

Chapter 22

Too Many Names

Nora Strejilevich

MY FAMILY'S EMIGRATION ROUTE can be summed up in a few words which I remember vaguely: "Your grandmother brought Aunt Bety and me from Warsaw when we were small; your grandfather had come earlier, and, once he had set up his hat factory, he sent for us." This brief story and a sepia-colored photo of a handsome young man staring out at me with dreamy eyes framed by his mushroom-shaped hat—my grandfather—are all I salvaged from the shipwreck of maternal memories.

My father's memories were not much more extensive. His family had come from Besarabia: parents, uncles, cousins I never met. Grandfather Isidoro had settled in the agrarian community of Entre Ríos at the beginning of the century, but he tired of peasant life without tools and with too many plagues, and when he could he moved from Gauleguaychú to the capital. He launched commercial ventures which took him to the far north and far south of the country, and his fortunes rose and fell. In one of the temporary peaks of prosperity, my father and his three brothers studied at the German school in Buenos Aires, where they received a good liberal arts education. Of course, after the war, German wasn't much use to them, since they didn't wish to ever again utter a word in the language of Goethe.

One of my aunts, Felisa, finally indulged my passion for genealogy. When my grandmother Kaila died, she hung a picture of my maternal great-grandparents on the wall. I was impressed by the face of that unknown woman who watched me with the expression and eyes of my mother and of whom I know only that I will know nothing beyond that dense gaze in black and white. It is the mark of my diasporic heritage: a series of intimate and anonymous images that gaze at even my dreams, without pronouncing a word. Images that deny me all access to anecdotes and mark me with an overwhelming desire to bring them to life.

Another aunt, Bety, told me between one maté and another that she and my mother were born in a town called Visigrod, and I even held in my hands some birth certificates written in letters as legalistic as they were indecipherable. In the twenties, there was in Argentina a Jewish white slavery organization which dealt especially in women from Poland, who were sold when they reached our shores to feed a prostitution racket called the Svi Migdal. Sometimes, tired of the silence the adults condemned me to, I suggested to Mama that surely she had been brought by the Migdal and that was why she didn't want to tell me anything. This heavy-handed joke was met only with anger. It killed off conversation, which had never been very lively.

I know even less about my father's family. I found my grandmother Shlesinger's surname on the walls of the Prague synagogue, where there is a list of those taken to concentration camps. Perhaps they are not our relatives, who, according to my father, came from Romania, but just in case, I made a note of them. A list of those possibly born in 1913, like Papa. I was aware of their divergent destinies: that of an America often silent and fearful of alluding to the catastrophe and that of these victims who died without their clan on the other side of the ocean keeping their memory alive.

The formula of forgetting, I insist, was that which many immigrants used to cope with their condition of being pariahs. To escape the weight of history, to not look backwards. Tragedy, which would be reincarnated in the distant lands of the new continent in the decade

of the seventies, made evident how much memory there is in each forgetting. And those people of severed roots would not find in their dictionaries any way to understand how history had crossed the ocean to condemn them yet again. I once met a woman who had survived Auschwitz with her husband. They sought refuge in Argentina in order to begin a new life, protected from the winds of horror. Twenty years later, their only son was disappeared by the military junta. Dark mists on both continents, concave mirrors, are always ready to give us the deformed image of what we believed humanity should be or was. Father and mother were speechless, without words to explain the untellable, and one of them has already died trying to pronounce his anguish. That's why some of us are charged to conserve the remnants of the shipwreck, take care of them. Write them.

It's said that all Argentines arrived by ship. My legacy from those ships is a wooden box full of opaque photographs, among which was a woman who resembles my future. I treasure that strange feeling of being linked in sisterhood to a distant and silent passerby for whom I developed fondness and whom I end up resembling. At the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, an oral history researcher spoke to me of a Strejilevich he had interviewed in Minsk. So I added Minsk to my list of possible horizons. Visigrod, someplace in Bessarabia. Minsk? Prague? Perhaps. Someday I'll follow the route of this imaginary map, attracted by the mysterious magnet of indécipherable relationships.

