Uncle Gustavo in Lima: A Nineteenth-Century German-Jewish Immigrant

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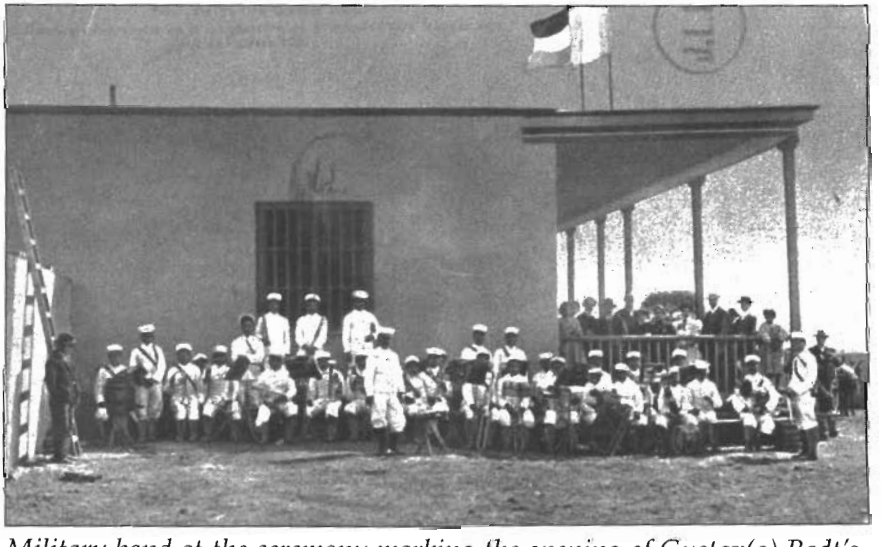
Gustav Badt (1849—1914), my grandmother's half-brother, was among the handful of Prussian Jews who emigrated to South America at the time of the American Civil War—not to vast Argentina or Brazil but to the relatively tiny, almost legendary Peru, virtually on the other side of the moon, which, come to think of it, seemed nearer to us in our little shtetl and more familiar. I knew it to be real only because of the truly outlandish postage stamps which I was allowed to admire in grandma's stamp collection. I still have picture postcards of Lima in those days; and of the lovely little presents we received, two silver llamas have survived which used to occupy a place of honor in grandma's drawing room. Several photos, too, arrived, the handiwork of the apparently well established local photographers Polack-Schneider, one showing a well-turned-out, prosperous country gentleman; and I am sure an obituary would have appeared in the Lima press of July 1914 had it not been for the even more important news that made itself felt even in far-off Lima at that time.

As I tried to reconstruct my great-uncle's life story, beyond the few data already known to me, I sought to obtain information by writing a letter to the editor of Lima's leading daily, *El Comercio*. The contents of the letter were published, but the result was, perhaps predictably, somewhat meager, for how many of that generation, and more so, how many likely to remember Gustav Badt, could have been left? However, the postage was not entirely wasted. I managed to piece together a reasonable tale, and I will tell it, as I feel it might be of more than passing and personal interest.

Gustav Badt was sixteen when he left little Exin (now Keynia) in the province of Posen (now part of Poland) for Lima, the "City of Kings," in the land of the Incas, at the other end of the world. He was not entirely on his own; his brother Michael, six years older, went with him, or was sent with him, and presumably the family

Gustav(o) Badt's tombstone in Lima



Military band at the ceremony marking the opening of Gustav(o) Badt's silk factory (1908),

knew (of) somebody who had gone there before and the reports had been tempting. There were indeed many who were then leaving their ancient homes—most of them for New York, whence some, after a while, would move on to the southern part of the Americas. As early as 1854, the *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judenthums* reported from Bremen, Germany's chief transatlantic port, "not an emigration but a veritable 'migration of the people,' " and the reporter added wistfully: "We cannot really say we are sorry to see them go. Unfair discrimination, humiliation, and the denial of solemnly granted civil rights can be given no better answer than—emigration." This was eighty years before the Nuremberg Laws.

I do not know what precisely the family's expectations were when they sent the boys to Peru. It appears that, with the end of Spanish rule, the now independent South American countries, Peru among them, were believed to offer attractive opportunities in trade and commerce. The famous Yankee railroad constructor Henry Meiggs, now engaged in bold, large-scale operations in Peru, was in need of suitable youngsters who were busily recruited. Some also may have seen bright visions when they heard of the gold mines of Huancavelica, not far from Lima, and some probably saw not much more.

