



Nora Glickman

FROM
THE PAMPAS TO
NEW YORK, WITH
DETOURS

Scenes from the Life of a
Jewish Gaucha

Jewish Studies

Collection Editor
ANGY COHEN

LIVED PLACES
PUBLISHING



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Introduction

This collection of stories begins with family memory. Like many Jews fleeing pogroms in Eastern Europe, my grandparents arrived in Argentina at the end of the 1890s, during a period of large-scale immigration—largely from Spain and Italy—encouraged by government policies under President Julio A. Roca (1880–1886; 1898–1904). By then, foreign-born residents in Argentina already outnumbered the native-born *criollo* population.¹

Partly funded by the German philanthropist Baron Maurice Hirsch (1831–1886), founder of the Jewish Colonization Association (JCA), Jewish immigrants settled in the Pampas, where Jewish agricultural colonies took root. As Jewish gauchos, those immigrants built not only farms but also communal institutions—a synagogue, a cemetery, a Yiddish school, and a library—that helped sustain cultural continuity in an unfamiliar land. Most of these communities have since faded, yet traces remain, embedded in my memories.

My parents were first-generation Argentines. At home, Yiddish was spoken naturally among elders, while Spanish connected us fully to Argentine life. I grew up within this bilingual, bicultural setting, inheriting what came to be known as the “Jewish gaucho” tradition—a life shaped as much by the rhythms of rural Argentina as by Jewish custom and storytelling. This cultural synthesis gained literary recognition through *The Jewish Gauchos of the Pampas* (1910), the celebrated vignettes by Alberto

Gerchunoff, who captured both the struggles and the humor of these pioneers.² For me, however, this was more than a literary construct: in my childhood, it was a lived reality.

The stories in this book are narrated by Teresita—my alter ego—and unfold across three stages and locations: childhood in Argentina, adolescence in Europe and Israel, and adulthood in the United States. I wrote most of them in the 1970s, during my early years in the United States, when I was beginning my academic career. Much of my later scholarly work—edited critical volumes and journals, anthologies, articles, reviews, and translations—has remained closely tied to my Judeo-Hispanic identity. Only one story in this collection, “How I Became Who I Am,” took many years to complete, as it required time to absorb and process scattered events and circumstances.

Chapter 1, “Childhood: My years as a boy,” is told from Teresita’s perspective as an Argentine Jewish child. These stories recount her early years on her parents’ farm in the Pampas. Proudly taking on demanding chores, she becomes “the boy of the house,” earning her father’s admiration and the respect of neighbors. This period is defined by her innocence, determination, and joy in growing up within a bilingual environment, where Yiddish and Spanish mingle and where she responds instinctively to the poetic sounds of Yiddish.

Chapter 2, “Adolescence: The crucial years,” covers Teresita’s adolescence, the most decisive years of her life. For her *quinceañera*,³ her parents gave her not a party but a transatlantic journey to Europe and Israel. Intended to broaden her horizons, the trip ends up testing her relationship with her family. Upon returning to Argentina, she asserts her independence by

rebellious against their expectations and choosing to marry a non-Jewish man. Later, when she returns reluctantly to Israel, experiences she once resented begin to open new perspectives. Gradually, curiosity and resilience replace resistance, and she comes to recognize this period as a formative rite of passage.

Chapter 3, “Adulthood: New York, New York,” explores Teresa’s adulthood. After a gap of several years, the stories resume with her new life in the United States. As a graduate student and Spanish teacher in New York, she confronts the physical and emotional demands of academic life while managing her roles as wife and mother. The later stories unfold in New York City and its suburbs, where struggle coexists with discovery.

Notes

1. *Criollo* (Spanish): This refers to people of local ancestry, typically Spanish or Portuguese descendants of the inhabitants present since the colonial period, irrespective of their race or origin.
2. Alberto Gerchunoff (1834–1950): Russian-born journalist and author of *Los gauchos judíos* (1910) (*The Jewish Gauchos*, translated into English in 1955), who envisioned the promised land on the agricultural colonies as a haven for Jews fleeing from pogroms in Czarist Russia.
3. *Quinceañera*: Traditional Latin American 15th birthday celebration.

Abstract

Childhood dreams falter when tested against adult realities, yet a quiet reconciliation emerges. Sustained by memory, curiosity, and candid humor, the narrator learns to reinterpret her early hopes through the lens of experience and to embrace the rhythms of a life lived across continents.

