

EAST SIDE STORY

JEWISH AND GAY LIFE IN COSTA RICA
AND WASHINGTON D.C (1950-1980)

A NOVEL OR A TRUE STORY?

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CHAPTER 1 THE DEVIL

At the age of six, I saw the devil. He came in the form of a Costa Rican opossum, referred as a fox in this country, an ugly and repulsive animal. People were trying to exterminate him, but he played an important role in the economy: he ate any waste and cleaned up even the carrion of other animals. He lived in the ceiling of my room and only came out at night, hiding from the rest of my family.

A moonbeam that filtered through the window of my room illuminated his hairy face and fangs, and a red tongue full of saliva that extended outward. The sounds of crickets, bees, and cicadas that usually came from the garden quieted down. His black, round eyes - shining like the tropical night - locked onto mine, terrified and motionless. Beelzebub escaped through the window and climbed up the avocado trees.

That morning, I had seen a photo in the newspaper *La Nación* of a dead man with a large, old-fashioned beard and an evil gaze. His family begged for his soul and described him as a venerable man, but his face instilled fear: there was an absence in his expression as if the photograph had been taken in a cemetery. The Catholic maid had taught me to fear the deceased, claiming that God kept track: "The wicked die and burn in hell. Since they never rest, they come to take

away the naughty children.” The fox was then a deceased person coming to take me away.

After much analysis, I have come to believe that the fox was created by my own mind to represent what was tormenting me: my first sexual experience. In the afternoons when my parents were not around, Ramón, the robust gardener with a wide forehead, full lips, black hair slicked back, and never wearing shoes, would take my hand and lead me to his room.

CHAPTER 2. LOS YOSSES

I loved my fellow countrywomen and despised the men. In 1951, my parents took us to live in Los Yoses, the elegant residential neighborhood to the East of San José. (In the 1950s, there was a large group of Jews who moved to the West of the capital, while a smaller group moved to the East. The stories of the West and the East would differ because those in the West would live more socially connected lives, while those in the East were more isolated. In schools and colleges, the children in the East were one or two among forty or fifty Christian children. The theatrical play *West Side Story* was initially called *East Side Story* because the protagonists were Jews and Christians, but it was changed to *West Side Story* when it was decided that they would be Puerto Ricans and Anglo-Saxons. This novel reverses the roles, and since it is a love story between a Jew and an Anglo-Saxon, it deserves to use the original title)

Although inconvenient due to its distance from the synagogue, our house was a beautiful Art Deco construction that would catch the attention even to this day. The garden was spacious because Elena wanted to plant flowers and fruits, something she had never been able to do in Długosiodło¹. My parents' room

¹ Długosiodło [dwugo'ɔɔdwo] is a village in Wyszaków County, Masovian Voivodeship, in East-central Poland. It is the seat of the gmina (administrative district) called Gmina Długosiodło. It lies

was comfortable and full of windows, with a large closet, a beautiful, red-tiled end-suite bathroom, and the luxury of the time: a bathtub.

The children's rooms faced the garden; mine faced two immense avocado trees, which were the delight of squirrels and foxes. Our living room was huge, with a reddish mahogany wooden floor that reflected the envious faces of all our visitors. The sofas were long and could accommodate up to forty members of the WIZO², the organization presided over by my mother. They were so sturdy that even Mrs. Perla, who weighed around two hundred pounds, could sit on them without any problem. Considering that each sofa could hold fifteen behinds, we're talking about more than a ton.

In theory, we were supposed to be wealthy to live in the most prestigious neighborhood and be the first Jews to do so, and on top of that, the house was our own! The other fellow countrymen had to settle for simpler and rented accommodations far from the coffee aristocracy and the embassies. "Who would have thought that we would end up living in such a dream castle?" - our Aunt Esther would say, proud

approximately 21 kilometers (13 mi) north-east of Wyszaków and 73 km (45 mi) north-east of Warsaw.