The family no doubt hoped that Gustav and Michael would do well in business in a country clearly in need of European efficiency and drive. As late as the early 1900s, Peru's main industrial trouble was seen not only in the absence of skilled workers but also in a "general disinclination of working people to work regular hours." The nineteenth century, therefore, was a time when European immigrants were welcome and much appreciated. As late as 1873 a Peruvian law provided for each arrival of this type to be assisted with a fair sum of money and a free grant of land.

There were drawbacks, of course. If Prussia was unenlightened in some ways, so was Peru in others. There was liberty, yes, but as likely as not there was license degenerating into lawlessness, violence erupting in revolution, rebellion and coups d'etat, assassination and the rule of the gun, bigotry and superstition, the sum total of what Europeans then believed to be typical South American conditions—to say nothing of an all-pervading corruption which was accepted as a fact of public life. Judges at that time virtually

expected to be bribed, and Meiggs, the railroad king, found "the only way to get on with successive Governments of Peru was to let each sell itself for its own price."

A hideously characteristic example of the gangsterism practiced in high quarters happened in 1872 when the minister of war, supported by his three brothers, all army colonels, seized the president and declared himself dictator. He failed, however, to gauge the strength of popular feeling. An angry mob lynched and murdered one of the brothers, whereupon the dictator ordered the imprisoned president to be shot, holding him responsible. Armed civilians now stormed the barracks in which the dictator was hiding. He and his brothers were killed and their mutilated bodies exhibited, for all to see, high up on the towers of Lima's venerable cathedral.

Things were particularly bad after Peru lost its five-year war with Chile (1879—1884). The country was, quite literally, in ruins; the government no longer able to hide its bankruptcy and the people merely a shadow of their former selves. Lima, the capital, once the proud residence of Spanish viceroys, suffered the supreme humiliation of being occupied by the enemy for several years. "Of all its upheavals during the 19th century," writes Jorge Basadre, the national historian, "none was quite like the war of 1879. It was the most tremendous shock suffered by the Peruvian as a human being." It was a time when no one was safe from a looting and marauding mob—Chileans, so the Peruvians claimed; Peruvians according to the Chileans. The historian adds this picturesque if pathetic detail: "It was then rare to see a person wearing new and elegant clothes, and when such a person was spotted people would think he or she must be a foreigner."

I have often wondered how the Prussian small-town boy made his way in this savage society. Oddly enough he soon did. He was helped by the general Peruvian attitude toward business in those days, which a modern Peruvian writer, Juan M. Ugarte Elespuru, defines in these words: "Trade and commerce were reserved for those of the lower classes and acceptable only among foreigners"; and the foreigners, immigrants like Gustav Badt, could offer a wide field. There were hundreds of Britons, North Americans,

Italians, Frenchmen, also a colony of Chinese and Japanese, and there were about 300 Germans too, among them many Jews. Badt naturally sought their company, especially as the Germans were on good terms with the Jews.

There was apparently no anti-Semitism among Peru's transplanted Germans, though an occasional disharmony could not be ignored. E. W. Middendorf, a physician who spent twenty-five years in the country, referred in his book on Peru published in 1893 to the "resident German Jews most of whom are moneylenders." According to Middendorf, "some claim to be citizens of the U.S.A. and prefer to speak English, but the German accent with which they utter their ghetto language *[mauscheln]* betrays their true origin, most of them hailing from the eastern borderland of Prussia."

Some of them indeed came to Lima via New York, and if they preferred to speak English—an understandable preference in view of their experience—they no doubt had (like Dr. Middendorf) a German accent, which only an anti-Semite would have termed *mauscheln*, just as only ill will would have seen their West Prussian homes as an "eastern borderland."

However, a Germania Club had been opened in 1863, and its leading light, in fact its founder, was a Jew, Max Bromberg. Moreover, when the foundation stone was laid for the Jewish cemetery in 1875, the local German choral society, Teutonia, took part in the ceremony, and according to a Jewish reporter, their "splendid chanting added much to the solemnity of the occasion."

Germany in those days enjoyed the very highest reputation, in Peru as well as in the rest of South America, particularly after 1870, when Bismarck made her the foremost power on the continent of Europe. German technology, German education, and especially Krupp's big guns were regarded as symbols of perfection and prestige.

