

INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES 45



A Glimmer of Hope

The AMIA Bombing, Five Years Later

Sergio Kiernan

THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE

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Foreword

A year ago—July 1998—in the foreword to AJC’s fourth annual report on the status of the investigation of the AMIA bombing in Buenos Aires, I expressed the hope that a fifth report would not be necessary, that those who blew up the main center of Argentine Jewish life and killed 86 people would be apprehended, convicted, and sentenced before another year passed. Sadly, that has not happened. Not only are we still in the dark about responsibility for the AMIA bombing, but the destruction of the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires two years earlier has not been solved either.

Nevertheless, as the title of this essay suggests, there may be “a glimmer of hope.” Twenty people—fifteen policemen and five civilians—are due to stand trial for their involvement in the case. On a grimmer note, however, the internal conflicts within Argentine Jewry over how to address the issue have been aggravated by the failure of Jewish-owned banks in the country, leading to severe demoralization in the community.

The American Jewish Committee, with its long-standing ties to the Jews of Argentina, has been monitoring events carefully. Immediately after the AMIA bombing an AJC delegation flew to Buenos Aires to express solidarity with the community, and we continue to maintain close contact with Argentine Jews. We have also met frequently with Argentine officials to urge aggressive prosecution of the investigation. And on each anniversary of the tragedy, AJC has published reports by the noted Argentine journalist Sergio Kiernan.

This is the latest report. Is it too much to hope once again that it may be the last?

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A GLIMMER OF HOPE

The AMIA Bombing, Five Years Later

On July 18, 1994, a powerful bomb destroyed the main building of the Argentine Israelite Mutual Aid Association, or AMIA, in downtown Buenos Aires. The bombing left 86 dead, hundreds wounded, and a city block looking like a war zone. The old six-story building collapsed, burying dozens of people. The survivors had to climb over the rubble and escape by jumping to nearby terraces. Argentines, who only two years before had witnessed the destruction of the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires in a terrorist bombing, were horrified. The 300,000 Argentine Jews were aghast: the bombing was a blow to the heart of their community.

While confusion reigned at the bombing site, while corpses were being dug out and a specialized Israeli rescue squad was landing in Buenos Aires, the Argentine government promised a swift, thorough investigation. That promise was not kept: five years after the 1994 bombing, there is only a glimmer of hope that at least a small part of the case will be solved.

From the very beginning, Argentines suspected that the terrorists responsible for the mass murders of their fellow citizens had been aided by what became known as “the local connection,” Argentines or foreigners residing in Argentina who provided the contacts, cars, explosives, and intelligence to carry out the attack. Most people also suspected that the members of “the local connection” were or had been in uniform: Argentines have an extensive and sad experience with government-sponsored right-wing death squads.

During the military dictatorship that ruled the country from 1976 to 1983, dozens of special units were charged with doing away with whole sectors of the population regarded as “subversives.” At least 11,000 people died in the cleansing process, a sizable minority of them Jews. Along with kidnapping and murdering for political reasons, the squads soon learned that their immunity from prosecution extended to plain robbery: victims’

houses were ransacked, wealthy individuals kidnapped for ransom. After democracy was restored in 1983, Argentines had to face the legacy of military rule: mutinous armed forces, security agencies and police forces used to committing crimes. It took years to weed out the worst cases. The story of the AMIA bombing proves that the task is far from complete.

The AMIA legal team pointed out in an interview with the author what they consider the most important fact in the five-year-long investigation: of the twenty persons facing charges in the case, no less than fifteen are policemen, including high-ranking officers in the Buenos Aires Province police force, the largest in the country. Officials investigating the case make no secret of their suspicion that army personnel were involved in the preparation of the attack, providing explosives and intelligence. The fact that later this year or early in 2000, the twenty accused will face a panel of judges sustains the hope that more will be known of at least one aspect of the local connection: the role of the twenty Argentines who, apparently for money, helped the terrorists attack the Argentine Jewish community building.

This hope sustains a divided, tired Jewish community that is undergoing the deepest political crisis in its history, a community that elected a new president after seeing its last, Ruben Beraja, leave the post in public disgrace after the suspicious collapse of his bank.

