

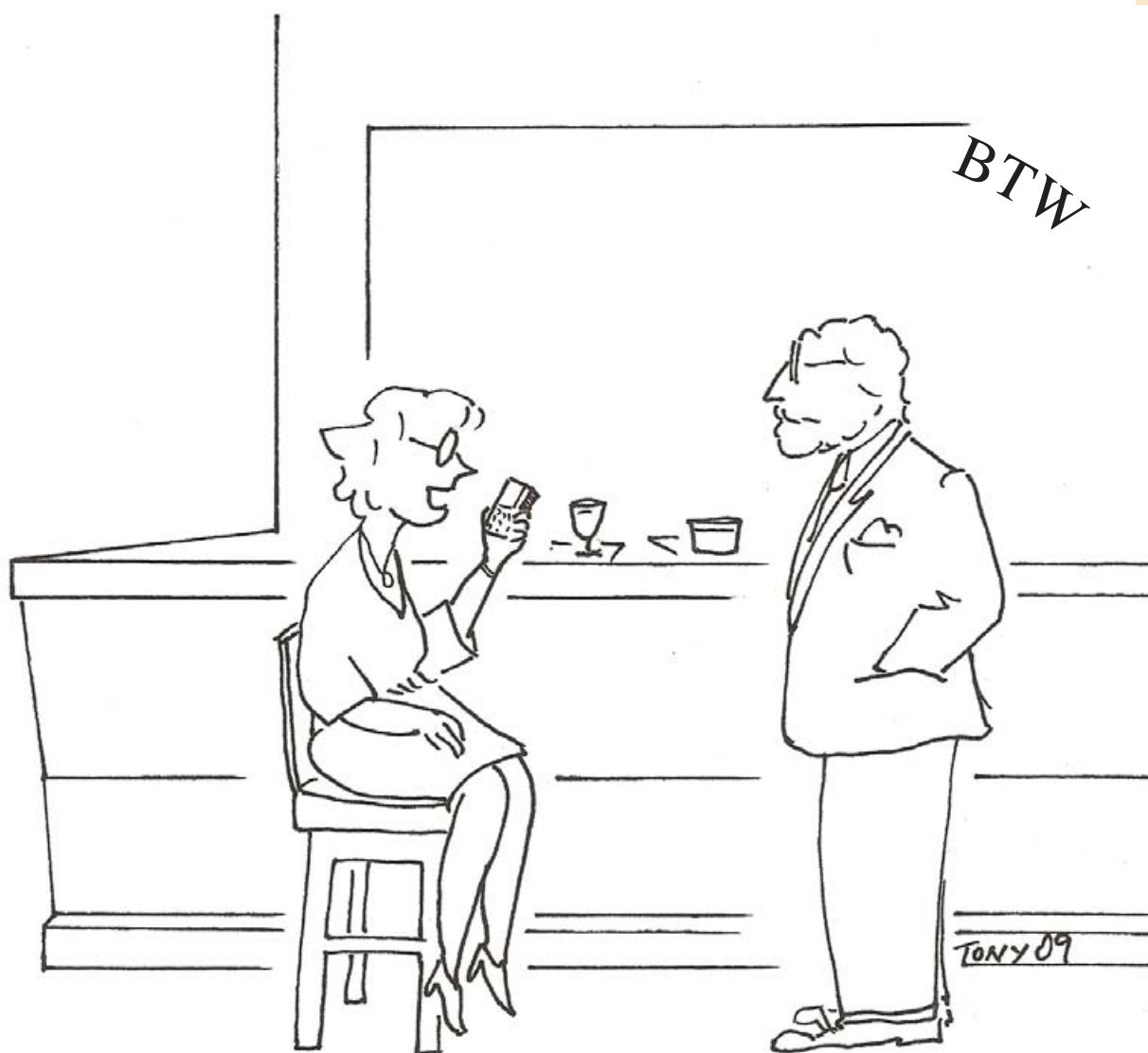
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# SOURCE

AN ONLINE PUBLICATION  
OF THE LITERARY DIVISION

NO. 46

FALL 2009



They have a lame one, a sitting one, and a daffy one,  
and they're trying to get them all in a row.

## Letter from the Editor

Our Fall 2009 issue features “Translating the Armenian Genocide,” a moving portrait of aging descendents of the survivors residing in Syria, excerpted from *Deir-Zor*, the work of French-Armenian photographer Bardig Kouyoumdjian and French journalist Christine Simeone. **By-the-Way** regular Tony Beckwith (“¡Gringo!”) teams up with Argentine writer Fernando Sorrentino (“El nación in Gaucho Lingo”) to study two faces of the coining of terms for foreigners south of the Texas border. “ATA Members Donate Stories” highlights the generous contributions of ATA members Michele A. Berdy, Liv Bliss, Nora Favorov, and Marian Schwartz to an anthology benefiting Russian hospices. Describing a successful ATA conference at the end of October, outgoing LD Administrator Enrica Ardemagni has posted her farewell letter in these pages. And lastly, I would like to express my thanks to Diane Goullard Parlante for her helpful proofreading of this issue.

Sincerely,

*Michele Aynesworth*

[www.mckayaynesworth.com](http://www.mckayaynesworth.com)



## ata Source

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Editor: Michele Aynesworth

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[michele@mckayaynesworth.com](mailto:michele@mckayaynesworth.com).

Deadline for the Winter issue is January 15.  
Please include a photo  
and brief bio of 2 or 3 sentences.

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Michele Aynesworth has specialized in translating Argentine authors, notably Roberto Arlt, Fernando Sorrentino, Edgar Brau, and Guillermo Saavedra. Her translation of Roberto Arlt's novel *Mad Toy* was honored as a finalist for the Soeurette-Diehl Fraser Translation Award. Editor of the ATA's *Beacons 10* and *Source*, she recently published *Blue on Rye*, a collection of her poetry and blues songs, and is now translating a French war journal by Charles Rist thanks to a 2009 NEA grant.