Nobody ever understood this desire of mine to reconstruct our past, nor why I was so resistant to accepting our limited family tree. I'm not sure I understand either. Maybe my reaction to not having a middle name is related to this fixed idea. A middle name, according to Jewish tradition if I'm not mistaken, should be that of a grandmother who has died. But I was only given one name, not for any lack of dead people in the family, but because, according to my mother, it's sufficient to have one name and to be named for a living person. They saved me from Fanny, which, if placed between Nora and Strejilevich, would not rhyme melodically. My brother was saved from Isidoro, which is not

too lamentable, in my opinion. In our country, Isidoro is the famous caricature of a greedy *porteño*, a caricature that is inevitably linked to anyone with that name. That is, on one hand they did us a favor, but at the same time we were orphaned of a middle name, a link of interconnection between generations, and it symbolizes other orphanings. Perhaps my reaction, which so amused adults, had to do with this. From age four on, whenever I was asked my name, I'd answer, "Nora Norita." Thus I solved, with everyone's approval, the lack of a middle name so that I could belong to a family group with all the credentials.

Our transnational horizons made me feel that Argentina was a perilous territory for me, that I could have been born somewhere else. This idea lent me wings, and so I nourished it. Everything could have been, or could be, or will be something quite different. Thus my mother's "that's the way it is" lost its authority on the spot. I wasn't from here or from there, but quite the opposite, and my natural state had to be that of movement. My brother liked to travel from adolescence on, and the path he opened benefited me when I wanted to launch forth on adventures: "You let him go," I reminded them, and, since they had always said they believed in the equality of the sexes, sooner or later they had to open the door for me. That's how I got to Chile, Peru, Uruguay, and Brazil. A third-world version of the Wandering Jew, but by choice. I wandered through nearby and not so nearby countries with the conviction that I was a citizen of the world. I was eager for new aromas; I wanted to discover what was beyond our limited daily life. At that time, I didn't dream of being a writer—my model was more like Madame Curie—but the narrative diet I was kept on for years finally stimulated a thirst for storytelling.

Influence of My Parents

My father, who was my guide for years in existential and philosophical matters, was secular. He read Buber and, although he supported

the existence of the state of Israel, didn't consider himself a Zionist. Chito was a Jew of the Diaspora, and he knew that there was an abyss between his world view and that of an Israeli, an abyss marked by the distance opened by exile and closed by belonging to a state.

He was a humanist, a socialist. The idea of a country for all Jews, while he accepted it as an inevitable reaction to the Holocaust, seemed problematic to him. It implied a renunciation of the internationalism that had nourished and sustained the humanistic thought of the wandering people. "A state has to defend its boundaries against others, it has to attack and fight, it has to be unjust," he explained to me. "Israelis cannot, by definition, think like I do." He struggled to sustain dialogue, rather than have one army confront another. He knew that that would be impractical in a Middle East with its own history and native population, even if our tribe shared with that population many of the same roots. Jews sought refuge in Palestine because there was no other choice in a Europe that washed its hands of them, its complicity evident. In Argentina, many progressive Jews during those years understood the reasons why Israel had been created, but chose to support social change in their own countries instead. They resisted the false option of singular loyalty that sounded like a question a not-too-bright neighbor might ask: "Whom do you love more, your mother or your father?" *Mutatis mutandis*: "Which do you love more, Israel or Argentina?" Faced with that question, the only answer is: I want a world where questions like that are not asked.

The only holidays we celebrated at home were our birthdays and the secular New Year. We never lit candles or commemorated important dates on the Jewish calendar. We were not an exception; many secular families did not observe any traditions at all in the Buenos Aires I knew; Judaism was practiced, rather, on the level of culture, readings, thought. My parents participated in events organized by the *Hebraica* in which local writers and artists, particularly Ashkenazis, participated. They also used the club's library, which had the best collection of Jewish literature in the country. At home, we had a huge collection

of translations of Yiddish literature and magazines published by Jewish groups in Buenos Aires.

