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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CONTRIBUTORS	1
EDITOR'S NOTE	7
<i>by Helen Epstein</i>	
JEWISH WOMEN IN THE UNITED STATES.	13
<i>by Riv-Ellen Prell</i>	
WOMEN AND RESEARCH ON WOMEN IN ISRAEL.	21
<i>by Hanna Herzog</i>	
ITALY	31
<i>by Micaela Procaccia</i>	
LATIN AMERICAN JEWS.	39
<i>by Judith Laikin Elkin</i>	
IRANIAN JEWISH DIASPORA WOMEN	49
<i>by G.B.</i>	
JEWISH WOMEN IN THE FORMER YUGOSLAVIA	59
<i>by Ana Lebl</i>	
BEING A JEWISH WOMAN IN FRENCH SOCIETY	65
<i>by Regine Azria</i>	
SOUTH AFRICAN JEWISH WOMEN	71
<i>by Sally Frankental</i>	
MIZRAHI WOMEN IN ISRAEL: THE DOUBLE ERASURE ...	79
<i>by Pnina Motzafi-Haller</i>	
JEWISH WOMEN IN MEXICO	97
<i>by Paulette Kershenovich</i>	
ISRAELI WOMEN AND HEALTH	109
<i>by Susan Sered</i>	
REPORT FROM LITHUANIA	117
<i>by Basia Nikiforova</i>	
CANADIAN, JEWISH AND FEMALE.	123
<i>by Norma Baumel Joseph</i>	
HOMING PIGEON: A SEPHARDIC JEW	129
<i>Ruth Knafo Setton</i>	

continued



TABLE OF CONTENTS, *continued*

THE MOTHERS OF PASTEUR STREET: THE STRUGGLE FOR PLURALISM IN ARGENTINA	137
<i>by Edna Aizenberg</i>	
IRANIAN JEWISH WOMEN DISCOVER THE POWER OF WORDS	145
<i>by Farideh Dayanim Goldin</i>	
TESHUVAH AMONG FRENCH JEWISH WOMEN.	161
<i>by Laurence Podselver</i>	
JEWISH WOMEN IN CHILE	169
<i>by Marjorie Agosin</i>	
ISRAELI WOMEN: COLLECTIVISM AND INDIVIDUALISM	173
<i>by Eetta Prince Gibson</i>	
HUNGARY	183
<i>by Katalin Taliygás</i>	
BOOKENDS.	187
<i>by Pamela S. Nadell</i>	
JEWISH WOMEN IN BRITAIN	191
<i>by Marlena Schmool</i>	
GENDER AND LITERACY AMONG YOUNG ORTHODOX JEWISH WOMEN	199
<i>By Tamar El-Or</i>	
JEWISH WOMEN IN LATVIA	233
<i>By Ruta Marjasa</i>	

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EDITOR'S NOTE



FOR SEVERAL MONTHS NOW, I have been editing the papers of 24 women working in different fields and in different places throughout the world. These women also come from very different parts of the Jewish community and work in a variety of settings: some are academics; some are writers; some are social workers. All originally presented papers in 1997 and 1998 at the Hadassah Research Institute on Jewish Women located at Brandeis University. Reading their work, thinking about their ideas, and sometimes struggling to translate them into English has been an unexpectedly absorbing experience for me and I've wondered what it is, exactly, that I find so rewarding. I've concluded that spending time in the company of an international, interdisciplinary group of Jewish women begins to fill a most basic and persistent need in me: the need of human beings to see themselves sympathetically represented and reflected in their culture.

As a Jewish woman growing up in post-war America, I rarely saw any semblance of my reflection in the mainstream culture. Although I grew up in the middle of New York City where almost everybody in my immediate world was Jewish, representations of Jews were absent from the museums I visited, the movies I saw, or the books I read in school. Except for *The Diary of Anne Frank*, which I consider problematic reading for a young Jewish girl, there was no Jewish heroine in the books of my childhood. I identified with active, adventurous girls like Jo March, Nancy Drew or Cherry Ames and liked reading about the dramatic lives of European and English queens. I didn't then notice that none of the women I was reading about were Jewish, or that Archie and Veronica seemed to have no Jewish friends; that there were no Jewish Mouseketeers; or that there were no Jewish girls in *American Girl* or *Seventeen*.