² WIZO stands for the Women's International Zionist Organization. It is a non-profit organization that focuses on empowering women, promoting education, and supporting social welfare programs in Israel. WIZO works in various fields, including healthcare, education, and youth empowerment, with the goal of improving the lives of women, children, and families in Israel.

that a relative of hers achieved the success that never came in Poland. However, the woman lived in *El Paso de la Vaca*, near the Central Market, and her pride was nothing more than a projection, as our fellow countryman Freud would say.

Were we rich? Only in appearance.

Although the house was worth a fortune, life was simple. Paquita, the maid, served us in cut Coca Cola bottles or ordinary plates from the Central Market. They never taught me to use deodorant or shampoo. They didn't take a single photo of me from the age of 1 to 13. There was no pleasure trip beyond *La Sabana*³. We had a castle of a house and lived like paupers.

But that wasn't the only contradiction.

Another thorny one was living in a neighborhood far from the rest of the Jewish community, which made us doubly strange. On one hand, by residing to the East of the city, our options for kindergartens and schools were limited to those where there were no other Jews. Contact with the other fellow countrymen then occurred in two ways: visits from my mother's companions, the occasional party, and attending Hebrew school.

The three o'clock teas were memorable. About thirty or forty fellow Jewish women would come monthly to the WIZO meetings, a Zionist women's

³ La Sabana Metropolitan Park (Spanish: Parque Metropolitano La Sabana) is located in downtown San José, Costa Rica. It is the country's largest and most significant urban park. La Sabana is considered "the lungs of San José" by Costa Ricans.

organization. For the occasion, the living room - the one that was only used for our guests - was adorned. The guests were treated like queens and princesses, the aristocracy of *La Sabana*. “Elena I don’t know how you manage to live so far from the shul (synagogue),” Mrs. Rebeca would say, thinking that coming to Los Yoses. was a journey like Marco Polo’s. Others believed that coming to San Pedro⁴, as if leaving the country, required a passport.

They were artists of pastry. They brought cakes and desserts that were not seen in the capital: chocolate tart, lemon mousse, cherry pie, milk meringues, pistachio baskets, famous strudels (apple pie), sweet noodle rolls with raisins, and an endless list of sweets.

The conversations were passionate. Each lady had her own point of view. Mrs. Sarita, who was considered an intellectual but whose true passion was card games, considered Costa Rica as paradise, the real Gan Eden (Eden), and her husband, who worked as a peddler in Turrialba⁵, believed that democracy protected us. While stuffing her mouth with a pineapple cake, Mrs. Sisa refuted her. For her, Figueres’ government was full of Nazis and Germans who supported the local anti-Semites: We would be better off with Dr. Calderón Guardia. The woman who lived in Puntarenas and smelled like almond wood had

⁴ San Pedro is a district of the Montes de Oca canton, in the San José province of Costa Rica. San Pedro is in the eastern side of the capital.

⁵ Turrialba is a district of the Turrialba canton, in the Cartago province of Costa Rica.

married an industrialist three times her age; she boasted of being the only Polish Calderonist⁶.

“Poo! How dare you call me crazy?” Mrs. Golche would burst in, she who always suffered from migraines. According to her, if Calderón returned, we would be sent abroad, something he had already attempted in 1940. “Gedenkst? (Do you understand?)” she would ask. Suddenly, Mrs. Regina and Mrs. Raquel, who were discussing the Spanish anti-Semitic hairdresser who refused to serve them, interrupted to disagree with everyone and suggest that it was best to be prepared for a new exile. “Pisk-malogeh!” (Nonsense!) -responded Doña Pepa - who did not believe in empty promises - responded with disdain. At that moment, pandemonium reigned, and each woman supported the one whose husband owed her money.

“Shh (Silence), comrades!” shouted Elena, using her power as the hostess. No one dared to make a sound, fearing being added to the Schirano’s blacklist, which meant political ostracism.

