

A life in search for meaning. Art and justice *à propos* of Eichmann's trial*

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Abstract. Adolf Eichmann's influence has passed through the author family's life for four generations. His father's, because of his emigration from Poland before WWII, his activism within the Jewish diaspora community and participation in Eichmann's trial in Jerusalem. The children's, because of their Jewish education in a family fled from the anti-Semitism, and the grandchildren's and great-grandchildren's respect for the memory, tradition, and its creative continuity. This work is a reflection on the marks of the Shoah in a Buenos Aires family, the perpetuation of inherited testimonials, and the possibilities of experiencing justice through art.

Keywords: Memory, Family, Shoah, Meaning.

“With my eyes fixed and wide open, I look at the anchored boats in the harbor of Buenos Aires. I was then seven or eight years old. Between fascination and fear, I could not take my eyes off those immensities made of iron and wood that sculpted smoke, squeaks, and people. Wrapped in my thoughts I looked at them without seeing it. For the third time in my short, but intense life, I had escaped from the room where I lived with my family in the district of Villa Crespo. I had a firm intention: to return to my homeland, to the warmth of my grandmother, and the happiness of my friends. I used to approach the mariners and talk to them in a mix of *Idish* (1) dripped with my scarce Castilian words. Some would look at me in astonishment, others were indifferent. My extreme thinness, the shaved hair, and my loose and worn clothes formed the very image of helplessness. I was determined to find a boat that would definitely take me away from this land that I felt hostile and foreign. A boat that would take me back to Brest Litovsk (2), to my cows, to the cart that I used to pull from house to house, to those neighbors that greeted me each morning while following my grandmother Masha in her milk and cheese distribution. I also missed the snow, in which with my *shiteled* (3) I used to play racing with the other boys, fellow students in *Jeider* (4) and accomplices in our escapes to the other side of Bug river, where we used to dive”...

This is the first paragraph of the book *Memorias de una vida intensa*, from Ber Londynski. *Berele* in his native language. My father. A man who wanted to tell his story, the comes and goes of a life marked by the desire of growing, learning, progressing, forming a family and celebrating his time and resources on the construction of a Jewish community in the Diaspora.

In such way he was narrating fragments which, sometimes, repeated throughout his 91 years. Testimonies of presence and memories that I used to hear as fresh remembrances of smells, colors, pains, punishments, hungers, achievements, defiance. A whole life! The excerpts were joining each other in time such as puzzle pieces. At moments, passages full of sense. In others, they were sprouting as a work from the imagination, being built in their flow. It looked like if he held himself at any moment, his children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren would know where they came from, from which deep waters the roots of our lives feed, being able to find the strength and inspiration that are necessary and indispensable to keep growing, to fly in search of the ways to keep writing new chapters of our intense history for generations.

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This is how I yearned bringing some of these reports impregnated with sense from my memories, risking finding the footprints that would guide me to meet my history as an attempt of continuity, honoring the memory of a generation which is going away.

How to transform a life that starts with the catastrophe of extermination, the destruction of the family, dreams, the abandonment of home, the loss of dignity and the escape to some other country? How to turn a life in search for sense?

Those first experiences would deeply mark a path of fight for subsistence, for the desire of reaching goals and justice. I remember my father sharing his experiences as an activist of *Hashomer Hatzair* (5), or of the sports *Club Hacoaj* (6), or *Sojnut* (7) an Israeli governmental entity in Buenos Aires, which is responsible for organizing *aliyah* (8).

