

TRANSLATING GERCHUNOFF

Edna Aizenberg

Alberto Gerchunoff's 1910 story collection, *Los gauchos judíos* (The Jewish Gauchos), about Jewish agricultural settlement on the pampas, has long been considered the founding text of Spanish-language Argentine-Jewish literature. The book has been praised as Argentine Jewry's naturalization papers and reviled as a sellout to an antipluralist Argentina. Honored or damned, the work has been exceedingly influential, and was important for later authors.

I wish to focus on a little-acknowledged but significant aspect of the book: the differences between its original edition and the revised 1936 version from which all subsequent printings—and subsequent judgments—derive. I want to argue that Gerchunoff's linguistic and ideological exertions provide a much more complex picture of the work and its meanings than both praisers and detractors (including yours truly) have allowed for. This reconsideration is especially timely in light of current developments in Argentine political and intellectual life, and it forms part of my larger project of translating a rethought Gerchunoff into English.

The two positions toward *Los gauchos judíos*, respect and vituperation, simplify the book. They are based on the premise that Gerchunoff constructed a one-voiced text and an uncomplicated figure—the Jewish gaucho. At the height of Argentine nativism, each argument runs, when the *crisol de razas*, melting pot philosophy was most operational, Gerchunoff “went native,” transforming the agriculturalists of Yiddish expression into cowboys speaking Cervantine Spanish, maintaining that Argentina was the one and only promised land, and silencing the specific marks of Jewish tradition. Was this good or bad? Here is where the two arguments part company.

Officialist postures generally see it as good. Thus the musical stage production, *Aquellos gauchos judíos: recuerdos de la colonia* (Those Jewish Gauchos: Memories of the Colony), presented in Buenos Aires's Teatro Municipal Cervantes in 1995. Authored by the well-known dramatists Ricardo Halac and Roberto Cossa, the play was presented under the auspices of the AMIA, the Jewish Mutual Aid Association, to

raise funds for its shattered building, destroyed a year earlier in a still-unresolved bombing (see Aizenberg, "Post-Pinochet"). It is revealing that even after this tragedy, which shook the Jewish community to its very core, Gerchunoff's Jewish gaucho was once again invoked, as if to remind the Argentine nation: Remember that we Jews are fine rooted citizens. After all, didn't Gerchunoff provide us with our naturalization papers close to a century ago?

Perhaps he did, his detractors say, but that is precisely the problem. In the 1970s, when Argentina slid into her greatest inhumanity, a generation of parricidal intellectuals took their literary precursor to task. David Viñas, Saúl Sosnowski, Leonardo Senkman, Gerardo Mario Goloboff, Mario Szichman, and others attempted to undo the Jewish gaucho metaphor, replacing what they saw as rootedness with inadaptation and exile; linguistic-cultural accommodation with estrangement, and adhesion to the homogenizing melting pot with a harsh questioning of its premises. Their novels and essays, products of the era of dictatorship, assaulted their patriarch, in great part for the elimination of Jewish idiomatic and ethnic signs that they endeavored to work into their writings. My study, "Parricide on the Pampa," chronicles this rebellion.

Yet did Gerchunoff really obliterate Jewish idiomatic and ethnic signs? And, more importantly, was his text as unremittingly accommodationist and monovocal as I, and others, had it? As is often the case, it seems that things are far more complicated.

Translation is the best way of reading. It forces one to get into the nuts and bolts of the text, to notice the minutiae. If criticism looks at macrostructures and makes generalizations, translation focuses on microunits — articles, prepositions, words, phrases. I had long studied *Los gauchos judíos* as a critic, but it is only as a translator that I was able to see aspects that had been ignored. Thanks to the facets revealed by translation I can do a better job as a commentator.

My rethinking began with the rarely reproduced words on the cover of the 1936 version: "nueva edición corregida y aumentada" (new revised and expanded edition).

What revision, I asked? What expansions? Most everyone had either not known or ignored the fact that there had been such a reworking. I went back to the original 1910 edition, and found that Gerchunoff had made significant changes. These modifications of the original work underscored his extensive work-in-language and his struggle to forge a new expressive medium for a new experience. They revealed a greater ideological and linguistic-cultural intricacy than had been allowed for, calling for a more nuanced assessment.

I realized that I had to reread *Los gauchos judíos* in the shuttle space between versions, as a process not a stasis. I was helped by the insights of genetic criticism, which looks at literary texts as complex entities made up of notes, drafts, emendations, and reprintings, as well as by current translation theories which posit interlinguistic transfer as a contentious act meant to lay bare rather than to smooth over roughness, differences, and ambiguity.¹ Unfreezing the text highlighted its restlessness more than its much-vaunted quietism.