So if German-Jewish immigrants in Lima preferred the German Club to exclusively Jewish society, they had sound reasons, sentimental but also practical. In a study of the foreigners' stake in his country's trade, the well-known Peruvian economist Alejandro Garland remarks (1908):

> The Germans today control the greater part of the import trade, having succeeded to a substantial extent in supplanting the English. The steady progress of German trade is due to the fact that they carefully study the tastes and likings of the clients. The increasing efforts of their merchants and commission agents, combined with the special talent of their manufacturers for the making of cheap articles for the great mass of the consumers, are gradually transferring to the Germans the commercial predominance in this country.

An association with these fellow-countrymen was bound to be profitable. So Gustav Badt began his career with a German, or German-Jewish, firm, and there were quite a few. An important position was held by the brothers Sigmund, Hugo, and Ferdinand Jacobi, natives of Thorn (modern Torun), near Bromberg (modern Bydgoszcz, not far from Badt's Exin); they were jewelers, pawnbrokers, dealers in antiques, as well as bankers, in fact agents of the Rothschilds in Lima. During the war with Chile they nearly went bankrupt because, in their patriotic enthusiasm, they lent the government money far beyond the credit it deserved.

Many Jews followed other lines of endeavor, such as the flourishing trade in cigars and cigarettes in which a numerous clan of Cohens seems to have been engaged, importing the famous Havana cigars as well as various brands from Europe. A German traveler at the time remarked on "the custom of smoking," which he thought was "quite general . . . in fact at all levels of society," particularly among women, "from the slave to the duchess." As this indicates, slavery had not yet been abolished in Peru, and the duchesses had survived the Spanish empire, but the German made no distinction between the ones and the other, and his perfect freedom from prejudice is revealed in his observation: "The smoke rises from rosy lips behind which the prettiest teeth can be seen." The ladies' "soothing puff of cigarillo," together with their "fan and dark mantilla," with their "eyes that put to shame the stars," even inspired a modest measure of poetry in a Yankee visitor. In more prosaic terms, the cigar trade clearly yielded substantial profits.

Then, of course, Jews were prominent in the textile trade, in which they, like many of their descendants, soon prospered, and I believe this was the field in which Gustav Badt was apprenticed. He soon developed a particular fancy for the manufacture of silk,

which was a shrewd choice. Silk, like satin, was much in vogue among the ladies of Lima. The two fabrics, said a French expert then visiting the city, were "the only ones the ladies are keen on for their celebrated dresses, the petticoat and the large mantilla." Similarly, the (unfortunately anonymous) German traveler mentioned before refers particularly to the ladies' dresses "made of satin or a material from Tibet which is lined with silk." About that time (1835) Charles Darwin was also in Peru, and in his diary he not only mentioned the attractive young ladies who wear a "black silk veil" but his penetrating eye discovered the "very white silk stockings."

So there was obviously a great demand for silk, and this was, to some extent, supplied by the numerous Chinese importers, but no industry existed that might have profitably manufactured silk, like many other commodities, at home. Here Badt had the idea of attending to the demand directly. The first clothing factory had been opened in Lima in 1874, and gradually silk fabrics also began to be manufactured. Some efforts in this respect were being made elsewhere on the continent, especially in Argentina, and as a token of its interest, the municipality of Lima established a practical school of sericulture which was to help launch the new industry.

Badt started his enterprise by acquiring some land, which was available cheaply, as shown by the immigration law of 1873. His estate, known as the Chacra Colorada, was then outside Lima, though now it is a densely populated part of the city. Here he planted some 14,000 mulberry trees imported from China which, with the help of another import, the silk worm, were to supply the raw material for his operations.

He had also begun to employ quite a number of native laborers when work was interrupted by the war with Chile. In 1881, in the defense of Lima, he organized his work force as well as some of his friends in a special home guard with himself holding the titular rank of captain. He does not seem to have excelled in his military career though, which was brief anyway. The regular army (according to a Peruvian historian) was largely "an army on paper," the navy "a naval museum," and so Badt's home guard was likely to have illustrated the Duke of Wellington's observation: "I don't know whether

our captains will frighten the enemy, but, by God, they frighten me." Nor would the patriotic Badt have claimed to be a military genius. His talents shone rather in his business operations.