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# FROM THE LD ADMINISTRATOR

Dear Literary Division Members:  
This is my parting letter for the LD newsletter as I am completing my four years as Literary Division Administrator. And although somewhat sad, I will always stay connected, especially after the invigorating success of Literary Division activities at the 2009 ATA conference. The 11th Annual Marilyn Gaddis Rose Lecture was presented by the distinguished translator, Edith Grossman. Ms. Grossman is an award-winning translator specializing in English versions of Spanish language books and one of the most predominant and prolific translators of Latin American fiction. Ms. Grossman gave a provocative presentation on "Why Translation Matters," which is also the title of her forthcoming book, to a standing-room-only audience (which also included about 20 people sitting on the floor). In her presentation she discussed the importance of literary translation to readers and writers. Her presentation was

followed by numerous questions regarding everything from deciding on how to select the correct word in a translation to her discipline working as a translator since she left academia in 1990. Her presentation was followed by a book-signing sponsored by Freek Lankhoff of Intrans Book Service. At the 2008 LD Business meeting those in attendance brainstormed a special activity for the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the ATA conference. Phyllis Zatlin, a long-standing member and well-known translator, recommended presenting a play. After much help from ATA administrators, Rutgers University, and Pace University, this became a reality. Professor Ruis Woertendkye from the theatre department of Pace University selected and directed scenes from J. L. Alonso de Santos' *La estanquera de Vallecas* (Hostages in the Barrio, trans. Phyllis Zatlin) for the occasion. Although he does not know Spanish himself, he identified two student actors who



Edith Grossman (L) with Marilyn Gaddis Rose

could portray a key scene from this tragicomedy in both English and Spanish. John Ceballos and Michelle Ferreira gave an outstanding performance of a scene in English and then in Spanish. Other scenes were presented as staged readings in English with Professor Woertendkye

## The Literary Division

### Officers



Administrator:

Enrica Ardemagni

[eardema@iupui.edu](mailto:eardema@iupui.edu)

Assistant Administrator:

Montserrat Zuckerman

[montsezuck@ameritech.net](mailto:montsezuck@ameritech.net)

In addition to having served two terms as Administrator of ATA's Literary Division, Enrica Ardemagni is Associate Professor of Spanish and Director of the Certificate in Translation Studies at Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis, is a board member of the National Council on Interpreting in Health Care, Chair of the Indiana Commission on Health Care Interpreters and Translators, and Chair of the Communications Committee of the Midwest Association of Translators and Interpreters.

and Lilah Shreeve. As Phyllis Zatlin stated, “The ATA members who attended the theatre event responded enthusiastically to the performance. It should be noted that among these spectators were some who normally do not attend sessions sponsored by the Literary Division. Our purpose in scheduling a theatre performance was to break down the barriers between the literature group and other areas of specialization (legal, medical, etc.) Thanks to the efforts of Prof. Woertendyke, we were able to do



*Performers (L to R) Ruis Woertendkye, Lilah Shreeve, John Ceballos, Michelle Ferreira*

so.” The staging/staged reading was followed by a lively 90-minute panel discussion that included translator Phyllis Zatlin, Professor Gregory “Gary” Racz, and Professor Woertendyke and his cast.

They provided considerable insights into what is involved in acting and staging a translated play.

Six other sessions rounded out the Literary Division sessions at this year’s conference. On Thursday evening there were some 20 literary readings with an audience of about 60 during the after-hours Literary Café. Approximately thirty members attended the LD annual business meeting and discussed the option of offering bilingual readings either through a regular session or as a more organized Literary Café.

*Newly-elected Literary  
Division Administrator  
Emilia Balke*



The Literary Division installed the new Administrator, Emilia Balke, and Assistant Administrator, Dr. Rashid Hasan.

I close by giving tremendous thanks to those who have been of assistance over the past four years: Montserrat Zuckerman, Assistant Administrator, Myriam Young, Webmaster, and Michele Aynsworth, editor of Beacons X and Source. I do not say goodbye, but until our next conference.

*Enrica J. Ardemagni*



*During the panel discussion (L to R), play translator Phyllis Zatlin, Michelle Ferreira, John Ceballos, Lilah Shreeve, Ruis Woertendkye.*

