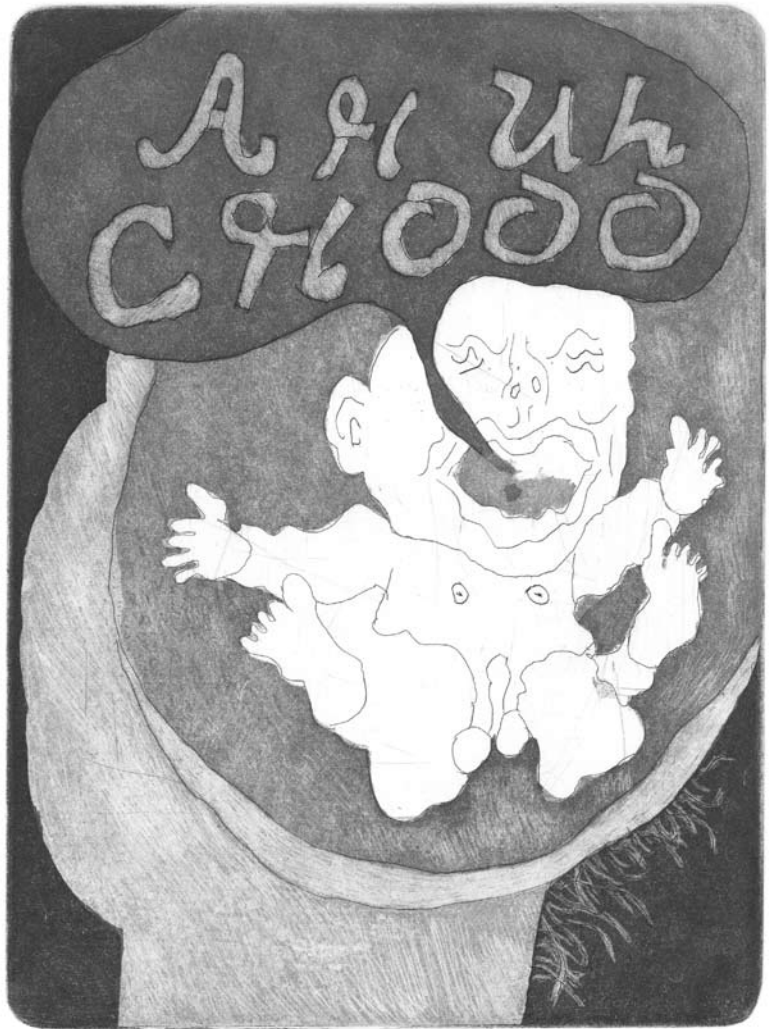


# Traces of Sepharad

The Sephardim lived for about a millennium on the Iberian Peninsula until March 31, 1492, when they were forcibly expelled. The expulsion, and the Inquisition that followed, ended centuries of shared history and social commingling during which Jews, Muslims, and Christians lived together in relative peace and tolerance. While in Spain, Jews were a small but influential minority, assisting, adapting to, and drawing inspiration from one or the other of two powerful competing political, military, and ideological forces: the Muslims in the south and the Christians in the north. Out of this mix came much cultural cross-fertilization. Most of the Judeo-Spanish (“Ladino”) proverbs I illustrate have their origin in this Jewish Iberian experience. Others refer to Biblical texts, while still others are rooted in the Sephardic Diaspora that followed the expulsion.

*“Refranes mentirozos no ay.”* (“There are no false proverbs.”) Proverbs are a condensed form of wisdom gleaned from centuries of experience. They sprout from the soil of human nature. Human experience is distilled, and a lesson is drawn. Proverbs function as short-cut teaching methods, reinforcing community morality and cultural values without delving into their complex and sometimes ambiguous theological underpinnings. At its core, a proverb is a story that has been boiled down to a sentence or two. It makes its point succinctly, oftentimes ironically, and occasionally poetically.

