

Checito

I lead what Socrates in his trial called “an examined life.” Actually, what he said was that “a life *unexamined* is not worth living.” He meant that one should question and analyze one’s life all the time. Since the Athenian court forbade him to continue his dialogues questioning everyone’s lives, Socrates chose death over exile. Death over a life unexamined.

I am not sure I want to go that far. Yet his maxim is with me every day. I examine *my* life all the time: Who I am, where did I come from? Perhaps my always-present obsession to know myself may touch a nerve in all of you. It deals with a universal theme: Identity. Who am I? Who are you? Who cares? Why does it matter?

Let me try some answers.

I was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in 1949, the only son of Jews, refugees from the horrors of mid 20th century Europe. My father escaped the anti European wave that had taken over nationalist Turkey after the first war, which, in 1922, led to the burning of Smyrna, the city of his birth. My mother escaped sure deportation from Vienna and death in Auschwitz when the Nazis invaded Austria in the second war in 1938.

Argentina was one of the many places to which my parents might have wished to go. But not everyone was welcoming. I know that Mom would

October 20, 2023

have preferred the USA, but visas were not forthcoming from the State Department then (nothing much seems to have changed . . .).

They met in Buenos Aires in 1947:



... and, in 1949, I was the result.



My identity troubles started, right then, from the get-go.

Mom wanted me to be her little European, nay, her little *Austrian* boy. They named me Jorge, but she called me Schorschi, a Viennese nickname of endearment. Schorschi was raised in three languages, German first and Spanish second. And English too, just in case the State Department changed its mind.

I was not encouraged to mingle with the Argentine kids, the *porteños*. I never played *fútbol* as well as they did, I was taught to waltz but not to tango – tango being the dance of the locals... (As if I was not a local.) I, Schorschi received an accordion as a gift and learnt how to play waltzes and polkas, dressed in *Lederhosen*, leather pants.



We lived in an island of European languages, music, and friends. Mom defined my identity as that of Schorschi, a Central European kid who would be in Argentina only for a short time.

But then, suddenly, Mom and then Dad died in my teens, and I was left alone in Buenos Aires, no brothers, sisters, uncles, or aunts. And the first of many fascist governments took over Argentina in the late '60s and they closed the Universidad de Buenos Aires where I was by then a freshman.

So, I turned to the place that they had always hoped to which I would come: the USA. I applied to Rensselaer Polytechnic, RPI, as "George

Goldstein” and headed North to reinvent myself as an American scientist. I used “George” because I didn’t just want to fit in, but I wanted to reinvent myself as an “American.”

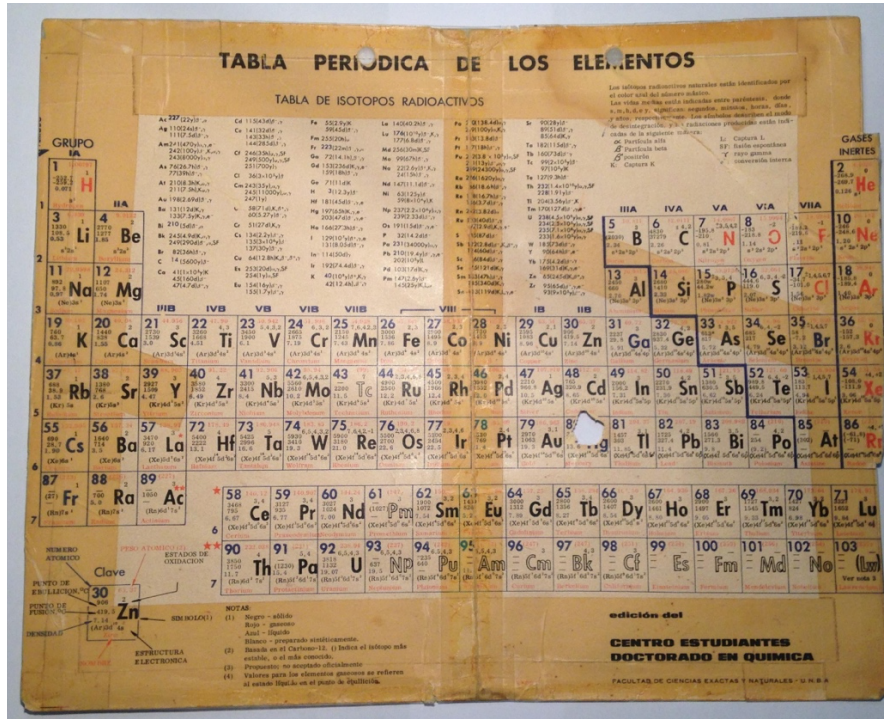
I arrived in 1968 at Kennedy Airport, at age 18:



Mom’s brother, my uncle Jack, his wife Bertha, and my Grandma Rachel lived in New Jersey. They received me with open arms and became my new family. And so, I moved on to Troy, upstate New York, to study chemistry at RPI.

I had nothing but my clothes, one chemistry book in Spanish, and a brownish and battered periodic table. It has a hole right through Hg,

Mercury, between Gold (Au) and Thallium (Tl). It is probably the remnant of a tiny drop of acid from my early lab days in BA.



Troy looked to me like the original Troy must have looked to Agamemnon when he left to seek Helen: the underdeveloped provinces. I missed my home in Argentina with longing and pain those first years in Troy. I missed Mom's Viennese accent and Dad's High German. But mostly, I missed the *fútbol* games, the sounds of *porteño* Spanish, the strong coffee, the bread, the steaks, the *dulce de leche*.

But I found, on 3rd Street in Troy, a few blocks down the hill from RPI, a decrepit old row house that was the headquarters of Phi Iota Alpha. Phi Iota was the Latin-America fraternity on campus. Diego Bonifaz, an engineering student, and the son of Ecuadorian landowners, was the

chapter president. He told me that one day he had organized his father's *peones* in a *sindicato*, a worker's union, and encouraged them to strike for better pay and conditions. The day after that, his father decided to ship him off to *El Norte*, to straighten him out and to cure him of his fever for social justice.

Diego convinced me to join Phi Iota and I did, as much for his passion as for my longing to belong someplace that felt like home.

It was because of my brothers at Phi Iota Alpha in 1968 that I changed from being Schorschi, the European kid in a sea of *argentinos*, to a *latinoamericano* in a sea of *gringos*. I discovered *ecuatorianos*, like Diego, *colombianos*, *venezolanos*, and many other Latino-Americans at Phi Iota. What is fun to remember, however, is that even though I suddenly felt like an all-around *latinoamericano*, my fraternity brothers still saw me as an Argentine.

Alberto, another Argentine, was a grad student, older than I, so they called him "el Che." This was not because he was a revolutionary like Guevara, but because all argentinians around Latin America are known as "Che." (Ernesto Guevara was indeed Argentine and that's why the *cubanos*, like Fidel, called him "el Che.")



My fraternity brothers, however, called me “el *checito*,” because I was shorter and younger than Alberto.



In that fraternity I also discovered Latino American heroes about whom I had barely heard in Buenos Aires: Simon Bolivar, Jose Marti, Benito Juarez, and Bernardo O’Higgins . . . I learned about them in ways I had never known. I suddenly realized that every country had its own heroes, not just Jose de San Martin, the Argentine one that had been drilled into me in grammar and high school as the greatest of them all. San Martin was just one more.