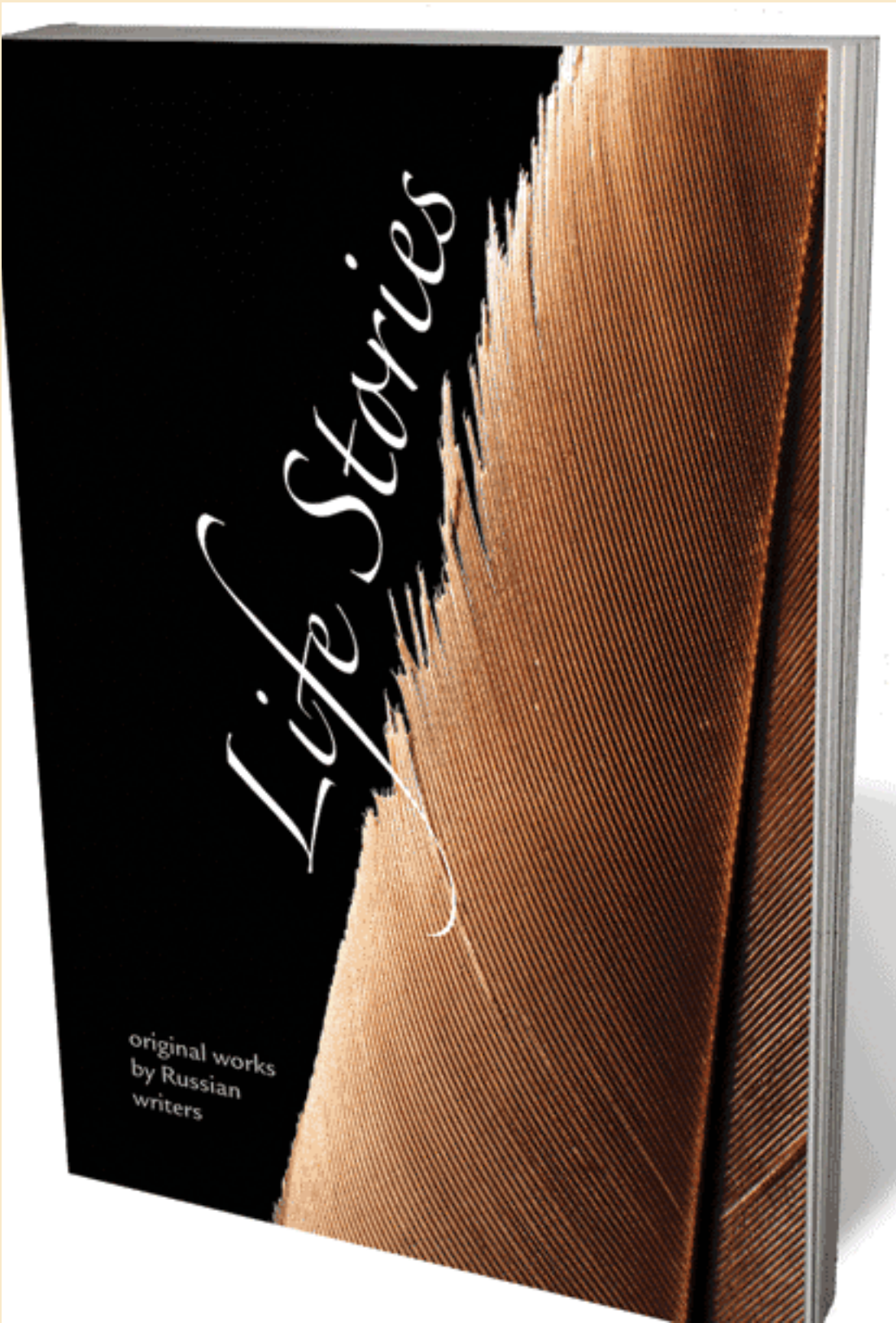


# ATA MEMBERS DONATE STORIES TO BENEFIT RUSSIAN HOSPICE PROGRAM

## *LIFE STORIES*

*An imprint of Russian Life Books*  
[www.storiesforgood.org](http://www.storiesforgood.org)

Russian Life, in collaboration with the Russian Arts Foundation, Vera Hospice Fund, and Galina Dursthoff Literary Agency, has published *Life Stories*, a special short story collection of works by 19 of Russia's most acclaimed contemporary authors, translated by fourteen prominent American and British translators. All proceeds will be donated to benefit hospice care in Russia.



ATA members Michele A. Berdy, Liv Bliss, Nora Favorov, and Marian Schwartz, as well as Alexei Bayer, Lise Brody, Anne Fisher, Deborah Hoffman, Michael Katz, Peter Morley, Susanna Nazarova, Anna Razumnaya-Seluyanov, Paul E. Richardson, Bela Shayevich and Nina Shevchuk contributed their time and talent to the anthology.

The authors included in this collection are: Dmitry Bykov, Vladimir Voinovich, Andrey Gelasimov, Boris Grebenshchikov, Yevgeny Grishkovets, Victor Yerofeyev, Alexander Kabakov, Eduard Limonov, Dmitry Lipskerov, Sergey Lukyanenko, Vladimir Makanin, Marina Moskvina, Victor Pelevin, Ludmila Petrushevskaya, Zakhar Prilepin, Dina Rubina, Dunya Smirnova, Vladimir Sorokin, Alexander Khurgin and Leonid Yuzefovich.

The Russian edition, published in March 2009, was hailed by critics in Russia as “the best of contemporary Russian fiction.” One of the year’s top fiction bestsellers in Russia, it has already sold over 40,000 copies. The English edition, *Life Stories*, showcases works by authors already well-known to English-speaking audiences, such as Eduard Limonov, Vladimir Makanin, Victor Pelevin, Ludmila Petrushevskaya, Vladimir Sorokin, and Vladimir Voinovich, as well as stories by accomplished Russian writers who are less widely known abroad, such as Andrei Gelasimov, Marina Moskvina, and Zahar Prelepin. The contributing authors represent the full gamut of styles, subjects, esthetics, and politics of Russian fiction today. Only one of the 19 works in the volume has been previously published in English.

Jay Parini, author of *The Last Station*, says: “Only once in a great while does such a rich collection of stories appear – so many voices, moods, temperaments, takes. *Life Stories* lives up to its title: it’s a life-enhancing compendium, full of variety and color, humor, sadness, and – in the best Russian tradition – wisdom.” The project began as an innovative way to support the nascent hospice movement in Russia. Oleg Vavilov, project coordinator and publisher of the Russian edition, said, “In putting out this book, we are

trying to raise money for institutions that are in great financial difficulty, but which are really quite inexpensive to run. But we are also trying to raise awareness of the importance of hospice care within Russia and abroad.” Every writer he asked donated a short story for the collection. So far over 5 million rubles (approximately \$165,000) has been presented to the Vera Hospice Fund from the sale of the Russian editions. The modern hospice movement, which began over 40 years ago in Britain and quickly spread around the world, is relatively new in Russia. The first hospice appeared in 1990, and today there are just over 200 organizations providing palliative care in the country. “This is a truly non-profit collaboration between cultures,” said Publisher Paul E. Richardson. “Russian authors have donated their works, American translators, designers and editors all worked pro bono, and books will be sold worldwide directly to consumers, using the power of the internet and digital publishing to ensure that the maximum return gets back to Vera Hospice Fund. Readers of these books will receive some truly great works of modern Russian literature, and at the same time they will help provide end-of-life care for countless fellow human beings.”