My mother, Sarita, was a voracious reader and, although she had not finished high school, had read an impressive amount. She had remarkable recall of titles, plots, and characters; it was as though she had lived with them. She used to recommend books to me, but I rarely followed her suggestions. One of the books she often talked to me about was the Old Testament. She explained how our whole culture stemmed from it, but above all she told me about those marvelous stories crammed with images, with fantastic tales like that of Moses when he was about to receive the Ten Commandments. I still haven't followed her suggestion, the only advice of hers that had to do with our tradition. My parents had gotten married in a synagogue just to please my grandparents. My grandmother Kaila changed dishes and fasted on the Day of Pardon, but only one of her daughters, the youngest, went with her to temple. Oddly, traditions filtered down uninvited: from my mother I inherited a book that had come down to her from her family, a Bible with a bas relief of the Tablets of the Law on its silver cover. It's so beautiful, I carry it around with me. Sometimes I think that the elegant decoration of the Book is how our ancestors keep us connected to the tribe.

The Role of Memory, My Infancy

The memories I am piecing together now and many others are the subject of my writing. Playing with those misty scraps of the past has always attracted me, as though my task were that of restoring ruins or vessels whose fragments are scattered all over the planet. Memory is a province of the imagination. We rescue what matters to us, we splice in threads of our feelings, our fantasies, and we knit it all together into what we call our history. Infinite versions of a life can be told; every moment of the present produces new and different images of the

infinite cavern of footprints called the past. I have a very poor memory, so all I write is interwoven with threads of fantasy. Fiction creeps in subtly without my realizing. And the forms that emerge distill their truths, as happens in all fiction.

During my childhood we lived in Olivos, a suburb in greater Buenos Aires. At that time, in the fifties, we seemed to be the only Jews there. There were differences between some of my family's customs and those of our neighbors. Although we didn't celebrate Christmas at home, Father Christmas made an appearance to all the neighborhood children, and the festivities were collective. I didn't go to church on Sundays, but I felt liberated by that: I didn't have to go to confession, or study for First Communion, or do penance for having gone out with a boy—a whole series of things that I didn't envy my friends. I've wondered how my parents managed to protect me from ever feeling discriminated against, isolated, or diminished in the face of the Apostolic Roman Catholic majority that surrounded us. I don't know how they did it, but my brother and I were both happy about my family's rejection of all religious practice. I can remember telling my friends with total conviction that angels didn't exist, that they were all a fairy tale. My identity, on the other hand, bestowed upon me marvels that my "goy" friends didn't enjoy. I was a life member of Hebraica, the club which organized championship Ping-Pong tournaments and swimming competitions. In addition, it offered vacation programs—we children got to go camping with our instructors, freed from family pressures for a month. That was pure paradise, and no one else in our neighborhood got to do this, only my brother and I. From age eight on, we went to the seaside or the mountains with our *haverim* and *madrihim*, Hebraica companions and instructors, and later with Hashomer Hatsair, a leftist Zionist group. During these four weeks of adventures, we'd hike along singing "caminemos compañeros sin cesar, / si los pies no nos pueden aguantar, / caminemos con los codos hasta que caigamos todos, / caminemos compañeros sin cesar"; we'd take turns standing night guard

duty in threes, watching over our sleeping companions; we did round dances; we learned personal defense; and we'd end the day sitting around the campfire opening our hearts and finding words for our feelings. It never occurred to me to think that personal defense with sticks was a way to train us in case the Tacuara came to beat us. The Tacuara were nationalists from whose ranks came *montoneros* like Firmenich and who dedicated themselves to beating up Jews with chains as they came out of school, facts of local life that did not affect me until much later.

In my other life, in my neighborhood, I worked out an intuitive *marranismo*. I learned how to use masks in order to escape notice. I had no scruples about genuflecting and crossing myself when I'd enter the church to go play on the slide and hammock that were at the back of the chapel. If that was what it took in order to play with my friends, it was easy enough to do. The moral: belonging to two worlds was possible without any apparent conflict. The conflict didn't appear until much later on, when a college friend pointed out that my last name was "moishe." Fortunately, by then I had learned that one could not really belong on both sides, but that was the first time I felt someone look askance at me, look down on me because of my evidently inferior status as a Jew.

