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# ‘A Quilt of Memory’: The Shoah as a Prism in the Testimonies of Survivors of the Dictatorship in Argentina

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This paper analyses testimonies of survivors of the detention camps operated by the last military dictatorship in Argentina, with special attention to the functions served by the referencing of testimonies of the Shoah (above all in *Ese infierno*, a collective testimony by five women in dialogue form). The intertextuality herein assumes different functions in the shaping of discourses and representations, whether in the form of a quotation, an epigraph, a metaphor, an endeavour to legitimise what is being said, a comparison, or an effort to incorporate one’s own experience into a narrative of the catastrophe already so well known in human history.

I affixed this name, which is so precious to me, on the doorpost of my book and thus it became more habitable and safe. Also our books should have their *Messusse*.<sup>1</sup> (Letter from Heinrich Heine to Eduard Gans, 26 May 1826)

In 1984, when the military dictatorship in Argentina had just ended, David Roskies published in the United States, *Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture*.<sup>2</sup> His introduction refers to the legend according to which the Sephardic Jews had taken with them the keys to the houses they were forced to abandon in the expulsion from Spain in 1492, and continued passing them down to subsequent generations. Although this was maybe only a metaphor, Roskies adds, there are keys to the past that open up other dimensions in history itself. *The Vision of the Vanquished* (1977), Nathan Wachtel’s work about the Quechua perspective on the Spanish Conquest of Peru, also shows that the response of individuals and collectives to crisis situations is governed by pre-existing paths: however terrible the present devastation, memory confirmed that it was not impossible. The point is to integrate the catastrophe into a narrative that is already familiar. Roskies, in his search for the Jewish responses, especially to the Shoah, finds in his sources other strategies, including parody and science fiction. The use of ‘pre-existing paths’ is also an old Jewish rhetorical strategy by which, for example, the survivors of the Shoah gave

themselves the name *she'erit hapleitat* (the surviving remnant), a figure of speech that was already present in the Book of Ezra, referring to the remnant of the people that survived the Babylonian exile. The same logic involved the Yiddish name of the Holocaust: *khurbn* (which actually refers to the destruction of the Temple) and which vanished in the history of the 'names of the catastrophe'.

But the topic of this article is the memory of the trauma in Argentina, where we find a similar construction in the testimonies of survivors of the dictatorship: the Shoah – above all, the testimonies of the victims – became a pattern for understanding the Argentine experience, for transmitting it and inscribing it in a historical tradition. On the one hand, it differs from the studies of Wachtel and Roskies, because the traumatic experience is not derived from Argentina's own history. But this adoption of the historical patterns of 'others' to give sense to one's own extreme experience has succeeded before: Perla Sneh demonstrated in her brilliant work that one of the most-read books in the Warsaw Ghetto was Franz Werfel's *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*. The book circulated avidly, and the experience in the Ghetto began to be spoken of in Yiddish as 'our Musa Dagh'.<sup>3</sup> At a time when the stories of pogroms no longer provided a way to order the narrative of what was taking place, which surpassed all previous history of violence, the Armenian genocide served to give a name to 'that' – although it was 'borrowed'.

On the other hand, many of the Argentine authors and survivors who resort to this kind of strategy are Jews – an observation to which we must add the Argentine dictatorship's complex interrelation with an anti-Semitic ideological stance. In that sense, they offer to the society a way of elaboration that exists in their cultural memory (and at times is communicative, as some are children of survivors or know the stories through direct accounts given in the communities, etc). These strategies of 'translation' are so extensive in Argentina that even in *Broken Silences* (2001), the international documentary series produced by the Shoah Foundation (Spielberg), the Argentine chapter is the only one that does not end in 1945. Instead, it has an 'aftermath' in the dictatorship (it was directed by Luis Puenzo, the first Argentine to receive an Oscar for Best Foreign Film in 1985, with *La historia oficial*, a piece about the stolen children of the *desaparecidos* in Argentina, based on a story by well-known Jewish writer Aída Bortnik).

One of the first invitations to this dialogue between the European and the Argentine traumatic experiences was the play *Ana y Haroldo*, by Alfredo Zemma, which appeared as early as 1985. This work is an imaginary dialogue between Anne Frank (born in 1929) and Haroldo Conti (an Argentine writer who was born in 1925 and was 'disappeared' and murdered in 1976). In the dialogue, both remain 'frozen' in time, at the moment of their kidnapping. The military forces that abduct them are the same: a condensation of the Gestapo and the Argentine *grupos de tareas* (paramilitary forces). The entire work opens a dialogue between the victims of both massacres. It has to do with staging, with bearing witness to what took place; the author (Zemma) wants to testify for his absent friend, Haroldo, looking at his history through the experience of the Frank family – and the traces of both these 'disappeared' persons in the literature.