*Life Stories* (ISBN 1-880100-58-4) sells for \$25 (plus s&h) via [www.storiesforgood.org](http://www.storiesforgood.org). It can also be purchased through Amazon. All profits from book sales will be donated to the Vera Hospice Fund, a Russian not-for-profit enterprise dedicated to supporting hospice care.

# BY THE WAY

by Tony Beckwith,  
<http://www.tonybeckwith.com/>

¡Gringo!



*Tony Beckwith was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, spent his formative years in Montevideo, Uruguay, then set off to see the world. He came to Texas in 1980 and now lives in Austin where he works as a writer, translator, poet, and cartoonist.*

Given a choice, most people probably prefer to live among their own kind, and by and large would rather socialize with those they consider to be like them. But as populations shift and demographics change, many communities – whether they like it or not – are forced to face the challenges of diversity in their midst.

What happens when cultures meet? We see good and bad results in the news and in our neighborhoods, and in most cases it is obvious that, like other gaps, cultural divides can best be bridged when people learn to understand each other. To do this, they must get beyond the initial stages of culture-clash which, predictably, involve a fair amount of *misunderstanding*.

One of the most inflammatory moments in any clash tends to be sparked by those who resort to name calling. It sounds so juvenile, yet it happens among people of all ages, in

every race and culture, sometimes with tragic results. Why do we allow words to be used in such negative ways? And, how do we react to them when they are? Many will remember the children's rhyme: "Sticks and stones may break my bones but words can never hurt me." Does that good advice still ring true today?

At the elementary school where I spent my childhood there was nothing worse than being called a *nab*. The school was in Uruguay, and the word was a hybrid, *Spanglish* version of *nabo*, which means "turnip." Hardly as cruel as the slings and barbs we learned later in life, but at that tender stage it was a devastating insult. In the asphalt jungle of the playground you (and everyone else) would hear the shout, "don't be such a *nab*!" Or worse, the whispered, "he's *such a nab*!" The word itself was insipid but the energy behind it was venomous, and the target of this abuse was frequently reduced to tears. As I remember well.



It's been years since I've heard anyone called a *nab*. Like most people, my peers and I progressed through a rich heritage of insults based largely on the various taboos in effect in our culture at the time. There were the fairly standard religious blasphemies, embarrassingly crude references to body parts and functions, gleeful allusions to the reputed sexual habits of family members and authority figures, politically incorrect (to say the least!) characterizations of ethnic origins and, on special occasions, a no-holds-barred mayhem of all of the above. In the playground we learned that the only possible protection against any or all of them was a steadfast conviction that they simply weren't true. One might feel scorched by the emotion behind the words, but all withering accusations and slithering innuendo bounced off one's armor of self-knowledge. Otherwise, one was doomed.

Thinking back on my own experience, I have wondered about other words that, depending on how they are spoken and by whom, have the power to offend rather than contribute to cultural understanding. There are so many aren't there? Let's look at one that's fairly familiar everywhere in the Americas: *gringo*. What is it about this word, and why does it ruffle so many feathers?

In the first place, there is considerable misunderstanding about the origin and exact meaning of the word. For years, people have referred to a song that was allegedly sung by British soldiers during their various campaigns in Latin America early in the nineteenth century. The song was "Green Grow the Rushes, Oh," and many have suggested that

the word *gringo* derives from there. There are other urban legends that attempt to answer this question, such as the explanation that it has something to do with the American greenback.

The *Diccionario de la Real Academia Española* begs to differ, and defines *gringo* ("of disputed etymology") as follows: "Foreigner, especially English-speaking, and in general one who speaks a language other than Spanish." It then goes on to say that the term refers to people from the United States, or England, or Russia, according to where in Latin America the word is being used. In some countries it is defined as a "fair-haired person with white skin." The entry ends with this definition: "An unintelligible language." No insults there so far.

A search of the Internet and other resources reveals that the word *gringo* came originally from Andalucía in southern Spain, and was a corruption of the Spanish word for "Greek" which is *griego*. Just as in English we say "it's all Greek to me," in the Spanish of the fifteenth century *griego* referred to something unintelligible, something foreign. Over time *griego* eroded to *gringo* and was brought to Latin America by Spaniards who came with the Conquest. They used it in Argentina, for example, as a name for the other main groups of European migrants (who were foreigners to them), the Italians and the British. So in Argentina, *gringo* can mean an Italian, and since the Italian migrants moved out to the country to work the land (while the Spaniards stayed in the city to work in the restaurants and cafés), *gringo* came to mean "Italian farm worker." The word was also used as a

synonym for *inglés*, to refer to the Englishmen who came to the Río de la Plata region during the nineteenth century, seeking their fortune in the thriving sheep and cattle business of the pampas.

Meanwhile, in northern Latin America, the “foreign” meaning of the word coupled with its other connotations of “white-skinned” and “English-speaking” was tagged to the main group of foreigners in those parts, and *gringo* became just another word for *norteamericano*. Like other Latinos, Mexicans took exception when people in the United States appropriated to themselves the name of their common continental homeland by calling themselves Americans, so they called them *gringos* instead, and it stuck. In its essential form it was not necessarily intended as an insult; it was just a name for a particular group of people.

In the heat of battle, verbal or otherwise, we hurl whatever we have at hand, but the fact is there is nothing inherently evil or malicious about this particular expression; as usual, it’s how we say it that counts. Personally, I’d rather be called a *gringo* than a *nab* any day. In either case, an understanding of the true meaning of the word can deprive it of its sting, and prevent an escalation of mere name-calling into an exchange of sticks and stones.

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#### *Columnist’s remarks:*

I wrote this essay several years ago, and in the back of my mind had always intended to do some more research on the subject. Surely, I thought, if the word *gringo* has been in use in the Americas for several centuries, it must have been mentioned here and there by writers who chronicled the life and times of early settlers in the countries bordering the Río de la Plata.