I was in my forties and listening to West Indian writer Jamaica Kincaid speaking at the Isabella Gardner Museum in Boston, when I suddenly perceived their absence (like Pnina Motzafi-Haller in her essay about *mizrahi* women in Israel, I applied the insight of an African-American woman to my own life). Jamaica Kincaid had done a brilliant and audacious thing: invited to choose her favorite painting at the museum and speak to a large audience about the reasons for her choice, she had beamed an old snapshot of her mother on the museum's large screen and talked about it.



All of us in the audience, of course, had been accustomed to viewing the parade of art history on such a screen – from the Greeks to the Renaissance masters to the Impressionists and Abstract Expressionists. We were accustomed to oil portraits and elaborately framed photographs. The effect of Kinkaid's snapshot was shocking and made the author's point more forcefully than her words: Had we ever seen the image of an ordinary West Indian woman on the walls of a museum? Had we ever contemplated her face? Her body? Her surroundings? Her life? How did we ascribe value to this snapshot when it was viewed in a private photo album, in a newspaper, or here, in the context of other portraits in the museum? We had all read or at least heard of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, but what about the invisible woman? In this case, what about an entire sub-culture usually hidden by the majority African-American minority culture?

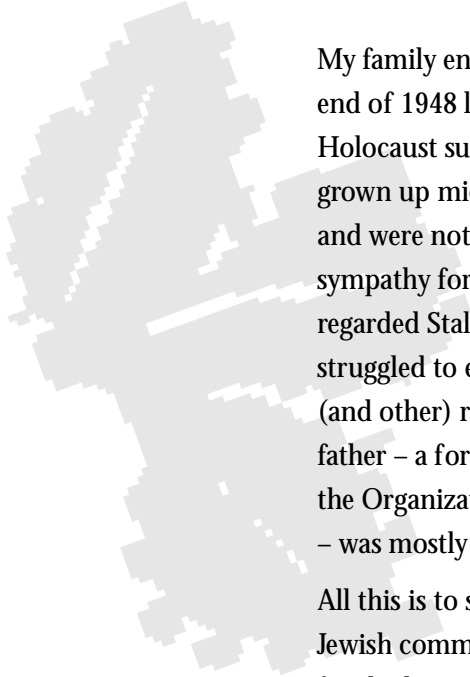
I viewed many of these working papers as such snapshots that raised some of these and many other questions.

In addition to experiencing a kind of invisibility as a Jewish girl in America, I also felt an invisibility in the Jewish community as the daughter of Czech Jews (of *ashkenazi* descent on my mother's side; *sephardi* on my father's). We lived on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, where there were many Jewish refugees from Central Europe but where the definition of Jewish culture was determined by people who, like the majority of American Jews, were of Russian and Polish descent.

This particular group, I later learned, had jettisoned their working-class, Yiddish-speaking parents (as well as their working-class culture) in the Bronx, or Brooklyn, or Queens, or the Lower East Side.

They were West Siders now, middle-class, highly educated, new Jews, who frequented the American – not Yiddish-language – theater and Lincoln Center, collected art, read the cultural sections of the *Times* and the *New Yorker*. The men worked as professionals; the women were delighted to be full-time homemakers in the image of Betty Crocker. Most were political liberals who had flirted with Communism or Socialism in college; they had friends or acquaintances who were blacklisted and were deeply affected by McCarthyism. They had also been deeply affected by the events of the second world war and were in every way invested in a prototypically 1950s American mainstream lifestyle.