For many, these gatherings were a respite in their lives, condemned to small shops or clothing factories. At times, between a piece of strudel and a banana soufflé, one of them would fix her eyes on the window, perhaps thinking of a family member, while another

⁶ Calderonista is a follower of President Calderon Guardia (1940-1944) who fought against Jose Figueres in Costa Rica’s Civil War of 1948. Most Jews would not take sides during the conflict, but the country would then divide for many years between Figueristas and Calderonistas.

sighed for some Polish-Jewish town. Another would switch from broken Spanish to equally poor Yiddish or sing some songs that her friends had forgotten.

The guests were affectionate, kind, and made me feel like the most beautiful boy in the block. Jewish mothers who loved their children, although they believed that none were better than their own. They never tired of talking about Evita's *shainkeit* (beauty), or Rebecca's artistic talents, or Lazarito's intelligence. Each one had conceived a genius, a new Einstein who would master mathematics and physics. If they were girls, they were as beautiful as Elizabeth Taylor or Marilyn Monroe. "Both are now Jewish," my Aunt Adela proudly said. "Don't you dare mention it!" Doña Eva responded. "Don't you realize they're more promiscuous than hens?"

If the afternoon teas were marvelous, my experience at the Hebrew School was nothing like it. It wasn't really an institution because it had only one *moréh* or teacher who told us stories about the Jewish Bible in an old room next to the synagogue. Our *moréh* was named Pablo Koplovich, a man with graceful features, a crooked smile, and the worst breath in the world. Ruth, his wife, was also a teacher, a blonde and graceful woman, somewhat submissive, of whom I barely have any memories. She would tragically die in an accident in Guatemala. Attending these classes was an

odyssey because they were held at the Israelite Center, located at Paseo Colón⁷.

I never knew if it was due to different geographical origins, my incipient speech impediment, heightened shyness, or some unknown reason that made me the target of mockery. Jacob, to my moréh, the dumb kid who struggled to learn Hebrew and didn't understand the moral lessons of his biblical talks. When they ridiculed me, the other children burst into laughter like flatulent hyenas. This had no name at that time, now it's known as bullying, and the consequences were, yesterday as well as today, terrible. I hated going to this school and being with these little monsters, no different from the demons I saw in my bedroom.

To avoid them, many afternoons I would stay on a bench in Morazán Park. Other times, I pretended to be sick. Unfortunately, I couldn't stay in bed every day, and when I ran out of colds and diarrhea, I begged Elena not to send me.

Samuelito, a fat, white, and ugly classmate, slapped me; Tuqui, his cousin, pushed me. Abrahamcito, a small bully, touched my face; Johnny, a freckled, skinny redhead, imitated me. The worst of them all was Mono Rubio, who pursued me relentlessly and

⁷ Paseo Colón is an important street in San José, Costa Rica, belonging to Avenida Central. It starts to the east of La Sabana at 42nd Street and ends northeast of Hospital San Juan de Dios at 14th Street, where it becomes a pedestrian walkway. It is the main artery in the western part of the city and, along with Avenida Segunda, is a strategic route for crossing San José. It is part of and the western beginning of the South Interamerican Highway (Route 2).

often did the same to Ernesto's children, a good friend (and lover) of my mother.

The girls weren't cruel; they weren't bothered by the fact that I came from the other side of the world, or that I was shy and quiet, or that I was overweight. Especially Lisa, my childhood love. She was the daughter of a friend of my mother. She had blonde hair, mischievous eyes, and a gentle and playful smile; she never made fun of the way I spoke or thought I was stupid.

When we saw the fires in the mountains surrounding San José, I told her they were caused by the Indians coming to liberate *Los Yoses*. I convinced her not to join them because, in the new Indian-Jewish republic, no child would be forced to learn Hebrew, that strange language written backwards.