I learned to love *cumbias*, *ballenatos*, *salsas*, and *merengues*. And I learned to curse in Spanish words, which I never knew existed: “*Que vaina . . . coño!*”

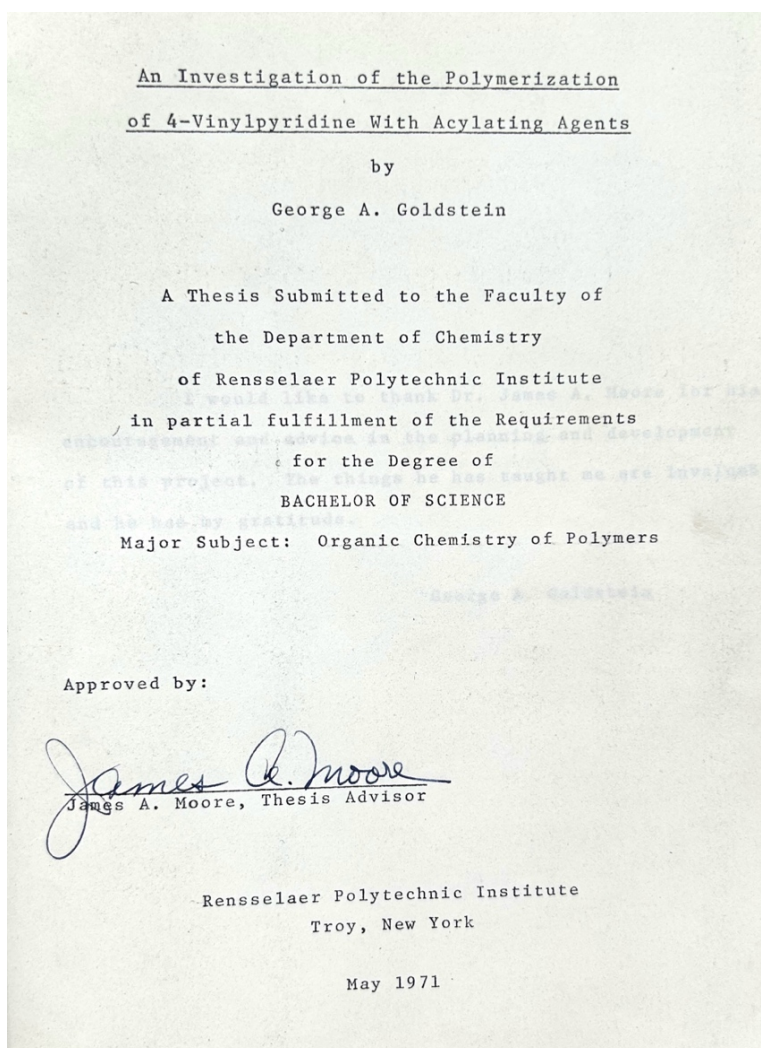
I had a very good friend in those years, Ramon de Torres, an engineering student from San Juan, Puerto Rico. He used to hang out a lot at Phi Iota, but he never joined. He thought that Phi Iota was not for *puertorriqueños* since he saw himself more as a *Norte-americano* than a *Latino-americano*. And in 1968, Phi Iota was perceived as a fraternity of foreign students. Ramon didn't see himself as a foreign student, certainly not as Diego Bonifaz or I. Diego used to complain to me that Ramon was confused, that he thought of himself as a *gringo*. Diego wanted Ramon to be more *latino* than *gringo*.

My best friend those years, and who has remained so to this day, was Micky. I had known him since my childhood in Buenos Aires and he was - and still is - back home. I missed him a lot. We corresponded in letters that took about three weeks to come and go (no e mail then!). After I left BA, Micky also started calling me George, not Jorge, as had always been his custom. To this day, Micky still occasionally calls me George, since he wanted me then and I guess still wants me today to be this childhood friend of his who left forever to go to the US, the one who became a *norteamericano*.

October 20, 2023

The weird thing is that, in spite of my newfound identity as an all-around *latino* at RPI and at Phi Iota, I graduated from RPI as George, not Jorge. I think that I wanted to be both, *north-american gringo* in the classroom, and a *latino-american* the rest of the time.

Here's my 1971 Senior Thesis from RPI:



Note my *gringo* name, George.

