

On the Fifteenth Anniversary  
of *Parricide On The Pampa?*  
Introduction to the Second Edition

*Los gauchos judíos* is the foundation stone of Judeo-Argentine literature and the indispensable reference point for any discussion of the Jewish writer's mission in Argentine letters.

Lázaro Liacho, "Re-reading  
*Los gauchos judíos*" on the occasion  
of a new edition a quarter of a  
century later, 1936.

I wouldn't say that *Los gauchos judíos* reflects Gerchunoff's thinking at the end of his life. To believe otherwise would be to fix his thoughts and convictions in an immutable stasis totally alien to his mentality. Fortunately, historical tragedies still exert power over thinking beings and succeed in modifying fundamental beliefs to the extent necessary.

Samuel Eichelbaum,  
Homage to Gerchunoff, *Davar*, 1951

1. *LOS GAUCHOS JUDÍOS: A COMPLEX BOOK*

A decade and a half ago I published *Parricide on the Pampa?* and wrote that *Los gauchos judíos* was a complex book. In the time since *Parricide* appeared, the complexities of Alberto Gerchunoff's inaugural volume have only increased; I see this as a felicitous development.

Rather than let Gerchunoff's vignettes descend into quiet oblivion or paralysis, *Parricide* opened up the pioneering tales about the early twentieth-century Jewish agricultural colonies on the Argentine plains to greater scholarly scrutiny and greater awareness of the author's constant evolution as a language-meister and as a political activist (see Ricardo Feierstein, Judith Freidenberg). By uncovering the existence of differing versions of *The Jewish Gauchos*—the

original 1910 collection and the 1936 revision—I succeeded in unfreezing the text, and I facilitated more accurate and productive approaches to the foundational book of Spanish-language Judeo-Argentine literature.

## 2. 1910, 1936, AND THE NEW SCHOLARSHIP

Thanks to my focus on Gerchunoff's two editions, with the first pungently particularistic and openly yiddishist—if ready to call Argentina a provisional “Zion”—subsequent scholars have questioned and even attacked the parricidal generation of 1970s Argentine authors (James Hussar, Perla Sneh). These father-slayers censured Gerchunoff for allegedly neutralizing his Jewish identity in 1910, at the Centenary of Argentine independence, in return for a place in the southern “Promised Land” (David Viñas and others.) The censorious Viñas generation mirrored their own troubled dictatorship years through the assault on the patriarch, unaware that they were throwing aspersions on the 1936 reworked text.

My attention to the emendations Gerchunoff made in 1936, coming at a much less rosy era in Argentine and world history, with the rise of local and international fascism, has led recent scholars not to censure Gerchunoff but to see *The Jewish Gauchos* as an open book, able to respond and adapt to the shifting socio-political winds.<sup>1</sup> The author's skill in modulating his revised text with a more universal tenor and a more generic vocabulary in the Nazi years reflected the altered world historical moment when Jewishness was threatened, and the image of the gaucho was radically divergent, by the infamous decade of the 1930s frankly a symbol of the anti-Semitic nationalist-fascist right. The place of the Jews in Argentina was likewise different by mid-century, like Gerchunoff himself no longer primarily farming greenhorns in need of “amalgamation” into the once-upon-a-time national symbol.

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<sup>1</sup> This adaptability can be seen in a letter from Gerchunoff, written in 1940 to his boss, Leónides de Vedia, chief editor of the important Argentine daily *La Nación*, after de Vedia wanted to offer him a tribute on the thirty-year anniversary of the original book. Gerchunoff politely turns down the homage, saying: “The circumstances under which we are living, coupled with an understanding of the magnitude of the dangers threatening civilization, prevent those of us who retain a modicum of human feeling from accepting personal tributes or deriving satisfaction from affectionate acts of friendship” (Senkman, 148).

Working with my 1910/1936 comparisons, scholars have become more aware of the layers of historical and cultural phenomena and their varied stages of development (Ariana Huberman, Monica Szurmuk). *Los gauchos judíos* was not a simple South of the Border *Fiddler on the Pampa*, although an attempt was made to turn it into just that by the director Juan José Jusid in a 1974 film.

### 3. NOT JUST ONE BOOK

If *Parricide on the Pampa?* helped the process of unblocking Gerchunoff's best-known work, it also contributed to an uncovering of many of his previously-buried writings. The former Jewish cowboy from Entre Ríos became increasingly recognized as the author of not just one book, but of multiple stories, novels and essays, from the gritty urban tales of *Cuentos de ayer* (Tales of Yesteryear; 1919) to the fiery articles of the anti-fascist paper, *Argentina Libre* (Free Argentina; 1940-1949) (Leonardo Senkman). As a result, writings by Gerchunoff have been anthologized in editions sponsored by private communal groups and by government entities (Ricardo Feierstein, Perla Sneh). The controversial author who had never really gone away was "rediscovered," favorably rethought and substantially expanded.

### 4. GERCHUNOFF, ANTI-FASCIST: FROM "ZION" TO ZION

An invaluable primary source in the rural-young-man-turned-city-slicker's textual expansion is the Alberto Gerchunoff Archive at the Dr. Emilio Ravignani Institute for Argentine and American History, held at the University of Buenos Aires. It was there, sifting through faded papers to see if I could further my research, that I found the almost-lost treasure of Gerchunoff's final manuscript: the potential book, *La estrella de David* [The Star of David], ready to be published if not for the journalist-author's untimely death in 1950.

*La estrella de David* painfully bookends Gerchunoff's career. *Los gauchos judíos* was intended, the author said, to observe Jewish life in an environment of freedom without the age-old persecution. When he became literary critic

of *La Nación*, he could carry out this plan (*Entre Ríos, mi país*, 34). Forty years later, in his last book, Gerchunoff again tackles a turning point—now a catastrophe—in Jewish history, a thousand-fold replay of the age-old persecution that he thought had ended. *La estrella de David*, based largely on the fighting journalist's articles in *Argentina Libre*, confronts the horrors of the Shoah and, still ever hopeful, the longed-for liberation in the real Zion, Israel. *La estrella de David* shares with *Los gauchos judíos* the 'the slavery to redemption' arc, this time rising from Nazi extermination to liberty in the ancestral homeland.

The former Jewish gaucho, stung to the core by the world's (including Argentina's) indifference to the Jewish genocide but nevertheless optimistic, again redoes the ancient script. And as in *Los gauchos judíos*, versions one and two, he struggles with language, early on tackling questions of Holocaust representation and the dilemmas of 'writing the catastrophe.' Hence the appropriateness of Samuel Eichelbaum's words in the epigraph: historical tragedies exert power and modify fundamental beliefs to the extent necessary.

Seen in this light, the unpublished volume can be considered one more rewriting of the 1910 collection: showing concern with Jews in Argentina and among the nations; restlessly changing topics and techniques to reflect history; and while aware of the weight of calamity, refusing to give up, to let the star of shame crowd out the star of redemption, as Gerchunoff put it in his last book.

##### 5. A 21<sup>ST</sup>-CENTURY JEWISH GAUCHOS?

It is my hope that with the republication of *Parricide in the Pampa?* the inaugural work of Judeo-Argentine literature can be studied and taught as a book that in its latest incarnation opens up to Holocaust Studies, bringing the turn-of-the-twentieth-century volume closer to us in our post-Shoah twenty-first century. It was Gerchunoff's genius that on the rural scaffolding of the first *Los gauchos judíos* he was able to construct a sturdy yet flexible literary edifice, able to speak to different eras, able to retain its timeliness from generation to generation.

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