

*Filipson: Memories of the
First Jewish Colony in Rio
Grande do Sul¹ by Frida
Alexandr, 1967*

Translated from Portuguese by Júlia Irion Martins

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Translator's Introduction

I found Frida Alexandr while lost in a Wikipedia hole prompted by a conversation with Marina Mayorski, co-editor of this very *Absinthe* issue. During a meeting about the issue, I mentioned to her I wanted to translate something, but I just couldn't think of any Brazilian Jewish writers. Over Zoom, I saw Marina's face shift into a sort of are-you-kidding-me formation: "Clarice?" I tried to cover my tracks with an "Oh, well, yeah duh, of course, Clarice!" But to me, Clarice Lispector isn't a Jewish Brazilian writer—she is *the* Brazilian writer. I'm not sharing this embarrassing anecdote to humiliate myself. Rather, it's to echo Mayorski and Maya Barzilai's question in the introduction to this issue. Brazil is one of the most culturally and ethnically diverse countries in the world; Brazilians have Iberian, African, Indigenous, Levantine, Japanese, and Eastern/Central European ancestry. In the same way that this issue raises questions about what it means to be a "Jewish Literature," Jewish Brazilian writers demand readers to consider what it means to be "Brazilian Literature."

One such author is Frida Alexandr, who is the only woman to have written a firsthand account of Jewish life in southern Brazil. Her book, *Filipson: Memories of the First Jewish Colony in Rio Grande do Sul*, is an indispensable text for both those interested in Jewish life in Brazil and those more broadly interested in immigration to Brazil.²

Born in Rio Grande do Sul to Russian Jewish immigrants, Alexandr grew up in Filipson, a rural farming community about fourteen miles north of the nearest city, Santa Maria. Filipson was one of many Jewish farming communities in the Southern Cone (primarily in Argentina) managed by Baron Maurice de Hirsch of the Jewish Colonization Association (JCA). Through these farms, Hirsch aimed to resettle Jews from Podolia, Bessarabia, and Imperial Russia. The colonies in Brazil (Filipson and Quatro Irmãos) did not last long, with inhabitants quickly moving to more urban areas such as Santa

² *Filipson* has been out of print since its first run in 1967, but this year, Chão Editora published a much needed second edition with photographs and an afterword by Dr. Regina Zilberman (Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul). Soon, the work will appear in a full English translation by Regina Igel. I'd like to take a moment to thank Professor Igel for sharing with me the translation rights for these two stories; it's very generous.

Maria, Porto Alegre, and farther north to São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro.

After marrying Boris Alexandr, a pianist and Russian immigrant, Alexandr herself moved to São Paulo. There, she began writing *Filipson* at the behest of her children and with the help of the Women's International Zionist Organization, of which she was an active volunteer.³ Published by Editora Fulgor in 1967, *Filipson* is hard to generically classify.⁴ Composed of fifty-six short chronicles, the stories describe colony life from approximately 1904 to 1920 and illustrate the ways in which the recent immigrants adapted to *gaúcho* life while maintaining their Jewish traditions and customs: they learned how to read the directions of the winds and measure the fertility of the soil while also bringing Jewish teachers from Europe to educate their children in Hebrew and Portuguese (though children were not at all exempt from farm labor). At the same time, Alexandr also provides a critique of the JCA's administration of Filipson, detailing the unequal living conditions of the colonists and the JCA administrators as well as the administrators' failure to furnish the colonists with the necessary tools to survive.

Although *Filipson* is memoiristic, some of the recollections in the book happened before Alexandr could remember them, and others happened off the farm, where young women were by and large prohibited from going until married. For this reason, Alexandr often relies on the verbiage of "telling" (*contar* and *relatar*) and naming the inhabitants of Filipson who told her so.⁵ With this rhetorical move, Regina Igel writes that "there prevails, in [Alexandr's] writings, a floating atmosphere of oral communication, further emphasized by her choice of a vocabulary filled with local colloquialisms."⁶ Similarly, in some stories such as "The Mirror," Alexandr narrates both from her position as a grown woman in São Paulo, years after leaving

³ Igel, "Frida Alexandr."

