

HOSTOS REVIEW
REVISTA HOSTOSIANA



EL TIEMPO Y LAS PALABRAS

LITERATURA Y CULTURA JUDÍA LATINOAMERICANA CONTEMPORÁNEA

TIME AND THE WORDS

O TEMPO E AS PALAVRAS

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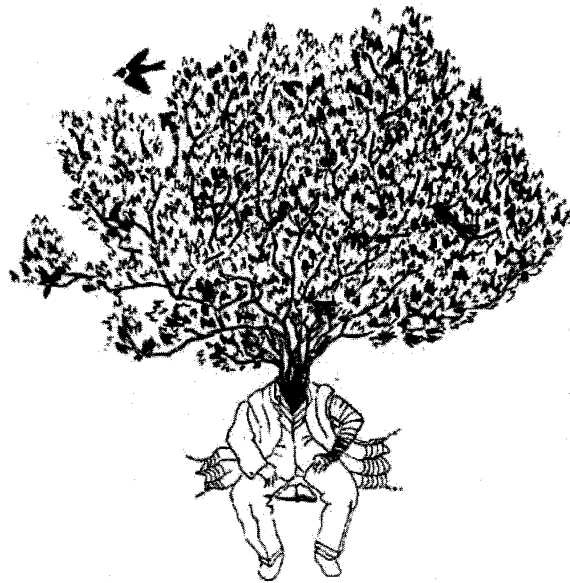
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JUDAICA LATINO-AMERICANA CONTEMPORÁNEA



Moico Yaker
Having Trouble to Pray

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Murray Baumgarten (Panama/United States, 1938)

SHAPE-SHIFTERS

Refugees, penniless, frightened, wearing out, who could blame them for raising me to entertain, to redeem them? In the terror of flight and confusion I came early from my mother's womb, eager, everyone thought, to perform.

But at what? My sister already the accomplished pianist, but I? I was a failure as a violinist. "When Maury plays, the rats leave the ship," the family mantra went. And when I hid from sharp tongues my father pointed to the *shaygetz* on the street shining shoes: "That, is that how you'll turn out?"

My monologues did not amuse, my singing off-pitch. I was skinny and near-sighted, full of silly jokes, and ticklish "like a girl." What else was there for me to do but bury my nose in a book?

The books told me there were other ways to live. Why so little about why we were being hunted? And who could tell us how to make a living in the new world?

What would it have taken for us, urban refugees, to leave the city for the fertile countryside? Others had farms, estates. Izzy Miller owned land, a fancy house with a bathroom as big as our living room, he had horses on his *hacienda*. (I got to ride on Brandy once.)

He asked Phoebus — Dr. Rosenberg, my uncle the Viennese doctor — to open an office at his place. He would set him up, find servants, see about getting medicines, build a house on his property for him.

But Uncle Phoebus had no time for him. Didn't Izzy Miller realize we were all just guests here? Couldn't he see what history had written on the Jews? How could he not know that homelessness was our middle name? That we were in Panama, and it was just another hotel for the Jews. No, it was not a tropical Vienna, not Buenos Aires or Moisesville, where the heroic Jews of the Pampas lived. Why didn't this rich landowner, he wondered, care for Zion as he did, prepare to make *aliya*?

And Phoebus had other worries, wandering around the apartment in his undershirt with his reddish hair sticking through like wire-mesh. He was always muttering to himself, complaining in a Yiddish-German sing-song, his shoulders hunched, his blue eyes intense in his wire-rim glasses. We could hear him talk about us, always the *kinder*, we kids, Teddi, Maury, and Gertie "Nutrition," he intoned, "nourishment." "*Narishkeit*," my father answered: "Nonsense." What weren't we getting

to eat, Phoebus worried. "Children are resilient. They'll be ok," my father said after a long day's work, "we had less in Vienna in the other war. And when," he would add, "will you start earning a living?"

And my mother struggled with her brother's fears, her husband's worries, the children's nightmares.

All the photographs show the sorrow in her face, the lines, the hollows under her eyes. Couldn't we have cleared a patch of jungle and raised fruits and vegetables, chickens? Uncle Phoebus, I thought, would know how to do that. And care, like Tevye, for a cow to give the milk so hard to get here, so a can of condensed milk was a treasure? In Palestine, I knew, Jews like us were farmers.