Some are cruel, ridiculing our vanity or mocking our stupidity. Others are witty, encouraging us to laugh at our sadness. They shock us with their indecency as they revel



*No nació que ya estornudó.*

Not yet born and already sneezing.

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For Marc Shanker's bio and  
sale information, see page 49.

in vulgarity. Rhyme and meter facilitate their insidious linguistic charms. The expressive quality of the speaker's voice and the sonority of the words propel their message, creating an internal synergy, the whole exceeding the sum of the parts.

Like human imperfection, proverbial wisdom is ageless. The subject matter is quintessentially relevant: unwary fiancés, unmeritorious daughters-in-law, false friends, loose women, good mothers and bad step-parents, gossips, good-for-nothings, fleas, rats and cats, spit and snot, drunkenness, the vanity of kings, God's overwhelming power, ancestral lineage, poverty and wealth, good luck and bad, patience, the tribulations of love.

*Si no es lo que quiero, quiera yo lo que es.* (If it's not what I wish for, may I wish for what it is.) Most proverbs are adversaries of radical change. Proverbial advice is customarily conservative: traditional values, community norms, and the preservation of the status quo are highly regarded. Proverbs point us toward the golden mean rather than behavioral extremes.

Proverbs are structured, through rhyme, meter, and content, to facilitate recall. Once a proverb has entered consciousness, it can stick to your mind like soft chewing gum to the sole of a shoe. Then, slowly, it starts to alter perceptions and bend experiences to fit its conclusions. When it starts popping up in your daily conversation, you are hooked; it is too late. If you do fall victim, do not despair; proverbs make entertaining and intelligent companions.



*Los peches grandes comen peches chicos.*

The big fish eat the small fish.

**M**y grandparents Riketa (Nona) and Judah (Pop) Pitchon arrived in New York City some time around 1915, having spent their early years in Salonica, at that time under the rule of the Ottoman Turks. They came with their meager possessions and their rich proverbial linguistic tradition. Since their deaths, my mother often repeats their proverbs. They are her way of remembering, and having learned them from her, I have now made them my way of remembering too.

For my immigrant grandparents, proverbs functioned like trusted maps for a beleaguered traveler. As Pop said, "*En tus apuros y afanes, toma consejo de los refranes.*" ("In your hardships and toils, take counsel from proverbs.") Unable to read or write, my grandparents turned to proverbial wisdom when their experience was insufficient. Proverbs helped them chart a reasonable path through



*De una pulga lo hacen gamello.*  
 From a flea they make a camel.

the unforeseen and inevitable adversities of their new life in a new world. Proverbs mirrored their values and occupied a significant place in Pop's conversation.

As the last patriarch of the Pitchon family, Pop was a carrier of a tradition that stretched back to Turkey, medieval Spain, even Biblical Israel. He was the unquestioned master of his house — but even a master is required, from time to time, to explain himself. Pop would validate his decisions by reciting proverbs. "As they used to say," he would begin, as if "they" were both sworn jury and final judge. By quoting a proverb, Pop could prove, objectively in his mind, the correctness of his judgment. Proverbs legitimized his place as family patriarch.

Pop's authority also rested upon his unquestioned prowess. His most outrageous boast, meant to inspire awe in his children, was that he had chewed glass. Judging from his appearance, that claim may have been true. He looked tough. He stood a little over five feet tall, had

short thick legs, a torso like a tank, and broad muscular arms. His girth appeared as great as his height. He sported a thick, black Turkish-style moustache. For years, I believed he had no neck; his shoulders, like two massive mountains, hid its traces. His eyes were small but very alert, like a harrier hawk's. When he smiled (a rare occasion), you felt like leaving the room, fast. His twisted grin was more frightening than his curses. It betrayed a malice and vindictiveness that made everyone feel uneasy. Behind the smile, you clearly saw his teeth, stained brown by years of pipe and cigar smoking.