⁴ It's worth noting that Alexandr's book came out one year before the Brazilian military dictatorship's AI-5—a decree that suspended habeas corpus and ushered in the most brutal years of the dictatorship. During this time, there was massive censorship of the arts—including the persecution of the São Paulo-based Editora Fulgor. Maués, "Livros," 102.

⁵ Igel, "Brazilian Jewish Women Writers," 70.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 70.

the colony, and as a young woman becoming aware of herself. This playfulness with memory, narration, and perspective positions Alexandr as an author who blurred generic lines—between memoir and fiction and between oral and written communication—in an effort to revive, at least textually, a form of life that had long since disappeared from the world.

The stories I've selected from *Filipson*—"The Mirror" and "Santa Maria," which appear consecutively in the book—are from Alexandr's direct experiences. "Santa Maria" is one of four stories that take place off the colony. In "The Mirror," Alexandr develops a painful toothache that requires her to go to Santa Maria by herself to be treated. Not only do these stories chronicle the rare event of a girl leaving Filipson alone, they also chronicle Alexandr's awareness of her transition from girlhood to womanhood.

But to stay in the spirit of memoir, I have to admit the primary reason I chose *Filipson* and this pair of stories: my mom is from Santa Maria, and I selfishly wanted to turn this into some sort of genealogy project. I knew her side of the family had immigrated to Rio Grande do Sul in the late 1800s from Bessarabia's neighbor, Bukovina. And although I didn't learn anything particularly concrete (just a poorly recollected story about a great- or great-great-grandmother converting to Catholicism), it was fun to share *Filipson* with my mom and receive WhatsApp messages as she read family names of childhood friends in Alexandr's work. (Thanks mom for editing my translation <3)

Works Cited

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From Filipson: Memories of the First Jewish Colony in Rio Grande do Sul

“The Mirror”

It's one in the morning. I can't fall asleep. A growing fatigue takes hold of my limbs and brain, and, as always when I can't fall asleep and repress the maelstrom that reigns me, I feel frustrated, shattered.

I turn on the lamp and meet my image reflected in the dressing table mirror. Such disappointment! I see myself as I am: an old woman. I fixate on myself attentively and penetrate the depths of my tired eyes and my lost gaze. So I see myself again—many, many years ago. It was late at night, and a persistent toothache had tormented me for several days. I try to find a comfortable position. I shove my face in the pillow, looking to find in its warm softness a relief from the pain. I am exhausted from a day of work on the farm harvesting corn. My stomach is queasy and my head is spinning from the cigarettes that I smoked during the day, keeping my mouth full of smoke in order to numb the exposed nerve, as recommended to me by Maroca, Tibúrcio's mother, who assured me it was an infallible remedy. I don't want to turn the light on so as to not disturb my little sister, who sleeps beside me. In the adjoining room, I hear the measured snores of my dad and I hardly notice my mom's breaths. Maybe she's awake, with her gaze lost in the dark. I feel alone, abandoned. Nobody notices my suffering, or they just don't care. They're only interested in my labor, or so it seems. I spend the whole day on Malacara's back, perched atop baskets full of corn that I carry home from the fields. There, with help from mom and from little Idinha, I slide the heavy baskets onto the ground and we empty them. Next, we toss the corn into the dining room—transformed into a granary after our shed collapsed—where we watch it pile up and grow taller. I return the empty baskets to Malacara's back and resume my post on the trotting horse. I let go of the bridle and take from beneath the saddle blanket a book that I brought—hidden from mom—that helps me break the monotony of this back-and-forth all day. Sometimes I'm so absorbed in my reading that I don't even notice I'm

arriving at the farm. I only awake with the horse's sudden halt when we arrive at the gate.

The toothache continued to torment me, making me release some muffled moans. I felt my head throb. It must've been close to daybreak, as the roosters could be heard in succession from all the quarters of Filipson.

