Sketches from my life in Quito (1941-1950)
(From My Memoirs)
Elio Schaechter

I. What to be and what not to be

No sooner had I arrived in Quito that I had to deal once again with questions of identity, as if I hadn't had enough of this (note added. I was born in Italy, of Polish parents. We left for Ecuador in late 1940, and arrived in Quito in January 1941). I had already been an Italian and an Eastern European, a traditional Jew and an assimilated Westernized one. Now, challenges came simultaneously from my new South American homeland and from a Jewish refugee community that was also unfamiliar to me.

Previously, I had been exposed to three traditions, Italian, Polish Jewish, and Austrian. In Northern Italy where we had lived, Jews were strikingly Italian, high class, wealthy, educated, and aloof. Among them were major artists, writers, and scientists, not to mention some prominent members of the Fascist party. Italian Jews were Sephardi, claiming descent from the Jews who fled from Spain during the 1492 expulsion and many of them did in fact have ancestors who came that way. We, on the other hand, were Ashkenazi, Eastern European Jews. We were tolerated and did attend their synagogue and school, but my parents were not integrated in this community. However, as a small child I did not sense the difference and thought that I was part of them. This was the community I had grown up with and knew.

In stark contrast, Polish Jews typically lived in small towns and were only tangentially touched by Western culture. For several centuries, my ancestors most likely led a secluded life, centered on deep religious practices, family, and community. They were probably small shopkeepers, or at least the women in the family were. The men were supposed to spend their time studying the Talmud under the guidance of a Rebbe, a man of greater or lesser mystical leanings. This was particularly likely in the case of my family, since they liven in Galicia, the home of Hassidism. Until the 20th century, my folks spoke Yiddish among themselves, although I assume that they could handle the local language, e.g., Polish or Ukranian.

My parents had left Poland in their mid-teens. My mother, as I said already, had been swept along by the process of Westernization that had already taken place among German and Austrian Jews. Going back into the 19th century, Jews in Central Europe had become quite assimilated and felt to be part of the larger society. Hitler came as an unimaginable shock to them. Germans and Austrians in general held tended to have pejorative views about all Poles, Latvians, Russians, and Romanians, who were supposed to be unkempt, uncultured, untrustworthy, unschooled. In parallel, Westernized Jews looked down with contempt on their unassimilated and unsophisticated brethren. That many of the Eastern Jews were scholars of the Talmud and had a long tradition of learning counted for little. The process of Westernization went fast and newly arrived Jews from the East tended to acquire the new manners and appearance very soon. My

mother was a good example. Had she stayed in Vienna, she would have become indistinguishable from other Viennese Jews, and probably from Viennese at large.

In Quito, my Italian identity, dubious as it was, counted for little because there few kids my age came from Italy. Most of my new friends were Austrian and a few German, and what did they know about Italian Jews! Abruptly, I was no longer the Italian Jew I had aspired to be. In my new group, I was typecast as an Eastern Jew, not without some logic, because I didn't speak German. The refugees brought along to Ecuador their full baggage of attitudes and prejudices, including making sharp distinction about what kind of a Jew one was. The distinction was between the Germans and Austrians on one side, the Poles, Romanians and Russians on the other, and there were even finer splits. The Czechs, for example, wanted to have nothing to do with anyone else. Language and accent gave away who was from where.

Initially, the social contact between the groups was limited. Each group had its own social club and its members studiously avoided the others. Eventually, the rifts became less important for the adults as well, in part because the Quito community was too small to support these divisions, in part because people began to realize how absurd this was in light of the cataclysmic events in Europe. The kids my age had an easier time getting along, and overcame these barriers more rapidly and easily. Slowly, as everybody felt more and more at home in Quito, the interactions between them increased, in time to become much less unimportant. Ecuador, it was said, was a place where Polish Jews learned German and German Jews learned Yiddish. Even so, the old prejudices lingered. Before my marriage to Edith in 1994, I said something to my future mother-in-law about being Polish. Almost in panic, she blurted out: "But your mother was Austrian!"