But I recall a particular story from him. It always started with time. It was 1960, a very special year for the Jews from all over the world and also for the Argentinians. He would make a long pause and deeply breathe as if falling into a long dive, in a dense sea. And continued.. In May, this year, an Israeli intelligence command kidnapped the Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann here in Buenos Aires, and he explained to me, he was the one who led six million European Jews to systematic death during the Second World War. Eichmann had arrived in Argentina in 1950, under the false identity of Ricardo Klement, with the complicity of the government of our president Juan Domingo Perón, and the support of several members of the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church, which provided financial assistance, coverage, documentation and escape routes to various Nazi criminals. My father then stopped, lowered his head and so, unintentionally, his hair moved from his “always combed to the side” hairstyle, prolxly covering his baldness, he adjusts it and proceeds, Eichmann was captured at night, on May 11th, 1960, at the corner of his house, Streets Garibaldi and Ruta 2010, at the district of San Fernando, in Provincia de Buenos Aires, as he returned from work at Mercedes Benz. He was then identified with certainty and kept hidden for several days, until they could take him in an Israeli EL AL airplane that had brought the Israeli delegation invited to the celebrations of the 150th anniversary of the May Revolution (9). When Israel’s first Minister, David Ben Gurión, made the news of the capture known in a session of the *Knesset* (10), the world was shocked. Eichmann would be immediately subjected to judgment in Jerusalem for his crimes against the Jewish people and against humanity. The Argentinean Jewish Community struggled between emotion and fear. Reprisals were expected by the not few allies and sympathizers that Nazism had, since always, in our country. The clandestine capture of the murderer was justified by the fact that other criminals of war had vanished from Argentina since it had been intended to follow the legal routes for their arrests, by requests of extradition.

My father continued with a pulsed voice and the sight farther away from me; Those were feverish days. The institutions were preparing for self-defense. The Jewish sports clubs organized groups of boys armed with sticks and batons, distributed around dozens of schools and synagogues of the capital and Greater Buenos Aires. The directives, like me, (he said) could not participate directly in the custodies, but we equally supervised, to see how each of our boys complied with their duties. In one of these patrols, he remembers, he asked a boy: “Why are you taking this risk if you have never entered in a *Shil* (11)?” The boy, with tears in his eyes, answered him: “*I do it for the Jewish dignity*”. Those were intense days indeed, with many nights of vigil. There were moments of violence. But the leader of the Nazi execution machinery would be judged with all guarantees of the law, in a judicial system model for equanimity and transparency.

His reports started making sense in understanding the possibility of changing fate, like the image of a horizon where the boats he expected to find in the harbor were born to take him back to his life ripped from Poland and to guide him inside himself to modify his life with creating capacity. Suddenly, I could see him emerging from the center of a target. I caught myself in his gaze. His light blue eyes reflected images of judgments, reserves. And I could only try to decipher them.

He would then adjust himself on the black Miller armchair and carry on. Time, he continues: In the year of 1961, the judgment started. That year, I had the opportunity to travel for the first time to Israel, the country I had always dreamed of and for which I had fought so much since my juvenile militancy and all my activity as an adult in different communitarian spaces. I was invited to watch Eichmann's trial sessions. We were placed in the journalists' sector room. With headphones on, we received simultaneous translations from German to Hebrew and from Hebrew to Spanish. So it would take a long time, a void remained between each speech. But we could see him there, inside a glass cabin, speaking in German. The image looks vivid and intense. A very thin, downcast, helpless, simple man, without any signal of emotion when hearing the witnesses and calmly answering them. An extremely touching and ineffable experience. Suddenly he stopped. In that moment, I was able to see that far sight he had once again in that documentary (Cervio *et al*, 2016), when I was intimately touched.

The following years, every time an illustrious Israeli visitor would go to Argentina, they'd asked my father to take them for a stroll around Buenos Aires in our car. Personalities such as Golda Méier (12) and Jaika Grossman (13). They all wanted to know the place where Eichmann had been captured. They all arrived at that corner and stayed there for a long time, speechless and thoughtful. Some of them cried.

I treasure this story that comes to my mind as a testimony among so many other intense, sad and exciting memories of my father's reports as a survivor of the Shoah. Images full of meanings for me and my whole family. Why can we look back and feel that our lives have been shaped by his testimony? Why do these images touch us in a singular way and are always making themselves present?