What profound satisfaction, then, to be introduced to the Argentine writer, Fernando Sorrentino, who approached the matter from a more local angle and documented the use of a synonym for *gringo* in the works of several writers, including the legendary José Hernández in his epic gaucho poem, *Martín Fierro*.

Fernando Sorrentino’s work focuses on the term *el nación*, which uses the masculine article to differentiate it from the Spanish word for “nation”. Like *gringo*, this is yet another name for those who “aren’t from around here.” As shown in this review, it comes from the language of the gaucho, the iconic, romanticized cowboy of the pampas.

In the following essay, Sorrentino’s meticulous detective work shows us how the word was used to refer to the foreigners who found their way out to the ranches and towns of the Argentine interior. At the same time, he provides a fascinating insight into the overlap of cultures that took place during that earlier phase of globalization, when Europeans set sail in search of India, and instead landed in America.

# “EL NACIÓN” IN GAUCHO LINGO

by Fernando Sorrentino

Translation: mma

Fernando Sorrentino was born in Buenos Aires November 8, 1942. For some four decades he taught Spanish Language and Literature in various Argentine schools and, at the same time, allowed himself the pleasure of two interconnected avocations: reading and writing. He has published around one hundred short stories and, perhaps, an equal number of linguistic and literary essays. As of December 31, 2008, his publications amounted to more than forty books, in Spanish as well as in translation in numerous other languages. He has always noted the affection of those with whom he has worked, which shows he is a good fellow and, hence, a relatively happy one.

[www.fernandosorrentino.com.ar](http://www.fernandosorrentino.com.ar)

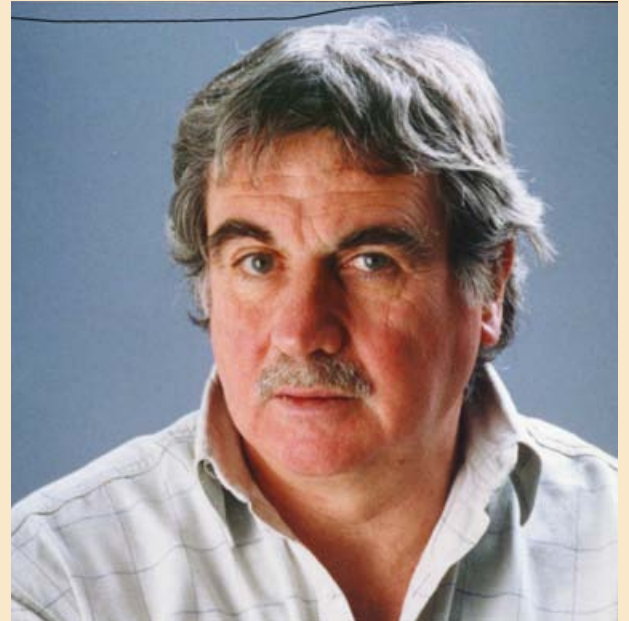


Photo by VERÓNICA RUIZ

## I

### Nine translators

**confronted with “un nación” (not “una nación”) on sentry duty.**

With a greater or lesser margin of error, all Spanish-English translators can say what the syntagma “la nación” means. But the possibilities of being right are considerably reduced if it is a question of translating “el nación.” The fact is that its meaning is quite precise and restricted to the narrow field of gaucho language. Let us look at three examples, in chronological order:

- a) From the year 1846. Hilario Ascasubi (Argentine, 1807-1875). “Martín Sayago recibiendo en el palenque de su casa a su amigo Paulino Lucero” [Martín Sayago receiving his friend Paulino Lucero at the hitching post by his house], 514-523:



Allá en mi pago tenemos  
un **nacioncito** bozal,<sup>1</sup>  
muchacho muy liberal  
con quien nos entretenemos;  
y al lazo le conocemos  
muchafición de una vez.  
Y ni sé qué **nación** es,  
pero cuando, entre otras cosas,  
le grito: “Pialame a Rosas”,  
se alegra y responde: “¡Yes!”.

[Over at my country place  
we’ve got a *nacioncito* whose Spanish stinks,  
a bleeding-heart liberal  
we have a lot of fun with;  
and we know he’s mighty  
partial to the lasso.  
I don’t know what nation he’s from,  
but when (among other things)  
I yell at him, “Rope Rosas for me,”  
he gets excited and hollers back, “Yes!”]

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1. *Un nacioncito bozal*, that is, “a little gringo whose Spanish is clumsy.”



<http://www.confederaciongaucha.com.ar/fotos/>



- b) From June, 1872. Antonio D. Lussich (Uruguayan, 1848-1928). *Los tres gauchos orientales* [The Three Gauchos from Uruguay], 535-538:

Si me hace acordar a un pion  
estranjis que yo tenía;  
era labia tuito el día,  
en su idomia, aquel **nación**.

[He reminds me of a foreign peon  
I had once;  
he babbled all day  
in his language, that *nación*.]

- c) From December, 1872. José Hernández (Argentine, 1834-1886). *Martín Fierro* (I: 871-876):

Por de contao, con el tiro  
se alborotó el avispero;<sup>2</sup>  
los oficiales salieron  
y se empezó la junción:  
quedó en su puesto **el nación**  
y yo fi al estaquiadero.<sup>3</sup>

[You may bet the bee-hive was soon a-hum  
At the shot that nearly bagged me;  
The officers came tumbling out  
To see what the row was all about;  
They left the gringo at his post,  
And off to the stakes they dragged me.]

“El nación” is a synonym of “el gringo,” that is, any non-Spanish-speaking foreigner, and the word generally carries pejorative overtones. Ascasubi’s “el nación,” as the monosyllabic “Yes!” indicates, has his origin in some Anglo-Saxon part of the world, possibly the British isles; Lussich’s remains a mystery; Hernández’s is Italian.

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2. In his 1925 edition of *Martín Fierro*, don Eleuterio F. Tiscornia explains: “*alborotarse el avispero*: ‘raise the alarm.’ The same meaning as in the Spanish saying *alborotarse el cotarro* . . . .

