



POSTS

Adventures in Buenos Aires (Day 4)

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By [David Shneer](#) / March 22, 2007

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times. Yesterday, at 2pm, I was nearly arrested for taking a picture of a synagogue. Just two hours later I plugged into a nascent group of Yiddish scholars who are reviving the language in the same way as happened in the States 10-15 years ago. I'll let you figure out which is the best, which the worst.

Gregg and I decided to walk through the old Ashkenazi immigrant Jewish neighborhood, Once, which houses three premiere pieces of Buenos Aires Jewish architecture—the huge old Ashkenazi synagogue, the old Sephardic synagogue, and AMIA, the Jewish cultural center that was blown up in 1994 and has since been rebuilt. Once now serves as the home of black-hat, ultra-Orthodox Buenos Aires Jewry.

We took the subway a few stops to the neighborhood and emerged in Shmattaville. For those of you who have a hard time with Yiddish-inflected English, a *shmatta* is literally a rag—more figuratively, it's cheap clothing that many immigrants peddle in order to make a living. Shmattaville, then, would be the part of town in which such cheap rag dealing takes places, and that's where we landed.

The narrow streets were packed with people running with bolts of fabric, trucks nearly running over pedestrians and dumping out mountains of shirts for sale, and, my favorite, uniformed café waiters bringing ceramic cups of steaming coffee to people up the street who had ordered Buenos Aires' version of "coffee to go." These to-go coffee orders are ubiquitous throughout the city, not just in Shmattaville and, in fact, looked quite out of place in this relatively poor neighborhood.

We quickly found the Sephardic synagogue, and unlike at the institutions we had visited before, this time we saw real live Jews going in and out. (OK readers, how did we know when we had reached the synagogue on these busy bustling streets? **Find the street barriers!**) Each of these institutions was protected with steel and concrete barricades like the other ones and a visible federal police presence. Federal police protect all of Buenos Aires, not just Jewish institutions, because the capital does not have its own police force. It is like Washington, D.C., in that it serves as the federal capital and therefore only has semi-independent political status as its own city. Anyone who criticizes the Argentinian government for not taking Jewish security concerns seriously has not wandered through Once and visited these sites. Nor has such a critic ever tried to take photographs of a synagogue.

Now, mind you, I lived in Russia back when it was the Soviet Union. In the Soviet Union there were intense rules about what could and could not be photographed. But I have photographed Jewish places and Jewish people around the world and have never experienced what happened to me in Once. And after recounting the following story to my Buenos Aires Jewish informants, each one said (in their sweet Spanish accents) "Of course, David. You don't make pictures of synagogues." So I was the only one in the dark.

After photographing the Sephardic synagogue with little fanfare, we moved around the corner to **AMIA**, which is at once depressing and exciting. Pasteur Street, on which AMIA sits, is lined with trees, each with a plaque bearing the name of a victim of the bombing. It took us a while to put two and two together and realize that everyone named on the plaques sounded Jewish and they all died on July 17, 1994.

These plaques serve as a narrative prelude to the amazing and awful site that is the current AMIA. The building is set back about 100 feet, and is a stark, ugly 15-story modernist tower. In front of it is a giant memorial plaque with names spray painted on it, and off to the right, a small door through which people enter and exit, of course guarded by police. To enter I would have had to submit my passport number in advance for security checking, which I did not do, so we stayed across the street and bore witness to this scar on the landscape. I pulled out my camera but then the police man walked across the street informing me that photographing AMIA was not allowed for security reasons.

We slinked away without a photograph and made our way to our third stop, the Ashkenazi synagogue. As with the Sephardic synagogue, the Ashkenazic one stands stately among the shmatta shops and is guarded by police. I took out my camera to photograph, now a bit sheepishly after having been yelled at back at AMIA.

This time, the police came over and began harassing me...in Spanish of course, and let's just say that I have no idea where it came from, but I pulled out all of my childhood Spanish from deep in the memory wells (I don't practice Spanish often) as he started grabbing my camera and pulling me and Gregg toward his police car where four other officers were waiting for us criminals. Rather than use the word "journalist," I said I was a professor of Jewish history working on a project on Jewish history, handed him my business card, which he probably couldn't read, as he demanded that I delete the synagogue picture. I did so, praying to God that the view finder on my camera wouldn't then show him how I had taken pictures of 2 bazillion other Jewish institutions in the Buenos Aires area (it didn't), and then he demanded our passports, so he could document us.