The new day came, equally full of work. We needed to move all the harvested corn into the house. The corn formed literal pyramids. If the rains were to fall and we left it piled up like this, all the corn would be ruined from rapid fermentation.

Until now, the weather had favored us. The cold was intense and dense frosts fell overnight. Ideally, one would stay at home next to a stove heated by a happy fire, roasting the last sweet potatoes of the season on the brazier while reading a good novel and pretending to be its protagonist. This, however, was nothing more than a vain chimera. After Adélia got married and after Jacques abandoned the colony for the no less brutal struggle of the city, I became indispensable to my parents. Dad counted on me for all contingencies. More specifically, he counted on me and Malacara. The horse and I helped each other. When we had less work, I loosened the girth, gave him a good ration of corn to be washed down with some fresh water, and then let him graze freely. In return, Malacara didn't trouble me when I was lulled by his leisurely pace, reading my favorite books.

But because I could no longer stand my persistent toothache, I got up and groped around in the dark until I found matches. I struck one and turned on the gas lamp. Next to it was the can of creolin with which we treated the cattle's worms.

I stuck my finger through a hole in the bedquilt and pulled out a grimy piece of cotton. I wrapped it around the tip of the used match that I'd dipped in the creolin can. I hunched over the mirror, opened my mouth, and pressed the creolin-coated cotton into the cavity. A lukewarm and abundant salivation began to dull the pain, diminishing the unpleasant taste of creolin. I continued looking at myself in the mirror as if I were seeing myself for the first time, momentarily forgetting that anguishing pain. I examined myself more thoroughly, and what I saw didn't displease me. I noticed two green eyes stained

with sparkling brown speckles, resembling the eyes of cats at night; I noticed eyebrows arched over long eyelashes that fluttered when the lamplight hit them in full. The eyes were circled by dark bags, which were made a bit less severe by the red of my sunburned cheeks. I was mesmerized by this image, carefully studying its assembly. Upon it, a rebellious wave of hair with the same golden highlights as my dad's, swept over my forehead and eyes, erasing the image from the mirror. I let out a breath of either satisfaction or sadness—I myself couldn't say which. Should I continue to ignore—or pretend that I was ignoring—what I already knew? That I had the appearance of a young lady and, as such, go on behaving like an unmannered little boy, treating the people with whom I was obliged to deal with the same air of defiance and arrogance that I'd always had, to make me respectable? I felt that something within me was changing, but that for my sake and for my parents' sanity, I shouldn't take it seriously.

The next morning, I awoke feverish. They didn't let me go to work. Mom went with me to the pharmacist, her *compadre*. We found him on his way out. Seeing us, he got out of the cab and caringly put his hand on my shoulders. In a nonchalant tone, he asked me, "What's wrong? Chatterbox isn't speaking today? Did you fill your mouth with potatoes?"

He examined me. He sprinkled some white powder on a little piece of cotton and placed it on my cavity. He spoke to my mom in private. I saw a cloud come over mom's face. With a forced smile, she said goodbye to the *machteinste* (*comadre*),⁷ who insisted that we stay a bit longer.

On the way, mom was telling me that I would have to go to Santa Maria to have my tooth pulled. I was alarmed at the idea of going alone, but mom calmed me: "You will take the train tomorrow, and your dad will pick you up the next day on horseback. Don't worry, Freide."

⁷ The word *compadre* in Portuguese specifically means "godfather of one's son." While earlier the narrator referred to the pharmacist simply as *compadre*, here she uses *machteinste*, a Yiddish word derived from Hebrew (מדותנתסט) that means relation by marriage (referring to the parents of the son- or daughter-in-law). In Yiddish, it can also be ironic, meaning "pal" or "buddy." The author's transliteration of the word is consistent with how Yiddish speakers would have pronounced it. Similarly, in contemporary Brazilian Portuguese, the words *compadre* and *comadre* are used to mean "pal" or "buddy" (though not necessarily ironically).



A photograph of Primeira Quadra in Santa Maria, Rio Grande do Sul, circa 1911. Acervo do Arquivo Histórico Municipal de Santa Maria.