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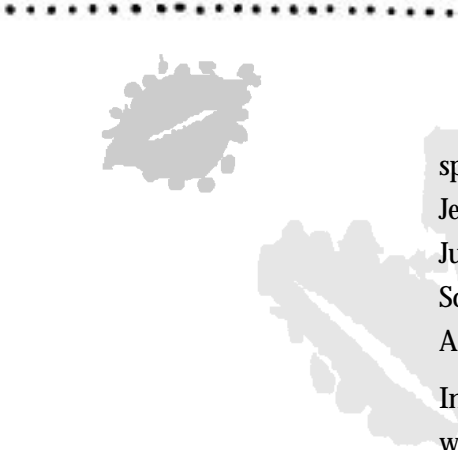


My family entered this Upper West Side Jewish milieu towards the end of 1948 like creatures from another planet. My parents were *both* Holocaust survivors and political exiles from Communism. They had grown up middle-class, did not speak Yiddish, had never seen a bagel, and were not especially interested in Israel. Although they had no sympathy for McCarthyism, they were staunch anti-Communists who regarded Stalin as another version of Hitler. During the 1950s, they struggled to earn money and to adjust to America. Like many Jewish (and other) refugee women, my mother supported the family. My father – a former Olympic water polo player and sometimes officer of the Organization of Czech Sportsmen in-Exile-in-the Western World – was mostly unemployed until I was ten years old.

All this is to say that, as I was growing up, I felt as invisible in the Jewish community as I did in the American one. And when I had finished growing up, although I was counted as an American Jew, I still did not feel like American Jewish culture included me. G.B. could have been describing the Epsteins when she writes “Iranian Jews do not easily mesh with the majority Jewish culture. Those who live in North America feel marginalized: their experience has been that American Jews know nothing about them... The Iranian Jewish diaspora is triggering a re-examination of hegemonic notions of American Jewish identity. Iranian Jews with their own ethnic and cultural tradition are challenging the American Jewish culture that was brought from Eastern Europe and that is presumed to apply to all arriving Jews regardless of their background. This ashkenazi standard for Jews is similar to the WASP standard for assimilation to North American society.”

The issue of cultural hegemony is addressed in an even more dramatic way by South African Sally Frankental. “It is a truism to note that all Jewish communities, in all times and places, reflect the context in which they are located,” she writes. “In the South African case, the segregationist policies of the colonial authorities, the Boer republics, and the Union, followed by the apartheid system of the past fifty years, form the inescapable frame for all who live in South Africa... the disproportionate numbers who arrived from one region, Lithuania, gave the community an unusual degree of homogeneity relative to other diaspora communities. This was reflected in the virtual absence of Hasidism (until the 1970s), in the particular form of Yiddish

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spoken, and in a variety of foods and customs particular to Lithuanian Jewry. In addition, the east Europeans' lack of exposure to Reform Judaism meant that Reform or Progressive Judaism was established in South Africa only in 1933, far later than in most diaspora communities." All this, of course, shaped the lives of South African Jewish women.

In reading these papers, I was struck by how many kinds of Jewish women there are, how profoundly we are influenced by our country of origin and the continuity or discontinuity of Jewish life within its borders, and by our experience of such factors as entitlement, dislocation, prejudice and outsider status. History, particularly this century's history, has not treated all Jewish women equally. In writing their papers, some authors – like Katalin Talyigas of Hungary – was reconnecting to and reconstructing the history of Jews in their country for the first time. Others, like Micaela Procaccia, who lives in Rome, is steeped in her history and writes with the surety of long immersion in the past: "In the year 1537, a Roman Jewish working class girl named Lariccia cried for days because of an unwanted match," begins her paper. "The day before the *qiddushin*, or betrothal, a washerwoman named Clemenza heard Lariccia saying to her father: "I do not like this man, nor do I desire him. I refuse him and reject him, nor do I want him." She declared herself to be "the unhappiest of all women," and on the next Shabbat, she told her father that she would not agree to let "the *qiddushin* become *nissu'in*.' Her father then hit her with the butt of a knife."

The biographical section of this volume itself makes for fascinating reading – as much for the wide geographical spectrum represented as for the facts each woman deemed important to include. As different as each woman is, I find much in common with her. It was easy for me to enter into her world.

Although this first HRIJW collection of writing by Jewish women around the world is inevitably uneven and incomplete, it is a respectable beginning. The authors represented here are, in some countries, part of a larger scholarly and cultural project of researching and writing about women's lives; in others, they are pioneers – the first of their kind. In some countries, they have been able to draw on a large body of data and literature; in others, they are themselves creating that data and literature. Ana Lebl from Split (now in Croatia) lives in an aging and relatively poor community of only 100 Jews



with scarce resources; Americans Riv-Ellen Prell and Pamela Nadell enjoy the support of Jewish Studies as well as Women's Studies departments at major American universities. Our Israeli and Latin American contributors bring both these realities into yet another perspective.