Not surprisingly, my admission into the Jewish group demanded some fortitude. At first, I got much painful ribbing for being a Polish Jew, an "Ost-Jude", and not speaking good German. I remember the chant: "*Du bist so schön wie Apoll… Apoll… Wie ein Polnischer Yid"* (*"You are as lovely as Apollo, Apoll…. A Polish Jew"*). I had to work on my German pronunciation and improved it fairly rapidly. I have puzzled how come I became fluent in German so fast because this was not a language I thought I knew. (One Jew asks another: "*Do you speak German*?" "*Oui*", he answers. The friend says: "*But* Oui *is a French word!*" "*You mean I also speak French? I didn't know!*") My parents usually spoke Yiddish among themselves and, in Italy, Italian to me. Perhaps the closeness of our living quarters in the last few years in Italy and during the trip to Ecuador had made me learn more Yiddish than I was aware of. And Yiddish was a stepping-stone to German. For all I know, I may also have picked up some German from our relatives in Austria. To borrow someone else's expression, Italian was my mother-tongue and Yiddish my grandmother-tongue.

So, why did being picked on for being Polish sting so much? Was it the familiar signal that, once again, I was an outsider? Did I inherit this? I knew that my father was well aware of his lower social standing as a Polish Jew. He spoke German with an accent; his dialogue was not very sophisticated, his manners at times revealed his origins, thus he was readily "found out." An impetuous and assertive person, he was deferential to Italian

and, to a lesser extent, to German Jews. It became a source of pride for my father to be the go-between for the small group of Italian Jews and the larger community. My mother was quite the opposite, and could readily be taken for an assimilated Jew. So who was I? Talk about "farblonget" (mixed up)! All this and puberty too!

My hurts were my own to feel. The "class" distinction was more important to me than to the other refugee kids, most of whom treated this in an age-appropriate manner and soon got over it. I became very close with several of them and they provided me with an enriching and stimulating experience. Among others were Egon, Fritz, Michael, Walter Werner – their names tell of their origins (I list them alphabetically on purpose as it would be hard to do it by their order of importance to me).

The Jewish community had an active intellectual life. It numbered not more than 3000, yet it supported a small newspaper, lectures, concerts, and musical shows. There was even a tiny theater in the director's house. All of this, of course, was done in German. I had a few minor roles in plays, such as George Bernard Shaw's *Candida*. There was also an active sports organization, with basketball and soccer courts, and even an indoor boxing ring. This ring was the site of a story that Edith likes to tell. I was boxing, or tried to. I was terrible at it, which prompted Edith and her friends to get the giggles. She says that afterwards I came over to her, gave her a coin, and said: "Here, when you grow up, give me a call." Which she did, some forty years later.

Some of my friends and I belonged to a discussion group that met twice a month, led by a well-read older person. We explored Thomas Mann, Andre Gide, Hermann Hesse, the existence of God, whatever theme was deemed to be intellectual enough. Belonging to this group was a mark of intellectual distinction and my membership in it surely facilitated my integration into the upper intellectual echelons of the Jewish community. Many of my friends went on to do great things. We all hold on to the notion that our group spawned an unusually high number of high achievers. Perhaps. The stimulus was there.

Very few of these friends stayed in Ecuador. After the war, there was a sudden and dramatic exodus, mainly to the U. S. The reason was not only alienation with the surroundings but also that the prospects were limited, other than for making money. Some of those remaining kept their identity, others married Ecuadorians and their children became assimilated.

The intricate and exciting story of this refugee community has been told by a German, Maria-Luise Kreuter. Her book called *Wo liegt Ecuador? : Exil in einem unbekannten Land* ("*Where on Earth is Ecuador? Exile to a Land Unknown*") is available in Spanish translation but not in English. Another source of this information is a book by Benno Weiser, *Professions of a Lucky Jew*. Benno was especially entitled to write such a book. In my days he was a journalist in the pay of the British Embassy, in charge of counteracting the Nazi propaganda evident in Ecuador until the time when the U. S. entered the war, when the Nazis were expelled from the country. Benno then became

ambassador of Israel to Paraguay and, later a professor at Boston University, which is where I got to see him again.

As I will relate next, my European persona was only part of my personality. I was also something of an Ecuadorian.

