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POSTS

Adventures in Buenos Aires (Day 2)

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By [David Shneer](#) / March 19, 2007

It's easy to spot a Jewish place in central Buenos Aires. I learned that this morning, when my husband and I walked by the Buenos Aires Holocaust Museum. Visiting the museum was the last thing I wanted to do, but I did want to see it from the outside. How would a Holocaust museum present itself in this city's classic turn-of-the-century landscape?

The museum is on a busy street in central Buenos Aires, and halfway down the block, not seeing anything obviously museum-like, I proclaimed us lost. "Wait, there are the barricades," Gregg called out, as though he'd spotted something as Jewish as a star of David or a cluster of bearded men with peyes and kippot.

Today it seems that barricades and security guards are the ubiquitous symbols of Jewish space. Metal barricades protect the Holocaust museum, and a guard stands sentinel across the street. The building is rather ominous: solid red brick with huge doors that we were convinced were locked, since we did not see a single person enter or exit the building. The sign on the front claimed that it was open, but we were afraid to approach the doors for fear that...well, for fear that it would, in fact, be open and we'd feel obliged to enter, which neither of us really wanted to do.

We slithered away, sure that the video cameras in front had noted our presence and wired everyone back home showing how these two bad American Jews decided *not* to visit the Holocaust museum in Buenos Aires. We then walked around the corner and down a few blocks to the Jewish museum, located just off a large square and housed in an old synagogue. Finally, all of the trappings of Jewish space came together in one building: stars of David, Hebrew writing, the Ten Commandments perched high atop a Moorish-style old synagogue and, yes, the barricades and guards watching everyone's coming and going.

My foray into Jewish Buenos Aires—meeting the actual people, I mean—begins tonight at dinner with the head of one of the city's gay Jewish organizations. But the most interesting Jewish place I have so far visited was the Plaza Embajada Israel, at the corner of Arroyo and Suipacha where the Israeli embassy used to stand. On March 17, 1992, a **car bomb demolished** the entire building, killing 29 people. In its place there is now a concrete memorial plaza, shaded with several dozen trees, located in the heart of downtown Buenos Aires. It is used for lunchtime picnicking and as a resting place for weary walkers, myself among them.

I didn't see anyone visiting it as a memorial site, although this weekend is the 15th anniversary and embassy officials have planned a ceremony on the plaza. That bombing was followed by the even more awful 1994 **bombing of AMIA**, the Argentina Israelite Mutual Association (the Jewish Community Center of Buenos Aires). The AMIA bombing destroyed the cultural nerve center of Buenos Aires Jewry, killed 85 people and severely damaged one of the best Jewish libraries in Latin America. The destruction of AMIA still haunts much of Buenos Aires Jewry.

Past violence haunts the broader Argentinian landscape, as well. Tomorrow, I am heading to Plaza de Mayo, the central square of Buenos Aires, to bear witness to one of the most popular tourist attractions in the city. No, it's not a changing of the guards. It's the weekly protest of the Plaza de Mayo Mothers, women whose children and grandchildren were "disappeared" during the **Dirty War** of 1976-1983, in which the right-wing military regime killed off up to 30,000 suspected "opponents".

There are several layers of Jewishness to this story. There's the disproportionate number of Jews disappeared by the regime, and the fact that the Dirty War served as a prelude to the embassy and AMIA bombings in the 1990s. And now this: today, literally today, there are reports by the Jewish Telegraph Agency that the Plaza de Mayo Mothers—those heroes of passive resistance to the violent military regime, this group of women whose ceaseless yearning for the truth about events nearly 30 years in the past makes people (and tourists) proud—are supporting two leftist Argentinian activists who made a controversial visit to Iran in early March.

The two activists traveled there as a sign of protest against an Argentinian court's recently-issued arrest warrant for a Lebanese man and 11 Iranians, including a former Iranian president, in connection with the 1994 AMIA bombing. The warrants should be good news, right? Justice may finally be served. Wrong, according to the Plaza Mothers and the two activists. They claim the warrants are part of a campaign by the "Israeli-American lobby" to defame Iran.

Apparently the self-proclaimed leader of the Mothers, Hebe de Bonafini, a self-styled "anti-imperialist," is well-known for statements rationalizing the 9/11 attacks, as well as for remarks that some have labeled antisemitic. Oy, can't we all just get along.

I still went to the Plaza to see the protest. At precisely 3:30pm about 20 women and perhaps 100 supporters marched in circles around a statue in the middle of the Plaza, all witnessed and photographed by hundreds of tourists, including yours truly. On the one hand, the whole scene was political theater with a very large and mostly foreign audience. On the other hand, there were stray protesters holding up signs with photographs of their own disappeared children, whose whereabouts or date of death are still unknown. Banality and poignancy all in one rally.

Today's tour of Jewish Buenos Aires left me suffering from a bit of malaise—one Holocaust museum, a memorial park of a bombed out embassy, and a protest rally turned tourist attraction. But we did happen across one happier Jewish site in our wanderings.

In a small gallery in the fashionable San Telmo district, we were examining contemporary Argentinian art when Gregg pointed to a piece buried in a pile of oils. "It's Fiddler on the Roof," he exclaimed. Sure enough, the fanciful oil was titled "Tevye the Milkman," the name of the main character in a series of Sholem Aleichem stories that serves as the basis for the famous Fiddler musical.

We were tempted to buy it, if only to bring home something "Jewish" that wasn't a menorah, mezuzah, or anything with a Jewish star. But the painting was, well, not that great (even at 50% off). So we decided to leave it in the gallery for other visitors to behold, in all its kitschy glory, so that they, too, could have an unexpected Jewish moment.

Next: David meets the dons of Argentina's gay, Jewish mafia

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