I gave him my Colorado driver's license instead, which he liked, because as he said, "hey, at least there's some Spanish on here... Colorado means red in Spanish." He asked where we lived (I fudged it...I learned in Russia never to tell a police officer your exact address), what our phone number was (don't have one...I use my US cell phone...), and probably other goodies that I simply didn't understand. I did my best to make it look like we were having fun, but I wasn't.

I understood the security concerns, I respected the Argentinian government for protecting Jewish institutions, but I also found my liberty deeply violated at being detained by the police and having my camera confiscated for photographing a synagogue. And I tried playing my Jew card, which always works with security in Israel (where profiling serves as the basis for anti-terrorist policing).

Here's how that conversation always goes: "Eh, mah atah oseh ba'arets? What are you doing in Israel?" I respond with, "I'm a professor of Jewish history with the last name of SHHHNNNNEEEEEERRR ...need I say more Mr. Security?"—and I pass through immediately. But it didn't work here. The cultural cues weren't the same.

After getting our documents back and being released, we went shopping. (Isn't that what one does after being detained by the police?) And then, after a quick sojourn to Plaza de Mayo to see the Madres marching, met up with Perla Sneh, who is one of the key participants in the revitalization of Yiddish in Buenos Aires.

Perla said that I would recognize her at El Olmo, the café she picked as our meeting spot. El Olmo becomes somewhat gay at night, although I don't think she knew how perfect her café choice was for me. "Look for me outside, where I've been banished as a smoker. I have long black hair and will have a Yiddish book on my table."

OK, smoker, long black hair, this describes many Portenas (Spanish for a woman from Buenos Aires) but I figured the Yiddish book would be the big give away. But no, I saw Perla the moment she sat at the outdoor table—elegant, jet black hair, stylish, cigarette in hand...definitely a European Jewish studies intellectual. Perla insisted on the cheek-kiss greeting over the handshake, which immediately added an intimacy to our conversation.

Like German, Perla's passion for new Jewish culture is a labor of love. By day, she is a psychotherapist (it seems that many baby boomer Latin American Jews are psychotherapists and Argentinian Jews are still infatuated with Freud), and by night she is a newly enrolled Ph.D. student at Universidad de Buenos Aires, studying Yiddish in the Holocaust. Her father, Simje Sneh, was a famous translator of Yiddish into Spanish, and Perle has picked up the torch where her father left off, having translated some of the greats of Yiddish poetry herself into Spanish.

I asked her if, as in the States, Yiddish was becoming popular again among the younger generation, and she said, "Absolutely. My generation abandoned the Yiddish of our parents, so the grandchildren feel cheated out of their cultural heritage." Sounds a lot like the American Jewish renaissance of Yiddish. She told me about a 2005 conference dedicated to Yiddish in Buenos Aires. The planners had expected about 150 people to attend each session, but more than 400 showed up, "and not all old people," she added.

Although Buenos Aires does not immediately come to mind when most global Jews think of Yiddish, in the 20th century it was one of the most important centers of Yiddish—especially after the war, when those centers shifted from Europe to other parts of the world. It had daily newspapers, a lively literary and theater scene, and housed a branch of the YIVO, the Institute for Jewish Research that serves as the center for Yiddish Studies worldwide. Perla herself attended a Jewish school program, as a supplement to her Argentinian public school education, that was oriented toward a particular leftist ideology known as "left Poalei Tzion."

In the world of Jewish schools of the 1950s and 1960s, this means something important. Most Jewish schools in the heyday of secular Jewishness (1910s-1950s) were identified with a particular ideology—some combination of socialism, Zionism, and nationalism. Her school was oriented to a form of socialist Zionism that put more emphasis on the socialist, and a little less on the Zionist.

The way she put it, "In our school, it wasn't ever socialism OR Zionism, Yiddish OR Hebrew, it was always an "AND," not an "OR." For Perla, this meant becoming a fluent Yiddish speaker, being immersed in the literature of the classic Yiddish writers like Sholem Aleichem, and making aliyah to Israel after finishing high school in Argentina.

She didn't like Israel, so she came back to Argentina in 1977, just in time for the Dirty War (which she knew about, but nonetheless wanted to return home). I give her brief biography to show how the Jewish communal politics that shaped American Jewish immigrant culture so deeply in the 1920s and 1930s shaped Buenos Aires Jewish culture through the 1960s. And from what I have been told, in Mexico City, the other major outpost of Yiddish culture in Latin America, the schools there still have ideological bents.