Around this time the era of Peru's political revolutions was overtaken by something like an industrial revolution. By the turn of the century the economy was showing signs of progress. Various industrial ventures were started which managed to raise capital both at home and abroad. Badt saw his chance, for an expanding silk trade offered opportunities for sound investment. Having practiced in this field over many years, he now entered into partnership with a more technologically minded native Peruvian, Julio T. Chocano, whom he enabled to import some of the most modern machinery from Europe. Chocano built his silk factory on Badt's estate and showed his gratitude by calling it, the first of its kind in Peru, "La Germanica." It was opened in February 1908 in the presence of government officials and representatives of high society, and was under the patronage of the German minister, whose friendship Badt had taken care to cultivate. The occasion was marked as a Peruvian-German event; both the German and the Peruvian flags were flown and a military band struck up the national anthem, at least Peru's: they did not seem to be too sure of *Deutschland über Alles.*

Badt was by then securely established in Lima society. He was and remained, technically, a foreigner. In his association with Chocano, for example, at the opening of the factory, he emphasized his German nationality (which added to his standing), and the hoisting of the German flag side by side with the Peruvian must have seemed to him perfectly natural. He never applied for naturalization (which would have been readily granted), and like the other immigrants from Germany he did not change his name. He just added an o to Gustav.

I was thinking about Uncle Gustavo when I later heard a little ditty which was as true of him as of many of his countrymen in Lima:

> He might have been a Prussian,
> A Scot, or Turk, or Russian,

Or a native of Peru
Or a native of Peru.

But in spite of all temptations
To belong to other nations
He firmly remained a Jew.

From time to time Badt would send the family clippings about himself that appeared in some of Lima's glossy society magazines, which in those days kept appearing and disappearing at more or less regular (or irregular) intervals, all according to the unsteady finances available to keep them going. There he was presented as a "well-known German gentleman" who not only "by hard and honorable work" had acquired a "considerable fortune" but also was "the first amongst us to start the latest industry, that of silk manufacture, sparing neither cost nor effort in the development of an enterprise called to such high destiny in Peru," and so forth.

In September 1907 the progress of his estate was featured as a tribute to one who "forms part of that great-hearted band of foreigners who have come to our country not only to make their fortune but in order to contribute, solidly and efficiently, to its moral and material progress."

Badt had indeed not merely material interests; he showed himself to be possessed of a social conscience. He was concerned for the health and housing of the poor. At his own expense he built for them a whole street of one-floor houses, such houses being chosen for safety reasons because of the frequent earthquakes that afflicted Lima. He also took up the cause of juvenile welfare. He assisted in the building of schools for the children of the poor, and he financed the construction of a whole block intended to be a juvenile detention center. I have been assured by those who ought to know that because of his social concerns, "Don Gustavo" (as he came to be widely known) was "well liked by the people, who thought of him as charitable and generous."

He never married. Apparently there were relatively few women among the early immigrants. As late as 1876, the 6,500 Europeans and North Americans in Lima included no more than 1,500

females. There was, of course, no lack of native ladies. They in fact, at least those of the (eligible) upper classes, have been credited with quite an extraordinary charm—not only, as might be expected, by impressionable gentlemen. Their "graceful appearance . . . defying the most seductive French woman with their spiritual eyes, their gay manner and the very refinement of their coquetry," were noted by a Paris-born Peruvian lady, Flora Tristan, the grandmother of Paul Gauguin, the French impressionist painter, who spent his childhood in Lima. Knowing all about the chic Parisiennes, Mme. Tristan thought "the ladies of Lima might well be proclaimed the queens of the earth," and if they ruled the men (as apparently, according to Mme. Tristan, they did), it was "because they are much superior to them in intelligence and moral strength."

Other travelers, possibly having had unfortunate experiences, referred to "an evil influence of a subtle kind" in the way the ladies dressed, "decently covering" bust and hips without "hiding the shapely body underneath," while "a shawl conceals all the head like a hood, leaving an opening through which one beautiful eye sparkles out on the world." That "one beautiful eye"—"so black and brilliant," with "such a power of motion and expression"—left its mark even on the sophisticated mind of Darwin, whose visit to Lima I mentioned before.

No wonder there was a great deal of intermarriage, and all the more remarkable that Gustavo Badt preferred (and managed) to stay single. He stressed this in his will, where he described himself as "unmarried," adding that he had no children—"even less have I recognized any child as mine." This point was very much on his mind, and he went to the trouble of reiterating this statement in a codicil, two days later, a week before his death, explaining that he was doing so because he feared that a child might be "foisted" on him. There had once been an attempt to enter a child's name as his on the register of births, he said. If any such attempt were made again, he now declared, it should at once be recognized as a fraud, and the executor was instructed to take legal action.