The Quiet Year

There is little to report on the AMIA investigation since the American Jewish Committee's last report on the bombing. Critics of the investigation say that little has been done; supporters of the official in charge of the case, Federal Judge Juan José Galeano, say that he has worked quietly and efficiently. Judge Galeano no longer grants interviews.¹

A few facts, however, deserve to be highlighted. First, Judge Galeano accused Hezbollah of being responsible for both the AMIA bombing and the March 17, 1992, bombing of the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires. Second, the judge interrogated two key foreign witnesses, the Iranian prostitute Nasrim Mokhtari and the Brazilian taxi boy and thief Wilson dos Santos. Third, those to be tried soon lost all appeals before other courts. Fourth, there will be a reconstruction of the bombing.

On July 8, 1994, a seedy character visited the Argentine consulate in Milan, Italy. He spoke a broken Spanish mixed with Portuguese and introduced himself as Wilson dos Santos. He had an urgent message: "In a few days' time there will be a terrible attack against a Jewish target in Buenos

Aires.” The consulate’s personnel clearly did not believe him, filed away the warning, and promptly forgot about it. Ten days later, they remembered, when the news of the AMIA bombing reached Italy. The Argentine government asked the Italian police to locate dos Santos, but he had vanished. All that could be established was that he had repeated his warning to Israeli and Brazilian diplomats, who did not act on it.

It took four years to find dos Santos, living quietly in Brazil. Judge Galeano wanted to interrogate him, but all extradition appeals were ignored by the Brazilian judiciary. Public pressure in Buenos Aires mounted and President Carlos Menem had to ask his Brazilian counterpart, Fernando Henrique Cardoso, for an answer. Late last year, both countries, partners in the Mercosur common market, came close to a diplomatic rift over the issue. Frantic behind-the-scenes negotiations patched up a solution: dos Santos would not be extradited to Argentina, but Judge Galeano would be able to interrogate him in Brazil. Late in December 1998 the judge and his team went to Brazil and met dos Santos. They came back empty-handed: the Brazilian denied his early story and claimed that his role was accidental and that he had made up his early statements.

When he had originally delivered his warning, dos Santos said that he had got wind of the coming attack through his Iranian girlfriend, Nasrim Mokhtari, whom he had met in Buenos Aires. Dos Santos said that he and the Iranian had separated while living in Switzerland. But before the separation, she had told him that the Iranians were preparing an attack in Buenos Aires. Dos Santos even volunteered the information that Mokhtari had taken part in the bombing of the Israeli embassy. When faced by Galeano and his team in Brazil, dos Santos backtracked: he claimed he had made up the story in alliance with a journalist who wanted to write a book, paid him \$1,050, and promised a share of the profits. It was just bad luck that there was a bombing so soon afterward.

Sources close to the investigation claim that Judge Galeano did not believe dos Santos. The investigators work with two hypotheses: that the Brazilian is a pimp who befriended the Iranian, promised to arrange a Canadian visa for her with the intention of stealing her savings, but got cold feet when he heard her discuss a bombing; or that dos Santos has some connection with Brazilian intelligence, which would explain the degree of protection he enjoys from his government.

Galeano had a second chance to test his hypotheses when, in an unexpected coup, Interpol delivered Nasrim Mokhtari to him. On December 4, the Iranian was captured in Europe and sent to Buenos Aires to be interrogated by the Argentine Supreme Court in connection with the bombing of the Israeli embassy.² In a barely intelligible Spanish, she denied any

connection with the bombings, painted herself as a citizen persecuted by the Iranian and the Argentine governments, and claimed to be just a hairdresser cheated by a greedy boyfriend. The Supreme Court interrogators, Gustavo Bossert and Esteban Canevari, could not find any legal reason to detain her: even her naturalization and citizenship papers were in perfect order. She was released into Judge Galeano's custody for further interrogation. Soon she was released to find her way back to Europe.³

On February 23, 1999, Judge Galeano cleared Mokhtari of all charges with a writ that contained a surprise. Out of the blue and without giving much in the way of material proof, the judge charged Hezbollah with being involved in both bombings. "At the time of the attacks, Hezbollah was clearly subordinated to the decisions taken by certain Iranian officials," the judge wrote. He did not elaborate, and his statement surprised everybody: not even the Supreme Court, after seven years of investigating the Israeli embassy bombing, had made charges against Iran.

