

Remembrance and Exile in Argentina's Jewish Diaspora: The Poetry of Adriana Stein

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In *Últimos poemas a Buenos Aires*, Adriana Stein, like many contemporary Jewish Latin American writers, explores the nature of remembrance and exile within the context of social justice not only in the Americas, but also within the broader context of world politics. Her collection of poetry, published as an e-book in 2015, traces the legacy of the Jewish diaspora in Argentina through her own experiences and those of friends and family as she summons memories of the disappeared during the Dirty War from 1974 to 1983. Some of the poems contained in this collection were first published under the name of Adriana Stein Fourman on the *Proyecto desaparecidos* for Argentina, the website dedicated to the memory of the victims of the military regime and to exposing their repressors. Themes of the marginalized or fragmented self as well as both internal and external exile common in works by diasporic communities throughout Jewish history also find expression in Stein's collection, along with the oft repeated history of Shoah. Indeed, through her poetry, Adriana Stein contributes to the wider discourse of the politics of identity that serves as literary testimony of the perpetual struggle for human rights that focuses on diasporic societies in Latin America and elsewhere.

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Introduction

In *Últimos Poemas a Buenos Aires*, Adriana Stein, like many contemporary Jewish Latin American writers, explores the nature of remembrance and exile within the context of social justice not only in the Americas, but also within the broader context of world politics. Her collection of poetry, published as an e-book in 2015, traces the legacy of the Jewish diaspora in Argentina through her own experiences and those of friends and family as she summons memories of the disappeared during the Dirty War from 1974 to 1983. Some of the poems contained in this collection were first published under the name of Adriana Stein Fourman on the *Proyecto Desaparecidos* for Argentina,¹ the website dedicated to the memory of the victims of the military regime, both living and dead, and to exposing their repressors, both punished and free. Themes of the marginalized or fragmented self as well as both internal and external exile common in works by diasporic communities throughout Jewish history also find expression in Stein's collection, along with the oft repeated history of Shoah.

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¹ See the section on "Voces" on the website *Proyectos Desaparecidos* for Argentina (<http://www.desaparecidos.org/arg/voces/lit/poesia/>) for selections of Adriana Stein Fourman's poetry.

The Dirty War

The history of the Dirty War in Argentina is particularly salient in terms of its Jewish population which constituted the largest such diaspora in Latin America at that time and still does to this day. Uki Goñi (1999) reported in Buenos Aires' *The Guardian* that the Comisión de Solidaridad con Familiares de Prisioneros, Desaparecidos y Torturados en Argentina (COSOFAM) "...maintains that the military regime enacted 'a specific anti-Semitic genocidal plan' during the dirty war against political opponents."² Goñi further cited Juan Pablo Jaroslavsky of COSOFAM on estimates of the number of Jewish victims.

"We have identified 1,296 Jewish victims by name out of the official list of 10,000 victims," Mr Jaroslavsky said. "But if the unofficial figure of 30,000 total victims is correct then the number of Jewish victims could be over 3,000."³

Goñi then referred to the anti-Semitism of the military regime, citing the influence of Nazism and noting how "recordings of Hitler's speeches were played during torture sessions."⁴

This aspect of the dictatorship has been well-documented. For example, in tracing the nacionalista ideology of Argentina from the beginning of the twentieth century, Federico Finchelstein (2014) in *The Ideological Origins of the Dirty War* examined the confluence of anti-Semitism, fascism, and Catholicism:

For the nacionalistas, the "final solution" to the "Jewish problem" in Argentina represented one of the most original aspects of their fascism. This Argentine anti-Semitism coincided in discursive terms with that of the Nazis, although its double genealogy, Catholic and nacionalista, equipped it with a supposedly theological base and gave it greater longevity. (Finchelstein, 2014, p. 63)

Jews represented for nacionalismo the archetypical internal and irreconcilable enemy. (Finchelstein, 2014, p. 64)