As the sun began going down, Perla pulled out two more books of her own Spanish-language poetry. She gave them to me as gifts, as we agreed to keep in touch via the Jewish Studies scholar mafia network. I told her that Friday's activity would be going to the big Conservative synagogue in Belgrano, the upper class Jewish neighborhood, and she gently scorned it. "Not for me, thanks." We kissed

goodbye and said "chau" und "zay gezunt," informally parting ways in the two languages that so deeply shaped 20th century Buenos Aires Jewish culture.

NEXT: Sexy rabbis and saber-rattling politicians on the anniversary of a catastrophe

POSTS

Adventures in Buenos Aires (Day 3)

Last night, a torrid downpour cooled off the hot-tempered evening rush hour before we headed out for dinner with German (pronounced Herman) Vaisman, the founder of Keshet, one of two lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Jewish organizations in Buenos Aires. ...

By [David Shneer](#) / March 20, 2007

Last night, a torrid downpour cooled off the hot-tempered evening rush hour before we headed out for dinner with German (pronounced *Herman*) Vaisman, the founder of **Keshet**, one of two lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Jewish organizations in Buenos Aires. You know a city's Jewish community is vibrant when it has not one but two gay Jewish organizations.

I know German through my participation in two sometimes competing and sometimes overlapping global mafias—the gay one and the Jewish one. Granted, these mafias do not generally extort money or leave horse heads in people's beds (at least not that I know of), but they do form a network of mutual, communal interdependence among those who identify a certain way.

Wherever I travel, I know that I'll have some form of community by networking with one of these two groups—or, as with this trip, both. In Paris, for example, I may end up in a gay bar and soon after have invitations to parties hosted by local gay men. During the day, I may head to Paris's Medem Library and be invited to an evening of Yiddish poetry. And then I am expected to serve as host for each network when people visit my hometown of Denver, which is, I'll grant you, a bit less frequented than Paris. (I didn't say either network entailed equal give-and-take.) 

And sometimes, these networks align perfectly. Enter German, whom I met last summer in Jerusalem at the **WorldPride** festival, and who in the past two months had hosted in Buenos Aires no fewer than five other members of the international gay Jewish mafia. (See how this works?)

In ten minutes, German made me realize that the lachrymose itinerary I followed in **my last dispatch** was exactly the kind favored by Jewish travelers—one that revels in memorials, rather than in people. He told us about Keshet, which shows films, sponsors lectures, and considers itself more activist-oriented and political than its counterpart, the queer Jewish social network known as **JAG**, (pronounced *chag*, as in the Hebrew for "holiday.") The groups sponsored events for Purim, which passed a week ago, and will be hosting seders for Pesach, which takes place after I leave, so during my stay in Buenos Aires I won't get to participate in the group's activities.

As with most Jewish communal activists I have met, German is a volunteer. By day, he is an architect with his own firm. Relying on volunteers for such high-level Jewish communal work has clearly exhausted many of Buenos Aires' most promising younger Jewish activists. German maintains Keshet's **website** and hosts film evenings once in a while, but had desperately wanted to organize an event around my visit (a gay mafia writer/scholar is coming to town...must organize an event), but was too exhausted with his architecture business and just wasn't able to do it.

Perhaps the most unusual group German told me about is **Yok**, which German described as a *Heeb Magazine*-type network that sponsors what we in the States now call "**public space Judaism**." On Tuesday night, German had invited me to a cultural center, not a Jewish one mind you, to attend a Yok book discussion called "The Rubble of Humanism."

Since I had seen enough real rubble for one day, and really preferred sitting in a restaurant with a glass of wine to hearing two scholars drone on about the death of humanism, I politely declined. At dinner, German gave me more details about Yok, which fashions itself a hipster, New York-style *Heeb*-Reboot-Jewcy Jewish cultural network, but is in fact made up of 50-something Jewish intellectuals too "hip" for synagogues or other Jewish institutions. Not exactly what *Heeb* et al. has in mind, but frankly, I thought it sounded rather cool that baby-boomer Argentinean Jews established their own age-appropriate *Heeb*. (What the hell "Yok" means not even German knew!)

After an amazing meal with a piece of steak bigger than my head, we parted ways with plans for a wild Friday night—at Comunidad Bet El, a well-known Conservative/Masorti synagogue...more on that in my next dispatch.

Next: Running from the police in Shmattaville

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