Over the years, the Shoah continues (not only in Argentina) to take on different functions: allusion, metaphor, parallel. In some extreme cases, this parallel or

quotation is achieved by means of a mere 'exchange of names' (literally), as in this article by the well-known Argentine philosopher José Pablo Feinmann:

There is a text by Theodor Adorno titled *Education after ESMA*. Adorno invites us to think on two levels: 1) how ESMA was possible; 2) what to do to prevent its recurrence [...] The text begins with a slogan [...]: 'The premier demand upon all education is that ESMA not happen again' [...] Thus the priority of the educational theme undeniably faces us: 'Every debate about the ideals of education is trivial and inconsequential compared to this single ideal: never again ESMA' [...].<sup>4</sup>

The present article focuses on this parallel and examines the functions performed by this intertextuality by using the example of a rather unusual work: *Ese infierno: Conversaciones de cinco mujeres sobrevivientes de la ESMA (That Inferno: Conversations with Five Women Survivors of ESMA)*.<sup>5</sup> This book has many special characteristics of its own, including the fact that it is a collective testimony by five women in dialogue form. Its title refers to Dante's metaphor as employed by Primo Levi in relation to Auschwitz. This intertextuality was already present in the prologue to the report *Nunca Más*, written by Ernesto Sábato. Published in 1984, soon after the restoration of democracy, this report presents the testimonies of the few survivors of the camps in Argentina. Dante's inferno is invoked there in a way that clearly references Levi for all readers familiar with the sources: 'The victims were then taken to a chamber over whose doorway might well have been written the words Dante read on the gates of Hell: 'Abandon hope, all ye who enter here.'<sup>6</sup>

This 'quotation' of the Shoah runs suggestively through the entire text of *Ese infierno*, in the form of *epigraphs*. The one that 'inaugurates' the book – 'So then, to tell my story, here I stand [...]. You hear me speak. But do you hear me feel?' (Gertrud Kolmar) – establishes the parallel between Argentina and the Shoah, but simultaneously calls into question the possibility of transmitting the testimony ('do you hear me feel?').

*Ese infierno*, a text based on material recorded in group conversations among the survivors conducted over a period of two years, is divided into ten chapters. Although the topic of the Shoah is present in other circumstances, it is in the function of the epigraph that it takes on more strength. Of the seven chapters with epigraphs, only two have quotes from authors who are not survivors – and the majority of them are Jews and/or women. What is amazing in this context is that the women authors have not taken epigraphs from survivors who were political prisoners of the Nazis. This seems strange, because they assert their political activism in their testimonies – and a historical comparison would have many more common experiences with the political prisoners of the Gestapo than with the Jewish victims of National Socialism. The example of Jean Améry is clearest, as his voice – in epigraph – appears not in the chapter about torture, but in the part dealing with life after liberation. Jorge Semprún is quoted often in the conversation, but there is no epigraph based on his texts.

Interestingly, the chapter dedicated specifically to the Jewish Holocaust and the parallels with the Argentine experience has no epigraph (nor does the chapter about the political prisoners), while the book's introduction, written by the Jewish Argentine philosopher León Rozichtner, connects the text with the Jewish tradition

by taking its title from a verse by the prophet Isaiah ('And sorrow and sighing will flee away', Isaiah 35:10), though it does not mention the source. In this sense, the text is marked by the Jewish tradition, but it must be sensed between the lines. Or, as pointed out earlier, *above* the lines.

The epigraph, as Gérard Genette points out in *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* has a (paradoxically) central function in the text: among other things, it points the reader toward a certain direction, to other authors and texts. But it is not just any intertextuality: it has a privileged place, to which the author in some way subordinates himself – his text is also a reaction to, or commentary on, that quotation (which in many cases functions as a citing of authority). In fact, the genealogy of the epigraph places it near – or rather above – the quote and, what interests us in this context, in connection with the *epitaph*.