At the end of 1969, Phi Iota Alpha was no more. The small band of brothers lived on in Troy, but the row house on 3rd Street was closed for good. The fraternity did not have enough members coming from Latin America, not enough undergraduate students to study abroad – and it did not have the identity of the *Hispanic* fraternity that it does today. That would have to wait until the '80s and '90s, and until the present. So, Phi Iota went into my memory bank, dormant for several decades. I lost track of Diego, of el *Che* Alberto, and the rest of them.

That thesis with the name George, won a research prize at graduation. I was top of my class in the chemistry department in 1971 and I applied to PhD programs around the country. And when I applied to get into grad school, I did so as “Jorge,” no longer “George.”

I'm not sure why I did that. Looking back, it's clear that I was trying to shake off George and regain Jorge for all the world to see. I wanted it to be official. I must have thought that I would still fit in here, in the US, even as Jorge. True to my childhood upbringing as Schorschi the Austrian kid, I felt quite comfortable as the outsider – as the guy with the difficult name to pronounce, as the guy who was different. If people had trouble pronouncing Jorge, so be it.

And that is the case to this date . . . with one exception. My Uncle Jack had difficulty with this renaming from George to Jorge. Until the day he passed away, he refused to call me Jorge and called me by my American

name, George. When I asked him one day, he grunted: “Too hard to pronounce.”

So, I, as Jorge, applied and got into Harvard. And in Cambridge my lab mates were *norteamericanos*, but my weekend friends were all *latinos*. One day, the Chemistry Department, in doing a survey of minorities for the NIH, classified me as a “Minority – Latin American.” And I disagreed . . . That day, I, the grad student with the hard-to-pronounce name, thought of myself as Schorschi, a Central European who had been born in Latin America by accident.

It’s not that I was ashamed of being Latin American. After all, I insisted that everyone, professors included, call me Jorge, no matter how badly they mauled my name. And my PhD degree of 1976 says Jorge Alberto, not George Albert:



So, what was going on? To put it simply: I was confused . . . quite confused.

After graduation, my Harvard advisor, Prof. Frank Westheimer, one of the great chemists of the 20th century, wanted me to become a professor at some university in the States.



His identity for me was a mirror of his own: I would be a scientist, a researcher, and an academician. But I did not share the view that he had of my future. After a year of postdoctoral work, I decided that, true to the best American tradition, it was time to reinvent myself once again.

I kept my Spanish name, Jorge. But Jorge the scientist would now become Jorge the attorney. When I told Westheimer that I did not see my future the way he did and that I would go to law school instead, he was floored. He didn't know what to make of me. Thirty years later, just before his death in 2006, he confessed that he had forever taken credit for me becoming, as he said, "the best lawyer who had graduated from [his] chemistry lab!"

So, next, I went to law school. I am happy to report that my law degree from George Washington University still says Jorge, as do my law firm business cards, and my published papers, my books, and my reported court decisions. Jorge has been my name for more than five decades now.

So, who am I, after all this?

Am I the outsider Schorschi, the Austrian kid that my Mom wanted me to be in Argentina, forever on the sidelines of my own life?

Or am I the confused Latin American foreign student with aspirations of being the *gringo* George that I wanted to be in college? Or indeed that my friend Micky in BA wanted me to be?

Or am I the Argentine "*checito*" that my Phi Iota brothers wanted me to be at RPI?

Or the Latin American foreign student Jorge that I wanted to be to everyone during my Harvard years?

Am I that guy who resisted being classified as a minority by the Chem Department because I thought of myself as Schorschi, the Austrian?

Am I the chemist that Frank Westheimer wanted?

Or am I the lawyer that I am, member of the DC bar?

Who am I?