I look at my photos at six and seven years old and see that I was striking. I had my mother's black eyes and her huge eyelashes. Those who see these photographs agree that I must have been the cutest little Polaco⁸ at that time. However, I felt grotesque and despicable.

⁸ Polaco is a pejorative term in Costa Rica for Jews since the first Jews in the 20th Century came from Poland. But the name was later used to mean all Jews and it was used to differentiate them from "real" Costa Ricans who were Christians. The term is close to the use of "Kike" in the United States.

CHAPTER 3. SEXUAL ATTRACTION

When did I realize I was homosexual? It's a question I've asked thousands of gay men, and most of them say they realized it very early on. How early? Apparently, at some point during their school years, between six and eight years old. Of course, there are thousands of exceptions. My cousin didn't realize it until he was thirty, and I know others who did at seventy.

In my case, when I had relations with the gardener at six years old, it became evident to me that there was the possibility of sex between men. I remember one time when he touched my genitals under the maid's bed, and another time when he masturbated in front of me in a coffee plantation. I didn't interpret these advances as abuse or trauma. I am aware that I enjoyed the intimacy with a man. Possibly because my father was the most distant, indifferent, and cruel person one could have. When Ramón, the gardener, realized that I had horrible nightmares where the devil came to take me, he possibly suspected that I would betray him and that the cause was the illicit nature of our relations. One night, I had a hallucination where the devil came in the form of a huge fox to kill me, and I screamed desperately. It never crossed anyone's mind to ask me what was happening and why I couldn't sleep. It's likely that I felt guilty because I suspected that if we had contact in secret and under the

bed, it was because we were doing something wrong. Later, my brother took me to the shower and started kissing and touching me. Again, I didn't feel repulsion but pleasure. In both cases, both the gardener and my brother stopped doing it, and the former quit his job and the latter distanced himself from me. What I felt was abandonment and sadness. I agree with Žižek, the Marxist philosopher, that many people who had early relationships, influenced by psychiatry, project their emotional problems onto this. While I do not support older people initiating minors sexually, I also don't believe it is always the disaster that psychiatrists make us believe. Moreover, in the 1960s, French intellectuals signed a letter calling for the decriminalization of relationships with minors because they believed that adults could be more careful than initiations between adolescents. In early 20th century Costa Rica, it was the sex workers who initiated young people, and parents took their children to brothels. In studies I conducted as an adult among thousands of Costa Rican adolescents, I found that the majority admitted to being initiated by others of the same age and that the experience was generally terrible. Given these facts I sometimes joke with the idea that to avoid trauma we all should start having sex at 60!

I entered school at six years old. I know that soon I would be attracted to the classmates I considered cute. One of them was a blond with green eyes who lit up the classroom. That's when my attraction to blond

and white males began. But I'm not sure if this attraction happened at six or seven years old. What I have no doubt about is that by eight years old, homosexuality was latent. In 1961, *West Side Story* was released in Costa Rica, and there were no more doubts: I went crazy not for Tony or Bernardo but for Riff. Riff is the leader of the Jets, a gang in the musical. He is best friends with Tony, the protagonist, and plays a significant role in the conflict between the Jets and the Sharks, another gang. Riff is charismatic, bold, and plays a key part in the unfolding drama of the story. Why him of all the gang members? Riff was a taker, someone who does not ask from what it wants, something very similar to my sexual experiences. The Jet dance in "*West Side Story*" is a lively and energetic performance that showcases the camaraderie and unity within the gang. Some interpretations suggest elements of homoeroticism in the dance, emphasizing close physical contact and intense relationships between male characters. The tight pants worn by characters can be seen as a stylistic choice reflecting the fashion of the time the musical is set (1950s) and the rebellious nature of the youth culture depicted. The costumes, contribute to the overall visual and thematic elements of the production, emphasizing the characters' youthful energy and urban street style. I was mesmerized by the dance, and I could not take my eyes from those pants and bulges, and I became painfully aware why I was not turned on by girls.

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