

VERSIONS AND PERVERSIONS OF THE HOLOCAUST IN LATIN AMERICA

Ilán Stavans

When the invitation first came in the form of a telephone call to participate in a symposium on Third World views of the Holocaust, I was both excited and terrified: excited, because finally American Jews were ready to look beyond their own nose to understand the echoes and impact of the Nazi genocide in the world at large; and terrified because of what they might find. A set of questions immediately descended on me: Are American Jews ready to expand their horizon? And are we ready for them to be ready? In a matter of days, in an attempt to answer these questions, I found myself drafting an essay on the subject that was eventually printed in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. What follows is an annotated synopsis.

I want to start by recalling a book I received about three months ago. It is a tiny book published in Argentina, barely a hundred pages in length, titled *Barbarie y memoria* [Barbarism and Memory], a literary anthology that includes poems, prose, essays, memoirs that relate in one way or another to the experience of the Holocaust, but also, and this should be stressed, to the experience to the Dirty War, *la guerra sucia*, and the *desaparecidos*, particularly in Argentina. It is edited by Manuela Fingueret. By saying that it is barely a hundred pages long and that it just arrived three months ago, I am suggesting that its appearance in my mailbox was a surprise: Why did it come just now? Who is it addressed to? Why is it so short?

I had never seen anything similar. I had seen as a person who was born and raised in Mexico a number of books that had been published in Argentina and Spain, mainly translations of Anne Frank, Elie Wiesel, Isaac Bashevis Singer's stories that relate to the Holocaust, and on a very few occasions a handful of native products—that is, memoirs by Holocaust survivors from Argentina, Mexico, and Brazil. But never an anthology that wanted to put together the two major events that have colored my life—that of repression as a Jew, and that of repression as a Latin American.

Why hadn't an anthology of such caliber or scope been published before? Had I been oblivious or ignorant of any of them? Could we suggest that we are witnessing anew phenomenon of awareness in Latin America regarding what Jews are, or what the Holocaust is, altogether?

Is there such a thing as a Holocaust consciousness in Latin America? And who, if anybody, would have such consciousness? Would it be the overall Latin American population? Or the small Jewish minority that lives in that territory? And with that last question I think it would be proper to say who these Jews are that live there. Where did they come from and what kind of presence do they have?

The Jewish population in the so-called Latin American countries is the fifth largest in the world—almost half a million people. The majority of the Jews live first and foremost in Argentina, then in Brazil, thirdly in Mexico. But the differences between the size of the population of Jews in Argentina and that of Mexico are dramatic. Argentina might have

between a hundred and eighty and two hundred and forty thousand Jews, whereas Mexico has barely forty to fifty thousand. It is a dramatic change that also suggests a difference in the kind of perception that Jews have in society at large. Argentinean Jews have a much more involved—I would even say promiscuous—relationship with the rest of the country. And the presence of many Jewish ministers, secretaries, intellectuals is obvious as one opens the newspaper or a magazine or turns on the television.

That is not the case in Mexico where you might have one or two cases of people involved in government who are of Jewish extraction. The participation of Mexican Jews in cultural and governmental affairs is comparatively minor. Somewhere in-between, or perhaps somewhere better than these two extremes, is Brazil, the so-called racial democracy of Latin America. And I put it in between quotes, a place where race is perceived in a very different, under a very different prism than that of the United States and where Jews, for better or for worse, have been received and embraced far more wholeheartedly. Brazil has a writer, and I am just using writers in this case as examples, Moacyr Scliar, who is perhaps the Portuguese equivalent of what Sholem Aleichem is to Yiddish literature. A writer who is both able to entertain, enlighten, and educate the masses, can use humor in order to bring forth topics that might be perceived as difficult and challenging, and at the same time a writer who is published by major Brazilian publishing houses. And embraced by literary supplements, by readers at large. His books have gone through many printings.

It is deceitful from my end to tell you anything about the response, the versions and perversions of the Holocaust in Latin America, because that conception of Latin America is a difficult one altogether. The reactions in Argentina are not the same as one would get in Mexico or Brazil or Cuba, where the Jewish community was a lively one up until 1958-59, when the majority of middle and upper-middle class Jews left for Miami or New Jersey or other parts of the United States.