In the haste of their arrival and the misery of their leaving the Wachtels and Ostroviaks and Baumgartens had only been able to focus on the urban possibilities of Colón. They were businessmen, and here was a town with business opportunities. They saw it on the waterfront filled with sailors strutting on shore leave, felt it in the tidy homes of the Canal Zone, understood how the trucks that sprayed the daily DDT made the city safe for commerce.

But how it must have disappointed them. Uncle Phoebus never tired of reminding them that it wasn't cosmopolitan Europe, Berlin, Prague, Warsaw that they had left behind. It wasn't Mexico City or New York or at the other end of the new world Santiago or Buenos Aires. Why didn't the Aleppo Jews who had rushed here after the Arab uprising of the '20s warn them?

But they had welcomed us, greenhorns as they once had been, new Jews. They staked my father to his peddler's stock of shirts and ties that led to sidewalk pitches, sales, lent him money to start with my uncle Eli's arrival the New York store.

Even I knew that in Colón the mosquitoes would sting but the police would not break in. The mobs and the brownshirts did not rule this street. In Panama the street was where business not mayhem and murder got done. Here in this city of refuge we could breathe. Even Phoebus, who to take his last exam at the University of Vienna and receive his medical degree, the Nazis made him walk on his knees to the lecture room.

How much after all could I know having just come from my mother's womb? I was taken off the ship in Colón to a hospital which cajoled me, the premature refugee, to survive.

My Panamanian street friends knew the names of the matadors who filled the Sunday stadiums; not me. Years later in New York there were baseball heroes waiting for me. Was there baseball in Panama then? I

don't mean kids throwing the ball and taking turns swinging at loopy pitches. Had the GIs not had time yet to clear the fast-growing tropical brush from the moist earth and play in the abandoned lots? where they could show the arc of curveballs, the fine art of bunting and hitting to right field.

Memory plays its tricks. Here in California's Santa Cruz, with its harbor curving north to south so the sun never seems to fall at evening into the water to the west, Panama wells up for me. Why not give in to remembered youth, sorting the difference from my here and now. Who cares that I have no memories of major league hoopla for the ancestors of Bobby Bonilla or Mariano Rivera in those days when the planes took off just before sunset with a roar that blocked all other sounds of evening. Protectors of the Canal, our heroes circled continuously overhead.

The Canal was everything: that was why the GIs were there, the canal cutting through all our thoughts. The railroad followed it to Gatún from Colón, then swerved away. It took us past Balboa, the big American base, and then to Panama City, the capital, where HIAS and the Joint could help you start a business, arrange to bring you stuff from other places.

That was where my father met Kelber.

In the family album the picture shows two young men with eager eyes beneath the brim of stylish hats. My father checks the time on his pocket watch, and Kelber smooths his blond mustache. His brother, the doctor, had been a classmate of Phoebus in medical school. They had done their medical residencies together in Vienna. Now Kelber and Baumgarten stand in front of the ornate Presidential Palace, before it was scarred in the American invasion that undid Noriega.

Max Baumgarten contacted his brother Marcus, who sent cloth and dresses from New York, and Kelber wrote his brother the doctor in Colombia, who arranged for a shipment of silver trays. They talked to the Mayor's brother-in-law to get business permits, some ready money changing hands.

Kelber had stopped in Curacao as we had; like us he could only visit the Dutch island, stay for no more than six weeks, arrange for transshipments of goods. Somehow lace arrived from the old world, and black slips that only the European women and the ones who dressed up from the Zone would wear.

My Panama, a whirl of voices saying many things in all these languages, all speaking at once in the dreaming, that is remembering. How can I sort the voices and make the babel of tongues an experience — a

meaning? What words do I have that I could use for this? How did my father do it? educated in Vienna in German, speaking Yiddish at home and mixing them up, making a living in Spanish, negotiating deals in English.

We were in Panama, a transitional place. The crossroads of the world, we were told, "puente del mundo/corazón del universo." But this bridge was unsteady, the heartbeats kept skipping, a needle jumping grooves on a scratchy record. Languages of transition kept jumping past us. We had to learn the exchanges of translation on the fly, like going through the Canal without a pilot.