II. My native self

One should be thankful to be able to participate in any culture, but I have a special liking for my Latin side. When I am being Ecuadorian, I feel tender towards others, more willing to laugh, more light spirited. It's a joyful and liberating feeling, one that does not come so readily to people of the North. How did I acquire get this?

I stood a head taller and was lighter skinned than most of the kids in my classes. I was promptly labeled "El Gringo" because, unlike purists in the use of the term, average Ecuadorians did not distinguish between Americans and Europeans, Jewish or otherwise. All were gringos, folks who were different and who could be made fun of because they appeared to be slow-witted. There was merit in this assessment because in general "gringos" were not necessarily street wise and they seemed to take every statement literally. To Ecuadorians, whose survival often depended on some measure of cunning, my fellow refugees and I must have seemed naïve indeed. There is absurdity in this, given that leaving Europe had often demanded considerable ingenuity. Jokes that reflected these paradoxes circulated within the Jewish community. This one is a true story. A "gringa" went to the market to buy oranges and was told that they were 10 for a sucre. Remembering that she should always bargain down, she said: "No, no, nine is as far as I'll go." What soon surprised the Ecuadorians was that these odd people, having come nearly penniless, managed to make money, some eventually becoming quite wealthy. An easy interpretation was that they must have done this by stealing.

The language problem only helped to reinforce the impression that the refugees weren't all there. The local people weren't much used to foreigners and strange accents and can't be blamed for being mystified. Speaking Spanish without an accent was limited to the immigrants who arrived before puberty. Many of the rest massacred the language, at least initially. Being totally fluent in Spanish was not seen as a particular mark of honor in the Jewish community, where German, Czech, and Yiddish held sway. It seems sad and wasteful that not many took the trouble of learning that language well and taking pleasure in its richness. But, as I said elsewhere, this was part of the cultural hardening that had taken place among the refugees. This was recognized, not without amusement, and the way the refugees were butchering Spanish became a source of fun in the cultural evenings at the Jewish club.

Getting used to school, learning Spanish, adapting to life in Quito were, of course, imperceptibly gradual processes that left only general memories. I vaguely recall the jostling around, the name-calling, the bravado, all the things one expects of teenage boys. None of this was out the ordinary. Our classmates once goaded another Jewish boy and

me, and to save our honor we challenged each other to a fight behind the school building. Other than some flailing of arms in the air, this great encounter went nowhere, because both of us were pretty scared. In my early days in school, I was sometimes called a dirty Jew or something like it, but this was the result of propaganda emanating from the German embassy because once these people left so did most anti-Semitic utterances and attitudes. In time, I felt that I accepted by my classmates and gradually ceased to feel that I did stick out. Part of me became Ecuadorian and I could react, behave, even joke like a native. This was just a part of me, but I could produced it on demand. I was aware of being compartmentalized, but passing for a Quiteño was something I did spontaneously and it felt good. Surely I had to thank my Italian, hence Latin, background for this relatively easy adaptation.

Paradoxically, getting used to living in Quito was less of a problem for other refugees than it was for me. Most of them had no intention to assimilate into the Ecuadorian community. Quite the contrary, most denied their circumstances and acted as if they had never left Europe. I, on the other hand, felt a greater urge to become integrated in the culture of Quito. Meanwhile I was pulled at least as strongly in the direction of affirming my European and Jewish identity. This theme of a cultural and emotional split was not my last one. It was to accompany me in another stage of my life, when I went to the United States.

I had one Ecuadorian friend, Galo, whereas my closest Jewish friends had none, not a one. Galo became like a brother to me and helped me cross some of the barriers to a normal life in Quito. I did not have other intimate friends among the Ecuadorians, but my feelings towards Galo made up for it. He was not a garrulous person but we managed to have intense conversations with me doing most of the talking. We used to sit at night on the steps of our high school, by the light of a lamppost, reciting Hamlet in English, a language neither of us knew. Later on, we went along different paths, he to France and Canada to become a pathologist before returning to Quito, me to the U. S. Galo became a leading light in Latin American Pathology and was revered as a teacher and a scientist. Some eighteen years after I last saw him, he heard that I had a heart attack and within a couple of weeks traveled to Boston to see me. We both thought that our conversation began where we had left it off years before. What a gift, this friendship!

