

Author: Ariana Huberman

Session: How to Integrate the Jewish Experience in Latin America into Jewish Studies Courses

Jewish Immigration to Latin America at the Turn of the Nineteenth Century

Note: This essay appeared in the Winter 2012/Spring 2013 issue of the Latin American Jewish Studies (LAJS) Newsletter, viewable here:

http://www.utexas.edu/cola/orgs/lajsa/files/downloads/newsletters/2013_w-s.pdf

It has been reproduced with the author's permission.

For this presentation I chose to show how I introduce in my class on Jewish Trajectories in Latin America what is considered one of the pioneer Latin American Jewish literary texts, *The Jewish Gauchos* by Alberto Gerchunoff. I briefly introduced the key historical aspects of the text's significance, and I described the lesson plan that I outlined in a handout I shared with the audience. My presentation was primarily directed toward Jewish Studies professors who wanted to include Latin America in their syllabi.

Here is the brief overview of the text's history I started with: *The Jewish Gauchos* was published in 1910 in conjunction with Argentina's Centennial celebration. This collection of short stories or vignettes describes a particular migratory phenomenon that took place in Argentina at the end of the nineteenth century and into the first decades of the twentieth century. It was an organized effort that helped thousands of Jews to flee the violence in Russia and other countries in Eastern Europe, and to resettle into the Argentine countryside. The Jewish Colonization Association (J.C.A.), founded by the Jewish philanthropist Baron Maurice de Hirsch, bought land and helped to administer a cluster of agricultural settlements in Argentina. They also tried similar ventures in the South of Brazil, Bolivia, and the Dominican Republic with less significant success. The Jewish colonies in Argentina enjoyed economic and cultural prosperity from the 1920s until the 1940s when Argentina experienced internal migrations towards the cities due to questionable economic and political policies that failed to retain immigrants in the countryside (*Historia de los judíos argentinos* 121). From that moment on the young started to migrate to the urban centers and to the newly created state of Israel in order to seek professional education and greater opportunities..

The collection of interlinked stories published as *The Jewish Gauchos* received a mixed reception. The Jewish gaucho figure was perceived by the Argentine Jewish community as a step toward becoming exclusively Argentine and as being too assimilationist. However, Gerchunoff's celebration of Jewish values as a contribution to Argentine culture was perceived as his antidote against complete assimilation as a viable solution. At the same time, even if he was a bit "too Jewish" for the melting pot ideal, the Jewish gaucho was highly celebrated by the Argentine nationalists. The xenophobic intelligentsia curiously "appropriated" texts such as Gerchunoff's *The Jewish Gauchos*.

The collection of stories starts in the Pale of Settlement where a beleaguered Jewish community resolves to pursue a life of renewal for their people and a return to working the land in the New

World. The rest of the short tales describe their experiences in the Argentine countryside. While these tales are based on the historical migration organized by the Jewish Colonization Association—the same migratory effort that brought the author and his family to Argentina—Gerchunoff’s tales are a fictionalized version of the events that took place back then, and that is one of the reasons for this texts’ controversial reception.

Another key aspect that needs to be explained as an introduction to discussing this text is the fascinating transformation the *gaucho* went through in the Argentine national imaginary. The Argentine cowboy went from being considered a social pariah, because he rejected the law of the land, to becoming the national icon. The main reason for this transformation was the xenophobic reaction to the massive influx of immigrants into Argentina in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (for many immigrants who wanted to live in the US, Argentina became plan B, so we share similar migratory patterns). By 1914 one out of four inhabitants of Buenos Aires was foreign-born. The gaucho then came to represent the “original” Argentine culture that was there before the vast migratory waves. Understanding the symbolic value and the historic transformation of the gaucho figure is central for the students’ appreciation of Gerchunoff’s collection of short stories and its reception.

When discussing the text’s reception, it is important to mention that *The Jewish Gauchos* has been perceived as a failed effort to portray the coexistence of gauchos and Jewish immigrants in the Argentine countryside. Therefore, discussing the concepts of assimilation, transculturation, and cultural translation as theoretical issues is central for this class. I am particularly interested in the instances of cultural translation that take place within the text in an effort to conceptualize the Jewish gaucho. Some examples of intra-textual gloss are explanations about the gaucho and the Jews’ religious practices and beliefs, rituals, clothing and lifestyle. These glosses represent a unique approach to cultural identity that open up questions about how representations of Jews, gauchos, and Jewish gauchos are constructed and deconstructed.

At this point I described how I organize the class (the audience was looking at a handout I provided). I usually assign a selection of short stories from *The Jewish Gauchos* and I ask the students to watch the film *Camera Obscura* by Maria Victoria Menis before class.

I. Powerpoint. I start with a powerpoint presentation that summarizes in about 15 to 20 minutes the author’s biography, the historical process of immigration organized by the Jewish Colonization Association, the text’s reception, and the transformation of the gaucho figure (I elaborate the key points I spent the first part of this presentation). An alternative is to make this presentation at the end of the previous class so that students become familiar with the historical context and the author before they read the stories. After that I open the class for questions on the presentation and respond to any doubts the students may have. Then I give them time to discuss the questions that follow in the following handout.

II. Alberto Gerchunoff –*The Jewish Gauchos* (1910)

1. Describe the characters in this story.
2. Where does the action take place? Describe the setting.

3. What happens in this story? Plot.
4. Is assimilation a part of this story?
5. Are there elements of conflict between Jews and gauchos in this story?
6. How does the story construct the gaucho, the Jew and the Jewish gaucho figure?
7. Do you find the way these cultural categories are convincing? Why?

As you can see, I start the set with very basic questions that help students reach a common understanding the story, and then I ask more analytical questions. Each group has to use these questions to discuss a different short story that I assign from the selection they read. After ten minutes of small-group discussion, they share a summary of their conversation with the whole class and other students can join the conversation. Breaking the class into small groups before that allows students to reflect and to organize their thoughts about what they want to share with the rest of the class.

III. *Camera Obscura*. I end the class by asking students to compare Gerchunoff's stories to the film by Maria Victoria Menis, *Camera Obscura* (Argentina 2007). This film is about the life of a woman who was not appreciated by her family and community in a Jewish colony in the Argentine countryside because she was considered unattractive. She marries a man who had been betrayed by his first wife and is determined to prevent this from happening again. She has several children and lives a very simple domestic life in the shadows of her community until a French photographer comes to town. They fall in love, she comes out of her shell and leaves her family and community behind. The fact that the photographer is not Jewish adds an interesting layer of meaning that could be linked to Gerchunoff's stories' controversial label of being pro-assimilation (an interpretation I don't share). Needless to say that Gertrudis, the main character in the film, enjoys her revenge by shaming her husband, family and community who could not "see" her true value.

I ask students to concentrate on two issues to discuss in small groups before sharing their thoughts with the class: the portrayal of the migratory experience and the representation of women in both the stories and the film. Since they are both problematic they tend to lead to a productive discussion. The comparison between Gerchunoff's text and this film is particularly fruitful because, while *The Jewish Gauchos* has been amply criticized for portraying an idealized and artificial version of this particular migratory experience, the Jews encounter several instances of culture clash, violence, and prejudice. On the other hand, the film portrays life in the countryside as ideal and harmonious for everyone but the protagonist, so the contrast is very revealing. I finished my presentation saying that I hope the audience members consider including these materials in their classes