“Freide” was my baptismal name in Yiddish, but my older brothers had matriculated me in school with the name “Alegria” as an homage to Professor Back’s wife. I, however, didn’t feel comfortable with this name. As soon as we moved to Porto Alegre, I left it behind for good, along with all the other memories tied to my life as a peasant girl. Today, I really regret this. If I’d held onto it, it’s possible that my life would’ve unfolded in greater harmony with its meaning.

“Santa Maria”

At night, my parents discussed where I might be able to stay for a few days. Mom remembered that my sister, Adélia, on certain occasions, had stayed at Chaïke Aronis’s house where she’d been treated like family. Additionally, Bene—Chaïke’s husband—was Abraão, the *shoiched*’s son and a close friend of my brother, Jacob.⁸

⁸ The word *shoiched* is derived from the Hebrew word *shohhet* (שוחט), referring to the ritual slaughterer of livestock. It is transliterated to Portuguese the way Yiddish speakers would have pronounced it: *shoyhet*.

As such, there was no doubt that I'd be welcomed, especially in such an emergency.

As for me, the idea of staying at Bene's house made me smile. Adélia had told me about the comfort and luxury that Chaïke flaunted. She didn't even seem like she'd come from the colony, with her satin slippers and silk gowns that revealed her plump, pink bosom dusted with the finest rice powder. I still remembered the treats I'd gotten from her at temple during the end-of-year celebrations. Her chubby, ring-adorned fingers had caressed my face. From her neck hung a large, gold chain. The chain was accompanied, over her opulent chest, by a pin—also of gold—and a small watch of the same metal studded with small stones. I overindulged myself in admiring her big, plume-covered hat while she praised my mom.

I got to Santa Maria at dusk, carrying a small bundle of clothes and, tied in a handkerchief, the sum of two thousand *réis*. The directions were simple: I was to go up the street that began at the station and as soon as I reached the First Block, to knock on one of the doors.⁹ If I didn't happen upon Bene Schteinbruch's house, I would, without fail, find myself at the door of some other former resident of Filipson who would know how to orient me.

With my heart racing, I knocked on the first door. A great apprehension began to torment my mind. What if none of our old acquaintances lived there anymore? Then where would I go? And what would I do? And as these thoughts assaulted me, the door opened and there appeared not Chaïke, but old Mrs. Raicher. Immediately recognizing me, she exclaimed, "God almighty! Who is it that I see! Where is your mom? And where is your dad? Is it possible that you came alone? Come in, come in! What am I doing, standing here at the door without inviting you in, you poor thing."

I excused myself awkwardly and told her that I was expected at Bene's house, but I didn't know how to find it.

I stammered, "Mom expects me to stay there."

⁹ In the original text, "First Block" (*primeira quadra*) is not capitalized—it is presented merely as descriptive directions. However, for decades, "Primeira Quadra" was the name of this particular, very trafficked street (now Rua Dr. Bozano, which turns into the Calçada Salvador Isaia, a pedestrian-only commercial area). Maciel, "O Projeto Do Calçada de Santa Maria (RS)," 5. With this in mind, I've chosen to capitalize it.

“Well then, walk quickly. It’s on the next block. It’s already getting dark.”

I kept walking up the street. When I came upon the indicated house, the first thing I saw through a wide-open window with a low sill was a table covered with a red velvet tablecloth falling all the way to the floor. A centerpiece full of fruits smiled at me. Opposite the table was a gleaming china cabinet full of crystals. Next to it was a door leading to a long corridor, from which the elegant figure of Chaïke emerged.

For a second, it seemed she didn’t recognize me. My head—and part of my face—was wrapped up in a scarf. She leaned over the windowsill, peered down the street in both directions, and then, as if she’d seen me mere moments ago and I was back to pester her yet again, she asked me, “What are you doing here in Santa Maria?”