The accounts in this volume are based on real experiences, though they also incorporate elements of creative fiction. Certain periods are more revealing than others, which helps explain the distance between my childhood and adolescent accounts and those of adulthood. I integrate dialogue and monologue throughout the stories and alternate between first- and third-person narration. My approach may be described as autofiction: largely autobiographical yet shaped by fictional elaboration that does not require the continuity or completeness of a novel. These stories attempt to clarify, for myself, moments of heightened emotional intensity, times when writing becomes a way of giving expression to feeling.

Key words

Latina; Jewish; The Pampas; Israel; New York; Culture; Identity

Notes and discussion questions

Chapter 1 Childhood: My years as a boy

Juan, tame and wild

A child's innocence can be a double-edged knife: the child senses meaning but may not fully understand the adult message.

Discussion questions:

1. As a child, did you ever find yourself in an uncomfortable or ambiguous situation with a stranger? How did you respond?
2. Were you ever drawn to an older person—man or woman—without fully understanding your feelings? How did you express them?

The last of the settlers

The narrator recounts the struggles of Boruch, a Jewish immigrant who fled persecution in Russia in the early twentieth century, only to encounter poverty in the Argentine Pampas.

Discussion questions:

1. Can you recall a moment in childhood when you first became aware of a family hardship or tragedy? How did it affect you emotionally?

2. Do you remember overhearing an adult conversation that changed your understanding of your family or community?

My years as a boy

The company of a child of the opposite sex allows the narrator to explore identity freely and experiment with different roles.

Discussion questions:

1. What kinds of games did you play as a child?
2. Did any involve role-playing or experimentation with gender roles?
3. How do you interpret games shared between boys and girls in shaping identity?

At the movies

The story contrasts older forms of communal movie-going with modern cinema culture.

Discussion questions:

1. Do you recall making a promise as a child and later breaking it? What did you learn from the experience?
2. How would you respond to a form of movie-going that included socializing and intermissions rather than silent attention?

A wind at dawn

Learning a grandparent's native language establishes a lasting intergenerational bond. The story also recounts the narrator's shock upon learning about her uncle's failed aspirations as a Yiddish poet.

Discussion questions:

1. Were you exposed to a family tragedy at an age when you could not fully understand it?
2. What artistic experience in childhood—literature, music, film, or poetry—left a lasting impression on you?

My cousin Elenita

Children must often adapt to family decisions without consultation.

Discussion questions:

1. Has your family ever had to adjust a living arrangement due to a relative's crisis?
2. How do you respond when an adult behaves unjustly toward someone you care about? Is forgiveness possible?

Fire in the farm

A child is unexpectedly forced to assume an adult responsibility.

Discussion questions:

1. Were you ever asked to perform an adult task before you felt ready?
2. Can you identify a moment when you realized you were no longer a child?

Chapter 2 Adolescence: The crucial years

The broken necklace

In the 1950s, school assignments in Argentina often demanded formulaic personal essays.

Discussion questions:

1. If assigned to write about your summer vacation, would you choose honesty, autobiography, or imaginative embellishment? Why?

The gloved hand

Adolescence involves risk-taking, venturing into new experiences, and emerging independence.

Discussion questions:

1. Did your parents ever disapprove of a friendship or romantic interest? How did you respond?
2. What conflict of identity did you experience during adolescence?

How I became who I am

The story unfolds amid Argentina's political instability in the 1950s and 1960s, including the anti-Semitic attacks by *Tacuara*, a neo-Nazi group.

Discussion questions:

1. How did adolescence mark your transition from rebellion to maturity?
2. What aspirations guided you as you were growing up?
3. Have you migrated from one country to another? What challenges and opportunities did you encounter?

Chapter 3 Adulthood: New York, New York

A day in New York

The narrator compresses 24 hours of professional and domestic life into a single narrative arc, juxtaposed with reflections of *Candide*.

Discussion questions:

1. Have you observed significant demographic or cultural shifts in a neighborhood that was once familiar to you?
2. Have you ever felt overwhelmed by opportunity and responsibility at the same time?

Rereading “The unbearable sadness of a hotel rooms”

Literary reflection intersects with urban experiences and immigrant memory on rereading a story by Germán Rozenmacher, one of Argentina’s most important twentieth-century Jewish writers.