But let me go back to primary school. My brother and I attended a school where the director tried to eliminate all trace of the repressiveness so often typical of the traditional system. No racist comments were allowed at the Instituto Didáctico Educativo. My mother was the one who insisted on our attending this privileged school where we could speak familiarly to the director, where we were not scolded for behaving badly, and where we did not have to leave the classroom when it was time for religion class. At state schools, Jewish students had to stand up and leave the room when it was time for that required course. Sarita wanted to spare us these bitter moments by sending us to a private, liberal neighborhood school which had its own rules. I can remember the mother of one of my classmates, a German who lived

across the street, saying to my mother, "You're Jews, but you're good people." These comments would only be made away from the school, since Pepe, the director, would not tolerate any mention of categories that implied approval or disapproval of anyone. But the comments were made nevertheless, and they must have weighed heavily on the adults.

Later on, when we moved to downtown Buenos Aires, I began going every Friday to the Hebraica, the club that had long been familiar but which was now only a few blocks away. Suddenly my world of Catholics, where like it or not we were the "others," was exchanged for one inhabited by "our people." Only in school were we the "others." In high school, the first thing I saw on the blackboard, in a public girls' school, was a cross. Since it was not a Catholic school, it seemed only logical to me that if religious symbols were exhibited, all of them should be included: the Muslim crescent, the Star of David, and an altar for the ancestors of my friend Higa, of Japanese origin. I persuaded a few first-year classmates, and we went to ask the director to take down the cross or put up other symbols, too. We almost got expelled: it was my first defeat in the area of social militancy. At that time I was still going on camping trips, but now with friends from the Buenos Aires, the best high school in the city. I had not enrolled there because I had listened to my elders: "Better you should become a teacher rather than spend six years studying for a degree that will be of no use to you." A high-school degree didn't prepare you for a job, but the normal school did. It seemed to make sense but they let my brother study for a high-school degree.

Skipping to another scene in this kaleidoscope of memories . . .

I am twenty-four years old and studying medicine. It's the middle of 1977, the second year of Jorge Rafael Videla's dictatorship. The police are a daily spectacle, and we cross paths with them whenever we enter or leave the university. The walls are whitewashed, cleaner than they've ever been, political activities prohibited, although certainly there are secret gatherings. I had withdrawn from the activism which

was typical at universities in the early seventies. From 1976 on, the dictatorship ruled with an iron hand, and I knew that opposing the armed forces with marches and *estribillos* was as inefficacious as it was dangerous. It never crossed my mind to take up arms, although it made sense to choose armed confrontation when there was no other option in the face of violence imposed from above, as it was called in that world of those who had cause to be dissidents. I concentrated on my medical courses, an entry into research into a phenomenon that intrigued me: memory. *Desensillar hasta que amaine.*

During those first two years of the dictatorship, people began to disappear. People I knew. One of my brother's ex-girlfriends, another Nora, was taken from her work at a health center. Another friend was pulled out of a bus and shoved into a car in view of everyone. Some streets were closed at night, and, right around the corner from my house, my boyfriend and I were accosted by policemen who pointed their machine guns at us because we were kissing outside the police station. This systematic suction of inhabitants into a mysterious nothing was dumbfounding; we had lived through many dictatorships, there had been deaths and tortures, but there had never before been so many disappearances. Suddenly a black hole would open in the space just occupied by a friend or neighbor or a relative, and there would be a murky pause, during which people would be very careful for as long as seemed prudent. "Being careful" could mean moving, going on a trip, leaving one's usual haunts. "As long as seemed prudent" would be interpreted vaguely and according to very subjective criteria. I substitute taught for a friend who was having to be careful. I took over his philosophy classes and don't even remember how we managed this sudden switch, but this sort of thing was going on all the time. In a bizarre chess game, pieces were constantly being removed or substituted for each other in an atmosphere charged with fear. These empty spaces and sudden switches gave me goose pimples—we must all have felt that way, but no one said so. I began to plan a retreat. I remember it all as very hushed, as though the anguish of living

in a place besieged by terror could only be expressed in voices so low as to be almost inaudible.

