

environment, or series of environments, that is profoundly different from that known by the parents' generation. Some have become immigrants themselves; they have left Latin America for the United States or Europe. Possessing stubbornness and determination, they share a fierce will to be successful. And they have been.

## Alberto Gerchunoff

### Argentina



Novelist, short story writer, cowboy, metalworker, peddler, journalist, newspaper editor. Alberto Gerchunoff (1884–1950) lived to tell the tale of early Jewish life in Argentina. His first novel, *Los gauchos judíos*, remains his best-known work and his most controversial. Born in the European shtetl, he arrived in the Argentine pampas when only six, his parents seeking a better future in the agricultural colonies supported by the Baron de Hirsch and the Jewish Colonization Association. As a boy, Gerchunoff quickly assimilated local ways: he spoke Spanish, became a skilled horseman, and grew to love the land.

Gerchunoff's life thereafter was a balancing act of opposing experiences. He started as a country boy yet spent most of his life in the big city. He was a farmer and a factory worker, a country journalist and later an editor for *La nación*, the country's most influential newspaper. A native speaker of Yiddish, he came to dominate literary and journalistic Spanish. He loved school but was mainly self-educated. He favored assimilation into Argentine society but had great pride in his Jewish heritage. Intensely patriotic, he tended to understate anti-Semitism in Argentina. Though concerned about the fate of the Jewish people, he was slow to support the state of Israel. Though

foreign-born, he became a dominating figure in Argentine intellectual life. Prolific throughout his life, he wrote social satire, numerous short stories, and studies of Cervantes and Heine.

The autobiography included here (the date of which is unknown) was probably written before Gerchunoff had reached middle age, certainly before the anti-Jewish violence that broke out during *La semana trágica* (Tragic Week) in Buenos Aires in 1919. An extended essay, this autobiography has been edited and its archaic language modernized.

## A JEWISH GAUCHO

*Alberto Gerchunoff*

Moisés Ville was visibly progressing. Behind the tents, the lush horse pastures were giving way bit by bit to cultivation, and the furrows were becoming damp and dark. Squeaking carts, drawn by pairs of oxen, brought wire and posts, and the plow creaked while turning over thick clay. The tame cows and the docile horses decorated our tranquil way of life, their presence evocative of olden days of peace, the ancient days of the Bible. During the warm mornings the Jews greeted each other as they drew water from the wells; their robust voices covered over by the harsh sound of the pulleys. The greetings had something ritualistic and mystical about them in that peaceable and primitive setting.

I had a white mare, agile and fleet, which would arch its neck and gallop backward, under the pull of the bridle, whenever we passed a girl from the colony. An audacious rider already at a tender age, I would lose my way on the outskirts of Moisés Ville, looking for a lost lamb or for some unexpected rhea tracks.

After midday I would go to the tent of a hunchbacked and lame Jew who taught me Hebrew and then to the synagogue with my father, since I liked to hear the old men's opinions and their interpre-

tations of obscure passages from the texts. A tavern, owned by a Spaniard, had been opened close by us. All the farm workers would meet there, and it quickly became the focal point for the area. Gauchos from nearby ranches, wagon drivers, as well as passersby would stop off at the rancho, tying their horses to the posts in the *criollo* style, and enter the tavern. More than a few times, bitter arguments broke out. From behind the counter, the Spaniard, raising a club above his head to defend himself against possible attack, would shout them down.

The colonists saw this tavern as something evil, and they would not stop telling the town administration's local representative that it should be shut down. After all, something serious had taken place there. A suspicious-looking Jewish fellow, covered with scars, very dark, with shifty eyes and a large curved knife, had stolen a horse from Moisés Ville; the owner complained to the authorities. The police had quickly found the thief and forced him to return the animal. The Jewish fellow, it turned out, was from the outskirts, a slacker, a brawler and a drunk. After returning the horse, he spent even more time in the tavern, particularly during the afternoons, and never stopped arguing with the other gauchos.

One day, as the colonists were preparing to celebrate Passover, the slacker sat in the tavern from morning to evening, completely drunk. It was getting dark. On the road a few colonists passed by. We were in front of the tent, drinking maté. We were talking about this and that and observing, among other things, that it was foolhardy to live in Moisés Ville without a gun. But no colonist had so much as a shotgun for shooting partridges. Suddenly, a gaucho appeared, brandishing an unsheathed knife. It was an instant at once horrible and terrifying. Shouts of panic heated the air. A minute of terrible confusion passed. Soon I grasped the enormity of our misfortune. I don't know exactly how, but we found ourselves before the town administration.