Some of the authors chose to spend time reworking their original presentations; others were content to have published what they originally presented. Many have struggled to express themselves in English – their second or third or fourth language. As a writer who has often had to communicate in foreign languages, I admire their pluck; as editor, I hope they forgive my journalistic bias, my many questions, and my inadvertent mistakes. Parts of all their work – even where it represents a starting point – moved and inspired me. I hope it will move and inspire you.

Helen Epstein

October, 1999

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THE MOTHERS OF PASTEUR STREET: THE STRUGGLE FOR PLURALISM IN ARGENTINA

by Edna Aizenberg

On July 18, 1994, at 9:50 a.m., a powerful bomb blew up a square block in downtown Buenos Aires. The immediate objective of the explosion was the *Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina*, known as the AMIA, the building housing most of Argentina's major Jewish organizations.

I say the "immediate objective," because, despite its primary intention to murder Jews and burn Jewish property, the bomb did not discriminate: Jews and non-Jews, some one hundred of them, were killed that day, and apartment houses, schools, and stores in the area were destroyed. Images of the block on Pasteur Street where the AMIA stood resembled cities like Sarajevo or Beirut or Kosovo, their guts ripped out by ethnic violence.



I dedicate this paper to all those who perished, most personally to my friend Susy Kreiman, who was crushed to death by falling debris while she fulfilled her humanitarian duties – helping the needy and unemployed find work as head of the AMIA's Employment Bureau.

Argentina prides itself on being the most "European" of Latin American nations. The long-prevalent official image paints Argentina as a homogeneous country peopled by inhabitants of European, Catholic stock, with only a smattering of "other bloods" – Native American, African, Jewish. Until very recently, any president of Argentina was constitutionally required to be a Roman Catholic. The armed forces, major players in Argentine politics, rarely looked kindly on those they perceived as outside Western, Christian civilization. Custodians of the fatherland's "fundamental values," they defended – by "disappearance" and torture, if necessary – a cluster of essential Hispano-Catholic ideals ultimately derived from medieval Iberia. Those who are not born with these essential qualities cannot be "true" Argentines, Santiago Kovadloff explains in his powerful essay, "*Un lugar en el tiempo: La Argentina como vivencia de los judíos*" (A Place in Time: Argentina as a Jewish Experience).

"We in Argentina are lucky," a debonaire citizen of Buenos Aires once told me, voicing a generalized attitude. "We don't have racial or ethnic problems like in the United States." I, perhaps not so politely, answered: "Of course not. You killed the Indians and marginalized anyone who wasn't white or Christian enough. That's why you claim to have no 'racial' problems." Women, needless to say, are not equal players when the *machista*, military-Catholic ethos prevails. Jewish women even less so: in the terrifying secret detention camps run by Argentina's fascist dictatorship of the nineteen seventies, Jewish women received doubly brutal treatment, as women and as Jews. Alejandra Ungaro's testimony says it poignantly and directly, better than I ever could: After beating me on my head and back "they drew swastikas all over my body with a very strong marker." (*Nunca Más*, 69)

The bomb that exploded at the AMIA is painful testimony to the fact that Argentina, like many other Latin American countries, has yet to develop a pluralistic national polity. Despite its *manías de superioridad*, its European airs, its capital, Buenos Aires, styled the Paris of the South, Argentina is painfully Latin American, still struggling with issues of human rights, diversity, and equality for peoples of varying social, religious, and ethnic backgrounds, of different genders and sexual orientations. The mask of European-

ness that Argentina wears not only erases the existence of indigenous and *mestizo* peoples (derided as *cabecitas negras* or blackheads) but also the presence of non-European immigrants, such as Afro-Asians, *sephardic* Jews, and Arabs. The current president, Carlos Saul Menem, is the son of Muslim-Syrian immigrants, who had to convert to Catholicism in order to run for the presidency. The mask of European-ness further erases the differences among so-called Europeans; not all descendants of Europeans have similar clout.