Not casually, the epigraph of the first chapter of *Ese infierno* refers directly to the Bible or, more precisely, to the Torah: 'Take heed [...], lest thou forget the things which thine eyes saw [...]; make them known unto thy children and thy children's children' (Deuteronomy 4:9). This has to do with *zakhor!*, the Jewish duty to remember.<sup>7</sup> To give testimony. The title itself of this introduction, *A Quilt of Memory*, is also a quotation from a piece by Juan Gelman (Argentina's best-known poet, who has a son who disappeared and was murdered and a grandchild who was recovered). At the end of the chapter, the women authors explain in their own words the meaning they give to it:

What a *quilt of collective memory* could be woven from these tiny bits of memory or sayings, fragmented, scattered, which the witnesses and the victims store away for themselves, as if immobilized in their former place. *A comforting, warm quilt to protect against possible repetitions.* The crimes of the past survive in what is hushed up about them in the present. (Ref. 5, p. 31)

The metaphor plays with the cloak (quilt) of forgetfulness (and of silence) and suggests the collective embroidery of a texture of memory on the basis of the remnants. This collective embroidery is what the other chapters seek to create. In its framework, the voices of those others who were in the 'there' in *Ese infierno* but also in other infernos continue to be interwoven, crossing the times and the continents.

The next chapter ('The Previous Days and the Kidnapping') begins with a quotation of Ety Hillesum: 'What is going on, what *mysteries* are these, *in what sort of fatal mechanism have we become enmeshed?* The answer cannot simply be that we are all cowards. We're not that bad. We stand before a much deeper question...' This is perhaps the most unusual epigraph, because this chapter is about the beginning, they speak of their political activism and its importance in their lives, above all after the kidnapping. The political awareness helps them to survive, a topic that also appears in texts by Semprún and Améry. In this context, a writer such as Hillesum refers in her intertextuality to metaphysical problems – but at first glance certainly not to political ones. What elements of the mystical writing of Hillesum slip in among the highly rational discourses that describe a radical activism in their political commitment? Perhaps, at that moment, politics had a mystical aura, perhaps elements of the sacred

moved into the sphere of human action? And that perspective, so difficult to express in the actual dialogue, slips in through the voice of a murdered woman writer?

These sparks of mystical feelings can be found between the lines of the conversations. In a dialogue about taking the cyanide capsule that some activists used to carry, so they could commit suicide if they were kidnapped, Miriam affirms: 'For me, to kill myself with the pill would be, as I have seen at this moment, a *dignified death*, thinking of the others. *I wanted to have a death like that of Jesus*, a death for my friends. That was what I wanted.' After this affirmation, Elisa replies to her, echoing her last sentence: 'A dignified death!' (Ref. 5, p. 45). Later, speaking about her activism, Miriam added: 'We wager everything to *make life a priesthood*' (Ref. 5, p. 62). But the description of the sort of fatal mechanism in which we have become enmeshed, the everyday, survives inside ESMA – above all with regard to torture – and offers a contrary logic: a mixture of madness and distressingly rational cruelty.

An epigraph by Primo Levi opens the second chapter ('Women Arrested and Disappeared'):

Many were the ways devised and put into practice by us to keep from dying, as many as exist different human personalities. All involved a debilitating struggle of one against all, and a considerable number of outrages and compromises. Survival without giving up anything of one's own moral world was granted only to very few superior individuals, *made of the stuff of martyrs and saints*.

The humiliations and the difficulties of everyday life in the camp recall this quote – many of the topics Levi addresses in his writings appear in the conversations: shame, nakedness, the guilt of the survivor, meaningless violence, the wounding of memory. One of the more powerful images in this sense is the lack of distance, the lack of intimacy: 'In the ESMA there were no bars to put distance within victims and perpetrators, therefore for the captives to keep their integrity was more difficult than in a prison' (Ref. 5, p. 65).

The reference to Levi appears also to give hope that it is possible the other would understand – somehow, as in this dialogue between the authors:

Miriam: I wonder why everybody understands that some Jewish women prisoners went to bed with Germans in order to survive and is nevertheless horrified that the same thing happened there in ESMA. It's not understood...[...]

Elisa: Do you know why that part of World War II is understood? Because someone told about it. But nobody has told how things really were in ESMA. What happened in Germany is understood because somebody disclosed it, it's talked about and continues being talked about.

Miriam: [...] Why were they able to tell about all this and we seemingly are ashamed to do so?

Munú: I have no feeling of shame. [...]

Miriam: [...] Why are we afraid that they won't understand us? Above all, when there have been such similar historical experiences. *The more I read about the Holocaust, the more I read about the Nazi concentration camps, the more I understand that this is not new, that the behaviour of human beings was similar*.

Elisa: I want to tell what happens. The truth. (Ref. 5, pp. 93–96)

At the end of this chapter the text completes a circle, returning to the beginning, putting into the characters' words the conclusion of Levi's quotation. Elisa says: 'Each one did what he or she could. Facing the real situation of kidnapping and 'disappearance', each one answered as best he or she could'. And Munú adds: 'And we still are still answering as best we can' (Ref. 5, p. 104).