By early May, six suspects in custody in connection with the AMIA bombing had lost all their many appeals. The Federal Chamber, the supervising and appeals court in the case, had rejected all their arguments and even ordered the rearrest of five policemen free on bail, raising the total of persons charged with serious crimes to eleven. The Chamber discreetly criticized Galeano and ordered him to carry out a reconstruction of the bombing. On June 23, the judge officially ordered the reconstruction to take place, under the supervision of Federal Police Commissar Jorge Palacios, chief of the antiterrorism unit. The reconstruction, which involves citing dozens of witnesses and stationing every vehicle and person in their locations at the time of the attack, will take place later this month or early in August.

Preparing for the Trial

Luis Dobniewsky shows in his face how long and hard the investigation has been. A well known and successful attorney, he has been volunteering time and resources (from clerks to a high-tech photocopier he leased) to represent AMIA in the investigation, free of charge. "It's been complex, very, very complex," he says. "The investigation followed the usual path: leads were examined, some were discarded, others followed. The investigating judge followed 160 leads in the past five years."

In the Argentine judiciary system, a judge and not a prosecutor is in charge of establishing the basic facts of a case, pursuing leads and arrest-

ing suspects. Unless the case is truly small and simple, or involves a single individual, the investigating judge sends it to another tribunal for trial, effectively acting as a prosecutor. The AMIA case will be tried by a three-judge panel later this year or early next year. Dobniewsky explains that “Judge Juan José Galeano has been able to gather proof involving five leads, but has hard proof of only one: that on July 10, 1994, eight days prior to the bombing, Carlos Telleldín delivered the van that was later used in the attack to a group of Buenos Aires police officers. This, the judge has proved beyond any reasonable doubt.”

In a case that has already gathered several scores of thousands of sheets of legal writs, four facts are considered “proved beyond reasonable doubt” and will form the core of the prosecution against the twenty accused:

- * A car bomb was used in the attack.
- * The specific car used, a white Renault Traffic van, has been positively identified.
- * Parts of the van actually killed people in the street, turning it into a murder weapon.
- * Telleldín sold the van to a group of police officers.

Forensic studies established the first three items: over 60 percent of the van’s structure was recovered and pieced together, plus several engine parts; engine-block numbers allowed a positive identification of the specific van; pieces of the van were recovered from bodies of victims killed outside the building. The official cause of death for several victims was deemed to be the wounds sustained from flying debris from the van.

“We are going to bring to trial this very small and partial aspect of the case,” says Dobniewsky. “It is small but enormously important to break the vow of silence around the case. In 1997 we denounced the obstructions the investigation was suffering: evidence went missing, important probes were badly carried out, witnesses lied. Back in 1994, right after the bombing and the very first arrests, Buenos Aires Province police officer Juan José Ribelli, who is a prime suspect in the case, paid \$100,000 to a witness to say that he, and not Ribelli, had taken possession of the van. Luckily, the false witness cracked under examination and confessed. The point is that suspects under arrest don’t speak, they believe that if they sit tight their fellow policemen will somehow help them.”

The arrest of Ribelli and his fellow officers two years ago triggered the worst institutional crisis the Buenos Aires Province police force had ever seen. Ribelli was exposed as the cashier for an extensive organization of crooked policemen. Officers and men alike regularly extorted money from businesses, legitimate or illegal. Even Argentines, who are perfectly

used to corrupted policemen, were surprised by the sheer scale of the racket: millions of dollars were circulated from the bottom to the top of the province's police force. Governor Eduardo Duhalde, a presidential hopeful, fired half the area chiefs, completely revamped the force, and gave ample powers to his justice minister, a well known enemy of corruption. Hundreds of police were dismissed.

"For that alone, even if we cannot establish any connection with the bombing proper, they risk terms of up to fifteen years in jail," says Dobniewsky. "We hope to establish that five of them actually knew of the bombing and willingly collaborated for a fee. If we succeed, they'll receive life terms."

Judge Juan José Galeano has already taken the first steps to bring the case to trial. Twenty people will face charges, fifteen policemen and five civilians. Eleven are charged with serious crimes and are in jail awaiting trial. Of the twenty to be tried, five (including Telleldín, Ribelli, and three other policemen) are considered "necessary parties to the bombing" and face charges of murder, conspiracy, and corruption. The other fifteen face charges of corruption, racketeering, and conspiracy.