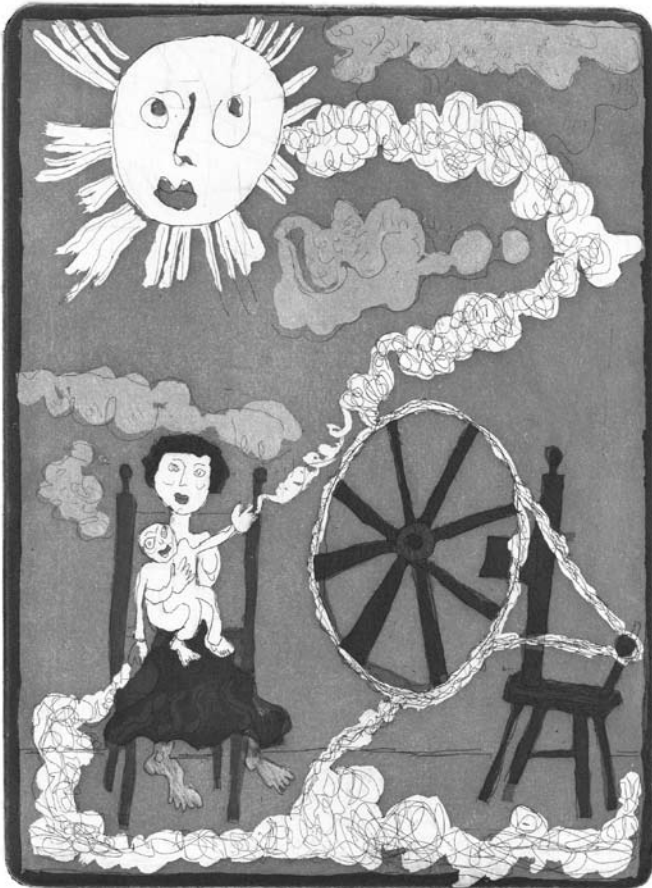
Through the thick gray smoke and noise, Pop spit out proverbs. They began as a phlegm-like rumbling deep within his chest and ended with a series of snaps, like bullets exploding from the barrel of a gun. His sentences had an Old Testament finality. Just in case you misunderstood his intention, he tacked on a long string of vulgarities in Spanish, Turkish, or Italian.

"*Para palabra y palabra su moko savrozo.*" ("For each and every word its own delicious mucus.") Every Sunday, our extended family met at my grandparents' home. To outsiders, it might have seemed like bedlam. The small living room echoed with Ladino, with loud, passionate arguments, yelling, and raucous laughter. Everyone spoke simultaneously, acting out their stories with dramatic hand gestures and body movements. My aunts, physically strong women with loud voices, competed aggressively with their boisterous brothers. Everyone had a comment or, more often, a wisecrack. To get in a word, you had to scream or gesture in some compelling, absurd way. If you didn't speak fast, your words would be lost in the pandemonium.

As a child, I experienced these gatherings as exciting fun. Now they take on a greater importance: They were the visible expressions — through language, culture, and food — of the emotional ties that bound us as a family. We expressed our love and commitment through passionate conversation, passionate humor,

*Quien hijo cría, oro hila.*

One who raises a child spins gold.



and passionate argument. Each personality rubbed up against the others.

*“Kuando un avla, serra la boca y avre los oídos.”* (“When someone speaks, close your mouth and open your ears.”) Unfortunately, I understood little of what was said. My grandparents spoke broken English, and I didn’t speak or understand Ladino. I called frequently for an interpreter: “What did he say?” Despite my linguistic ignorance, I could sense my family’s vitality. My friends’ families were not as exciting; they were like seltzer without fizz. My family’s intensity, I came to realize, made us different.

In the eyes of his Americanized children, Pop was an Old World specimen, his proverbs, rituals, and beliefs more suited to the epoch prior to Noah’s flood than to 20<sup>th</sup>-century, cosmopolitan New York City. At our gatherings, my uncles and aunts would sometimes poke fun and ridicule my grandfather’s manners, sayings, and old-fashioned ways.