I started out my schooling in Quito in the 7th grade, which was already high school. “El Mejia,” as the school was known, was one of the imposing buildings of my youth. It was only a few blocks downhill from my house, and in time I got to know every pebble on the road. It was a neo-classic building with large columns in front, and it extended for a couple of city blocks. It was about four stories high, made of brick that did not get stuccoed over until many years later. In the earlier version of my youth, had a pleasingly unfinished look. It taught some 5000 students over six grades, all male, and was considered the academic jewel of the nation. It was modeled after the grand European gymnasium and lycée, and succeeded quite well in its mission. Everything about it, from the building itself to what went on inside it, spoke of substance. As a "national" high school, it received the support and encouragement of political and business leaders, many of whom had graduated from

there. It is a source of enormous pride to be an alumnus of El Mejia and to be able to wear the lofty appellation of "mejia," a state of near grace that I relish to this day.

I was not so ambitious that I had to get top grades consistently but I wanted to pass my courses comfortably. My knowledge of history and geography I had acquired by reading my children's encyclopedia from top to bottom made studying easy. I had also had a couple of years of Latin in Italy, which gave me a leg up on my classmates. Once in a while, I cheated on exams, but kept it to a minimum partly because I was scared of being caught, partly because usually I had studied enough to know most of the answers. On the other hand, I didn't want to be one of the rare ones who never cheated. I liked special projects and, as soon as there were some to be done, I eagerly joined it. One of my first ones was to make a poster where I had traced drawings of four skulls of different human ancestors and to explain it to all who came by. Another time I made a display of a dissected mouse pickled in alcohol and prominently showing its innards. After I started to work summers in a lab, I got increasingly wed to the idea that what I really wanted to do were things other than schoolwork. Since then, I have tended to respond better to challenges than arise sideways rather than to the frontal ones.

III. Life in Quito

We were quite poor, but this is a relative statement for a city where the majority of the population lived at a subsistence level or below. We were surrounded by abject poverty, and few of the inhabitants of Quito could be called middle class. However, compared with many of the other Jewish refugees, we were not doing too well. My father had come to Ecuador with some US $ 5000, which was a considerable sum in those days. As a result, he felt like he was a capitalist and didn't have to stoop to do what many others did at the beginning. Quite a few of the refugees, especially those with an eastern European background, went from door to door, with a pack on their back, trying to sell bits of merchandise Everything was sold on time and the chance of getting paid were low, hence the prices tended to be very high. . Eventually many of these people opened stores or started small manufacturing enterprises.

My father plugged along for a few years, going steadily downhill, eventually reaching near penury. Much later, after I had left Quito, my father had a brilliant idea of how to make money under the local conditions. He approached directors of the few trade unions that existed in the city and made them the following proposition: They would guarantee that he would get his payments by withholding them from the workers' salaries, and he would greatly lower the prices. Of course, all those involved would get a nice cut and everybody would come out ahead, including the customers. This worked extremely well because there were no laws that prohibited withholding money from people's pay. My father had a store in the center of the city where the merchandise could be inspected. He made a fair amount of money and would have become wealthy but my mother took ill, which required all his attention and which is the reason why they eventually left for Israel.

My father's store was called "Almacenes Chester," or Chester's Store. The reason for the name is that there was no way that Ecuadorians could pronounce our surname. The closest they could come to was Chester, which they knew as an abbreviation for Chesterfield cigarettes. Before the coup with the trade unions, my father lived from making deals. He would buy this, sell that. This included cuts of cloth for suits, shirts, radios, cans of tomato paste, whatever. He was called in German, a "Seehändler," which can be directly translated into English. It means that he was a "Sea-dealer" because that he dealt with "whatever he saw." Some of the time he lent money, sometimes he borrowed it. He tried to be scrupulously honest, but this didn't prevent him from trading in smuggled good, especially diamonds. I guess that didn't count.

Having so little money meant that I had a very small allowance, which allowed me to go to a movie every couple of weeks or treat myself to a candy once in a while. A bus ride in Quito cost then the equivalent of a U. S. penny, and I remember saving that by walking quite long distances. Still, I always had sufficient clothing and enough food to eat. When I finished high school, I had to work for a year because my father told me that he didn't have enough money to pay for my going to the university.

