

## **2. FIR DOIRES: Four Generations**

*Free translation, by Susana Singer Lombardi, from an article published on Der Yidishe Tzaitung, in Buenos Aires, written by Dr. Elias Singer, on March 22, 1949.*

*Dr. Elias Singer, and the characters of this article were all born in Basavilbaso Lucienville*

### **A CHAPTER OF COLONY'S MEMOIRS**

Uncle Yaakov ( José). He did not come to Argentina to become a farmer. He did not really come. He was brought here. His son in law, my Uncle Luzer who came here to become a farmer, brought his old father-in-law along, a sort of “living baggage”.

In this way, many old parents, with children that did not want to part from them, arrived in Argentina.

And this was also true for Uncle Yakov . He was sixty years old, tall, slim, bent, with a long and not too thick beard and reddish eyes. He was a frail man who kept complaining about his health.

Back at home in Russia he had been a simple teacher (*melamed*). He came from a small town in Bessarabia and, being a religious fanatic, once here he cared little about horses, oxen, ploughed fields or threshing machines. He would spend all day long studying a Holy Book or praying, not daring to look out of the window the green reality surrounding him. He represented the inactive character of the Colony, where there was an active life consisting of plowing, sowing and threshing. All this was alien to him. He lived in a different world. He would carry on with the same habits of his old town : fasting on Mondays and Thursdays, clipping his nails every two weeks and ‘burying’ them afterwards with a blessing (a *bruje*) . He was a symbol of our family.

He was the oldest in the Colony and had the task of keeping the religious traditions alive, but was not able to become a patriarch because he had cut himself off of the real world. He thought his mission was to study and serve God.

He was the first “*melamed* “ in the Colony and in his “*jeder*” the holy Books Chumash and Rashi were studied.

Yakov's *Jeder* was based on the European model. Students would start with *Beresis* (Genesis) and continue with the five *chumashim*. This was the classic study program. You would study every single day the whole year round except the religious holidays.

His daughter, Ite ( we will come back to her), was 'religiously' devoted to her father and took care of his wellbeing so that he could dedicate himself to his spiritual life. He passed away when he was seventy years old and the family lost with him its religiousness. He had been the 'guardian' of that religious zeal brought from 'back home'.

Uncle Yakov's daughter, Ite, pale and slim, was also very religious. A true saint. She was also prejudiced, had a strong personality and when she died all our world changed.

When we visited her, she would not ask us "would you like to eat?" but would instead order "go wash your hands"

She died not long ago, at a very old age. She survived the times of extreme religiousness in the Colony, seldom complained about modern times and kept her religious habits to the end of her life.

Her husband, Uncle Luzer, was the opposite. He was big and tall, sporting a wild white beard. He was a typical worker of his native Bessarabia. He lived, ate and worked as a laborer. He was not illiterate but knew little of the Holy Books. He was the ideal farmer, colonized by the Jewish Colonization Association and dedicated his body and soul to the tilling of the fields. He would laugh at the farmer's children who would leave the farms to go to Buenos Aires and become 'merchants'. He called them "*luft menshen*" (people who live on air). He could not understand them. Even if it was not a paradise, in the Colony they had bread, milk, eggs, butter. They could survive.

We ate very well at Uncle Luzer's. We would visit them during Rosh Hashana and Pesach. We had to prepare ourselves because Ite and her two sons forced us to eat a lot. If one of us relented she would say "I'll become ill if you don't eat what we serve you"

The table was lavishly served with different and appetizing dishes. There were dairy and meat dishes. There was also the traditional "*momeligue*" a sort of cornmeal Bessarabia style that was cut with a thread. I cannot forget her famous

'*borsht*' well known throughout the Colony, or the tasty dishes prepared with geese or duck.

On Fridays dough was kneaded at every home. The first loaves of bread which came out of the oven were tried at lunch time with rice cooked in a way that had an unforgettable taste.

You can well imagine the type of food prepared for a marriage of any relative of Ite.

The farmer's wives were very good at baking bread and cakes (*leicach, strudl*) that were prepared in great numbers for weddings. There was a feeling of solidarity between these women. They would help each other to prepare a *chasene*.

Weddings generally took place on Wednesdays (*the author here means that weddings started at the beginning of Thursdays but, according to our tradition, start on Wednesday evening.* Yehuda's note) so that relatives and guests would not have to travel on Fridays, *shaves'* eve as weddings lasted for two or three days.

In general, the *jupa* was installed across from the synagogue on Thursday's evening, when the wedding would take place and the reception would be at a big tent because it was impossible to accommodate all the guests that could be up to two or three hundred people. It was usual to invite not only relatives but neighbors of the nearby Colonies who would come with their children as well.

This was a big event comparable to the labors related to the land. These were the plowing, sowing and threshing; the harvesting of the goods when Nature was kind; and the blessing of flax and wheat that was obtained after a long and hard effort. These were people who came to work on the land, even if in their countries of origin they had worked on different trades or professions. The young people tried other activities such as my brother David did. He played the violin by ear. All these volunteers helped in every marriage and would enjoy themselves till dawn by dancing '*freilach*', eating the abundant meals and drinking beer. We had the usual 'big eaters' who would make bets about who could be the biggest eater or drinker, with the logical consequences. The young boys could dance the modern tunes like polkas and waltzes even if they were a bit stiff around the feet while women had learnt to be 'modern dancers' but these skills did not stop them to getting up at dawn to milk the cows.