Discussion questions:

1. Have you ever become deeply absorbed in a literary work to the point that it influenced your daily life?
2. Can you appreciate a story’s emotional complexity even without knowing all its literary references?

Door half open

A mother reflects on her daughter’s emotional evolution.

Discussion questions:

1. Have you experienced shifts in your relationship with your parents as you matured?
2. How did growing older alter your perception of family and home?

Learning objectives

After reading this collection, students should be able to:

1. Evaluate the power of parental authority on adolescent identity formation.
2. Examine the emotional dimensions of youthful rebellion.
3. Reflect on the impact of migration and transnational experience on cultural identity.
4. Compare your own upbringing with that of a Latina-Jewish narrator navigating multiple cultural frameworks.
5. Assess the role of childhood memories in shaping adult self-understanding.

1

Childhood: My years as a boy

Juan, tame and wild

In those days, I could take as long as I wanted, as time stood still and waited for me: "Easy, easy, there's time ...!" I rode my horse bareback, without a blanket or saddle to separate me from his vast haunches, so I could feel how everything flowed together. Riding, I felt a harmonious energy coming from my horse, spreading through from his hooves to his ankles, knees, backbone, muscles, and mane, in an equestrian dance that thrust me forward, jumping over foxholes and hares burrows, almost stumbling, only to rise with spirit, galloping on. My horse trusted me as if the warmth and lightness of my body protected him, and when I shouted, "Giddy up, horse, giddy up!" barely touching the reins, he'd shake his head and whinny "Pffffhh!" in his compact, equine language.

"Giddy up, horse, giddy up!"

We'd look for the shade of a tree in the open fields. I'd tie him to a post where he could find something to chew, to keep him busy for a while. I'd sit on the grass and wait for things to happen. I'd wait for birds, hares, and foxes to appear. I had to keep as still as a statue, so they'd let me watch them, so they'd approach me without fear,

see me as the harmless animal I was, and smell me, touch me. I'd be very quiet, certain that none of them would dare bite me.

Maybe, if I kept waiting, Juan, a *gaucho*,¹ would appear—Juan, the wildest animal in the wilds. In order to live, he had to kill. His hunting knife thrust inside his faded waistband; his beard, stubbly and disheveled; his hat, coated with the dust from the desert; his hemp sandals exposing the hardened calluses on his feet.

Was he a heroic *gaucho* like Martin Fierro?² Santos Vega?³ *Don Segundo Sombra*?⁴ Back then, I knew nothing of *gaucho* literature. I only knew *Little Red Riding Hood*, *Snow White*, and *Sleeping Beauty*, and I'd learned not to leave a trail of breadcrumbs along the way, because birds would eat them, and you wouldn't find your way back home.

And one day, he came. He looked at me from a distance, measuring me, holding himself back.

"You're the boss's daughter, right?"

"Yes."

"What are you doing here? Aren't you afraid?"

"No."

He tied his chestnut horse next to my horse, laid his bundle in the shade of a tree, and began to gather brush, which he ably broke to start a fire. Then, from a moist and reddish rag, he took out a piece of meat and speared it on an iron spit. While roasting the meat he drew a circle around it, sweeping away dirt and burned brushwood with a stick.

"I came to look at the critters."

"Critters! Am I a critter to you?"

I shrugged.

"Your horse doesn't have a saddle."

"He does, but I ride bareback."

Juan looked at the faded leather of his own saddle; his uneven reins tied with clumsy knots. He rose to unburden his horse.

"This way he'll rest with yours."

I felt that Juan looked at me with the curiosity of a fox, a hare, or a bird perched on a branch. I let myself be looked at, and waited, motionless, wondering if this critter would bite or scratch.

I was roused by the enveloping smell of roasting meat; the smoke began to cloud my eyes. I stood up.

"Well, I must go. It's getting dark. They're waiting for me."

"Don't you want some meat?"

"No, thanks."

"Some other day."

"Some other day."

"D'you know there are snakes here that bite?"

I clutched the Star of David⁵ hanging from my thin gold chain.

"I know, but I come anyway."

Juan looked down, grabbed his wine jug, and began to stare at the fire, not even turning around as I rode away.

Tame and brave, my Juan, a lone animal in the wild.

The last of the settlers

Old Leiserman is dead—the old settler, Boruch Leiserman. The news stirs up memories of my little town in the province of La Pampa. In those days, Boruch was closer to me than my grandfather, than any of my uncles.