But I also think that in order to understand the Holocaust, one has to understand what Jews are in the Latin American imagination. One would use that big geographic category to approach the subject. Not only is the Holocaust not part of the overall Latin American consciousness, but the Jewish events in history in general are also not part of that consciousness outside the Jewish exclusive ghettoized community. One ponders why most Latin Americans would know anything about the Holocaust through *Schindler's List*, or through a mini-series like *War and Remembrance* or *The Holocaust* with Meryl Streep, but yet not be familiar even remotely with the word *Shoah*. I don't think any of my intellectual friends in Mexico have ever heard it or would use it in any context. They would not understand what it means, how it connects. They wouldn't even relate to the debate that Cynthia Ozick had during the Balkan conflict, trying to appropriate the term Holocaust only for the experience that Jews went through, and the genocide under the Nazi regime, and not understand it in any way as connected to the genocide that Indians suffered or that other segments of the Latin American population have undergone. The semantics of the word is totally foreign to the region.

Let's go back to the issue of history in general. Latin Americans know little about the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492. They know about Columbus. They know about the arrival to the New Land. But very few connected directly to the fact that it is the exact same year that Jews were literally thrown out from the Iberian Peninsula. The presence in textbooks all over Latin America of Crypto-Jews, conversos, marranos—in Hebrew, *anusim*—and other

sort of "masked Jews" in the region is also minimal. One of the major texts on the subject, an autobiography by Luis de Carvajal the Younger, who was one of the mystics and a cabalist, and his uncle—then governor of the state of Nuevo León, is out of print in Spanish. It has gone through several additions in English. It's out of print and coming back and yet in Spanish, this major text in Mexican Jewish history is absolutely out of sight.

When I was growing up in Mexico, in a Yiddish-speaking school, exposure to the Holocaust came through, first and foremost. I remember very vividly the time that a teacher of ours took us in fifth or probably sixth grade to see *Night and Fog*, the documentary by Alaine Resnais. I remember having uncles and relatives with a number tattooed in the arm. We knew who they were, but we never were open about who they were with the neighbors. In the neighborhood, people would never really suspect or ask that a family member who had arrived in the 50's or the 60's from Israel or from Europe was any way connected to a part of Jewish history that wasn't like ours. And who were we? We were those looking a little lighter, had a strange religion, perhaps had killed Jesus, and were asked many times—the male ones—if we were circumcised. Even that concept was suspicious to many of them.

Even in college, I remember having a bunch of friends who—enlightened as we were—would come at the same time as I was going to the bathroom to see what a circumcised Jew, even congenitally, looked like. This presence of Jews was related to having horns or having a pigtail, to praying to a pig in a synagogue. Those are facts that I relate and refer to you as a series of recollections of friends who would ask me if that was the case. But never in any informed, committed fashion. And yet, Latin America, because of the size of its Jewish communities, needs to have—or better, ought to have—a connection with the Holocaust.

Many refugees from Poland, from Lithuania, from the Ukraine, many of those who survived from Auschwitz, Dachau, arrived in Paraguay, Uruguay, Brazil and Argentina, at the very same time that the government—many dictatorships, like those of Juan Domingo Perón and other tyrants—were allowing, or should I say inviting, former Nazis to live exactly in the same places. There are a few novels that are significant, written by non-Jews. One of them that I want to call attention to by José Emilio Pacheco in Mexico entitled *Morirás lejos* [You Should Die in a Distant Land]. It is the novel of a man who is opening the curtain to see who is looking at him, ponders if it is a former Nazi. You suspect that a person in the room is perhaps a Nazi too, or perhaps somebody from the Simon Wiesenthal services is trying to get at him and put him finally in jail. It is an interesting perception of how Latin American non-Jews have seen Jews.

In Latin American fiction per se you have authors like Carlos Fuentes, but in one way or another in their novels have tried to digest and present the Holocaust always in a very remote way. Fuentes has a couple of novels: *The Hydra Head* and *Terra Nostra* where survivors and Nazis come together in the same car, a Volkswagen. We have major figures like Jorge Luis Borges, perhaps the most cosmopolitan un-Argentine of all Argentines, who literally makes the Holocaust a subject of his literature. There are a series of short stories by him that deal with either people who are about to be killed, shot by the Nazis—such as “The Secret Miracle,” a tribute to Kafka—or others that are about Nazis that are imprisoned already like “Deutches Requiem,” trying to figure out what a moral duty was and is in the present.

