

## PART I

### YO, JUDÍO

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If I am not one of Thy repetitions or errata . . .

—“The Secret Miracle” (1943)

Throughout his life, Borges was overwhelmed by a strange feeling of unworthiness. He was, he claimed, unworthy of friendship, love, and public attention. The more he achieved, the more puzzled he was by the towering praise that had descended on him. And he kept on waiting for the day when people would finally recognize how mistaken they had been about his genius. This might be seen as an excess of modesty; it could also be equated with a complex Jews are often linked to: self-deprecation.

Borges wasn't an aristocrat, although often he behaved as such. And even though his genealogical connection with the *soldados* in Argentina on his mother's side of the family is ethereal, his eulogies to them are defined by envy. Simply put, Borges refurbished his background, making it look more distinguished than it was; or more suitable to the ethos that defines a life spent with too many books around and too little adventure. Needless to say, this enhancement of one's own heritage, this falsification of the self, is a common trait in the Hispanic world, where *las apariencias engañan*, nothing is as it appears.

“I spent a great deal of my boyhood indoors,” he wrote in a profile called “An Autobiographical Essay,” published in *The New Yorker*, in the September 19, 1970, issue:

Having no childhood friends, my sister and I invented two imaginary companions, named, for some, reason or other, Quilos and The Windmill. (When they finally bored us, we told our mother that they had died.) I was always very nearsighted and wore glasses, and I was rather frail.<sup>1</sup>

One of Borges’s grandfathers, Francisco Borges Lafinur, had fought at the Battle of Caseros against the tyrant Juan Manuel de Rosas; he died in the Battle of La Verde, which was part of General Bartolomé Mitre’s failed armed uprising against Domingo Faustino Sarmiento. What killed him were two bullets shot from a Remington rifle, the first time this weapon had ever been used in Argentina. This lineage of military men instrumental in the shaping of the Argentine Republic, he wrote in his diary, “may account for my yearning after that epic destiny which my gods denied me, no doubt wisely.” This line signals Borges’s unworthiness. It clearly shows how he saw himself for what *he was not* and how he used literature to impersonate that absence—to become the warrior he could never be.

Borges’s paternal grandmother, Fanny Haslam, was an Englishwoman with a Quaker past. More important, she was a great reader. Her Spanish was fluent but poor; her English, on the other hand, was hypnotizing. In it she fell in love with her favorite authors: Arnold Bennett, Galsworthy, Dickens, and Thackeray; and she also introduced her grandchild to the beauties of the English language. Thanks in large part to her, Borges grew up in both English and Spanish. He did most of his early readings in Shakespeare’s tongue, including *Don Quixote*, which, years later, upon rereading it in the original, seemed to him like a second-rate translation.

Again, the feeling of unworthiness. Borges's sense of possessing a masked identity is traceable to his philo-Semitism: his love of Jews. His genealogical tree doesn't show any Semitic lineage. But he longed for one. In a poem written in 1967, celebrating the triumphant Six Day War in which Israel defended itself against its Arab enemies, he wondered if Israel, as an emblem, could be found in his genealogy. Indeed, he faithfully searched throughout his entire life for a trace of Jewish blood in his ancestry. This is poignantly clear in a brief essay called "Yo, judío," whose historical value is decisive in understanding Borges's interest in things Jewish. Over the years, that interest, in its different facets, and with various degrees of success, has been explored by academics such as Edna Aizenberg, Saúl Sosnowski, and Jaime Alazraki. Herein the first paragraph of the essay, included in *Jorge Luis Borges: Selected Non-Fictions* (1999), in Eliot Weinberger's English translation:

Like the Druzes, like the moon, like death, like next week, the distant past is one of those things that can enrich ignorance. It is infinitely malleable and agreeable, far more obliging than the future and far less demanding of our efforts. It is the famous season favored by all mythologies.