I understand a life in the search for sense as a Jewish family legacy. Sprouting from the pain, from the images of a tragic memory, opening ways for transformations as a work from the imagination of lived lives. Making justice with creative singularities. Perpetuating through art, literature and poetry in the lived reports. Through the creation of communitarian projects, carrying on a defense for life that touches and embodies itself, making us and the memories alive when exercising Jewish traditions.

Adolf Eichmann was one of the greatest assassins of all time, the Nazi who before his execution thanked his homeland, Austria, and Argentina, my birthplace. The permanence of Eichmann in my country gives it an added value: on one hand, for contributing to unraveling a tragedy; on the other, because it forces us to look at ourselves once again as a country in a dark and marshy mirror, with secret stories that can justify the past as the future.

Another situation refers to one of the most controversial expressions within the field of twentieth-century thought, coined by Hannah Arendt, which is the "banality of evil," or how behind noble appearances monsters exist. Could one of the biggest criminals look like a "normal man"?

To this day, these images cause chills, at the same time as they come up as stripped stories that pass through the Shoah and deeply touch us when they are present.

Adolf Eichmann has crossed the history of my family for many generations. My fathers, grandfathers and great-grandfathers as testimonies of the extermination and escape to Argentina. Of my parents' great-grandchildren when learning from their great-grandfather's memoir a part of our family's history, as well as watching his testimony in the movie *The German Neighbor*. One of his granddaughters working on this documentary (from the Eichmann trial) as a record of the Shoah and an excerpt from the nefarious history of our country. My generation, the children of immigrants fleeing from World War II, growing up with the complex task of taking root between two cultures in this new country, between grandparents who only spoke Idish (1) and a Spaniard-laden accent. Doorway to scents of food, singing, dancing, and traditional parties, felt through all senses, perpetrating the legacy of life in search of meaning.

Vocabulary

- (1) *Idish (Yiddish)*: it is a language from the Indo-European family, belonging to the German subgroup, having been adopted by Jews, particularly in central Europe and in Eastern Europe, in the second millennium, who write it using the Hebrew characters.
- (2) *Brest Litovsk*: City located in the center of the western frontier of the Russian empire, at Bug riverbank, was one of the few places where the Russian Czars had allowed the Jews to live legally.
- (3) *Shiteled*: Sled.
- (4) *Jeider*: A school where the rabbi taught Torah, sacred book of Judaism.
- (5) *Hashomer Hatzair*: Socialist Zionist youth movement, of scout style, which had been founded in Poland, in 1913 and that had subsidiaries in several countries. In Argentina, it reached thousands of members and still exists.
- (6) *Hacoaj*: Jewish Nautical Club located in the district of Tigre, Province of Buenos Aires.
- (7) *Sojnut*: Jewish agency in Buenos Aires. An Israeli governmental entity, in charge of organizing aliá and going through with educational programs, always collaborating to the construction of the Jewish community.
- (8) *Aliyah*: A term that designates the Jewish immigration to the Land of Israel.
- (9) *May Revolution*: It is the historic event that caused the collapse of the Spanish government in Buenos Aires and the creation of a Government Board integrated by the creoles of Rio da Prata.
- (10) *Knesset*: Israeli Parliament.
- (11) *Shil*: Synagogue.
- (12) *Golda Méier* (1898-1978): Israeli politician of the *avodá* party, social democrat, founder and Prime Minister of the State of Israel. She has also been Minister of Foreign Affairs and Minister of Labor.
- (13) *Jaika Grossman* (1919-1996): Survivor of the Shoah, a heroine on the revival of the Bialystok ghetto. Israeli politician of the Mapam party, Zionist, socialist, political arm of Hashomer Hatzair. Member of the Knesset for many years in which she once became vice president.
- (14) *El Vecino Alemán*: Film, The German Neighbor, directed by Rosario Cervio and Martin Liji, Buenos Aires, 2016.
- (15) *Shoah*: Holocaust was the genocide or mass murder of around six million Jews during the Second World War, in the greatest genocide of the 20th century.

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