3. *Estaquiadero* (estaqueadero). The place where the *estaqueada* takes place, a punishment that consists of tying someone hand and foot to four stakes by means of raw leather strips.

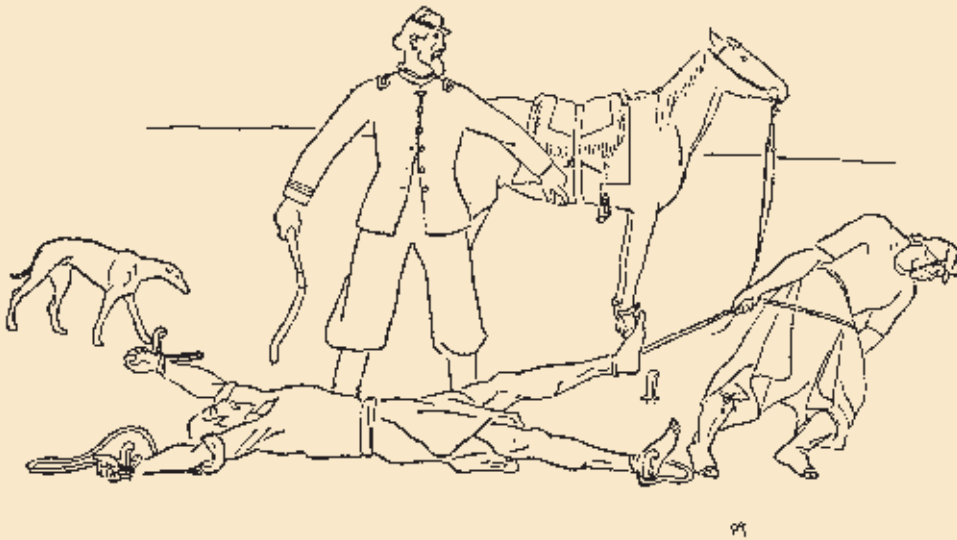


Illustration by Alberto Guiraldes  
for Walter Owen's 1936 translation of *Martin Fierro*. Pub. Farrar & Rinehart, 1936.

To my knowledge the texts of Ascasubi and Lussich have not been translated. In contrast, Hernández's has seen multiple versions in other languages. Let us examine how some of these translations<sup>4</sup> dealt with the phrase "el nación."

Into German. Adolf Borstendoerfer: *der Gringo*.

Into Catalán. Enric Martí i Muntaner: *el gring*.<sup>5</sup>

Into French. Paul Verdevoye: *l'Italien*.

Into English. Walter Owen: *the gringo*. Henry Alfred Holmes: *the foreigner*.

Into Italian. Folco Testena: *la sentinella*;<sup>6</sup> Mario and Venanzio Todesco: *lo straniero*;  
Giovanni Meo Zilio: *l'italiano*.

4. *German*: Adolf Borstendoerfer, Buenos Aires, Cosmopolita, 1945. *Catalán*: Enric Martí i Muntaner, Buenos Aires, Fontana y Traverso, 1936. *French*: Paul Verdevoye, Paris, Nagel, 1955. *English*: a) Walter Owen, *op. cit.*; b) Henry Alfred Holmes, New York, Hispanic Institute in the United States, 1948. *Italian*: a) Folco Testena, Buenos Aires, no pub., 1919; b) Mario and Venanzio Todesco, Padua, Rebellato, 1959; c) Giovanni Meo Zilio, Buenos Aires, Asociación Dante Alighieri, 1985.

5. Of course, the word *gring*, invented by Martí y Muntaner, was "catalanized" by the curious surgical apocope.

6. Testena, by translating "el nación" as *la sentinella*, does not lie, nor does he tell the truth. In the place of Hernández's morphological emphasis on identity, he goes for function, thus committing what, to use a soccer metaphor, may be called "cornering the ball": he got rid of the problem without solving it.

Now then, we can say that, in spite of Testena's evasive action, these nine gentlemen understood, each in his own way, that Hernández was using a synonym for "el gringo" when he said "el nación." But, as we shall see below, there were two ladies who lacked such discrimination.

## II

**"Los naciones" does not mean "los nativos," rather the reverse.**

Let us return now to the *sextina* (I:871-876) of *Martín Fierro* (1872):

Por de conta, con el tiro  
se alborotó el avispero;  
los oficiales salieron  
y se empezó la junción:  
quedó en su puesto el nación  
y yo fi al estaquiadero.

And may I repeat, the phrase "el nación" in Gaucho language means "el gringo."

Fifty-four years after Hernández, Ricardo Güiraldes used the same expression in Chapter 11 of *Don Segundo Sombra* (1926), this time in the plural:

—Po'l lao del lazo se desmontan **los naciones**.

I am able to compare only three translations.<sup>7</sup>

Into French, by Marcelle Auclair :

— Les étrangers descendent de cheval du côté du lasso.  
[Foreigners dismount on the side of the lasso.]

Into German,<sup>8</sup> by Hedwig Ollerich:

Auf der Lassoseite sitzen unsere Landsleute ab.  
[Our countrymen get off on the side of the lasso.]

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7. *French*: Marcelle Auclair, Paris, Gallimard, 1932. *German* : Hedwig Ollerich, Berlin, Bruno Cassirer, 1934. *English*: Harriet de Onís, New York, Farrar & Rinehart, 1935.

8. The German translation is printed in Gothic letters whose deciphering, however, did not leave me completely blind. The truth is that, for sure transliteration to the Roman alphabet, I called on the kind help of Marion Kaufmann, a German woman of Buenos Aires, to whom I turn when I must immerse myself in a German text.

Into English, by Harriet de Onís:

We get off our ponies on the side of the lasso.

As we can see, Auclair's translation hit the mark.<sup>9</sup> But the ladies of the H and the O, each in her fashion, understood — perhaps because of the identical root shared by the words *naciones*, *nacionales* and *nativos* — exactly the opposite of what Güiraldes wrote.