Perhaps the most admirable of all intellectuals in Latin America of the twentieth century is of Octavio Paz, who literally wrote about everything imaginable. In my eyes, he was a kind of Edmund Wilson in Spanish and won the Nobel Prize in 1998. His completed works are made of fourteen volumes, each of which has about eight hundred to nine hundred pages. In every entry of those fourteen volumes he absolutely ignores anything that has to do with the Jews. (There are some forty thousand Mexican Jews, and I am one of them.) A man who wrote about T.S. Eliot and Buddhism, about the uprising of students in 1968 in Mexico, in Berkeley, in Paris, in Czechoslovakia; who wrote about the Middle Ages, about Greek mythology; and yet there is no reference, whatsoever about the Jews. This is the most enlightened, the most admirable of all Latin American writers.

Let me conclude with the controversy that took place not too long ago—that of Rigoberta Menchú. As you might have heard or read, Menchú, a spokesperson for the aboriginal population in Guatemala was the target of a campaign to undermine—I don't want to put it that way, it would be unfair, but let me put it that way at least to begin—to undermine her credibility in suggesting that *I, Rigoberta Menchú* was a product more of imagination than of real facts that had taken place. She defended herself as she judged appropriate. In the end, the whole controversy was seen through the prism of a Stanford educated, Middlebury College professor who is obsessed with facts, and a Latin American activist who knows that facts can be casualties in the road to enlightenment and to truth. The controversy was very much in the pages of the *New York Times*, of *The New York Review of Books*, of the *New Republic*, and spread all over. There is currently a book published by the University of Minnesota Press with all of the responses to the controversy.

It was simultaneous with another controversy that is significant. That of a book that had been published in 1990 in Mexico under the aegis of a very important Mexican publisher of a Mexican mainstream publisher Diana and was called *Man of Ashes* [Hombre de cenizas]. It was a memoir by an Ecuadorian Jew, a survivor of the Holocaust, about his experience. He was from the same town as Elie Wiesel. It covers experiences through Auschwitz and other concentration camps, his ultimate survival, his arrival to Ecuador, his encounter with the native Indian population, and his adaptation to Latin America and to Spanish society in general.

When the book appeared in 1990, it had some circulation and it won a prize from the Mexican Jewish community. It was authored by him Salomon Isacovici, but ghost-written or helped by Juan Manuel Rodríguez, whose bio was literally reduced to three or four lines. The book was translated into English in the hands of a translator, Dick Gerdes, at that time on the faculty at the University of New Mexico. The translation was produced and was sent to a number of publishers and it ended up in the hands of the University of Nebraska Press.

But at that point, this Manuel Rodríguez began a legal battle, saying that the book was really not ghostwritten but co-written by him. Rodríguez himself, an aspiring published novelist from Ecuador, was an ex-Jesuit born in Spain who immigrated to Latin America and was a prominent figure in academic circles in Quito. He forbade the University of Nebraska Press from publishing the book unless the two names—Isacovici and Rodríguez—appeared together. By doing so he said that this was his book and that this book was a novel, a novel that he had constructed by interviewing Isacovici in great detail and then turning his images, his anecdotes, his metaphors into a narrative that he produced.

It was a controversy only in the United States. Some of us academics and intellectuals put a lot of pressure on the University of Nebraska Press to finally bring the book out, to not allow having the two names at the same level, and to say that this was an attempt to kidnap, to handcuff, one of the few published memoirs in Latin America of a Holocaust survivor, allowing us to see the experiences from that side of the border. In the United States, very few have appeared. This legal debate took three or four years and eventually the book was published in censored or cleansed form, with the two names together. It appears as a memoir in the catalogue of Nebraska, but nowhere is it to be seen on the title page as it is in Spanish that this is a memoir, perhaps suggesting that it could be something otherwise. And of course the tension between memoir and novel is dramatic. Are we getting truth or fiction?

