

ARTURO DESIMONE

Those Without Tombs in Memory Park:
On poems by the disappeared Argentinean child Franca
Jarach, and her mother's statements to the German
Chancellor.

The video¹ went viral in Argentina not long ago. It shows one of the May Plaza Mothers, Vera Jarach, coming to meet the visiting German chancellor in Memory Park (Parque de la Memoria). Merkel seems to doubt her environs, as if finding herself in a dream. Memory Park is awash in purgatorial twilight, at once bright and faded, a sickly color of illumined talc (like the salt plains of Jujuy, in the North of Argentina—home to Alcira Fidalgo, a very young poet who had a similar fate to the daughter of Vera Jarach from Buenos Aires.



Vera Jarach and portrait of her disappeared daughter, Franca.
Espacio Memoria y Derechos Humanos, Argentina.

In her kerchief, holding up a sign with the cipher “30,000” in marker, Vera Jarach tells the Chancellor of Germany, “I am an Italian Jew. I was a child in Italy, 12 years old when they introduced the racial laws, but we saved ourselves by going to Argentina” Her grandfather, she explains, was less lucky.

“He stayed and was taken to Auschwitz and there is no grave. Many years later, my daughter—13 years old—was taken to a camp, where she was tortured, died. And there is no grave for her either. These are analogies: history repeats itself. The good things also repeat themselves, not only tragedies! Among those things that repeat, there is the revisionism, the denial. In Germany, in many of the countries that were occupied, there were those who denied the holocaust and still do. And here in Argentina, revisionism is happening under this government, people who say there were no 30,000. Well, we want to know the exact number and only they can tell us. The military regime knows *exactly* how many and they know the facts about the children who were transferred to other families.”

History doesn't repeat itself, but it sure does rhyme. Human rights supporters in Argentina estimate the toll at 30,000, but the official revisionism of President Mauricio Macri's ruling PRO Party tends to deny that approximation altogether. Darío Lopérfido—the Ex-Minister of Culture, who resigned because of protests by Argentinian artists—notoriously stated repeatedly there were at most “a few thousand” disappearances, caused by technical circumstances. Lopérfido was selected to be Minister of Culture because he brought the Rolling Stones to Argentina, among other credentials. Today he runs part of the *Teatro Colón* opera and concert hall.

The President who, unlike his ex-Minister of Culture, has not yet resigned often calls human rights a marketing gimmick, and accused the May Plaza Mothers' organization of forging their testimonies in order to get state subsidies. In official statements by the Pro Party when they hosted the World Economic Forum in Argentina this year—including on the “WEF Argentina” Medium page—pro-government spokespersons ironically warned against ‘fake news’ from the ‘populist’ opposition.

The South holds an inverted mirror up to the bizarre power relations that are taken for granted in the North: in the South, the light falls in a certain way and the same illusions, when transplanted here, disintegrate; their vulgarity becomes more blatant. In New York, a scandal recently flared up around the new sculpture of a little girl placed in front of the DOW-Jones bull statue on Wall Street, allegedly dislocating the meaning of the former sculpture in a vandalistic act. (The defenders of this act of “montage” are dismissed as exuberant utopians, echoes of the defeated “Occupy Wall Street” movement.)

In the South, this showdown finds its equivalent in the absent body of Franca Jarach against the World Economic Forum hosted in Argentina; a geriatric mother with a diaper cloth tied round her head debunks the shallow styrofoam rhetoric of PR hacks.

The German Chancellor made headlines earlier in June, getting coverage in the few national newspapers that remain insubordinate to the Clarín pro-government media conglomerate. Apparently Merkel digested the potent analogy made by Vera Jarach and its significance for a German head-of-state visiting Argentina: at press conferences she insisted on affirming the 30,000.

Merkel is very far from poetry—possibly its antidote. There is a good reason, however, for my writing about Vera and Franca Jarach in a blog for poetry: Franca, herself, wrote poetry.

A Place

by Franca Jarach, 12 years old

In the morning I walk by
near a site surrounded by walls
tall gray sad filthy walls
of advertising billboards, the kind that say
“vote for this or that candidate on the blue list”
one day I peek inside:

it's a slum.
People
more people.
Dressed in cheap fabrics
naked of happiness.
A girl offers me her lemons
“a hundred for a dozen, buy me”
She's thirteen years old,
more or less
my age.
A noisy warehouse,
with rats, with dirt
with sepulchral microbes.
Here is a site enclosed by walls,
sullied with human crimes
that are only our own.

(Translator's note: “Naked of happiness”, if it were translated in a grammatically correct way, would be “Unclothed by happiness,” as in “bereft of happiness,” Fixing the grammar, however, might not carry the effect of “desnuda de felicidad.”)