The third chapter ('Day by Day in Captivity') combines two different epigraphs: the well-known sentence *Arbeit macht frei* from Auschwitz (which Levi had reinterpreted as one of Dante's entrances to Hell) with a quote from the Argentine survivor and sociologist Pilar Calveiro: 'The camp is an infinite range, not of grey, which assumes the combination of white and black, but of different colours, always a range in which there appear no vivid, pure shades, but multiple combinations.' Calveiro refers to and enriches the idea of Levi's 'grey zone'. It has to do with giving an account of daily coexistence among the prisoners and with the murderers as well as the utilisation of slave labour – the possibilities and the risks of having been chosen for these tasks. How to live with the memories of these grey zones, by the others and by oneself?

The fourth Chapter ('Torturers', and interestingly not 'Tortures') describes not only physical torture – probably the experience about which it is most difficult to bear witness – but also the extreme experience of life together with the murderers. And above all speak about them: the torturers. The epigraph is a poem by Mario Benedetti:

The past is here with its groans  
 Today it continues being here but does not groan  
 There are faces of shame and of failure  
 The needle with the thread of horror  
 The snares of derision and of doubt  
 We're not going to forget a single millimetre  
 Or spend it on hatred  
 The past is here, it is enough.

It leads to an Uruguayan poet rather than to Améry – to remembering without spending one's energy on hatred rather than to the feeling of 'no longer being able to feel at home in this world.' That suggests a deliberate choice in favour of life and a prism for the reader. This chapter is situated in the middle of the book and divides it into two parts: the experience of torture generates an unbridgeable distance from the world, which the survivors then seek to bridge by sharing their narratives about this pain. Actually, however, the experience of torture crosses through the entire conversation (the entire book) and somehow forms its core. *The needle with the thread of horror*. But life after torture is possible. And it is possible to speak about it, even to laugh about the pain.

Humour is the core of the epigraph of Simone Veil that introduces Chapter 5 ('An Excursion to the Outside World'): 'It is among ourselves, the survivors, that we can talk. Paradoxically, it is a delight. We speak of what happened by making fun of it, laughing at it' (Ref. 5, epigraph chapter 5). Humour acts as a way of offering resistance and working through – a healing weapon. The reference also introduces a

collective sense of a 'we' (the survivors) and includes in this way a sense of belonging to a group. Other points also connect both experiences: it is suggestive that although the topic of this chapter is very typical of the Argentine experience (the prisoners' 'excursions' to the outside world of the camps), Adriana Marcus (a daughter of German-Jewish refugees) recalls the moment of her kidnapping and, in that flash, the transmission of intergenerational trauma – with the strange detail that the German language in this case was the way they communicated to avoid the perpetrators:

Adriana: My papa fell with me. [silence, sighs] [...] Everything was dark and they dragged me away by the hair. A cry that I later knew was my own, pistols at my head, orders that the guys gave at the top of their voice, the hood, the wives, body to the ground and boots on the body. *I hadn't spoken German for quite some time, but I thought in German, something like 'this is how it is, then, when they kill you.'* [...] When my dad heard the shouts and the shots, he went running. They shot at his car and kidnapped him along with me. *We communicated with a couple of sentences in German.* (Ref. 5, p. 234)

We find traces of these family traumas also at the end of another chapter, in an effort to develop more systematically these parallels with the Shoah and the dictatorship. When Miriam says that just a few days ago she discovered that the parents of her grandparents were killed in a concentration camp in Europe (Ref. 5, p. 285), Adriana finishes the chapter in the other generational direction, referring to her son:

Reading [about the Shoah] made me feel good, because I lost the sense that nobody else went through such an experience, this sense of loneliness. Once, when I spoke with my older son about the Nazis, he was about 13 years old, he said: 'All four of my grandparents had to flee because of the Nazis, and you went through what you went through. What is going to happen to me?' And I had no answer to give him. (Ref. 5, p. 288)

Even with no answers, it is necessary to learn again in order to live after all they had been through. A quotation from Améry opens Chapter 7 ('Liberation and the Aftermath'): 'We leave the camp naked, empty, disoriented, and we need a great deal of time to learn the daily language of freedom'. Continuing to use the Shoah as a prism for reading (or understanding) the Argentine experience, they try to tackle the situation of the survivors after the dictatorship, not only in the 'return' to a 'normal life', but also in the reactions of the society and its reluctance to accept those who return, the *aparecidos* and the consequences and problems of the trials of the perpetrators as well as of the use of the media to tell these stories. 'Miriam: "I think that the same feeling would be found among the survivors of the World War II". Elisa: "Exactly"' (Ref. 5, p. 276). And later, there is the experience of Miriam, who is a journalist, an interviewer of Shoah survivors. Even when trying to point out some differences: from the comment of Munú: 'somehow you are like them', Miriam answers 'Well, with some differences. We were not six million' (Ref. 5, p. 279). But the parallels are strong: (Miriam: 'The association cannot be avoided'; Elisa: 'I felt so identified with them!' (the words of a Shoah survivor who comments ironically on the idea 'You're lucky to be alive') and Munú (about the confusion of an elderly survivor who in the middle of the interview no longer knew whether he was in present-day



Argentina or in Poland in the 1940s): ‘It is the same confusion we have to deal with!’ (Ref. 5, p. 279).