In June 1977, I went over to the *sohnut*, the Jewish Agency, and signed up for one of those excursions for young people who want to visit Israel. By the following month, they had accepted me to go for a year with a group of professionals. We'd spend some months in an *ulpan* learning Hebrew, and the rest of the time we'd work at something related to our professions. I wondered what job they'd find for someone who had studied philosophy, was in medical school, and did not speak Hebrew, but they accepted me and that was enough.

By this time my brother was no longer living at home, and I tried to convince him to take some time away from the dangerous circles in which he lived. Gerardo would post me on the balcony whenever he came home so I could see whether he was being followed, so I knew it was urgent that he should leave. He accepted the suggestion and went to the *sohnut*, but when he mentioned that his girlfriend, whom he planned to bring along, was a *goy*, they told him to get married. They only accepted Jews or mixed couples who were married. It was evident that for the *sohnut* bureaucrats there was no particular hurry: getting married before a trip is perfectly normal anywhere in the world. That the military was right on our heels was a detail no one seemed to take into account, even though they knew perfectly well what our situation was. Many young Jews were active in leftist movements, and we all knew what that meant at that moment. Our lives were at stake. But they acted as though they wanted to ignore that urgency, as though there were time, as though the history of persecutions had not shown them what you have to do to save yourself from the massacre. "What's happening," someone told me, "is that you live in terror, sleep with terror, eat terror, and get used to terror. And all of a sudden the phone rings and you're told Hey, they just picked up so-and-so, and you answer Oh shit, then you hang up and you go on as though nothing had happened."

My brother and his girlfriend never got out of the country. They

were taken away July 15, 1977, and are still disappeared. A friend called us at home a few days later to ask why Gerardo hadn't kept an appointment, and Mother told him he had been taken away. The one who called probably said how terrible, hung up, and kept on going, feeling panic, but as though nothing were happening.

My family also seemed to be anesthetized, even after my first two cousins were disappeared. I wasn't even told about it, because no one wanted to give me such bad news. Gerardo mentioned it to me, to explain where he'd been. According to him, he'd put in the "as long as seemed prudent" time after Hugo and Abel, our cousins, had been taken away: three months. If they hadn't come looking for him by now, then surely he must be safe, since besides being their relative he belonged, like them, to the Peronista Youth. My brother's reasoning frightened me: it was a sign that we were all going mad trying to deny the undeniable. I went to see my uncle Pedro, the father of the disappeared cousins. He told me in great detail how they had chased Hugo, the older one, over roofs, firing at him. How they had forced Pedro, a doctor, with his eyes blindfolded, to feel his own son to see if he was still alive: no, he was dead. How my younger cousin had intervened to try to get them to leave the body, and how they had taken the two of them away. As a result, my uncle had lost his sanity and now spent his days putting adhesive tape on the walls to keep the enemies from spying on him. All of a sudden, the situation had become menacing: Hugo dead, Abel disappeared, Gerardo talking about hiding "as long as seemed prudent," and my parents hiding everything. Faced with all this, my desire to escape became more urgent. This was a save-yourself-if-you-can situation. But getting away was not so easy.

The Comando Conjunto squad came to our apartment after I'd packed my suitcase and said goodbye to everyone except for Gerardo, who had not come by to see us for a week. When they knocked at the door, the walls seemed to cry out. It was my mother, who yelled in a desperate tone, "I'll open the door but don't come charging in." I immediately realized who was going to enter, and I ran toward the back

door. I was operating on that survival instinct that sharpens when it is already too late. My father yelled "Stop, stop!" while they ran into the apartment with big guns, ordering "On the floor, face down!" They aimed a gun at the nape of my neck and kept me that way for an hour or two. Too long, in any case, for me to stand having a gun in my neck and a boot on my back. They immediately treated me like a whore. My race for the back of the apartment proved my guilt. They searched the house, ransacking and tossing everything, and blindfolded me with a rag, and I hardly had breath to cry out to my parents "They're taking me, they're taking me!" when they shoved me toward the elevator. They were interrogating Sarita and Chito in the bedroom where they couldn't see what was happening with me.