In our interview, Dobniewsky tried hard to make one point as clear as possible: that trying the "small, very small" part of the case did not mean that the investigation would be closed. "Even if Judge Galeano wanted to close the case, he cannot do that under the law," Dobniewsky says. "He is the investigating magistrate; he has to keep on investigating and sending people to be tried by other judges."

Dobniewsky's hope is that the trial of the twenty accomplices of the terrorists will enable Galeano to advance the investigation. He identifies four areas of investigation that could be illuminated by the trial:

The military: Judge Galeano and his investigators are strongly suspicious of a group of retired and active army officers and NCOs with strong far-right connections that could have sold the explosives used in the bombing.

The accomplices: Telleldín was not alone in his dealings with the corrupted policemen. His wife, brothers, and a few of his friends are suspected of being accomplices in the sale of the van and of knowing what it was going to be used for.

Dos Santos and Mokhtari: Dobniewsky thinks that they know who actually ordered and paid for the bombing. He hopes to have them rearrested and confronted with new evidence after the trial.

Fundamentalists in Argentina: Dobniewsky thinks that there is "a network of fundamentalist cells active in the Argentine Arab community.

Monser Rabbani, a former Iranian cultural attaché who was expelled from the country, had been in charge of the Shiite mosques and of recruiting; he was even filmed by intelligence agents shopping for a van.” Investigators have noticed that Shiite Islam is becoming more popular among, of all people, Buenos Aires Province policemen.⁴

Dobniewsky’s hopes are not shared by everybody. Diana Malamud, a founder of the group Memoria Activa who lost her architect husband in the bombing, is far less enthusiastic about the coming trial. “There’s been very little progress in the investigation,” she says. “And none since 1996, when Ribelli was arrested. I don’t think the trial will solve anything. Our only hope is that there is a new breakthrough, a new lead.”

In fact, Malamud thinks the trial will hurt the investigation. “The AMIA case will effectively die with the trial. Of course, it will be legally and formally still alive, but it will be dead in fact. Sure, they will throw the book at Telleldín, Ribelli, and a few more, all small fry; so what? We will not know anything of real importance and after the anticlimax of a trial, there will be no amount of pressure that will move this case. Remember, Judge Galeano works as slowly as public opinion will let him. He took so long to do anything against Telleldín and Ribelli that they were on the brink of being released; we, the relatives of the dead, had to appeal to the Federal Chamber. We asked him for hundreds of procedures, he ignored most of our pleas. For instance, he never raided the precincts in the AMIA neighborhood, although the interrogations of policemen and officers show contradictions. And he did not want to carry out a reconstruction of the bombing: we had to force him to do so by appealing to the Chamber. I am very pessimistic.”

A Community in Crisis

The AMIA bombing created a deep crisis in the Argentine Jewish community, both political and financial. In the last year, the crisis reached a climax and became public after an unexpected incident: the two largest Jewish-owned banks in Argentina collapsed amid allegations of wrongdoing and anti-Semitism.

Prior to the 1994 bombing, the institutional life of Jews in Argentina was little known outside the community itself. The leaders of AMIA were strangers to the public at large and the leaders of the Jewish umbrella organization DAIA were known only to those who closely followed political news. As an organized community, Jews made news only sporadically,

when they protested an act of anti-Semitism or bigotry. Perfectly integrated into local politics, Jews considered community life a private affair. The political organization, activity, and influence of the American Jewish community were admired but not taken as a model.

The bombing changed that overnight. Suddenly, the Jewish community was very much in the limelight, and its leaders became public figures. The DAIA president, Ruben Beraja, was quoted daily in the press; his face became a familiar feature on television. At the time, nobody seemed to notice that, unlike its American counterpart, the Argentine community had little real political skills, few professional staff, and precious little experience in the political arena. Soon, attention was focused solely on Beraja, a quiet-spoken, religiously observant banker.