I shall conclude by invoking again the anthology *Barbarie y memoria*. It includes contributions by Wiesel and Primo Levi with Rigoberta Menchú and Héctor Yánover, among other Latin American locals. It puts together the Dirty War with the Holocaust and will reach perhaps fifty thousand people. If it does, it would be on some news stands together with The Protocols of the Elders of Zion, a major book in Latin America, and in every single world corner. Thank you.

DISCUSSION

Panelists

Steven Katz: I should explain, the musical interlude is the wisdom of Professor Miles. He had the strange idea that at an academic conference, people should think before they speak and therefore he wanted to give people a chance to reflect, collect their thoughts before they ask their questions. It's a very novel approach. Before we go on we'll open with questions from the panel to Professor Stavans. Please.

Shawkat Toorawa: I have a question. Borges, who you mentioned, in addition to his fascination with the Jewish culture, had a fascination with Islamic culture and of things Arabic and it's all over his literature and I needn't rehearse it. I'm curious, did Octavio Paz in his fourteen volumes, while ignoring the experience of Jews within his own country, or even the world, similarly exclude the experiences of Arabs and Muslims? And if so, does that not make it less remarkable? It doesn't make it excusable; it makes it explicable. If not, it makes it perhaps even more important to interrogate why he would exclude the Jewish experience.

Locksley Edmondson: This question is based on a feeling I have and if the feeling is wrong, then obviously the question is irrelevant. My impression has been that Argentina and Latin America attracted more than a fair share, let's put it, of Nazis. Part of Argentina's modern history, and aspects of their politics, have been fascism. It is not as alien to the Argentinean political experience as, I suspect, Mexico or Brazil. If this is so, what complications, if any, have these raised in regard to the Jewish population in Argentina or in any of the other countries?

Nadim Rouhana: If you draw a comparison of social conditions that are conducive for genocide in Germany and in Argentina, I find it strange that there is not much connecting the Jewish Holocaust and crimes against humanity in Latin America. I wonder how that is doable.

How is it possible, as people have been doing in the last couple days here, to make connections between the concept of Holocaust and other groups and experiences?

The other questions related to what you presented of the absence of the Holocaust and Jews in Latin American literature. Your very opening sentence about the American Jewish community looking beyond its nose—obviously this can come only from a person who is a member of that community and can dare say something like that. But how is that related to it?

Gerald Gahima: You spoke about a presence of around a half a million Jews in Latin America, a place, as we know, that has had its fair share of injustice. Now, Professor Edmondson talked about South Africa yesterday and its relationship with the state of Israel, and the fact that Israel was, by and large, a very close ally of the apartheid regime... People in South Africa saw that the Jewish people, although victims of injustice themselves, had been blinded to the sufferings of the black people in South Africa.

Now, I would like to be educated as to what was the stand of the Jewish community in Latin America during the troubled years of Latin America and the Dirty Wars? For example, you said there was a significant Jewish community in Brazil. What is by and large—I know it is hard to generalize—their stand on racial prejudice and this commission in Brazil, for example?

Informed attitudes of society of the past are shaped by how we behave today. Like, for example, in South Africa. The conduct of some of the members of the Jewish community or the State of Israel has affected the Jews in South Africa. Now, because people expect the Jewish people, having been victims, to be sympathetic to the problems, the sufferings of others. Knowing that that was the case in the case of South Africa, for example, what has their experience been in Latin America? What has been their contribution?

Locksley Edmondson [responding to Gahima]: A speaker yesterday raised a question about Guatemala. These are critical issues. One of the beautiful things about the previous paper is how the speaker from Japan was very prepared to be self-critical of her society and her government. I think that is a very important thing for any of us to get onto. If we get ultra-defensive about the misdeeds of a particular society whom we support, we're losing the fight. But I still want to clarify one thing. I do not just make the jump, and I'm sure that you did not really mean it, to say that because Israel was involved in these impure relationships, it was the Jewish people. I make a clear difference in my mind. In South Africa, Mandela's prosecutor was a Jew who asked for the death penalty, but many anti-apartheid activists were also Jewish. And one of the main ones was George Slovo, who fought in the liberation movement, who was Mandela's main ally, who made a very important commitment. He was a Communist and hated by the apartheid regime. So I think we should be careful, if we speak about the political foreign policy of the State of Israel, not to generalize about Jews.

