CHAPTER 3

Remembering the AMIA Bombing: The Mothers of Pasteur Street and Stones of Memory

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Remembering the AMIA

“On July 18, 1994, at 9:53 a.m., a powerful bomb blew up a square block in downtown Buenos Aires. The immediate objective of the explosion was the destruction of 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 eighty 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 wrote these words some twenty years ago, shortly after the horrible event that changed the face of Argentine Jewry, of Argentina, and of Latin America’s Jewish and pluralistic life. But more than an objective, reasoned analysis of the tragedy (a prelude to 9/11), what I expressed was a cry of hurt at the death of my friend Susy Kreiman, buried under the rubble and the symbol of the unending pain of so many other friends and families of the victims. What I expressed was also a cry of outrage at the destroyed Jewish Argentine heritage—Spanish, Hebrew, and Yiddish books and countless documents and folios—the archival and intellectual legacy of the community. How to replace the mutilated treasures? How to rebuild? The challenge was overwhelming.

The essays that follow, “The Mothers of Pasteur Street” and “Stones of Memory,” represent my continuing effort over two decades to assuage the pain and to understand the catastrophe. The first is a tribute to the women who refused to give up and who demanded justice—bringing accountability to those responsible for the bombing. The second is an attempt to rethink Latin America’s memory map and to construct a new map that revises our definitions of memory by including Jewish sites of remembrance.

Like my book Books and Bombs in Buenos Aires, both essays combine a depth of emotion with academic study. Feelings cannot be left behind; neither can
the scholarly mechanisms that may allow us to comprehend, and perhaps pre-
vent, such catastrophes.

I dedicate my writings to the memory of Susy Kreiman and to all those who
perished.

The Mothers of Pasteur Street: The Struggle for Pluralism in Argentina

Argentina takes pride in being the most “European” country in South America.¹ According to the official rhetoric, Argentina is a homogeneous country populated by inhabitants of European heritage with hardly any “drops” of indigenous, African, or Jewish blood. The armed forces, major players in Argentine politics, have rarely looked kindly on those they perceive as outside Western, Christian civilization. Custodians of the fatherland’s “fundamental values,” they have defended—by “dis-
appearance” and torture, if necessary—a cluster of Hispano-Catholic ideals ulti-
mately 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: Argentina como vivencia de los judíos” (A Place in Time: Argentina as a Jewish Experience).² They remain inevitably condemned to marginalization, to being outsiders to the Argentine experience.

The bomb that exploded at the AMIA seven unresolved years ago is painful testimony to the fact that Argentina, like many other Latin American coun-
tries, has yet to cohere into a pluralistic national polity.³ Despite its manías de superioridad, its superior European airs—with 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 Europeanness Argentina wears not only erases the existence of indig-
enous and mestizo peoples, sometimes contemptuously called cabecitas negras, little blackheads, but also the presence of such non-European immi-
gants as Afro Asian Sephardic Jews, and Arabs. For instance, the immediate

¹ This article previously appeared in Spanish in Revista Iberoamericana and in English as part of the Introduction to Aizenberg’s Books and Bombs in Buenos Aires. It is reprinted here with permission from the author and from Revista Iberoamericana. For the Spanish, see “Las madres de la calle Pasteur: la lucha por el pluralismo en la Argentina,” Revista Iberoamericana 66, no. 191 (April–June 2000): 339–345.
³ This essay was written in 2001.