Most of Argentina's 200,000 Jews, the largest Jewish community in Latin America, are of Yiddish-speaking Eastern European stock, but Feierstein, Steimberg or Aizenberg do not have the same ring as Rodriguez, Anchorena, or Borges, nor do their cultural-linguistic heritages, even if they are immigrant, have comparable weight. Argentine-Jewish intellectuals, men like Ricardo Feierstein, and many, many women, like Siliva Plager, Reina Roffé, Ana María Shua, and Alicia Steimberg, caustically take on this linguistic and onomastic bigotry in some of their best works. Here is Steimberg from her novel, *Cuando digo Magdalena* (When I Say Magdalena): "Remember how Borges used to say that he would speak to one grandmother in one way and to another grandmother in another way, and that those two ways of speaking were called Spanish and English? [Borges, the famous writer, had an English immigrant grandmother.] Well, something similar happened to me, except that in my case one way of speaking was Spanish and the other Yiddish. But since Yiddish sounded harsh and unpleasant to me, I refused to speak it. It was a mysterious language that could reveal to me who I really was. From childhood I was expected to hide, to cover up, who I 'really' was and to pretend that I was someone else, who, strangely, I also was" (61). Feierstein presents his attack in a piece entitled *Aventuras de un apellido* (Adventures of a Last Name), written as a dialogue between an office employee and a man named David Schnaiderman, who needs to fill out a form: "Last name? Schnaiderman. How's that again? Always the same story; over and over since elementary school.... Schnaiderman, you repeat. ... Don't worry, I'll spell it for you.... Why don't you write it out. It's hard for me to write down foreign names... What's your name, sir, you ask the employee. Héctor Gómez, why do you ask? Is that an Argentine, not foreign name.... Of course. You mean to say that you descend from a tribe of Mataco or Toba Indians? That there were ... Araucanian Indians by the name of Gómez? Of course not, he answers sharply, getting red in the face. I meant that I was born here. Right here. So was I, you answer back..." (4-5). And so it goes until the employee calls the next one it line, and David Schnaiderman muses: "Forget the verbal pyrotechnics... You're still the Jew, the minority, for many, a marginal being" (6). Steimberg's *Magdalena*, too, is a marginal being, with a Jewish and womanly identity so questioned that even her name is unstable: "When I say *Magdalena*:" it's just a provisional name.

For one hundred years, since the time Argentina pursued a pro-European immigration policy aimed at populating and modernizing the land, there has been an ongoing battle between those forces who wish to retain the discourse of exclusion and those who wish to embrace a discourse of inclusion that mirrors what the nation really is. The events surrounding the AMIA bombing, especially the subsequent investigation, give a good picture of the struggle. First, who planted the bomb? Apparently, international terrorists, under the direction of Iran. But nothing is sure. Four years after the explosion, there is "still no justice," to cite the painful title of a report just issued by the American Jewish Committee: "Despite ongoing assurances from Argentine officials that the case is being pursued diligently, those who destroyed Argentina's main center of Jewish life... have not been brought to justice... Nor, for that matter, have those who perpetrated the bombing of the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires two years earlier" (iii).

Why? Because, most observers believe, powerful local Argentine interests are implicated such as groups with ties to the military, to neo-Nazis, to right-wing activists – in short, to those elements in Argentine society who have always viewed Jews as an alien, diabolical body, and who have attacked Jewish institutions and denounced “Jewish” professions, such as psychoanalysis. The depth of the animosity was driven home to me personally in a chilling anonymous letter I received shortly after I published an op-ed article on the bombing in the *New York Times*. It read in part: “Listen to me Jewess: It is an affront to all Spanish peoples, esp[ecially] to we Argentines, to even remotely imply that there is such as thing as an Argentine...Jew... As a former Argentine army officer I am insulted by your inferences that these creatures [in other words, Jews] have done anything positive for Argentina. They are known throughout the world as pariahs and manipulators... Viva Perón.”