The stress he laid on this matter may well be due to the fact that he had lived (or was living) with a Peruvian woman, a chola (i.e., of mixed European and Indian stock). They were indeed never

married. The story came to the family's notice in Europe sometime after his death, and they took the news in the charitably resigned spirit that nothing but good must be thought of the dead.

While thus emphatically disowning any family ties in Peru, Gustavo Badt left all his property to his sisters in Germany but made provision for three "godchildren" in Lima, including the daughter of an army colonel and an executor's daughter. The latter woman's son later became a Roman Catholic bishop, and in reply to my letter in *El Comercio*, he kindly supplied me with some information.

Nothing is known of the aforementioned attempt to "foist" a child on Badt, but his fears were proved to be well founded at the time of his death. Three days later, on July 31, 1914, the following personal notice appeared in *El Comercio*: "The daughters, Maria Isabel Badt and Marina Badt, also the grand-daughter, the son-in-law, and other relations of Gustavo Badt, wish to express their most profound thanks to those who kindly attended the funeral."

It was a weird procession, like a scene from another Beggar's Opera that might have appealed to Bert Brecht—a schnorrer's dance behind seven veils, performed in dead men's shoes. Badt had expressly and repeatedly declared that he had no children and recognized none, and therefore the two "daughters" had no right to assume the Badt name in the hope, however pious, of inheriting the "father." Perhaps they were—who knows?—the children who, according to Badt, were to have been "foisted" on him.

Anyway, none of these "family" members are as much as mentioned in the will. It is worth noting, too, that the one person who would have been the principal mourner, the "widow," who must still have been alive, was conspicuous by her absence, and if there was a "son-in-law," why was he not identified and which of the two "daughters," both bearing the "fathers'" name, had he married? And where does the "grand-daughter" come in? Who the "other relations" might have been is another mystery. It was altogether a fishy, thoroughly disreputable business. What legal action (if any) the executor took to expose the obvious swindle, I do not know; I like to think that the obviously fraudulent claim was exposed when the final will and testament was opened—at least

none of the self-appointed mishpacha was ever heard of again.

Similarly, occasional press references to "Badt and his family" at the opening of Chocano's silk factory and at other times were plainly inaccurate, though Badt did nothing to correct the error, which, in the special circumstances of his personal relationships, was perhaps a wise course: the less said the better. In any case, any suspicions were (apparently) not aroused until later.

By contrast, Gustav's brother Michael (Miguel) had (apparently) married, or was credibly believed to be married. At least Leticia de los Ricos claimed to be his wife. At her death in 1931 (thirty-four years after his) she was described as Michael's "widow" ("de Badt"), though Gustav does not seem to have known her as a "sister-in-law." In his will she figures as a nondescript individual to whom he left a (relatively meager) life annuity of ten Peruvian pounds per month, with no reference at all to Michael. Leticia's name was occasionally mentioned, with disdain or derision, by my grandmother (who was, however, glad to pay for an expensive tombstone). In Gustavo's will Leticia appears as one of several females who received legacies, usually for miscellaneous (sometimes specified) "services rendered." Her claim to be Michael's wife was almost certainly spurious. For no marriages other than those blessed by the Catholic Church were then recognized in Peru. A civil marriage therefore was ruled out, and Michael never converted, nor did Leticia, or, for that matter, Gustav.

On the other hand, Michael's association with Leticia was considered sufficiently substantial to cause his involuntary resignation from office in the Jewish representative body, the Sociedad de Beneficencia Israelita, of which he was vice-president. He attended no religious services during the last ten years of his life—almost certainly because he resented the way he had been treated. The resentment was shared by Gustav, who, however (after Michael's death in 1897), returned to the fold. He even held office, as chairman of a committee for the enlargement of the cemetery. He was not much of a macher. Nor was he, on the whole, a very observant Jew—any more than the majority of the immigrants from Germany, who, by reason of intermarriage, often disappeared in the general

population (or thought they did), though some arranged to be buried among their own kind. Having been born as Jews, they also wanted to die as Jews. Gustav Badt is not necessarily to be counted among them, but this final wish he indeed shared.

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Note

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