in there?"

"Don't worry about that. Rebecca's there."

When the girls who were with the bride did return to the party, Madam Liske asked for her daughter-in-law. "She's coming right away with Rebecca," they told her. Then Rebecca returned alone, and gave the old lady still another excuse. Jacobo was doing his best to distract Madam Liske with toasts. Others took it up, and there was a great clinking of glasses and mumblings of toasts. The musicians continued to play and the guests to eat and drink. The jugs of wine were being refilled continuously, and no one's glass was ever low.

Pascual, the groom, looked fat and solemn and said nothing. From time to time, he would dart a quick look at the bride's empty chair. The gallop

of a horse was heard at that moment, and then, soon after, the sounds of a sulky starting off.

Jacobo whispered into Rebecca's ear: "That's them, isn't it?"

"Yes," the girl whispered back, "they were leaving when I came away."

The continued absence of the bride was worrying her mother-in-law and, without saying anything, she slipped into the house to see. She came out immediately.

"Rebecca, have you seen Raquel?" she said.

"I left her in the house, Señora. Isn't she there?"

"She's not."

"That's funny. . . ."

The old lady spoke to her husband and to her son, Pascual. The guests were beginning to whisper among themselves. They saw that something had gone wrong. The accordion and guitar went silent. The guests began to stand up; some glasses were tipped over, but no one paid any attention. A few of the guests moved towards the house. Others asked: "Is it the bride? Has something happened to the bride?"

The Shochet of Rajil asked his friend and counterpart from Karmel about the point of sacred law if it was true that the bride had fled.

"Do you think she has?" the Shochet of Karmel asked.

"It's possible. Anything is possible in these situations."

"Well, I think that divorce would be the next step. The girl would be free, as would be her husband. It's the common course."

Meanwhile, the excitement was growing all around them. Old Liske grabbed the Gaucho's little son. "Did you see anything out there? Out there on the road?" he said.

"Yes. Out there, on the road to San Gregorio. I saw a sulky, with Gabriel—he was driving it—and there was a girl sitting with him."

"He's kidnapped her!" Madam Liske screamed. Her voice was close to hysteria. "Kidnapped her!"

Shouts and quick talking started all over the grounds now. Most of the crowd were genuinely shocked and surprised. When old Liske turned to abuse the father of the Gaucho boy, the man stood up to him, and they were soon wrestling and rolling in the center of pushing and shouting guests. The table was overturned, and spilled wine and broken glass added to the excitement. The Shochet of Rajil mounted a chair and shouted for order. What had happened was a disgrace, he said, a punishment from God, but fighting and shouting would not ease it any.

"She's an adulteress!" shouted the enraged Liske, as he sought to break out of restraining hands. "An infamous adulteress!"

"She is not!" the Shochet answered him. "She would be," he said, "if she had left her husband 'after one day, at least, after the marriage,' as our

law so clearly says it. This is the law of God, you know, and there is no other way but that they be divorced. Pascual is a fine, honorable young man, but if she doesn't love him, she can't be made to live under his roof."

The Shochet went on in his usually eloquent and wise way, and he cited similar cases acknowledged by the most illustrious rabbis and scholars. In Jerusalem, the sacred capital, there had occurred a similar case, and Rabbi Hillel had declared in favor of the girl. At the end, the Shochet turned to Pascual: "In the name of our laws, Pascual, I ask that you grant a divorce to Raquel and that you declare, here and now, that you accept it for yourself."

Pascual scratched his head and looked sad. Then, in a tearful voice, he accepted the Shochet's proposal.

The crowd grew quiet and the guests soon began to leave, one by one, some murmuring, some hiding a smile.

Well, as you can see, my patient readers, there are fierce, arrogant Gauchos, wife-stealers and Camachos, as well as the most learned and honorable of rabbinical scholars in the little Jewish colony where I learned to love the Argentine sky and felt a part of its wonderful earth. This story I've told—with more detail than art—is a true one, just as I'm sure the original story of Camacho's feast is true. May I die this instant if I've dared to add the slightest bit of invention to the marvelous story.

I'd like very much to add some verses—as was done to the original Camacho story—but God has denied me that talent. I gave you the tale in its purest truth, and if you want couplets, add them yourself in your most gracious style. Don't forget *my* name, however—just as our gracious Master Don Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra remembered the name of Cide Hamete Benegeli and gave him all due credit for the original Camacho story.

And if the exact, accurate telling of this tale has pleased you, don't send me any golden doubloons—here, they don't even buy bread and water. Send me some golden drachmas or, if not, I'd appreciate a carafe of Jerusalem wine from the vineyards my ancestors planted as they sang the praises of Jehovah.

May He grant you wealth and health, the gifts I ask for myself.

TRANSLATED BY PRUDENCIO DE PEREDA

## Shmuel Yosef Agnon

(Poland-Israel, 1888–1970)



A prolific and eminent novelist and short story writer, Shmuel Yosef Agnon, né Shmuel Yosef Czaczkes, was born in the town of Buczaz in what was then the Austro-Hungarian Empire. He first moved to Palestine in 1907, and after lecturing and tutoring Hebrew in Germany from 1913 to 1924, he returned permanently to Jerusalem. His works include the allegorical *Agunot: A Tale* (1908), *The Bridal Canopy* (1931), *In the Heart of the Sea* (1934), *Days of Awe* (1948), and *Ad Hena* (1953). Like the poets of the so-called Hebrew renaissance Hayyim Nakhman Bialik and Saul Tchernichovsky, Agnon linked modern Hebrew to its ancient sources. His oeuvre, often mistakenly compared to Kafka's, is devoted to chronicling the whole panorama of a passing Jewish order. His story "The Whole Loaf" originally appeared in *The Book of Deeds* (1932). It accepts at least two possible readings, each advanced by a literary critic: one, by Arnold J. Band, suggests the story depicts a spiritual struggle between a life structured by well-defined commandments (the doctor's letters) and a vague pursuit of wholeness, of sanctity; the other, by Baruch Kurzweil, suggests that the protagonist is an egotist interested in material reward ("a whole loaf"); but at the same time he is in tension with an obligation toward the sacred book and its ineffable author, the lord, indicated by four dots in parentheses (the tetragrammaton) and transmitted to us by Dr. Yekutiel (one of the names of Moses) Ne'eman ("Faithful"—a quality of Moses); Mr. Gressler is the persistent hinderer in the narrator's attempt to mail the letters. Any way one reads it, Agnon's tale has mystical connotations and is somewhat reminiscent of the tales of Rabbi Nakhman of Bratzlav. In 1966 Agnon, along with German poet Nelly Sachs, was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature.

### A Whole Loaf

1.

I had not tasted anything all day long. I had made no preparations on Sabbath eve, so I had nothing to eat on the Sabbath. At that time I was on my own. My wife and children were abroad, and I had remained all