Let me give some brief specifics. Contrary to what might be expected, in 1910, when melting-potism and Hispanism were regnant, and Gerchunoff wanted so to be accepted, his text was particularistic and Yiddishist. In 1910, at the time of the centenary of Argentine independence, when debates were raging on foreign-language instruction in immigrant schools, Gerchunoff openly incorporates the idiosyncratic cultural baggage of the greenhorns: words in Yiddish and Hebrew, footnotes that explain those words, specific references to classic Jewish religious works, translations of Yiddish songs and allusions to popular Yiddish plays and novels, Hebrew-Yiddish forms of biblical names, Spanish calques of Yiddish expressions.

Here are some of the words and names that appear in the 1910 book (the spelling is Gerchunoff's): "Cherba-le-jaim" (tzaar baale haim), "Sana- Toikef" (U-netane tokef), "Mischnais," "Zeroim," "Guemara," "Ioredea," "benujid," "shel yod" (referring to the phylacteries), "umed," "kitol," "Iom Kipur," "Rabenu Jehuda Ha-Kadosh." There are repeated references to "jerga vulgar" (a translation of *zhargon*, Yiddish); to "el canto de la Sulamita" ("Shulamis," Abraham Goldfaden's popular Yiddish romantic operetta [1880]); and to Yiddish novels by the then best-selling author, Shomer; to Kishinev, Zhitomi, and Elizabet-grad. Women are called "Dvora," not "Deborah," "Esther," not "Ester," and

1 On genetic criticism, see Louis Hay and Péter Nagy, eds., *Avant-Texte, Texte, Après Texte*, Paris: Editions du CNRS; Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1982; and Michel Malicet, ed., *Exercices de Critique Génétique* (Cahiers de Textologie) Paris; Minard, 1986. I quote from the introduction to *Exercices*: "toutes ces études illustrent l'importance de la critique génétique que peut d'autant mieux fournir la base de toute interprétation ultérieure qu'elle révèle la nébuleuse primitive dont nous parlions plus haut, où réside la plupart du temps la source de la polysémie du texte définitif" (4). For current translation theory see, for example, André Lefevre, *Translating Literature*, New York: Modern Language Association, 1992. Also, Suzanne Jill Levine, *The Subversive Scribe: Translating Latin American Literature*, Saint Paul: Graywolf, 1991.

men are addressed as “rabí,” Gerchunoff’s attempt to render the Yiddish “reb,” mister, through a multilingual layering that retains the Hebraic “rav” yet tries to meld it with the medieval Spanish word for “rabbi.” His solution is far from perfect to contemporary eyes, but it demonstrates his efforts, as do many elements in the work.

The influx of Yiddish-speaking Ashkenazi Jews into an Hispanic-American milieu was an unprecedented event. What models could be used to bridge the divide between their old and new worlds, to bring the Jewish heritage to Catholic readers? Gerchunoff was navigating in uncharted waters and essaying untested solutions. He hasn’t been given enough credit for his efforts, even if they now seem quaint—like *rabí*. A comparison of the two editions shows that the author himself often realized where he had gone astray.

What do you call Jewish prayer, the prayerbook, the ark? Together with the Judaized vocabulary of 1910, Gerchunoff tries on “misa” (mass), “misal” (missal), and “santuario” (a niche for a saint’s image); he eliminates or modifies these Christianizing words in 1936. But along with this Christological vocabulary, there are anti-Christian remarks in the colonists’ speech, such as “sus escasas luces de cristiano” (his limited Christian intelligence), surely a translation of “goyisher kop,” omitted in 1936 as well. Some of the Judaic idioms are similarly toned down in the later edition — “kitol” becomes “ropón blanco” (white tunic), “Ioredea,” merely “los libros” (the books) — producing a more distanced version, if you will.

The shift in narrative voice from first person “yo” (I) in 1910 to third person “él” (he) in 1936 underscores the distancing at a time when Gerchunoff was much further away from the cultural and speech milieu that inspired his book, and from the book itself. His literary mouthpiece in the second version is Dr. Noé Yarcho, protagonist of “El médico milagroso” (The Miraculous Doctor), one of the two stories added to the later edition. Based on the real Dr. Yarcho, one of the first doctors in the colonies, the fictional physician respects the settlers’ agricultural labors and Jewish practice, even though by profession and conviction he doesn’t fully participate in either, as was certainly the case with his creator by 1936. Republishing *Los gauchos judíos* after twenty-five years was itself a symptom of the ideological and artistic restlessness I have been tracing, since it affirmed Jewish identity in an era of growing anti-Semitism, with Gerchunoff unafraid to describe Yarcho as non-Aryan, yet it also reflected the author’s moving away from the optimism of the past.

This does not mean that we can neatly posit a first, upbeat, Hebraic version and a second, downbeat, de-Hebraized rewriting. The writer’s

struggles foreground the multiple signs of contentiousness in *both* editions. In a closer look, the quarrelsomeness and questioning are there right from the inception of *Los gauchos judíos*. Here, Gerchunoff's repeated recourse to talmudic literature, whether as "Mishnais" in 1910 or more generically as "Talmud" in 1936, takes on heightened meaning; it is much more than folkloric windowdressing.