As the AMIA case became more and more political, and as time went by with no results from the investigation, the Jewish community started to polarize. The argument over the pace of the investigation became an argument over the relationship of the Argentine Jewish institutions with the government. Two camps emerged: Beraja and the established leadership, called "appeasers" by their opposition; and grassroots organizations such as Memoria Activa, a group of relatives of the victims and people concerned with the case that included Jews and Gentiles alike, branded "troublemakers" by the leadership. Memoria Activa, gathering every Monday morning at the park across the street from the Argentine Supreme Court, soon gained a very high profile and great media exposure. The debate became bitter. Those opposed to Beraja openly called him a "crony" of President Carlos Menem and charged him with being "first a banker, then a Jew." The yearly ceremonies commemorating the bombing became the scene of mutual recriminations. On July 18, 1997, the rift became evident when Laura Ginsberg, representing Memoria Activa, spoke scathingly against the government from the same dais where Beraja and Interior Minister Carlos Corach (who is Jewish) stood. Challenged, Beraja had to pocket his prepared speech and improvise a tough condemnation of Iran. He was booed and hissed. There was no shared ceremony in 1998. Memoria Activa was not allowed to attend the "official" ceremony organized by DAIA and AMIA.

The second crisis the divided community had to withstand came from an unexpected quarter: Mexico. Mexico's economic problems made life hard for Argentine banks. In panic over the collapse of the Mexican peso, international investors quickly abandoned emerging markets in Latin America. Argentina was not spared and although the government handled the crisis relatively well and very decisively, it showed no intention of going out of its way to save small banks: it was survival of the fittest.

Many banks closed and were merged with bigger ones; others were sold piecemeal. When, last year, Brazil devalued its currency, most banks were strong enough to survive the renewed crisis of confidence. But some of the smaller banks collapsed, among them the Patricios Bank, owned by the Spolskys, a Jewish family. In June 1998, the Patricios was absorbed by Ruben Beraja's much larger Banco Mayo.⁵ The result was an exponential growth for the Mayo, which totaled \$1.1 billion in assets. Beraja quietly assured the Jewish community that all the financial support previously given by the Patricios would continue. But his Banco Mayo also collapsed in October 1998 and was quickly sold to a consortium led by Citibank.

In December 1998, a smaller Jewish-owned bank, the Banco Israelita de Córdoba, folded after a run by its depositors prompted by a story in the newspaper *La Nación*. The bank was sold to a group of six other banks. The small, 10,000-strong Jewish community in the province of Córdoba was faced with the uncomfortable prospect of having to return, and quickly, soft loans totaling \$1.5 million to the bank's new owners.

Suddenly, there were no more Jewish-owned banks.⁶ The consequences were soon felt. The Patricios and the Mayo had enjoyed the custom of Jews and supported the community in two main ways: the banks donated money for cultural and social activities, and they provided financial services and loans on very advantageous terms. The extensive network of schools, clubs, and social institutions depended heavily on the two major Jewish banks for their daily operations and payrolls. The collapse of the Mayo put several schools, the Israelite Hospital, an old-age home, the Aleph cable station, the FM Jai radio station, the Jerusalem school, and the brand-new Bar-Ilan University on the brink. The collapse of the bank also meant the end of Beraja's role as political leader of the Jewish community. After three terms as president of DAIA, the banker stepped down and out of the scene.⁷

An article published by the *Jerusalem Letter*⁸ on a Jewish Agency fact-finding trip to Argentina gives a panorama of the material situation of the Argentine Jewish community and hints at some of the true reasons for its dependency on Jewish-owned banks. Written by Ilan Rubin, secretary general of the Jewish Agency, the article reports on the findings of an Agency task force that visited Argentina in November and December of 1998. According to Rubin, "Their [the banks'] contribution had partially concealed the reality of a significant decrease in individual/local philanthropy in Argentina. Indeed, there are a number of very wealthy Jews in Argentina who do not contribute at all to the Jewish community and who are totally alienated from Judaism and Israel. The closure of these two banks in the wake of a general countrywide recession meant the abrupt

end of their support and has exposed the decline in local philanthropy.³³ The report rightly points out the effects of the deep recession Argentina is currently undergoing on an overwhelmingly middle-class community. “At present, over 35 percent of the 40,000 pupils in the Jewish day schools are at least partially subsidized. The situation is particularly difficult for smaller schools and schools located outside the Buenos Aires area.” Rubin highlights the heavy financial burden of providing security for dozens of community buildings.

Rubin’s conclusion is that, however difficult the situation must seem, and despite the complaints the task force heard, “there is no sign of a deterioration of the political situation or of instability that could bring immediate danger to the Jews.” Rubin notes that in spite of the dark picture painted by people he spoke to, there is no mass emigration of Jews and that aliyah actually declined in 1998. The author frankly admits that many Argentines expected the Jewish Agency to simply “bring money” and solve the problems. Rubin claims that “any attempt, even partial, to bail out the community by external sources would simply impede the healthy and inevitable process of matching expenditures to income.”

