

BUENOS AIRES
CITY *of* FADED ELEGANCE

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baires.elsur.org



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INTRODUCTION

On the evening of March 22, 2005 I sat in the international concourse of the Miami airport waiting for my flight to Buenos Aires. I had made the flight more than a half dozen times in the previous two years. That night was different. I was going to Buenos Aires to live, to make it my home, and not just for a visit.

Sometimes it's still hard for me, a boy from a small town in Tennessee, to believe that I'm actually living in Buenos Aires, in Argentina, in South America.

Almost exactly five years before moving to Buenos Aires I moved to Miami from Norfolk, Virginia where I also had lived for five years. Before Norfolk I lived in Knoxville for five years. (Am I a five year person?) In that same month of March 2000, as I was settling into my South Beach home, Cecilia Sorochin had moved from Buenos Aires to Miami and rented an apartment four miles away in North Beach, the Miami community that is sometimes called Little Buenos Aires because it's an area favored by Argentine immigrants. Cecilia and I remained unknown to each other for twenty months until a Monday afternoon in late November 2001 when we met at a coffee shop on Lincoln Road in South Beach.

In March 2003 Cecilia moved back to Buenos Aires to study graphic design at the University of Palermo. I travelled back with her then, my first trip to South America. Many more visits followed over the intervening two years, nearly half-a-dozen trips to Argentina along with journeys to Uruguay, Brazil, Peru, and Venezuela.

I made the decision to move to Buenos Aires one night in January 2005. It was the last week of my winter vacation, my break from

working to visit Argentina. Cecilia and I were walking back to her apartment from the cinema in the neighborhood of Recoleta. The thought of moving had been in my mind but the real decision was made that night: move to Buenos Aires, leave my job as a librarian at the University of Miami, and start a new phase of my life.

The flights from Miami to Buenos Aires are always overnight, leaving usually either at ten or eleven p.m. and arriving almost nine hours later. Moving to another country is a frantic effort. To help in the move my sister drove down to Miami from Tennessee with her twin daughters. They dropped me off at the Miami International Airport with three large suitcases that amounted to a hundred dollars excess baggage fee. Finally, it was time to just wait for the plane. The first time I had to relax in days.

Before finding a spot in the terminal to wait for boarding the plane, I picked up a soda, a few magazines, and the daily newspaper. That day the **Miami Herald** featured a photograph of anti-American protesters in Buenos Aires burning a U.S. flag. Somehow, this seemed oddly ironic to see in the newspaper on the day that I was leaving for Argentina. However, I understood the context of the protest: Donald Rumsfeld's visit to Argentina. It wouldn't be my last experience with the U.S. media distorting life in Argentina. Street demonstrations are common in Buenos Aires and a sensational photograph in the newspaper hardly reflects the real nature of Argentine society.

A hundred years ago Buenos Aires was at its height. Argentina was one of the strongest economies in the world. Wealthy landowning families, profiting from exports to Europe, constructed grand, Parisian



A typical protest in Plaza de Mayo.

a sense of what it means to be alive in Buenos Aires at the beginnings of the 21st century

style homes and buildings in the center of the city. Immigration was strong as new arrivals from Italy and eastern Europe brought skills and craftsmanship. In turn, these immigrants developed their own distinctive neighborhoods as the city expanded in size. In 1870 the population of Buenos Aires was 180,000. Within forty years the population had surged to more than 1.3 million.

There is no simple way to explain why, over the course of the 20th century, Argentina experienced such dire economic and political instability. It cannot be answered by simply pointing the finger at one or two political figures. Indeed, it seems as if long-term economic prosperity and political stability always have been just outside of Argentina's grasp.

Is it an unfortunate tendency for history to repeat itself in Argentina? While the collective memory of human rights groups keep the terrors of the most recent dictatorship from happening again, politics are still controlled by a few provincial leaders who govern more for self-interests rather than a beneficial society. Yet, the air of pessimism and self-doubt that pervades the consciousness of the city's residents has created a vibrant cultural environment where creative pursuits in art, film, literature, and music flourish. Equally rich are the intellectual discussions that enliven the city's cafes and newspapers. But behind the veneer of the city's sophistication are the daily lives of thousands who struggle to survive.

Through observing what is happening in this society, we can gain a sense of what it means to be alive in Buenos Aires at the beginnings of the 21st century.



PART I

BECOMING PORTEÑO

Recognizing the importance of the city's port, the people of Buenos Aires call themselves porteños even though most hardly ever see the water. Being porteño may be partly a birthright but it's also a perspective shaped by the culture of the city, formed among the neighborhood streets and the cafés nestled in the corner floors of hundred year old buildings.

Buenos Aires, like New York, is a city of immigrants. Guidebooks often refer to Buenos Aires as the Paris of South America or the most European city in Latin America. Yet, Europeans scoff at that comparison. A Puerto Rican friend of mine describes women in Buenos Aires as Latin with a European twist. In comparison to other South American capitals such as Lima or Caracas, Buenos Aires is clearly different. Buenos Aires especially displays a stark difference from Miami, which is certainly more Latin American and Caribbean than North American. Despite having more Spanish speakers, Buenos Aires is less Latin than Miami.

WALKING BUENOS AIRES

Walking the streets of Buenos Aires makes me feel alive. If I'm feeling depressed, a simple stroll around the city raises my spirits. Certainly, I am fortunate in my circumstances. If I had to struggle for survival here, then I may not be so in love with Buenos Aires. Then again, struggling anywhere is a heartache.

More than two years have gone by since I moved to Buenos Aires. It's such a short time, particularly compared to those who have lived here for years or even their entire lives. I now know Buenos Aires better than I do any other city in the world. Walking is the best way to explore the barrios that form the distinctive communities which define the city.

Each walk I take in this city brings an unexpected discovery, a fresh perspective. My advice to those who live here is to go to an unfamiliar neighborhood or even one you think you know well, perhaps the very place you live. Choose a street. Just start walking with no destination in mind. Don't hurry, you're going no where. The walk is the journey. Walking Buenos Aires is your life at that very moment, nothing more.

**Each walk
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Put other thoughts out of your mind. Forget annoyances from work and the things that must be done at home. Simply walk. Open your senses to the street, observe the life that is circling around you. Don't hurry across the intersections. Wait on the corner for another change of the traffic signal. Look down the road, find the buildings that you may have missed with a quicker pace, each has something new to offer.

Just as important, pay attention to the people, those you normally

might not notice: the man carrying a basket of bread from the bakery; the finely dressed old woman carefully leaving a building; the child on a balcony.

Listen to the sounds. Each street has its own voice, waiting for you.



Many times I stay awake all night, writing and reading. Around five in the morning I hear a rooster crow, which is a rather odd sound when you live within walking distance of downtown Buenos Aires. Often I decide to take my daily walk around sunrise, which comes very early in the springtime month of October. As any photographer knows, the morning sun provides remarkable light. The buildings display a remarkable amber tone during these early morning hours as the sun rises over the Rio de la Plata.

One of my favorite routes is walking from our apartment in San Telmo to Plaza San Martín and back, roughly fifty blocks. Being from Tennessee, I walk relatively slow so it takes me about two hours to do that circuit, not counting stopping in a cafe or at the park.

At this time of the morning San Telmo is littered with remains of the garbage dissected by the *cartoneros*. Everything recyclable has been carried off during the night, even the plastic garbage bags. Only traces of the previous day's meals are left strewn along the street and sidewalks.

In the early mornings I see buildings in totally different ways. Details come out that are not noticeable in the bright midday sun. South and east facing sculptures high up on the towers of Basilica de San Francisco, normally hidden in shadows, are revealed in the direct light. The statue on top of the La Prensa building shines a brilliant gold. At 6:30 a.m. Plaza de Mayo is completely empty and peaceful. Florida street also is almost deserted. None of the stores



Kavanagh
building in
Retiro

are open as only a few employees stand outside waiting to start their workday. The street is absent of all those aggressive touts attempting to lure buyers into the stores. Passing into the barrio of Retiro a few early morning walkers circle around Plaza San Martín. The rising sun shines from behind the Kavanagh building.