One of the proverbs Pop liked to quote went: *“Kria kuevos i ti kitarán los ozos.”* (“Raise crows and they will pick your eyes out.”) This expressed his bitterness and disappointment in his children, whom he had raised as a cold, patriarchal father coupled with a protective, loving mother. Pop believed his children should fear him, because from fear grew respect.

He did not take disrespect lightly. His most humiliating insult was *“Se escupe en su cara, el piensa que esta lloviendo.”* (“You spit in his face, he thinks it is raining.”) A man must look adversity in the eye and take the consequences. Being seen as weak, especially in public or in front of one’s children, was disgraceful, and the man who was weak was despicable to him.

Living up to this standard is fraught with difficulties. *“Vida sin penas no ay.”* (“There is no life without problems.”) The family was desperately poor and work was scarce, but when Pop thought his honor had been violated, he would tell off his boss. A man must never be spit on.

Pride notwithstanding, tact was sometimes required. Pop worked for a Jewish boss who did not knowingly hire Jews. To hold his garment-industry job, Pop had to

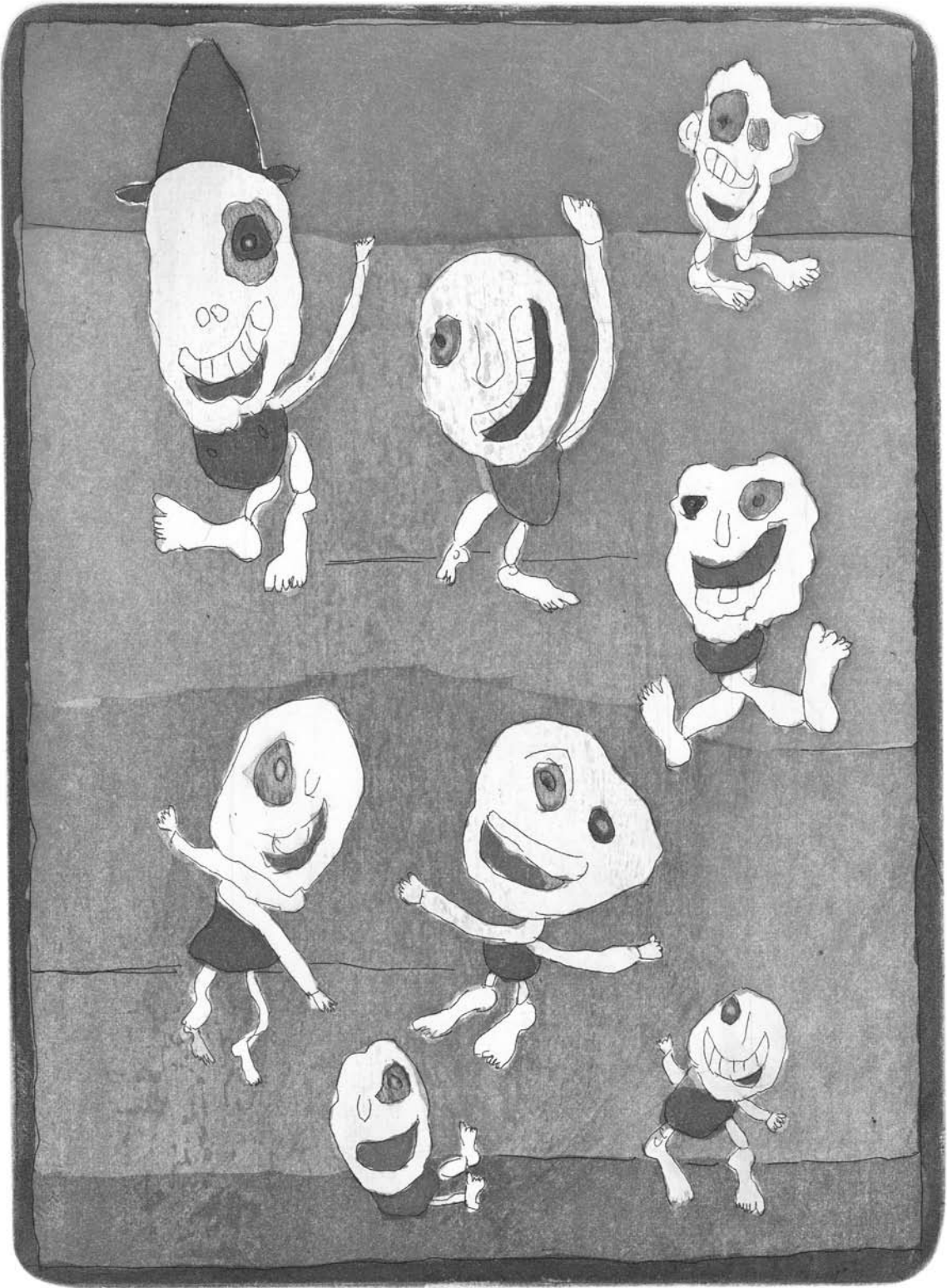


*Perro que ladra no muedre.*

A barking dog doesn’t bite.

pretend he was Italian. This was not too difficult: His dark skin could be taken as an Italian’s, and he cursed fluently in the Italian he had learned working on the Salonica docks.

But a serious conflict arose during the Jewish High Holy Days: Pop was afraid God would punish him and his family if he didn’t attend synagogue. Remarking that *“Kien a dos duenyos sirve, a uno kale ke enganye”* (“He who serves two bosses must deceive one”), he had one of his children call his employer to report that he was sick or a family member had died. Pop probably was unaware that his Sephardic ancestors, when faced with the overwhelming power and advantages of the Christian and Muslim majorities, had also struggled for ways, as individuals and as a community, to preserve their faith. →



*La mentira tiene pies curtos.*

Falsehood has short legs.