Panama Canal: it made the place a melting pot, a way station, taking everything and everyone from the Caribbean to the Pacific in that strange S-shaped twist of the Isthmus that goes north to south, 48 miles from sea to sea. My junior high school project in the Bronx: build a plaster-of-model, narrate a tour of the Panama Canal.

At war's end we cheered the USS Missouri on its way through Gatún locks. Huge and monstrous, bristling with guns and aircraft, the Missouri scraped the sides of the locks.

Thick naval ropes along the sides protected the ship as it went by. People put their fingers in their ears to block the raucous squeaking and squealing, they said the bigger ships that were coming wouldn't be able to use the Canal. Would they build a sea-level canal in Nicaragua after all? And were the days of the Panama Canal now numbered?

The Missouri passing through, that was the closest we got to it.

This time enter the Gulf of Panama from the Pacific, go eight miles up the channel to the Miraflores Locks and pass under the Bridge of the Americas. The mile long two-stage Miraflores Locks lift your ship high above the Pacific, and then you reach the man-made Miraflores Lake. You are 54 feet above sea level.

A mile further you head north-east to the Pedro Miguel Lock, the ship pulled by iron "mules" on the tracks above the Lock. The sluice gates close, the water rushes in, and you rise 31 feet higher. Exit through the other gate and sail through the Culebra Cut that snake-like slices through the continental divide at an altitude of 85 feet. Then pass under the Centennial Bridge and reach huge Gatún Lake. Crocodiles live there, up to eighteen feet of menace, peacock bass. The jungle crowds the banks, as you make for the other end, fifteen miles away, to get to the Gatún Locks. There are three Locks here, steps now on a downward journey, as you are ushered by the "mules" into the descent to the Atlantic, which is saltier, warmer, heavier than the Pacific, and almost two feet lower.

Why not build a sea-level canal like Suez, De Lesseps' triumph? The waters of the Pacific would rush to the Atlantic like a waterfall, the Pacific species would storm a welcoming ecology, immigrants from another world seeking to take possession of these new opportunities. The Locks step you down, block the way to the impassioned rush where the Pacific water would meet the warmer Atlantic and makes the Straits of Magellan inhospitable.

Now you have reached the channel, approaching Bahía Limón, to take you to the Caribbean and then out into the Atlantic Ocean.

Though we lived next door, though it dominated our lives, we never got to go through the Canal till my sister in her 50s took a cruise from Acapulco to Fort Lauderdale. Even my father, the traveler, befriended by the Americans, didn't get more than a tour.

He took a ship to Baltimore in 1941, representing Panama at the World Jewish Congress. That was East Coastal travel. He flew to Mexico City in 1942 for an all-Americas conference. Had he planned a trip to San Francisco, would he have gone through the Canal, as so many 49ers before him? Would he too have trekked across the Isthmus? Before the Canal Panama was the land bridge that brought the fabled silver and gold of the Incas from Peru up the Pacific to Balboa. In the Caribbean, the galleons waited.

Not all the gold and silver made it across. Raiders captured it, enraged by jungle fever soldiers flung it away, or how shrewdly they thought buried it. Everyone knew there was treasure waiting for the finding. But where? Who had the treasure maps that could guide us when the jungle had changed the landscape hundred-fold? Had the clever German settlers found it, with their science and their cold logic? Was that what they lived on like retired pirates?

When we took the train to Panama City the sight of the American base at Balboa told us we had left the jungle of the interior and would soon see the coast. White sands, blue ocean, long beaches. We had a vacation weekend once, and visited the San Blas Indians. One morning a bull crashed through the jungle, thundered across the sand, and disappeared across the way.

But the American soldiers are safe. Guarding the Canal they march up and down, fly back and forth, polish weapons,

Members of the tribe had made it to Mexico, Chile, Argentina. What was the trade-off? That we stayed in the cities and they ruled in the countryside? In gated villages where everyone spoke German, wore lederhosen, drank beer, and toasted Der Fuehrer?

In Panama, how could you know the truth?