Jacobo Timerman (1981) also wrote of the anti-Semitic nature of the Argentine military during the Dirty War in addition to his own abduction and torture in *Prisoner Without a Name, Cell Without a Number*:

Amid moments of hatred, when the enemy must be hated in order for him to be broken, hatred of the Jew was visceral, explosive, a supernatural bolt, a gut excitement, the sense of one's entire being abandoned to hatred... One could hate a political prisoner for belonging to the opposite camp, but one could also try to convince him, turn him around, make him understand his error, switch sides, get him to work for you. But how can a Jew be changed? That is hatred: eternal, interminable, perfect, inevitable. Always inevitable. (Timerman, 1981, p. 66)

The description of his treatment by the military offers confirmation of his analysis of the roots of anti-Semitism in Argentina as evidenced in this example of one of the many interrogation sessions to which he was subjected:

No questions were asked. Merely a barrage of insults, which increase in intensity as the minutes pass. Suddenly, a hysterical voice begins shouting a single word: "Jew...Jew...Jew!". (Timerman, 1981, p. 60)

Through the written account of his own experience and through his work as editor of the periodical *La Opinión* in Buenos Aires, Timerman is still probably the most well-known victim of the military dictatorship, but he is certainly not the only one.

² See Uki Goñi's full article on "Jews Targeted in Argentina's Dirty War," published on-line in the United States edition of the periodical on March 24, 1999: <https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/1999/mar/24/guardianweekly.guardianweekly1>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

Adriana Stein

In the poem titled "ARGENTINA," Adriana Stein similarly documents the persecution of the Jewish people in the twentieth century in this particular country through the description of her own abduction by the military as well as that of her sister:

No los veo pero sé
Que la electricidad funciona

Tengo veinte años.
Se han llevado a mi hermana
Estoy en una cueva con los ojos vendados.

Judía de izquierdas atea renegade

Ésta soy yo y no soy.
Veo mi cuerpo en la noche
Callada. (XVII ARGENTINA)

Labeling herself the "Judía de izquierdas atea renegade," Stein saliently explains the reason why she was taken to a detention camp in the first place. This is evident in the name of Stein's poem, "ARGENTINA," a purposeful title to make the point of how not only she, but the Jewish people in general were treated in that country by the fascist regime.

Latin American Jewish writers have as their duty what Marjorie Agosín (1999) in *The House of Memory* calls "the task of reclaiming and rewriting the story of their heritage..., which is different from the conditions of the indigenous or the Spanish or the other non-Jewish European peoples in Latin America. ..." (Agosín, 1999, p. 4). The result is "a literature that constantly questions itself and that questions not only its own identity but the nature of the very forces that shape destiny" (Agosín, 1999, p.4). In this way, Stein's contemporary poetry, much like the works of other twentieth and twenty-first century diasporic writers in Latin America, serves as testimony of Shoah, a term used since the Middle Ages to describe the repeated attempts to exterminate Jewish populations across the globe. Thus, while focusing on her plight in Argentina, Stein also traces the diasporic history of her people from medieval Spain to the Holocaust of the twentieth century and then to the Dirty War in Argentina 40 years later. In "SEFARAD," the poet writes:

Hijos de la Inquisición
Hijos
De tu terror y tu codicia y de tus miedos;
Dementes hijos de todas las guerras;

¿Qué herencia maquiavélica heredamos?

¿Vendrás un día con los brazos abiertos?
 ¿Con los brazos desnudos?
 ¿Sin cruces?
 ¿Sin banderas?
 ¿Sin espadas?
 ¿Vendrás un día solamente a querernos?
 ¿Solamente? (XXXII SEFARAD)

In "REQUIEM," a poem dedicated to Ann Frank, Stein expresses the need to remember the young girl's tragic experience as part of this chronicle of the Jewish people and forewarns those responsible of the justice that will surely one day come:

Te había dicho que un día perderían el sueño
 Que el pasado vendría a quitarles el sueño:
 Desde el estercolero del recuerdo
 Las larvas multiplicando
 Los gusanos de la memoria

Como el intermitente de una alarma incesante
 Aparecen los huesos
 Lacerando el recuerdo. (XXX REQUIEM)

Adriana Stein is not the only Latin American Jewish writer to address the story of Ann Frank as the emblem of the Holocaust that all need to remember. Indeed, as Timerman noted, the connections between the Holocaust and the Dirty War are undeniable.