"I, a Jew" appeared in the April 1934 issue of the Buenos Aires magazine *Megáfono*. (Should the translation be "I, the Jew"?) It is among the least known essays by Borges, who saw it as an orphan piece, never collecting it in *Other Inquisitions* or any of his nonfiction volumes. However, it has always been available in Spanish in one form or another, and it surfaced briefly in English in an American anthology published by E. P. Dutton called *Borges: A Reader* (1981), edited by Emir Rodríguez Monegal and Alastair Reid, and in Weinberger's *Selected Non-Fictions*. The essay continues:

Who has not, at one point or another, played with thoughts of his ancestors, with the prehistory of his flesh and blood? I have done so many times, and many times it has not displeased me to think of myself as Jewish. It is an idle hypothesis, a frugal and sedentary adventure that harms no one, not even the name of Israel, as my Judaism is wordless, like the songs of Mendelssohn. The magazine *Crisol* [*Crucible*], in its issue of January 30, has decided to gratify this retrospective hope; it speaks of my “Jewish ancestry, maliciously hidden” (the participle and the adverb amaze and delight me).

Borges reacted with enviable concentration, even stalwart conviction, to an accusation, made in 1934 by the magazine *Crisol*, that he was indeed a Jew. The accusation came from an anti-Semitic faction of the Argentine intelligentsia and had as an objective to discredit Borges in public opinion. He, in turn, took the accusation as a compliment.

At the time of the publication of “*Yo, judío*,” Argentina, in what proved to be a pattern throughout the century, was ruled by the military. In 1933, *Megáfono* had devoted a full issue to Borges, who was regarded locally as what the Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío once described, in general terms, as “*un raro*”—a Wildean dandy, an Europeanized auteur infatuated with metaphysics and prone to an obtuse vocabulary. As a response to the *Megáfono* festschrift, the right-wing, nationalist periodical *Crisol*, also published in Buenos Aires, attacked Borges for hiding his “Israelite” origins. “*Yo, judío*,” his brave and unapologetic response to *Crisol*, pointed out, in the measured prose that was to become his trademark, a deep desire to find the missing link in his ancestry—the Jew in the mirror. The essay continues:

Borges Acevedo is my name. Ramos Mejía, in a note to the fifth chapter of *Rosas and His time*, lists

the family names in Buenos Aires at that time in order to demonstrate that all, or almost all, “come from Judeo-Portuguese stock.” “Acevedo” is included in the list: the only supporting evidence for my Jewish pretensions until this confirmation in *Crisol*. Nevertheless, Captain Honorario Acevedo undertook a detailed investigation that I cannot ignore. His study notes that the first Acevedo to disembark on this land was the Catalan Don Pedro de Azevedo in 1728: landholder, settler of “Pago de los Arroyos,” father and grandfather of cattle ranchers in that province, a notable who figures in the annals of the parish of Santa Fe and in the documents of the history and the Viceroyalty—an ancestor, in short, irreparably Spanish.

Two hundred years and I can’t find the Israelite; two hundred years and my ancestor still eludes me.

I am grateful for the stimulus provided by *Crisol*, but hope is dimming that I will ever be able to discover my link to the Table of the Breads and the Sea of Bronze; to Heine, Gleizer, and the ten *Sefiroth*; to Ecclesiastes and Chaplin.

The final section of “Yo, judío” is emphatic. In it Borges establishes, once and for all, his unquestionable loyalty. In a country such as Argentina where anti-Semitism has been present from the second half of the nineteenth century onward, which marked the arrival of poor, Yiddish-speaking immigrants from Eastern Europe, whose landing was sometimes greeted with animosity, to outbursts of historical proportions like the labor unrest known as *Semana Trágica* in 1919, in which Jews were a prime target, and the terrorist attack against the Jewish Community Center in Buenos Aires on July 18, 1994—events about which I will talk at more length—Borges made a commitment to connect with the Jewish community in Buenos Aires.