Finally, a very short Chapter 8 (‘The Jewish Holocaust’), which is more an epilogue (following the story that must be testified to, that is, after liberation), deals in a more obvious manner with the parallels between the Shoah and the Argentine dictatorship. Precisely here, where so many epigraphs would be possible, there is only emptiness.

Seemingly, one function of the epigraph is to refer to a situation prior to the testimony and, through that parallel, to integrate the catastrophe into a narrative that is already familiar. The previous narratives allow us to arrange the testimony itself and understand what happened within the framework of the possible (‘it had already happened before’). Interestingly, the first book of the ‘best-known witness’ – Primo Levi – begins not with an epigraph, but with something similar: a poem he wrote, *Shema*; in it he refers, as many have authors pointed out, to the tradition (the most important prayer in Judaism), and simultaneously he rewrites it on the basis of his experience in Auschwitz. It is again the use of a well-known narrative to name the catastrophe, above all in the last strophe:

Consider that this has been:  
I commend these words to you.  
Engrave them on your hearts  
When you are in your house, when you walk on your way,  
When you go to bed, when you rise.  
Repeat them to your children.  
Or may your house crumble,  
Disease render you powerless,  
Your offspring avert their faces from you.<sup>8</sup>

*Shema* is an imperative: *Hear!* (here: the testimony) – which also implies *remember!*

Not casually, the source of the *Shema* (Deuteronomy 6: 4–9) is very near to the epigraph with which the Argentine book begins, ‘that inferno’: ‘Only take heed to thyself, and keep thy soul diligently, lest thou forget the things which thine eyes saw, and lest they depart from thy heart all the days of thy life; but make them known unto thy children and thy children’s children.’ (Deuteronomy 4:9).

In the introduction of *That Inferno*, the authors conclude the prologue by saying:

Our book is only a tiny scrap of that quilt of memory of which Juan Gelman speaks. There were hundreds of survivors; there are tens of thousands of relatives of disappeared people. There are many pieces that still must be brought together laboriously so that the quilt, immense, fatherly, covers all of us, once and for all. (Ref. 5, p. 31)

The writing of the survivors of the Shoah that is woven into this collective quilt is what constitutes it. This company, this longed-for protection, is present even in the format of the book. Located on its thresholds, the epigraphs of the survivors of the Shoah ‘look after’ the texts. And also in other testimonies of (Jewish-)Argentine survivors, for example in Susana Romano Sued’s *Procedimiento. Memoria de la Perla*

y la Ribera:<sup>9</sup> the quotation from Eli Wiesel's at the beginning, and another from Paul Celan at the end. They surround them, they protect them, they give them shelter. That could be one of the contributions of a collective weaving that reaches both into the future and into the past – braving the coldness of silence and forgetfulness.

### References and Notes

1. *Messuse* (Yiddish) from the Hebrew *mezuzah*: small parchment scroll affixed to the doorpost to inscribe the teachings of the Torah 'on the doorposts of your house and on your gates'. It designates the space as Jewish. All translations are my own.
2. D.G. Roskies (1984) *Against the Apocalypse. Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture* (New York: Syracuse University Press).
3. P. Sneh (2012) *Palabras para decirlo. Lenguaje y exterminio* (Buenos Aires: Paradiso).
4. J.P. Feinmann (2000) Adorno y la ESMA. *Página 12* (Buenos Aires). The intertextuality involves the text of Theodor W. Adorno, *Erziehung nach Auschwitz*. ESMA is the Escuela de Mecánica de la Armada, the largest and best-known (with an 'iconic function') camp of torture in Argentina.
5. M. Actis, C. Aldini, L. Gardella, M. Lewin and E. Tokar (2006) *Ese infierno. Conversaciones de cinco mujeres sobrevivientes de la ESMA* (Buenos Aires: Altamira, first edition 2001).
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7. Y.H. Yerushalmi (1982) *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Washington: Washington University Press).
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9. S. Romano Sued (2007) *Procedimiento. Memoria de La Perla y la Ribera* (Buenos Aires: El Emporio Ediciones).

### About the Author

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