In Nazi Germany, the Jews were guilty through birth, the liberals through weakness and corruption, the Communists through ideology. The same equation of guilt proved suitable for the enemy of the Argentine military. (Timerman, 1981, p. 155)

Likewise, Marjorie Agosín (2001) in *Miriam's Daughters* wrote of the importance of Jewish Latin American writers in terms of how they:

Raise questions in their poetry about the diasporic experience and the experience of post-Holocaust generations and who have been moved and touched by the experience of their ancestors and their own distinctive roles as bearers of memory... The voices of these poets interact between the past and the future, between the dead and the living. (Agosín, 2001, p. 16)

The following poems dedicated to Stein's disappeared Jewish friends first appeared on the *Proyecto Desaparecidos* site and are included in this same e-book collection. In "NEGRO IN MEMORIAM," she dreams of returning to Argentina to find her friend Guillermo Binstock only to realize that her mission is one without hope.

Sabré que todo
Ha pasado.

Con las cenizas de mi vida quemada
Puedo escribir las últimas palabras.
Todo ha pasado.

Nada. (XIII NEGRO IN MEMORIAM)

Similarly, the poem about Marcelo Gelman also disappeared at the same time, simply titled "MARCELO" also evinces the futility of hope. All that is left is to try to conjure up the memories of what was once a treasured friendship.

Vuelve a ese lugar en el que un día
Fuimos.

Vení Marcelo
Sembraremos de sueños los surcos de la vida.
Ven.
...Déjame creer un instante
Que aún estás aquí abajo.
Conmigo. (XI MARCELO)

And in "CAROLINA," she summons the memory of her friend Carolina Segal through the son from whom she was separated when she was taken: "El llanto de tu hijo/Te reclama." (VII CAROLINA).

The image of the tears of her son becomes a power metaphor of the testimonial nature of Stein's poetry which is akin to other works of the diaspora which espouse themes of human rights, since they underscore the same imperative to remember those that did not survive. Marjorie Agosín reminds us of the need to retrieve "acts of memory" in regard to the diasporic experience: "These poets, who articulate the memories of the disappeared, the silenced, and the unnamed in mass graves, continue to seek expression for this almost unspeakable historical moment" (Agosín, 2001, p. 19). As she stated in her article, "So We Will not Forget":

The theme of human rights is intrinsically linked to a literature that does not forget and that refuses to be silenced. In this way, these writers become the survivors, the living voices, the witnesses who defy censorship, self-censorship, and, at times, death. (Agosín, 1996, p. 65)

Jacobo Timerman, in a similar way, begins his tale of incarceration at the hands of the Argentine military regime by noting in his preface that "I have survived, to give testimony" (preface).

It is exactly this aspect of Stein's work that she explains in "LOS GUARDIANES DE LA MEMORIA," which she dedicates to her sister Laura "y a todos los que sobrevivieron al horror":

¿Desaparecidos?
 ¿Hay vida más allá de la vida?
 ¿Quién es el guardián de las llaves del cielo?
 ¿Adónde van las almas de las vidas segadas?
 ¿Adónde van las almas de las vidas robadas?
 ¿Adónde van las almas de los cuerpos perdidos?
 ¿De los cuerpos vaciados?
 ¿De las almas?

Han pasado treinta años y he olvidado
 El rostro del verdugo.
 He atravesado el Gólgota incesante;
 Treinta años

Han pasado treinta años y sigo hablando
 Con Carolina
 Con Marcelo
 Con Guillermo.