The author of the hate missive – who unashamedly signed his name – was surely among those heartened that soon after the bomb several important sports clubs refused to compete with Jewish clubs; that neighbors of Jewish schools and synagogues signed petitions asking them to move out; that the suggestion was floated to have all Jewish institutions in Buenos Aires moved to a remote area on the abandoned Buenos Aires docks! The fires of discrimination had been fanned, and after one group is singled out, it does not take long before another follows.

After a memorial mass for the victims of the bomb, the cardinal primate of Argentina, in answer to a journalist’s question on the matter of right for various groups under a new Argentine constitution being debated at the time, responded that homosexuals might want their own country on an island, with their own constitution! During the same period – July, 1994 – a government planning committee drawing up a new national curriculum was forced to erase references to sex education, and to replace the word “gender” with “sex,” since “gender” was perceived by conservative and Church forces to be anti-marriage, anti-family, and anti-social [Franco, 281]).

On the other hand, soon after the bombing there was the mass march of tens of thousands of Argentines of diverse backgrounds and creeds to show solidarity with the victims and to repudiate the violence. There were also the many expressions of support from the intellectual community, a community that understands all too well the dangers of murder and destruction as forms of political coercion and cultural censorship. The novelist Tomás Eloy Martínez reminded Argentines on the pages of the daily *Página Doce* that it was not so long before that Argentines disappeared under a brutal military dictatorship, and death squads roamed Buenos Aires. The current evil, Martínez insisted, could not be disconnected from the past. Argentines wanted to forget what happened then, to “pardon” the perpetrators, and they want to forget now as well through cowardly calls for isolating Jews. But repressed horrors return with a vengeance, Martínez warned. Let us not fear; let us not forget (32).

Many Argentines have not forgotten. “By mid-1998,” Argentine journalist Sergio Kiernan writes in the report, *Still No Justice, Argentines – Jews and Gentiles* – hardly consider the terrorist bombing “an affair of exclusively Jewish concern. Its resolution,” he continues, “has become a top priority for society at large, a symbol of what is wrong with Argentina” (12). The most vocal group in the fight to remember and to bring those responsible to justice is *Memoria Activa*, the significantly-named grassroots organization of private citizens, most but not all Jewish, most but not all relatives of the explosion’s victims. Women are

the motor behind *Memoria Activa*, so much so that they have been called “*las madres de la calle Pasteur*,” the mothers of Pasteur Street, in analogy with the now-legendary *Madres de la Plaza de Mayo*, the mothers of the disappeared who during the seventies dictatorship weekly circled Buenos Aires’s main square clamoring for information about their children, clamoring for justice (*Memoria Activa: cuatro años de impunidad*, 46).

Led by Norma Lew (president), Diana Malamud (secretary), and Laura Ginsberg (treasurer), three mothers and wives who lost children and husbands in the AMIA catastrophe, *Memoria Activa* refuses to play ball with the government, unlike Argentine Jewry’s official representatives. It dismisses the authorities’ so-called investigation as a sham that diverts attention from local culprits by concentrating on the supposed Iranian connection. Every Monday since the bombing, *Memoria Activa* members and sympathizers gather at another Buenos Aires Square, across from the Supreme Court, under the banner of the command from Deuteronomy, *tzedek, tzedek tirdof*, justice, justice you shall pursue. As the years have passed, *Memoria Activa* has garnered considerable media attention and significant moral weight (Kiernan 9). The list of those who have stood with *Memoria Activa* on so many Mondays, and who have spoken at the vigils, reads like a who’s who of democratically-minded Argentina. Here is what Laura Bonaparte of the *Madres de la de Mayo* said on Monday, October 20, 1997: “Yesterday was Mother’s Day. And this society is trying to put together the broken body of its mother institution. And we have to do this together. Because what happened happened in each and every one of our homes. All of us discovered that state terrorism was alive and well. How can we call it anything else when it’s the state that keeps us from putting that body back together again, the state whose silence makes it complicit? The AMIA didn’t abandon us, it was assassinated. Those responsible for the act and for the silence are right here. The legacy of the crime will be perpetuated until such time as the testimony of truth becomes part of the search for justice” (*Memoria Activa*, 58).