Statistically, the Hebrews were few. What would we think of someone in the year 4000 who uncovers people from San Juan province everywhere? Our inquisitors seek out Hebrews, but never Phoenicians, Garamantes, Scythians, Babylonians, Persians, Egyptians, Huns, Vandals, Ostrogoths, Ethiopians, Illyrians, Paphlagonians, Sarmatians, Medes, Ottomans, Berbers, Britons, Libyians, Cyclopes, or Lapiths. The nights of Alexandria, of Babylon, of Carthage, of Memphis, never succeeded in engendering a single grandfather; it was only to the tribes of the bituminous Dead Sea that this gift was granted.<sup>2</sup>

In the context of Argentine letters, and, by extension, in Hispanic intellectual circles, Borges is a *rara avis*. No other non-Jewish author from the region addresses Jewish themes with the depth and complexity of the Argentine. The question, one wonders, is why. How is it that in an area where *lo judío* is often met with *lo anti-judío*, an ecosystem in which Jews have thrived for more than a century and a half yet have also met with a persistent, unabated anti-Semitic animus, comes along so influential and visionary a figure?

The answer, perhaps, is that quality comes from contest. To be opposed gives literature a purpose.

*Post Scriptum*: “Bituminous” (in Spanish, *bituminoso*)—who else uses such word?



Through Borges’s personal journey, one is able to get a sharp picture of the fragile status of Jews in the Hispanic world. As a result of his exposure to the immediate surroundings in Buenos Aires, Borges was less attracted to the Sephardim than to the Ashkenazi culture of the Yiddish-speaking immigrants and their descendants. These immigrants arrived at the River Plate in the

last couple of decades of the nineteenth century. He maintained closed ties with a handful of urbane, forward-looking intellectuals, among them his tutor Alberto Gerchunoff (1884–1950), considered the grandfather of Jewish Latin American letters with his collection of vignettes *The Jewish Gauchos of the Pampas*, originally published in 1910 as a celebration of Argentina's first hundred years of independence.

Borges's Jewish education was far more cosmopolitan than most Jews received at the time, or, for that matter, than they do today, not only in Argentina. He learned about Jews from books. While still young, he read James Joyce (whose character Leopold Bloom struck him as emblematic of "*el judío errante*," the "Wandering Jew") and Franz Kafka, a writer that inspired him to such extent that he translated him into Spanish and for decades was among his first, and only, promoters in the Spanish-speaking world. Gustav Meyrink's German novel *The Golem* (1914) also left a deep impression. The Hassidic tales compiled by Martin Buber exercised a fascination for him. At different points in his life, he even expressed interest in learning ancient Hebrew. (He eventually settled for other ancient languages, including Anglo-Saxon.)

Here, I will make a detour to explore Jewish literature in Argentina. At the time of Borges's death, the country's Jewish community comprised a population of approximately 220,000. In contrast with the United States, Israel, France, and the former Soviet Union, this number is minuscule. Yet in the Hispanic world (including Spain and the Caribbean Basin), in which they totaled 450 million, it was the biggest, most vigorous concentration of Jews, and in Latin America alone it was the leader in size, followed by, in descending order, Brazil, Mexico, and Colombia.

The Ashkenazi population of Latin America arrived, cumulatively, roughly between 1880 and 1930, so by the time Borges came of age, Jews, mostly poor and uneducated, were a fixture in Argentinean society. Prior to this wave of immigration, another one across the Atlantic into the Spanish-language

regions had taken place: thousands of *marranos*, New Christians, and crypto-Jews had arrived from Portugal, the Netherlands, and Northern Africa in the colonial era. They had also escaped from Spain directly, where persecution and forced conversion under the fist of the Holy Inquisition made life miserable incrementally since the thirteenth century, a process that culminated in the edict of expulsion of 1492. But for a variety of reasons the slow disappearance of these crypto-Jews, and of the New Christians that came at the same time, was all but consummated when the Yiddish-language *shtetl* dwellers made it to the same landscape. Argentina in particular was a magnet for large-scale philanthropists and organizations imbued in the project of the resettlement of Jews out of Europe.

The French benefactor Baron Maurice de Hirsch, as well as the *Alliance Israélite universelle*, put immense resources into the objective of making the Pampas a suitable habitat—by means of socialist agricultural communes—for poor Jews escaping pogroms in Poland, Lithuania, and Ukraine. The early immigrants, thus, were located in rural milieus where gaucho life prevailed. This explains the lore of the Jewish gaucho at the turn of the nineteenth century. However, life in the countryside only lasted one, at the most two, generations. The Jewish newcomers and their children slowly moved, en masse, to urban centers, especially to Buenos Aires. By the thirties, the majority of Jews were already not only fluent in Spanish but also active in Argentine society. Still, anti-Jewish sentiment, a fixture in Latin America since the arrival of the Spanish *conquistadores* and the Catholic missionaries, remained rampant, and to this day it refuses to vanish altogether.