In *Don Segundo Sombra*, the young rustic narrator, referring to the true or supposed equestrian clumsiness of the gringos, wants to say “Foreigners dismount from a horse on the right side rather than the left,” a rather hyperbolic way of symbolizing something that is aberrant and unacceptable.

Indeed, a gaucho who would dismount on the right side is almost as inconceivable as — restricting ourselves to the realm of ideal objects — a triangle of four sides or an octosyllabic alexandrine, or — restricting ourselves to the realm of fantastic animals — a seafaring dromedary or an arboricole whale.



<http://www.casaargentina.org/efemerides/noviembre.htm>

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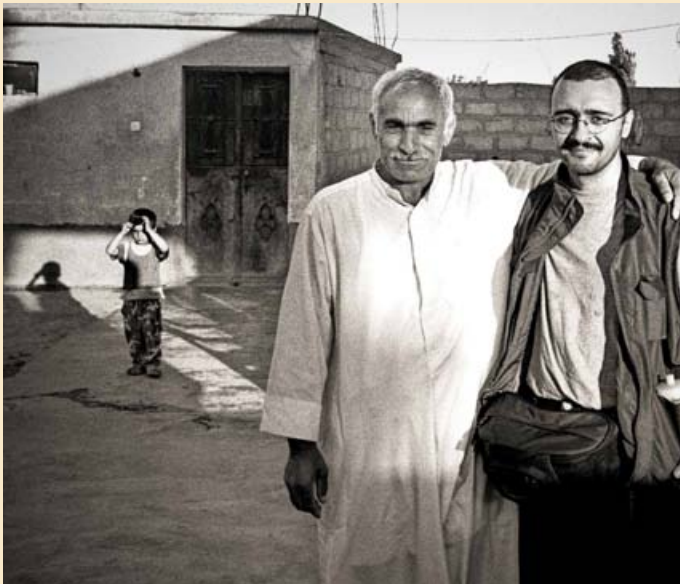
9. Let us not forget that Jules Supervielle, born in Montevideo and a friend of Güiraldes, collaborated on revising this translation.



# TRANSLATING THE ARMENIAN GENOCIDE

EXCERPTS FROM  
*Deir-Zor: On the Trail of the Armenian Genocide of 1915*

WITH PHOTOGRAPHS BY BARDIG KOUYOUMDJIAN  
AND TEXT BY CHRISTINE SIMEONE



Bardig with Ait Badras in the Syrian desert

*Bardig Kouyoumdjian, co-author of Deir-Zor: Sur les traces du génocide arménien de 1915 [Deir-Zor: On the Trail of the Armenian Genocide of 1915], is the forty-six-year-old grandson of survivors of the Armenian holocaust. A photographer born in Lebanon, educated at the New York Institute of Photography, and now based in Paris, Bardig made several trips into the Syrian desert in an attempt to translate into images what words could not describe, the forced march of Turkish Armenians to Deir-Zor, the mass exterminations, the abandoned children who survived to become Bedouins, growing up in another land, speaking another language, immersed in another culture and religion. The resulting book, written with journalist Christine Siméone, and with a preface by historian Yves Ternon, was published to great acclaim in France by Actes Sud in 2005.*

Having been asked by Bardig Kouyoumdjian to translate **Deir-Zor: Sur les traces du génocide arménien** into English, the editor of *Source* was struck by how often the book returns to the theme of lost language and the impossibility of words to tell the story of the diaspora — problems of communication and speech, the problem of descendants of the genocide having to “translate” what has happened to their people and their own experiences in an alien land, another culture, a foreign tongue.

What follows are excerpts and photographs from *Deir-Zor* that illustrate how the experience of those remnants of survivors in the Syrian desert has been nearly “lost in translation.”

*What is a man who lacks the language of those who begot him? In France, my country today, those immigrants, after having survived the suffering inflicted and escaped the death promised by Constantinople, have endured silence and the impossibility of sharing their pain with others. For years I went looking for those scattered around the globe by the diaspora. Their life in the western countries where they have been accommodated has only been possible on condition that they erase the wounds and say nothing, allowing others to remain indifferent and act as if these refugees were “normal” people with no history. General indifference tells me that I do not exist, my ghosts do not haunt the nights of my fellow citizens. General indifference tells me that I am nothing more than the descendent of a people to be wiped off the map.*

*A child of the void, I therefore set out for Deir-Zor.*



Parsegh Chatoyan

*Parsegh Chatoyan suddenly began to speak. It was the middle of the afternoon, he sat down on his bed. He lost his parents in the desert at the age of seven. His father left in a convoy, he did not know where to, he never saw him again. His mother died in the desert of hunger and fatigue. Some deportees led him to a city, very probably Deir-Zor. He cried like a baby as he told me this. He spoke of his mother as if he had just lost her. His voice changed pitch, he*

*spoke in Armenian, remembering the people crying out and the moments of panic, young girls throwing themselves into the Euphrates. Brought up in the desert, he learned Arabic and arrived in Lebanon, where he translated the works of writers who were victims of the genocide.*



*I still feel the desperate hand of Hripsime Kazezian. I entered her room, explaining that I had come to speak with survivors of the Armenian genocide. “Come nearer,” she said, “I am blind, I have to touch you.” I extended my right hand, and she held on so tightly and for so long that I could not free myself. I picked up a camera with my left hand and began to take photos, just like that, while I was only a few centimeters from her. I managed to switch hands, placing my left hand in hers where my right had been, and continued snapping photographs without stopping, without breaking this contact with her. Meanwhile, she told me her story, in Turkish, her usual language, and a little in Armenian to help me out. In Turkish one uses the term “seferbellig” for the genocide, but the word connotes an exodus more than an extermination. Hripsime “traveled” across the desert from Adana to Deir-Zor, where her family disappeared. Her story poured out from her lips in barely comprehensible fragments.*