In general the party went on for a second day but at a slower pace and with fewer guests. You would have lunch and keep dancing, specially *freilach* and if by a 'stroke of bad luck' it started raining, the guests could not go home and would keep on with the celebration.

Uncle Luzer had two daughters and three sons. All of them collaborated in the tilling of the land. The eldest daughter had her father's body and her mother's face, in a more modern version of it. The second daughter and the youngest son looked mostly like their mother. The eldest son was quite similar to his father, especially in the way he talked with his hands in a very wild manner. He had always dreamt of having at least one rabbi son. Her dream came true with Hershl (Gregorio), her second daughter's twin. He was the middle son and she took him away from the farm and sent him to another colony to study with a scholar. Gregorio studied there for several years. He was a clever boy and learnt fast. His mother was very pleased with his progress.

But times were hard and there was no need for rabbinic studies. At that time, people had to work full time on the farm in order to survive. They were always hoping for good results from the flax and wheat crops and wanted to celebrate the harvesting with a big party.

Hershl, on top of his learning of the Torah, married the rabbi's daughter. He came back to his colony and became a member who, having learnt the Holy Laws, was more educated than the other settlers in the area.

In those times, in my Uncle Luzer's colony, Escriña number 4, Gregorio's studies were the exception even if he did not finish them. This was an outstanding feat for the family because the other two sons were plain farmers.

The six families lived in the same colony, so called Mishpuje Hick's Colony.

This fact could be considered quite a special aspect of the colonization of Entre Rios.

But we can say that this went unnoticed in the community -- the fact of wanting to educate a son. Uncle Luzer was not the centre of events; he was not a patriotic farmer and had little influence in the place where his sons lived except for an event that I will explain.

Hershl, whose mother, Ite, dreamt of seeing him a rabbi, became a farmer after his marriage. He was a good farmer and worked hard, happily sacrificing himself year after year as he kept bringing children into this world. As he sat on his plough on the cold winter mornings, Hershl thought and wondered about work in the Colony, with the weather's problems and the long distance to an urban centre. He realized that work in the farm was very hard and in spite of his efforts they were living very poorly and with a lot of difficulties. He shared these problems with his wife, the rabbi's daughter, even if he would not renounce his ideals. His hands were witness of how hard he had worked. They had already noticed that those who had left the farm to become small merchants in the capital could live better, free of worries and be able to send their children to school, even to University.

He was not thinking of leaving the farm to move to the big city, to become a merchant and to dedicate himself to community life. But he asked himself many questions. Why people who work hard live a miserable life while some others almost with no sacrifice lead a comfortable life?

He did not leave the Colony in spite of the frequent doubts that tormented him so much. He placed himself more and more to the 'left'. I used to meet with him in my visits to the Colony. He looked worn out and tired of the hard work and kept talking about his doubts, his situation and the possible solutions. During these meetings he complained about the world, with its unfairness and misery. He worried about the difficulties he encountered to feed his family or give an education to his children so that they would be freer in the future.

Hershl stayed as an exemplary farmer in the Colony for many years. He kept sowing and harvesting when nature with its droughts, rains or hails would allow it. And even when these weather problems were mastered, every six or seven years the locusts came and destroyed the effort of the whole year.

Perhaps Hershl would have continued being a farmer and fighting the adverse conditions in the fields. He would not have abandoned his passion for the farm in spite of the droughts and the swarm of locusts which would darken the horizon as they came down to eat every single grain or tree leaving behind them as a 'gift' the eggs that would become the green hoppers and leave the farmers economically and morally ruined.

His fighting spirit forced him to think about his sons as they were growing up. He had to think about their future.

All his sons were influenced by their father's extravagant 'leftist' ideas. They were socialist with a strong 'red' preference. The first to leave the farm to come to Buenos Aires was his only daughter who decided to work for her living and "do something positive for humanity". She is today a sensitive woman with a socialist ideology but different in her behavior and manners from the first 'agitators' who arrived from Russia at the turn of the century. Her youngest son went to university and God only knows how he could support himself to arrive to his goal of becoming a medical doctor. He is today a very good ophthalmologist in Buenos Aires. He considers himself a 'liberal leftist' who has freed himself from the 'Jewish sectarianism'. Proof of this was his marriage to a non-Jewish woman. It's grandson, our good ophthalmologist, seems to have accomplished an 'ideological precept'.

Holy Aunt Itz , who was never aware of this marriage, went to her grave without knowing about the existence of her non-Jewish granddaughter.

The second son came to Buenos Aires and studied for a year at our ORT school. But even if he was so young he had to quit school in order to work for a living. I got him a job to work for a friend of mine who was an important industrialist. Some years later, my friend phoned me and said: "doctor , your *protegé* has caused a revolution in my staff. He has even organized a strike..."

My cousin Hershl , born a farmer, was finally forced to leave the farm and come to Buenos Aires "to be with his children". Regrettably this attitude was taken by many farmers who left their lands and came to the city where they took great pains to acclimatize and get used to a different environment. Unfortunately, they came when they were over fifty and found themselves here with no activity and no goal to their lives. They got used to the new reality with great difficulty and had to forget their past as farmers. From Uncle Luzer to his great grandson , the ophthalmologist, only 40 years have elapsed but it was quite an evolution, a swift revolution, a real history in the path of an immigration.