A half hour later, past seven, and the streets start coming alive. Doormen are out polishing the little brass that remains on the posh buildings in Barrio Norte, while others are washing off the sidewalks. By the time I make it back to San Telmo the city is bustling, embarking on a new day.

Everyone knows that Buenos Aires is a great city to experience at night but it's worth getting up early on some days to wander around at dawn. Or, if you're already been up till sunrise enjoying the nightlife, or just reading like me, then take a walk before climbing into the bed and see Buenos Aires in a different light.



The Southside

Many times I first see an area of Buenos Aires through the windows of a bus or from the backseat of a taxi. The walks often come later. While the subway provides access to most of Buenos Aires, I prefer to take the bus whenever possible. Travelling above ground affords at least a passing view of the streets, glimpsing the occasional cupola, a chance for noting the intersection so that I can return later on foot.

On a Saturday morning I left San Telmo and walked west, making my way through the park in front of Constitución station then headed down towards Av Caseros. My destination was simply to wander along Caseros seeing what I encountered.

Actually, I now live on Av Caseros but on the east side of Av 9 de Julio where Caseros forms the border of the San Telmo and Barracas barrios. This part of Caseros is separated from its other half by the railroad tracks leading south from Constitución. On the west side of the tracks Caseros is the border of several barrios,

separating Constitución from Barracas and leading onward to Parque Patricios. I've already explored the interior of Barracas but this time I wanted to walk as far as Parque Patricios before turning back towards San Telmo.

The weather was great: sunny with a slight breeze, the type of day made for walking miles. Approaching Caseros on the other side of the train station, I came across a couple of young men, Mormon missionaries from their dress, also walking about the city.

Parque España is another one of those city parks that has a bit of potential but this Saturday morning there were still a fair number of ruffled, smelly men hanging loosely around the benches. I ventured forward along Caseros.

Soon I came across the Centro Cultural del Sur, a venue that often has good musical performances featuring tango or *folclore*.



Just a block-and-half from my apartment is Parque Lezama, where one can usually find men playing chess at one of the tables at the end of a tree covered promenade. During the week I often wander down there for a stroll or to sit on a bench under the shade and admire the Russian Orthodox Church across the street. I used to think that there is just a little too much cyan on the domes of that church until a friend from Serbia informed me that the specific tone of blue on the Church was considered a sacred color.

On weekends Parque Lezama is filled with families. On Sundays in Parque Lezama I have heard some fairly good local rock bands performing. They just setup their equipment on the grass and play. Mostly, though, I try to avoid Parque Lezama on the weekends because of the crowd and the vendors selling not crafts but socks, underwear, and other things. More sellers have emerged onto Parque Lezama in the past year. The booths now line almost all the streets surrounding the park. I'm not really complaining, though some people in the neighborhood have done so. I'm able to enjoy the park on other days and there are always plenty of things to do in Buenos Aires on the weekend that I have no difficulty finding an alternative.

If you haven't visited Parque Lezama on a weekday afternoon then it's certainly worth the visit. It actually has the potential to be one of the nicest parks in the city if the city would do a little more maintenance. There are some really wonderful trees and the national history museum in the mansion whose grounds first formed the parkland.

Sure, La Boca is to the south and that scares some people. But wander around the side streets to the west of the park, such as Caseros or Uspallata, and you'll find a nice, little neighborhood.



San Telmo

Weekdays, San Telmo is a barrio of cobblestone streets that grace the edges of the city's oldest buildings. But on Sundays, almost every tourist in town descends onto San Telmo for its famed antique fair. Formed in 1970 by José María Peña, former director of the Museo de la Ciudad, the fair consists of dozens of stalls setup around the Plaza Dorrego. Unlike the craft fair taking place across town every weekend in Recoleta, La Feria de la Plaza Dorrego is as if the Antique Roadshow had made a stop every Sunday in Argentina. Of course, as with any such endeavor, there's a large amount of dusty rubble displayed for sale alongside often high quality finds. For those who like to explore flea markets and antique stores then there's nothing better than Sundays in San Telmo.

Among the offerings are old walking sticks, gaucho knives, stylishly old telephones, record players, old tango records, assorted bottles of varying colors and shapes, silverware, dishes, and jewellery.

If the make-shift booths don't fill your need for antiques and you still have money (or a lot of it), then San Telmo also has the best antique stores on the continent. You can imagine that many of these antiques came from the homes of formerly wealthy families, the porteño elite who, for one reason or another, had to sell off their family heirlooms.

The popularity of the fair has made San Telmo not just a source of



Bar "El Federal" in San Telmo

antiques. Lining the side streets off the Plaza are artisan booths.

Since San Telmo on Sundays is one of the areas of Buenos Aires where you are as likely to hear English as much as Spanish, the touts are out in full force, practicing their own halting English to lure travelers into a restaurant or – worse yet – an over-baked tango show that will relieve you of the money in your wallet faster than any pickpocket. But there's tango of some sort for free on the street. Better yet, you'll probably come across a few young, professional musicians skilfully performing on the streets, the facade of a crumbling building forming the perfect backdrop.

While these Sundays in San Telmo have a carnival feel, rather like parts of the French Quarter in New Orleans, it's still a pleasant area to stroll around. After you tire of the antiques, walk past the mostly bad street “performers” (including an older woman in a tango outfit who seems more mentally ill than artistically inclined) and find the uncrowded side streets of San Telmo.

I'm reminded of something that Jorge Luis Borges, the city's greatest writer, said about San Telmo and the southern barrios of Buenos Aires:

For everyone in Buenos Aires, the Southside is, in a mysterious way, the secret center of the city. **Not the other, somewhat ostentatious center we show to tourists – in those days there was not that bit of public relations called the Barrio de San Telmo.** But the Southside has come to be the modest secret center of Buenos Aires.

When I think of Buenos Aires, I think of the Buenos Aires I knew as a child: the low houses, the patios, the porches, the cisterns with turtles in them, the grated windows. That Buenos Aires was all of Buenos Aires. Now only the southern section has been preserved. I felt that I had returned to the neighborhood of my elders.

I know that some of these words are not quite how it is expressed in Spanish but it will have to do, for now. For instance, “Southside” is likely “el Sur” in the way that Borges wrote when he referred to this area.

Almost thirty years after Borges gave that lecture, people still don't make it to many of the southern barrios other than San Telmo and the ultimate tourist trap that is Caminito in La Boca. Of course, nothing is like it was a hundred years ago. It's debatable even if it was in 1977 when Borges gave this lecture. Of course, by that time he had been blind for twenty years and, perhaps, was fortunate not to see, literally, the changes. Yet, the southern barrios do have a different feeling of the past not found in Barrio Norte or Palermo.



Barracas

On an October morning in 2005 we made our first exploration of Barracas, one of the southern barrios of Buenos Aires. It's one of those places that most visitors to Buenos Aires never see unless they're traveling securely in a tourist bus on the way to one of the tango shows; Señor Tango has a large and gaudy building in Barracas for its extravaganzas. Their only impression of Barracas may be that it's full of squalor, old factories, and warehouses. Actually, I get the idea that a lot of Porteños have that same impression.

After walking around Barracas on our own for five hours on Saturday we came away with a different perspective. Certainly there is an area that is lined with factories, particularly as you get close to the river which reeks of an infamous stench. A number of makeshift residences underneath the elevated railroad tracks also gives the barrio a questionable character. The name of the barrio doesn't help either. The word “barracas” means “cabins, huts, shacks” and the barrio's name refers to the 18th century warehouses near the river that stored leather and salted meat.

Yet, most of Barracas is a nice residential area with an interesting history that I'm beginning to learn.

If you're only in Buenos Aires for a few days or on your first visit, then you can safely skip Barracas. But, if you live here then get out of trendy Palermo and comfy Recoleta and get yourself down to one of the southern barrios for a few hours. Borges was very fond of the southern barrios which for him most reflected the mythological nature of Buenos Aires that he sought to create through his literature.