Laid out on the ground was my father, drenched in blood. Clearly, the horse's owner had mistaken him for the thief. In a room inside, women were attending to my suffering mother and my older sister, also in agony, on a pair of cots. The entire distraught colony of Moisés Ville was in the patio. People had beaten the killer to death; his head lay mutilated and his body torn apart.

My father was buried in the little cemetery of Moisés Ville. On his tombstone, the Jews inscribed an epitaph that they composed in the synagogue, in classical Hebrew: "Here lies Reb Gershun Gerchunoff, beloved for his wisdom and venerated for his extreme prudence, a chosen and a just man."

We didn't leave the house for many weeks. In the evening, the neighbors came over to entertain us, and Pinhas Glusberg, former leader of the synagogue, would invariably relate an incomprehensible story about the mythical Russian general Kokoroff, with whom he had had the honor to speak. On the slightest pretext, he would intervene with the name of the famous officer I still can't quite believe existed. Pinhas Glusberg was a little old man, a talker and a dreamer with a poet's imagination. "Don't you see him on autumn afternoons, rising on a distant horizon, a ghost with white wings? Believe me . . ."

Exhausted by the memory of the tragedy, our family abandoned Moisés Ville. We moved to Entre Ríos and settled in the Rajil colony, where we became farmers in the fullest sense. I spent several years there, tilling the land with my brother, guiding the harvesters, and caring for the stock. The ox driver, a former soldier with General [Justo José] Urquiza, helped me perfect the art of horseback riding. He also initiated me in the use of the bola. Like all Jewish boys in the colony, I looked like a gaucho. I wore widely cut trousers, a large homburg, and boots with ringing spurs; from the horn of the saddle hung a lasso of

shining iron rings; and tied to my belt, next to my knife, were bolas used for hunting.

No Jew of my age could claim to bring a wild yearling down with a jolt better than I. Nor could anyone else stop an unbroken colt in full flight dead in its tracks with a lasso. But my favorite task was to take care of the livestock near a stream bordering our land. All the boys in the colony would meet there, presided over by the native ox driver, who, incessantly chewing on his black tobacco cigarette, would invite us to drink maté with him.

The ox driver had a special fondness for me. I would praise the songs that he sang to the monotonous chords of his broken-down guitar, and at my pleading, he would relate his adventures as a heroic soldier. He divided the tasks among the boys. He worked the land, while we planted the seed for the next season's harvest.

In Rajil my youthful spirit was filled with legends of the Comarcas Indians. Through picturesque, rustic gaucho tales, through simple rhapsodies to Argentina's past, I assimilated the traditions of the place, its collective memories, the imaginary adventures of local warriors. For the first time, my heart opened up to the poetry of the countryside, making me aware of the native beauty of Entre Ríos and igniting in me a steady pride in liberty and a love of *criollo* manners. The vast calmness of the Entre Ríos, bounded by rivers under a matchless sky, so excited me that it erased my origins and made me an Argentine.

The crops failed the day we saw the approach of a cloud so thick that it blocked out the sun. It was locusts, of course, and hours later, the orchard and the seeded fields were covered with their plague. Men, women, and children we went out with sacks and sugar pans to chase the plague away. The wheat was high, and the orchard was flourishing.

We fought courageously; roaring and shouting. But exhaustion and the locust cloud defeated us, and by the time the sweet, magnificent

moon illuminated the colony, only farmers' sighs and the women's bitter laments could be heard in the saddened huts.

The curse came three years in a row.

But Rajil, like the other Jewish colonies, made progress in spite of these disasters. Social life slowly began to stir, and families from different regions quickly formed close ties, overcoming the considerable distances separating them.

The construction of a synagogue and a school was proposed. Jews convened to deliberate. Since the younger Jews predominated in the assembly, they endorsed the school first. Soon it was established in a large zinc shed, and from all over, children were brought in daily, with their lunch boxes hanging down. This was to be the very first school in the area.

I was a good student. I learned the stanzas of the "Himno argentino," the Argentine national anthem, very quickly. During recess, my friends would surround me, as I repeated the gaucho tales I had learned from the ox driver in Rajil.

My studies there didn't last long, though. My mother, obsessed with the fatal evening in Moisés Ville, yearned to leave the region altogether, and her pleading was so compelling that the whole family decided to go to Buenos Aires.

It was in 1895, and my uncertain and wandering life had begun. My mother insisted that I study, but it wasn't possible at first since someone needed to support the family. But how? None of us knew any trade at all, of course. Eventually, I found work in a Jew's business, kneading dough for Passover's unleavened bread. The bakery was far from where we lived, so that I had to get up at dawn. At night, a Spanish cart driver started me on the Spanish alphabet.