They dragged me down to the ground floor, and on the sidewalk I kicked to put off being forced into that car—which would be the end of me—and to give me time for someone to hear my name as I shouted it out. I knew you had to shout your name when this happened so that people would know who was being taken away. When they managed, with their six arms and a lot of effort, to shove me on the floor of the back seat, they started hitting me, kicking me and repeating "Shitty Jew, we're going to make soap with you." Other variants were "Take this for crying out in Jewish," "Even if you haven't done anything, you'll pay for being *moishe*." When I had shouted out my last name, which doesn't sound like López or García, they thought it was a foreign language, spoken by one of those enemies of the state that had to be finished off as members of the international conspiracy. Reason enough to decree my condemnation. There was no way out: I was on my way to a collective grave.

They took me to a basement somewhere in the city center. A basement that only seven years later, in 1984, could be named and defined when I returned to Buenos Aires to give my evidence to the National Commission which prepared the Nunca Más report. The Athletic Club, I was told by other survivors, better informed than I. The interrogation began with so-called softening up, where they ask you for

names and more names while they increase the electric shocks until you end up shouting in someone else's voice. After the softening up, they left me in a cubicle so that I could decide to collaborate, and, after this ploy, the second session centered on the Jewish theme. Since I was traveling to Israel, it was logical to think that I was going to be trained in guerrilla tactics at some kibbutz. All they needed was to find out at which one, and with which instructors. One of them kept sticking in words in Hebrew, like *haverim* or *madrih*, the only words I understood. I was astonished when they brought in a specialist in the topic, and when they noticed my surprise, they explained, "First we're going to get rid of the Montoneros, and then of the Jews."

Evidently these people knew what they were doing and were well organized; the only thing that seemed a little bizarre was that they wanted information about the Irgun. The then Prime Minister of Israel, Menachem Begin, had belonged to the Irgun: it was a right-wing nationalist group which devoted itself in Palestine to attacking the English, who had finally given up their protectorate in 1947, making possible the creation of the state of Israel the following year. I realized that these questions came from *Oh Jerusalem*, the book they had stolen from my luggage. They must have been choosing items from that book as take-off points to find out about my connections with subversive groups of other times and persuasions. They were all alike. If this method had not been applied together with the electric cattle prod, I could have laughed it off. Next, they asked about who was responsible for my trip, and, since I couldn't remember them, they described them and told me about the offices, and where the stairways were, and the corridors of that building to which I'd paid so little attention. They knew the *sohnut* building inside and out.

My liberation came about this way: someone knocked on the door of my cell, checked my identity by name and number, as usual, and, still blindfolded, I was led out to be taken somewhere, I didn't know where. I felt for the first time that I wanted to die rather than be subjected again to that torture many underwent for months and years. They led me up

blindfolded to the ground floor and called me by my name. They dragged me to an office where they made me sit—not on the floor this time, but on a chair. A male voice described my family briefly, giving me to understand that they had us under surveillance. “This was an error; you were not here, you didn’t see or hear anything, and keep your mouth shut because it would be regrettable if anything happened to your family.” I suspected that my brother was in there; I had heard his voice crying out, and surely I wasn’t wrong about that. But that “surely” left open a margin of doubt. It was never possible to be sure about anything. Once I was “outside,” I found out that they had taken him away the same day they took me, at dawn. Seven years later, tying the threads together, I found out that we had all been together there at the Club: my brother, his girlfriend Graciela Barrocca, another friend, and I.