I just wanted to clarify that I was speaking about the State of Israel. My argument was that, given the fact that the apartheid regime architects were ex-Nazis—some of whom were jailed—who sided with Hitler (partly because he was anti-British,) it became more paradoxical than ever that Sharon—I have quotations from him—was defending publicly this relationship with apartheid South Africa.

Audience

Wendy Surinach, Northeastern University political science graduate student: First, I would like to thank you for such an insightful presentation. I thought it was great and in my mind I think it is absolutely mind-boggling that such a renowned author such as Octavio Paz didn't even mention Jews in his work. And my question would be: Did the Latin American community of scholars criticize him in any way? Did he receive any criticism? And if he did, what was his reaction to it?

Rita Schneider, Northeastern University Spanish and French instructor: I grew up in Buenos Aires, Argentina, (the child of a Holocaust survivor.) I just wanted to add a comment to your sharing about the great contradiction of growing up Jewish in Buenos Aires.

My memory went back to the day, first of all, that Eichmann was captured. I was a child at the time and there were very strong polarized feelings in the community at large. The contradiction of growing up in a country that had organized anti-Semitic, actively anti-Semitic groups. In 1994 I arrived in Buenos Aires a few days after the bombing of the AMIA building and there were close to a million people who came out into the streets in solidarity and support of the Jewish community. Both of these sides are true. And also belonging to a generation where 30,000 people disappeared, with a number of Jewish people disproportionately high, suffering in the death camps as Jacobo Timerman documented in his book *Prisoner Without a Name, Cell Without a Number*. Being Jewish and being captured at the time was a double aggravating factor. But it was, also, I must say, shocking for me living outside of the country. Timerman, who opposed the Argentine military, also challenged certain views of the Israeli government positions, and he was ostracized by the Argentine Jewish establishment.

Unidentified: Yes, I also want to thank Professor Stavans. You, yourself are responsible for this consciousness. Also I would add the growing number of rabbis from Argentina who are in Florida.

To explain a little bit why the American Jewish community is interested, why the power has shifted from the East to Florida to the West. The Jewish community in America is very involved and very interested in Central and South America, especially, by the way, with Cuba, the Cuban community. I myself am discovering my South American roots, too. I, for a long time, knew that I had two uncles who went to Argentina in the 20's or 30's. I don't even know when they came. Maybe you can explain how they went to Argentina. Later they went to Los Angeles and yet this is something we never talked about. I never talked with Uncle Leo and Uncle Boris about my roots. Many Jews who came there lived among Germans, then lived among Nazis, they later the desaparecidos, the bombings in 1994.

How did Argentina deal with the Holocaust? How could the Jewish community live? Don't they have any impact on education dealing with the Holocaust? It is a very strange phenomenon for such a powerful community to have no influence on education.

Elana Heideman, Boston University: On the note of education, I was interested with the presence of such mixed messages in literature. You've got the abuse of the Holocaust in literature. I am wondering how much literature is present for the younger generation that actually, accurately, represents the history both of Latin America as well as their general

worldview of what happened during that time. And how its presence helps shape the next generation's response because the Nazis are not going to be there anymore, but their presence will still have made an impact on the society there. Are there uses, as opposed to abuses, of the Holocaust in literature for the future?

Carol Ann Reed, Holocaust Center in Toronto. It was my understanding that the Holocaust Center in Argentina has made a lot of connections between the Dirty War and the Holocaust and was doing a lot of work in schools and the general community about the Holocaust and the Dirty War. Are you aware of that work and could you comment on it please?

Ilan Stavans responds

I'm delighted with the debate, though I have only five minutes to say something that should be said in two hours. So I apologize for everything I won't be able to say and I apologize for the cryptic telegraphic nature of what I will say in the next five minutes. And I've already lost about half a minute!

First of all, as for being critical of Latin American Jews—I would be the first one probably to be in that line. We in Latin America among Jews have had this...sense that dirty linens are only washed at home and that anything that you say outside could literally turn you into a pariah. Some of us that do say critical things of the State of Israel or of the status quo of Jews in Latin America often need to live in exile. I am present here. Many other of my colleagues who are Latin American Jewish writers live in Spain, in Israel, or the United States. This is not to say that there aren't significant Latin American Jewish writers that live in their own place of origin and that are making an essential contribution to changing the nature of the debate.