A random house in the Southside

Parque Patricios

In Parque Patricios on Av Caseros is the very nice Parque Ameghino. I'm very fond of the parks and plazas scattered through Buenos Aires, so I thought I would check this one out.

Just after entering the park I saw a small sign with a brief history of the park. The park was originally the *Cementerio del Sur*, which dates back to 1867. The next year 1,400 victims of the cholera epidemic were buried there. Just a few years later during the 1871 Yellow Fever epidemic more than 14,000 people who died from the disease were buried in the cemetery. A monument to the victims of Yellow Fever is at the center of the park.



Just across Av Caseros from Parque Ameghino is an old building with a turret. My first view of the building was from a distance. I couldn't imagine its purpose, thinking that the turret must have simply been decorative. That would have made for an odd touch but there are a lot of unusual buildings in Buenos Aires.

The building is an old prison, dating to the 1800s. Knowing that, you realize that the turret is a former guard tower. The prison has been abandoned for years and scheduled for demolition. During the last dictatorship the building was used to detain political prisoners. Until this past year a pair of more modern towers, housing prison cells, rose from behind the old prison. An art project knocked out bits of glass in the windows to create faces of prisoners. So, when I was there on this particular Saturday I went down the side street and looked for the faces. Honestly, I couldn't quite see anything that looked like faces. I did see the windows and the patterns but the shapes didn't quite appear to me. Later, on another visit, I found the right spot to stand and could discern the face-like patterns in the windows. Those towers, like the many prisoners who resided there, are now gone. The old section still remains, a dark but picturesque reminder of the neighborhood's past.



Puerto Madero



Puente de la Mujer in Puerto Madero

It's hard to understand the fascination of porteños with Puerto Madero. Other than the bridge designed by Calatrava, I've never seen Puerto Madero as anything more than the typical riverfront development that can be found in many mid-sized U.S. cities. Yet, I've recently developed a new appreciation for the area.

A while ago, Ceci worked with one of the many high-tech companies with offices in Puerto Madero. The office spaces in those buildings are very pleasant. In the late afternoons, I would head over to Puerto Madero to meet her after work so that we could do something downtown or just walk back to San Telmo together. I often arrived in Puerto Madero an hour or so early and found a seat on a shady bench. It's actually quite relaxing. Compared with San Telmo, Puerto Madero is incredibly quiet.

Lately, I've also enjoyed going over to *Costanera Sur*, a short walk away. It gets rather crowded on weekends but during the week *Costanera Sur* is a place where one can really escape the noise and sometimes frantic pace of the city.

I still think that there's no reason for tourists to spend time in Puerto Madero, though I continue to see a lot of them wandering around. There are just so many other fascinating parts to Buenos Aires to explore if you're only here for a few days.

And I don't really understand why anyone would want to live in Puerto Madero. The apartments, while surely nice, are way overpriced. Walking among those apartment buildings, I feel like I'm in some generic part of a boring U.S. city. There is nothing about Puerto Madero that is Buenos Aires.

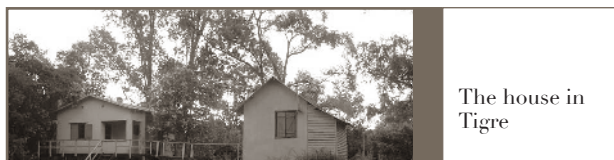
So, indeed, I've come to realize that is also its appeal. Puerto Madero is where you go when you want to feel like you're in some place other than Buenos Aires, or even South America for that matter.



Tigre and the Delta

On New Year's Day 2006 we went with our friends Ceci and Nestor to Tigre, the fascinating Paraná river delta that flows into the Rio de la Plata. Tigre itself is a small town but the name also refers to the vast waterways throughout the delta where many residents of Buenos Aires have second homes.

Scattered across hundreds of small islands, the only way to access the interior is by boat. Many of the residents have a boat that they keep in dry storage when not visiting the islands. During the thirty or so minute boat ride we passed a number of homes that range in size and quality. Some are very nice, practically luxurious, others are simple and pleasant and then there are those like Nestor's: primitive and without electricity. But, somehow, it fits a fifty-something photographer who drives a classic Citroen. Of course, electricity isn't needed for a great asado and it was a memorable experience.



While relaxing in a hammock next to the stream that runs in front of the house I had the chance to finish reading a story by Bioy Casares, "De la forma del mundo/About the Shape of the World". The story is set in Tigre and, ostensibly, is about a secret tunnel on one of the islands in the delta that provides a five-minute shortcut to Punta del Este, which is a resort almost 400km away on the far coast of Uruguay. Incidentally, Punta del Este is where many of the pretentious set from Buenos Aires bask in the sun. (Having lived in South Beach I've had enough of that).

Back to Bioy's story: the young narrator named Correa is shown the tunnel by a mysterious dentist that he met on the ferry to Tigre. The story is set in 1951 and there's a subplot of smuggling goods from

Uruguay to Argentina. I learned through the story that Perón had banned travel to Uruguay, something which I didn't know before. The story revolves around the possible untruths between the narrator and the dentist, and then among others later in the story.

Correa meets Cecilia, a woman in Punta del Este who is very sad over a husband who had deceived her and left her for a younger woman. Cecilia begins to fall in love with Correa, who tells her about the tunnel. Correa doesn't understand Cecilia's lack of fascination over the tunnel or why she then says to him, "Por más que te acompañe, un mentiroso te deja sola." ["No matter how good a companion he is, you're always alone with a liar.", tr. SL Levine].

The nickname of the narrator is "el Geógrafo" [the Geographer]. Allusions to mapmaking and how once firm notions turn out to be false, such as the world is flat, are never far from the surface of Bioy's story. Building to a suspenseful ending, "De la forma del mundo" ultimately becomes an examination of lies, beliefs about the truth, and the validity of knowledge that is passed from one person to another.

A NATION OF FÚTBOL FANATICS

I just returned from my neighborhood Coto, the largest grocery store chain here in Argentina. The San Telmo store on Av Brasil has two TVs showing the World Cup, one back in the produce section and another in front of the cashiers.

As I was standing in line, all the other men in line suddenly turned their heads towards the TV. They were listening to the play-by-play and turned just in time to see Togo scored a goal against South Korea. Smiles all around. Even the cashiers, who are mostly young women, seemed to be enjoying it. I guess it makes ringing up groceries all day much more interesting. The whole thing was a rather funny sight, particularly since the game was South Korea vs Togo.

I must admit that watching the World Cup is quite addictive. I became more of a soccer fan before it was all over. Indeed, after returning from the store, I quickly turned on the TV to finish watching Togo.

In Argentina people have been buying new TV sets for months. I was in a bookstore that had brought in a TV set just to watch Argentina play in the Mundial, as the World Cup is known in Spanish. At the corner market, the guy who sells fresh vegetables had set up a little TV between the potatoes and broccoli.

The first game for Argentinian in the 2006 Mundial was on a Saturday, but the second and third games that Argentina played in the first round were on weekdays. But no concern, the schools allowed the kids to watch Argentina compete against the world, all with the blessing of the government.

The first round games featuring Argentina were shown by no less

than five TV channels, including all of the non-cables stations. There also always seem to be a half dozen cable channels showing football at anytime of the day or night.

This is my first time in Buenos Aires for the Mundial, an unforgettable experience. There was an excitement in the air. While I planned on watching the games I also wanted to spend some time walking around town during one of the broadcasts just to see how focused everyone was on the games.

When these games don't go well, then Argentines can comfort themselves by remembering the *goal of the century* by Diego Maradona against England in the 1986 World Cup game. Everyone talks about the infamous *hand of God* but the second goal by Maradona in that game impresses even me, someone who is not really a fan of soccer (uh, football, ahem, fútbol!). Through the wonders of YouTube one can relive both those moments, along with the exhilarating voice of the announcer praising God for fútbol and Maradona.