I mentioned Alberto Gerchunoff a couple of paragraphs ago. He is considered the father of Jewish literature in Latin America, an imposing figure whose oeuvre serves as a map to understand the vicissitudes in Argentina's intellectual life in the first half of the twentieth century. Before Gerchunoff, one can find sketches, poems, vignettes, and chronicles of immigrant life,

written by Jewish refugees in Russian, Polish, Hebrew, Yiddish, and at times in a rudimentary Spanish. He believed Argentina was a “*país de advenimiento*,” a country of accession where Jews would be able to finally live without hatred in the Southern Cone. Gerchunoff’s life and craft have to be understood in the context of the history of Jewish immigration to Argentina.

In 1891, when Gerchunoff was seven, his father traveled from Russia to the Pampas, and the family followed him. Agriculture and cattle raising were the jobs designated for the *shtetl* dwellers, and hard labor was their lot. As expressed in his 1914 autobiography *Entre Ríos, My Country*, published posthumously in 1950, Gerchunoff admired the capacity for hard work of his fellow Argentines. His family was first stationed in the colony of Moisés Ville, but when his father was brutally killed by a gaucho, or Argentine cowboy, they moved to the Rajíl colony. This tragic event and Gerchunoff’s later adventures in the new settlement were the inspiration for his early work.

One of the admirable things about Gerchunoff is his multilingualism. Language, after all, is the basic vehicle by which any newcomer must begin to adapt to the new country. Most immigrants improvised a “survival” Spanish during their first Argentine decade, but in Gerchunoff’s case, as a child not only did he learn to speak perfect Spanish, but by 1910, at the age of twenty-six, his prose was setting a linguistic and narrative standard. Reading him today, we discover in his writing stylistic forms that were later developed by his followers, among them Borges.

Simultaneously, Gerchunoff’s brief biographical sketches of such writers as Sholem Aleichem, Miguel de Unamuno, James Joyce, Max Nordau, and I. L. Peretz, which appeared in newspapers and magazines, and his deep and careful readings of British writers such as G. K. Chesterton, H. G. Wells, and Rudyard Kipling, influenced future artistic generations on the River Plate. Even if he did not fully belong to the popular *modernista* movement budding at the turn of the century in Latin America,

many moderns welcomed his literature. The Cuban activist José Martí, the Mexican sonneteer Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera, and other *modernistas* dreamed of reviving all literatures written in Spanish. So did Gerchunoff, although he did not quite share the aesthetic and political values of these contemporaries.

His objective was to help Jews become Argentines, to be like everyone else. Following his death, after having composed some two dozen books and innumerable articles, he was praised by Borges himself as “*the writer of le mot juste.*” Such a distinction, one should add, is seldom awarded to an immigrant. I can think of only a few others who have achieved it, among them Vladimir Nabokov, Joseph Brodsky, and Joseph Conrad.

It isn't common for traditions to have clearly defined genealogies. This happens in the Jewish literature of Latin America because of its short history: in tangible terms, it only started in the early twentieth century. This is if one ignores *converso* manifestations in the colonial period. This is a common practice—and, in fact, necessarily—because these manifestations, which align themselves in the shadow, concealing the hidden self, don't align themselves in full with Jewish tradition. Also, this artificial divide is the result of the parting of historical waters: the Sephardic and Ashkenazic literary traditions haven't been seen as a unit until rather recently; in previous epochs, they were perceived as parallel lines that never intersected.