The poems by 12- and 13-year-old Franca Jarach are those of a child's awakening to a social consciousness about how her society generates economic exclusion and suffering. The poem translated here, “A Place,” appeared in the anthology *Desde el Silencio (From the Silence)* published by the Argentine left-wing newspaper *Página 12* in 1984, the first year of democracy in Argentina after the most recent civic-military dictatorship ceded power, having accomplished its core objectives for Argentinian society to a complete, yet fundamentally mediocre success. Democracy arrived after the junta's total delegitimization in global media, among other crises then faced by the echelons of military personnel, tired of their own sordid campaigns. The junta eliminated humans as well as ideas, leaving a void in

the quality of poetry. The junta killed not only prominent intellectuals and poets, but just about any young person who showed developmental signs of an evolving socio-political consciousness.

The facts of Franca Jarach being abducted by the police and transferred to the ESMA detention camp in Buenos Aires (where, according to eye-witnesses, she was pushed from the open door of an airplane to fall into the river Paraná) are shocking. Yet, after reading her poetry, it is unsurprising that young Franca Jarach came under the scrutiny of those who employed coercion for their project of reengineering the social fabric of Argentina. The junta sought to engineer the foundations of a new society that would accept, with unquestioning conformism and glee, the foundation of a new mode of capitalist exploitation sold as democracy.

The new Argentina, envisioned by its economic planners and beneficiaries of the regimes, was turbulent and poor in the 1980s until it came to its full flowering in the 1990s. Only then (in the period coinciding with Latin American elites' loyalty to George Bush and Bill Clinton) did the seeds of the economic experiment begin to have their effect. The newest phase of unfettered capitalism that was implemented by the US-backed dictatorships in Latin American countries began to be celebrated as inclusive and miraculous by parts of the population, while others were as suppressed as ever, consigned to the slums that the child Jarach saw before plainclothes police spirited her off to a dark fort.

Argentinean illusions about the “economic miracle”—the seeds of which were planted by the regime that suppressed and ended all opposing social movements—were not the symptoms of a mere economist’s miscalculation. Rather, the minor financial deception (such as President Carlos Saul Menem’s famous pairing up of the dollar-peso values, 1-to-1 in the 1990s) resulted from a more inhuman injustice: the policy of so-called “Amnesty.” “Amnesty” meant the institutional, illegal pardoning of the officers who killed Franca Jarach and 29,999 others. The crowning deception under

democracy was the “clean slate” philosophy (“*borrón y cuenta nueva*” in Argentine slang): the price of a vain hope for peace was supposedly the injustice of “letting-off-the-hook” for the officers such as Alfredo Astíz, who led the torture camps and waged the state terror wars, and their civilian beneficiaries. Such narcotic racket-illusions met their collapse during the economic crash of 2001. But the consumerist values of that age of oblivion permeated a consumerist poetics that characterized the 1990s (such as from the hand of former ESPN-*Español* journalist Santiago Vega, better known as “Washington *Cucurto*,” and his many generational colleagues).

Argentinian revolutions in poetry and aesthetics, as well as in thinking and ideas just before the long-awaited dawn of democracy, met a similar fate to the bodies of those children in the grip of an awakening social-political consciousness and unraveling illusions: they were made to walk the plank, from the airplane’s door into the river, at gunpoint. They were shoved, crown-first, into the dark of abattoirs, and they were beaten. Their remains were cast into the gray waters, where they found the remains of the children of poet Juan Gelman, the remains of the daughter of resistance writer Rodolfo Walsh. They only recently discovered those of the surrealist poet Miguel-Ángel Bustos. But there were many more such as Jarach.

It is the same river at which Mauricio Macri and Barack Obama threw some flowers in 2016, during the US presidential visit to celebrate the return of the revisionists to the Casa Rosada (the Presidential Place on the Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires).

With thanks to Daniela Szpilbarg

—previously published on the blog “Notes On a Return
to the Ever-Dying Lands,” *Anomaly*

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p57Cu49IGg0>

Original Spanish text of Jarach's poem in my translation above:

Lugar

A la mañana paso
cerca de un sitio rodeado de muros
altos grises tristes sucios
de carteles, de vote lista azul
un día miro adentro
es una villa miseria.

Gente
más gente.

Vestida de tela barata
desnuda de felicidad.

Una chica me ofrece limones
“cien la docena, cómpreme”

Tiene trece años, más o menos
mi edad.

Un almacén ruinoso,
con ratas, con suciedad
con microbios funestos.

Es un sitio rodeado de muros
sucios de crímenes humanos
que son sólo los nuestros.