With over \$200 million a year in total outlay, the Argentine Jewish community shows signs of vitality despite the failure of the *Patricios* and the *Mayo*. “The problem here is political: a very few get involved, even fewer give money or time. Maybe the problem is that we are so well integrated that we don’t care much anymore,” says an Argentine Jew active in community circles.⁹ Any informal poll would find that opinion to be popular.

A second element in the representation crisis of the community is its peculiar electoral system. DAIA stands for Delegation of Argentine-Israelite Associations, a name that implies its function as an umbrella organization. Originally founded to provide a unified voice for all Jewish groups in the country and to fight against Nazism and anti-Semitism, it still retains a voting system in which a small inland community with a few hundred members has the same weight at an institution in Buenos Aires with thousands of members. Members never get to vote for DAIA’s president, who is elected by a council of presidents of lesser institutions. The system is custom-made for self-perpetuation, and critics charge that a banker can easily get the votes of impoverished communities in the provinces.

On January 12, 1999, DAIA’s then secretary, Rogelio Cichowolsky, a lawyer and close associate of Ruben Beraja, succeeded him as president of DAIA. His election was far from quiet: those present at the council’s meeting still remember the shouting matches. Far more telling, for the first

time in the history of the nearly one-hundred-year-old institution, several Jewish associations simply refused to attend meetings anymore—among them, the Hebraica (the largest Jewish social and sports club in the country), the Argentine branch of the Israeli Labor Party, the Convergencia group, and the Community Emanu-El. Cichowolsky was reduced to taking office in a half empty room.

The opposition charged the new president with being “Beraja under a different name.” “What we needed was somebody who could unite, not divide, the community. Somebody who would steer DAIA away from the banks and particularly away from the government,” said an opposition figure. To Cichowolsky’s supporters, the charges against him are unfair. Although they share in the criticism of Beraja’s presidency, some spokesmen for major organizations see Cichowolsky as “experienced, able, and honest.” The new president tried to calm the debate and asked for the level “of verbal violence and aggression” to be curbed. He promised to start a series of grassroots meetings to hear his constituency.

Many Jews in Argentina are truly shocked by this factiousness and particularly by seeing it reported in detail by the media.¹⁰ To anybody familiar with the community, the anger against Ruben Beraja is truly shocking, as are the depths of pessimism. “We never, ever learn,” says a middle-aged professional active in community circles. “We’ve been talking forever about changing our internal electoral system, but we never do it. We keep electing bankers or businessmen who go bust amid allegations and charges. It’s embarrassing. The result is that the younger keep clear of community affairs, they don’t get involved.” Others point to the curious passivity that overcame the community after Beraja stepped down.

A Symbol

On Monday, May 26, 1999, the AMIA inaugurated its new headquarters. The ultramodern, \$8-million building stands at the exact site of the bombing, on Pasteur Street. It’s a cream-colored, eight-story mass of concrete with small windows, protected by a ten-foot-high wall and an array of high-tech security measures. At 9:53, the time of the bombing, the ceremony started with the long, piercing wail of sirens. The names of the victims were read, a rabbi said Kaddish, and there were speeches by AMIA’s president, Oscar Hansman, Israeli ambassador Itzhak Aviran, Israeli attorney general Elyakim Rubinstein and University of Buenos Aires Law School dean Andres D’Alessio. With bitter memories of having its officials and even ministers booed, the government sent only one repre-

sentative, the head of the antidiscrimination office. A few hundred people stood patiently in the street, listening to the speeches in silence. The prayers and the sirens brought tears to some eyes, but the mood was sober. After the ceremony, people passed through metal detectors to visit the building.

“Today we return to our house, but we cannot celebrate,” said AMIA’s president. “This building is in itself a memorial to the victims.”

Notes

1. See Sergio Kiernan, *Still No Justice: Four Years After the AMIA Bombing* (New York: The American Jewish Committee, 1998). In the United States, a rally at the Argentine consulate in New York on the fourth anniversary of the bombing protested the investigation’s lack of progress. In March 1999, on the anniversary of the embassy bombing, Rep. Benjamin A. Gilman (R-NY) also criticized the failure of Argentine authorities in the U.S. House of Representatives.