I choked out a few words that refused to leave my mouth. I don’t quite remember exactly what it was that she said to me, nor do I remember how I dismissed myself. All I know is that I turned and went back down the street, not knowing what to do. I contemplated: If my parents had recommended the house of the son of our *shoiched*, it must’ve been because they were certain I’d be well received. Why, then, that indifference? What was it about my person that displeased her? Well, the only alternative was to return to Mrs. Raicher’s house and accept her truly spontaneous hospitality. But how would my parents come to know my whereabouts, and how would they take it when they found out? The Raichers had traded their existence as farm laborers for city life, where they dealt in scrap metal and used clothing and goods—peddling bric-a-brac, as we said in those days. Mom kept a certain distance in her dealings with them. Once, Adélia bought a little necklace of milky beads called “opalines” from them. Mom condemned this purchase, arguing with my sister. I didn’t understand why. In spite of it all, I found myself in the position of asking them for accommodations. Just as I raised my hand to knock on the door, it opened, as if someone were waiting for me. Clara, the Raichers’ daughter, grabbed my hand and exclaimed, “How good that you’ve come! You will sleep with me. Come quickly! We’ve been waiting for you for supper.”

She guided me across a dark courtyard. We walked up a few wooden steps that creaked under our weight. I heard, beneath my feet, the honks and quacks of ducks and chickens whose sleep we disturbed. In front of us a half-open door let in a thread of light, illuminating our path. Finally, we reached the dining room. Around a long table covered in a white tablecloth sat the entirety of the large Raicher family. Old Mr. Raicher sat at the head of the table.

I sat between Clara and her mother, who, in a continuous back-and-forth served the food, not able to remain seated long enough to serve herself. Everybody laughed and talked, doing everything to make me feel at home among them. Nobody asked me questions. I wasn't pressured by anybody to explain myself.

Before I settled into bed, Mother Raicher gave me a medication to gargle, saying it was an infallible toothache remedy.

The next day, they took me to a dentist who ripped open the abscess, releasing me from my suffering. The other times, I went alone. Clara went to school and the other family members left at the crack of dawn, each off to take care of their respective chores.

During these times where everybody was occupied, I roamed around, getting used to the house and the objects which made it up. It was an old cabin held up by stone pillars. Around it was a wooden veranda with a poorly fitted plank floor that creaked underfoot. Between the cracks, one could see piles of firewood, screened crates with chickens and ducks. Through the cracks rose the smell of rotten potatoes, rotten oranges, and chicken excrement. I think this shoddily constructed wooden floor was to blame for the nightmares that would trouble my sleep for years to come. I would often dream of walking over loose, spaced-out planks. They escaped from under my feet, and I ran the risk of being launched into the void. In this dream, I clung to the beams, wanting to call for help, but my voice was trapped in my throat. Here I woke, as if feeling a link between the nightmare and something located very far from my life.

A long corridor separated the bedrooms from a certain part of the house. This corner of the house was the only one forbidden from me because an extremely sick member of the family lived there—or so they said. The enormous front hall was a storage area with the

most absurd collection of objects: old furniture, used clothing, dusty china, books, and musical instruments including, even, a piano.

Clara studied piano. And when she was at school, I took care of martyring the poor keys. More than once, I tried to help the housewife. She was always busy with pots in the kitchen, but old Mrs. Raicher never accepted my offer. She did, however, sometimes call me to taste new seasonal fruit compotes.

After lunch, when the house was silent due to the mandatory nap, I excused myself to my little room with whichever book I'd picked up at random.

On the third day of my stay in Santa Maria, the dentist extracted my tooth without anesthesia. I returned to the Raichers' house and retired to the attic, where I cried bitter tears. An intermittent cold came over my body. I buried myself beneath a mattress and fell asleep. I don't know how many hours I remained immersed in that slumber. When I woke up, drenched in sweat, I saw in front of me the good Mrs. Raicher, who told me my dad had come to see me. He came upstairs twice, but, because I continued in my deep sleep, he didn't want to wake me. He'd been unable to wait, for fear of night creeping up on us while returning to Filipson. And so, he left me money for a return ticket.

Days after the extraction, the dentist allowed me to return home. I said goodbye to the Raicher family, sad to leave them, captivated by the attention and affection they'd given me.

Work Cited

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