I always hungered for meat. My parents were vegetarians, more by convenience than by belief. There was no kosher butcher for large animals in Quito and they tried to keep kosher. Chickens were OK because their slaughter required a lesser religious license. However, Ecuadorian chickens in those days were mainly strings and bones. They didn't even make a decent soup, which we blamed on the fact that water came to a boil at a considerably lower temperature at that altitude, which is 9000 feet. On the other hands, vegetables and fruits were superb and included what to us were exotic varieties such as papayas, mangoes and chirimoyas. I ate pasta every day, for lunch, which was fine with me (and still is). My breakfasts and dinners consisted of white bread with cheese slices, both of which were fresh and good. Once in a while I filled my craving for something more substantive by buying some kind of meat sandwich at a local store. The parents of my friend Frisco owned a restaurant and let me have a plate of mashed potatoes with gravy for one sucre, about 5 cents at the time. The restaurant was called Gambrinus, after the god of beer.

The main form of entertainment for me was getting together with my friends, in groups or singly. Often, we went on Sunday walks or rode a bus to nearby villages where there were public swimming pools. We had parties quite often, but these were tame affairs. I remember getting drunk for the first time at one of these parties, drinking a lot of vermouth, of all things. I was sick for three days but my mother quite understood and took good care of me. The most satisfying social thing for me was to chat with my friends. We usually did this while walking up and down the dark streets at night. It can get quite cold in the evening in Quito, hence the need to keep moving. We would occasionally stop in a café and have a cup of coffee or a drink. The topics were wide ranging, to include politics and the meaning of life. Although we were generally aware of what was going on in Europe during the war, this was not a common topic of conversation. It probably felt too remote. Occasionally, we would take longer trips, lasting a couple of days since there are many places to visit not far from Quito, both

along the mountains and going down to the coast. For vacation, we favored a place called Baños, which is a resort town in a narrow valley on the way to the Amazon basin. There were a couple of inns run by refugees.

I began to study English around the age of 14 or 15. At first, I didn't make much progress but as with other events in my life, there is a story associated with it. One day, my father came home, handed me a slim book in English and said: "Here, translate it!" The fact that I knew practically no English didn't faze him. He just passed his audacity on to his only son. Besides, he told me that I was supposed to be a bright kid. The book belonged to a professor of pharmacy who needed it for his teaching. The subject was on the poison curare and author an American scientist. Natives in the Amazon jungle used curare as an arrow poison, so it was of particular interest to an Ecuadorian scientist. Wondering what I was getting into, I started to tackle it, needing a dictionary for almost every word. Somehow, I navigated through the myriad of irregular verbs and the syntax, and typed the translation on an ancient Remington. I got a sucre a page, about 5 U. S. cents. When I got to the bibliography at the end of the book, I got an unpleasant awakening. One of the references was to an Italian article entitled: *"Sull'arte del curare."* The word curare was there all right, but in Italian it means "to cure, to heal." The author had obviously never bothered to look up this article. Ay ay ay, another illusion shattered at an early age.

In time, my English became better and better. Towards my late teens, it was good enough to read novels. I had always been an avid book reader and went through novels rapidly, at least one a week. The source of most of the novels, both in Spanish and English, was the Information Service run by the American embassy, called Centro Ecuatoriano-Norteamericano, which had a fairly good lending library. In Spanish and later in English, I read many U. S. novelists: Dos Passos, Upton Sinclair, Hemingway, Steinbeck, Sinclair Lewis, and others. I got my fill of the social novel, which helped reinforce my leftist leaning. Meanwhile, my spoken English gradually improved thanks to my two friends, Mary Dean and John Howieson, who came from the States for some time. By the time I came to the States, in January 1950, I could converse pretty well, read with ease, and write fluently, although with mistakes. John saved a letter I had written to him shortly before that in which I complained of having "aches in the bellies."

Author: **SCHAECHTER, Moselio (Elio)**
City: San Diego, California
Title: "Elio's Memoirs"
Date: March 2012

Click here: http://schaechter.asmblog.org/elios_memoirs/2012/03/preface.html