When the season of the unleavened bread ended, I once again found myself with no means of support. I had to think about a trade.

Soon I entered a mechanic's workshop as an apprentice. I was assigned to the nickel-plating section among a swarm of young shouting boys who all but drowned out the boss's hoarse voice. I spent the day bent over near a sink filled with chalk, brushing bronzes that I would put in the can of boiling lye later.

My fingers swelled and split open. The days were not as bad as the nights, when I really suffered. Yet in spite of it all, I liked the mechanic's trade, and when I didn't have work to do in the nickel-plating section, I would go down the founders' workshop or the metalworkers' to learn something. After a month, I was able to polish pretty well, and I knew how to handle more than a few machines. I would have stayed with the trade, if a shocking event had not convinced my family to pull me out. I am referring to the death of a metalworker, an Italian with enormous, wide shoulders, a rough and good fellow. One morning, on starting the motor, he got his shirt caught in a pulley. I was preparing the lye when I heard a horrifying crash.

On the floor I saw his decapitated and mutilated body; an enormous bloodstain covered the ceiling.

With affectionate insistence, my mother persuaded me to leave the mechanic's workshop. I then joined a cigarette maker from whom I earned fifteen pesos a month and lunch. My boss would pay his workers only after they had fulfilled a certain hourly quota. I learned fast. In three months, I was producing a thousand cigarettes a day. The owner didn't keep his word, though, and failed to pay me as promised. So I changed trades once again and became a ribbon and embroidery maker—a beautiful trade, which I quickly grew to like. I progressed slowly. I spun, learned how to dye silks, knitted random stripes, and became skilled in framing. I was capable of producing a decorated ribbon less than a centimeter wide.

Soon I was a first-class worker. The factory owner, a jaundiced Jew, nearsighted and quarrelsome, once told me, in the presence of the

operators, that I was the most skilled tradesman he had ever known. Meanwhile, I kept studying at night. A buddy taught me Spanish grammar, history, sciences. A factory friend, a lean and witty Asturian, introduced me to *Don Quixote*, a book for which I have a singular and profound love.

My aspirations were no longer those of a simple worker. I dreamed of structuring my studies, of taking examinations at the Colegio Nacional; I longed for the glory of a doctorate. No sooner did my day at the factory end than I went to my books, mixing my reading of the dry everyday texts with those I sought after: my *Quixote*, the *Thousand and One Nights*, and Victor Hugo's novels.

Over these first serious books, I usually would fall asleep, exhausted, and when I opened my eyes, my mother's angular and wrinkled silhouette would be in front of me. She wouldn't go to bed until she had covered me up, protecting me during those winter nights from the cold wind. A medical student also gave me lessons. But it wasn't easy to study and work at the same time. I couldn't leave the shop, since I needed to earn a living.

I spent a total of three years in the factory as an ordinary worker. At the end of that period, I arranged to work half a day for a third of my salary. This way I could prepare for my exams, which, when the time came, I passed easily.

Now the problem was, where would I find the money for tuition and books?

A neighbor, the owner of a small store, offered me popular merchandise to sell in the street. This was during the crash of 1899. I would take a bulky sack and go around hawking from sunrise to sunset. I mainly sold the merchandise in the endless port area, but I also spent time in the city's outskirts. And so I walked for long weeks until I collected a paltry sum, sufficient for my immediate needs. It was this job that brought me the greatest suffering and humiliation.

I entered the school. I applied myself above all to grammar and history. Restlessly, with exaggerated curiosity, I read enormously, chaotically. I also became interested in public affairs and argued with my classmates about the questions of the day.

That was the time I obtained my Argentine citizenship card. Until then, I had not been equal to the others, that is, not an Argentine. Once when I told my grammar teacher about this problem, he first laughed heartily and then hugged me affectionately. I was sixteen years old then, two years too young to become a naturalized citizen. The next day, I was called to the school director's little office, where I found my teacher. He put me in a car.

"Where are we going?" I asked timidly.

"Well, my good man!" the director exclaimed. "To make you an Argentine . . . Aren't you really one already?"

Once again I passed my exams with high marks. But the question of making a living was still unresolved. I began to give lessons to Jewish workers. But those unpredictable little earnings were clearly insufficient even for the most rudimentary necessities.

The following year, I was no longer able to study as a regular student. In vain the school director and the teachers sought work for me. But I could find nothing. Free from the discipline of the program, I spent many hours in the National Library, poking around books. And so, bit by bit, my interests led me to journalism and literature.