2. The Supreme Court hears all cases involving diplomats.

3. Mokhtari’s stay in Buenos Aires became a dark comedy. Nobody could figure what to do with somebody who had been arrested abroad but faced no charges: she could not be jailed, but there was no legal procedure to pay for her stay in Argentina. The officials who were supposed to interrogate her ended up chipping in to pay for her hotel. Different judiciary bureaus and even the State Intelligence Secretariat, which had located her in Europe, were asked to provide funds. Even Mokhtari’s friends, old and new, helped pay her bills. The Iranian was soon charging talk shows and magazines for interviews.

4. Iran remains very much on the minds of Argentines. On June 11, a delegation headed by DAIA’s president Rogelio Cichowolsky met with Argentine foreign minister Guido di Tella and the president’s chief of staff, Jorge Rodriguez, to discuss the arrest of thirteen Jews in Iran on charges of espionage. The government officials expressed their “grave concern” for the Jews arrested and said that if the thirteen Jews “were executed that would destroy the constructive international image of the new Iranian government.” But if the Argentine Jewish leaders expected the government officials to act, they were sadly mistaken. While Argentina and Iran maintain a very low level of diplomatic relations, with *chargés d’affaires* in charge of the embassies, there are signs of a cautious rapprochement. Earlier this year, Argentina abstained when a condemnation of Iran was put before the UN’s Committee on Human Rights. Traditionally, Argentina had voted against Iran. In May, the Iranians reciprocated, lifting the prohibition on trade with Argentina. Tehran used to be Argentina’s most important customer for vegetable oils and foodstuffs. Trade was one-sided: Argentina barely bought some carpets from Iran. Breaking relations with the ayatollahs cost Argentina over \$1 million a year in business.

5. Both banks have patriotic names. “Patricios” is the name of the oldest regiment in the Argentine army, founded in 1806, four years before the country became independent, to fight against a British invasion. The bank’s logo was a stylized version of the regiment’s ceremonial top hat. “Mayo” is simply Spanish for May, the month in which Argentines started their fight for independence in 1810. Its logo was a drawing of the Buenos Aires “Cabildo,” the old assembly hall where the first revolutionaries gathered in May 1810.

6. Of course, there were and are Jews who invest in banks and partially own banks. What disappeared with the Mayo were the community-oriented banks, friendly to its institutions.

7. Beraja is currently involved in a bitter dispute with the president of the Argentine Central Bank, Pedro Pou. According to Beraja, Pou is an anti-Semite who let the Patricios and Mayo collapse without providing a minimum of financial assistance mandated by law. Beraja publicly charged Pou with saying that he did not believe “in ethnic banks” and with purposely calling a meeting on Yom Kippur. In April, Beraja filed charges against Pou under the antidiscrimination law. Pou hotly denies the charges and filed an affidavit before the court stating that “all charges against me are false, absolutely false” and that Beraja’s version of the story contained “several lies.”

The Jewish community divided again over the Pou-Beraja quarrel. Beraja’s successor as president of DAIA, Rogelio Cichowolsky, wondered, “Did prejudice affect the bank failure? I do not have any proof, but given the pattern of events, the central bank must have some prejudice.” Others believe the charges to be a smoke screen to cover the true nature of Banco Mayo’s finances. Horacio Verbitsky, a well known columnist for the daily *Pagina/12*, reflected this position, held by many other Jews, when he wrote a series of stories charging Beraja’s bank with running an offshore bank holding \$200 million in funds. This bank-within-a-bank had an unofficial existence, reportedly operated with a Cayman Islands associate, and managed funds that were never disclosed in tax returns.

In fact, some sources say that Pou, far from being hostile to Beraja or Jewish banks, showed himself particularly friendly to both the Patricios and the Mayo at the time of their respective crises, supporting them with tens of millions of dollars in fresh funds to shore them up. Pou himself points to his public record to show that of the banks that were closed during the Mexican and Brazilian crises, several had ties to the Catholic Church and to prominent Catholic businessmen. These banks were not spared.

8. *Jerusalem Letter*, no. 400, Feb. 15, 1999.

9. Name withheld by request.

10. In fact, Jewish communal affairs has become a regular beat for the media and part of the never-ending AMIA coverage. Several journalists, like Raul Kollman from *Pagina/12* and Gerardo Young from *Clarín*, have become true specialists in Argentine Jewish politics.

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