CHAPTER 5

Blows to the Heart: Reflections on the Literature of the AMIA

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The deadly bombing of the AMIA on July 18, 1994, provoked a swell of protest literature from Jewish writers all over Argentina that lasted for many years. These writings go far beyond “art for art’s sake” and entail a sense of moral outrage and political intent. I focus on three aspects of the force of literature as it relates to the AMIA. I explore the AMIA as a place where literature was highly valued, the swift and fierce reply of Argentina’s Jewish poets and novelists to the destruction of the AMIA building, and my own testimony about how the bombing affected me both personally and as a student of literature.

The AMIA as a Literary Place

For me, the original AMIA building and its replacement were and are primarily a literary place. It stood on the site of the Ombú Yiddish Theater where King Lear had been a favorite and to which New York megastars Maurice and Stella Adler came to act in Yiddish theater classics, with an Argentine cast. The Marc Turkow library held books in Spanish, Yiddish, Russian, and English. In 1987, Ricardo Feierstein became the founder and director of Editorial Milá, the AMIA’s publishing arm. Editorial Milá produced hundreds of titles for the community: Holocaust memoirs, short-story collections, novels, community documents, the works of great Jewish literature translated into Spanish, and huge anthologies of Argentine Jewish writings. For many years, Editorial Milá dominated Jewish publishing in Latin America; its books were purchased in many

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1 For Argentine Jews, since the arrival of the first immigrants in 1888, literature has served a crucial role in helping them understand the complex realities of life in the countries in which they live, helping them forge a new identity, and warning them of real or potential danger. In Yiddish and Ladino and then in Spanish, narrators and poets have, sometimes bitingly, sometimes humorously, explored Jewish life in Argentina. Among the most influential writers are Mordejai Alperson, Alberto Gerchunoff, César Tiempo, Ricardo Feierstein, Silvia Plager, Ana María Shua, Alicia Steinberg, David Viñas, and Marcelo Birmajer. Most Argentine Jewish households have a collection of books written by Jewish authors.
Latin American countries and can be found in libraries in the United States and Israel.

The AMIA building was familiar to most Argentine Jews. Beyond its social service functions, it was a center of Jewish culture, housing an active theater, which played host to musical and artistic events, and also held the archives of the community. The AMIA’s Department of Culture became my center of operations. I remember clearly the black marble façade. I would go into the building that was open to everyone, without as much as a security guard. I noted that people regularly entered the AMIA to seek assistance from the job placement and pension offices and to use the library.

From then to the present, I have made yearly visits to the Jewish community of Buenos Aires. I became an observer and participant in the cultural life of that community. For years, every time I entered Ricardo’s office, he was busy editing that year’s list of publications. Moshé Korin, the director of the Department of Culture and an expert on Yiddish literature, and I often discussed the latest in Argentine Jewish poetry and prose. Over time, I came to know dozens of Jewish writers and artists.

To a large extent, Jewish cultural production up until the bombing of the AMIA building, subsequently known as the atentado, was characterized by guarded optimism. In Ricardo Feierstein’s complex novel Mestizo, published in 1994 by the prestigious Editorial Planeta, the protagonist David Schneiderman is finally able to identify himself simultaneously as a Jew and an Argentine. The same year witnessed the publication of Ana María Shua’s short novel El libro de los recuerdos (The Book of Memories), which tenderly presents the travails and foibles of the Remitka family made up of Jewish immigrants and first-generation Argentines. Under the editorship of Feierstein and Perla Sneh, the AMIA itself was about to publish El libro del centenario (The Centennial Book), a celebratory history of the Jewish community of Buenos Aires. This mood changed abruptly on July 18, 1994.

Edna Aizenberg observes:

The terrorist attack left a gaping hole in the Argentine imagination. Alongside the dead and broken bodies buried in the rubble were

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3 Ricardo Feierstein retired from the AMIA in 2007. He now edits for Acervo Cultural.
4 Ricardo Feierstein, Mestizo (Buenos Aires: Planeta, 1994).