Gerchunoff presents colonists steeped in the semiotics of the talmudic world in which "no ideological position could be expressed without arguing a real or hypothetical counterposition" (Harshav 16). Like much of the secular literature of Yiddish-speaking Jewry (Sholem Aleichem's Tevye is an example), his book reproduces this debating discourse, only aggravated by the need to contend with an epoch when Jews confronted modernity. Where should Jews go? And what political and cultural patterns should they follow? What languages should they speak and write?

Seen in this context, *Los gauchos judíos* no longer disingenuously mirrors a single territoriality, a single ideology, or a single-minded linguistic obliteration, but displays the disputes, the differing options. The opening pages of the work (and these remain unaltered) portray a Talmud-saturated environment, a Sabbath gathering at which the Dain (dayan) explicates, "difficult points with arguments culled from memorable controversies." In characteristic mishnaic style, the ensuing debate applies past precedents to present events, as the Jews critically consider various territorial options—Spain, Argentina, Zion. The interlocutors vehemently defend opposing views. One praises Spain, another graphically recalls the horrors of the Inquisition and the curses pronounced on blood-drenched Iberia. A participant extols Argentina's virtues, but the millenary pull of Zion cannot simply be ignored, and it isn't throughout the stories. While the colonists express profound gratitude to the South American refuge, they unhesitatingly recall that they are not in Jerusalem, that Argentina is not the land of their ancestors.²

The same differences of opinion appear with regard to assimilation. Jews may wear bombachas and boleadoras, sip *mate*, go to rodeos, sing *vidalitas*, and—more seriously—lapse in Jewish observance and run off with *galant gauchos*, but this melting-potism isn't uncontested. The following strong line remains in both editions: "En Rusia se vive mal,

2 The prominent Gerchunoff scholar, Leonardo Senkman, has recently published a major study of the author's later Zionist activism, without noting the early Zion-drenched debates in *Los gauchos judíos*.

pero se teme a Dios; y se vive de acuerdo con su Ley. Aquí los jóvenes se vuelven unos gauchos” ‘In Russia, life is bad but God is feared and His Law followed; here, the young people turn into gauchos’ (*Los gauchos judíos* [1936] 46).

In his introduction to the 1910 version, rarely included in reprintings, the nativist writer Martiniano Leguizamón had especially lauded the young Jewish immigrant girls as the sexualized instruments of cross-ethnic breeding, latter-day *belles juives* whose charms would help do away with Jewish particularism; but in the two editions his “protegé” Gerchunoff emphasizes the bitter dismay and deep pain that their actions bring to their families and to the community: “Es una vergüenza. ¿Pero será cierto? Lo es, por desgracia. Huyó con el peón. ¡Un gaucho!...Lo preveíamos. Hacía el samovar el sábado y comía gallinas muertas por un peón: ¡una pérdida!” (It’s a disgrace. But is it true? I’m afraid it is. She ran off with a peon, a gaucho. We saw it coming. She lit the samovar on the Sabbath and ate chickens killed by the peon. What a loss!) (38-39). Even the gaucho, Gerchunoff’s supposed ideal for nativist political correctness receives ambivalent treatment, sometimes portrayed as noble and patriarchal, sometimes as ignoble and murderous.

But the most glaring subversion of the apparently unequivocal adherence to the Argentina-Land-of-Technicolor ideology is the story “Historia de un caballo robado” (Tale of a Stolen Horse), in which a Jew, with the authorities’ acquiescence, is falsely accused of taking a gaucho’s mare. The epigraph, taken from medieval Castilian documents, sets the tone. It explains that a knight, one Don Nuño de Guevara, has stolen another gentleman’s sword, but that it would be wiser to impute the crime to the Jew Don Moisés de Sandobal, for it’s better to blame the dogs of Jewry than Christian noblemen. The learned shochet, Rabí Abraham, talmudically restates the obvious message: The landscape and the peasants may change, but a Jew is a Jew is a Jew; Argentina may be no different from Russia, or any other place.

Gerchunoff attempts to put a positive twist on the tale, ending in both versions: “I want to believe that it won’t always be this way,” but its disturbing implications are evident. (He retains the “I” here despite the overall switch to third-person in 1936.) Typically, the dark undertones are heightened in the 1930s version by the second story the author appended to the collection, “El candelabro de plata.” The tale about the theft, now from a *Jewish* home, of a valuable and symbolic silver candelabrum, closes the most familiar edition of Gerchunoff’s paean to the Argentine homeland.

To sum up: Translating Gerchunoff has provided me with a more nuanced understanding of his foundational book, leading to a serious rethinking of his optimism, melting-potism and verbal placidity. Read against the long-accepted grain, Don Alberto emerges less as the high priest of obliterating quietism and more as the contentious forerunner of contemporary Judeo-Argentine writers.

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