Argentina scores & Church bells ring

During the big football games I'm accustom to hearing cheers from the streets whenever there is a goal. But when Argentina scored its first goal this morning against Serbia-Montenegro I didn't expect to hear the church bells ringing from Santa Catalina outside the street from my apartment. Considering that Argentina scored 5 more goals, it amounted to a lot of ringing. It's just another part of the World Cup experience in Buenos Aires.

Big losses in the World Cup this weekend....not sure whom I'm cheering for now, Italy, perhaps Portugal. Yesterday, just before the Argentina-Germany game I heard the church bells again ringing across the street at Santa Catalina. Perhaps it was just the midday call for prayer, something Argentina needed but didn't get against Germany. Oh, well, losing is part of the game.

Saw one of our neighbors on the stairwell after the game. She was

cursing Leonardo Franco, the substitute goalkeeper for Argentina.

Ceci had been sick with a head cold, sinus headache, for a few days and went over to the pharmacy Friday afternoon to get a *migral*. The pharmacist said that he just couldn't get over his rage about the game.

Fortunately, after Saturday's games, Argentina isn't alone in the Mundial misery column. Compared to the fate of both Brazil and England, the Argentina loss doesn't look so bad.

We went for a long walk from San Telmo, up thru the downtown, and ended up at a cafe in Recoleta to watch the second-half of the Brazil-France game. All the Argentines in the cafe were rooting for France. Next to the Argentine team, I like the Brazil team, but kept my mouth shut in the cafe. All the Argentines cheered when France won and the cars driving along Junín started blowing their horns. I thought that it would be nice for a South American team to remain in the tournament. But, maybe Brazil has been just too successful and people like to cheer for the underdog, though I'm sure there is some Argentine-Brazil football rivalry figuring into it, too.



Cheers for Italia from the heart patients... and for a great doctor

**Favaloro
pioneered
the
coronary
artery
bypass
graft
surgery**

I saw most of the Italy-Germany game at home but had to skip the overtime to meet Ceci at the cardiac institute where her father had a procedure on Tuesday. (He's doing fine). We got to the hospital just in time to hear the cheers as Italy won. Suddenly the street was full of cars honking their horns again. Of course, Argentines were happy to see Germany lose after Germany's recent defeat of the Argentine team.

The game was a vivid reminder of the Italians in Buenos Aires. A lot are like Ceci and have dual citizenship but many are like her mother who immigrated here after World War II and remained simply Italian, never obtaining Argentine citizenship; needless to say, she was very happy after the game (and that her husband's

procedure went well).

I wonder: during the Argentina-Germany game did the cardiac institute have to keep an extra close eye on its patients?

Some words about the cardiac institute, Fundación Favaloro: it's a very nice, modern facility and there's an interesting history behind the foundation. René Favaloro was one of the foremost heart surgeons in the world. In 1967, at the Cleveland Clinic in the U.S., Favaloro pioneered the coronary artery bypass graft surgery, a procedure that has impacted the lives of millions.

Favaloro returned in 1971 to Argentina from the U.S. to create the first thoracic and cardiovascular center in Buenos Aires. Over the years Favaloro developed Fundación Favaloro, the Universidad Favaloro, and the non-profit Institute of Cardiology and Cardiovascular Surgery.

Sadly, Favaloro committed suicide on July 29, 2000 by shooting himself in the heart.

Favaloro was a strong supporter of universal health care, treating the uninsured and wealthy without discrimination. At the time of his death the foundation was owed millions but also was itself deeply in debt and almost bankrupt. Just before his death, Favaloro wrote a letter to Argentine president Fernando de la Rúa pleading for financial assistance to the foundation. I don't know the full story about the financial problems of the foundation at that time, which undoubtedly were complex, but the foundation has recovered.

In so many ways, Favaloro is a very admirable person: a child from a working class family who became a great surgeon; a man that left behind the immense personal wealth of a medical practice in the U.S. in order to promote healthcare in Latin America; someone who devoted his life to helping others.

Favaloro, isn't that name Italian? I thought today that I was just going to watch a football game, but I learned about so much more.



Fundraiser
for
Fundación
Favaloro

IMMIGRATION

A city of immigrants: the massive arrival of Europeans to Buenos Aires since the late 1800s has resulted in a population that speaks Spanish with an Italian lilt. But, hidden among the immigrant stories is the Buenos Aires that was a capital of white slavery and forced prostitution managed by a mysterious Jewish underworld known as the Zwi Migdal. While I have to save that dark part of history for another chapter, I will be covering the Italian and Jewish immigration to Argentina.



Italians

Ceci and I walked over to Consituición station and took a bus to Quilmes. After about 45 minutes on the late afternoon bus, so crowded with commuters that we had to stand for half the trip, we arrived at our destination. There we met Ceci's cousin Ani and the two of them proceeded to give me a tour of Quilmes and introduced me to the story of their maternal grandparents - "El Nonno & La Nonna".

Buenos Aires is filled with families descended from Italian immigrants. Many came in the late 1800s, others throughout the early and mid 20th century. The life of Oliverio D'alessandro is perhaps similar to many other Italians who immigrated to Argentina after World War II.

Oliverio was born on the thirteenth of January in 1913. His hometown

was San Vito Chietino, which is located on the Adriatic coast of the Abruzzo region of Italy. There he married Ana Di Paolo and they started to live the lives that had been lived for generations in that small town on a hill overlooking the sea.

The German occupation of San Vito Chietino ended the tranquility and, as with so many families, would change the lives of Oliverio and Ana forever. In 1940 Oliverio was given an option by the Germans to go to work without pay in the coal mines of Germany or to fight on the front. He chose the coal mines.

The same year that he left Italy for the mines in Germany his first child was born. She was named Italia and is Ani's mother.

His wife, Ana Di Paolo, stayed with her family in San Vito Chietino and cared for her young baby girl. The Germans looted the houses regularly, taking whatever they pleased and treated all the women of the town terribly. Ana placed the family's valuables, including fabrics and linens, into a trunk which she hid behind a staircase. She built a wall around the back of the stairs to conceal the trunk from the Germans.

Oliverio worked in the German mines for three years, finally returning to San Vito Chietino in 1943. Later that year, his second child, Gilda, was born; she is Ceci's mother.

Just weeks after Gilda was born, planes of the Allied forces bombed San Vito Chietino. During the next year Germans counterattacked and the town was evacuated. During one of the attacks Ana's brother was killed by a bomb. His wife went to his aid, trying to rescue him but she was also killed.

After the War, work was scarce in Italy. Oliverio, along with many other Italians, went to work in the coal mines of Belgium in 1945.

In 1949 after four years of working in the mines, Oliverio and four Italian friends also working in the Belgian mines decided to go to "America." At first, they tried to obtain passage to Venezuela but visas were no longer being granted. They were told to try the Argentine consulate, where they were able to obtain the necessary travel documents. The five men sailed to Argentina in 1949.



The nonno
& nonna

On the advice of his godfather, who had preceded him to Argentina, Oliverio settled in Quilmes. He found work in a textile factory, brought some land, and built a home in Quilmes for his family.

In 1952, three years after he arrived in Argentina, Oliverio was able to pay for his family to journey across the ocean to join him. Ana and her three daughters (another child - Maria - was born after the War) embarked on the long voyage by themselves from Italy to Argentina. Ana also brought with her the trunk of fabrics and linens that she had hid from the Germans during the War. The family settled into the house in Quilmes that Oliverio had built for them.

Ani and Ceci drove me by that house in Quilmes. Just off the plaza at the center of the town is the old school where the young daughters of Oliverio attended school after they moved to Quilmes. While the three daughters adjusted to life in their new country, their mother never learned to speak Spanish even though she would live in Argentina for more than thirty years.

After Oliverio retired from the factory in 1976, he and his wife traveled back to Italy by ship for a final visit to the country of their birth.

La Nonna passed away in 1986. El Nonno lived a long life, became a gardener and rode his bike everyday. He passed away at the age of eighty-five in 1998.