Antes les contaba de mi hija
 Ahora puedo contarles de sus hijos (XXXIII LOS GUARDIANES DE LA MEMORIA)

In Latin American Jewish writing in general and in Stein's poetry specifically, exile is both internal and external. Internal exile for the poet becomes expressed in themes of displacement and loss in which her native Buenos Aires is no longer the cultural and intellectual heart of the country where she was born and raised. In "ÚLTIMOS POEMAS A BUENOS AIRES, II," she now sees only the horrors perpetrated there:

En el espacio azul de mi memoria sos la que fuiste
 La que no sos más.

Vacía de los rostros y las voces queridas
 Vacía
 Casi acabada casi muerta
 En el espacio azul de mi memoria

En la realidad sin color de tu diaria agonía
 De tus espinas
 Eléctricas
 Aceradas. (XXVIII ÚLTIMOS POEMAS A BUENOS AIRES, II)

This type of internal exile due to persecution is also evident in numerous metaphors embedded in Stein's poetry that symbolize the conflictive relationship between the anti-Semitic right-wing dictatorship and those that were considered enemies of the State. The military regime's efforts to cast Argentina in the image of a purely patriarchal, Christian nation and the repression that resulted because of it, although not new to the Argentine consciousness, also had roots in distinctively gender-based discrimination. Diana Taylor (2005), in *Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina's "Dirty War"*, detailed programs of "racial hygiene" early in the twentieth century that specifically targeted women:

Argentine leaders, scientists, and physicians developed a Catholic variation of biological politics to purify their population, instituting programs that controlled marriages, prohibited actions, and forced pregnant women to register for state monitoring and medical surveillance. During these early decades, women became increasingly associated with social deviance... The perception of women as enemies of the state to be dominated in the name of nationhood was one of the cornerstones of the junta's national security doctrine in 1976. (Taylor, 2005, p. 44)

Taylor then recounted how this paradigm played itself out during the Dirty War using the example of the notorious detention camp Olimpo in which...

...The distinction between embodied and disembodied "womanhood" (women/woman) was made brutally evident as military soldiers tortured female prisoners in front of the image of the Virgin Mary. The negative image of the "public" or active woman provoked and enabled the systematic assault on the reproductive organs of all female prisoners held in captivity. (Taylor, 2005, p. 84)

In the poem "JUDÍA ERRANTE," Stein ponders a return one day to Buenos Aires in which she expresses a type of internal exile tinged with the anti-Semitism she experienced in Argentina under the military regime:

Hipnotizada
Atravesaré mi Via Crucis

Hasta tocar las tumbas que aun me esperan
En esa ciudad donde hoy seré extranjera
Donde nadie me reconocerá
Donde nadie dice ya
Mi nombre.

Encontraré el camino hacia mi alumbramiento
El instante oscuro en que fue concebido
Mi exilio.

Soy este árbol que sobrevivió la tala
Y en vano busca sus raíces;
Soy esta libra de carne
Condenada a volar;

Allí donde nací
Soy extranjera. (XXVI JUDÍA ERRANTE)

The title itself references the transnational history of the Jewish diaspora as well as the last several verses in which she expresses the sensation of being an “extranjera” or “stranger” in the country of her birth. Stein also calls herself the “libra de carne” or “pound of flesh” to describe her victimization as a Jew in a parallel from Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice* who is “condenada a volar” or “condemned to fly.” In addition, Stein utilizes Christian symbolism in the beginning of the poem in order to personalize the passion of Jesus Christ shifting both religion and gender in order to describe this profound sense of internal exile from her native Argentina while at the same time impugning the radical Catholicism of her fascist tormentors. For example, she refers to the “Via Crucis,” or the Way of the Cross of Jesus Christ recalling the forced march through Jerusalem carrying the cross on which he would be nailed in order to echo her own anguished steps through Buenos Aires should she ever return to visit the city from which she was exiled. Similarly, in the poem, “LOS GUARDIANES DE LA MEMORIA,” Stein speaks of “Gólgota incesante” to describe her memories of how her friends were tortured and killed as a parallel to where Jesus Christ was crucified on Calvary.