When things were slow at our shop, Mama used to take me along on visits to see Boruch and his wife, Sarah. Around five o'clock, while Papa tried to talk a client into buying some insurance policy—a topic that could keep him going for hours on end—Mama slipped out of the office and went into the house to get me.

It was just a few blocks away. As we walked, the stench of beery cigarette smoke from Lanuse's bar followed us to the corner. The Viners and the Shameses had set their cane chairs out in front of their stores, close enough to chat with each other. The wives looked older than their husbands. They rocked slowly and spoke a sort of Yiddishized Spanish. We passed Litner's bakery, where a shaggy, dusty dog lay stretched out across the sidewalk, relaxing in the aroma of freshly baked rolls, or perhaps sleepy in its old age. Mama would buy me some pastries and chat with Mrs. Litner, who always complained about the arthritis that was gnawing her knees, and about her mother, who lay dying in the little room out back. Mama listened calmly—things were going to Hell at a steady pace. There would be months and months to enjoy the same pastries and the same conversations.

Sarah Leiserman would greet us with a big bowl of toasted sunflower seeds with *lekach*⁶ and with some Russian tea in which we soaked sugar lumps. I preferred to wet the sugar a little bit

at a time and watch it darken as it dissolved. After a while, Sarah would go lie down. She was always tired. Mama stayed to chat with Boruch, and I went to the barn out back, where I'd collect some corn in my skirt and scatter it in the yard for the chickens. Sometimes I threw a violent fistful at them, just to watch them run and hear them cackle. Then I'd chase a few and pull on their feathers. Over by the water tank, I'd find Boruch's old roan horse rubbing his neck on the rusty edge of the watery trough, avoiding the sharp edges, and fill his bag with fodder so he wouldn't get hungry at night.

While Mama and Boruch were still talking, I'd slip inside and listen, looking through the shoebox of old, faded photographs of relatives from the Old World. Boruch talked about the Russian Revolution, about the ear infection he had contracted on purpose in order to avoid conscription (his ear still oozed occasionally), and about the workers' strike in Buenos Aires. Mama told him about the articles in her Yiddish newspaper, especially about Israel, Zionism, and the *kibbutz*.⁷ But Boruch didn't see the point of a Jewish homeland. "A Jewish state [he grumbled] surrounded by Arab enemies, can't stay a democracy for long." To annoy him, I guess, Mama would ask me to sing *Mir furn kein Eretz*⁸ and then she'd go on alone, with a song about dreaming of planting orange groves in Israel and forgetting the *goles*, the Diaspora. Mama poured her heart and soul into those songs, as if they brought her closer to Israel, as if she could throw off the burden of the millenary exile.

Boruch grimaced an impatient "Ach," shooining the song away. Then he'd put his arm around me and say, "Meyn ketzele, zing mir'Oyfn Pripechic,"⁹ which was his favorite song. He didn't have

to ask me twice. I sang that song and others while they hummed with me. The old man closed his eyes and raised his bushy eyebrows, creating a kind of magic, magnetic space on his forehead. When he opened his eyes, it was as if he were waking up from something that made him shudder. I don't really know how he felt, because he would always cut the moment short with some practical, commonplace observation.

During those visits, Mama went over Boruch's bills, which were always a mess. It took her only a few sums to prove that yes, he could afford to replace his little carriage with a used pickup truck; yes, he could build a wall to close off the vine-covered passageway from the winter cold; and yes, it was cheaper to have one hired hand all year round than to pay several at harvest time. Boruch just held his head in his hands and reminded Mama of the locusts that had devoured everything two summers before, and also of the fire that had burned the Perels's field during last year's harvest, when his own field had been saved only because the wind changed direction. A fire like that, or another hailstorm like the one in 1951, could leave him bankrupt. And then what would become of him? You always needed to keep something in reserve for emergencies.

Mama grew impatient. "You're so stubborn you'll never get anywhere." We were all silent for a few moments. Only the crackling of the fireplace could be heard. The shells of the sunflower seeds slowly accumulated on the plaid tablecloth, and a few fell to the floor.

When we got back to our store, we found Papa in a bad mood, scribbling numbers, tearing up papers, and throwing them into the wastebasket:

"You left without transferring the balance. Blanca was alone at the cash register, and she fouled up again."

"So, since when am I working for you?" Mama retorted. "You pay Blanca, not me."