*The Armenian Kids of Deir-Zor*

*In Deir-Zor only a few dilapidated buildings still bear witness to the presence of the Armenian Catholics at the end of the nineteenth century, and their small community has been reduced to some two hundred people. The children go to a private Assyro-Chaldean school where fewer than twenty percent of the students are Christian. The Armenian language is no longer taught; the Catholics are generally Arabophones and have another idea of Armenianism. Here as in Lebanon and elsewhere, they have completely adopted the local ways of life.*



*Abdallah Talal*

*I also met a man whose life history definitively changed course in the nomads' tents. Born Hagop Dogramadjian at the beginning of the twentieth century, he died with the name Abdallah Talal nearly a century later in the vicinity of Tel Abiad near the Turkish border. Hagop remembered that his mother had abandoned him. She had probably hoped to save him by giving him to a Bedouin before marrying a sheik, whom she left when the armistice was declared. Years later she underwent a search to find her Hagop again; she recognized him thanks to a birthmark on his back. Hagop-Abdallah, owning land and animals, was a successful Bedouin in one of the most barren places in that desert region. One of his sons was raised as an Armenian in Aleppo by Hagop's mother. I saw a tear roll down his face, a drop of the past coming back to him, and carrying away with it all the words that could have informed me about his childhood.*



*Ait Badras and family*

*When Ait Badras saw me arrive one day in June 2002, he pointed his finger at me and said, "You, you abandoned us in the desert." . . . The Badras family, with its nine sons and daughters, lives in a stone house in a little village neighboring Deir-Zor, near Hatla, in a rather verdant but dusty landscape. Wheat fields lie next to pastures for sheep, whose wool piles up in enormous jute bags near the houses. Ait's daughter studies at the university in Deir-Zor, and at the time of our meeting, she was doing research on their family. The Badras family knows almost nothing about the genocide, just that [Ait and his wife were adopted by*

*Bedouins] . . . attached by chance to a family and to an Arabic way of life. Ait remembers only two words in Armenian, which his father Bedros Mgrditch David Tchaouchian must have taught him, “hats” (bread) and “tchour” (water). He repeated these two words for me like a child that is proud of showing off what he has just learned, at the same time hoping he is not getting it wrong. Ait the Muslim feels cut off from a kindred people whom he does not know in any case. “Why can’t you accept us as Muslim Armenians, can’t there be Muslim Armenians?” he asked me in desperation. He wants to be recognized for what he is today, just as his father was before. I answered that I did accept him as he was, and he retorted, “Religion, you know, is personal, and I am truly Armenian.”*

*. . .*

*Like an abandoned child, Ait is completely in the dark as to his parents’ background. Family culture and traditions have been lost, though not by choice; he knows they existed, but he knows nothing of them, as if he had been engendered by the void.*

*In Ras-ul-Ain . . . everything (but what “everything”?) has been passed down orally, the young people have only minimal knowledge of their ancestors, and they recount bits of history with flagrant errors. “What do I know about it?” History, family stories, thus become embellished as a result of gaps in memory, distortions, and the imagination of this or that one over the course of generations. It is quite easy today, for those who wish to deny the existence of the genocide, to rely upon the erosion of words and memories, as well as the difficulty for each human being to reconstitute history, especially when it has been falsified.*

*Seeing that there were too many survivors at the end of September 1915, the Young Turks, by Talaat’s written decree, ordered the extermination of the children, with the exception of those under five as they would not be old enough to remember. They were very little children, true, but the images imprinted themselves on their minds, their history was written in the depths of their pupils, the smells worked their way into their nostrils; the heat and the cold, sickness and parasites, inhabited their bodies. . . . Lost in the immensity of History, they carried in their baggage a culture that was buried in their subconscious — the*

*sufferings of their families, the shock of barbarism parading before their eyes, the dust of that hell of fire and sand issuing from the tufts of grass and the piles of rock, the burning pain of sun on their bodies, the*



*humiliation, and the rape of dear ones — and it is the contents of that baggage that I have tried to capture with my camera.*

*Talaat had not foreseen that all this would be passed on from generation to generation, would be carried forth in the flesh of those yet to be born, and that like me, they would have no choice in the world they would inherit, in a foreign tongue, on an unknown soil, but to construct an identity for themselves and to require the truth from Talaat’s successors. Today a demand is made of the Turkish authorities that will not go away until the truth lives in the mouths of everyone, victims as well as executioners.*



*Words, like rocks, erode with time,  
just as dunes shift with the wind.*





*Harout Vartanian receives me in his office in Deir-Zor, accompanied by his green-feathered parrot, sitting before a piece of glass-covered mahogany furniture, and scattered around, some business cards, a vase of artificial flowers, and the portrait of President Hafez al-Assad with the legend, "You are my father." Needless to say, parrots do not talk. They say nothing intelligible to my ears. The bird-man does not want to tell me the story of his father Arouch, who died the previous year. It is too overwhelming, and he has not finished crying. He hands me the photocopy of a newspaper article: "There, everything is there." Everything is not in fact there, in those few lines published in 1994, lines offered up to the inattention of the reader, the memory of a man, a screen revealing some snippets of misfortune in order to disguise the mystery.*

*At stake in my anxiety to conserve and transmit my language and my culture is just permission to continue to exist beyond my origins. The bones gathered in Ras-ul-Ain, I put them in a box so that their zone of influence is well defined. They are enclosed and contained in that cardboard cage. They cannot escape being looked at or reflected upon, today by me, tomorrow by my offspring. I hope for my descendants that the negative of my people's history, sought by the roundabout means of these snapshots, will remain in the lower depths of memory, neatly curled up under its black shroud, ready to hand, within the reach of forgetfulness for those who will have taken the time to recognize them. I am left with . . . obscurities, secrets, and mysteries, messages that have been erased from the surface of the earth by the breath of heaven, and lost words whose echoes reverberate in an invisible infinite where birds have the first word.*