When I returned to Argentina in 1983, my teeth chattered every time I saw a uniform. I arrived a few months after President Alfonsín had assumed office, after the defeat of the dictatorship in the Falklands War. I arrived just before my mother died, defeated by the certainty of Gerardo’s death. In 1988, my father committed suicide. And thus ends the saga of this family group that tried to turn its back on its past but managed, paradoxically, to repeat the tragedy: that script of grief and desolation which it had made such efforts to avoid. Sartre used to say that to be a Jew is to be seen as such. Those words described us well, since in our case the rich cultural heritage of the tribe could be summed up in a few vestiges: poor skeletons of the rich life of communities that were wiped out during the war or even before, the remains of shipwreck after the first Flood had reached us. And now I was left with an even more concise version of history, since a second Flood had stripped us of even the box of black-and-white photos that had made it across so many countries. To whom can we recur when people, objects, world, universe have been stolen? To no one. Only perhaps to the word, the memory, the recollection of that which in the moment of disaster we do not know how to name. That was why I decided to write—because I didn’t know what to say.

Being a Writer in Your Country

I have not been a writer in my country. I began to write in exile, where language became my country. In Israel I began to sketch out poems, and I say “sketch out” because some of them were drawings in words. I’d send them home on the back of allusive postcards. I remember one with the image of a shovel lifting a bit of earth that was suspended in the air. The poem was called “Memory.” My poetry of that era is about time, about the memories that entrap and from which I’d so often longed to escape, about distance, about feeling, the senses, or, rather, about the senseless. I’d send them with long letters to my parents, like a shared diary where I’d let them see the landscapes that surrounded me as I tread the paths of an untiring traveler. I’d paint word scenarios for them for lack of a paintbrush. My father used to draw, and, in some periods, I imitated him. But drawing turned out to be more arduous for me than storytelling. When I sat down to write, the words would come flowing out, and sometimes I’d laugh at the jokes that seemed to appear on their own. I used to remark that I’m laughing because it’s the first time I’m telling myself this joke. The agility of words that surprised me by bursting out when I didn’t choose them seduced me so, that the letters turned into manuscripts. But my dedication to it was sporadic. Between moves, interrogations about what direction to take in these journeys without return, in this distance in which I floated, thinking about going back, I kept noting down impressions, memories, and poems. When I ended up in Canada in 1980, sure that it would not be possible to go back soon, I began a doctorate in Latin American literature. I enrolled in a course titled Autobiography, where the professor invited us to write either an essay or the story of our lives. I chose the latter, and kept writing, and sent my first book to a prize competition. I received my first literary prize from the University of Alberta for the testimony *Una visión de mi misma*. It was followed by *Sobre-vivencias* and the novel *Una sola muerte numerosa*, and I am still writing. In all my stories, I take

refuge, I remember and I forget, I laugh and weep, I lose myself, find myself, and console myself.

Objects Brought by Ancestors to the New World

I already mentioned the photographs and the thirst for stories produced by those uncut curls and mushroom hats, the distinctive clothing and infinite gazes. They were like actors playing the role of formal and serious people, but I knew that they were my aunts and uncles and grandparents, that they were just acting, and that they would start playing with me once they were liberated from those rigid and pompous poses to which they seemed condemned. In the "little room," which turned into a museum of useless household objects, marvelous things that surely belonged to those static and two-dimensional characters had been stored. There was a trunk, brought from Europe at the beginning of the century, which contained treasures like embroidered sheets and table cloths, hats my grandfather might have made in Argentina but which I was certain had belonged to my distant relatives, things like purses and shoes that I used when I played dress-up. I'd wrap those sheets around myself and become a queen, a ghost, a character from the *Thousand and One Nights*, or an immigrant of the turn of the century (when I was tempering my fantasy with a trace of realism). Sometimes I'd add the props of a pair of antique-looking candelabra. I never asked whether they came from Europe, so that they wouldn't tell me they didn't.