Gerchunoff's role is not unlike that of Mendele Mokher Sforim, aka Sholem Yankev Abramovitch, the *zayde* of the Yiddish literary tradition. Although the two belong to two different worlds and even different languages, both managed to create a sense of literary tradition and continuity absent before. Mendele was considered by Sholem Aleichem to be the grandfather of Yiddish letters, as Gerchunoff became a cultural mentor and compass for later Jewish writers in Argentina such as Gerardo Mario Goloboff, Mario Szichman, Alicia Steimberg, and Isidoro Blaisten. In fact, the comparison is a clue to the linguistic reality the Argentine had to face: by writing in Spanish, he subscribed

to the chain of Spanish and South American letters; Yiddish, the language of most of the immigrants, was left behind after he began publishing, and replaced by Spanish, a cosmopolitan, secular vehicle. Indeed, one has to consider that very few Jewish writers, even if they had some knowledge of Yiddish, could write anything beyond a crude transliterated version.

That's why some, including Gerchunoff himself and successors such as Mario Szichman, used transliterated Yiddish in dialogue. Besides, a Yiddish-reading audience today is practically nonexistent. Mendele found Yiddish the appropriate vehicle for communication with his people; for Gerchunoff, it was Spanish, the idiom of "exile," that turned them into "normal" citizens of Argentina. The two were equally celebrated as speakers of the collective soul.

During his youth, Gerchunoff had an acquaintance, Leopoldo Lugones, a representative of the *modernistas* in Argentina and paternalistically philo-Jewish and pro-immigrant, who gained access for him to *La Nación*, a very influential newspaper in Buenos Aires. Yet Lugones's last, sour years and his own ideological odyssey are symbolic of the attitude of Argentina as a whole toward the Jews: at first a socialist and a liberal, in his mature years and up until his suicide in 1938 he was a fascist and a nationalist. By then the Jews, "alien" people in his eyes, were unacceptable to him as equals because they represented the unwelcome outsider.

This hostility has its counterpart. Take the example of Rubén Darío, the *modernista* par excellence and famous Nicaraguan poet who in 1888 wrote *Azul . . .* (Blue), a book whose impact on Hispanic letters was equivalent to that of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* on English poetry. Darío saw the Jews as appealing citizens, paradoxically both symbolic of an eternal voyage and deeply rooted in the Argentine soil. In a beautiful poem entitled "Song to Argentina," he celebrated the biblical heritage and bucolic present of the citizens of Entre Ríos and Santa Fe. Here is a rough, free translation of one of its stanzas:

Sing Jews of La Pampa!  
Young men of rude appearance,  
sweet Rebeccas with honest eyes,  
Reubens of long locks,  
patriarchs of white,  
dense, horselike hair.  
Sing, sing old Sarahs  
and adolescent Benjamins  
with the voice of our heart:  
“We have found ZION!”<sup>3</sup>

The very same tone is to be found in the twenty-six stories collected by Gerchunoff in *The Jewish Gauchos*, the book to which he owes his fame, a parade of Spanish-speaking but stereotypical Jewish men and women from Eastern Europe adapting to the linguistic and cultural reality of the southern hemisphere. The autonomous narratives that make up every chapter, some better than others, recreate life, tradition, and hard labor in this “new *shtetl*” across the Atlantic. The focus is on relations between Jews and gentiles, the passion to maintain their Jewish religion yet understand and assimilate new customs.

What is most striking about the book to today’s reader is the political ideology it professes. Nineteen ten, one should know, was the centenary of Argentina’s independence, and Gerchunoff meant his text to be a celebration of the nation’s friendly, tolerant, and multiethnic spirit. He had moved to Buenos Aires in 1895 and, beginning in August 1902, contributed regularly to many newspapers, among them *La Nación*. Even after the tragic loss of his father, he stubbornly went on believing that Argentina was a true paradise. He saw the province of Entre Ríos and the cosmopolitan Buenos Aires as a diasporic “holy land” of sorts where the contribution of the Jews would always be welcome in shaping the national culture and where all manifestations of anti-Semitism would ultimately vanish. Such

optimism flourished for only a single generation. It evaporated even faster than the hatred it stood against.

In the short story “Camacho’s Wedding Feast,” part of *The Jewish Gauchos of the Pampas*, Gerchunoff describes the sorrows of a Jewish family when their daughter, about to be married off to a rich Jew, is suddenly carried off by her gentile lover, Camacho, on the very day of the wedding. To be sure, the motif of the stolen bride is universal, having been used by Boccaccio, Federico García Lorca, and Charles Dickens.