Quilmes itself is a pleasant town. We walked around the center of town and then Ani drove us around several of the neighborhoods followed by a drive out to the long river front. Quilmes is centered around the huge brewery named after the city. Near the brewery is a quaint barrio of charming small houses originally built for workers of the brewery. Nearby is also a very nice park, with a restaurant that features all things Quilmes (mostly the beer, not the town). There we raised a toast to their grandparents and the life they built for their family in Argentina.

Later, in a humorous way, we found out that Ita and Gilda, Ani & Ceci mothers respectively, were themselves on their own tour of Quilmes that very evening...perhaps hoping to accidentally bump into us...ah, Italian mothers.

The Jewish Community

A book I've been reading lately is **The Jewish Gauchos of the Pampas** [Los Gauchos Judíos] by Alberto Gerchunoff. Through a series of 26 interlocking stories it conveys the history of Russian Jews who emigrated to Argentina. Set in Entre Rios province this small book creates a vivid picture of the life in the Jewish farm settlements. Gerchunoff's own grandfather was one of the original Jewish colonists in Argentina. This book was first recommended to me by a Jewish colleague of mine in Miami who grew up in Rosario. She said that the stories in this book remind her of the stories that she heard as a young child in Argentina.

While reading the book I came away with a sense of the heritage that the families brought with them to their new country. The importance of faith and ritual is stressed. Even on the farm the plowing of the first furrow in the field is given not only symbolic significance but is an act respectfully observed by the entire family. Yet, as I read I couldn't help but wonder if these first generation immigrants from Russia wondered what were they doing here, in Entre Rios, in South America? Towards the end of the book one of the stories is about an old colonist Reb Guedali ben Schlomo. Possessing the "noble bearing" of the highly educated, Guedali served as a teacher to the narrator. As a young man, Guedali was a rich landowner. In what was still a feudalized Russian society, Guedali had socialist ideas and shared the product of his lands with those who worked it. The young narrator learns through Guedali not to question his new homeland but to be thankful:

Guedali "had journeyed to Jerusalem before, but he had returned saddened, and declared that he preferred to live in any place but the crowded square that was the sacred capital of the Jews, with its convents, its crosses and its minarets. He came to Entre Rios with the first immigrants. Here, he had realized his ideal, to work the land, to eat bread made from his own wheat and beans grown in his own garden."

An excellent fifteen page introduction accompanies the English translation of the Jewish Gauchos of the Pampas. Originally published in 1910, the Jewish Gauchos of the Pampas has been called the first significant literary work in Spanish written by a Jew. The National Yiddish Book Center in the U.S. has the book on its list

of the **100 Greatest Works of Modern Jewish Literature**.

In 1975 Los Gauchos Judíos was made into a movie of the same name. It would be remiss of me not to mention that a couple parts of the book (at least, the English translation) do read rather like a telenovel:

"Meanwhile, by the little stockade, Raquel went on milking the quiet cow. She was on her knees as her fingers squeezed the magnificent udders and pressed out streams of steaming milk. The dawn around them now was the pale red of autumn, but the open neck of Raquel's dress showed full firm breasts that a hot summer sun had baked the color of golden fruit. The milk squirted into the pail with the same soft rhythm as the girl's breathing and the light snorting of the cow."

I'm wondering how they filmed that scene.

The Jewish gauchos also have been the subject of a 1990 documentary by two filmmakers from the U.S., Mark Freeman and his wife Alison Brysk. Freeman tells the very interesting story behind the making of his documentary **Yidische Gauchos** in an essay titled **Fiddler on the Hoof: The Jewish Gauchos of Argentina**.



Jewish Immigration to Argentina

With the largest Jewish population in Latin America Buenos Aires has 50 Orthodox synagogues, five Conservative, and one Reform. Eighty percent of Argentine Jews live in the capital city. The World Jewish Congress estimates that the current Jewish population in Buenos Aires is 200,000, which is down from 300,000 over the past 40 years. Those who left have gone mostly to Mexico City, Miami, Spain, and Israel.

My interest in Jewish immigration to Argentina is partly personal. Ceci's father's family, Sorochin, is Jewish. Her father was born in Paraguay to a Russian father and a Romanian mother. The couple had previously lived in Argentina. When he was a young child they moved to Buenos Aires. The specifics of their story is mostly lost but there's a clear pattern to Jewish immigration to Argentina that is well documented.

The Jewish Colonization Association was founded in 1891 by Baron Maurice de Hirsch and his wife in memory of their son. The Argentine government viewed immigration as a favorable way of improving the quality of the country. Baron Hirsch purchased land throughout the world including over a million acres in Argentina.

Russians were not the only Jewish settlers in Argentina. Jews from Morocco, Syria, and other Sephardic communities also came to Argentina. World War II also saw a large influx of Jews to Argentina.

The AMIA bombing, 11 years later

Before we made the move to San Telmo we lived in another part of Buenos Aires. The balcony of our eleventh floor apartment overlooked the neighborhood of Once. The area is characterized as being predominantly Jewish and as the garment district of Buenos Aires. From our balcony, looking a couple of blocks to the east, we could see the only new building in the area: the Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina (AMIA).

Located on Pasteur street AMIA was the target of a terrorist bomb on July 18, 1994 that killed 85 and wounded hundreds. The AMIA attack came two years after a terrorist bomb also destroyed the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires, killing 29 and wounding over 200.

In this *age of terrorism* these attacks are little known in North America. They happened before Oklahoma City and before 9/11. They happened back when terrorism was something that happened in countries outside the U.S. Unfortunately, they happened before the world became outraged over terrorism. Or, as someone in Buenos Aires said to me, people in the US and Europe didn't care then because "terrorism happened to someone else".

The attacks on AMIA and the Israeli embassy have never been solved, culprits have not been clearly identified, no one has been prosecuted. Little seems to have been done, though the Argentine government has clearly indicated that Iran is behind the bombings. A sticker was placed over the Pasteur street sign, temporarily renaming it *calle Injusticia*.

Monday morning, a memorial service was being held in front of the new AMIA building. Ceci and I decided to walk over there. Streets were barricaded several blocks in each direction by armored vehicles and heavily armed, masked soldiers in camouflage with automatic rifles at the ready. In addition to the armed troops, a multitude of regular police were joined by a large number of plain-clothed Jewish security agents. It was the most intense security that I've seen at anytime in Buenos Aires.

When we approached the barricades it didn't appear that they were letting everyone through. We were directed by the police over to one of the Jewish security agents who questioned us about why we were there. He asked Ceci if she was part of the Jewish community. She replied that she was but that I wasn't Jewish. He asked about her ties to the community and she mentioned that she used to own a shop in Once. Then he asked where she went to synagogue. She replied that she didn't anymore but she had gone to synagogues in Once when she had the store there. Then he asked specifically which synagogues. Finally, he asked her family name. After she said "Sorochin", he let us go through the barricade and then we were examined by the police for weapons. Somehow, I sense that I would not have gotten in by myself. Yet, with the recent bombings in London, the intense security was understandable.

The crowd gathered on calle Pasteur in front of the AMIA building and spread out into the adjoining intersections. Loudspeakers broadcasted the voices of the speakers out along the street. From our position at the corner of Pasteur and Tucuman, we couldn't really see the speaking platform. The crowd was very quiet and somber, as expected. Glancing up at the buildings, I noticed that security agents were positioned on the top floor of the buildings and were scanning the crowd with binoculars.

When I moved here one of the first things I noticed when walking down calle Pasteur was the young trees that line the street. There are 85 trees in fact on Pasteur between Cordoba and Corrientes, one representing each life that was lost the day of the bombing. A plaque at the base of each tree commemorates those who died... David Barriga... Jacoba Chemaue... Monica Feldman De Goldfeder... On its web site, AMIA names the dead. Eventually, the trees will grow large, creating a beautifully shaded street.



PART II

THE MARGINALIZED

Pushed to the sides of Buenos Aires society, the working class is present night and day on most streets, even if it's just the face on a poster of a person missing for thirty years.

SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Piqueteros, the Argentine Government, & the Right to March into Plaza de Mayo

Plaza de Mayo always has been a popular gathering spot for political assemblies in Buenos Aires. It's the historic plaza of the city: on one end of the Plaza is the colonial-styled Cabildo and the city government building, on the other side of the Plaza is Casa Rosada, which houses the executive branch of the Argentine government. Leading away from the plaza is Avenida de Mayo, one of the grandest avenues in the city, stretching for thirteen blocks, culminating in the Congreso.

One controversy was the decree by Aníbal Fernández, Minister of the Interior, that marchers will need permits to march into Plaza de Mayo. This new regulation came after piqueteros camped out for a week in the Plaza and when marchers were blocked by police last Friday. There was a significant outcry in the city about this new restriction. A lawsuit was filed in the courts stating that such actions have not been seen since the end of the dictatorship. One of the founders of the Madres de Plaza de Mayo, the most well-known human rights group in Argentina, stated that the Plaza needs to remain a symbol of freedom for the country. Yet, the restriction was primarily directed against the piquetero movement, a loose confederation of political and social groups comprised of the unemployed and the working class. The piqueteros most common form of political expression are marches and roadblocks

that snarl the already congested traffic in the capital city.

So, it seems like Plaza de Mayo briefly became a political hostage. Earlier in the week I saw a small group of protesters (artisans and hippies, not piqueteros) turned away from the Plaza, stopped by the police just a block away at the intersection of calle Florida and Av de Mayo. However, towards the end of the week, Interior Minister Fernandez announced that this evening's marchers would be allowed to enter Plaza de Mayo. Yet, it turned out that there was a little surprise waiting for them.



Confrontation between Protesters & Police

What was planned as an anti-Bush rally in Plaza de Mayo turned into a stubborn, violent standoff between police and piqueteros about the right to march down Avenida de Mayo and into Plaza de Mayo.

The march was scheduled to commence at 5pm from Congreso. I was running late and didn't leave our apartment in San Telmo until a quarter till five. Thinking that the subway would be quicker, I walked over to Constitucion station to find that it was packed with piqueteros on their way to the march. Then I realized that the march was on "Argentina time" and probably would start at least an hour late.

I got off the subte at the Av de Mayo stop on the "C" line to find that the exits from the subway to the street were locked. There were several of us who had gotten off the subte and wanted to exit onto Av de Mayo. At first the official at the station just shrugged his shoulders and suggested that we get back on the subte and get off at another stop. One man in a business suit said to him, "We're not piqueteros." Soon, the official led us up the steps and unlocked the gate.

As I walked down Av de Mayo towards the Congreso, I noticed a large number of people walking in the same direction. The Avenue was closed and a few of the people were piqueteros going to join

up with the rest of the marchers who were gathering in front the Congreso. But, most were simply ordinary people getting off from work on a Friday afternoon during rush hour only to find that the "A" subway line which runs underneath Av de Mayo was closed due to the protest. None of these people looked too happy. I have to say that I didn't see any reason for the city to close the subway line, though I'm sure that the city said that they had to do that for safety reasons.

Once I got to Congreso I could tell by everyone sitting around that the march was at least a good hour away from starting. So, I wandered back down Av de Mayo towards the Plaza. There had been significant controversy over the right of protesters to enter Plaza de Mayo and I was pleased to hear that the marchers were going to be allowed to enter freely.

Yet, as I crossed Av 9 de Julio, I saw a massive police presence gathered at the intersection of Av de Mayo and Av 9 de Julio. Walking around the police, I saw the riot squads lined up against the wall of a restaurant and waiting. Parked half-a-block away was an armored police vehicle with two water cannons mounted on top. I stopped to look at that vehicle, glanced around, and realized that the police again had no intention of letting the marchers proceed to the Plaza along Av de Mayo.

So, I waited around to see what was going to happen. As the marchers got nearer, the police formed a double line of officers that closed off Av de Mayo. A swarm of photographers and news media started gathering in front of the officers to wait for the marchers. Standing next to me was a TV reporter interviewing a senior police official about whether the marchers would be allowed to enter Plaza de Mayo. The official said, "Yes, they can enter Plaza de Mayo but they cannot march down Av de Mayo. They will need to go down Av 9 de Julio, down Av Belgrano, and enter the Plaza from Av Roca." The reporter asked again, if the marchers could enter the Plaza and the officer re-confirmed that they could if they took this route.

From the point where the police blocked Av de Mayo, it is only 5 blocks to the Plaza. On the new route ordered by the police, the marchers would have to go an extra 4 blocks, for a total of 9 blocks. Not really a long way, but clearly not the most direct path. I heard that an official reason for this new route was to prevent traffic

**the police
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the Plaza**

problems. What?! The new route obviously would cause more traffic jams than just letting the marchers walk down Av de Mayo.

The police roadblock of Av de Mayo seemed clearly to be a message from the Kirchner government to the piqueteros about who was in charge: the government. There was an incredible display of police force present. Indeed, I would say that the police presence was excessive, much more than I had seen at any other march this year. Of course, the police (I'm sure acting on orders of the government) were clearly intending to be confrontational.

If the march would have been allowed to continue, then it likely would have been peaceful. However, the tension escalated into a couple of pushing matches between police and a few protesters. I lost track of time during all this, but it must have been more than an hour, or an hour and a half, that this standoff continued. Reportedly, eleven police officers were injured this night. For most of the time, I was standing right next to the police line and I'm not sure how that many officers were injured. I suspect that several of the injured officers were hurt by their own riot police as the riot squad with their clubs swinging came jumping over the backs of the regular police. I did see one photographer who ended up with a bloody face.

The police intensified their presence by bringing a second armored vehicle with water cannons pointing towards the protesters. I took a few minutes to walk around to get a sense of the crowd. The protesters towards the front of the march were, actually, mostly students. When I realized this, I became even more dismayed at the police force. So, I started taking photographs of the students in the march. In the event that the police used water cannons on these students, who were obviously being well-behaved, I wanted to document that they were peaceful. These students, late teens/early twenties, were there to protest George Bush's visit to Argentina in November. While these students were members of leftist parties, it would have been a shame if these students had gotten injured by the police.

I do not want to fault the police and the government entirely for tonight's conflict. The piqueteros share some of the blame. Rather than accepting the police invitation to a confrontation, the marchers easily could have gone along the suggested route of Av 9 de Julio,

a second armored vehicle with water cannons pointing towards the protesters



Piquetero protesting

Belgrano, and Av Roca to Plaza de Mayo. Indeed, it would have resulted in a bigger protest by blocking even more streets and causing more traffic problems. In this scenario, the police would have ended up looking silly for creating even further gridlock than was necessary. Yet, the marchers who appeared to be under the leadership of the piqueteros did not do that. They held their ground in the middle of 9 de Julio. In my opinion, that was a significant miscalculation since the issue was not the right to march down Av de Mayo but instead the right to enter Plaza de Mayo.

Well, actually, the focus of the march was supposed to be anti-Bush but that somehow got lost in the tense standoff. I do think that a lot of people in the march knew that tonight's protest wasn't about Bush but was more about piquetero-government relations.

As I was standing around watching this all unfold, I had a chance to think about the piqueteros. I've never really been bothered by their roadblocks, but maybe that's because I don't drive here. Also, I think that people who are clearly impoverished and on the margins of society have a right to protest and to exercise their political voice.

I am disturbed, however, by the potential for violence on the part of the piqueteros. Why do they need to carry those big sticks unless they plan to engage in violence? As I walked around the crowd of student protesters, I also observed several piqueteros who were arming themselves for a violent encounter with the police. One man was standing behind a group of students. Clinched in his hands was a slingshot made of thick rubber. He was ready to fight. But, he was no schoolyard bully; he was a grown man in his thirties. On the other side of more students were piqueteros breaking apart the sidewalk, taking chunks of concrete. They were ready to fight the police.

As the marchers gave up and moved away towards the Obelisk, a couple of piqueteros hung back and flung stones at the police. Indeed, it was remarkable restraint on the part of the police not to pursue and arrest the stone throwers. But, the police, with their riot gear and water cannons let the stone throwers walk off into the night.