The theme of external exile finds expression at the very end of all of the poems in the collection of *Últimos Poemas a Buenos Aires* rather than specifically in her poetry. Stein recounts her physical journey outside of Argentina after surviving her incarceration by noting at the end of each poem the exact city where each was written, whether in in a kibbutz in Israel, in Spain, or in France along with the year in which these poems were written from 1978 through 2002. In this simple way, Stein expresses a major theme of Latin American literature by echoing the perpetual journey members of the Jewish diaspora who have sought refuge from persecution in other lands. At the same time, the poet underscores a crucial point for her and for others who suffered and survived the Dirty War, which is that victimization occurs in many forms. Eduardo D. Faingold (2008) in *Exile From Argentina: A Jewish Family and Military Dictatorship (1976-1983)* also highlighted value of documenting the plight of exiles in the prologue of his own family’s flight from Argentina during this same time:

Just like the “disappeared,” the exiles were also victims of the “Dirty War” of the military against its own country. I think it is important to safeguard the stories of those years during the military repression, and to reproduce testimonies of the damage caused to the victims, including those who left to avoid being murdered by the military. (Faingold, 2008, p. x)

Conclusion

In summary, the poems in this collection reflect Adriana Stein’s efforts to reclaim the space that has been the source of both an internal and external exile for her personally as well as for the Jewish people. Her individual journey and memories are iconic representations of the attempt to reconcile the past with the present which are emblematic of diasporic literature. Memory is key in this process since the value of remembering is not only what allows her to speak of what she and others suffered during the Dirty War, but even more importantly to give a voice to those who can no longer speak for themselves. It is this testimony that cements both the religious and cultural bonds for those in the Jewish diaspora not only in Argentina but elsewhere in the world. Stephen A. Sadow in the introduction to his anthology, *Literatura Judía Latinoamericana Contemporánea*, declared that this literature “es una literatura de minorías, pero no es una literatura menor” (Sadow, 2013, p. 9). Indeed, through her poetry, Adriana Stein contributes to the wider discourse of the politics of identity that serves as literary

testimony of the perpetual struggle for human rights that focuses on diasporic societies in Latin America and elsewhere.

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1 Raanan Rein and Adriana Brodsky Chapter One The Jewish Experience in Argentina in a Diasporic Comparative Perspective . 7 Jos C. Moya Chapter Two From Textile Thieves to Supposed Seamstresses: Jews, Crime, and Urban Identities in Buenos Aires, 1905-1930 ...

Â This paper argues that *Crítica* strategically portrayed the narrative of successful Jewish immigration and adaptation in Don Jacobo en la Argentina in accordance with its commitment to an ideology of modernization, liberal populism, and inclusive and expansive nationalism. The translated nature of Don Jacobo en la Argentina was part of a broader intervention in public discourse regarding the nature of Argentineness and the role of immigration in it. The Argentine Jewish community is the largest in the Diaspora after the US. Its history goes back to the nineteenth century, and it is today an integral part of Argentine society. This collection of essays, *The New Jewish Argentina*, addresses different aspects of its life, paying attention to historical developments and contemporary issues. The book presents articles dealing with issues of genre, the overall cultural contribution of Jews in Argentine society, and how they assimilate as full members of the Argentine nation. It also explores a lesser known Jewish underworld, and the way the very existence of Jewish mafias in the early twentieth century affected communitarian life. The vast majority of Argentina's Jewish population is now located in Buenos Aires, though smaller communities can be found in other parts of the country, especially Rosario, Córdoba and Santa Fe. Buenos Aires' Jewish community is active with synagogues, schools, youth groups, kosher restaurants and other Jewish organizations that one would expect to find in other world hubs of Judaism such as London or New York. Eighty-five percent of the Jews in Argentina are Ashkenazi, descending from France, Germany and Eastern Europe. The remaining 15 % are Sephardic, descendants of those from the Iberian Peninsula, the Middle East and North Africa. The majority of the Sephardic Jews in Argentina are Orthodox. Jewish Immigration to Argentina.