Yet note Gerchunoff’s selection of the Argentine character’s name: Camacho was also part of the cast of *Don Quixote of La Mancha*. With all its literary echoes, the author of *The Jewish Gauchos* is able to create a tale in a style that reminds us of oral storytelling. He does it by having a tête-à-tête with the reader and by shaping an unpretentious, colloquial prose that foreshadows the experimental techniques yet to come in Latin America. Here’s the illuminating passage:

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.<sup>4</sup>

Three things are evident from this passage: the author's deep and honest love for his new country, Argentina; his parody of *Don Quixote*; and his sense of tradition, both Jewish and Hispanic. This last is crucial: by referring to Cervantes, Gerchunoff, as a member of a cultural minority, nevertheless placed himself in the grand tradition of Hispanic letters.

While on the one hand he wanted to forge a link with the great master of Renaissance Spain, on the other he sought to relate himself to the Jewish past by referring to such biblical symbols as the wine "from the vineyards my ancestors planted as they sang the praises of Jehovah." Thus, two paths intersect in *The Jewish Gauchos*, and the encounter is dynamic and reciprocal. The Jews of Gerchunoff's community of Entre Ríos behave like gauchos, and the gauchos, in turn, inherit from the Jews a set of ethical values. Writing at the moment of Argentina's first centennial, the author sings to a new communion and to a fresh, hopeful love affair. This glorification of assimilation is puzzling.

As critic Naomi Lindstrom, in *Jewish Issues in Argentine Literature* (1989), claims: "The [novel] assumes that the long-standing Hispanic population of Argentina are the hosts, whereas the new Argentines coming from Eastern European Jewry are guests who must take care not to disrupt preexisting national life with their alien ways."<sup>5</sup> The goal for Gerchunoff's patriotism is to dream of a democratic society where Jews share

and actually contribute to the new culture. But was that the goal of the Jewish immigrants as a whole?

Within a few years after 1910, things turned sour in Argentina. And Gerchunoff's perception of the country as a new "Zion" was not left unchallenged. On the contrary, it was opposed and even repudiated by Jewish intellectuals and literati. More than that, his response to a major crisis for the Jews in Argentina was regarded as disappointing for a figure of his stature. Anti-Semitism reached its height in 1919 with the *Semana Trágica*, the tragic week, an explosion of xenophobic fear that amounted to a full-blown pogrom with numerous injured and dead. (David Viñas, a Jewish novelist born ten years after the tragedy, made use of this sad event, a reminder that the heart of the Americas was not untouched by the same hatred left behind in the old continent, in a novel published in 1966.)

The intensification of negative feelings toward the Jews, generated by a wave of nationalism during the first administration of Hipólito Irigoyen (1916–1922), contributed to profound disappointment and skepticism regarding the future of a pluralistic society in Argentina. Though deeply affected, Gerchunoff did not publicly comment on the event. His silence was taken as a sign of self-criticism as well as cowardly passivity: some thought he might have come to the conclusion that assimilation was impossible in a country with such profound anti-Semitic feelings. The public would have to wait for a coherent statement. Of course, Gerchunoff was no politician; yet in Latin America the opinions of intellectuals are often the only channels through which deep political and ethical concerns are expressed.

Leonardo Senkman, in his study *Jewish Identity in Argentine Literature* (1983), discusses the various essays Gerchunoff wrote to articulate and explain his ideas. In response to Adolf Hitler's ascendancy to power in Germany, Gerchunoff's arguments finally became clear in his brief prologue to an Argentine edition of Ludwig Lewisohn's *Rebirth: A Book of Modern Jewish Thought* (1937). Speaking out against a restriction imposed on

Jewish immigration by the Argentine government that limited the quota of immigrants to at least one-third of the number in previous years, he openly defended the right of the Jews to live anywhere at any time without prohibitions.