Kirchner has called for the piqueteros to stop blocking the streets before the government will sit down and negotiate with them. I

have less of a problem with piqueteros blocking the streets, but they need to lay down their sticks and stones. Throughout the world, peaceful, non-violent protests have proven to be remarkably successful as a way of galvanizing international attention on social problems and injustices. There's a perfectly good example here in Argentina with the Madres de Plaza de Mayo.

Up until now the piquetero marches that I've seen have been remarkably peaceful. In looking at the crowds of piqueteros it's obvious that they are mostly good people. Yet, among them, are an angry violent few that are ruining the reputation of the entire movement.

The piquetero leadership needs to re-examine its tactics. Likewise, the government shouldn't act so stubborn and create unnecessary conflicts that lead to violence.

THE DISAPPEARED

More than 30,000 people were kidnapped, disappeared, by the government during the 1976 – 1983 dictatorship. Two groups representing mothers of the disappeared protest weekly while a group of grandmothers continue searching for their now grown grandchildren who were born in the detention facilities but “adopted” by military families.



Posters, 30 years of trials

Every few days I see a story on the news or a sign on the streets commemorating the thirtieth anniversary of someone who was *disappeared*, such as the poster that is an homage to a mother who fought for life and liberty.

Angela Maria Aieta de Gullo was born in Fuscaldo, Italy on March 7, 1921. She lived in the barrio of Parque Chacabuco and Flores and was the mother of four sons. One of her sons, Juan Carlos Dante was imprisoned in 1975 for being a leader of the Peronist Youth. On the fifth of August in 1976 she was taken from her own home and witnesses reported seeing her at ESMA, the Navy School of Mechanics, a notorious torture center. In 1979 her youngest son Salvador Jorge also was disappeared. Juan Carlos Dante Gullo was freed in 1983 with the fall of the dictatorship and is still active in politics.

It is believed that she was carried onto one of the death flights in

1976 that dropped the disappeared into the Rio de la Plata.

Last night, Saturday evening, a mass and tribute to all the disappeared from the barrio took place in front of her home. A statement on the web site of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo listed the names of 32 people who disappeared from the same barrio.

Trial in Italy

There's more to this poster than the simple remembrance of a dear mother by her family.

Italy used the death of Angela Aieta and two other Italian citizens who resided and disappeared in Argentina as the basis of an investigation and trial of five officers from the Argentine Navy: Jorge Acosta, Alfredo Astiz, Hector Frebrés, Antonio Vanek, and Jorge Vildoza. Lawyers for navy admiral Emilio Massera, who was a member of the ruling military junta, pleaded that he is now mentally unfit to stand trial.

They were tried *in absentia* in Italy. Testimony came from more than forty witnesses against the navy officers. The Navy officers were found guilty and sentenced by the Italian court to life in prison.

Most of the former Navy officers still live in Argentina. Vildoza is a fugitive whose location is unknown.

Justice, decades late

Not everyone reads the paper or watches the news on TV. But everyone sees the posters on the street.

On Friday posters were pasted to the city's walls proclaiming Justice against one of the most notorious torturers from the last dictatorship. The poster, sponsored by the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo and the Center for Legal and Social Studies, focuses on Julio Simón, known to his victims as Julián the Turk.

along with
Nunca Más,
should be
required
reading for
anyone trying
to understand
contemporary
Argentina

Simón was finally sentenced to 25 years in prison for his involvement in the kidnapping, torture, and forced disappearance in November 1978 of José Poblete, Gertrudis Hlaczik and their 8 month old daughter.

The long delay was caused by the Full Stop and Due Obedience Laws that provided impunity to those who participated in the military government that ruled Argentina from 1976 to 1983. Efforts to repeal the laws were finally successful in 2005.

Simón is the first person to be sentenced now that Full Stop and Due Obedience are no longer in effect.

“Legacies of Torture”

I first learned about the horrendous person that is Julio Simón, Julian the Turk, a few years ago when reading **A Lexicon of Terror: Argentina and the Legacies of Torture** by Marguerite Feitlowitz. It's an excellent book on the dark history of the last dictatorship and, along with *Nunca Mas*, should be required reading for anyone trying to understand contemporary Argentina.

Described as a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, Julián the Turk is said to love opera. One of his victims tells that Julián would bring tapes of classical music to the detention center and they would listen to it together. The same victim recounts horrors committed by Julián the Turk and the large swastika that hung on the end of a watch chain worn by Julián the Turk.

After the dictatorship ended some victims encountered Julián the Turk walking on the streets and were warmly greeted by their former torturer. Reading some accounts of the Dirty War and its aftermath can leave you with a bizarre feeling in which you wonder whether the old man sitting next to you on the bus is so kind.

On May 1, 1995 a taped interview with Julián the Turk was shown on the Buenos Aires news program *Telenoche* on Canal 13. One of his victims also was presented on the same program and said

the following about Julián the Turk. **Warning: graphic description of torture:**

There was Julián standing over a prisoner they had naked, laid out on his belly, with his legs hanging down over the end of the table. Julián was torturing this man with an electric cable which he had shorn of its insulation and charged to 220 volts. It seems this wasn't enough for Julián for he then inserted a stick into the man's anus and then tortured him some more with the cable. As the man's body writhed and jolted, the stick tore apart his intestines, and he died.

There's also an odd story about competing news stations. Julián the Turk had pre-recorded his interview with Canal 13 but was irritated that he wasn't going to be paid for his appearance. The station advertised heavily in the newspaper to promote the exclusive interview.

So, he went to the state-run TV station then called ATC (now channel 7), which reportedly paid him for the interview and ATC aired the interview prior to his appearance on channel 13.

On Canal 13 Julián the Turk appeared in a dirty turtleneck sweater and with a beard. On the ATC interview he was clean shaven with hair slick by gel and combed back. On ATC he told the interviewer,

“What I did I did for my Fatherland, my faith, and my religion. Of course I would do it again.” (Feitlowitz 212).

The things nations do to fight terrorism

Marguerite Feitlowitz, who was conducting research for **A Lexicon of Terror**, met with Julián the Turk two months after the TV interviews at a café near where he was living in the Constitución section of Buenos Aires.

Julián the Turk immediately told her,

“I am not repentant...This was a war to save the Nation from the terrorist hordes. Look, torture is eternal. It has always

existed and always will. It is an essential part of the human being.” (Feitlowitz 212)

Feitlowitz writes:

Julián says the program on Channel 13 was “distorted. Not one innocent person passed through my hands.” He holds out his hands, which are large and muscular, with trunk-like fingers, and not entirely clean. What about the man with the stick in his bowels? He waves this away. The pregnant blind woman tortured and raped at his command? For some reason this gets to him, he denies ever having tortured “cripples.”

Justice - nothing more, nothing less

I know for a fact that there are some educated porteños who believe that the actions of the government at that time were justified. Their arguments have the hauntingly familiar tone that it was all about protecting the nation from terrorists. They say, “It was a war.”

It's important to fight terrorism but it's equally important for the state, for all countries, not to overstep human rights in that struggle. The path to justice and peace always seems decades away.

Julio Lopez

Again on Wednesday evening several human rights groups led a march down Avenida de Mayo from Congreso to Plaza de Mayo to protest the disappearance of Jorge Julio Lopez.

18 of October: a month after 77 year-old Jorge Julio Lopez disappeared, a key witness in the recent trial against former police official Miguel Etchecolatz, who was sentenced last month to life imprisonment for his involvement in the last dictatorship in Argentina.

At one point during the demonstration I turned away from the crowd

and saw a person in a black hood spray painting the words “Donde esta Lopez?” on the walls of the Cabildo. Layers of white paint covered graffiti from past demonstrations. Four policemen stood just within the closed gate of the Cabildo, clearly knowing that it’s easier to re-paint the Cabildo than try and stop the vandalism.

A few minutes earlier, across the street, a couple of girls sprayed a stencil on the walls of the Palacio de Gobierno de la Ciudad. The city used to station a line of riot police in front of that building but, this year, the city seems to have pulled most of the police away from that area during the demonstrations.