→ “*Una buena mujer yena la kaza.*” (“A good wife fills the house.”) In a corner of the dining room stood my grandmother (Nona), calmly pouring cupfuls of hot, fragrant Turkish coffee from her metal *librik*. Nona was a sturdy woman a few inches under five feet. She was always cooking and serving food, cleaning the house, or crocheting. She wore no jewelry, rings or earrings. Raising six children in desperate poverty taught her to value the essentials.

Nona’s gentle kindness, love, and devotion were the glue that held the family together and kept everyone coming back to her apartment, Sunday after Sunday. But there was also a melancholy side to her life. Always in the shadow of her patriarchal husband, and having to protect and defend her children when Pop would fly into drunken rages, she was sometimes overwhelmed. At these times she would ask herself, with a sigh: “*Chaka, maca, no pas aca, porque me naci?*” (“... Why was I born?”)

As a young child, I spent hours with Nona playing “War,” the simplest card game ever. I loved how her eyes sparkled when my card trumped hers. She enjoyed having me win: I was the family’s future.

As a young boy, I was introduced to Nona’s delicious Turkish coffee. Accompanying the coffee were *roskitas*, small round cookies with a hole in the center that were delicately dipped into the coffee. I marveled at these cream-colored cookies as they absorbed the dark-brown liquid. Timing was critical: You had to remove the cookie from the coffee and eat it before it fell apart. A split-second too late, and the pieces fell to the bottom of the cup. There they sat among the coffee grounds, impossible to remove without a fine coating of coffee-grain sludge. Sadly, you relinquished them.

Once I was old enough to travel alone, I would often visit her after school. Even as a teenager, I was never too busy to drop in. We would chat, laugh, or just sit quietly together at the dinner table enjoying no more than each other’s company. I cannot recall even a single topic of conversation. Her English was minimal. But language wasn’t necessary; we communicated through an emotional intimacy that made all words, even proverbs, unnecessary. **Jc**



*Mira la madre, tome la hija.*

[First] look at the mother,  
[then] take the daughter.



*De tu patada veremos hayre.*

From your footsteps we shall see good fortune.