I have discovered that people will pin identities on you for their own peculiar reasons. Diego at Phi Iota wanted Ramon the *Puertorriqueño* to be a foreign Latin American student . . . Micky from Buenos Aires wanted me to be George, a North American friend in the US . . . My advisor Westheimer wanted a scientist made in his own mold . . . My mother wanted Schorschi, an Austrian kid like she would have raised had she never escaped from Europe . . . My fraternity brothers from Phi Iota wanted me to be *checito*, an Argentine, because it added to the diversity of Latin-Americans in the fraternity.... I wanted to be a North American as well as a *latinoamericano* . . . I could not tell if I was Schorschi, George, or Jorge . . . But one thing was always certain: I was and am a Goldstein, a Jew with deep and old roots in Central Europe.

So, one day many years ago, I decided that I would be all of these people. I would be Dr. the scientist, and Jorge the Argentine, and Goldstein the Jew, and J.D. the law firm partner, and I would be Schorschi, the boy born of European parents in Latin America, and, if my beloved Uncle

wanted me to be George, the citizen of the USA, so be it, I would humor him too.

In other words, I would be who I am.

I would not be any one of the many people that others have tried to tell me that I am. The only way to resolve my confusions was - and remains - to be all of these people at the same time.

Walt Whitman comes to mind:

**I am large, I contain multitudes
Walt Whitman, *Song of Myself***

I think that there is a lesson in this for all of us, including you. People will define you by their own wishes and needs. There will always be a loved one, a good friend, an advisor, who has an emotional investment in you being someone who will make him or her feel better or richer. This is not necessarily for your benefit, but for him or her.

Your parents, of course, are the first ones to do this. They mean well. They want the best for you – but sometimes they confuse what’s best for you with what’s best for them. Your friends, your fraternity brothers,

your teachers, your mentors, even an occasional bureaucrat . . . they all load you up with their own expectations and hopes.

And from time to time, you and I buy into these identities. We do that because we want to please them, and because it is very romantic to try on different skins at different times. We like to think that we can charge right ahead and move on with a new identity and close the doors to the old ones. But the doors never quite close behind us; they remain open just a little bit, no matter how hard we try to slam them. You can always hear a rumble behind them.

Your task in life then is discovering who you really are. Let the world know who you are. Speak it loud and clear. Cherish among the many relatives, teachers, and advisors the ones who have advised you well, who have advised you to be yourself, no matter their own wishes and needs.

And what now for me? Well, in a never-ending quest, I try to find ways to bring my different identities together one way or another. Some of the legal work that I have done reflects this. For example, I do *pro bono publico* work with indigenous groups in Latin America – helping with issues such as their intellectual property rights. I help protect and fight for what they believe is misappropriation of long-held medicinal

knowledge so that they will benefit not some multinational that has gone in and taken it without asking.

Here's a Colombian Emberá girl painted with the blue juice from *jagua americana*.



The juice was turned into an edible blue powder by our client Ecoflora in Medellin, and we have patented the powder and licensed it around the world. It's edible and drinkable, so you may soon see blue sparkling water!

I have advised government agencies in Colombia, Costa Rica, and Venezuela about biodiversity. I have biotech clients in Latin America, VaxThera in Colombia, Silanes in Mexico, CONICET in Argentina. I represent them in the US to protect their legal rights.

October 20, 2023

My wife Sandy and I have taken serious tango lessons, so that when I go back to Buenos Aires I no longer feel like Schorschi, the Austrian kid watching from the edge of the dance floor. I want to dance with the best of them. And I've picked up the accordion again and have learned to play tangos and American folk music, not just Vienna waltzes!



I confess that at times being a *latino* helps a lot... as when a telemarketer calls at home during dinner and asks for George Goldstein, and – after making sure it's not my uncle Jack's ghost - I can say with a clean conscience, "No one by that name here, sorry!"

Oh, I almost forgot. I have also become the *paterfamilias* of a large American clan with six daughters, three from Sandy, three from me, four sons in law, and fourteen grandchildren:



I leave you with some more words of Walt Whitman, this time from his poem *Leaves of Grass*:

**Re-examine all you have been told at school or church or in any
book, dismiss whatever insults your own soul, and your very flesh
shall be a great poem . . .**

Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*