It is not difficult to feel in his words a fear of the growth of anti-Semitic literature at the time of the invigorated Nationalist Party, which supported Irigoyen, and its call for the expulsion or even annihilation of all Jews in Argentina. Yet Gerchunoff's general passivity is palpable when placed in relation to the Zionist struggle for an independent Jewish state in Palestine that was taking place in those years. Though angry, he never advocated any kind of Jewish collective self-assertion. I translate:

What should we do? Jews and Argentines, we can protest, fight, expose the hidden goals of the policy of cowardice and crime. And it would be proper to set a foundation for the right of the Jew to life, the right of the Jew to go on living exactly in the same place he was born or where he was left by fate, in the name of the following evidence:

(1) No effort in history to get rid of the Jewish element has been successful, precisely because the Jew, anywhere, is irreplaceable when he performs on the stage of the human spirit, and ineradicable even when one tries to dissimulate his physical presence by means of alien dicta forced on him. . . .

(2) It is positively useless to persecute the Jew, take away from him his goods, or place him in a ghetto, because he may accept that circumstance and will find a way through it. He will be resurrected when given the chance, because those same ones that are willing to beat him, eventually will protect him. . . .

(3) When persecuted, humiliated, or molested anywhere on the planet, the Jew will expand his solidarity with other Jews, because precisely in that he finds his dignity. . . . And in that sense, the Jewish character and his diasporic pride will be confirmed when his attachment to other Jews is awakened.<sup>6</sup>

Gerchunoff calls at first for intellectual protests against anti-Semitic acts because he thinks he may persuade his enemy by intellectual means. That persuasion remained a hope, not a reality. As time went on, he sank into disillusionment and silence, and eventually isolated himself from his community.

Although he became quite enthusiastic about certain Jewish topics, such as the Talmud, he remained evasive and ambivalent. When Jewish symbols appear in his late fiction, it is always in a remote and distant context, with reference to Heinrich Heine or Baruch Spinoza, never the current scene. His dream of a Promised Land in South America was slowly collapsing, along with other liberal values. At the outbreak of World War II in 1939, about 218,000 Jews lived in Argentina. Yet only a decade later, the country turned into a nightmare for all integrationist hopes.

Arguably the most horrific events in that nightmare took place in 1994, when the AMIA (Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina), the Jewish Community Center in Buenos Aires, was the target of a terrorist attack that left almost a hundred people dead and many more injured. The event took place more than two years after another anti-Semitic attack in Buenos Aires, this one against the Israeli Embassy. Twenty-nine people died and more than two hundred were injured.

The investigation to the AMIA attack led to Iran, but the then-president Carlos Saúl Menem, who was of Lebanese descent, impeded a thorough investigation. As a result, the wounds remained open. The AMIA attack was the first major terrorist incident against Jews not only in Argentina but also

in Latin America. The outcome of that event left the Jewish communities in the region vulnerable, fearful of further aggressions. While Gerchunoff couldn't have foreseen the atrocities, in his disenchantment he produced a litany that augured a time when Jews would become individualized as objects of animosity.

The incident serves as a bookend to Borges's intellectual quest because politics infringed on Argentine Jewish life in cathartic ways. The detached, cosmopolitan Jew that is ubiquitous in his stories and poems became even more of an anachronism, an ethereal creature only capable of existing as an abstraction. A number of journalistic investigations as well as literary works and movies have been produced around the terrorist attack.

A decade after it, ten directors, including Daniel Burman and Alberto Lecchi, made a film anthology titled after the date of the attack, *18-j* (2004). Also, in 2009 Marcos Carnevale premiered *Anita*, about a young woman with Down Syndrome who wanders Buenos Aires after her mother is killed in the AMIA bombing. Among others, Gustavo D. Perednik published a fictionalized chronicle called *Matar sin que se note* (*Killing without Trace*, 2009). Also, along with Marcelo Brodsky, I created a *fotonovela* about the preparations for the attack called *Once @ 9:53am* (2012).

The history of Jewish Argentine literature includes many others considered to be Gerchunoff's successors. Among them is César Tiempo (pseudonym of Israel Zeitlin, 1906–1980), a famous-in-his-time playwright, critic, and poet, who had emigrated to Argentina from Ukraine. He was highly esteemed as a man of letters and travel writer whose poetry almost uniquely refers to one central metaphor: the Sabbath. This interest is reflected in some of the titles of his works: *Book for the Break of the Sabbath*, published in 1930, or *Joyful Saturday*, which appeared in 1955.