I got to know a number of writers and journalists at public lectures. They grew accustomed to my presence and were quite interested in my views and stories on Jewish life. Soon I became part of the bohemian side of Buenos Aires. This phase lasted for a long time. Happily, neighborhood newspapers and youth magazines began to accept my hesitant essays.

One fine day in 1903, I was offered the position of editor of *El censor* in the city of Rosario.

Of course, I didn't know how to run a newspaper. It took a great deal of work to acquire the most basic techniques. *El censor* was an opposition newspaper, and my articles, violent like all beginner's, caused a small scandal in town, sufficient to make me a man of the press. The newspaper was forced to close down, and I returned to Buenos Aires, armed, fortunately, with a certain professional preparation.

It was then that I joined *El país* and became an effective journalist, able to take on any assignment and do a passable job of it. I stayed at this daily for years. I also collaborated on various periodicals.

My departure from Moisés Ville and Rajil had not led to my separation from Jewish people. In Buenos Aires the Jewish community was constantly growing, forming a visible nucleus for its intense commercial and industrial activities. Already, there were a considerable number of Jews in the high schools and the universities, all hardworking and extraordinarily energetic, stubborn and firm-willed, who didn't take long to distinguish themselves with their scholarly achievements.

Observing this, I conceived of a plan to study Jewish life in a free atmosphere, without outside persecution. Wouldn't it be interesting to show Judaism redeemed from the share of slavery, martyrdom, and sticism that usually plunges it into abjection? I was, at the time, literary critic of *La nación*. Well placed and calmer than I had once been, I carried out part of my plan in 1910 by publishing a book in which I tried to describe the customs of Jewish immigrant farmers in Argentina.

I traveled a lot, edited newspapers in the interior, took over the associate editorship of *La mañana* and later the position of editor-in-chief of *La gaceta* in Buenos Aires. That, in short, is how I became a full-fledged journalist, wandering from place to place and from trade to trade. Life, in all its hardships, taught me to love being alive. It

planted deep in my spirit the feeling of human pain, and more than books had done, shaped my personal ideas. This is why I love the Jewish people, for they know, like no one else, the supreme value of liberty. In Argentina, Jews, redeemed from injustice and religious stereotypes, will lose their generally accepted profile. On this soil, they will be gradually freed from the whip of persecution. This can be seen already. From the city and countryside, Argentine Jews are deeply and sincerely patriotic as are their elders, those born in Odessa or Warsaw and immigrants to this land. Argentina can be proud of this and show it to older civilizations. What would the Russian people say about such a transformation, for instance? As I carry out many official functions, I come across Jews who are university professors, which neither shocks nor irritates anyone. These Jews are Argentine citizens, nobody cares which temple they pray in, if they are Catholics or not.

In truth, the Jew lacks religious preoccupations. He is mystical without being dogmatic, exactly the reverse of what anti-Semites think. In an atmosphere of freedom, he assimilates to the country; he is remade in its essence. The venerable Baron de Hirsch understood this potential well when he founded the agricultural colonies in Argentina, an immense task of practical philanthropy, and, at the same time, a testimony to show the systematic enemies of this small suffering people, dispersed over the globe.

Neither moneylender nor martyr, the Jew is a free man. No matter what trade he embarks on—laborer on the land, factory worker, or financial magnate—in Argentina his status will not change; for this is Palestine for the Jew, a land of liberty, the Promised Land in the biblical sense of the word.

I don't sing of Jewish life only, though: above all, I am an Argentine, and, as such, a man of letters.

Translated by Stephen A. Sadow

## Margo Glantz

### Mexico



Margo Glantz (1930–) is blessed with a quick and subtle sense of humor. Her work is often fun to read. Her powers of observation are extraordinary, and she is able to skip from topic to topic or scene to scene at lightning speed. Her writing style is fractured, sometimes surreal in its presentation.

Daughter of the Yiddish poet Yakov Glantz, an émigré to Mexico, Glantz grew up surrounded by Mexico's intelligentsia. She has not felt like an outsider in Mexico. On the contrary, she is considered a force in Mexican literature.

Margo Glantz is a professor of literature at the Universidad Autónoma de México, and has been cultural attaché at the Mexican embassy in London and a visiting professor at Yale and Princeton universities. She has made a substantial contribution as a journalist and as an essayist and literary critic. Her writing is quite varied, often veering off in unexpected directions. Her *Las genealogías* (The Family Tree) is a "fictional autobiography" or "pseudo-novel." Her novel *Síndrome de naufragios* (Syndrome of Shipwrecks) replays the story of Noah, while *El día de la boda* (Wedding Day) pretends to be a collection of love postcards.

The selection that follows, which shows Glantz's wit and attention to detail, is taken from *The Family Tree*.