Papa just kept on crumpling paper into balls and going over the numbers. He didn't argue anymore, but he stayed in the store and worked until nightfall. How could Mama drop everything to go see that *schlimazl*, that loser, Boruch? What did she see in him? But Mama rose to his defense. "He's got *seychel*, good sense. And he reads more than all of you put together—how could he get stuck in this God-forsaken dump, I'd like to know?—But *Shoy'n!* Enough!" And that was that.

If Papa felt sorry for anyone, it was for Sarah. She was stuck with Boruch. She had survived the pogroms in Russia by sheer miracle. When the Cossacks broke into her uncle's house, Sarah was the only one who managed to hide in time, under the rafters of the ceiling. What she saw from there haunted her the rest of her life. The drunken hooligans tore the house apart. Feathers went flying all over when they ripped the blankets and the pillows with their sabers. They disemboweled Sarah's uncle, a big man, and stuffed his belly with the feathers. Annoyed at her aunt's screaming, they stabbed out her eyes before they killed her. I don't want to remember what she told me about the gruesome murder of her three cousins. After the pogrom was over, my *zeyde*¹⁰ took pity on that wretched orphan and brought her to Argentina, passing her off as one of his children. Absent and withdrawn, she seemed to cleanse the sorrows from her veined hands by rubbing them into her apron. My father was convinced that Boruch had never looked at Sarah before taking her to

wife—and probably never looked at her after, either. His first wife had died while giving birth, leaving him with four small children. It was clear that Boruch couldn't handle them by himself, and there was Sarah, available, submissive, silent ... Mama says that people are just the way they are, and if Sarah wanted to become a martyr, she got what she wanted.

After my family moved to Bahia,¹¹ we kept going back to Bernasconi¹² every summer, just because the village was on the way to our farm. Sometimes, we dropped in to say hello to the Leisermans, but it wasn't the same anymore. Since Papa came along with us, he insisted we cut the visits short so that we could see as many friends and relatives as possible in one afternoon and not offend anyone. During one of those visits, we found out about Boruch's accident.

It happened at his farm, a short distance from the village. Nobody better than Boruch could tell the tornado was coming; he could read the dense crimson streaks in the clouds, racing low in the sky, the loud screeching of the ducks, flying away in panic. An old-time *gaucho*, he understood the menace implicit in the motionless air, suspended like in a photograph. He must have anticipated the inexorable advance of the dark column that would swallow everything in its path, and he, the stubborn immigrant, had to thwart it; he had to defeat it just long enough to get his four panic-stricken cows into the barn. Once they were secured, he went out to close the gate of the corral.

The farmhand just happened to be in the village that day. When he returned the following morning he found Boruch among the wreckage, 100 yards or more from the barn, in the middle

of a large puddle left behind by the storm. Boruch must have rolled into the mud, dragging with him all the plants he had ever seeded during his life. What would he have been thinking? About the cows that wouldn't make it? About the next harvest, already lost? About his unfinished business? No! I guess he closed his eyes just like when he was enjoying a song, knitted his brow, and let himself go, carried away in an enchanted poncho.

My years as a boy

Back then, nothing was clear. When Papa introduced me to visitors as the boy of the house rather than as his daughter, I lengthened my skinny back, took a deep breath, and felt my shoulder blades crackle with pride. Some of the visitors insisted on treating me as a girl. Maybe they thought I was more malleable, more compliant. Nothing could be done about them.

Alfredo's father, Doctor Sofovich, who liked to give orders, would send me to play with his son because he expected me to play gently. Alfredo had contracted polio and always stayed home. If the order to play with Alfredo interrupted a ball game, I went unwillingly. But if he called me when we were tormenting a cat or throwing stones at frogs, I went without protest.

Alfredo slept next door to his father's waiting room, and he told me about the conversations he overheard and the procedures he spied on. If I liked them, we play-acted them. That was how I learned about treatments and cures.

Many of the patients who came to Doctor Sofovich had already gone to the town healer and to Doña Josefa, the doddering, ancient gypsy who read cards better than anyone. They only saw the doctor when there was no other choice. If I went to Alfredo's house, it wasn't so much because I cared about his stories; I didn't want to be a doctor. I wanted to be a rancher, like my father. Besides, no real boy wanted to play with Alfredo. I went only because he agreed to my conditions without objecting.

"Today we'll talk about diseases."