I didn't realize how fond I was of these objects until I had to relinquish that trunk, those linens, and my entire house, when there was no one else left in my immediate family and I was left with sculptures, pictures, books, linens, porcelain, rugs, tableware, china, clothing, more books. I'd have liked a magic carpet in order to carry it all away, but none appeared. I couldn't fit all those beloved treasures into my migrant's household, that tent I pitched and pretended was home in Van-

couver and then in Edmonton, in Calgary, in Ashland. . . . And as I had to divest myself of those unique objects that my grandparents had brought from their native or not so native lands, I kept only the items that Jewish *mucos* of the Diaspora had always kept to protect themselves in adversity: the jewels. They had traveled with a handful of necklaces and rings, with a few precious stones and gold watches, because that handful was all they could carry along and might save their lives in the next Flood. And so I, who had also learned to survive in a world without certainties, held onto this minimal treasure, not as beloved as the other objects, but more practical when one rides the storms. From their eternal distance, my ancestors watch over this unfamiliar descendant who continued to journey, as did they, in pure trial and error, along this difficult road that unravels behind our steps and dissolves.

Jewish Latin American European Hybridity

I imagine hybridity as a house inhabited by many voices. In my case, the Jew clamors for gefilte fish as my grandmother did, the Argentine wants to drink *maté* and make sure you don't let the water come to a boil, the Canadian wants everyone to be quiet for a moment, and the granddaughter of Europeans wonders what the madwomen are doing, making such a huge fuss over trivia. Why don't they learn to drink tea with a sugar cube in their mouths once and for all and stop fooling around? The voices never stop, and the worst is that often they have nothing in common. But this is what it is about—understanding that we are many in one, pulled many ways by different compulsions, opposing desires, disparate histories. Without even mentioning readings: the Jewish Nora would like to revel in Yiddish literature; Nora the woman feels the urgent need to catch up on all the women writers she hasn't yet read; the Argentine Nora needs to page through all the newspapers and the most recent books written about the national reality; the

Europeanized Nora doesn't have enough time to think over Derrida, and Kristeva, and why not go back over Foucault, this is why she studied philosophy after all, to be able to understand contemporary thought. And of course, there is work, too, and taking notes on a few scenes that have sprung to mind, but it all remains half done because today I listened to a racist and it made me so angry that I started to write about anti-Semitism in Argentina, and tomorrow a meteorite will go by that will lead me to research on the curvature of the circle.

To get all this coordinated is an adventure in itself, but it would be useless to suppress any one of these voices: repression only serves to increase the volume of the conflicts. In exile I realized that in Argentina I was Jewish; but in Israel I was *dromamericai*, South American; in Canada I was Latin American; and in the United States I am Hispanic. Each place catalogs me differently, but the common denominator is foreignness. I've given up believing in any kind of monochromatic classification; I am always much more than these definitions that serve, very precariously, the filling out of forms. At the same time, out of pure defiance, I identify with all the categories, especially with the segregated ones. Which in my case are: woman, Jew, Latin American—three labels that don't seem favorable for climbing the social ladder. I identify fully with these, my great attributes, and I feel ever more part of a *mestiza* community which proclaims sincerity, citizenship, mixtures of cultures, languages, and colors. The unidimensional is nearly extinct, although many still yearn to preserve an illusory purity of blood, of mind, and of sex.

Contributor Biographies

EDNA AIZENBERG

Edna Aizenberg is professor and chair of Hispanic Studies at Marymount Manhattan College. She describes herself as *mestiza*, with Israeli, Argentinean, Venezuelan, and American strands in her wandering biography and diasporic family tree. Edna is the author of award-winning books and articles in her specialty, Latin American Jewish culture and literature. Her work on the renowned Argentinean writer Jorge Luis Borges has received international recognition. Her still-developing resume also includes the following items: correspondent for the *London Jewish Chronicle*, the *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, and *Haaretz*; teacher of Jewish studies and English in Caracas; editor of Spanish-language B'nai B'rith journals; lecturer throughout South America and the Caribbean; wife; mother of two sons; developer of courses on Hispanic women writers that for the first time included Jewish women; and activist for Jewish rights in Argentina and Latin America.

RUTH BEHAR

Ruth Behar holds a Ph.D. from Princeton University and is considered to be one of the country's most distinguished anthropologists.