The conflict between *Memoria Activa*, the Jewish establishment, and the Menem government became public at the 1997 ceremony marking the third anniversary of the bombing, when the crowd of thirty thousand gave a rousing ovation to the tough speech delivered by *Memoria Activa*’s Laura Ginsberg, and, in the presence of several government ministers, repeatedly interrupted Rub n Beraja, president of the DAIA, Argentine Jewry’s representative agency. After the fiasco, Beraja was summarily summoned by the Minister of the Interior, Carlos Corach (who, incidentally, is Jewish) to explain the embarrassing protest. In May, 1999, barely two months away from the fifth anniversary of the bombing, a new AMIA building was inaugurated on the same spot, built like a bunker meant to withstand any future assaults. The dedication of the gray building, made of doubly-reinforced concrete brimming with the latest high-tech security equipment, was hardly a healing occasion, since *Memoria Activa* and other groups of relatives boycotted the event. Calls to turn the page and begin anew were overshadowed by the lack of justice for the murdered and their survivors (Young 18).

It is clear, then, that the explosion at the AMIA raises serious questions about pluralism in Argentina as it attempts to enter the late twentieth century by overcoming outmoded legacies. To some, “overcoming outmoded legacies” largely means “privatizing,” selling off unprofitable state-controlled industries to transnational investors. But to others the “overcoming” goes much deeper, to the shape of Argentina as a society. Argentine cultural critic Beatriz Sarlo puts it bluntly: Can we find an idea of nation that doesn’t derive from fundamentalism or dictatorship? (109). Will Argentina at century’s end be a space of

oneness – one religion, one language, one color? Or will it be a kaleidoscopic space of multiplicity, where different ethnicities, religions, and races are celebrated, where women no longer need to grieve over their shattered dead?¹

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¹ NOTE: My sincere thanks to Jacobo Kovadloff, Latin American Consultant, American Jewish Committee, and Anita Weinstein, Director of the Mark Turkow Library of the AMIA and a survivor of the bombing, for their help in gathering material for this article. My translation of Salo Lotersztejn poem, "In Memoriam," follows this article.



IN MEMORIAM

*To Marisa and her smile,
receptionist only
to the world's goodness;*

*To Jaime, dean of workers
and culture makers.*

*To Marta, Yanina, Noemi, and Silvana,
the girls in Social Work,
young and open,
ready to alleviate others' sorrow and pain;*

*To those who met us
at the door
and watched our coming and going
with a human touch:
Carlitos, Naum, Ricki, Gregorio and Mauricio;*

*To Rosita, the operator,
who will never again say:
"AMIA, JEWISH COMMUNITY CENTER OF
BUENOS AIRES, MY NAME
IS ROSITA, HOW CAN I HELP YOU?"*

*To Susy and Dorita,
who kept the Job Exchange going
and suffered the anguish of joblessness,
opening doors of hope
with their search.*

*To the people of the Burial Society,
who brought comfort to the bereaved
in their loved ones' final hours;
to the tireless Kuky and his stoic assistants –
Nober, Claudio, the young Agustín and Fabián –
who were taken away, together with Rita,
the one with the bright blue eyes.*

*To Mirta, trapped
under the rubble,
who after that day
can never again take care of her kids.*

*To Cacho Chemuel, who was saved and brought back to life,
only to be caught by death this time around.
To the memory of the men in Maintenance:
Olgario, dragged down by his ailing heart;
Buby, who brought the hot coffee every morning;
Avedaño, who came from Chile
to fix lights
but was swept up by the dark.
To Jorgito
who was just coming
from the corner coffee shop
feeling so alive
when the deadly bomb
caught him
and blew him apart
with his tray full of cups;
to Paola, so young and perky,
who was coming to pick them up
and picked up death and desolation instead.*

*To the Bolivian workers
who came to find
a better future
and didn't
because the terrorists "decided"
what was to become of them;
to the passerby who just happened to chance
into the valley of death;
to the girl
who signed up for college
and took only one final exam;
to the architect
who designed for Life;
to those who were there to take care of some matter
or to find work so that they could go on living;
to all those who fell or suffered
simply because they were close by,
in next door stores and houses,
paying for the horrible desire to harm.*

*To all of them:
our anguish, our pain,
our solidarity as those who survived.*

Salo Lotersztein