Night of the Pencils

On September 16, 1976 seven teenagers in La Plata were kidnapped by the government for protesting bus fares. Only one of the teens survived, the rest became part of the disappeared. Known as the **Night of the Pencils** it is one of the many infamous acts that occurred during Argentina’s last military dictatorship. Tonight [September 16, 2005], the 29th anniversary, a massive march was held in downtown Buenos Aires to commemorate the event. There also was a social agenda to the student marchers: the demand of wage and budget increases in the educational sector.

Early in the day there was some concern about the march as the government announced the previous night that police would again block parts of Avenida de Mayo and restrict marchers to a specified route in order to reach Plaza de Mayo. Last Friday night’s march became a tense standoff between marchers and the police. It seemed like there was the possibility for more of the same. However, midday Friday, the government changed its mind and announced that marchers would be free to walk all the way down Av de Mayo from Congreso to the Plaza. The opening of Av de Mayo was mediated by Adolfo Pérez Esquivel, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1980 for his efforts to promote human rights in Argentina and Latin America.

Compared to last week, this evening’s march was very peaceful.

Along Avenida de Mayo there were hardly any police, though a significant police presence encircled the Catedral side of Plaza de Mayo. A metal fence was erected alongside the Plaza to keep traffic flowing freely along Rivadavia, which runs westbound on the north side of the Plaza. Even in front of the Palacio Municipal (the “city hall”), often a focal point of protest for the city’s frustrated, there was only a small contingent of riot police positioned behind two metal fences that stood between them and the marchers. But, that’s hardly an unusual sight at the home of city government.

It was one of the largest marches that I have seen in Buenos Aires. Considering the tensions of last week surrounding access to Plaza de Mayo, it seems as if every group that regularly protests social issues turned out for this event. Ceci and I first watched the start of the march from a spot near Congreso across from La Inmobiliara. Once all the student groups had passed we quickly made our way down to the other end of Av de Mayo and positioned ourselves between the Cabildo and Palacio Municipal. For more than ninety minutes, group after group, each carrying their own distinctive banners and flags, marched by. Every so often, a group would stop in front of Palacio Municipal to shout and chant angry slogans at the city and to taunt the police behind the barricades.

The crowd was so large that the rally in the Plaza ended before all the marchers could arrive there. Since the police had blocked off the roads north of the Plaza, most people simply returned to Av de Mayo and marched back towards Congreso. This created a rather odd sight as you had a flow of marchers still arriving and another stream of them departing all along the same street.

The Cabildo and the Pirámide de Mayo suffered extensive graffiti coverage, most of which was of an anti-Bush nature. (Dubya is coming to Argentina in November). Remember that last week’s protest was supposed to be an anti-Bush march, but since the marchers never made it to Plaza de Mayo last week I guess they were saving their graffiti for tonight.

The crowd cleared out of Plaza de Mayo fairly quickly after the rally. Afterwards, it was mostly just small groups of students hanging around, dancing, and smoking.

Disturbing viewpoints

Around the time of the anniversary of the Night of the Pencils there was a controversial entry in the Spanish version of Wikipedia about that event, *La Noche de los Lápices*.

The entry has been updated but an earlier version claimed that **The Night of the Pencils** was invented by terrorist organizations and that the seven youths who were kidnapped by the government on 16 September 1976 were actually terrorists. What is disturbing is that this viewpoint that the military government of 1976-1983 was in a struggle against terrorism is still accepted among certain parts of Argentine society. Admittedly, Argentina during the 1960s-1970s is a very complicated history - one that everyone needs to reflect upon. There were terrorist activities against the government in the 1960s and early 1970s but, clearly, the Argentine government overreacted during a time that is now known as a dictatorship.



The Madres de Plaza de Mayo

After 25 years and 1,500 Thursdays, the Madres de Plaza de Mayo made a historic march in Plaza de Mayo. The Pirámide, around which the Madres march every week, was covered with photos of the disappeared.

In the year that is the 30th anniversary of the last military coup in Argentina, this march by the Madres received surprisingly little news attention. While there were a good number of photographers in attendance, there was not the horde of videographers and photographers that seem to accompany every piquetero demonstration even though an announcement about the march had been on the Madres web site for at least two weeks.

A confusion about wording led many to believe that this was the very last march by the Madres. There was an almost circus-like atmosphere to this Thursday's event that, I thought, detracted from the solemnity of the regular weekly marches. Two stages of live music, food stalls, and a number of piquetero groups staked out

spots on the Plaza. Yet, appropriately for what many thought was the last march, the presence of the piqueteros ensured that this time there were more Argentines than foreign tourists in the Plaza with the Madres.

Foreigners often don't learn that there are several groups of mothers associated with the Plaza de Mayo and the disappeared. The largest and most well-known is the *Asociación Madres de Plaza de Mayo*, headed by the outspoken, and sometimes controversial, Hebe de Bonafini. A splinter group is the *Madres de Plaza de Mayo - Línea Fundadora*, which separated from the original group in 1986; this group marches at the same time as the original group but does so separately and under its own banner.

Bonafini gave some odd statements explaining the end of the marches was because they do not have an enemy in the Casa Rosada and that "El presidente es amigo de Madres". Technically, the Madres have called these marches "la Marcha de la Resistencia" and it is the march of the resistance by the Madres that is ending. However, the Madres still march in the Plaza de Mayo on Thursdays at 3:30 p.m.

Then there also are the *Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo*, though they don't march in the Plaza. The grandmothers focus on the children who were born in captivity to pregnant women kidnapped by the dictatorship. The Abuelas also are concerned with children that were kidnapped with their parents. A fascinating book on the work of the grandmothers in investigating the identity of these children who were placed with adopted families, sometimes with military men responsible for the disappearances, is **Searching for Life: The Grandmothers of the Plaza De Mayo and the Disappeared Children of Argentina**.

The book is based on many interviews with the Madres and Abuelas. One account by a woman whose daughter, 8 months pregnant, and son were both disappeared highlights the suffering and courage of the mothers:

At first when my children disappeared I just laid down in bed, looking at the ceiling, blank. That was all I could do. My weight went down to forty kilos...I met a woman who said to me: "Why don't you come on Thursday to the Plaza de

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Mayo? Take a little nail, that is how they will recognize you.” So I went, and I sat on a bench and my husband sat a little away from me. I had this little nail in my hand, and I saw that the others also had a little nail, and that is how I knew it was them....In the Plaza we secretly passed notes about where our meetings would be....We were simply housewives. Most of us had never done anything outside the home.

I first saw the Madres in Plaza de Mayo in early March of 2003 on my first visit to Buenos Aires. After they finished their half-hour demonstration in the Plaza, we followed the Madres as they made their way to a statue in front of the Casa Rosada. The Madres walked up onto the base of the statue to give a speech.

Standing near me was an older American tourist, surrounded by his two college age children. He motioned to them and said, “You will remember this for the rest of your lives.”

Later I learned that the speech was a regular part of the Madres’ Thursday ritual. Normally, the speech is given by Hebe de Bonafini but she wasn’t there that day. Instead, it was given by one of the other prominent Madres. This was only a couple of weeks before the U.S. invaded Iraq but it was clear that war was coming. The Madres spoke out passionately against war, stressing that it is the mothers and the children who suffer the most during war.

In reading books about the last military government in Argentina, it’s chilling to come across statements in which the government labeled the disappeared as terrorists and justified its oppressive actions as means of combating terrorism. Groups like the Madres are needed to serve as a reminder, not only to Argentina but also to the world, of the atrocities that can be committed by governments in the name of patriotism.

Leaving the Plaza that day in March 2003, walking down Avenida de Mayo, I looked back and took a photograph that always will be my most emblematic memory of Buenos Aires. The Plaza’s centerpiece, the Pirámide de Mayo, is often covered with graffiti and continually repainted white by the government. On that particular day it was adorned with the simple words, “**GRACIAS MADRES**”.