He always willingly wrote for a gentile audience and, probably influenced by Israel Zangwill's *Dreamers of the Ghetto*,

used the vivid imagery of the Buenos Aires Jewish ghetto to draw an appealing distinction between the Jewish and Christian Sabbaths. As a liberal, Tiempo identified with the oppressed and humiliated, and favored a multiethnic society. His two famous theatrical pieces, *I Am the Theater* and *Creole Bread*, staged in the thirties, dealt with the subject of assimilation and Jewish versus gentile justice.

Like Gerchunoff, he was deeply depressed by outbursts of anti-Semitism; yet unlike him, he actively responded with written arguments and oral protests against the racist campaign inspired by the infamous writings of the propagandist Gustavo Martínez Zuviría. The director of the National Library in Buenos Aires, Zuviría, under the pen name of Hugo Wast, had written both *The Kahal and Gold* in 1938, inspired by *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, the infamous anti-Semitic tract immensely popular, even today, throughout Latin America. Yet despite Tiempo's public complaints, nothing changed. At times, even the national press, as if echoing his own writing, denied the presence of racial tension in the country. As with Gerchunoff, the political events helped develop in him a deeply rooted skepticism about Argentina's democratic future, and they also frightened his young Jewish followers.

Another important Jewish figure in Argentine literature is Bernardo Verbitsky (1907–1979), a prolific realist writer who published long novels dealing with Jewish identity in contemporary Argentina and the world at large. They include *Hard to Start Living* (1941), which is an essential text for understanding the cultural situation of Buenos Aires in the thirties. The critic and novelist David Viñas (1929–2011), whom I mentioned in reference to the *Semana Trágica*, in his novel *Dar la Cara* (1962), argues for a nation that is at once multiethnic, democratic, and tolerant.

Jewish writers and intellectuals of later generations suffered the horrors of military dictatorship, persecution, violence, and exile. Among them was Luisa Mercedes Levinson, half-Jewish

and a close friend and colleague of Borges, who wrote “The Cove”; she is the mother of the Argentine-born New York experimentalist Luisa Valenzuela, author of *The Lizard’s Tail* (1985).

Another crucial name is Germán Rozenmacher (1936–1971), a talented young man who felt that the constant attempt to participate in the country’s everyday life created deep psychological scars among the Jews. The protagonists of his stories, collected in one volume in 1970, are lonely creatures, many of them failed artists with identity problems, who aspire to enter genteel society but are unable to do so. His tenacious belief in assimilation always brings the reader to the conclusion that for him no Jewish existence proud of its accomplishments could flourish in his native Argentina. In “Blues in the Night,” Vassily Goloboff, a music professor who once sang in the Moscow Opera and rejected his Jewish name and identity after immigrating to Buenos Aires, returns to religion in his later years. In the tradition of the encounter between Leopold Bloom and Stephen Dedalus, one day he has a sudden rendezvous with Bernardo, a young Jew, in which they share memories about broken families and talk about their enchantment with *I Pagliacci*. But no happiness comes to them in the end.

In the same generation as Rozenmacher are the storyteller Mario Goloboff (b. 1939), the author of a trilogy that includes the 1984 novel *Pigeon Keeper*, about rural life in the mythical town of Algarrobos; Humberto Costantini (1924–1987); Pedro Orgambide (b. 1928); Isidoro Blaisten (1933–2004); Alicia Steimberg (1933–2012); Marcos Aguinis (b. 1935); Ricardo Feierstein (b. 1942); Cecilia Absatz (b. 1943); Aída Bortnik (b. 1943); Nora Glickman (b. 1942); Mario Satz (b. 1944); Marcos Ricardo Barnatán (b. 1946); Mario Szichman (b. 1945); Ana María Shua (b. 1951), Marcelo Birmajer (b. 1966); and Andrés Neuman (b. 1977).

Szichman, the author of *At 8:25 Evita Became Immortal* (1983), is particularly interesting. In the late 1960s he tried to