Octavio Paz is a very emblematic figure connecting those two questions, a very emblematic figure. The only known moment that I am aware of where he literally talks about the State of Israel, the Middle Eastern conflict, is in an interview that he did just after he received the Jerusalem Prize—for liberty, freedom. The interview aired on Spanish television. He said he was delighted to receive this because of all of the other people who had received it prior to him. But that doesn't stop him from being critical of the State of Israel, which he endorses and celebrates, but also he recognizes that the Palestinians should have rights and should have their own state and structure. The interview lasts an hour and a half and this does not go beyond a half a minute. And I am not aware of any essay where he goes beyond this. This is a guy who wrote about the Berlin Wall, China, Yugoslavia, everything.

The Muslims? Borges is a map for many of us. Arab and Muslims culture are essential to his writings. He has, for instance, one great study of love in the Western world, and he connects it first and foremost to the Greeks and to the Muslims. He talks about Spain prior to the expulsion of the Moors of cohabitation, love as a source that comes from the Arab texts. But he never thinks, even remotely, of the Jewish component of this coexistence between Christians and Jews and Muslims.

As for ex-Nazis in Argentina, this is really a major topic. I surely cannot do justice to it the remaining seconds I have. But I feel I should, and want to, be a spokesperson, but it is very

complex issue. The existence of Eichmann and Mengele in Brazil, in Argentina, in Uruguay, is crucial. The kidnapping of Eichmann, flown to Israel, was referred to here.

With regards to how the Jewish community behaves as a group, and how debates take place inside but hardly ever outside. Even the AMIA bombing and how it was debated in the public forum, in newspapers, in television shows and radios. You might use this American image of going out of the closet, or perhaps opening the door of the closet, but not truly going out. Contradictions are just the right word.

Jews in Latin America have benefited from racial issues, have been able to climb up faster in the social ladder in the economic ladder than any other group that doesn't come from whiteness. This gives us a sense of protection and we don't want to give this up. We have benefited from it, so we will sympathize politically, but we will not compromise ourselves. I'm saying all of this in a very critical sense.

When I arrive in Mexico, people wouldn't even think that I am Mexican because of the way I look. Not even opening my mouth, the person carrying my luggage will say, "Now, you the patron." I have already become a *patron* without having done anything, even going to my luggage with someone trying to help me with it. This is an explanation of how race is played out and how Jews fit into that race. Sephardic Jews that came during the colonial period (or Crypto-Jews) benefited from the kind of melding into the environment that was very different from the Ashkenazi Jews who came in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century. The connection between the Sephardic and the Ashkenazi Jews has not been a happy one.

As for American Jews looking at us beyond their nose. I grew up in Mexico in an Ashkenazi community. Most of the Ashkenazi Jews in Mexico had originally wanted to come to the United States. But the immigration quarters were closed and so we stayed in Cuba, or in Puerto Rico, or in the Dominican Republic, eventually moved to Vera Cruz. Finally, part of the families moved north and some stayed south. But there was always this envy of the United States. We should have been American, but we ended up being Latin American. Latin America was a kind of borrowed rented home, for which we were grateful, but any opportunity we had, we would go north and in shopping sprees. Or envy American Jews for the kind of mighty presence they had in their culture. They would write major novels—Bellow, Malamud, Ozick, Roth—about the experience of being American and Jewish. The novels that we wrote would be self-published. Nobody would really read about them, so there was a sense of envy today connected to what was said at the very end.

Today, there is a kind of bizarre twist. American Jews are this fractured community looking elsewhere to understand their roots. Hispanics have become an overwhelming presence in American society. American Jews and Hispanic Jews are finding new connections, because of these demographic changes. And suddenly the power has shifted and suddenly Latin America is attractive and hot. And Americans are not that mighty and we get the sense that the ghetto that we had when growing up and felt uncomfortable about is romanticized now, looked at nostalgically. It's kind of the *shtetl* for American Jews. *Shtetl* dwellers wanted to leave as quickly as possible and yet American Jews book at travel agencies for trips that will enable them to find the site where a grandmother spent her days sewing and cooking. It is ironic that a past so grim, so dark at times, can be a foundation of nostalgia. But what is memory if not a game of mirrors?

